



Degraded Work: The Struggle at the Bottom of the Labor Market

By Marc Doussard

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In *Degraded Work: The Struggle at the Bottom of the Labor Market*, Marc Doussard challenges his readers to look beyond the traditional narrative for the source of increasing economic inequality in North American cities—that deindustrialization and decline of manufacturing employment, coupled with the increase in service sector employment, created a gulf between high-skill positions in the finance, insurance, and real estate industries, and low-skill service jobs in janitorial services, restaurants, and the like—and urges readers to think seriously about the changing nature of low-wage employment *within the service sector* in producing economic inequality. Such low-wage service-sector employment, characterized by intensified pace of labor and increasingly frequent employer violations of basic labor laws, is what Doussard calls *degraded work*. In fact, Doussard argues not only that degraded work contributes to inequality but also that degraded work provides a *better* explanation for urban economic and social inequality than the traditional lament of manufacturing jobs runoff.

Analyzing that argument alone would make for a worthwhile read among economic geographers, but *Degraded Work* offers a second organizing theme of equal intrigue. Degraded work occurs most commonly in place-bound industries: restaurants, cleaning services, laundries, residential construction, retail, and child care. The very nature of these businesses limits their ability to use relocation as a means of disciplining labor. Therefore, opportunities exist for resisting, slowing, or halting income inequality in North American cities, if progressively minded scholars and activists can identify appropriate leverage points at the industry or firm level. The challenge is in the identification of leverage points. As becomes clear in the case studies of food retail and residential construction in Chicago, a thorough understanding of local context is essential in the fight against degraded work.

Each chapter in *Degraded Work* frames Doussard's central themes at a different scale, starting with a systemic employment analysis of North America and gradually moving the lens closer to examine employment in the city of Chicago, the food retail industry, specific food retailers, and individual day laborers. The early chapters focus on the processes that allowed degraded work conditions to become a systemic feature of low-wage service-sector employment in North America. The analysis is thorough, and it details how businesses use a great number of tactics to keep labor costs low and discipline labor when it begins to organize for improved working conditions. Employers offering subminimum wage compensation, refusing to pay overtime wages, maintaining hostile and/or dangerous working conditions, cutting hours or rescheduling shifts as retribution for *poor* behavior, and a host of other job-site tactics of varying legality may be familiar to readers interested in labor geography or immigrant labor markets. However, the expansion of low-wage service employment, coupled with the rollback of legal protections and fiscal disempowerment of labor regulatory agencies, created additional opportunities and economic incentives for job degradation tactics to take hold even in industries, such as food retail, which have historical connections to organized labor.

In the later chapters the necessity of in-depth industry and local knowledge for antilabor degradation activism is made clear, due to the geographic and industrial complexity found in Doussard's case studies. The sections that examine food retail, and,

in particular, midsized food retail establishments in Chicago, show clearly that the motivations for job downgrading vary depending on what part of the retail food industry a firm inhabits. Moreover, the *necessity* of job degradation for firm success or survival will also vary. Employers are highly strategic in the ways they degrade work, in some cases even viewing particular types of workers' rights violations as an advantage in luring workers from their competitors. So there is a spectrum of employer motivations for job degradation, as well as for job degradation tactics, within a single industry. The case studies of particular food retail firms, and later of particular contractors, reveal the quality of Doussard's research. The qualitative portions of his work show incredible access to proprietors and employers who are remarkably forthcoming regarding their basis for job downgrading, and how job degradation fits into their profit-generating strategy more broadly.

348 He found similar access to employers in his analysis of the residential construction industry and particularly how it relates to day labor activity in Chicago. However, the residential construction industry proves more complex in terms of analyzing the basis for job degradation, due to the industry-wide practice of subcontracting constituent parts of a total building project. In a given week, a single person may act as project foreman, specialty contractor, and wage laborer, depending on the length and type of jobs available. The constant shifting of employment position produces a landscape of legal and ethical ambiguity for job degradation since an individual may suffer labor violations (unsafe working conditions and wage theft are most common) and commit them in the same week. The disorganized nature of the residential construction industry also proved to be a leverage point for activists in Illinois who managed to get a new statewide policy passed that protects day laborers and other temporary service workers from common workplace violations. The Illinois activists' success is rare among the various examples of attempts by community groups and workers to improve working conditions in food retail or the residential construction industry. Each failed attempt Doussard chronicles was unsuccessful because organizers did not sufficiently understand the firm-specific locational or industrial context that allowed those businesses to profit.

A remarkably detailed book, *Degraded Work* challenges one of the dominant theories for urban inequality in North America and challenges readers to do something about inequality in their own city. Perhaps Doussard's greatest accomplishment is to challenge what his readers believe and what they are doing with their lives or careers, without being confrontational. His analysis shows considerable depth and detail, but he presents it with humor, and without pretense, so it is accessible to experts and laypeople alike. In the end, degraded work is not an *alternative* explanation for societal inequality, but rather a *complementary* perspective that provides a more complete picture of how the slide toward inequality took place, and it pushes our collective understanding of the root causes of income inequality forward. Degraded work is also an exhortation to get involved locally, to turn attention to the study of place-bound service sector firms and identify opportunities where locationally aware activism can improve working conditions for our friends and neighbors.

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