

RESEARCH HANDBOOK OF COMPARATIVE EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS *Edited by Michael Bary & Adrian Wilkinson*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2011, xi+470pp, Hard back.

One can notice that in the post-globalization world, many new ways of IR management are coming up in different countries. Scholars are keen to know whether substantial changes are taking place all over, or some countries reflect more vigorous changes than the others. Many questions need to be asked to grasp the factors that contribute to the new realities: What is the comparative IR situation today in the ever changing and globalizing world? Have the realities of the past quarter century substantially altered/modified the policies and the institutions? How far learning/benchmarking from other IR models is possible? What conditions are necessary for transplanting the practices from other locales? What forces are causing the change? How do institutions evolve in new dispensation? The book under review is an attempt to answer some of these questions through presenting reviews of the contemporary research on comparative employment relations by some well-known scholars in the field of employee relations and related areas.

Besides a well-written introduction by the two editors, the book presents seventeen other chapters, some by well-known writers on the subject or related social sciences. These are divided into

three sections i.e. Perspectives (Part 2); Paired Country Comparisons (Part 3); and Broader Comparative Influences (Part 4). The soul of this research handbook is the ten chapters that are the contents of Part 3. These chapters show comparisons of two countries each, thus in all putting together the IR data and developments in 20 major countries. The editors see this as cultural interfaces approach, which they claim to be a novel approach. This perhaps is partly the *raison d'être* of the book.

Part two provides four chapters which lay down the theoretical perspectives of the subject—each related to an area of analysis adopted by the social scientists in the study of IR. These four chapters are titled as: Comparative Employment Relations, Institutional and Neo-Institutional Theories (Bruce Kaufman), the Political Economy of Comparative Employment Relations (John Kelly), Legal Origins, Labour Law, and Regulation of Employment Relations (Sean Cooney, Peter Gahan & Richard Mitchell), and Cross-Cultural Studies (Terence Jackson). These chapters also reflect a new approach. The four chapters remind the reader that one could approach the discipline of IR from other equally strong

perspectives than one's own. This part of the book helps understanding the book and its central idea in a better way. At the same time, it reminds the reader that employee relations reflect a very complex relationship in terms of the factors, and various contexts, that contribute to it. And, one must refrain from any oversimplification. Terrence Jackson, in his chapter on "Cross-cultural Studies" could have added some very useful punches on IR if he had also specialized in IR as a secondary area; that however does not appear to be so, which of course is quite understandable. But the articulation of the other three perspectives is quite helpful towards a more holistic grasp of the nuances of the subject on hand.

The ten chapters in the paired comparisons section (Part 3) have compared employment relations in the developed as well developing world. These chapters compare the following countries: Chile and Argentina (M. Atzeni et al.); Canada and the US (Sara Slinn & Richard Hurd); China and India (Fang L. Cooke); the UK and Ireland (Tony Dundon & D. Collings); Japan and Korea (Eehwan Jung); Belgium and the Netherlands (Hester Houwing et al.); Australia and New Zealand (Nick Wailes); South Africa and Mozambique (Geoffery Wood); France and Germany (Stefan Zagelmeyer) and oil-rich Gulf countries (Kamel Mellahi & Ingo Forstenlenchner). The basis of pairing the countries is not necessarily convenience, but also features such aspects as common employment relations base; unique structures of labour market; speed of development (like India and

China); cultural, economic and political systems; language and cultural heritage (e.g. Republic of Ireland and the UK); common industrial history, say of import substitution; or industrial relations history.

Some of the portions in Part 3 necessitate comments. The USA and Canada appear two very similar IR systems, even as the union density in the latter country is much higher. But Sara Slinn and Richard Hurd's chapter discern important differences in the two systems. They have rightly argued that the Canadian law is more supportive of collective bargaining and unions than that of the US. The chapter on Chile and Argentina compares the major setbacks that labour in both countries has suffered in the neo-liberal world. They focus on inequality in both the countries, but project some ray of hope for labour justice as reflected in the renewed labour activism in Argentina, and the rise of contract labour movement in Chile. In a well-written chapter that compares India and China, Fang Cooke makes the finest and perhaps the first ever attempt to contrast these seemingly two different IR systems. Despite some common approaches to employee relations in the two countries like state dominance, she takes the reader to different historical and political systems of the two countries, which have considerably influenced their IR systems. In the chapter that compares the UK and Ireland, the authors acknowledge several areas of similarities, and especially the voluntarist method of dispute resolution unlike the main land Europe. But they compare institutions, processes, approaches, postures, and

cultural legacies of the two countries to show the important differences; for example while the UK is witnessing increasing unitarist tendencies Ireland continues to demonstrate corporatist social partnerships and institutionalized collectivism. The chapter by EeHwan Jung compares Japan and Korea, which have some very interesting comparisons, though the two are very different systems. The former reflects the well developed IR system but the latter's IR system is more like that of developing countries. Both however have enterprise unions and seniority-based payments that can lead one to see their IR system as an East Asian model. The author has pointed out the increasing number of peripheral workforce in both the countries. He has also pointed out a situation of lack of peace in Korea compared to Japan, despite similar institutions. Nick Wales compares Australia and New Zealand, yet two other similar systems of IR; but has argued the differences created by adopting different labour market policies by governments in the two countries. This comparison points out the need to explore all factors causing the working of the IR system rather than just the institutions.

After having examined the cases (read countries) of IR systems from across the globe, the book has examined in the last part (comprising three chapters) some influences coming from outside the country—in terms of the role played by the MNEs, influences of public and private codes—through the lenses of international labour standards and

corporate voluntary initiatives. This part has in effect argued that there is a growing trend of the influence of the Anglo-Saxon IR model, and also a closer relationship between government and interest groups. But labour market institutions of many European countries did not converge on the Anglo-Saxon trend. Rather there was a kind of renaissance in the corporatism. While the form remained the same the institutional functions were substantially different from the way they worked in the past. The chapter by Collings et al. shows that MNCs have put a substantial challenge to the countervailing power of the unions; mainly because they have the capability to practice innovative employment relations policies into the diverse host economies they operate in. This is also corroborated by the way the state is protecting their interests in India, for example, both for the sake of bringing in more foreign direct investment(FDI) even at the cost of obfuscating the true spirit of the constitutional mandate of social justice, and for promoting high growth strategies. In one of the finest chapters that concludes this book, Tony Royle has emphasized that in general the way MNCs are working, and the way governments are sustaining their interest, employees' interests are bound to suffer more in the never-ending labour management conflict; and, that the declining influence of ILO is a further manifestation of these realities. In view of a weakening ILO, it is settled that NGOs, community groups, consumers and trade unions will have to struggle harder to salvage human rights of employees, without which we are

definitely marching to a dangerous situation so far as power and countervailing power of the social partners is concerned.

This is a substantial resource book for scholars and students of comparative IR, especially for those who look towards the evolution of IR in the new economic world that is in formation, and in a comparative perspective. The book focuses on how IR institutions are conducting themselves or adapting to the changes taking place in the wider business environment, as also how the new employee relations scenarios are impacting (or corroding) the working class rights across the globe in novel ways; what new pieces of legislation are coming up to respond to the new detailing of the emerging realities in at least two different nations. This also helps a focus on a larger number of countries.

The book has shown that overall there is no singular way in which the IR world is moving across countries. It has also succeeded in pointing out the complexities of industrial relations and the difficulties in its theorization. Though convergence may not be clearly discernible from the ten comparative studies, it is amply clear that IR institutions of yester-years are under tremendous strain; either they are giving way to new structures or are being used

as masks for new sets of functions. Without doubt, as the reader grasps the messages contained in this useful book, s/he is likely to enjoy the richness of the contents and the spread of the coverage, which definitely is quite comprehensive.

All in all, the book contains intellectually stimulating analyses of employee relations realities across the globe. The editors' choice of the pairs is quite appropriate; they have succeeded in bringing home a better way of appreciating the differences in the contexts of the countries concerned and their points of departure. The approach has helped unravel interesting ideas and even innovations in appreciating employee relations management practices across countries. It also facilitates understanding the present state and the future direction in which the discipline is moving. Scholars belonging to different disciplinary perspectives, from which IR has been studied in the past, will also find in it a good reference material of comparative analyses. The book has been conceptualized imaginatively; and the editors deserve complements for their efforts. The publishers too deserve accolades for their professionalism and first rate copy-editing and production.

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