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The cultishly popular film *The Big Lebowski* (1998) introduces the main character to the audience in a large, neon-lit supermarket, with generic piped music in the background and, judging by the deserted aisles, in the wee hours when night merges with morning. Our anti-hero, ‘the man for his time and place’ in the narrator’s words, fumbles when asked for proof of ID as he tries to pay for his purchase by personal cheque, and then produces the only one he has: his ‘Value Club Card’ at this well-known Californian supermarket chain. Audience members recognize this sort of setting immediately – even if the subtext of the American 24-hour, constantly ‘on’ retail space is not exactly the same everywhere – it is a space we inhabit routinely. Part of the familiarity is engendered by others we have gotten used to encountering in these increasingly standardized settings. In fact, there are two other characters in the scene, neither of them as visible or as memorable as the errant consumer: a bored-looking, indifferent, fatigued checkout clerk whose experience at work is captured by her expressionless face as she has no option but to show patience with the tedious transaction, arms folded, and a Mexican call-out boy wearing a bright-coloured store uniform who carries the customer’s ridiculously sparse purchase, a sole carton of milk, to his car in this intentionally ironic instance. Not only does the audience recognize this sort of space, but we also recognize these sorts of workers and these sorts of encounters with workers. In fact, many of us have been these workers, and recognize these sorts of customers.

Contemporary retail workplaces and workers figure prominently in shorthand popular cultural representations of the zeitgeist, because they are an integral part of how we live everyday life as consumers of an ever growing range of goods and services. And depictions that give us glimpses of retail jobs as downtrodden, thankless and rather hopeless certainly resonate far
more immediately and strongly with most of us than the sort exulted by Sam Walton, the founder of Walmart, whose ‘vigorou

s staff motivation and customer care program’ included a pledge to be taken by workers: ‘I solemnly promise and declare that every customer that comes within 10ft of me I will smile, look at them in the eye and greet them, so help me Sam’ (McGoldrick, 2002: 500).

Indeed, there are grounds to argue that retail work is in many ways the new generic form of mass employment in the post-industrial socio-economic landscape. If the factory and the assembly line came to represent the quin
tessential workplace under industrialism, prompting much employment research (Beynon, 1985; Burawoy, 1979; Chinoy, 1955); technology-driven high-tech offices are conjured up by both celebrants and sceptics of the post-industrial economy in a similar manner. But a far more representative workplace of the post-industrial era may be Walmart, rather than Google. Certainly, Braverman (1974) anticipated the growing significance of retailing and observed the way in which retail employment demonstrated the worst impulses of service industries to replicate the extractive labour processes of industrialism, with increasing losses of discretion and autonomy on the job. He noted that ‘a revolution is now being prepared which will make of retail workers, by and large, something closer to factory operatives than anyone had ever imagined possible’(371).

Yet while on the surface only all too familiar, retail work remains under-studied. Despite a growing body of greatly insightful research exploring the dynamics of the transition from industrial to service-based economies over the past several decades, this specific area within services has not garnered much attention. While, for example, the fast food industry (Leidner, 1993; Ritzer, 1993) and call centres (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002; Taylor and Bain, 1999) have proved critical settings through which scholars have sought to challenge utopian statements about the purported change in the nature of jobs under post-industrialism, retail employment has not been privy to such sustained academic interest. This is particularly curious against a backdrop where both academic writing, mostly but not exclusively with a strategic thrust, and popular writing on retail per se has proliferated rapidly. There has been what could be called a ‘boom’ in such scholarship, inspirational books about exemplary businesses following a trajectory paralleling the rise and fall of different sectors over time, from automotives to software companies to now, perhaps, retailers (Bergdahl, 2006; Bevan, 2007; Brandes, 2004; Fishman, 2007; Lewis, 2005). Thus we are presented with surveys of the sector and assessments of what it takes to succeed in it (Berman, 2010; Randall and Seth, 2005), as well as studies looking at various aspects of retailing strategy such as internationalization (Dawson et al., 2006), marketing (McCormick, 2002) and logistics (Fernie and Sparks, 2009). Supermarkets have received the
most attention in public debates on retail by a wide margin, several recent highly popular books investigating how they have had an impact on the way communities consume, work, and indeed, live (Bevan, 2006; Blythman, 2005; Seth and Randall, 2001; Simms, 2007; Spotts, 2006).

This growing interest in retailing is inextricably linked to the increasing significance of the sector as an economic, social, cultural and political force. In the post-war era, the retailing sector and consequently retail employment have undergone radical transformation, a process whose momentum has not diminished over time. As the large, multi-store format, especially in food retailing, came to dominate, retail businesses joined the ranks of the largest and most important companies. Major retailers’ quarterly financial announcements now stand as much-heeded signs summarizing the direction and health of national economies and retail spending is taken as a clear indicator of consumer, and hence, of societal mood. The arrival of multinational retailers in new markets and the standardization of the line-up of high streets (and, of course, ‘malls’) around the world underscore how retail is globalizing, and in the process globalizing the world (Wrigley and Lowe, 2002). Large retailers also play a key role in what happens at the very local level, too, informing consumer choice in micro-geographies (Clarke et al., 2006) and routinely inciting ‘community wars’ against the arrival of supermarket chain stores in individual neighbourhoods. Yet, at the same time, a lack of major retailers often signals the death knell of the very same communities, and urban regeneration plans increasingly rely on participation by retail chains (Wrigley et al., 2002).

In most of this recent literature on retailing, employment issues figure as a chapter or even as footnotes. There is, however, an interesting development in the writing (and, one can only presume reading) about retail, and one that entails a much closer look at retail employment: the recent crop of books by retail workers themselves. Or, put differently, ‘there is a new form of misery lit out there – and it goes bip!’ (Long, 2009). Ahmad’s *The Checkout Girl* (2009), based on the former investigative reporter’s six months working at one of the largest supermarket chains in Britain, talks about the author’s days spent trying to ‘hit her bip target’ and recounts experiences of dealing with customers with all sorts of idiosyncracies. In *Shelf Life* (2009), Simon Parke, a vicar of 20 years standing and the author of popular spirituality books, shares his experiences of seeking (and finding) the meaning of life on-the-job working in a supermarket. Anna Sam of France, a literary student who ‘never planned to end up in a supermarket’ but ‘failed to find a job to match her qualification’ (Sage, 2008), began writing a blog of her experiences after seven years working for a hypermarket (http://caissierenofutur.over-blog.com), attracting over 600,000 subscribers within the year. Her book, subsequently published in English under the title *A Life at the Tills* (2009), sold over 100,000 copies
in France (Sage, 2009). Sam noted that everyone she ever worked with was at one time or another used as a cautionary tale by mothers urging their children to study by remarking, ‘If you don’t work hard at school, you’ll end up like that lady behind the counter.’ (Walden, 2009) and once she was asked by a six-year old if she was ‘in prison’. While thoroughly engaging and highly in tune with the times, as evidenced by their popularity, these books make curiously little of the corporate policies behind the work practices their authors observe (and, indeed, suffer under) and instead focus far greater attention on the inconsiderate/rude/offensive customers. In failing to generate truly critical public debate about the nature of retail jobs, these books are narrowly missed opportunities. This is all the more regrettable given the availability of a precursor, an equally readable but infinitely more analytical account by academic/writer Barbara Ehrenreich, Nickel and Dimed (2001). Here, retail is afforded only one chapter in Ehrenreich’s quest to find out if it is indeed possible to make ends meet through minimum-wage employment in the US, about her time at a Wal-Mart store in Minnesota, but it is one where the reader is given a vivid sense of how such grossly under-rewarded work can at the same time be compulsively engrossing for the workers who seek to experience some degree of authority and control over their labour and who have few alternative means of earning a living.

If retail work is understudied, then, perhaps this dearth of interest is warranted either by the fact that there is nothing that important to know about it or, relatedly, that we already know whatever there is to know about it. Although various studies on different aspects of employment have recently been carried out in the retail context, the most recent edited volume on the topic put together by academics remains Åkehurst and Alexander’s Retail Employment from 1996. Is retail work trivial or self-evident to an extent to not warrant closer inspection, and do not studies on the service sector in general (such as Macdonald and Sirianni, 1996; Bosch and Lehndorff, 2005; Korczynski and Macdonald, 2009), or, for example, those on low-wage work (Carré et al., 2010), answer all the questions worth posing? Obviously, the motivation behind this edited volume is to argue that this is definitely not the case. The effort is based on the belief that retail work does deserve much closer and more focussed scholarly attention, because retail work is significant, diverse and problematic.

Retail work is significant in multiple ways. In sheer quantitative terms, as the chapters in this book detail, retail employment constitutes over 10 per cent of the total labour force in advanced economies. In the US, seven of the
ten largest employers in 2004 were in food service and retail (Davis, 2009: 201). In the UK, 2.9 million people were employed in retail in December 2009, roughly equal to 11 per cent of the British workforce (British Retail Consortium, 2010). The implications of this include the importance of retailing to policy makers, employers, workers and academics alike. However, the frequent references to retail employment in public debates as the only or leading area of job growth, at least in the British context, often prove misleading. As the recent recession has shown, with ‘heritage retailers’ such as Woolworths declaring bankruptcy and going out of business, as well as the closure of many small independent retailers, leaving many British high streets all but deserted, retail work continues to be precarious. Over the last five years, employment in retailing in the UK has fallen by over 145,000 (British Retail Consortium, 2010). The share of retail employment in the entire British workforce was in fact one percent higher, at 12 per cent, in 2003 (Burt and Sparks, 2003). The impression that the share of the workforce employed in retail is constantly on the rise may therefore have more to do with the relative growth of retail jobs in comparison with traditional manufacturing jobs within the context of the overall shift of jobs from industry to services, and that from the perspective of individual workers, retail jobs often end up the only alternative against backdrops of declining job opportunities. In one trivial but telling example, in the recession-inspired reality show The Fairy Jobmother on British TV in the summer of 2010, in which a ‘personal coach’ prepares long-term unemployed families to get back into the labour market, at least one of the jobs one family member gets is inevitably in retail in each episode. Furthermore, while the numbers may not bear out such widespread portrayal of retail as (the only) growth area for jobs, the significance of the sector for employment needs to also take into account the different forms of employment generated across the entire supply chain and not only in the retail stores. Although rationalization has squeezed many jobs out of these retail linkage areas (Wright and Lund, 2003), the employment generated at the intersection points between retailers and suppliers does remains sizeable, if difficult to quantify.

Retail work is diverse

Despite the popular cultural shorthand used to depict retail workers as automatons who cannot wait to get out of these jobs if only the opportunities were there, retail work is widely diverse. The labour market spans a range from attractive, middle class dominated ‘style’ labour markets where workers enjoy heavy discounts on the latest fashions (Nickson et al., this volume; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007) to the poorly paid shift work offered by mass
Ödül Bozkurt and Irena Grugulis

retailers (Bair and Bernstein, 2006). Retail work involves many different subsectors and many different types of workers in different age groups, in different stages of participation in the labour market. Furthermore, there are the visible and invisible sides of retail employment and not all work is confined to face-to-face service provision. There is work done on the shop floor but also in the entire supply chain that is involved in bringing the goods to the sites where consumers obtain them for subsequent consumption.

Retail work is diverse because, in the first instance, retail employers are diverse. They range from small ‘boutique establishments’ to global corporate giants, from ethnic businesses to family affairs, with immediate implications for the variability in the organization of work. In the UK, 9 per cent of all VAT-registered businesses were in retailing in 2010, with a total number of 192,600 retailers and, according to 2008 figures, 293,510 retail outlets (British Retail Consortium, 2010). These figures underscore the fact that although the giant supermarkets or the high-street stores selling brand-name products are the first to come to mind, they are by no means the only type of retail workplaces. In fact, often their very arrival in specific communities is ridden with conflict and disagreement precisely because of different views of how the corporate, large-scale, chain establishments will impact employment both quantitatively and qualitatively, at the expense of other types of retailers. One very widely debated issue has been, for example, whether the arrival of large supermarkets, and of course the ‘queen’ of them all, Walmart, actually creates or destroys jobs in the communities they move into (Basker, 2005). Neumark et al. (2008) find that each Walmart worker replaces approximately 1.4 retail workers (although while also noting that, given retail employment growth, this has meant a lower rate of growth in the number of jobs, rather than actual job losses). In the British context, community regeneration plans generally involve the discussion of plans to move in major retailers, which often spark heated debates between those who look at retail employment as the saviour of underprivileged, deprived communities (Percival, 2010) and those who argue that retail employment by large employers is created at the expense of small retailers (Simms, 2010).

Second, retail work is diverse because, as consumption patterns have changed, the products and services that retail workers need to deliver have become more diverse. Industry publications or practitioner conferences often make the point that despite the growth of the range of products retailers carry, the era of the ‘one stop shop’, even in the case of ‘all under one roof’ supermarkets, may be becoming obsolete, as consumers ‘mix and match’. In the UK, Business Link, the government agency in place to provide support to businesses, lists ten categories within retail (and hire and repair), ranging from arts, antiques and second-hand goods retail to sports and recreation goods retail, and under these there are a further total of
60 subcategories (which actually make for an entertaining read) (Business Link, 2010).

Third, the skills demands in retail also vary dramatically. For soft skills these range from an insistence on middle class, attractive staff (Gatta and Nickson et al. both this volume) to differing levels of customer service (Sturdy, 2001; Macdonald and Siriani, 1996). McGauran (2001) observes the way that French customers insisted on high levels of product knowledge from the assistants who served them and Gamble’s (2006) research into high-status multinational retailers in China reveals impressively knowledgeable and highly educated workers. This diversity is often linked to products. The recent Russell Sage project into low wage work has distinguished between male, full-time staff selling electrical goods and the predominantly female part-timers employed in supermarkets (Mason et al., 2008; see also Darr; and Price both this volume). But such differentials are not static and there seems to be more evidence of erosion in terms and conditions than in improvements (Van Klaveren and Voss-Dahm; Jordan both this volume; Kirsch et al., 2000).

Retail work is diverse because, the ‘retail workforce’, despite the flattening of hierarchies in store operations witnessed over the past two decades and the proliferation of increasingly isomorphic approaches to the utilization of labour (Grimshaw et al., 2001), remains comprised of different categories of workers. There is, first of all, a radical distinction between head office staff and store employees. Second, there is a distinction between managerial staff and shop floor workers in retail stores, particularly in the large multiples, which continues despite the context of disappearing middle ranks. Finally, one of the most visibly problematic aspects of diversity in this respect is the differences between part-time and full-time employment contracts, although this distinction is threatened as the former grows at seemingly unstoppable pace while the latter appears to be in irreversible entrenchment (Shackleton, 1998). In the US, food service and retail had the shortest tenures among employees among all sectors in 2004 (Davis, 2009: 201). This variability in the concrete employment forms also relates to the differences between workers who see and pursue retail as a job and those who view it as a career.

Retail employment is demographically diverse as well, despite being justifiably associated with women, youth and ethnic minority workers in most contexts. Admittedly, the gendered nature of retail employment (e.g., McGauran, 2001; McLaughlin, 1999) is critically linked with working-time arrangements that increasingly and heavily favour part-time contracts, as well as coincide in generating some of the grossest forms of inequality retail employment engenders. But the retail workforce is diverse among members of the same gender too, as well as being highly variable across a range of
demographic divisions informed by the variable motivations behind individual workers taking up employment in the sector.

Finally, retail work is diverse because its particular forms and rewards remain variable across different market contexts and in different national employment systems. This is so despite the fact that national distinctions do appear to be eroding through the growing significance of globalization in retailing, and the diffusion of and convergence around various employment policies around ‘of industry best practice’ are increasingly defined in global terms. As Dawson and Mukoyama (2006: 1) note, ‘international activity in retailing is evident in many ways: in the sourcing of goods for resale, the operation of shops, the use of foreign labour, the adoption of foreign ideas and the use of foreign capital’. Globalization impacts retailing and hence retail work in at least three, often overlapping ways. Perhaps the most concrete manifestation of how the retail sector is undergoing a transformation in line with the larger globalization of contemporary capitalism is the increasing transnationalization of the largest retailers (Wrigley et al., 2005). The world’s largest retailer (and, incidentally, the world’s biggest private employer), Walmart, is increasingly less of an ‘all American’ institution and more a global giant. Despite its high-profile failure in the German market, Walmart’s global expansion continues especially into the populous emerging markets such as China and Brazil. Of the world’s largest 100 retailers, the operations of only 29 were confined to their domestic markets in 2004 (Dawson, 2007: 37). These retailers play a hitherto understudied yet direct and significant role in the transfer and diffusion of a range of retail strategies, including those on employment, but the enactment of these strategies in different institutional contexts yields variable outcomes. A second way in which retail work is implicated in globalization is the diffusion not of the particular retail organizations but of the dominant forms of ‘doing retail’ around the world. The battles of the ‘mom-and-pop shops’/ ‘high-street independents’ vs. the chainstore Goliaths unfold simultaneously in multiple country locations. Although such temporal coincidence of the conflicts underscores that consumption patterns, retailing strategies and consequently retail work are facing similar trajectories of transformation, institutional, legal, cultural, political and social differences between national contexts mean that similar dilemmas lead to diverse outcomes. Finally, globalization impacts retail employment even in the case of purely domestic retailers. In our research with one of the major British supermarket chains that only operates nationally, for example, a core change initiative and its specific prescriptions, most of them involving and in fact dictating changes in the management of workers, were formulated by a US-based retail consultancy that was contracted to bring in ‘the state of the art’ practices. Yet once again, we observed, the ‘translation’ of policies, the particular forms the practices took, and certainly the eventual
impact of these on retail work were, though similar, still identifiably different than what has been observed in the American retailing context.

**Retail work is problematic**

The variability of and diversity in retail work are integral to the range of ways in which retail work is problematic. On the one hand, the problems pertaining to work and workers in different categories vary (e.g., across different types of retail employers, in different national contexts); on the other, some of the problems highlight or even stem from the inequalities engendered by the differences in the fortunes of different groups of workers (e.g., the confluence of female workers with part-time jobs and the disconnect between part-time jobs and career progression).

Underlining the diversity that also applies to the problems of retail work helps us make sense of some seemingly paradoxical elements in the discussion of ‘the problems with retail jobs’, such as the conflicting narratives of employers and workers about whether it is difficult to find ‘good people for perfectly satisfying, challenging and rewarding jobs’, or more difficult to find ‘[sufficiently] satisfying, challenging and rewarding jobs for good people’. Such oft-heard statements conflict directly, because they refer to different types of retail work and different groups of workers. For example, employers widely see high labour turnover (Booth and Hamer, 2007) in store operations as problematic, but tend to attribute this to the lack of motivation, engagement and commitment by workers. Since these qualities tend to be labelled ‘soft skills’, rather than reciprocal elements in a relationship in which employers play an active part (see Lafer, 2004) turnover is presented as a skills rather than a management issue. At another level, employers’ difficulty in attracting graduates to retail employment (Andrews, 2009) is often traced back to unfavourable views of careers in retail among university students (Broadbridge, 2003), a general trend that does not appear to be changing radically despite the recent proliferation of retail-related university degree programmes and the number of students who undertake retail work while studying (see Huddleston, this volume).

For the vast majority of the retail workforce, as captured in the popular discourse about retail jobs, retail work is problematic because in many ways it brings together the worst of all worlds – it is low status because it is low-skilled, therefore low-paid, and being all of these things, it tends not to make for a desirable career. Even for those who do desire to make a career in retailing, the options are limited. The very same employer strategies that demand an increasingly more highly skilled workforce in head office functions also help jeopardise the quality and attractiveness of jobs in stores. A focus on
generating margins, competitive advantages and hence profits within a context of constantly intensifying competition has increasingly forced retailers to rely on greater and faster innovation in head office functions while at the same time requiring rigorous rationalization of store operations. Such systemic polarization renders much of retail work problematic in a way that defies situational adjustments to try and improve the working conditions for individual workers.

The extreme rationalization of retail operations by the major employers not only makes retailing and hence retail employment by other types of (smaller) organizations more precarious, but also suppresses the potential for collective action by workers in their own ranks. The slicing up of working hours into bundles through advanced scheduling technology and techniques in an attempt to ever more closely match customer flows and product demands notoriously complicates the forging of group identities and hence the politics of workplace resistance. Several years after the film was released, the supermarket where The Big Lebowski’s opening scene took place was involved in one of the longest running and most widely supported union strikes in Californian, and indeed American, labour history. However the outcomes of the struggle were only partially satisfying for the union and its members. Garnering such high levels of participation and support appears, if anything, increasingly more difficult as retail work gets to be accepted as the sort of job where workers have no reason to expect anything better.

**The book**

This book is based on a stream that was run at the International Labour Process Conference in Edinburgh, 2009, with contributions from participants there as well as from others whose recent research addresses various aspects of employment in the retail context. It is revealing that, unlike, for example, assembly line workers, the caring professions, or even hospitality industry workers, there is to date no identifiable cluster of studies and networks of scholars engaged in investigating retail employment. This book attempts, as the conference stream did before it, to bring together researchers who have been carrying out work looking into retail and retailing but who are driven by a variety of theoretical interests and contribute to a range of different debates around employment. Some of us are primarily scholars of skills and the ways that labour markets demand, supply and reward them; some of us have a core interest in the link between education and jobs; some of us are keen to explore the micro-dynamics of various workplace practices such as teamwork or leadership as they are re-enacted in real life; some of us are concerned with issues of worker representation and equality. Exploring these
themes together around the shared empirical object of retail should not only contribute to the debates on our respective themes, but also help to consolidate retail employment as a field of study where knowledge can be shared and accumulated.

The chapters are arranged under four themes that emerged from the contributions. These partially overlap with the points we have raised above, but do not and cannot fully circumscribe the lesson we learn from each chapter. Gender, for example, is an integral part of many of the chapters, but is taken up mostly in relation to other axes of inequality, like the distribution of part-time as opposed to full-time jobs. And some of the themes, such as skill and the way work is controlled, run throughout the book. The research contexts include a range of advanced capitalist countries, including the UK, the US, Germany, the Netherlands, Australia and Israel, providing us with the rewards of a comparative look at various core issues in retail work.

**Part I: Work and skills**

Skill is one of the four key areas of activity that The Employment Policy Action Group of the British Retail Consortium identified in 2010, the others being the national minimum wage, national insurance contributions and diversity. The organization claimed:

*The retail sector has an excellent record on training and upskilling its workforce. In 2008, 5,000 retail apprenticeships were completed and 63 per cent of all individuals in the sector were given training equivalent to 14 working days. The sector also provides employees with transferable skills which help them progress either within retail or other business sectors.*

(British Retail Consortium, 2010)

So at once a ‘key target area’ and one where claims of an ‘excellent record’ are made, skills is certainly a critical point of discussion for retail practitioners. In a key speech in 2010, the Chief Executive of the Institute of Grocery Distributors, currently the largest representative body for the food and grocery retailers in the UK, noted, ‘We have great people in our industry, even though we’re rarely front of mind when it comes to career planning or national skills assessments’ (Denney-Finch, 2010). The industry’s discourse around skills is certainly a rather confusing one. On the one hand, there are widespread (to the point of universal) claims that retailers do no recruit ‘for’ skills and employers state that they are equipped to train recruits in all the necessary skills themselves once on the job. On the other, references to a ‘skills shortage’, for example in terms of efforts to increase productivity in
the retail sector in the UK, suggest otherwise (Hart et al., 2007). One of the most important areas in retail work that invite the attention of researchers is therefore that of skills.

Three of the chapters in this book address issues of skills and skilling in relation to retail work. Felstead, Fuller, Jewson and Unwin draw on some of the extensive data from their ESRC Teaching and Learning research to draw out skills and learning issues in supermarkets and sandwich retailing. Acknowledging that one of the principal weaknesses of HRM is that its analysis stops at the boundaries of the firm, the team have developed the ‘Working as Learning Framework’ (WALF) that uses data from the whole supply chain to set the context. In the two areas considered here influence is exerted at different points in this continuum. In supermarkets control is centralized at head office level and facilitated by in-store technologies (particularly the ‘symbol gun’); while new product development in sandwich manufacturing varies according to clientele. It may be driven by the manufacturers themselves, as it is in firms that supply a number of small retail outlets, or by clients, when one powerful customer purchases the majority of output. These different pressure points and power relationships each have very different implications for work, learning and skills.

In Chapter 3 Gatta deals with a very different type of skill, the aesthetic and emotional ability to display the ‘right personality’ (and, in her own case, to be a ‘Betsy’s girl’). Focussing on distinctive and up-market retailers in New Jersey, USA she draws out the real skills employers recruit for and considers the implications of this for publicly funded training programmes that aim to bridge the gap between the skills employers desire and those potential workers possess. Store owners’ emphasis on first impressions, the ‘blink’ moment when they ‘just know’ and the interpersonal skills that could not (in contrast to store-specific knowledge) be trained for. Yet, as Gatta points out, by emphasising this instead of, for example, retail experience, store owners can simply legitimise stereotypes and recruit by prejudice. There are actions that public workfare programmes can take in response to this, but there is also much they need to be wary of.

Nickson, Hurrell, Warhurst and Commander extend this discussion of soft skills with evidence from a survey of the Manchester ‘style’ labour market. This area, according to their respondents, is one of the most desirable in retailing with shops in which it is ‘cool’ to work. Here too, employers stressed appearance and personality, though were cautious on whether they selected on the basis of age, weight or height (perhaps because such an admission was more likely to attract legal action than a more general focus on ‘appearance’ or ‘personality’). In contrast to Gatta’s employers, the Manchester recruiters also valued product knowledge, but here too the emphasis on aesthetics may have been an easy proxy for discrimination.
In the last chapter in this section, Chapter 5, Robin Price shifts the focus away from sought after jobs in the ‘style’ labour markets and onto the more mundane face of retail work. She draws on detailed research into an Australian supermarket with all its corporate pressure to cut costs and centralize operations. This account allows us to see the deskilling at store level: as apprentice-trained butchers and bakers found that the extensive use of vacuum packed meats and premixed or par-baked breads and cakes result in the transfer of skills to workers at a different point in the supply chain; which skills were retained; and the impact of inflexible and fragmented staff budgets; and the skills that were retained. Grocery staff still needed to check the quality of produce, and butchers and bakers still baked and prepared meat in-store.

The picture that emerges most clearly from these four chapters is one of diversity. As noted above, retail employment is not homogeneous. At the ‘high end’ described by Gatta and Nickson et al., employer demands can be substantially different to those in the ‘no frills’ part of the sector yet interestingly, while technical skills and product knowledge are part of the work, all informants seemed happy to train staff themselves. Recruitment is focused on soft skills, aesthetics, glamour (and probably) class, race and gender. Away from these elite establishments the chapters by Felstead et al. and Price enable us to see both what skills are required of workers in supermarkets and sandwich manufacturers and the points in the supply chain at which influence is exerted. This is an important point since it provides both better explanations of the data, by not limiting analysis to the individual firm. Something which also has implications for policy should attempts be made to improve retail work.

Part II: Retail as a job versus retailing as a career

In the second part we consider the other dilemma that is oft posed about retail employment, that it is seen and experienced as transitory. In a study of university students, half of whom were in management/business degree programmes, Broadbridge found that only 2.6 per cent of the participants freely named retail as their first career choice, while 23.9 per cent indicated that they would definitely not consider such a career (2002:301). Although the subsequent recession together with the sudden contraction of the graduate job market in Britain provided opportunities for the likes of Sainsbury’s graduate recruitment manager to claim that retail was ‘attracting lots of graduates who might have otherwise applied to banks or other City firms’ (CIPD, 2009), even the sector itself readily acknowledges that it is not a graduate ‘destination’. For the majority of non-graduate workers in retail the key issue is the broader distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ jobs, a distinction that
often pivots on the material conditions of work: pay, prospects, scheduling and terms and conditions. Retailing is the site of much low-paid work with career prospects that are often limited to a minority of full-time staff (Mason et al., 2008) and scheduling to suit employers’ rather than employees’ needs (Arrowsmith and Sisson, 1999).

The complicated relationship between retail jobs and retail careers is explored in the three chapters in this second part of the book, each from a unique perspective and focusing on a particular aspect of this puzzle. Huddleston takes on the industry cries for lack of skilled personnel and poses the dilemmas of retention. Her study follows a small number of students over time, gathering data from them as they work part-time in retailing during their studies and observing whether and why they change jobs, within the sector, within a particular sub-sector and out of the sector. As she argues, there are growing numbers of students who do retail work as a part-time, stopgap means of earning money. This is a potentially unrivalled opportunity for employers to demonstrate the advantages of a longer-term career in retail yet few take advantage of this, the corollary perhaps of the deskilling and the gulf between managers and workers observed in other chapters. Huddleston questions how and why employers fail at converting the accumulated skills of these ‘experienced’ workers into long-term, permanent careers.

In Chapter 7 Roberts directs our attention to another understudied, unobserved group: that of 18–24-year-old men who work as part of a highly feminized workforce. These ‘lost boys’ are neglected by both researchers and policy makers. They are not unemployed, not students and not apprentices. As a result we know surprisingly little about them, their work experiences, expectations and prospects. Here, drawing on interviews with young men working in retail, Roberts observes a fascinating distinction between workers on full-time and part-time contracts. While the full-timers considered themselves established in retail, with clear and realistic ambitions for the future and pride in their work and work skills, the part-timers spoke slightingly of retail work and retail workers and their ambitions centred on attaining celebrity status, starring in a rock band or somehow making lots of money. It seems that here, the boundary between retail work and retail careers is both contractual and attitudinal.

Jordan, with an American example, has some depressing findings on the possibility of careers in retail. For her research, she worked in and interviewed workers from ‘Hometown Market’, a unionized US supermarket chain that prided itself on treating workers well. Wages were good for the sector, part-timers had ample opportunities to switch to full-time contracts if they wished to and fringe benefits included health insurance. But, since the 1990s, rationalizations have dramatically altered these ‘good jobs’, intensifying work, cutting employees’ hours and limiting pay for new hires. Jordan
observes that, perhaps in response to this, many of the staff see retail as a temporary stopgap with even long-serving workers desirous of avoiding being ‘trapped’ at Hometown. She argues that this re-framing of their experiences enables workers to cope with the indignities of low-paid, low-status work.

This focus on terms and conditions is a useful one and a good point on which to leave this section since the difference, at Hometown at least, between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ work was not one of skill or status in the labour market but pay and prospects. As Braverman (1974) observed, the romanticized accounts of many jobs that attribute more knowledge to them than they possess fail to note their pay slips in the process. These three chapters offer very different perspectives on retail work. For all it is a place which people are ‘just passing through’ and it is interesting to see the differences between those who stay, from the choices of Huddleston’s graduates, to the realistic expectations of Roberts’s lost boys to Jordan’s constantly temporary workers.

Part III: The pressures of retail work

In the third section we look at some of the pressures and the structural factors behind the way retail employment is organized, from national, institutional frameworks to store-level human resource practices and the expectations and work of store managers. Klaveren and Voss-Dahm provide data from Germany and the Netherlands, collected as part of a wider, comparative study funded by Russell Sage. In their chapter, they reveal how these two countries, generally lauded as exemplars of good employment through regulation are making increasing use of ‘loopholes’ in the law to allow the quality and rewards of jobs to deteriorate. Here, the age-related national minimum wage in the Netherlands and the lower tax rates on part-time ‘mini-jobs’ in Germany have served to provide retail firms with cheap labour as young workers replace their older colleagues and tax breaks intended to advantage workers subsidize their employers instead.

In Chapter 10 Grugulis, Bozkurt and Clegg focus on supermarket store managers and contrast the language of leadership used in both stores and head office with the expectations and realities of work. Drawing on data from an EPSRC-funded study, they argue that managers were not inspirational visionaries but tightly controlled links in a chain who occasionally, and often illicitly, exercised small freedoms to change and improve the work of the store. Although all understood the nature of their work and their relative powerlessness they valued the leadership rhetoric. Its up-beat evangelism provided a much more aspirational account of work than the mundane realities of everyday life and helped them to mediate the human aspects of the work (as well as blaming them for every failing).
Mulholland’s work on teamworking contrasts the cooperative image suggested by the term with practice in store. She argues that, in the supermarket she worked and researched in, teamworking took three forms: it was a rhetorical way of alluding to all staff; functionally organized groups of workers who were often used interchangeably between different jobs; and small work groups of four to five employees. Store rationalization, ‘lean’ working and ‘lean’ teams resulted in intensified work, demanding targets and team leaders allocated by management with managerial and supervisory responsibilities. Structurally the picture these chapters paint of retail work is a discouraging one. Pressure to perform, pressure to reduce labour costs and pressure to meet targets are combined with the use and abuse of legislative ‘loopholes’ to reduce staff costs.

**Part IV: Negotiating ‘good work’ in retail**

The confluence of low skills, low levels of discretion, low status and low pay, and the difficulties of forging a career, much less full-time employment, in much of the retailing sector for those who are willing to try despite all these disadvantages, account for why popular conceptions of retail work involve ‘dead-ends’ and ‘dead beats’. Indeed, far from being misconceptions, much of the research in the area does underscore why such conceptions may not be ill-founded after all. Against this backdrop, is there indeed no room, and more importantly, no point in negotiating for ‘good work’ in retail? Is it a foregone conclusion that the conditions of retail employment around the world, especially by large retailers, is only to further deteriorate, with no recourse by individual workers and collective groups to resist, challenge or subvert the dictates of retail strategies of a ‘race to the bottom’? The final section of the book begins an inquiry into such questions and provides three examples from three very different contexts of how retail work is negotiated at the individual, union and national employment system levels, in efforts to carve out spaces for and resurrect ‘good work’ in this notorious type of workplace.

Asaf Darr’s chapter is taken from an ethnography of retail work, a rich and detailed account of this micro-market that forms one of the bulwarks of Capitalism. It is through retail after all that much of the buying and selling in markets takes place, so studying retail work in this way provides evidence on the way markets are enacted. As Darr’s evidence shows, his Tel Aviv computer salespeople were not crudely rational economic actors, rather they saw themselves as participants in a moral economy. This morality took two forms: first, customers were expected to actually be customers and to purchase goods. Chatty grandmother ‘Ruth’, ‘Michael Jackson’ the moonwalker,
‘Kramer’ and ‘David’ who are regular visitors to the store but who never buy anything are the unknowing butts of jokes and mockery because of their failure in this regard. Second, customers are expected to know their place in the social order and to tailor their acquisitions accordingly so that they can make use of the goods that they buy. In the moral order ‘good’ salespeople do not push top-of-the-range systems on computer novices but equally computer novices do not invest in top-of-the-range systems and those who do are again the subject of humour.

Andersson, Kazemi, Tengblad and Wickelgren provide a more positive picture of the way institutional structures and varieties of Capitalism can alter retail work than that afforded by earlier chapters on the USA, Germany and the Netherlands. Reporting on an extensive survey of retail workers and managers in Sweden they find high levels of motivation, satisfaction and commitment and argue that this probably stems from the flat wage distribution. Interestingly, this was achieved not by upskilling workers but by simply paying decent wages and a general acceptance that wage dispersion should be narrow.

In the last chapter in this section, Lynch, Pyman, Bailey and Price focus on another way of negotiating good work, the role of the trade unions. They compare the organizing strategies of SDA and USDAW, the unions in Australia and the UK respectively. Despite the geographical distance these two unions face similar issues and approach them in similar ways. Both deal with feminized, youthful labour forces with low union densities and high numbers of part-time jobs. Both have to cope with high levels of turnover in their membership and both have adopted strategies of cooperation with management. The results of their campaigns and the influence of the Organizing Academies are considered here, together with the levels of bargaining coverage in the two countries.

Finally, in an incisive Endnote, Tilly and Carré offer an account of the perceptions and realities of retail work. Detailing seven widely held views they offer research-based answers which both praise and condemn retailers. They highlight the clear need for more research in this area, into retailing in general, as a means of illuminating the diversity of the various sub-sectors and through cross-national comparisons then conclude with some policy implications on retail recruitment and how to make retail jobs better.

Conclusions

So is retail work worthy of academic interest? It is in these micro-markets that the foundations of Capitalism are laid and in the presence and activities of customers that the employment relationship is structured and restructured.
Empirically retail accounts for a significant proportion of jobs (and particularly of women's jobs) and the sector encompasses a wide range of employment systems, conditions, skills and workers. We hope that this book, and the chapters within it, help to stimulate interest in the sector as a whole since we believe it is definitely worthy of further study.

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