

Book Review: *On the Clock: What Low-Wage Work Did to Me and How it Drives America Insane.*

Lawrence M. Eppard¹

¹Shippensburg University, Shippensburg, PA, USA
Lawrence Eppard email: leeppard@ship.edu

Received September 20, 2019

Accepted for publication September 20, 2019

Published November 12, 2019

Publication Type: Book Review

Preferred Citation: Eppard, Lawrence. 2019. Review of *On the Clock: What Low-Wage Work Did to Me and How it Drives America Insane*. *Sociation*, 18(2): 47-49.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 2.0 Generic License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/)

On the Clock from Emily Guendelsberger reads like a worthy 2019 update of Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*. In *On the Clock*, Guendelsberger provides an excellent description of the day-to-day work experiences of those Americans who must settle for low-wage jobs today. This large segment of the American workforce faces various forms of social, political, and economic marginalization and mistreatment. For many, their jobs offer not only low wages, but insecurity, irregular and non-traditional hours, and dehumanizing conditions as well. This likely contributes to their risk of chronic stress, depression and anxiety, unhappiness and despair, family instability, and opioid addiction, as well as general bitterness and resentment.

After her employer, the *Philadelphia City Paper* closed in the fall of 2015, Guendelsberger went to work at a series of three low-wage jobs over the next few years. They included an Amazon fulfillment center in Kentucky, a call center in North Carolina, and a McDonald's fast-food restaurant in California. These jobs are somewhat representative of the kinds of work done by many Americans without a bachelor's degree. Along her journey, Guendelsberger meticulously detailed what she did and how it felt, as well as how it was impacting the lives of her fellow low-wage workers.

Guendelsberger begins *On the Clock* with an intriguing question: what does the phrase "in the weeds" mean to you? She finds that how one answers this question suggests where they are situated in the geography of American social class. Those who respond with some stale description of being immersed in the minute details of white-collar work likely to hold a bachelor's degree. To the majority of the American workforce, which does not hold such a degree, however, the phrase "in the weeds" likely arouses visceral emotions of hopelessness and desperation. It suggests being inescapably locked into a Sisyphean struggle to work harder and longer to keep one's head above water in the contemporary American economy. For these high-school educated workers, their *entire lives*, not just the hours spent on the job, are in the weeds. Moreover, Guendelsberger believes this frantic and precarious existence is toxic—stressing workers beyond their limits, sapping their happiness, undermining their relationships and families, making many sick, tired, and incredibly anxious, and forcing many to search for some form of relief.

Guendelsberger identified modern management techniques employed at her three low-wage jobs as a critical source of stress for workers. These modern productivity-enforcing technologies, which she refers to collectively as "techno-Taylorism," ensure that workers never escape the weeds, leaving many feeling miserable and dehumanized.

At Amazon, for instance, each worker's scanner kept track of where they were at all times via GPS, as well as whether they were keeping up with the challenging work-rate. Each time that a worker completed a task, the LCD screen on their scanner began a countdown of precisely how many seconds they had to complete the subsequent

task. Automatic daily reports were generated and sent to supervisors detailing an employee's work rate and "time off task." Not "making rate" or too much time off task could be grounds for punishment or termination. This form of techno-Taylorism left workers "at a dead sprint [their] entire shift."

Similar techniques were employed at the other two jobs. At McDonald's, workers were instructed that they had no more than 60 seconds to deliver an order—22 seconds for sandwich assembly, 14 seconds for sandwich wrapping, and so on. At the call center, her supervisors tracked the frequency and duration of her bathroom visits. During one conversation documented in the book, Guendelsberger commented to her call center colleague that she had never before experienced such intense micromanagement in the workplace, to which her colleague replied, "I have not had a job where they *do not* time you like that."

The work Guendelsberger describes is always demanding—sometimes physically, sometimes mentally, and often-times, both. At Amazon, workers were perpetually sore and repetitive stress injuries were common. After only three days into her job at the fulfillment center, she found herself so sore during a shift that she ended up crying and unable to move on the warehouse floor. When she was finally able to will herself to her feet, she limped to the cafeteria vending machines, which she already knew were stocked with pain medication. When she checked her pedometer later that night, she had walked fifteen miles during her shift, which she would later realize was not abnormal in this type of work. Guendelsberger remarked that the dull, lonely, monotonous, and physically-demanding work at Amazon made her feel like she was "actually going to go crazy."

At the call center, she noted that the repetitive, mind-numbing, low-control, and high-stress nature of the work was as mentally exhausting as the fulfillment center had been physically. An alarming number of workers at the center reported mental stress, anxiety, depression, and ulcers. Guendelsberger claims that she could "fill 20 pages" with stories of workers who seriously considered self-harm or suicide due to their jobs. Calls came in one-after-another, were strictly scripted, and workers were implicitly discouraged from providing excellent customer service in order to keep the never-ending barrage of calls moving along. Workers were stressed by both the customers on one end and their supervisors on the other. The customers were always angry, and the supervisors were hyper-vigilant that every second of every shift be accounted for, or otherwise, it was considered "time theft" by the company (taken to such an extreme that a supervisor stood outside a bathroom stall to verify that one worker did, in fact, have stress-induced diarrhea). When an ambulance arrived to care for and transport a worker suffering from a work-induced panic attack on one shift, Guendelsberger overheard the ambulance driver ask the call center security guard, "Okay, who is it this time?"

There were numerous other themes highlighted in the book. Worker turnover was unbelievably high. Algorithmic scheduling made it impossible for many workers to plan their lives and the lives of their families even a few days. Some employers intentionally under-staffed in order to cut costs and drive the pace of work to unreasonable levels. For some workers, emotional detachment from their work and their customers was a necessity for survival. Opioids were "everywhere." In short, the work was toxic, and its effects reached far beyond the workplace into people's home lives and individual psyches.

Guendelsberger openly admits that she can never live this experience as it truly feels for most low-income workers, remarking that, "I am the upper class. I always will be. I will not ever really *understand* what it feels like to work here, because I know that I get to leave." Nevertheless, this work impacts her in a variety of negative ways, which is very telling about what this work must be like for her colleagues who have it much worse. She is so stressed at many points, for instance, that she seeks release in unhealthy food that she is usually able to avoid. Her demanding shifts at Amazon sap her empathy to such a degree that she intentionally ignores a colleague's plea for a ride home. Several other similar examples indicated that the harsh reality of low-wage work took its toll on even her, a social class interloper. If this happened to her, how much worse would it have been had she also been dealing with the same level of insecurity, stress, despair, family instability, addiction, and/or bitterness as many of her low-wage colleagues?

Guendelsberger aims to help readers *feel* what low-wage work is like in America today, and this is, in fact, the strength of the book due to its meticulous details. She provides vivid in-depth descriptions—readers can truly feel her despair as she wills herself out of bed for another shift at Amazon. Her extensive quotes have the same impact, pulling the reader into the scene—whether she was drinking whiskey with workcampers around a campfire,

or listening to single mothers on a smoke break detailing with amazement how much their sons scratched themselves.

An important take-home message from *On the Clock* is that many current low-wage jobs are robbing Americans of their humanity, sapping their happiness, eroding the social aspects of their personalities, destabilizing their relationships and families, and contributing to a state of never-ending chronic stress at work and home. Guendelsberger argues that it should not surprise anyone that America is so “crazy” today, given “the inescapable chronic stress built into the way we work and live. It is the insane idea that an honest day’s work means suppressing your humanity, dignity, family, and other nonwork priorities in exchange for low wages that make home life constantly stressful, too. Is it surprising that Americans have started exhibiting unhelpful physical, mental, and social adaptations to chronic stress en masse?”

On the Clock should encourage readers to rethink the future of work for all Americans, but particularly those in jobs like the ones detailed here, which are driving the American precariat even further into the weeds. A majority of the American workforce does not hold a bachelor’s degree, so remedying their unacceptable work conditions and wages is an obvious moral imperative. After reading Guendelsberger’s excellent book, it becomes clear that such actions are also social and political necessities if we wish to rebuild social bonds in our communities and heal our ailing democracy.