

BOOK REVIEW

Employment with a Human Face: Balancing Efficiency, Equity, and Voice, John W. Budd. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004, 288 pp., \$39.95 (hardback))

reviewed by Tony Dundon[†]

Almost all students of business and management at some point encounter industrial relations and human resource management. However, many students tend to regard the details of such areas as equality, worker voice, the history of collective bargaining, or trade unionism about as relevant as studying the boy scouts movement. Probably only a dedicated core actually get to grips with the dynamics and complexities associated with managing the employment relationship. In this book, John W. Budd articulates a stimulating (re)conceptualization of the employment relationship in modern society. The book argues for a theme-based (rather than process-based) approach to the study of Human Resources and Industrial Relations (HRIR), and provides a critical engagement with current industrial relations disciplines and policy implications applicable not only in the United States but elsewhere.

The book commences from first principles by reviewing the objectives of the employment relationship as “efficiency, equity, and voice” (chapters 1 and 2) along with the factors that shape employment outcomes (chapters 3 and 4). Chapter 4 reviews business ethics as a neglected influence on the employment relationship. For me, the core of the analysis really gets interesting from chapter 5 onwards when questions about balancing a trilogy incorporating “efficiency, equity, and voice” are considered in relation to workplace governance; looking at, inter alia, market forces and trade union controls, human resource strategies, employment regulation, globalization, and labor standards. Chapter 6 reviews the U.S. New Deal arrangement while chapter 7 provides fresh insights on the

[†] College Lecturer, Department of Management, National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland.

geometry of “efficiency, equity, and voice” in a comparative context. The latter will certainly give the book a great deal of appeal outside the United States. Chapter 8, after an important though static review of U.S. job control unionism, picks up the pace with an analysis of alternative and newer union organizing approaches. The ideas on “empowerment unionism” are both insightful and debatable that should keep students occupied for some years to come. Chapter 9 asks who should govern the “global” workplace and assesses the role of the ILO, WTO, and NAFTA, and corporate codes. The book does not answer nor intends to provide solutions to how “efficiency, equity, and voice” should be provided. What the book does do, and it does it very well, is provide an intellectual pedigree and analytical rationale for viewing the employment relationship in more interesting and dynamic ways than the traditional industrial relations perspective of how rules are made and modified. Budd quite rightly asserts that such employment rules are a means to an end, not an end in themselves.

There is a lot to agree and disagree with in *Employment with a Human Face*. This is both its strength, but also part of its weakness. Budd is evidently a pluralist seeking to limit the harsher realities of a capitalist system. Thus, the underpinning philosophy is essentially for a better way to manage capitalism. This is most striking when Budd makes periodic but superficial links between voice and the current high performance/high commitment management paradigm. As a distinct model the latter is questionable: even softer human resources strategies can have harder employment outcomes for workers. Budd’s arguments are much stronger in terms of the value of independent worker voice, regardless of any economic efficiency. There is some analysis about class, institutions, and society in industrial relations, although I felt this was underplayed and relegated to a radical school of thought. Areas such as class, family, gender, and the household are important determinants that could have been dealt with in a more systematic way regarding the central tenants of efficiency, equity, and voice. Another frustration I found is the partial attention to employer hostility toward unions or collective representation. Budd reviews non-union forms of employee representation and touches on union substitution strategies among employers. But the ideological undercurrent among many employers, especially U.S. multinationals, probably represents the most single barrier to the argument about balancing efficiency, equity, and voice. Many employers simply resist, owing to their ideological disposition. And what voice actually means is important. For workers who have a voice on trivial matters, such as

2003]

BOOK REVIEW

527

food in the company restaurant, this is hardly the stuff of a more equitable and human face of employment.

Of course, these are the very themes that Budd is seeking to ignite, and quite rightly so. There is certainly plenty to whet the appetite for students, academic researchers, practitioners, and policymakers concerned with the world of work. To Budd's credit, the analysis weaves in and out of a range of disciplinary approaches: economics, sociology, politics, law, and psychology. The reader is reminded at appropriate junctures of the importance of history with reference to the Webbs, Commons, and Hoxie (among others), while at the same time emphasizing the need to appreciate why current processes (and a range of alternatives) shape employment and public policy choices in different contexts. It is in this regard that *Employment with a Human Face* stands out and is a valuable contribution to the subject area. The significance of Budd's work will be its capacity to open up debate on a range of issues that affect people's working lives in the United States and elsewhere. By treating the subject matter as a field of study, this book brings together a rich treatment of industrial relations and human resource management perspectives under the eclectic rubric of HRIR. Budd concludes by making a valuable call for a renaissance in the subject area through stronger multidisciplinary linkages. The challenge is for those who study and research HRIR to make this a reality by taking forward the agenda with research and debate.

