

LIVING LABOUR: LIFE ON THE LINE AT PEUGEOT FRANCE

by Jean-Pierre Durand and Nicholas Hatzfeld

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Reviewed by Janet Lenaghan

The business literature is replete with discussions of organizational change, ranging from prescriptive models to qualitative analyses. The organization, as an open system, experiences a constant changing environment and, as such, must align and realign itself to maintain competitiveness. Tremendous gains in technology and globalization are often cited as the major drivers of change, yet neither has led to the elimination of manual workers. The automobile industry provides a consummate illustration of this phenomenon at work. In *Living Labour: Life on the Line at Peugeot France*, Jean-Pierre Durand and Nicholas Hatzfeld painstakingly examine the impact of these changes on the lives of the assembly line worker. This book elucidates the stress of the line worker, categorized by the authors as the “multiplicity of tensions” (p.4) present in the fragmented and repetitive work itself.

Living Labour is an account of the line worker at Peugeot’s Sochaux car assembly plant. The study is based on interview data and direct observation. Additionally, in two of the shops (Montage Voiture or MV and Habillage Caisse or HC), one of the researchers actually engaged in the work itself. The line, which management refers as the “mines” (p.29), is the unit of analysis. The first chapter contextualizes the plant by providing its history. At the time of the study (1996), production had weakened and employment was less than its high in 1979.

After reading this account, one cannot help but marvel at the lack of management understanding of the line worker and the power of organizational culture. The plant had experienced labor stoppages in 1968 and 1989, which left a divided culture. The mantra of “us versus them” seems to guide the relationship between the line workers and management. Many attempts at benchmarking ultimately failed to yield the expected results due to lack of trust in management by line workers. An illustration can be found in the PARI project, *i.e.*, participatory management through a suggestion incentive program. The ultimate goal of PARI, according to many line workers, was “reducing the amount of bonus paid” (p.168). Also suspect were the quality improvement plans that focused on punishment. The discovery of a defect served as an excuse for management to initiate disciplinary action rather than as an opportunity to improve the system. Therefore, the policy of improvement in quality was, in practice, accomplishing the opposite, as the mechanics of the procedures actually motivated workers to hide defects. Thus, the formal policies developed at the top of the organization contradicted those actually practiced by the line workers and supervisors.

The book does provide a discussion of operational changes such as just-in-time production and other influences from Japanese manufacturers that were initiated at Sochaux. Nonetheless, its utility is not in the operations management view but rather in the human and social implications of such processes. Herein again, the notion of distrust becomes evident as Durand and Hatzfeld argue that Sochaux’s attempt toward “Japanization” did not work, in part, because of the “resistance encountered among assembly-line workers” (p. 227). The culture at Sochaux has embraced neither the career mobility paths inherent in the Japanese approach nor the belief in worker autonomy and engagement.

Among the most interesting points in *Living Labour* is management's loyalty to its lagging position in compensation. The wage at Sochoux, the lowest among European car manufacturers, is "...no longer better than that offered by other industrial employers" (p.234). Moreover, the compensation system is shrouded in secrecy with most line workers unable to identify compensable factors, leaving some to believe that incentives are dependent on whether "they [*i.e.*, management] like your face" (p. 207). The absence of transparency counteracts any management attempt to motivate workers to increase production. Moreover, although the introduction of ergonomics has improved the design of the work, the line worker still contends with physical injury and production defects. Management's detection of the latter results in the line workers' loss of compensable points. Sadly, management seems ignorant of the impact of its policies.

The tediously repetitive work on the line seems to confer little intrinsic gratification to compensate for its lack of extrinsic rewards. One would think that job enrichment techniques could make the work more engaging. Durand and Hatzfeld report, however, that the majority of line workers reject job enrichment. In fact, they are pleased that the short, repetitive cycles of their jobs enable them to commit their tasks to memory and achieve mastery; the opportunity to "develop certain niches allow[s] one even to find some satisfaction" (p. 49). Unfortunately, the managers thwart this sense of mastery by periodically rebalancing the line, shuffling the employees to different stations to perform unfamiliar tasks. This discovery reveals simultaneously that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to workplace motivation and that, at least for the workers at Sochoux, life on the assembly line has not improved much during the last 40 years (see Blauner, 1964).

In my opinion, Durand and Hatzfeld could have enhanced *Living Labour* by including transcripts of a sampling of their interviews with line workers. These beleaguered individuals' own words would have given the reader a richer understanding of their experiences. Moreover, it would have been useful for the authors to contextualize this account of life on the line at Peugeot *vis-a-vis* other automobile manufacturing plants. An overview of plants in the United States and the European Union, which Durand could have provided given his previous research on the automobile industry in the U.S. and abroad (see Durand, Stewart, & Castillo, 1999), would have painted a clearer picture of the environment in which Sochoux operates.

Yet, the true value of Durand and Hatzfeld's book is not limited to the one industry. Their ethnographic study of line workers in a major automobile manufacturer provides invaluable insight into the complex relationship between work and worker. The juxtaposition of organizational strategies to the worker's daily life on the line underscores the disjuncture present in too many organizations. Durand and Hatzfeld provide a worthwhile read for those seeking a view of work from "below the line".

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NOTES

Blauner, R. 1964. *Alienation and Freedom: The factory worker and his industry*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Durand, J.P., Stewart, P., & Castillo, J.J. (eds.). 1999. *Teamwork in the Automobile Industry: Radical Change or Passing Fashion?* London, UK: Macmillan.

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