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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Recensions

Book Reviews

The Paradox of American Unionism

by Seymour Martin Lipset and Noah M. Meltz, Ithaca: ILR Press, 2004, 226 pages, ISBN 0-8014-4200-1.

This book explores two paradoxes. The central paradox is that Americans approve of unions more than Canadians, but have been far less inclined to join unions. The second paradox suggests that U.S. managers are less resistant to union organizing initiatives than their Canadian counterparts.

These issues are explored by examining four hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that the surge in U.S. union density from 1938 to 1958 was an anomaly to the overall U.S. experience with unionism. Second, the higher public approval of unions in the United States is the result of a weak union movement. The corollary is that lower public approval of unions in Canada is because unions are relatively stronger. The third hypothesis is a major component of the paradox and submits that Americans experience greater difficulty joining unions than Canadians even though they express a greater desire or willingness to become union members. The fourth hypothesis states that Americans place greater emphasis on individual freedom, whereas Canadians stress the importance of collective rights for the group and the common good. The thrust of the argument advanced by the authors is that the relationship between attitudes and union density is best understood in terms of the differences between the value systems in the two countries.

The book is organized into 11 chapters. Chapter one provides an overview

of the study. This is followed by chapters providing a cross-national comparison of union density (which shows support for unions is associated with social democratic strength), a review of union growth in the United States and Canada (1901-2001), and a discussion of how social, political and economic factors have contributed to stronger legal protection for collective bargaining in Canada. Much of the material in these chapters would be familiar to industrial relations scholars. Chapters 5 and 6, which are based largely on the authors survey data, examine the two paradoxes and the extent of frustrated demand for union membership in the United States. Chapter 7 examines inter-state and inter-provincial differences in union density and finds differences within countries are greater than the difference between the two countries. Citing the importance of these factors for union expansion, chapters 8 and 9 examine the attitudes and behaviour of white-collar and professional employees toward unions in each country. Chapter 10 considers non-union employee representation plans as a possible alternative to unions and finds the incidence of nonunion representation is similar in both countries (10 percent). The final chapter summarizes the evidence respecting the paradoxes related to union representation.

The study draws heavily on a 1996 survey (3,245 telephone interviews) conducted for the authors by the Angus

Reid Group (now Ipsos-Reid Group). The design of the survey questions was guided by earlier surveys of work, unions and related issues. In addition to exploring differences in attitudes toward unions among workers, managers and the public in the two countries, the survey examined various societal attitudes and values.

Frankly, I have mixed feelings about this book. On the positive side, it is beautifully written – clear, concise and well organized. Considering the breadth of the topic and the extent of the survey research, it is impressive that the analysis is confined to less than 200 pages. That being said, the analysis itself is not entirely satisfactory as evidenced by the discussion of the main paradoxes. As well, the authors fail to consider several major studies bearing on the divergence of union density in Canada and the United States (including several comparative research articles and conference papers by Chaison and Rose).

Let us consider what the authors consider anomalous. Despite differences in values (Canadians are more statist and communitarian, Americans more individualistic and competitive) and union density (much higher in Canada), “[t]he paradox of strong unionism and weak public support emerges because perceived union power is negatively correlated with union approval” (page 77). This finding is hardly startling as earlier studies have reached the same conclusion. Unfortunately, there is no reference to the earlier studies. The strength of the Lipset and Meltz study lies in the breadth and depth of their questionnaire. They examine the relationship between union approval and attitudes in greater detail by looking at several indicators of union approval and by comparing the attitudes of union and nonunion workers and managers in union and nonunion workplaces in both countries.

Arguably, the more intriguing finding is that American employers express

more favourable attitudes toward unions (and Canadian managers express greater disapproval of unions). The authors state their findings challenge “the assumption that variations in the intensity of employer animosity to union organizing is the most important factor accounting for cross-border variations in union density” and that stronger opposition to unions in the United States “resides with differing legal regimes rather than more militant anti-union attitudes” (page 92). I do not believe the significance of this finding is fully explored. When one considers that research shows employer interference in union organizing campaigns is far more prevalent in the United States and that American companies are more likely to pursue union resistance or removal strategies south of the border and union acceptance when operating in Canada, one might reasonably question the relevance or importance of attitudes. In this regard, perhaps it would have been useful to more fully consider the nexus between union approval/disapproval and behaviour. Put somewhat differently, may be more focus should be on the difference between attitudes and behaviours rather than on the conflict between attitudes and values.

The other paradox is the stronger preference for unions by nonunion American workers than their Canadian counterparts (as expressed by an intention to vote for a union). The authors suggest this indicates that the frustrated demand for unionization is considerably greater south of the border. In other words, the extent of unionization is inversely related to the level of frustrated demand for unionization. The authors do a good job identifying the factors influencing differences in the frustrated demand for unionization, most notably the extent of government support for unionization and the amount of public employment.

I have several other reservations about the book. The first involves the

decision to devote two chapters to professional and white-collar workers. While this appears to have been motivated by a desire to update Lipset's 1962 study on these workers' attitudes towards unions, the chapters are redundant. It would have been better to have integrated the findings into a single chapter. It would have also been more interesting if the authors had examined the attitudes of other hard-to-organize workers (e.g., service and part-time workers). Another concern is the

occasional failure to provide timely data (e.g., the use of 1995 figures on public employment in Canada and the United States and 1997 figures on health care costs as a percentage of GDP).

These limitations aside, this is a provocative and interesting book that should appeal to anyone interested in differences in unionism in the two countries.

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International and Comparative Employment Relations: Globalization and the Developed Market Economies

edited by Greg J. BAMBER, Russell D. LANSBURY and Nick WAILES, 4th edition, London: Sage, 2004, 454 pages, ISBN 1-4129-0125-1 (pbk).

This book is an update of the popular text whose last version appeared in 1998. Structurally it is identical to the last edition. There is an introductory chapter, 10 country studies, a conclusion and an excellent, extensive statistical appendix.

The introductory chapter by Greg Bamber, Russell Lansbury and new co-editor, Nick Wailes, contains a brief discussion of the nature of the subject, reasons for studying it and pitfalls of comparative analysis. The authors also review several frameworks for approaching the subject including John Dunlop's IR Systems Framework, collective bargaining as an organizing concept, the convergence hypothesis and critical political economy. They also denote, as a major theme of the book, "the impact of globalization on employment relations."

The core of the book consists of country chapters written by scholars generally recognized to be among the most outstanding in their respective nations. Most have also been involved in comparative research projects or are active in organizations such as the International Industrial Relations Association and thus are sensitive to international analysis.

Contributors include Mick Marchington, John Goodman and John Berridge from the UK; Harry Katz and Hoyt Wheeler from the USA; Mark Thompson and Daphne Taras from Canada; Russell Lansbury and Nick Wailes on Australia; Janine Goetschy and Annett Jobert from France; Olle Hammarström, Tony Huzzard and Tommy Nilsson from Sweden. Yasuo Kuwahara contributed the chapter on Japan and Young-Bum Park and Chris Leggett the one on South Korea. New authors include Sarafino Negrelli and Peter Sheldon doing Italy and Berndt Keller writing on Germany.

Although the authors define employment relations as comprehending labour relations and human resource management, the basic organizational framework for each chapter appears to be Dunlop's IR Systems Framework. After describing the economic, political and social climate, the authors commonly discuss the role of labour organizations, employer organizations and the state and the interaction between them including prominently "collective bargaining, arbitration and other forms of job regulation." In addition, each chapter contains a section on contemporary concerns in which such "human resource" issues as