

Press, E. (2021). *Dirty Work: Essential Jobs and the Hidden Toll of Inequality in America*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux

Review by Nathaniel Heggins Bryant

The most recent book by American journalist Eyal Press, his 2021 *Dirty Work: Essential Jobs and the Hidden Toll of Inequality in America* might sound like the latest in a long line of popular exposés that show average people doing a variety of necessary, physically taxing, underappreciated labor, usually the kind that leaves workers unhealthy, exhausted, and soiled. In some ways, and in some chapters, that is certainly true, but, on the whole, readers should not expect Press's book to function like the Mike Rowe television series *Dirty Jobs* (2005-2012) or *Somebody's Gotta Do It* (2014-2016).

Instead, the 'dirty work' that Press examines is as much about individual shame, social stigma, and existential pollution as it is about dirty laboring bodies. Drawing on sociology, psychology, economics, philosophy, labor studies, and a wide variety of investigative reports, he investigates four large arenas of essential but often invisible contemporary labor, much of it oriented around different facets of violence work.

Part I, titled 'Behind the Walls,' explores current conditions in US jails and prisons, particularly in the way these institutions have become warehouses for people with untreated mental health issues. Part II: Behind the Screens, is a powerful examination of the lives of unmanned drone operators in the US's recent wars abroad. Press demonstrates how a broad public and political desire to remove American soldiers from killing fields gave rise to unmanned combat and, unfortunately, to new, underappreciated forms of moral injury to those operators. Part III: On the Kill Floors is perhaps the most familiar section of the book to people within labor studies; in it Press testifies to the lives, labor, and ongoing struggles of meatpacking workers, many of whom are undocumented. Part IV: The Metabolism of the Modern World, shifts gears one more time as Press indicts the polluting effects of resource extraction and the energy sector, focusing on the 2010 British Petroleum Deepwater disaster and the environmental and social aftermath, and then concluding with a brief but sharply focused discussion of the global tech industry's dirtier dimensions, including corporate surveillance and data mining.

What unites these seemingly disparate forms of work, what makes them 'dirty,' is one of Press's key contributions. In the introduction he draws on the ideas of Everett Hughes, who after World War II sought to understand why so many Germans not only stood aside but even tacitly approved of the Nazi extermination of Jews, Roma, and other socially undesirable people. Dirty work, in this historical example, was (to quote Press), 'unethical activity that was delegated to certain agents and then conveniently disavowed. Far from rogue actors, the perpetrators to whom this work was allotted had an 'unconscious mandate' from society' (p. 5). From this early definition Press painstakingly lays bare the ways we encounter similar cycles of public exigence for and subsequent repudiation of the laborers engaged in forms of violence that benefit us greatly.

The bind, of course, is that each one of these industries often employs people already marginalized who engage in necessary but morally repugnant and often physically *and* spiritually degraded and degrading

labor because the work is widely understood, at the outset, to be beneath most peoples' basic dignity. Many of the laborers are working- or poverty-class people of color in rural spaces, far removed from centers of power and policy making. What usually happens is familiar to those steeped in labor and working-class studies: Press illustrates multiple times a public relations cycle wherein investigations into the spaces of this dirty work engender public outrage that is nearly always directed at the workers themselves. The jobs they do are 'essential' precisely because a vast majority of Americans want, to cite his first example, an overtly punitive judicial system with long prison sentences and, at the same time, continually vote in politicians who vow to slash state budgets for adequate penal facilities, let alone mental health care. This same public later decries the logical results of their very own social desires when inmates are abused, neglected, or killed by guards, while the guards themselves rightly feel stigmatized for working in underfunded, under-resourced systems that do exactly what the broader public expects and 'perhaps even secretly desire[s]' (p. 88).

These dirty workers are invisible, forgotten, except when what they actually do is made public from time to time, at which point, they draw our ire, scorn, and opprobrium. As Press convincingly makes clear, there is very little rinsing and repeating for these dirty jobs; the moral stains and pollution run too deep. And this is not a leftist or liberal treatise, either, because the author is fully cognizant of the ways that well-meaning participation in animal rights, anti-war, or climate change activism often unwittingly contribute to a cycle of outrage that winds up further stigmatizing the workers carrying out these broad social mandates.

Outside of Hughes's idea and term, Press leans heavily on a handful of other familiar interlocutors in *Dirty Work*. These include the sociologist Erving Goffman and his ideas about stigma. He also employs the ideas of clinical psychiatrist Jonathan Shay, whose groundbreaking 1994 book *Achilles in Vietnam* introduced the idea of 'moral injury' to describe the experience of Vietnam War veterans and their ongoing, often debilitating sense of shame and grief in participating in things they knew to be ethically wrong. Press deftly recontextualizes these ideas in a timely and contemporary work that helps to identify and name familiar but nevertheless damaging patterns that marginalize and victimize some of the most precariously positioned workers in the United States.

Finally, this is one of the first books I have encountered that testifies to the ongoing and as-yet unresolved impacts that the COVID-19 global pandemic has had on already difficult work. The portraits that Press paints of 'essential' prison guards and undocumented slaughterhouse workers in an era of Trump and the coronavirus are timely, devastating, and gutting. This is doubly true because these portraits of everyday people are informed by Press's careful documentation of the political and economic machinery, or cynical machinations, maintained to ensure that guards and inmates bear the burden of their own infections, that meatpacking factories remain open for business despite the clear and present danger these spaces have for contributing to the spread of viruses.

Reviewer Bio

Nathaniel Heggins Bryant is Assistant Professor of English at California State University, Chico. He is the author of several articles dealing with the intersection of labor studies, prison studies, and prison writing on individuals like George Jackson and Caryl Chessman. Recently he served as the Working-Class Studies Association secretary and is also the secretary for his campus chapter of the California Faculty Association, the labor union representing faculty, counselors, librarians, and coaches in the CSU system.