

Vivian Shalla and Wallace Clement, eds.

Work in Tumultuous Times: Critical Perspectives.

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This edited volume, with contributions from 20 authors in 13 essays, explores the evolving and increasingly precarious nature of work — both paid and unpaid — in contemporary Canadian society. Co-editor Vivian Shalla introduces the collection by reviewing recent theoretical developments in the study of work, and observing that each of the contributed essays reflects “a critical analysis informed by the progressive political economy tradition” (11). One of the unifying themes within the collection of essays is a focus on the “uncertainty, insecurity, and instability faced by workers and their families in paid workplaces, households, and labour markets” (12). Co-editor Wallace Clement balances the theoretical overview with a review of methodological considerations in the study of work, distinguishing “Big M Methods” (involving the logic of inquiry) from “Small m methods” (specific research techniques). Both methodological levels require clarity in defining the fundamental unit of analysis in research, whether vulnerable workers or precarious jobs, with Clement advocating an integrative approach. Within his own research, Clement engages in “relational analysis”, exploring relationships of “class, gender, and generation” through the connections between different research sites of “households, labour markets, and welfare states” (43).

In a statistical portrait of precarious employment in three post-industrial countries — Canada, Australia and the United States — Leah Vosko documents significant differences in the nature or form of non-standard work, and interactive gender effects which disadvantage females in the paid work force. Precarious employment is evident in Canada in the recent growth of solo self-employment (especially among females), while in Australia, part-time on-going casual employment is more common (with less than half of the labour force employed in permanent full-time jobs). In the United States, full-time permanent employment (more aptly described as “indefinite employment”) remains the norm, although such employment is often uncertain and precarious given limited labour standards and worker protections (employment may be terminated at any time, with or without cause), limited access to social benefits (such as health insurance) and the decline of collective bargaining in general (reducing wages over time).

Despite increasing levels of both formal and informal education, and rising attainments of knowledge and skills by workers, under-employment remains a critical problem affecting millions of Canadian workers according to research by David Livingstone and Antonie Scholtz. They observe that the under-utilization of knowledge and skills in the workplace is particularly common among the working classes of service and industrial workers in the Canadian labour market, and conclude that “Canada appears to be one of the more extreme cases of under-employment among advanced capitalist economies” (150). Related to this problem of under-employment, Janet Siltanen argues that governments in recent decades have reduced social support and services in Canada (a clear shift away from “social rights of citizenship”), pointing to a marked increase in the working poor in this country (with limited employment security and unstable incomes), and particular problems faced by displaced workers (who despite hard work and the expense of retraining may still find they are unable to successfully reintegrate into an evolving labour market).

Several of the essays focus on precarious employment within particular occupational or industrial sectors. Often characterized as a declining industrial sector, Charlotte Yates and Belinda Leach

proclaim that “manufacturing matters” (167) since as a sector manufacturing continues to employ over two million Canadian workers, and has experienced growth in absolute employment numbers since 1945 (declining only during the severe recessions of the early 1980s and 1990s). They document important shifts in manufacturing employment in the past twenty years including mobility away from major urban centres (notably Toronto and Montreal) to suburban and rural communities, a downsizing in manufacturing production to smaller, typically non-unionized workplaces (“low-wage, labour-intensive firms” 185), and evidence of some regional relocation towards the western provinces of Manitoba, Alberta and British Columbia.

Vivian Shalla presents case studies of significant shifts in working time arrangements for two groups of service workers with Air Canada, resulting from managerial strategies to cut labour costs and enhance flexibility and control. In the 1980s, customer sales and service agents were forced to accept increased casualization of employment (with a growing reliance on and substitution of part-time labour for full-time jobs), while in the mid-2000s, flight attendants were required to work longer non-standard hours (following the company’s near collapse into bankruptcy), markedly reducing available non-work time with their families. Also within the service sector, Pat Armstrong, Hugh Armstrong and Kate Laxer advocate a much broader definition for counting health care work which goes beyond a physician-centred medical approach (diagnosis and cure defined as core work performed by doctors and nurses), to include a wider range of both paid and unpaid, predominantly female ancillary workers (e.g. cooks, cleaners, clerks, volunteers) who contribute to physical and social environments directly impacting health care.

The concept of “employment strain” associated with precarious employment is investigated by Wayne Lewchuk, Alice De Wolff and Andy King, who find greater levels of strain among those in precarious or uncertain employment circumstances — particularly workers employed through temporary agencies, as well as short-term and on-call workers — relative to full-time workers. Their survey data reveal an association between precarious employment relationships and poorer health outcomes among Ontario workers.

With less than one in three Canadian workers now protected by a collective agreement and percentage declines in union density in recent decades, Rosemary Warskett observes that union organizations tend to respond to evolving work and employment relationships in a piecemeal or fragmented and uncoordinated fashion. Union organizations have not adequately responded to the marked shift towards non-standard or contingent work arrangements (especially common for new job creation in the private sector), or to significant economic restructuring occurring in traditional unionized industries.

Racial dimensions of precarious employment are explored by Gillian Creese, who documents the disadvantaged labour market circumstances and outcomes of Aboriginal, recent immigrant and visible minority Canadians. Drawing on statistical evidence, these racial groups are shown to be disadvantaged across a broad range of labour and economic indicators, including employment rates, unemployment rates, average incomes, non-standard employment status, under-representation in “good jobs” and over-representation in “bad jobs”, leading to the conclusion that “Work is a central site that reproduces racial inequality and white privilege in Canada” (216).

Against a backdrop of increasing paid labour force activity, Norene Pupo and Ann Duffy examine the growing trend towards commodification of onerous and time-consuming household work, with busy Canadian families now purchasing a wider range of household products (including prepared foods, improved major and small appliances) and domestic services (such as child/elder care, house cleaning, lawn maintenance, snow removal). They observe important class distinctions, with lower-

income families more likely being “the creators and providers of commodified services for middle- and upper-income families” (308), rather than consumers of such products and services. June Corman and Meg Luxton explore unpaid domestic labour and caregiving crises through two case studies — farm families in Saskatchewan (pressed into the paid workforce from economic necessity, resulting in revised divisions of domestic labour, particularly for caregiving), and adult children and parents cohabitating out of economic necessity (with at least one family member lacking resources to sustain an independent household), and the strains and pressures of domestic labour under such circumstances.

Work in Tumultuous Times will be of particular interest to labour sociologists and other social scientists studying the world of work, and will appeal more broadly to those with an interest in recent trends in the restructuring of work and the precariousness of employment in contemporary Canadian society. The book is dedicated to the memory of Bruce McFarlane, an important scholar in Canadian sociology and the study of work, occupations and professions, and mentor to many, including this reviewer.

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