

Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



Tolliday, S., and J. Zeitlin, eds., *The Power to Manage ? Employers and Industrial Relations in Comparative-Historical Perspective*

Anthony E. Smith

Volume 48, Number 1, 1993

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/050841ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/050841ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (print)

1703-8138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Smith, A. E. (1993). Review of [Tolliday, S., and J. Zeitlin, eds., *The Power to Manage ? Employers and Industrial Relations in Comparative-Historical Perspective*]. *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 48(1), 193–195.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/050841ar>

The Power to Manage? Employers and Industrial Relations in Comparative-Historical Perspective, by S. TOLLIDAY and J. ZEITLIN, eds., London, Routledge, 1991, 352 p., ISBN 0-415-02625-3

This book is an edited volume that emerged out of a conference held at Cambridge University, England in 1987. There are nine main chapters, plus an introduction and conclusion, which cover a broad and eclectic view of the role of employers and managers in the development of industrial relations. Despite a growing body of empirical research on the role of employers, there remains little consensus on key issues such as the determinants of managerial strategies, or employers' contribution to differing national patterns of industrial relations. Tolliday and Zeitlin argue that many of these difficulties stem from the limitations of the theoretical frameworks within which research has been carried out. Both Marxist and mainstream perspectives subordinate managerial choices to the pressures of the market or the broader patterns of business development. Consequently, such approaches are unable to explain the diversity of employers' labour policies or the prevalence of contradictory and incoherent strategies. From this collection of papers, however, and despite the editors interesting conclusions at the end of the volume, it remains unclear how our conceptual understanding of the employers' role in industrial relations is going to develop in the future.

Although there is insufficient space to provide a critique of all the chapters, some of the key contributions in the book are worth highlighting. In this context, reference should be made to the introduction, which does an admirable job of introducing the empirical studies on employer labour policies in various countries. More specifically, using the "peculiarities" of British industrial relations, the editors establish a comparative-historical framework within which the distinctiveness of British developments can be evaluated and point the way towards a new interpretation of the employer's role in industrial relations.

Parts one and two contain chapters which attempt to tackle issues involved with national patterns of industrial relations. The first important theme identified here is the distinctiveness of British employers, explored in three chapters in part 1 through detailed case studies of key sectors such as shipbuilding (chapter 1, Reid), engineering (chapter 2, Zeitlin) and automobiles (chapter 3, Tolliday).

Four chapters in the second part develop the notion of contrasting national models through historical accounts of labour-management and employer organization. Harris (chapter 4) examines a group of American small and medium-sized metalworking firms through the "open-shop" era of the early 1900s until the 1930s. Chapter 5 by Homburg also concentrates on metalworking, but the contributor here outlines German management's reactions prior to the second world war to the emerging limits of its power to manage the "human factor" in industry. The following chapter by Plumpe complements Homburg's work by focusing on the reshaping of German industrial relations after the war. This chapter provides an interesting analysis of the role played by heavy industries such as coal, iron and steel in the restructuring of post-war industrial relations. The fourth contribution to contrasting national models of industrial relations assesses the extent to which labour policies of Italian employers have been influenced by their ambivalent relationship with the state and the political system, as well as by union strategies and their own internal politics. Here, Contini utilizes data on industrial firms

(particularly Fiat), public enterprises and Confindustria (the General Confederation of Italian Industry) to argue that the behaviour of Italian employers has not simply reflected their material or sectoral interests. Instead, political change, state policies and union strategies have constantly reshaped their interests and perceptions while also being reshaped by the latter in turn.

For this reviewer, however, the third part contains the most interesting chapters. Chapters 8 and 9 adopt an explicitly comparative framework, scrutinizing work organization and collective bargaining respectively across a variety of countries. In doing so they both reject the notion of a tendency towards the convergence of managerial strategies across nations.

Contemporary debates on managerial strategy have raised the possibility of technological change as an important transnational element for combining and controlling labour and production capital. As Jones points out, it remains problematic, however, as to whether new practices and policies are sufficiently uniform and coherent to constitute a distinctively new outlook. This chapter poses and seeks to answer the question: are the indigenous practices of British enterprise and plant-level systems of work organization and labour control being displaced by the seemingly global trend towards the adoption of new production technologies with a universal design and purpose? To deal with this question the author examines the introduction of computer-integrating technologies into the automation of batch production processes in the metal-engineering industries. Drawing on case study evidence from Britain, the USA and Japan, Jones argues that the pressures for a transformed model of the production enterprise, incorporating new hierarchies of skill and decision-making based on a common technological core, do exist. The suggestion here is, however, that the effects of higher-level constraints and control of financial regulation of production policies, and state targeting of industrial goals through technology support schemes, may promote diverse and partially inconsistent practices at plant level.

The subsequent chapter by Sisson draws on a larger study of the role of employers and their organizations in the development and practice of collective bargaining. In a comparison of Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Sweden and the USA, three main points are succinctly made. First, although the approach of British employers to collective bargaining appears to differ from that of employers in most other countries in major respects (such as the structure of collective bargaining and its significance), there is no one dominant model. The approach of employers to collective bargaining and to trade unions more generally is far more varied than is normally recognized. Second, the *institutions* [reviewer's emphasis] of collective bargaining which most commentators imply are determined by employers, are themselves perhaps the most important single influence on employer behaviour. Third, rather than being determined by employers (or by the state), these institutions are deeply rooted in an historical compromise which reflects the pattern of industrialization and the nature of the trade union challenge.

As the introduction to this volume suggests, after years of being virtually ignored, in the past decade or so employers have come to occupy centre stage in the industrial relations literature. However, from this collection of papers, and despite the editors interesting concluding chapter, perhaps the lasting impression of the book is how little social scientists have progressed in developing adequate methodologies which can

successfully analyze and measure the notion of national models of industrial relations and the role of employers in their development. Most of the contributions still seem to move unsteadily and rapidly from the very generalized statements about employers and industrial relations through to outlining highly specific case studies. New approaches that can effectively posit and analyze international and comparative industrial relations at the intermediate-level still seem to be lacking. For example, Locke has recently argued that the strategic choices of employers and trade unions lead to outcomes which challenge the concept of national industrial relations. He suggests that the diversity within industrial relations systems will, in certain industries or sectors, be greater than the diversity across systems. (R. Locke, "The Demise of the National Union in Italy", *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Vol. 45, No. 2, 1992, 229-249). However, as Tolliday and Zeitlin in the final chapter in this volume conclude, national models of industrial relations "should be understood not as homeostatic and self-producing systems of action but as complex and contingent historical constructions whose unity and coherence always remain open empirical questions" (p. 277). Thus the comparative experiences of the empirical research in this book may portend the emergence of industrial relations in which various institutional arrangements are in a state of continuing evolution.

Overall the standard of the contributions are high, the book is very well referenced and presented, and at the level of editors' commentary it is extremely valuable. In addition, the volume is set out in a form which should be accessible to a wide range of social scientists interested in the determinants of employers' labour policies and their contribution to diverging (or converging) national patterns of industrial relations. The editors should be congratulated on their efforts and level of scholarship.

Anthony E. SMITH

University of New Brunswick

The State of the Unions, by George STRAUSS, Daniel GALLAGHER and Jack FIORITO, eds., Industrial Relations Research Association Series, 1991, 426 p., ISBN 0-913447-49-8, ISSN 50-13564, Lib. of Congress Catalog Card

Although the subject of union decline in the U.S. has taxed the research initiatives of industrial relations scholars for well over a decade now, this book probably stands as the most ambitious attempt to date to assess all the evidence. Strauss et al. have assembled an impressive volume here. We are presented with four parts which respectively dispense with the issues of Union Membership and Growth, Union Governance, Unions in Larger Perspective and The Future. Each section also includes further commentaries which embellish and interpret the main articles. And the editors' Preface also contains a meta-guide, thus helping the cursory reader to pick and choose from the menu. To carry out this task the editors claim to have "recruited a distinguished group of authors and commentators who represent a broad range of viewpoints, disciplines and ages" (p. vii), — a claim which is clearly legitimate. There is some dense yet valuable reading here. At least, at the level of institutional scholarship, little is missed and for that reason alone *The State of the Unions* will stand as a well thumbed reference resource. Nevertheless