

# *Industrial & Labor Relations Review*

---

*Volume 62, Issue 1*

2008

*Article 11*

---

## Employment Research and State Traditions: A Comparative History of Britain, Germany, and the United States.

Carola M. Frege\*

\*,

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

Trevor Pinch

Professor  
Science and Technology Studies  
Cornell University

### 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*

were written by non-economist social scientists, six times the percentage in counterpart Anglophone journals. Different disciplinary affiliations are reflected in differences in the German research agenda. Subjects that overwhelmingly dominated the Anglophone research agenda were practically absent from the German one: only one German article (out of 91) addressed a topic in human relations, and only six focused on labor market questions. German researchers also shunned Anglophone empiricism; only 41% of German articles were empirical, and fewer than 20% used the quantitative empiricism that marked almost all of the American research and was popular in Great Britain. Instead, German researchers favored theoretical work and “think pieces” or essays exploring the larger questions missing from much Anglophone research. German researchers view employment relations as a product of social structures, fundamentally *political* in cast, rather than as an epiphenomenon of market dynamics. Dismissing Anglophone claims to scientific neutrality, German research is openly political in the larger sense of the word; a “critical industrial sociology,” it critiques existing social arrangements by exposing underlying assumptions and hidden ideology. German scholars, Frege suggests, assume that workplace phenomena can be explained only within a wider system of society and ideology, and that changes in employment must be linked with broader social changes. German research, therefore, addresses questions about the possibility of greater “societal rationality” (in a Weberian sense), the organization of work, and the nature of social partnership among the various stakeholders in the employment relationship.

The words “stakeholders” and “social partnership” themselves signal how different German industrial and employment research is from the work done in the Anglophone world, especially the United States. This insight is so important, I believe, that even if it were the only contribution of *Employment Research and State Traditions*, the book would be of value. Differing national political histories—in particular, the strong social democratic movement in Germany, the late development of the Labour Party in Britain, and the lack of strong socialist institutions in the United States—are largely responsible, in Frege’s view, both for differences in patterns of unionization across these countries and for the different national research agendas. While vague, Frege’s historical analysis allows her to ground national differences and suggest that they are the products of path-dependent national development. This point of view is reasonable but, alas, like other simple materialist perspectives, it lends a curious futility

to just such exercises as the one Frege undertakes in this book. If the crisis in Anglophone IR is due to the exhaustion of a path-dependent research agenda, then what cure can we expect from a work of scholarship, however well researched and cogently argued?

I suspect that Carola Frege is less certain of path dependency and even simple materialism than she suggests in the historical sections of this book. Instead, she thinks that the work people do can change the world because it becomes part of the material reality that shapes human consciousness; and that is why she bothered to write this generally excellent book. Seen in this way, her discussion of the forces shaping German versus British versus American research should have included more about the actors shaping the fields, including not only the most influential scholars (John Bates Clark versus Max Weber and Sidney and Beatrice Webb, for example) but also the relevant national institutions (such as university systems and their funding sources). The book would also have been better had Frege recognized the systems of power that have shaped the university systems in these three countries and the national research projects that she describes.

That said, this is an excellent book. Carola Frege has done much more than describe the decline of industrial and employment relations; she has helped us to understand it. I would urge everyone to read her book and to think about the important questions she raises.

Gerald Friedman

Professor of Economics  
University of Massachusetts  
at Amherst

*Towards a European Labour Identity: The Case of the European Works Council.* Edited by Michael Whittall, Herman Knudsen, and Fred Huijgen. Abingdon, U.K., and New York: Routledge, 2007. 256 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-40396-2, \$140.00 (cloth).

Those who are unfamiliar with the European integration process may react with anything from indifference to keen curiosity to the European debate on transnational governance, identity, and solidarity. To the parties directly involved, however, this debate is very much in earnest, and mirrors the actual situation of the European Union (EU). Europe’s economy is to a very large extent denationalized due to the common market and the single currency. Slowly but surely, the nation