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# Introduction to Part 1: The Division of Labor

Rosemary Batt

*Cornell University*, [rb41@cornell.edu](mailto:rb41@cornell.edu)

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# Introduction to Part 1: The Division of Labor

## Abstract

The changing nature of work, technology, and the division of labor in the last quarter of the twentieth century has been a central preoccupation of scholarship on organizations. Debate has centered on the extent to which a fundamental shift in employment systems has occurred—from so-called Fordist to post-Fordist models. The stylized facts portray the former as characterized by internal labor market systems in large organizations, narrow jobs in hierarchical career ladders, and long-term employment relations. The latter include decentralized organizations, flatter hierarchies, team-based forms of work organization, and shorter employment relations that reflect external market pressures.

The accumulated body of case-study and survey research over the last twenty years provides ample evidence that fundamental changes have occurred in employment systems (Appelbaum and Batt 1994). A few examples from national and cross-national surveys of work practices are instructive. First, they generally show the substantial use of 'flexible' work practices associated with post-Fordist systems, such as work teams, problem-solving groups, and total quality management. For example, the 1996 survey of Employee Direct Participation in Organizational Change (EPOC) in ten EU countries found that the overwhelming majority of workplaces had some form of direct participation scheme. A cross-national analysis comparing Europe, Japan, Canada, and the United States found that the overwhelming majority of workplaces in each region had adopted total quality management and the use of permanent problem-solving groups such as quality circles (OECD 1999).

Second, these surveys show there is wide variation in adoption of new work practices across countries, industries, and occupations. For example, in the European Union, adoption of simple forms of direct participation ranged from 61 percent of workplaces in Portugal to 90 percent in the Netherlands (OECD 1999). Across industries, 50 percent of manufacturing sites reported the use of employee involvement compared to 67 percent in banking and insurance, and 73 percent in professional services (OECD 1999). Similarly, the 1998 UK Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS) found that some form of team-based work system covered anywhere from 68 percent to 92 percent of non-management workers, depending on industry or occupation (Cully et al. 1999).

In sum, these examples suggest both an overall trend in adoption of new work practices and considerable variation in these trends across countries, industries, and occupations. Economic actors faced with the same global conditions have a range of options and responses, depending on differences in public policy, institutions, norms, and managerial choices.

## Keywords

work, organization, division of labor, management systems

## Disciplines

Human Resources Management | Labor Relations | Work, Economy and Organizations

## Comments

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# Introduction to Part 1: The Division of Labor

Rosemary Batt  
*Cornell University*

## How Much Has Changed?

The changing nature of work, technology, and the division of labor in the last quarter of the twentieth century has been a central preoccupation of scholarship on organizations. Debate has centered on the extent to which a fundamental shift in employment systems has occurred—from so-called Fordist to post-Fordist models. The stylized facts portray the former as characterized by internal labor market systems in large organizations, narrow jobs in hierarchical career ladders, and long-term employment relations. The latter include decentralized organizations, flatter hierarchies, team-based forms of work organization, and shorter employment relations that reflect external market pressures.

The accumulated body of case-study and survey research over the last twenty years provides ample evidence that fundamental changes have occurred in employment systems (Appelbaum and Batt 1994). A few examples from national and cross-national surveys of work practices are instructive. First, they generally show the substantial use of 'flexible' work practices associated with post-Fordist systems, such as work teams, problem-solving groups, and total quality management. For example, the 1996 survey of Employee Direct Participation in Organizational Change (EPOC) in ten EU countries found that the overwhelming majority of workplaces had some form of direct participation scheme. A cross-national analysis comparing Europe, Japan, Canada, and the United States found that the overwhelming majority of workplaces in each region had adopted total quality management and the use of permanent problem-solving groups such as quality circles (OECD 1999).

Second, these surveys show there is wide variation in adoption of new work practices across countries, industries, and occupations. For example, in the European Union, adoption of simple forms of direct participation ranged from 61 percent of workplaces in Portugal to 90 percent in the Netherlands (OECD 1999). Across industries, 50 percent of manufacturing sites reported the use of employee involvement compared to 67 percent in banking and insurance, and 73 percent in professional services (OECD 1999). Similarly, the 1998 UK Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS) found that some form of team-based work system covered anywhere from 68 percent to 92 percent of non-management workers, depending on industry or occupation (Cully et al. 1999).

In sum, these examples suggest both an overall trend in adoption of new work practices and considerable variation in these trends across countries, industries, and occupations. Economic actors faced with the same global conditions have a range of options and responses, depending on differences in public policy, institutions, norms, and managerial choices.

Thus, something has changed, but what is it? Compared to the general participatory schemes cited above, the incidence of more radical changes in work organization—for example, the incidence of semi-

autonomous or autonomous work teams—is much lower: about 40 percent of workplaces in the United States (Hunter 2000; Osterman 2000), 47 percent in Australia (Morehead et al. 1997), and 34 percent in the United Kingdom (Cully et al. 1999). Moreover, more decentralized forms of work organization are much more prevalent among higher skilled workers, such as the technical workers described by Barley in Chapter 16 or professional workers described by Hinings in Chapter 17. Non-management workers who are most in need of relief from hierarchy—the blue-collar workers captured by Graham (Chapter 14) or the frontline service workers examined by Frenkel (Chapter 15)—are the least likely to experience it. In the United Kingdom, for example, semi-autonomous or autonomous teams cover 47 percent of workplaces for technical workers, but only 23 percent for craft-workers, and 18 percent for machine operators (Cully et al. 1999). Moreover, these estimates are for any use of these teams. The average usage rates are typically cut in half again when employers report coverage for 50 percent or more of the workers at a given site (e.g. OECD 1999).

Finally, how to assess change gets even messier when estimates from different surveys covering the same country and similar sampling frames are compared. In the United States, for example, Osterman (2000) surveyed workplaces with fifty or more workers and found that 38.5 percent used self-directed teams in 1997. Cappelli's 1997 national establishment survey covering workplaces with twenty or more workers reported an average of 18 percent using self-directed work teams (Cappelli and Neumark 2001).

These examples illustrate the complexities of interpreting the extent and nature of change in the organization of work and labor markets in the current period. Beyond a general consensus that something fundamental has occurred, estimates and interpretations diverge. The authors in this Part address these debates. They recognize that fundamental changes have taken place in the organization of work and labor markets but are critical of overly optimistic, pessimistic, or unilineal accounts of change. They have great respect for organizational and institutional context, for indeterminate and often paradoxical outcomes, and they pay close attention to empirical research on their particular topic.

In addition, the authors provide a new angle on these debates by bringing together literatures that typically are not discussed in common. The first three chapters, for example, discuss labor markets and restructuring not only as they are influenced by employer strategies but also in the context of changing families and households, social welfare institutions, and gender and race relations. They focus on labor market flexibility (Rubery), work-family conflict (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg, and Kalleberg), and the new inequality arising from the intersection of restructuring, gender, and race (McCall). The second three chapters focus on specific aspects of restructuring of employment systems, bringing together alternative perspectives on skill formation systems (Crouch), technological change (Badham), and the organization of work (Batt and Doellgast).

### **Labor Market Flexibility, Work-Family Conflict, and Inequality**

We begin with Jill Rubery's chapter on the rise of flexible labor markets, as it provides a broad framework for interpreting the relationship between a range of social institutions and change in employment systems. Drawing on the Supiot report (2001) on the future of employment protection in the European Union, Rubery examines four dimensions of employment systems that have

fundamentally changed over the last thirty years. These are: employer organizations and the governance systems that shape product market organization and regulation; the organization of work, pay, and internal management systems; the supply of labor as influenced by family and social welfare systems; and employment regulation as shaped by labor market policy and social security systems.

She uses this framework to identify the fundamental differences between Fordist and post-Fordist employment systems. The former are characterized by bureaucracy, hierarchical job structures, a male-breadwinner/female-caregiver division of labor, and a standard employment contract. These good jobs existed primarily for male breadwinners, while women and minority workers held low-wage, dead-end jobs in secondary firms. Post-Fordist regimes, by contrast, are built on networked organizations, flatter hierarchies, teamworking and empowerment, a dual-earner/dual-caregiver model, and nonstandard employment contracts.

Having accepted the premise that a fundamental shift in employment systems has occurred, Rubery outlines a series of critiques of the literature on post-Fordism. She questions whether the model of the flexible firm (Atkinson 1984)—in which a core of loyal employees exists alongside a periphery of 'flexible' (contingent) workers—is more prescription than description of what has actually occurred. Evidence of employer adoption of this model is weak as core workers themselves have experienced greater job insecurity, downward pressure on wages, and work intensification. In addition, the model depends on the commitment of core workers to one employer when the division of labor in production chains is shifting to a multiemployer environment with more permeable boundaries. 'Peripheral' workers in supply chains often perform 'core tasks'. Moreover, the literature understates the continuing problematic nature of labor-management relations. Few studies have examined the real or potential conflicts between labor and capital or the contradictions between control and cooperation in the labor process in new organizational forms.

Rubery goes on to examine the dynamic between demand- and supply-side factors in the changing structure of labor markets for women, youth, and older workers. Women's higher labor force participation, while initially stimulated by employer demand, has subsequently become relatively autonomous as women develop their own aspirations for work and employment. While cross-national differences in the structure of family institutions and social welfare systems shape women's employment trajectories, in all countries these institutions have lagged behind the actual changes taking place in employment systems, creating heightened conflict between paid work and care work.

The implications of the intersection between labor market and household restructuring are taken up more fully in the next chapter in this part by Eileen Appelbaum, Thomas Bailey, Peter Berg, and Arne Kalleberg. They not only show how institutional mechanisms for integrating work and family life seriously lag behind actual changes; they also point to the dearth of research available to inform debates or guide firm- and public-level policies. While some countries provide better institutional support for families than others—for example, the generous paid maternity leave in most European countries compared to the ungenerous unpaid leave in the United States—all advanced economies exhibit a fundamental mismatch between the nature of institutional supports for families, on the one hand, and the changing demands at work and increased labor force participation of women, on the

other. For this reason, private sector employer solutions have emerged. Appelbaum and her colleagues develop a conceptual and empirical foundation for understanding the role of employers in relation to national laws and institutions in resolving work and family conflict.

They identify two broad types of family-friendly employer policies: caregiver replacement policies, on the one hand, and those that give workers more control over their work time, on the other. The former cover child or elder care referral services, subsidized care programs, concierge services, and other services historically provided by a full-time caregiver in a traditional breadwinner/homemaker model. The latter include paid leaves, flexible work scheduling, job sharing, and other devices that allow workers to better coordinate their work and personal responsibilities. These policies provide flexibility based on workers' needs, not employers' demands. Employers are likely to adopt these policies either because they calculate that the benefits of adoption will outweigh the costs or because they respond to institutional pressures or norms to adopt them.

Few national surveys exist, however, to assess the extent of diffusion of these types of policies, despite the fact that all advanced industrial countries have moved from a full-time breadwinner model to a dual-earner/dual-caregiver model. In the United States, where several national surveys have been conducted, Appelbaum and her colleagues reached three conclusions. First, only a minority of firms offer child or elder care assistance to any of their employees. Second, while a majority of firms surveyed report that they offer some form of flexible work arrangements, the most reliable government data shows that these policies are only available to a minority of full-time employees. Third, access to firm-level policies is highly unequal across occupational groups, with professional, technical, and managerial employees most likely to have access and blue-collar workers least likely.

More generally, the authors consider international variation in public policies and cultural norms that shape firm- and individual-level behavior. Where governments provide generous parental leave policies and subsidized childcare, as in the social democratic Nordic countries, the difficulties women face in reconciling paid work and unpaid care are substantially reduced. By comparison, in liberal market-driven economies, such as the United States and United Kingdom, women and their families absorb the costs of work/family coordination; and in conservative corporatist regimes, public policy marginalizes women and encourages them to stay at home with their children.

Nonetheless, even in countries where public policy governing work-family issues is extensive and gender inequality is less, implementation of work-family policies takes place within organizations and is subject to firm-level pressures. Overall, the authors conclude that while the number of firm-level policies has grown over the last two decades in all advanced industrial economies, actual use of them is unknown, but probably low.

The process and outcomes of restructuring for workers and their families is also taken up by Leslie McCall in Chapter 3, but she focuses on our failure to understand the interaction between race, gender, and economic restructuring. The mainstream literature on race and gender in employment, like that on social welfare and work—family policy, has been divorced from the debates over organizational restructuring, employer competitive strategies, and new models of employment systems.

McCall argues that theories of discrimination—and the policy prescriptions for targeted affirmative action programs based on race or gender—are inadequate for dealing with the new inequality because they are based on the assumptions of the male breadwinner model, when employment systems were stable and internal labor markets created good jobs for white male insiders and lousy secondary jobs for women and minorities.

Over the last two decades, new configurations of inequality have emerged within as well as between social groups. For example, as (primarily white) women have sought to eradicate gender discrepancies and enter restructured professional jobs with 80-hour work weeks, they have hired immigrant women to care for their children. This intersection of work and household restructuring has created a perverse chain of global caregiving based on power and unequal relations between First and Third World women (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002).

The intersection of race, class, and ethnicity has produced new configurations of inequality among men as well. In the United States, for example, as manufacturing left northern cities and was replaced by service industries with a polarized demand for skills, class divisions grew, with blue-collar men—white and black alike—losing union jobs that paid middle-class wages. However, as the work of William Julius Wilson (1996) and others has shown, the interaction of race and class led to disproportionately higher inequality among black men: that is, blue-collar blacks in inner-city ghettos lost their social connections to their middle-class counterparts, and this spatial segregation diminished their access to new suburban jobs. Wilson's policy solution was not to target racial discrimination, but to suggest non-targeted policies that create good jobs in urban centers where working-class blacks and whites live, but where blacks will benefit disproportionately.

McCall, like the other authors in this Part, argues that the outcomes of restructuring are highly uncertain and context-specific. For example, there are no theoretical predictions as to how workplace restructuring or the use of new work practices such as self-directed work groups will affect existing patterns of inequality. The use of teams may increase equality by creating the same job description and pay for all members in the group; or it may result in an informal reconstruction of the division of labor, with men assuming technical jobs, and women the clerical jobs in teams. Teams may allow group members to create more egalitarian work structures and more flexible schedules to balance work and family; or the lack for formal structures may foster a 'hero' culture of long work hours and peer pressure so that people feel less able to manage family obligations or have a personal life.

Unfortunately, empirical studies of these issues are few. The only consistent finding is that groups or teams with more demographic diversity experience greater conflict and more difficulties. This is not optimistic for any theory that team-based systems are inherently more egalitarian or democratic than hierarchical structures.

McCall calls for a new generation of scholarship that examines how organizational and institutional variation, within and across nations, affects the extent and nature of inequality in our societies. This new research agenda requires a focus on a larger range of 'gender/race neutral' institutions and policies—including minimum wages, working time regulations, unions, education and training, social welfare, and

tax, among others. It also requires an exploration of a wider range of outcomes, including labor force participation rates, work hours, pay, occupational segregation, job mobility, work/family integration, and work-related stress, among others. Without a more context-rich understanding of the hidden dynamics of restructuring and inequality, policy solutions will not begin to address the problem.

### **Skill Formation, Technology, and Work Organization**

The issues of institutional lag and indeterminate outcomes are also central themes in the chapter by Colin Crouch on how skill formation systems are adapting to industry restructuring. Crouch begins by reviewing existing systems that have supported occupational skills and economic development in advanced economies. These systems have had to overcome several dilemmas that arise from the collective goods nature of skills. While individuals need skills to work in advanced economies, training is generally too costly for them to absorb on their own. While firms benefit from a skilled workforce, they are reluctant to invest in training because they risk losing that investment to other firms that poach. The government has a general interest in educating its workforce, both to maintain social order and to build a productive workforce, but it does not want to subsidize the costs of production that would otherwise be paid for by firms.

To deal with these dilemmas, different countries have developed alternative institutional arrangements that include more or less reliance on markets, corporate hierarchies, the state, associations, and community networks. For example, the United States has relied primarily on the market and corporate hierarchies, while Germany's vocational education training (VET) system combines state support with a role for employers' associations and unions. Whatever the configuration, Crouch argues that these systems work best in a stable economy because training can be matched to employer demands for skill. The rapid change and instability brought on by new technologies and globalization at the end of the twentieth century has undermined the effectiveness of these stable systems.

This uncertainty in the demand for skills has led to several paradoxes. While there is consensus that a high-skilled workforce is necessary to compete effectively in the new economy, there is no consensus about which skills are needed. Moreover, the systems that have been viewed as very weak in their provision of stable skills, such as the United Kingdom and the United States, have adapted more successfully to current uncertainty than the more institutionalized systems, such as the German apprenticeship system.

Nonetheless, most advanced economies now face the dilemma of how to reorganize their skill formation systems in an era of high uncertainty in which innovation does not necessarily depend on codified knowledge. One response by governments and employers has been to shift the burden of training to individuals, particularly young people. However, this approach requires three conditions: a population with relatively low general education, from which entrepreneurs or risk-takers will emerge; a set of incentives to encourage people to take risks and invest in skills that have an uncertain payoff; and a large variety of jobs with relatively low skill requirements for the majority of workers who are not risk-takers. These are likely to be service jobs that must be provided in face-to-face transactions. This describes the current situation in Scandinavia, where employment in personal public services creates

secure employment at relatively low wages. In the United States and other countries with income inequality, the wealthy create demand for domestic services and the commercialization of household tasks. This type of system is likely to be found where the market, in conjunction with the state, is dominant.

Crouch, however, also suggests that other scenarios are emerging. Many professions, such as law, medicine, and engineering, have been demanding more specialized skills. The uncertainty of skill demand associated with new information technologies may be related to an early stage of development, which could become more stable over time. Some VET institutions have shown the ability to adapt and reconfigure themselves into quite different models from the past. Finally, societies typically have several types of skill formation systems operating at the same time, which provide the institutional flexibility to adapt to new demands and uncertainty. In sum, where a range of system types can coexist, there are opportunities for adaptation—both in terms of the deconstruction of existing systems and the construction of new ones to codify and disseminate knowledge after innovative junctures.

The discussion of skill formation systems and their transformation makes the fundamental assumption that changes in the broader economy, and in particular new information technologies, have led to powerful changes in the demand for skills—changes that have created ambiguity and uncertainty and destabilized skill formation institutions. The subsequent chapter on technology by Richard Badham makes that assumption problematic. While recognizing that new technologies do exert external pressure on institutions, Badham seeks to create a more integrative, multidimensional approach to the concept of technological change and how it plays out at the organizational level.

He first explores what he views as traditional or one-dimensional approaches to technology as impact. While there is considerable variation among writers in this tradition of research—in terms of how technology is conceptualized and the form or degree of impact on work—they have in common an assumption that technology is a 'social fact' that shapes or constrains the nature of work and the division of labor. According to Badham, this tradition includes 'hard determinists', as exemplified by contingency theories of the impact of technology on organizational size and structure, as well as 'soft determinists' such as Shoshana Zuboff (1988), who recognizes the ways in which political and organizational factors shape the effects of technology.

Another version of the one-dimensional view, according to Badham, is research that examines how social agency shapes technology. Included here are micro-ethnographies and macro-analyses of how social, cultural, or political assumptions are embedded in the way technologies are created or implemented. This social constructionist approach predicts a range of variation in the processes and outcomes of technological change. Although different in many respects, studies of new production systems based on institutionalist, Marxist labor process, and neo-Foucauldian theories are often similar in their focus on how social and political factors shape technological outcomes.

Debate over these two perspectives in the 1980s and 1990s has led to a degree of consensus that both offer partial insights and that a more useful approach is interactionist or two-dimensional. Orlikowski's 'technology in practice' (2000) approach is exemplary: social actors implement new technologies at

work, and in turn, discover new technical capabilities emerging from their decisions—a process of repeated iterations or mutual adaptations. Others want to push this approach further. Bijker (1995), for example, develops the concept of 'sociotechnical ensembles'—the idea of mutual interpenetration of the technical and social at work. Similarly, for Latour (1993), we cannot think of humans in isolation from tools, as they are so deeply embedded in our knowledge and understanding of the world. This critical examination of the literature brings Badham to three propositions: that technologies should be understood as 'sociotechnologies', or two dimensions of one phenomenon; that workplaces, similarly, should be understood as complex webs of human and nonhuman elements or social and technical configurations; and that change or innovation at work should be viewed as a process of mutual adaptation in which one sociotechnical system replaces another.

In the final chapter of Part I, Batt and Doellgast explore the ongoing debates over the reorganization of work in the last three decades. While there is growing consensus that groups have replaced individuals as the key unit of production at work, the research across disciplines does a poor job of integrating insights or developing a coherent understanding of why they are effective and what happens to workers in these systems. To foster more integration, Batt and Doellgast compare three traditions of research on teams: psychological, institutional, and critical sociological.

Micro-organizational research has concentrated on theories of why individuals in groups perform better than in isolation. One psychological explanation, building on the work of Hackman and Oldham (1980), is that team-based systems create intrinsically motivating jobs, leading to greater worker satisfaction and discretionary effort. Another explanation, at the heart of the sociotechnical systems (STS) literature, is that teams allow people to work smarter by solving problems across an entire work process. More recent versions of cognitive theory use laboratory studies to measure information processing, group cognition, and shared mental models among individuals in a group. Another recent body of literature draws on the social capital literature as it applies to organizations (Leana and Van Buren 1999). Here the argument is that team-based work systems are effective only when they build both trust among workers as well as opportunities for communication and information sharing.

While this research has helped to create a theoretical foundation for understanding groups at work, it suffers from its neglect of organizational, industrial, or institutional context. There is no serious attention to technology or the economics of production systems, which as Badham has shown, is intimately linked to how work is organized. In addition, while researchers profess to be studying performance outcomes, the focus is on a narrow set of attitudes and behaviors that may or may not be linked to operational or economic performance.

In contrast to psychological accounts, industrial relations and institutional studies of teams relate their adoption to changes in markets and technology. According to these accounts, team-based systems allow firms greater flexibility and allocative efficiency through job rotation and multitasking; they allow quicker problem-solving at the point of production by shifting operational decisions to workers; they reduce costs by eliminating indirect labor. A large body of research on high-performance work systems in many industries has demonstrated the relationship between team-based or collaborative work organization and better operational performance (e.g. Appelbaum et al. 2000). Workers in these

environments do better where there are strong labor market institutions, such as education and training systems, unions, or works councils. These macro-organizational accounts, however, treat 'teams' as a black box so that the causal mechanisms underlying performance gains have not been clearly articulated or tested.

Critical sociologists bring to these debates a healthy skepticism about why firms have adopted team-based work systems and why they are effective. Foucauldian interpretations (Barker 1993) view teamwork as a more insidious form of control than has previously existed. Peer monitoring and control systems produce higher levels of work intensity and conformity because ties of solidarity or guilt bind workers to each other. However, these explanations are ultimately unsatisfactory because they are largely unilineal (Smith and Thompson 1999). Studies of the labor process have shown that employees have a wide range of reactions to new work practices and do not necessarily buy into management rhetoric, as demonstrated in this volume by the work of Graham (Chapter 14), Collinson and Ackroyd (Chapter 13), and Kelly (Chapter 12). As of yet, however, we lack serious studies of the politics of team production—comparable to, for example, Roy's goldbricking in a machine shop (1952) or 'banana time' (1959) or Burawoy's study of the game of making out (1979), which capture the rich contradictions of formal and informal work structures, of conflict and consent at work.

In sum, while the use of team-based systems is widespread, and the research is voluminous, we have not developed a sound understanding of how and why groups work effectively in the new economy.

### **Future Directions**

There are some topics that we did not adequately cover in this Part, such as the issue of labor mobility and migration flows across advanced and developing economies. While some have done valuable research in this area (e.g. Castles and Miller 2003; Waldinger and Lichter 2003), there is much to be done to understand how immigration flows intersect with organizational restructuring. Similarly, while some work has begun to examine the globalization of service work (e.g. Burawoy et al. 2000), it is so new that relatively little research has attacked this question, but it will surely become a critical topic in future research.

Together, however, the chapters in this Part point to several productive avenues for future research. First, they call for a broadening of the institutional framework for understanding change at work—one that incorporates an appreciation of workplace change in relationship to household changes, gender and family relations, and social welfare policies. Second, they suggest the need to make connections across parallel trends—as in bringing together the research on gender and race discrimination and economic restructuring. Third, they demonstrate the value of bringing together research on the same topic across disciplines—as in the research on teams at work. Fourth, they suggest the need for research at multiple levels of analysis—building theory across individuals and work groups, establishments, firms, and institutions—in order to inform public policy. Finally, they show the need for greater skepticism, more attention to the indeterminate processes of economic restructuring, and an awareness of the potential for complex and contradictory outcomes.