

SOCIOLOGY FOR A NEW CENTURY



THIRD EDITION

CHANGING CONTOURS OF WORK

Jobs and Opportunities in the New Economy

STEPHEN SWEET ♦ PETER MEIKSINS



CHANGING CONTOURS OF WORK

**Jobs and Opportunities in
the New Economy**

Third Edition

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FOR INFORMATION:

SAGE Publications, Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
E-mail: order@sagepub.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London, EC1Y 1SP
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
B 1/1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044
India

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Acquisitions Editor: Jeff Lasser
Editorial Assistant: Alexandra Croell
Production Editor: Bennie Clark Allen
Copy Editor: Mark Bast
Typesetter: Hurix Systems Pvt. Ltd.
Proofreader: Rae-Ann Goodwin
Indexer: Maria Sosnowski
Cover Designer: Michael Dubowe
Marketing Manager: Johanna Swenson
eLearning Editor: Gabrielle Piccininni

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sweet, Stephen A., author.

Changing contours of work : jobs and opportunities in the new economy / Stephen Sweet, Peter Meiksins. — Third edition.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4833-5825-3 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Technological innovations—Economic aspects—United States. 2. Labor market—United States. 3. High technology industries—United States. 4. Hours of labor—United States. 5. Industrial relations—United States. 6. United States—Economic conditions—21st century. 7. Globalization. I. Meiksins, Peter, 1953- author. II. Title.

HC110.T4S93 2016

331.0973—dc23

2015030397

This book is printed on acid-free paper.



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SFI-00453

15 16 17 18 19 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Stephen Sweet is an associate professor of sociology at Ithaca College and editor of the journal *Teaching Sociology*. His studies of work and its impact on and off the job have appeared in a variety of publications, including *Work and Occupations*; *Sex Roles*; *Research in the Sociology of Work*; *Family Relations*; *New Directions in Life Course Research*; *Journal of Vocational Behavior*; *Journal of Marriage and the Family*; *Generations*; and *Community, Work, & Family*. His books, *The Work-Family Interface* (2014), *Data Analysis With SPSS: A First Course in Applied Statistics* (2012), and *College and Society: An Introduction to the Sociological Imagination* (2001), have been extensively adopted in sociology courses. He has edited and coedited publications including the *Work and Family Handbook: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, Methods, and Approaches* (2006), *The Work and Family Encyclopedia* (2008–2011), and special issues of the journals *Teaching Sociology* and *Community, Work & Family*. His current research focuses on the factors that lead people to embrace work as part of their identity and the ways that organizations integrate flexible work practices. In his job at home, he provides support to (and receives support from) his wife Jai (a college administrator) and children Arjun and Nisha.

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Preface to the Third Edition

This book is an effort to make sense of work opportunity—as it was in the twentieth century and as it is today—and how it influences lives on and off the job. When we began writing the first edition of this book, we thought this would be a straightforward endeavor. First, we intended to discuss the “old economy” and the types of opportunities present when most of the labor force was employed in jobs critical to mass production industrial work. Then we were going to write about the emerging “new economy” and the ways new technologies, new organizations, new jobs, a new workforce, and globalization are transforming work. Our unique contribution would be to show the ways that current policies and practices, designed to correspond with needs in the old economy, fail to address the present-day concerns.

When we wrote the first edition, we spent well over a year blocking out chapters, going back into the research literature, writing chapter drafts, restructuring our arguments, and rewriting. With all of these efforts, we faced a recurring problem, namely, that our observations about the old economy kept intruding into what we wanted to say about the new economy, and vice versa. Our work in that first year would have been far easier if we had recognized then what was to become a central theme of this book: *the old economy has not been replaced by a new economy; the old economy is operating within the new economy.*

Once we understood the overlap of the old and new economies, we realized that our thesis would have to be modified, as would the structure of our project. The story of the old and new economies is one of *common social forces* that shape the development of work opportunity. Many features of the old economy, although sometimes in new forms, are central to the dynamics of the new. Our conclusion is that concerns facing workers today result from *structural lags* that have forestalled the implementation of effective responses to changes in the ways work is performed and from *enduring failures* to address the problems of inequality that developed in the old economy.

In the years that followed the publication of the first edition, the global economy tanked and the housing bubble burst. Job insecurity expanded, homes were lost, and working families experienced compounded strains. But not everything that happened was bad. There were some important expansions in workers' rights, such as increased opportunity to file discrimination suits and expanded opportunities for working women to breastfeed their children. There is now greater access to health care as well. But perhaps the biggest story, in respect to work and opportunity, concerns the reckless decisions made to serve the interests of those at the very top of the opportunity ladder and the consequences those decisions had on almost everyone else. Even with the ongoing economic recovery, large numbers of working families have been left behind, struggle to make ends meet, and live in precarious conditions. While the observations we presented in the previous editions remain largely the same, new and updated statistics presented in this edition show that opportunity divides have continued to expand, rather than contract. It is abundantly clear that the new economy, even in the context of an economic recovery, is not working for everyone.

In the chapters that follow, our goals are to identify the contours of work and how they have changed over time, considering both short-term changes that may have occurred over the course of the preceding decades, as well as the longer-term development of modern ways of organizing work. Our analysis relies primarily on the research of sociologists but also on that of labor historians and economists. Our goal is not to offer comprehensive histories of work, or to detail the experiences of all groups in the workforce, but to document the processes that shape work opportunity and how opportunities have been divided in the United States along class, gender, and racial lines. To do this, we adopted a comparative perspective, placing our analysis of opportunity and policy in the United States alongside the somewhat different realities of work in Western Europe and elsewhere. We also compare the experience of workers laboring today with those laboring in the mid-twentieth century and earlier, and we explore the American workplace in the larger context of an integrated global economy and emerging global networks of trade.

Chapter 1, "Mapping the Contours of Work," offers an introduction to the sociology of work and the unique contributions sociological analysis brings to the understanding of the changing economy. Our concern in this chapter is not so much to detail the nature of work in the new economy, or how changes in work have happened, but rather to indicate what needs to be examined if one is to understand work, society, and social change today. To do this, we outline observations sociologists have made about the ways

culture, social structure, and agency shape the opportunity to work and the careers of workers. We introduce this chapter by describing the challenges faced by six workers laboring in the new economy. These individuals illuminate the *diversity* of workers' experiences and how the transition to a new economy is affecting career prospects and introducing distinct strains into family lives.

Chapter 2, "New Products, New Ways of Working, and the New Economy," considers the changing patterns of what is produced and how production occurs. In this chapter we consider the implications of concerns such as deindustrialization, the rise of service sector employment, and changing organizational designs and technologies. The primary question we consider here is the extent to which the new economy differs from the old economy in respect to what is created and the labor processes and practices involved in production. This chapter is designed primarily to illuminate why we have concluded that the old economy operates within a new economy.

Chapter 3, "Economic Inequality, Social Mobility, and the New Economy," examines the economic returns received from work and how work opportunity gives shape to the class structure of society. The analysis reveals sobering signs that economic transformations are contributing to a divided economy, one that sustains a two-tiered division between good jobs and bad jobs and one that is funneling substantial shares of the returns of work to a privileged elite. We also consider how the movement of "good jobs" from the United States affects the life chances of workers in emerging economies, as well as more peripheral areas of the global economy.

Chapter 4, "Whose Jobs Are Secure?" and Chapter 5, "A Fair Day's Work? The Intensity and Scheduling of Jobs in the New Economy," consider how security and time commitments to work have changed. We first show the ways work designs in the new economy are contributing to widening job insecurity. Our interest here is not just to detail the extent of risk present today but also to show how social policies implemented in the old economy set workers up to bear the burden of risk, often at the expense of their families and careers. Chapter 5 extends this history of the present by examining trends in the time spent working and the intensity of work. Here, we discuss the question of why American workers are working more than they did in the past, more than workers in almost every other society, and in many instances more than they want to. We also consider the implications of work in a 24/7 economy and the impact nonstandard schedules have on family lives.

Chapter 6, "Gender Chasms in the New Economy," examines the issue of gender inequalities at work. We revisit the fundamental question of what constitutes work and why women's contributions to society are commonly

defined as something other than “real work” or not worthy of compensation commensurate to that received by men. We also consider the extent to which gender inequalities are disappearing in the new economy and detail why many inequalities persist. We conclude this chapter by examining the approach to handling care work in the United States, how it departs from the approaches used in Western Europe and its impact on both the quality of care and women’s life chances.

Chapter 7, “Race, Ethnicity, and Work: Legacies of the Past, Problems in the Present,” examines the proposition that race might be of declining significance in the new economy. We show that racial inequalities persist but that there are important differences in the ways various minority groups have responded to, and are being treated in, the new economy. We also detail the dominant reasons why racial and ethnic inequalities exist today. Because race continues to be a major policy concern, we consider two of the most pressing debates: the controversies about affirmative action programs and the impact of immigration on opportunity structures.

Chapter 8, “Reshaping the Contours of the New Economy,” outlines what needs to change if work is to become a positive experience for all and how opportunities might be distributed more equitably in the new economy. Basing our recommendations on what has been done in other developed societies, we try to offer realistic goals that, if fulfilled, would enhance opportunity and life quality. We also acknowledge that the dehumanizing, unjust aspects of work in the new economy are unlikely to change by themselves and that positive steps must be taken to promote improvements. A variety of agents—including individuals, interest groups, unions, corporations, and government entities—will all need to play a role in reshaping work. In the end, we suggest that government intervention will be the key to bringing the expectations of employers in line with what should be expected of workers. Its level of engagement will hinge on the ability of individuals, activist groups, and unions to exert sufficient pressures.

Our hope is that this book will help readers to understand the origins of current problems confronting working people in the new economy. Beyond this, we hope this book will contribute to a much-needed dialogue about the strategies for liberating workers from poverty, from drudgery, from discrimination, from stress, and from exploitation.

Acknowledgments

This book is the result of the contributions of numerous people, from those who cut the trees, milled them into paper, drove the paper to our offices, designed our computers, filled our libraries with books (or at least electronic links to books!), fed us and our children, and heated our offices, to those who printed and delivered the book to your hands. Our intellectual efforts stand on the shoulders of the giants in the field, individuals who introduced the ideas we tried to advance and to whom our thoughts are indebted. We also relied on the efforts of the numerous researchers and officials who collected and organized the data we use to outline changes in work and opportunity. Here, we can only express our appreciation to those with whom we formed close interpersonal ties.

Our colleagues and mentors—including Cynthia Duncan, Phyllis Moen, Marcie Pitt-Catsoupes, and Peter Whalley—offered valuable guidance by directing our attention to the issues that need to be addressed and what to look for. Reviewers Judith Barker, Elizabeth Callaghan, William Canak, Carol Caronna, Marc Dixon, Linda Geller-Schwartz, Heidi Gottfried, Judith Hennessy, Martin Hughes, Arne Kalleberg, Charles Koeber, Kevin Leicht, Joya Misra, Cynthia Negrey, Vincent Roscigno, Gay Seidman, and Patrick Withen provided the sharp criticism that the book needed in its formation. Marissa Cardwell, Hillary Gozigian, and Stacy Sauppe offered insightful students'-eye views of the manuscript and helped us bring the manuscript together. Students in our graduate and undergraduate classes at Ithaca College and Cleveland State University, many of whom also are experienced workers in the new economy, raised questions that stimulated our thinking for this book. We also thank the incredibly supportive team at SAGE, including our editor, Jeff Lasser.

The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation provided support for the study of job insecurities (B2001–50, Stephen Sweet and Phyllis Moen, coprincipal investigators). In addition to Kathleen Christensen at the Sloan Foundation,

we extend thanks to Yasamin Diciccio-Miller, Akshay Gupta, and the staff of the Cornell Careers Institute for their contributions to the Couples Managing Change Study.

Finally, we express gratitude to our spouses, Jai and Joyce, who gave us much-appreciated time to devote to this project, who listened to our struggles, and who offered their perspectives and guidance throughout.

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