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## Anthropologies of Unemployment: New Perspectives on Work and Its Absence

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# Anthropologies of Unemployment: New Perspectives on Work and Its Absence

## Abstract

*[Excerpt]* *Anthropologies of Unemployment* offers accessible, theoretically innovative, and ethnographically rich examinations of unemployment in rural and urban regions across North and South America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. The diversity of case studies demonstrates that unemployment is a pressing global phenomenon that sheds light on the uneven consequences of free-market ideologies and policies. Economic, social, and cultural marginalization is common in the lives of the unemployed, but their experience and interpretation are shaped by local and national cultural particularities. In exploring those differences, the contributors to this volume employ recent theoretical innovations and engage with some of the more salient topics in contemporary anthropology, such as globalization, migration, youth cultures, bureaucracy, class, gender, and race.

Taken together, the chapters reveal that there is something new about unemployment today. It is not a temporary occurrence, but a chronic condition. In adjusting to persistent, longstanding unemployment, people and groups create new understandings of unemployment as well as of work and employment; they improvise new forms of sociality, morality, and personhood. Ethnographic studies such as those found in *Anthropologies of Unemployment* are crucial if we are to understand the broader forms, meanings, and significance of pervasive economic insecurity and discover the emergence of new social and cultural possibilities.

## Keywords

unemployment, globalization, ethnography, neoliberalism, precarity

## Disciplines

Anthropology | International and Comparative Labor Relations | Labor Economics

## Comments

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# **ANTHROPOLOGIES OF UNEMPLOYMENT**

New Perspectives on Work  
and Its Absence

**Edited by Jong Bum Kwon and  
Carrie M. Lane**

**ILR PRESS**

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## INTRODUCTION

*Jong Bum Kwon and Carrie M. Lane*

In the cartoon by Jimmy Margulies depicted below, which ran in U.S. newspapers in 2014, we see a baffled-looking, middle-aged white man sitting beneath a version of the *American Idol* logo that has been revised to read “American Idle.” Holding a newspaper announcing that jobless benefits will not be extended for U.S. workers, the man, whose shirt identifies him as a representative of the “long-term unemployed,” says, “We’ve been renewed for another season.” On one level, the cartoon sends a straightforward, if humorous, message about the continuing plight of the American unemployed, whose situation seems unlikely to improve any time soon. On other levels, the cartoon offers us a great deal more to consider.

For instance, what should we make of the choice to represent the long-term unemployed as a white male in a white-collared shirt, clothing traditionally associated with middle-class occupations? If the character pictured were a white woman, for instance, the cartoon’s message would be reshaped by long-standing assumptions about the appropriate role of white women relative to paid employment in the United States. Some might brand it a sexist commentary on the inability of women to keep up in the labor force; others might celebrate the cartoon for bringing attention to the plight of unemployed females.

Alternately, attaching the caption “American Idle” to an image of an African American male could be perceived as racially inflammatory in light of pejorative stereotypes of the work ethic and employability of black American men. Yet that version would arguably be more accurate, as African American men not only have been historically marginalized from employment but also continue to

MARGULIES  
 © 2011, NEWSPAPER / JOURNALISM YORK  
 www.jimmyknewspaper.com



**FIGURE 1.** "American Idle." Reprinted with permission from Cagle Cartoons, Inc.

experience the highest rates of chronic unemployment. With that in mind, we might now see the choice to represent the jobless with a white man as a politically charged attempt to position white American men as the primary victims of the recession.

We could continue this thought exercise indefinitely. What if the character were Asian American or Latina, teenaged or elderly, clothed in a turban or a military uniform? How would each of those variables change the meaning and impact of the cartoon? Even in its current form, in order to make sense of the cartoon, to get the joke, one must know at least a little bit about a lot of things—the high unemployment levels the United States has experienced since the Great Recession; the political controversy around extending government benefits for the jobless; the expectation that white American men should be able to find paid, secure employment; even the popularity of reality television programming. Without context, the punch line loses its punch. These sorts of "what if" exercises help us see and make sense of the unexamined assumptions embedded in the media representations we encounter every day. One of the major strengths of the anthropological approach to studying culture is precisely this exercise of situating the seemingly mundane and taken-for-granted in its wider context.



To understand what unemployment means, why it happens, and how it feels, we need to consider it within its appropriate context. And that, in short, is what this volume does. The anthropologists whose work is featured herein provide the context—historical, political, cultural, and economic—for analyzing unemployment from a variety of different angles across a variety of different settings.

One of the key contributions of this volume is the ethnographic portrayal of unemployment across multiple national contexts—in Argentina, Ethiopia, France, Mexico, Nicaragua, and South Korea as well as the United States—providing important vantage points for cultural critique (Marcus and Fischer 1986). These cross-cultural comparisons highlight the value of ethnographic inquiry for understanding broadly political-economic circumstances, disruptions, and transformations.

The diversity of these case studies extends beyond regional or national variations. The ethnographic subjects discussed herein are young and old, male and female, immigrant and native-born, of varying races and socioeconomic backgrounds. Some continue to look for paid employment; others face such structural and social obstacles that being unemployed has, in many respects, become their daily work. Yet all are unemployed or underemployed, and thus—despite the many differences between them—they share the experience of economic, cultural, and even bodily disenfranchisement. In all cases the consequences of unemployment are long-lasting, affecting social and familial relationships, personal wealth, self-identity, and mental and physical health well after re-employment. People do not simply recover; their worlds do not just return to normal. But the ways in which their worlds change, and the ways in which they remain the same, vary dramatically across contexts. Juxtaposing ethnographic accounts of unemployment across a variety of regions, professions, and populations also allows us to identify common themes and experiences without reducing the significance of the intersection of gender, class, age, race, and citizenship in specific cultural contexts.

## **The Great Global Recession**

This volume was conceived after the Great Recession (2007–2009), a worldwide economic crisis that led to unprecedented levels of unemployment in developed and developing nations alike. The recession's official end in June 2009 did not quell anxieties in most affected countries, nor did it signal job recovery. The U.S. unemployment rate, for example, was 9.5 percent at the end of the recession. It peaked to 10 percent in October 2009, when over fifteen million people were still unemployed.<sup>1</sup> Among that number, 6.1 million were jobless for twenty-seven

weeks or more, the highest proportion of long-term unemployment on record.<sup>2</sup> The average duration of unemployment was more than nine months. In December 2015, six years after the end of the recession, the unemployment rate returned to the pre-recession level of 5 percent in December 2007 (which is considered “full employment,” a concept built around the idea that some people’s joblessness is society’s gain). At that point the number of long-term unemployed was still at three million.<sup>3</sup> In other words, even though the Great Recession is technically in the past, its impact is still being felt every day by millions of people in the United States and throughout the world.

The Great Recession affected the quality of employment as well as its quantity. A United Nations report found that “across the globe, many workers who did not lose their jobs were forced to accept reduced working hours as well as lower wages and benefits. In developing countries, a large number of workers lost their jobs in export sectors and were forced into informal and vulnerable employment elsewhere” (United Nations DESA 2011, 28). Even those fortunate enough to remain employed during this period experienced a profound unraveling of many of the benefits generally associated with formal employment.

In many nations rising unemployment and the declining quality of work life pushed into public view people and predicaments that had long been culturally marginal. In the United States, for instance, unemployed Americans have tended to become visible, if only temporarily, only in times of depression and recession, during which they are often perceived as threats to normative values and behaviors (Denning 2010, 79). The presumption has been that full-time, formal employment is the normal socioeconomic condition; conversely, unemployment is understood to be abnormal and temporary, despite economic evidence to the contrary, stretching as far back as the Great Depression in the 1930s. Yet in recent years stories of the long-term unemployed have been shared across popular media, from traditional news outlets to interactive news sites and popular blog networks.<sup>4</sup> They tell of personal feelings of grief, confusion, and indignation; broken marriages and families; social isolation and alienation; shattered identities and lost self-esteem; and deteriorating health and well-being. While there are exceptions (stories of strengthened marital and family bonds, of reprioritized social values, of recommitments to religious life, and of those who have not been affected at all), most narratives describe the social and personal costs of prolonged joblessness.

On a global level, chronic unemployment is hardly a novel phenomenon; conditions that are shockingly new to middle-class Americans, for instance, have been the norm for generations in other regions, especially among marginalized populations. As the chapters herein document, there is a tremendous amount of variability in how unemployment is framed and experienced across nations,

regions, classes, races, genders, age groups, and sectors of the economy. In each region and for each population within that region there exist long and shifting narratives around both the presence and absence of employment.

Institutions, forms of knowledge and practice, social relationships, affective orientations—these are all critical contexts for making sense of unemployment. Our contributors develop complex linkages between intimate and macro-level structures of meaning and value. While appreciating the different ways people live and cope with economic insecurity and dispossession, all reveal that unemployment and employment are crucial cultural registers in shaping that experience. Local and national discourses around work and employment, for example, deeply inform notions of personhood, citizenship, and moral-economic value (see the chapters by Murphy and Perelman). These in turn affect how individuals receive and react to conditions of chronic unemployment. Unemployment is not simply understood and experienced as either in opposition to or as the loss of employment but in a complex relationship to its construction in particular contexts. Some of the subjects in the coming chapters, especially youth, have never had what might be called formal employment but continue to organize life course expectations and individual aspirations according to its promise (see the chapters by Mains and Murphy). Employment may not be normal worldwide, but it is normative; that is, it is part of a prescribed parcel of behaviors and attributes expected of “normal” and “valued” citizens.

In this volume we highlight unemployed people’s individual and collective responses to conditions of economic insecurity and chronic unemployment, demonstrating their agency and cultural productivity in contexts of severe constraint. Our intent is not to romanticize these responses. Rather, the chapters demonstrate the complex and surprising ways people adjust to, resist, and accommodate circumstances of political and economic inequality and exclusion. Importantly, it is in their struggle to make meaningful lives under considerable duress that we see the emergence of new meanings and experiences of work and unemployment. By immersing the reader in how unemployment looks, feels, and smells, the chapters in this volume make their collective case that unemployment is more than simply the loss of a job.

## **Meanings of Work, Employment, and Unemployment**

One of the challenges of this volume has been figuring out how to talk about work, employment, and unemployment in clear and consistent ways despite the terms’ fluidity and the increasingly blurry boundaries dividing them. This challenge is in part

semantic. In Western industrialized nations the terms *work* and *employment* are often used interchangeably to designate formal, regular, paid activity. To be unemployed is sometimes referred to as being “out of work.” Yet work and formal employment are not always, or even often, the same thing. Cultural histories and ethnographic studies of the meaning of work reveal that work is the more expansive cultural concept while employment is narrower. Across time and culture, work has been central to how people understand social life both in and outside the domain of formal economic activity, including politics, leisure, social intercourse and organization, and gender (see Applebaum 1995; Budd 2011; Comaroff and Comaroff 1992). The Argentine trash pickers Perelman discusses in this volume, for instance, clearly work; they collect garbage in order to make money and retain their role as family providers in the absence of formal unemployment. Yet to highlight the ambiguity of pickers’ employment status, Perelman refers to their labor as “non-work,” as many of its practitioners, as well as many of their countrymen, see pickers as “unemployed” (*desempleado*). In this case, as in so many others, what counts as employment is a political issue with profound consequences. Distinctions based on categories of race, gender, and class have long delimited what may be regarded as legitimate employment and who may work particular jobs. Unwaged work—such as domestic work, child rearing, self-provisioning, the labor of peasants, and informal economies—has played an indispensable economic and social role in every single society, even the most industrialized ones (Smith, Wallerstein, and Evers 1984; Smith and Wallerstein 1992).

With the expansion of capitalism and wage labor across the globe, employment—in the sense of formal, steady, paid labor—has become the dominant, but not the exclusive, model for what work should look like (Williams 1983, 326). This privileging of employment has broad implications. In most modern capitalist economies, formal employment has come to structure how people think about and experience things like time, gender, life course trajectories, social networks, and domains of cultural authority. In much of the contemporary world employment has become a condition for doing other kinds of work, in the culturally expansive sense of the term, such as the work of building social relationships, attaining new social statuses, or gaining social respectability. For example, what it means to be an adult male in many societies is intimately linked with the securing of formal employment (see the chapters by Mains and Murphy). When such employment proves elusive, so does a man’s ability to achieve adult status and the many potential benefits thereof (such as independent housing, marriage, children, and the respect of one’s kin and peers). Those who lose their jobs, or cannot find jobs in the first place, stand to lose far more than just wages or a title.

Thinking about the many things jobs provide to workers requires a slight shift of perspective for many scholars. As Elaine Scarry (1994) has remarked, since the widespread penetration of industrial capitalism, we tend to associate work

and employment with pain, self-denial, and loss of autonomy. It is of course politically and intellectually crucial to consider the ways in which workers suffer exploitation, alienation, discrimination, and stigmatization. Yet those same workers often associate their jobs with personal and national progress, freedom from patriarchal constraints, opportunities for leisure and consumption, and moral responsibility to family and kin.<sup>5</sup> Apparently oppressive forms of employment may also allow other kinds of culturally productive work—the making of selves, persons, and social relationships. Work is indeed exertion, sacrifice, and suffering, but it is also freedom, personal fulfillment, self-esteem, self-discipline, social maturity, and care for others. Work produces value—material, moral, symbolic, and social—and constitutes ways of life and forms of individual and collective identity as well as exclusion.<sup>6</sup>

Recognizing the complicated ways work is entangled with other cultural meanings, values, and statuses can help us appreciate the depth of personal and social suffering that accompany unemployment. Doing so also provides insight into the breadth of culturally creative responses to conditions of chronic economic insecurity and unemployment. The unemployed and those historically excluded from secure formal employment struggle but develop means to acquire and produce meaning and value, such as autonomy, respect, and sociality, often replicating the forms and practices, if not content, of formal employment.<sup>7</sup> People who may not be formally employed nevertheless find ways to feel employed, that is, to work. As described in Lane's chapter, unemployed U.S. technology workers dressed in business attire for weekly networking meetings and referred to job-seeking as "the hardest job I've ever had." The Ethiopian youth Mains writes about spent scarce funds on and obsessively checked their cell phones for urgent messages that rarely came. Members of the Nicaraguan workers cooperative Fisher studied attended meetings for more than five years to discuss a factory that had no working machinery and never produced a single item of clothing. For these groups, as for so many others, unemployment cannot be reduced to the absence of a job. It is instead a constituent component of contemporary life, a site for forging new ways of working, being, and thinking in these precarious neoliberal times. The ethnographic studies collected in this volume take that assumption as their jumping off point as they set out to document and make sense of this important and understudied cultural terrain.

## **Neoliberalism, Precarity, and Unemployment**

This book is a product of recent heightened attention to unemployment and underemployment in anthropology.<sup>8</sup> The past several decades have seen considerable intellectual ferment about pervasive economic upheaval and dislocation

across the globe. Ethnographic examinations of neoliberalism and, more recently, precarity, for example, have constructively complicated our understandings of the interconnections between cultures and capitalisms and the production of inequality, insecurity, and social-economic marginalization. Too seldom, however, has unemployment been the explicit focus of such investigations. Too commonly, unemployment has been understood more as symptom than a constituent component of the structure and experience of contemporary life.

We therefore see this volume as contributing to the vitality and relevance of contemporary anthropological projects about globalized inequality and insecurity but insist on the centrality of unemployment. Unemployment is culturally productive, not in the sense that it is a positive development but in the sense that it produces new cultural meanings, norms, and connections. As people adapt and make adjustments to their lives under circumstances of economic disenfranchisement and deprivation, they form new, even if tentative, identities, social relationships and, importantly, meanings of employment and unemployment. The experience and meaning of unemployment is integrally related to local constructions of work and employment, but unemployment is lived neither merely as their absence nor as a liminal state in between stable categories of employment. The chapters herein suggest that the distinction between employment and unemployment is increasingly blurred, if indeed it was ever as distinct as has been presumed, and this conflation has intensified with the normalization of unemployment in these precarious times. More and more, people work without employment. One cannot, we therefore argue, make sense of the precarious neoliberal world today without also making sense of unemployment.

For many scholars, the terms *neoliberalism* and *precarity* are familiar shorthand for a way of thinking about the political, economic, and cultural conditions under which most people in the world currently live. For students and others new to this subject matter, these terms may be less familiar, so we briefly explain them as well as how they relate to each other and to unemployment.

## Neoliberalism

*Neoliberalism* is an unwieldy word, often underspecified and used as shorthand for contemporary capitalism and its ills (Ferguson 2009, 172). At its core, *neoliberalism* refers to a set of ideas about how the world works—or should work—when it comes to the relationship between people, governments, and the market. Neoliberal ideology privileges individual freedom, unfettered competition, and the self-regulating free market as the most effective means of achieving a healthy economy.<sup>9</sup> Under this model, the ideal state is non-interventionist, and its primary function is to assure competitive markets and protect individual

liberties (rather than individual people), in particular the unassailability of private property.

Starting in the 1970s, neoliberal principles have been used to justify legislation and programs to privatize state-owned enterprises and public goods; to deregulate markets, repealing legal and policy encumbrances to their efficiency; and to liberalize trade, eliminating tariffs and other barriers to global commerce. Associated policies include the attenuation of environmental protections, the weakening of labor rights, the withdrawal of social services and welfare programs, the downsizing of government, and the removal of controls on financial activity (Steger and Roy 2010, 14). In addition to these we may add global development agendas and programs (that is, structural adjustment and austerity) enforced by powerful supranational institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

More abstractly, neoliberalism describes the increasingly blurred distinction between the realms of public government and private business. This blurring and its implications are the subject of Michel Foucault's studies of governmentality (Foucault 2009; Foucault and Burchell 2010), which expand the analysis of power and politics beyond the state to encompass the "rationalities" (the very way we think about problems and their solutions) embedded in the "technologies" (procedures and mechanisms) used to evaluate and manage conduct from the individual to the national level and beyond. Important in this conceptualization is Foucault's understanding that power results not merely in the subjugation of one group under another; rather, power produces identities and subjectivities. In other words, studies of neoliberalism encompass not just the enforcement of neoliberal ideals through specific political actions but also the ways in which individuals are encouraged and persuaded to manage their own conduct in order to become ideal individualistic and entrepreneurial neoliberal subjects (Brady 2014, 18).<sup>10</sup>

The relationship between neoliberalism and unemployment is at once obvious and more complicated than it seems. The spread of neoliberal ideas and implementation of neoliberal policies have made it easier and more culturally acceptable for companies to lay off workers, relocate jobs overseas, and privilege short-term stock prices over long-term investment in persons and places. All of this was accomplished in the name of freeing companies to compete on an increasingly global scale while "liberating" individual workers from the infantilizing shackles of secure employment. Proponents of these shifts cast high unemployment as an unavoidable, even beneficial, by-product of progress rather than the result of a long class struggle that, over the previous half-century, consolidated power and wealth in the hands of financial and political elites while fueling social and economic insecurity in countries around the world (Harvey 2005).

The lives of the unemployed men and women described in the ethnographic examples in this volume have been undeniably shaped by neoliberalism. And yet neoliberalism is not monolithic. It has not spread across the globe in an inexorable and identical manner. Despite our abbreviated overview above, neoliberalism is not an unvarying set of ideas and practices that is uniformly interpreted and experienced across contexts. One of the key contributions of anthropology to the examination of neoliberalism has been a varied collection of detailed ethnographic analyses of local productions, accommodations, and challenges to neoliberal ideologies, governance, and policies in settings typically imagined as outside liberal political histories and free markets (for instance, African nations and China). Ethnographically grounded research reveals that neoliberalism is a contingent, contested, and incomplete process, the dimensions of which take hold in uneven and unexpected ways, depending on local political histories (Ong 2006), policy regimes (Elyachar 2005), governmental cultures (Chalfin 2010), national identities (Rofel 2007), and cultural understandings of gender and moral respectability (Karim 2011; Lynch 2007) and life course statuses (Mains 2007). This volume offers a similarly grounded investigation of the connections between neoliberalism and unemployment specifically; the two are undoubtedly connected, but these chapters document the important ways in which the form and content of such connections vary by time and context.

### **Precurity**

Adding a third variable to this already complicated relationship, one of the major impacts of the spread of neoliberalism has been the production of what scholars call precarity, or the increased experience of inequality and insecurity that has accompanied the destabilization of the institutions, expectations, and life trajectories around which people once built their lives (see Allison 2013; Berlant 2007). While neoliberalism is a set of ways to think and govern, precarity is an assemblage of ways to *feel*. Uncertainty and insecurity are not new phenomena, but in recent decades income and wealth polarization have grown not only between countries but also within them, as seven out of ten people live in countries where the gap between rich and poor is greater than it was thirty years ago (Seery and Arendar 2014, 8). Political corruption, public health crises, stalled development (personal and national), and crime and violent conflict are correlated with the stark rise in inequality and affective worlds of insecurity, suffering, and fear (see also Besteman 2009).

With regard to unemployment, precarity involves the dissolution of the opportunities and expectations around historical and culturally specific constructions of work and employment. It refers to the dismantling of stable structures of work and employment and the rise of labor that is irregular and contingent, that is,



“precarious” labor (Millar 2014; Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012; Neilson and Rossiter 2008; Standing 2011).<sup>11</sup> Precariousness of livelihood and uncertainty of employment have always been a part of the lives of the working poor as well as many other people (Millar 2014, 34; Neilson and Rossiter 2005).<sup>12</sup> But precarious employment is now the norm; half of the world’s workers are informally, casually, or irregularly employed (Allison 2012, 368n3). Thus “unstable work destabilizes daily living” (Allison 2012, 349). As certain forms of work are disappearing, so too are the institutional structures and relationships that shaped ways of thinking, feeling, and acting about one’s place in social worlds. This has led to new configurations of the “normal”—new life cycle statuses and trajectories, new modes of belonging, and new moral evaluations that guide social-economic action and expectation. To be clear, these configurations are not simply new. As many of the contributors to this volume demonstrate, the social relationships, practices, and values about work and employment (in their specific regional and national contexts), even in their absence, continue to inform and shape the imaginaries and social-cultural adjustments of the unemployed (Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012). While precarity may be painful, as the stories herein attest, it is not simply uncertainty. Precarity is also longing and aspiration: longing for what should have been (stable employment and life) and aspirations for what should be (stable employment and life).

While Guy Standing has posited the precariat as a “class-in-the-making” (2011, vii), this prediction assumes a unity of experience and agenda that empirical research has yet to bear out. Millions of people around the world may be living increasingly uncertain lives, but the way they experience their precarious condition—how they explain it, where and when it pains them, whom they blame for it, and whether and how they seek to fix it—depends on factors more particular than universal. It is only through close ethnographic examinations of the on-the-ground, lived experiences of both employment and unemployment that we can come to understand the forms, meanings, and significance of the larger turn to neoliberalism and precarity.

## **Organization of the Book**

We have organized the book’s chapters around the volume’s three central contributions to the anthropological study of unemployment. First, we call for a rethinking of the very concept of unemployment, particularly as it has been imagined in relationship to employment, economics, and human feeling. Second, we document how the lived experience of unemployment differs across national contexts and how unemployment itself is positioned within and in

opposition to existing national discourses such as those around solidarity, productivity, poverty, rurality, and reciprocity. Third, we consider the new identities, social relationships, and political movements produced by individual and collective experiences of unemployment. Finally, we round out the volume with an epilogue by Caitrin Lynch and Daniel Mains that explores the thematic connections between the chapters and points ahead to new directions for research around unemployment.

## Challenging Existing Understandings of Unemployment

Carrie Lane's chapter opens the volume with an important question: Is unemployment normal? For many men and women in these pages, unemployment was and is a difficult and troubling experience, and yet, economic precarity was neither a new nor intermittent condition but a persistent one, having enveloped much of their lives. Lane's subjects are American job seekers, in this case in the high-technology industry (telecommunications, web design, programming, e-commerce). Despite the challenges of prolonged unemployment, these white-collar, middle-class workers evince considerable resiliency and have not only come to accept but to embrace dominant business ideologies of impermanent employment. Layoffs did not necessarily dismantle their self-identification as highly trained professionals; in fact, their identities were in some respects buttressed by constant job-seeking and job change. Lane's findings refute long-standing presumptions about the consequences of layoffs. Unemployment, she uncovers, was not a liminal situation of untethered and displaced identities. They did not expect or desire "reincorporation" into normative social-cultural structures. Nonetheless, this does not mean that structures did not matter. Rather, as she describes, job-seeking itself became work, constituting alternative socialities, relationships, and sites of belonging. Interestingly, she states, in their job searches they produce ways of feeling employed—recreating the rhythms, roles, and rituals of employed life. What is new, though, is that the adjustments that these high-tech workers have made have blurred the distinction between employment and unemployment. Like many of the contributors to this volume, Lane ethnographically tracks how chronic unemployment is transforming the meanings, values, and practices of work.

In the next chapter, author David Karjanen offers a critique of economic models of unemployment. He lays out a challenge to revisit the predominant conceptions of unemployment and the unemployed, particularly with regard to the experiences of African American job seekers in the United States. His careful analysis of the premises of modern economic thought (including assumptions

and assertions about the social world, most pertinently that it is populated by rational, self-interested, individual actors) directs our attention to the blind spots that (mis)inform conventional economic understandings. By deploying ethnographic analysis, Karjanen demonstrates the potential of anthropological research to produce empirical and rigorous analyses of people's behaviors and motivations. Although it may seem prosaic to anthropologists, Karjanen offers a lesson well worth remembering as we evaluate our own methodologies, theoretical constructs, and descriptions of unemployment and the unemployed: People are complex social and historical beings, embedded in intricate, interacting structures.

Unemployment is often ambivalently portrayed in public culture, depicted as a temporary, if unfortunate, consequence of unleashing competition, entrepreneurial spirit, and individual freedoms. This ambivalence is sharpened when the fate of mass manufacturing in advanced industrial nations is the subject. The broad sweep of deindustrialization in the United States since the 1970s, for example, provoked fierce debate about blue-collar traditions and the obstacles to national and individual progress. Yet whether industrial labor's decline is being mourned or celebrated, the impact of blue-collar unemployment tends to be discussed in communal, regional, or national terms rather than at the level of embodied human experience. Jong Bum Kwon's research with male laid-off auto-workers in South Korea in the disastrous aftermath of the Asian financial crisis (1997–2001) offers a compelling analysis of the bodily cost of the loss of industrial work. Predominant imaginings of industrial labor in both the United States and Korea depict it as physically painful, mind-numbing repetition that constrains individual development. Focusing on the bodily experience of working on the assembly line, Kwon argues that industrial labor in this particular case was in fact a process of making *healthy* working bodies. After being laid off, workers felt severed not only from the factory but also from a vital part of their own bodies. They were not freed from painful physical labor; rather, they suffered a form of structural violence. His analysis also provokes a rethinking of employment and, consequently, unemployment. He suggests that we consider employment as a form of *occupation*, an affective and bodily process of habitation that mutually transforms worker and workplace in deeply felt and meaningful ways.

## National Contexts and Discourses

Unemployment is a matter of the state because it provokes questions about moral order, about the composition and organization of social relationships, about the legitimacy of social-economic arrangements, and about national identity. Jack Murphy's contribution examines how unemployment in France in the mid-2000s

resonated with long-held notions of *solidarité* (solidarity). With a deep intellectual and political history, solidarity functions as a symbol of a national social compact. Many French citizens deemed unemployment a threat to society itself, and the explosion of “riots” in the outer cities in the autumn of 2005 and mass street protests in January 2006 appeared to corroborate this fear. As unemployed youth in Limoges, a medium-sized peripheral city, Murphy’s ethnographic subjects presumably embody the discontent and social exclusion that was widely thought to underlie the upheavals, but they belie simple characterizations. While they were clearly disenfranchised and living a life of *galère* (infantilizing dependence), Murphy’s careful depiction of their everyday struggles challenges those national narratives, revealing the emergence of alternative forms of sociality and collective identity. While they may be denied normative adulthood, defined as social and economic autonomy achieved through stable employment, these youth improvised ways of belonging and asserting autonomous personhood. The question remains, however, whether the lives of these youth suggest the formation of new social classes.

The meaning and experience of unemployment are culturally and historically variable, informed by specific ideals of social dignity and moral-political belonging. Based on extended fieldwork with *cirujas* (pickers or scavengers of recyclable materials) in Buenos Aires, Mariano Perelman examines the contested imaginaries of work and employment in neoliberal Argentina. Since Juan Peron (president from 1946 to 1955), employment has been deeply linked to citizenship: rights and privileges of formal workers and obligations of the state to provide them basic welfare (housing, education, recreation). This arrangement laid the foundation for the ideals of dignified work and social identity (working man as provider of the family). In this context, not all work is considered employment. Thus, a scavenger who is occupied full time collecting waste matter considers himself *both* worker and unemployed, because picking does not secure “guarantees.” With the entrenchment of neoliberal policies and ideologies withdrawing state employment opportunities and social services, however, the linkage is increasingly strained. Perelman shows that *cirujas* were forming new understandings of their work and work identity to adjust to conditions of chronic unemployment.

Karjanen’s ethnographic case studies involve unemployed men and women in urban settings, the most common site of popular racialized preconceptions of economic disenfranchisement. Ann Kingsolver’s contribution redirects our gaze toward the rural United States, which holds different but equally powerful spatialized imaginaries of racial poverty. Specifically examining the low country and the upcountry in South Carolina and parts of Appalachian Kentucky, Kingsolver argues that while those regions may be associated with long-standing poverty, they are rendered invisible in regards to unemployment. Poverty in fact has been naturalized to the region, as its residents have been depicted as culturally deprived

(that is, steeped in a “culture of poverty”) by politicians, scholars, and popular media alike. Placing the focus on un- and underemployment, Kingsolver renders visible the political economic structures that have impoverished the area and that enable the continued exploitation of its inhabitants. These are not isolated and backward places but sites of global capitalist extraction by multinational enterprises attracted to poor rural workers advertised as hospitable to low wages, anti-union policies, and inadequate working conditions. The urban and rural may stand apart in America’s symbolic geography, but the poor and unemployed of those regions are entwined by global political-economic machinations.

Daniel Mains’s ethnography investigates the struggles of disenfranchised youth: unemployed urban males in Jimma, Ethiopia, since the turn of the twenty-first century. The term *youth* is an ambiguous descriptor, describing not biological age but location in normative social trajectories. It is a category of persons burdened with ambivalence, a symbol of the future, signifying what should or should not come to pass. In other words, we imagine in youth both hope and fear for the future. As such, considerable anthropological attention has been placed on youth in contexts of neoliberal precarity. Mains cogently argues that among these men, unemployment was experienced as temporal and spatial problems to be solved. Rather than abstract philosophical concepts, time and space are lived and interpreted in and through social relationships. Employment is a social relationship, and particular kinds of employment index individual progress, namely the attainment of social respect and autonomy. Conversely, particular jobs bring about intense feelings of shame (*yiluññta*) because of their association with subservience. Expectations of progress at both national and individual levels have heightened in Ethiopia with modernization and greater access to education. With prolonged unemployment, young males are unable to insert themselves into narratives of national progress and self-development. These youth attempted to resolve the temporal problem with spatial fixes, migrating to other cities in Ethiopia (more commonly) or to the United States or elsewhere in Africa (less frequently) in order to avoid social scrutiny and reconfigure social relationships, thereby becoming different and ideally respected persons.

## Renewed Selves and New Socialities

Economic relationships, as our authors demonstrate, are moral relationships deeply embedded in rich social-cultural contexts. Fran Rothstein takes this insight to shed light on labor migration patterns. Her study of migrants from San Cosme Mazatecochco, a rural community in central Mexico, residing in New Jersey ethnographically investigates a puzzling finding: During the long recession in the United States, more men were returning to Mexico than women. Migration

is a strategy to deal with economic distress evident the world over. While an oversimplification, migratory movements tend to follow the vagaries of the relative economic circumstances between sending and receiving countries. Building on research that commenced in 2009 as well as on decades of previous fieldwork in San Cosme Mazatecochco, Rothstein shows that patterns of settlement and return are not, in fact, determined by naked economic calculus but are powerfully shaped by women and their capacity to enlarge and manage kin and social networks. San Cosmeros/as, she explains, participate in a flexible kinship and ritual system that can accommodate changing circumstances and incorporate varied individuals and groups. At the center of local and transnational networks are the women who do the work of kinship, maintaining kin contacts and organizing ritual celebrations to solidify social ties. These ties are crucial in obtaining and distributing information and resources and in anchoring members to particular locales. Kinship is a form of work, often done by women, and kinship is an important resource in responding to precarious forms of employment.

Migrants in Rothstein's study turn to their kin networks in difficult times. In contrast, amidst the hardship of prolonged unemployment in 2011–2012, Claudia Strauss's unemployed American workers looked to an ideology to sustain them, that of positive thinking. Positive thinking, of course, is not emblematic of an essential American character, but, as Strauss describes, it has a profound purchase on American society, both as a discourse and a technique of emotional self-management. Positive thinking appeals to unemployed workers as a way to keep up their spirits, remain optimistic, and present oneself as a "positive" individual. It has a long history, and Strauss identifies key sites of its production in contemporary American society, from popular positive psychology (for instance, Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking*) to Protestant and New Age religions. Some of the key purveyors are managers and professionals, which illuminates the long-standing connection between psychological and business discourses. Positive thinking resonates powerfully with neoliberal injunctions for individual, self-optimizing conduct. Not simply "thinking," positive thinking, as well as neoliberal ideologies, endorses affect management, defined as the constant monitoring of one's emotions and their physical manifestations. Cultural critics like Barbara Ehrenreich (2009a) have inveighed against positive thinking as an ideology that foreshortens social analysis and places the onus on the individual for her own success and failure. Strauss's respondents, however, did not blame themselves and did not misconstrue structures of inequality. Her interviews reveal that positive thinking may also be a form of self-care, a way of coping with the rejection and disappointment of repeated failed job searches. Positive thinking may enable one to imagine oneself in a future different from one's present situation of precarity.

Joshua Fisher's chapter interweaves Strauss's emphasis on the potentially transformative role of positivity with Rothstein's focus on the buoying power of human connection and community. His is an analysis of a small cotton-spinning cooperative called Génesis in Ciudad Sandino, Nicaragua. The cooperative is an example of transnational nongovernmental organization (NGO) projects to generate employment and local communal responses to widespread unemployment. It is not a story of success in the usual sense. The purchased machinery never arrived, and the project was cancelled. Yet, it is instructive because, even without having produced a single thread, the co-op of forty-two women and men did not disband. Starting in 2007, they waited and worked without pay for five years. They continued to meet and collectively responded to their immediate social and financial needs. Those women and men demonstrated an important dimension of work: It is not simply about wages, profits, and efficiencies. Continuing to work, without pay, they produced a sense of purpose, dignity, and hope for the future. Working collaboratively, they cleared a space for producing meaningful socialities and collective agencies.

Fisher's work closes the volume on a positive and provocative note, documenting as it does the potential for meaningful if unpredictable responses to even the most entrenched structures of inequality and exploitation. He also brings us full circle, back to the question of how we conceptualize work and unemployment. As Fisher demonstrates, work is valued because it is productive in the manifold sense of making meaningful and dignified lives and communities. What is at stake in unemployment, as he and every other contributor to this volume can attest, is not simply a job. At stake are people's identities and relationships; their mental, physical, and emotional health; their ability to fully participate in social, political, and economic life; and the futures they envision for themselves, their children, and their nations. What is at stake, in short, is everything.

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## THE LIMITS OF LIMINALITY

### Anthropological Approaches to Unemployment in the United States

*Carrie M. Lane*

For more than seventy years, the general consensus among scholars of work in the United States has been that the most crippling effect of job loss, especially for middle-class men, is the resulting loss of identity. Building on E. Wight Bakke's famous Depression-era studies, anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists have amply documented unemployment's many negative effects for how men understand their own self-worth and social status (Bakke 1934, 1940; Newman 1988, 1993; Townsend 2002). Having pinned their sense of who they are to what they do for a living and their sense of what they do for a living to a single, stable job, laid-off white-collar workers are, according to Katherine Newman's seminal 1988 study *Falling from Grace*, "left hanging and socially isolated with no stable sense of who they are. Trained to see identity as a matter of occupation, yet unable to claim a place in the business culture they came from, they remain socially disabled and suspended in time" (Newman 1988, 93). Stuck in a liminal state<sup>1</sup> between the status of deservingly employed and that of undeserving unemployed, laid-off managers found themselves depressed, isolated, and adrift, a characterization of the unemployed that has proven remarkably resilient over time, in both academic scholarship and popular culture.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, that is not what I encountered during my own fieldwork among laid-off high-technology workers in the early 2000s. From 2001 to 2004, I immersed myself in what I refer to as the culture of job-seeking, attending dozens of different networking events, job fairs, and job search seminars in Dallas, Texas. I met hundreds of laid-off high-tech workers from fields as diverse as



telecommunications, web site design, computer programming, dot-com consulting, and e-commerce. I ultimately interviewed more than seventy-five job seekers, some as many as five times, and in 2009 I conducted “where are they now” follow-up interviews with ten primary informants. Mirroring the white-collar high-tech labor force itself, a majority of the interviewees were white, middle- and upper-middle-class men, but the study also included white women and Asian Americans, Latinos, and African Americans of both sexes.<sup>3</sup> Most informants were between the ages of twenty-five and sixty-five. Nearly all were college-educated, and many had advanced degrees in business, engineering, and computer science. Their pre-layoff salaries ranged widely, but most made between \$40,000 to \$100,000 a year when steadily employed. As these demographic details indicate, these workers occupy a privileged niche in the American labor force, and their experiences cannot be taken as representative of American workers more broadly (see for example Karjanen and Kingsolver in this volume). Yet these are the very workers—educated, economically advantaged, and professionally connected—who are supposedly best positioned to withstand the vagaries of economic and industry shifts. And yet they, too, are increasingly subject—albeit in different ways and to varying degrees—to the same destabilizing forces and downward trajectories that plague other, less-advantaged corners of the American workforce.

Through my interviews and observations I learned that while tech workers were rarely thrilled to have been laid off, and while depression and isolation did rear their ugly heads now and then, the workers I met were neither shocked nor devastated by their layoffs. Their identities, their sense of themselves as valuable and skilled professionals, remained for the most part intact, proving exceptionally resilient even after, for some, years of unemployment. There were of course occasional departures from the optimistic individualism that characterized most job seekers’ responses, but in the end job seekers tended to focus not on what or who had done them wrong but on what they themselves could do to advance and safeguard their professional futures.<sup>4</sup>

I asked myself why responses to job loss had changed so much in a relatively short time, just twenty years since Newman’s study. Ultimately I concluded that just as the structure of white-collar work has changed over the previous decades, so too have cultural understandings of what it means to be employed, what it means to be unemployed, and how individual workers feel about both. Specifically, studies of white-collar unemployment to date have, nearly unanimously, presumed a norm—that of secure, long-term employment at a single company—and defined unemployment in opposition to that norm. Yet that “normal career”—in both its real and idealized forms—has changed, and thus

our understanding of its alleged opposite, unemployment, must also change. The conceptualization of unemployment as a liminal state by definition requires a structure, and an accompanying set of stable social roles and statuses, into which groups or individuals will eventually be reintegrated once they progress through the liminal phase. Without the presumption of an eventual return to stability, the framing of unemployment as a liminal phase bookended by occupational and social stability ceases to make sense in the way it once did, and the clear distinction between unemployment and employment begins to unravel.

Drawing on my own research among white-collar workers facing unemployment in the first years of the twenty-first century, in this essay I describe four shifts that have contributed to the blurring, even breaking, of the boundary between employment and unemployment: increased frequency of job change; changing ideas of career success; the rise of cultural and social spaces for job seekers; and new discourses around work that rely less and less on paid employment. I then consider the implications of these changes for those who experience job loss as well as for those of us who study it.

## **The Normalization of Layoffs and Job Change**

Perhaps the most important shift concerning white-collar unemployment today is that for the most part job loss is no longer unexpected, nor, for most workers, unprecedented. Nearly 60 percent of my interviewees had been laid off more than once.<sup>5</sup> White-collar layoffs, once rare, have become increasingly common since the 1970s; each of the last four recessions affected a higher percentage of white-collar workers than the last (Mishel, Bernstein, and Boushey 2003; Stettner and Wenger 2003; Shierholz and Mishel 2009). Even the most educated and highly skilled Americans are now regularly advised to keep an “emergency fund” on hand to cover their living expenses in case of an unforeseen layoff. The recommended amount of time such funds should cover has inched up over the last decade, from six to eight months to one to two years, according to some financial advisors, a telling indicator of increasing rates of prolonged unemployment, defined in the United States as being out of work for twenty-seven months or more (Mayer 2010).

Thus for most workers the sense of disbelief and betrayal that previous generations of managers experienced after layoffs seems downright antiquated. These workers either never had expected to spend their career at one company or had long ago surrendered such expectations. One job seeker in his late fifties had been laid off three times over the course of his professional life. “The first time,” he said, “it was devastating. You know, ‘Oh my gosh, what happened?’ The second time it was easier.”

Along with these changes has come a new perspective on what, exactly, employer and employee owe one another. In the words of one laid-off technology executive in his late fifties:

The best way I like to look at it is that, you know, during the '80s, companies realized they don't have any loyalty to their employees anymore. During the '90s, employees realized they don't have any loyalty to their companies anymore. And now, I think, any employment is based on a need and a skill. You know, very much on a contractual basis. If a company has a need for my skills and I can supply that to them, they hire me. When that need is over with, when they don't need me anymore, sure, I'm terminated. [...] I don't know any company where it's in their charter, where it's in their goal as a company, to provide employment to people. You know, it's just not there. They're in business to provide a service or a product. They're not in business to hire people. And, you know, people are a resource. A very important resource. [...] But you're a resource, you know, so realize it.

For good or for bad, he and other job seekers say, the days in which hard work and loyalty were rewarded with secure employment are gone. Rather than opposing this shift, the unemployed high-tech workers I spoke with focused on being as "marketable" as possible (a form of self-commodification I discuss more fully later in this essay), positioning themselves in whatever way they believed would make them most valuable, not just to their next employer but to the employer after that, and, inevitably, the one after that.

Other job seekers shared personal experiences of coming to terms with this new reality and the demands it placed on individual workers. A job seeker in his late twenties explained, "When I first started out of school, yeah, I thought I was going to be the thirty-year [until] retirement person. When I started at [my first full-time job] I thought I would be with the company forever." When his one-year contract with that company was not renewed, he quickly found a new position, this time at an internet company; he again assumed he would be there for the long term. Following yet another layoff, news of which arrived on the day his wife delivered their twin sons, he has come to see things differently. "My vision has changed a lot now." Today, he regularly warns friends and colleagues not to assume that their current job will be a lasting one. "I tell everybody, whenever you find a job, you keep looking for your next job. Because three years from now, you're going to go through a downsize of some sort, and in ten years the market is going to fall again, like it has for centuries." His expectation of lifelong security in exchange for loyal hard work had been replaced by the expectation that no job is ever permanent, no amount of labor or loyalty enough to secure protection from the vagaries of corporate restructuring and economic volatility.

Whether voluntary or not, frequent job change has become the new normal. The average American worker now changes jobs at least ten times over a career and tends to stay in the same job for just under four and a half years. Younger workers in their twenties and thirties stay in jobs about half as long and are on track to hold between fifteen and twenty positions over the course of their work lives (BLS 2012; Meister 2012). Once pejoratively dismissed as “job hopping” and seen as a sign of frivolity or disloyalty, moving frequently from job to job has been reframed as a savvy career move, a way to earn promotions and raises more quickly while preventing one’s skills and professional networks from growing stale.<sup>6</sup>

This perspective was enthusiastically endorsed by a team of career counselors I interviewed in Dallas. These counselors regularly advised their clients—most of whom were, or had been, corporate executives—to surrender the expectation of job security in favor of a more peripatetic model of employment:

One thing they have to understand, and they haven’t gotten this yet, is that we had a time where corporations took care of us for ten or twenty, thirty years. Really the HR [Human Resources] organizations of those companies managed our careers. What they have to understand when they come out [onto the labor market] is that they think it is just going to be hard to find a job, but when I get that job I’ll be there for ten years. That’s not going to happen. It is changing every three years. And so they have to accept that fact that you are going to be changing every three years. This is not a [situation where] you’ve been there for twenty years, you got laid off and now you’re going to go find some other company and you’re going to be there for the next twenty years. It’s not going to happen. They’re sorely mistaken if that’s what they believe.

Despite this career counselor’s conviction that job seekers need to alter their misguided mindsets and expectations (and indeed, charged clients for helping them do just that), most job seekers I interviewed actually already shared this perspective and were equally critical of those who did not.

One software engineer in his late twenties lamented his layoff from an aviation company but said that it was hardly unexpected and was in some ways even welcome. He had been with the company five and a half years at the time of his layoff. He believed he had already “overstayed” his time there and worried about being pigeonholed into a particular role or status. “Although I was doing more than what I was doing earlier, and definitely I had career progress and the career advancement and the salary increases, I knew I was branding myself as a particular [type of engineer].” He suspected he’d been promoted as high as he would ever go at that company and believed that he had already gained as much

as he could from working there. “There’s a certain amount of skill set that you can pick up from one place. After a while, you have learned all the tricks of the trade, unless you make a change within the company to move to other focus areas or other groups, which is an option if you’re happy with the company. But otherwise the same old thing, it kind of gets boring after a while. It was time to move on.” Being laid off, he concluded, had actually been good for his career, as he’d determined it was never in one’s best interest to stay at a company for more than five years.

Another young worker, a married father of one who had lost his job in telecommunications a year earlier, echoed this sentiment:

I think that if you stay in one place too long, you lose your edge. And I think that companies value their employees a lot less today maybe when they used to when my father was working. That, and I like the sense of adventure. I think if I stay in one place too long, there’s a tendency to get bored, to get complacent. Now, all that said, if I were to come to the perfect company with the perfect culture, with management that I really liked working for, would I stay there for fifteen or twenty years? Sure. As long as there were a consistent challenge to the work, as long as there were opportunities to learn, to grow. But I don’t think in this day and age that truly exists with any one particular company.

According to this perspective, frequent job change brings both personal and professional benefits. It keeps one’s skills sharp and one’s mind engaged. And although this job seeker holds out the possibility of an ideal company at which one might stay both content and inspired over the course of an entire career, he is clearly not holding his breath for that entity to appear.

Lest this perspective seem a young man’s game, it is worth noting that older workers, both male and female, expressed similar beliefs. One job seeker in her late forties explained that most people today believe that their career is their own responsibility, not something that can be left in the hands of corporate employers:

It’s not [like] you get a job and then somebody watches out for you the rest of your life, or as long as you work hard you’ll be paid appropriately and promoted appropriately and have a job for the rest of your life. Now I think it will take a more active role to evaluate the pros and cons of every situation and decide what you’re going to put in and when you’re going to get out, and that’s the best way to move forward, and you probably do that every two years.

Placing the entire onus of managing one’s career squarely on the shoulders of the individual worker, a topic to which I return in the next section, she names job

change as the single most effective way to advance one's career. She even one-ups younger job seekers by advocating a switch every two years, rather than the three- or five-year timelines more commonly suggested.

As the experience of losing one's job has become more commonplace, the dramatic transition from employed to unemployed has been softened somewhat. People might not like being laid off—indeed, they might loathe it—but the experience is rarely unprecedented. Amid a sea of constant job change, being laid off can be reframed as a career move, albeit an involuntary one. For this shift to have occurred, it is not enough that layoffs and job change become increasingly common. It took another, equally significant shift to make that happen, one that has more to do with how people think about their jobs than how long they stay in them.

## **The Rise of the Protean Career**

During the early years of the twentieth century, corporate employers fought doggedly, and shrewdly, to convince young, white, middle-class men to forego entrepreneurship for permanent employee status.<sup>7</sup> As part of their campaign to recruit and retain these prized employees, employers successfully reconceptualized the ideal career as a series of upward moves along a preset corporate ladder, usually at a single company. That model stuck, and through the 1960s secure cradle-to-grave employment was considered the just reward of loyal and hard-working organization men. In the latter part of the century an alternative model of career started to emerge, one that emphasized flexibility over predictability and, in its capaciousness, left decidedly more room for individual workers to chart their own unique paths to professional success. These “protean careers,” a term coined by management expert Douglas T. Hall in the 1970s, were designed to be both self-directed and personally satisfying. Rather than allowing an employer to decide one's career trajectory it was left up to the individual to plan whether and how one might advance one's personal and professional interests (Hall 1976). This new model was allegedly designed to serve employers and employees alike, creating more fulfilled and productive workers. In this new imagining, stable employment was actually the enemy of individual freedom, a perspective that meshed beautifully with the neoliberal principles and policies gaining cultural traction at that same moment in American history.<sup>8</sup> As one executive put it, “To give my employees job security would be to disempower them and relieve them of the responsibility that they need to feel for their own success” (Ross 2003, 17).

Despite its lauded potential to empower workers, the consensus is that the shift to more flexible work has done the opposite. Coming as it did at the same

time that American corporations eagerly embraced downsizing as a way to trim expenses and increase stock valuations, the protean career started to look less like an emancipatory tool for workers than a handy excuse for employers to divest themselves of responsibility for employees' well-being and professional futures. To be sure, some highly skilled workers have managed to benefit from the rise of contingent and contract work and have willingly traded full-time traditional employment for less secure but potentially more lucrative and exciting careers as independent contractors (Barley and Kunda 2004; Marschall 2012; Osnowitz 2010). In most cases, however, flexibility is just a euphemism for disposability, and the freedom to build one's own career has been transformed into the obligation to navigate increasingly uncertain professional waters with almost no guidance or support. The high costs of this transition for workers, their families, and American society have been well documented. Even Hall himself, the originator of the term *protean career* and one of the concept's most vocal advocates, later lamented the heavy pressure this type of career placed on individual workers, who found themselves overwhelmed by the demands of planning and preparing for professional futures that looked increasingly uncertain (Harrington 2001). The resulting losses are not just a matter of emotional hardship, financial adversity, or diminished professional opportunities; they also come in the form of squandered human capital, unrealized potential, and the erosion of certain values—loyalty, commitment, and upward mobility—that once served as the foundation of American ideas about work and its rewards.<sup>9</sup>

Yet the protean career, at least in its idealized form, has continued to gain cultural traction and now enjoys widespread popularity well beyond managerial circles. Today, the expectation that individuals take responsibility for managing their own careers is so ingrained as to seem hardly worthy of mention, and the attribute of flexibility is now prized far higher than the once-lauded traits of loyalty or perseverance. To be flexible, in this rendering, means being willing to be anything or do anything an employer might require. As one might imagine, this endeavor requires a complicated and continual process of impression management in order to continually reshape how one is perceived by potential employers. Consequently, the process of looking for work has become less about self-promotion and more about self-commodification, as job seekers are encouraged to see themselves as brands or commodities to be marketed and sold to potential employers. Although cultural critics have expressed dismay at the psychological and political implications of this commodification of the self, "the brand called you," like the protean career, has become such a commonplace that job seekers I interviewed regularly referred to their résumés as "marketing materials" and to themselves as "valuable commodities" to be "used" by employers