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Book Review:

The Good Temp by Vicky Smith and Ester B. Neuwirth. Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 2008

I remember my experiences working as a temp very well; the monotony of continuous data entry for eight hours a day, the piles and piles and piles of paper waiting to be filed neatly away in alphabetical order, the days that seemed to drag on without end, the paper cuts, the time sheets, the low pay. So, having worked as a temp myself in numerous work environments I was keen to crack open Smith and Neuwirth's "The Good Temp" to see what their sociological imagination could bring to bear in an analysis of this particular kind of employment. The book is not principally concerned with the experiences of temps themselves. It is an analysis of the changing nature of the temporary help service (THS) industry as a whole, and examines the day-to-day work practices of temp agencies and the self-legitimizing discourses which the temp agencies themselves create and disseminate. The central argument of the book is that in the latter half of the twentieth-century temp agencies, motivated by their need for profit, began to actively construct and disseminate discourses which promoted temporary work over full-time work and framed temporary work as a normative and highly productive form of employment. At the core of this emergent discourse is the notion of the "Good Temp"; a semi-mythical employee, who was promoted as being just as productive and reliable as the full-time employee, but as much less costly in terms of salary expectations, required training, and medical benefits. Smith and Neuwirth chart the rise of this new staffing paradigm in the US, noting the various ways in which temporary workers become commodified and sold by the THS industry. Interestingly, while the authors clearly recognize the negative aspects of temporary employment their treatment of the subject is the extremely balanced. They note their inclination is to take "a middle path between seeing temporary employment as exclusively negative (the oppressive model) or exclusively as liberating (the free agent model)" (p.5). An additional argument made throughout the book is that the increased use of temporary employment over time was not simply a result of an increase in demand for that kind of work, but rather was the result of the wide-spread adoption of attitudes and beliefs within the corporate world regarding the supposed benefits of temporary labor; attitudes and beliefs which had been carefully constructed by the THS industry itself.

Smith and Neuwirth take a twofold methodological approach. Firstly a content analysis of 263 articles published between 1960 and 1990 in THS industry magazines allows for a close examination of the prevalent discourses within the industry regarding temporary employment. The findings of this content analysis are presented in chapter two of the book entitled "The Social Construction of New Markets and New Products". Here the authors present compelling evidence to

suggest a systematic ideological project by the THS industry, aimed at changing the minds of employers regarding the potential benefits of using temporary labor. In addition of selling the notion of the “Good Temp” these discourses also made employers aware of the hidden costs of permanent labor, suggesting that permanent employees were in fact much more harmful to companies than temporary ones. The second methodological element of Smith and Neuwirth’s research is an eight month ethnography of two temp agencies in Silicon Valley in 2000 and 2001. Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of this data is a tension which seems to be inherent in the work of temp agencies. On the one hand Smith and Neuwirth make clear that temp agencies are businesses, and like any other business they have a commodity to market and sell – in this case, the temporary worker. Their discussion also suggests that the kinds of jobs temps could hope to obtain through these agencies are often little more than dead end jobs with low pay and no job security. However, on the other hand the authors cite evidence to suggest that staff in the temp agencies they studied were often extremely concerned about the personal well-being of their temps, the quality of the work placements, and the potential for the temp to grow in the job. Far from being manipulative or exploitative, it seems temp agency staff often went out of their way to help their temps in any way possible, even on occasion personally driving the temp to their place of work if they were unable to get there on their own. Furthermore, Smith and Neuwirth argue that temporary employment, while perhaps not being the most fulfilling kind of work is nevertheless a better alternative for many than being out of work altogether.

Therefore, what ultimately emerges from Smith and Neuwirth’s book is an extremely balanced account of temp agencies and temporary employment. In fact their account is a little too balanced for my liking. At the end of the book the authors state:

Our analysis should not be construed as an endorsement of profit-making temporary help service agencies or the industry as a whole. The fact that the practices we have discussed take the edge off temporary employment, in our view, is a byproduct of the explicit profit-seeking strategies of private-sector business, profits created by the labor of temporary employees (p.176).

However, this is one of the few times Smith and Neuwirth take this explicitly critical stance, and by this point in the book it seems like too little too late. It would have also been useful if the authors had spent a little more time discussing existing literature in the field in order to place their study in a broader theoretical context. Nevertheless, “The Good Temp” will make compelling reading for anyone interested in this particular subject matter, and it provides is a fascinating window into the world of temporary employment and the THS industry.

Citation

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