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Introduction

Job quality, not just job creation, matters – it contributes to economic competitiveness, social cohesion and personal well-being. In the UK, government recognizes that bad jobs can undermine health and well-being, generate in-work poverty and exacerbate child poverty, create and perpetuate gender inequalities in the labour market and beyond and constrain job and social mobility. Even during the current economic downturn the issue of job quality remains high on government agendas as part of a jobs growth strategy. US policy debates have similarly raised concerns about improving job quality and creating good jobs to deal with social and economic problems (Appelbaum et al., 2008). In Australia, it is recognized that poor job quality has costs for individuals, families and communities, and that the country’s social fabric will be frayed without policy intervention to address bad jobs. A similar concern over job quality exists within the EU, with the Lisbon Agreement promoting not just ‘more’ but also ‘better’ jobs, attempting to balance the need for increased employment participation with improved job quality. Globally, the ILO is promoting a ‘decent work’ agenda to raise labour standards, enhance employment and income opportunities, provide social protection and social security and promote social dialogue.

Academic research and debate on job quality have a long history as exemplified by the socio-technical experiments of the Tavistock Institute (e.g. Beirne, 2008), the quality of working life movement (e.g. Davis and Cherns, 1975) and job enrichment initiatives (e.g Hackman et al., 1975). Thereafter, academic attention to job quality waned in some contexts: in the UK, for example, while critical scholars engaged indirectly with job quality through marker of skills, job quality per se was a less explicit
More recently, because of its economic and social impacts, academics throughout the advanced economies are once again examining job quality (e.g. Appelbaum, Bernhardt, and Murnane, 2007; Bazen et al., 2005; Bartik and Houseman, 2008; Coats, 2009; Gallie, 2007; Gautié and Schmitt, 2010; Green, 2006). Many think tanks in these countries, using their own and often path-breaking empirical research are pressing governments to do something about bad jobs (e.g. Brookings Institution, 2007; Goulden, 2010; Lawton and Cooke, 2008). However in many cases it is journalists – through national and international bestselling books – who have been most successful in confronting government and raising public consciousness about job quality with damning indictments of the continued existence and consequences of bad jobs (e.g. Aubenas, 2011; Ehrenreich, 2001; Toynbee, 2003; Wynhausen, 2005). As these books graphically portray, workers in bad jobs are often inadequately protected by collective bargaining and employment law. They are frequently vulnerable workers, many of whom are female or ethnic minority workers, with low or no qualifications, often working part-time and in industries that are vitally important, such as health and social care.

This book focuses on these bad jobs. Over recent decades governments in the advanced economies have implicitly assumed that the ‘new economy’ would generate good jobs while eradicating bad jobs through technological substitution. The reality is somewhat different. Good jobs have been created but bad jobs persist, particularly in services (Holmes, 2011). Not surprisingly there are now demands for a ‘new deal’ or ‘new strategy’ for workers in bad jobs (e.g. Kenway, 2008; Grimshaw et al., 2008; Osterman, 2008). Yet while bad jobs are increasingly recognized as a problem, there is little evidence of a coherent policy response.

As the contents of this book recognize, an answer to the question ‘are bad jobs inevitable’ needs to draw upon new and multidisciplinary approaches, be sensitive to workers’ life courses and draw out lessons from a range of countries. The contributions that follow outline debates, developments, issues and trends in job quality; attempt to define and measure bad jobs; explain variation and change in job quality; and identify workplace practices and broader non-workplace strategies for making bad jobs better. This chapter begins by considering a range of job quality scenarios and the debates that underpin them. These debates draw upon varying definitions, components and measures of job quality which, taken together, pose a particular challenge to efforts to chart trends in job quality within and across countries. The chapter then addresses definitional issues before addressing the question of whether bad jobs are inevitable. Thereafter, the various contributors to the book expand and develop these ideas in international, national, sectoral and company contexts.
Potential job quality scenarios

In terms of what is happening to job quality there are a number of possible scenarios. These scenarios can be distinguished by their concern: some focus on changes to the number of good and bad jobs within the labour market; others focus on changes within particular jobs which make these jobs either better or worse. The two dominant scenarios for most of the past 50 years have been of the former type, anticipating that there will be relatively more good or more bad jobs respectively:

Scenario 1: jobs are getting better. In this scenario, bad jobs are eliminated, leaving only good jobs; at the same time, new types of good jobs emerge. As a consequence, the labour market is populated with only good jobs. For much of the latter half of the twentieth century, this possibility seemed more like a probability within some policy and academic circles and across the political spectrum (Darr and Warhurst, 2008). Bad jobs are eradicated as labour is substituted by technology (Holmes, 2011). The number of good jobs increases because technological advances create more complex processes, and the shift to service-based economies requires more educated labour – that is, more skilled workers (with qualifications as the proxy) (e.g. Mills, 1951; Kerr et al., 1960; Bell, 1973). A recent twist on this scenario in the advanced economies is the quest for comparative advantage against developing economies by becoming high-skill economies driven by knowledge and creativity. In such economies the production of high value-added, often intangible, products is carried out by high-skilled workers who are paid commensurately higher wages (Reich, 1993; Florida, 2002 – for an overview see Lloyd and Payne, 2004).

Scenario 2: jobs are getting worse. In this scenario, good jobs deteriorate so that the labour market is populated primarily with bad jobs. As an intentional counter to Scenario 1, some academics argued that the long-term trend over the twentieth century was not better work but a ‘degradation of work’, most obviously manifest in deskilling (Braverman, 1974). Deskilling resulted from the needs of capitalists to remain competitive and how they used technology to do so, rather than technological determinism. This deskilling applied as much to the emerging white-collar work as to blue-collar work, and would eventually occur to ‘brain work’ as well as that involving brawn (Braverman, 1974: ch.15; Beirne et al., 1998). Labour process analysis emerged out of this critique, became a key critical account of jobs in the advanced economies in the 1990s (Kitay, 1997) and continues to exercise intellectual influence (see Thompson and Smith, 2010).

Both scenarios rely heavily on skill as a marker of job quality. Interestingly, although acknowledging the role of technology, both scenarios also represent market-based accounts of job quality trends. Scenario 1 assumes that the
emergence of particular products and/or positioning in particular product markets can determine job quality – intangible goods and services trigger upskilling and quality-driven products need highly skilled workers. Scenario 2 assumes that competitive pressures from the market drive employers to seek to cheapen production processes leading to the deskilling of workers, starting with blue-collar but eventually spreading to white-collar workers too.

More recently there is an emerging consensus around a third scenario that is still focused on the relative numbers of good and bad jobs:

**Scenario 3: polarization of job quality.** In this scenario structural economic change triggers two possibilities: first, differential growth expands employment in industries providing good and bad jobs; second, the middle is hollowed out as intermediate jobs either disappear or gravitate into either good or bad jobs or are simply offshored to the developing countries. Both the US and UK labour markets have experienced growth in the number of jobs at the top and bottom of the occupational hierarchy, leading to more managerial, professional and associate professional jobs at the top, and more routine personal and interactive services jobs at the bottom (Levy and Murnane, 2004; Reich, 1993). In this respect, Goos and Manning (2007) argue that the UK labour market is now characterized by what they call ‘lovely’ and ‘lousy’ jobs. Using a mix of pay and skill as a proxy for pay, they demonstrate job growth in the lowest two and highest two deciles by pay over 1979–99, and a contraction in all other deciles (for a similar pattern in the US see Wright and Dwyer, 2006). This job polarization however does not form two parallel economies; rather, its parts are structurally interdependent, rising and falling together. Illustratively, more routine workers are required to service cash rich, time poor workers in good jobs facing a time squeeze that disables their capacity to service their own physical reproduction. Florida (2002) refers to these low-wage, low-skill workers as a ‘service class’ undertaking work pushed out from the home into the market (Warhurst, 2008). These routine service jobs are not easily automated (Holmes, 2011). This phenomenon exists in the larger global (Sassen, 2001) and creative (Florida, 2005) cities; it also exists throughout the Anglo-Saxon economies where relatively deregulated labour markets and highly polarized wage distributions make labour displacement and reconfiguration economically viable (Gautié and Schmitt, 2010).

The above three scenarios largely reflect a quantitative approach, charting the relative number of good and bad jobs in the economy. In contrast, the scenarios below focus on qualitative changes to the characteristics of jobs that make them better or worse. There are two main possibilities. The first possibility envisages the distance between good and bad jobs widening, either as good jobs get better or bad jobs get worse; the second envisages the distance diminishing, as either good jobs get worse or bad jobs get better.
**Scenario 4: good jobs are getting better.** In this scenario, features that make a job good in the first place become further enhanced. In both the US and UK top earners’ pay has increased dramatically as a ratio of low earners’ pay and even middle income earners’ pay has stagnated relative to that of top earners who have ‘continued to move away’ from middle and bottom income earners (Plunkett, 2011: 10). If bad jobs are the end of a camel train, to paraphrase Toynbee (2003), the camels at the front of the train are now not just pulling further away but disappearing over the dunes. Stewart (2011) reports that high income earners have pulled even further away during the current economic downturn as monetary quantitative easing policy has boosted share dividends and profits, from which some workers already in good jobs are more likely to benefit (as shareholders), while fiscal and wage restraint has resulted in falling real wages and salaries for workers in poorer quality jobs.

**Scenario 5: bad jobs are getting worse.** In this scenario, the gap between good and bad jobs also widens but for different reasons. The features that make jobs bad become worse. For example, in the US workers on the lowest wages have seen those wages drop not just in relative but also absolute terms over recent years (Green, 2006). In Australia, as Pocock and Skinner (Chapter 4) note, swathes of already low wage, low skill workers have seen their employment status reconfigured to become ‘casual’ labour, losing benefits, entitlements and protection as a consequence. By 2010 a quarter of all such employees were employed as casuals, lacking both holiday pay and sick leave entitlements. Eroding standards and weak government enforcement of employment law both in the US (Fine and Gordon in Chapter 12 and Theodore et al. in Chapter 13 ) and UK (Metcalf, 2007) mean that workers in bad jobs become even more vulnerable.

It is possible that both these scenarios unfold simultaneously, creating an even greater gap and a squeeze on modal job quality. However the other possibility is that the distance diminishes between good and bad jobs:

**Scenario 6: good jobs go bad.** Under this scenario, the features that made these jobs good deteriorate. A stark illustration of this possibility for good jobs at the top of the occupational hierarchy is provided by Felstead et al. (2007) who note that whilst discretion in work has declined over time for all workers, it has declined most for professional workers. Even within professional jobs, not all workers enjoy high pay and good career prospects, either because of discrimination or because the work is not equally accessible to all workers due to non-work commitments. For example, Eikhof and Warhurst (2010) reveal how nominally good jobs in the audio-visual industries go bad for women and particularly those with dependent children. This occurrence matters because the creative industries are a key feature of governments’ beloved ‘new economy’. This example also illustrates that who the job-holders are matters in any understanding of job quality, and how workers’
particular personal circumstances can influence perceptions and experience of job quality. Moreover, relatively good jobs are not confined to the top of the occupational hierarchy. Some intermediate jobs, particularly in manufacturing, also attained some good jobs’ features in the twentieth century; won by trade unions supported by progressive governments. However these gains are under threat, this time through globalization. To save these jobs from being offshored and lost to cheaper wage countries, labour in the advanced economies accepts new and inferior terms and conditions, typically work intensification and lower wages. Health insurance and other benefits too are disappearing (Bartik and Houseman, 2008). This theme is one taken up by Rothstein (Chapter 8). Amid concerns about the relocation of production to Mexico, he reveals a ‘hollowing out’ of good jobs in the US auto industry. However he also appreciates that those jobs that are relocated to Mexico are relatively good jobs in that country even if comparatively worse than jobs remaining in the US. Clearly geography matters too in understanding job quality.

There are thus a number of possibilities with regard to the job quality trajectory. What can be said with some confidence is that bad jobs still exist, are likely to persist and possibly grow in number and may even be worsening. There is some indication that good jobs might also be worsening. The latter scenario represents a regressive way to reduce the gap between good and bad jobs. A more progressive way forward emerges with the final scenario, that of improving bad jobs:

Scenario 7: bad jobs get better. Under this scenario, the features that make jobs bad are ameliorated. Despite governments’ desire for a ‘new economy’ of good jobs, a wholesale transformation of bad jobs into good jobs is unlikely. As Crouch et al. (1999) and Keep (2000) point out, if product market positioning and consumer purchasing power in the economy drive job quality, there are only so many industries and occupations that can sustain high pay and skills. That bad jobs will persist might not be a problem if they are populated with workers with ready exit options. Students, for example, can work in these jobs to pay their way through study but then move onwards and upwards into good jobs using their acquired educational qualifications as leverage. However for other occupants of these jobs, at least in the US and UK, there is an acute ‘bad jobs trap’ (Booth and Snower, 1996), particularly for women (Mason and Salverda, 2010), with a range of deleterious economic and social consequences. Interventions to make bad jobs better are therefore desirable, and discretionary space exists for these interventions (Glyn, 2006). These interventions would centre on enforcing, or better still, enhancing existing employment standards – that is leveraging ‘employment enrichment’. They would be driven by a number of actors individually or in concert nationally and internationally: government, unions and employers.
most obviously. Chapters in this volume, especially in Part II, offer a range of ideas, initiatives and suggestions as to how this discretionary space is being, or could be, exploited. For example, Dill et al. (Chapter 7) discuss specific improvement initiatives aimed at bad jobs in the US health care sector; Lambert and Henly (Chapter 9) show that even in the presence of strong corporate constraints, managers can create more humane scheduling regimes; Fine and Gordon (Chapter 12) explore how worker organizations can be incorporated into workplace inspection. Thus while making bad jobs better is aspirational, there are good examples of how aspiration might be turned into reality.

**Analysing job quality**

As Antón et al. (Chapter 2) note, despite the best efforts of governments and academics, there is no universally accepted definition of job quality. Instead, analyses typically proceed by focusing on one or a number of components of what might comprise job quality and for which data sets already exist. The scenarios above highlight the reliance on pay and skill in many accounts, and this approach is not unusual (Clark, 2005). However, the scenarios also hint at other potential components of job quality. These components include labour contract type, job security, training and progression opportunities, employee voice and social dialogue, job satisfaction, work organization generally and task discretion particularly, management style and fairness at work, working hours flexibility specifically and work–life balance generally (variously, for example, Coats 2009; Gallie, 2007; Gautié and Schmitt, 2010; Green, 2006; Kalleberg, 2011; Smith et al.2008; Tilly, 1997). Enveloping these markers is an over-arching debate over whether job quality should be measured by job or worker characteristics, objective or subjective measures (Gallie, 2007). A recent addition to this debate is the configuration of good and bad jobs by geography. The varieties of capitalism approach, whilst primarily seeking to differentiate and categorize countries – articulated usually as those with co-ordinated market economies or liberal market economies – also, at least implicitly, assumes that jobs within one of these types – the co-ordinated market economies – are better than in the others (Crouch, 2009). This assumption is borne out by Green’s (2006) analysis. However, good jobs and bad jobs can and do co-exist within the same economy type (even within occupations) and in different regions of the same country, as Green (2009) demonstrates with the UK. Regional differences shape not just average job quality, but also the contours of inequality in job quality (McCall, 2001).

Within this debate, academics have a disciplinary bent. Economists prioritize pay and sometimes skill; sociologists focus on skill (and related work and
management practices such as autonomy and discretion) and more recently job security (Kalleberg, 2011; Kalleberg et al., 2000) and work–life balance (Kelliher and Anderson, 2008). Psychologists focus on job satisfaction and commitment and, more recently, well-being and happiness (Warr and Clapperton, 2009). Political scientists and geographers emphasize the cross-national and cross-regional distribution of job quality (Crouch, 2009; Green, 2009). This debate on how best to analyse job quality is important. Despite the emphasis on it, data on what workers consider a good job reveal that pay is not the priority. Using two proxy measures of job quality – workers’ commitment to their job and the attributes of those jobs (the latter distinguished by extrinsic and intrinsic attributes), Sutherland (2011) shows that, in order of preference, workers most value work that is enjoyable, has job security, provides opportunity to use their abilities, has good social relations in production and allows them to use their initiative. Pay ranks only seventh. These findings are aggregated; a breakdown reveals that women more than men value work with convenient hours or hours that they can choose, that highly qualified workers want jobs that allow them to use their initiative and use their abilities, and that workers with dependent children place more emphasis on pay. This later emphasis is picked up by Pocock and Skinner (Chapter 4). They point out that, although objective minimum standards are required, particularly for casual workers in Australia, what constitutes a good job can vary subjectively by personal circumstance. They argue analysis of job quality requires a new framework, one based on workplace, industry, relevant institutions and wider social contexts plus awareness that what constitutes a good job may change over a workers’ life stage.

In addition to identifying and analysing the components of job quality, a key issue implicitly raised by Pocock and Skinner is the standard against which job quality is measured. Absolute standards (such as ‘decent work’) have some appeal; although in order to generate consensus, they tend to be set low. Further, on closer examination what may appear at face value as an absolute standard can contain relative elements. For example, in the ILO’s ‘decent work’ discourse there is a welcome demand for the banning of child labour but definitions of a ‘child’ may be contested.

Moreover, sociological and social psychological evidence suggests that beyond a minimum level of job quality, relative rather than absolute assessments of job quality are most salient to people. Highlighting the importance of relative quality, Álvarez-Galván (Chapter 10) examines the apparent paradox that workers in ‘bad’ call centre jobs in Mexico like their jobs, whereas those in ‘good’ call centre jobs do not: the explanation lies in the reference point to which they are comparing these jobs. However, there are varied dimensions of relativity: comparisons can be made relative to other jobs and economic alternatives, relative to other life circumstances and stages,
relative to past job quality and relative to job quality in other countries. The latter emphasizes the need for international analyses of job quality which recognizes dynamism in the global economy. Job quality can be ‘read’ differently in different countries at different times. Consider, for example, contemporary China in relation to the US or UK. In China, rural-to-urban migrants begin by comparing jobs to even worse rural alternatives but over time shift the focus of their comparison to their urban peers, leading to different evaluations and expectations of job quality, in this case contributing to the mid-2010 manufacturing strike wave (Piore, 1979; Kennedy and Tilly, 2010). Moreover, because of the participation of companies and countries in global value chains, job quality comparisons (particularly in relation to wages and therefore production costs) become international. In China’s case, Chinese labour costs are constantly being compared with those in richer countries (‘Is China taking our jobs?’) and poorer countries (‘Will Vietnam and Bangladesh take China’s jobs?’).

Similarly, even in the richer countries such as the US and UK, workers make intra-country comparisons with other occupations and over time. Bad jobs look particularly bad in the context of extraordinarily high compensation for managers, bankers and entertainers, and in context of increasing shares of national income going to property income (Toynbee and Walker, 2008). Moreover, there is a strong sense that the quality of bad jobs is worsening over time. As Aubenas (2011) points out in her account of bad jobs in France, these jobs were indeed bad before the current economic downturn but have become considerably worse.

Are bad jobs inevitable?

The co-editors of this volume share the view that disparities among jobs, between so-called bad jobs and the rest, are too large and can be reduced. Given the evidence of worsening job quality in a number of industries and occupations, this section examines the forces that have contributed to eroding the quality of entry- and mid-level jobs. It then goes on to explore avenues for counteracting these forces or remedying the impacts on workers.

What forces are driving changes in jobs, particularly the worsening of jobs?

Three sets of inter-related trends of the past 30 years have undermined job quality. First, in a number of industries, business strategy has essentially shifted to labour cost cutting as a primary competitive strategy. Coupled with this emphasis, firms have reorganized production processes in ways that
rely more readily on international supply chains, inter-firm subcontracting, and externalization of some workforces to the end of saving on production costs. Concurrent with these changes, greater penetration of financial actors in firm ownership and finances (‘financialization’) has generated particular incentives – for example, leveraged buy-outs have inserted great pressure on management to yield high and growing net earnings and shortened the time horizon for management decisions (Batt and Appelbaum, 2010). Second, many of these practices have thrived in a neo-liberal policy environment favouring deregulation of industries and reduction of labour standards protection. Third, pressure on systems has come from more proximate wage competition due to the increased ease of implementation of off-shore production. The intent in analysing these trends is not to argue that jobs have on average become worse but to understand the dynamics that underlie situations in which jobs at lower and middle levels have become worse.

Firstly, in industries where job quality has been of concern – often, but not exclusively, labour-intensive industries – the most proximate cause for quality erosion has been changes in labour deployment strategies. Firms have chosen labour strategies, ostensibly to match product market strategies, that emphasize cost cutting, with labour costs reductions expected to support other cost savings achieved through productive efficiency gains. These cost cutting strategies in turn have been further enabled by the choices underpinning the implementation of new technologies, particularly information technologies, that facilitate off-shoring of manufacturing and some services (by facilitating long distance coordination) (Appelbaum et al., 2008). Rothstein’s study (Chapter 8) of the downward arc of automotive assembly jobs includes all of these elements.

Additionally, in domestic service industries, firms have implemented information technology in ways that decrease the task autonomy of workers while increasing their responsibility for outcomes, as has been the case with banking and insurance workers (e.g. Adler, 1986; Appelbaum and Albin, 1989). In many industries, management has exhibited a predilection towards maintaining, or reinforcing, habits regarding job design that limit autonomy. Contributions to this volume by Álvarez-Galván (Chapter 10) and Lambert and Henly (Chapter 9) depict cases in point, low end call centre work and retail sales. This pattern of control occurs even in industries where the prevailing competitive strategy is not simply cost cutting but entails competing on product or service quality (Bailey and Bernhardt, 1998; Putton et al. 2008). In this regard, broad groups of entry- and mid-level workers, not solely those with the worst jobs, may have experienced job worsening.

A number of factors have enabled or facilitated these changes within firms: changes in job structures and altered power relations. Traditional avenues for pay progression and job improvement over the work careers that
consisted of job ladders within firms have significantly weakened (Cappelli et al., 1997; Osterman, 1996). Employers have greater ability to recruit from outside the firm for intermediate positions. With this pattern of recruitment, entry level jobs are severed from paths of internal promotion and remain low quality. In most countries, the shift to mid-level recruitment from outside has been made possible by the increased availability of credentialed workers and, to some extent, the spread of generic skills (tied to widely used information technologies) that facilitates lateral mobility of mid-level workers (Hartmann, 1987). The decreased emphasis on firm-specific knowledge (Cappelli et al., 1997; Hunter et al., 2001) has played a role in this altered hiring and promotion pattern though it is hard to tell whether this emphasis is inevitable or itself a product of the choice of labour strategy. In industries that do not entail face-to-face contact to deliver the product, even mid-level jobs can be outsourced domestically or off-shored and are thus subject to wage pressure.

At the same time, within firms and industries, worker organizations have lost substantial bargaining power over compensation and job design; again, Rothstein’s account of an auto industry once dominated by a mighty union in the US is apposite. This power shift from labour to management has consequences at the firm level and, as discussed below, at the policy level as well. The loss of power of worker organizations is driven by several factors: forces described above, as well as increased geographical mobility of capital within and across national borders. Within national borders, firms may choose to move to regions with low unionization rates or threaten to do so. Flexibility in the location of production is significant for manufacturing, e.g. in the auto industry as seen in Rothstein’s chapter (Chapter 8) and financial services (banking, insurance, telecommunications, as in the outsourced call centre functions Álvarez-Galván describes (Chapter 10), but is quite limited in the case of in-person services industries. Also, labour bargaining power is weakened by labour market conditions themselves as a result of changes in the geographical distribution of production. In parts of Western Europe, for example, persistent high unemployment and underemployment, particularly among recent labour force entrants, have undermined workers’ individual and collective power.

Within each industry, patterns of labour use have spread through dynamics of their own. Labour cost cutting competitive strategies can spread and average job quality may worsen as a result. Spread occurs primarily through price competition: witness the spread of labour cost cutting practices in the food retail sector as a result of the expansion of large chains such as Tesco and Walmart. Importantly, practices that lead to debased job design and low compensation may spread within industries through the adoption of ‘standards of practice’ by management.
A second trend feeding the worsening of jobs is that, beyond within-sector management practices, changes have taken place in national institutional environments that render easier the spread of cost cutting practices across sectors, with damaging impacts on job quality. (The contributions in Gautié and Schmitt (2010) illustrate how some industries take the lead in low-wage practices that are the ‘wedges’ in jettisoning practices and standards in other industries.) While the present discussion summarizes these trends schematically, cross-national differences in institutional environments and in interactions between state and market spheres must be borne in mind. The extent of bad jobs and their characteristics depend upon national and regional institutional contexts as well. For example, countries differ greatly in the extent of regulation of a floor of wage and working conditions (an issue spotlighted by Theodore et al. in Chapter 13), of collective bargaining coverage and comprehensiveness of vocational and skill training systems. Additionally, countries differ in the extent to which work organization and design are subjects of collective bargaining. Here, the goal is to identify broad trends that have affected all advanced economies but have been more marked in some countries than others, partly due to these cross-national differences in national models (Gallie, 2007; Gautié and Schmitt, 2010).

What societal and institutional forces have enabled the spread and adoption of strategies that result in ‘bad’ jobs? An overarching factor has been a progressive loss of interest in a redistributive agenda and a social agenda for policy as well as a reduced sense of social responsibility among leading employers. It is difficult to tell whether this loss of interest is the cause or effect of other changes. Nevertheless, it is related in part to changed power relationships in societies, most notably the loss of union power at the national level, itself another dimension of the diminished role of unions at the workplace level in some countries as well as the reduced share of (heavily unionized) manufacturing in total employment. In the policy arena, this shift is often characterized as neo-liberalism (Gentile, 2011; Harvey, 2005). The ability of unions and other pro-worker organizations to maintain the value of minimum wages, to forestall deregulatory policy moves (youth sub minimum wages or marginal/’mini’ jobs operating under different social contribution regimes or nonstandard contracts) and to support training and job creation policies has decreased. A pro-worker agenda is harder to push forward in national environments where state–employer relationships are being re-negotiated and where tri-partite (corporatist) frameworks for policy making are losing legitimacy or simply losing relevance and impact. In one example, Thomas (Chapter 14) shows how governments in the Canadian province of Ontario progressively loosened labour standards in the name of ‘efficiency’. Related policy changes extend as well to more macroeconomic
policies, so-called free trade agreements, or even foreign exchange policies that affect the price of exports thereby affecting market opportunities for particular sectors (particularly manufacturing), with further consequences for managerial decisions regarding job quality.

Bad jobs have also persisted because firms have been able to externalize some of the costs of bad jobs and shifted them to other parts of the socio-economic system. For example, low-wage workers may access income support programmes to make up for budget shortfalls. Osterman in Chapter 3 notes that even those sympathetic to the needs of workers in the US tend to emphasize the Earned Income Tax Credit – an income supplement – rather than policy directed at improving jobs themselves, a point Toynbee (2003) made about the last New Labour Government in the UK.

Also contributing to a policy environment where the generation of bad jobs is not perceived as a policy problem is the reduction in government’s role as an employer, thus diminishing its opportunities to play the role of a trend setter for employment practices and policies as it has historically done in many countries. Fiscal pressures have affected jobs in public organizations, government agencies as well as para-public institutions such as hospitals or public utilities. Munro (Chapter 11) examines the trajectory of government’s initiatives to change – or not – the nature of hospital cleaning jobs in the UK and the impact of such changes on the quality of cleaning jobs.

National and regional institutional environments may also enable the spread of bad job strategies by facilitating the migration of practices from one industry to others. ‘Race to the bottom’ strategies that are enabled by weak worker organization also weaken action to reinforce labour standards, to advocate for workforce training and to put pressure on firms to invest in workforce training and career ladder development.

A third and often mentioned source of downward pressure on job quality has been what some see as the virtual expansion of labour markets due to European integration and the opening of Eastern Europe as well as China and India to global markets. Workforces may travel more easily and directly compete for jobs with each other or may compete indirectly by being involved in cross-border production processes that enable firms to achieve cost savings through wage competition (Freeman, 2006). Actual relocation, or even a threat of relocation, can discourage worker organization, as Bronfenbrenner (2000) notes, and trigger wage pressure. This pressure can affect jobs at all levels. Effects may include a worsening of existing bad jobs or an increase in the number of bad jobs. Exactly how these pressures will play out and affect labour markets is still the subject for industry- and occupation-specific research.
How could bad jobs get better?

The three sets of reasons for worsening jobs also point to three possible leverage points for improving job quality: ‘high road’ business strategy, shifts in the institutional incentive structure and global regulatory approaches. However, before examining these three avenues, it is necessary to examine a stumbling block to improving jobs: the notion of a ‘quality–quantity trade off’, meaning that any attempt to raise labour standards will lead to decreases in the quantity of employment, or at least of formal employment.

The quality–quantity trade-off is underpinned by the neoclassical economic propositions that workers get pay equal to their productivity, that the configuration of technology and skills determine productivity levels, and that actions raising unit labour costs above productivity will induce employers to either scale back employment (shedding less productive workers) or evade the raised labour standards by moving into the informal economy. This argument is deployed against minimum wages, unionization and a variety of other worker protections. Perhaps its most notable exposition was the OECD Jobs Study (1994), which casts a long shadow over job quality discussions to this day. However, much research has challenged the Jobs Study directly (Howell et al. 2007; Bradley and Stevens, 2007), as well as presenting evidence that particular labour standards have little or no negative employment impact (Card and Krueger, 1995; Galli and Kucera, 2008). Indeed, within this volume, Paul Osterman (Chapter 3) mounts a spirited critique of the quality–quantity trade-off and Antón et al. (Chapter 2) show that, within Europe, job quality is positively correlated with employment levels. Overall, the evidence could be summarized as demonstrating that quite a bit of variation in labour standards and institutions is possible with little or no negative effect (and in some cases, it appears, with positive effect) on the quantity of formal jobs.

So what of the three avenues for improving bad jobs? Regarding business strategy, many argue that firms can follow a ‘high road’ that involves simultaneously improving worker jobs and achieving higher quality and innovation, so that the two processes reinforce each other (Appelbaum and Batt, 1994; Appelbaum et al., 2000; Best, 1990, Lazonick, 1991; Schuler and Jackson, 1987). In this view, diffusing knowledge of high road strategies is in itself an important strategy for better jobs. However, some research suggests that the connection between business strategy and human resource strategy is tighter in manufacturing than in services (Bailey and Bernhardt, 1997; Dutton et al., 2008; Lloyd, 2005) – and of course, at least in the richer countries, service jobs make up the majority of jobs and include a disproportionate share of bad jobs (as Antón et al. document in Chapter 2). Moreover, most high road advocates acknowledge that it is necessary to ‘block off the
low road’ through regulatory measures in addition to ‘paving the high road’ (Wright and Rogers, 2010, ch. 9).

In this volume, several authors cast a critical eye on high road possibilities. Dill et al. are most sanguine, describing how US health care employers have constructed career ladders offering upward mobility in order to motivate and retain their employees. Munro also examines a health care case (hospital cleaners in the UK), but find a tension between cost-cutting and career path creation. Lambert and Henly, studying a single US retailer, offer evidence that when managers use their limited discretionary power to offer more liveable work schedules, it pays off in reduced employee turnover. Huzzard, contrasting two Swedish automotive suppliers, notes the importance of corporate governance, and specifically ‘patient capital’, in making high road human resource strategies feasible. Finally Rothstein, comparing auto assembly plants in the US and Mexico, not only explores the downside of employee involvement but also shows that even within the same company and production system, the meaning and implementation of employee involvement can take entirely distinct forms depending on historical and institutional context.

Institutional carrots and sticks represent a second possible avenue towards better jobs. The emphasis here is precisely on paving the high road and closing off the low road. Paving the high road can include strengthening workforce training and retraining (Ashton et al., 2000), and providing assistance for technological or business system upgrading, especially for smaller or informal businesses (Lal, 2008; Tendler, 2002). Closing off the low road, most fundamentally, means setting and enforcing a floor on employment conditions, as Fine and Gordon, Pocock and Skinner, Thomas and Theodore et al. emphasize in this volume. But it can also extend beyond the workplace proper to include rebuilding a social safety net (Standing, 2004) and providing added supports in the reproductive sphere to enable those with unpaid care work and family responsibilities to more effectively negotiate the interface between work and home life (Wagner, 2005); Lambert and Henly’s contribution to this volume (Chapter 9) demonstrates how important this interface is to workers, but also to business outcomes. Blocking the low road can also include policies in the market for goods and services, directing competition towards channels other than pure price competition (Askenazy et al. forthcoming; Gautié and Schmitt, 2010).

Although this list of institutional levers has spotlighted state action, worker organizations also play a critically important role in both facilitating the high road and obstructing the low road. Thus innovative labour strategies, especially those that reach marginal, informal and hard-to-organize workers, are part of the prescription for better jobs (Eade and Leather, 2005; Milkman et al., 2010; Silver, 2003). Trades unions and other worker organizations do not loom large in the current volume, perhaps a reflection of their
diminished clout. Indeed, Rothstein depicts an autoworkers’ union wielding precious little power in the face of competitive threats and the reorganization of production. Nonetheless Carré and Tilly, Huzzard and Pocock and Skinner posit the continuing importance of unions and Thomas’s account of legislated employment standards points to the importance of organized labour as an advocate for high road policies.

Importantly, these policy tools can be most effective in combination. To this point, Keep and James (Chapter 15) argue that investing in skills alone has not and cannot substantively change the nature of jobs; rather, what they call ‘a multi-level suite of policy interventions’ is required – a point amplified by Pocock and Skinner (Chapter 4).

Turning to the third avenue for improving jobs, global labour regulation in many ways reprises the options just discussed, though on the less familiar terrain of the global economy. Backer (2008) and others have pointed to the growing importance of private regulatory channels, such as corporate codes of conduct or fair trade labelling. Bronfenbrenner (2007) highlights the impact of global unions and labour alliances. The ILO (e.g. ILO 1998) has stressed the adoption by states of universal principles, especially the so-called core labour standards. Some observers (Evans, 2010; Hepple, 2005) descry in this accumulating patchwork of regulatory elements the potential for a more comprehensive and powerful global framework for boosting job quality. Rothstein’s analysis of the transnational auto industry (Chapter 8) points to the need to develop such a comprehensive framework.

A relevant question about these avenues for improving bad jobs is, will any of them actually happen? This is a difficult question to answer from the cool detachment of social science observation. The viability of these options is largely a matter of political and managerial will as well as the organizing ingenuity and persistence of worker organizations and other progressive forces. What can be stated is that these options are real possibilities.

The book before you

This volume explores the inevitability – or not – of bad jobs empirically. Part I, ‘International Overviews and Comparative Approaches’, starts with reviews of job quality issues in the EU (Antón, Fernández-Macías and Muñoz de Bustillo), the US (Osterman) and Australia (Pocock and Skinner). All three chapters make comparisons: Antón et al. compare two dozen EU countries, while Osterman and Pocock and Skinner contrast their subject countries with other OECD members. Carré and Tilly close the section with a conceptual framework for cross-national comparative analysis of determinants of job quality.
Part II, ‘Influences on Job Quality: Sectoral Approaches and Workplace Practices’, presents a kaleidoscopic collection of case studies of bad jobs in particular industries and countries. The chapters encompass a broad range of industries. Huzzard and Rothstein scrutinize automotive manufacturing – Huzzard in Sweden, Rothstein in the US and Mexico. Lambert and Henly examine retail in the US. Álvarez-Galván draws contrasts among call centre jobs in Mexico. Munro, along with Dill, Morgan and Kalleberg, investigates health care jobs in the UK and the US respectively. These rich case studies analyse why some jobs are better or worse than others despite similar job content and settings. They emphasize the variability of business human resource strategies.

Part III, ‘Influences on Job Quality: The Role of Public Agency’, spotlights the state’s role in assuring or undermining job quality. James and Keep and Theodore, Bernhardt and DeFilippis (plus co-authors) point to the problems that arise when states set labour standards too low or fail to enforce them. Finally, Thomas as well as Fine and Gordon look at ways that local and regional authorities and national states can more effectively regulate job terms and conditions.

Are bad jobs inevitable? The evidence in this volume suggests that they are not. Particular business strategies, particular market ground rules and particular public policies can make many bad jobs better. This research makes a strong case that, though it is not easy to improve bad jobs, it can be done.

Note

1 For an overview of the UK government’s approach see http://www.makingbadjobsbetter.org.uk

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