

Stockman, F. (2021) *American Made: What Happens to People When Work Disappears*. Random House.

Review by Joseph Varga

There is an old academic joke about an anthropologist who gathers the leaders of the Indigenous group he has been studying for years, to relate to them his research findings. The learned professor goes into great detail on family groups, kinship ties, food, dress, politics, and culture of the indigenous group. Finally, at the end of his report, he looks out at his audience and says, ‘But enough about me. Let’s talk about you for a while.’

Farah Stockman’s much-lauded journalistic ethnography of a factory closure in Indianapolis, backgrounded against the rise of right-wing populism, is ostensibly about the lives of American workers under global capitalism. She examines the closure of a long-standing ball bearing manufacturer, Rexnord, which had provided steady, well-compensated union work for several generations of workers. But like our anthropologist, it seems just as much about Stockman herself, as she struggles to understand people very unlike herself and other people she has known.

This does not take away from the value of the work, or its importance. This is a good book and well worth reading. But at this point, the re-discovery of the vaunted Midwest working class has become a cottage industry in the mainstream publishing world, from JD Vance’s ill-conceived *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016) through works such as Beth Macy’s *Dopesick* (2018), Phillip Meyer’s *American Rust* (2009), and Joan Williams’ *White Working Class* (2017). We have been treated to numerous works dissecting the foibles and misdirected anger of a group of people who have been portrayed, at least in this political moment, as the helpless victims of the global economy, poor souls who turn to drugs, authoritarianism, religion, and other irrational pursuits as they witness the destruction of the world their parents and grandparents knew. The result is a mixed bag of sometimes valuable insights that allow the workers themselves to speak (Meyer) to pornographic works like Vance’s, whose workers become a self-parody of working-class angst and anger. But all of them, like Stockman’s book, *American Made: What Happens to People When Work Disappears*, reflect their author’s background and worldview every bit as much as they represent the very workers they are trying to understand.

Stockman, a Pulitzer Prize winning author and lauded *New York Times* journalist, is upfront about her class privilege. She is the offspring of college professors who were a generation removed from their own working-class roots. She readily confesses her befuddlement at some of the behavior she observes, and owns up to her ignorance regarding the overall devastating effects of free trade on the working-class people she portrays. This is the root of the story being told here, not that working people need jobs to complete their identities, nor that a good union job, while difficult and precarious, can deliver the American Dream for a white woman, a Black man, and a union supporter. What Stockman thinks she reveals is the disconnect that the rise of Trumpism and right-wing populism has exposed: the cultural rift between those who have benefitted from the global

economy, and those whose trajectories out of the daily grind and precarity of working-class life have been derailed by the search for ever-growing corporate profits at the expense of community. For folks like Farah Stockman, the point is not to lead a fulfilling working-class life, but to escape it, to utilize the union-won wage and health care to strive for something better. For Stockman, what happens to people when work disappears is that the escape routes she would choose for her working-class subjects close, and therein lies the tragedy. By far the most interesting aspects of this book are its depictions of upper middle-class life, as seen through Stockman's interactions with her subjects, and her writing.

That writing is elegant. She is careful, cautious, even loving, in her treatment of her subjects. They are, in turn, Shannon, the working-class white woman who represents the feminist movement; Wally, the Black man from a troubled background, who represents the triumphs of the civil rights movement; and John, the white man who proudly represents his union and the victories of organized labor. Stockman uses each in turn as stand-ins for these respective social movements. For Shannon, the job at Rexnord, where she becomes the first woman to operate the dangerous furnaces, offers autonomy from failed relationships and dysfunctional family. For Wally, the union wage affords him the opportunity to try his hand at a small business (barbeque) while providing the satisfactions of a job well done, a certain pride that overcomes the indignities of racial prejudice and a disadvantaged upbringing. For John, Rexnord's union wage provides redemption and rescues him from the shame many workers feel (my father, for one) at the loss of a previous high-paying union job.

While some of the prose may be a bit overdone, Stockman takes her subjects seriously, and goes to great lengths to present them in a fair and fairly objective light. She recognizes early on the importance of a 'good job' to her working-class subjects. She sensitively handles the sometimes-checkered life histories that many working-class people lead, people like myself, whose own narrative includes drug use, arrest, and delinquency. She does not gloss over some of the negative aspects and attitudes of some of the Rexnord workers. Stockman deals head-on with racism, sexism, xenophobia, and other issues that divide workers on the shop floor and in the community. But she also captures the joys and small triumphs of working-class life, such as Shannon's joy when her daughter receives a hard-earned scholarship, or when John and his wife find their next house, not exactly the dream house in the woods, but good enough.

Stockman's subtitle, 'What Happens to People When Work Disappears,' is drawn from William Julius Wilson's 1996 work that attempted to explain entrenched poverty not through the infamous lens of 'culture' but through the direct relationship between community health and sustaining wages. But work does not simply disappear. Our three characters do not lose their jobs to some conjuror's trick, but rather to the relentless pursuit of profit. All three suffer from the closing of Rexnord, and one, Wally, succumbs to one of the 'deaths of despair' made famous by Angus Deaton and Anne Case in their 2020 book of the same title. Shannon's politics are altered as she comes to understand the emptiness of Trumpist populism, while John clings to his unionist beliefs, and soldiers on, because he has little choice. Jobs disappear, others jobs emerge, and our workers work.

Away from its downtown towers and monolithic sports stadiums, Indianapolis is very much a working-class city. I write this review while staying at a friend's home on Indy's very working-

class west side, about three miles from the site of the closed Rexnord plant. It's a neighborhood of modest shotgun bungalows whose various states of repair and disrepair reflect the ambiguity of working-class life. A working rail line literally runs through the backyard, while two blocks away the locally famous Workingman's Friend restaurant serves up artery-clogging fare to crowds of retirees and current workers. My home-buying friends are tech workers, with little interest in the neighborhood, which is dotted with old industrial plants, both shuttered and active, set amidst the homes. She and her partner purchased the renovated bungalow to 'crash' in on nights she does not feel like driving back to Bloomington, where we all live full-time. They are part of the gentrification that already threatens this working-class enclave, a place where one can still buy a two-bedroom home for under 100K, and rents are still (barely) affordable.

The point is not that these working-class enclaves are threatened (they are) or that the working class will disappear along with good union factory jobs (they won't). Capitalism needs the working class. Indeed, it cannot function without a group of workers from whom it extracts profit. Some jobs do 'disappear,' but the working class remains, albeit in a constantly evolving, emergent form, as global capital links, de-links, creates and re-creates. The working class survives but seldom under conditions of their own choosing. The working class in contemporary Indianapolis still makes things, and the owners still extract profit from that making. But now, ball bearings are replaced by services, by provision of health care, and yes, there are still factories on the city's west side making things for the global economy. Until something replaces the system of capitalist exploitation, the working class will still work, still create community, still raise their kids, and make a life for themselves. It is important that we continue to make certain that their stories are told, and that we recognize that the precarious conditions of our contemporary working class are not normal or natural, but are the result of political decisions. Farah Stockman has done us a service by telling these stories. She has also done a service by telling her own story, even if that is not what she set out to do.

Reviewer Bio

Joseph Varga is Associate Professor of Labor Studies at Indiana University in Bloomington and former president of the Working-Class Studies Association. A long-time labor activist before becoming an academic, he is the author of *Hell's Kitchen and the Battle for Urban Space: Class Struggle and Progressive Reform in New York City, 1894-1914*.