

Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



Changing Contours of Work: Jobs and Opportunities in the New Economy, by Stephen SWEET and Peter MEIKSINS, Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 2008, 239 pp., ISBN: 978-1-4129-1744-5.

Graham Clinch

Volume 63, numéro 4, 2008

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/019546ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/019546ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (imprimé)

1703-8138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Clinch, G. (2008). Compte rendu de [*Changing Contours of Work: Jobs and Opportunities in the New Economy*, by Stephen SWEET and Peter MEIKSINS, Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 2008, 239 pp., ISBN: 978-1-4129-1744-5.] *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 63(4), 773–775.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/019546ar>

Recensions

Book Reviews

Changing Contours of Work: Jobs and Opportunities in the New Economy,

by Stephen SWEET and Peter MEIKSINS, Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 2008, 239 pp., ISBN: 978-1-4129-1744-5.

Stephen Sweet and Peter Meiksins have written their book, *Changing Contours of Work*, with a strong sense of purpose: to mount a relentless case in support of all those members of the workforce who are actually worse off in the new (global) economy rather than sharing in its many potential benefits. Initially it might appear to focus on the needs of those in lower socio-economic groups, but the more pervasive message is that the majority of the workforce have fewer options in their pursuit of reasonable and meaningful work, and therefore, of a balanced and meaningful life. The authors' intent is to make sense of work opportunities in the "new economy" with the hope of generating dialogue about strategies which would result in more equitable opportunities for all. They raise significant issues which are likely to be overlooked as people strive to respond individually to forces which need to be addressed collectively. They identify issues and causes, they support their case with extensive evidence, but significant change is not anticipated in the short to medium term.

Differences between the old and the new economies are addressed with the conclusion that while there might be productivity gains through differences in methods and structures, there have not been equivalent gains in opportunities for the average worker to make choices

about work and overall quality of life. If anything, the options are more limited than they were.

The "new economy" (or "global" economy) has emerged with significant changes to so many areas of work including information management, production processes, geographically distributed manufacturing, and globally based services such as call centers. Exploitation of the changes to increase profits do not benefit workers, especially those with limited skills or education. Even those with professional qualifications can find themselves having to make "hard" choices between career goals and other personal values.

The need for substantial change is established by considering work as a necessary opportunity for people to develop a meaningful and fulfilling life, not to do no more than achieve mere subsistence. Race, gender and ethnicity are factors which still leave some members of society with significantly fewer choices than others. Evidence and arguments are amassed to make the case that shifts in power and control in workplaces have resulted in a greater proportion of workers being vulnerable.

Four case studies represent the range of workers and situations where the authors identify a deterioration of opportunities and equitable conditions.

Further examples make explicitly clear the frustrating dialectic of productivity improvements (for those in control) resulting in diminishing opportunities and increasing constraints (for those who lack any form of power). Where those in middle class jobs and roles might have thought themselves to be safe from threat, the authors point out that the pressure to perform and the lack of certainty about tenure in a job, leave virtually no one unaffected. Little doubt, if any, is left in the reader's mind that a strong reaction to these conditions is required.

The authors are also clear and direct in laying virtually all responsibility for this situation with employers and with government. The primary area of their concern is North America with extensive research data being cited in their various claims that the United States in particular is well behind the reasonable practices and standards of other countries. At times it is implied that changes initiated by employers are even designed to their advantage with concomitant disadvantage to employees. Some positive changes such as flextime and flexplace are attributed to the demands of workers, and even then their resultant disadvantages are noted.

It is suggested that six stakeholder groups could all contribute to solutions, although expectations for positive change in the near future are not particularly strong. These stakeholders include workers themselves, employers, governments, international organizations, organized labour, and activist groups. Contributions which each of these stakeholders could or should make are spelled out. However, while each would need to be involved for major and pervasive change to be realized, the means or incentives for the disparate parties to develop a unified approach are not as clear.

The authors have achieved a significant part of their aim in making it

clear that the changing contours of work in the new economy are detrimental not for minority groups alone, but for the majority of workers, and, therefore, are a matter for sociological concern on a global scale. They have maintained their focus and have not attempted to incorporate some of the related philosophical issues such as the freedom to make choices and having to accept the inevitable consequences; there are times when the reader might infer that the book is arguing for workers not to have to accept any undesirable outcomes which might flow from their decisions.

Stimulating dialogue about the issues with a view to progress and development is one of the clearly stated aims. Unfortunately most actions or initiatives of employers generally are reproached as being not in employees' interests even with expectations that are at times contradictory. For example, retraining employees whose skills have become redundant is both criticized and expected. Employers could understandably respond to any invitation to dialogue in a defensive manner.

Governments are also seen to be lagging in their response to the need which is well established. Perhaps more encouragement could have been given to a multilateral approach to a solution by exploring some of the mutual benefits in which stakeholders could share, if necessary changes were implemented.

The extensive research on which the book's arguments are based add to its credibility and impact; the reader cannot dismiss the messages as the opinions of two strong proponents of the cause. For the non-academic reader, however, following the argument would be easier at times if there were fewer citations and references.

The authors can be credited with having made a significant contribution to the issues surrounding jobs and

opportunities in the new economy; they can be encouraged to continue to develop reasons and means by which the stakeholders might commence working together to achieve the necessary

changes which they have brought vividly to our attention.

GRAHAM CLINCH
Organizational Psychologist,
Gold Coast, Australia

Relations au travail, relations de travail,

coordonné par François ABALLÉA et Michel LALLEMENT, Toulouse : Octares Éditions, 2007, 305 p., ISBN : 978-2-9153-4646-6.

Dans un esprit de sociologie contemporaine, le jeu de mots *Relations au travail, relations de travail* surplombe les transformations organisationnelles, technologiques et juridiques de l'emploi qui bouleversent tant les rapports au travail que les scènes de régulation. Cet ouvrage collectif, recueillant une série de contributions issues des X^e Journées Internationales de Sociologie du Travail, examine ainsi l'articulation entre les changements dans l'organisation du travail et l'action collective au sein d'une panoplie de pratiques professionnelles. Il se structure autour de six axes d'interrogations centrés sur autant de facettes du monde du travail.

Le premier axe, sur le thème *Acteurs et action collective dans le travail : quelles figures nouvelles ?*, campe les principales transformations en cours qui fragilisent mais également reconfigurent l'action collective dans l'univers du travail. Elles concernent la précarisation de l'emploi qui rend plus improbable le recours à la grève par les intermittents du spectacle (Proust), l'internationalisation centrée sur le développement de la sous-traitance et la pression accrue des clients (Merlin) ainsi que la mobilisation des employeurs autour de la disqualification des pratiques syndicales (Giraud). Ces sources de vulnérabilité, même si elles ne concourent pas à façonner de véritables nouvelles figures, commandent l'ajustement de la représentation collective par l'entremise d'un élargissement de ses actions (par exemple, le renchérissement de la santé au travail présenté par Friedmann) et de

la multiplicité de ses formes de coordination (Demazière).

Le deuxième thème, intitulé *Conflits, négociations et règles de droit*, rend compte des effets du renforcement de la régulation individualisée des relations de travail sur les conflits, la négociation et les règles de droit (Saglio). Les auteurs de cet atelier témoignent de la capacité des acteurs à créer une régulation malgré la présence de règles astreignantes. À cet effet, l'activité d'encadrement dépeinte par Mispelblom-Beyer est le « cœur des luttes pour la cohésion sociale » (p. 80). Le cas du travail pénitentiaire, quant à lui, décrit la tension entre la rationalité sécuritaire et le rapport au travail des détenus (Guilbault). Ou encore, les pratiques locales de négociation collective ont permis le reclassement des emplois de la sidérurgie italienne durant les années 1950-1960 et une nouvelle légitimité du syndicat (Ricciardi). En somme, même si l'évolution incessante des changements rend éphémère la régulation inventée (Gaglio et Roblain), la portée du niveau individualisé n'épuise ni le conflit, ni la négociation. De même, les règles de droit rapportées aux conflits et aux négociations, plutôt qu'à la seule domination patronale, favorisent une plus grande compréhension de la dynamique et de la diversité des régulations (p. 64-67).

Les contributions du troisième axe, portant sur *Les relations de travail entre résistance et détournement*, toutes issues du secteur des services, débutent par la mise en évidence de