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Demanding Work: The Paradox of Job Quality in the Affluent Economy

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Chapter 10 opens the discussion of discrimination by describing the major economic theories of its causes. Chapter 11 discusses race discrimination in labor markets and the legal remedies and other policy options for reducing it. Chapters 12 and 13 provide parallel treatments of race discrimination in education, housing, other customer markets, and the judicial system. Chapter 14 covers similar ground for sex discrimination and includes a welcome section on sexual orientation. The final chapter presents the author's conclusions, based on his values and reading of the evidence, about the most promising directions for poverty and discrimination policies.

The text explicitly takes an economic perspective to the issues and discusses a number of sophisticated empirical studies produced by economists. Though it does an excellent job of keeping technicalities to a minimum by avoiding equations and presenting theories using simple but apt examples, readers without a grasp of intermediate microeconomics and basic regression analysis will still find it tough going. Restricting attention almost entirely to the economics literature keeps the book's length manageable and allows more extensive examination of economic theories and empirical studies. But doing so leaves readers with an incomplete picture of the scope of high-quality research on poverty and discrimination. To me, this is most apparent in the material on family structure, child well-being, and concentrated poverty, topics to which sociologists and developmental psychologists have made major contributions.

While no text can cover every topic germane to poverty and discrimination and this one does address a huge range of topics, three omissions deserve mention. Most egregious is the neglect (save for two short descriptive paragraphs) of child support policy. In view of child support's importance for single parent families, its prominence in poverty policy debates for more than 25 years, the interesting behavioral issues it raises, and the torrent of research on it, instructors who adopt this book will need to assign supplemental material on this topic. The text does not include comparative data on the level, trend, and demographic composition of poverty in other affluent countries. This choice forgoes the opportunity to place the U.S. situation in international perspective and engage students in thinking about why our rate of poverty is among the highest. Readers interested in poverty among elders will need to look elsewhere. The economic well-being of elders, Social Security, Supplemental Security Income, Medicare, and pension policy receive scant attention.

Poverty and Discrimination is intended for two audiences: "advanced undergraduates and masters-level students in the social sciences and public policy, and individuals involved in policy" (p. xii). It will successfully serve students who have the needed preparation. Students who work through the material will gain a comprehensive overview of the major economic theories used to analyze poverty and discrimination and of the sweep of current policies (except child support) intended to reduce poverty among children and working-age adults and discrimination by race and sex. Among persons involved in policy, the book is likely to be most useful to non-partisan legislative and executive staff who have the requisite background, need a quick overview of some aspect of poverty or discrimination policy, and want to sharpen their skill in evaluating empirical evidence about social policy. Readers of the book will become better critics of statistical evidence used in policy debates and more skeptical of strong claims about a policy's success (or failure). They also will more fully understand the difficulty of conducting highly credible policy research and crafting effective policies.

Instructors will find the text to be a sound core for a semester course. They will probably want to supplement each chapter with a few accessible journal articles that expand on some of the substantive issues and provide in-depth illustrations of quantitative methodologies used in policy research. Including high-quality ethnographic and other qualitative studies as well as exemplary work in sociology and developmental psychology would help make students aware of the full range of research on poverty and discrimination and the need to bring multidisciplinary perspectives to bear on complex social issues.

Written for more advanced readers than previous texts on poverty and discrimination in the United States, *Poverty and Discrimination* fills an important gap. Notwithstanding its limitations, it is a welcome addition to the pedagogical literature.

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Labor Economics

Demanding Work: The Paradox of Job Quality in the Affluent Economy. By Francis Green. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. 252

pp. ISBN 978-0-691-11712-8, \$39.95 (cloth); ISBN 978-0-691-13441-3, \$24.95 (paper).

Francis Green's *Demanding Work* is a welcome addition to the literature on job quality. This book is extraordinarily wide-ranging, interdisciplinary, and cross-national in scope. It is probably the most sustained example of a growing tendency among economists to integrate quality of work life concerns with traditional research on material well-being. Green and his colleagues have made major contributions to the study of work in Britain through the design and analysis of several social surveys, and this book carries that effort forward in a more cross-national set of studies, although Britain receives the greatest attention partly due to the relative wealth of data. Using more than a dozen surveys from various countries, Green addresses the question of changing job quality in the broadest terms and does an admirable job of combining traditional economic approaches with those found more commonly in sociology and psychology.

The book focuses on trends since the 1980s along five dimensions of job quality—skill requirements, work effort intensity, job autonomy, wages, and job insecurity—as well as trends in overall measures of the quality of work life. The record is mixed and will challenge the preconceptions of researchers in various intellectual camps.

Using data for the United States, Germany, and Britain, Green concludes that job skill requirements have increased since the mid-1980s. From the British data, he finds evidence to support the prevailing explanation for this trend, which emphasizes the role of computers and skill-biased technological change.

More surprisingly, British data indicate that required effort levels rose during the 1980s and 1990s, particularly for public sector workers, though the overall trend leveled out in the late 1990s. Twelve out of fifteen European countries also experienced work intensification in the 1990s. Interestingly, employees in jobs that are more skilled often register the greatest growth in work intensity. Since the trends reflect movements in contemporaneous self-reports of levels, not retrospective judgments of changes, Green argues convincingly that they cannot reflect stable response biases toward over-reporting intensification, as these would difference out over time. The evidence also does not support explanations based on growth in hours worked, rising unemployment rates, or declining union power. Green finds explanations based on rising consumerism unconvincing because they do not explain the growth in consumerism itself, though

there may be more evidence of changing values and practices, at least in the United States, than his dismissal recognizes.

Using British and Australian data, Green finds that effort intensification is associated with organizational changes, including multi-skilling and performance-based pay. However, he declines to see this as evidence of the growth of a “lean and mean” employee relations system, because wages also rose in most industrialized countries outside the United States, which is inconsistent with the declining employee bargaining power assumed by that view. Indeed, self-reported work intensity is associated with a slight cross-sectional wage premium.

Green demonstrates associations between advanced technology and effort intensity that he finds more plausibly causal. However, he is reluctant to endorse the view that computers increase work effort simply through more effective employee monitoring and control of work pace, which leaves his theory of “effort-biased technological change” somewhat vague. He also does not reconcile his emphasis on the role of technology with his earlier findings that the largest growth in effort pressures in Britain came from customers, colleagues, and supervisors. Nor does he explore in depth the possibility that growing work intensity in the British public sector reflected institutional and political changes associated with Thatcherism and its aftermath.

In a briefer treatment of trends in employee discretion, Green finds divergent patterns for different European countries in the 1990s. Six countries registered declining discretion, two increasing discretion, and seven no significant change, though most point estimates for the last group were negative. In Britain discretion declined in all occupation groups, but particularly for professionals, interestingly. Green notes that declining discretion is partly a concomitant of effort intensification but that the development was all the more remarkable given rising job skill requirements and their expected positive effects on discretion. His explanation for declining discretion again tends to point to the effects of advanced technology, but he also notes that institutional tightening, such as the growth of target-setting and accountability controls, may explain the results for professionals in Britain.

Turning to job insecurity, Green finds that there is no secular trend in either the objective or perceived risk of job loss in the United States, Britain, and Germany. From these and other results he concludes that there is no secular trend in employment insecurity, although he allows that the rise in temporary work contracts may have increased

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-