

HARVARD UNIVERSITY
FALL 2015

Freshman Seminar 43H

**White Collar Blues?
Work in the Age of Flexible Capitalism**

Tuesdays 1:00–3:00
William James Hall 501

Instructor: Rachel Meyer, Department of Sociology

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Office: 616 William James Hall

Office Hours: Wednesdays 1:30-2:30 and by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Does flexible work lead to liberation or loss of identity? Does it bring self-fulfillment or insecurity? This course will examine the ways in which workers' connections to employers, occupations, and locations have become more fluid and transitory, and we will critically engage in the debate about the social and personal consequences of such "flexible" labor. We will investigate what flexibility means in a variety of economic sectors and occupations, exploring the experience of work in the contemporary political economy with an eye toward both its liberating and oppressive potential. How do different forms of work affect our personalities, life circumstances, and connections to each other? What is meaningful work? Our approach will be rooted in the crucial question of workers' control over their own labor. Throughout the course we will pay particular attention to occupations—such as physicians, managers, and engineers—where social class is ambiguous or problematic, leading us to the question: what does it mean to be a worker versus a professional? In examining the labor process under modern capitalism we will focus on both its structural aspects as well as on culture, ideology, and identity. We will delve into case studies of Silicon Valley and investment banking, and we will examine how the workplace intersects with gender, the family, and one's experience outside of the factory gate or office cubicle. We will read prominent social theorists along with a variety of ethnographic accounts which in different ways seek to elucidate the conditions of work under modern capitalism.

REQUIREMENTS

Students are expected to do each week's readings in advance of class and to attend each course meeting. Your attendance and participation, and your level of engagement with the readings, are crucial to the quality of your experience as well as your success in the course.

An emphasis will be placed on participation in class discussions and students will be required to submit analytical questions on the course readings in advance.

There are six major components of the course, all of which are required:

- 1) Participation and Attendance
- 2) Analytical Questions on the Course Readings (6) - WEEKS 2 THROUGH 7
- 3) Critical Book Review Conversation – IN CLASS OCTOBER 27TH
- 4) Critical Book Review (5-6 pages) – DUE FRIDAY OCTOBER 30TH at 5:00 PM
- 5) Case Study Presentations – IN CLASS DECEMBER 1ST
- 6) Case Study Paper (6-8 PAGES) – DUE DECEMBER 10TH at 5:00 PM

There may be additional exercises or assignments throughout the course.

Final grades will be determined as follows:

- 1) Participation and Attendance – 10%
- 2) Analytical Questions on the Course Readings – 15%
- 3) Critical Book Review Conversation – 5%
- 4) Critical Book Review (5-6 pages) – 30%
- 5) Case Study Presentations – 10%
- 6) Case Study Paper (6-8 paper) – 30%

Participation: Please come prepared to discuss the readings, assignments, and your own analytical questions. The quality of your contribution and the level of your engagement with course material is crucial to the success of the class. Being able to listen closely, respect the perspectives of your peers, and refrain from dominating discussion is as important as speaking in class and contributing directly to the conversation.

Attendance: Attendance is expected at each class session. Absences will be excused for medical reasons or for religious observance. In these cases you must email the instructor in advance unless there is a medical emergency, in which case you should contact me within 24 hours.

Analytical Questions on the Course Readings: You will submit an analytical question on the course readings six times—from week 2 through week 7. Submit questions to me via email (meyer2@fas.harvard.edu), putting them in the body of the email (rather than as an attachment). Use the subject line “flexible labor question.” Questions are due at 10:00 AM on Tuesday before class. These questions should demonstrate a critical engagement with the material. Focus on something you find particularly interesting, enlightening, or troubling about the reading. Perhaps you discover a contradiction, or there is something that you find confusing. You may relate the readings to other material that has been covered in class or to something you observed in your everyday life. Question submissions should be focused and to the point, but they should give some context or offer some framing and can be up to 250 words. Questions may emerge from a deep reading of a single text or they may treat multiple readings and their relationship to each other. **Please bring your analytical questions to class and be prepared to share and discuss them.**

COURSE POLICIES

Electronic Devices: Students are not permitted to use electronic devices—including laptops, tablets, or cell phones—during class.

Grading System and Standards: The course is graded SAT/UNS. As outlined by the Freshman Seminar Program, students who neglect the work of the seminar or who do not perform satisfactorily will be excluded from the seminar and/or denied credit.

If you have any problems—understanding the material, completing assignments, attendance, etc.—contact the instructor as soon as possible. If I know about problems ahead of time I will be better able to solve them.

The Harvard College Writing Center is available to assist in any stage of the writing process. Information about the Writing Center can be found online.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AND COLLABORATION

Discussion and the exchange of ideas are essential to academic work. For assignments in this course you are encouraged to consult with your classmates on the choice of paper topics and to share sources. You may find it useful to discuss your chosen topic with your peers, particularly if you are working on the same topic as a classmate. However, you should ensure that any written work you submit for evaluation is the result of your own research and writing and that it reflects your own approach to the topic. You must also adhere to standard citation practice in this discipline and properly cite any books, articles, websites, lectures, etc. that have

helped you with your work. If you received any help with your writing (feedback on drafts, etc.), you must also acknowledge this assistance.

READINGS

Required Text:

Barley, Stephen R. and Gideon Kunda. 2004. *Gurus, Hired Guns, and Warm Bodies: Itinerant Experts in a Knowledge Economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Gurus, Hired Guns, and Warm Bodies is available at the Harvard Coop. All other readings will be available on the course website.

All readings are required, and it is expected that each week's readings will be completed before Tuesday's class. The readings are a crucial part of the course, and they are essential to your learning and success in the class. **Additional readings may be assigned.**

SCHEDULE

WEEK 1 (SEPTEMBER 8) – INTRODUCTION

WEEK 2 (SEPTEMBER 15) – FLEXIBLE ACCUMULATION: STRUCTURE

What are the macro political and economic structures that characterize “flexible accumulation”? How is the labor market structured in the contemporary political economy? What are “flexible” jobs?

Smith, Vicki. 1997. “New Forms of Work Organization.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 23. (pp. 315-319)

Harvey, David. 1990. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Malden, MA: Blackwell. (pp. 141-159)

Lipset, Seymour Martin and Marcella Ridlen Ray. 1996. “Technology, Work, and Social Change.” *Journal of Labor Research* 17(4). (pp. 613-618)

WEEK 3 (SEPTEMBER 22) – FLEXIBILITY, IDENTITY, & SUBJECTIVITY

How does flexible work affect workers' subjectivities and identities?

Sennett, Richard. 1998. *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. (chapter 1)

Bauman, Zygmunt. 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press. (selections from chapter 4)

WEEK 4 (SEPTEMBER 29) – ALIENATION: THEORY AND CONCEPTS

What is "alienation"? How can we conceptualize the question of workplace control?

Marx, Karl. 1964. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Edited by Dirk J. Struik. Translated by Martin Milligan. New York: International Publishers. (pp. 107-115)

Crawford, Matthew B. 2009. *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work*. New York: Penguin Press. (selections)

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2003[1983]. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press. (pp. 147-156)

WEEK 5 (OCTOBER 6) – PROFESSIONALS, IDEOLOGY AND CONTROL

Where and how are professionals able to exert control over their work? What is ideology and how does it relate to corporate culture?

Derber, Charles. 1983. "Managing Professionals: Ideological Proletarianization and Post-Industrial Labor." *Theory and Society* 12(3):309-341.

Kunda, Gideon. 2006. *Engineering Culture: Control and Commitment in a High-Tech Corporation*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. (selections)

WEEK 6 (OCTOBER 13) – WORKING-CLASS FLEXIBILITY

How does the working class experience flexibility? How do working-class jobs compare to professional jobs in the era of flexible accumulation?

Sliva, Jennifer M. 2013. *Coming Up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (chapters 2 & 4)

WEEK 7 (OCTOBER 20) – BOOK REVIEW PREP – DAY 1

Barley, Stephen R. and Gideon Kunda. 2004. *Gurus, Hired Guns, and Warm Bodies: Itinerant Experts in a Knowledge Economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. (chapters 1, 7, 8 & 9, pp. 285-302)

WEEK 8 (OCTOBER 27) – BOOK REVIEW PREP – DAY 2

CRITICAL BOOK REVIEW CONVERSATION IN CLASS – “AUTHOR MEETS CRITICS”

CRITICAL BOOK REVIEWS ARE DUE FRIDAY OCTOBER 30TH AT 5:00 PM

WEEK 9 (NOVEMBER 3) – FAMILY, GENDER AND PART-TIME EMPLOYMENT

What is the relationship between flexible labor and workers’ personal and family lives?

Blair-Loy, Mary. 2003. *Competing Devotions: Career and Family among Women Executives*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. (introduction & chapter 3)

Epstein, Cynthia Fuchs, Carroll Seron, Bonnie Oglensky, and Robert Sauté. 1999. *The Part-Time Paradox: Time Norms, Professional Lives, Family, and Gender*. New York: Routledge. (chapters 1, 4, 5 and 14)

WEEK 10 (NOVEMBER 10) – CASE STUDY EXAMPLE – SILICON VALLEY

Shih, Johanna. 2004. “Project Time in Silicon Valley.” *Qualitative Sociology* 27(2):223-245.

Kantor, Jodi and David Streitfeld. “Inside Amazon’s Thrilling, Bruising Workplace,” *New York Times*. August 15, 2015.

Whalley, Peter and Stephen R. Barley. 1997. “Technical Work in the Division of Labor: Stalking the Wily Anomaly.” In *Between Craft and Science: Technical Work in U.S. Settings*. Ithaca: ILR/Cornell University Press. (pp. 30-35)

WEEK 11 (NOVEMBER 17) – CASE STUDY EXAMPLE – INVESTMENT BANKING

CASE STUDY CONFERENCES THIS WEEK

Ho, Karen. 2009. *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*. Durham: Duke University Press. (chapters 1, 2 and 5)

WEEK 12 (NOVEMBER 24) – ALTERNATIVE POLICIES AND FUTURES

What are the policy implications of flexible work? How can we think about the variety of possible policy responses and futures?

Ross, Andrew. 2009. *Nice Work If You Can Get It: Life and Labor in Precarious Times*. New York: New York University Press. (pp. 1-10, 43-49)

Heckscher, Charles. 2001. "Living with Flexibility." Pp. 59-81 in *Rekindling the Movement: Labor's Quest for Relevance in the 21st Century*, edited by Lowell Turner, Harry C. Katz, and Richard W. Hurd. Ithaca: ILR/Cornell University Press. (pp. 64-74)

Wright, Erik Olin. 2010. *Envisioning Real Utopias*. London: Verso. (pp. 217-222)

WEEK 13 (DECEMBER 1)

CASE STUDY PRESENTATIONS IN CLASS

READING PERIOD

CASE STUDY PAPERS ARE DUE THURSDAY DECEMBER 10TH AT 5:00 PM