

EMERGING CONCEPTIONS OF  
WORK, MANAGEMENT AND THE  
LABOR MARKET

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RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF WORK VOLUME 30

# **EMERGING CONCEPTIONS OF WORK, MANAGEMENT AND THE LABOR MARKET**

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# INTRODUCTION: EMERGING CONCEPTIONS OF WORK, MANAGEMENT AND THE LABOR MARKET

In recent decades, there has been no shortage of speculation about the structural and cultural changes that have gripped work, management practices and the labor market in virtually all the advanced capitalist societies. Yet, little clarity has emerged concerning the nature of the new, post-Fordist regimes, the forces shaping them, and how distinct groups and classes are likely to fare in the new economy. The present volume is intended to fill these gaps. The chapters it contains draw on a diverse set of theoretical and methodological strategies. But what unites them is their shared concern with the changing economic landscape, its impact on the meaning of work, and way authority relations are shifting with the rise of neo-liberal capitalism. In this introduction to the volume, I will briefly sketch the intellectual context in which these chapters have emerged, and then address the distinctive ways in which each chapter advances our knowledge in this field.

From one perspective, of course, the transformation of market-based work represents nothing new; what was once called the “labor question” is, after all, as old as modern capitalism. Centuries of debate have unfolded regarding the brutalizing nature of wage labor and the destructive uses to which industrial technologies have been put. For decades following the introduction of the assembly line, a temporary solution had emerged in which workers relinquished their claim over job control, receiving in exchange varying measures of job security and rising wages. By the late 1970s, even this temporary solution – which came to be known as Fordism – had come undone, and the question arose as to the structure and meanings that work would assume in a post-Fordist period.

For a time, especially during the late 1980s and early 1990s, scholars envisioned a world in which an enhanced quality of employment seemed possible or even likely for many workers. Literature in this vein foresaw a weakening of centralized, hierarchical controls over work and the emergence of a horizontal logic empowering both skilled manual and mental workers alike (see [Arthur & Rousseau, 2001](#); [Piore & Sabel, 1984](#); [Powell, 2001](#); [Saxenian, 1994](#)). Envisioned here was a logic of *flexibility*, a term that conjured work in a more creative and egalitarian form than Fordist regimes had allowed ([Florida, 2003](#); [Pink, 2001](#)).



Since that time, a different and far more dystopian set of images has governed scholarly and public discussion of work, careers, and employment relations. This shift is partly due to the growing frequency and severity of economic crises, and partly to a growing awareness (and fear) of the risks to which workers have been exposed (Beck, 1992; Hacker, 2006; Harvey, 2005). Indeed, if “words are witnesses” (Hobsbawm, 1962, p. 17), then ours is a moment best described in terms of *precarity* – a term that has appeared with growing prominence in many languages. As Bauman notes, “French theorists speak of *‘precarite’*, the Germans of *Unsicherheit* and *Risikogestellschaft*, the Italians of *incertezza* and the English of insecurity – but all of them have in mind the same aspect of the human predicament” (2000, pp. 160–161), in which workers stand more fully exposed to market volatility (see Kalleberg, 2011; Pfeffer & Baron, 1988; Pugh, 2015). This trend is perhaps most evident in the rising use of downsizing and outsourcing as managerial strategies by even highly profitable firms. It can be glimpsed in the disproportionate growth of jobs that are temporary, that offer highly uncertain or limited working hours (e.g., the British “zero hours” contract), or that apportion work on a project basis, offering contracts of limited duration. If precarious work is defined in this relatively stringent way, then the share of workers holding non-standard jobs had risen to one-sixth of the U.S. labor force in 2015 (Katz & Krueger, 2016), a 50% increase since 2005. Indeed, according to Katz and Krueger, the expansion of non-standard jobs accounted for virtually all of the job growth since 2005. The number of workers employed in such jobs is now more than twice as large as the number who belong to labor unions (Pugh, 2015).

The importance of these developments involves more than a matter of aggregate numbers, and cannot be attributed to purely subjective or irrational fears. Indeed, theorists have increasingly concluded that “precarity is not a passing or episodic condition, but a *new form of regulation* that distinguishes [our] historical time” (Butler, 2015, pp. vii–viii). In this view, “precarity has itself become a regime, a hegemonic mode of being governed, and of governing ourselves.” Put differently, economic precarity has given rise to a “*mode of domination* of a new kind” (Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 83, 85, emphasis in the original). The notion here is that the “end of organized capitalism” (Lash & Urry, 1987) has now given way to a different, neo-liberal form of capitalism; and that in place of the Fordist regimes there has emerged newer and more protean regimes governed by a logic of “flexible accumulation” (see Bauman, 2000; Clegg & Baumeler, 2010; Davis, 2016; Harvey, 1989). Here, the performance of labor ceases to provide the central organizing principle of the firm; indeed, as Davis shows (2016), the most prosperous firms hardly need employ large aggregates of labor at all. The result can at times impose managerial domination in a largely *negative* form, based largely on economic coercion or fear. But at other times, managerial domination assumes a more positive or *affirmative* guise, as with discourses that advise workers to embrace a “career management” ideology that construes workers

as “entrepreneurs of themselves” (Brockling, 2016; Freeman, 2014; Ho, 2009; Lane, 2011; Vallas & Cummins, 2015).

European theorists have paid particular attention to the latter forms of managerial regime. Thus, du Gay (1996) viewed work organizations as increasingly informed by what he termed “enterprise culture,” a set of practices and beliefs in which workers adopt the outlook of the “sovereign consumer” toward their own work. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) developed a theory of identity regulation, in which the ability to shape worker identity becomes a critical component of the neo-liberal firm. And Clegg and Baumeler (2010) envision contemporary firms through the lens of what Bauman called “liquid modernity” (2000). All these conceptions essentially extend the general proposition, reiterated in recent decades, that managerial power and authority have come to rest in its control over the discourses, norms, and identities that arise within the workplace itself (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Kunda, 1992).

These claims have provoked much discussion, debate, and empirical research. Yet the literature that has emerged is as yet marked by a number of absences and ambiguities. First, owing to the abstract level at which much of the discussion has been pitched, we have little clear understanding of precisely how neo-liberal employment regimes operate. How are the new forms of subjectivity and identity established or policed? How do the new regimes “work” to elicit consent on the part of employees? And what is the role of technology in shaping the identity norms to which employees are expected to comply?

Second, the question arises as to how disparate groups and categories of employees are affected by the new precarity. Here, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which racial, gender, and class privilege have all differentially positioned workers in the labor market. Rather than assume that precarity represents a “collective mentality” that is “common to the whole epoch” (Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 83, 85), research on job and labor market insecurity cannot afford to accept a single, overarching narrative, least of all at a time when primordial affiliations based on race and gender seem so powerful, often prompting workers to assume a defensive and even reactionary stance (Atkinson, 2007; Wacquant, 2009).

Third, and related to the above, is the matter of agency, or the ways in which workers themselves can act to modify, negotiate, or resist managerial authority (Courpasson & Vallas, 2016; Hodson, 1995, 2001). The question of resistance has been well developed in the field of organization studies, where a rich tradition of theory and research has developed (see Vallas, 2016). Yet the connection between precarity and worker agency has not been well explored. Occasional eruptions of worker mobilization, as in the Euro May Day movements during the early years of this century, prompted a number of claims regarding the self-styled “precariat” (Standing, 2011), whose validity remains open to doubt. Our may not be a time in which a “new dangerous class” has emerged, but rather on in which an old class struggles desperately to restore its previous economic position.

In varying ways and using diverse approaches, each of the contributions to the current volume has sought to address such absences and ambiguities as these. Sharone's analysis, for example, scrutinizes a previously unexamined feature of the labor market: its growing reliance of digital platforms such as LinkedIn, which harbor structural constraints and normative presuppositions that impose on job seekers an array of subtle yet powerful pressures and dilemmas (Marwick & boyd, 2010; van Dijck, 2013). Having a "complete" profile on this site virtually requires the posting of a photograph, with obvious implications for labor market stratification. The very structure of LinkedIn rules out the impression management tactics (such as the tailoring of resumes to fit particular audiences) on which job seekers have long relied. Social networking sites expand the visibility of job seekers' skills, but they do so by subjecting workers to the watchful gaze of potential employers. Implied here are subtle institutional forces that shape workers' orientations toward work, the labor market, and the self, thus contributing to the workings of the new managerial regimes.

The chapters by Pech and by Jenkins and Delbridge also inquire into the exercise of managerial authority. Using the case of mid-level workers in the financial industry, Pech asks what happens when workers face the clear and present danger of downsizing (Ho, 2009). Do workers exhibit pattern of continuing loyalty to their employers, even in the absence of firm reciprocity? Or do they withdraw their affiliation and adopt a more self-interested orientation? Pech's findings support the former point of view. The effect of job and labor market uncertainty seems to incline workers to narrow their job horizons, redoubling their willingness to identify with their current employer. Here is a good example of the tenacity of what Pugh (2015) has called the "one-way honor code."

The chapter by Jenkins and Delbridge runs parallel to that by Pech. Here workers exhibit a similar form of loyalty or allegiance to the firm, in spite of the unrewarding nature of the job as measured by wages. In this case, involving workers in an upscale call center, the reason is not rooted in the pursuit of career opportunities (as in the chapter by Pech). Instead, the efficacy of management's regime lies in its willingness to allow workers the capacity to exercise "value discretion" – that is, the ability to rule on the firm's behalf. Here we encounter a regime that bears more than a passing resemblance to what popular writers have termed "liberation management," and what Fleming and Sturdy (2009) have called "neo-normative control." Here, firms achieve control over employees by enabling them to "just be themselves" – thus lending managerial authority an informal and even "natural" quality to which no one could reasonably object. A subtle form of colonization occurs here, Jenkins and Delbridge conclude, in which workers embody the interests of the firm, now on their own account.

The chapters by Attwood-Charles and Babb and by Rodriguez both address a terrain that stands in particular need of attention – the provision of medical care – given the health care industry's growing embrace of privatization, profit

imperatives, cost controls, and new managerial constructs (e.g., “lean production” and “team” systems). Indeed, the adoption of the latter practices by the health care industry attests to the pervasive presence that neo-liberal logic has achieved across broad swaths of the economy. Notably, both these chapters speak to the capacity of medical practitioners to subvert normative practices they find to be alien to their own professional orientations. In the case of the Attwood-Charles and Babb chapter, doctors easily marginalized the lean regimes their employers had proposed, but in highly variable ways. In one site, doctors invoked their professional autonomy, refusing lean medicine by defining it as too profit-oriented, and thus as foreign to their professional norms. In a second site, however, lean medicine failed to gain traction for very different reasons: largely because it seemed at odds with the efficiency- and profit-generating needs that administrators sought to address. These findings provide a healthy reminder of the limits of managerial regimes, and of the nuanced patterns of contention that arise within work organizations, even in the face of economic restructuring and organizational consolidation (Kellogg, 2011). Parallel processes unfold in Rodriquez’s account. Here, management introduced a new, team-based regime with great promise, only to see this effort crash and burn. The reason did not stem from the resistance of either professionals or administrators; indeed, “team” discourse seemed wholly acceptable to both groups. Instead, the failure of the new regime stemmed from the contradictions implied within the new regime itself – its promise of enhanced quality, cooperation, and autonomy on the one hand, versus its imposition of a regime of austerity and rationalized cost-cutting on the other hand.

As noted, we have as yet only a meager understanding of the ways in which ascribed statuses shape the unfolding of labor market uncertainty in the current period. For this reason, the chapter by Vuolo, Uggen, and Lageson, which explores the relation between recession and racial hierarchies, is especially welcome. The question Vuolo and his colleagues have posed whether the labor market privileges that whites enjoy tend to expand during periods of substantial downturn (as social closure theory might suggest); or alternatively, whether racial hierarchies within the labor market exhibit the qualities that Tilly (1998) once called “durable inequality.” Both scenarios seem plausible. It is conceivable that hiring managers would respond to a recessionary economy by exhibiting a preference for white labor, even within low-wage jobs, especially if doing so would advance the firm’s prestige. The alternative possibility is that racial hierarchies are so deeply institutionalized as to persist as part of the “natural” order of things, with racial disparities in the labor market remaining as a constant over time. As Vuolo et al. report, the “durable” outcome seems to obtain, suggesting that racial disparities and status hierarchies are powerfully institutionalized within the low-wage labor market. Perhaps most strikingly, the job rewards that black workers receive even during flush times remain less generous than those which their white counterparts receive during recessionary times (see Pager, 2003). The Vuolo, Uggen, and Lageson chapter stands as a strong

example of the need to sort out the workings of the categorical inequalities that are brought forward into the neo-liberal economy.

The final chapter in this volume, that by Shin, investigates the link between what has become the *lingua franca* of contemporary corporate life – the view of the firm as a platform for the enrichment of shareholders – and the rolling out of downsizing campaigns as a result layoffs. Carefully studying CEO reports, Shin finds evidence of a close connection between their content – that is, their embrace of the “shareholder value” discourse – and correlative shifts in employment levels (the use of downsizing as a weapon against alleged inefficiencies within the firm). These findings provide a cautionary note against neo-institutionalist accounts that encourage us to view corporate announcements as discursive performances that uncoupled from the internal operations of the firm. Discourse, Shin finds, has real consequences; it seems closely bound up with managerial practices that operate to the disadvantages of millions of employees.

Much remains unknown about the nature of the economic era into which we have been so blindly propelled. Some scholars, such as Beck (2000) speak of a looming crisis of the “work society,” suggesting that the modernization process has begun to erode its own sources of stability. Certainly, the onset of precarity has disrupted longstanding assumptions and orientations regarding the meaning of work and the employment relation itself. Needed are studies such as those collected here, the better to map out the ways in which work organizations and labor market institutions have evolved – and to explore the space in which alternative arrangements might conceivably emerge.

Steven Vallas  
*Editor*

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