

Introduction

This book about the livelihood of working-class families was motivated by an entirely mistaken premise.

As residents of the rural state in which the research was conducted, we were well aware that the region offered considerable opportunity for people to engage in a broad array of economic activities, including employment in a formal labor market, informal or unrecorded work, barter and other forms of nonmonetary exchange, and self-provisioning activities, such as growing one's own vegetables and hunting. We anticipated that the practice of melding a variety of these activities emerged among, and was a major recourse for, those whose participation in the waged labor force was less than optimal because of either inadequate jobs or the lack of full-time work.

We also anticipated that a spate of industrial activity that began in the 1960s and quickly brought the local labor force in line with the rest of the country had led to the creation of a different set of jobs that required *and* enabled families to rationalize the use of their labor. Gone would be the unwaged housewife, to be replaced by the working woman and the local day care center; gone would be the homegrown tomatoes and woodpiles, to be replaced by convenience stores and oil delivery trucks. In sum, we expected that working-class families with members employed in the *new* waged work in the formal economy increasingly would turn to modern forms of labor and consumption, while other working-class families—those who worked for low wages, those en-

gaged in traditional rural activities, those with jobs in the service sector and especially in the seasonal tourist industry—would have no alternative but to practice forms of labor activity outside the formal waged market.¹

We were wrong. We were wrong in part because we had not yet uncovered a central fact about the changing economy in the area in which we conducted our research: That area had not just (re)industrialized² and become more “modern” but also had experienced a degradation in the jobs industry provided. As a result of these two overlapping changes, not all waged work in the county—and not even all industrial work—was being cut from the same cloth. Quite simply, there was good work that offered the benefits and amenities which had prevailed under what is sometimes called the Fordist regime,³ and there was bad work that, though no less “modern,” failed to offer those same benefits and amenities. The emergence of an economy constituted by this dualism was hardly a local phenomenon. While controversy abounds about the degree to which bad jobs are replacing good ones and why, there is now little debate that the growth of bad jobs is widespread and characterizes the contemporary U.S. economy. Neither the statistically rural Coolidge County* in which we conducted our research, nor Vermont, the state in which that county is located, was immune from this development. Even in the face of economic recovery during the 1990s, Vermont’s Commerce and Community Development secretary said, “We’ve created jobs; we’ve just created a disproportionate amount of jobs in a sector that doesn’t pay as much.”⁴

It also turned out that we were wrong because, in drawing on the wealth of studies of marginal populations in “developed” regions as well as of those in “less developed” parts of the world,⁵ we had reversed an important, and perhaps relatively new, direction of causality between regular waged employment and the other aspects of a household’s survival strategy. Ironically, and contrary to our expectations, we found that the households with access to decent jobs were also precisely the households that relied on the combination of very different economic activities—they used the labor of a second worker, they engaged in entrepreneurial side-work, they depended on friends and neighbors for access to a broad array of goods and services, and they built their own

*To protect the confidentiality of our respondents, we have changed the name of the county in which we conducted our research. Coolidge County cannot be found in any Vermont atlas. The details about Coolidge County do, however, accurately represent a very real place.

homes and grew their own tomatoes. We also found that this combination of economic activities was a source of pride, comfort, and security to these working-class families—as well as the source (and savings) of income. Because much of this work had as its precondition a specific household organization of labor, it also had the effect of reconstituting what at first glance passes for “typical” gender relationships within the household. We were surprised to find, however, that those living in families without at least one good job were considerably less capable of deploying the same kind of complex, multifaceted survival strategy and that in these less well-off households, sustaining customary gender privileges came at a greater cost. These unexpected findings motivate this book.

Although the processes of economic restructuring, as they are enacted in Coolidge County, provide the broad context for this work, neither economic restructuring nor Coolidge County is the subject. We do not seek to explain in depth or in detail the *causes* of economic restructuring. This topic has received considerable attention elsewhere.⁶ For our immediate purposes, it is sufficient to note that the effects of restructuring transcend the rural-urban divide (but may be more extreme in the countryside)⁷ and the gender divide (although men and women are affected in somewhat different ways).⁸ What is most important for this book is how this process has affected the household economy. We do not focus on the effects of economic restructuring that have received the bulk of scholarly attention—declining wages and increased economic inequality⁹—although we offer evidence about these issues. This is a book about a different aspect of economic restructuring—the loss of the *other* advantages working families had come to expect from employment. Though largely invisible in the scholarly literature, these advantages are central to how families live. We have found that the failure of the economy to provide these other benefits—long-term and stable employment, vacations and sick days, regular hours, assured pension plans and health insurance—is an equally (and perhaps even more) significant impediment to the capacity of households to get by and to recreate the so-called traditional household with its complement of gendered activities.

We chose Coolidge County, Vermont, as the site for this research for both practical and conceptual reasons. One practical reason is that it is close to where we live and work. A second, more important reason is that it was subject to a particular version of the economic restructuring that has characterized the U.S. domestic economy for the past two decades. In addition, it is small enough to see close at hand—where, in

fact, it is only visible—how families have struggled to accommodate themselves to these shifts in the economic tide.

On the conceptual level, we were all too aware that aggregate studies of economic processes can be profoundly misleading. Lying behind national level data are the significant and important regional differences that are most consequential in shaping the economy of any specific area, and thus of the families whose futures are fundamentally tied to the place in which they live and work. Over the long run, there certainly are trends that influence all regions—there is a world or “global” economy. These trends, however, are always worked out in conjunction with the unique characteristics of specific locales as well as with vast disparities between regions, a hallmark of that world economy.

There are two issues to be noted. First, local economies stand in very different relations to national and international ones. Second, and more important in some respects, different locales have quite different cultures when it comes to how their labor forces will be deployed. As Michael Storper and Richard Walker note, “Community attitudes and practices can also be a medium of political response to the predicaments of work and life. The local population accumulates historical experience of its social condition as labor force and citizenry, and its collective geographical presence eases the tasks of political mobilization around the roles.”¹⁰

Taken together, these two dimensions of local areas have the overall effect of refracturing the same aggregate national and international trends in quite different directions and with very different results. Changes in national average wages, sites of production, or forms of labor control may describe the aggregate but bear little or no relationship to what is going on in any particular place. In fact, there is good reason to believe that far from long-term, widespread trends producing a convergence across regions of the nation (or indeed the world), the specificities of different locales are becoming more rather than less important. Not only is it the case that economic restructuring produces geographically specific results, but the very nature of current economic processes also both heightens and takes advantage of regional differences.¹¹

Coolidge County was affected by the current economic restructuring somewhat later than, and in different ways from, other regions in the country. Some of what we describe, therefore, might be considered more relevant to other similar (rural) areas than to urban areas where restructuring occurred at a different time and with some different consequences for a household survival strategy.¹² In addition, Coolidge County may

appear unusual (in comparison with the country as a whole) with respect to the particular opportunities it offers for informal economic activity and for making a living off the land. We are less concerned, however, with either timing or the particular content of the survival strategy of Coolidge County residents than we are with two other issues which we believe have widespread relevance: first, that households diversify their economic activities—that is, households combine a multiplicity of activities to get by during a period of change; and second, that the combination that is possible for a given household depends on its specific relationship to waged employment.

Two concepts need further discussion here: household is one; survival strategy is another. We make no distinction between the use of the terms “household” and “family”; in fact, we use them interchangeably. We define a household or family as these terms are used in everyday speech: a group of people who live together, share resources (even if that sharing is not equitable or fair), and (at least at some level) make efforts to coordinate their activities. Having said that, it is the case that we include only certain kinds of households in this study. Because we were interested in how families got along independent of the very real constraints brought against them by virtue of being either single-parent households or households made up of a homosexual couple, we chose to focus exclusively on two-parent, heterosexual families and any children living with them. Also, because Coolidge County in 1990 had a minority population of less than 2 percent,¹³ virtually all of our research subjects are white. In short, the data we will be discussing are strictly generalizable only to intact, heterosexual, white families. The apparent limitations of our sample population are, we believe, a source of strength. If even these relatively privileged families face structural barriers to the full use of their available labor supplies, then less advantaged families—single-parent families, gay couples, and families facing racial barriers—are presumably even more hampered. In other words, what we present here is the best case scenario. It will take little imagination to deduce from these data what the worst case may be.

We applied two criteria to narrow further the group of households in this study. First, because from the very beginning we had a special interest in how families with the best employment “chances” were positioned with respect to the practice we initially called “patching it together,” we limited our investigation to those families in which at least one person currently had as his or her principal source of income employment in the formal waged labor force. This is a study about families

with a link to waged work.¹⁴ Second, because we wanted to see what happened to families that were best positioned to adopt a multifaceted survival strategy, we included only those households in which the second adult partner was *eligible* for employment as well. This is not a book that investigates the lives of families with a disabled or elderly worker, important as such families are. Once again, we limited the population studied not to understate the problems faced by other kinds of families but, in fact, to do just the opposite.

Like our definition of a household, our definition of a survival strategy is quite straightforward. It has an empirical or grounded meaning: a specific set of economic activities families develop to ensure and even enhance their daily survival, including gainful employment (whether in the formal or informal economy), moonlighting or on-the-side employment, self-provisioning efforts, and nonmonetary exchanges with other households.¹⁵ With these considerations taken together, then, we conceive of a household strategy much as Pahl does: “[the] distinctive *practices* adopted by members of a household collectively or individually to get work done.”¹⁶ Thus, the strategy is the household’s “particular mix of activities or practices.”¹⁷

From its use in historical studies, the concept of a household or family strategy has been picked up by a broad range of social scientists.¹⁸ That use has also aroused considerable debate.¹⁹ On one hand, the concept is lauded by those who believe it can move analysis beyond the classic structure/agency dichotomy and be attractive both to those coming from an interactionist tradition and to those from the Marxist perspective. On the other hand, scholars object to many of the term’s connotations, particularly to the implicit assumptions of voluntarism, rationality, consensus, and fairness.²⁰

We accept none of these connotations. In fact, we argue that the emerging household strategies take place within a very specific context and that the context (regional resources, labor market opportunities) often shapes and constrains the options households have at their disposal. This is an important point. Although we speak about “tactics” and “choices,” and although we use verbs that suggest agency (“send,” “develop,” “use”), the reader should not be confused by our language. The argument throughout the book makes it clear that some actions represent forced choices.

We also reject the connotation that households are made up of actors whose motivation is purely economic. Instead, we demonstrate that some practices, rather than having any strict economic rationale or logic,

are motivated by other kinds of concerns. We show concretely that the practices engaged in by family members sometimes arise from individual choices rather than collective agreement, and that whatever sharing transpires may very well be unfair and inequitable.

Even with these qualifications, we employ the term “household” or “family” strategy because of its connotation of “collectivity,” and because that connotation is partly accurate: A household or family is more than a mere agglomeration of individuals going about their business without any reference to the whole. The term thus helps identify a central theme in this analysis: Households are critical units that shape and define economic life, and they do so according to a set of rules that dictate who contributes what, how, to whom, under what circumstances, and with what boundaries.²¹

In what follows, we first provide a context for our analysis by describing economic restructuring in Coolidge County (chapter 1). We then both depict and account for the survival strategies of the households in that county. More particularly, we compare the survival strategies of two different sets of Coolidge County households: those in which at least one member of the household has managed to find and hold onto “good work” and those in which the household members are less fortunate and have recourse only to what we inelegantly, but accurately, call “bad work.” This comparison takes place at three levels: as an overall comparison of household strategies, as a comparison of how those strategies affect relationships between men and women within the household, and as a comparison of how individuals within each set of households make sense of their employment.

The first “pass” through the comparison focuses on households as single units with the sets of identifiable goals and aims that we call survival strategies. Whether or not there are differences between family members as to these goals, we assume the members make contributions that maintain the family as a unit. Hence, we focus on what it is the household members do, on how those activities are enabled by the position the family as a whole holds in the labor force, and, to a certain extent, on the motivations that lead individuals to engage in some practices rather than others. We generally ignore here the issue of *who* in the household is engaged in these practices. Our focus in the first part of the book is on *households* and on the comparison between the two sets of households in their access to various elements of an overall survival strategy.

More specifically, in chapter 2 we discuss each of these elements as

they occur among Coolidge County families (and among U.S. families taken as a whole), and we provide an overview of the differences between two sets of Coolidge County households—those with good work and those without—both with respect to the extent to which they engage in various survival tactics and with respect to their demography. Chapters 3 and 4 are complementary pieces that look in detail at two broad components of the household economy and at the differences between the two sets of households with respect to each of them. Chapter 3 focuses on income-producing activities (the dual-earner strategy, moonlighting). Chapter 4 explores activities that, even though they do not produce income, meet household needs (self-provisioning, nonmonetary household exchanges).

In the second “pass,” we split open the household to consider the implications of these survival strategies for the recreation of gender within the household. No matter how scholars define gender—and no matter how they explain it—two issues stand out. Gender refers to difference, the “social relations that separate people into differentiated gendered status.”²² It also refers to the consequences of those differences, to a social system of inequality in which men generally (albeit not all men and not with respect to all activities) have a status superior to that of women. Joan Wallach Scott refers to both of these when she notes, “Gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes and . . . a primary way of signifying relationships of power.”²³ These two issues—of difference and of its consequences for hierarchy—will be the focus when we turn our attention to dynamics inside the household. We will explore how it is that the different survival strategies of the two sets of households allow for, or give rise to, the recreation of gender difference (chapter 5); we will explore as well the implications of gender for the division of domestic labor within the two sets of households (chapter 6).

By ordering the book in this way (that is, by starting with the household’s overall survival strategy and then looking at its implications for gender and the division of domestic labor), we do not mean to imply that gender occurs only in the household. Clearly, persistent gender differences in the workplace (in both the formal and the informal economy) play a significant role in shaping the options available to men and women alike, and we will briefly examine those issues in chapters 1 and 2. Those differences, however, are not the centerpiece of the analysis. We are interested in how economic restructuring itself plays out its

role—not just in the stock market or occupational and industrial reorganization, but also in how men and women relate to each other on a daily basis within the apparent privacy of the home. Finally, we should add that we are not trying to account for the creation of gender in the household; rather, we are interested in showing the very different foundations upon which those gendered arrangements rest (and are *recreated*) in the two kinds of households that constitute the subject matter of this study.

In chapter 7, we turn to individuals to consider how the family's survival strategy shapes the manner in which those with good work—in contrast to those who are less privileged—make sense of and respond to the changing labor force, the very jobs they hold, and the social world in which they have a place. Thus, the focus in this book moves from broad to narrow and then back out again, from an investigation of the context in which the households with which we are concerned are located, through an analysis of the survival strategies of those households themselves, to a discussion of men and women and gendered relationships within households, and finally to a consideration of individual attitudes that on an aggregate level begin to define the public arena of politics (or what passes for politics these days).

Although we are dealing with a very contemporary topic in this book—the consequences of recent forms of economic restructuring—the methods for this study are quite traditional.²⁴ We employed two different, standard data collection techniques to obtain information about the population. First, using a snowball sampling procedure, we conducted in-depth, face-to-face interviews with a sample of 117 individuals representing 81 different households. Second, we conducted, over the telephone, a random survey of the population from which we drew a subset of 158 households that met the criteria discussed above. (Data collection procedures and measurement issues are discussed more fully in the Appendix.) All the data were collected in Coolidge County, Vermont, between 1991 and 1992.²⁵

The notions of good jobs and bad jobs are part of common parlance these days. To operationalize these concepts, we rely on two component features of employment. The first describes the *terms of employment* in a given job: An individual who holds a waged job that is defined as year round, full time, and “regular”²⁶ is provisionally classified as having “good” employment; in contrast, an individual whose work is part time, seasonal, or specifically designated “temporary” by the terms of that

employment is automatically classified as having a “bad” job. This first discrimination, then, gets at what is usually thought of as “contingent” work.

The second discrimination assesses not only the job’s stability but also the character of the workplace itself.²⁷ We include measures of six items reflecting three components of the quality of employment: availability of benefits (health insurance, paid vacation), workplace stability (frequency of layoffs in the workplace, necessity of bringing one’s own equipment to the workplace), and “bureaucratization” (number of employees in the workplace, whether or not the employee is related to the employer).²⁸ Each of these items was scored as a dichotomous variable.²⁹ A “good” job was defined as one with a score of five or higher; 56 percent of all waged jobs held by respondents were classified as “good jobs.”³⁰

As noted above, we classify households on the basis of whether or not any of their members currently hold good work. The households in our sample are divided between those in which at least one adult has what we define here as a “good” job (54 percent of the households in the random sample and 52 percent of those in which we conducted in-depth interviews) and those in which all employed individuals hold what we define as “bad” jobs. We make this distinction on the basis of households rather than individuals because we believe—and will argue throughout—that it is the household resources taken as a whole, and not the individual relationship to the labor force alone, that determines how well the members of a given family can put together the various tactics that enable and enhance survival.

Each aspect of a household’s survival strategy has its own definition. First, we simply count how many of its members engage in paid work. That is, we distinguish between those households that rely on one earner and those that use a *dual-earner* strategy. Second, we consider whether any individual in the household has, in addition to “regular” or “principal” employment (the activity from which that person derives the greatest income), some form of *moonlighting* activity. Finally, we differentiate between two additional sets of activities. *Self-provisioning* refers to the efforts that household members make to provide, through their own labor (and for themselves), goods and services they would otherwise have to purchase in the (formal or informal) market. We further subdivide self-provisioning into that which is *routine*, and helps to guarantee the daily life of the household, and that which is *substantial*, and helps to improve the family’s living conditions.³¹ Nonmonetary *in-*

terhousehold exchange, the last set of activities, refers to the efforts household members make to exchange a similar set of goods and services with those in *other* households. We include here a variety of different kinds of practices—informal assistance (the casual and reciprocal exchange of goods and services), barter (“the exchange of goods and services of comparable value or the understood exchange of equivalents”), reduced rates (“the exchange of goods and services for token or symbolic payment”), and moving in with other households.³²

Although an observer might have difficulty distinguishing among these various practices with respect to their location within the household survival strategy, our respondents could easily make fine distinctions. For example, they could distinguish between the purchase or sale of goods in the market and what we call nonmonetary interhousehold exchange even when the “same” activity was involved in more than one domain and even when the latter involved a cash transaction. Consider the following example. Bruce Sharp* has a full-time waged job; his wife Nancy holds down part-time employment. To the Sharps and any outsider, it is clear that this is a dual-earner family, but that is only the beginning of the story. Bruce Sharp has a plow attachment for his truck with which, on snowy mornings, he clears his own driveway as well as others in his neighborhood. Both Bruce and Nancy discussed this snowplowing in their interview.

INTERVIEWER: Do you charge different rates for plowing for different people?

BRUCE: Yes, it depends on how long it takes me.

NANCY: And how old they are. I’m glad he does, but he wasn’t going to tell you. Like [when you plow for] Ted. He’s bought you a six-pack of beer. Or a couple of times last winter Bruce would plow and [Ted would] bring him home Friendly’s ice cream.

INTERVIEWER [TO BRUCE]: Were you expecting . . . money?

NANCY: No, not for friends. There’s an older couple that you’ve gone down and just, [gotten] \$5 or something. Because they want to pay something. You don’t make a killing on that.

INTERVIEWER [TO BRUCE]: Why do you do it then?

BRUCE: I started out a long time ago . . . just to give me extra soda money, cigarette money.

NANCY: But you did it a lot of times as a favor when you first started, you just did it to be nice different times. . . . He does one for the apartment house [in

*Throughout this book, we use pseudonyms for our respondents. Where we believe that others could identify specific individuals, we change the identifying information while remaining true to the basic portrait.

return for which] Stuart brought you a load of corn. You don't overcharge him. More or less to help out a lot of times. The store, that's a business. That's a different thing. That has to be taken care of.

INTERVIEWER [TO BRUCE]: And they pay reasonable rates for that?

BRUCE: Yes.

As this conversation, and especially Nancy's interruptions of it, suggests, in addition to taking care of his own family's needs (self-provisioning), Bruce does his snowplowing as an on-the-side business (that is, he moonlights), and he receives an hourly or contracted rate for doing so for "the store." As Nancy says, "that has to be taken care of." Bruce also does plowing as part of interhousehold exchanges: Some he does as part of a casual reciprocity (with Ted), some he barter (with Stuart), and some he does for a reduced rate (the elderly couple). (To make the issue more complicated, in charging the "elderly couple" anything at all, Bruce is freeing them from the burden of reciprocity that is imposed on Ted and Stuart; he is also freeing them from the burden of having received charity. The "fee" in this case is almost a gift. At the same time, the elderly couple might believe that in paying \$5, they have purchased a service in the informal economy and not the social economy.) From Bruce and Nancy's perspective—as well as from the perspective of this book—the context clearly differentiates among these separate transactions and among these various elements of their household survival strategy.

In much of what follows, then, we divide households into two groups—good job households and bad job households—and we consider the extent to which each participates in four separate elements of the family survival strategy. The fact that we have to assign idiosyncratic terms—and often clumsy ones at that—to these different components of a household strategy suggests that as a society we have not yet developed an easy language to capture the fact that families need to engage in a wide range of economic activities simply to get by from day to day. This "oversight," we suggest, poses significant problems for policymakers who focus on wage levels alone to determine how families are doing. As we shall see, wages are not enough to sustain families.

Constructing a New Economy

Driving the back roads of Coolidge County, one may get the impression that this is an area that has escaped the last half of the twentieth century. As wrong as that impression is—and it is indeed wrong—it still deserves our attention. History most certainly did not stop at the borders of what appears to be a bucolic place out of time, but it did take advantage of it, in ways that, paradoxically, illuminate a very complex set of quite modern economic processes accompanied by the social and political realities these processes unleashed.

To understand fully what happened to Coolidge County families in recent years, it is necessary to start outside Coolidge County and back in time—in the United States as a whole and the 1960s, when the glue that held the postwar economy together began to dissolve. Industrial overcapacity, along with the saturation of domestic markets, the increased industrial output of Japan and European countries, the two oil crises, and the erosion of Pax Americana had combined to force a profound restructuring of the U.S. economy.¹

Any number of different measures can be marshaled to describe the resulting changes in the U.S. economy over the past several decades and the terms on which it has recently rebounded. While the mid-1990s witnessed an economic resurgence, the previous declines left an indelible mark on working-class families, both as a consequence of earlier bad times and as a premise for the current good times. Those good times, unfortunately, seem reserved for the upper 20 percent of wealth holders.