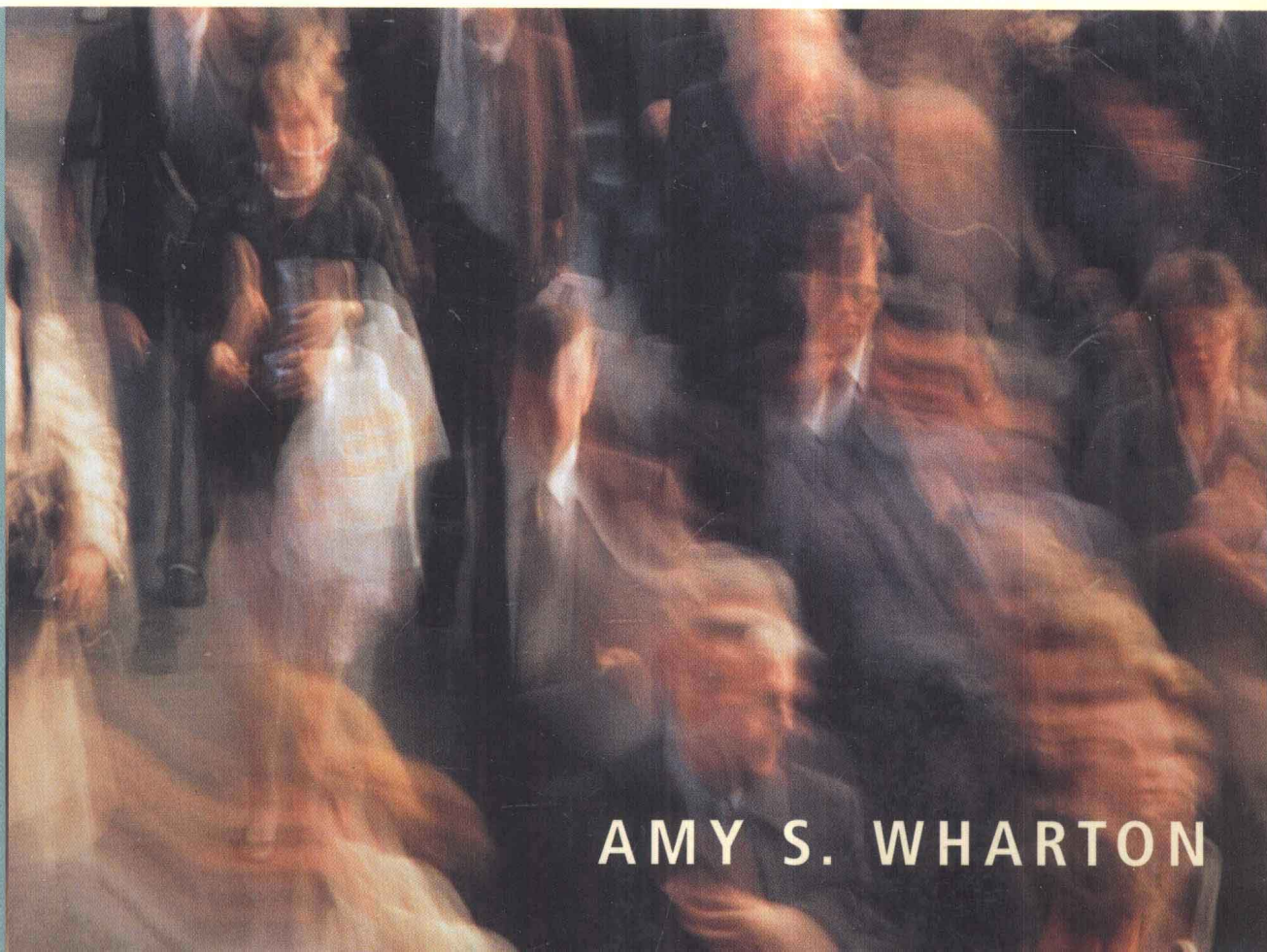




Working in America

CONTINUITY, CONFLICT, AND CHANGE



AMY S. WHARTON



WORKING IN AMERICA

Continuity, Conflict, and Change

SECOND EDITION

Amy S. Wharton

Washington State University



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To my father, William Wharton, and the
memory of my mother, Marilyn Wharton (1921–1964)

Preface

College students today are more anxious about their futures than in the past, particularly with respect to their places in the world of work. The social contract that promised steadily increasing wages and secure employment has unraveled, leaving many uncertain about their lives and livelihoods. In these times, a sociological perspective on work is more important than ever. Analysis and understanding of the societal conditions that shape people's work lives may be the best tools for conquering their anxiety and uncertainty. To prepare for and reshape the future demands knowledge of the social forces that influenced the past and help structure the present.

The study of work is central to the discipline of sociology. From the industrial revolution to the service economy, sociologists have contributed much to our understanding of the forces shaping workers' lives and the workplace. This anthology contains a sampling of some of the best that sociologists of work have to offer. Through a variety of methods and approaches, the readings address several pertinent questions about the American workplace: What have been the most important changes in workers' lives and work organization during the twentieth century? What factors shape employment today? What does the future hold for work and workers?

By examining how sociologists have pursued answers to these questions, I hope students will acquire tools to address their own concerns and come away better equipped to make sense of their past, present, and future work experiences.

Selecting the readings for this anthology was both a challenge and a pleasure. It was challenging because my colleagues have produced such a tremendous amount of valuable research on the workplace that I could have filled several volumes easily; deciding what to exclude was a difficult task. At the same time, compiling these readings provided me with an opportunity to explore and appreciate sociologists' contributions to our knowledge about workers and work. This process reaffirmed my belief that a sociological perspective remains the best vantage point from which to understand the social world.

In the end, the readings that appear here were selected with several considerations in mind. First, I aimed for a degree of comprehensiveness in the coverage of topics. While no anthology can address everything, the anthology remains one of the best vehicles for presenting information to students on a range of topics. Second, I wanted to present the key pieces of research in a particular area. I included some classics but primarily used examples of contemporary research that have made an impact. Third, attending to gender, racial, and ethnic differentiation in the workplace was important to me. Hence, these issues are addressed throughout the anthology. Finally, I selected readings with a student audience in mind. When all is said and done, this anthology is for them.

Intellectual work is, at its best, a collective enterprise. In editing this anthology, I benefited from the valuable comments and suggestions of many colleagues around the country.

These included William Canak, Middle Tennessee State University; Samuel Cohn, Texas A&M University; Daniel Cornfield, Vanderbilt University; Barbara Thomas Coventry, The University of Toledo; Patricia Craig, Ohio State University; William Finlay, University of Georgia; Robin Leidner, University of Pennsylvania; Garth Massey, University of Wyoming; Peter Meiksins, Cleveland State University; Stephen Petterson, University of Virginia; Patricia A. Roos, Rutgers University; and Vicki Smith, University of California–Davis. At Washington State University, my friend and colleague in the English Department, Anne Maxham, cheerfully volunteered to give critical feedback on my introductions; Nathan Lauster provided crucial research assistance.

The division of labor involved in producing this book extends beyond academe to include many others' contributions. I owe tremendous thanks to Mayfield Senior Editor Serina Beauparlant, whose gentle prodding, enthusiasm, and constant positive reinforcement helped this anthology move from idea to reality in what seems like record time. Others at Mayfield, including Sara Early and April Wells-Hayes, have been equally helpful and conscientious. In fact, from the beginning to the end of this project, I have benefited from the efforts of many people who are very good at their jobs. They have my thanks and appreciation.

Changes to the Second Edition

The second edition contains several changes, most inspired by comments and suggestions from colleagues around the country. I have added a new introductory section that includes readings on the history of work. I have also added several readings that address the global economy. Contingent, marginal, and low-wage jobs receive more attention than in the first edition, as does work in the household. Throughout the anthology, I have replaced older readings with more updated research. In making all of these changes, however, I have adhered to the themes that guided my selection of readings for the first edition.

As always, I have benefited from reviewers' comments. Reviewers for the second edition include Robert Althaus, Indiana University; Spencer Blakeslee, Framingham State College; William T. Clute, University of Nebraska at Omaha; Richard H. Hall, University at Albany; Kevin D. Henson, Loyola University of Chicago; Linda Markowitz, Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville; Carol Ray, San Jose State University; Raymond Russell, University of California, Riverside; and Denise Scott, State University of New York, Geneseo. I have also been privileged to continue my association with McGraw-Hill and its fine staff. Special thanks to my editor and friend, Serina Beauparlant. I also wish to thank Serina's assistant, Kate Schubert, for her assistance.

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General Introduction

The beginning of a new century offers an opportune time to assess the past, reflect on the present, and imagine the future. As the millennium begins, a course in the sociology of work can provide a conceptual and theoretical platform from which to explore a variety of enduring sociological issues. Though this anthology focuses mainly on the contemporary workplace, it also looks at workplaces of the past and the future through a critical, sociological lens. Work is among the most important social institutions; indeed, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sociologists Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim placed work at the center of their analyses. Contemplating the development of capitalism in the West and the burgeoning industrial revolution, these “founding fathers of sociology” understood that the organization of work helps to determine the fates of individuals as well as their societies.

Three major themes guided the selection of readings for this anthology—the first reflects a methodological concern, the second stems from an empirical observation, and the third emphasizes conceptual and theoretical issues. Each theme has continuity with past efforts to understand the American workplace, yet each also directs attention to important questions about the present and future.

The first theme is that workers’ lives are shaped not only by daily life on the job but also by larger trends that are transforming work in the country and across the globe. This theme has methodological implications because it suggests that any study of work must concern itself not only with workers’ experiences but also with the larger histori-

cal, economic, and social contexts within which these experiences occur. Multiple levels of analysis are thus necessary to address the important questions in the sociology of work.

The second major theme is that workers are demographically more diverse than ever, and this changing demography plays an important role in the organization and experience of work. This theme is drawn from an empirical observation: The American workplace—like the larger society—has always been composed of workers from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, genders, ages, religions, and sexual orientations—to name but a few characteristics. As American society moves into the next century, this demographic diversity is increasing: Most new entrants to the labor force are expected to be nonwhites, females, or immigrants (Johnston and Packer 1987). Sociologists have come to believe that we cannot fully understand work without considering the characteristics of the people who perform it.

The third theme of this book is perhaps the most significant to sociologists: Work is not strictly an instrumental activity, nor can it be understood only in economic terms. Instead, as Friedland and Robertson (1990, p. 25) explain, “Work provides identities as much as it provides bread for the table; participation in commodity and labor markets is as much an expression of who you are as what you want.” Moreover, from this perspective work is not an isolated institution, closed off from the rest of society, but is profoundly interconnected with the larger social world. Not only are its boundaries permeable, making the workplace subject to

influences from other institutions, but the influence of work on other aspects of society is also great. Indeed, work shapes every aspect of life—from people's conceptions of self to the degree of inequality in a society. Through the years sociologists studying work have disagreed as to which effects of work they consider most important, but there has been no dispute with the basic premise that the study of work is a vehicle for examining some of the most fundamental aspects of social life.

Linking the Micro and the Macro in Sociological Studies of Work

Like the field of sociology as a whole, teaching and scholarship in the sociology of work reflect a range of approaches, which typically have been characterized as either *micro* or *macro*. Micro-level approaches tend to focus on individuals or small groups in a particular workplace and examine processes or outcomes that operate at these levels of analysis. Though by no means all micro-level research is ethnographic, many researchers prefer qualitative methodologies that allow for close, in-depth scrutiny of particular social phenomena. Indeed, there is a long and rich tradition of micro-level ethnographic research in the sociology of work. This research has provided useful accounts of many jobs, offering the student a way to vicariously experience life as a machine shop worker, a medical student, a flight attendant, or a McDonald's employee (Roy 1959; Becker, Geer, Hughes, and Strauss 1961; Hochschild 1983; Leidner 1993).

In contrast, macro-level studies in the sociology of work tend to be less concerned with "flesh-and-blood workers" and more attentive to larger processes, trends, and outcomes (Simpson 1989, p. 565). Studies of this type typically analyze data collected from

representative samples of people, jobs, or workplaces and seek to identify patterns and relationships between key variables. Macro-level research thus is often quantitative, driven by the desire to test hypotheses or produce generalizable results. The popularity of macro-level research has grown in recent years, as sociologists have borrowed concepts and theories from economists. Sociological studies of wage determination, for example, attempt to explain what factors determine the "worth" of jobs and cause some jobs to command higher wages than others (Tomaskovic-Devey 1993).

Micro and macro research traditions are often perceived as distinct, and sometimes even conflicting, approaches. Courses in the sociology of work have thus traditionally emphasized one or the other approach, but not both. Ideally, however, micro and macro studies should inform one another, as no single approach can address everything. Moreover, in my view, important sociological questions cannot be answered by only one type of study or approach but require a "division of labor" among researchers. For example, to understand the role of race in the workplace we need both fine-grained, ethnographic studies *and* more large-scale, quantitative analyses. The former can help us understand such issues as workers' experiences of discrimination and the meaning of race to employers (Kirschenman and Neckerman 1991), and the latter may address such issues as the racial gap in earnings or the consequences of corporate restructuring for the employment chances of African Americans (Wilson 1996). This view is reflected in the selection of readings for this anthology, which incorporates studies employing diverse methodologies and approaches. By studying both the micro and the macro dimensions of work, we can begin to see how work is shaped by its social context and, conversely, how workplace dynamics may shape the larger society.

The Changing Demographics of the Workplace

Anyone who takes even a cursory look around any place of work in industrialized countries can see that workers doing the same or similar jobs tend to be of the same gender and racial and ethnic group. In a workplace in New York City—for instance, a handbag factory—a walk through the various departments might reveal that the owners and managers are white men; their secretaries and bookkeepers are white and Asian women; the order takers and data processors are African-American women; the factory hands are Hispanic men cutting pieces and Hispanic women sewing them together; African-American men are packing and loading the finished product; and non-English-speaking Eastern European women are cleaning up after everyone. (Lorber 1994, p. 194)

Although the labor force is becoming increasingly diverse, jobs and workplaces continue to be highly segregated along gender, racial, and ethnic lines. The continuing association between jobs and workers of a particular gender, race, or ethnic background suggests that these social categories are as powerful in shaping life inside the workplace as they have been shown to be in shaping life in other societal institutions.

Gender, race, and ethnicity in the workplace are often studied by focusing on discrimination and inequality, and these remain important topics. Despite widespread social changes, as well as the passage of legislation and social policies designed to prevent discrimination and reduce inequality, the costs and rewards of work remain unevenly distributed across social categories. The desire to understand the sources of these work-related inequalities, the forces that perpetuate them, and the consequences of these

inequalities for workers and their families has generated a tremendous amount of research in recent years. We thus know a great deal about some aspects of gender, racial, and ethnic inequality in the workplace. Changes in the organization of work brought on by a global economy and the changing demographics of workers raise new questions for analysis, however. How will these changes affect the costs and rewards of work? More important, how will the relative situations of different groups of workers be affected by the changing workplace? Will economic inequality increase or diminish in the twenty-first century? Questions such as these are important topics for research and debate.

The impacts of gender, race, and ethnicity on the workplace are not confined to their roles in producing inequality and discrimination, nor do these factors affect only the personal consequences of work. Rather, sociologists argue that, at a more fundamental level, the structure and organization of work also reflect the influences of gender, race, and ethnicity. From this perspective, gender, race, and ethnicity are not just characteristics of workers but may also be considered characteristics of work roles and jobs or seen as embedded in work arrangements and technologies (Acker 1991). Understanding how the workplace is gendered and how it is imbued with racial symbolism have become important concerns in recent years. Addressing these issues requires us to examine how work structures and practices that may appear “neutral” in design or application may nevertheless contribute to the construction and maintenance of gender and racial distinctions in the workplace. Including issues pertaining to gender, race, and ethnicity throughout this anthology, instead of confining them to a section on discrimination, allows the reader to see the many ways in which these social categories shape work experience and organization.

Work and Society

Viewing work through a sociological lens enables us to consider the varied ways in which work and society are interrelated. For example, at the individual level, work shapes identity, values, and beliefs, as well as a host of other outcomes ranging from mental and physical health to political attitudes (see, e.g., Kohn and Schooler 1983; Karasek and Theorell 1990; Brint 1985). Thus, while sociologists tend to view families as the primary agents of socialization in American society, it is also important to recognize the ways in which people are socialized by their jobs and work experiences. Indeed, some argue that work is an increasingly “greedy” institution, capable of “outcompeting” other institutions for people’s time, emotional energies, and commitments.

One often-overlooked feature of work is that it typically brings people into contact with others—co-workers, subordinates, supervisors, and, increasingly for many, the public. Hence, social interaction and group dynamics are just as important in the workplace as they are in other social arenas. An early, influential sociological study first called attention to the ways that the social relations of work shaped workers’ reactions to their jobs (Mayo 1933). For contemporary researchers, this insight is reflected in the claim that workers are not “atomized optimizers,” unaffected by their interactions with other workplace members (Baron and Pfeffer 1994). Instead, both the content and quality of these relations are seen as important for understanding the consequences and significance of work. Along these lines, some suggest that it is not so much workers’ own characteristics that shape their views and behavior; rather, it is the relation between their characteristics and the characteristics of those with whom they interact. From this perspective, workplaces are settings in which both expressive and instru-

mental ties between people are important—not only for understanding workers’ responses to their jobs, but also for understanding the broader ways in which work shapes meanings and life experience. As Marks (1994, p. 855) explains, “With the help of co-workers, ethnic statuses may get reaffirmed and enlivened, and age and gender identities may be consolidated, celebrated, reorganized, and even transformed. The same is true, of course, of worker identities.”

Though the workplace has never been truly separate from other societal institutions and trends, its interdependence with the larger environment has perhaps never been greater. This point can best be illustrated by considering the relations between work and another important social institution: family life. Societal changes, such as women’s rising participation in the labor force, declining birth rates, and changing gender roles, have transformed relations between families and work. In the process, new conceptual approaches have emerged, and there has been a change in the way social institutions, including work, are understood. In particular, there has been a move away from rigid dichotomies, such as public and private or impersonal and personal, that compartmentalized work and family life, toward more complex portrayals of these social institutions and those who negotiate the work-family boundary (Marks 1994). Work, family, and the relations between them are not static but rather reflect and respond to developments in the wider society.

People’s lives in advanced, capitalist societies are largely dependent on forces emanating from the workplace. The organization and availability of work determine—to a great extent—the social and economic well-being of individuals, neighborhoods, cities, and societies. Work is thus among the most important social institutions, with influential consequences for just about all arenas of social life.

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PART I

Historical Perspectives

A glimpse at the past can help frame our study of the present and future. For this reason, we begin with three selections focused on life and work during the early stages of industrialization.

Historical Perspectives

For most American workers, the boundaries between work and leisure are clearly drawn. For many, the weekend marks the end of the workweek and offers, if not time for play and recreation, at least time away from paid work. In Reading 1, Witold Rybczynski examines the origins of the “weekend.” He traces this particular way of organizing non-work time to nineteenth-century England and the changes brought about by industrialization. Rybczynski also explores the origin and demise of “Saint Monday,” another

tradition related to the changing boundaries between work and leisure.

What was work like for those laboring in factories during the early years of industrialization in the United States? In Reading 2, Sanford Jacoby describes the harsh conditions confronted by factory workers. These conditions stemmed in part from the brutality of foremen and their reliance on the “drive system” as a method of labor control.

In Reading 3, we turn our attention to the American household in the nineteenth century. Ruth Schwartz Cowan chronicles the ways that households were transformed by industrialization and the consequences of these changes for those who did the work necessary to maintain a home. Cowan shows that industrialization increased, rather than decreased, household work, and she demonstrates how this work became the primary responsibility of women.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

1

Keeping Saint Monday

Witold Rybczynski

The Oxford English Dictionary finds the earliest recorded use of the word “weekend” in an 1879 issue of *Notes and queries*, an English magazine. “In Staffordshire, if a person leaves home at the end of his week’s work on the Saturday afternoon to spend the evening of Saturday and the following Sunday with friends at a distance,” the entry goes, “he is said to be spending his week-end at So-and-so.” The quotation is obviously a definition, which suggests that the word had only recently come into use. It is also important to note that the “week’s work” is described as ending on Saturday afternoon. It was precisely this early ending to the week that produced a holiday period of a day and a half—the first weekend. This innovation—and it was a uniquely British one—occurred in roughly the third quarter of the nineteenth century. To understand how and why the weekend appeared when it did, let’s examine how the nature of free time changed during the previous hundred years.

Throughout the eighteenth century, the work-week ended on Saturday evening; Sunday was the weekly day off. The Reformation and, later, Puritanism had made Sunday the weekly holy day in an attempt to displace the saints’ days and religious festivals of Catholicism. Although the taboo on

work was more or less respected, the strictures of Sabbatarianism that prohibited merriment and levity on the Lord’s Day were rejected by most Englishmen, who saw the holiday as a chance to drink, gamble, and generally have a good time.

Only one official weekly holiday did not necessarily mean that the life of the average British worker was one of unremitting toil. Far from it. Work was always interrupted to commemorate the annual feasts of Christmas, New Year, and Whitsuntide (the days following the seventh Sunday after Easter). These traditional holidays were universally observed, but the length of the breaks varied. Depending on local convention, work stopped for anywhere from a few days to two weeks. In addition to the religious holidays, villages and rural parishes observed their own annual festivals or “wakes.” These celebratory rituals, which dated from medieval times, were mainly secular and involved sports, dancing, and other public amusements.

Towns had their own festivals, less bucolic than those of the countryside. Stamford, in Lincolnshire, celebrated a special holiday; each November 13th, thousands of men and boys gathered in the streets for bull running, an event reminiscent of the famous festival that still takes place in Pamplona. The British today deride the Spanish passion for bullfighting, but their sensibility in this regard is, at least culturally speaking, recent—the Stamford run ended with the

From Witold Rybczynski, *Waiting for the Weekend*. New York: Viking, 1991.