

## Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



### Regulating Flexibility: The Political Economy of Employment Standards By Mark P. Thomas, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009, 248 pp., ISBN 978-0-7735-3528-2.

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of their book should have a different and more animated title.

The authors of the *State of Working America* know how to communicate statistics about the economy. The evidence they present is well contextualized and handled with a deft touch. Of course, there are risks in reading economic data. However this book avoids, what I consider to be, the more obvious traps: *non-sequiturs*; favouring certain results over others without rationale; making unjustified casual inferences; and/or over-analysis. In essence, the authors have taken a back-seat with this work; minimizing the narrative and interpretation but rather arranging data so that it speaks for itself. The outcome of their style is a message which is dispassionate and straightforward. Beyond its arguments, this book represents best practice in social-science research. It should be mandatory reading for policy makers. It would also be valuable for social science researchers and PhD students searching for a benchmark of a great dissertation.

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### **Regulating Flexibility: The Political Economy of Employment Standards**

By Mark P. Thomas, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009, 248 pp., ISBN 978-0-7735-3528-2.

Mark Thomas' qualitative analysis follows firmly in the York tradition of political economy with its heavy emphasis on analysing the way in which institutions are both shaped by and shape the composition of social relations between class, gender and ethnicity. His study is thus able to offer insights on the way in which what would at first glance seem to be rather mundane legislative changes, have nonetheless significant impacts when analysed within the broader context of neoliberal economic restructuring.

In *Regulating Flexibility* Mark Thomas undertakes an analysis of the evolution of

labour market policy principally with respect to employment standards in Ontario. While the bulk of his analysis is concentrated on the period from the beginning of the 1970s to the new millennium, he nonetheless commences his empirical analysis with a concise presentation of the evolution of minimum standards legislation since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Ontario.

One of the central strengths of *Regulating Flexibility* is that it makes the firm link between economic restructuring in Ontario in the pursuit of deep integration with the US and the broader global processes restructuring of production and consumption. In this frame, policies designed to elicit greater "flexibility" from the workforce in general and individual workers at the level of the enterprise more often than not served to increase a sense of insecurity on the part of workers. That is, in many ways the pursuit of flexibility with respect to minimum standards legislation, by conscious design or not, served as a punitive form of (re)regulation which intensified the insecurity of already increasingly precarious and marginalized segments of the labour force. Moreover, all of this occurred in the context of a diminished and diminishing labour movement which was increasingly incapable of defending core labour markets.

The picture that thus emerges in *Regulating Flexibility* is one of a (re)segmentation of labour markets; with elements of secondary and tertiary labour markets creeping into primary labour markets while at the same time, in the pursuit of flexibility, producing noticeably deteriorating conditions in secondary and tertiary labour markets. Clearly minimum standards legislation is part of the broader labour relations regime.

Characteristically, Thomas concludes his book with a discussion of what is to be done about what he, rightly, views as a distressing turn in labour market regulation in Ontario at century's end. Here the familiar tension is drawn out between the evident need for transnational regulatory

institutions to limit the regional whipsawing of what are increasingly integrated global labour markets and the intuitional reality that unlike the regulation of global trade via the WTO for example, there is not an international organization with the power to enforce transnational minimum standards. Simply, as far as labour markets go, the national and regional states are the only games in town. And in Canada, given the constitutional division of powers, it is at the provincial level where most of the work must be done.

I generally agree with the list of reforms that Thomas suggests will ameliorate the most egregious of labour practices in Ontario—expanding coverage, increasing minimum wages, improving minimum standards on work times and, equally important, enforcement. I am, however, less sanguine, given the current milieu, that workers in Ontario have the organizational capacity and solidarity to win these reforms by pressure from the ground up. One of the facts of neoliberal labour market policies coupled with the trans-nationalization of production and consumption is that they actively intensify the intra-class cleavages between workers. That said, the mobilization of workers to defend and promote their collective needs is historically the only way legislative reform has taken place. Thomas thus quite rightly understands that mobilization and solidarity are the only ways forward so perhaps he is right to cast his prescriptive gaze and hopes in that direction.

I would like to conclude this review with some quips and errata. With respect to the quips, I found Thomas' presentation of his framework of analysis to be too perfunctory which, in no small part, I would argue derives from its eclectic nature. It is not at all clear to me that different research strategies and paradigms he draws on make for good dance partners. The result is a rather, albeit rich, descriptive exercise married to underdeveloped theoretical underpinnings.

Which research program does this book seek to advance? There is no sense in which there are serious differences between the hypotheses of the contending theoretical camps he is drawing from. Simply put, those looking for elegant conceptual formulations or an explicitly coherent framework of analysis will be disappointed. That said, this eclecticism is refreshing if one has been reading too much hypothetical deductive analyses of late.

The last quip I have is that Thomas did not attempt to answer what was surely one of the central questions his study posed. Namely, did the pursuit of flexibility lead to a more competitive and productive economy in Ontario as its protagonists claimed it would? Surely, in order to understand neoliberalism as an ideological and macro-economic strategy, at least attempting to answer the above questions is critical.

As to the errata, researchers who are looking for a cogent take on the path of labour market reform in Ontario will find this book a useful reference resource. It catalogues and summarizes the key reforms made in each successive legislative change. The appendices are likewise a valuable resource on changes to employment standards legislation and coverage at both the federal and provincial levels.

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### **Ce que sait la main : la culture de l'artisanat**

Par Richard Sennett (traduction de : *The Craftsman* par Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat),  
Paris : Albin Michel, 2010, 405 p., ISBN 978-2-226-18719-2.

Sous le titre *Ce que sait la main*, Richard Sennett souligne la valeur du travail bien fait tant pour l'artisan lui-même que pour la société. Cette étude précise le sens profond et véritable à la formule populaire d'un savoir « sur le bout des doigts ». Par ses multiples illustrations, Richard Sennett