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The Quality of Work: A People-Centred Agenda by Graham S. LOWE, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2000, 213 pp., ISBN 0-19-541479-9.

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The Quality of Work: A People-Centred Agenda

by Graham S. Lowe, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2000, 213 pp., ISBN 0-19-541479-9.

With the fall in unemployment the attention is shifting from the quantity of jobs to the quality of jobs. Graham Lowe, Professor of Sociology at the University of Alberta, and Director of the Work Network at Canadian Policy Research Networks, has written a very readable well documented non-technical account of quality of work issues in Canada.

The objective of the book is “to critically assess the directions in which work seems to be headed, and determine how we can meet the aspirations that individual Canadians have for their work

life.” Lowe offers a diagnosis of the problem of contemporary work and a prescription for making it better.

Lowe argues that debates about the future of work have focused too narrowly on the quantity of jobs available and that we need to think seriously about the quality of the work we create. Indeed, he believes an agenda centred on work quality is essential if we want to ensure Canada’s continued viability both economically and socially. Lowe suggests that high-quality work offers a common ground for employers with an eye on productivity and individuals

seeking greater challenge and meaning in their work.

The book is very well organized and laid out. It first situates the idea of high quality work in earlier debates about the nature, purpose, and meaning of work and, on the basis of public opinion polls, outlines Canadians' most persistent concerns about work in the 1990s. It then builds the case that Canadians generally want from paid work personal rewards that derive from the work itself, not just decent pay and economic security. The book next focuses on a number of issues: the gap between the skills and education of the workforce and the actual requirements of jobs, arguing that many jobs do not require high skills and that many workers are in fact overqualified for their jobs; the kind of working life that the next generation of workers can expect; the contradictions and inconsistencies in management rhetoric that people are the key resource; and the role of unions in pursuing a quality-of-work agenda. The book concludes by pulling together the threads of these arguments into a model and action plan of how to create a higher quality of work.

I have five major points to raise on the book: the unproven nature of a crisis in the Canadian workplace; neglect of the impact of the macroeconomic environment on the workplace; failure to make the case that quality of work is a priority of Canadians; the limited impact of public policy on workplace issues; and the intrinsic undemocratic nature of the workplace. These points are discussed below.

The proposition that there is a crisis in the Canadian workplace is in my view not convincing. It is true that perceptions of job insecurity may have risen in the 1990s, but one can argue that this was not a permanent development but rather linked with high unemployment and downsizing and these fears have since abated with the fall in unemployment. No evidence is presented that objective

indicators of job quality, such as work accidents or degree of physical drudgery, have deteriorated. Neither is evidence presented that subjective indicators of job quality, such as surveys on how much workers like/hate their jobs, show a decline. Indeed, I believe that a case can be made that there is a strong long-term upward trend in job quality, although subject to short-to-medium term reversals because of negative cyclical developments. Factors behind this trend include the mechanization of the workplace, which reduced drudgery and industrial accidents, the employment shift from the goods sector to the service sector, and the concentration of net employment growth in professional and managerial occupations.

Lowe brings valuable insights from a sociological perspective to the issue of work quality. But he completely neglects the economic perspective and hence provides only a partial perspective on workplace issues. The biggest gap in my view is his failure to see how the macroeconomic environment conditions developments in the workplace. One cannot separate economic and social issues. For example, the national unemployment rate—a macroeconomic variable—is a key determinant of the relative bargaining power of workers. Low unemployment gives workers more bargaining power and forces employers to improve job quality (wages, benefits, working conditions, etc.) to attract and retain workers.

The book tries but fails in my view to make the case that the issue of work quality is a major priority of Canadians. It was certainly not an issue in the 2000 federal election and is not high on the issues elicited by pollsters. It did not figure prominently in the recent CPRN Quality of Life survey administered to Canadians in 2000.

Outside of the regulation of workplace health and safety, hours of work, minimum wages, vacation, and collective bargaining, the role for public

policy in the job quality issue appears limited. The key actors are employees and employers. On an individual basis, if a worker is concerned about the quality of his job, she can negotiate an improvement (voice) or find another (exit). On a collective basis, if (unionized) workers feel certain aspects of jobs are lacking in quality, they can target these areas for improvement in the next round of collective bargaining.

Lowe argues that the workplace, like society, can be democratic. But this ignores the intrinsic difference in power and control between the owners of the enterprise and the workers. The objective of the owners is to maximize profits while that of the workers is to maximize wages. Unlike in overall society where the concept of democracy

can be applied since all citizens have equal rights, it is much more difficult if not impossible to structure the workplace along democratic lines. The “one-person, one-vote” principle does not apply when stakeholders bring different endowments to the table. Ownership connotes power and control.

Despite the criticisms noted above, I believe that this book represents an important contribution to the debate on job quality in Canada. It is particularly recommended for the non-specialist in workplace issues who wants a readable and well-informed overview and synthesis of the key ideas in the field.

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