The Sociology of Work

STRUCTURES AND INEQUALITIES

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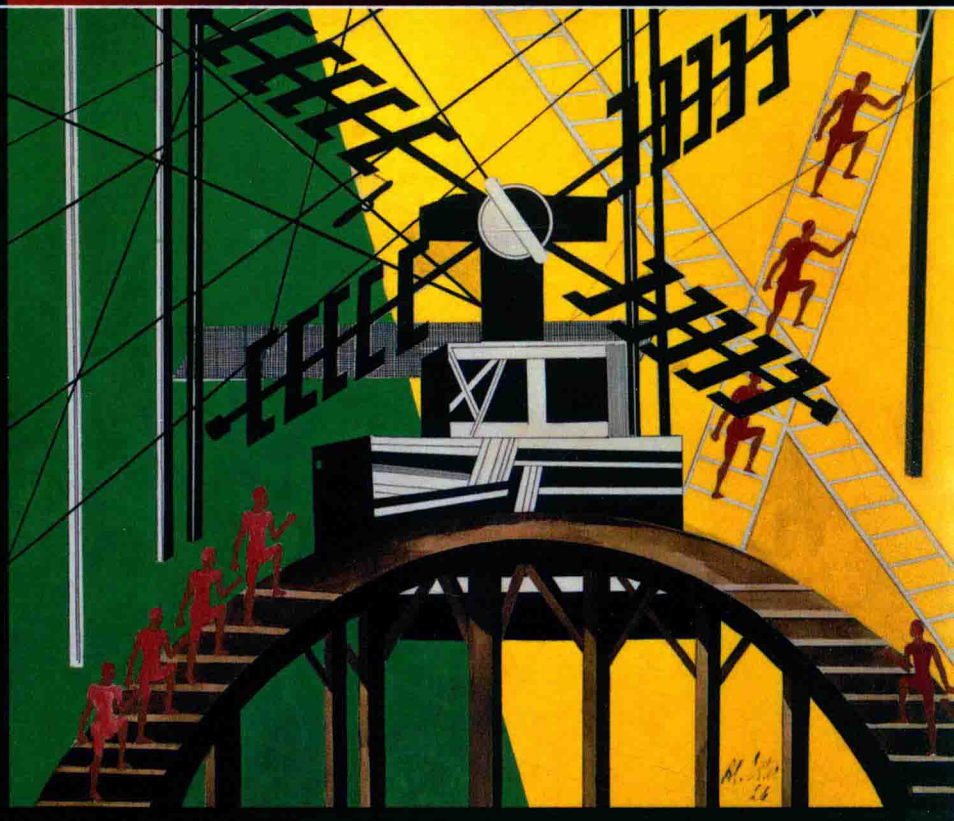

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Structures and Inequalities

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Preface

The sociology of work and occupations is one of the larger and more influential of specialization in the discipline. Its concerns have been at the heart of sociology since its very establishment, and they have remained centrally important parts of the field. Yet those of us who teach the sociology of work have often had to make especially difficult choices when it comes time to submit our book orders. How can we best convey the substance of the field to newcomers—to undergraduates generally, to majors in sociology in particular, and to graduate students (among others) needing to grasp the field as a whole? Selecting useful readings for these audiences has often been a labored task. Using original monographs, or selected articles and chapters, has the advantage of immersing students in the original research—but relying on these specialized works often makes it difficult for students to grasp the broader conceptual principles that bind the field together. Using textbooks has an obvious advantage, for they can indeed convey the core principles and themes that inform the sociology of work. Yet textbooks in the sociology of work have typically wound up sacrificing the specifically *sociological* content of the field—that is, the theoretical principles and conceptual moorings that distinguishes its approach from that of kindred disciplines such as management theory or industrial and organizational psychology. On the one hand, we have sociology as Babel. On the other, simply sociobabble. Not an ideal situation either way.

This text was written in an effort to transcend this dilemma. Put simply, we have written a textbook that seeks to convey the excitement of discovery that stems from close engagement with particular findings, yet does so in ways that remain faithful to the overarching principles and intellectual rigor that define sociology as a distinct discipline in its own right. In short, here (we hope) is a textbook written as if sociological thinking mattered. A corollary benefit of our approach will be the stimulation of discussion and debate among our fellow scholars, who may (we again hope) will derive benefit from the book as well.

Practicing what we preach, we have adopted a division of intellectual labor in which our respective interests and expertise complement one another, providing strengths that would be difficult for lone scholars to achieve. The result is a volume that is distinct in several respects. First, reflecting our sense that discussion of historical developments is indispensable for any serious

understanding of work, employment, and social inequality, we have sought to discuss key historical issues that are too seldom given emphasis in books such as this, such as Luddism, the role of gender in the industrial revolution, or the rise and decline of the workers' movement. Without some understanding of economic, labor, and social history, students simply cannot grasp the choices (and the dangers) that contemporary developments imply. Second, we have sought to transcend the ironic tendency to ghettoize discussion of gender, which inevitably suffers when it is sequestered within isolated chapters. We therefore weave issues of gender inequality into our discussion at multiple points of the analysis, from the rise of the factory system to management occupations, access to the professions, to debates over work and family.

A third point is that the book does not refrain from introducing complex theoretical or methodological issues. We devote chapters to theoretical approaches that have informed the field, with treatment of both classical and contemporary views of work and paid employment. We also devote a chapter to the research methods and data sources that are employed within the sociology of work, the better to equip students to understand the findings the volume presents. Finally, we have sought to do these things in an engaging, lively manner that draws on contemporary events to illustrate the many points of applicability which sociological thinking enjoys. Let the readers be the judge.

We have incurred many personal and professional debts in the writing of this book, and we wish to thank Claude Tewles, who instigated this project, and Sherith Pankretz, Marianne Paul, and Chase Billingham, along with various reviewers, editors, and research assistants who are too numerous (or too anonymous!) to single out for thanks.

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PART I

Introduction

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Chapter 1

The Sociology of Work: An Invitation

Concerns about the shuttering of American factories and the disappearance of middle-class jobs. Debates in the U.S. Congress over the rights of women alleging discrimination in their paychecks. Reports about a "culture of corruption," first at such major financial corporations as Enron, Qwest, and HealthSouth, and now at major commercial lending institutions. Acrimony over the outsourcing of once-secure white-collar jobs in engineering, finance, and other professions, as work is shifted to India and other offshore sites. It is difficult nowadays to avoid the topic of "work" in one or another form. This should not be surprising: From its very establishment, political, business, and religious leaders have extolled the virtues of hard work. Immigrants, seeking a better life, have often flocked to U.S. shores in hopes of finding better jobs; they continue to do so today. The sitdown strikes in the 1930s were a pivotal event in American social history, through which industrial workers—a previously marginalized class—gained not only the wages but also the public admiration that helped them join mainstream society. Perhaps the most enduring symbol of the women's movement to date has been Rosie the Riveter, an iconic figure who symbolized women's ability to do manual work as well as any man. And of course, for many people today, the pursuit of a college education has a practical significance in addition to its intellectual one: a college degree—much like the frontier during earlier periods in U.S. history—promises to open up a path to fulfilling working lives for millions of young people today.

Thus it is not difficult to understand why people should be concerned about the nature of work. What *is* surprising, however, is how few of us take work seriously as an object of study in its own right. This book aims to fill that gap. It invites the reader to look again at the meanings and orientations that people bring to bear on work, at the organizational structures that surround us at work, and at the forms of social interaction we sustain with managers and our fellow employees. The book is written in the belief that these are vital aspects of our lives, whose importance too often outstrips our understanding of them. Developing the principles, theories, and knowledge that make up the sociology of work, we hope to deepen our appreciation for the myriad ways in which work and employment affect our lives, our identities, and the societies in which we live.

Of course, social scientists have long studied the workplace, doing so from several different

vantage points. Industrial and organizational psychologists have developed much research on employees' personalities and on the factors that affect motivation, job satisfaction, and job performance. Labor historians have explored shifts in the structure and meaning of work, focusing especially on the impact of industrial capitalism on workers' lives. Economic anthropologists have developed a rich corpus of research focused on the meanings of work within many cultures, especially less developed ones. And labor economists have amassed an impressive body of knowledge about how markets and social influences combine to affect levels of pay and productivity and even decisions about how economic transactions should be shaped.

These are all important and worthy areas of study. They tell us a great deal about the forces that impinge on the workplace, and for this reason we draw on these perspectives at several points throughout this book. Yet we do so in an effort to capture aspects of workplace life that these disciplines often neglect and which we believe are especially fateful for both individuals and the groups in which they live. We have in mind a series of issues and themes that are the province of the specifically *sociological* approach toward work, which focuses on the informal norms and values that workers establish on the job and that lend work meaning in their eyes; the workings of organizational structures and the different forms that managerial authority assumes; and differences in the work situations faced by employees in varying occupations, whether in managerial and professional jobs or in routine clerical, manual, and service occupations. The sociology of work also studies the distribution of opportunity among different groups of workers, exploring how, when, and why job rewards are unequally allocated along the lines of gender, race, ethnicity, or nationality. The sociology of work approaches all of these themes in a dynamic fashion, asking how the workplace is changing in the wake of new digital technologies, innovative forms of work organization, rising concerns about work and family, and continuing debates about equal employment rights. These and other topics provide the central threads that unite the sociology of work and define its unique perspective toward the social and cultural dimensions of workplace life. They provide the themes we pursue in this book.

These themes are far from idle concerns. As will be discussed, although the sociology of work is based on academic theories and research, for several generations now the field has sought to contribute to the lives of individuals, groups, organizations, and the wider society and polity. Thus, for aspiring professionals or managers, an understanding of the informal underside of work organizations, of how diversity might be handled on the job, or how job ladders impinge on one's hopes for advancement within a given firm can all provide practical knowledge that has direct relevance to one's career aspirations. (The literature is filled with real-life instances in which managers and professionals underestimated the importance of social and cultural factors and suffered as a direct result.) In civic terms, too, the sociology of work can help one grasp a number of key issues that are hotly debated in political contests and debates. One has only to think of issues such as gender disparities in pay, the influx of immigrant workers into jobs previously held by native-born workers, debates over the fairness of hundred-million-dollar severance packages for CEOs (or,

at the opposite end of the economic structure, the situation of the working poor) to see what we mean. Finally, and in more intellectual terms, the sociology of work promises to deepen our understanding of the human condition, exploring the ways in which the nature of our jobs affects our identities, values, and ideals. Exploring how work has been organized and distributed and how contemporary forces are transforming work organizations better equips us to make choices, both as individual citizens and as a society writ large.

In this introductory chapter, we sketch out the major principles that underlie the sociological study of work. Then, in Chapter 2, we present the major perspectives on which researchers have relied, both in classical and contemporary debates.

The Primacy-of-Production Thesis

References to the fundamental nature of work for human life can be found in works as different as the Bible, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, and Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto*. Drawing on a long history of theological and philosophical thinking about work, conservative thinkers and managers today often speak about the overarching significance of the work ethic—and the destructive impact of government support on the individual's sense of self-reliance and self-fulfillment. Sociologists of work agree with much of this thinking, though in very specific ways, and hold that the work that people do is "fateful" for their social lives more generally. This is what is sometimes meant by the "primacy-of-production thesis"—an important axiom which holds that the productive relations into which people enter as they set about making ends meet have decisive effects on their individual and social lives. At the *individual* level, the notion is obvious: Especially in modern industrial societies, what we do for a living not only determines what we earn; in addition, it defines us in other people's eyes, "placing" us in relation to other people in ways that affect our friendship networks, our selection of appropriate marital partners, and even our self-esteem and physical well-being. At the more *collective* level, the notion here is that the structural arrangements that societies make while adapting to their environments will have far-reaching effects on the social order as a whole. It is in this sense that sociologists contend that work is a creative act in a double sense: In making our external world, we at the same time make ourselves, both as individuals and as collectivities.

The Impact of Work on the Individual

One of the first generations of sociologists to study work systematically coined the term "master status" to refer to the pivotal role that occupations play in defining us in the eyes of others. This is, after all, why the first question strangers ask us about ourselves is "What do you do?" or "Where do you work?" (For students, the equivalent is often "What's your major?"—a precursor, perhaps, to one's eventual occupational tie.) In an earlier historical period, the equivalent question might have asked about one's kin or village of origin. Now, in the wake of industrial capitalism, one's place within the labor market has become the defining characteristic of the person, conferring on us certain levels of prestige and levels of access to scarce opportunities. Experimental research indicates that our occupational roles strongly affect how other people perceive us,

leading them to attribute certain characteristics to us that we may in fact lack. Thus, in a study by Humphrey (1985), it was found that in a laboratory setting, people who were randomly assigned to perform "managerial" jobs were more likely to be perceived as intelligent and as having leadership ability than were similar people who were assigned to perform "clerical" jobs. Apparently the role we play at work presents us in a particular light, affecting the characteristics that people attribute to us as individuals.

Research also suggests that the jobs we hold affect our perceptions of the world around us. This point emerged early in the development of the field, as in Lieberman's (1956) classic study of factory workers, which gathered a wealth of data on the levels of education, experience, and attitudes toward management found among 2,000 factory employees in the Midwest. Two years after his initial survey, more than 100 of his respondents had been promoted to jobs as supervisors, allowing Lieberman to devise an interesting comparison. He constructed two "matched" groups of respondents, contrasting the newly promoted supervisors with workers who had reported identical levels of experience, ability, and attitudes at the outset of the study but who had *not* been promoted to supervisory jobs. The author found that workers who had come to hold positions with authority developed very different attitudes toward management, toward the company's incentive pay plan, and toward their fellow employees from those held by workers who had stayed in nonsupervisory jobs. In other words, holding a position of authority at work dramatically changed the world views of those involved. The same point emerges in a more recent study by the Harvard sociologist Michele Lamont (1992). Interviewing middle-class employees in distinct regions of both France and the United States, she finds that people whose jobs are located within commercial and market contexts tend to place a much greater value on material success and possessions as the basis for evaluating their fellow citizens than do employees in other occupations and industries. These findings, which are robust and replicated in many studies, suggest that *the job shapes the person* in deep and abiding ways quite beyond what we might suspect.

Work also embeds us within social networks of one or another sort. Indeed, evidence suggests that one's occupational position affects the friendships we form, the people we date, the leisure activities we tend to embrace, and even the people we are inclined to choose as mates (Jackman and Jackman 1983). By and large we choose as associates (or intimates) those who share many of our attitudes, backgrounds, and affiliations, often forming friendship networks on the basis of the organizations and institutions to which we are attached. This is one important reason why the friendship networks a classical musician develops are likely to be very different from those of a corrections officer, for example, even if they earn approximately the same level of pay.

Work also reaches into one's health. This point has been found repeatedly in studies of the linkage between occupational position and both physical and mental well-being. Thus, in an early study by a Swedish epidemiologist, Palmore (1971) sought to identify those factors that most strongly affected individual longevity. He began by administering physical examinations to a sample of subjects, gathering data about their medical histories and social behaviors such as smoking and drinking. He had the foresight to ask about their levels of job satisfaction.

A follow-up stage of data collection conducted several years later revealed that the single strongest predictor of his subjects' longevity was their level of job satisfaction at time one. Similar findings were reported in studies by Karasek (1979, 1981), which found that factory and office employees whose jobs combined two characteristics—low levels of autonomy and high quantitative demands—had significantly greater rates of coronary heart disease as a result. A recent study of French workers conducted by Cambois (2004) even found that job mobility (or the lack of it) had a pronounced effect on mortality rates: Especially among men, mobility into a higher status job contributed on average to a longer life, while workers who were stuck in place or downwardly mobile tended to die at higher rates.

The effects of the job on mental health have also been much studied, with results again suggesting how the job shapes the person. In a pioneering study of manual workers in Detroit, Kornhauser (1965) found that respondents who performed machine-paced tasks exhibited far higher levels of depression, poor self-esteem, and hostility toward others than did similar workers who enjoyed greater autonomy at work. Workers seemed to suffer from a sense that their lives were being wasted, with few significant gains to show for the tedium of their jobs. As some critics pointed out, this study was limited in certain respects: Since it was based on data gathered from a single point in time, workers may have had poor mental health to begin with and may have been "selected into" unrewarding jobs for lack of any alternative. Put differently, the point remained that it might have been the "person that shapes the job." To address precisely this question, Kohn and Schooler (1983) used a statistically rigorous method of analysis to separate out the causal effects that flow in each direction. Studying nationally representative samples of Americans (and later, workers in other nations as well), they drew two important conclusions in their study: First, while people with certain personality attributes did tend to cluster within certain jobs, the impact of the job on the person was more than twice as pronounced as the reverse. Second, the longer the person held a given job, the stronger the effect it had on his or her personality and well-being. Kohn and Schooler later found that the occupational conditions one encounters on the job also affect one's intellectual functioning and even one's values as a parent. Clearly, work reaches deep into one's personality, health, and self-concept.

The Impact of Work on Societies

We are trained to think of ourselves as self-reliant, freely acting individuals. For this reason we tend to neglect social and cultural dynamics at the macro-social or collective level, for this is a seemingly abstract realm that lies beyond direct experience. Yet historical studies can sensitize us to institutional changes that occur behind our backs, showing us some of the ways in which work structures have left a deep and abiding mark on human societies. Such effects can be momentous, as when large-scale changes in the institutional structure of work lead to dramatic shifts in the social order writ large. As systems of production change, so too does the surrounding society.

This point is made abundantly clear in studies of the transition to industrial capitalism within Western Europe (a topic discussed more fully in Chapter 4). As peasant labor, home-based production, and artisanal forms of work gave way to the factory system, thousands of workers began to be concentrated together in urban

areas spatially removed from their homes, setting in motion institutional changes that redrew the social landscape throughout European societies. The recruitment of wage laborers (including men, women, and children) disrupted customary patterns of gender and family life. As women began to earn a wage—they were, it should be emphasized, among the earliest factory workers—male control over women's lives became highly problematic. Women's and children's labor began to be used against men's in ways that threatened the well-being of all workers. And as worker mobility increased, family life more generally was strained as intergenerational ties grew more problematic. Though it had long existed in European countries, the nuclear family (as opposed to the extended, cross-generational family structure) gained greater centrality as the factory system took root.

The rise of industrial production processes also reconfigured the class structure of the European societies, giving rise to a growing commercial class of entrepreneurs who eventually became elite members of a new dominant class. The growth of a large manual working class, whose members could no longer expect to become autonomous craftsmen and who were denied political rights, provided the basis for the great social and political movements that defined the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and that won many rights now taken for granted (such as universal education, voting rights, fair labor standards, and universal access to public education).

Industrial capitalism, and with it the machine-based rhythms of daily life, also led to subtle yet significant shifts in the nature of Western culture. Discipline, punctuality, regularity, and compliance with organizational demands all became norms that were imposed on populations only with the greatest difficulty, in ways that often disrupted deeply established customs and traditional ways of life (Thompson 1964). Interestingly, most historians view the rise of the prison as a mechanism of social control as itself an outgrowth of the factory system, as it borrowed much of the factory's harsh and coercive logic. Indeed, the function of incarceration in early prisons was precisely to inculcate the norms of work discipline, imposing harsh rituals on unruly masses as a form of penance, while also providing an object lesson about the norms that industrial capitalism now demanded of its members.

As capitalism developed, it left its mark on education as an institution as well. Schooling of course had traditionally been restricted to the children of elites, the aristocracy, or the clergy. As the need for office and administrative labor grew, and as the demand for literacy expanded, schooling on a more generalized basis arose, but again in ways that often adopted the logic of industrial production. Educational reformers in the United States frequently looked to industrial management as a model for the organization of schooling, often viewing students as "raw materials" that needed to be shaped in accordance with "customer specifications" (that is, the demands of employers), using industrial methods of control as the model for the structure of schooling (Bowles and Gintis 1974).

Perhaps one of the most momentous of all shifts that the rise of industrial capitalism produced was its redefinition of "human nature." This is a complex issue but an important one. Most historians and anthropologists have now agreed that Adam Smith was quite wrong to view the tendency to "truck and barter" as a characteristic of

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