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*The European Sectoral Social Dialogue: Actors, Developments and Challenges*, Edited by Anne Dufresne, Christophe Degryse and Philippe Pochet, Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2006, 340 pp., ISBN 90-5201-052-8.

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Un autre traité du soutien social et de son apport à la réduction potentielle du conflit emploi-famille. Un article aborde ce que les anglophones appellent le « *face time* » et indique que ce type de temps a de l'importance; l'article expose un modèle de la manière dont la flexibilité entre les sphères du travail et de la vie familiale peuvent influencer sur la performance des individus et des groupes. Enfin, les derniers articles s'intéressent aux approches liées à la « culture » de la conciliation, aux approches interculturelles, et finalement Lero et Lewis concluent l'ouvrage en revenant sur les diverses hypothèses qui prévalent dans les travaux sur la conciliation, en traitant des aspects sur lesquels peu de recherches se sont penchées et qui pourraient faire l'objet d'analyse. Les auteures mettent de l'avant les incidences pour les politiques et la pratique. Elles affirment que les travaux évoluent vers des perspectives de plus en plus systémiques plutôt qu'individuelles, ce qui a effectivement beaucoup caractérisé nombre de travaux, en psychologie surtout, mais parfois ailleurs. Les dimensions organisationnelle et culturelle semblent donc prendre plus d'importance et les auteures considèrent que les travaux doivent continuer de s'orienter en ce sens. Elles invitent à étudier davantage les bas salariés et à se pencher sur des contextes plus diversifiés, comme ceux des petites et moyennes entreprises. Bref, ce dernier chapitre est fort intéressant puisqu'il ouvre sur les travaux à venir, les questions à poser dans les recherches futures, alors que les précédents offrent un très bon panorama des théories et des études menées sur la conciliation dans le monde anglo-saxon.

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### **The European Sectoral Social Dialogue: Actors, Developments and Challenges**

Edited by Anne Dufresne, Christophe Degryse and Philippe Pochet, Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2006, 340 pp., ISBN 90-5201-052-8.

*The European Sectoral Social Dialogue: Actors, Developments and Challenges* is a good text to start with for those who wish to improve their familiarity with EU industrial relations. The novelty of this collection is that it

“explores for the first time all the documents produced by the sectoral social dialogue” (p. 22). These materials are the joint documents from the officially recognized European Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee as well as from the cross-industry social dialogue. The purpose of these official documents is “to influence European policy-making rather than to negotiate autonomous agreements on social matters” (p. 23).

The book is comprised of three sections. The first contextualizes the social dialogue; the second considers sector-specific case studies; and the third contemplates the future. For this review, and only for the purposes of brevity, I will engage the first and third sections of the collection. A question which pervades consideration of this book is whether or not sectoral social dialogue is a realistic goal given the relative paucity of its dominant use amongst the Member States and those seeking admission.

The collection's first section establishes the circumstances in which EU social dialogue has arisen and is currently conducted. Degryse's historical overview seeks to highlight the factors which “determine the quality of this dialogue: the general political context . . . , the protagonists' political will, organizations' strategies, shifting alliances and power politics” (p. 45). He posits social dialogue has floundered to the point that “the very purpose of European social dialogue as a means of defining and enforcing a set of Community-wide social standards has been cast into doubt” (p. 45). Dufresne continues the exploration of social dialogue. She provides a “simple” definition which appears to be more a functional interpretation than an effort to codify an understanding of the term: “a set of frameworks (joint committees, informal working parties and then SSDCs) and functions (joint action, consultation and negotiation) serving to involve the social partners in European-level decision-making” (p. 71). Her intriguing overview of joint consultation and action between the European Commission with employers' and employees' representatives highlights the dearth of autonomous dialogue (the ultimate aim of the process) between employers and employees. Sadly, the Commission must remain present during the negotiation of agreements. Noting three strands of cross-industry social

dialogue (1. involvement in a range of general European policy areas; 2. reinforcement of social dialogue; 3. construction of an independent agenda, p. 104), Pochet suggests the products of social dialogue resemble “codes of conduct or optional guidelines.” Implementation of these end results is then left with “decentralized stakeholders, perhaps with moral pressure exerted on those who fail in their duty” (p. 106). Finally, Pochet, Degryse and Dufresne answer the question, “what are the impediments to sectoral social dialogue?”

After a series of case studies in the middle section, the final set of essays in this collection focus on the challenges faced by the European Community. Here considerations take the reader deeper into the area and yet one gets a sense that the rhisomatic nature of the issues suggest not just an unwieldy character, but also some level of inherent (perhaps indiscernible) complexity which prevents comprehensive engagement. For example, Léonard, Rochet and Vandebussche question the “relevance and feasibility of sector-level industrial relations as a key level of bargaining within the countries” (p. 331). The dilemma does not cease there for “sectoral social dialogue is hampered by the characteristics of the actors themselves . . .” (p. 331).

The collection’s “Conclusion” attempts to shape the preceding contributions by dissecting the issues under a common set of headings (pp. 335-340). Procedural issues concern: methods of approving joint texts; clarification of the scope of these texts; follow-up; verification of national-level implementation (p. 336). With particular emphasis, the authors call upon the European Commission to play the “key role” (p. 337). Degryse and Pochet rely on the Commission’s role as facilitator for discussion between management and labour. One wonders how much the Commission may do, for a facilitative role empowers to a limited extent. It relies very heavily on the parties to want to build on common ground which the Commission may outline. Furthermore, the authors refer to Article 138 which mandates the Commission ensure balanced support for the parties. The question is whether or not this charge conflicts with the Commission’s facilitation role. Arguably labour is at a distinct disadvantage in relation to the growing prevalence of international commercial

competitiveness and so can the Commission “prop up” labour and be taken seriously as a facilitator? On this point the Commission’s 2006 Green Paper “Modernising labour law to meet the challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” serves as an illustration. It frequently notes the employment of “social dialogue” in order to modernize labour law. Aside from the Commission’s underutilization of collective forms of representation in favour of more individual interaction, the tone of this Green Paper is directed dialogue, agreement on a purpose set by the enterprise.

Structural issues can be summed up by the prescient question Degryse and Pochet pose: “What is the point of strengthening European sectoral social dialogue if its effects within Europe are asymmetrical because the players in certain countries are too weak for any European-level outcomes to be implemented nationally?” (p. 338). They elaborate: “The links among all the sectors currently organised, as well as between the sectoral and cross-industry levels, appear to be weak. All the players of course quite rightly emphasise their particularities, their independence and the existence of informal or formal cooperation with one or other related sector, but we cannot envisage a coherent European social arena emerging on this basis. So, even though these structural issues are equally pressing in all sectors, they seem not to be the subject of any joint deliberations and strategies. We have noted, for example, that headway made in one sector has no knock-on effect in others” (p. 338).

Finally the substantive issues stand out from these other headings because they “depend to a large extent on the particularities of each sector” (p. 338). The authors outline the varied depths of the issues. For example, they query whether or not dialogue can progress if trade unions are not convinced of the importance of transnational European developments (p. 339). The overarching conundrum appears to be one of both substantive and theoretical salience, especially when speaking of dialogue and its shape – “in what ways should the European and national levels complement each other?” (p. 339).

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