Segmented work, divided workers
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The historical transformation of labor in the United States

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Preface

This book grew out of an urgent political concern about persistent political and economic divisions among workers in the United States. These divisions have helped frustrate widespread hopes for a much broader and more dynamic progressive movement in this country. We argue in this book that such disunity persists in large part as a result of historically created objective divisions among workers in their production experiences.

The work leading to this book has passed through several stages. We began, along with others, by helping shape the “dual labor market” hypothesis (see Doeringer and Piore, 1971; and Gordon, 1972a, for a summary of these early efforts). This idea suggested that U.S. workers were located in two qualitatively distinct, nonconvergent labor markets: the primary and the secondary labor markets. According to the dual labor market hypothesis, the characteristic kinds of jobs in each market created fundamentally different working experiences for “primary” and “secondary” workers.

As originally formulated, the dual labor market hypothesis soon seemed inadequate. It built upon an eclectic theoretical foundation; it had not yet been grounded in a historical analysis of the development of production and labor markets in the United States; and it did not illuminate many of the important dimensions of differentiation among American workers.

We subsequently sought with others to address these weaknesses in dual labor market theory. Papers presented at a conference on labor market segmentation developed some of these concerns. The three of us presented a general historical analysis of the origins of labor market differentiation, and we then formulated a tripartite rather than a dual analysis of divisions among workers. Several others presented specific historical and theoretical analyses of labor market segmentation (see Edwards, Reich, and Gordon, 1975; Piore, 1975; Stone, 1975; and Wachtel, 1975). We had chosen the term “segmentation” in order (1) to suggest that there were more than just two important divisions in the labor market, as the dual labor market view suggested;
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(2) to emphasize that labor market divisions are connected by a process through which, to rely on the dictionary, a whole organically “gives origin to one or more new cells by segmentation”; and (3) to distinguish our work from the “social stratification” literature upon which so much of the end-of-ideology analysis depended (see Chapter 1 for a brief review of this literature).

Although most of these early efforts were rather primitive, they nonetheless attracted a certain amount of attention, simply because they represented an interesting alternative view of labor market structure and divisions among workers. (See, in addition to the work just cited, Harrison, 1972; Wachtel and Betsey, 1972; and Bluestone, Murphy, and Stevenson, 1973.) The limitations of this early work generated three main strands of critical response.

First, many Marxist critics questioned the theoretical basis for these early analyses of labor market segmentation. What was the relation between the value-theoretic categories of classical Marxism and the institutional/historical/empirical perceptions that framed the segmentation hypotheses? How could one relate analyses of the mode of production to analyses of segmentation? If tendencies toward the segmentation of labor have recent origins, upon what basis were we arguing that capitalist development “caused” segmentation? Was it not possible that the historical and institutional causes of labor market segmentation were discrete from the dynamics of capitalism?

Second, many neoclassical economists expressed skepticism about the importance and qualitative character of the labor market divisions highlighted by the segmentation analysis. (Cain, 1975, 1976; and Wachter, 1974, present most of these criticisms.) Had we imposed the structural divisions we observed in the data by a priori expectations, or did we provide legitimate tests for structural differentiation? How was it possible to reconcile labor market divergence with the competitive (and homogenizing) mechanisms upon which neoclassical labor market theory rests? Although early tests of the dual labor market and segmentation hypotheses presented evidence supporting hypotheses of behavioral differentiation among segments, could one not easily argue that these tests suffered from incomplete model specification and truncated sample bias?

Third, many historians wondered about the historical accuracy and specificity of our accounts of the origins of segmentation. Was it really possible to distinguish, as our analysis apparently presumed, between historical tendencies promoting job specialization and fragmentation, on the one hand, and those promoting segmentation, on the other? Were our generalizations about the sweep of U.S. labor history
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obscuring more precise insights available through concrete studies of production and working-class movements?

Many of these criticisms seemed pertinent and appropriate, and they have prompted further efforts to develop analyses of working-class divisions.

Some radical economists have pursued more rigorous theoretical integration of segmentation analysis with classical Marxian value theory and historical materialism. Bowles and Gintis (1977), for example, provide one account of the relationship between heterogeneous labor and the labor theory of value.

Other scholars have pursued cross-sectional empirical specification and analysis of segmentation in production and in labor markets. While many of these empirical studies are beset by data and methodological limitations, the evidence supporting the segmentation perspective continues to mount. (See Edwards, 1979, ch. 9, and Wilkinson, in press, for a review of most of this more recent empirical evidence.)

The historical project has seemed in many ways the least developed. Although U.S. labor historians have opened many new vistas for analyzing and appreciating the history of work and workers in the United States, few have sought to integrate economic analyses of the dynamics of capital accumulation with historical analyses of the complexity, totality, and specificity of working-class experience. The work of David Montgomery (1979, 1980) and his students comes closest, but even their important contributions fall short, in our view, of a systematic account of the connections between capitalist development and working-class life in the United States.

In this book we explore further the historical dimension of labor segmentation analysis. We address two critical questions: Where did labor segmentation come from in the United States? Why did it develop?

We believe that we have made substantial progress on both questions. At the same time, we also recognize that our analysis is ambitious and that our research has opened many more issues than it has closed. We hope this book will stimulate at least some of the additional research that further exploration of our hypotheses requires. We look forward to joining with others in such continuing work.

In preparing this book we have drawn in many ways from the work and suggestions of many of our colleagues and students. To all of them, we offer a collective note of appreciation. Each of us has benefited from the labors of research assistants; we are grateful to Randy Albelda, Joseph Bowring, Bob Cohen, Susan Gabbard, Charles Jepsen, Paul Ong, and Will Whittemore. We would also like to thank the
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We note finally that, in order to emphasize the cooperative character of our work, we have continued our previous policy of rotating the order of our names on the title page.

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