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Recent Books on the Quality of Jobs and Inequality

Rosemary Batt

Cornell University ILR School, rb41@cornell.edu

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BOOK REVIEWS



Recent Books on the Quality of Jobs and Inequality

Continued high unemployment levels resulting from the recession of 2008 have led to an important debate over how to improve aggregate demand and return labor market participation rates to prerecession levels. At the same time, however, a growing concern has emerged over the quality of jobs and working conditions for those who continue to hold jobs. In this issue, we feature several reviews of books on this topic. To what extent has the quality of jobs changed, and for whom? Do trends show an improvement, deterioration, or polarization in job quality? How do changes map across different demographic and occupational groups and industries? To what extent are changes in the quality of jobs due to cyclical versus structural or institutional changes in the economy?

The books reviewed here address these questions. They examine different aspects of the quality of jobs, including wage and benefit levels, job and income security, and day-to-day working conditions, such as hours of work and scheduling, the intensification of work demands, the ability to balance work and family, and job satisfaction. The first two—by Paul Osterman and Beth Shulman and by Arne Kalleberg—are published by the Russell Sage Foundation and originate from the foundation's Program on the Future of Work. Motivated by concern over rising inequality in the U.S. labor market, both provide broad and complementary overviews of the question. Osterman and Shulman particularly examine the extent and distribution of low-wage jobs and the range of policy solutions for improving them. They debunk conventional explanations, explore the potential for firm-level policies to improve wages via the reorganization of work and human resource practices, and provide a thorough exploration of public policy solutions. Kalleberg, by contrast, focuses on the growth of temporary and insecure jobs as unions have lost power and firms have sought to compete on the basis of labor flexibility in the context of tough global competition. Labor market polarization is reflected not only by indicators of job insecurity but working conditions, such as hours of work, scheduling, work intensity, and job satisfaction. Kalleberg also draws on European debates regarding "flexicurity" policies to inspire solutions in the United States.

The two other books reviewed here provide specific examples of the growing insecurity of work. Erin Hatton has detailed the history of the temporary help agency industry since the 1950s to explain how it transformed itself from a narrow supplier of Kelly Girls to a mainstream supplier of labor across many industries and how and why it became legitimized and institutionalized as a major actor in U.S. labor markets. Complementing this picture of temporary work, Carrie Lane provides an in-depth analysis of casualized white-collar work in the aftermath of the dot-com crash of 2001. Her portrayal of job and income insecurity among high-tech workers and the impact of these conditions on work and family demonstrates how the debate over the quality of jobs in the United States needs to expand to include the dynamics of this issue among high-skilled workers as well. These books signal the growing interest in the question of the quality of jobs, the need for further research, and the importance of new policy solutions to address the problem of low wages and benefits, job insecurity, and the intensification of work in the U.S. economy.

—The Editor