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Roy J. Adams

Volume 78, numéro 1, 2023

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1101317ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1101317ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (imprimé)

1703-8138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Adams, R. J. (2023). *The Story of Work, A New History of Humanity* by Jan Lucassen – a book review. *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 78(1). <https://doi.org/10.7202/1101317ar>

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The Story of Work, A New History of Humanity by Jan Lucassen – a book review

Roy J. ADAMS

Professor Emeritus, McMaster University

In my essay “All Aspects of People at Work: Unity and Division in the Study of Labor and Labor Management,” (in Roy J. Adams and Noah Meltz, eds. *Industrial Relations Theory, Its Nature, Scope and Pedagogy*, IMLR Press, Rutgers University, 1993) I documented the attempt by the newly-formed Industrial Relations Research Association to assemble scholars from several disciplines in a united attempt to understand the nature of work.

One of the concerted efforts of IR scholarship in the early years was to develop a framework that would guide research and provide a vehicle to assemble the disparate strands of labour research. Perhaps the most successful attempt was John Dunlop’s Industrial Relations System framework. At first, that effort bore some fruit, but in the longer run it was not successful. By the early 1990s, the field had split into a number of independent approaches to the topic.

In his new book, the Dutch historian Jan Lucassen sets forth a list of “labour relations” schemes that he claims to be comprehensive. All work through time and across space may be filed under one of those systems. They are, first of all, “reciprocal labour relations” these are egalitarian in that everyone in a household or a community of several households is expected to contribute to the production of what is required to survive and, perhaps, thrive. Each member is entitled to a fair share of what is produced in total. Thus, the hunter who brings down a large animal is not the owner of that product. It is instead the property of the entire community.

There is some division of labour, especially by sex and age, but it is informal and flexible compared to what is to come. This form of labour was characteristic of the hunter-gathering societies that populated the earth for 98% of the time during which modern human have existed. That form of “labour relations” continues to exist, Lucassen insightfully tells us, in the modern household.

The Neolithic (or agricultural) revolution that occurred when hunter-gatherer societies began to domesticate agricultural and became more sedentary very gradually led to another form of “labour relations,” one that Lucassen refers to as “tributary-redistributive.” This system comes about when sedentary agricultural production becomes efficient enough to create a surplus. This allows for the emergence of more specialized functions to be carried out by non-agriculturalists whose needs are met by some of the surplus being contributed by those in agricultural and subsequently redistributed to specialists such as government officials, priests and skilled builders and artisans. This form of production emerged in Mesopotamia where large cities appeared from about 5000 BCE. It was also notably present in ancient Egypt and more recently in the Inca and Aztec empires of America. In these instances there was no money, little trade and no labour market. Whereas hunter-gatherer society was mostly egalitarian, tributary-redistributive societies were predominantly hierarchical with set class divisions. At the pinnacle of the hierarchy most commonly there was a deity. In the twenty-first century, this format has completely disappeared. But it would be premature, Lucassen warns, to say it is gone forever.

The other “labour relations” schemes in the framework are self-employment, free wage labour, slavery and employership. Lucassen’s claim is that all the labour done everywhere in the world and as far back as the emergence of modern humans, may be fitted into one of these categories or variants of them. For example as history advanced in Mesopotamia, some of those involved in the tributary system began to offer their services on their own thus bringing into effect an early form of self-employment. In addition to classical chattel slavery where one human is owned by another, other forms of unfree labour include medieval serfdom, indentured labour and modern day sexual trafficking.

Free labour required the invention of money of small denominations to be minted so that workers could be easily remunerated. Often the spark that produced small coinage was the need to recruit soldiers and sailors who, according to Lucassen, simply performed a sort of specialist labour. With small coinage in circulation other forms of free labour emerged.

Employership came about when some self-employed producers hired or took on as apprentices free workers. By roughly 2000 BCE all of these forms had made their appearance and all labour since, Lucassen claims, may be fitted into the framework.

The Story of Work demonstrates that there has been no straightforward climb of humanity from simple work producing subsistence to complex work producing wealth and prosperity. Instead, rich societies such as several Mayan cities, collapsed with survivors dispersing and getting a living as best they could. Labour markets and markets for goods flourished in the Roman Empire (and in India) and then vanished for 500 years or so in West Europe and parts of India where the predominant form of labour relations became that of subsistence farmer or land owner such as aristocratic and religious communities that lived off of the modest surplus produced by peasants, an echo of tributary-redistributive schemes.

Slavery and other forms of unfree labour were instituted only to decline and then, in many cases, reappear. Prisoners of war were often made slaves, especially if it was to the advantage of the victors to house and feed them. Sometimes, however, the defeated, to save on the expense of maintaining them, were slaughtered en masse. Debt was another common portal to slavery and other forms of unfree labour. Lucassen makes no value judgement about these social “choices” He simply presents them dispassionately as the way societies organized the work to be done.

By the year 1000 CE or so, Western Europe was an impoverished part of the world. China, Japan and other areas had a higher standard of living. By 1500 CE West Europe had caught up and by about 1750, in what became known as The Great Divergence, moved rapidly out in front.

For most of history the powerful few dominated the many but in the mid-19th century labour movements began to appear. They developed from, Lucassen tells us, not the guilds which were associations of employers and self-employed but rather from associations of journeymen and apprentices. By the mid-20th century, via unions and union-supported left-leaning political parties, labour had more clout than ever it had in history and “welfare states” came into prominence. But, Lucassen demonstrates, that was not to last (as many of us who came of age in the three decades after World War II assumed it would). In the 1980s labour’s hard won power began to fade resulting in growing inequality in the rich countries. Less developed countries, on the other hand, continued to make up ground on the rich ones.

At this point there are divergent views on the future of the rich countries. Some scholars argue that the labour upsurge was a historical blip. The more prevalent view is that democratic states will eventually be able to right the listing ship. Another view is that artificial intelligence is forging a new era whose character can be no more than imagined at present.

The Story of Work is not an easy read. It is not as tidily organized as one might hope; in many places the author goes off on tangents. I had to go back over passages and chapters several times in order to identify the key issues being discussed. But the effort was well worth it. It is a brilliant achievement.

It offers several lessons for the students of IR. For example, at one point when several of us were struggling to get a grip on the field whose mission was the study of all aspects of people at work, George Strauss and Pete Feuille wrote an article (“Industrial Relations Research: A Critical Analysis.” *Industrial Relations*, vol. 17, no. 3, 1978) in which they claimed that the effort was a waste of time. The subject was too disparate and unruly to form a coherent subject matter.

Lucassen’s book strongly and convincingly, as I see it, refutes that claim. He stays firmly focused on work through the entirety of history. There is very little discussion of what has long been the main subjects of history: kings, dynasties, battles and political subterfuge. While sticking to that strategy, Lucassen draws not only on the scholarship of historians but also on relevant contributions by archaeologists, anthropologists, genetic experts and others and weaves it all together as the

founders of IR envisioned. Those founders were, predominantly, labour economists. While their vision of a broad-based coalition of scholars trained in several disciplines united in their quest for knowledge about work was not successful, this new coalition led by labour historians might well make that happen.