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Liberté, Égalité, and Fraternité at Work: Changing French Employment Relations and Management

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BOOK REVIEWS

Industrial Relations Theory

Liberté, Égalité, and Fraternité at Work: Changing French Employment Relations and Management. By Steve Jefferys. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. 261 pp. ISBN 0-333-744137-4, $72.50 (cloth).

Postwar French industrial relations have been characterized by an enduring paradox. A weak, fragmented labor movement, low on almost every measure of collective strength and capacity, has nonetheless been capable of periodic mass mobilizations that have forced government policy reversals, and in recent years French workers appear to have maintained a stubborn anti-capitalist refusal to accommodate themselves to the prevailing neoliberalism. A labor movement that organizes less than one in ten workers is regularly consulted on matters of public policy by governments of both the Left and the Right, and the few collective agreements that are reached are extended by government decree to cover nine out of ten workers.

Steve Jefferys has written a superb exploration of this paradox. *Liberté, Égalité, and Fraternité at Work* summarizes and offers a coherent narrative account of the evolution of state-labor-business relations in France. Compact but comprehensive, this book is the best single-volume study of postwar French industrial relations available. The book pivots around the French Socialist Party's ascension to power in 1981, following more than a quarter-century's exclusion of the Left from government. Two early chapters offer a historical account of social and industrial relations. The second chapter alone provides a remarkable account of industrialization, class formation, the impact of immigration, and trade union organizational development in the century prior to 1980. The remaining chapters examine various aspects of the period since 1981, including state industrial relations policy, managerial strategy, and the "crisis" of trade unionism.

However, Jefferys goes well beyond synthesis: this book is a sustained argument about the centrality of ideology in explaining national patterns of class relations. The argument, advanced in the introduction and in the review of theoretical approaches, and illustrated in later chapters, is that the mental maps that workers use to process their experience at work critically influence how they act, and these ideological frames are relatively independent of structural economic change. Politics and the struggle over ideas matter because "how those who exercise power and those who are subordinate to it, actually view the world and then mobilise to take specific choices is an inherently uncertain process that leads to a wide variety of social forms and power relations" (p. 4).

Jefferys is critical of explanatory approaches to French industrial relations that emphasize broad structural determinants of social action (including arguments advanced by this reviewer) and limit the space for politics and struggle. Building on Hyman's tripartite taxonomy of trade union ideologies (class, market, and social integration), the author advances a similar taxonomy of political action ideologies, which give the book its title: *fraternité, liberté,* and *égalité.* Over time one can trace shifts in the particular balance of those ideological elements among French workers, but the more radical features of each have never quite disappeared despite the collapse of Fordist economic growth and the rightward drift of politics across the rest of the advanced capitalist world. For Jefferys, the upsurge of worker mobilization in December 1995, and its success in defeating proposed cuts in social benefits for public sector employees, is powerful evidence that ideology matters and can generate mass class action even in the absence of strong labor institutions.

This book has three principal strengths, beyond its comprehensiveness and refreshing optimism about the future of working-class resistance to neo-liberalism. The first is its emphasis on the role of the state: "The state remains at the heart of the organisation of relations between capital and French labour" (p. 128). In part because his theoretical approach privileges political and ideological struggle, Jefferys sees the state as playing a central role in regulating industrial relations, and different political projects of reform as shaping the terrain of social relations. Hence the importance of 1981, and the emergence of an electorally viable Left. Jefferys examines in some detail the *Auroux* laws of the early 1980s and the 35-hour work week legislation at the end of the 1990s, both distinctive Left approaches to industrial relations.

Second, the account contained in *Liberté, Égalité, and Fraternité at Work* shows clearly how

closely industrial relations and welfare policy are related in France. Too often, social policy is treated separately from industrial relations, but Jefferys demonstrates the linkages: the *paritarisme* of employers and unions in managing elements of the welfare system; the manner in which social benefits came to be used to compensate industrial actors for changes in the industrial relations system; and, of course, the way in which efforts to limit widely accepted benefits generated class mobilization. The importance of social policy for French industrial relations is another reason for the continued centrality of the state in managing class relations.

The third strength of this book is its emphasis on employers, as both industrial and political actors. Two chapters are devoted to exploring shifts in the organization and interests of business, emerging managerial strategies, and the growing assertiveness of organizations lobbying on employers' behalf. The story for Jefferys is not simply one of economic and technological constraints acting on employers, but of conscious political mobilization. The transformation of the main employers' organization into Medef (the *Mouvement des entreprises de France*) in 1998 catalyzed the political strategy of employers, challenging both the welfare system and the 35-hour work week policy.

One can question some parts of the argument that Jefferys makes. Notably, in a book with such well-grounded theory, the state is itself strangely under-theorized. The account of state action is narrowly political, so that it becomes difficult to explain why state reform projects in the period after 1981 often failed and produced unintended consequences—occasionally, indeed, consequences diametrically opposite those intended. It is striking in this regard that trade union decline continued despite wide-ranging Socialist reform efforts. The strike wave of December 1995 is also a thin reed on which to hang an argument about the continued vitality of class ideology and mobilizational capacity; the strikes were mostly limited to the public sector, and similar welfare reforms passed with only limited contestation in 2003.

But *Liberté, Égalité, and Fraternité at Work* provides a powerful and compelling account of postwar French industrial relations that offers important insights even if one is unconvinced of the role it accords ideology or its optimism about the survival of a significant oppositional current within the French working class. Jefferys manages to take the state, employers, and workers equally seriously, and in so doing, he has produced an original and convincing interpretation of French industrial relations. It will be impossible to examine French industrial relations again without reference to this book.

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Labor-Management Relations

Emerging Systems for Managing Workplace Conflict: Lessons from American Corporations for Managers and Dispute Resolution Professionals. By David B. Lipsky, Ronald L. Seeber, and Richard D. Fincher. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003. xxiii, 406 pp. ISBN 0-787964344, $49.00 (cloth).

This is the most important book yet published to address the evolution of private justice systems for managing workplace disputes—a cutting-edge development of significance to the fields of industrial and labor relations, personnel and human resource management, and conflict resolution. Until now, no single scholarly volume has provided a comprehensive introduction to the field of employment dispute resolution and integrated conflict management systems. David Lipsky, Ronald Seeber, and Richard Fincher provide one that is both a conceptual and practical resource, of great benefit to scholars and practitioners alike.

There have been other efforts to chronicle the emergence of employment dispute resolution as distinguished from more traditional employee voice systems. In *Getting Disputes Resolved: Designing Systems to Cut the Costs of Conflict* (1986), William Ury, Jeanne Brett, and Stephen Goldberg extrapolated from classic experiments with grievance mediation in the unionized coal industry to found a new field of dispute system design for both union and non-union workplaces. Building on experience in the field and inspired by organizational development, practitioners from the public sector (Cathy Costantino and Christina Merchant, *Designing Conflict Management Systems,* 1996) and the private sector (Karl A. Slaikeu and Ralph H. Hasson, *Controlling the Costs of Conflict: How to Design a System for Your Organization,* 1998) proposed models for working with organizations to design and implement conflict management systems. John Dunlop and Arnold Zack (*Mediation and Arbitra-*