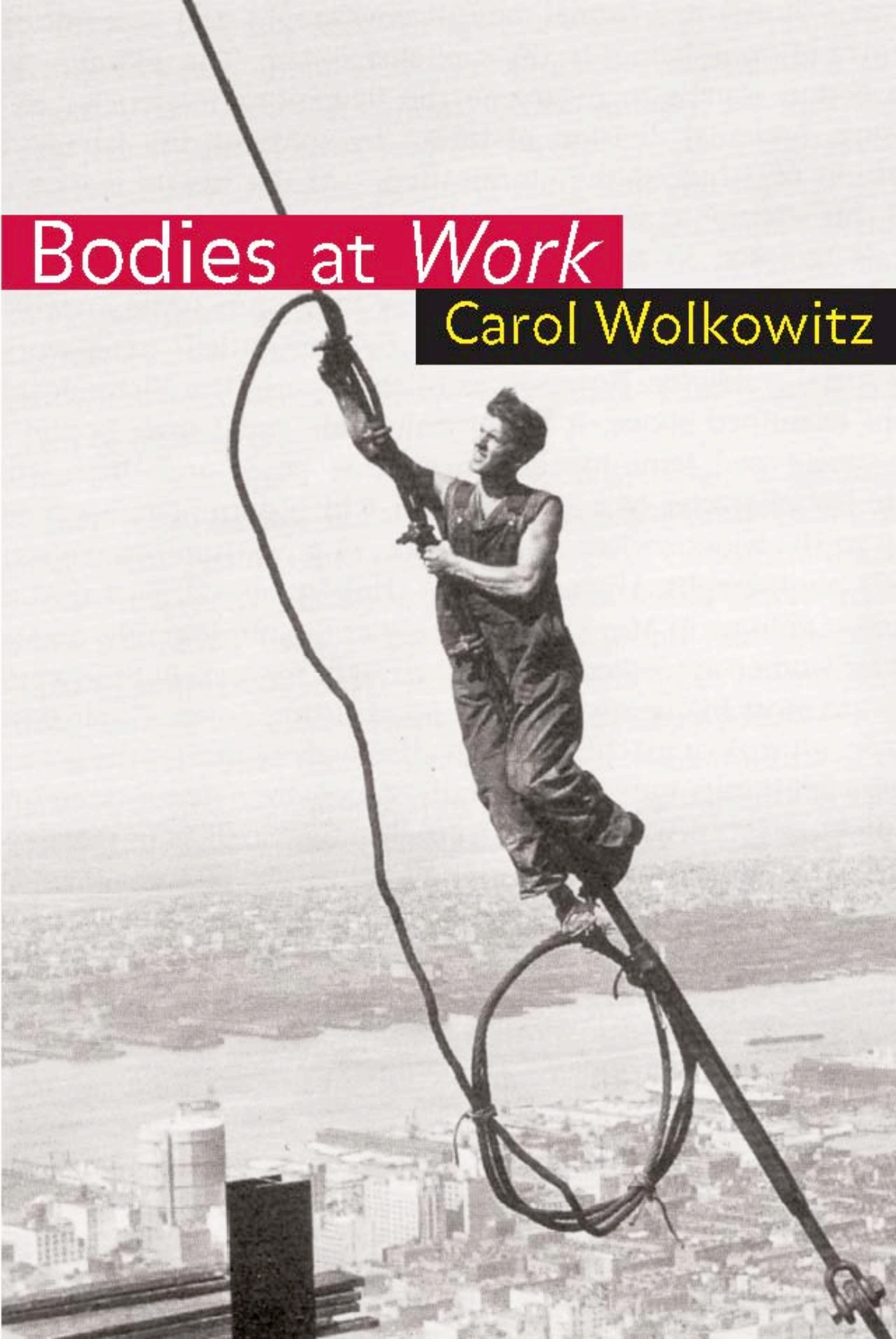


# Bodies at Work

Carol Wolkowitz



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## Introduction

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The changed meaning of the 'body shop', from a section of a car factory – or a garage knocking wrecks back into shape – to The Body Shop, a chain of stores selling products to relax and enhance the appearance of human bodies, is now so entrenched that some younger people may scarcely remember the earlier usage. The shifting connotations of the phrase 'body shop' testify to complex changes in how we think about the role of the human body in economic life and employment relations. Because much of the production of things has been exported to countries where wage rates are lower, or environmental or other controls less strict, workers in the richer Western nations are increasingly concentrated in jobs in the service sector, in which interpersonal interactions, as compared to the making of objects, is often of greater importance.

This shift means that if we want to consider embodiment in the workplace, we need to consider changes as well as continuities in the constructions of the body and its uses that guide, empower, constrain and exhaust many kinds of workers. Based on a wide range of literatures, this book crosses conventional demarcations, demonstrating the contribution that concepts developed in the sociology of the body can make to our understanding of changing patterns of work and employment; equally important, it highlights the impact of work and employment on experiences of embodiment. It shows that the body/work nexus is crucial to the organisation and experience of work relations, and, conversely, that people's experience of embodiment is deeply embedded in their experiences of paid employment.

To date the body and embodiment have constituted a relatively minor thread in research on organisation, work or employment. Even where they are present, this theme tends to be subsumed within the focus on work cultures and identities. Research and debate have tended to follow the main drift of postmodernist approaches on the body, highlighting the production and consumption of the fluid and dynamic symbolic body as a feature of social

interaction. While this perspective has succeeded in bringing the body into our picture of work, one of the problems of such an approach may be its exaggeration of the malleability of the body and its underestimation of the bodily effort work still involves. This can result in a failure to recognise that, as journalist Madeleine Bunting (2004: 177) puts it, 'human beings have finite resources, physical and emotional'. Workplaces and work identities focused around competition and long hours, a 'can do anything' culture, have ignored this, leading to the current epidemic in stress, overwork and depression. One of the key arguments of this book is the need to supplement the body as constructed by the 'cultural turn' in sociology with a fuller picture of the continuing materiality of workplace activity, including the many ways in which workers' health and safety contribute to their experience as embodied social actors. This entails making fuller use of feminist perspectives that, though long concerned to reveal the contribution of embodied sexual difference to language and culture (for example Grosz 1994; Moi 1999) need to be widened so as to encompass more aspects of embodiment, especially in the context of employment relations.

The origins of this book go back to two experiences that provoked a lot of thought about the body as a focus of diverse labour processes. The first was my observations of my father's care in an American hospice in the weeks before his death from cancer in the late 1980s. Although I was aware of criticisms of the objectification of the body by the biomedical model adopted by doctors, what struck me more forcibly at the time was the relation between the division of labour that governed work in this institution and the fragmentation of the human patient. Concern for the patients' emotional well-being was seen as the responsibility of the hospice chaplains, and seemingly completely divorced from either pain relief, which was delivered by nurses at set hours, or the physical upkeep of the patients' environment. Rooms would be dusted, tables wiped and floors swept as if the bed in the room were empty; and every time the mop handle rattled my father's bedstead he would wince with pain. Even in a hospice, a type of institution supposedly guided by notions of holistic care (Saunders et al. 1981), no one seemed to comment on this, or find it unusual, perhaps having already naturalised the division between patient care and housekeeping services that was to become so prominent in debates on the NHS in Britain. Even today, health policies recognising the links between care, cleaning and patient health are the exception, as in the current crises over the rates of MRSA infection of hospital patients in the UK, which has brought to the fore the relation between infection and nurses' overloaded timetables, the contracting out of housekeeping services, and the movement of patients from ward to ward to improve bed occupancy rates.

The second experience occurred a few years later. When my son started school I had to take him round a number of appointments to get him organised for the new venture. I took him for inoculations at the GP's, then to be measured for school shoes, for a haircut, to the dentist. It was a Foucauldian moment, when I realised my child's entry into the wider social world involved a new degree and type of bodily regulation. I was also conscious that to meet his requirements for food or clothes, I had not previously needed to have him with me, mostly choosing items appropriate for a child of his age on the way to or from work. My university term started a month later, in October, and again I made the rounds of a number of practitioners and salespeople. Like many academics, I attempt to get personal business finished before the pressure of term time makes it difficult to fit in. So I too needed to freshen up my public body, undertaking a round of visits to dentist, opticians, and hairdresser; I bought a new outfit for work and had my first mammogram. All this involved interactions with a range of practitioners and retail workers in which parts of my body, or my child's, were systematically isolated and taken up as the focus of attention. The distinctiveness of these engagements with the world of service work seemed to lie partly in the co-presence of the service provider and service user, but they also targeted the body as such and involved a degree of intimate interaction and even fleshiness that went beyond the boundaries of normal social interaction.

Yet at that time the sociology of work, to which I was linked by earlier research on gender and home-based work, made almost no reference to aspects of the body and embodiment that were beginning to feature in sociology (Featherstone et al. 1991; Turner 1984) or the study of sexuality (Foucault 1979; Walkowitz 1980), a subject on which I already taught. Term started, my colleagues and I gave our 'option talks' to postgraduate students, and it seemed that all the modules on our then Labour Studies MA programme dealt with the production of things. Vehicle assembly lines and South African mine workers were part of the curriculum, but health care was dealt with in the sociology of health and healing rather than the sociology of employment. Do we need to rethink the sociology of work, I thought, in relation to bodies' softness, individuality, responsiveness and capacity for independent growth and feeling, as against one originally constructed in relation to the 'hard', defensive social relations of industrial production and the social practices with which they were associated? It was true that we had courses in public sector unionism, but there seemed no explicit interest in considering its relation to the micropolitics of the intimate encounter between worker and customer. Sociologists could build on our understanding of gender relations, I thought, by considering not only the gender composition of the workforce in various kind of work, but also by focusing on the connections between

labour processes, gender ideologies and constructions of the bodies of workers and those with whom they interacted, including their patients, customers and clients.

In the mid-1990s these reflections led me to add a new, 10-week MA module I called *Body/Work* to the course I already taught on Gender, Work and Employment – a course that eventually, with the expansion of research literature on the body and work over the intervening period, gave rise to this book. The course considers the relationship between the body and paid employment in a number of different areas, including changing assumptions about the body as an instrument in the labour process and constructions of the body that guide workers in their relations with clients, customers and patients. But because the literature at the time was so sparse, the students were asked to produce their own data, and this process also fed into my project. I still recommend this as a way into the subject, even now that there is so much more material available. In addition to the research publications then available on topics like emotional labour (Hochschild 1983) or healing (Lawler 1991), we tried to consider how feminist scholarship on, for instance, the disciplining of female bodies (Bartky 1990; Bordo 1990a) or sociological theories of the body (Shilling 1993) would need to be expanded if they were to comprehend women's involvement as paid workers in the remaking of the body. Each student was therefore asked to supplement the reading by conducting an interview with someone whose work involved intimate contact between bodies, for example a doctor or nurse, a tattooist, a hairdresser or physiotherapist, concentrating on the worker's experience of embodied activity and their understanding of their relation to the bodies on which they focused.

Although more literature soon became available, for instance Macdonald and Sirianni's (1996) *Working in the Service Society*, Lawler's (1997) *The Body in Nursing* and Foner's (1994) *The Caregiving Dilemma*, books which are still important on the course, we found that analysing together the transcripts the students had produced provoked new insights into workers' perceptions of their relations, as workers, to their own and others' bodies. Moreover, it helped to shift our gaze towards the kinds of labour processes in which women workers are concentrated, rather than seeing these as exceptions to patterns of work more typical of the male-dominated industrial work around which many of the questions in labour studies were first formulated. Although the evolution of the course in some ways paralleled increasing interest within sociology in areas like consumption, workplace identities and cultures, care work and new forms of labour market polarisation, coming at them 'through the body' gave them an immediacy, helped to integrate them within a common framework, and highlighted their relation to gender, race and ethnic divisions in employment.

Recognition of the centrality of the body and embodiment to work and employment has grown exponentially since these personal and work experiences in the late 1980s and 1990s, but rather surprisingly it has not yet been dealt with systematically as a distinct, emergent field of study. Drawing on my experience in teaching the course mentioned above, this book seeks to highlight the body/work relation as a key field for research and teaching, taking the key texts already mentioned as a starting point. It is meant mainly for undergraduate and postgraduate students, as an aid to identifying resources that can help us understand both the changing constructions of the body that accompany its instrumentalisation as a labour input and the labour processes and occupational cultures that take the body as a focus of work. I hope it will also encourage sociologists to see the potential that looking at the body/work relation has for enriching our understanding of work and employment, by focusing on the corporeality of social agents, and to give more attention to work relations in understanding human embodiment.

In considering the body/work relation I am especially concerned with questions of individual agency of different kinds. As we shall see, there are many ways that workers, as embodied agents, make space for themselves at the micropolitical level and it is very important to document these. But the agency gained at the micropolitical level may also reinforce gender stereotypes and even shift the costs onto other people, such as the paid substitutes for work traditionally undertaken, unpaid, by women in the home. Similarly, one of the key benefits of focusing on the body and body work is being able to capture the feelings of power women especially may feel 'flowing out' from themselves as givers of care or intimate services to recipients (Bartky 1990). But body work occupations and relationships are also structured by the complex, global hierarchies and polarised labour markets in which they are located. Optimistic variants of postmodernism, and also those who have distanced themselves from it, such as Giddens, place hope for change in the social relations of consumption. Pessimists, such as Bourdieu, Harvey and many of the studies I report on here, echo Adorno and the Frankfurt School in seeing the social relations of consumption and personal life stitched up so tightly with the social relations of capitalism that there is no hope in that direction. I too think we need to insist on the links between the body, which lends itself to an analysis at the micro-level, and these wider relations of inequality and domination. Although this picture would be much stronger were we able to take the story onto a global scale, there is enough evidence of the ambiguous consequences of the commodification of bodies and embodied experience here in the Western countries to be getting on with.

However, the problem is not just that one can become so enchanted with the pleasures of consumption (and I don't exempt myself) that one can lose



sight of these macro-issues. It is also a question of *whose* bodies we take as a focus. Focusing on the bodies of workers contributes a vivid picture of the costs they – we – bear, which obviously vary considerably in type and extent. But there is also a problem because although we can highlight the productive, ‘powerful bodies’ of the workplace, the ‘bodies of power’ that people international finance or corporate boardrooms, which have less need to embody that power or to represent it in their own corporeality, remain shadowed. Of course many public figures, especially politicians, are advantaged as both bodies of power and powerful bodies, and those women who have got through the door to the corporate boardroom will have even more need to demonstrate their entitlement to embody both kinds of power. But we need to remember that although everyone has a body, not everyone has the same relation to its economic and symbolic significance.

Chapter 1 seeks to provide the intellectual context within which research and debate on the body, embodiment and work can be located. It seeks to sketch, with a necessarily broad brush, key concerns considered in, firstly, the sociology of work and, secondly, sociological and feminist scholarship on the body and embodiment, for readers who may be familiar with only one (or indeed neither) of these fields. As part of the review of concepts deployed in the sociology of employment, it identifies key changes in labour markets and work organisation over the past 30 years. As this book will show, research in the specialised area of work, employment and organisation is already showing that dealing explicitly with the embodied character of work does much to enrich our understanding. However, the chapter suggests that the main advocates of the sociology of the body in Britain have so far resisted taking this research on board, and considers why this has been the case so far. It argues that while we can appreciate the rich view of subjectivity provided by the anti-dualist perspectives that challenge the Cartesian mind-body binary, they cannot develop further unless they take on board the embeddedness of such dualisms in the structures and experiences of paid employment. The chapter then considers the contribution that the political economy of the body can make to this endeavour.

Chapter 2 provides historical depth through an analysis of still photographic images that vividly portray changing constructions of the body as an instrument of labour. It contributes, therefore, to increasing interest in the development of visual sociology, as well as to the sociology of work, considering the continuing legacy of representation of labouring bodies in gender, race and class-specific terms. It takes as examples particular figures in the Western imaginative landscape whose bodies have become emblematic of labour in different ways. There are three case studies:

- 1 the photographs collected by of A.J. Munby (1828–1910), which demonstrate the fascination of Victorian gentlemen with images of working-class women in Britain, those who worked outdoors in trousers as well as the household servants whose bodies were metaphorically stained by household labour;
- 2 the images produced by the American photographer Lewis Hine (1874–1940), in which are contrasted the iconic figure of the heroic, white manly worker and degraded female workers pictured as having usurped men's proper role as breadwinners; and
- 3 photographs produced by the American Manhattan Project during the Second World War, in which the images circulated by the project adopted the photographic conventions established by Hine and others in order to normalise the secret work of the project, making atomic bombs, and reassure prospective and current workers.

The use of still photographs as a way of highlighting bodily posture, conduct and interaction in the work environment is continued in the rest of the book, where the focus is on employment today.

Chapters 3 and 4 review the literature on aspects of embodied labour for which research is already underway. Chapter 3 considers constructions of the industrial body from several vantage points, outlining Foucault's influential analysis of the production of the 'docile body' and considering some of the limitations of this view. Chapter 4 considers newer constructions of the working body, especially in large-scale organisational settings, including managerial workers' own anxiety about their bodily self-presentation and expectations regarding the performance of emotional, sexual and aesthetic labour. It focuses on interrelational customer services, one of the areas in which there has been considerable research on the body in work and organisation. Chapter 5 considers occupational health and safety, one area which is usually omitted from scholarship on the body, reminding us of the organic moorings of work activities and relationships.

The latter part of the book considers occupations and interactions that involve a high degree of intimate contact between workers' bodies and those on which their work focuses. Chapter 6 looks at prostitution and other kinds of sex work, long crucial foci of feminist debate, but only just beginning to be considered by those with an interest in work and organisation. An important example of this development is Brewis and Linstead's (2000) *Sex, Work and Sex Work*, which considers postmodernist theories of the body as essential to understanding the place of sex in organisations and the organised sex of prostitution. In addition to providing a vivid picture of the ways some sex workers talk about their experiences, the chapter identifies six distinct constructions of the body that appear in feminist debate on sex work, in order to demonstrate the relationship between concepts of the body and political argument and social policy.

In Chapter 7 the term 'body work' is adopted as a move towards conceptualising paid work that takes the body as its immediate site of labour, involving intimate, messy contact with the (frequently supine or naked) body, its orifices or products through touch or close proximity. This kind of paid body work is a component of a wide range of occupations, for instance (in alphabetical order) care assistants, dentists, hairdressers, maids, undertakers and yoga instructors. After considering the centrality of these kinds of body work to post-industrial national and global economies, it considers four aspects of this increasingly large 'sector': the concepts of the body that guide workers and practitioners in their relations with consumers; the hierarchical divisions of labour by which occupations are ranked; the spatial organisation of work, including its relation to migration; and the micropolitics of bodily interaction that workers have to negotiate. The chapter shows how the construction of the Other's body is constitutive of work relations, especially in the employment of racialised migrants to do the invisible 'dirty work' on which the new body regimes actually depend.

Finally, Chapter 8 tries to summarise what research on work and employment may be telling us about the key themes emerging from the sociology of the body, as identified in Chapter 1. These are the body's relation to the social order, to conceptualising the self, to constructions of gender and to the political economy of contemporary life. The concluding remarks in Chapter 8 stress the recursive relationship between these aspects of social life and constructions of the body and embodiment.

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## ONE Embodiment and Paid Employment

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This chapter seeks to provide the intellectual context within which research and debate on the body, embodiment and work can be located. It seeks to sketch, with a necessarily very broad brush, some of the main concerns considered in, firstly, the sociology of work and, secondly, scholarship on the body and embodiment, for readers who may be familiar with only one (or indeed neither) of these fields. But I also want to consider the absence of employment in the way the sociology of the body has developed as a field of study. As this book will show, research within the specialised literature on work, employment and organisation is already showing that dealing explicitly with the embodied character of work does much to enrich our understanding. Yet the main advocates of the sociology of the body in Britain have so far either resisted taking this research on board, or have done so very belatedly. The lack of attention to the world of work has many sources. As Scarry (1994) points out, we tend to associate bodies with sensuousness, play, pleasure and spontaneity rather than work, which is seen to involve mainly numbing routine. But underlying the neglect of paid employment may also be a reluctance to confront the kinds of constraints to fluidity and self-expression that work has historically represented.

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### What is the sociology of work and employment?

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Traditionally, what distinguishes work from non-work depended on the social context within which an activity is undertaken and the value it is given in particular societies (Grint 1991). Although it is often seen as something that transforms nature, or that ensures survival, the meanings expressed by calling something 'work' are extremely variable. Feminist insistence on defining unpaid caring in the home as work demonstrates that, like other sociological categories, 'work'

is a contested concept (Glucksmann 2006, 1995). Employment tends to be used as a narrower, more objective term, since the social relations within which it takes place are specified. Generally it refers to all forms of waged work in which an employee works under the authority of an employer (Edwards 2003: 1), and therefore excludes some kinds of paid work, such as self-employment, along with unpaid labour.

Three areas have dominated research. One focuses on long- and short-term changes in the structure of the labour markets that 'bring together workers in search of a wage and capitalists in search of employees' (Peck 1996: 1). Although many economists may understand labour market outcomes in terms of the inevitable logic of market exchange, in which jobs are allocated based on workers' skills and other human capital, sociologists have long stressed their socially contingent nature. If only because the choices of both employers and workers are affected not only by economic incentives but also by many features of the wider society, including state welfare systems, migration opportunities, gender roles, family and household composition, and educational aspirations, the sociology of work and employment has always had to consider the social developments and institutions within which labour markets are embedded. Moreover, the structuring of labour markets feeds back into the wider society, since the output of employment includes 'not only the production of goods and services but also the structures of advantage and disadvantage' to which employment gives rise (Edwards 2003: 4).

Much debate concerns the effects of the sectoral shift that has taken place since the early 1970s in the labour markets of Britain and other advanced capitalist societies (Peck 1996; Sayer and Walker 1992; Warhurst and Thompson 1998). Much of the employment previously required by manufacturing, mining and agriculture has now been now transferred to lower-wage economies and has been supplanted by jobs in the service sector. This has involved to some extent the upgrading of employment through the growth of job opportunities in the 'new economy', led by knowledge-intensive work in, for instance, finance and business services, product design, retail management, the professions and the creative industries. However, many commentators stress counter-trends in which jobs available to previous generations of craft and assembly line workers have been replaced by less well-paid and less secure jobs as cleaners, fast-food retail workers and carers, to take just three examples of work that cannot be readily exported. Meanwhile many jobs even in new, technologically more advanced sectors still involve routinised, repetitive tasks and close monitoring, such as customer service work in high-volume call centres.

Herzenberg et al. (1998) suggest that the characteristics of jobs available in the labour markets of post-industrial economies have to be analysed in terms

of the restructuring of a whole range of different aspects of employment, for example the characteristics of business organisation (including, the expansion of franchising arrangements and outsourcing); work systems (how jobs are defined and worker effort regulated, especially the types of incentives that are available and degree of autonomy permitted); and career paths, especially the balance between long-term employment with promotion prospects and casualised, insecure work. Many of these changes reflect the increasing possibilities offered by technological changes in information-processing and surveillance, and, at least in Britain, are intertwined with the privatisation of formerly publicly owned services and assets. These changes are resulting in complex new patterns of employment inequality and insecurity among workers (Beynon et al. 2002).

In the US the particular mix of manual and non-manual, union and non-union, and high-skill and low-skill jobs characteristic of different regional labour markets has important and contradictory implications for men and women, white and racialised minority workers (McCall 2001). In Britain the previous segregation of women into relatively low-paid jobs in manufacturing and routine services (along with their concentration in the lower strata of professional and semi-professional public sector employment, for example as primary school teachers and nurses) has been succeeded by a much more polarised labour market for women, which has seen highly educated women's opportunities expand dramatically, although they still do not match those of men with the same qualifications (Walby 1997). At the other end of the labour market, jobs may be so ill-paid, insecure and dead-end, Peck (2004) argues, that at least in the US they are increasingly filled by workers effectively forced to accept them by prison parole programmes, immigration controls and the state workfare programmes, which have replaced welfare payments for the mothers of dependent children. Moreover, the monopolisation of access to jobs in the low-paid sector by temporary help agencies has made it difficult for workers to directly challenge terms and conditions of work.

These labour market changes have meant that a second area where sociologists have been especially active – the study of workplace relations – has also altered to some extent. Much of the research on workplace relations that is concerned to reveal a rich world of meaning (Cornfield and Hodson 2002: 6) has involved ethnographic case studies of particular occupations and workplaces. These initially focused on male workers, including classic studies of manual occupations, including fishermen (Tunstall 1962), lorry drivers (Hollowell 1968) and manufacturing and processing plants (Beynon 1973; Burawoy 1979; Collinson 1992; Nichols and Beynon 1977), but from the 1970s also focusing on the experience of women factory workers (Cavendish 1982; Pollert 1981; Westwood 1984).

Following Braverman (1974), many were influenced by the debate over the reworkings of Marx's concept of the labour process, i.e. the processes of production which transform raw materials, through the application of human labour, tools and machinery, into use values that can be sold on the market as commodities (Thompson 1989: xv). According to this way of thinking, the labour process has a dual character, since the concrete labour processes through which specific goods are made and particular types of services provided are shaped by the capitalist labour process which seeks to turn labour into profit. In the light of the sectoral shifts noted above, ethnographic study has had to be extended by new research on the organisation of work in expanding sectors, for instance the hospitality industry, retail work, knowledge work and cultural production, and the new roles, relationships and identities these kinds of work may involve (Adkins 1995; Black 2004; Kunda 1992; Foner 1994; Lash and Urry 1994; Macdonald and Sirianni 1996; Pettinger 2004). There have also been important contributions by women journalists (Ehrenreich 2001; Toynbee 2003) who have sought to capture the experience of workers in feminised, low-wage personal services and sales work by taking low-paid jobs themselves and writing about their experiences. But it has to be said that the direction of ethnographic research still lags behind the sectoral shifts in the location of paid work.

Much of the research on paid work tends to be integrated by taking presumed commonalities in the employment relation – the relation between capital and labour, employers and workers – as its starting point, and focuses on how the labour processes involved in producing diverse goods and services shape (and are in turn shaped by) conflicts of interest between employers' perceived interests (for instance, increasing profits, saving costs, controlling or monitoring workers' input, marketing considerations) and by what workers define as theirs (e.g. financial rewards, security of employment, autonomy and self-esteem). However, research increasingly draws on new theoretical frameworks that focus on the subjectivity of the worker, said to be missing from labour process analysis (Newton 1999; Sturdy and Fineman 2001), or at least broadens the interest in worker's consent or compliance to encompass with more precision? 'how corporate power and worker subjectivity intersect within social relations of organisational domination' (Fleming and Spicer 2003: 158; see also Kunda 1992). In fact, some critics argue that theorists influenced by the work of Foucault (see below) have been so preoccupied with the construction of worker identity and subjectivity that new approaches present a picture in which 'the labour process is just part of the scenery' rather than integral to the analysis (Thompson and Ackroyd 1995: 627, cited in Newton 1999: 425; West and Austrin 2002).

The sociology of employment increasingly overlaps with a third focus, the study of organisations, i.e. 'the bureaucracies that employ workers in many