

Berthoin Antal, Ariane

**Book Review — Digitized Version**

[Rezension] Jeff Hearn, Deborah Sheppard, Petra Tancred-Sheriff, Gibson Burrell (Hrsg.): The sexuality of organization. London: Sage, 1989

Organization studies: An international multidisciplinary journal devoted to the study of organization, organizing, and the organized in and between societies

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**J. Hearn, D. Sheppard, P. Tancred-Sheriff and G. Burrell (eds.):  
The Sexuality of Organization**

1989, London: Sage. 205 pages.

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The authors who contributed to this book took on a large and important task: to lay the groundwork for a 'critical orientation of organization theory towards concerns with gender, reproduction, and sexuality rather than just production and productivity' (p. 2). The importance of the topic hardly needs to be explained at this point in time, and those of us who know and respect the work of the contributors to this volume will take up the book eagerly in the confidence that these are just the people who have succeeded in clarifying and changing perspectives on organizational research in the past. Unfortunately, the task does not prove to be quite manageable, and although the book contains interesting insights and useful empirical material, it leaves one somewhat confused and unsatisfied. In spite of the fact that the editors worked unusually interactively and the chapters were subjected to iterative revisions, the hoped for clarity of theoretical threads does not emerge.

The first three chapters (by Gibson Burrell and Jeff Hearn, Albert Mills, and Petra Tancred-Sheriff) provide very thorough reviews of the literature on gender, sexuality and organization theory. They show how the issue of sexuality has been excluded from consideration in organizations and organizational theory, yet not how central sexuality is to life and work in organizations. This contradiction between the pervasiveness of sexuality in reality and its reflection in organizational policy and research is explored empirically in various contexts in the following chapters.

Barbara Gutek's chapter summarizes the findings of her large-scale surveys on the extent of sexual behaviour in organizations and the different ways men and women experience these behaviours. Nancy DiTomaso conducted interviews with workers in three organizations (heavy manufacturing, service, and a public agency) and found that 'women who transcend their traditional subordinate roles to men in the workplace by working in "male jobs" or otherwise challenging male authority in the workplace are most likely to become conscious of the sexualization of the workplace in the form of both sexual harassment and sex discrimination' (p. 88). David L. Collinson and Margaret Collinson also seek to fill the void by drawing on detailed case studies. It is worth noting that the studies they conducted were not specifically designed to explore sexuality, but that the significance of the issue emerged over

time. A key result is that contrary to arguments 'that management has always been concerned to protect production by eliminating any manifestation of sexuality from the organization' (p. 92), they found that 'the evidence overwhelmingly tended to highlight the persistence and dominance of conventional forms of *men's* sexuality within organizations' (p. 93). Wendy Parkin undertook to study sexuality in residential care organizations as a particularly interesting example of the public/private divide in the treatment of sexuality in organizations. They represent 'an ambiguous organizational setting, straddling the public and private realms' (p. 123) in which sexuality is a constant factor and source of difficulties, but almost never officially treated in meetings, policy statements or training. The specific situation of lesbians in organizations and their strategies for maintaining their identities and developing careers was explored by Marny Hall. Deborah Sheppard focused on the strategies used by women managers to deal with the tension between feminine identity and male-based notions of business-like behaviour. She shows the ambiguity inherent in being seen as 'female': 'femaleness embodies sexuality which must be contained, but being seen as "unfemale", i.e. not sexually attractive or available to men (for example a lesbian) still means that a woman is perceived primarily in sexual terms' (p. 147). Rosemary Pringle's research on secretaries documented that 'despite the ideology that public and private are separate, workplaces do not actually manage to exclude the personal or sexual, and sexuality and family symbolism are an important part of modern authority structures' (p. 161). She illustrated how the boss-secretary relation 'need not be seen as an anomalous piece of traditionalism, or an incursion of the private sphere, but rather as a site of strategies of power in which sexuality is an important, though by no means the only, dimension' (p. 162). A particularly intriguing suggestion she makes is to go beyond the focus on coercive forms of sexuality to explore 'the ways in which sexual pleasure might be used to disrupt male rationality and to empower women' (p. 166).

There are several themes that are treated by the chapters in this book. The two most significant for the future development of organizational theory are the relationship between sexuality, gender and power, and the way the public and private aspects of identity relate to the structuring of work and society. The book succeeds in illustrating how complex these relationships are and how well dominant thought systems have succeeded in veiling them from sight. Maybe one of the reasons why the book falls far short of its goal, however, is that the language is strangely disembodied and dispassionate in spite of its very bodily subject. It is to be hoped that future work will make a major leap.