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Book Review: Where Bad Jobs Are Better: Retail Jobs Across Countries and Companies by Françoise Carré and Chris Tilly

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Carré, Françoise and Chris Tilly. *Where Bad Jobs Are Better: Retail Jobs Across Countries and Companies*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2017. xiii + 306 pages. Softcover, \$35.00.

The core of this well-researched, timely book rests upon a simple thesis: in advanced economies, retail jobs are generally not “good” jobs—and they are getting worse. Since the retail sector tends to be the leading employer in postindustrial economies, this observation has broad and deep ramifications. Françoise Carré, Research Director at the Center for Social Policy at the J.W. McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies at the University of Massachusetts–Boston and Chris Tilly, Professor of Urban Planning at the University of California, Los Angeles, embed their deceptively simple thesis into a framework of social, economic, and political factors that explain patterns of similarity and difference among two different types of retail jobs (food retail and consumer electronics) in the US and between the US and a selection of countries in Western Europe. Their essential conclusion—that while retail jobs are seldom “good” jobs in advanced economies, they are worse in the United States than they are in Western Europe. Carré and Tilly’s work provides both an adequate framework for evaluating the low quality of retail jobs at home and abroad, and also a reasonable set of policy and institutional solutions to improve the overall quality of retail employment.

Carré and Tilly base their analysis on extensive field research conducted in the United States, United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Germany, and Denmark (with a brief excursus into Mexico City). The fieldwork centers on eighteen retail firms (ten grocery chains and eight electronics retailers), wherein the authors conducted on-site interviews with staff, both frontline and managerial. The data were collected between 2005-2007, which opens the door to interesting and important questions about the impact of the global financial crisis of 2008-2009, which are unfortunately beyond the scope of the book. In the book, the firms are identified

pseudonymously, which likely played a role in helping the authors gain the access and cooperation that is evident by the wealth of information the fieldwork was able to generate.

Where Bad Jobs Are Better makes two major contributions to the study of the contemporary political economy. The first of these contributions is its careful disaggregation of the massive US retail employment sector. While Carré and Tilly's study only food retail, consumer electronics, and "big box" stores, their findings illuminate the retail sector as a whole and also suggest many insights that should be broadly applicable to the postindustrial work environment as a whole. Factors like deskilling, precisely-managed computerized global supply chains, and a relentless focus on short-term earnings and profitability have impacts which extend far beyond the retail sector. Indeed, the authors note that the retail sector is often a laboratory for changes that then spread to other economic sectors. When those economic changes are coupled with a political environment that is primed to erode institutional features that protect lower-wage, lower-skill workers, it is easy to paint a dire picture of the future quality of retail jobs—not just for frontline employees, but for managers as well.

Indeed, one of the interesting lessons from the book is that much of the cost of the changing retail environment is borne by store-level managers. It is they who end up performing basic tasks like mopping floors when stores are short-staffed, either because of the frequency of job-hopping or absenteeism or because of sharp constraints on the store's labor budget imposed by an ever more cost-conscious upper management. Salaried (and thus a sunken part of a store's labor budget) managers report regularly working at least six days per week and upwards of sixty or seventy hours in those weeks.

The other major contribution of Carré and Tilly's work is the cross-national comparisons of retail jobs. It is through these comparisons that the authors can begin to develop propositions

about how to improve the quality of retail jobs in the US. The answer to the question, “Why are retail jobs in the US worse than retail jobs in Western Europe?” is, to the authors, relatively straightforward. The policy environment in the United States is less protective of workers than it is in the five other countries analyzed. Some of the differences between the US labor policy environment and Europe’s are well known. A lack of national health care, minimal national’s pension scheme, and dwindling levels of unionization in the US have been thoroughly explored for many years. Carré and Tilly do well to highlight other, more subtle differences that also have an effect on the quality of a job. Job “quality,” after all, is at least partly due to non-monetary factors, and it turns out that there are broad differences in those factors internationally.

One revelation that is likely to shock American readers is that German retail workers are required by law to receive their schedules six months in advance. This gives the German retail worker ample opportunity to plan things like child/elder care, family outings, etc. Retail stores in France are closed on Sundays. Cashiers in many European retail stores work seated, and customers have the responsibility to bag their groceries. While retail salaries are low everywhere, the minimal US social safety net coupled with lax protections for workers create a retail environment where job quality is significantly lower than it could otherwise be.

Where Bad Jobs Are Better is a well-researched and well-written book that should be of interest to students of political economy (domestic and international), economic sociology, and labor policy. Accessible to undergraduates and valuable for practitioners, it could be a central reading in a course on comparative political economy. Carré and Tilly have delivered an insightful, competent, and highly readable work whose only major drawback is that the timing of the fieldwork makes it impossible to evaluate the impact of the 2008-2009 global financial crisis and the increasing “Amazonification” of the retail environment. Recommended.

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