

## Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



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Greg J. BAMBER, Russell D. LANSBURY : *International and Comparative Industrial Relations*. London, Allen & Unwin, 1987, 289 pp., ISBN 0-04-331117-4

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## RECENSIONS BOOK REVIEWS

**The Social Foundations of Industrial Power: A Comparison of France and Germany**, by Marc Maurice, François Sellier, and Jean-Jacques Silvestre, translated by Arthur Goldhammer, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1986, pp. 292, ISBN 0-262-13213-3

**International and Comparative Industrial Relations**, edited by Greg J. Bamber and Russell D. Lansbury, London, Allen & Unwin, 1987, pp. 289, ISBN 0-04-331117-4

Each of these books promises a comparative analysis of industrial relations. Each is around 290 pages long. Each has a blue cover. But in virtually all other respects, the two books are strikingly different. This is quite disconcerting for a reviewer who thought that he could acquire two books for the price of a single review. More significantly, the contrasts between the two books illustrate in an especially sharp way the different types of studies that are lumped together as «comparative industrial relations research». Indeed, as with the process of comparison itself, the differences between the two studies are what catches the eye.

The volume edited by Bamber and Lansbury is a recent example of a long tradition of collections of single-country studies — in this case including Britain, the USA, Canada, Australia, Italy, France, West Germany, Sweden and Japan — in which actual «comparison» is left entirely to the reader. The book is, one should hasten to say, a fairly competent example of the genre: the individual chapters are reasonably comparable; the translations are quite good; there is a useful appendix containing comparative data; and the editors make an effort to alert the reader to some of the general issues involved in making intelligent comparisons between nations. On the other side of the coin, although the editors' introduction also raises some oft-ignored questions of theory, it concludes a little lamely by urging the reader to apply these different theories, since the chapter authors themselves are «mostly» (read «all») adherents of the traditional pluralist school. It should also be said that the inclusion of a synoptic overview of international industrial relations institutions does not sit easily beside the other themes. More generally, this reviewer was left scratching his head over the reason for yet another one of these studies which is «comparative» only in name.

In marked contrast, **The Social Foundations of Industrial Power** is an innovative and provocative contribution to the field of international comparisons. At one level, the book is a study of differences in the structuring of industrial work forces and the organization of the workplace; yet on another level, Maurice, Sellier and Silvestre attempt to formulate an ambitious new social theory that breaks with the traditions of labour economics, sociology and industrial relations.

The central empirical puzzle that the authors set out to investigate is the finding — derived from seven years of research into matched pairs of French and German factories — that there are startling differences in the way the work force is structured and work is organized in the two countries. This finding is central to the whole purpose of the book, for by comparing matched pairs of factories, they are able to hold technology constant and highlight the factors specific to the respective societies that influence industrial relations.

In the first chapter the focus is on the stratification and mobility of the industrial work force. Here it is demonstrated that in French firms, in comparison with similar German firms,

there are more white collar workers relative to blue collar workers, there are higher wage differentials for white collar workers, and there are more front-line supervisors. Further, the internal structure of the work force in Germany is heavily influenced by the type of specialized occupational training which individual workers acquire, whereas in France a key variable is the level of general education that a worker attains, along with the company-specific training acquired on the job. That is, job placement in Germany is a function of the type of professional qualification that a worker obtains, whereas in France specialized occupational training plays a very small role. These differences are then related to the educational systems of the two countries. Although there is a tracking system in each country, and although the choice of tracks is in each case heavily influenced by class origins, there is more mobility between tracks in the French educational system than in the German system. Likewise, in France there is more job mobility between occupational classifications and between the industrial and tertiary sectors. Finally, workers in the two countries acquire occupational training differently. In Germany the apprenticeship system and more advanced training is highly developed and closely integrated with industry; the certificates which workers obtain are widely recognized throughout industry, and establish the workers' identity. In France, formal occupational training is underdeveloped and functions quite separately from both the schooling system and from industry. As a result, professional qualifications are not very influential in job placement or in promotion; instead, seniority and on-the-job training are the means by which workers can advance. In general, then, there is a close and reciprocal relationship between the education and training system on the one hand, and the stratification of the work force on the other.

In the second chapter, the analysis is broadened to include the structure of industrial organizations and the organization of work. Here the focus is on how the socialization and training of workers interact with organizational factors to affect the way in which work is divided and carried out. Compared to France, German factories have more senior managers, but fewer «technical-production» supervisors; the span of control (i.e. the number of workers supervised) is wider; polyvalence is a central aspect of the organization of work, leading to a broader skill base and more cooperative work methods; and the production department is generally considered the heart of the operation. In short, in the German factories, workers tend to possess a wider range of skills, they rotate through a number of different tasks; and supervision tends to be largely a matter of technical guidance rather than social control. These dimensions of work organization are related to broader social relations in the two countries. In Germany, skilled workers are viewed as part of a professional community, and qualifications are seen as attributes of individuals; in France, skill is not acquired prior to job placement, but after; status thus derives from position. Authority relations and the structuring of work in the firm are affected by these factors. In particular, in Germany, where professional qualifications inhere in the individual, technical authority is closely integrated into the structure of authority; in France, where skills are acquired after promotion, technical expertise is regarded as being an attribute of the position.

In the third chapter, the authors turn their attention to industrial conflict in the two countries, comparing the mechanisms for setting pay and the institutions of worker representation. The central purpose here is to show how some of the previously discussed differences between French and German industrial organizations are reflected in the domain of industrial relations.

French firms tend to adhere to the general pay structure set out in industry-wide agreements, though they can (and often do) supplement these minimums if the bonuses are paid across the board, leaving intact the differentials established by elaborate job classification systems which assign coefficients to particular jobs. A French worker's pay is therefore dependent on the specific job to which he/she is assigned, and pay raises can only come by filling a vacancy that opens up at a higher classification. In this system, the supervisor has little discretion, and the status of the individual worker tends to be determined by seniority.

In German firms, the pay structure is quite different. First, bonuses tend to be restricted to blue collar workers (thus accounting for the lower blue/white collar differential), and seem to be widely accepted for a variety of reasons: because the bonuses are related to the performance of a work group led by a supervisor who, being regarded as a worker and a fellow professional (rather than as a manager), is treated as an ally in the battle for larger productivity bonuses; and because German workers, despite their general adherence to a class-based world view, value efficiency. Second, because specific tasks are rotated, pay is not a function of the actual job performed at a particular point in time, but rather is related to the classification into which a worker has been put on the basis of his/her professional qualifications. Thus, unlike France where the **job** is remunerated, in German factories, the **worker** is remunerated. In this system, the supervisor therefore has considerable discretion, and worker status is determined by the level of qualification and training.

The determination of changes in average wage levels also varies between the two countries. In France, where contracts are of indeterminate length, unions and employers' associations relatively weak, and industrial branches quite heterogeneous, the individual firm is the main battleground, and so pay levels are a function of the balance of power at this level. The local conflicts over pay levels are eventually transmitted to the weaker firms by means of the renegotiation of industry-wide agreements or through a rise in the minimum wage. In Germany, due to fixed duration contracts, strong union and employer associations, and homogeneous industrial branches, wage levels are affected above all by the economic conditions prevailing at the time at which contracts are renegotiated, and by the general wage policies adopted by the unions. Thus, while in France individual firms are at the centre of the wages struggle, German firms, though they apply the contract, are more or less sheltered from such disputes.

Pay structures are then related to other aspects of industrial relations, and in particular, to systems of worker representation. In France, given the central role played by the Personnel department in determining job classifications, transfers, and similar decisions vital to the allocation of pay and status, conflicts tend to escalate to this level quite quickly because supervisors lack the authority to settle shop floor disputes. Moreover, although French unions are free to promote strike activity, the lack of any obligation on the part of management to reach plant-level agreements (at least during the time the research was conducted) compels union activists to search for grievances that can be used as the basis of mobilization. In German factories, conflicts tend not to escalate, partly because production supervisors have the authority to settle shop floor disputes, but also because unions themselves, at the level of the firm, cannot promote strikes yet have the right to bargain on a range of issues such as job classification. Thus, German unions tend to look for grievances in order to defuse potential mobilizations. And for this reason German managers, unlike their French counterparts, have an interest in encouraging the development of an adequate system of workplace union organization.

At the beginning of the fourth chapter the authors summarize the results of the first three chapters by advancing a seemingly self-defeating paradox: they claim to have demonstrated, through the use of point-by-point comparisons, that international comparisons of this sort are in fact impossible. That is, categories of comparison are not directly comparable because the categories only take on real meaning within the context of particular societies. It is worth quoting them here:

We have found that analysis of differences in worker mobility is inseparable from analysis of differences in the nature of the categories between which mobility takes place. To take a particularly significant example, consider mobility between the [blue-collar] and [white-collar] worker categories. In both countries the nature and intensity

of this mobility is a symptom and cause of the social and professional position of each group, not only within the firm but in the wider society as well. For example, the fact that in Germany it is difficult to pass from unskilled to skilled status has to do with the way worker status is created and perpetuated in German schools and factories. Occupational training, which plays a general role in structuring the working class, is also important for understanding in what sense the criteria governing mobility into [white-collar] jobs are consistent with the criteria that enter into the definition of skilled workers as a group and that determine which workers within that group will be able to move up.

The purpose of this chapter, then, is to shift to a more theoretical level of analysis in an attempt to develop an explanation of why the categories of analysis (mobility, etc.) differ between countries, how these categories relate to each other within each country, and how the pattern of differences between the categories are related to «broader social trends».

It is appropriate to pause here to reflect on the implication that this approach to international comparisons is path-breaking. While the authors clearly believe that it is — and roundly condemn those who have dared to compare in a different fashion — one must question whether the approach is truly novel. In fact, there have long been two distinct schools of thought about the issue of international comparison, one of which has held to the view that it is possible, even desirable, to isolate particular phenomena for comparison, the other stoutly maintaining that particular phenomena can only be understood in their nation-specific settings. While there is a good deal of merit in the second school's point of view, it should be said that its proponents often fall into the trap of violating their own premises by simply renaming the phenomena which they are seeking to understand through comparison. This is in fact what Maurice *et al* end up doing, and in the process leave themselves open to the exact charge which they level at others.

At the centre of the argument in Chapter 4 is the contention that characteristics of industrial societies are not determined by simple one-way causal forces, but are instead part of a complex pattern of reciprocally interactive structures and behaviours that are comprehensible only within the context of the broad class relations of a particular society. For the analysis of industrial relations this implies that, within particular countries, it is necessary to view labour relations as being intimately related to the relationships between the educational system, the authority structure of the firm, and established patterns of collective action. Or, to use the authors' own term, each country has a «professional domain», much broader than the «labour market» as traditionally defined, within which a variety of substructures interact to shape the activities of social actors.

It would be impossible to give a full account of this argument here, but a sense of it can be gleaned from a summary of their explanation of how the logic of work organization interacts with distinct socialization processes within each country to create very different workplace relations. In Germany, work organization is governed by a «professional logic» which puts emphasis on professional specialization and little emphasis on direct control of work. The system of labour control therefore encourages both professional autonomy and productivity; stress is placed on technical-instrumental skills; and workplace relations tend to be cooperative. In contrast, work organization in French factories tends to be dominated by an «administrative logic», with an emphasis on firm-specific socialization and tight internal control. This system of labour control gives far less autonomy with respect to work organization, with reliance being placed instead on the supervisory hierarchy. Workplace relations, in consequence, tend to be more hierarchical and compartmentalized.

Although this argument is only one of several in the chapter, it illustrates the concern of the authors to situate the analysis of industrial relations within the broader set of social structures and institutions of which advanced capitalist societies are comprised. Thus the behaviour of employers and unions cannot be understood without first grasping how class relations within societies structure the collective identities of the main actors and shape the organizational processes within which social relations are crystallized.

In a work of this scope and ambition there are bound to be plenty of weaknesses. For example, while Maurice *et al* effectively demolish the technological determinism that underpinned the convergence theories so popular in the field of industrial relations in the past, their equal concern to avoid uni-causal explanations (especially anything that smacks of Marxism) often leads them to advance tortuously complex explanations that often border on a viciously circular brand of relativism wherein «everything affects everything else». In fact, they even deny themselves the well-worn escape route of attributing international differences to «historical differences» — but can then only fall back on vague references to «social relations in society at large» or «class relations». This vagueness is in fact indicative of a deeper problem with the analysis: in many ways the weight of the theoretical edifice which they have attempted to erect can not always be easily borne by the empirical foundation which they have laid. In one sense this problem is a product of their research design, since the results of two-country studies, as they themselves acknowledge, are not easily generalizable. But in another sense, Maurice *et al* often resort to a style of exposition that involves sudden and disconcerting jumps from detailed discussions of particular issues to grand, sweeping pronouncements, which are not substantiated by their empirical discussion. Indeed, while the reader will often be swept up and carried away in the torrent of allusive suggestions, many of the core arguments need to be fleshed out by an expanded investigation into the **precise** characteristics of the «wider society». A good place to start would be with the different political structures in the two countries, of which there is a puzzling lack of mention.

Despite these — and other — problems, this is one of the most valuable studies to be published in the field of comparative industrial relations for quite some time. It is packed with stimulating ideas about theory and method, and represents a challenge — made explicit in a lengthy theoretical appendix — to a wide number of cherished beliefs in labour economics, sociology and industrial relations. That it raises more questions than it answers can be readily excused, for that is the mark of a valuable contribution to any field of intellectual inquiry.

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**La flexibilité du marché de l'emploi: un enjeu économique et social**, étude publiée sous la direction de Hedva Sarfati et Catherine Kobrin, Genève, Bureau international du Travail, 1987, 384 pp., ISBN 92-2-205675-2

En Europe, le débat sur la réduction du temps de travail initié au milieu des années '70 par le mouvement syndical et certains gouvernements comme un des moyens de solutionner le chômage s'est graduellement transformé dans les années '80 en débat sur la flexibilité du travail. La persistance du chômage dans certains pays peu habitués à vivre avec un sous-emploi chronique a graduellement fait accréditer la thèse du chômage «naturel». Devenue la nouvelle orthodoxie au Canada et aux États-Unis au cours des années '70, cette thèse s'est véritablement