

Review - The Routledge Companion to Ethics, Politics and Organizations

Written by Nicholas Tampio

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The Routledge Companion to Ethics, Politics and Organizations

Edited By: Alison Pullen, Carl Rhodes

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On August 12, 2015, explosions ripped through warehouses storing dangerous chemicals in Tianjin, China, killing over 145 people and contaminating the air and water in the region. Rui Hai International Logistics had established a lucrative hazardous materials business in the Binhain New Area, an economic development zone in the vicinity of Beijing. Rui Hai had apparently bribed many regulators and ignored safety rules about, for example, the proximity of warehouses to residential areas. It may be tempting, in this situation, to blame the catastrophe on the malfeasance of the local parties involved, but it is worth noting that more than half of the Fortune Global 500 companies have invested in Binhai. The Tianjin explosion is an indictment of global capitalism. What explains the ethical lapses of companies that, in this case, turn a blind eye to the environmental and labor practices of a key link in the global supply chain? More importantly, what can be done to inject an ethical sensibility into international corporations and organizations? To address these questions, Alison Pullen and Carl Rhodes have assembled essays from established and emerging scholars in, primarily, management and business schools, who share a willingness to criticize neoliberal thought and practice.

Many of the authors express a roughly Marxist perspective on how and why multinational corporations exploit natural resources and labor markets around the world. Matthew Higgins and Nick Ellis argue that the global supply chain is more properly conceived of as a net with many inter-organizational relationships (IORs) that enable firms to escape responsibility for how materials are acquired or workers are treated. Other authors explore the more subtle workings of neoliberalism that infuse a capitalist ethos across human interactions. Occupy Wall Street used savvy marketing techniques to spread ideas and images about corporate wrongdoing, and yet, Amanda Earley and Michael Saren show, the activists unwittingly “wedded the pro-capitalist ideology of marketing to socialist and anti-capitalist causes” (p. 46). Many corporations embrace the discourse of environmental sustainability and responsibility; upon closer examination, Mary Phillips observes, this discourse “serves to legitimize the interests and power of corporations while curtailing the interests and voices of external stakeholders” (p. 54). Health care providers often portray themselves as ethical representatives of patients; but, as Robert McMurray argues, these claims enact a kind of violence by marginalizing the concerns of professional competitors or recalcitrant patients (pp. 331-332). In short, this volume details how neoliberalism is perpetuating unethical practices throughout the world.

Is business ethics an antidote to the vices of neoliberalism? Although many of the authors acknowledge that this tradition is complex and that nudging it in a more ethical direction might be a better option than ignoring it, many also express frustration at how this tradition often excuses unethical practices or offers negligible resistance. Scholars of diversity management and International, Cross-Cultural and Comparative Management promote a diverse workforce; unfortunately, Robert Westbrook argues, these researchers often “enable those who need to economically transact with the other to better manage and control them” (p. 136). Sometimes, businesses tout their codes of conduct, ethics training programs, and ethics measurement systems; the problem, according to Mollie Painter-Morland, is that the business ethics literature often depoliticizes problems that need to be addressed collectively. In perhaps the most

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provocative essay in the collection, Peter Bloom argues that “safe resistances can produce an innocuous organizational politics oriented less toward transformation and more toward sustaining the ontological security of subjects as ‘resistance selves’” (p. 377). The authors make a convincing case that business ethicists are often, as it were, sleeping with the enemy, justifying or softly criticizing practices that need to be militantly challenged.

If business ethics has often relied on utilitarian, Kantian, and Aristotelian sources to contest neoliberalism, and failed, then perhaps it is time to consider new sources, including those from Continental philosophy. Thus Peter Edward and Hugh Willmont go to Ernesto Laclau for insights on how managers may make ethical decisions from a postfoundational perspective. Allison Pullen and Carl Rhodes appeal to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of “becoming-woman” to envision a business ethics not so dominated by the image of masculine control. Torkild Thanem and Louise Wallenberg articulate a “monstrous ethics” that relies on Spinoza’s *Ethics* and its conception of bodies assembling to produce joy and avoid sadness. The richness of the theoretical sources, however, also poses its own quandary. Do all of these scholars and philosophers mean the same thing by ethics, and what to do if they disagree? I will return to this theme in the penultimate paragraph.

Many authors in the book describe concrete situations where people contest global capital. Maria Ceci Miscocsky and Steffen Böhm explain how Argentinian peasants have been able to stop, so far, a megaming operation spearheaded by transnational organizations. Dhammika Jayawardena shows how Sri Lankan women in the apparel industry refuse to be treated as *lamai*, childrenized adults. Tim Butcher and Barry Judd trace how Indigenous Australians have formed the *Wilurarra Tjukatu* Football League as a more communitarian alternative to the Australian Football League. Each of these stories is of a “local ethics opposed to seemingly insurmountable corporate power” (p. 4). Still, the book keeps portraying asymmetrical battles, where multinational organizations have resources—lawyers, courts, trade treaties, media outlets, political connections, and so forth—unavailable to local activists. One lingering question of the book, then, is how to forge left assemblages, in Deleuzian terms, that can fight neoliberalism on a global scale. In other words, we may need to envision political arrangements whereby Davids around the world can work together to stop the Goliath of international capital.

The ghost of Marxism haunts the book. As noted above, many authors diagnose the failings of global capitalism in Marxist terms, but none of the authors embrace a Marxist solution of a vanguard leading a proletarian revolution to attain a communist state that leads to a classless society. Peter Bloom identifies the pathologies of capitalist resistance, but his alternative is the minimal survival strategies of the American author Charles Bukowski, an idea seconded by Peter Fleming, who suggests that illness can be a weapon of refusal in neoliberal capitalism. Gerard Hanlon and Matteo Mandarani draw upon the Italian Workerist tradition to argue that capitalists want to fragment the working class, they do not pursue, at least in this essay, a project of consolidating the proletariat. Nobody in the book takes up Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s project of invoking a new communist body (“the multitude”), but the downside is that it is hard to envision how people can collaborate to propose more humane ends than those of neoliberalism. The book raises a major question for the twenty-first century left: how can we create an international movement that does not repeat the failures—e.g. environmental degradation, centralized bureaucracies, corrupt leadership—that plagued twentieth century communism?

The key concept of the book may be “the ethico-political,” an overcoming of western philosophy’s traditional opposition between ethics and politics. Ethics is what enables actors or spectators to evaluate the moral righteousness of organizations or diagnose inequalities; politics is the actualization of ethics (pp. 2-3). Most readers, I gather, will understand what the editors and authors mean, say, when pointing out that it is unethical to exploit workers and this should be stopped politically.

And yet many political theorists, Continental and Anglo-American, insist on the distinction between ethics and politics. Why? One reason is what the American philosopher John Rawls called the “fact of reasonable disagreement.” Citizens disagree on metaphysical questions such as the origin of the universe, the source of moral authority, or where we go when we die, and yet we still need to forge an overlapping consensus on questions such as whether to sustain the welfare state or enforce environmental regulations. What happens when philosophers or theologians disagree about, say, why we ought to care about the suffering of distant others? At that moment, we may see the value of distinguishing one set of terms we use when we speak to our friends and another for when we speak

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to other citizens. This may also be what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari were striving for when they used the garden as an image of pluralism in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Ethics is the faith and practice of my community (a flower), but we will need to work with other ethical communities (flowers) to ensure the well being of the garden.

In sum, this volume provides an excellent overview of how organization theorists are searching for post-communist paradigms to contest the march of neoliberalism. Many essays open up promising research agendas and describe brave people around the world who still believe that another world is possible, even if this world is presently hidden behind scholarly and popular advertisements for neoliberalism.

About the author:

Nicholas Tampio is Associate Professor of Political Science at Fordham University. He is the author of Deleuze's Political Vision (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015) and Kantian Courage (Fordham University Press, 2012). Tampio is currently researching democracy and education policy and writing articles about education for outlets such as Al Jazeera America and JSTOR Daily. Nicholas can be contacted at nicholas.tampio@gmail.com or followed on Twitter as @Ntampio.