

Book review

Changing Contours of Work: Jobs and Opportunities in the New Economy

Stephen Sweet and Peter Meiksins

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'The old economy has not been replaced by the new economy; the old economy is operating within the new economy' (xviii). This argument is central to sociologists Stephen Sweet and Peter Meiksins' updated overview of what they term the new economy, and how it came to be as it is. They contend that this lag, and the inadequacy of contemporary economic policy and employment practices, have brought about an economy that "is not for everyone" (p.xviii). This latter point is unarguable, but in this discussion I appraise whether the authors' explanations and analyses of causes convince. The new economy to which the book pertains is specifically that of the present-day United States.

Drawing on a varied and fascinating choice of literature, Chapter 1 presents case studies of six workers performing a range of jobs in the new economy. These examples are used to illustrate a subsequent introduction to key sociological concepts of culture, structure, and agency, and their relevance to paid work. The diversity of experience of the six workers is the basis for the contention that there is no typical worker in the new economy. The book's earlier chapters also see the authors elaborate on their argument about the old economy operating within the new. Whilst avoiding oversimplification they consider the relative decline (but not complete disappearance) of manufacturing, and the rise of the service sector. They recognise that automation, technology, and the relocation of factories have contributed to a decline in production jobs and a trend towards high-skilled employment in this area. Dual labour theory and theories of job polarisation are referred to in a survey of these issues, which also encompasses the impact on particular localities when work moves away or dries up. This duality feeds into the authors' account of widening income inequality and class divisions, and declining social mobility.

Although far from a polemic, the authors do caution against viewing the changes in the opportunities and rewards of the economy as being inevitable. They see the importance of regulation and concentrations of capital, and in reference to post-2008 economic policy, are critical of "the reckless decisions made to serve the interests of those at the top of the opportunity ladder, and the consequences those decisions had on almost everyone else" (p.xviii). As the recent work of Piketty, Stiglitz and Dorling

respectively has shown, uneven rewards of paid work and concentrations of wealth have resulted in corrosive inequality chasms. The authors provide an apt comparison between the CEO of Walmart, Michael T. Duke, and a shop employee, Jodi: "If Jodi were to secure full-time work at Walmart (which she cannot), at her current wage rate she would have to work 247 years to earn what Michael earns in a single year. Conversely, in a single morning Michael earns far more than Jodi's annual income" (p.63). Furthermore, the authors include informed discussions around dispensable labour, flexibility, and the transfer of risk to employees (whilst also noting the decline of trade union influence).

Some of the best sections of the book relate to the authors' insights on US-specific employment legislation and working culture, and how these interact with culture in a broader sense. The chapter on working time and intensity features a consideration of why average hours of work are longer in the US than in Europe. The authors attribute this to factors such as needing to earn enough to fund the more common requirement to buy (and run) a car – a symbol of America's individualist society – which is not mirrored in the Europe of more comprehensive, widely-used public transportation systems. In the US medical care and other benefits are also tied to full-time work, whereas in other contexts these are also available to those who work fewer hours, or even none at all. Due to the expense of paying for these additional benefits (much of which form part of European welfare state provision), American employers often ask existing staff to work longer hours, or employ staff on a part-time or temporary basis in order to avoid paying for the additional benefits.

Chapter 4 is devoted to a discussion of job insecurity, but reference to the concept of precarious work is rather cursory; it could have been expanded upon as its relevance spans across many of the job quality issues mentioned in the book. The debate around precarious work relates to changing notions of class, and whilst entire chapters of the book grapple with issues of gender and race/ethnicity, the book is considerably lighter on overt consideration of class inequality. Nevertheless, although the book is about the present-day US economy, the authors' understanding is far from ethnocentric. They make relevant comparisons across historical and geographical contexts, placing their findings in relation to trends in the interconnected global economy, and effectively linking them to events past and present.

The second half of the book looks at how the opportunities and rewards of the new economy continue to be spread unevenly across gender and racial/ethnic divides. In Chapter 6, on gender, the authors effectively employ sociological language to show how gender constructs contribute to women's subordination, but also constrain men. For example, the conflation of biological sex and gender naturalises certain qualities which are linked to the job roles women are expected to, and do, perform. This segregation into occupational ghettos plays a part in perpetuating the gender pay gap. The authors offer insight on this issue by highlighting that the recent narrowing of this gap has been in part due to the stagnation in men's wages rather than necessarily pro-gender equality systemic and cultural change. The authors emphasise other factors in women's disproportionate impoverishment, such as their concentration in part-time work, and the ways gender intersects with class and ethnicity to amplify this.

Overall, the chapter offers nuance on the ways in which gender shapes opportunities and outcomes. However, there are ways in which this could have been enhanced. The authors rightly remark on the lack of recognition of the economic value of domestic work and care, and that it is women who continue to bear the overwhelming responsibility for this, often through working part-time. Yet in addition to the effect of gender norms and expectations, this situation is also often a consequence of the gender pay gap. If a male-female couple have children, and a decision is to be made over who should work less and care more, as women continue to earn less than

men it is unsurprising that in the majority of cases this falls to women. Although the authors demonstrate awareness of the changing nature of family relationships, another weakness of their gender analysis is the near-constant framing of discussion around the heterosexual couple. The notion of women marrying for financial security is outdated, so the importance of how injustices such as the gender pay gap impact on individual women is heightened. Furthermore, as women are more likely than men to be single parents, in this changing demographic context, the gender pay gap is sustaining the feminisation of poverty. By framing these gender questions around the norm of the heterosexual couple, the authors at times fail to acknowledge the additional negative implications for those not in such relationships. Despite these limitations, the chapter on gender offers an excellent, detailed view of its manifestations in contemporary working life.

The six case studies in Chapter 1 present well-chosen, revealing snapshots of the diversity of work in the new economy, but I would have liked to have seen the cases utilised more regularly throughout the whole book. As someone developing specialist knowledge of particular strands of the sociology of work, but also looking to extend the breadth of my understanding, I would class myself as archetypal of the book's target audience. I find these case studies to be useful aids in grasping these issues. As an additional point regarding usability, an aspect that would improve a future edition of the book is increasing the quality of the graphics, which are often confusing and poorly laid out.

This book provides a thorough panorama of paid work in the present-day US economy, including commendable and appropriate levels of insight on causes and consequences. Sweet and Meiksins ably compare across geographic and historical contexts, and do so in a balanced way by maintaining throughout a consistency of depth and substance for their readers.

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