We DIG Books!

work with just-in-time production, imposing greater insecurity on workers through irregular scheduling and ending the notion of a "permanent job." Contract labor, team-based processes and tight deadlines make the individual worker responsible for managing the completion of specific tasks.

To some extent this reflects the success of capitalism in absorbing the energy of previous generations of workers' revolt. The 20th century dependence on assembly line structures in which work was deskilled, routinized and rendered increasingly measurable by supervisorial oversight led to a huge increase in absenteeism, shoddy production, and what has been known as a "revolt against work." In the mid-1970s, a body of work emerged detailing the "Fordist" or "Taylorist" model of production, and its function in controlling workers.
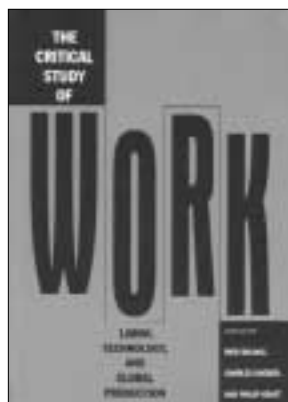
Reviewed by Chris Carlsson

The rhythm of daily life has dramatically changed over the past quarter century. Nowhere is this more glaring that at work. *ProcessedWorld* magazine was a rare voice questioning work's purpose and structure, especially from the subjective point of view of the workers themselves. This new issue was motivated in part by the eerie sense of silence about what is plainly going on all around us. The enormous expansion and redesign of work has gone largely ignored by the press and academia, except for claims that somehow we were living in a more exciting and "empowering" time than ever before.

The business press runneth over with competing management theories and strategies. Contradictions and conflict are as much a part of managing as they are of working. In spite of the clash of theories and practices, the overarching needs of capitalism to reproduce itself has thus far won out over any other social goal. The success or failure of a given capitalist enterprise is unimportant compared to the longer range success of "the system" in ensuring and extending its power and control over our lives. This persistent success is based in no small part on a continual churning and overturning of the structures of work so as to break down the rise of any alternative communities of workers that can mount a sustained challenge to the needs of profitability. Some of the mechanisms of this are relatively familiar: low wages, union-busting, illegal immigration as a wedge against labor shortages, etc.

In the past 25 years or so, the old style of managing workers by closely bossing them with front-line managers has been replaced by a more subtle system. The new structure facilitates a type of self-management in many kinds of work. This involves speeding up the pace and intensity of

The Critical Study of Work: Labor, Technology, and Global Production
Edited by Rick Baldoz, Charles Koeber, and Philip Kraft
Temple University Press, Philadelphia PA: 2001

Out of sight, toiling in universities, critical scholars are extending this analysis, studying the Great Speedup that characterizes the last quarter of the 20th century. ***The Critical Study of Work*** presents an insightful and refreshing inquiry by over a dozen writers. The critiques are usually rooted in the "labor process theory" developed in the wake of Harry Braverman's 1974 classic *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. Braverman made a compelling case that the unique nature of human labor and capitalist production led to the organization of modern life that we have today. The editors summarize Braverman's analysis, showing that the design of work in the 20th century was meant to

"continuously replace each generation of workers with another and to expand "productive," that is waged, relations to all spaces, public and private, where they do not yet exist. . . The whole capitalist labor process is simultaneously technical, ideological and political: the production process itself is a form of class struggle." (p. 10, "Making Sense of Work in the Twenty-First Century" *The Critical Study of Work*)

In the same introduction, the editors characterize one of the book's central points:

"Increased flexibility for employers translates into

longer work days not just for minimum-wage contingent workers in sweatshops, but also for technical and administrative workers in twenty-four hour-time-zone production chains. . . Firms with marketing and sales departments in New York or Frankfurt and research and design facilities in the Silicon Valley or Geneva can continually shop for the cheapest contract manufacturers in Ireland or Brazil or Penang or China. High-fashion clothing designers in New York and Milan hire manufacturing subcontractors in the United States and Italy, who in turn can choose between sweatshops in China—or Chinatown."

The "new economy" and "globalization" receive the glare of sustained criticism in this important volume. In San Francisco we have been in the eye of the new economy hurricane, and have long been a capitalist headquarters city from which globalization has been planned and carried out. Standard Oil of California, Bechtel Engineering—and until recently Bank of America and Del Monte Foods—call San Francisco home. Silicon Valley's electronic giants are just fifty miles south. While political campaigns decrying this abuse or that unethical investment have risen and fallen over the years, this book digs deeper, with case studies of the emerging organization of work that multinational companies have helped design and implement.

Michael Buroway, inspired by Braverman and others, sets out in the first essay to explore the subjective experiences of work, trying to understand not why workers shirk work but why workers work as hard as they do. He worked in a Chicago machine shop, in Hungary, and in the former Soviet Union, labeling the different types of workplace organization as "hegemony" and "despotism." The concept of despotism recurs in other essays, too. The somewhat jargonistic term "flexible despotism" is the rubric describing the current era.

In "Flexible Despotism: The Intensification of Insecurity and Uncertainty in the lives of Silicon Valley's High-Tech Assembly Workers," Jennifer JiHye Chun poses the issue clearly.

> "How do flexible production regimes actually create, maintain, and reproduce worker consent to the stress and insecurity associated with the drive for flexibility, particularly in a global economy in which constant adaptation to change is directly associated with survival?"

The question of consent is crucial to our era. After all, we work many more hours, with more household members having to work, today than at any time since the 19th century (see "Farce or Figleaf" in this issue). It seems unlikely that we would agree to work longer and harder for essentially similar standards of living if we saw it as externally imposed on us, especially by the owners of business. Why do we go along with this? Chun again:

> "Employers in flexible despotic regimes attempt to mask the coercive character of their labor control strategies

through two types of labor regimes: subcontracting and contract manufacturing. In both regimes, they tie workers' need for work to their performance on the job by stressing the "voluntary" nature of worker consent to the chaotic and unpredictable demands of flexible production."

The flexibility demanded depends on the global reach of production facilities, the just-in-time systems of subcontracting components and materials from other companies, and use of temporary, contingent workers, often immigrants and women, at low wages. Even in higher wage sectors like software production, flexibility has led to widely dispersed members of product development teams, with for example, programmers in Ireland working with a program designer in St. Louis and graphic designers in San Francisco. Such interdependence across geographic space reinforces an apparently voluntary engagement with tight deadlines and huge workloads.

Three essays in the concluding section of *The Critical Study of Work* examine professional and technical workers, focusing on the control of technical workers. Nowadays work imposes its own discipline through the use of contract labor, the assembling of specialized teams to create specific products, working unpaid and unavoidable overtime (accepted in part due to the teamwork concept in which workers become beholden to each other to meet impossible deadlines). The urgency faced by each worker to successfully complete the project is reinforced by the need to move on from the current job to the next, move horizontally to a new employer or project, bid up the value of skills—and the fear of falling that accompanies any time out of the technical workplace.

This is a crucial analysis of how the system holds itself together while making the structure of work and the social relations surrounding it appear to be inevitable and "natural." From the high-end programmers and technical writers all the way to fastfood workers (the subject of the other two books reviewed here), personal insecurity regarding the next job, or to having enough hours of paid work (or variations on that theme), drive people to accept adverse conditions of overwork, unpaid overtime, and severe disruptions to anything resembling a "normal" life outside of work.

We have just seen the meltdown of the New Economy stock values, bemoaned in the press and either lamented or cheered in local communities. This book illustrated the way capitalist markets "shake out" over time, purging "inefficient" and unprofitable businesses—and business practices. San Francisco during the boom was ground zero for new work patterns based on team projects, contract and temp work, and equally high levels of transience, wages and bravado. For a couple of years these businesses thrived on millions of dollars of venture capital, on balance producing very little of value. The dotcom crash is not merely about purging weak businesses with no products, but, importantly, about imposing insecurity and fear on a subset of the working class which had grown cocky and even proprietary when it actually

owned nothing, and produced relatively little, with skills that were temporarily rare and highly paid.

Many web workers used to $50,000+ salaries will have to accept far less to get regular work again, unless they have augmented their capabilities with database programming or other skills. Regardless, the collapse of value in this sector will lower wages for such work. The highly flexible and transient workforce will find it difficult to contest lower wages when constantly threatened with prolonged unemployment. Web work is being made easier (i.e. "deskilled"). The convergence of WYSIWYG ("what you see is what you get") web design tools (software like Dreamweaver and Frontpage) and a steady increase in the number of recently trained "web designers" assures that the computer know-how of this recently richly rewarded sector will become more common and less expensive.

A similar process took place in the 1980s among early operators of "word processing machines" who had found double wages over their previous employment as secretaries and typists. For a brief period word processing was a "with-it" modern sounding job. Then it became the back office clerical plantation job. Will web designers follow the same path? The dotcom meltdown might be best understood as a mechanism to quickly alter downward the "deal" offered a small part of the working population.

The contingent nature of new work structures profoundly impacts human connections. A 50-60 hour work week, leaves little time at home, with family, friends or neighbors. This in turn limits the ability to form the human bonds that help grow the spaces in which resistance and revolt can develop. Would less intense, less fragmented work lead to the formation of a stronger sense of class and the growth of oppositional political movements? We can't know the answer, but we do know that the new structures of work produce harried, isolated and exhausted people. The short duration of shared work experiences precludes the kinds of connections that allow for trust and mutual aid to grow beyond the most basic kinds of human solidarity (e.g. helping a coworker take a long enough bathroom break, talk to a sick child on the phone, etc.)
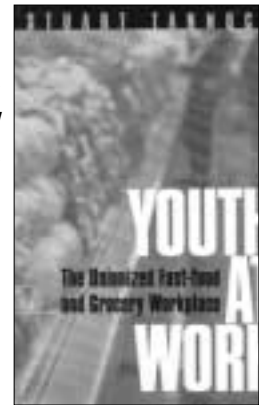
Still, workers find ways to connect and help each other out. In "Silent Rebellions in the Capitalist Paradise: A Brazil-Quebec Comparison," Angelo Soares takes a look at strategies of mutual aid and resistance by female supermarket cashiers in Quebec and Brazil. He documents a rich vein of strategies by workers in both locales that protect them from supervisors and unpleasant customers. The women who preside at the check-out counters stand astride a crucial point of capitalist reproduction: the moment where one exchanges hard-earned wages for the goods required to live. As Soares puts it, "the difficult transition between the Garden of Eden and the brutality of the marketplace."

The actual behaviors undertaken are familiar and even trivial when taken in isolation, but Soares argues that the

"daily strategies of resistance form a constant struggle that uses such simple and ordinary weapons as dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, foot dragging, sabotage, work-to-rule, solidarity, absenteeism, and more radically, quitting. Thus, just as millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly, a coral reef, so do the multiple acts of worker insubordination and evasion create political and economic barrier reefs of their own and these… in a certain way, have a shielding effect against oppression, violence, and exploitation at work."

Youth At Work: The Unionized Fast-food and Grocery Workplace
By Stuart Tannock, Temple Univ. Press, Philadelphia, PA: 2001

Supermarket workers get a different but close look in *Youth at Work: The Unionized Fast-food and Grocery Workplace*. Stuart Tannock examines the condition of work in low-wage, high-turnover service sector jobs in fast food and supermarkets. He shows that the fact that these jobs typically employ young people is no justification for the lousy conditions and low pay on which they depend. He examines the condition of youth *as workers*, in itself a radical departure from the rest of the literature in the field, which prefers to look at this sector of the working class as "youth" (reproducing the academic aversion in the U.S. to "class" as a meaningful concept). He spends the first part of the book criticizing the four areas of previous sociological data that have attempted to understand youth work: youth labor market, school-to-work, student-worker, and social-reproduction.

We read a detailed analysis of unionized "Fry House" fastfood workplaces in the pseudonymously named town of "Glenwood" (Canada) and unionized supermarkets in "Box Hill" (U.S.). Tannock's analysis is a breath of fresh air in a field of sociological blather that usually reproduces platitudes in the service of the captains of industry. The kind of sociology that puts out a false, ideological account of work is simply insulting to anyone who actually works. His research brought back memories of his own restaurant work experiences. From the preface:

"Restaurants can be miserable places to work. Managers micro-manage, ride high on tinpot power trips, and act as if they have no clue about what life is really like on the restaurant floor. . . time seems to career endlessly from panicked rush to deadened emptiness, so that if you're not having to handle the stress of a fast-packed workday, you're having to figure out how on earth you're going to get through the monotony of a

seemingly never-ending six-hour shift. [. . .] Workers constantly come and go, and in an at-will work environment, managers can fire staff whenever and wherever they desire."

But he knows there are some redeeming aspects to the work, too.

"For all the asshole managers and pinhead customers I had in my restaurant career, I also had some awesome managers and many favorite customers."

He shows that the notion that fastfood restaurant employment teaches young people self-discipline and how to be good workers in future employment is absurd. This

FRANK TALK
about wieners

D. Minkler 1993

The Muscle Hustle

While you're outside flipping the meat, the beef industry is inside your pants lowering your sperm count. There's nothing virile about cancer of the bowel and nothing masculine about eating farm animals.
Don't buy the bull.

whole sector of the economy depends on a permanent supply of low-wage stopgap youth workers. Tannock insists that the currently underpaid, degraded working conditions of youth workers are the responsibility of the so-called "secondary labor market" employers. He devotes a good deal of space to examining unionized workplaces as a way for "stopgap" workers to gain some control over their work experiences and see real improvements.

As a sociological study this book offers an abundance of detailed, on-the-ground stories. From the ways different fastfood stores in the same chain differ from one another due to different work cultures, to the very different styles of unionism between the U.S.-based supermarket union and the Canadian union of fastfood workers, Tannock has done his homework. As efforts to organize and improve conditions continue to emerge among low-wage service sector workers, particularly young people, this book is an indispensable resource.

His research gives more evidence of the emerging design of work. Here he cites James Barker (writing in 1993 in a magazine called *Administrative Science Quarterly*) who is calling it "concertive control":

"[Concertive control] represents a key shift in the locus of control from management to workers themselves, who collaborate to develop the means of their own control. . . Concertive control becomes manifest as . . . team members act within the parameters of value systems and the discourses they themselves create. These new collaboratively created, value-laden premises (manifest as ideas, norms, and rules) become the supervisory force that guides activity in the concertive control system."

Tannock continues

"Most Fry House outlets in Glenwood operate without a full-time, in-store managerial presence—and some outlets are left for months to run themselves without any store manager at all. Fry House ensures that workers will work hard, first, by deliberately fostering a sense of team membership, store ownership, and distinctive store-based identity system among its employees; and second, by using a "just-in-time" labor system, cutting work hours so tightly that workers have to cooperate closely and work hard simply to make it through the workday."

Tannock humanizes the subtle distinctions that exist even among workers in one of the most carefully designed work regimes of our time.

Fast Food Nation spends a chapter illustrating the conditions "Behind the Counter" and in the process corroborates a good deal of the research presented in greater detail by Tannock. Eric Schlosser does a brief case study of a teenager who works in a Colorado Springs McDonalds. Her workday, starting at 5:15 a.m. on weekends, and including weekday shifts, fills up a great deal of her life. Little time is left for schoolwork and even less for a "normal" teenage social life. Teachers are quoted about students falling asleep in class, failing to finish homework assignments, etc., often due to employment at nearby fast food franchises.

Doug Minkler

Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal
By Eric Schlosser
Houghton Mifflin, NY, NY: 2001

Not only are the youthful fastfood workers finding their education compromised, they are not gaining any real skills. At a conference profiled by Schlosser fastfood executives agreed that "zero training" is the industry's goal—to be achieved by relying on photographs of menu items. "[I]f there are instructions, make them very simple, write them at a fifth-grade level, and write them in Spanish and English." (p. 72) Everyone knows how McDonalds insists that its franchise operators follow centralized directives on every aspect of running a franchise, right down to the size of the pickle slices to the circumference of the paper cups.

Schlosser has written an impressive book. He details the impact of fast food on the eating habits of Americans, including its contribution to the soaring obesity rate. He takes a hard look at the political economy of fast food, its connection to suburbanization, sprawl and car culture. The restaurant industry, he notes, is the single largest contributor to right-wing Republicans in Congress, who in turn have led the fight to keep the minimum wage down (it is now *40% less* in real terms than it was in the early 1970s). During the last 25 years of a falling real minimum wage the fast food industry has expanded enormously. No other industry depends so completely on low wage workers.

Meanwhile, the fast food industry has grown so large so fast that it has affected many aspects of the American economy. Potato farming, cattle ranching, meatpacking, public health and marketing, all have been radically altered by the rise of the fast food industry. Meatpacking has been widely de-unionized since the early 1980s. (In *Processed World* #30 I reviewed Barbara Kopple's fascinating documentary *American Dream*, which documents the sordid demise of Local P-9, the meatpacking union at Hormel's Austin, Minnesota factory.) Due to intensification, speedup and the employment of non-union immigrant labor, meatpacking is once again one the nation's most dangerous jobs, plagued with enormous accident rates. Moreover, the practice of slaughtering and preparing meat has led to a growing public health crisis, as deadly pathogens like *E.coli* routinely appear in ground beef (dozens of food poisoning outbreaks are documented). As Schlosser pungently puts it: "There's shit in the meat" and he means it quite literally, backing up his sickening assertion with a 1996 USDA study that found 78.6% of ground beef contained microbes that are spread primarily by fecal material.

Fast Food Nation is a *tour de force* and a great read. For any of us fighting creeping monoculture, the corporatization of everyday life, and the subjection of human values to those of the market, this book is as galling as it is inspiring.

Mapping Cyberspace
By Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchen
Routledge
NY, NY: 2001

reviewed by Primitivo Morales

Geographic space has always been an issue—moving ourselves, messages or goods from point "A" to point "B" has seen constant technological innovation. Modern aspects range from "urban sprawl" (cars) and "globalization" (telecommunications; containerization; jets) to issues of access (the Americans With Disabilities Act) and control (see, for instance Mike Davis' *City of Quartz*).

The popularization of the Internet has led to some new possibilities: some have seen the advent of global communities which ignore spatial constraints; others predict the disappearance of local politics and community. Clashes between the "old" spatially defined units, such as countries, and the new "borderless" world of the web are seen in the daily press: U.S. edicts that attempt to control the whole world; attempts by some states to ban the sale of items found to be criminal in their countries (e.g. Nazi paraphernalia, items offensive to certain religions, etc.). Certain forms of surveillance seem to also take on much wider implications (the NSA/GCHQ system known as "Echelon," which monitors international telecommunications, and the F.B.I.'s "Cerberus," which monitors e-mail and other Internet traffic).

An ambitious new book by Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchen, **Mapping Cyberspace** addresses some of these issues in the course of extending cartography to "Information and Communication Technologies (hereafter referred to as ICTs), or to "cyberspace," borrowing a term from science fiction writer William Gibson. Summarizing hundreds of studies and books in fields as diverse as philosophy, cartography, sociology, psychology and literary theory, this books covers a lot of (virtual) ground.

They define cyberspace as "the *conceptual space* within ICTs, rather than the technology itself. … [C]yberspace does not consist of one homogeneous space; it is a myriad of rapidly expanding cyberspaces, each providing a different form of digital interaction and communication. In general, these spaces can be categorized into … the Internet, those within

virtual reality, and conventional telecommunications[.]" The focus of the book is on the first two the Internet and virtual reality.

There's way too much in this book to cover here —they examine ways of mapping geographical use of the Internet, the circadian rhythm of global telecommunications and Internet usage, methods of charting interaction in chat rooms or in email, as well MUDs and MOOs ("Multi-User Domains," which are text-based worlds that users share, and "Multi-User Object Oriented Environments," which may present a visual interface, and allow users to change the environment). They've got a good selection of illustrations, and the book has a rich bibliography and lots of links to relevant Internet sites (their address is www.MappingCyberspace.com).

Of particular interest to the non-cartographer/non-Internet techie, is the second chapter, "Geographies of the information society," which examines "how the development and use of ICTs and cyberspace effects socio-spatial relations." One aspect is global culturalization: the "new global village" anticipated by Marshall McLuhan. Citing several studies, they find that the village would seem to be "largely constructed and dominated by American desires, values and practices." It reflects a view of the world that is based on linear perspective and objective realism. Cyberspace also contributes to "global corporate restructuring and increased market penetration," and incidentally restructures urban landscapes so they are all the same. This promises to be particularly true of so called "soft-cities" like Singapore, parts of London and Dublin — soft because they depend more on information that industrial production. "This sameness is the result of decentering of production and consumption accompanied by homogenous, satellite development; gentrification in the form of reworking the old and unique into the new and the same; and new buildings adopting architectural pastiches that do not relate to local, historical styles." In fairness, they also look at a countervailing trend: "Western cities seem to be developing in two directions simultaneously. At one level, they are becoming less distinct, more global and more homogenous; at another

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take photographs in McDonalds!

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photos by David Green

level, they are trying to market themselves as unique locales, set apart from other places, in order to attract consumption. What emerges is a complex interplay between the local and the global; the authentic and the inauthentic, between place and placelessness." (It is left to the reader to describe where our recent project, *Shaping San Francisco*, a multimedia history of SF, might lie.)

The impact of ICTs on a sense of community is also examined. The ability of people to develop virtual communities may be an antidote to living in places which people have no connection to; or these new on-line communities may be an escape hatch which serves to weaken existing local communities. Cyberspace may also be used to reconnect people to the place they live in (again, projects such as SSF), and may also be an extension of a person's geographic space, just as telephones and postal letters can tie people together. Projects such as Santa Monica's PEN (Public Electronic Networks) and Montana's Big Sky Telegraph are examples of publicly visible networks based on a shared geography. They cite a number of studies showing that new communities are also being formed: "…subcultures, centered on cyberpunk and youth movements which meet in cyberspace, cybercafes, nightclubs and communes, and whose materialistic practices are grounded in computer use, rave, ambient and industrial music, smart or designer drugs, science-fiction writing, and calls for cultural and political change." They point out that these are found in only a few areas— Amsterdam, London, the San Francisco area..

The effects of ICTs on political structures and movements are questioned: do they lead to a possibility that representative government could be replaced by direct government? Or might they mean the death of place-based mobilizations? Or might they serve to reinforce existing structures? Examples range from the highly visible "War of ink and Internet" waged by the Zapatistas and their supporters, to homeless people in Santa Monica who used PEN to pressure the city into providing shower facilities. The Zapatista campaign seems to indicate a deconstruction of some aspects of nationality, even as it is based on a very geographic space, the Lacandon region of southern Mexico.

Of course, governments are not exactly lying still — some have imposed controls on use of Internet technology (China, Singapore, etc.), while in other countries (the U.S., western Europe) it seems that the digital traces left by routine transactions are all grist for the powers-that-be, whether for "market research" or active surveillance. From details on work performance (key-stroke counting and monitoring breaks), on consumer choices, from education and health records, from one's correspondence and reading habits, private and public cops can amass a wealth of detail on people.

They also deal with the fond illusion of grass-roots access to the technology: "Cyberspace is patently not accessible to all. For example, in 1996 . . . 50 percent of all US Internet hosts were located in just five states . . . This pattern, although weakening continues to exist [in 2000] . . .

Cyberspace usage, and therefore benefits . . . are fragmented along traditional spatial and social divisions." Not surprisingly, a number of studies have found cyberspace to be the playground of white middle-class males who speak English; although the profile has broadened somewhat in recent years, cyberspace is just another dividing line between the "haves" and "have-nots." ICTs also seem to be contributing to an increased divide between countries, as well.

Of course, workers still are needed in the "post-industrial" age, and ICTs make it possible for them to be located far from their traditional stomping grounds. Tele-cottages and tele-communting are only part of the picture— call centers allow support operations in Dublin or India to service U.S. customers at a fraction of the cost of U.S. wages and costs. These routine and tightly monitored economies have additional costs: according to a 1998 U.N. report, Ireland now has the greatest income polarization in Europe. The income gap between men and women has increased, and that the number of children living in poverty has doubled since 1971. Wages in Dublin, for instance, have increased by some 17.6 percent between 1992 and 1997, while housing costs have increased 231 percent between 1994 and 1999.

And that's just from the first 60 pages of this book (out of some 220). They do eventually get down to the more prosaic challenge of describing the formal topic of the book, representations of cyberspace. Building on recent innovations in cartography, they look at number of attempts to represent cyberspace, focusing on five key issues: "How "accurate" is the map? Is the map interpretable? What does the map *not* tell us? Why was the map drawn? Is the map ethical?"

They look at ways to represent traffic flow and usage of the Internet, ways to represent the results of searches, and methods of visually showing interactions among people in email, USENET and chat rooms. They also cover projects such as Alphaworld (a 3-d visual representation of a virtual city and environs) and the use of "avatars" (software simulacra) to represent one's self. One of the final chapters is on "Spatial cognition in cyberspace," in which they sum up research on how people find their way in the real world, and look at applications of that knowledge to cyberspace. One difference in getting around in cyberspace, which any user of web sites must surely recognize, is that something like half of all navigational moves are users backing up to find their way to someplace else! A far cry from our ability to maneuver in cities and other "real world" environments.
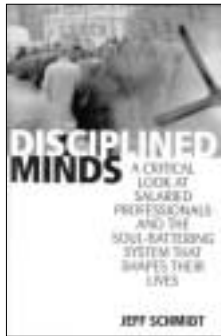
They finish off with a detailed analysis of dozens of cyberpunk and science-fiction books using a computerized semantic analysis to isolate major themes and ideas.

This book is a little dry at times, in part because they are summing up so much research in so little space. It's an illuminating read if you're interested in the political and social effects of cyberspace, or if you have a technical interest in representing this new world.

Three and half stars! Check it out!

Disciplined Minds:
A CRITICAL LOOK AT SALARIED
PROFESSIONALS AND THE
SOUL-BATTERING SYSTEM THAT
SHAPES THEIR LIVES
By Jeff Schmidt
Rowman and Littlefield
NY, NY: 2001

A lot lurks beneath the workplace goal of professionalism. The popular and technical meanings of "professional" interact to reveal a whole world of social relations. One of the most important is that "professional" isn't an appearance—it's a way of life. An excellent book by Jeff Schmidt, *"Disciplined Minds"* examines both the social role and the training of the professional. Even more importantly, he gives a whole slew of techniques for resisting professionalism in college and at work.

He writes that "[o]ne of this book's goals is to deconstruct the minimum requirements that make a person a professional. … As professionals become a bigger segment of the forces of production, so the production of professionals becomes a bigger activity in society … The supposed political neutrality of the process of professional qualification [is] a myth … The ideological obedience that the qualification system requires for success turns out to be identical to the ideological obedience that characterizes the work of the salaried professional."

He presents intriguing ideas about the differences between expectations and ideals and the realities settled for. Even MBAs would demand more money to work for a tobacco company than for a non-profit. Women are less likely to be bought off than men, which, he opines, may contribute to the "glass-ceiling" that keeps women from upper management.

He disposes of the popular myth of the left-wing/liberal leanings of professionals. Using polls during the Korean and Vietnam wars he demonstrates that the percentage of people who supported these wars goes up with educational level. Although some studies have shown professionals to more liberal on broadly posed social questions, when actual issues of work-place hierarchy arise, the veneer strips away. With only about five percent of all full-time college professors considering themselves left of the conservative-liberal mainstream (the number of right-wingers is about 0.4 percent), it's hard to see why universities have such leftist reputations.

> "For understanding the professional, the concept of 'ideology' will emerge as much more useful that that of 'skill.' But what is ideology exactly? Ideology is thought that justifies action … Economics may bring you back to your employer day after day, but it is ideology that makes that activity feel like a reasonable or unreasonable way to spend your life.

> "Work in general is becoming more and more ideological, and so is the workforce that does it. … Of course, ideology has been a workplace issue all along: Employers have always scrutinized the attitudes and values of the people they hire, to protect themselves … Today, however, for a relatively small but rapidly growing fraction of jobs, employers will carefully assess your attitude for an additional reason: its crucial role in the work itself. On these jobs, which are in every field, from journalism and architecture to education and commercial art, your view of the world threatens to affect not only the quantity and quality of what you produce, but also the very nature of the product. … [A] prerequisite for employment is the willingness and ability to exercise what I call ideological discipline."

He also explores the concept of "assignable curiosity" as a hallmark of the successful professional. Scientists and researchers must restrict their curiosity to narrow areas of interest to their masters; at the same time there is a remarkable ability to invent good reasons to delve into narrow—but useful—areas of study.

Not all modern offices are dominated by professionals, and so to some extent the material in this book may be less applicable outside academia. I work for a dot-com, and there are no doubt some advanced degrees present, but the fields of computers and information technology have expanded so rapidly that credentialed workers (i.e. those stamped and certified by the graduate degree programs) are often hard to find. Many technologies have evolved more rapidly than the standard education, and event the most current degree could be outmoded in a few years. OJT (on the job training) is far more likely to be necessary to keep up on new developments. The very nature of the work tends to draw people with a similar problem-solving desire, and often a similar background. That in turn "selects" and filters much like graduate school. Although the "how" may be unusually flexible, the "why" is not.

After showing why the workplace requires certain traits, Schmidt visits the standardized tests so familiar to U.S. high schools. He does an excellent job of showing why these tests are inherently biased (and, indeed, must be so), not merely due to content—which Educational Testing Service et. al. try to correct—but because of the structure and demands of the questions. By selecting for those students who are willing to work artificial problems within a very constricted time frame and produce the correct formula (often an answer learned by rote from studying other tests), the system winnows out those not willing to conform to artificial rules. It deems most valuable those who know "how" rather than "why." The tests provide a façade of neutrality, allowing the student to make decisions about his or her future based on seemingly objective facts.

Statistics show that most potential professionals will fail. In 1997 some 2.8 million people graduated from high

school while a half million didn't finish. On the graduates, 1.2 million enrolled in four year schools and another 630,000 in two-year schools. Other studies show that of those that go to 4-year colleges, roughly half graduate; of those, half will go to graduate school, and half of *those* will get an advanced degree. Of the junior colleges students, only about five percent go to a four year university. The apparent neutrality of the testing process provides the same sort of "cooling out" for those that fail as a shill does in a classic sting. Rather than blaming the system, the shill persuades the "mark" to blame himself, or fate. In the same way that a con game can't be won by most players, so to is graduate school a goal that won't be attained by most students.

The concept of legitimacy holds sway in professionaldom; subordination to authority is a central component. It's common for such workers to be aware of the effect of their work on the world, but it is very uncommon for them to move beyond criticism and sarcasm. Schmidt quotes Max Horkeimer: "Well-informed cynicism is only another mode of conformity." It serves to palliate the worst threats to a professional's world by encapsulating such issues in a funny wrapper, discarding any alternatives as "unrealistic." In the end, even if they wanted to, there is no way for them to actually do anything.

"Professionals are angry about such abuses of power, but having no vision of how power in the schools, in the workplace and the larger society could be distributed more democratically, they naturally look for ways to make the present hierarchical power structures work. Here the choices are limited—restaff the hierarchy with 'better people' or give those at the top even more power so they can 'act decisively.' So even the most well-meaning individuals end up reinventing some such elitist or authoritarian solution. … Those who have no vision of greater democracy are paralyzed even further by the individualism inherent in their outlook. They retreat in fear at the mere suggestion of joining with others …" [B]ecause of the threat to their idealized images of themselves as rugged individuals.

The most valuable sections borrow from, among other sources, U.S. Army doctrine for Prisoners of War to help resist brainwashing. The techniques and methods—33 in number—which may allow the "radical professional" (and those radicals who to have to deal with professionals) are a refreshing antidote to the usual weak palliatives offered in many books. They range from fairly innocuous to quite visible and even dangerous, and include:

- encourage coworkers to connect themselves with radical organizations and to read and subscribe to radical publications. You circulate anti-establishment periodicals, or selected articles from them …
- assign your own curiosity. On the job, you develop and pursue your own goals while supposedly pursuing your employer's goals. You steal as much time and as many resources as possible to do this. You encourage the hiring of more employees to give everyone more time to pursue their own goals.
- give priority, during working hours, to helping coworkers with their own self-assigned, politically progressive projects.
- channel as much useful information as possible, especially inside information, to opposition groups, publications and individuals … you may have to act anonymously … [which] does not mean acting alone—that you only do when there is no other way. …
- sharpen and deepen your coworkers' dissatisfaction with the restrictions on their work …
- help organize a union. After all, management is organized and sticks together to defend its interests.
- hire coworkers on the basis of character …
- work to abolish professionals. That is, you work to eliminate the professional/nonprofessional division of labor
- undermine management's information advantage …

The author, a long-time friend of *PW*, was fired for writing this book. The pretext was his first paragraph in the introduction: "This book is stolen. Written in part on stolen time, that is." He details the problems he had in physics graduate school at U.C. Irvine, in particular running afoul of a professor (and science fiction writer), Gregory Benford, who apparently took offense at Schmidt's politics, and campaigned to get Schmidt fired. Let this be a warning and an inspiration. Go out and buy a couple copies for friends. 4 stars! ❣

"Flight and Other Stories" is a great collection of short stories, just released by the University of Nevada Press (2001, ISBN 0-87414-359-0). The author, José Skinner, focuses mostly on the varieties of experience of Latinos in the United States. Amidst echoes of foreign conflicts (Chile, Guatemala, El Salvador) a varied cast —a former junkie, an Hispanic-named lawyer who has virtually no latino heritage, school kids, marijuana smugglers, lovers and adulterers—inhabits diverse landscapes. The recent US census shows that an ever larger area of this country is drawing its labor force from immigrants from Mexico and Central America, and with those workers come changes in food and music, as well as changes in identity. I'm taken with "Age of Copper," a story that is mostly a flashback to a young Chilenos' adolescence as a newcomer to the U.S. during the Allende period (1970-73). The protagonist's presentation of himself, and his own ambivalences, are delicately explored. José's book is a good read, illuminating the small victories and defeats of daily life.
—*P. Morales*