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Judy Haiven

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Recensions / Book Reviews

Research Handbook on the Future of Work and Employment Relations

edited by Keith Townsend and Adrian Wilkinson, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2011, 418 pp., ISBN: 978-1-8484-4846-9.

By my reckoning *Research Handbook on the Future of Work and Employment Relations* is a bigger book than its 418 pages. Edited by Keith Townsend and Adrian Wilkinson, the *Research Handbook* covers areas as disparate as new and emerging actors in employment relations to justice in the workplace of the 21st century.

The editors make it clear that research into “standard” areas of industrial relations is on the wane and indeed under threat, and that going “beyond the Dunlop Model” (p. 3) will be the way forward. Unlike some other books on work and employment, the *Research Handbook* looks at the social philosophy of industrial relations (IR) in order to anchor it in the historical and social contexts of today, rather than parking IR neatly in the business school car lot. Peter Acker’s interesting contribution “Finding the future in the past? The social philosophy of Oxford industrial relations pluralism” demonstrates that there was life in IR before it was consigned to a course or two, though mainly as after-thoughts, in business schools. The chapter gives the reader the background and politics of IR giants such as Allan Flanders, Hugh Clegg and Allan Fox who agreed with the state playing some type of role in IR. Ackers also notes that: “Unlike mainstream Fabian statist, the Oxford pluralists retained a healthy scepticism about ... social engineering and a preference for voluntary self-regulation” (p. 59).

In Gregor Gall’s chapter, “Union strategy and circumstance: back to the future

and forward to the past,” he suggests that union ideology and union identity are operationalized through strategy (p. 106). This means that unions must mobilize their members in order to do anything with significant impact. Gall points out that, unlike management, unions are democratic organizations, so mobilizing members is not merely a matter of forcing members to act. Because unions are shaped by capitalism, they tend to be reactive and so they must consciously struggle to build and sustain activism, or effective action.

The role of civil society organizations (CSOs) and labour is discussed in the chapter “New and emerging actors in work and employment relations: the case of civil society organizations.” Authors Williams, Abbott and Heery suggest a framework for classifying CSOs along two dimensions: “... First, whether or not work-related issues are their main focus; and second, whether or not they are single-issue bodies, rather than multi-issue concerns” (p. 133). The authors explain the value of the methods the CSOs employ, which can augment what unions do. For example, CSOs sometimes form worker centres, which deliver certain labour market services such as training or operating a hiring hall (p. 139). One question that the chapter leaves out is to what extent does the reliance on CSOs undermine the importance of trade unions?

Only five of the nineteen chapters are written even in part by women. It was no surprise to note that the female authors wrote about workers’ skills, work-life balance, equity, dignity and justice in the workplace. Too often one sees women’s research pigeon-holed into what are sometimes called “soft” IR issues. Their contributions in this book should not be underestimated. The irony is not lost on this reviewer that in the chapter “Equity in the twenty-first-century workplace”

authors Strachan, Burgess and French note that OECD nations are facing both a “feminization and an ageing of the workforce” (p. 363) in a globalized world with shrinking jobs. This means that employers can offer less work, and more non-standard employment than before. This also means that wages can be depressed as job insecurity rises. Issues such as “family-friendly arrangements,...flexible working hours...[and] diversity in the workforce” (p. 365) are key in the new workplace, but trade unions have comparatively recently started to bargain different agendas than in the past (*ibid.*)

In the chapter entitled “Dimensions of dignity: defining the future of work,” Sharon Bolton explains that dignity is both subjective and objective (p. 370). She distinguishes between: “...*Dignity in work*, linked with the notion of ‘good work’ and *dignity at work* linked with how we are perceived and valued as a person in the workplace” (p. 371). She believes that due to increased globalization, *any work* is now considered *good work* (*ibid.*). Bolton traces the need for dignity at work from Weber’s considerations of *anomie*, to Hertzberg and Maslow’s writing on self-esteem to human resource practices such as job enlargement, team work and industrial democracy (p. 372). Bolton criticizes the current focus on bullying and harassment in the workplace, writing that bullying centres: “On denials of dignity created by poor working relationships with over-zealous managers or competitive colleagues, and tends to miss that dignity at work is related to a wide range of issues not always linked to bullying” (p. 372).

One chapter in the book stands out as distinctly different from the others. “Industrial relations in China” is the only chapter to deal with a non-Western country, and the only chapter that seems to have an obvious political bias. Author E. Patrick

McDermott teaches law and management at the Perdue School of Business at Salisbury University in Maryland, USA. A former Fulbright lecturer in law, he taught at East China University in Shanghai. Reading this chapter catapults one back in time to Mao’s era. He refers to the “Chinese psyche” (p. 321), which means the Chinese cannot be pushed around by the West. He describes the Chinese government as being sensitive to public opinion. For instance, while previously the government gave incentives to foreign companies, today the government should not be “dictated to by Western interests” (*ibid.*).

The chapter is a rollercoaster ride of information and generalizations. McDermott writes that State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) “maintained bloated payrolls and engaged in other conduct to serve the predominant interests of the Party...” (*ibid.*). He claims that today there is serious social unrest because of huge income disparities as exemplified by increasing numbers of migrant workers who are paid poverty wages and the rich (p. 330). McDermott points out that only “10 percent of Chinese own 40 percent of the nation’s wealth” (p. 331).

According to McDermott, the IR system is controlled by the Communist Party (p. 332) and that China passes labour laws: “As window dressing with no underlying commitment to their enforcement. ...This IR model serves the interests of ‘crony socialist marketers’ who command an IR model that provides for the development of China at the expense of its working class” (p. 335-6). The chapter is lively, though prescriptive, and it lacks the nuance and balance of the rest of the volume.

Still, the chapter adds to a fascinating and useful book.

Judy Haiven
Saint Mary’s University