

Good Jobs America: Making Work Better for Everyone, by **Paul Osterman** and **Beth Shulman**. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011. 181pp. \$24.95 paper. ISBN: 9780871546630.

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Debates in which moral imperatives run up against finite economic resources and the pragmatics of policy-making are rarely productive. Each side arrives armed with studies and statistics to support their own position—this thing must be done at all costs; this thing costs too much to do; this thing cannot realistically be done—and each usually departs with those same beliefs intact. To move beyond this impasse requires careful analysis of the assumptions and evidence, in all their varied forms, each group brings to the table. With their book *Good Jobs America*, Paul Osterman and Beth Shulman hope to do just that for discussions around low-wage work. They make a smart and complex case that creating good jobs does not necessarily entail sacrificing other worthwhile goals such as low prices, a healthy economy, and global competitiveness, and that when tradeoffs are necessary, the benefits ultimately outweigh the costs. (Although Osterman and Shulman conceptualized the book together, Shulman unfortunately passed away before the writing began.)

The book's greatest contribution is its clear elucidation of the myths shaping most debates and policies around low-wage work (jobs paying below poverty wage or less than two-thirds of the median wage). Following an informative and wide-ranging first chapter on the state of low-wage work in America today, the authors spend Chapter Two debunking misconceptions around low-wage work: (1) low-wage jobs are temporary positions people move through as they progress up the career ladder; (2) most bad jobs disappear when the economy improves; (3) the low-wage labor market is populated by immigrants who push down wages; (4) better jobs lead to unmotivated workers who produce less; and (5) policies around low-wage work are ineffective if not detrimental.

One by one, each contention is briefly disputed by an assortment of statistics, case studies, and international comparisons. For example, the authors note that the United States lags behind comparable countries in intergenerational mobility, and few adult low-wage workers ever escape into better-paid positions. Charts demonstrate that the percentage of low-wage positions remained relatively constant throughout the boom-and-bust 1990s, disproving the claim that a strong economy necessarily leads to better jobs. The link between immigration and low-wage work is challenged by evidence that increased immigration has not pushed down wages in any significant way, and even during periods of high immigration native workers hold the majority of low-wage jobs. To dispute the notion that raising wages decrease productivity, the United States is measured against European countries with much smaller fractions of low-wage jobs which nonetheless remain competitive in international markets. Finally, minimum wage laws, which contrary to predictions do not result in fewer jobs overall, are offered as examples of effective policy-making.

Subsequent chapters continue the work of myth-busting. An especially strong chapter challenges the claim that better education and improved skills alone can prevent workers from falling into low-wage jobs. Another focuses on how employers themselves think about low-wage work, providing heartening evidence that most employers want to offer better jobs but are discouraged from doing so by a combination of fear, misinformation, and lack of managerial resources. Peppered throughout this chapter, and the rest of the book, are examples of firms that have managed, through a combination of dedication and innovation, to provide high-quality jobs in sectors dominated by low-wage work (e.g., healthcare, hotels, and manufacturing). These success stories offer tangible, tested strategies for turning bad jobs into good by providing fair wages, skills training, and opportunities for advancement without compromising—and sometimes even enhancing—profitability and competitiveness.

Chapter Five laments the current system of inadequate and rarely-enforced employment standards, advocating for stronger regulations to be enforced by a coalition of

government agencies and community and advocacy groups. (Amid an otherwise solid discussion, the authors make the peculiar claim that “Americans have never been willing to view people as commodities, like pork bellies” [p. 72], a statement the tragic counter-example of slavery patently belies.) Subsequent chapters describe channels for employee voices such as unions and community groups, and offer roadmaps for providing career ladders and training programs to low-wage workers. The penultimate chapter compares residential weatherization work (one of many “green jobs” currently garnering attention, and subsidies) across three cities to assess how campaigns around job quality fare against potentially competing interests such as private enterprise, labor unions, environmental movements, and community groups. The authors conclude that such campaigns’ effectiveness depends on the presence of strong political leadership committed to creating and protecting good jobs.

The book’s conclusion nicely summarizes the authors’ central argument, “that there are choices when it comes to job quality and that low-wage work need not be low-quality” (p. 116). They call for a combination of carrot and stick in urging firms to improve job quality, sanctioning those who do not and supporting and rewarding those who do. Ultimately, I found their argument compelling, and after reading the book felt well-equipped to make the case that creating good jobs makes both moral and economic sense. Yet therein lies a potential problem. I was committed to that point of view *before* I read the book. *Good Jobs America* did not change my mind; it provided useful fodder for making a case I already wanted to make. A more skeptical reader might dismiss the limited statistics and case studies presented as having been cherry-picked to support the authors’ cause, while contradictory evidence was excluded. One could question, for instance, whether a single study on intergenerational mobility is enough to disprove the Horatio Alger myth. Similarly, it is worth asking whether the percentage of low-wage jobs remained steady during other boom-and-bust cycles in American history (not just the 1990s), or if a case study other than minimum wage laws might reveal

more deleterious effects of policy intervention. Such questions do not invalidate the authors’ arguments, but they do undermine the book’s usefulness as a tool for shaping public opinion. That said, readers who support the campaign for improving low-wage work will undoubtedly find the book a useful and informative guide to the opportunities and obstacles that lie ahead.

Illicit Flirtations: Labor, Migration, and Sex Trafficking in Tokyo, by **Rhacel Salazar Parreñas**. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011. 325pp. \$21.95 paper. ISBN: 9780804777124.

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Rhacel Parreñas’ timely book, *Illicit Flirtations*, takes to task U.S. policies that attempt to curb and eradicate the sexual trafficking of women. Based on an in-depth ethnography of Filipina hostesses who migrate to Japan, Parreñas draws her readers into the all-night work shifts of Filipina entertainers to refute their classification as trafficked victims, and more insidiously, to prove that the laws set out to “help” these women generate the very vulnerable labor conditions they set out to eradicate. While various feminists have made this argument, this is the first book-length study to do so from the perspective of how states laws across the United States, the Philippines, and Japan affect women’s labor conditions. Rather than dismantle highly-coveted gendered migration streams for poor and transgender entertainers, what is needed, she concludes, is better protection of these women who face conditions of indentured servitude. For this reason, the author redefines women’s labor migration from trafficking to what she labels, “indentured mobility,” to highlight the constraints caused by middlemen (authorized by state laws) who facilitate women’s travel and employment and secure high profits by holding onto migrants’ passports and wages until the completion of six-month term contracts in hostess clubs in Japan. That middlemen force women to remain in sometimes exploitative labor conditions in clubs that

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