

The Post-Fordist Sexual Contract

Working and Living in Contingency

EDITED BY

Lisa Adkins
Maryanne Dever



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Lisa Adkins

University of Newcastle, Australia

University of Tampere and University of Turku, Finland

Maryanne Dever

University of Technology Sydney

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Notes on Contributors

Lisa Adkins holds the BHP Billiton Chair of Sociology at the University of Newcastle, Australia, and is also a FiDiPro Distinguished Professor at the Universities of Tampere and Turku, Finland (2015–19). She was previously Professor of Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her research interests fall into three main areas: social and cultural theory, economic sociology (especially the sociology of post-industrial economies and the new political economy), and feminist theory and the sociology of gender. She has published *Gendered Work: Sexuality, Family and the Labour Market* (1995) and *Revisions: Gender and Sexuality in Late Modernity* (2002), together with *Feminism After Bourdieu* (2005), co-edited with Beverley Skeggs. She has also contributed to debates concerning the reconstruction of social science through the volumes *What is the Empirical?* (2009) and *Measure and Value* (2012), both co-edited with Celia Lury. Her recent research focuses on the restructuring of labour, money and time in post-Fordist capitalism. Publications from this work have appeared in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, *Feminist Review*, and *Social Epistemology*. She co-edits *Australian Feminist Studies* with Maryanne Dever.

Ayşe Akalin is Assistant Professor of Sociology in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Istanbul Technical University, Turkey. Her fields of interest include critical migration studies, feminist theory and theories of the body.

Kori Allan is a conjoint fellow in the School of Humanities and Social Science at the University of Newcastle, Australia, where she holds a postdoctoral fellowship (2014–2016) awarded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). Her research interests in anthropology and sociology focus on the study of labour, migration and language. Her current project examines the reconfiguration of labour and life in post-industrial Canada through the lens of unpaid work placements (e.g. volunteer work and internships).

Orly Benjamin is an associate professor in the Sociology Department and the Gender Studies programme at Bar-Ilan University, Israel. She co-chairs the Israeli Sociological Association's section on the family and connects women's issues at home to their position in the workplace.

Her research interests include women and precarious employment in Israel, gender and job insecurity, and family, intimate relations, sexuality and adolescent girls. Her book with Michal Rom, *Feminism, Family and Identities in Israel* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), discusses Israeli married women's naming practices as reflecting local political contestations of feminist understandings of family obligations.

Maryanne Dever is a professor and an associate dean in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney, Australia, and a visiting professor at the University of Tampere, Finland. She was previously the director of the Centre for Women's Studies & Gender Research at Monash University, Melbourne, and president of the Australian Women's and Gender Studies Association. Her primary area of research is archive studies. In addition, she has published on debates in women's and gender studies and on women, work and higher education. Her articles in this area have appeared in *Gender, Work and Organization*, *Tertiary Education and Management*, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, and *The European Journal of Women's Studies*. She co-edits *Australian Feminist Studies* with Lisa Adkins.

Lydia Hayes is an early career researcher at Cardiff University Law School, UK, where she holds a research fellowship sponsored by the *Journal of Law and Society*. Her research investigates how law at work has particular impacts on the experiences and well-being of workers in low-wage employment. She is currently writing a monograph, entitled *Homecare: Low-waged Women, Stereotyping and Law at Work*. It explores the experience of homecare workers and the gendered and class bias inherent in the organisation and application of employment law.

Dan Irving is an associate professor at the Institute of Interdisciplinary Studies, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada. His book *Trans Activism in Canada: A Reader* (co-edited with Rupert Raj) was published in 2014. His current research focuses on unemployment and underemployment among trans* identified populations.

Susan Luckman is Professor of Cultural Studies in the School of Communication, International Studies and Languages at the University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia. She is also a member of the Hawke Research Institute and leader of the Creative Communities and Global Cosmopolitanisms Research Group. She is the author of *Craft and the Creative Economy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) and *Locating Cultural Work: The Politics and Poetics of Rural, Regional and Remote Creativity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). She currently holds an Australian Research Council

Discovery Grant which investigates the contemporary experience of operating a design craft creative business.

Mona Mannevu works at the School of History, Culture and Art Studies at the University of Turku, Finland, and in 2016 will take up the position of research fellow in the Academy of Finland FiDiPro project 'Social Science for the C21st' led by Lisa Adkins. Her research interests include gender, class, capitalism, affects and post-Fordist politics.

Jessica Taylor is a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Toronto Mississauga, Canada. Her research examines the work of women writers in both new and old media, from ethnographic research on flexible labour, romance writers and writing communities in Canada to her new project on mommy bloggers.

1

Contingent Labour and the Rewriting of the Sexual Contract

Lisa Adkins

Introduction

This book is concerned with labour in post-Fordist capitalism and especially with its reworking and restructuring. This reworking and restructuring is multi-dimensional and multi-faceted and its terms are constantly under revision. Such ceaseless and apparently limitless restructuring – including of the conditions and possibilities of labour – is taking place in a context where capital has been released from the equilibrium-seeking devices and regulatory constraints of Fordism. This is a context where capital seeks not a social contract with labour but a contingent and provisional contract, a contract where nothing is guaranteed for the worker or would-be worker other than the hope or possibility of work but not necessarily a sustaining wage or a life that can be planned into the future.

The techniques of such contingency are legion. They include the contracting and sub-contracting of labour (including the transformation of employees into self-employed workers), the externalisation of wages (where wages are placed in a perpetual state of market competition) and insourcing. The latter involves the break-up of organisations into discrete enterprises, the formation of sub-contracting chains between and across such enterprises, and the transformation of employees into assignment workers. The techniques of contingency also include the rewriting of employment and working contracts (such that employment and social rights are downgraded and where work and wages themselves are by no means guaranteed), and the use of commercial – rather than labour or employment – law in the writing and framing of employment contracts and of broader workplace agreements (Adkins, 2015; Bryan and Rafferty, 2014; Cooper, 2012; Fudge, 2012; Fudge and Strauss, 2013;

Peck and Theodore, 2012; Rafferty and Yu, 2010). In these conditions it is no surprise that the figures of the independent contractor and the entrepreneur have emerged as the ideal workers of post-Fordism. These are workers who invest in their own human capital, contract out their own labour and take on the risks and costs of such investments and of contracting themselves, as well as the risks and costs of their whole lives and life-times. Moreover, these are workers who paradigmatically fund these activities via indebtedness: they invest in themselves as assets in the hope of future returns.

Notwithstanding the emergence of these ideal figures, the realities of post-Fordist contingency are austere: debt is leveraged by repressed and stagnant wages to fund livelihoods; underemployment and unemployment have increased apace;¹ the unemployed train for work that never arrives; would-be workers are commanded to become employable by investing in the self; and contracted workers with unpredictable and unknowable working hours live without time horizons in an ever-expanding extended present. One feature of the contingent contracting of post-Fordism is, then, an erosion of the distinctions between the employed, the waged, the wageless, the underemployed and the unemployed. Critical in this erosion or flattening is an active recalibration of the relations between capital and labour. Peck and Theodore (2012) elaborate, for example, how contingent contracting is shaping the terms of a reworked labour market settlement, 'which is systematically skewed against the interests of labour – a downscaling and atomization of employment relations achieved in the context of transnationalizing employment relations' (Peck and Theodore, 2012: 743). But as well as a recalibration of class relations, this book proposes that the contingent contracting of post-Fordism and the reworked labour settlement it is unfolding is also the scene of the roll-out of a post-Fordist sexual contract.

The features of the Fordist sexual contract – including the regulatory ideals of the dependent housewife, the male breadwinner, the family wage and the heteronormative family on which it rested – are well established, as is the significance of these socio-economic formations to the balance-seeking techniques and standardising impulses of Fordism. It is clear, however, that the contingent contracting of post-Fordism has dismantled these ideals. The break-up of collective wage bargaining, the end of life-long employment and the disassembling of employment contracts with rights and social provisions attached to them (and especially provisions for dependants) have, for example, dismantled the family wage and the male breadwinner ideal. Indeed, an adult worker

model has replaced this ideal, a model where all workers – regardless of their circumstances – are positioned as duty-bound to work or, if not in employment, to be actively seeking and constantly prepared for the possibility of waged work. The contingent contracting of post-Fordism therefore demands that individuals craft their own employability. In the face of such models and demands, this volume asks how, and in what ways, is the contingent contract implicated in unfolding and setting the co-ordinates of a post-Fordist sexual contract?

In addressing this question, a number of key sites, modes of co-ordination, models and demands emerge as central, many of which stand in contrast to those at issue in the setting of the Fordist sexual contract. These include employability and work-readiness, entrepreneurship, financial accounting and calculation, indebtedness, attachments to work and to working, diverse and dispersed processes of sub-contracting (both formal and informal), employment and working contracts, and the very nature of post-Fordist labour. Through detailed analyses of these latter formations and practices this volume elaborates how a range of ideals operative for women are unfolding in the contingent contracting of post-Fordism, ideals which are emerging against a background of precarity, insecurity, wage repression, under- and unemployment, financialisation and pervasive debt. Amongst these are ideals of intensive mothering, a rearticulated domesticity, familism, entrepreneurship, boundless love, heteronormative femininity and intimacy, excessive attachments to work, indebted citizenship and financial literacy. Critically, while the Fordist sexual contract ideally placed women in the space of the home and separated domesticity and motherhood from the world of paid labour, the post-Fordist sexual contract places the ideals of intensive mothering, domesticity, entrepreneurialism and an investor spirit towards work and working on the same continuous plane.

Yet while this volume traces how these ideals and their co-ordinates are emergent and unfolding in the context of contingent contracting, it also maps how they are illusive and virtually impossible to attain, requiring constant and exhausting labour and especially constant investment in the self. Indeed, this volume maps how the very contingency that yields such ideals both demands such constant investment and is productive of such impossibility. Despite this impossibility, aspirations to such ideals abound, not least because they offer a path to middle-classness. But these ideals are themselves classed and raced. Claims towards intensive mothering, for example, cannot be made by those women workers who care for the children of others, and claims to entrepreneurialism and/or employability can be thwarted when the

worker or aspiring worker has the 'wrong' kind of human capital. In the context of such impossibility, a further question that this volume explores is how and why many women are so attached to and endure their exhausting and impossible lives. In part, this is of necessity and about 'getting by', but also at issue here are powerful affective attachments to work and working, especially affects such as love, which enable fortitude and endurance in the present via a heightened anticipation of and hopes for a better future, even if that future must be endlessly deferred. Such affects – which have a history which is not coterminous with post-Fordism – attach women to precarious, insecure, fatiguing and impossible forms of working and living, indeed to the continuous plane on which the terms of the post-Fordist contract are endlessly played out. This volume therefore underscores how the contingent contracting of post-Fordism is connected to particular forms of suffering – endurance, exhaustion, deferral – which are embedded in the very attachments that many women have to their work and their lives, indeed in attachments to the demand that to become a viable economic subject, workers must invest the whole of their lives in their work.

Work-readiness, employability and excessive attachments

In his contribution to this volume, Dan Irving confronts head-on the demands of capitalism interested in the whole life of the employee. He is concerned, in particular, with how contemporary workplaces demand that all aspects of the lives of employees – including bodies, minds and psychic lives – are put to work in the interests of the creation of economic value. This demand stands in contrast to that of the Fordist workplace, which was paradigmatically interested in the exchange of labour power as commodity, a demand that left in place 'a clear distinction between one's work and oneself'. Irving notes how the enrolment of the whole lives of employees in the creation of value has witnessed the introduction of a range of new forms of workplace surveillance and control, including performance reviews and surveillance technologies which scrutinise employee passions, sentiments, feelings and embodied states as well as the self-management of these states. In this context, the prudent employee and would-be employee should continuously invest in their bodily and affective states to ensure future employability. It is therefore not simply the accumulation of skills and capacities which are imperative for employability, but continuous investment in the self, indeed investment in the process of self-actualisation.