THE ROAD TO HELL: WORKER HEALTH, SAFETY AND WELLBEING WITHIN UK CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY PRACTICES

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Construction work is often unsafe, unhealthy and bad for worker wellbeing. In the UK governments and companies have sought to address this, the former through legislation the latter through their compliance, and more recently through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) remit. Yet these developments have brought with them challenges of commodification with worker health enhancement and wellbeing initiatives readily packaged to support the corporate brand. When viewed through a Marxist lens such commodification increases in complexity as the fundamental conflict between capitalism and worker HSW is revealed, suggesting that a ‘business case’ for worker HSW can never truly be made and HSW CSR initiatives remain inevitably superficial, as construction work inevitably exploits its workers and their HSW. Contemporary CSR fails to acknowledge these characteristics of the capitalist system and instead, perhaps more dangerously, is contributing to the illusion that construction worker HSW has never been better taken care of. This paper challenges the ideas of benevolent business practice, decries the notion of CSR within the contemporary neo-liberal doctrine, and questions whether construction should not be doing better in terms of ‘true’ CSR within its hazardous and harmful operations?

Keywords: business case, Corporate Social Responsibility, health, Marxism, wellbeing, CSR

INTRODUCTION

Construction work is often unsafe, unhealthy and bad for worker wellbeing. In the UK, governments and large construction contractors have sought to address this, the former through legislation the latter through compliance and various management systems. Although there have been considerable improvements in UK construction site safety over recent years, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE 2017) still notes that ‘… a number of serious ill-health issues continue to affect construction workers.’ Available figures from 2014/15 show that construction workers have rates of occupationally related illness that are statistically significantly higher than for workers in any other industry, including many specific illnesses such as work-related musculoskeletal disorders, lung problems and occupational cancers (HSE 2015). Most recently, public health has grown in prominence within the construction industry (Sherratt 2015), with diets, wellbeing and

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lifestyles becoming a new area of focus as large contractors have adopted a ‘partnership’ role with the UK government, taking on responsibilities for their worker’s health beyond the site hoardings and promoting general wellbeing on their sites. This is arguably a positive move, as construction workers are often more unhealthy than most, for example their consumption of drink and illicit drugs is also statistically significantly higher than those working in other comparable high-hazard industries (Tan and Lloyd 2016).

Yet such unhealthy ‘symptoms’ are closely linked to the ‘social determinants of health’; the reasons why people drink or take drugs or eat to excess (Wilkinson and Marmot 2003), which can themselves be associated with more fundamental ‘causes’ including: work related stress (Fardhosseini and Esmaeili 2016), unsocial work patterns, long travel and abnormal shifts (Miller et al., 2007), remote job locations (Pinto et al., 2011), short term employment and job insecurity (Frone 2013). That this list is simply a description of ‘normal’ UK construction industry operations is rightly its own cause for concern (Sherratt 2016a), but despite good intentions, worker wellbeing programmes on construction sites all too often follow the template of the vast majority of such benevolent interventions (Sherratt 2016a); focusing on superficial symptoms, rather than seeking to address any more systemic or deep-rooted underlying causes (Conrad 2005).

Indeed, it has been suggested that such superficiality is itself a symptom of the growing influence of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) on construction health, safety and wellbeing (HSW). The ways in which this influence has led to challenges of the commodification of worker HSW, health enhancement and wellbeing initiatives readily packaged and used to support the corporate brand and increase organisational attractiveness, has been explored in detail elsewhere (see Rawlinson and Farrell 2010; Sherratt 2015; Sherratt 2016a). The repackaging of HSW in this way, through corporate propaganda, allows companies to present activities or offerings as evidence of benevolence and pastoral care of their workers, whilst fundamental conflicts between construction work and worker HSW remain hidden. This paper draws on history, economics and politics to critically explore CSR, and specifically worker HSW, mobilising Marx to provide a timely reminder of the fundamental conflicts at play within our contemporary contexts. In this way we challenge the ideas of benevolent business practice, decry the very notion of CSR within the contemporary neo-liberal doctrine, and question whether construction should not be doing better in terms of ‘true’ CSR within its hazardous and harmful operations.

UNPACKING WORKER HEALTH, SAFETY AND WELLBEING

To begin this process, due consideration of the way worker HSW ‘works’ within contemporary contexts should be made. Indeed, as history, economics and politics all have their roles to play, a considered archaeology of their influences is first presented here, albeit within the constraints of this paper. Marxist theory has been mobilised to support this archaeological analysis, and to develop a holistic critique of construction worker HSW and the influence of CSR on contemporary practice.

Ethics, Morals and God: A Very Brief History of UK HSW Legislation

One of the most fundamental arguments for the prioritisation of worker HSW in any workplace is grounded in ethics and morality. Such principles are highly personal, although they have also been realised at the corporate level as ‘professional ethics’, one of the key drivers of CSR. This is a relationship with a considerable history, and can readily be traced back to the industrial revolution and the much more prominent role religion then played in UK society. Indeed, the first legislated attempt to improve the
Health and safety of the newly-industrialised UK workforce was made through the first 'Factory Act', the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act of 1802 (Putson 2013; Eaves 2014), which sought to set minimum standards for cleanliness, fresh air and care for the apprentices, but also the requirement that apprentices be ‘instructed and examined in the Principles of Christian Religion’; their morality, or rather conformity to the dominant doctrine, considered to be of equal value to their health.

It was the raising of awareness by people horrified at the conditions facing those working in the newly industrialised areas of Britain that formed the foundations of corporate pastoral care amongst the nascent industrial capitalists of the time. At its best, such gestures led to developments such as the high-quality housing estate of Bourneville, constructed by the Cadbury brothers (both Quakers) for their chocolate factory workforce. Yet such philanthropy was by no means common practice, and although specific examples remain, these actions remain dwarfed by the acts of indifference displayed by the vast majority of employers to their workforce when one considers the speed and magnitude of industrialisation in the UK at that time. A much more realistic picture of the contemporaneous development of worker HSW can be found in the records of the Houses of Parliaments and Lords, as the 1802 Act and those that followed were furiously debated. Indeed, it is more than a little unsettling to find challenges to worker HSW in the records of over one hundred years ago that still echo loudly today. For despite those who spoke of ‘… the living testimony which the pallid faces and distorted limbs of the wretched victims of the system, who had been brought before them presented.’ (Strickland, HC Deb 28 Feb 1833 Vol 15 cc 1293-9), there were many who argued instead that any such legislation would constrain local and national productivity, and threaten the economic position of the UK on the world stage. Support of worker HSW was therefore often tempered with the caveat that parliament needed to ‘… take care to adopt no step that may be fatal to commerce and manufactures’ (Graham, HC Deb 15 March 1844 Vol 73 cc1073-155). The debates between productivity and worker HSW have very long shadows, and can still be readily identified within the dominant discourses of safety found on the UK construction sites of the twenty first century (Sherratt 2016b).

A significant milestone of the industrial revolution, worthy of mention here, was the presentation of the People’s Charter to the House of Commons in 1842. Signed by over 3 million from the ‘industrious classes’ of the UK, the Charter directly challenged the government to better fulfil its role as the representation of ‘the people’, its contents arguing that: ‘… the hours of labour, particularly of the factory workers, are protracted beyond the limits of human endurance, and that the wages earned, after unnatural application to toil in heated and unhealthy workshops, are inadequate to sustain the bodily strength, and supply those comforts which are so imperative after an excessive waste of physical energy.’ (HC Deb 02 May 1842 Vol 62 cc1373-81). Production had become valued higher than people, and the unwillingness of parliament to legislate effective controls clearly demonstrated their prioritisation of industrial outputs over worker HSW. Yet despite this intervention, the influential discourses of industrialisation, progress, growth and development had already firmly established themselves in UK parliament by the mid nineteenth century, although profit was less prominent in this particular context, perhaps appearing a less seemly subject for discussion amongst those who were personally benefiting from its creation.

**Mobilising Marx I**

The historical positioning of worker HSW as a hindrance to the growth of industrialisation and capital within the UK is not all that surprising. Indeed, Marx (1867
[1977:393]) was particularly damning of the developments of early UK HSW legislation, noting how the capitalists were able to ‘annul the whole Factory Act, not only in the spirit, but in the letter’ in his considerations of how management of the working day and other constraints were readily manipulated to their benefit and worker exploitation.

Indeed, when viewed through a Marxist lens, the construction worker is even more maltreated, even abused, when their HSW is considered. Within the capitalist mode of production, it is the workers' labour that produces not only the final commodity but also the surplus value, or profit, that then enables the capitalist to continue in their operations (Marx 1867 [1977:975]). There is a continued reliance on construction workers as integral to the process of production in the creation of built environment commodities, yet this exchange goes beyond simple labour. As even contemporary statistics of poor HSW still demonstrate, it is evident that worker HSW is also exchanged during construction work, in part for a wage but also in the contribution it inevitably makes to surplus value, or profit. As revealed through the Marxist consideration of dialectical materialism, worker HSW is therefore also commodified through this process, via the commodification of labour, and so also inevitably exploited within this system for others' gain.

Within construction work it is also all too evident that the 'use-value' of this commodity of worker HSW is highly significant, being twofold and affecting both the workers ability to continue to carry out what is often hard and demanding work, but also their own individual ability to employ it for their own benefit and enjoyment in their own time. Construction workers are therefore not only exploited during the process of production itself, but remain so after work has ceased. Their HSW is readily commodified and 'used up' by their employers during this process, but it is they who have to take the consequences of this exploitation home with them each day.

The Neoliberal Context

The emergence of the neoliberal paradigm in the 1980s, a paradigm that believes the needs of society are best met by ‘the market’ and therefore places market forces at the centre of any discussion of the well-being of society, has inevitable influences on both economic and political practices as well as worker HSW. The relocation of production (globalisation) by large corporations to places where wages are low, working conditions poor and worker unions non-existent, readily reveals the inherent flaws and the internal contradictions found within the capitalist mode of production regarding worker-capitalist interests (Marx 1867[1977:258]).

Within this neoliberal context, the dominant discourses established in the mid c.19 can still be heard; those of progress, development and economic growth as necessary, nay vital, for our continued existence. One clear effect of this agenda on UK construction was its impact on the structure of the workforce. In efforts to reduce costs and maximise surplus value, more 'flexible' ways of working were adopted and companies disposed of their in-house workforce, who were not only expensive but also protected by employment laws requiring such 'luxuries' as sick pay and pensions. Instead the industry turned to sub-contracting, assisted by the 'institutionalised incentivisation' of the workers to become happily self-employed to secure tax breaks (see Green 2009 for a much more detailed discussion of these developments). This shift to supply chains also allowed the industry to take advantage of cheaper migrant labour, something now very familiar to construction work both in the UK and all across the world.

A further consequence of this change to the construction workforce was the significant weakening, if not almost total destruction, of any collective bargaining power of the
workers. It needs to be constantly borne in mind that all of the positive changes in worker conditions from the period of the Industrial Revolution to the present came about through bottom-up pressure in the form of (often illegal) organised worker unions. The policies of neoliberalism have done much to undermine the capacity of workers to combine to fight for better working conditions through outsourcing of jobs along now-familiar subcontracted supply-chains, to sourcing workers from countries where unions are illegal or suppressed and, more subtly, by curtailing through incremental yet impactful changes in industrial relations legislation (Green 2009). The ability of the people to create one unified voice, as they did in the presentation of the People's Charter of 1842, to seek improvements to worker HSW is arguably now little more than a memory.

Yet any increase in subcontracting and 'self-employment' also impacts worker HSW. Consequences include reductions in investment in safety training and equipment, as profits are squeezed at each level of the supply chain, as well as a lack of commitment to safety on sites from a fragmented workforce, resulting in increased problems for safety management (Lingard and Rowlinson 2005) and a barrier to the development of a coherent safety culture (Clarke 2003, cited in Green 2009: 32). Furthermore, the short term and uncertain employment this structuring brings is one of the social determinants of health, negatively impacting worker security and their consequential wellbeing. Whilst the ongoing exploitation of migrant worker HSW is well documented elsewhere (see for example work by the Centre for Corporate Accountability 2009), it remains worthy of note here, not least because of its frequent contraventions of 'professional ethics' in practice (see Amnesty International 2016 for a particularly fine example).

It is within this context, where profits and markets are prioritised over worker HSW, that morals and ethics have made some attempts to regain a foothold. By seeking to harmonise between the two, the 'business case' for worker HSW has often been, or, more specifically, has attempted to be made.

THE BUSINESS CASE

The Business Case for Worker HSW

A direct consequence of the dominant 'market' discourses is the need to ‘… conform [to] the omnipotent ‘business case’” (Green 2009:36). Indeed, all corporate and governmental investments, including those for benevolent causes, now require a business case to demonstrate their 'value'. Even academic research is not exempt, and needs to justify itself through 'impact', using essentially the same parameters.

It could be expected that worker HSW should be quite a straightforward business case to make; it can be readily linked to a significant volume of management theory that tells us healthy, and happy workers are more productive (e.g. Sgroi 2015). You certainly cannot build with a workforce that is unwell, injured, maimed or even dead, and, of course, morally and ethically, it is the right thing to do. Consequentially, there has been an ongoing quest to empirically prove the business case for worker HSW, including within construction HSW research. Yet to the best of the authors' knowledge, so far this quest has failed. Although reference is often made to 'the business case' within safety management literature, the evidence is itself lacking. For example although Tymvios and Gambatese (2016) found the ‘business case’ this to be the best method by which to promote Prevention through Design for clients, the case study they provided as 'business case evidence' was that of improvements in HSW for the completed facility's workers, not for those who constructed it. Indeed, that this research enquired of clients, contractors, architects and engineers would also suggest a familiarity with and therefore
unquestioning conformity to the business case ideal in practice. Others are simply optimistic, indeed Bell et al., (2016) note that ‘… it is currently difficult to make a convincing business case or plan for the introduction of well-being … strategies in construction.’ Here the discourse is more nuanced, the suggestion made that there certainly will be a time it can be made in the future, just not right now, but as both examples suggest, the business case must eventually be able to be made for worker HSW, not least because it's the right thing to do, right?

**Mobilising Marx II**

Wrong.

As demonstrated above, worker HSW is necessarily commodified by contemporary construction production practices; it is inevitably used up in the system. Surplus value cannot be generated in the construction industry without such exploitation of workers, and without the generation of surplus value, the capitalist mode of production itself collapses. Therefore, any desire to present 'the business case for worker HSW' immediately hits an internal contradiction in the system (Marx [181867 [1977]), an inevitable and fundamental conflict between capitalism and worker HSW, and one that cannot be resolved with recourse back to the system itself.

Indeed, there is far more empirical evidence to support this 'conflict argument' that there is for any business case for worker HSW. Most academic HSW research within the construction industry actually finds just two problematic root causes: time and money. Given that within the construction context time also equals money, it is really just all about money, or rather the maximisation of surplus value within this mode of production. Whether it is so baldly stated as such (Sherratt 2016b:184) or couched in more pleasant terms, such as suggestions for additional worker training, better equipment, or better worker welfare (all of which of course also cost money), often depends on who funded the research in the first place.

**The Business Case against Worker HSW**

As shown, to suggest that there can ever be a 'business case for worker HSW' within the contemporary construction industry context is simply nonsensical. It is a myth that we really want to believe in, because morals and ethics tells us we should, but this bears no relationship to the way the world actually works. Given this analysis, we should not be at all surprised that in the UK construction remains a key focus of the Health and Safety Executive, and perhaps why the notion that it is 'inherently dangerous' perpetuates.

It would actually be far easier to produce a business case against worker HSW, particularly in the construction industry, where the commodity of their HSW plays such a significant role in the maximisation of surplus value. Yet would this inherent contradiction, such blatant exploitation of the workforce, not mean we would inevitably one day run out of workers? Well, the significant skills shortage currently being experienced by UK construction (CITB 2016) certainly agrees with that prediction; the perception of construction work as inherently 'dangerous' frequently cited as a barrier to recruitment in the trades (Chan and Connolly 2006). Yet the neoliberal paradigm had a solution, and for the UK this was in part facilitated by the free movement of labour throughout the European Union, a move that further undermined the worker’s ability to organise whilst strengthening the power of organised capital. The EU was readily able to provide the UK with another workforce all too willing to sacrifice their HSW to the construction of commodities within a country with the money, or perhaps more accurately with the mechanisms to create the money through a debt fuelled bubble to pay for them.
Indeed, with the BREXIT referendum of 2016 that this 'Band-Aid' workforce may no longer be a viable solution, and UK construction industry capitalists were only too quick to clearly state their Pro-Remain position, arguing that 'free movement is the cornerstone of the UK construction industry's success' (Builder and Engineer 2016). Which when you are continually exploiting workers and their commodified HSW to the point of their inability to participate in the process altogether, could actually be considered something of an understatement.

**CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

However, a solution has emerged to help smooth over these wrinkles, stutters and other unpleasant problems inherent in the capitalist mode of production with relation to construction workers HSW, and that solution is CSR. CSR enables us to cling firmly to morals and ethics, or the ideas of them at least, because at its very heart is the idea of ‘doing good to do good’ which will in turn help companies ‘do good to do well’ (Brès and Gond 2014). It fits beautifully within the neoliberal paradigm, transforming organisations from ‘…perceived evil empires to ‘partners’ (Whitehouse 2003:303), keen to demonstrate that they are committed to behaving ethically and improving the quality of life for the workforce (Baptiste 2008).

For many years construction worker HSW was a clear priority in the industry, yet in the last decade it has been readily subsumed into the realm of CSR (Rawlinson and Farrell 2010). Such an approach could perhaps be considered 'progress', to draw on an appropriate discourse, as where else could doing the right thing go? What is construction worker HSW if not the responsibility of the construction capitalists? Indeed, improvements in worker HSW have been linked to CSR, although the empirical evidence for this remains as elusive and ethereal as that provided for the business case. Indeed, the CSR approach to worker HSW within the construction industry has met with robust challenge, corporate activities to promote worker HSW found to focus on superficial prizes, awards and events rather than any fundamental changes to work practices or structuring (Sherratt 2016a).

**Mobilising Marx III**

The final consideration of Marx's thinking is here made by mobilising his aphorism of tragedy and farce (Marx 1852); it has already been demonstrated that worker HSW is the tragedy, their exploitation within the capitalist mode of production augmented by the commodification of their HSW. It is now suggested that CSR is the farce; that there could ever be any kind of business case for worker HSW has already been shown to be paradoxical, and so has resulted in governments and companies turning instead to superficial worker HSW initiatives and programmes under the CSR umbrella in attempts to address the inherent inequalities within the system. Ironically, this creates yet a further manipulation of the workers; the rebranding and reuse of their already commodified HSW through CSR, utilised as a corporate enhancement, rather than the evident exploitation that it is.

**The Road to Hell is paved with CSR**

The nature of this farce becomes even more pronounced when the medium of the message is considered in any depth. Contemporary CSR is arguably a product of the technological developments and trends in society (Pedersen 2015), and as CSR activities are placed in the public eye under the management of PR staff (Ennals 2011:146) it is again unsurprising that they have become focused on superficial ventures (Conrad 2005) which are in turn readily commodified, photographed and tweeted (Sherratt 2016a).
But such a highly visible approach is all the more concerning, even dangerous, in the way it seemingly convinces the world that for UK construction workers, their HSW has never been better taken care of. It creates good intentions writ large, but without any depth or substance, instead presenting a colourful and convenient misdirection from the fundamental causes of poor worker HSW within our industry, that go deep into history, economics and politics, altogether much more serious, complicated and difficult issues than can be solved by the photogenic offerings of healthy apples, oranges and bananas for breakfast in the site canteen. Indeed, the growth of public health initiatives for construction workers is something of a road to hell, as their HSW, both occupational and public, is happily exploited by the very same industry setting out with such good intentions to save them.

CONCLUSIONS

The capitalist mode of production is by necessity a system that is complicit in the exploitation of those it needs to create our contemporary built environments. The philosophy of neoliberalism lends a veneer of respectability to this exploitation by valorising the market (profit) and placing it at the centre of society. That this philosophy has led to increased (and increasing) disparities between rich and poor is not an unforeseen outcome but a predictable consequence of placing gain (for some) at the heart of society. The words of Mary Ellen Lease, speaking in 1890, ‘Wall Street owns the country. It is no longer a government of the people, by the people and for the people, but a government of Wall Street, by Wall Street and for Wall Street’ (Zinn 1980:288) could just have easily been addressed to protesters of the ‘Occupy Movement’ of 2011, and reveal that the contradictions addressed above between profit and worker HSW are not new issues, but as Marx propounded they are systemic contradictions contained within the capitalist system.

Yet these problems have in part been mitigated by the emergence of CSR, a ready and willing tool of neoliberalism. For construction worker HSW, CSR has been able to photogenically obfuscate the systemic issues that surround worker HSW, replacing them instead with superficiality. Construction is an industry that exploits workers on many different levels: from their fundamental contribution to surplus value through the capitalist mode of production, to the further commodification of their HSW, to the way work is structured to the detriment of their social determinants of health, to the final indignity of having CSR approaches to HSW ignore all of this and instead set about packaging and once again commodifying superficial attempts of benevolence towards them, as if they make any real difference to worker HSW at all.

But can we really do no better than this? Can we not consider the true position of construction worker HSW within industry operations, within legislation and government bodies, or within academia? Can we not start to develop some notion of ‘true’ CSR that has effective impact on the systemic problems highlighted above? Perhaps not, given the current contexts as revealed through this analysis, but perhaps there is change afoot. Perhaps the capitalist mode of production is approaching its final stutter, and then we may be able to move on from a system that is so fully complicit in the exploitation of those it needs to create the built environments in which we all live, work and play.

REFERENCES


