

**Ocejo, Richard E. (2017) *Masters of Craft: Old Jobs in the New Urban Economy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ**

**Viscelli, Steve (2016) *The Big Rig: Trucking and the Decline of the American Dream*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Ca.**

### **Review by Colby King and Jacob Bibeault**

Ocejo's *Masters of Craft* and Viscelli's *The Big Rig* both illustrate how working-class jobs in today's economy ain't what they used to be. Viscelli explores how truck driving is no longer 'one of the best blue-collar jobs in the US' (p. 9), while Ocejo focuses on 'how middle-class kids' take 'working-class jobs' made trendy through a sense of handcrafted authenticity (p. 129). Both books illuminate how perceptions of the work, particularly independent contracting and hip craft trades, obscure the unstable realities of jobs in these industries. Offering sociological analysis of the economic context in which these occupations are changing, both books highlight how good working-class jobs are increasingly scarce and available to only a privileged few.

Both books are based on ethnographic research about jobs in male-dominated industries. *The Big Rig* reveals how deregulation, independent contracting, and weakening worker solidarity has increased the precariousness of truck driving and eroded wages and benefits. *Masters of Craft* (which was nominated for the WCSA's 2017 CLR James Award) focuses on how some positions in particular service industries have been made hip by those doing the work and are, for now at least, providing some (typically male, white, and from middle-class background) workers more status and a better income than typically available from working-class service jobs. While characterizing contrasting trends in separate industries, together these books illustrate how both working-class work conditions and social identity are in flux. Both books also highlight how the make-or-break circumstances for workers in these jobs are the result of changing industry structures and the evolving demands of the new economy.

Taking a relational view of social class, Viscelli explains how the rise of independent contracting in the trucking industry has been associated with reduced worker solidarity, a decrease in wages, and a reduction in benefits for workers. Aligning with the American individualist ethos, independent contracting is often portrayed to potential owner-operators as a situation that provides the worker control over their work circumstances. They are told that by becoming the owner of their own truck, they will be able to steer their own financial destiny. As other reviewers of *The Big Rig* have noted, however, the book demonstrates how truckers are working harder but earning less (Harrison 2017, Upton 2017).

Viscelli explains that through these depictions, carriers have managed a 'class project' that obscures the history of industry practices that harm independent contractors. Coupled with

instability and fracturing of the industry, he writes that ‘it is as if carriers continually wipe labor’s memory clean’ (p. 203). Individual contractors take on an ‘owner’ identity, although their circumstances as contractors in this industry do not correspond with rights to control production or appropriate profits—both definitional qualities of capital ownership. Together, this labor structure and cultural environment ‘obscures the sources and consequences of unequal class power in the industry, while it diminishes the potential for workers to exercise power on their own behalf’ (p. 204). In his review of *The Big Rig*, Ryan Haney, a unionized truck driver and member of Teamsters Local 745, calls on drivers to take on their own class project in response, one that ‘fortifies our remaining union power’ and disputes ‘the lie that workers can get ahead by competing with one another.’ (Haney 2017).

While Viscelli’s book examines deteriorating working conditions in an industry that once provided stable, well-paying (if not high status) jobs, Richard Ocejo’s *Masters of Craft* illustrates how some intrepid individuals have carved out niche higher-status positions doing work that is more commonly unstable and of lower status. *Masters of Craft* details how some young urbanites are making careers of ‘craft’ jobs, doing work that might otherwise be perceived as low-status service work. Often in businesses situated in gentrifying neighborhoods, the bartenders, barbers, butchers, and distillers that Ocejo meets explain how the unique nature of their efforts lends a crafted-by-hand quality to their products and services, elevating their cost and, by extension, both their earnings and their social status. Through Ocejo we meet owners and managers as well as employees in these businesses, but, beyond pointing out the fact that owners and managers can serve as gatekeepers to jobs in these industries, Ocejo does not interrogate the relational nature of their work positions. Rather, the focus is on the practices of refining their crafts and the sense that many owners/managers see their employees as protégés with whom they share a commitment to mastering their crafts. In an interview with *Marketplace*, Ocejo explains that the workers he studied ‘really reinvigorated [the jobs] with this sense of meaning, this sense of craft, and this idea that the process that they were going through was going to enhance the quality’ (Ryssdal 2017).

Importantly, Ocejo explains that, having come from middle-class circumstances, many of the individuals elevating these jobs to craft status chose their career paths from a range of options available to them. ‘They are young and free to choose whatever job they [want] . . . and often with college degrees in hand to give them choices’ (p. 18). He finds these workers love their ‘bad jobs,’ and many felt that work should be ‘pleasurable and meaningful’ (p. 18). The relatively privileged circumstances of many of those working these ‘bad jobs’ illustrates the book’s central and fundamental idea—these jobs are attracting people, oftentimes young, college-educated men, who adopt language and imagery that highlights the unique, hand-crafted (read: authentic, laborious, working-class) qualities of their labor. The products of this labor are primarily marketed to hip, middle-class, conspicuous consumers. The ‘authenticity’ of these products is used to raise prices and allure. You can observe that these workers are conducting their own class project, one that is making both the jobs and their products and services more niche, more exclusive, and more elitist.

*Masters of Craft* also illuminates the pivotal, nuanced role of masculinity in these craft jobs. The jobs require substantial interactive service work and skillful application of cultural repertoires. The rise in demand for friendly customer service interactions, frequently associated with feminine gender expectations, presents a conundrum for male workers, even in male-dominated fields. According to Ocejo, ‘these new elite manual labor jobs give men . . . the chance to use their bodies directly in their work . . . as well as their minds, which grants them greater status in these jobs than they would otherwise have. . . . Men are thus able to use these

jobs to achieve a lost sense of middle-class, heterosexual masculinity in their work' (p. 20). In Ocejo's book we see examples of workers going out of their way to reaffirm their masculinity while engaging in what might otherwise be considered feminine labor. For instance, the barbershop in the book represents a male preserve, and the barbers employ 'group banter as a masculine cover for the more intimate, emotional bodywork going on in the shop. . . . The masculine-coded banter they conduct . . . help[s] to hide the emotional labor they perform' (p. 92). As Nixon (2009) warns, men who are reluctant to take on this kind of emotional labor at work will likely struggle in the new economy, both to maintain employment and to affirm their masculine identities. In a way, the workers Ocejo observes are willing to do exactly what Nixon's (2009) respondents were reluctant or unable to do—'put a smiley face on' (p. 300). Men are overrepresented in all the jobs examined in these two books, and the characteristics of these jobs have important implications for gender and family. We see in both books that, in order to fit in, the few women in these jobs often put in additional labor, emotional and otherwise. From Ocejo's book, we see that in the contemporary economy, success seems to come to those workers most willing to adapt to the often-gendered expectations of emotional labor and self-presentation of service work, and also those who are young and willing to work odd shifts that are less conducive to family life. In Viscelli's book, we also see the toll that long hours of truck driving imposes on workers and their families.

Both books feature empathetic characters, and through them the reader finds engaging details and immersive depictions of the workers' occupational circumstances. Both books also provide meaningful context and critical insights that make the books appealing for casual readers or instructors considering books on working-class jobs in today's economy.

Tastes and gas prices change quickly, and those changes are largely indifferent to the circumstances of the workers in the relevant industries. Both books, then, are about the pitfalls of individualism for workers. In Viscelli's view, truck driving as an independent operator offers a false promise of ownership and control over one's work. Viscelli also recognizes that the changes he observes are not unique to the trucking industry, explaining that 'employment relations are being marketized for millions of low-skilled workers in dozens of occupations' (p. 206). Ocejo outlines how individuals can do very well for themselves, but success is dependent not just on hustle, or even willingness and ability to do interactive service work, but also their skill in styling themselves as hip purveyors of quality products and trendy services in a volatile marketplace. From Ocejo we can see how craft work offers higher status but also higher risk, making craft jobs less appealing to those without the options a college degree offers to fall back on. While *The Big Rig* charts the general decline in quality of work in one industry and *Masters of Craft* charts the improvement in quality of work for a few select jobs, both books highlight the continued erosion of solidarity and stability in working-class jobs in today's economy.

### Reviewer Bios

**Colby King** teaches and studies urban sociology, social stratification and inequality, social class, work, and strategies for supporting working-class and first-generation college students. A son of a steel mill worker, in 2014 Dr. King organized Class Beyond the Classroom, an organization of BSU faculty and staff who support working-class and first-generation college students at BSU. He is also a member of the [Steering Committee for the Working-Class Studies Association](#) and the [American Sociological Association's Task Force on First-Generation and Working-Class People in Sociology](#).

**Jacob Bibeault** is an undergraduate student at Bridgewater State University who is currently majoring in English and Secondary Education. He is a member of the Honors Program and took Dr. King's first-year honors seminar on social class. Because of this course, Jacob is now a minor in Sociology.

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