

Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



Jon P. ALSTOM : *The American Samurai. Blending American and Japanese Managerial Practices*. Berlin-New York, Walter de Gruyter, 1986, 369 pp., ISBN 0-89925-063-7

Alexander J. Matejko

Volume 41, Number 3, 1986

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/050245ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/050245ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (print)

1703-8138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Matejko, A. J. (1986). Review of [Jon P. ALSTOM : *The American Samurai. Blending American and Japanese Managerial Practices*. Berlin-New York, Walter de Gruyter, 1986, 369 pp., ISBN 0-89925-063-7]. *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 41(3), 662–664. <https://doi.org/10.7202/050245ar>

Tous droits réservés © Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval, 1986

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

Érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

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

The American Samurai. Blending American and Japanese Managerial Practices, by Jon P. Alstom, Berlin-New York, Walter de Gruyter, 1986, XI + 369 pp., ISBN 0-89925-063-7

This is a detailed description of the Japanese managerial practices based on the lifetime employment, union-management harmony, group oriented model of human relations cooperative approach, strong collegial bonds, indirect leadership, seniority, and deep commitment.

Competition and individualism widely appearing in the West lead to much waste of the competitive power on the international markets and therefore there is a growing interest to copy from the Japanese what is possible to be absorbed from them in another environment. There are now many books on the Japanese labour relations patterns, but the one under review here provides particularly good insight.

The author makes clear how wrong are the popular American myths about the Japanese worker. Misunderstandings arise mostly from the fact that the axioms underlying the managerial culture are so different. The Japanese way of work is based on the assumption that the worker who is able to perform any work duty is intelligent enough to improve the productivity and quality of that work. Given the chance workers want to improve the quality of their work. Members of a corporation form a «family». The group is more important than the individual (p. 23).

The concern for *group harmony/Wa* penetrates deeply the managerial practices in Japan as well as the actual motivation of workers. Official transactions are personalized in this sense that the socio-moral concerns are always present and they influence the tactics of the encounter. The «family» approach is valid not only for the micro-groups but also for the macro-groups. For example, this approach allows major corporations to depend on the «satellite» suppliers so much that the low inventories are possible, and this diminishes considerably the costs of production. Workers are trusted and the delegation of power is the matter of fact. Trade unions cooperate with management but this does not exclude the subtle way of exercising a collective pressure for the benefit of workers.

Unequal rewards and relative deprivation both function in Japan in a much different way than in the West. «The genius of the Japanese work style is based on the realization that long-term profits based on mutual cooperation are greater than short-term profits that result in distrust and non-cooperation» (p. 82). The concern of Japanese business leaders with the limits of power encourages them to tread a very fine line between being too lax and too harsh. Leadership-by-influence is given priority over leadership-by-designation. Legitimacy offered by subordinates is looked for, and there is a tendency to avoid a direct confrontation. Private talks and informal discussions are more welcomed than the public dealing.

A subtle network of mutual dependencies and influences is carefully cultivated on both side in Japan: the superiors as well as the subordinates. Emotional dependence on the others is taken very seriously and it contributes to the tight socio-moral bonds among people. «Workers and employers are entangled in a complex web of mutually exchanged debts and favors» (p. 131). Trust is very appreciated and for its sake many potential conflicts are being suppressed. Proposals (*ringisho*) are informally circulated (*ringi*) in order to reinforce the consensus of a future action. Contacts are treated mainly as a background of trust and cooperation and not as formal documents.

On the basis of the Japanese experience, the author has formulated the following suggestions for business leaders in running meetings: do not involve yourself in a dialogue with a specific person during the meeting, write down all solutions without evaluation, never probe,

be alert when people are ready to close the meeting, be responsible for the solutions made by the group, your contribution should be more emotional (supportive) than factual, don't be impatient, set a positive tone as quickly as possible, keep meetings short (p. 323).

The internal *diversification* of management styles in Japan does not appear in this book. The focus is on an «ideal type» (Max Weber) of Japanese leadership and supervision without probing into the diversity of circumstances. This is a disadvantage but a well justified one because at least the author has avoided confusing the reader with the variety of qualifications. He mentions the fact that only minority of the labour force in Japan is employed permanently and stays in big enterprises. The rest have much less security and they are not taken so much care of.

The «ideal model» approach to the cross-cultural comparative study was in this case quite useful but in general it missed several important factors. *Organizational culture* actually is the product of models more or consciously promoted inside the organization by influential groups and individuals, as well as of the external conditioning. Employees bring to the organization several patterns acquired outside. For example, the high consumption mentality and the regular watching of programs have a major impact on working people in all big industrial democracies. There is an evident change from the work orientation to the leisure orientation.

These trends may be in Japan less definite than in North America or Western Europe but they do exist, especially among the young generation. The «ideal model» applied by Alston does not allow to look closer into the inside/outside dialectical relationship. Things are definitely not static in Japan. There are major *contradictions* between the tradition and the modernity, family-leisure and workplace-duty, others-orientation and self-orientation. The readers of the book are not able to find enough insight into the drama of progress in the society which culturally reminds one more of the middle ages than the twentieth century.

So far Japan has managed to preserve peaceful industrial relations, but this obvious success has much of its *raison d'être* in the economic progress. With the growing difficulty locating Japanese products on the foreign markets and to resist the free flow of imports, the conditioning of Japanese social culture has been changing quite substantially. The consumer economy (Japan exports actually only 10% of its products) makes the Japanese people gradually more like citizens of the other industrial democracies. The blend of foreign/domestic becomes more and more evident. By being a vital part of the Western world, Japan is unavoidably exposed to the same (or at least similar) agencies of socialization, and the final product is being formed in the same direction. Mass advertising does its best to convince people that they should care primarily about their own happiness. Politicians in order to win elections try to please the general public. Mass media are mainly entertaining and promote a liberal/tolerant perspective on life. Of course, in Japan it is still a long way to the cult of individuality, but many forces are engaged in this direction. Alston does not seem to appreciate how vulnerable the current equilibrium of Japan is, which he described so well.

Social culture of Japan, and particularly the organizational subculture, so far allows people to find the sense of their lives in the *accommodation* to the existing groups, particularly work groups. Manipulation coming from the top will be accepted by them as long as it provides a satisfactory answer to the existential problems experienced by people. The question is whether the present cultural status quo will be satisfactory in the case of any major crisis. Not having her own natural resources, Japan is potentially very vulnerable.

Even more important is the question how much the present day organizational culture will fit into the gradual transformation of traditionalistic Japan into the modern mass society with its heavy load of artificiality, depersonification, manipulation, and alienation. Tradition in

Japan becomes more and more the matter of the past, relevant as a relict, good for ornamental purposes, but pushed into the margin by the necessities of daily «modern» life.

With the cheapening of patriotism and religious beliefs there is a major danger that the gap will grow between the pretended Japanese identity and the real, practical expediency-orientation of the people living in a mass society. The present day Japanese practicism inclines people to pay homage to many gods at the same time. Japanese for the sake of good relations want to be everything at the same time: traditionalists, patriots, democrats, cosmopolitans, friends of the U.S. as well as of the U.S.S.R., religious, agnostic, committed, uncommitted.

This expedient relativism in the long run confuses primarily people who are trying hard to practice it. The moral-cultural dilemmas of modern Japan almost unavoidably have to multiply. The readers of the book by Alston have not been adequately prepared to grasp these dilemmas. There is a great need of a more critical writing about Japan. In the West we do not know enough about the nature of contradictions carried by people who undoubtedly have great virtues but perhaps are in general too practical.

Alexander J. MATEJKO

University of Alberta

Contradictions of the Welfare State, by Claus Offe, edited and introduced by John Keane, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1984, 310 pp., ISBN 0-262-65014-2

Contradictions of the Welfare State is a collection of essays written over the past decade by Claus Offe. In his introduction, the editor surveys the major themes woven through the essays, and provides a critical appraisal of Offe's contribution to our understanding of the current crisis of the welfare state. The volume is concluded by an interview with Offe, ranging over many of the issues discussed in the essays and highlighting some of the shifts in Offe's thinking.

At first glance it might seem that we stand to learn little about Canadian industrial relations from Offe. After all, the traditions of Anglo-American industrial relations research do not intersect in too many places with the disciplinary touchstones of Offe's work — Marxist economic analysis, critical theory, and modern socialist debates on the theory of the state. But a second glance behind the bright pink cover of this book reveals much that is of theoretical and practical relevance. Rather than detailing the contents of the individual essays, it will be useful to examine what we can learn from Offe.

Before looking more closely at what Offe has to offer, it should be pointed out that the title of the collection may be misleading to North Americans. We are accustomed to thinking about the welfare state in rather narrow terms — as the provision of assistance to those who are temporarily or permanently excluded from paid employment, and to those whose income is insufficient to provide 'basic necessities'. Offe's conception of the welfare state is much broader. Indeed, the various essays touch upon a wide variety of policy areas, including macro-economic management, the regulation of industrial relations, labour market policy, social assistance, consumer policy, research and development policy, policing, and much else. A better description of his analytical target, then, is the modern *interventionist* state.

In fact, this is the first lesson that we can learn from Offe: that it is wrong to examine a single area of government policy in isolation from the multiple functions performed by the