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On the Fireline: Living and Dying with Wildland Firefighters

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Weiner's book is a significant achievement. Whereas most of the literature on post-communist transformation focuses on macro-level factors, this book fills a void by illuminating the lived experiences of post-communist workers. The theoretical payoff for doing this is important: Weiner is able to offer an elegant explanation to the puzzling "quietness" of Czech workers by carefully showing the effects of the market discourse down to the individual level. Another positive attribute is the author's willingness to discuss seriously the work of East European scholars—a habit not routinely embraced by Western scholars of post-communism.

This is not to say, however, that the book is without its problems. For an account that concentrates on workers' identities, the role of the workplace in creating and maintaining these identities is largely neglected. Not considering the possibility that some of workers' identity is created and reproduced in the workplace leaves the book open to questions regarding the accuracy of the empirical story. For example, because most managers were employed by large multinationals, it is not impossible to imagine that they could have also learned self-reliance and independence from their colleagues and superiors. Another problem is the author's reluctance to extrapolate beyond the Czech case. We should not expect bold generalizations from a qualitative study. However, in a book of this caliber the expectation is that the author will at least try to show how the current analysis might be useful in understanding other cases.

These problems, however, do not significantly detract from the study's importance. Weiner has written a compelling account that will be of great interest for students of post-communism, especially those interested in gender, work and ideology.

On the Fireline: Living and Dying with Wildland Firefighters

By Matthew Desmond

University of Chicago Press. 2007. 369 pages. \$24 cloth, \$18 paper.

Reviewer: Steve G. Hoffman, *University at Buffalo, SUNY*

Turning a dissertation into a book is difficult enough. Matthew Desmond has upped the ante by doing this with his master's thesis. *On the Fireline* is an artfully written, richly detailed and highly sentimental ethnography of the author's summers home from college working as an Arizona wildland firefighter for the U.S. Forest Service. Desmond, a rural, white, working-class male, shares a similar demographic background as his fellow firefighters and arrives at his field site with three years of first-hand experience. This earns him the trust of his colleagues, which in turns gives him an insider's view on how firefighters make sense of their organizational culture and the risks they face. What Desmond accomplishes is both a thorough ethnographic portrait of the everyday milieu of wildland firefighting and a fine example of a Bourdieu-inspired, but American-styled, ethnography of habitus. It is an impressive contribution to a small but growing genre of research

that carefully documents the personal embodiment of organizational conduct within particular institutional settings. Furthermore, his arguments on class social reproduction echo those made in classic qualitative monographs of the working class, such as Willis's *Learning to Labor* and Lamont's *The Dignity of Working Men*.

The tale begins with a dramatic and perplexing state of affairs. Rick Lupe, a well-respected firefighter from another crew, has been killed in the line of duty. While the public commemoration of Lupe treats him as a fallen hero, Desmond is struck by his crewmates utterly blasé attitude toward the death. They assume it was Lupe's own fault, regardless of the available evidence. The analysis that follows is, in a sense, a carefully analyzed case study of what sort of organization creates indifference to the death of one's own. Along the way, we learn that firefighters tend to "view masculine aggression and courage as negative qualities," prizing self-restraint, competence and prudence instead. This is precisely the worldview the U.S. Forest Service wants its employees to hold, and it is systematically reinforced via established policy and procedure, training, formal and informal social exchange, the framing and dissemination of fatality reports, and in general, the incessant message that tragedies such as Lupe's are the result of the individual's incompetence.

Desmond deftly points out that members of organizations are not socialized *de novo*, but come to their work with a well-developed disposition for the type of work they will engage in. Adding to the ever growing list of habitus that scholars modify with a group- or occupation-specific adjective, Desmond refers to this pre-requisite rural, working-class disposition as a "country-masculine habitus."

Desmond's central theoretical intervention is a critique of how scholars have conceptualized the relationship between motivation, risk and masculinity. I did not find this part of his analysis particularly compelling. His appraisal of Goffman's discussion of masculinity and risk taking, taken from his famous essay, "Where the Action Is," is rather narrowly conceived—the willingness to routinely charge face-first into danger, motivated by the desire for social recognition and honor. A more charitable reading of Goffman's overall corpus would point out that he does treat the avoidance of embarrassment, a form of self-restraint, as the centerpiece of his analysis of conduct. Furthermore, Desmond does not consider a large body of historical scholarship on institutional conduct and masculinity, from such varied scholars as Norbert Elias, Gail Bederman and Raewyn Connell, which has repeatedly shown how modern Western ideologies of masculinity tend to prize shame, self-restraint and task-level competence above simplistic notions of courage in the face of danger.

Desmond's critique of masculinity and risk also sits uneasily with his argument that firefighters possess an "illuio of self-determinacy," a clunky phrase for the "belief that the uncontrollable force of wildfire is completely within firefighters' control and therefore devoid of danger." (14) Desmond suggests that by understanding the risk of their work as minimal, firefighters come to blame themselves for injuries and fatalities rather than the organizational and institutional con-

straints they operate within. It remains unclear to the reader how, on the one hand, wildland firefighters can value self-restraint and prudence in the face of danger, yet on the other, can possess an ideology that their work is not, in fact, dangerous.

Perhaps this analytic tension could be eased if we dig a bit deeper into Desmond's own rich evidence about the firefighters' views of God and Mother Nature. My reading of his data is that the members of Elk River lived in a remarkably magical world, filled with omniscient forces beyond human control. Fire is a central character in this story, very much alive and possessing its own internal logic. Desmond reserves his most loving and reverential prose for the flames. He also reports that many of his colleagues have been obsessed with fire from a young age. Desmond and his crewmates pine for fire, and gaze longingly when it is before them. One confesses to having committed arson while on duty, for the thrill of seeing it "light off," its captivating sights and smells, and the ensuing drama of the fight. Several of his subjects convey a deep deference to either, or both, Mother Nature and God. In the minds of many of Desmond's Elk River colleagues, then, these are the forces—not the Forest Service's rational planning, or urban encroachment, or the incompetence of the dead—that determine one's ultimate fate. Looked at from this vantage, the firefighters may report that their work is not dangerous because they ultimately have no control over their fate. This would suggest that side-by-side with an illu^sio of self-determinacy, then, we need to theorize an illu^sio of fatalism.

I suspect that a theory of deference to omniscient forces, whether supernatural or all-too-natural, is in the offing here, in the sense that people may hold contradictory positions on organizational risk and human efficacy when ultimate consequences are attributed to omniscient powers. While a competent firefighter must do her or his best to preserve life on the fire line, after God, Mother Nature or some other omniscient power decides fate, individual and organizational efficacy are understood to be superfluous. Taking omniscient forces seriously, of course, is not readily within the repertoire of Bourdiean-inspired analyses of organizational conduct. More classic traditions, particularly Durkheimian and Weberian traditions, might more readily point toward a theory of deference to omniscient powers as a key factor in the social organization of high-risk occupations.

The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools and Societies

By Scott E. Page

Princeton University Press. 2007. 424 pages. \$27.95 cloth.

Reviewer: John C. Scott, *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

Where do you store your ketchup, in the refrigerator or in the cupboard? Ketchup storage illustrates a problem of coordination when people do things differently. People don't much care how the condiment is stored; they just want to find it. However,