Nilanjan Ragunath, Shaping the Futures of Work: Proactive Governance and Millennials (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021)

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Citer ce compte rendu

But how can this actually be accomplished? Dale does not pretend to have identified a magic bullet, but he does find seeds of hope in the city's painful recent history. Chapter 4 focuses on Hamilton's "all for one" spirit, an unpretentious, egalitarian blue-collar ethos that grew out of the steel mills. Much has been lost as both union membership and local corporate power have shrivelled, and that blue-collar tradition also comes with its dark sides, including ongoing challenges with racism and homophobia. However, Dale argues that this residual spirit of place-based solidarity could allow Hamilton to grow more equitably and inclusively than its much larger neighbour. In the fifth and final chapter, Dale explores the challenges that the city will face in the years to come, including the impact of provincial government cuts and the arrival of a new light rail transit system. However, he ends on an optimistic note, pointing to the successful restoration of the city's waterfront and innovative efforts in community-led housing development as models for the future.

Shift Change is a highly engaging read and is clearly the result of intensive on-the-ground research. The voices of community activists, union leaders, business owners, and residents are effectively integrated into the narrative and allow the reader to feel immersed in the political and cultural life of the city.

At times, the focus on housing and urban space overshadows other critical aspects of the post-industrial crisis faced by cities like Hamilton, particularly the lack of well-paid jobs and the precarity of employment for those outside of the rarified "Creative Class". This focus also risks obscuring the true historical origins of Hamilton's crisis. Gentrification may presently be top of mind, but the poverty, inequality, drug abuse, and social dislocation faced by many Hamiltonians cannot be understood without reference to the physical and metaphorical ruins left behind by deindustrialization. It therefore would have been useful to provide a clearer description of the specific process of industrial decline in Hamilton, identifying how it has impacted inner-city communities and reshaped the social and economic geography of the wider city, thereby setting the stage for present-day conflicts and challenges.

Finally, the book lacks an obvious thematic or chronological structure, and international comparisons and connections are introduced in a haphazard way, which often interrupts the narrative flow. Better organization and the addition of a short introduction and/or conclusion would strengthen the force and clarity of the analysis.

Overall, however, Dale has provided a unique glimpse into the social and cultural landscape of contemporary Hamilton and the people who are fighting to shape its future. *Shift Change* will be of value to anyone interested in gentrification, urban change, and the interconnected challenges faced by post-industrial cities across the global north.

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Nilanjan Ragunath, *Shaping the Futures of Work: Proactive Governance and Millennials* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021)

For the past ten years, the future of work has emerged as a key subject for the social sciences, for institutions, and for public discourse all over the world. A number of macrotrends, including the introduction of new digital technologies, the ageing of populations, the climate emergency, and the covid-19 pandemic, have made labour markets appear unpredictable, reigniting concerns about their future. It is in this context of uncertainty

that Ragunath's book *Shaping the Futures of Work* is published, representing a valuable effort to theorize the "flux society" in which we are living, proposing a "proactive" approach to govern the futures of work. Against techno-deterministic views that portray digitalization and automation as unstoppable forces, Ragunath's study stresses the importance of agency and of institutions to understand how the future of work is shaped in practice. In that line, the book is divided into three parts: the first introduces the notion of flux society, the second expands on the concept of proactive governance, while the last part analyses the experiences of millennials in Singapore in relation to the changing world of work. The main contribution of the study to the vast literature on the future of work can be found in its multidimensionality related to those three focal points. It is an effective demonstration of "sociological imagination" – making sense of broad, complex social process through individual lived experiences – an approach that has been largely secondary in the literature compared to other, more structuralist accounts.

Ragunath's study will be relevant for students of the future of work and technological change, as well as for policy analysts interested in proactive governance. Debates on those topics have been noticeably Western-centric, and this book focused on Singapore represents a positive break from that pattern. Singapore is presented as a future-oriented society in which institutions (for example, a largely successful education system) have been configured from the outset to respond to rapid changes in labour markets. At the same time, interviews held by Ragunath with high-skilled workers and entrepreneurs indicate that cultural values in Singaporean society have been shaped by the larger institutional preference for proactivity. The book argues for this kind of approach. It does so referring to a large body of literature that ranges from classical sociologists to contemporary labour economists, and from data sources that come from consultancy companies and from the author's own fieldwork with Singaporean millennials. It holds a fruitful conversation with different disciplines but is decidedly sociological in terms of its analytical lenses. It points to the perennial tension between agency and structure in this discipline's perspective, and to the insufficiency of purely quantitative estimations of the risks of automation, without any reference to actual individuals with projects, stories, and backgrounds. The focus on generations is something particularly remarkable about the study, given the scarcity of analyses of the future of work that concentrate on shared experiences by generations. The results indicate that millennials are well-equipped to face the future of jobs insofar as they are open to constant change, which comes at the expense of career stability, life planning, and economic certainty.

Beyond the merits of Ragunath's study, there are two aspects that would deserve a deeper reflection. Firstly, the point of view of the author has clear affinities with the discourse of international business consultancy groups on the future of work. They have urged governments and companies to be proactive and adapt their practices to the digital era, supporting an entrepreneurial, optimistic approach to new technologies at work. This naturally contrasts to voices in academia, in the international labour movement, and in transnational advocacy networks that have identified significant risks associated with digital innovations, which play a secondary role in the author's analysis of the future of work. Issues of power, inequality, and economic concentration that are intrinsically connected to technological change – e.g., in the diffusion of platform work – are likewise

overlooked by the book. A second critical point, closely linked to the previous, is the understanding of work from a primarily individual perspective – future trends are approached by interviewing service workers and studying their experiences and projects. However, a collective conception of labour must be part of any multidimensional understanding of the future of work, given that unions and social movements are at present battling to defend their collective rights, again, as exemplified by digital workers' activism. Ragunath tends to follow sociological analyses that overestimate the effects of individualisation in contemporary societies, leaving this collective level of analysis unexplored. There is value, to be sure, in the author's emphasis on agency to frame the future of work, but individuals, companies, and states are not the only protagonists in its development: organisations and civil society are offering channels to shape the future in a variety of tangible ways.

The reader will find in this book an interesting exercise of "sociological imagination," despite its shortcomings. In terms of future research and how to expand this study's project, it can inspire analyses of the institutional transformation that proactive governance would represent. The author presents a number of reasons to implement a proactive approach from a policy perspective – and this need is understandable given the uncertainties that technological change, the environmental crisis, and new geopolitical crises might bring about. As an extension to this book, a study of the already existing model of governance – perhaps more reactive than proactive – as well as an interpretation of the welfare state and its (in)capacity to deal with contemporary risks appears particularly promising. At the same time, since the latter is focused on workers in the knowledge economy in a richer nation, comparative scholarship would benefit from applying a similar approach but now focused on other contexts. Millennials in Singapore seem, based on the findings of the book, particularly attuned to the idea of an ever-changing world of work, and that is certainly one of the reasons that makes them interesting as a case study. However, if the analyst's aim is to understand modern risks, it would be worth looking at vulnerable groups as a complement, especially in occupations and socio-economic situations that make them unaware and unprepared for the future of work. A proactive state should devote its energies and political will especially to protecting this type of group.

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Alessandro Delfanti, *The Warehouse: Workers and Robots at Amazon* (London: Pluto Press, 2021)

As a key player in today's era of digital capitalism – "the corporate use of digital technology to maximize the private accumulation of power and money," (9) Amazon looms large in today's social, economic, and political landscape. Delfanti's book offers a rich and timely ethnographic account of the labour process inside Amazon's warehousing facilities (referred to as "fulfilment centres or 'FCs" by the e-commerce giant), drawing on interviews conducted primarily in Piacenza, Italy and site visits to warehouses in Canada, among other textual materials. Though primarily set in Piacenza, Delfanti's description and analysis of the labour process extends across multiple regions and locales where the company operates given the high degree of standardization of work in its facilities. Offering a history from below, each of Delfanti's six book chapters is ironically