

## Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



*New Directions in the Study of Work and Employment:  
Revitalizing Industrial Relations as an Academic Enterprise*  
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## Recensions / Book Reviews

### **New Directions in the Study of Work and Employment: Revitalizing Industrial Relations as an Academic Enterprise**

Edited by Charles J. Whalen, Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, USA: Edward Elgar, 2008, 264 pp., ISBN 978-1-84720-452-3.

This book is about the decline of industrial relations (IR) as an area of academic study, and the need to defend and revitalize it. The eminent authors come from various academic and industry backgrounds and the chapters are a mixture of empirical research, theoretical development, historical overview and trade union practice. Its aim is to foster dialogue on IR's future with a common thread being a vision of IR as a broad interdisciplinary field.

The decline of IR is examined through several indicators including the decline of unionism and other institutions charged with regulating conflict and collective bargaining. It also addresses the problem IR has had with it diffusing to other disciplinary areas, particularly the battle of holding the line against neo-classical economics (Bruce Kaufman's chapter) and established labour law (William Gould's chapter). Several other contributors cover this general terrain (Joel Cutcher-Gershenfeld; David Lipsky and Ronald Seeber) in ways which illuminate the downward trajectory of US IR. Others focus on the academic decline including the shrinking reach of the research and publications from the education sector (Daphne Taras on IR teaching in Canada; Immanuel Ness, Bruce Nissen and Charles Whalen on IR journals and Michael Piore on US universities). A strength of the book is that it identifies and examines the spread of the malaise in its various forms, both academic and industry practice.

The contributors point out shifts in the practice and study of IR and its context: (a) that the centre of IR remains the employment relationship but there has been a spread of stakeholders (Cutcher-Gershenfeld); (b) how the structure of some industries (US garment industry by Katie Quan) and demographic changes (US immigration by Kent Wong and Janna Shaddock-Hernandez) have resulted in

vacuums which need to be filled; and, (c) that IR has lost much of its theoretical capability which has resulted in a fragmentation to the more established social sciences (Piore). Some have moved to address the academic decline by advancing theoretical approaches (for example John Budd's chapter on the efficiency, equity, voice model; and John Godard's institutional environment approach). All this points to a growing diversity within and beyond IR. The issue is one of how to capture it and return it to the IR field of study where, as Thomas Kochan points out in the conclusion, "conflicting and common interests are still at play."

There are several matters that arise from this book. It leaves a number of gaps and tends to withdraw into the IR past and the institutional framework upon which the last fifty years has been built. First, the title of the book suggests that it is about work and employment, but in fact it is almost exclusively about the employment relationship as the cornerstone of all industrial relations systems. Such an assumption is the straight jacket from which IR needs to extract itself. The authors want to do this, but it is, at best, a difficult task to save industrial relations because in part it is a question of saving it from itself. It remains clear that the institutional framework and all that we have considered, researched, taught and theorized over the last fifty years, remains the solid core of IR. However, that core is shrinking and even if it plateaus, it seems unlikely to sustain IR in any of its past and present forms. The main problem therefore is how to strengthen the core, an exercise which can only be done by building around it. The book considers the core through its coverage of its most important aspects. However, it largely ignores the growing edge around it which appears to be necessary to rebuild IR as a discipline. To include work in the title is a misnomer because almost all of the authors return to an employment relationship focus on work, rather than making use of the now extensive literature on how work itself is organized. The term labour process theory never appears in this book, nor with rare exception do any of the threads of literature which it has, in part, spawned over the last forty years. The day-to-day world of work for most workers and employers

is about the work itself and to ignore this contributes to the decline of IR.

Second, in terms of the theoretical literature, the chapters do not address changes which themselves have been aimed at revitalizing IR as a discipline in its own right. What is surprising is that the book largely ignores recent theory building such as Acker's neopluralism, Kelly's revitalization of unions and the injection of post-structural approaches on work identity and consumption.

Third, in emphasizing the significance of established institutional arrangements and changes within and between them, IR is treated by most of the contributors in either a traditional, broad institutional way or by making use of new theoretical approaches which are based upon the new Institutionalism. The theoretical value of this tends to be assumed and rarely questioned except by Nick Wailes, Russell Lansbury and Jim Kitay in their chapter on globalization and the auto industry. Nor is the broad institutional approach critically evaluated as a phase in the development of IR in the same way as all other theoretical approaches before it have been. One strength of IR has always been that it has dealt with a variety of theoretical approaches and moreover, that it has moved away from some and towards others as circumstances change. The problem here is that this book still appears to have an institutional focus. As valuable as the institutional history is, in theory and practice, it is no longer enough to sustain IR into the future. If history is any guide, new theoretical approaches, including those based on institutionalism, will become less relevant as the basis for all aspects of IR.

While the book offers a broad understanding of the current malaise of industrial relations, it is worth IR attempting to incorporate structure and arrangements which go outside Dunlop's original three key actors, and in doing so, seek explanations for what appears to be the increasing diversity of IR beyond its core. There is the possibility that in doing so, the links between the edge and the core in both theory and practice will strengthen and revitalize industrial relations into the future.

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## **Emploi et travail : le grand écart**

Par Françoise Piotet, Paris : Armand Colin, 2007, 264 p., ISBN 978-2-200-35137-3.

Travail et emploi sont deux termes souvent utilisés comme synonymes, alors qu'ils recouvrent deux significations distinctes. L'emploi en lui-même ne dit rien sur le travail, mais il en délimite le champ. Il est en quelque sorte l'enveloppe du travail qui, quant à lui, réfère au contenu. Le fil conducteur de l'ouvrage de Françoise Piotet s'appuie sur cette distinction entre travail et emploi. L'auteure cherche à savoir comment ces deux domaines s'articulent et interagissent et, plus précisément, à établir un lien entre la dégradation de l'emploi et les transformations du travail. C'est en étudiant le contexte français qu'elle développe sa réflexion.

Le grand écart entre travail et emploi, mais également les relations étroites qui les unissent, sont présentés au cours de neuf chapitres. L'auteure trace d'abord, au premier chapitre, les contours de l'emploi en s'attardant à quatre questions : qui travaille, sous quel statut, dans quelle structure et avec quelle qualification reconnue ? Après avoir ainsi campé le décor, Piotet fait état de la détérioration de la situation de l'emploi au second chapitre. Elle explique les craintes des Français quant à la sécurité d'emploi et à la possibilité de dénicher un emploi. Ces inquiétudes prennent forme suite au constat que les entreprises sont des objets comme les autres qui s'achètent et se vendent sur le marché mondial. Alors qu'il ne semble pas y avoir de frontières pour les transactions financières, il y en a pour les individus qui ne peuvent changer de nationalité aussi facilement que les entreprises. Les inquiétudes des salariés découlent également de la situation du chômage en France qui dure longtemps et devient vite un état. Finalement, la diminution de l'emploi public, les discours sur les vertus de la flexibilité et l'augmentation des formes d'emploi atypiques font craindre aux salariés français une croissance de la précarité, déjà constatée d'ailleurs.

Ces transformations de l'emploi sont en lien avec les transformations de l'organisation du travail. À cet égard, au troisième chapitre, Piotet présente les nouvelles frontières de l'organisation, plus poreuses. Elle indique