

1 *Introduction*

And you have all these people say, "When are you going to get a real job?" I mean, you're going through all the motions of a real job. I mean, you're showing up at a place between eight and five. And technically, you're probably doing as much as anyone else who works there full-time. You know? But you're just sort of this ghost. And you don't have a real life. And what goes along with the territory is this low-level depression. And you can't put a finger on it. An erosion of self-esteem. (Helen)

American notions of what constitutes a "real job" are based on a post-World War II model of full-time employment with implied permanency, steady and predictable wages, internal advancement and training opportunities, and the provision of employer-sponsored fringe benefits. Ideally, such real jobs are also a basis of personal identity, self-expression, and individual fulfillment. Though close to 83 percent of all working Americans were employed on a full-time basis in 1992 (U.S. Department of Commerce 1993, 402), an increasingly large segment of the U.S. work force is being hired on a temporary, part-time, contrac-

tual, or leased basis. For these workers, many of the traditional assumptions about work, its organization, and its various meanings no longer hold true.

This segment of the work force, collectively referred to as the "contingent work force," is expanding. Part-time employment, for example, has been growing 10 percent faster than full-time employment since 1968 (9 to 5 1986, iii; U.S. House 1988, 6; U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, 1988). Part-time workers, voluntary and involuntary, comprised nearly a fifth of the U.S. work force in 1992 (U.S. Department of Commerce 1993, 402; see also Tilly 1989). And employee leasing, in which agencies, using the economics of scale of a large work force, provide workers with insurance and other benefits while "leasing" them to smaller companies, grew to more than fifteen hundred companies covering nearly a million workers from 1978 to 1988 (Day 1988, 59).¹ Though accurate aggregate figures are difficult to gather, estimates currently place the size of the contingent work force at between 17 and 25 percent of all U.S. employment (9 to 5 1986, 4; Harrison and Bluestone 1988, 45; Kilborn 1993; Sperry 1993; Lewin 1994).

My research explores one sector of this rapidly expanding contingent work force: temporary employment. Although a relatively new industry, temporary work has become firmly rooted in present-day American society and culture.² The U.S. Census Bureau, for instance, solicited prospective census workers for the 1990 census with a brochure proclaiming such work the "best temporary job in America" (U.S. Department of Commerce 1989a). Using a slightly different tack, the National Geographic Society (1990) appealed to its members to renew their subscriptions early to avoid the costs of "the service of many temporary employees." Additionally, temporary work and temporary workers have crossed over into popular culture. Major film, television, and stage productions have featured temporary workers as major or recurring characters.

Indeed, temporary employment is not only well known; it is one of the fastest-growing industries in the economy today (Carey and Hazebaker 1986; 9 to 5 1986, 13; Kilborn 1993; Morrow 1993; Sperry 1993; Lewin 1994; Parker 1994). In the mid-1980s temporary employment accounted for one out of every thirteen new jobs and was projected to

increase 5 percent annually, a rate higher than the 1.3 percent projected growth rate for all industries (Carey and Hazelbaker 1986; 9 to 5 1986, 12; U.S. House 1988, 86). These projections, however, turned out to be a huge underestimation. Between 1982 and 1993 temporary employment increased almost 250 percent, ten times faster than the rate for overall employment (Ansberry 1993; Morrow 1993, 40; Sperry 1993). In 1992 and 1993 temporary employment respectively accounted for an astounding 26 and 15 percent of all new jobs created nationally (Lewin 1994, A[12]).

Not only has the industry grown in size but the variety of placements available through temporary agencies has also dramatically increased. Today client companies can order temporary accountants, bank tellers, biologists, chemists, chauffeurs, computer programmers, designers, drafters, engineers, executives, gardeners, graphic artists, lab technicians, lawyers, lifeguards, nurses, and writers in addition to the traditional clerical categories such as data entry clerks, receptionists, secretaries, typists, and word processors.³ Notwithstanding the extensive media attention technical, professional, and managerial temporaries have received (see Asinof 1988; Cohen 1988; Kirkpatrick 1988; Reibstein 1988; Feinstein 1989; Garson 1992; Impoco 1993), the clerical sector is still the largest segment of the industry, accounting in some estimates for upward of 80 percent of all temporary employment (Olesen and Katsuranis 1978; Gannon 1984; Howe 1986; Halcrow 1988; Harrison and Bluestone 1988; Parker 1994).

Despite their growing numbers, temporaries, like many contingent workers, are still considered to be on the fringes of the labor force and the society. Indeed, the marginality of temporaries can be seen in the various labels applied to this occupational group; "secondary," "peripheral," and "fringe" (Morse 1969; 9 to 5 1986; Kornbluh 1988; U.S. House 1988; Christensen 1991). These particular categorizations, with their semantic and symbolic weightings, are routinely used to deny temporary workers the legal access to social, political, and institutional protections granted full-time or permanent employees. Temporary workers, for example, rarely qualify for paid health plans, vacation pay, pension plans, or even unemployment insurance benefits. Like the unemployed (Newman

1988), temporary workers are socially marginalized and stigmatized. Temporaries, both on and off the job, have their personal commitments, qualifications, and integrity questioned.

Despite mounting evidence that the rapid growth in temporary employment has been driven more by employer than employee demand, the common assumption is that individual temporary workers prefer or choose temporary work or possess personal characteristics that account for their employment in the temporary sector. Industry claims of greater scheduling flexibility, varied and satisfying work experiences, skill acquisition and development, access to permanent employment opportunities, and a cornucopia of other supposed monetary and nonmonetary rewards, for example, are often accepted as valid and compelling, if unsupported, explanations for why individuals seek temporary employment. From this labor-supply perspective, changes in the character of the labor force—particularly increases in the number of working women and younger workers who presumably prefer and choose temporary work—have driven the recent spectacular growth of the temporary industry. Alternatively, temporaries are assumed to possess serious characterological flaws that prevent their employment in full-time, “real” jobs. Position in the occupational structure, then, is believed to reflect personal preference or individual qualifications.

Others, however, attribute the rapid growth in temporary employment to employer rather than employee demands (see Golden and Appelbaum 1992; Parker 1994). From this labor-demand perspective, employers are driving the growth of temporary work through reorganizing their corporate work forces into core and peripheral workers to decrease their labor costs. Since temporary workers can be hired for lower wages, without the payroll expenses of health care and other benefits, employers are creating contingent positions rather than full-time positions.

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The account of temporary employment presented in the following chapters is not the standard laudatory perspective common in the popular press. It does not, for example, adopt the outlook of temporary industry leaders, corporate executives, or personnel managers or use a

language of cost containment, profit margins, or efficiency. Instead, it is a look at temporary employment from the perspective of those who take the assignments, go from company to company, and do the work. Rather than focusing on labor costs, then, this study focuses on the costs to labor. What is the experience of working in the temporary employment sector?

The Temporary Help Service Industry

The temporary help industry consists of agencies that employ workers for rent or hire by other client companies for work assignments as short as half a day and as long as several months. Temporary agencies hire workers after skills testing and one-on-one interviews. Once workers have registered with the agency, their contact information is filed according to their skills and availability. Client companies contact the agency and place orders for temporary workers which detail the work tasks, duration of the assignment, working hours, and location. Agency "counselors" fill these orders by matching client company requests with an available and appropriately "skilled" temporary. Once a temporary accepts an assignment, she or he is generally given a job number, the company name and address, and the name of a contact person. The individual temporary worker goes to the client company on the appropriate day at the specified time and completes the assigned work for a prearranged hourly wage.

Typically, "rented" workers complete work for the client on the client company's premises, with its equipment, and under its supervision; on some occasions, however, the work is completed under the supervision of the agency, in the agency office, or even in the worker's home. The temporary agency bills the client company at an hourly rate for the work completed and pays the worker approximately 40 to 60 percent of this rate (Kirkpatrick 1988). Though agencies must withhold taxes, mandated social security, and worker's compensation and cover other overhead costs, substantial profits are made (Moore 1963; Joray 1972; Carey and Hazelbaker 1986; Harrison and Bluestone 1988; Doeringer 1991; Parker 1994).

Generally, "benefits" such as health insurance, vacation pay, sick leave,

unemployment insurance, and other expenses associated with full-time, white-collar, and salaried employment are not provided temporary workers. Moreover, unable to meet the minimum earnings, minimum hours, or full-time "availability" requirements (in effect in forty-four states), most temporary workers are automatically excluded from unemployment insurance benefits (9 to 5 1986, iv). In addition, though temporaries with long tenure may be offered the opportunity to enroll in group health and life insurance through the agency, unlike full-time employees, temporaries frequently must pay 100 percent of their premiums. Consequently, enrollment in these plans is quite low. Indeed, these benefit plans may be more symbolic than functional, allowing the industry to appear concerned about temporary workers without actually having to make a financial commitment to provide benefits or services.

Although temporary agencies existed in the United States as early as 1920, the field's status as an industry is primarily a post-World War II phenomenon. Many of the current national industry leaders were established in the period immediately following the Second World War; Kelly Girls and Manpower, for example, were founded in 1947 and 1948, respectively (Moore 1963; Joray 1972; Gannon 1978; Hulin and Joray 1978). The temporary industry today is dominated by three large corporations: Manpower, Kelly, and Olsten.⁴ Manpower, with company-owned and franchised offices in the United States and abroad, is the largest. In 1990 it had \$3.5 billion in revenues. Kelly Services, with a primarily United States-based system of company-owned offices, is the second largest, with revenues of \$1.4 billion in 1990. And Olsten Corporation, with both company-owned and franchised offices in the United States and Canada, had \$838 million in revenues during 1990 (Berck 1992). Overall, annual receipts from firms supplying taxable temporary help increased from an estimated \$9 million in 1985 to \$19.2 million in 1990 (U.S. Department of Commerce 1989b, 785; U.S. Department of Labor 1991, 16).

The temporary help industry, unlike its "employees," is politically well organized (Cook 1994). The National Association of Temporary Services (NATS) and affiliated state associations promote the industry and monitor legislation (such as unemployment, worker's compensation,

health care reform) that threatens to curtail the industry's growth and profits (Gonos 1992; Cook 1994). The California Association of Temporary Services (CATS), for example, employs a full-time lobbyist to monitor that state's employment legislation. Patricia Beprestis, the executive secretary of CATS, bluntly states, "[Our lobbyist] has the clout with the Senators and Congressmen so that when legislation comes up, we can get through to them. They remember the dollars. They remember that the association gave money to them" (Cook 1994, 126). The associations claim to represent the interests of their "employees" by protecting the industry. Dubiously equating their workers' interests with those of the temporary industry, they lobby against extending the benefits provided to full-time workers to temporary workers.

Not surprisingly, the number of people finding employment in the temporary sector has soared along with the tremendous expansion of the industry. In 1946 the handful of existing agencies employed only "a few thousand" people. Ten years later the figure was "about 20,000" people (Gannon 1978, 44). By 1983 the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that there were nearly 472,000 temporary employees (U.S. Department of Labor 1992). Recently, employment growth in the industry has been even more dramatic. Indeed, in January 1993 the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated that nearly 1.5 million workers, or 1.3 percent of the total work force, were employed through temporary agencies (Kilborn 1993, 6[A]; Sperry 1993, 1).

These figures, however, include only temporaries contracted directly through independent temporary employment agencies. An unknown number of temporary employees are hired directly by client companies from internal temporary pools, or "floater pools." In 1985 Cigna Corporation, for example, hired 60 percent of all temporary employees in its home office directly (9 to 5 1986, 13). As the cost of hiring temporary help has risen, many universities, law firms, and other large concerns have begun operating their own internal temporary services (Bassett 1989). A 1989 Conference Board survey, for instance, found that 49 percent of the 521 largest U.S. corporations examined had established internal temporary pools and an additional 9 percent were currently studying such a possibility. Although the number of temporary workers

enrolled in any one internal pool has generally been small, collectively these pools may boost the overall number of temporary workers significantly (Christensen 1991).

The Temporary Work Force

Who are these workers? Early temporary agencies assumed from the beginning that temporary employment was "women's work." This assumption was reflected in the common inclusion of the word "girl" in the names of the newly formed temporary agencies (such as Kelly Girl, Western Girl, Right Girl). Recruitment efforts in the early industry specifically targeted and courted women. Women who worked as temporaries, however, were reminded that their participation should always be secondary to their primary feminine roles as wives and mothers. Temporary employment, with its intermittent work availability and without a promotional track, fit well with an existing national ideology that assumed that women's labor activity was transitory, impermanent, and secondary.

During the early 1960s, while Kelly Girl was inviting "housewives to meetings in suburban hotels to view films on the advantages of working," it was still "common policy" not to accept male applicants for clerical temporary work (Moore 1963, 35). In 1963 the president of Kelly Girls said, "We can think of 60,000 reasons why our 60,000 female employees want to work on a temporary basis, but we cannot think of one good reason why a man, other than a student or a man between jobs, would want to work as a temporary employee unless he wants to 'moonlight'" (Moore 1963, 29). Men, it was assumed, should be seeking permanent, full-time work—legitimate work that would facilitate taking on the idealized male role of the family provider. In recent years, however, these formal policies excluding men from temporary employment have been reversed.

Although temporary help firms have formally modernized their names (i.e., Kelly Girl became Kelly Services, Western Girl became Western Services, and Right Girl became Right Temporaries), they are still commonly referred to by their former monikers. These monikers may be

objectionable because of their use of the infantilizing term "girl," but the gendered composition of the temporary work force they connote is not far from the mark. The clerical sector of temporary employment, like the general full-time clerical sector, is predominantly made up of women (Moore 1963; Gannon 1978; Olesen and Katsuranis 1978; McNally 1979; Howe 1986). Although more men have been seeking employment through temporary agencies (Olesen and Katsuranis 1978, 320), they still constitute a relatively small proportion of the clerical temporary work force.

In May 1985, for the first time, the Current Population Survey included questions about "workers who viewed their jobs as temporary and whose salaries were being paid by a temporary help supply agency" (Howe 1986, 45). At that time, women, who accounted for only two out of every five permanent (wage and salary) positions, accounted for nearly two-thirds of the temporary work force. Similarly, while only one out of every five permanent positions was held by a young worker (aged sixteen to twenty-four), one-third of all temporary positions were filled by young workers. Black workers were also disproportionately overrepresented in the temporary work force. Nearly twice the proportion of black workers present in other industries, or 20 percent of all temporary workers, were black.

Expansion, Scientific Management, and Feminization

The establishment and tremendous growth of the clerical temporary industry was made possible, at least in part, by the earlier expansion of the clerical employment sector generally. Large modern American corporations, at least as we know them today, began to emerge in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Mills 1956; Braverman 1974; Kanter 1977; Davies 1982; Fine 1990; Strom 1992). At the turn of the century the rapid consolidation and merging of many small and dispersed companies created huge new organizations. In 1901 more than 150 smaller firms consolidated to form the giant U.S. Steel Corporation, for example (Kanter 1977, 19). The period from 1897 to 1904

witnessed "more than four thousand firms merged into 257 combinations, trusts, or corporations" (Strom 1992, 17). These new corporate giants, along with significant expansions in the government sector and the growth of industries such as insurance, banking, and mail order houses, created an enormous demand for record-keeping, accounting, correspondence, and general communications personnel (Mills 1956; Braverman 1974; Davies 1982; Fine 1990; Strom 1992).

Consequently, the clerical occupational sector experienced dramatic growth in conjunction with the rise of the modern corporation (Mills 1956; Glenn and Feldberg 1982; Strom 1992). In 1880 only 4.3 percent, or 186,000, of all employed Americans held clerical positions (Glenn and Feldberg 1982, 204). In the decade between 1910 and 1920 alone, however, nearly three million new clerical positions were created (Strom 1992, 48). This growth, while large in absolute numbers, was also disproportionately large in comparison to the expansion of the industrial sector (Glenn and Feldberg 1982; Strom 1992). The ratio of manual workers to white-collar workers in manufacturing establishments, for example, declined from 11.4 in 1899 to only 5.8 in 1921 (Strom 1992, 48). By 1992 clerical positions comprised nearly 20 percent of the labor force (U.S. Department of Commerce 1993, 406).

Office work in the early twentieth century not only was expanding at an explosive rate, requiring substantial reorganization, but also was undergoing a dramatic transformation in terms of gender (Davies 1982; Hartmann 1982; Kessler-Harris 1982; Fine 1990; Goldin 1990; Strom 1992). Clerical work, which first appeared as a notable and separate occupational category in the United States in the nineteenth century, was initially an exclusively male field (Kessler-Harris 1982; Davies 1982; Strom 1992). The first women clerical workers were hired by the federal government during the Civil War (Strom 1982). Yet a decade later, in 1870, enumerators in New York City counted only five female shorthand writers (Kessler-Harris 1982). At the national level "less than one-half of 1 percent" of working women were employed as clerks, cashiers, typists, and stenographers (Kessler-Harris 1982, 407).⁵ By 1900 2 percent of women workers were employed in these clerical jobs (Kessler-Harris 1982, 148). And by 1920 the ranks of women clerical workers

(swelled by World War I) accounted for over 50 percent of all clerical positions (Hartmann 1982, 92-93; Kessler-Harris 1982, 148; Fine 1990; Goldin 1990). Women's presence in the clerical field continued to grow over the ensuing decades, and their predominance was soon firmly established. Clerical work, in a relatively short historical span, completely reversed its initial gender-typing as "men's work" to become female-dominated and identified as "women's work."

What produced this reversal? The rapid growth of women's labor force participation, particularly among married women, is one possible and frequently offered explanation. Whereas only 19 percent of all women had been engaged in wage labor in 1890, by 1910 over 25 percent of all women were employed outside the home (Chafe 1972, 55; Goldin 1990, 10). Among married women only 5 percent had been engaged in wage labor in 1890 (Goldin 1990, 10). Indeed, as late as 1939 the national expectation, sometimes codified or legislated, was for women to leave the labor force at the time of marriage (Goldin 1990, 13). But the barriers to married women's employment were falling, and the percentage of married women working for wages continued to grow. By 1992 nearly 60 percent of married women worked in the labor force (U.S. Department of Commerce 1993, 399). Yet changes in women's labor force participation rates alone, as dramatic as they have been, cannot adequately explain the concentration of women in clerical work.

Many scholars of work have argued that the feminization of clerical work occurred as the work was transformed from an exclusively male, relatively skilled, craftlike occupation in the nineteenth century to a semiskilled, proletarianized, low-status occupation in the twentieth (Mills 1956; Lockwood 1958; Braverman 1974; Glenn and Feldberg 1979; Davies 1982). Early-nineteenth-century clerical positions, from this perspective, were apprenticeships that required a great deal of overall knowledge of the organization and a wide variety of office and managerial skills and frequently led to career advancement or even the opening of one's own business (Lockwood 1958; Braverman 1974; Davies 1982; Glenn and Feldberg 1982; Fine 1990).

As corporations grew and the clerical occupations expanded, however, scientific management techniques—including highly detailed divisions

of labor and the introduction of new office technologies⁶—fragmented and deskilled clerical work. The proletarianization thesis argues that tasks that had previously been the province of individual clerks were broken “into a series of steps, which were then reordered to save time, and/or divided among different groups of workers” (Glenn and Feldberg 1982, 204; see also Braverman 1974; Kanter 1977). Functionally distinct departments were created to handle limited and bounded work tasks in the largest corporations. As the “rationalization” of office work continued, many clerical workers were stripped of their worker-specific office knowledge and found themselves reassigned to the filing, stenography, billing, payroll, or various other single-detail and single-activity divisions (Braverman 1974; Kanter 1977; McNally 1979; Glenn and Feldberg 1982; Ferguson 1984). No longer engaged in a wide variety of tasks requiring diverse skills and personal judgment, many clerical workers instead attended to specific, isolated, and often mechanically regulated tasks:

Typists, mail sorters, telephone operators, stock clerks, receptionists, payroll and timekeeping clerks, shipping and receiving clerks are subjected to routines, more or less mechanized according to current possibilities, that strip them of their former grasp of even a limited amount of office information, divest them of the need or ability to understand and decide, and make of them so many mechanical eyes, fingers, and voices whose functioning is, insofar as possible, predetermined by both rules and machinery. (Braverman 1974, 340)

Office work, consequently, was reorganized, rationalized, fragmented, deskilled, and proletarianized (Braverman 1974; Kanter 1977; Glenn and Feldberg 1979; Crompton and Reid 1982; Davies 1982; Glenn and Feldberg 1982; Machung 1983; Werneke 1984; Strom 1992).

The (re)organization of many clerical positions, with the assistance of the efficiency experts, along the same lines as manual factory labor led many analysts to note that the traditional distinctions between blue-collar and white-collar work were no longer applicable (Braverman

1974; Garson 1975; Kanter 1977; Davies 1982; Glenn and Feldberg 1982; Feldberg and Glenn 1983). Evelyn Nakano Glenn and Roslyn L. Feldberg, for example, note:

The features that distinguish clerical work, justifying its inclusion among "middle-class" occupations, are: clean physical surroundings, an emphasis on mental as opposed to manual activities, reliance on workers' judgment in executing tasks, and direct personal contact among workers and between workers and managers. Proletarianization occurs as clerical work loses these special characteristics, i.e., as work is organized around manual rather than mental activities, as tasks become externally structured and controlled, and as relationships become depersonalized. (1982, 203)

While significant differences in the physical settings of office and manufacturing work persisted, differences in the organization of the work processes and the character of relations between management and labor, these analysts argue, narrowed.

Furthermore, as the status and skill level of office work declined, women, as a cheap, literate, and increasingly available source of labor, were hired into the office in large numbers (Braverman 1974; Davies 1982; Glenn and Feldberg 1982; Fine 1990).⁷ Indeed, the rapidly increasing rate of women's labor force participation generally and a revolution in national gender ideologies, these analysts suggest, created the necessary conditions for the rapid feminization of clerical work (Davies 1982; Strom 1992). For example, restrictive social and legal barriers to women's employment, including the marriage bar and protective legislation limiting women's working hours, fell quickly in the wake of labor shortages created by World War I and World War II (Chafe 1972; Hartmann 1982; Kessler-Harris 1982; Goldin 1990; Strom 1992). War-time labor shortages allowed women to enter traditional as well as non-traditional occupations in large numbers (Hartmann 1982). As one female banking executive during World War I observed, "It was not until our men were called overseas that we made any real onslaught on the

realm of finance, and became tellers, managers of departments, and junior and senior officers" (quoted in Kessler-Harris 1982, 219).

Once women were employed, their competent work performance "challenged the physiological and social assumptions that justified discrimination against them" (Kessler-Harris 1982, 219; see also Chafe 1972; Hartmann 1982; Strom 1992). Nevertheless, many women hired into higher-pay manufacturing jobs during the world wars were summarily fired with the return of peacetime, while women clerical workers were frequently allowed to remain in the office (Hartmann 1982; Strom 1992).

Other scholars, however, contend that the proletarianization thesis overstates the extent to which clerical work has been deskilled (Cohn 1985). These theorists begin by arguing that the quality of clerical work in the nineteenth century has been greatly romanticized (Anderson 1976; Cohn 1985). Pointing to a substantial secondary strata of nineteenth-century clerical work, these scholars note that a great deal of "the work in early offices was done not by clerks but by copyists" (Anderson 1976; Cohn 1985, 67). The copyists were low-level employees, often boys, who handled much of the routine and tedious work in the office:

Copyists were temporary workers, comparable to modern Kelly Girls, who were paid by the piece to do tasks involving writing. The work consisted of simple duties such as making copies of correspondence, addressing receipts, or making entries in ledgers. The job security, pay, and prospects of these positions was marginal. The skills required were negligible, since transcription requires few skills other than literacy and penmanship. (Cohn 1985, 67)

Rather than a homogeneous group of highly skilled male artisans, then, a much wider variety of (male) workers performed early office work. Gregory Anderson (1976), far from confirming that all full-time British clerks were highly skilled apprentices, documented high levels of unemployment, marginal employment, and poverty in his study of Victorian clerks.

These scholars, challenging the belief in an earlier "golden era" for clerks, argue that it is not at all clear that clerical work was deskilled by the introduction of new office technologies (Cohn 1985). Indeed, new technologies may have increased the skill levels required in certain clerical occupations as some lower-level, routine tasks were automated or eliminated. Rather than static skill requirements that are chipped away little by little with every new technological or organizational innovation, skill requirements in clerical work have been more mutable, changing as the work is reorganized and recombined into various clerical occupations.

Furthermore, these scholars argue that the proletarianization thesis cannot adequately explain the feminization of clerical labor. Samuel Cohn (1985), for example, argues that clerical work first became feminized in industries and firms that were clerical labor intensive and could not afford to "prefer" more expensive male labor. Since women were generally paid less, the costs to employers of hiring women were considerably lower. As the Librarian of Congress said of women workers in 1870, "they could give good service for less pay than the men on his staff, thus resulting in economy" (quoted in Strom 1992, 177). Additionally, whereas men might continue to work for years, earning substantial increases in pay, women's tenure could be "legitimately" manipulated through the marriage bar to hold down costs. As Cohn argues, "hiring sixteen-year-old women and forcing them to retire at marriage ensures careers anywhere from six to ten years long. This is long enough to ensure the conservation of any firm-specific skills, but not so long as to create a severe crisis of productivity" (Cohn 1985, 225). Women were also available for work in large numbers, while other groups of secondary labor were becoming more scarce (for example, as the supply of boys decreased with the passage of child labor and mandatory schooling laws).

The Limits of Routinization

Both perspectives fail to account adequately for the diversity and variability of skill requirements within clerical work as a whole (for example, the work of a data entry clerk, word processor, and an executive secretary, though all requiring typing, are not equivalent).

Rather than a homogeneous occupational sector that has been completely and uniformly fragmented, deskilled, and proletarianized or one that has been reskilled or upgraded, clerical work is composed of positions that are extremely rationalized and routine as well as those that are nonrationalized and varied.

Harry Braverman, observing dramatic efforts in the early 1970s to bring an end to the "social office," assumed that all clerical work that had not already been subdivided, fragmented, and deskilled soon would be. As he watched, scientific management, through the establishment of word processing and administrative centers, appeared poised to subdivide and fragment the entire clerical occupational sector, even those secretarial positions that had remained more varied and challenging:

From the beginning, office managers held that all forms of clerical work, not just routine or repetitive ones, could be standardized and "rationalized." For this purpose they undertook elaborate studies of even those occupations which involved little routine, scores of different operations each day, and the exercise of judgment. The essential feature of this effort was to make the clerical worker, of whatever sort, account for the entire working day. Its effect was to make the work of every office employee, no matter how experienced, the subject of management interference. (Braverman 1974, 309)

Indeed, Braverman believed that once this process began, it would advance rapidly. Because clerical work was unencumbered by the physical limitations of moving heavy industrial materials, being "conducted almost entirely on paper," he envisioned few bulwarks against the efficiency experts and their reorganization of the office: "In general, the rationalization of most office work and the replacement of the all-around clerical worker by the subdivided detail worker proceeds easily because of the nature of the process itself" (Braverman 1974, 315).

But as Sharon Hartman Strom has argued in her history of office work, "only so many [office] jobs could be routinized" (1992, 174). As

other clerical positions were rationalized, tasks that proved difficult to systemize were bundled into the jobs of secretaries. These more varied jobs, then, became the repository for tasks that had resisted the earlier efforts of scientific management—perhaps inoculating them against future attempts at rationalization. Furthermore, not everyone in the office responded passively to the efforts of the efficiency experts. Strom contends that “both employers and workers resisted the penetration of rationalization too far up the office hierarchy or too far into men’s work” (1992, 174). Both secretaries and their bosses (who faced the loss of an important source of symbolic status as well as personalized attention and assistance), for example, opposed efforts to abolish the historically privileged secretary-boss relationship.

The organization of clerical work that emerged from these rationalization efforts, then, was still a two-tiered system. The distinctions that had prevailed between clerks and copyists in the nineteenth century (Cohn 1985) and between secretaries and stenographers in the early twentieth century (Strom 1992) were retained. Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977), in her examination of the corporation, describes this dual system of clerical work in operation:

Secretarial work was divided into two kinds: marriage-like and factory-like. The elite corps of private secretaries were directly attached to one or more bosses for whom they did a variety of tasks and from whom they derived status. Other secretarial work was done in steno and typing pools whose occupants were little more than extensions of their machines—and highly replaceable at that. (Kanter 1977, 27)

The overall impact of scientific management was to increase the number of routine or factory-like clerical positions, while maintaining at least a portion of marriage-like and more varied secretarial jobs.⁸

Temporary workers experience their work life within this highly bifurcated system. More often than not, temporaries possessing the required combination of minimal “skills”—computer literacy, typing, shorthand,

or phone manner—are assigned to the routine, factory-like clerical work assignments (data entry, filing, photocopying, envelope stuffing, and the like). Indeed, it is this vision of increasingly routine clerical work, the relative insignificance of a training period, and the general interchangeability of workers that the temporary clerical industry both fosters through their marketing efforts and serves (see Parker 1994).

Temporary workers are still occasionally assigned to marriage-like secretarial positions, however, where the work is more varied. Yet these positions are generally available only on a fill-in or replacement basis (that is, when a full-time employee is absent or unavailable). Additionally, these fill-in, replacement, or coverage positions appear to constitute a much smaller proportion of today's temporary assignments. In a 1989 survey (Christensen 1991), for example, 81 percent of temporary agency hires and 83 percent of internal temporary pool hires were employed exclusively for routine clerical and administrative support tasks.

The Growth of Contingent Employment

Why did temporary employment, after continuous but steady growth for a period of fifty years, expand so rapidly and disproportionately in the last two decades? Ultimately, to answer this question, we must turn to an examination of changes in the very structure of the U.S. economy.

U.S. workers and their employers enjoyed an unprecedented expanding economy in the twenty-year period immediately after World War II (Harrison and Bluestone 1988). Average family incomes and corporate profits were both on the rise. More workers expected, and received, benefits such as health insurance, pension plans, training, and paid vacations from their employers. And new generations of workers could genuinely expect to be better off than their parents (Harrison and Bluestone 1988). But changes in the global economy were brewing that would eventually threaten this prosperity and sense of national well-being.

U.S.-based corporations began to feel the effects of global competition and stagnating profits in the mid-1970s (Harrison and Bluestone 1988, 7; Doeringer 1991, 1). Net after-tax profit rates of domestic nonfinan-

cial corporations, for instance, peaked at 10 percent in 1965 and then dropped to less than 6 percent a decade later (Harrison and Bluestone 1988, 7). This already painful corporate "profit squeeze" became excruciating in the early 1970s when the costs of production increased significantly. OPEC oil price hikes, government regulations, taxes, inflation, and the rising cost of employee wages and benefits all cut deeper into corporate America's bottom line (Bluestone and Harrison 1982; Bowles, Gordon, and Weisskopf 1983; Freedman 1985; Harrison and Bluestone 1988; Doeringer 1991).

U.S. corporations, faced with the possibility of further declines in profits and dissatisfied stockholders, knew that something had to be done to revive their bottom line. Management teams essentially had two choices for buoying up their sagging profit margins: significantly improve the quality of their products and productivity through new technology and organizational innovation or produce the same products "cheaper" by attacking and beating back the cost side of the equation (Harrison and Bluestone 1988, 12). American corporations chose to attack costs, particularly labor costs. Between 1980 and 1987 downsizing, outsourcing, mergers, and acquisitions activity among the Fortune 500 companies under the rubric of "restructuring" eliminated 3.1 million jobs (Doeringer 1991, 140; see also Newman 1988). And although many of these cutbacks were initially attributed to the recession, as the economy "recovered" in the early 1990s, it became clear that there would be no callbacks: U.S. corporations had entered a new period of being "lean and mean." Indeed, corporations have continued to shed jobs by the thousands, announcing new layoffs even while earning substantial profits. In 1993 more than 615,000 jobs were eliminated and economists were predicting even larger job losses for 1994 (Uchitelle 1994, 4[C]).

Besides outright labor force reductions, in some industries management successfully bargained for "givebacks" with labor—promising to avoid layoffs or plant closings for concessions in wage rates, benefit packages, or work rules and regulations (Katz 1985; Slaughter 1986; Bensman and Lynch 1987; Blin 1987; Harrison and Bluestone 1988; Bernstein 1992; Greenhouse 1992). And corporate America, with the

initial symbolic nod of assent from Ronald Reagan's conservative National Labor Relations Board and the perfunctory firing of the nation's striking air traffic controllers (PATCO) in the early 1980s, began openly engaging in union busting (Harrison and Bluestone 1988, 102). Management had chosen a strategy, a strategy that President Richard Nixon's assistant secretary of labor, Arnold Weber, called "zapping labor" (Harrison and Bluestone 1988, 25). The post-World War II social contract around work and the American dream had begun to unravel.

The promise of full-time work and advancement through "internal labor markets," almost normative forms of post-World War II work organization (Doeringer and Piore 1971), started to become the province of only a small core of the U.S. work force. Beginning in the early 1970s, corporations began to organize their work forces on a core and periphery basis (Berger and Piore 1980; Piore and Sabel 1984; Mangum, Mayall, and Nelson 1985; 9 to 5 1986; Belous 1989a; Doeringer 1991). Core workers, those who could anticipate "a future with the company and for whom the company is willing to provide health insurance and retirement benefits," were first reduced and then held to a minimum (Eileen Appelbaum, quoted in 9 to 5 1986, 1). Corporate managers, lawyers, professionals, and other workers whose activities were deemed essential to the daily running of global corporations fill this upper tier of the new labor force (Bluestone and Harrison 1982; Harrison and Bluestone 1988; 9 to 5 1986). The lower tier is composed of peripheral workers, those who not only provide personal and business services to the upper tier but also act as a buffer to the core, absorbing economic fluctuations and cyclical downturns (9 to 5 1986; Harrison and Bluestone 1988; Waller 1989).⁹ Peripheral workers, unlike core workers, generally do not have employer-provided benefits, have lower average wages, and experience greater variability in work hours (Bluestone and Harrison 1982; 9 to 5 1986; U.S. Department of Labor, 1988; Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. House 1988; Doeringer 1991). As Eileen Appelbaum noted, "Internal labor markets play a special role in meeting the needs of companies that are poised for expansion. . . . Today, however, companies are poised for contraction" (quoted in Harrison and Bluestone 1988, 45).