

**Half a Job: Bad and Good Part-time Jobs
in a Changing Labor Market
Chris Tilly
Temple University Press (Philadelphia, 1996)**

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Brief Summary

“Half a Job” examines the characteristics and trends of part-time work in America. By juxtaposing the differences between “voluntary” and “involuntary” part-time work, Tilly presents the reader with a more focused view of the problems that accompany the disparities and the implications they have for society. Tilly suggests that the issues, while substantial, are not insurmountable and that a commitment to understanding the labor market can go a long way in bringing about necessary improvements.

Facts and Findings

Part-time work is on the increase. This trend is made more complex by the fact that the majority of these jobs are “bad” – financially insufficient, scarce, static and generally undesirable. Tilly found that the common explanations given for this trend were inadequate, and that the causes most likely stem from industries’ shift towards secondary labor markets. A solution lies in finding a way to balance the market’s demand for cheap labor with the need for equitable employment opportunities.

Recommendations and Implications

Tilly recommends policy changes that will limit the number of “bad” part-time jobs that are created. He also suggests that policy changes be implemented that incentivize industrial shifts towards primary labor markets. Tilly further asserts that better enforcement of current legislation and the increased representation of labor unions would mitigate some of the issues that characterize “bad” part-time jobs.

Analysis / Critique

My main critique of the book is its packaging. The way in which the information was conveyed seems to target a very specific audience – economic theorists – which runs counter to the aim of the text, which I took was to inform the reader so as to spark interest and a dedication to change. That being said, I think the average person can glean the basic problems that certain forms of part-time work create and the fact that the trend favoring these types of employment is growing. By the end of the text, you have enough information to agree or disagree with Tilly's proposed remedies, and come up with a few of your own.

Full Review

“Half-a-Job” by Chris Tilly is a study and commentary on the disparities that create, and define, “good” and “bad” part-time jobs in America. Through the use of economic theories, statistics, case studies, social trends and interviews, Tilly invites his readers to carefully scrutinize part-time work in America, its foundations, growth and the problems it creates. Finally, the author suggests means to address these issues.

As a preliminary measure, it is a good idea to become familiar with a few foundational terms, used interchangeably throughout the text: a “good” part-time job is typically a salaried position, *offered* as a means of retaining a valuable employee. This type of employment reflects flexible and favorable working conditions and is characterized as “*voluntary*” part-time employment throughout the book. Conversely, a “bad” job is based on an hourly wage, *accepted* because there are no other options available. The conditions are far less favorable, usually typified by extensive manual labor and less pay and characterized by Tilly as “involuntary” because it is only “half the job the employee wants.”

Tilly begins by noting that part-time work itself is not a new phenomenon – in 1957, 13% of the workplace was part-time (1). Between 1968 and 1992, the temporary workforce grew 15 times while the labor force as a whole did not even double (1). What is markedly different in recent years is the prominence of involuntary work in the workforce. At the time the book was written (1996), 5.5% of part-time work was involuntary (3). While this may not sound like a significant percentage, it represents over 6 million Americans, and the number has likely grown since 1996.

So what is the big deal with the growth of involuntary work? Tilly answers this by illustrating some of the common features of this type of “secondary” employment.

First, workers in these jobs are typically unable to secure sufficient hours and make sufficient income. Although not all part-time jobs lead to poverty, many do: part-time workers make up two-thirds of all people working at or below the minimum wage (4). This struggle to make ends meet often leads to a “multi-part-time job remedy” to compensate for the inadequate hours and pay of the initial job. Further illustrating the differences between involuntary and voluntary part-time work is the gap between incomes: in 1991, involuntary workers had a median family income that was \$17,000 below that of voluntary workers (4).

Second, involuntary employment in many cases ends up being a prolonged predicament. Tilly found that workers who were involuntarily part-time usually stayed in that situation for at least 4 months and in many cases much longer (3). One of the reasons is the unavailability of child and elder care. When persons with these needs are unable to afford quality care, they are forced to provide the care themselves- making securing additional hours, and consequently better pay, difficult if not impossible.

Finally, Tilly notes that there are not even enough of these undesirable jobs! As many as 3 million people are involuntary *full-time* workers who would prefer to work *fewer* hours and earn less money. With this additional demand, the problem of involuntary work is exacerbated by scarcity – thus individuals, already disadvantaged by not being in the position to bargain for a better job, are struggling to secure employment that will allow them to make minimum wage. What is more plausible, he suggests, is that the employer’s cost of providing benefits to full-time workers might incentivize a shift towards part-time work with no benefits. However, Tilly lacks evidence for this shift.

Tilly next moves to the “why” behind the growth. In doing so, he confines himself to 3 periods of discernible increase: 1969-1979, 1979-1989 and 1989-1993. He first deals with the usual explanations given for the growth in part-time employment *generally* – not of involuntary employment specifically. The first is the demographic shift that occurred when women, students and retirees entered the market. Tilly disposes of this explanation by noting that while this may account for growth in the 1950s and 1960s, it matters little after these periods. Second he addresses the argument that long-term unemployment growth can account for the increase in part-time employment. This he outright rejects because of his own statistical analysis showing that for every percentage point rise in unemployment, involuntary part-time employment rose by about one-half of a point (19). This ‘evidence’ shows that the correlation was not one-to-one but that part-time employment actually was on its own steady incline (19). Finally, Tilly addresses the proposition that full-time work was just too expensive, and it was cheaper for employers to substitute part-time

work. While the wage gap between full-time and part-time employment is significant, Tilly says it has always been this way and the overall differential between the two has not increased significantlyⁱ (19).

With these often debated and arguably plausible explanations disposed of, Tilly moves to explanations that he thinks are correct: (1) that the industry shift from manufacturing to trade has created more part-time *secondary* jobs and ; (2) that more jobs in more industries have adopted the industry shift . His evidence showed that almost all of the increase in part –time employment rate accounted for by changes in industry shares was explained by the growth of trade and services – where secondary labor markets were prominent (21). Furthermore, part-time work has grown the fastest in less-skilled, white and pink-collar occupations. For example, part-time workers in clerical, sales, and service occupations climbed from 9.5% to 11.7% (of all *nonagricultural workers*) between 1969 and 1993.

Throughout the book, Tilly seems almost obsessive in his quest to illustrate the differences between the two-types of work (involuntary versus voluntary part-time work) and their place in labor. He compares two economic theories: the neoclassical theory and the “institutionalist” theory. The neoclassical theory is the standard labor ‘supply and demand’ model which says that a person is “presented with a wage and decides how to spend time between hours of work and leisure.” The firms on the other hand, maximize profits and seek to minimize production costs (45). This model takes into account the general inflexibility of firms. The institutionalist theory, in contrast, posits that the choice between part-time and full-time employment is discrete, and that, in any case, employment come bundled with a host of other characteristics and considerations. Tilly favors the institutionalist theory because it takes into account those variables that exceed the bounds of employment considerations and the other features that contribute to the disparities and problems of part-time work.

To further illustrate this last point, he compares the common features of a job, generally, with the distinctions between secondary and retention employment. In this comparison he discusses how the skill, training and responsibility associated with a voluntary part-time job tend to be more extensive than those of a involuntary worker, how the pay and benefits received by involuntary workers are significantly less and tend to create more (socio) economic ills for the worker, and how promotion opportunities are scarce and turnover high for secondary workers while the converse is typical of voluntary employees (50-61).

I was most moved, however, by his interviews with managers of the two types of employeesⁱⁱ. While the bosses of the voluntary workers

spoke of their employees as assets and people to be trusted, the bosses of involuntary workers characterized their employees as disinterested thieves who were easily replaced. The conversations supported the notion that it was the person or people and not necessarily the actual hours that make up the differences in pay, training and promotability. I would take that even a step further and say that it was the industries' images of the employee and the work to be done that created and justified these staggering disparities.

Without a doubt the issues surrounding part-time work are serious and many. Tilly goes beyond the inequalities in earnings to the effects on family and on society as a whole. He discusses the "issue of choice." There are a large number of people who desire types of work which they have limited or no access to. He speaks about the lag in productivity, efficiency and quality that spurs from this discontentment (among other things) and the loss of the "worker's voice" where unions have not adapted to the needs of the modern workplace.

The discussion concludes with the notion that part-time work does not have to be this way. He suggests policy changes, from placing some sort of limit in the creation of these sub-par and socially detrimental forms of employment, to industrial policies encouraging manufacturing industries to move in the direction of primary labor markets and standards. He pushes hard for the increased representation of unions which could help to secure equal compensation and better working conditions, enforce pertinent legislation and possibly even limit the creation of these types of jobs in the future. He finally pushes for an increase in information. The more we know about part-time work and other forms of contingency employment, and their appeal to employers, the better positioned we will be to make the changes needed to ensure equitable employment opportunities for all.

ⁱ Tilly notes that the full-time/ part-time wage differential *for men* has not grown significantly; for women, the gap has widened somewhat but the percentage of women working part-time has remained static (p19).

ⁱⁱ Tilly interviewed employees and employers in the retail and insurance industries, corresponding with secondary and retention employment