



Book Review

Steven Peter Vallas: *Work. Polity*, 2012

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In Polity's series of books on key concepts in social science, time has come to "work"—after for example issues as time, consumption, risk, gender, welfare, power, and culture. It is written by Steven Peter Vallas, Professor at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Northwestern University, USA, who is a renowned working life researcher with many important contributions to the field. He declares that he intends the book as a user's guide or manual for performing the labor of sociology of work. To this end he lays down three rules of thumb, basic principles or axioms for our endeavors which he thinks permeates this research field. The first point is that work is of great importance in human life, both on an individual and a collective level. Through our work we change not only the world around us but also ourselves. Many studies have shown the importance of occupations and jobs in forming identities of working people.

The second is that work is a social, not only economic, phenomenon. In spite of claims in neoliberalism and New Public Management ideologies—Vallas calls them myths—that the market is the most efficient and natural way of organizing, leading to the idea that work is limited to economic parameters, work is much richer. Innumerable studies, of which Vallas reminds us of classics such as Polanyi on the embeddedness of economic institutions in social ones and the Hawthorne studies on the limitations of economic incentives for worker productivity, have made us aware of the importance of social, cultural, and political influences on the way work is organized. The third is what he calls "the hidden underside of work," meaning that workers can find ways to escape even the hardest employer forms of control, although the means of doing so varies with many institutional and cultural factors. Working life researchers should never assume that work is performed according to formal rules and managers' directives—and neither should managers: "This very assumption has short-circuited many aspiring managers" (19). Perhaps one can say that through these points he tries to formulate the essence of the results of sociological research on work—always a difficult and risky thing to do, but I tend to agree with his analysis.

After the introduction, the book is organized according to macrostructural factors in work. There are two chapters on class, one on capital's control of the labor process, another on the development of work organization. Then one on gender, another on race, and finally one on globalization. In the chapter "Capitalism, Taylorism, and the problem of labor control" Vallas discusses what he calls the labor process school, in which many Marxist-inspired ethnographic studies of workplaces have been performed. The central concept here is managerial control over the labor process, work, and workers. Vallas starts out with Taylor and the deskilling debate following Braverman's now classic book on the degradation of work in the 20th century. In the analysis the continuous process of deskilling of work in capitalism rests on employers successively taking over the control of the planning of work from workers. Braverman argued the importance of the application of



Taylorist principles for this process and later scholars of the school have analyzed lean production as a neo-Taylorist management offensive. But, Vallas claims, there are also other ways through which employers seek control over workers, and an important one is workplace culture. (For those who want names of the most important scholars he mentions, these are Richard Edwards, Michael Burawoy, and John Van Maanen.) Gradually, employers have realized the strength of normative constructs for moving workers' sympathies from fellow workers to the firm. Ethnographic workplace studies of labor processes were extremely important as empirical bases for theoretical understanding of the role of culture in the "production of consent" to work among workers and normative control over workplace life. But the history of employer control of work—or rather the labor process school analysis of employer control of work—does not stop there. The next step is employer endeavors to govern the workers' soul. Surrounding workers with normative control at the workplace is not enough, control must enter the worker's identity itself (Vallas mentions mainly analyses by Arlie Hochschild, Robin Leidner, Paul du Gay, Chris Warhurst, and Dennis Nickson). Employers have opened a new frontier of control, Vallas says, the workers' self "has in effect become subject to commercial development and appropriation" (49). The identity of workers is to be aligned with the need of the employer. Vallas finishes the chapter by claiming that employees' struggle for control over workers never succeeds fully—as some scholars influenced by specific interpretations of Foucault have maintained. There are always "unmanaged spaces" of worker resistance to employer control.

Toward the background of Vallas' general declarations on the importance of worker resistance and these concluding ideas of the chapter on employer control, it should follow logically that the next chapter would be on worker struggles for their own forms of control over the labor process—but that is not the case. Instead, he provides us with a—in itself extremely interesting—nuanced analysis of flexibility and the organization of work, "From Fordism to flexibility?" He refers to such theories as Piore and Sabel on "flexible specialization" and industrial districts, Annalee Saxenian on "industrial systems," and Walter Powell on "decentralized capitalism." They all claim the advent of benign flexibility of benefit for all and the end of Fordist bureaucratic mass production. Workers are (or will be, it is not always clear which it is) empowered members of autonomous teams, firms are part of complex webs of networks, and nations embracing flexibility are successful. Those at all levels sticking to the old Fordist model perish.

But this rosy picture forgets, Vallas reminds us, the "dark side of flexibility." The flexibility thesis has been heavily criticized by other scholars; some point out that the production networks of firms soon become dominated by one or a few companies and a shape akin to the Fordist hierarchies emerges. When it comes to emancipation and empowerment of workers through team work, Vallas finds that this happens mainly in cases in which workers take over the teams, changing them in ways that are not intended by management. All in all, however, he finds that there might be something in the benevolent interpretations of flexibility for workers, especially if there is a political institutional involvement to prevent development to be left to market forces alone.

Then follows two chapters on "Ascriptive inequalities at work:" gender, and race and ethnicity, respectively. There are social processes allocating people to different occupations and parts of the labor market, even exiling some from it. The most important types of such ascriptive inequalities are those just mentioned. Both chapters deal, however, exclusively with the United States. After a short but highly informative description of gender segregation in that country, Vallas discusses four types of explanation of these

patterns. The first are those that stress the output side, concentrating on characteristics of individuals. Perhaps a bit surprising, he brings together under this heading human capital theory and gender socialization theory, but on consideration he is right in their individualistic tendency—although in different ways. The second concerns the demand side, which means that the level at which the explanations are situated is the workplace and employers rather than employees themselves. At the center here is Kanter's classic study of men and women in a corporation, in which the two most important mechanisms behind gender segregation are homophily and the relative proportion of the sexes. However, Vallas also points to modifications made to the theory by later studies.

The third kind of explanation claims that workers are dependent on knowing certain people in order to be able to take advantage of informal inroads to good and well-paid jobs. In general, networks dominated by men (especially white men) tend to provide much more important contacts than networks dominated by women (especially minority women). Finally, there is devaluation of women's work. Vallas (107) says that "the more feminized an occupation's workforce, the lower the status and pay its incumbents will enjoy, even when the objective demands of the job are held constant." He mentions two rival explanations: one says that women are forced into bad jobs that men do not want, the other that bad conditions are the result of feminization of jobs. The latter turns out to have stronger support in the literature than the former. This chapter provides a brilliant overview of explanations of gender segregation, although its empirical concentration on women's possibilities to reach higher (managerial) positions is a bit limiting in scope.

The United States is also a deeply segregated society along race and ethnic lines. Vallas' point of departure in analyzing this is that the mechanisms behind gender and racial/ethnic segregation might seem alike but that they are basically different—although intersecting. In the same way as in the gender chapter he discusses what he considers to be the four most influential types of explanation. The first are social closure processes, through which privileged groups mobilize structural and cultural mechanisms to keep underprivileged groups away from valued resources—in this case for example well-paid jobs. Second, in a parallel to gender segregation, differences in social networks are important for employers' hiring practices. This goes not only for getting a job but also for careers within firms when you have a job. Third, like gender effects there are race/ethnic effects on the valuation of jobs—and they seem to go in the same direction: Jobs dominated by minorities are devaluated. Finally, and perhaps paradoxically, there is the growing importance in management rhetoric of "diversity" at the workplace. Vallas finds that diversity is not motivated by moral criteria but market motives: Companies not embracing diversity are expected to lose out in the competition with other companies. When diversity's only rationale is that it makes profit, its stability as part of working life is in danger. Although mechanisms behind gender and race/ethnic discrimination are not the same, Vallas concludes, it is important to analyze their interplay. In reality, they should not be studied separately but in interaction.

In the next chapter Vallas goes even higher in levels, namely to globalization processes. He starts out with establishing that "Side by side with the globalization of work there has occurred a steady stream of reports of industrial atrocities in one form or another" (134). This is not valid only for poor countries, but also the United States—and I would add, the Nordic countries. He provides us with a wealth of horrifying examples of these atrocities, which are guided and legitimated by neoliberalism. According to this ideology every form of government intervention in economic and social life distorts the benign and "natural" working of the marketplace. This includes, of course, workers'



rights as formulated by unions and politics. In the debate between defenders and critics of the effects of globalization on working conditions, Vallas obviously sides with the latter, citing many social science studies to support his argument. As he points out, the enormous Western capitalist companies have actively resisted reforms of worker rights and working conditions throughout the world.

His analysis is, however, not entirely pessimistic. Characteristics of labor markets and work organizations are not the result of economic mechanisms alone—social factors play an important role. There are still possibilities of active public interventions, which can override the negative consequences of globalization of work under a neoliberal regime. He discusses transnational anti-sweatshop, human rights, and solidarity movements, which at least to some extent have succeeded in mitigating some of the worst expressions of globalization on working life.

Considering the many serious problems that workers face, Vallas' conclusion concerning the future of social science studies of labor markets and working life is easy to agree with: "There is a great deal of work to be done" (169).

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Unsurprisingly, it is a very American book in its perspectives. Nordic working life research is largely missing and to a great extent so are wider European studies. It is, for example, a bit strange for a European scholar of the field to read a whole chapter about Labor Process Theory without the names of Paul Thompson, Stephen Ackroyd, Chris Smith, or Sharon Bolton figuring in the presentation and discussion at all. He also ignores these authors' own division of the development of labor process theory into four "waves." For Nordic researchers and practitioners it is also noteworthy that in general Vallas' discussions take place at the societal and organizational levels, less on the level of working conditions and work environment—levels at which much of our research is situated. At the same time we can learn a lot from the book as an overview of US-based international research on work. It also has a strong critical edge, with arguments richly illustrated with examples from empirical studies.

In the international literature on working life there have been quite a lot of excellent Anglo-Saxon overviews during the latest decade or so. Some examples are Noon, Blyton, and Morrell (2013) *The Realities of Work*, Strangleman and Warren (2008) *Work and Society*, Edwards and Wajcman (2005) *The Politics of Working Life*, and Korczynski, Hodson, and Edwards (2006) *Social Theory at Work*. Vallas' book has an important place in this context.

References

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