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The New Old Economy: Networks, Institutions, and the Organizational Transformation of American Manufacturing

Josh Whitford

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American manufacturing is in obvious crisis: the sector lost three million jobs between 2000 and 2003 as the American trade deficit shot to record highs. Manufacturers have increasingly decentralized productive responsibilities to armies of supplier firms, both domestic and abroad. Many have speculated as to whether or not manufacturing is even feasible in the United States, given the difficulties. Josh Whitford's book shows that discussion of this shift, in the media and in the academic literature, hits on the right issues - globalization, de-industrialization, and the outsourcing of production in marketized and in network relationships - but in an overly polarized way that obscures as much as it enlightens. Drawing on the results of extensive interviews conducted with manufacturers in the American Upper Midwest, Whitford shows that the range of possibilities is more complex and contingent than is usually recognized. Highlighting heretofore unexamined elements of constraint, contradiction and innovation that characterize contemporary network production models, Whitford shakes received understanding in economic and organizational sociology, comparative political economy, and economic geography to reveal ways in which the American economic development apparatus can be adjusted to better meet the challenges of a highly decentralized production regime.

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