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## Selling Technology: The Changing Shape of Sales in an Information Economy.

Asaf Darr\*

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direct and explicit comparative linkages. Second, the book focuses on two levels of industrial relations activity, the strategic and the functional. An interesting and important extension of these two levels of analysis would be the study of the implications of widespread and comprehensive change for actors and institutions at the workplace level. In other words, how have these changes influenced the organization and structuring of work and the outcomes experienced by employees and managers on the frontlines of a transformed industrial relations system?

*Fading Corporatism* is laudable both for substance and for style. Mundlak's substantive contributions—to the study of industrial relations and law in general, and their joint transformation in particular—are large, and his seamless weaving together of scholarship from two disciplines is exemplary. The book is a must read for industrial relations and labor law scholars alike.

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### Human Resources, Management, and Personnel

*Selling Technology: The Changing Shape of Sales in an Information Economy.* By Asaf Darr. Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press (an imprint of Cornell University Press), 2006. 143 pp. ISBN 0-8014-4431-4, \$45.00 (cloth).

This slim but important book deals with the neglected topic of selling and the changing nature of sales work. At its center is a comparative ethnographic study of sales in two areas of technology: mass market electronic components, such as resistors and capacitors, and emerging technologies, particularly what are known as real-time computing applications. Darr spent time hanging out with sales personnel in these two industries—joining them on the road as they visited customers, lunching with them (he usually picked up the tab), attending trade shows, and the like. The book is full of thick description, primarily of sales encounters—some of which went well, others not so well—and of the sorts of strategies and tactics that sellers and buyers employ. The book makes fascinating reading.

It is scandalous how little attention selling has received from the academy. Sales staff are everywhere and, as Darr shows, sectors of what used to

be a low-prestige service industry have undergone transformations in the last few decades as highly skilled knowledge workers, in his study engineers, have moved sideways in their careers into sales. I am reminded of how this profession is changing every time I go watch my kids play soccer. The soccer moms these days are accompanied occasionally by soccer dads, most of whom seem to be in sales. They trade stories of esoteric products, of what is coming down the pipeline, and of which Fortune 500 companies they have dealt with most recently; they exchange travel tips based on their many flights around the United States and the world on sales adventures. Selling may even be about to become glamorous.

For many decades, a stigma has attached to sales jobs, and sales people have been subject to simple-minded stereotyping. The worst stereotypes portray them as inauthentic, deceitful, rapacious, and ready to prey on the vulnerable. But these negative popular perceptions cannot alone explain labor relations scholars' systematic neglect of sales occupations. Also influential, I suspect, has been a kind of invisibility these occupations have acquired because they represent "people skills," which not only the general public but scholars as well have tended to regard as low-status, partly because of the long-standing association of this work with low-paid female labor.

Indeed the fraught subject of gendered work roles is one I would like to have seen more thoroughly examined in this book. The dynamics are not straightforward. Sometimes the devaluation of work that is performed predominantly by women affects the pay and status of that work even when it is performed by men (as I believe is the case in sales work), sometimes not. Nor does the use of finely developed people skills in a job automatically deal a blow to the job's status. For example, Sharon Traweek, in *Beantimes and Lifetimes*, documented the case of a group of mainly male high energy physicists who developed highly attuned social skills and learned the right way to joke and tell stories—skills often associated with women. Why is it that workers in some occupations can use people skills with no damage to their status, while workers in other occupations apparently cannot?

Perhaps the answer lies in the centrality, or lack thereof, of people skills to a job's identity. High energy physics is anything but a people-skills job at its core. In contrast, dealing one-on-one with people is much closer to the core of sales work. Sales people must perfect other skills as well, of course; one of the salesmen Darr studied, for example, excelled at benign espionage, touring industrial parks in his car to see what new compa-

nies had moved in and spying on loading docks to see what products they made and whether they would be in need of the electronic components he sold. But highly attuned social skills are integral to selling. Sales people are, as a rule, exceptionally socially adept. They are expert at conversation, joking, and building rapport, partly in order to pick up on gossip about potential new clients (hence the need for endless lunches).

What is most remarkable about the mass market sales people Darr followed around is that the relationships they build with their customers are not short-term and exploitative, but long-term and built on trust and reciprocation of social ties. Far from being inauthentic, these relationships seem very "real." A buyer who is offered a cheaper quote from another company, for example, will not unceremoniously jettison a seller with whom he has built a relationship over the years, but will give that seller a chance to come back with a new quote. These sellers are also remarkably skilled at handling mismatches. When there is nothing in a deal for them, they learn to exit gracefully. They have to do this all the time because they are inundated with casual leads and showered with business cards of potential customers. The skill is in finding the highly prized "qualified leads."

Darr succeeds in showing how the complex "moral economy" of sales people differs greatly from the "rational actors" world beloved of economic theory, with its simple, selfish calculus. The book is full of acute insights. Among them is Darr's appreciation of exactly what is the basis for a sale. He notes that in his mass-market study the components being sold are standard and their quality clearly signaled by brand names; moreover, product information and prices are standardized and listed in chunky product catalogs, which these sales staff lug around with them. In this highly standardized world of products and prices, what tips the scales for sellers is a reputation for quality and trustworthiness.

In the mass market, sellers build mutual obligations partly through "gifting"—free samples, perhaps, or sometimes more elaborate favors, such as meals and rounds of golf. These social relationships are designed to keep a client from "cherry-picking" products from different suppliers rather than turning to one seller for everything. Often moral arguments are used to enforce obligations. A free sample is not referred to as "free" unless there is danger that a bond of trust is about to be broken. Loyalty is to the person, not to the company. When buyers and sellers change company affiliations, they maintain their relationships.

Darr's juxtaposed case studies of two very

different sales lines yield valuable insights into how technologies get adopted and adapted. The computer systems that represent emerging technologies are highly innovative and typically must be customized for different applications. Darr's big insight here is that there is great uncertainty as to how users will apply the real-time computer technology: this technology's "interpretative flexibility" (a term from science and technology studies) is such that sellers simply cannot anticipate what uses will be found for it. Given this massive "client uncertainty," there is an art to identifying potential clients, and these sellers spend much time searching for leads on the Internet or at trade shows. Casual conversations with engineering acquaintances can occasionally lead to huge deals.

The sales staff—referred to sometimes as sales engineers—must acquire formidable engineering expertise in order to follow through on these customization projects. For example, a motorcycle manufacturer may need a real-time computer application to monitor and test the sound of the engines, but will the software and hardware being sold fit in with the company's already elaborate testing and monitoring equipment for production control? Part of the sales work involves a long technical negotiation over whether the application is feasible. Trust between partners has slowly to be built, starting with the signing of a non-disclosure agreement. Unlike the mass-market component sales people, these sales workers fly rather than drive, and spend most of their time in the field in elaborate interactions with the clients rather than in perfunctory exchanges. Once the customization is complete and working, the sales engineers may have to train company engineers to maintain and problem-shoot it. This is far afield from our standard image of selling. Throughout the process, technical skills and social skills are both needed. Indeed, it is the seamless mixing of the two sorts of skills that makes for the best sellers. Darr's overall argument is that as engineering and other industries become more knowledge-intensive and as emerging technologies play an ever greater role in the economy, the sorts of social skills these sellers employ will become more and more crucial.

Darr's excellent book makes several important points about the social construction of markets and the distinctive pattern of social interaction that underlie the moral economy of selling. Studying these important intermediaries between manufacture and use provides a novel angle on the social processes of innovation. The information and analysis this book presents on an important and neglected subject can benefit general readers and

social scientists alike. Indeed, the publication of *Selling Technology* may mark the birth of a much-needed new academic domain.

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### International and Comparative Industrial Relations

*Employment Research and State Traditions: A Comparative History of Britain, Germany, and the United States.* By Carola M. Frege. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. x, 223 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-920806-7, \$99 (cloth).

Readers of this journal need no reminder that the field of industrial relations (or employment relations) is in trouble. Fewer American universities offer programs, or even courses, in the field today than in past decades; there are ever fewer active IR scholars, and our average age increases steadily. Beyond these material problems, there is a larger issue, a sense that the field has lost direction. There are still employers and employed, and the wage-labor relationship remains, but with the decline of the labor movement there is less sense that our work matters, that our research will help to guide future social change. A field that began with an urgent need to understand a fundamental social transformation risks sinking into an intellectual backwater.

Not content to lament the decline of industrial relations, Carola Frege seeks to address larger issues in intellectual development and, from this, to suggest ways to revitalize our field. She begins with a provocative suggestion. Rejecting the “march of science” tone found in much intellectual history, she instead emphasizes “long-standing country-specific institutional and intellectual traditions.” Regardless of their intellectual merit, national intellectual traditions, Frege argues, are “born out of the economic but also political transformations of the nineteenth century” (p. 4). This makes intellectual traditions path-dependent, determined by past historical events. In Frege’s view, the decline of an intellectual tradition like industrial relations is a result of political and social changes, not a simple instance of better ideas driving out others. She further argues that the field can be rejuvenated if scholars will re-imagine it in a more creative way.

An editor of the *British Journal of Industrial Rela-*

*tions*, Carola Frege explores the crisis and future of IR by exploring the research work published in journals like hers. She begins with a fascinating investigation of IR research since the 1970s based on a pioneering content analysis of articles in five leading journals in the field—two of them American (*Industrial and Labor Relations Review* and *Industrial Relations*), two British (*British Journal of Industrial Relations* and *Industrial Relations Journal*), and one German (*Industrielle Beziehungen*). The analysis includes articles published in all five journals in 1994–2000, as well as articles published in the four Anglophone journals in 1970–73. (*Industrielle Beziehungen* could not be included for the earlier years because it began publication in 1994.) For each article, Frege codes for subject, research methodology, and authors’ discipline, as well as for research theories, purpose, and paradigms. In addition, to check for any trend toward globalization, she includes the authors’ national affiliation.

With these data, Frege can trace the changing character of IR through the research published under its banner in these three countries. She can also describe differences in research traditions between the Anglophone world and Germany. First, she establishes that the persistence of some national intellectual traditions is linked to national isolation. Over 80% of articles published in the American journals were written by Americans, and the proportion of native authors was nearly as high in Britain and Germany; furthermore, there was little change in this ratio from the 1970s to the late 1990s in the Anglophone journals. Persistent nationalism would matter little were it not for significant differences across countries in the character of the work done by researchers in each country. In the American journals, for example, most authors during both observed periods were economists using individualist theories and quantitative techniques to answer questions about the functioning of labor markets and human relations systems—and this narrow focus only increased over time. The British brought only a slightly broader focus to their work. By comparison with the Americans, British researchers were more likely to explore institutional structures and industrial relations systems, more likely to undertake descriptive and qualitative research, and less likely to be drawn from economics and psychology (as were their favored theoretical systems). But the British research is also heavily weighted toward individualist models and empirical work on narrow questions.

The real contrast is between the Anglophone world and Germany. Nearly 60% of the articles published in the German *Industrielle Beziehungen*