NOTEWORTHY BOOKS IN INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS AND LABOR ECONOMICS, 2018*

The Industrial Relations Section is pleased to announce that this year's winner of the William G. Bowen Award is *Temp: how American work, American business, and the American dream became temporary* by Louis Hyman. The winner of the Richard A. Lester Award is *Diminishing returns at work: The consequences of long working hours* by John H. Pencavel.

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Louis Hyman’s *Temp* traces the history of the “gig economy” back to the creation of the Manpower temp agency in the 1940s, whose founders framed temporary work as an opportunity for women to earn extra spending money with flexible scheduling. The book chronicles the use of temporary labor across different industries and geographic regions, including the Silicon Valley tech industry, which Hyman contends has always relied heavily on subcontractors employing temporary workers, starting with semiconductor manufacturing in the 1960s. The book is written for a general audience, though Hyman brings his perspective as an academic historian with a research focus on the relationship between American capitalism and society. The author started his career as a McKinsey consultant, and he argues that management consultants’ relentless focus on the lean, agile workforce contributed to the nation’s increasing dependence on temporary labor.


Pencavel’s *Diminishing returns at work* is written for academic economists, but may also be relevant to an interdisciplinary audience of researchers, policymakers, and employers interested in understanding the relationship between hours worked, labor markets, and productivity in the United States and the United Kingdom over the past two centuries. The author compares different theoretical frameworks for incorporating hours worked into the production function and reviews empirical economic historical analyses of working hours across different industries in the two countries. Included in the book are new results from the author’s re-evaluation of his past empirical analysis of the plywood industry, using an alternative theoretical framework that explains diminishing returns of long working hours by distinguishing between nominal and effective hours worked.

* International Standard Book Numbers (ISBN) are given to facilitate ordering from vendors or other purchasing outlets. All issues can be found in PDF format at http://www.irs.princeton.edu/publications/selected-references.

Through a well-documented historical study, the case for direct job creation as a highly effective economic policy tool is made. Detailed accounts of the successes and failures of job creation in the New Deal, the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the War on Poverty, and the Humphrey Hawkins Act provide historical context. Attewell challenges common arguments such as World War II being the primary reason the Great Depression ended by offering evidence of job creation through the WPA. Specific programs that reduced unemployment are detailed. Interventionist programs and contracting out are argued as being less effective than direct job creation. Attewell concludes with why direct job creation as form of “job insurance” needs to be re-discovered and utilized by policy makers.


Labor sociologist, Barry Eidlin, examines reasons for the differences in union density between Canada and United States after the mid-1960s. Why this difference is important on issues ranging from working conditions to income inequality is explored. The argument that the way political parties characterized farmer and worker unrest in the 1930s and 1940s directly impacted union strength and that today in Canadian politics, labor is a proxy for class status whereas in the USA labor is an interest group. The typical arguments for the difference in systems (national characteristics, political institutions, race, and union characteristics) are each examined using archival materials and data. In each case, how, why, and when the countries began to differ is examined. Eidlin concludes with an acknowledgement of the problems labor faced on both sides of the border and the need for cooperation.


Grosse’s book argues strongly for the United States to switch from a five-day to a four-day workweek for all business and public sectors. Written in an accessible chatty style that aims at a lay audience, the book reviews statistics from other countries but focuses on domestic trends. Grosse builds on historical data showing that the average number of hours worked has declined steadily since the mid-1800’s to argue that a reduction to a 32-hour workweek would not be a dramatic change. He discusses potential positive and negative consequences on compensation, staffing structures, technology, educational institutions and organized labor. Although he briefly discusses the growing importance of the gig economy, he focuses on traditional work with fixed hours of operation. Grosse’s book continues academic conversations on work-life balance, including discussion of gender differences.

This labor history examines the concept of risk (individual versus the larger community) through the lens of the development of workplace accident risk programs in Western Europe primarily during the latter half of the 19th century through the 1920s. Drawing from many archives, government documents, and a plethora of other primary and secondary sources, historical context is provided to the rise of the social state. Arguments against such societal programs are presented and Moses argues that individual responsibility and statehood are not in opposition and are interconnected. Nations have taken different approaches and adjusted over time but the dual responsibility for risk continues. Helpful appendices include the sequencing of accident laws in relation to other social security policies and an international (including subnational) table of when accident laws were introduced.


With interviews focused on the meat and construction industries in the European Union, Wagner explores the power and information differentials that result in systematic exploitation of migrants who cross national borders in response to “posted work” opportunities. This academically-focused book builds on theoretical frameworks that consider how changes in institutional structure create situations where companies can circumvent national regulations on minimum wage, housing, labor reliability and worker protections. Wagner interviews workers from several countries who have traveled across borders based on false promises, and explores the barriers facing labor organizers in the host countries. Against the backdrop of the increased xenophobia revealed in the politics surrounding Brexit, this book provides insights into the complexity of bringing laborers across national boundaries in the EU.


This edited collection makes a major contribution to the field of labor economics by researching the increased participation of older women in the paid work force of the United States – a topic rarely examined in depth. The editors begin with empirical evidence that the situation in the United States is distinctive and traces back to the 1980s. In subsequent chapters, different scholars look at specific issues such as African-American women, changes in professions and attachments to one’s profession; societal drivers (caregiving, marriage, divorce); and financial considerations (household debt, retirement planning). An impressive array of data ranging from international macroeconomic to cross-sectional to longitudinal surveys to register data is used. Both positive and potentially negative consequences of women working longer are explored.