William G. Bowen Book Award 2019


Guendelsberger, a journalist, sets out to examine the day-to-day experience of low-wage work in America in the mid-2010's by working at four major companies at different times for one to two months each: Amazon, McDonald’s, Convergys, and AT&T. Aptly titled “On the Clock,” Guendelsberger’s book exposes the failures of a system that seeks to maximize productivity during every second of a worker’s time in highly routinized jobs with high turnover. Through technologies in the fast food industry that calculate a target order assembly time and monitor equipment tools, systems can be set to harass and trigger a worker’s stress response. Algorithmic scheduling in retail chains, which uses a business’s most recent data to predict the minimum number of workers needed, overworks low-wage workers during their minimally staffed shift, and inadvertently affects their families, as workers are unable to know their work schedules often more than one day in advance. In warehouse fulfillment centers, GPS-enabled scanners track a worker’s movements and note how many seconds remain to complete the task at hand. Through recorded notes of direct communications with her bosses and coworkers, Guendelsberger reveals this dehumanizing slice of the American labor market that, according to a 2013 study from Oxford University, employs about 47 percent of the U.S. workforce.

—Annotation by Charissa O. Jefferson, Labor Economics Librarian

Richard A. Lester Book Award 2019


Carl Benedikt Frey is the Director of Future of Work at Oxford University. In “The Technology Trap,” Frey compares the economic and political history of technological progress during the industrial revolution to the current age of automation and artificial intelligence. He starts with a brief history of technological advancement from agrarian society to the industrial revolution and its limited effect on economic progress. He then focuses on the labor-replacing aspects of the industrial revolution’s major technological advancements first in Britain, then America, and the varying effects this imposed on the middle class. After comparing this dynamic to the current age of automation, Frey provides a look at potential future outcomes and possible solutions. Frey often draws from both historical references and the work of current economists, such as Daren Acemoglu.

—Annotation by Willow Dressel, Engineering Librarian

Case and Deaton create the label “Deaths of Despair” to capture the recent increases in deaths from suicide, drugs, and alcohol among middle-aged white Americans, particularly working-class white males who do not have a four-year degree. They describe how the lack of robust health insurance, capitalist structures, loss of power, warped incentives for pharmaceutical companies, and changes in economic structures are affecting this demographic in the last few years. They document the steady decline in access to opportunities, perceptions of loss of white privilege, and changes in social norms surrounding work, marriage, and family.

Combining data from governmental sources with qualitative interviews, the authors paint a powerful picture of how the three different causes of death are interconnected as well as linked to mental health concerns that are not receiving sufficient support. They draw attention to rapid increases in specific geographic regions and discuss the effects of chronic pain, addiction, and social safety networks. By connecting individual stories with international datasets, the authors reveal connections across different health concerns and make an argument for interventions that are holistic and coherent.

—Annotation by Anu Vedantham, Assistant University Librarian for Research Services


Pedulla asks if employers systematically screen out job applicants with non-standard, precarious employment histories in favor of those who have persisted with full-time standard jobs. Scholars have examined the effects of non-standard, mismatched, and precarious employment on worker wages, benefits, autonomy, subjective wellbeing, job-security and health. However, Pedulla’s research uniquely explores the consequences of this type of employment on a worker’s ability to obtain a new job. Through interviews with hiring professionals to obtain key insights into the process of recruitment and selection, Pedulla explores how workers get jobs, how the hiring process works, and who comes out ahead. By examining employers’ evaluations of potential employees, Pedulla determines the ways in which hiring professionals have kept up with the changing pace of work in the new economy. The research was funded in part by the National Science Foundation and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as well as multiple academic research centers including the Employment Instability, Family, Well-Being and Social Policy Network and the University of Chicago.

—Annotation by Charissa O. Jefferson, Labor Economics Librarian