

Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



Boom, Bust and Crisis: Labour, Corporate Power and Politics in Canada, edited by John Peters, Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2012, 199 pp., ISBN: 978-1-5526-6518-3.

Ian Robinson

Volume 68, numéro 4, automne 2013

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1023016ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1023016ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (imprimé)

1703-8138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Robinson, I. (2013). Compte rendu de [*Boom, Bust and Crisis: Labour, Corporate Power and Politics in Canada*, edited by John Peters, Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2012, 199 pp., ISBN: 978-1-5526-6518-3.] *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 68(4), 718–720.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1023016ar>

Tous droits réservés © Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval, 2013

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

à la qualité des textes. Peut-être serait-il préférable d'en restreindre la quantité, pour un meilleur niveau d'analyse et de cohérence d'ensemble. Ce volume constitue néanmoins un référent incontournable de la GRH internationale dans la mesure où il comble l'absence d'une perspective francophone. Qui plus est, il porte sur un objet relativement récent de la GRH, particulièrement dans le contexte québécois. À souligner que les deux textes de Cazal se démarquent nettement des autres par la profondeur de l'analyse et la justesse de sa synthèse. Nous ne pouvons conclure sans ajouter que la GRH française se veut sociologique, pluraliste et interdisciplinaire en comparaison avec celle, nord-américaine, qui promeut des perspectives unitaristes et une épistémologie positiviste.

Yves Hallée
Université Laval

Boom, Bust and Crisis: Labour, Corporate Power and Politics in Canada

edited by John Peters, Halifax and
Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2012,
199 pp., ISBN: 978-1-5526-6518-3.

This collection of essays examines the changing character of Canada's political economy in the neoliberal era. The authors document changes in (1) the relative importance of the natural resource, manufacturing and financial sectors, (2) job quality and job security trends, (3) wage and benefit trends, and (4) economic inequality and poverty trends. These changes, it is argued, are produced by, and contribute to, changes in the balance of political power between labour and capital. The authors argue that the neoliberal era has been characterized by the "dualization" of provincial labour markets, meaning that a growing share of the workforce is trapped in jobs that are contingent (part-time and/or temporary) and poorly paid. Barring government policies that counteract its effects – through progressive taxes and transfers, an expanded social

wage, and labour law reforms adapt the right to organize to the changing nature of the workplace – an increasingly polarized labour market necessarily results in growing income and wealth inequality. However, because neoliberal economic restructuring has also been associated with declining labour movement political power, public policy is reinforcing rather than mitigating these economic dynamics. Only Quebec is seen as a partial exception to this generalization.

The result has been a vicious circle in which the living standards of most Canadians were deteriorating even before the economic crisis of 2008. Even in Quebec, where new policies increased the social wage, only a quarter of the 670,000 new jobs added to the economy between the 1970s and the mid-1990s were full-time; nearly two fifths were part-time and a third were self-employed (Graefe, p. 129). The authors argue that the concessions demanded of unions, and the austerity demanded of governments, in response to the 2008 crisis can only exacerbate the polarization that was already under way. The authors of this anthology hold that, again with the partial exception of Quebec, Canada's unions have not been able to devise strategies to break out of this vicious cycle, and are in danger of retreating from their role as advocates for working class interests to become defenders of the privileged minority of Canadian workers who still enjoy relatively good jobs.

This is not a new argument, either for Canada or for other rich capitalist democracies. The main contribution of this book is its careful attention to provincial variations in economic and political dynamics. Peters' Introductory essay states the argument at the national level, drawing on the findings of the other essays in the collection, most of which look at the experience of particular provinces. These provincial discussions are organized into three parts. The first looks at the impact of the oil

boom in Alberta (chapter by Diana Gibson and Regan Boychuk) and Newfoundland (chapter by Sean Cadigan) and the crisis of Ontario's steel industry (chapter by Stephen Arnold). The second part looks at provincial government policies directly affecting the labour market and the social wage in British Columbia (chapter by David Fairey, Tom Sandborn and John Peters) and Quebec (chapter by Peter Graefe). The third part looks at two very different cases: Yale Belanger examines the challenges faced by union efforts to organize First Nations gaming casinos in several provinces; Wayne Lewchuk, Marlea Clarke and Alice de Wolff document the negative impact of declining union power on occupational health and safety trends in Ontario.

Overall, this book is well worth reading. It offers a comprehensive, critical overview of major shifts in Canada's trajectory over the last 40 years, rooted in assumptions about the relationship between labour movement power, public policy and labour market outcomes that I find highly plausible. I do have two criticisms of the book. The first is that it does not compare across its provincial cases as much as it could and should. The authors could gain analytic leverage if they did more of this. One place where this kind of comparison does occur is in Graefe's discussion of why income inequality has grown more slowly in Quebec than in the other provinces of Canada. Graefe argues that part of the answer lies in market dynamics – Quebec business elites enjoying smaller income increases than their Anglo-Canadian and U.S. counterparts because they cannot plausibly claim to be competitive in the continental market. But the other factors, he thinks, are Quebec's more progressive income tax and its stronger "family friendly" policies (i.e., child benefits, tax credits to parents in low-wage work, its system of universal low-cost early childhood education and its more generous parental leave insurance system).

But why is Quebec more family – and therefore worker – friendly? Could it be because the Quebec labour movement is more politically powerful? Graefe says No, arguing that the women's movement and the family movement were more important in developing and pushing for these pro-family policies than was organized labour (p. 139). That may be so, but women's movements in many other places don't push for such policies, and many provinces don't have a "family movement" at all. Why is Quebec different in these respects? Could the Quebec women's movement be more interested in an agenda that benefits working women because of overlapping social movement networks, and, perhaps, common struggles for greater political sovereignty for Quebec? This raises the possibility that one of the most important sources of the labour movement's greater political power in Quebec is not just its higher level of union density, but its relationship to other important social movements. That, in turn, is an insight that might have important implications for labour movement power in other Canadian provinces. How do those relationships look at present and what could the labour movement in other parts of Canada do to build stronger relationships with other progressive social movements? A more systematic comparison of the causes of the quite substantial variations in levels of provincial labour movement power in Canada might have yielded useful insights.

This brings me to my second criticism. The authors of this book make a strong case that rebuilding labour movement power is in the interest of the great majority of Canadians, and they think unions must develop more innovative strategies if that is to be achieved. But what kinds of innovations? Their discussion of labour movement power looks mainly at factors such as union density, strike rates, wage trends and the ability to pass pro-union legislation – useful measures of movement power, but not its

deeper sources. It might have been helpful to consider the question of sources of movement power more systematically, in terms of comparative political economy's concept of power resources and social movement theory's concept of political opportunity structures. Such an analysis might point to the need for a number of types of movement organization in addition to unions. This seems to be the view embraced by the AFL-CIO's leadership in its recent Convention, which sought to institutionalize solidaristic relations with workers centres and student labour organizations like United Students Against Sweatshops, as well as expanding Working America to all 50 states. Several of the authors in this anthology note the importance of finding ways for the labour movement to represent – and mobilize into politics – workers that unions are not very successful at organizing under existing labour laws. This excellent set of essays would have been even better had the authors explored some of the ways in which this might be done, assessing their strengths and weaknesses.

Ian Robison

University of Michigan–Ann Arbor

Du côté des vainqueurs : une sociologie de l'incertitude sur les marchés du travail

par François Sarfati, Villeneuve D'Ascq :
Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2012,
201 p., ISBN : 978-2-7574-0377-8.

François Sarfati, auteur de l'ouvrage *Du côté des vainqueurs : une sociologie de l'incertitude sur les marchés du travail*, campe d'entrée de jeu sa réflexion dans le contexte de la multiplication des incertitudes (Castel, 2009). Son ouvrage est l'occasion de réfléchir à ce que veut dire, dans pareil contexte, être un salarié aujourd'hui. La réponse apportée par l'auteur à cette question détonne de celles qu'une majorité de sociologues ont proposées jusqu'ici. Sans verser dans un optimisme excessif et naïf, la thèse argumentée par François Sarfati propose

de se pencher sur le rapport positif qu'une partie des salariés français affirment entretenir avec leur emploi/travail, en dépit des transformations managériales du monde du travail qui, depuis les récentes décennies, tendent à se substituer aux régulations sociales et productives issues du compromis fordiste. À suivre l'auteur, en effet, l'insécurité, la flexibilité et l'épanouissement de soi par le travail comporteraient aussi leur lot d'attraits et de satisfactions pour une partie des travailleurs d'aujourd'hui, ceux-là même qu'ils désignent comme les « vainqueurs » de l'époque actuelle.

Mais à quelles conditions peut-on être du côté de ces « vainqueurs »? Autrement dit, à « quelles conditions peut se développer un rapport positif à l'incertitude sur le marché de l'emploi? » (p. 19). C'est à partir d'une enquête réalisée entre 2001 et 2004 auprès de salariés de la relation clientèle d'entreprises françaises de courtage en ligne que François Sarfati propose d'apporter des éléments de réponse à cette question centrale. Les méthodes de collecte de données privilégiées (entretiens et questionnaires) dans le cadre de cette enquête ne sont pas le fait du hasard. Se référant d'abord aux travaux de Hochschild (1983) sur le travail émotionnel des individus dans le processus de production, l'auteur précise vouloir se donner les moyens d'approcher la subjectivité des salariés enquêtés. De même, postulant, dans le sillage de Garfinkel (1967) que les individus ne sont pas des « idiots culturels » et, qu'en ce sens, ils construisent des justifications pour les actions qu'ils mènent, l'auteur propose ainsi de « prendre en compte ces justifications et d'y ajouter une analyse de l'expression de leurs sentiments dans le champ du travail et de l'emploi » (p. 17). C'est donc à partir de cette posture théorique et épistémologique particulière que François Sarfati cherche à mieux comprendre l'identité professionnelle et le rapport au travail des salariés de courtage en ligne, dans un premier temps d'analyse, et leur rapport à l'emploi