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# The Declining Significance of Gender?

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# The Declining Significance of Gender?

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insecurity in some countries, such as Spain.

Finally, Green reports that although most countries experienced rising living standards and a declining incidence of the most undesirable forms of manual labor, they also show stable or declining levels of job satisfaction. He concludes that rising effort demands and declining discretion explain most of the decline in job satisfaction in Britain in the 1990s. Computer use and teamwork, among other variables, had no effects on job satisfaction. Job insecurity was associated with substantially lower job satisfaction in the cross-section, but levels of insecurity fell in Britain in the 1990s and so cannot explain declining satisfaction.

The overriding conclusion from Green's investigations is that jobs have become more skilled and generally better-paying but not more satisfying as effort levels have risen and job discretion has declined. This mixed verdict is the paradox of the book's subtitle.

Sometimes one wishes Green had pushed his analyses further. He could have marshaled his previous research more thoroughly in some places, such as in his discussion of skills polarization or the growth of over-qualification in Britain. His argument for skill-biased technological change based on an association between skill upgrading and rising computer use (p. 38) does not consider the numerous questions raised regarding such analyses, such as the possibility of two-way causation. Computers may raise the demand for more highly skilled workers in office environments, for example, but a rising number of office workers will surely raise the demand for computers, as well. Since the growing share of white-collar workers is a trend that antedates the spread of computers, this is a serious problem for analysts attempting to disentangle causality. Similar problems may also affect Green's evidence for effort-biased technological change (p. 73).

Nevertheless, this book is something of a landmark. Many decades have passed since both the heyday of institutional labor economics and the American quality of work life surveys, when broader social science concerns were considered integral to understanding work and labor markets. Industrial relations keeps this interdisciplinary tradition alive, but Green's work, among others, is notable for the energy it brings to this effort from within labor economics. Green's understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of social surveys and specific measures matches that of sociologists and psychologists who study work. He appreciates the importance of substantive questions that include but also transcend the traditional concerns of labor economics, and he investigates them cross-nationally. The scope and intellectual

breadth of *Demanding Work* is impressive, and one hopes other researchers will follow its example, renewing a truly interdisciplinary study of work and labor markets.

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*The Declining Significance of Gender?* Edited by Francine D. Blau, Mary C. Brinton, and David B. Grusky. New York: Russell Sage, 2006. 304 pp. ISBN 978-0-87154-092-4, \$39.00 (cloth).

There is little doubt that gender inequality in the labor market has dramatically decreased over the past half-century. In the United States and Western Europe, gender differences in pay and labor force participation are at all-time lows, as is (to a lesser extent) gender-based occupational segregation. The rate of decline in these forms of inequality has, however, slowed since the early 1980s, raising the question of whether we are seeing a temporary stalemate in convergence or there are more permanent mechanisms at work prohibiting further eradication of gender differentials in the workplace. The question mark in this book's title therefore has special salience. In *The Declining Significance of Gender?*, editors Francine Blau, Mary Brinton, and David Grusky bring together leading gender scholars within sociology and economics to discuss and debate the future of gender inequality. Will gender differences continue to erode and inevitably disappear altogether, or could the mechanisms that have already slowed down the egalitarian trend actually arrest or reverse it?

Each chapter of *The Declining Significance of Gender?* contributes an important piece to a large and complex jigsaw puzzle that remains unfinished. Departing from an economic or sociological framework, the authors contributing to this volume document the nature of gender differentials in the labor market today, explain the declining trend in gender inequality, and venture predictions about the future of gender as a source of inequality in the workplace. Blau and Kahn, for example, discuss the rising pay gap between low- and high-skilled labor, noting that although women have narrowed the overall gender gap in pay, the relative economic status of less-skilled women is deteriorating, following a trend similar to that for men. Heidi Hartman, Stephen Rose, and Vicky Lovell discuss how a narrow focus on declining pay differentials overlooks gender differences in lifetime income arising from differ-

ences in work hours and work interruptions. In both of these chapters, as throughout the book, the gender division of labor in the household is argued to be one of the primary explanations for past, and possibly future, gender inequality in the labor market.

Solomon Polachek's chapter on the life-cycle human capital model aims to explain the decline of gender wage inequality, while Eva Meyersson Milgrom and Trond Petersen contribute an explanation of glass ceiling effects in Sweden and the United States. The final chapters of the book provide a more sociologically based analysis of the future of gender inequality. Robert Jackson optimistically argues that gender equality in the workplace is inevitable. Paula England, in contrast, argues that there are limitations to further gender equality due to the asymmetry of the two sexes' accommodation to new gender roles; specifically, she cites the slow or nonexistent movement of men into traditionally female occupations or household tasks. In the final chapter, Cecilia Ridgeway discusses how gender serves as one of the primary frameworks for social relations and how deep-rooted sex categorization of behaviors, attitudes, and norms is hard to break, especially in less structured organizational settings.

By providing an analysis of gender inequality from both economic and sociological perspectives, the volume is able to expand beyond narrow interdisciplinary debates about the future of gender as a source of inequality. Instead, a number of mechanisms that may lie behind gender differentials in the labor market are described and contrasted in a manner that elevates the debate while simultaneously posing the critical questions that can serve as inspiration for future research. Why has employer discrimination decreased? Why have women increasingly moved into male-dominated occupations and programs of study while men have been much more reluctant to move into female spheres at home and in the work force? Why are female-dominated occupations valued less than others, and why does the prestige of an occupation decline as more women move into it? Is there a risk that threats to deep-rooted gender norms and stereotypes will create a backlash that hampers further gains in gender equality?

Although each contribution is interesting in itself, the discussion becomes especially illuminating when the authors directly interact with each other, as they do in the final three chapters. The lively exchange between Jackson and England concerning the future of gender inequality provides the reader with two sides of an argument highlighting both the complexity of the issue and the uncertainty of the outcome. Whereas

Jackson discusses large-scale historical changes in economic and political structures that fostered the decline in gender inequality and that will, he argues, continue to serve as an engine for change, England focuses on subtler mechanisms that account for why some aspects of gender inequality are more resistant to change than others. Skeptical that legislation or other institutional means can erode male resistance to traditionally female activities at work and at home, England believes that future progress toward gender equality will be limited. Expressing an even less hopeful view of the future is Cecilia Ridgeway, who argues that because of gender's function as the primary contextual framework for how individuals interrelate, gender norms and stereotypes are likely to be self-perpetuating. The strength of these contributions lies not in furnishing irrefutable proof for one or the other standpoint but rather in providing several sides of an argument that pushes the reader to think critically about the future of gender inequality.

I would have liked to see similar interaction among the contributors of some other articles in the collection. For example, both Polachek's chapter on the life-cycle human capital model and Meyersson Milgrom and Petersen's article on glass ceilings discuss how gender differences in investment explain differences in labor market outcomes. Polachek argues that as women anticipate longer and more ambitious careers, they will increasingly invest in human capital accumulation, pushing down gender pay differentials. This is a trend that is observable in historical data but may be stymied by the continuing unequal division of labor in household production. Meyersson Milgrom and Petersen, in explaining the glass ceiling effect, argue that female decisions regarding investments in education and market production explain why so few women are found among top executives. Women are simply not investing enough in the right educational backgrounds, or gaining the right work experience, to qualify for top positions. Although both of these contributions are very interesting, they are liable to awaken questions in the minds of readers who have been attentive to points raised in some of the volume's other articles. Particularly germane is Claudia Goldin's insightful chapter on mechanisms resulting in the initial *rising* significance of gender in the paid labor market during the first decades of the twentieth century.

Goldin describes how the "genderization" of jobs during this period had long-term implications for the female labor supply. As white-collar positions opened for women in the 1920s and women increasingly entered the labor force, policies were

instituted at the firm level creating sex-segregated positions. Jobs became increasingly classified as either “female” or “male,” with the majority of female jobs being dead-end, providing little room for advancement to higher positions or earnings growth. The early rising significance of gender not only established hard-to-break social norms defining women’s “proper” occupational place, but also depressed their incentives to stay in the labor market and invest in certain types of education and training. This contribution and others in the book cast doubt on the proposition that women’s continued exclusion from some privileged domains is, in some sense, their own fault for their failure to make needed human capital investments.

In particular, to what degree does limited female investment in education or on-the-job training reflect the constriction of opportunities due not to direct discrimination, but to mechanisms implied by Goldin’s “pollution” theory of discrimination, which postulates that men try to exclude women from certain jobs because women’s presence in them is “polluting,” reducing the prestige that men get from being in those jobs? How do the social norms concerning female and male occupations that developed during the time when gender was rising in significance continue to influence female opportunities today? Why do most observers implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, assume that women must make the same investments men traditionally have made in order to succeed in the labor market—that is, why have so few voices questioned the foundation and perpetuation of those very norms?

Although the book’s editors and contributors do not pretend to definitively predict the future of gender inequality, *The Declining Significance of Gender?* provides an engaging, thought-provoking multidisciplinary analysis of factors likely to influence that path. Anyone interested in this debate will surely appreciate this volume.

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### International and Comparative Industrial Relations

*Satanic Mills or Silicon Islands? The Politics of High-Tech Production in the Philippines.* By Steven C. McKay. Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press (an imprint of Cornell University Press), 2006.

253 pp. ISBN 0-8014-4236-2, \$49.95 (cloth); 0-8014-8894-X, \$21.95 (paper).

Steven McKay’s *Satanic Mills or Silicon Islands?* accomplishes the all too rare feat of marshalling rich empirical research to arrive at important new theoretical insights on an issue—the nature of industrial relations under the twin regimes of neoliberal globalization and flexible production—that matters. The book deserves wide notice.

Through his exploration of industrial workplaces of four foreign firms in the Philippines’ electronics industry, McKay arrives at five important findings. First, challenging the notion that new production regimes demanding flexibility and high quality will lead to worker-centered production, McKay shows that in three of his four case studies, firms achieved high quality and stability (the goals of flexible production) without taking the “high road” of worker-centered production. Instead, worker input was often reduced rather than increased through increasing reliance on automation, statistical processes, and technical and engineering staff as opposed to traditional operators. McKay also shows that these three flexible factories adopted three distinctly different sets of strategies inside and outside the factory. He thus demonstrates that “flexible accumulation” (as he dubs it) does not inexorably lead to one type of industrial workplace. Flexible accumulation is not just about how production is constructed within the factory; it is also constructed through interactions between firms and national and local political and social institutions.

Second, McKay finds that firms use location strategically to satisfy two seemingly contradictory goals inherent in flexible accumulation: low-cost flexibility, but with stable, high-quality production. Firms accomplish this feat both by interfering in the creation of the labor supply (for example, by using local governments to suppress labor organizers) and by taking advantage of traditional labor market segmentation (in particular, by targeting young female workers, who, being subject to gender segmentation of the work force, tolerate low wages). Firms try to influence formal and informal regulation of labor markets, often in ways that lead to the undermining of workers’ legally mandated protections. One variable critically affecting their predisposition to do so is the nature of the inducements they use to attract and hold workers. Specifically, McKay finds that companies relying on positive incentives such as relatively higher wages are less apt than other companies to try to influence the external political and social construction of the labor market.

Third, McKay argues persuasively that when con-