

On the Fireline: Living and Dying with Wildland Firefighters.

Matthew Desmond. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. 369 pp. \$24.00.

Matthew Desmond—ethnographer, sociology graduate student, and wildland firefighter—describes the disturbing moment that led him to spend his fourth and final year with the Elk River engine crew, both fighting fires and asking questions. Peter, one of the crew members, had mentioned to the others that Rick Lupe, a wildland firefighter who was severely burned in the Sawtooth Mountain prescribed fire one month earlier, had just died. The other crew members paused for a moment. “Well,” Peter added, turning away, “he lasted about a month.” And with that, crew members went back to what they were doing. As Desmond says, “Lupe’s death didn’t seem to bother or perplex them in the least. But it disturbed me deeply . . .” (pp. 3–4). Desmond wanted to learn how firefighters understand risk and death and how organizations get firefighters to stand in harm’s way and stay there. His answer, developed in eight well-written chapters and a superb set of notes, is that the practical logic shaped by a rural, masculine, blue-collar upbringing (general habitus) predisposes people to embrace the specific habitus of the Forest Service, with its equivalent focus on individualism (“don’t trust anyone to watch out for you”). The meshing of these two sets of dispositions results in a durable, generative paradigm that guides thoughts and behaviors involving danger, risk, and death. That guidance is articulated and reinforced by informal, often crude socialization at the crew base (chapters 3 and 4) and more formal socialization through learning about fire behavior, 10 fire orders, and 18 situations that signal “watch out” (chapters 5 and 6).

To die in a fire is to be guilty of individual incompetence (“the incompetent dead”). Even though there are several other contributors to fatalities, such as administrative decisions, equipment failure, and environmental complexity, these latter factors tend to be “erased” during the after-action reviews and formal investigations that follow a tragedy. True to form, Rick Lupe’s “external eulogy” at his funeral portrayed him as a hero, but the “internal eulogy” constructed by management warned firefighters that Lupe died because he made mistakes. Desmond initially bought into the internal eulogy while writing the first draft of this book (e.g., Lupe violated Fire Order 7 and Watch Out 8). While tweaking the final revision, “for no reason in particular,” he restudied documents that analyzed the fire and discovered that Lupe actually did not make the mistakes “we” thought he did. Desmond rewrote portions of chapter 8 to show what the formal investigation had “overlooked” and why his crew was complicit in this filtering. The result is a sharp picture of the ways in which investigative reports can foster inappropriate learning even though they reiterate organizational common sense and reinforce preexisting beliefs.

This is not just an ethnography focused on Rick Lupe. The reader, instead, will find a theory-enhanced description of the “pace, sound, and dynamics” of firefighter practice. Descriptions of moment-by-moment firefighting at the Beaver Creek

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and Rodeo-Chedeski fires are interspersed with accounts of boredom and learning in the days between fires. These descriptions are enhanced by concepts such as the habitus, organizational common sense, the "illusio" (Bourdieu, 1991) of self-determinacy, and the mitigation of rules for firefighting. Firefighters tend to treat aggression and courage as liabilities, to know their limits rather than test them, and to think of fire as something "so innocuous that confidence is superfluous" (p. 197). This is not so much rationalizing or denial (there is nothing to be denied) as it is a way of perceiving fire. Fire is not dangerous if you understand it in ways compatible with organizational assumptions (organizational common sense supports a perception that alertness makes one invincible). This means that if you understand fire, you won't die. If you die, this "proves" you were incompetent. Individual fault remains the primary cause. What gets ignored in this closed causal loop are the complexities that can entrap anyone regardless of competence and the fact that an emphasis on individualism restricts the development of collective capabilities such as teamwork, communication, and leadership.

While this book fills in a great deal of color that is missing from other works on wildland firefighting (e.g., Maclean, 1992), what is more important are the questions it raises about the ways we think about organizations. For example, Desmond finds the concept of "organizational culture" unhelpful because its scope is elusive and it is usually treated as explicit norms. He prefers instead to talk about "organizational common sense," which connotes a paradigm that is so widely accepted by an organizational community that it serves as the unspoken, unarticulated assumptions that shape what does get articulated. While Edgar Schein's work on culture similarly incorporates assumptions, the difference is that a focus on common sense directs attention to the practices and logic that people bring to the organization. The question then arises, do the two mesh or contradict? Meshing occurs when organizational processes of socialization extend earlier processes of socialization: country competence converts into firefighting competence.

Desmond's work also pushes one to reexamine how people understand risk. Goffman (1967) in his essay "Where the action is," talks about an "illusion" of self-determinacy, by which he means that resolve in the face of danger often amounts to self-deception or rationalizing. Desmond doesn't buy this. Instead, borrowing from Bourdieu, he describes a more collective way that firefighters understand risk, namely, as an "illusio." An "illusio of self-determinacy" is a specific form of interest. It involves both an inclination to play the game and a feel for the game that allows people to differentiate important from insignificant things. For firefighters, the potential harm of fire is not denied or suppressed, but rather it is transformed into a "malleable object" that is cleansed of its danger. As Desmond puts it, the transformation extracts the "wild" from wildfire. Or as Asch (1948) put it, transformation is less often a change in the judgment of the object and more often a change in the object of judgment. What is crucial here is that transformation is a collective process, not an individual process. These are not people with the wool

pulled over their eyes. Instead, these are people whose eyes have become indistinguishable from those of the Forest Service, eyes that see individual incompetence as the cause of fireline accidents.

The book begins with a somewhat tedious account of the individuals who make up the Elk River crew. Portraits of their country upbringing serve to justify eventual discussions of the role of habitus and the class composition of high-risk organizations. But one byproduct of this structure is that it shows the limits of organizational accounts framed at the individual level of analysis. Questions of generality arise because engine crews are the low-status firefighters in a generally accepted hierarchy that goes downward from Hot-shot crews, to smokejumpers, helitack crews, and ends with engine crews. It is hard to tell how far upward these findings generalize. And it is hard to visualize how readily these findings generalize to other high-risk organizations, such as aircraft carriers, given that firefighters can walk away from threats but seamen cannot. Desmond states that the Forest Service is essentially "insulated from production pressures" (p. 346), yet forest administrators report being under intense pressure to ignite more prescribed fires to burn more acres under more marginal conditions in order to meet higher quotas for clearing underbrush. There is also the interesting twist that if individualism is indeed the driving value that Desmond says it is, then firefighters should be especially prone to make the fundamental attribution error and perceive people rather than contexts, situations, and organizations as central in the determination of outcomes. Thus we might expect "trust" to be a tricky issue. While firefighters are admonished to "trust no one but themselves," the entity that conveys this admonition must itself be trusted before compliance is assured.

This is an important book because it illustrates a set of practices that are sufficient to maintain social order in a dangerous world. Like much of organized life, wildland firefighting consists of "high energy scenes within a low energy rhythm most of the time." Risk under these conditions is neither self-evident nor a simple matter of construction. Instead, standing in harm's way and staying there is a complex mixture of continuity with earlier processes of socialization, rule bending, individualism, making do with incomplete information, and the rendering of objects of harm as malleable. Matthew Desmond deploys this complex argument with persuasive grounding and enviable control. We are in a stronger position to think about risk because of his efforts.

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