Book Review


One consequence of the transformation of the American economy in the last twenty-five years is the growing number of contingent work arrangements in a wide range of occupations, firms, and industries (Spalter-Roth and Hartmann 1998). Such jobs are typically characterized by uncertain tenure and do not provide workers with benefits such as health plans, disability leave, or paid vacation days. Moreover, many people working in these jobs do so involuntarily. In other words, they would prefer full-time, permanent positions, but are unable to find them (Tilly 1996).

One of the largest categories of workers in the contingent labor force is temps. Between 1968 and 1992, temporary service employment soared fifteen-fold, from 100,000 to 1.5 million workers in the United States (Tilly 1996, p. 155). Despite the phenomenal growth of this workforce, and the host of problems these jobs present for workers, such as lack of job security and benefits, there has been little attention to these workers among scholars of contemporary labor studies. Jackie Krasas Rogers’s important and timely new book fills this gap by considering the experiences of temps who work in both “high-skill” and “low-skill” temp jobs. Based on interviews with temporary clerical workers, contract lawyers, and agency personnel, and on participant observation as a temp herself, Rogers argues that temporary work has not one, but many, faces. Her main intent is to show not only how the experiences of temporary workers differ across occupational categories, but to illuminate how gender and race shape the experiences of these workers within different occupational contexts.

There are many things to recommend about this excellent book. First, it is important in that it distinguishes between different types of temporary work. In the scant literature that exists, the focus has been on clerical work (Henson 1996; Parker 1994), but not on other types of temporary work, particularly professional and other highly skilled positions. Second, it demonstrates that there is variation
by gender and race in the experience of temporary work. As Rogers observes, both temporary law and clerical work are gendered. They are “considered ‘female’ undertakings and women’s overrepresentation in temporary work is naturalized rather than problematized” (p. 158). White middle-class women are viewed as ideal candidates for such work. On the other hand, white men working in such positions are often viewed as “defective men,” lacking the requisite masculine motivation to succeed. By contrast, men of color do not encounter the same assumptions white men do because they are not expected to have the same orientation to work.

In addition, Rogers provides an important discussion about whether temporary workers experience their jobs as exploitation or as freedom to pursue their own interests and desires. While clerical workers often feel exploited on their jobs, women contract lawyers often describe their work as freeing from many of the constraints they faced in corporate law firms. For instance, many of the women lawyers found that they could better balance career and family life by doing temp work than by working in the more bureaucratic and restrictive environment of corporate law firms. Despite these advantages, these women also realized that temp work did little to help build their professional networks or, ultimately, their careers.

Rogers’s book also dispels many myths about temp workers, such as the notion that such jobs might someday become permanent positions or that temp work is just one step to upward mobility in a corporation or a career. In reality, however, very few jobs become permanent and most temps find that such work does not give them the experience or skills that would enable them to get better jobs. Furthermore, many of the workers Rogers interviewed temp involuntarily, that is, they would prefer permanent positions, but have not been able to obtain them, thereby debunking the notion that such workers temp because they choose such arrangements. Finally, Rogers’s conclusion provides an intelligent account of the difficulties this unregulated labor force faces in attempting to unionize and in finding case law that would potentially protect them from wage discrimination, sexual harassment, and other work-related problems.

Although Rogers provides an insightful analysis in showing how temporary work is gendered, she is less successful in theorizing the process of racialization. She provides many examples that speak to the continuing significance of race in hiring decisions, such as clients who implicitly request white workers by specifying to agencies “no Marias,” which means no Latinas, or “no Kims,” which means no Asian Americans (p. 72). However, Rogers’s analysis falls short in theorizing how the temporary work process racially forms these differences. Part of the problem is her implicit understanding of race as an additive category for describing workers and their varied experiences. As feminist scholar Elizabeth Spelman (1989) argues, an additive analysis simply adds race to gender as if they were variables in a mathematical equation rather than conceptualizing the context through which race and gender interact to produce difference and inequality. Rogers falls into the trap of adding race onto gender in many examples. For instance, she argues that