

We DIG Books!



send books for review to *ProcessedWorld*, 41 Sutter Street, #1829, San Francisco, CA 94104. We are especially interested in social analyses of technology and work, the relationship between political economy and ecology, history, art, etc.

work with just-in-time production, imposing greater insecurity on workers through irregular scheduling and ending the notion of a “permanent job.” Contract labor, team-based processes and tight deadlines make the individual worker responsible for managing the completion of specific tasks.

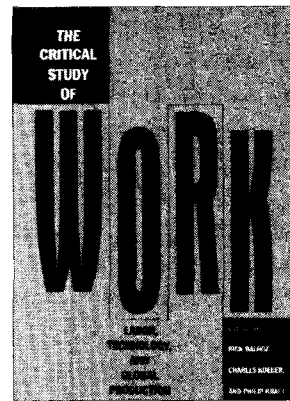
To some extent this reflects the success of capitalism in absorbing the energy of previous generations of workers’ revolt. The 20th century dependence on assembly line structures in which work was deskilled, routinized and rendered increasingly measurable by supervisory oversight led to a huge increase in absenteeism, shoddy production, and what has been known as a “revolt against work.” In the mid-1970s, a body of work emerged detailing the “Fordist” or “Taylorist” model of production, and its function in controlling workers.

Reviewed by Chris Carlsson

The rhythm of daily life has dramatically changed over the past quarter century. Nowhere is this more glaring than at work. *ProcessedWorld* magazine was a rare voice questioning work’s purpose and structure, especially from the subjective point of view of the workers themselves. This new issue was motivated in part by the eerie sense of silence about what is plainly going on all around us. The enormous expansion and redesign of work has gone largely ignored by the press and academia, except for claims that somehow we were living in a more exciting and “empowering” time than ever before.

The business press runneth over with competing management theories and strategies. Contradictions and conflict are as much a part of managing as they are of working. In spite of the clash of theories and practices, the overarching needs of capitalism to reproduce itself has thus far won out over any other social goal. The success or failure of a given capitalist enterprise is unimportant compared to the longer range success of “the system” in ensuring and extending its power and control over our lives. This persistent success is based in no small part on a continual churning and overturning of the structures of work so as to break down the rise of any alternative communities of workers that can mount a sustained challenge to the needs of profitability. Some of the mechanisms of this are relatively familiar: low wages, union-busting, illegal immigration as a wedge against labor shortages, etc.

In the past 25 years or so, the old style of managing workers by closely bossing them with front-line managers has been replaced by a more subtle system. The new structure facilitates a type of self-management in many kinds of work. This involves speeding up the pace and intensity of



The Critical Study of Work: Labor, Technology, and Global Production

Edited by Rick Baldoz, Charles Koeber, and Philip Kraft

Out of sight, toiling in universities, critical scholars are extending this analysis, studying the Great Speedup that characterizes the last quarter of the 20th century. *The Critical Study of Work* presents an insightful and refreshing inquiry by over a dozen writers. The critiques are usually rooted in the “labor process theory” developed in the wake of Harry Braverman’s 1974 classic *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. Braverman made a compelling case that the unique nature of human labor and capitalist production led to the organization of modern life that we have today. The editors summarize Braverman’s analysis, showing that the design of work in the 20th century was meant to

“continuously replace each generation of workers with another and to expand “productive,” that is waged, relations to all spaces, public and private, where they do not yet exist. . . . The whole capitalist labor process is simultaneously technical, ideological and political: the production process itself is a form of class struggle.” (p. 10, “Making Sense of Work in the Twenty-First Century” *The Critical Study of Work*)

In the same introduction, the editors characterize one of the book’s central points:

“Increased flexibility for employers translates into

longer work days not just for minimum-wage contingent workers in sweatshops, but also for technical and administrative workers in twenty-four hour-time-zone production chains. . . . Firms with marketing and sales departments in New York or Frankfurt and research and design facilities in the Silicon Valley or Geneva can continually shop for the cheapest contract manufacturers in Ireland or Brazil or Penang or China. High-fashion clothing designers in New York and Milan hire manufacturing subcontractors in the United States and Italy, who in turn can choose between sweatshops in China— or Chinatown.”

The “new economy” and “globalization” receive the glare of sustained criticism in this important volume. In San Francisco we have been in the eye of the new economy hurricane, and have long been a capitalist headquarters city from which globalization has been planned and carried out. Standard Oil of California, Bechtel Engineering—and until recently Bank of America and Del Monte Foods—call San Francisco home. Silicon Valley’s electronic giants are just fifty miles south. While political campaigns decrying this abuse or that unethical investment have risen and fallen over the years, this book digs deeper, with case studies of the emerging organization of work that multinational companies have helped design and implement.

Michael Buroway, inspired by Braverman and others, sets out in the first essay to explore the subjective experiences of work, trying to understand not why workers shirk work but why workers work as hard as they do. He worked in a Chicago machine shop, in Hungary, and in the former Soviet Union, labeling the different types of workplace organization as “hegemony” and “despotism.” The concept of despotism recurs in other essays, too. The somewhat jargonistic term “flexible despotism” is the rubric describing the current era.

In “Flexible Despotism: The Intensification of Insecurity and Uncertainty in the lives of Silicon Valley’s High-Tech Assembly Workers,” Jennifer JiHye Chun poses the issue clearly.

“How do flexible production regimes actually create, maintain, and reproduce worker consent to the stress and insecurity associated with the drive for flexibility, particularly in a global economy in which constant adaptation to change is directly associated with survival?”

The question of consent is crucial to our era. After all, we work many more hours, with more household members having to work, today than at any time since the 19th century (see “Farce or Figleaf” in this issue). It seems unlikely that we would agree to work longer and harder for essentially similar standards of living if we saw it as externally imposed on us, especially by the owners of business. Why do we go along with this? Chun again:

“Employers in flexible despotism regimes attempt to mask the coercive character of their labor control strategies

through two types of labor regimes: subcontracting and contract manufacturing. In both regimes, they tie workers’ need for work to their performance on the job by stressing the “voluntary” nature of worker consent to the chaotic and unpredictable demands of flexible production.”

The flexibility demanded depends on the global reach of production facilities, the just-in-time systems of subcontracting components and materials from other companies, and use of temporary, contingent workers, often immigrants and women, at low wages. Even in higher wage sectors like software production, flexibility has led to widely dispersed members of product development teams, with for example, programmers in Ireland working with a program designer in St. Louis and graphic designers in San Francisco. Such interdependence across geographic space reinforces an apparently voluntary engagement with tight deadlines and huge workloads.

Three essays in the concluding section of *The Critical Study of Work* examine professional and technical workers, focusing on the control of technical workers. Nowadays work imposes its own discipline through the use of contract labor, the assembling of specialized teams to create specific products, working unpaid and unavoidable overtime (accepted in part due to the teamwork concept in which workers become beholden to each other to meet impossible deadlines). The urgency faced by each worker to successfully complete the project is reinforced by the need to move on from the current job to the next, move horizontally to a new employer or project, bid up the value of skills—and the fear of falling that accompanies any time out of the technical workplace.

This is a crucial analysis of how the system holds itself together while making the structure of work and the social relations surrounding it appear to be inevitable and “natural.” From the high-end programmers and technical writers all the way to fastfood workers (the subject of the other two books reviewed here), personal insecurity regarding the next job, or to having enough hours of paid work (or variations on that theme), drive people to accept adverse conditions of overwork, unpaid overtime, and severe disruptions to anything resembling a “normal” life outside of work.

We have just seen the meltdown of the New Economy stock values, bemoaned in the press and either lamented or cheered in local communities. This book illustrated the way capitalist markets “shake out” over time, purging “inefficient” and unprofitable businesses and business practices. San Francisco during the boom was ground zero for new work patterns based on team projects, contract and temp work, and equally high levels of transience, wages and bravado. For a couple of years these businesses thrived on millions of dollars of venture capital, on balance producing very little of value. The dotcom crash is not merely about purging weak businesses with no products, but, importantly, about imposing insecurity and fear on a subset of the working class which had grown cocky and even proprietary when it actually

owned nothing, and produced relatively little, with skills that were temporarily rare and highly paid.

Many web workers used to \$50,000+ salaries will have to accept far less to get regular work again, unless they have augmented their capabilities with database programming or other skills. Regardless, the collapse of value in this sector will lower wages for such work. The highly flexible and transient workforce will find it difficult to contest lower wages when constantly threatened with prolonged unemployment. Web work is being made easier (i.e. "deskilled"). The convergence of WYSIWYG ("what you see is what you get") web design tools (software like Dreamweaver and Frontpage) and a steady increase in the number of recently trained "web designers" assures that the computer know-how of this recently richly rewarded sector will become more common and less expensive.

A similar process took place in the 1980s among early operators of "word processing machines" who had found double wages over their previous employment as secretaries and typists. For a brief period word processing was a "with-it" modern sounding job. Then it became the back office clerical plantation job. Will web designers follow the same path? The dotcom meltdown might be best understood as a mechanism to quickly alter downward the "deal" offered a small part of the working population.

The contingent nature of new work structures profoundly impacts human connections. A 50-60 hour work week, leaves little time at home, with family, friends or neighbors. This in turn limits the ability to form the human bonds that help grow the spaces in which resistance and revolt can develop. Would less intense, less fragmented work lead to the formation of a stronger sense of class and the growth of oppositional political movements? We can't know the answer, but we do know that the new structures of work produce harried, isolated and exhausted people. The short duration of shared work experiences precludes the kinds of connections that allow for trust and mutual aid to grow beyond the most basic kinds of human solidarity (e.g. helping a coworker take a long enough bathroom break, talk to a sick child on the phone, etc.)

Still, workers find ways to connect and help each other out. In "Silent Rebellions in the Capitalist Paradise: A Brazil-Quebec Comparison," Angelo Soares takes a look at strategies of mutual aid and resistance by female supermarket cashiers in Quebec and Brazil. He documents a rich vein of strategies by workers in both locales that protect them from supervisors and unpleasant customers. The women who preside at the check-out counters stand astride a crucial point of capitalist reproduction: the moment where one exchanges hard-earned wages for the goods required to live. As Soares puts it, "the difficult transition between the Garden of Eden and the brutality of the marketplace."

The actual behaviors undertaken are familiar and even trivial when taken in isolation, but Soares argues that the

"daily strategies of resistance form a constant struggle that uses such simple and ordinary weapons as dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, foot dragging, sabotage, work-to-rule, solidarity, absenteeism, and more radically, quitting. Thus, just as millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly, a coral reef, so do the multiple acts of worker insubordination and evasion create political and economic barrier reefs of their own and these... in a certain way, have a shielding effect against oppression, violence, and exploitation at work."

**Youth At Work: The
Unionized Fast-food and
Grocery Workplace**

By Stuart Tannock, Temple Univ.
Press, Philadelphia, PA: 2001



Supermarket workers get a different but close look in *Youth at Work: The Unionized Fast-food and Grocery Workplace*. Stuart Tannock examines the condition of work in low-wage, high-turnover service sector jobs in fast food and supermarkets. He shows that the fact that these jobs typically employ young people is no justification for the lousy conditions and low pay on which they depend. He examines the condition of youth *as workers*, in itself a radical departure from the rest of the literature in the field, which prefers to look at this sector of the working class as "youth" (reproducing the academic aversion in the U.S. to "class" as a meaningful concept). He spends the first part of the book criticizing the four areas of previous sociological data that have attempted to understand youth work: youth labor market, school-to-work, student-worker, and social-reproduction.

We read a detailed analysis of unionized "Fry House" fastfood workplaces in the pseudonymously named town of "Glenwood" (Canada) and unionized supermarkets in "Box Hill" (U.S.). Tannock's analysis is a breath of fresh air in a field of sociological blather that usually reproduces platitudes in the service of the captains of industry. The kind of sociology that puts out a false, ideological account of work is simply insulting to anyone who actually works. His research brought back memories of his own restaurant work experiences. From the preface:

"Restaurants can be miserable places to work. Managers micro-manage, ride high on tinpot power trips, and act as if they have no clue about what life is really like on the restaurant floor. . . time seems to career endlessly from panicked rush to deadened emptiness, so that if you're not having to handle the stress of a fast-packed workday, you're having to figure out how on earth you're going to get through the monotony of a