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The Good Temp

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of their instruction and create job placement opportunities for their students. This appears to have been more common at private for-profit occupational colleges than at public institutions. Other faculty members viewed such activities as outside the scope of their responsibilities. Within their sample, students reported higher effort and attachment at institutions with strong links to the labor market. The topics discussed in this chapter will be familiar to many academic readers who at times face pressure to establish the labor market relevance of their instruction.

In the final chapter, Nan L. Maxwell examines the set of skills demanded by employers in low-skill entry-level positions and supplied by low-skilled individuals. The author uses survey data with information on a wide set of skills such as basic reading and writing, simple math, the use of office equipment, and the ability to cooperate with others. She computes the fraction of firms demanding and fraction of individuals supplying each particular skill. Skill demand varies in a predictable fashion across industries. Older and younger workers supply somewhat different skill sets, though older workers report having higher levels of skill in the areas most in demand—perhaps because such skills are taught on the job. Not surprisingly, unemployed workers report systematically lower skill levels than do the employed. Employment and compensation do not appear systematically related to possessing skills that are in high demand relative to supply. This may be because possession of particular skills could reflect general human capital. Some skills may also be relatively easy to acquire on the job. While many readers will find the general question and the descriptive statistics quite interesting, data limitations make it difficult for the author to convincingly test economic models.

In summary, this volume is likely to be of interest to researchers and policy-makers already familiar with the literature on school-to-work transitions. While the volume lacks a unified structure, the individual essays provide valuable background information and statistical analyses on specific questions. Readers will want to flip through the chapters, focusing on those topics most relevant for their own research.

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of Cornell University Press), 2008. 248 pp. ISBN 978-0-8014-4580-4, \$29.95 (cloth).

At less than 5% of the total work force in the United States—2.3% employed by temporary help services (THS) agencies and 2.2% direct hires—temporary workers would seem to represent a relatively marginal phenomenon. But the establishment of temporary work as an acceptable form of employment has changed labor market norms and the strategic options of employers in far-reaching ways. As Vicki Smith and Esther B. Neuwirth skillfully demonstrate in their book, temporary help services (THS) agencies played a central role in the normative construction of a new model of flexible staffing.

Smith and Neuwirth's main argument is that the THS industry constructed temporary labor as a product—the good temp—to be sold to employers by convincing them that temporaries could be good workers and temporary employment a feasible, profitable alternative to permanent employment. In order to do this, the THS industry had to market itself both to client firms and to potential temp workers. In the process of socially constructing the good temp as a product, the THS industry helped institutionalize the temporary labor market.

For decades after World War II, temporary employment was indeed a marginal employment practice. Temps were a truly stop-gap solution for employers, simply filling in for permanent workers during vacation or illness. Employers generally assumed that temps would not be committed, high-quality workers. Through a content analysis of nearly 300 personnel and THS industry magazines published between 1960 and 1990, Smith and Neuwirth convincingly show how the industry disseminated new views about temporary and permanent employment to persuade employers to use temps in more planned and systematic ways—transforming jobs into permanently temporary positions in order to scale back the permanent work force—and ultimately succeeded in institutionalizing such use as the normative practice. Industry rhetoric sought to highlight the “true” costs of permanent employment; provided templates for how to use temps efficiently; and identified new occupations, industries, and tasks that could be “temped out.” The institutionalization of the temporary labor market, they suggest, played a crucial role in weakening norms of stable, permanent employment.

Smith and Neuwirth next turn to a contemporary analysis of the work THS agencies do to construct the good temp, based on extensive ethnographic analysis of an agency in Silicon

The Good Temp. By Vicki Smith and Esther B. Neuwirth. Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press (an imprint

Valley. Arguing that agencies cannot simply sell warm bodies but must actively work to construct good temps, Smith and Neuwirth identify four mechanisms used for that purpose by the agency they studied. The agency actively recruited temps, screened potential temps to weed out bad prospects, attempted to shape the temps' goals and align their aspirations with their opportunities, and provided special attention and support to good temps. Although driven by the profit motive, this strategy had some benefits for temp workers because the agency spent considerable time helping them personally (with interviewing, presentation, resumes, and so on) and improving their work conditions.

In an effort to stabilize their product—the good temp—THS agencies must “guarantee the quality of jobs in which they can place them.” Agencies work to understand the distinct cultures of the client firms and seek to “eliminate risk and capriciousness” toward temps in these workplaces (p. 99). In order to do so, agency staff work with line managers and HR managers in the client companies. Smith and Neuwirth present detailed evidence that the agency staff they observed spent considerable effort trying to moderate the behavior of abusive managers, rationalize the systems for temps, socialize managers to effectively use temps, improve workplace safety, and even help establish job ladders in some client firms. In addition to fostering good temps, the agency worked to establish “good enough” temporary jobs.

Smith and Neuwirth are certainly not unaware of the many problems associated with temporary work. Indeed, they devote half a dozen pages in the final chapter to discussing some of the key problems, including low pay and insecurity, and they note that THS agencies “perpetuate and reinforce a system of employment relationships that disadvantage workers structurally, financially, and normatively” (p. 156). At the same time, however, they take a balanced look at temporary work, highlighting the benefits that follow from the good temp strategy. The key benefit they suggest is “transitional mobility,” including helping disadvantaged groups overcome barriers, providing a path to better jobs, and helping temps to develop skills.

The Good Temp is an excellent addition to the literature on temporary work. Its biggest strengths are the authors' historical work on the social construction of the good temp as a commodity and the institution of the temporary labor market, and their rich ethnographic work on the role that THS agency staff play in shaping the staffing practices inside client firms. However, the book does suffer from two important problems. First,

the authors do not place their contribution within the larger literature on temporary work or on flexible work more generally. There is no systematic review of the literature and little effort to draw out the theoretical lessons and relate them to any larger theoretical understanding of contemporary capitalism, such as that provided by theories of post-Fordism or post-industrialism. Indeed, despite the book's rejection of the “warm bodies” model of THS agencies, Smith and Neuwirth do not systematically address any of the arguments made in Robert E. Parker's *Flesh Peddlers and Warm Bodies* (Rutgers University Press, 1994) or in similar literature presenting a critical view of THS agencies. They do acknowledge the existence of low-road THS agencies operating on the margins of the labor market (for example, in an endnote on p. 191), but unfortunately they simply fail to address this matter in their broader discussions.

Given the extensive critical literature on bad temporary agencies and the negative consequences of temporary work for workers, it is a shame that Smith and Neuwirth made no effort to discuss how their findings relate to previous findings, and what might account for the differences between their largely positive view and the more-or-less established critical view. Frustratingly, rather than offer their own thoughts on how the socio-economic context might mediate the development of high-road versus low-road THS agencies, they simply suggest that this is an important direction for future research.

Second, and relatedly, the book gives no indication of how widespread the good temp strategy is among THS agencies. The arguments throughout the book are phrased in general terms, referring to the strategies and imperatives of the industry as a whole; for instance, the authors write, “Agencies today strive to insulate temps from gross mismanagement” (p. 3); “What sells in the world of temporary employment is not simply warm bodies” (p. 69); and “Temporary help firms . . . must minimally stabilize and guarantee the quality of jobs” (p. 99). This is not meant to be a facile positivist critique of ethnography, but the “good temp” strategy contrasts with the extensive evidence in the literature that has documented low road agencies and terrible working conditions for temps. What, then, accounts for these different findings, and how common do the authors think the good temp model is within the industry?

Smith and Neuwirth implicitly suggest that the good temp strategy is widespread, given that it derives from competitive pressures and is the profit-making strategy. In particular, they suggest that THS agencies must compete for temps and thus must provide benefits (such as help with

interviewing) and secure good working conditions for temps. But it is questionable to what extent agencies must do this. After all, even at the agency they observed, "Routine were telephone calls from individuals who were 'desperate' to find temporary jobs" (p. 71). Do desperate workers have much choice or the labor market savvy to be picky about agencies? Do desperate workers need much incentive to be good-enough workers?

The balanced tone of the book is welcome. And Smith and Neuwirth do explicitly link the THS industry to the dissolution of the standard employment model with implicit guarantees for security and routes for advancement. But they seem to have a tendency to be overly optimistic in their general analysis. For example, is the fact that blacks and Hispanics are over-represented in the contingent work force really support for the idea that temporary employment is "a valuable backup option for workers who experience racial discrimination" (p. 152), or is it rather evidence of a larger problem in the American labor market that is unlikely to be addressed by for-profit intermediaries? Despite these drawbacks, however, *The Good Temp* is an excellent piece of scholarship and a necessary read for anyone interested in temporary work.

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Historical Studies

Why Is There No Labor Party in the United States?
By Robin Archer. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. 348 pp. ISBN 978-0-691-12701-9, \$35.00 (cloth).

In this comparison of labor politics in Australia and the United States, the left-hand-side variable takes a value of one when a country adopts a labor party, zero otherwise. On the right-hand side, Archer includes many of the protagonists in the timeworn debates on U.S. exceptionalism: levels of prosperity, liberalism, federalism, religion, the courts, state repression, immigration, and the like. He concludes that Australia established a labor party because its adherents were able to separate religion from politics and because its leaders were less ideologically driven and less prone to sectarianism than their American counterparts. In the United States, in the face of the authorities'

demonstrated willingness to use force to weaken organized labor, the American Federation of Labor was more cautious. It feared that a new labor party would accentuate existing religious divisions and ideological bickering among its potential supporters and, as a result, undermine workers' hard-earned achievements in collective bargaining.

The question Archer poses is distinct from, and more tractable than, the larger puzzle about the absence of socialism in the United States, although readers may need to remind themselves of this since the right-hand-side variables are suspiciously similar. The time-frame of study is the decades before 1914, when Australia and the United States diverged. At first blush, the comparison between these two European offshoots might seem farfetched, but Archer makes the valid claim that the traditional U.S.-Canada study is biased because these close neighbors shared a common union movement, the so-called internationals. Although there are two countries in his subsample, the larger population actually consists of the many sub-national jurisdictions. Archer is aware of this. Among the book's many strong points is its detailed study of labor politics at the state level, specifically for New South Wales and Illinois. The book is exhaustively researched and well organized. Because it avoids jargon, it will be read across the social sciences.

Claims to the contrary notwithstanding, Archer's approach is in many ways conventional. Like most histories of this sort, Archer's juxtaposes one country's experience on another, as if each labor party developed in isolation. Archer does make reference to the possibility of interdependence—the Australian Labor Party chose American spelling in honor of its U.S. brothers, and Henry George made considerable inroads across the Pacific—but he largely ignores the global movements of trade, capital, and labor. Consider workers' attitudes to commercial policy as a factor in mobilizing support for a labor party. In New South Wales, the labor party gained in strength when it sought to marshal support on the trade question; in the United States, workers and farmers chose either of the established political parties to represent their trade interests.

Archer eschews formal analysis of the problem he seeks to address, but the organization of the book fits comfortably in the basic regression framework. Separate chapters are each devoted to one of eight determinants—regressors—in the baseline model. Archer is interested in the causal mechanism as well as the size of the estimated coefficients. He rejects the electoral system as a