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The Last Good Job in America: Work and Education in the New Global Technoculture

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Abstract
The Last Good Job in America: Work and Education in the New Global Technoculture. By Stanley Aronowitz. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001. 273 pp. ISBN 0-7425- 0975-3, $27.95 (hardback).

ments. These impressive-sounding numbers may leave readers with an exaggerated impression of contingent-fee recruiters' presence in the overall staffing industry. According to the *Staffing Industry Report* (Staffing Industry Analysts, Inc., 2001—www.staffingindustry.com), there are four broad categories of intermediaries: Temporary Help Agencies ($85.9 billion in revenues in 2000 for a 61% share of the staffing industry market); Professional Employer Associations ($37.5 billion, 27%); Place and Search ($16.1 billion, 11%); and Outplacement ($1.1 billion, 1%). Contingent fee recruiters account for approximately half of revenues within the Place and Search segment, with 28% of the revenues coming from retained search and an additional 19% from temporary-to-permanent moves. Scholars interested in the broader phenomena of labor market intermediaries will need to consult additional sources, especially David Autor's "Why Do Temporary Help Firms Provide Free General Skills Training?" on the temporary help industry (forthcoming in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*) and Rakesh Khurana's *Searching for a Corporate Savior: The Irrational Quest for Charismatic CEOs,* on retained executive search (Princeton University Press, 2002). But *Headhunters* is a valuable contribution to our growing understanding of the modern labor market and currently the most compelling and comprehensive study of contingent fee recruiters.

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In some other universe people who study labor movements have to read Stanley Aronowitz. They force themselves to agree or disagree with his richly elaborated normative premises and to critically analyze the novel set of causal relations he posits. In that universe it does not matter much whether the author is doing normal social science. Instead, scholars enjoy his brand of provocation.

Here and now, however, the aloofness of Aronowitz's work from contemporary social science, including industrial relations, matters. His audience consists of a small knot of radical intellectuals under siege, concentrated in New York City. We know him most recently for his 2002 bid as the Green Party's anti-candidate for New York State's governor, running on a self-consciously ironic platform.

Even those of us who do not think of Aronowitz as one of our own, however, have much to learn from books like *The Last Good Job in America.*

The book covers an astonishingly broad territory. Its title refers to Aronowitz's position as a distinguished professor of sociology and cultural studies at the City University of New York. As a public intellectual he requires freedom to structure his time however he pleases; this, however, provokes attacks from corporate interests who scheme to make the university more "useful," and from ultra-conservatives who rail against the protections that leftist intellectuals enjoy under the banner of academic freedom. Most of the book's wide-ranging essays—on the "bohemian" scene in New York City, African American identity politics, globalization, state theory, the philosophy of science, and the labor movement's past, present, and future—pointedly and sometimes gleefully challenge the status quo. Others pay tribute to intellectual giants Paolo Freire, Antonio Gramsci, Herbert Marcuse, and C. Wright Mills.

Aronowitz's pessimism is pervasive, brilliantly articulated, and anything but vague. From the first page on, he follows the tradition of critical theory, harnessing Max Weber's concept of rationalization to argue that life becomes banal as civilization undergoes technological progress. As corporations and right-wing ideologues make the university "useful," good jobs like Aronowitz's (good for the world and good for the worker) disappear. As New York becomes "developed," it no longer has a place for those bohemians whose self-directed work originally helped make it a vibrant place. As unions age, they take on the administration of the private welfare state, become agents of industrial stabilization, and cease to be public places for workers to express their concerns. The heritage of the Frankfurt School comes to life in Aronowitz's narratives.

What if we started taking this way of thinking about union decline seriously? Instead of focusing on firm strategies, sources of leverage, or the levels of bargaining, we would ask what is happening to the union hall and the social scene inhabited by union members. People who study unions would ask questions very different from those they now ask. Does the union

occupy a space accessible to working-class communities where members get together to eat and drink and socialize with union brothers and sisters? Or is it in an office in the suburbs where elected officials and staff identify "leverage points," administer benefits, and find ways to "deliver"? Can data convince us that a shift from public sphere to administrative center has really happened? Could more cases show us concretely how it matters? This kind of empirical work would greatly enrich our knowledge of union decline and generate suggestions for revitalization.

Following C. Wright Mills's writing, Aronowitz argues, in line with the sentiments of most industrial relations scholars, that intellectuals should commit themselves to a public purpose. This means that he has to leave room for some hope. Unfortunately, his optimistic moments are difficult to reconcile with the bulk of his argument. How, for example, could labor "no longer see itself dependent on capital"? Would canceling cooperative agreements do the trick, as he asserts? It would be more consistent for him to argue that the incorporation of union leaders into the ruling bloc has deep roots that predate the growth of labor-management partnerships. Perhaps he refuses to take that path because such a fundamental critique would interfere with his hope that unions have a potentially transformative role.

Aronowitz's style is consistent with his message: just as the labor movement should be liberated from capital, his text is liberated from the bullet points, the numbered paragraphs, and the instrumentalist policy proposals that lend a pat, formulaic quality to most industrial relations scholarship. In his world an engaged intellectual should decide against scientific detachment and choose instead to be a "ranter."

Does this strategy work? I doubt it. By setting up a dichotomy between objective "science" and "ranting," Aronowitz interferes with the kind of commitment that would yield insights relevant to what unions are doing. For example, he seems to assume that good organizing practices are invariably coupled with democratic unions. Had he examined more unions, he would have met people who satisfy his "good organizer" criteria, but who work for unions that vary widely in terms of democracy. He might even have come upon cases in which prerogatives of union democracy and organizing interfere with each another. Behind most successful stories he would have found a bureaucracy that supported organizing efforts in surprising ways, using research, job training, benefits administration, and many other functions. He would have seen how good organizers use the know-how of functionaries hidden away in offices with little daily contact with the grass roots. With this kind of scientific investigation, he could have produced a more nuanced view that captured the many tensions between administration, organizing, and democracy. It may be that union strategists need heightened sensitivity to these tensions.

This book is probably not a blueprint for union renewal. More likely it points toward glorious defeat along a route so intellectually fertile and problematic that only someone with the last good job in America could map it.

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Paying for Performance: An International Comparison. Edited by Michelle Brown and John S. Heywood. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2002. 298 pp. ISBN 0-7656-0752-2, $66.95 (cloth); 0-7656-0753-0, $22.95 (paper).

"Definition, please." When *compensation,* as used in "His annual compensation was $25,000," is translated into various languages, the differing shades of meaning that result are illuminating. In English, *compensation* is colored by the primary definition of *compensate:* "counterbalance, offset, make up for." The Chinese term that would most probably be used in the same context, *dai yu,* means "how you are treated or taken care of," and the Japanese term, *kyu yo,* means "giving something" (George Milkovich and Jerry Newman, *Compensation,* 7th ed., 2002). These differences, embedded in a nation's history, culture, institutions, and so on, suggest that people in different countries perceive their compensation quite differently. Some may emphasize compensation as a return for their efforts, while others may view it as the means to maintain a decent life. Such nuanced differences are likely to attach not only to compensation in general, but also to specific forms of compensation. Performance-based pay, for example, may be perceived differently across the world. Consequently, studying the variety of