

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/174489/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Stoyanova Russell, Dimitrinka 2024. Media review: dramas of dignity: cleaners in the corporate underworld of Berlin [Book Review]. *Organization Studies* 10.1177/01708406241305751

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1177/01708406241305751>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies. See <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.





Media Review: Dramas of Dignity: Cleaners in the Corporate Underworld of Berlin

Journal:	<i>Organization Studies</i>
Manuscript ID	OS-24-0430.R2
Manuscript Type:	Media Review
Keywords:	media review, dirty work, dignity
Abstract:	

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

SCHOLARONE™
Manuscripts

1
2
3 **Media review: Dramas of Dignity**
4

5
6 **Jana Costas**
7

8 **Dramas of Dignity: cleaners in the corporate underworld of Berlin**
9

10 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 195 pp.
11

12
13 **Reviewed by:** Dimitrinka Stoyanova Russell, *Cardiff University, Cardiff Business School, UK*
14
15
16
17

18 Ever wondered what the underworld of a glamorous business centre looks like? What is the
19 light and what the air is like? And what is the life and social micro-cosmos of those working
20 there? Where they drink their coffee and what are their aspirations, attitudes, relationships,
21 homes and histories? Jana Costas' book *Dramas of Dignity: cleaners in the corporate*
22 *underworld of Berlin* gives an insightful and evocative answer to this. The book is an
23 ethnography of the underworld of invisible urban labourers: cleaners in the private designer
24 micro-city of Potsdamer Platz in Berlin. Costas illuminates for us a hidden organisational space
25 inhabited by low status strangers to the upper world. It provides rich detail of the material
26 conditions of the cleaners' work but also interrogates the ways these workers navigate their
27 social interactions, both internal and external to their underworld. Relationships between
28 workers and alliances of workers, and between the inhabitants of the 'under' and the 'upper
29 world' depict the complex and, at times, contradictory maze of such underworld social matrix.
30 Along the way, the reader also has a peek into controversial and less glamorous aspects of
31 contemporary German society.
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50

51 The book offers an insider look into an unknown yet important space of organisational life,
52 the 'underworld': literally as well as figuratively. Organization scholars would appreciate the
53 privileged access to such invisible space of an otherwise glamorous urban symbol, Potsdamer
54 Platz in Berlin. The book draws a multi-coloured picture of what working as a cleaner is
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 experienced like, both physically but also personally and socially. An asset of the approach is
4
5 the rich contextualising of the life in the underworld: the discussion of relationships beyond
6
7 the specific workplace, out in the glamour of the upperworld but also beyond, in the urban
8
9 areas workers come from (and return to at night), and the ways in which their wider social
10
11 milieu shapes relationships in the belly of the designer micro-city.
12
13

14
15 The ethnography is concerned with key areas of particular interest to organization scholars:
16
17 less privileged and low-skilled work combined with exploration of the ways dignity is sought
18
19 and fought. But it goes beyond a mere analysis of the cleaners' work as dirty and undesirable.
20
21 It illuminates the meanings workers attach to it and the ways in which they stand their ground
22
23 to make it count in their personal aspirations and social relations. It is this balance in the
24
25 richness and complexity of the work and non-work that Costas manages to convey so well.
26
27

28
29 The book consists of six chapters. Chapter one sets the physical space that provides context
30
31 for the study: the commercial and residential complex of Potsdamer Platz with its material
32
33 and social divisions. The focus is on the 'underworld': the windowless stuffy corridors and
34
35 smelly staff spaces constituting the dedicated cleaners' space. The set up is evocative and
36
37 abundant in detail (who would have thought mops are worth strategizing over to get?) and
38
39 the reader is immersed in the labyrinths of spaces and quirks of the invisible from the surface:
40
41 corridors, staircases and doors of the below level building.
42
43
44
45

46
47 Chapter two introduces us to the work of cleaners: what they do, how they train, what is their
48
49 labour market like, and reinforces the notion of cleaning as a stigmatized type of work: not
50
51 only because it involves manipulating dirt but also through being perceived as unskilled. In
52
53 this chapter we also get to know the four main characters Costas focuses on in the narrative:
54
55 chosen for exemplifying not just typical cleaners' profiles but also providing a snapshot of key
56
57 social groups of the German society that supply the workforce for such low-status jobs. These
58
59
60

1
2
3 are: Alex, a second-year cleaner trainee who has come through the usual occupational path,
4
5 and whose family have also worked as cleaners; Ali, a Turkish immigrant; Louisa, a (former
6
7 middle-class) woman from Mozambique who hardly speaks any German, and Marcel, an
8
9 intimidating but competent cleaner with a criminal past. In the course of the chapter, we get
10
11 to know them quite well: their physical appearance, their habits, what their characters and
12
13 tempers are like, how the others perceive and react to them and how they engage with the
14
15 job of cleaning. We also get to know Costas a bit, in their position as a researcher but also, to
16
17 an extent, an insider.

18
19
20
21
22 Chapter three discusses 'dirt' as a feature of work, which is a stimulus for a complex range of
23
24 responses and experiences. Cleaning, e.g. working with dirt is 'sweat, shame, disgust, pride
25
26 and fun' and Costas manages to bring these to life through vivid and detailed narratives and
27
28 stories, in which the researcher's own experience merges with this of their co-workers. It is
29
30 astonishing how diverse and complex handling dirt can be!

31
32
33
34
35 In Chapter four the reader is introduced to the personal and social dynamics amongst
36
37 cleaners. Observations and incidents are shared to build a picture of individual and group
38
39 reactions, philosophies and pursuits. We understand that the underworld is not a
40
41 straightforward social and organizational space: there is a complex social organisation,
42
43 hierarchies and prejudices existing among cleaners. Some of these are more personal, but
44
45 most are reflections of the world beyond the 'minus level'. These are not just shared but also
46
47 reproduced and negotiated, and Costas manages with great insight and sensitivity to explore
48
49 the nuances of wider social background, gender and aspirations in the shaping and
50
51 maintaining such relationships.

52
53
54
55
56 Chapter five details interactions with the 'upperworld' and introduces one of the main notions
57
58 of the book: that of dignity in and through low- skilled and low-status work. When in the upper
59
60

1
2
3 world, cleaners are vulnerable to being undermined or openly disrespected, but their active
4
5 engagement or disengagement is also a declared position. Cleaners lack the (assumed)
6
7 reverence towards white collar, skilled inhabitants of the upper world but are also interested
8
9 in what happens in that world. Chapter six discusses surveillance: its facets, effects and
10
11 cleaners' responses to it. Surveillance is resisted (thankfully!) but this does not result in a job
12
13 badly done. After all, it is the pursuit of dignity in and of the work that guides the cleaners of
14
15 Potsdamer Platz. The final chapter, seven, provides some reflections around dignity in such
16
17 dirty, low-status work and the contemporary society and asks the question of whether there
18
19 might be a shift towards a servant society.
20
21
22
23
24

25
26 Written in the traditions of rich ethnography-based narratives (e.g., Orr, 1996; Barley and
27
28 Kunda, 2011), the book is accessibly written and provides abundant and evocative detail of
29
30 hidden and obscure labour and labourers. Cleaners in the underworld are 'invisible'; their
31
32 work is dirty and unrecognised. Even if we know they exist, we do not actually know them.
33
34 They are a diverse gathering of citizens, and they differ in backgrounds, social aspirations,
35
36 language skills and tastes. Cleaners navigate complex social, material, personal tensions and
37
38 relationships while engaging with other social strata in the luxury mini-city. Jana Costas
39
40 narrates engagingly the experiences, social sub-structures, and relations cleaners have with
41
42 both co-workers and 'upperworld'-ers. Being physically situated in the stuffy, confusing maze
43
44 of the urban underground, cleaners are positioned and cast as the opposite of the glamorous
45
46 upper-world. The juxtaposition of 'upper' and 'under' however goes beyond the 'upstairs,
47
48 downstairs' social split. Cleaners occupy a 'minus' space, which detaches them further from
49
50 the 'visible' service economy. And yet, their world is not one-dimensional: it has its
51
52 hierarchies, alliances, struggles, rivalries, distinctions and ambitions. The book explains and
53
54 illuminates them compellingly. The narratives manage to tease out social and organisational
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 complexities particularly well without losing sight of the personal, emotional and the human.

4
5 The characters are vivid and authentic; and there is a valuable ‘honesty’ in elucidating the
6
7 realities of their work as well as their attitude to it.
8
9

10 The notion of ‘dignity’ is central to the narrative, and it is around this notion that the
11
12 relationships and dynamic interactions in the underworld revolve. Indeed, for the cleaners at
13
14 the bottom of corporate Berlin, ‘work also represents ... a portal to dignity’ (p. 10). Cleaners’
15
16 work involves dirt, often in extreme and repulsive forms, and one way of looking for dignity
17
18 is in their dealing with it. Handling dirt, contrary to common perception, involves skills,
19
20 competence and a degree of gumption. Applying these is a source of dignity. This insight and
21
22 interpretation of dignity directly contributes to a recent interest within *Organization Studies*,
23
24 the multiple ways in which dignity features to shape, develop and organise obscure
25
26 organizational spaces: to control low skilled workers (Varman, Al-Amoudi & Skålen, 2023) or
27
28 to act as a powerful drive for refugees (Musa, 2023). Costas’ book advances this by showing
29
30 the nuanced understanding and the nuanced dynamics in striving, negotiating and coping
31
32 with the ‘dramas of dignity’. The sense of agency through work is illuminating. An important
33
34 element is that dignity here is analysed both within and beyond the social matrix of the
35
36 underworld, thus showing a more holistic and contextually-driven understanding of dignity,
37
38 and of the resources available to strive for it and enforce it in low-skilled work.
39
40
41
42
43
44
45

46 In exploring these interrelated elements of the ‘dramas of dignity’, Costas prioritises her
47
48 participants and their voices. With sensitivity and candid detail, the author portrays and
49
50 conveys the sometimes controversial, sexist or racist, world views and social characters of the
51
52 inhabitants of the underworld. Yet, the reader also subtly finds out about the author’s own
53
54 challenges in being a part of this social underworld: a stolen jacket, being locked out on a
55
56 staircase, hesitation to clean extreme dirt or feeling intimidated by the ex-criminal colleague.
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 While Costas acknowledges this (dis)balance as a conscious choice in the Appendix, one
4
5 almost wishes to read more about the personal responses and inner struggles of a fellow-
6
7 academic in such a context.
8
9

10 The theorising of the above is left aside, and the concluding narrative stays on the meaning
11
12 and dignity cleaners find in their work. The reader will perhaps oscillate (as I have) between
13
14 the desire to read a more complete interpretation and statement of where Costas sees this
15
16 rich insight contributing in more abstract academic terms and being left with their own
17
18 responses and reflections of the compelling and nuanced insight. And while organizational
19
20 scholars may wish and divide in how much theorising should have been provided to them by
21
22 the author, somehow surprisingly, in the end Costas focuses on interpreting the meaning of
23
24 two images found along the labyrinth of underground corridors. It is, after all, meant to
25
26 stimulate the scholarly reader.
27
28
29
30
31

32 Such work enchants, provokes, and illuminates the complexities of a whole new space of
33
34 (previously) invisible characters and their engagement with their stigmatized work, with one
35
36 another and the wider society. The book can serve as an empirical base for feeding into larger
37
38 debates surrounding low-status employment, theorising dirty work and dignity at work.
39
40 Costas shows us not only how much more complex cleaners' dirty work is, but also how much
41
42 more complex cleaners' engagement with it is, especially in striving to actively establish
43
44 dignity in the dramas of their social matrix and relationships with their employer and the
45
46 visible upper world. Future work can add a more conceptual advancement of this. In my view,
47
48 the book would also provoke further appetite among organization scholars for interrogating
49
50 pockets of contrasting parallel workplaces beyond our existing assumptions and partial
51
52 knowledge, and illuminate further complexities of obscure, invisible and stigmatized
53
54 organizational spaces.
55
56
57
58
59
60

References

Barley, Stephen. & Kunda, Gideon. (2011). *Gurus, hired guns, and warm bodies: Itinerant experts in a knowledge economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Orr, Julian E. (1996) *Talking about machines: An ethnography of a modern job*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press .

Varman, Rohit, Al-Amoudi, Ismael, & Skålén, Per. (2023). Workplace Humiliation and the Organization of Domestic Work. *Organization Studies*, 44(11), 1853-1877.

Musa, SM. (2023). Organizing for Dignity. *Organization Studies*, 44(2), 320-323.