
Exploring the impact of globalization on labour relations and examining the potential for an effective trade union response has become a fashionable trend in the field of labour relations. Much of this literature is divided between those who highlight globalization’s impact on job creation and those who envision a pernicious race to the bottom. Accounts of transnational solidarity face a similar divide. Optimists note the range of creative and successful new forms of solidarity from global anti-sweatshop activism to Euro strikes, while transnational pessimists highlight the obstacles to transnational solidarity, including language barriers, the growing north/south income divide, and the heterogeneous nature of today’s global workforce.

Bieler, Lindberg and Pilly’s edited volume provides a much-needed balanced and nuanced account. They emphasize that while globalization is driven by a common market-oriented logic, the impact on national labour movements is varied due to variations in state structures. Yet in all countries, globalization has increased ‘precarious labour’ (a term introduced by Samir Amin in the preface). At the same time, transnational labour responses to globalization have been inadequate and need to be modified in order to ‘transform global capitalism’ (p. 283), a goal that appears to unify this group of authors.

Evidence for ‘precarious labour’ is everywhere, although the definition and degree vary considerably across countries. For developing countries, precarious labour is most often found in informal sectors — street vendors, black market activities, hidden urban sweatshops — that lie outside the purview of major labour legislation. In South Korea, Chun finds that even militant labour centres, such as the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, have had limited success in organizing these sectors in part because the organization is dominated by male workers who have not effectively reached out to the mostly female workers in irregular employment. A similar problem faces the union movement in South Africa, as Pilly notes. In India, where Praveen Jha finds only 10 per cent of the workforce is in the urban, formal sector, an effective trade union response has been lacking due partly to union rivalry and political splits.

China’s 180 million migrant workers, as Wen Tiejun explains, present a large challenge for the union movement, which has focused on urban workers in state-owned enterprises. Rauber highlights that in Argentina, a new movement, organized in the Central de Trabajadores de la Argentina, has reached out to the growing number of unemployed and informal workers while also building alliances with other social
and political actors. Jakobsen and Barbosa find that in Brazil, the labour movement has been able to block some flexibilizing reforms, such as pension reforms.

In developed countries, precarious labour is more often a reference to temporary, part-time and other forms of ‘non-core’ labour. In Japan, Shuto and Urata show that unions are just beginning to organize part-time, temporary and insecure employment are limited, and political responses have been weakened by the social democratic party’s shift away from its working class roots.

Dribbusch and Schulten’s chapter on Germany explores European Works Councils, international social movement alliances and dockworkers’ protests, which the authors see as offering limited responses at best. In the case of Sweden, Bieler and Lindberg place union responses into two categories: one seeks to ‘defend and restore’, while the other aims to ‘modernize and adapt’. A better strategy, they argue, would be ‘defend, modernize and strike back’ (p. 211). Lindell’s chapter on the informal sector in Africa notes that often, the informal sector is already organized; the problem is that these organizations are not linked to trade union movements. Mozambique and Ghana are exceptions. At the EU level, Bieler and Schulten also offer a sanguine picture: trade unions, influenced by social partnership at the national level, have a tendency to be ‘coopted into neoliberal restructuring at the European level’ (p. 239). For Waterman, unions would be better off pursuing ‘social movement internationalism’ such as that illustrated by the World Social Forum, as opposed to ‘social partnership internationalism’ (p. 258). Bieler, Lindberg and Pilly conclude their volume by outlining three fundamental tasks for labour: (i) increased transnational labour solidarity; (ii) organization of the informal sector; and (iii) co-operation with other social movements.

The chapters are informative and insightful, as they present a well-balanced, if not sober, picture of labour movements today. The emphasis on precarious work is a needed corrective for those labour activists and researchers who still exclusively focus on formal sector employment. The treatment of the ideological aspect of globalization illustrates that employers and governments often justify market-oriented reforms and labour market flexibility on the need for greater competitiveness, while these reforms are embedded in a larger neoliberal belief system and strategic agenda. Finally, while offering a cautious tale of what labour unions have done to date to build transnational solidarity, the conclusion takes the additional step to offer carefully considered proposals for labour reactivation via new forms of global solidarity.

Most country chapters, however, had remarkably little to say about national unions’ transnational strategies, an unfortunate gap. And perhaps the volume went too far by insisting that labour’s future is largely linked to its ability to organize informal workers. As Jakobsen and Barbosa find, this is a notoriously difficult sector to organize; while one effort in Brazil brought together 2,000 workers, the next month it was only possible to contact 20 of these workers due to their high level of mobility. A truly transformative strategy, while attending to the current needs of these workers, might also ask the question of what kind of economic and legislative policies would create a greater number of formal sector jobs, which in turn would be easier to unionize. At the same time, most formal sector workers in the world today still remain unorganized, and more could be done here too. Yet overall this is a well-balanced account of globalization, labour market restructuring, and the potential for more effective labour internationalism. Readers will not be disappointed.

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The year 2009 marks the centenary of the introduction of minimum wage legislation in Great Britain in the form of the Trade Boards Act 1909. This splendid book by Sheila Blackburn is the best possible tribute to the centenary. The essential message is that the establishment of the trade boards (later renamed wage councils) stymied the introduction of a national minimum wage (NMW) and an NMW is a superior instrument to tackle low pay.

A number of themes bind the chapters together. These include: what constitutes sweating and sweated labour, what generates sweating and low pay, what strategies have been advocated and implemented to combat low pay, how images of sweated workers have altered over time and how successful reforms have been. The book is organized chronologically starting with the mid-nineteenth-century writings of Thomas Hood, Henry Mayhew and Charles Kingsley, and ending with the introduction of the NMW in 1999.

Sweating meant different things to different authorities, but its common components are low pay, long hours and unpleasant working conditions. Blackburn emphasizes that it was not confined to the domestic workshop sector, nor was it identical with outwork or women’s employment.

Two inter-related elements were necessary preconditions for sweating to develop: over-supply of labour and lack of trade union organization among the workforce. Blackburn documents how over-supply was linked to ease of entry to a trade and absence of apprenticeship requirements. Even as late as 1901, at least 200,000 children were in paid employment, including homework, brickfields, baking and shops (as errand boys). And many women were in the sweated trades — chainmaking in the Midlands or tailoring in London — because the pay of their partners fluctuated so much.

Sweated workers were never strong enough to negotiate standard rates of pay. As Blackburn puts it: collective action only occurred when prices were forced down to near starvation levels. The constant pressure required to maintain pay and conditions was beyond the workers’ financial ability.

Mid-nineteenth century writings of Thomas Hood, Henry Mayhew and Charles Kingsley initially provoked public discussion of sweated labour. But their work was subtly misleading. Hood’s seamstress in The Song of the Shirt ‘was brushed aside as an isolated instance of distress’. By contrast Mayhew and Kingsley focused on distressed male artisans in tailoring and concluded that sweating revolved around small-scale employment, domestic piecework and subletting of contracts (ch. 1).

Renewed condemnation of sweating arose in the 1870s and 1880s. Many native Britons believed that immigrant Jews were simultaneously ‘both avaricious money-men and also impoverished under cutters of indigenous wage earners’ (ch. 2). This latter finds an echo in today’s discussion of the influx of less-skilled labour from the newly expanded EU.

Stricter inspection of domestic workshops became a favoured anti-sweating policy in the 1890s. This decade also ‘witnessed a substantial break with laissez-faire attitudes towards legal control of low pay’. Hobson and the Webbs took on the orthodox late Victorian economists who still held that ‘state intervention in the wages contract would be ruinous for Britain’. But disagreements over policy among the reformers and the Boer War (1899–1902) ensured sweating continued (ch. 3).
Popular opinion shifted against sweating and in favour of a limited legal minimum wage in the 1900s. This was coincident with the election of a Liberal government and the ‘dramatic staging in London’s West End of a sweatied industries exhibition [which] brought the privileged into close proximity with the sweated for the first time and demonstrated that even lavishly priced items were not immune from the problem’. The Trade Boards Act was duly passed in 1909 covering four industries where wages were deemed unduly low: domestic chainmaking; tailoring, cardboard box making and machine-made lace. The Act established Boards consisting of equal numbers of employers’ and workers’ representatives plus independent members nominated by the state. When there was impasse, the independents used final offer arbitration to set the wage. Although this modest beginning was a far cry from the Webbs’ favoured subsistence-level national minimum wage, it was the platform for a considerable expansion of minimum wage coverage in the subsequent half century (ch. 4).

Chainmaking was the first trade board industry and is the subject of a detailed case study (ch. 5), including wonderful old photographs. The nuances of employer statements concerning the board are nicely emphasized — good employers supporting the board one minute then switching to much bleating the next if they believe their profits will be eroded. There is a real echo today in, for example, evidence given to the Low Pay Commission by major supermarkets on the affordability of the minimum wage.

Tawney studied the practical operation of the early chainmaking and tailoring trade boards, and Blackburn is severe on his methods of investigation: ‘preoccupied with expedient reforms rather than radical ideas. In order to affirm the boards as an overwhelming success, Tawney ignored their failings...a n unreliable guide’ (ch. 6).

Finally, Blackburn explores why, despite repeated shifts in views of supporters and opponents alike, trade boards and later wages councils survived until 1993. Attention is give to the reasons for rejecting a NMW after the Second World War and the post-1999 NMW is scrutinized (ch. 7).

I have three minor quibbles. Blackburn accepts too readily the notions of: a ‘low wage’ economy, the so-called living wage, and a maximum wage. At a number of points, it is suggested (or, at a minimum, an author is not scrutinized) that Britain is a low-wage economy. This is nonsense. We have the fifth largest GDP in the world, yet our labour force is only 30 million. Labour’s share of national income is around 70 per cent. So it is just not possible that we are a low-wage economy. There is a confusion here between the average level of real wages and wage inequality. Second, the ‘living wage’ often appears to find favour. This is a slippery concept. It takes no account of family circumstances and piles one arbitrary calculation on top of another to generate a fanciful figure. It may be possible to accommodate this higher wage for public employees and contractors, but would surely cause employment problems for the private sector. Such is the rationale for tax credits.

Blackburn concludes, quoting Townsend favourably, that ‘if Britain is finally to end its historic tradition of low pay, she must be prepared to institute maximum income limits as well as minimum wages’ (p. 203). How? A maximum wage? One hundred per cent income tax rates above a pay threshold? A ban on emigration? Although many of us find the growth in pay inequality towards the top of the distribution not to our taste, the low paid will not be helped by empty rhetoric.

Sheila Blackburn has produced a magisterial research monograph in the very best traditions of social investigation. She deals with an important issue, brings many different methods of investigation into play, nicely mixes primary and secondary source material and — above all — has an empathy with the topic and with low-paid
workers. It is to be hoped that in (say) 2049 — its 50th anniversary — that the NMW gets a similarly brilliant treatment.

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Low-Wage Work in Germany is part of a comparative series by the Russell Sage Foundation focusing on low wages across six selected industrialized nations. Each volume tackles a different country, which is then subjected to an in-depth analysis of five low-wage jobs: call centre agents, low-skilled workers in the food processing industry, cleaners and nursing assistants in hospitals, hotel room attendants and salespeople in the retail sector. Written with a clear public policy orientation in mind and accessible to researchers, practitioners as well as laypeople unfamiliar with the German case, the case study chapters are preceded by a comprehensive first chapter introducing the institutions making up the German model of diversified quality production and their changes over time.

Reading that almost 20 per cent of all workers in Germany receive less than two-thirds of gross median hourly pay (9.96 Euros per hour) in 2004 will be surprising to researchers clinging to recollections of the heyday of the ‘German model’. It might also evoke the question of whether or not German firms are converging on a ‘low road’ organizational strategy. Far from making such strong assumptions, Bosch and Weinkopf’s edited volume is careful to point out different shades of grey in terms of institutional change. Chapter 1, the overview, embeds an account of incidence and extent of low pay in Germany into a broader narrative of the German model of diversified quality production. The editors convincingly argue that part of the German system has always been low road, and that current developments do not constitute a radical departure from it. Apparent instead is a trend towards consolidation and expansion of previously existing non-regular forms of employment, which is amplified by several instances of institutional change, among them reunification, Hartz law legislation, and changes in collective bargaining and corporate governance.

The jobs under scrutiny are located in industries that share the outcome of low wages, but that face very different challenges. Some face the challenge of increased international competition, others argue they are forced to outsource due to cost pressures. Mini-jobs for example are a form of marginal employment with a fixed monthly wage of 400 Euros, but without working time limit, accounting by 2006 for 6.76 million jobs within a 40 million-strong labour force and were introduced by the Hartz legislation. They are very unevenly distributed across industries, with low incidence in call centres and high incidence in retail or the hotel and restaurant industries. Collective bargaining in the past provided a floor to low wages, which made a national minimum wage dispensable. This wage floor is no longer given today.

Methodologically, the case study chapters combine quantitative longitudinal evidence from the German Socio-Economic Panel and three federal employment services (Bundesagentur für Arbeit) datasets with the contributors’ own qualitative research,
consisting of firm-level expert interviews with management, employees, supervisors and works councils, as well as context interviews with trade unions and employers’ associations. Supplementing quantitative data with qualitative evidence in this case helps fill in the panel data’s gaps and makes factors such as the role of employer interest evident that could not have been understood by looking at formal change.

While the case study chapters provide valuable and new empirical information on working conditions in specific jobs, when read in conjunction, certain trends emerge. Where collective agreements erode or are no longer generally binding, working conditions and pay deteriorate (chs 2, 3 and 6 on call centres, food processing and retail sales). Despite some collective agreements stipulating low wage rates, overall, pay tends to be better in workplaces with collective agreements than in workplaces where jobs have been outsourced, or workplaces without any form of workplace representation (chs 2, 4, 6). Where jobs have been outsourced, this affects not only pay but also training and promotion opportunities, which in turn has a negative impact on pay and job mobility (chs 2, 4, 5). Higher formal qualifications seem increasingly decoupled from higher wages under conditions of low growth and high unemployment. So while high formal qualifications protect from unemployment, they seem no longer a guarantee against low wages (ch. 7). The impact of this on human capital and return on investment prognoses in the long run is unclear.

As for the social groups concerned, women, foreign workers and the low skilled have been particularly hard hit. Women are mainly affected by the fragmentation of employment relationships into (marginal) part-time employment. Today, there are higher absolute rates of working women, but fewer full-time equivalencies due to the marginal nature of their employment (p. 87). Unfortunately, the analysis does not move beyond a discussion of the conservative family model, which is reminiscent of the ‘pin money’ debate led in Britain decades earlier, where lower pay for women was justified by their role as ‘secondary earners’. Non-national long-term residents also find themselves disadvantaged, although their plight is not as well explained as that of ‘posted workers’, immigrant workers ‘posted’ for a limited duration of time to work in Germany from another EU country. Lastly, the low skilled are adversely affected through technological change and high unemployment, as they compete for jobs with skilled labour preferring low pay to unemployment.

In terms of adding to the existing literature on the German case, this volume’s most commendable accomplishment is without doubt its rich empirical contribution. By virtue of a mixed methods approach and large scope, the present volume far surpasses previous studies in a field largely restricted to quantitative analyses of longitudinal datasets. A more rigorous analysis and linear argument having been forsaken on behalf of a lengthier presentation of empirical evidence works both in its favour and against it. With respect to the volume providing material for policy makers to draw from and a data basis for further research, it certainly is an asset. In terms of advancing our understanding of linkages between wages and individual characteristics or understanding the causes of women’s and immigrants’ disadvantageous labour market situation, inclusion of some theoretical argument would have been desirable. All in all, it is certainly an overdue debut in terms of comprehensive low wage research on Germany. It also provides an excellent introduction to the German model of industrial relations around the turn of the 21st century for novices to the German case with little time on their hands.

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Industrial relations research is replete with references to the disappearance of the ‘old employment model’, but has thus far offered little on the ‘new’ paradigm presumably unfolding before us. This volume begins to fill this gap by offering six self-standing responses to a question its editor poses in the introduction: What exactly is replacing the old model of work, employment and careers evoked by Whyte’s *Organization Man*? The book as a whole is methodologically eclectic. Even many of the individual chapters employ both qualitative and quantitative tools. The articles draw from a wide range of workplace settings, including doctors’ offices, call centres and factories, with a focus on white-collar employment issues within them. Indeed, the increased variety of employment arrangements — both within and across organizations and industries — emerges as an important characteristic of the new model. Sherer’s article on the changing nature of careers in large law firms perhaps best illustrates this theme. Whereas there were once just two classes of lawyers — partners and associates working to become partners — simplicity has given way to a range of non-equity-holding and non-partnership-seeking staff attorneys in addition to various types of short-term and long-term contractual positions for lawyers. This proliferation reflects the consequences of outside hiring and lateral career movement, a second theme that cuts across the entire volume. The third cross-chapter theme is that of increased uncertainty with respect to one’s employment and wages, a result of market forces dominating what were once strong organizational and labour market institutions.

Fortunately for the reader, Cappelli does not lament the state of industrial relations research. Nonetheless, the volume adopts the organizationally grounded, problem-centred approach indicative of industrial relations with the aim of updating the field’s premises and phenomenological scope. For example, one putative assumption of the old model was that there were essentially two actors (aside from government) in the employment relationship — the employee and the employer. The chapter by Bidwell and Fernandez-Mateo on triadic employment relationships rectifies this outmoded view while making a valuable theoretical contribution to the field, a framework for considering less traditional forms of employment. Their findings emerge from ‘shoe leather’ data gathering undertaken in a staffing agency and a bank, illustrative of the inductive orientation to research common across chapters and distinctive of the field. It is this approach to research that actually reveals a way in which the volume sells itself short. On the one hand, the chapters coalesce to make a strong case that the field of employment relations encompasses all aspects of employment relationships — whatever their form or organizational setting. On the other hand, none of the chapters directly confronts the high-quality, but more deductive studies offered up mainly by economists of organizations or of labour. Of course, the research in this volume by-and-large complements received studies more than it contradicts them, and the added value of organizational immersion is difficult to overstate.

Unfortunately, other facets of industrial relations have been lost (or jettisoned) in the translation to employment relations and the white-collar phenomena it seeks to explain. Chief among these are the normative underpinnings of the field. Cappelli’s eulogy for the ‘Organization Man’ might convince us that he’s really dead, but it does not evoke a sense of what new institutions must be
developed to help the actors in the new model achieve the goals of the employment relationship that were somehow internalized by the traditional model. That is not to say that every chapter focuses solely on efficiency at the expense of equity or fairness or that hints of determinism go wholly unchallenged. Dencker’s single-firm analysis of restructuring’s impact on managerial careers, for example, provides a nuanced view of the phenomenon. He shows that restructuring occasions more than a simple transfer of wealth from employees to owners. Indeed, some managers — particularly women — emerge as net beneficiaries of the restructuring process. Along the same lines, Wilk’s detailed piece on call centres acknowledges that the conscious decisions of managers ultimately determine whether or not call centres create good jobs or conform to their unfair stereotype as modern-day ‘sweat shops’.

As with most collections of this nature, there is disappointingly little ‘conversation’ between its constituent chapters. Indeed, this could have been mitigated rather easily with an integrative concluding chapter. Notwithstanding this minor shortcoming, the volume’s contribution exceeds the sum of its parts. Not only does it embody careful research aimed at explaining present-day topics in white-collar work and employment, even more critically — and probably unintentionally — most of its contributors are on the early rungs of their own career ladders. Therefore, these studies portend additional, near term ‘fleshing out’ of the new paradigm. They also signal more generally that the field has the ideas and energy required for generating impactful research well into the future.

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This book is the product of a research project on the historical development of mostly corporatist economies in continental Europe. As a result, a historical lens is used in most of the chapters to investigate topics ranging from labour law to industrial planning: social partnership is the not the sole focus of the book. Countries examined include the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Austria and Italy. Just why these countries were selected and others excluded is not apparent. Overall, however, the various chapters are accomplished and contain a series of interesting insights and arguments. Four features of the book are particularly attractive.

One is a long, erudite piece by Hemerijck on corporatist governance, the welfare state and European integration. This chapter reviews the core theoretical arguments behind corporatism in a careful and sympathetic manner and splendidly shows how close interdependencies between industrial relations institutions and welfare state arrangements have played an indispensable role in the functioning of co-ordinated economies. Hemerijck explores the implication of deeper European integration for both corporatist industrial relations and welfare states. This is probably the least convincing part of the chapter, as an overly positive interpretation is presented of the social dimension to the EU. A separate chapter was probably required to investigate the interaction behind corporatist industrial relations and the dynamics of European integration.
Second, the importance of having a historical perspective, a sense of path dependency, when investigating industrial relations and other related activities emerges from the chapters. The theory of path dependency suggests that the functioning of present day institutions are to a large extent shaped by past events, and that these in turn heavily frame the strategic choices open to people and organizations as they respond to new developments. For example, Vercautternen neatly shows how the differing responses of employers to postwar legislation on collective bargaining in the Netherlands and Belgium not only had an important impact in the shaping of distinctive industrial relations activities in the two countries, but also resulted in the Netherlands being more receptive to social partnership than Belgium in the 1980s. Berger, on the other hand, shows that the consultative arrangements used in postwar Austria have their roots in the break-up of the Habsburg Empire and the need to develop a positive national identity.

Third, a number of chapters give an informed insight into the emergence of social pacts in the Netherlands. Arnoldus persuasively argues that the emergence of the Wassenaar Agreement in 1982 can be explained by the social partners and government developing shared understandings of the challenges facing the Dutch economy and of the importance of working together to address increased unemployment and falling living standards. She also suggests that social pacts were sustainable in the Netherlands because all the parties held in check their expectations about what these arrangements could deliver. Van den Toren complements this analysis with a closely argued chapter about the institutional complexion of the Dutch model of consultation. He shows that the institutions that govern industrial relations and social insurance operate according to quite different organizing and operating logics.

Fourth, a theme that bubbles just beneath the surface in most of the chapters is that continental industrial relations systems have entered a period characterized by established collective arrangements struggling both to maintain economic functionality and social relevance. In the past, collective industrial relations institutions created public goods in the labour market. Economic theory tends to see public goods as given, as determined by objective characteristics of the good in question, which prevent it from being privately appropriated. It is more realistic, however, to see public goods as socially constructed, as being based on a gradually widening recognition of the common benefits arising from a particular type of public provision and of how that provision might be arranged. This was the case for collective employment relations. For example, collective employment relations give negotiations between employers and trade unions some public good characteristics in that individual employees and employers could not vary the outcome in any substantial manner.

Most of the chapters in one way or another focus on how these public good characteristics of collective industrial relations have weakened and on the various efforts made to redress this trend.

Overall, this is a competent and insightful set of essays. Almost invariably, the book as a whole lacks a certain coherence. A concluding chapter that sought to bring together some of the main themes emerging from the various chapters would have been useful. Industrial relations scholars are more likely to acquire from the book a greater appreciation of how and why history matters to the design of labour market institutions rather than a fresh insight into the dynamics of social partnership in Europe. This latter project has yet to be completed successfully.

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This text offers a critical analysis of a variety of issues relating to the development of skills and knowledge. Its focus is primarily (although not exclusively) the workplace and a sustained and successful effort has been made to analyse training and skill formation with reference to broader issues relating to the management of work and organizations and changes in the nature of occupations. The critical training and development literature is marked by a preoccupation with analysing different national ‘systems’ of skill formation. The workplace and company levels have received less attention. While this book is not unique among scholarly works on training and development in having a predominantly ‘micro’ focus (Rainbird 2000 is another example), I am not aware of any other text that has provided such a comprehensive engagement with the industrial relations, HRM, organizational behaviour and labour process literatures as they relate to training and skills. It is a very welcome addition to the literature.

The book comprises 10 chapters. The opening chapters provide an overview of different approaches to understanding the nature of ‘skills’ and the extent to which definitions of skill are influenced in practice by gender, technology, the organization of work and the exercise of power. The third chapter is concerned with differences in national training systems and the various roles that national governments, trade unions and employer organizations may play in the regulation of training and development. Grugulis provides a succinct overview of the literature and highlights research findings that have demonstrated how practices at the company and workplace level are influenced by the policies pursued by national governments and other social agencies. The focus then turns to vocational education and training in Britain, with particular attention being paid to the role of the state and the (often unimpressive) content and impact of government policies relating to qualifications, training programmes and training infrastructure. While these are important matters, the chapter could have devoted some attention to the role of trade unions, given their efforts to promote workplace learning, the activities of union learning representatives, the creation of the Union Learning Fund and so forth.

Chapters 5 and 6 explore employers’ changing skill requirements and the various ways in which personal attributes are being re-defined as ‘skills’. These chapters examine the conceptual status and practical significance of ‘soft skills’ and ‘emotional labour’. In so doing, they revisit some of the issues discussed in the first two chapters and discuss the extent to which employers’ assessments of workers’ ‘skills’ may be conditioned by workers’ gender and/or ethnic background. Close attention is paid to the social construction of skill and its implications for the distribution of advantages and disadvantages in the labour market.

The focus on training and development and skill formation is not sustained throughout the entire book. Chapter 7 is concerned with the management of organizational culture, but while this issue has implications for training and skill development, they are not discussed at length. Chapter 8, which is concerned with management and leadership development, devotes too much space to reviewing debates concerning the nature of the management function and too little attention to issues relating to the training and development of managers. These imbalances create the impression that the book is running out of steam as it approaches its brief conclusion.)
Overall, the book provides a very good account of the development and current state of debates relating to training and skill development. The effectiveness with which the task of summarizing and synthesizing contributions to the academic literature has been accomplished will be enough to ensure that researchers with interests relating to skills and training will learn much from reading the text. The book’s wide and reasonably comprehensive coverage, along with the engaging and accessible style in which it is written, will also make it an extremely valuable teaching resource.

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Much of the writing on the democratization process in Africa has focused on the procedural elements of democracy — statistical studies of election outcomes, levels of political liberties, and whether voting was ‘free and fair’. Indeed, the notion that a successful transition from authoritarianism to democracy can only be brought about by a pact between elites found new currency among political scientists in the 1980s and 1990s. Democracy is brought about through institutions of ‘elite pacted democracy’, Adam Przeworski announced, which insulate the government from the broad mass of people making politics the permanent business of a small number of specialized personnel (Democracy and the Market 1991, Cambridge University Press).

The origins of Trade Unions and Workplace Democracy in Africa lies in Gerard Kester’s realization that worker participation in Africa was often top-down; ‘single political parties, sometimes charismatic political leaders, or governments, rather than trade unions, or the workers themselves’ (p. 65). Whether these unions were sidetracked, co-opted or simply integrated in government and party, it was clear to Kester that trade unions were demanding to know more about worker participation and ways of turning its instruments to the advantage of workers. The outcome was the launch of the African Workers’ Participation Development Programme (APADEP) in 1982, and an education-cum-research project that culminated in a continental-wide trade union–university co-operative study.

The book is divided into three parts: part 1 sets the background of the research and underlying theory. Part 2 presents the learning experience within the different countries. The concluding part 3 examines the implications of the research findings for policy making on democratic participation, with a particular emphasis on the role of trade unions.

The central question posed in the study is action oriented; ‘how can workplace democracy become more meaningful, effective and democratic, and how can this be supported by the trade unions’ (p. 68). The APADEP questionnaire surveys were conducted in seven African countries — Guinea, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Mali, Ghana, Burkina Faso and Cape Verde — during 1986 and 2002. A further 67 case studies were conducted between 1984 and 2001 in Zambia, Togo, Cape Verde, Mali, Guinea, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Ghana, South Africa and Burkina Faso.

What do we learn from this ambitious exercise in what Kester describes as participatory research? The results do not present an optimistic picture. The survey revealed that conditions of work and employment had undermined the gains and rights obtained in the past (a secure job, openings to training and advancement), and
that these past achievements were now seen, under the impact of structural adjust-
ment programmes, as obstacles to ‘flexibility’ (p. 105). Although the survey revealed
a widespread desire to be involved in trade union activities and participate in decision
making, Kester concludes that ‘most trade union activity is captured in projects run
with foreign donor money’ (p. 128). Indeed, where participatory structures were
established, such as the I & J Fishing Industry case in South Africa, an employee
remarked that ‘union officials sometimes perceived these meetings as a threat,
because unions think that employees can now present issues for discussion or reso-
lution without first having gone via the union’ (p. 166). Although Kester presents
South Africa ‘as a possible harbinger of hope’ (p. 225), the evidence he provides in
the case studies shows that attempts to introduce statutory ‘workplace forums’ have
been entirely ignored by the trade union movement. In a separate chapter, Akua
Britwum concludes that in spite of a decade of consistent efforts to address women’s
unusually low representation and participation in Ghana, the impact has been
limited (p. 249).

Kester concludes by suggesting that the trade union movement formulate a new
‘labour ideology or philosophy in order to create a long-term frame of reference, a
new perspective’ (p. 294). His point of departure is that the forums for participation
that are being created are forums that have ‘donor-driven agendas on themes found
important in donor countries. Thus the emphasis has shifted, over the past ten years,
from gender to structural adjustment, from HIV to globalization, from environment
to child labour, and has failed to develop comprehensive long-term trade union
policy’ (p. 294). However, he says, ‘it would appear to make little sense to revive old
leftist ideologies’ (p. 294). Sensibly, he concludes by emphasizing the importance of
internal democracy within trade union structures. ‘Unions will themselves’, he says,
‘have to demonstrate good practice in such areas as democratic culture, good gover-
ance and democratic accountability if they wish to play a major role in consolidating
African democratization’ (p. 282).

This book is a timely intervention in a context where African trade unions have
going to realize the importance of strong shop floor based autonomous unions.
Increasingly unions have been at the centre of the wave of democratic struggles that
emerged in the 1980s and 1990s in Africa. However, I am not persuaded that ques-
tionnaires are the best instruments to understand the dynamics of workplace
democracy. The book comes alive when the results of the case studies are presented.
Here we see workplace ethnography in action, and the findings are more meaningful
rather than the static and blunt instrument that the questionnaire offers.

There is furthermore a tension in the book. The country case studies cover two very
different approaches to workplace democracy; the European-derived forms of code-
termination that provide for institutional representation in the workplace through
such institutions as works councils and the British model of union based participation
where the union is in an adversarial relationship with management. The case studies
blur these differences derived from the colonial legacies of the African countries
studied. European style co-determination has not worked in South Africa because the
unions have evolved out of the British model based on strong shop steward structures
in the workplace. Participation in pacts and forms of social dialogue are fine but, as
Kester himself argues, successful workplace democracy depends on strong union
organizations that can participate in pacts and in reaching and enforcing agreements
with capital and the state.

After two decades of reduced research interest in issues of employment in Africa,
work as a basic means of livelihood for the poor, as well as the motor for economic

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growth and social cohesion, is moving back to a central place in development policy. This book is an important contribution to the re-emergence of studies of employment and industrial relations in contemporary Africa.

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The cover of this stern-looking hardback book is a powder blue, washed by five ripples of blue. In white san serif, it has the title and authors, and then ‘Routledge Advances in Management and Business Studies’, at the bottom. That’s all. Add to that the price tag of £70, and you have a product that is going out of its way not to be popular. Unless it gets paperbacked, and a cover redesign, and some blur, and some hyperbolic endorsements and some TV advertising, this will stay as a university library purchase. A form of cult culture that surfaces briefly in a catalogue, and then snuffles back into the book stacks, mourned by the occasional citation and rediscovered by the occasional postgraduate. Much of academic work is like this. Condemned by publishers, by careers, by institutions, by the conventions of academic writing, to unpopularity. To a demi-monde where status comes from just being there, and other media appearances must be accidental if you are not to be accused of a lack of seriousness. A few weeks ago, I was told by an eminent professor that his ‘academic best seller’ had now sold 12,000 copies in the last 15 years. To get anywhere near a real best-seller list, a book needs to shift this many in a week. Rhodes and Westwood’s book will not be popular.

Not, I hasten to add, because of the ‘quality’ of what lies between the covers. This is a book that deserves to be read more widely, because it begins to link cultural studies with organizational analysis. This, to my mind, is an important project. But it won’t sell many copies simply because the gulf between the academic and the popular is huge. This is a book that attempts to problematize that divide, but the powder blue £70 is the message so the divide stays. For much less, £4.99 say, you could get a nice novel about sex and shopping, or an Andy McNab SAS romance or a few magazines about your favourite hobby (caravans, weightlifting, home crafts). You might also like to buy a DVD of BladeRunner, a boxed set of dinnerladies, something by Bruce Springsteen or the Sex Pistols. All the latter are topics for this book, but would your average punter want to buy them cheaply, or an expensive book in which somebody writes about them? Such is the status of so much academic work on culture. Like a politician on a Friday night chat show, serious work in a trivial context is in danger of being boring, and perhaps even embarrassing.

Rhodes and Westwood are well aware of these problems. This is a theoretically sophisticated and politically engaged set of essays. Even more importantly, these two are fans of popular culture and wish to make a strong claim that these cultural forms should not be dismissed as mere trivia. The key idea at the heart of this book is worthy of much wider exploration — that popular culture very often comments on work. From ‘Friday on my Mind’ to The Office, there are a wide range of ways in which the world of work becomes gently and cruelly satirized in pop music, sitcoms, cartoons, films and so on. Rhodes and Westwood wish to go a step further too. Much of
popular culture is ‘critical’ in a much more profound sense than the ‘critical’ in critical management studies. It routinely reproduces understandings of the indignities of labour and pomposities of management. So the task of this book is, as they very nicely put it, to find the ‘critique in culture’, that is to say, the critique that is already there, in advance of some desiccated academic coming along and dragging it off to the book stacks.

There is some great stuff in here, too. Blade Runner, corporate dominion and the possibilities for freedom. Work organizations in British sitcoms, from On the Buses to Absolutely Fabulous. Representations of McDonald’s in The Simpsons, Beavis and Butt-Head and South Park. A nice essay on work and the songs of Bruce Springsteen, and chapters on Glengarry Glen Ross, punk rock and sampling in music. These are all worthwhile and interesting things to be writing about, and many important things are said. Struggle over the meanings of work is not reducible to collective bargaining, or sabotage or syndicalism. It happens on TV too. But here is a question that they ask in several places that really threw me. Could some forms of management guru work themselves be popular culture as well? After all, Tom Peters’ sales figures are closer to Kylie Minogue’s, and you will find books about seven S’s in all sorts of busy bookshops and rather less in university libraries. Here, the argument becomes tricky. It is uncomplicated enough to adopt some arguments from cultural studies and use them to suggest a linkage between a counter-culture of work and the contradictions of capitalism. A people’s history of capitalism could certainly be written through manifestations of resistance to work in popular culture. But if we include management guru work as popular culture, too, then the romantic connections between oppression and expression become rather problematic.

Indeed, it is at this point that grumpy old Marxists and fine-boned elitists would start to complain that we cannot simply treat all culture as the same. At least they have a basis for their discriminations, while the romantic cultural studies lot (who Rhodes and Westwood are now introducing to the business school) have to be kind about everything. But if it is primarily ‘critical’ representations that we care about, we had better be clear what we deem to be critical, and why. And here, Rhodes and Westwood and me and others have much to learn from the sort of cultural studies that takes audiences and responses much more seriously. It is all very well suggesting that Mr Burns from The Simpsons captures a popular critique of the CEO, or that Mrs Slocum’s innuendo in Are You Being Served? expresses resistance to the patriarchy of Mr Grace. But people ‘read’ texts in different ways, and these readings are certainly related to (though not determined by) their interests. David Morely (The Nationwide Audience) and Ien Ang (Reading Dallas) have made this canonical for contemporary cultural studies, and perhaps this might also be a way for Rhodes and Westwood et al. to ground their discriminations between the critical and the managerial.

Much critical work on organizations has debunked things it does not like — total quality management, corporate culture programmes and the discourse of excellence. Rhodes and Westwood want to show that there is some popular culture that does this debunking for us, and that they like it. Fair enough, but are they fans of Tom Peters, too? Probably not, in which case they, like so many cultural critics before them, must have an implicit notion of value embedded within their analysis. They must also, I think, have an implicit ‘reader’ in mind. They know this, because they do refer to ‘active readers’ but attempt to deflect the question by claiming that they are not attempting to ‘totalize’. They must therefore acknowledge that this book is a particular reading of some of their favourite texts. They like Springsteen, punk and the plays of David Mamet. (Though I’m not sure how the latter make it into the box marked
‘popular’.) No doubt some marketer would tell us that this puts them (and probably me) in a particular market segment. But, and it’s a big ‘but’, if an analysis of critical representations of work and organizations in popular culture is to become as important as it could be, it needs to reach more audiences than this. What would a black woman make of these cultural choices? How would a Muslim student understand Mrs Slocum’s pussy? What would someone in McDonald’s make of Krusty the Clown? (Or George Ritzer, for that matter?) The theoretical problem of the reader does not go away and reflects the complexities of a cultural politics of organizations that must now begin with this admirable blue book. As the authors note in their commentary on guru texts, academic work is often seen as ‘too detailed, complex, indirect, abstract, too lengthy and not convertible into action’ (p. 27). Just so, despite its best intentions.

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Over the last decade, there has been a growing literature on employee relations (ER) in foreign-owned subsidiaries. One of the main aims has been to identify the extent to which industrial relations (IR) and human resource (HR) practices of these firms are influenced by their home country, the host country or global dominance effects. The innovative practices that could occur as a result of these pressures may not only have a model function for the host country, but also have implications for the home country if reverse diffusion occurs. Therefore, the study of ER in foreign-owned subsidiaries could point to more general future developments of policy and practice. Given the relatively weak institutional environment of the UK, which at least in theory allows a variety of ER models to operate, it is not surprising that a large number of studies have been conducted in this country. Among these, the subsidiaries of US, Japanese and German multinational corporations (MNCs) were those most often researched. The research by Tüselmann and colleagues is in this tradition.

Tüselmann, McDonald, Heise, Allen and Voronkova’s study is based on a 2004 postal survey of all German subsidiaries in the UK (209 usable responses, 24.6 per cent response rate) and a stratified survey of US firms (186 usable responses, 26.7 per cent response rate). The first aim of the research was to compare the ER approaches of MNC subsidiaries from the ideal type liberal market US economy and the ideal type co-operative market Germany economy. The second aim was to examine links between the ER approaches chosen by German subsidiaries and performance. The expectation of the authors was that an answer to these questions would not only provide insights into the future of ER in the UK, but also be a contribution to the debate about the continuing viability of the German model of IR.

The book starts with an account of the relative erosion of the British and German IR system, and speculates on whether both systems allow for an integration of collective and direct communication channels. It then examines the isomorphic pressures for MNC subsidiaries to develop ER systems in the context of home country, host country and dominance effects. This is followed by a review of the HRM and
performance, as well as the IR and performance literature. On the basis of this discussion, Tüselmann et al. develop a typology of ER systems and provide data on the extent to which a particular ER approach is used, as well as its performance implications. Similar to the more recent study of MNCs in the UK by Paul Edwards and colleagues, Tüselmann et al. found that German MNCs are more likely than US subsidiaries to recognize trade unions. More surprising is that US firms were not significantly more likely than German firms to use a high-involvement system (HIS), which for Tüselmann et al. includes direct participation, such as autonomous teamwork and quality circles, direct consultation, such as attitude surveys and suggestion schemes, as well as information sharing by team briefings or regular newsletters. Furthermore, only very few of the German subsidiaries are in the ‘Bleak House’ category, which is characterized by no trade union recognition and a minimal use of HIS.

Arguably, the most remarkable result of the research is that about one-quarter of German MNCs recognize trade unions and at the same time operate an HIS. Thus, they follow what Tüselmann et al. describe as a partnership ER approach and I call pluralist HRM. This finding contradicts previous survey evidence of German MNCs in the UK, but is in line with more recent case study research. It is consistent with developments towards a pluralist HRM model in the host country Germany, but remarkable given that research on partnership in the UK shows that the host country is not conducive to such an ER style given the predominance of short-termism and adversarial IR. Tüselmann et al. suggest two reasons for this finding. First, although their own evidence on this is relatively weak, they use case study evidence to argue that such an approach is encouraged by German parent companies that are interested in integrating their subsidiaries more closely by, for example, using German expatriates in management positions. More important may well be their finding that even in the UK context, the performance outcome of the partnership model are superior to those of the other ER approaches and in particular to the individualistic low road version of the Anglo-American model characterized by no trade union recognition and no HIS.

Arguably, the examination of links between ER approaches and performance is the strongest part of the study. At the same time, it is also one of its major weaknesses, as the performance question was only included in the questions for the German subsidiaries, but not in the survey of US firms. Therefore, no comparative assessment of the relative performance of ER approaches of US and German MNCs can be made. Overall, the book is very well written, and, in particular, I liked the way that the review of the relevant literature brought together a variety of sources from the fields of IR, HRM and economics. However, occasionally, the arguments are repetitive, and the presentation of the data is at times difficult to follow.

All in all, the book by Tüselmann and colleagues makes an important contribution to the comparative ER literature, the international HRM literature, the literature on ER in the UK and the debate on the viability of the German model of IR. It provides further support to those scholars who suggest that home country effects are still important and suggest that at least for foreign-owned MNCs, a partnership approach is viable in the UK and can lead to superior performance. Last but not least, the evidence presented does not indicate that German firms use the liberal market UK economy to escape the regulated German system. Thereby they contradict the claims of neoliberal critics of the German IR system who maintain that the high level of regulation has a detrimental effect on organizational performance. I do not only strongly recommend the book to any scholar interested in the above issues, but also
think that some of the theoretical chapters could provide good reading material for postgraduate courses.

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The sharp decline in strike activity across most of the advanced capitalist world since the 1970s was matched until recently by a corresponding decline in monographs on strikes. Silver’s Forces of Labor published in 2003 and Franzosi’s The Puzzle of Strikes published in 1995 stand out as the two exceptions to this trend, but otherwise, academic interest has shifted elsewhere. The current volume is therefore a very welcome addition to the field and one that will hopefully stimulate a resurgence of interest in strikes even in the midst of what Shalev referred to as widespread ‘labour quiescence’.

The book has a number of significant strengths. First, it presents the most reliable data available on strike frequency, workers involved and working days lost for 15 countries over a relatively long time span. Despite reference in the title to 1968, most of the national time series start in 1960. Moreover, a number of chapters include time series constructed by researchers independently of government agencies, and these ‘unofficial’ series typically reveal levels of strikes and worker participation that are significantly higher than those recorded in official statistics. Second, the chapters for the most part provide rich descriptions of the development of strike activity, often including brief accounts of many individual strikes. Some of them offer periodizations of strike patterns since 1960, and most offer some suggestions about causation, although normally in a somewhat ad hoc manner. Third, the range of countries in the volume is unusually broad: five ‘liberal market economies’ — the UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, three ‘coordinated market economies’ — Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands, three countries from Southern and Northern Europe — France, Denmark and Sweden, and four countries from the Southern hemisphere — Argentina, Mexico, South Korea and South Africa. Fourth, there is a particularly good discussion by Lyddon of the attributes of national strike statistics in different countries and the pitfalls involved in comparative research.

A number of themes emerge from the chapters, and these are usefully summed up in the closing chapter by Dribbusch and Vandaele. Strike activity, however measured, has declined in most countries since the highpoint of the 1970s, indicating a degree of cross-national convergence towards lower levels of collective action. On the other hand, strike decline is not a universal trend, particularly when judged against levels in the 1960s. In a number of countries, notably Argentina, Denmark and South Africa, strike numbers and days lost have remained at high levels throughout the 1990s and beyond. Most countries have witnessed a shift in the centre of gravity of strike activity away from manufacturing and towards the service sector, especially to public services, such as education, health and transportation. Since the education and health sectors are dominated by women workers, then the sectoral shift in strike activity probably reflects a change in the gender composition of strikers, although most countries lack the detailed data on strike participation required to test this proposition. A number
of chapters make the point that the volume of strike activity (days lost per 1,000 workers) depends not only on worker mobilization, but on the actions of employers and governments: aggressive attempts to restructure the labour process or labour markets have sometimes produced an escalation of conflict, as in Mexico, for example, although there are other cases where such restructuring has led to worker demobilization, as in the USA. Finally, many chapters use detailed narrative accounts to reinforce the point that levels of strike activity are not related in any simple or straightforward fashion to workers’ bargaining power. As Paul Edwards argued many years ago, low levels of strike activity can be found among well-organized groups who have little need to strike, and among poorly organized groups, who lack the capacity to strike.

As a source of data and strike descriptions for a wide range of countries, the book is very impressive. It is less successful, however, in advancing our theoretical understanding of patterns of strike activity. While there are references to the tertiarization of conflict and occasionally to long wave theory, the most detailed discussion of strike theory is to be found in the final chapter. Here the authors make the valid point that very few single factor explanations provide much insight into temporal and cross-national patterns. Whether one looks at the role of bargaining structures, legal regulation or union density — to name only three possible variables — it is clear that there are always exceptions to every hypothesis and that some form of multi-causal model is required. Yet this point was eloquently made some years ago by Roberto Franzosi in his magisterial study of strikes in postwar Italy and more recently in the work of Piazza. Since the editors hint at the possibility of a follow-up volume, then hopefully, they will make space for a far lengthier discussion of strike theory (as well as for an index). In the meantime, they are to be congratulated for having (hopefully) re-launched the comparative study of strikes.

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