

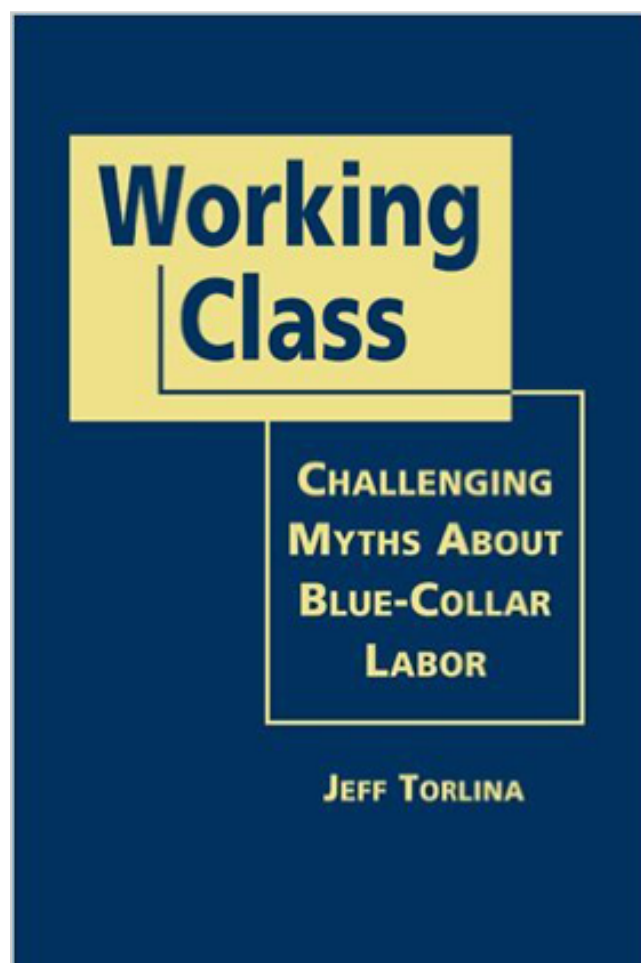
Navigating through a sea of blue-collar presuppositions

Working Class: Challenging Myths about Blue Collar Labor.

By Jeff Torlina. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2011, 208 pp.

What comes to mind when you think of blue-collar workers? Which preconceived notions does the term “blue-collar work” evoke in society? Your answers to these questions may depend on the kind of work you do; but it could also be based on a larger societal stigma.

In his book *Working Class: Challenging Myths about Blue Collar Labor*, Jeff Torlina explores how different workers answer these questions, along with many others relating to blue- and white-collar workers, and seeks to provide ideas to form the basis for new norms from which a more equal class system may emerge. The language of the book is not purely academic, and the ideas apply to a wide range of thinkers—not just researchers, but anyone who is interested in learning about working-class distinctions in America. As he tells the stories of the workers—stories based on his interviews and personal research—it becomes clear that Torlina has a unique perspective. He has lived on both sides of the story: after becoming a skilled craftsman in construction, an industry in which he worked for 20 years, including the time he spent earning a Ph.D. in sociology, he went on to hold an academic position at Utah Valley University. As he worked in construction, he gained trust seldom given to other researchers. He then used that trust to interview other blue-collar workers, in the end obtaining a more realistic perspective than those provided by pure academicians. In sum, he has been able to use both aspects of his career to examine multiple perspectives of an issue that is often told from only one side.



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Anytime one can add a new perspective to a conversation, the conversation is improved. Torlina definitely has added a new perspective to the ongoing conversation about blue-collar vs. white-collar distinctions and their place in the social hierarchy. Through his interviews with blue-collar workers, he points out flaws in the current social hierarchy in the United States. That hierarchy is built on the idea that white-collar workers are more skilled than blue-collar workers, so the white-collar workers tend to get paid more and, because people prefer higher pay, a person would choose to do blue-collar labor only if no other options were available. After poring over Torlina's interviews with the blue-collar workers, one begins to question the merits of the system as well as see how the preferences of blue-collar and white-collar workers may differ. Torlina points out that much research into the social hierarchy is based on circular reasoning, or a closed loop. The reasoning goes as follows: Papers are published which say that blue-collar workers are less skilled, so employers start paying less in response. Then a scholar tries, in good faith, to reevaluate the skill level of blue-collar workers but includes the rate of pay as an explanatory variable. In sum, blue-collar workers are less skilled, so they get paid less, and because they are paid less, they must be less skilled.

Torlina believes that this circular thinking is one part of the problem with the current social hierarchy, yet he does not condemn the researchers. Instead, he turns the issue into the thought-provoking one of why so many academics fail to question the status quo. He provides a few possible answers, one in particular that renders suspect the motivations of academics: in the current social hierarchy, in which white-collar workers are on top, the researchers, who are themselves the very white-collar workers they write about, benefit by maintaining the status quo. Again, Torlina looks, not to condemn, but merely to explain why it is that society views blue-collar workers in a different light than blue-collar workers view themselves. Overall, he uses the interviews he has conducted to compare current blue-collar and white-collar stereotypes and then looks at history and past research to explain why the preconceived notions society has may not be accurate.

As the subtitle, *Challenging Myths about Blue Collar Labor*, suggests, Torlina's main point was to resolve the discrepancies between how academics describe blue-collar workers and what he has personally observed, and this he does exceptionally well. He is not under the illusion that the positive attitudes of the blue-collar workers he has spoken to are representative of all blue-collar workers—a smart approach, given the small sample of limited diversity that he is working with. Still, he believes that these blue-collar workers, who have chosen their line of work and who have not been forced into it by the absence of other options, are the norm rather than the exception. His experience as a blue-collar worker provides the reader with a very raw discussion about the thoughts and feelings of those workers—a discussion that one would not normally get in academic writing on the subject. His critiques of the traditional, longstanding sociological views are refreshing.

Looking at the book's topics through the lens of blue-collar workers and white-collar researchers, we read how workers feel about their job compared with other types of jobs and are shown the effects that these stereotypes have on the relationships among classes. Suggesting what needs to be done to correct this unbalanced perspective, Torlina delves into how social scientists have the power to change the perception of blue-collar work and help blue-collar workers be seen for the value they provide to society. He presents a compelling argument for the idea that white-collar workers should want to reconstruct the attitudes society holds toward traditional laborers. By moving away from seeing society as a hierarchy in which blue-collar workers are always below white-collar workers, to viewing it on a level in which all workers are superior or inferior to each other in one way or another but no one is entirely inferior to another, a more equal and just society can be created.

In short, *Working Class: Challenging Myths about Blue Collar Labor* is a fairly easy read with a wide variety of topics relating to social hierarchy in America and with well-defined sections that will appeal to readers of various backgrounds. Included are tables listing the characteristics of the sample the author used in his research and the schedule for the interviews he conducted. The book will challenge readers to think about their own views of blue-collar workers and whether those views are grounded in truth or myth.