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Book Review:

The Transformation of Work in Western Societies

Éva Rozália Hölzle

Advanced Introduction to the Sociology of Work by Amy S. Wharton, 2022, Edward Elgar Publishing.

In her monograph, *Advanced Introduction to the Sociology of Work*, Amy S. Wharton leads the reader through the transformation of work, focusing on the United States and Western Europe. Informed by Professor Wharton's lengthy engagement with topics such as work, gender, and social inequality, the book offers a comprehensive overview of the transfiguration of work from industrialisation to today's new economy characterised by service work. In her analysis of work, Amy S. Wharton pays balanced attention to the literature of the last fifty years with her insightful analysis coloured with a solid tone that only a scientist deeply familiar with the topic can master. She argues that the transformation of work should be at the centre of understanding contemporary social, political and economic dynamics. The sociology of work offers relevant insights into how people make a living and how gendered, ethnic, and racial inequalities are reproduced and reinforced within workplaces. The questions of who gets access to what kind of work and how much a person must work to make a decent living are also informed by such inequalities. This intersectional approach permeates all the chapters while tracing the meaning of work across time and space.

The book is divided into six chapters. The first chapter serves as a historical foundation for the later segments. It introduces the book's central themes, *time and work* and *space and work*, and how these are implicated in the reproduction of inequalities. Amy S. Wharton discusses industrialisation as a historical momentum when the chronological conception of time and the separation of work and home is introduced. The strict rhythm of factory work is about controlling workers and extracting their labour as effectively as possible. On the other hand, the separation of work and home is about gendered spatial divisions: work becomes associated with a public male space while the home is a private female sphere. With the emergence of the Protestant ethic, a new era of work begins. Accordingly, a *good worker* works hard and does not desist from sacrificing their 'free' time for work. The subsequent Fordism, associated chiefly with mass production, buttressed the tendency towards an ethic of hard work. Nevertheless, Fordism was also a time when the separation between work and home deepened while new spatial divisions – such as US suburbs populated predominantly by white families – emerged that showcase existing societal inequalities along racial, ethnic, and class lines.

The second chapter examines post-Fordism, characterised by declining job security and the emergence of temporary work among the working class in the United States and Western Europe. *Precaarity* is the defining concept summarising and capturing the worker's eroding sense of security. In this era, the logic of financialisation left Wall Street and penetrated the production industries. Risk-taking and individual responsibility emerge as fashionable ideas with far-reaching consequences for workers. Employers are less and less inclined to offer workers steady employment and support in case of illness, retirement, or job loss. As Amy S. Wharton argues, precarity should not be regarded as an 'inevitable consequence of neutral or rational market forces.' Instead, it results from 'efforts to remake institutions in ways that favor elites' (28). She asserts that precarious work is an uneven process. Therefore, one should also pay attention to the actors who benefit from it.

The third chapter discusses the work conditions of service providers by differentiating them from professional knowledge workers who earn high wages and are required to demonstrate formal training. In contrast, frontline service workers labouring in restaurants, hotels, nail salons, child and health care, or call centres (45) are regarded as doing jobs that do not need formal teaching and must show high deference towards customers. For instance, female providers are presumed to

have a 'natural' inclination towards and ability in childcare. In drawing attention to the gendered aspects of care work, Amy S. Wharton refers to Hochschild's concept of *emotional labour*. At the same time to understand the situation of service workers in sales, she expands emotional labour with the concepts of *aesthetic* and *consumer workers*, both of which are pervasive in lifestyle branding. In this chapter, she also enlarges her geographical perspectives with examples of hotel services in China – to draw attention to the globalisation of service work – and the call centres in India – to highlight the tendency towards outsourcing certain types of tasks.

The fourth chapter continues with the central themes of the erosion of employment security and intensification of temporary work. Both themes have been imbued with new meaning and impetus with the rise of digital platforms, such as Amazon, Uber, Lyft, and others. Currently, the growth of service work is at an all-time high. Most internet providers offer services that cater to increased consumer needs. Workers are drawn to these platforms because they seem to offer more flexibility in choosing when to work and with how much effort. In reality, algorithms reward workers who invest the bulk of their time and work with increased intensity. At the same time, risks are deflected to the workers. As in the case of the frontline service worker, the customer has the advantage in this situation. Most workers cannot choose to whom to offer their services because the platforms hide customer identities. The worker's identity, in contrast, is revealed, and customer ratings are ways of controlling the worker and their performance.

The fifth chapter examines the intersection of gender and work more closely. It details how professional double-earner families profit from the rise of care services. Professional mothers in high-earning jobs can afford to outsource childcare to working-class or immigrant women who themselves are often mothers. Female knowledge workers, in this way, can continue to work and invest in their careers while avoiding the need to sacrifice essential care for their children's development. However, the differences between how much men and women work remain staggering. Even professional mothers, who outsource childcare, work far longer hours than their spouses. Amy S. Wharton analyses work-family policies in this context, comparing liberal democracies (USA and UK) with social democracies (Scandinavian countries). Despite policies encouraging maternal employment, the difference in the amount of work done between men and women remains substantial.

The final chapter returns to the theme of time, aiming for closure. It discusses the phenomenon of extreme work time that affects high and low earners, albeit in different ways. For instance, the increased working hours of high earners are mainly self-induced, while low earners in frontline services have little control over their work time. They work long hours to cover their living costs. High earners are rewarded for their time investments with financial means and other benefits. The financial advantages for low earners remain minimal, yet their health risks heighten through increased work time. Such inequalities exacerbate ethnic, class, racial, and gender inequalities. Yet, families with children are the most exposed to extreme insecurities in contemporary Western democracies. With the new economy and the rise of internet platform services, the Protestant work ethic is still relevant, albeit in a modified way. The ideal worker is not committed to a specific employer but to work itself, while the boundary between work and self increasingly dissolves (131). This trend shows how work shapes and reshapes subjectivities and that an analysis of work cannot be reduced to a mere understanding of how people make a living.

Amy S. Wharton's book is engaging. Yet, in terms of cross-cultural analysis, it is limited. The examples from China and India do not expand the geographical view. Instead, they are analysed in reference to the West. Furthermore, terms such as 'advanced democracies' are problematic. They imply a teleological conception of history that plagues Marxist-oriented studies to date, despite the abundant postcolonial critique. Accordingly, a history of work in postcolonial contexts does not start with industrialisation. Servitude in South Asian contexts is, for instance, a historical continuum disturbing a strict separation of feudalism from industrialised times. South Asian upper- and middle-class families outsource housework, yet most South Asian women do not enter the workforce but remain at home. Such examples disrupt conclusions that rely only on the analysis of Western societies. How humans work and what kind of meaning they attach to

work is contingent upon time and space. This relationship can be understood only through cross-cultural analysis. Despite this critique, this book by Amy S. Wharton provides a deep and sensitive exploration of work in Western societies. It will appeal to students and scholars interested in the intersection of work, gender, and other persistent inequalities in the USA and Western Europe.

Éva Rozália Hölzle is a researcher at the department of Social Anthropology at Bielefeld University. Her most recent monograph *Land, Life, and Emotional Landscapes at the Margins of Bangladesh* was published by Amsterdam University Press in 2022.