

1

Consuming Work

Introduction to Youth Work in America

It's a very American illness, the idea of giving yourself away entirely to the idea of working in order to achieve some sort of brass ring that usually involves people feeling some way about you—I mean, people wonder why we walk around feeling alienated and lonely and stressed out.

—David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*

The boundaries between work and non-work are becoming more fluid. Flexible, pluralized forms of underemployment are spreading.

—Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*

The paradise offered by the culture industry is the same old drudgery. Both escape and elopement are predesigned to lead back to the starting point.

—Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer,
Dialectic of Enlightenment

On one snowy day in an affluent suburb of a major metropolitan area, a winter weather advisory was in effect. With low visibility and slippery roads, snow had taken over the suburbs. On this bitterly cold day, Josh,¹ like many other teenagers, traveled many miles to get to work. Despite experiencing car troubles, nearly having a car accident, and spending hours in heavy traffic, he arrived at the coffee shop where he works part-time only—to do a double shift, carry heavy loads of garbage in the cold, and deal with a hectic day of selling hot beverages to shivering customers.

Even though his school was in session, he chose to come to work instead of going to class at the local college, where he is getting his degree in theater and

¹ All the real names and identifying characteristics of the participants have been changed. All the names used are pseudonyms.

humanities. When I asked him why he chose his work over his studies, he told me they need him here: “Nobody notices when I am not [in class].” Unlike at school, they notice him at work. He feels needed—like a hot cup of cocoa on a cold day.

Josh, like many other teenagers, works “part-time” while still in school, but do not be fooled by what he calls “part-time” work. “Part-time” sounds like a few hours of work scattered throughout the week, but he was at the coffee shop every day of the past week. Even on the days when he was not scheduled to work, he stopped by to hang out with his friends. He did not just stand idly by; he also helped the friends who were working. He is one of many young people who fold sweaters in clothing stores, pour our morning coffees, wait on us in restaurants, and serve us in many service and retail sector jobs. Yet Josh differs greatly from our traditional conceptions of young workers. For most of us, the terms “child labor” or “youth labor” evoke images of unventilated sweatshops in the developing world or the chimney sweeps of Dickens novels. Generally viewed as distant practices of the developing world or our historical past, child and youth labor is rarely associated with enterprises of contemporary United States. Yet contrary to popular belief, not only is youth labor widespread in the United States; it is an important element of our modern economy.

With his spiky blond hair, fashionable clothes, and brand-new cell phone, Josh looks nothing like the chimney sweeps of Dickens novels, nor does he fit the conventional definition of a service or retail worker in our contemporary economy. Typical service and retail sector jobs in which young people are employed are what Arne Kalleberg (2011) refers to as “bad jobs”: routine jobs with low wages, part-time hours, few or no benefits, no autonomy, and limited opportunities for advancement (see also Levy 1998; Williams and Connell 2010). In our current economy, there is great heterogeneity among part-time jobs (Kahne 1992; Kalleberg 2011; Tilly 1995). Some new concept part-time jobs, especially in the fields of publishing, entertainment, and teaching, offer “good” part-time jobs, with higher-than-minimum-wage hourly wages, ample fringe benefits, and numerous opportunities for advancement.

The workers who are employed in these jobs are typically assumed to be desperately poor to want to work under such conditions. However, today’s young labor force is dominated by more affluent youth. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics’s *Report on the Youth Labor Force* (Herman 2000), the labor-force participation rate of youth is the highest (71.6 percent) in the highest socioeconomic group and is lowest in the lowest socioeconomic group (40.6 percent). (See Figure 1.1.)

Youth who come from a higher socioeconomic status are not only more likely to work; they dominate the current composition of the youth labor force. Youth from upper and middle socioeconomic status backgrounds constitute the majority of the current youth labor force (44.0 percent and 11.9

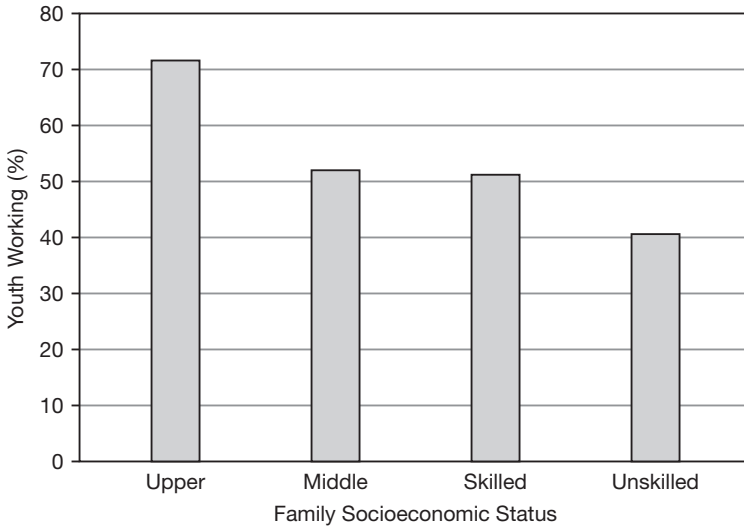


FIGURE 1.1 Percentage of Youth Working, by Socioeconomic Status

percent, respectively), and only 23.9 percent of working youth come from the lowest socioeconomic status backgrounds. (See Figure 1.2.)

Thus, contrary to popular views, the majority of youth who work do not come from economically deprived backgrounds (Herz and Kosanovich 2000; D. Johnson and Lino 2000). What sets the current youth labor force apart and renders it unique is its unprecedented and counterintuitive composition.

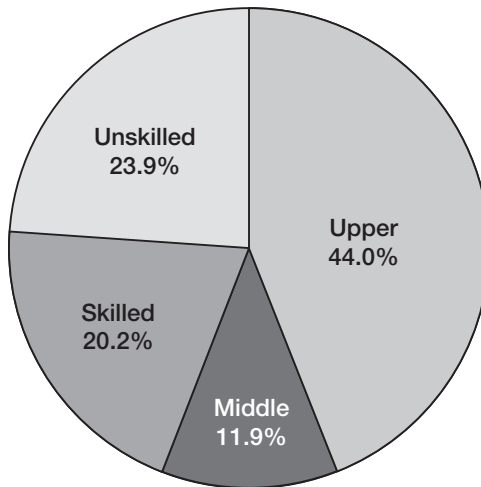


FIGURE 1.2 Composition of Youth Workforce, by Socioeconomic Status

Furthermore, because the youth labor force is dominated by youth from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, it is important to understand what motivates these young people to work. Service sector jobs, especially in the retail industry, where most young people are employed, generate some of the worst jobs (Williams and Connell 2010). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (H. Shaefer 2009), with wages averaging less than \$10 per hour and limited and often nonstandard hours, these workers do not earn enough money to support themselves (Williams and Connell 2010). Many scholars have argued that these workers must be desperate to take these jobs (Ehrenreich 2001), yet many of these retail and service sector workers are not desperate; rather, they are so-called decommodified workers who are able to maintain their standards of living without relying on their incomes (Holden 2003; Williams and Connell 2010).

Although commonsense explanations reduce the motivation of youth to enter the labor market to their economic need, these explanations are simply not applicable to these decommodified young workers. These economic reductionist explanations do not really explain *why* young people like Josh give up their free time to work at demanding jobs for little pay if they do not truly need the money. It is important to acknowledge that some youth do need to work out of economic necessity, but they constitute only a minority of the current youth labor force. For a more comprehensive understanding of the current labor force, it is important to focus on all youth and understand their reasons for working from *their* perspective. It is expected that economically deprived youth would work in low-paying jobs with odd hours and no benefits, but why would affluent youth give up their free time to work in demanding jobs that pay only minimum wage?

Today, almost every student in the United States works sometime throughout their school careers (Manning 1990; Mortimer 2003). Currently, the U.S. Department of Labor defines “an employed person” as a civilian over sixteen years of age who does a minimum of one hour of work for pay during the reference week or fifteen hours or more of unpaid work at home or at a family business. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 establishes the minimum age of child labor for nonagricultural employment as sixteen. According to U.S. federal law on youth employment, sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds can technically be employed, but they are banned from working in certain industries that the secretary of labor finds detrimental for this age group. Fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds, on the other hand, are banned from almost every industry, although they are allowed to work in retail and food services and gasoline services. There are also restrictions on the total number of hours they are allowed to work per day and per week and on the time of the day the work is performed.

For many young people, work starts much earlier than the federally mandated age. Some youth working as early as age twelve in freelance jobs, such

as babysitting, snowplowing, or yard work and slowly move into more formal service and retail jobs. In our predominantly service economy, young people have established themselves as central actors. Today, 13.6 percent of our entire labor force is composed of workers between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012b). Young people have become such an integral part of our economy that we rarely notice their sociological significance. In their landmark book *When Teenagers Work*, Ellen Greenberger and Laurence Steinberg observe, “The large teenage, part-time labor force that staffs the counters of fast-food establishments, waits on customers in retail stores, assembles parts in industrial settings, and cleans motel rooms and office buildings has become such a familiar part of our social landscape that we may fail to note its unique character or to ponder its social significance” (1986: 3).

Even though youth are essential parts of our economy, their motivations have been largely neglected, and their experiences have received little attention. Prior studies on youth employment approach the topic from the perspectives of parents, educators, administrators, and employers. However, the central actors—namely, young people themselves—have been left out of the study of youth labor. Especially given the new and unique composition of the American youth labor force, capturing their perspective and understanding of why they do what they do is very important to our understanding of youth labor (Besen-Cassino 2008; Liebel 2004).

Although young people have always worked in the United States, youth employment has been recognized as a social issue only since the 1970s. Starting in the 1970s, historical inquiries began to document the prevalence of youth work throughout our history (Coleman 1984; Engel, Marsden, and Woodaman 1968; Goldstein and Oldham 1979; Johnson and Bachman 1973; Lewin-Epstein 1981; Ruhm 1997; Shapiro 1979). For much of our history, young people have worked on family farms. Because farm work among young people was so prevalent, schools adapted to the farm schedule. Even though farm work constitutes a small minority of our current workforce, schools still remain on the farm schedule, offering summer vacations. With the rise of industrialization, many young people shifted their labor from family-owned farms to factories, working alongside adults (Bills 2004). Glen Elder’s pioneering work *Children of the Great Depression* (1974) documents the widespread nature of youth employment outside the family farms during the Great Depression. Youth employment, however, was not limited to economically challenging times. Mary Engel, Gerald Marsden, and Sylvie Woodaman’s (1968) study of the Boston metropolitan area and Bernard Goldstein and Jack Oldham’s (1979) study of New Jersey both demonstrate the widespread nature of teenage employment. Overall, this first wave of research documents the existence and prevalence of youth labor in the United States and establishes youth employment as an important area of sociological inquiry.

After the establishment of youth labor as a social issue, the second wave of research focuses on the advantages of work. This strand of research argues that working while still in school offers a wide range of benefits for young people, such as helping youth find future better jobs (D'Amico and Baker 1984; Meyer and Wise 1982; Stephenson 1980; Stern and Nakata 1989), reducing school dropout rates (D'Amico and Baker 1984; McNeal 1997), helping improve school attendance (Marsh 1991; Mortimer and Finch 1986), and improving academic performance (D'Amico and Baker 1984).

For young people who do not intend to go to college, working helps them not only find jobs more quickly but also perform better in their future jobs. Researchers in this era also argue that work teaches youth important skills, such as discipline and development of work ethic, which can be applied to an academic setting. According to many of these researchers, by providing necessary economic resources and work-related skills, such as scheduling, improving discipline, and meeting deadlines, working helps keep teenagers stay in school and focus on their studies. Ronald D'Amico and Paula Baker, however, show that although early work experience benefits non-college-bound youth, these positive effects are not present for college-bound youth. Finally, research from this era finds that working helps teens develop emotionally. These studies show that working improves teens' self-esteem by providing a sense of accomplishment. It also helps them transition into adulthood more smoothly.

This era of optimism is followed by a third wave of research that focuses primarily on the disadvantages of youth employment. In this era, many scholars question the potential negative effects of work, particularly on academic progress, psychological development, and risky behavior. Researchers argue that working while still in school lowers academic success (Marsh 1991; Mortimer and Finch 1986; Steinberg and Dornbusch 1991; Steinberg, Fegley, and Dornbusch 1993), interferes with emotional and psychological development (Greenberger and Steinberg 1986; Mortimer et al. 1994), reduces interactions with family and friends (Greenberger and Steinberg 1986; Finch et al. 1991; Mihalic and Elliot 1997; Paternoster et al. 2003), and increases the likelihood of risky behaviors, such as substance abuse (McMorris and Uggen 2000; Mihalic and Elliot 1997; Steinberg, Fegley, and Dornbush 1993) and crime (Hansen and Jarvis 2000).

Researchers in this era argue that working while still in school lowers academic success and decreases the likelihood of finishing school. Although previous studies do not take into account the intensity of work and number of hours that young people put in, this new wave of research argues that work intensity is a central factor in evaluating outcomes. Noah Lewin-Epstein (1981), for example, shows that working more than 19.5 hours per week interferes with academic progress by taking time away from academic studies. Although working fewer hours can have positive effects, higher-intensity

work interferes with academic success. On the basis of their study of California teens, Greenberger and Steinberg (1986) show that working during teen years also interferes with the psychological and emotional development of teenagers in a number of ways. Further studies also demonstrate that working, especially long hours, harms relationships with family and friends by taking time away from peers, family, and extracurricular activities.

Researchers in this era also show that working increases the likelihood of risky behavior among teens, such as alcohol use, drug use, and involvement in crime. However, there is little consensus about the direction and the magnitude of these effects. Barbara McMorris and Christopher Uggen (2000) find that working as a teenager increases alcohol use, although they state that these effects are short-lived and do not cause serious effects on alcohol consumption in adult years. Sharon W. Mihalic and Delbert Elliot (1997), however, argue that teenagers who work during high school report higher levels of alcohol and marijuana use in the long-term, when they are twenty-seven and twenty-eight. Working long hours seems to increase the likelihood of risky behavior, but scholars disagree on the context in which—and extent to which—work results in such behavior. David M. Hansen and Patricia Jarvis (2000) show that working in a family business, for example, actually decreases the likelihood of risky behavior.

Today, research on youth employment moves away from evaluating the positive and negative effects of employment to instead problematizing the working conditions and structural inequalities faced by these young workers. Contemporary inquiries do not view young people as passive recipients of work's effects but rather as active, central actors with their own agency, motivations, and aspirations (Besen-Cassino 2008; Liebel 2004). Emerging research also focuses on the context and conditions of work. Although some jobs and work conditions can be beneficial for working youth, some might be harmful, depending on the job content, working conditions, and job intensity. Therefore, the new wave of research explores the differences between various kinds of youth jobs and examines their conditions. The new wave of research also points to the effects of race, gender, and socioeconomic status in determining access and working conditions. Such factors determine the types of jobs that youth take, which, in turn, determine their relative effects on individuals.

This book looks more closely at the main actors of youth employment, exploring the causes of youth labor from a sociological perspective. It answers the recent call for actor-centric research and fills this gap in the literature. The aspirations and motivations of youth cannot be adequately explained by leaving out the central actors in the process: young people themselves. In this book, I aim to answer *why* youth choose to work in the United States while they are still in school, from *their* perspective. The goal is to offer a sociological answer to the question of youth employment rather than reduce social

behavior to a matter of economic gratification. This is not to say that economic gratification does not play a role in their decision to work: It is undeniable that economically deprived youth are most in need of work while still in school. However, such youth constitute a minority among the current youth labor force. For the overwhelming majority of the current youth labor force, the explanation of need fails to account for their propensity to work. In fact, a high proportion of youth who come from relatively affluent backgrounds give up their leisure time to work in highly mechanized and demanding jobs with odd hours and very low pay in addition to attending school full-time. If, in fact, economic need drives young people to work for money while they are still in school, why do affluent youth work? Are they working only for the money, too? Or does work fulfill other functions?

Methods

To answer these questions and capture the *lived experience* of work, I begin with nonparticipant observations. For the purposes of this study, I focus particularly on sixteen- to twenty-one-year-old full-time students who work while attending school. Because of corporate policy (my ethnographic site allows only students over eighteen years of age to work) and ethical reasons, my in-depth interviews focus particularly on students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one. To remain consistent with this early ethnographic work, my later interviews focus primarily on eighteen- to twenty-one-year-old students as well. However, to offer a broader understanding, my quantitative analyses include a wider age group that includes sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds. Because my analysis shows no significant differences between high school and college students in terms of their work decisions, it makes theoretical and empirical sense to include this group as well. In the gender chapter, I also include data from younger students (ages twelve to sixteen) to better capture how early work experiences translate into later inequalities. My focus in this book is particularly on student laborers: full-time students who work while still in school. I have included nonstudents in some chapters only for comparison purposes. In this book, I focus primarily on working for pay outside the home. Although there are many types of work, I follow the U.S. Department of Labor's definition; therefore, unpaid labor, household chores, and agricultural labor remain outside the scope of this study.

My ethnography of youth labor started in 2001 at two different branches of a national coffee chain, Coffee Bean,² located in upper-middle-class suburbs of a major city on the East Coast. This particular coffee chain has been identified

²The name of this coffee chain has been changed.

by young people as one of the most desirable places to work, and the two particular branches I picked employed predominantly young, full-time students. Between 2001 and 2004, I carried out extensive ethnographic fieldwork in two branches of this coffee chain, both of which are located in predominantly white areas with median annual incomes between \$90,000 and \$100,000. With their economic and ethnic/racial composition, these suburbs offer representative examples of white affluent suburbs. Although my research sites are not representative of all youth jobs, and it is important to acknowledge the idiosyncrasies of all jobs, I believe the sites provide typical examples. The coffee shop I studied is similar to the environment of many youth jobs, but other occupations—such as those involving fast food rather than coffee, or those that are located in urban areas—may differ substantially and deserve separate ethnographic attention.

Throughout the duration of my ethnography, I observed workers of Coffee Bean in one- to eight-hour shifts, taking detailed field notes that focused on describing the tasks performed, recording the interaction and dialogue between coworkers, and capturing their interaction with the customers. My observations included both weekday and weekend shifts; morning, afternoon, and night shifts; opening and closing shifts where the managers were present and other shifts where they were not; and shifts where young people were scheduled to work together and shifts where they worked with older employees. I started to record these observations first as a researcher sitting at a close table at the beginning of my ethnography, but with the help of key informants and time, I gained the confidence of the young workers and started to hang out at the counter with other friends, sometimes just observing them from the side and sometimes helping them. In addition to recording nonparticipant observations, I also conducted forty semistructured, in-depth, face-to-face interviews with college students employed at these coffee shops and similar venues. My respondents included employees of Coffee Bean at the time of the interview as well as past employees I contacted through key informants. Sixty percent of my respondents were female, and 40 percent were male. The majority of my respondents were white (except for one Asian American employee and one of Indian American origin). I had secured contacts with two key informants through the university, both of whom worked at the coffee shop. These key informants then provided me access to the other workers.

My face-to-face interviews varied in length from one to two hours. Most of the respondents were interviewed again at different intervals. I interviewed some at the coffee shop before or after their shifts, during their breaks, and at the nearby university, where many of them were full-time students. These interviews included detailed questions about their work and school experiences as well as their family lives, leisure activities, and consumption habits.

They were complemented by innumerable informal conversations, most of which took place in various corners of the coffee shops and at the young people's schools. I interpreted these interviews in the light of my extensive field notes. All the names used in this book are pseudonyms; all other identifying characteristics have been changed for confidentiality purposes.

In addition, between the years 2007 and 2008, I conducted a second wave of interviews with a wider pool of full-time college students who worked at different jobs. During this time, I conducted approximately fifty originally designed surveys and semistructured interviews at two universities (one public and one private). These universities were located in two towns in an East Coast state different from the one where I conducted my first set of observations. These locations were very similar to the locations for the earlier interviews in terms of their demographic makeup. Both were in predominantly white suburbs, with median annual incomes between \$90,000 and \$100,000. In these interviews, young people were asked about their work, school, and consumption habits as well as their views on different brands and stereotypes associated with different brands and their social and political views. In questions regarding consumption, I focused mostly on clothing, accessories, books, music, technology, food, and drinks. I inquired about how often these items were consumed, how much was spent on them, and which brands were found desirable.

The transcription of these interviews resulted in about 3 single-spaced pages each, totaling roughly 170 pages of text.

Finally, to document the effects of the most recent economic changes on youth employment, I conducted a third wave of seventy-five interviews and surveys in 2011. These interviews and supplemental surveys provided in-depth information on the lived experience of jobs from the perspectives of the young people. These original data offered an in-depth understanding of why they do what they do, to use the phrase coined by sociologist Jack Katz. This final wave of the study inquires about investigated some of the same issues that the previous waves of interviews dealt with. However, since the last wave took place after the economic recession, a key component of these interviews was to ask about the job-interview process and job searches with the intent to capture the effects of the economic recession on the ability to find jobs. Furthermore, unlike my detailed ethnography, which focused predominantly on white, affluent workers of Coffee Bean, in the second and third waves of my data collection, I included a more racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse group to allow for comparison.

I also relied on two large-scale surveys—the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY) and the World Values Study (WVS)—to contextualize these individual stories. I used advanced statistical techniques to uncover patterns in these data sets, the details of which are discussed in the chapters that follow.

These data sets helped me contextualize the interviews and also offered cross-national comparisons. Although the in-depth interviews helped me decode the meaning of jobs from the perspective of the actors, the large-scale surveys helped me generalize the findings.

Youth Labor Force Today

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics's *Report on the Youth Labor Force* (Herman 2000), 57 percent of early teens (fourteen- to fifteen-year-olds) work. Most teens start in freelance jobs, such as yard work, snowplowing, or babysitting, before moving on to more traditional employee positions. By the time they reach fifteen years of age, 38 percent have employee-type jobs, almost a 50 percent increase from the proportion of fourteen-year-olds in employee-type jobs. By the time youth reach eighteen years of age, almost everyone has worked sometime throughout school (Manning 1990). The largest category of employment is in the retail field (45 percent), where most youth work in eating, drinking, and restaurants (29 percent), with other retail jobs making up the remaining 16 percent. Retail is followed by the second largest sector of employment: the service sector (29 percent). Although retail and service are the dominant sectors in which youth are employed, smaller numbers work in agriculture (6 percent) and construction and manufacturing (12 percent), with the remaining 6 percent in other sectors. By the time they are older (ages sixteen to nineteen), based on 2005 data from the Current Population Survey, two major sectors of employment emerge: service (38 percent) and sales (38 percent); two-thirds of all older teenagers are employed in retail, food, and food preparation (Hirschman and Voloshin 2007).

Gender composition is approximately equally split, with females slightly more likely to work among early teenage years (59 percent to 55 percent, respectively), but these gender differences even out with time. By the time youth reach age fifteen, there are almost no gender differences in rates of employment.

Although gender does not make a substantial difference, marked racial and ethnic differences emerge among the youth workforce. White youth are more likely to work than African American and Hispanic youth. Although 64 percent of white youth are employed, the employment rates of African American and Hispanic youth are substantially lower: 43 percent and 41 percent, respectively. Finally, socioeconomic status makes a difference. Youth from higher socioeconomic status backgrounds are much more likely to work than youth from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds. Although employment rates increase substantially with age, as young people shift from more informal, freelance-type jobs to more structured, employee-type jobs, the inequalities and divisions discussed here remain fairly consistent throughout.

Young people have been a constant and vibrant part of our labor force. Today, they constitute 4 percent of our overall workforce (Hirschman and Voloshin 2007). Their labor-force participation rates have steadily increased over previous decades, peaking during the 1980s and stabilizing since then. Recent studies show that labor-force participation and intensity of work has remained relatively stable since the 1980s (Bills 2004; Warren and Forrest 2001). The recent recession, however, has shown a marked decline in youth labor-force participation rates; the labor-force participation rates of sixteen- to twenty-four-year-olds hit a record low in July 2011, as they found themselves in competition for jobs with older workers who had been laid off from higher paying jobs. Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (Morisi 2011) confirm that even summer employment rates, which used to be much higher than school-time employment, are substantially lower now, with many students unable to find summer jobs. However, the inequalities in the labor force, especially those based on race and ethnicity, persist (see also Current Population Survey 2005).

In the past, service and retail jobs were easy for young people to get, but even these are no longer as readily available as they used to be. Oftentimes, young people are in competition with adult workers, senior workers, and immigrant workers for these jobs. As recent research documents, socioeconomic factors play a major role in obtaining these jobs. Many employers prefer young workers with more upper-middle-class presentations and consumption habits.

The Suburb Is the New City

American suburbs have provided the backdrop for this research, because that is where many of the service and retail jobs that employ young people—especially those with higher socioeconomic statuses—are located. In general, suburbs have received limited academic attention; extensive studies of inequalities and work have focused on inner cities as the hotbed of multiple layers of inequality, such as class, race, and gender. Suburbs have always been the neutral ground, portrayed as having no class, race, or gender—just picket fences and neat yards. In the past few years, many jobs, especially service sector jobs, have left the inner cities and found homes in the suburbs. With this increased job availability, suburbs became the new cities in a way—turning into centers of service and retail jobs.

Suburbs are also important not just because they house available jobs but because in recent years they have been criticized for a lack of social interaction. As Donna Gaines (1998) shows, suburbs are centerless entities with limited common spaces. They offer few spaces for social interaction and limited opportunities to meet new people. For young people, suburbs are social wastelands. Victoria James (2007: 36) says that “the radius within which children

roam freely among their homes shrunk by almost 90 per cent since the 1970s.” Because many young people have limited opportunities to socialize with their friends without parental supervision, shopping malls, strip malls, and shops had provided sheltered spaces for youth to hang out without adult scrutiny. However, in recent years, young people hanging out without a specific activity has sometimes been associated with gang activity and has become the target of public suspicion (Abbott-Chapman and Robertson 2009; White 1999). Many suburban communities feel suspicious of young people congregating in public places, and many local businesses enforce rules to discourage such gatherings. For example, many malls and movie theaters do not accept unaccompanied teenagers, while some demand adult supervision for minors or define a “gang” as any group of more than three minors without a parent or guardian present. These rules allow management to kick teenagers off the premises without having to prove that they have engaged in any inappropriate activity, further narrowing the potential interaction space for these teens.

These jobs newly located in the suburbs—coffee shops on every corner, retail stores at every strip mall, clothing stores at the large malls—provide social spaces where young people meet new people and socialize with their friends. By taking jobs at these stores, young people carve out spaces for themselves, away from adult supervision and public scrutiny. Jobs enable these young people to see their friends away from their parents and other adults. They are also largely devoid of scrutiny: In the eyes of the local residents, they are not idle teenagers causing potential trouble, but responsible youth transitioning into adulthood.

The story of these affluent youth takes place within the context of affluent suburbs, with their available jobs and without unsupervised places for youth to meet.

Why Service and Retail Jobs?

In today’s economy, understanding service and retail work is essential. With the continuing decline in manufacturing jobs, service jobs have become ubiquitous in our economy (Korczynski and Macdonald 2008; Macdonald and Sirianni 1996; Williams and Connell 2010).

As Ödül Bozkurt and Irena Grugulis observe, “Retail work is in many ways the new generic form of mass employment in the post-industrial socio-economic landscape. If the factory and the assembly line came to represent the quintessential workplace under industrialism . . . [the workplace] of the post-industrial era may be Wal-Mart, rather than Google” (2011: 2). Service and retail work are, indeed, socially significant and central in today’s economy. More than 10 percent of the total labor force in advanced economies today is composed of retail workers (Bozkurt and Grugulis 2011). With the growing

significance of retail in today's economy, we have seen a growing interest in the sector. Many scholars have studied the fast-food industry (Leidner 1993; Ritzer 1993), call centers and customer service (Callaghan and Thompson 2002; Taylor and Bain 1999), and working conditions for these sectors (Ehrenreich 2001). However, few of these studies focus on the *lived experience* of the retail workers. As the cultural understanding of "retail workers" has become synonymous with unskilled, low-paid automatons working in standardized, routinized jobs, few researchers focus on the inner differences.

"Despite the popular cultural shorthand used to depict retail workers as automatons who cannot wait to get out of these jobs if only the opportunities were there, retail work is widely diverse. The labour market spans a range from attractive, middle-class dominated 'style' labour markets . . . to the poorly paid shift work offered by mass retailers" (Bozkurt and Grugulis 2011: 5). Although all retail work is typically depicted as poorly paid shift work at mass retailers, great variation exists within the category. Retail work today also includes many boutique retailers, high-end establishments, and specialized services. As a result, many retailers require "soft skills" for their employees, such as certain appearances (Korczyński and Macdonald 2008; Warhurst, Thompson, and Nickson 2009; Williams and Connell 2010), personality traits, and people skills (Moss and Tilly 1996; Wilson 1996) with the intent to extract maximum efficiency and high productivity (Leidner 1996, 2006).

Because of this, young, attractive, middle-class students become some of the most desirable workers (Gatta 2011; Nickson et al. 2011). As employers demand certain characteristics, the workforce responds: Alongside many economically disadvantaged youth looking for work are many affluent teenagers competing for the same jobs.

Consumption and Work

Work is also closely related to consumption. The intertwined relationship of youth, work, and consumption is well-documented. Throughout our economy, young people work to sustain their consumption habits. These consumption habits have changed drastically over the past few decades. For many years, youth have been avid consumers of small-ticket items, such as gum, candy, hair accessories, lip gloss, CDs, comics, and blue jeans (Best 2009). However, in recent years, young people in North America and western Europe have started to purchase more substantial consumption items ranging from cell phones to computers and other electronics. This consumption has paralleled the large increase in their disposable income. Driven by this increase, more corporations started targeting young markets (even teen and tween markets) as consumers with their own money and consumption habits. These prospec-

tive customers are even more alluring because of their relative lack of existing brand loyalty. Naomi Klein (2002) observes an important difference in the way youth are targeted by corporations and advertisers: branding. As Amy Best (2009: 257–258) points out:

Young people today are becoming adults in the age of competitive advertising and accelerated meaning where the image matters more than the product, in a new branded world of hyper-marketing where segmented marketing has prevailed over mass marketing, endless corporate sponsorships and partnerships that are thought to have eroded the public sphere and civil society and created a crisis of democracy. Indeed, one of the enduring features of the market that makes it so resilient is its adaptability as it relentlessly commodifies cultural forms, either folding them into already existing markets or carving out new ones.

Today, few spaces exist without the reach of the market: Virtually every part of young people's lives has been commodified and branded. The important part of consumption is the meaning and identity. Many successful corporations marketing to young people do so by imbuing commodities with social meaning that resonates with young people. Markets assign social meaning to different products and brands. By consuming them, young people form and market their identities (Best 2009). To borrow from the Frankfurt School, it can be argued that youth form their identities based on the resources offered by the cultural industries. The meaning of cultural objects is ascribed through the production process by the corporations and by the consumption process. During the exchange, in the words of Stuart Hall, meaning is encoded in the products in the production process. These products are recoded in the consumption process, during which a new layer of meaning is attached to the products. When Apple makes a phone, it is not marketing the product just by pointing out its function but is trying to show the kind of person who would use such a product. When the phone gets to the public, it acquires another level of meaning, which may or may not be what the original marketers had intended; this meaning is especially important to young people. Even countercultural movements utilize consumption items to express their individual views. Dick Hebdige (1979), in his study of Mods, shows the use of such objects as clothes, records, and hairstyles as identity markers to convey oppositional cultural ideas. The modern counterparts of these Mods might show off their identities by wearing specific brands of shoes, clothing, or audio equipment. Similarly, Sarah Thornton (1995) shows that youth develop subcultural identities through the consumption of a wide range of objects. In recent years,

the already complex relationship of youth consumption and identity has become even more complex against the new backdrop of late modernity. With increasing mobility, globalization, and increased production and consumption speeds, production and consumption are less tied to traditional institutions and organizations and more to “lifestyle choices.” These lifestyle choices are expressed through the consumption of cultural objects offered in the commodity culture (Bennett 2003). Identity and social status are less fixed and more fluid: They are constructed and reconstructed in everyday lives (Bauman 2000; Slater 1997). Youth spend increasing time and effort constructing their own identities and transforming their images through endless consumption. Don Slater observes, “Modernity dismantles a stable social order which provides fixed values and identities. . . . [T]he individual’s boundaries, sources of meaning, social relations and needs become blurred and uncertain. This is the context of consumer culture: it floods modernity with a torrent of values, meanings, selves and others, both filling in the cultural deficits of the modern world and constantly intensifying and exploiting them” (1997: 99). Against this backdrop, and armed with ample disposable income, young people search for their identities and selves. This world that young people live in is increasingly defined by consumption. As a result, youth attribute meaning to objects they consume. Best’s (2006) work shows that young people attribute meaning to their cars, with a car becoming a way to create visibility, mobility, and freedom. She shows that youth are increasingly drawn to markets not just to create and reinvent their individual identities but also to gain access and membership into groups. Because their identity and group membership is strongly entrenched in their consumption, many young people find themselves in a cycle of work and consumption (Schor 2000). Even traits or items that are not consumer goods can become part of this exercise in self-branding. Dan Cassino and Yasemin Besen-Cassino (2009), for example, show that young people consume political ideology as an object of consumption. In their analysis of the 2008 presidential elections, they show that young people relate to politics as if they are consuming a product, and they perceive political parties as brands and lifestyle choices.

This book studies the consumption of work and branded work experiences as markers of identity among youth. Within this postmodern landscape, work has transcended from supplying the means to consume commodities to being an object of consumption itself. Just as objects of consumption have become increasingly branded, jobs themselves have been branded as well. Brands are not only status markers but also identity markers. As Klein observes in *No Logo*, “Brand X is not a product but a way of life, an attitude, a set of values, a look, an idea” (2002: 23). Many commodities in the past few years have been presented and marketed as concepts: the brand as experience, as lifestyle (Klein 2002). Why not jobs? Just like an object of production, jobs can be con-

sumed and can be branded. In fact, more than consuming a product, taking a job at the desired brand creates a higher level of brand loyalty, a firmer identity, and a stronger commitment to a subculture. Therefore, work experience is not only a leisure activity and a social space to see friends and socialize but also a branded experience to be consumed by young people.

Work and Leisure: The Binary Opposition?

Traditional accounts define work and leisure as being in opposition: Leisure is whatever you do when you are not working. Typical studies of youth employment, therefore, view youth labor as an activity motivated primarily by consumerism (Gaines 1998; Greenberger and Steinberg 1986; Hine 1999; Schor 1993). As Juliet Schor argues, "In middle-class homes, much of this work is motivated by consumerism: teenagers buy clothes, music, even cars. Some observers are worried that the desire to make money has become a compulsion, with many young Americans now working full-time, in addition to full-time school" (1993: 26). Hence, the employment of teenagers during their free time from school is often assumed to be a way of acquiring money to support their often-conspicuous consumption patterns: splurging on clothes, magazines, music, and cars. Although part-time work during school is a way to support consumption habits, youth consume more than clothes, magazines, music, and cars. Work is not just an activity that facilitates the consumption of such items but is itself consumed as a leisure activity. The consumption of the work experience, although not unique to the youth labor force, is often obscured by its role in facilitating material forms of consumption. The work experience of many young people today points to a more fluid relationship between work and leisure rather than a rigid binary opposition. As articulated by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "Amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work. It is sought as an escape from the mechanized work process, and to recruit strength in order to be able to cope with it again" ([1979] 1997: 137). In one sense, leisure is presented as a binary opposition to recharge and recover from work, yet at the same time the leisure time is bombarded with images and products of capitalism. This fluid relationship of work and leisure proposed by Adorno is observed in the experience of youth work today. He argues, "At the same time, the difference between work and free time has been branded as a norm in the minds of people, at both the conscious and the unconscious level. Because, in accordance with the predominant work ethic, time free of work should be utilized for the recreation of expended labour power, then work-less time, precisely because it is a more appendage of work, is severed from the latter with puritanical zeal" (Adorno 2001: 189).

Therefore, the division between work and leisure is an arbitrary one, with the widespread nature of the division obscuring young people's true motives

for working. Even in definitions of work used by the U.S. Department of Labor, which reflect the popular understanding of the concept, work is an activity done outside the home for pay: An economic motive is assumed. In the popular culture, as explicated by Adorno, work and leisure have been seen as mutually exclusive: Work is the role in which the individual functions as a producer, while leisure is the role in which the individual functions as the consumer. For young people, the traditional role of work is filled by school, while what is technically a job takes on social, rather than economic, value. Throughout this book, I explore this intertwined relationship between work, leisure, and consumption for young people.

What the Young People Think: The Affluent Worker

When I ask Kimberly, an eighteen-year-old student, to describe what an average worker at the Coffee Bean is like, she tells me:

A typical [Coffee Bean] employee usually comes from a middle-class background or higher-class background. If in the higher class, they would probably be in their late teens and early twenties, as they are college students trying to get money for school costs. Also, while an employee here could have a family, typically they would be single or have a girlfriend or a boyfriend. Gender here is usually evenly split; however, most employees [here] are white. Most often, the people who work here are car owners, probably live in an apartment. . . . A typical [fast-food] employee is almost certainly a teenager who has the job for extra cash to buy things like CDs, car[s], and such. The typical worker here would work for minimum wage or something close to that. Unlike a [Coffee Bean] employee, a [fast-food] employee can be of any race or ethnic background. Typically, these employees are of a lower-income household, because if they were of higher income, they would not be working there in the first place. Most likely the typical employee here is of lower education or has something like a high school diploma.

Even though both the job she has and the fast-food job she looks down on are low-paying, low-skill, standardized, routine jobs, Kimberly and the other young people I spoke with make a sharp distinction between them. Youth working at more upscale establishments are associated with a more affluent lifestyle, and socioeconomic status plays a big role in getting these jobs. These jobs are not simply a means to an end: Even if they pay similar wages, they are very different, and the people working at these places are socially, economically, and demographically very different from each other. To borrow from

Proust, work becomes “the infinitely varied art of making distances.” Retail and service jobs that were classified as homogenous units are in fact branded and are infinitely different in the conceptions of young people. Coffee Bean, just like the upscale products it sells to a more affluent consumer, also offers jobs for a more affluent group of workers. The young people I spoke with have told me that youth labor is much different today. Many economically disadvantaged youth who need these jobs are either shut out of the labor force or they are stuck in undesirable jobs, whereas affluent youth dominate the workforce for the desirable positions. Many work at Coffee Bean to be associated with cool brands, to hang out with their friends, and to get discounts. Throughout this book, I explore work from the perspective of these and other young people and I aim to capture their lived experience of work.