

**ANGLAIS \* CIVILISATION**

**CIVILISATION  
DES ÉTATS-UNIS**

**MARIE-CHRISTINE PAUWELS**

*Maître de conférences à l'université Paris Nanterre*

**hachette**  
SUPÉRIEUR

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# AMERICANS AT WORK

## 1 *The Workforce and the Workplace*

### *A. A More Diversified Workforce*

One hundred fifty-seven million Americans belong to the working population today, a workforce which increases by 0.5% each year.

Its main features: it is an aging population (median age: 41); it is more and more diversified both ethnically and racially; it is becoming increasingly female. Indeed, the major structural changes since the 1960s have been the rising proportion of minorities (over 30% of the workforce today) and women (two-thirds of the working population's growth since World War Two and 46.8% of the workforce today). Women now represent three-fifths of all new entrants in the workplace.

Most women work in only a few different jobs, as teachers, salespersons, secretaries, nurses, cashiers, etc. The level of job segregation is therefore important. These occupations are often referred to as the *pink-collar jobs* (as opposed to white-collar/blue-collar) or as the *pink-collar ghetto*. Many women also work part-time. Because they disproportionately work in low-paying sectors, their wages are also lower: American women earn on average 82 cents while men earn \$1, even if this gap is slowly shrinking. Hispanic and African-American women earn even less (68 cents and 61 cents respectively). Fewer than 8% of women workers earn salaries over \$75,000, as against 19% of men, even if over the past 30 years, they have made numerous breakthroughs in the workplace and have been moving up the career ladder. But they are still seldom found at the top.

The dilemma facing corporate women today is that of the *glass ceiling*: while they have massively reached middle-management positions (about 50% of middle-management jobs are held by



women), most of them are stuck there, and the top-level positions are still out of reach. In 2016, there were only twenty-one women at the head of one of the largest 500 companies. The same situation prevails in politics: in 2015, only 84 representatives, 20 senators and 6 governors were female. Because of this *glass ceiling*, women are four times more likely than men to open their own businesses: 38% of all US firms are female-headed today.

When they do reach top jobs, most women still often have to choose between family and career, a choice which men hardly ever have to make. As a result, most men who are top executives have children by the age of 40, while only 40% of top executive women do. For men, having a family does not interfere with their career. For women, it can often mean the end of it, or at least the need to establish priorities. This is why women are still not always taken seriously, and are directed toward less demanding jobs when they start a family. This pattern is ironically called the *Mommy track*.

Americans work more than Europeans: there is no such thing in the USA as the French national vacation system of five weeks off or a 35-hour work week. The average work week is much higher, around 42 to 45 hours in practice for a full-time worker (up to 60 hours in hi-tech). As for the number of weeks off, they depend on employers and often on seniority (on average: 2 weeks off a year). Americans are often described as workaholics.

The job market today has recovered from the financial and economic crisis of 2008 which economists have called the “Great Recession”, echoing the Great Depression of the 1930s. The problem was triggered off by a housing bubble that burst in 2007, and was then followed by a subprime mortgage crisis and a financial meltdown one year later. This sent the United States and the rest of the world into a deep recession.

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### B. The Shift from Manufacturing to Services

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1 – Less than 1.5% of the working population now works on farms (even if 10% work in the agribusiness sector), and the primary sector as a whole is declining steadily as a proportion of the GDP.

2 – The secondary, or manufacturing sector, is experiencing only slow to moderate growth. It still employs about 15% of the workforce. The United States has lost some of its industrial jobs because of foreign competition and automation, mostly in the traditional “smokestack industries”, such as steel and automobile as well as in labor-intensive manufacturing. It is indeed cheaper to manufacture consumer goods –anything from shoes and clothes to TV sets and computers– in South-East Asia or in Mexico where assembling factories, called *maquiladoras*, have been proliferating south of the American border. The signing of the NAFTA (*North American Free Trade Agreement*) with Mexico in 1993 accelerated this trend, and several hundred thousand US jobs were transferred to “cheaper” Mexico.

However, at the same time, this does not mean the US is deindustrializing. In fact, the industrial jobs that are now found in the US require a higher professional level than before; workers must be computer-literate, and are given more responsibility on the job (this is called *empowerment*). Jobs that have been transferred abroad are predominantly low-knowledge factory jobs. So this means both good news and bad news for Americans: good news since the jobs offered in manufacturing have an added value, and require higher skills; bad news since many average Americans lack these skills for want of adequate education.

3 – The service sector now accounts for over 80% of all jobs in the United States and 77% of the GDP. In the years to come, according

to the Department of Labor, it is expected to account for 90% of all new job creations.

Among the most rapidly increasing branches: catering, retailing, health-related, and maintenance jobs.

Women are a majority in this sector: 53% (only 25% in the manufacturing sector).

Service workers are, on the whole, less well organized and less protected than manufacturing workers (very few belong to a union).

While the service sector creates many jobs, some experts voice concern about the quality issue, arguing that these jobs are too often precarious and offer few career prospects and few social benefits. The terms *on-demand*, *gig economy* or *WalMartization* are often used. One American out of four who holds a job in the service sector belongs to this category (compared to 19% in 1979). Even so, this is only partially true, as many service jobs such as computer programmers, systems analysts, financial specialists, etc. require high skills and a college education.

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### C. Unemployment and Contingency Work

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#### Unemployment (table 1)

Unemployment is usually lower than in Europe. In 2016, it hovered around 5%. Yet, this low percentage only tells one part of the story and hides the fact that the workplace has become much less stable than in the past. Each month, 2% of working Americans lose their jobs, compared with only 0.4% in France.

The US job market is indeed very flexible and workers are much less protected by labor legislation than in Europe. Hiring and firing are much easier: a worker can receive a *pink slip* (the piece of paper notifying he has been dismissed) requiring him to leave his/her job the next day! No one is immune from being laid off nowadays, even in jobs that were once considered secure. Workers have increasing become disposable.

1980	1990	2000	2004	2007	2010	2012	2016
7	5.4	3.8	5.5	4.6	9.5	8	5

Table 1 - Evolution of the unemployment rate 1980-2016

In the 1970s and 1980s, lay-offs were a necessity because firms had to restructure, to become “lean and mean” so as to be able to face increasingly aggressive worldwide competition. This was called *downsizing*.

But throughout the nineties, even though the American economy was booming, lay-offs continued. This apparent paradox can easily be explained: companies no longer lay off to restructure but to maximize their profits. For whenever a company lays off workers, this translates into an immediate increase of its share value on the stock exchange. American companies are focused on short term-results and this means quick worker turnover. As a result of this pressure, American workers are never secure about their future.

In addition, unemployment benefits are small and last for a short time only. While unemployment insurance is mandatory at the federal level, application procedures differ in each state, which can mean significant differences from one region to the next. Former President George Bush extended the duration of these benefits (previously covering a maximum of 26 weeks) to a maximum of 39 weeks in all, depending on regional variations. By and large, these benefits are considered insufficient (one third of people’s former wages on average) and cover only about half of all those looking for a job. Moreover, young people with no work experience or women seeking to enter the workplace are not eligible.

Being laid off means that people also, most of the time, lose their health insurance, which is commonly provided by employers in the US.

On the other hand, because workers are more mobile and flexible than in Europe, they also stay out of work for shorter periods of time. Long-term unemployment is less common than in Europe.

Finding a new job is almost always a painful task, and worker displacement tends to increase downward mobility. An increasing number of jobs, formerly requiring only a high school degree, are now being taken by college graduates.

### *Part-time and Contingency Work*

The past thirty years have seen the emergence of a much more flexible workplace with a boom in part-time and contingency work: +52% versus +14% for full-time work. Most of these jobs are filled by women, and are found in the service sector. Often underpaid, unstable and with few long-term advantages or career prospects, they now concern one wage-earner out of six, that is to say 26 million Americans (table 2). Two of the largest employers in the USA today are McDonald's and Wal-Mart, the retail giant.

Working part-time is not always a voluntary step and many would prefer a full-time job. This increase in contingent jobs can be explained first because the service sector heavily relies on them: people now commonly expect services to be available round the clock (stores open on Sundays, for instance, or even all night). In the retailing and catering sector, fragmented schedules are commonplace. The aim is to match customer expectations and adapt to demand fluctuations. Businesses must try to meet these requirements, and having a flexible workforce is the best way to respond.

Another explanation is linked to the decline of salaried work, and the rise of independent contracting and freelance work. For many Americans, becoming self-employed and offering their services –mostly via Internet sharing platforms and smartphone applications– has become a new means of earning a living or of complementing one's income.

Finally, part-time, independent or temporary workers are cost-effective. In the US, a part-timer (less than 35 hours/week) does not qualify for the same advantages as a full-timer. Employers often do not bother with medical

insurance or old-age pensions for instance (it is estimated that only 1 part-timer in 6 is covered under an employer's pension plan, versus 1 full-timer in 2). Part-time work means flexibility for businesses but often precariousness for workers and, as a result, an increasing number of workers (5%) now hold several jobs. They are called *multiple job-holders*.

Table 2 – Part-time work as a % of full-time work in France, the United Kingdom and the US

	France	UK	USA
1979	8.2	16.4	16.4
1990	12.0	21.8	16.9
2015	14	24.6	16.5

Source: OECD

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## *D. Challenges for the Future*

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### *Toward a Two-Tiered Job Market?*

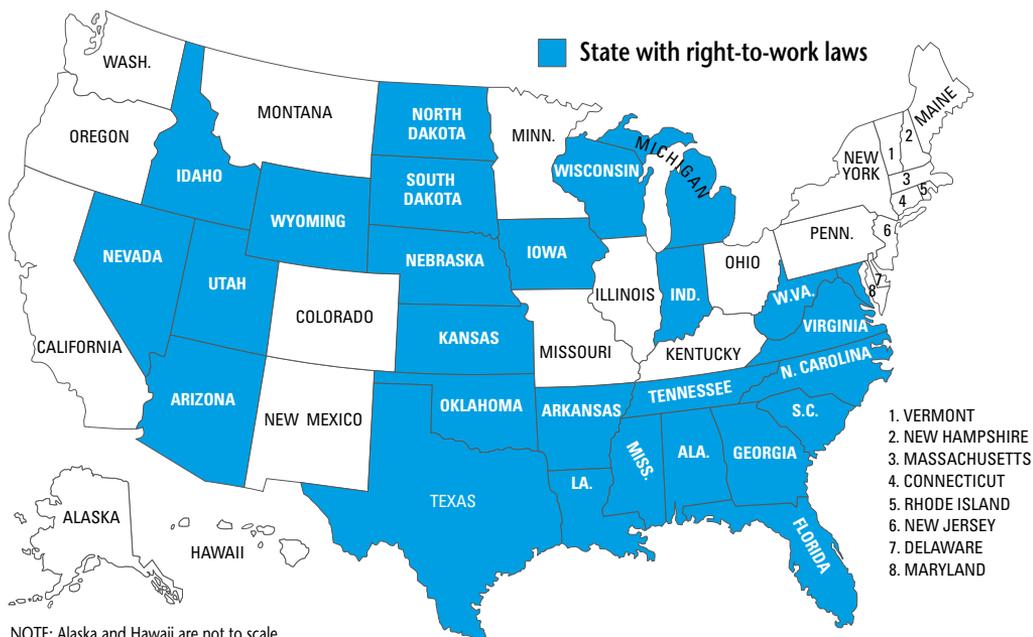
American society seems to be evolving toward a two-tiered job market: on the one hand, there are low-skilled, unstable jobs with a high turnover; on the other hand, high-skilled, well-paid jobs which are also expanding. Meanwhile the middle-of-the-road job market is shrinking. Why has there been such an evolution? Forty to fifty years ago, well-paid –\$14/hr on average– and reliable blue-collar jobs in traditional industries were numerous. In the American working class, families could afford to live on one paycheck. Women did not have to work. Even without a college education, people could live decently, send their children to college, etc. But with the shift from an industrial economy to an economy of services, such jobs have almost disappeared, to be replaced, on the one hand, by minimum-wage (\$7.25/hr), low-skilled jobs or, on the other hand, by well-paid, highly-skilled jobs.

The level of qualification required for certain positions is higher and higher, owing to the

**B**

**Right-to-work States**

*In 2016, West Virginia became the 26th state to pass a right-to-work law that undermines the ability of unions to organise and collect dues and fees.*



NOTE: Alaska and Hawaii are not to scale.

**Top 20 Reasons Corporations Chose Site for New Facility**

Percentage of corporate CEOs who ranked these factors important or very important for selecting sites for new facility; right-to-work state is ranked 16th :

Highway accessibility	97.3	Low union profile	75.4
Labor costs	91.0	Environmental regulations	74.8
Tax exemptions	90.9	Availability of land	73.4
Occupancy, const. costs	89.8	Advanced IT services	72.9
State, local incentives	89.3	Fast-track permitting	68.2
Corporate tax rate	86.3	Right-to-work states	67.9
Availability of skilled labor	85.9	Near major markets	66.4
Shipping costs	84.0	Proximity to suppliers	63.6
Energy availability, cost	82.1	Raw materials availability	61.5
Availability of building	81.0	Long-term financing	58.5

Source: National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation, 2012.