WORK: CULTURE, POWER, AND CONTROL
Rachel Meyer

This course explores the structure and experience of work in the contemporary political economy with an eye toward both its liberating and oppressive potential. We will take up enduring sociological questions with respect to power, control, autonomy, surveillance and self-determination on the job. How do different forms of work affect our life circumstances, personalities, and connections to each other? In the first unit we will examine corporate culture and how it affects the experience of professional work. Does a strong corporate culture enhance professional autonomy or management's power? Does it facilitate or undermine community? In unit two we explore the crucial issue of workers' control over their own labor and the concept of alienation. We examine accounts of deskilling, the separation of mental and manual labor, and the consequences of these processes for workers' experience on the job. To what extent does alienation occur in offices versus factories versus service counters? For the final unit we will critically engage in a debate about the development of "flexible" labor and the ways in which workers' connections to employers, occupations, and locations have become more fluid and transitory. We will explore what flexibility means in a variety of contexts and ask: does flexibility lead to liberation or loss of identity? Does it bring self-fulfillment or insecurity? What does flexibility mean for tech workers in Silicon Valley, bankers on Wall Street, and gig workers? Our texts consist of case studies and ethnographic accounts representing a variety of workplaces along with readings from prominent social theorists who in different ways seek to elucidate the conditions of work under modern capitalism.

I love teaching about work because of its relevance to both sociology and students' lives. The topic taps into larger sociological issues with respect to inequality, power, capitalism and social change. While we are focused on very concrete cases and ethnographic evidence from a variety of workplaces, we approach work in the context of broader understandings from historical, political and cultural sociology. See more about my approach to research and teaching here: https://scholar.harvard.edu/rachelmeyer
At the same time, the study of work is directly relevant to students who are exploring career options and thinking their futures. The course focuses on careers of potential interest to students such as those in the tech sector. Unit 1, for example, revolves around the book *Engineering Culture: Control and Commitment in a High-Tech Corporation* by Gideon Kunda: http://tupress.temple.edu/book/0229
Throughout the course we pay attention to current events and bring in newspaper and popular press articles. Why have tech workers been organizing and what form does recent activism take?:
https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/08/technology/tech-companies-union-organizing.html?referringSource=articleShare