

# Book Review: The Sociology of Work, 4th Edition by Keith Grint and Darren Nixon

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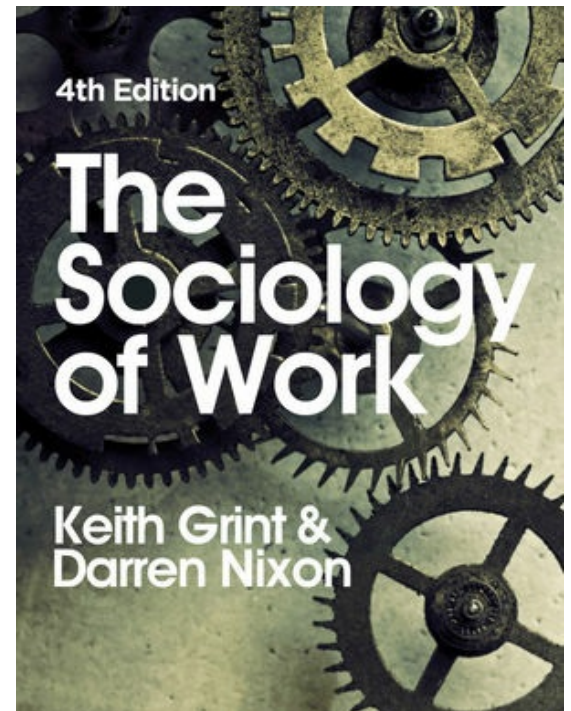
*Chris McLachlan reviews the 4th edition of **The Sociology of Work** and finds its intricate theoretical nuance and survey of relevant data offers students an intense appraisal of authors in the field and plenty of future avenues for study. Topics range from definitional, historical perspectives on work, to discussion of gender, race and class, finishing with an analysis of the proliferation of the knowledge and service sector in the global economy.*

**The Sociology of Work, 4th Edition. Keith Grint and Darren Nixon. Polity. 2015.**

In a time of growing employment precarity, zero hour contracts and the globalisation of the workforce, the significance of our working lives is more pertinent than ever. The question as to what work 'is' and how we orient our lives around it has not only been subject to much historical debate, its relevance remains timeless. Keith Grint and Darren Nixon – academics at Warwick and Leeds Beckett universities, respectively – have offered a lengthy volume that tackles the contemporary permutations of the world of work in the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of *Sociology of Work*.

In essence, *Sociology of Work* is a university textbook that would suit an undergraduate and even postgraduate audience with a range of further reading and authors recommended, along with the inclusion of prospective seminar questions at the end of each chapter. Each chapter acts as a new topic within the broader work sociology field, and given its textbook format could quite easily form a semester long university module. Topics range from definitional, historical perspectives on work, to discussion of gender, race and class, finishing with an analysis of the proliferation of the knowledge and service sector in the global economy. The key founding fathers of Marx, Weber and Durkheim make obvious appearances, with reference to their ideas effectively applied throughout.

At times the style of writing that can appear overly critical of the prevailing literature, seeming to set up 'straw men' in the analysis. There is the suggestion throughout the book that there is, basically, no adequate theorisation of the world of work. Indeed, one of the key messages is the heterogeneity and diversity inherent in the contemporary work context, so this would not be too far off the mark in this regard. This perhaps also reflects the university textbook format, offering students an intense appraisal of authors in the field in order to encourage a future critical spirit amongst them. Such an intention would mostly certainly be welcomed in business schools.





**Image credit:** [Karol Gajda](#)

The separate chapters addressing gender, race and class help bring the issues in contemporary working life and its impact on certain groups into focus. Although dealt with separately, the issues for each group naturally overlap into other areas. For example, the disproportionate impact of the rise of the service sector on women (and men via deindustrialisation) is highlighted in chapter 9, suggesting that service work has been viewed as more ‘appropriate’ to women because of the dominance of low skilled and emotional labour in the sector. Whilst a crude stereotype, data on occupation and sex reveals that women make up a greater share of employment in administrative and secretarial work, personal service and sales and customer service.

Such data do not necessarily suggest anything new, with the implicit assumption being that because of the outdated, traditional view of women’s work being in the domestic sphere, women take up work that best suits their domestic responsibilities. Further data presented in the book show that work of this nature is typically low paid, part time and in the aforementioned occupations. Here in lies another key message in the book; the false, socially constructed distinction between paid, market labour and unpaid, domestic labour. A startling figure from Legal and General suggests that in the UK the market value of domestic work is nearly £32,000 a year. This demonstrates the crucial role that domestic work plays in the production and reproduction of capitalism, providing it with a healthy workforce to go on and sell their productive labour in the paid, market sphere. In essence, this suggests that the continuation of capitalism relies on women being in the home.

Rightfully so that women’s relationship with work has moved away from such ‘traditional’ ideas and the book does well to highlight the improvements along with the negative experiences throughout history. This includes a damning critique of trade unions’ approach to organising women workers (and migrant workers). The old fashioned view of a union member being a working class male working in heavy industry has never really been amenable to the plight of women. Grint and Nixon present data highlighting the lower union densities of women members, but showing that some progress in recruiting women into unions is visible. But the reluctance and inflexibility of unions to actively recruit women has been attributed to unions’ historical hostility to part time work; of which women make up a larger share.

One of the new additions to this 4<sup>th</sup> edition is chapter 10 on work and identity. Do we work for the instrumental, material rewards it brings, or because of more meaningful, expressive orientations? Clearly, there is no one answer to this. We need our wages to survive, but we also aspire work that is satisfying and helps us realise our potential as

human beings. The challenge here, as argued by the authors, is that these two orientations are becoming more difficult to subsist because of the increasingly flexible, unstable and insecure nature of contemporary work. The instrumental reasons for which we work are, seemingly, taking further precedence.

This chapter is arguably the most thought-provoking, with a section considering how consumption has displaced occupations as the source of one's identity. The authors note that 'we increasingly use it [consumption] to differentiate ourselves and to evaluate, classify and judge others' (p. 309). Consumption is thus replacing the expressive orientations that work once provided. To offer a trivial example – as the authors fail to do – the suggestion is that one is more likely to identify as a mod because of the Fred Perry shirt and Vespa scooter they buy, as opposed to their day job as a steelworker. The job as a steelworker simply provides the money to sustain the mod lifestyle.

A usual criticism of social science textbooks is they tend to skim over issues in order to accommodate a higher number of topics in the limited space. This means they are often lacking the required depth to fully understand the complexities of the social world. This volume bucks that trend with intricate theoretical nuance where it matters, supplemented with relevant data where further explanation is required. For that reason, it should be a definitive text for any student seeking to understand our necessarily frustrating relationship with the world of work.

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