

Book Review: Steven P Vallas, William Finlay and Amy S Wharton: The Sociology of Work: Structures and Inequalities

Fritz, Martin

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Steven P Vallas, William Finlay and Amy S Wharton

The Sociology of Work: Structures and Inequalities

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, £50 hbk, (ISBN: 9780195381726), vii + 376 pp.

Reviewed by Martin Fritz, EUROLAB (European Data Laboratory for Comparative Social Research) at GESIS – Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, Germany

This textbook is an introduction to the sociology of work which primarily addresses newcomers and students. What makes it different from other textbooks is its special focus on occupational structures and the inequalities associated with them. In particular, disadvantages caused by gender, racial and ethnic differences are discussed throughout the book. The chapters mostly begin with a description of concrete situations from the working world or specific historical events. Thus, readers are introduced to the single topics in a clear and vivid way. An engaging and comprehensible writing style makes it easy to follow the authors' arguments. Another didactic element is the informative boxes which contain illustrative examples and deal with specific aspects in more detail. Contrary to other textbooks there are only a few charts and pictures. However, it would be helpful sometimes to have additional figures making the different topics more clear and accessible.

The book is organized in five parts. In the introduction the authors emphasize the importance of analysing work from a genuine sociological point of view. They map out

four core principles of the sociology of work, the first three of which emphasize the role of social factors in regulating processes of work. The fourth is concerned with the work of sociologists themselves and states that research within the sociology of work should challenge common sense notions of work: 'sociological investigation of work organizations often requires that we turn a critical eye toward established accounts about work, for these often reflect the preferences of those in positions of power' (p. 15). An important reminder, not only for students! In the rest of the first part, a compact theoretical chapter briefly discusses the most important concepts of Marx, Weber and Durkheim. Building on these classical approaches the authors give an overview of labour process and post-industrial theory as being the two main perspectives in the sociology of work today. In a very useful methodological chapter they then examine the strengths and weaknesses of four methods of social research (official statistics, surveys and interviews, ethnographies and experiments) and give examples of how these have been used in research.

The second part of the book is concerned with the historical development of work highlighting important characteristics of work from the age of slavery until the rise of Fordism. When looking at specific historical events the authors also engage in in-depth analyses, e.g. the cases of Luddism and the Hawthorne research. However, what is already striking at this point is the book's narrow North American focus – a substantial drawback for European readers which becomes evident in the following parts of the book, too.

The third and fourth parts of the book contain the central chapters. Structures within the working world and the inequalities associated with them are examined, referring to different occupations and occupational status. Thereby the social processes generating and reinforcing them are discussed in detail: questions of power and control among blue-collar workers and within the service sector; the role of recognition and status for professionals; and the dynamics of group behaviour within the spheres of higher management. Four chapters are dedicated exclusively to problems of inequality concerning gender, racial and ethnic differences as well as the role unions play in dealing with occupational inequalities. Although the North American focus is strongly apparent in this part of the book, readers will have few problems in extrapolating from the concrete examples given in the text. The authors present detailed analyses and versatile explanations of all problems which enable readers to apply the given concepts to the European situation and beyond.

The last chapters investigate aspects concerning the future of work. A paragraph explores the difficulties of balancing work and family and is, by the way, the only chapter containing an analysis in comparative perspective. Other sections deal with various forms of atypical employment and the numerous challenges that occur in the course of globalization. Though some contemporary developments and theories are not discussed in this last part (particularly those coming from the European research area such as, for instance, the concept of the self-entrepreneurial worker or the subjectification of work), the authors succeed in providing a broad and inspiring but also concise overview of up to date research in the sociology of work.

In summary, this extraordinary textbook appeals through its comprehensible and engaging style of writing without losing sight of being scientifically well founded. However, it should not be considered as a textbook providing a general introduction into the sociology of work, as some important topics are only dealt with in brief. More attention could have been paid to comparative analyses, relations between work and social policy and perspectives going beyond the North American horizon. Its unique focus on work-related inequalities nevertheless offers new and interesting insights. Given the current debates about precarious work and gender equality this book is an important and up to date contribution which is definitely worth reading.