

Book Reviews

Greg J Bamber and Russell D Lansbury (eds.), **International and Comparative Employment Relations: A Study of Industrialised Market Economies**, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, Australia 1998, 442 pp. (This is a third edition of a book with a slightly different name)

Reviewed by C. Regan*

Comparative employment relations is a difficult field of study because it needs the use of employment relationship theory to impose patterns of causation on widely-based historical narrative and the fruits of a plethora of contemporary empirical studies. Few scholars have tackled the formidable task of summarising the important body of literature essential to the field and, unsurprisingly, the predecessors of this edition, have been text-books that have been used world-wide. And deservedly so: the authors are distinguished scholars who clearly present the main theoretical issues and the facts/evidence from several countries. This new edition, which replaces 'International and Comparative Industrial Relations', updates that book and adds a new country in the form of Korea.

This is a good, academic text-book and there is a clear indication of strong editorial direction. The introductory chapter sets out definitions and briefly introduces the main theories and current controversies and issues: adversarial/social partnership systems, convergence/divergence, centralisation/decentralisation and economic performance and strategic choice. The main section consists of separate chapters which set out the employment relation systems of Britain, the USA, Canada, Australia, Italy, France, Germany, Sweden, Japan and Korea. Each follows a similar format, in general describing the context, the parties and processes and current/future issues. Students of comparative industrial relations who have little knowledge of the area will find this an invaluable introductory text, providing them with a solid chronological background and the presentation of the most important and recent theoretical issues and empirical findings.

However, although this is a good book which more than adequately satisfies the requirements of an academic text, it may need the production

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of a further edition before it reaches the status of a great book. As it stands, the overall impression is of a text which consists of separate, albeit uniformly structured, largely-chronological summaries of events and evidence. The Introduction and Conclusion, though finely crafted, act as book-ends, rather than providing/summarising coherent strands of analysis. Thus, because there is no theoretical anchor, continuities between the chapters involve factual rather than conceptual themes and chapter summaries are thus difficult to link together into a final comparative analysis. Yet the editors provide sufficient material to present an analytical approach that can be more deeply embedded in the body of the text. From the themes and issues they have so clearly introduced, the editors could easily construct a theoretical framework which could be explored in each chapter/country. In this way, the material could be introduced in a fashion which allows for interpretative rather than factual conclusions, lending themselves to international comparative analysis in the final chapter.

Two major broad themes seem to be apparent in the Introduction. The first concerns theories which purport to make comparisons between the employment systems of different nations and the second examines theories regarding the impact on these systems of major changes which have occurred in recent decades. If the editors synthesised selected material presented in the first chapter, they could provide a theoretical framework for the rest of the book in respect of an empirical investigation of these two issues. There are many approaches that could be taken, but the following, for the most part, requires a mere re-organisation of the existing material.

1. Comparisons between national employment relationship systems

Following the presentation of the relevant theoretical work, a typology of employment relation systems could be set out, including unitarist, pluralist and marxist systems. Categories within or across them can be identified or constructed (voluntarism, macro/mesa/micro corporatism, etc). Such a categorisation might lead to a different selection/sequencing of countries (why is Britain first?). More important, it would provide a focus for each chapter because the character of a given country's employment relationship (ER) system could be established at the outset in terms of this 'nested' typology, yet with an identification of its own idiosyncrasies (eg, neo-liberal; union/non-union), albeit via each individual author's interpretation. The task of each set of contributors would therefore be to present their material – mainly historical data and empirical findings of relevant studies

– within an analytical framework which explains the emergence/persistence/changing nature of this character, thereby justifying their categorisation. A common approach to the task might be suggested by the editors – within which the authors could present their individual arguments. For example, the establishment and evolution of a given ER system- and therefore its character – might thus be discussed in terms of the impact on the national interest (narrowly or widely defined) of the sectional interests of employer and worker and the consequent need for/effect of any state intervention. Such a discussion would take place with reference to cultural and historical context/accident.

2. Shifts in the economy and technology: the impact on the labour market

In the (modern) industrial era, economic and political change has occurred constantly and its impact on the power of the respective parties in the employment relationship is clearly explicable via the preceding analysis. However, an important shift occurred from about the late seventies and this new context provides the theoretical underpinning to massive, common change which has affected most countries and their employment systems. The effect of this shift on different ER systems is the second major theme that is apparent in the Introduction. Thus, it might be interesting if the authors placed theoretical discussion of change firmly within this context. For example, a new section on labour market change would be useful to help explain its causes, effects and manifestations with reference, say, to globalisation, new technology, changes in demand and structural/work organisation changes. The discussion of convergence/divergence theory might take place with particular reference to these new factors and specifically in terms of centralisation/decentralisation issues and their apparent link with economic indicators. The editors' own stated hypothesis is clearly linked to such a framework. These issues can be examined by investigating the impact of major change on each ER system by a review of the facts/evidence presented in each chapter.

By such an approach, thematically related summaries can explain the character of a given employment system and the effect of recent change. This can provide material for a true comparative analysis and a production of international themes. Moreover, to this effect, it might be useful to include empirical work on specifically global issues (the internationalisation of labour, the response of the ILO, etc) to present a more complete picture of the employment relationship at the end of the decade.

As the book is currently presented, the editors have provided a rich kaleidoscope of themes and issues. If they moved one stage further and wove them into an interlocking framework, imposing their own views, then a distinct analytical approach might be applied in each chapter whereby existing evidence is used to interpret the suggested themes. Successful text-books become refined with each new edition. This book is a credit to Australian scholarship and editorial direction. It holds promise of even better things to come.