

Book Review Symposium

Work, Employment and Society
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New Worlds of Work: Varieties of Work in Car Factories in the BRIC Countries
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, £55 hbk, (ISBN: 9780198722670), 368pp.

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The comparative method in the book

This book explores the pressures for work and employment standardisation in emerging economies of China, India, Brazil and Russia by using the auto sector as a model industry. It compares new and old plants of Toyota and VW, together with local players, in all four countries, and offers a rich, multi-case set of comparisons, between companies, countries and plants. Given the assumptions that emerging economies are undermining settlements on employment in developed economies this book strikes a more optimistic note, suggesting more a high than low road for the quality of auto-work in these countries. For comparative work analysis this book is a breath of fresh air. Especially given that so much research on multinational car plants has fallen into the problems of comparative method noted below – over-obsessed with transfer of dominant recipes, or creating empty analytical models of application and adaption, or paradigmatic claims for individual case studies that discard context, time and trend.

There are many problems with the comparative method. Researchers do not always compare like with like, and hence, any differences found cannot be meaningfully assessed. Comparisons are made using different data (primary and secondary sources, for example), so that directly reported and indirectly reported research is misaligned, and differences/commonalities inaccurately ascribed. This book maintains a consistent unit of analysis across the cases. So much comparative research is historically or functionally reductionist – with these institutional ingredients this cake is produced; with this path chosen, this is the destination. Hence, we do not really need to examine social processes, we simply read off consequences from recipe inputs. This undermines the importance of exploratory research. This book examines different work cultures and institutional contexts without ever reducing workplace actions to the wider context. So much comparative analysis is overly deterministic and paradigmatic – we compare one case against another with the express motive of measuring signs of movement towards the perceived/projected dominant model, for example, Japan or the USA, or mass or lean production.

This book maintains a degree of flexibility between particular cases and more general paradigms. So much comparative research is simply futile – this country, company, plant is different or similar to this other one – there is divergence or convergence, but the question of significance – why and under what historical conditions these processes are being produced, is rarely sufficiently addressed. This book carefully maintains the particularity of each case, while uncovering processes of emerging similarities. So much comparative work is random (and under-theorised) – comparing the public administration in Nigeria and the UK; the work relations in chemical plants in Britain and France. There can also be a weary pointlessness to comparative work – we know Japan is different from the UK, why bother with the idea of comparison which will not change deep, structural regularities. In sum, the principal problems boil down to the lack of interaction between units of comparison, and therefore the absence of dynamism and trajectory. Again, this book is very good at the integration of micro and macro elements of comparison.

In the light of these issues, this book engages with a series of contrasting theories of convergence and divergence within a rich multi-case comparison. The theoretical framework may not hang together, but this does not matter. The authors' focus remains exploratory, not confirmatory in tone, and hence there is a persistent deference towards their empirical data, and not theoretical form. While amassing a formidable knowledge of the particular sector accumulated over many years of research, the authors allude to the tenets of grounded theory that research has to be open-ended, not a mindless quantitative checklist. The direct experiences of respondents and the authors' interpretations of contradictory trends, are hence handled with a refreshingly light touch, with no sign of evangelical fervour for projecting the latest 'best way' of seeing work.

The unit of analysis is important in comparative research. We need to know at what level comparison is being made. The authors are focused on the workplace level, especially the subsidiary factories of two different global players (VW and Toyota) and examples of national car producers in the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India and China). Work and employment experience is based on extensive interviews with multiple actors: from HR and production managers, to shop floor workers, trade union leaders and works council representatives, to external auto industry experts. The factory or plant is the core dynamic of the comparative case studies in the book. But the cases are embedded within layers of structural and institutional practices that produce enabling (not determinate) forces that influence action or outcomes reported to the researchers in their studies of the workplaces. These forces are at industry, company, country and regional levels. As BRICs are the focus, there is a developmental component as well – assessing if policy and practices in factories exemplify 'high road' or 'low road' trends, which push plants either towards unregulated destructive competition or greater efficiency, security and innovation, with high wages safeguarding workers' rights to social protection at state and company levels.

Unique to the study are contrasts between strong country of origin templates from German-based firm practices of VW and Japanese firm practices of Toyota, and how heritage plays out in BRIC subsidiaries when compared with known home country practices as well as how they compare with each other and local firms (where they exist) in the BRICs. Within and across the 14 cases, there are multiple points of work and employment relations comparison, and there is also a temporal element that comes from

selecting plants of different ages to capture development dynamics prevalent within some BRIC economies.

The book is a must read for anyone interested in multiple, cross-national case-study research and ought to stand as a model for this form of rich workplace-based analysis of work and employment.