

## Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



*The State of Working America*, By Lawrence Mishel, Josh Bivens, Elise Gould and Heidi Shierholz, Ithaca, New York: ILR Press, Cornell University, 2012 (12<sup>th</sup> edition), 505 pages. ISBN: 978-0801478550.

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par ses clauses implicites de renonciation, définit tout autant la confiance que la méfiance. Partant, développer la confiance pourrait se limiter à diminuer la méfiance. Selon nous, il s'agit là d'une vision un peu réductrice de la confiance qui pourrait évacuer le réel de l'humain au travail. En effet, il existe aussi une confiance de l'ordre du spontané, du non rationalisé sans pour autant être aveugle. Une confiance qui implique un « *laisser advenir* » tout autant qu'elle le permet. Cette dernière soulève le besoin de prendre un risque de s'abandonner à l'autre, un risque nécessairement sans garantie. Si la confiance peut être considérée comme un moyen visant à réduire l'incertitude en homogénéisant la relation de travail, il ne faudrait pas occulter le fait qu'elle est aussi source d'un risque, symbolique cette fois, inscrit dans l'altérité et la différence.

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### **The State of Working America**

By Lawrence Mishel, Josh Bivens, Elise Gould and Heidi Shierholz, Ithaca, New York: ILR Press, Cornell University, 2012 (12<sup>th</sup> edition), 505 pages. ISBN: 978-0801478550.

*The State of Working America* by Mishel, Bivens, Gould (no relation to me), and Shierholz, put out by the Economic Policy Institute, is now in its 12th edition. There is a rumor doing the rounds that this may be its last version; disturbing news in my humble opinion. I reviewed the 11th edition of this book for edition 66 (2) of *Relations industrielles/Industrial Relations*, published in 2011. This earlier tome dealt with the period ending just before 2008's financial crisis. In my previous appraisal for the series, I said positive things about the work. In fact, I gave it a glowing endorsement. I can now report without exaggeration that, for several years, there would have been very few weeks when I did not flip through its pages to check on a point, and/or add nuance, and/or substance to

something I was thinking. Without being immodest, I consider that I am becoming an expert on this series; and, in the process, sinking into deeper depression.

Anyway, the 12th edition is every bit as good as its predecessor –probably a little better; and that is saying something. Drawing on diverse sources, the series presents tabulated and graphic data about the American labor market and, in its narrative, gives a first-blush reading of such data. It then goes further, and –in so doing– becomes profound. It addresses the issue of interpretation. The main difference between the latest version of the work and its earlier incantations is that the new edition references the 2008 global financial crisis, the so-called “Great Recession”, to create context for the subject matter. This was perhaps inevitable given that, in a technical sense, each edition of the book can be characterized as using panel data to create a longitudinal/historical perspective of what is happening to the American workforce; and American society.

This series is wonderful. However, be warned. To get the most out of it you have to put asunder preconceptions, particularly if you are American and/or watch Fox news. I was thinking about how to express this latter thought and here is what I have come up with: you will get the most out of the book if you start reading it as an ideological virgin.

The thesis of the book –and of the series– is that the American economy, and society, is polarizing in the cruelest and ugliest of ways. This trend started well before the 2008 global financial crisis and has moved into overdrive in the period since. The interesting thing about this phenomenon –and the way it is dealt with in the book– is that, in spite of what I said about the authors' deft touch with interpretation of data, the numbers alone tell most of the story. Hence, if one were to examine only the work's many many

competently produced tables and graphics, for the most part, the main argument can be appreciated without reading the text. But there is another important way the book may be used; it can provide a solid economics education. Thus, it simultaneously instructs about the contemporary American economic reality and about macro-economic theory. Because these two matters are dealt with in an entwined way, it is possible to develop knowledge of economic principles and remain interested. The theoretical points focus mostly on concepts from the domain of labour economics but also cover more general economic ideas and even venture into arenas such as sociology –inflation, the role of the Reserve bank, the money supply, poverty, affluence, etc. Key notions are simplified but without compromising intellectual depth. The authors typically start from scratch when they begin explaining something; they don't assume prior reader knowledge. For example, when reading about the, so-called, "Great Recession", we get one of the most compelling exposes that I have ever seen of how the concept of a recession has changed in the post-Reagan era. The argument goes like this (and I certainly am not pretending to be as good at explaining the situation as the book's authors): a "traditional" recession occurs when the economy is booming and a central bank raises interest rates to curb either actual or incipient inflation due to so-called "demand-pull". The solution in these kinds of cases is a natural one. At some point the reserve will lower interest rates and pent-up demand is released such that unemployment falls. This is how the world used to be. In such earlier instances, perhaps it was possible to argue convincingly for a monetarist solution. All governments had to do was get out of the way and maybe lower corporate taxes a little. In the modern era, the cause of recessions is different. The last three U.S recessions have arisen, not due to Central bank anxiety

about impending inflation coming off the back of a boom, but due to high levels of private sector debt and burst asset-market bubbles. In these latter cases, unemployment stays higher for longer and the solution is not –or does not appear to be– a natural one. This line of reasoning gives rise to a powerful modern argument for the Keynesian solution (is anyone in Washington listening? Please read the damned book. Read it twice. There needs to be more social spending, not less). We learn all of this while examining grim columns of data addressing how America is starting to look decidedly feudalist; at least in terms of the way its wealth is distributed. In short, things have never been less fair and never been more disquieting.

I am not going to be critical of the latest edition of this book. There are certainly several instances where I take issue with the authors' interpretation of data but this is not a big deal and certainly no reflection on the work's quality. If I were to be critical of this important work, I would be playing into the hands of the Neo-cons –those who either think that less regulation and less government spending will make things better or just push the barrow of non-interventionism because they are rich and want to get richer. Rather instead of being critical of the authors, I would rather lay into Obama and his administration. I do not believe I am getting off message here. On the contrary, from its first page, the book has an implicit thesis which, although not naming anyone, seems to be about this issue. I have a hunch that the authors' thesis remains as an elephant hiding under the carpet because of their professionalism and their commitment to the disciplines of economics and creation of good social policy. The implicit thesis is this: for all the talk of hope and change and "yes we can", things are bad in America –and they are bad under a guy who was, more than his predecessors, trusted to make them better. Domestically, nothing important has gotten

any better as a result of the efforts of the current administration –not unemployment, not the wages/income-gap, not the number of Americans living in poverty, or the social and economic inequalities. In fact, a careful reading of the data shows that each of these elements has gotten worse –mostly a lot worse. On the path to hell, an intellectually vacuous narrative has taken root. Specifically, the debate about how to address America's problems has been cast as a debate about the merits of pump-priming/ stimulus versus market self-correction. What needed to happen was for the debate to be about a very large stimulus versus an enormous stimulus. (For this asinine framing of the debate I personally blame Obama and his ideas about “reaching across the isle”, etc. –but that is probably not relevant here). Anyway, as noted, this is a key and inescapable message of the book. Those who know anything know this. However, if you find yourself on the side of the nation's shock-jocks, it really is important that you read this book.

The work is relevant to students (both undergraduates and post-graduates). It is especially relevant to social science researchers who have to report on data; for example, those writing theses and looking for a narrative style which effectively distinguishes between presentation and interpretation. I don't recommend the book to anyone who may be contemplating suicide and searching for a little more convincing before they do anything silly. On the other hand, I particularly recommend it to policy makers; because I don't really care much about what happens to most of them and want them to take heed of the book's key message(s). Are you listening Washington? The message is for you. To the authors, I say, brilliant work. Please write a 13<sup>th</sup> edition of the work to really bring us down.

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## Équité en emploi – Équité salariale

Legault, Marie-Josée Québec :  
Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2013,  
598 pages. ISBN : 978-2-7605-3719-4

Marie-Josée Legault, professeure de relations de travail à la TÉLUQ, propose de clarifier, avec *Équité en emploi – Équité salariale*, ce concept général d'équité en milieu de travail, trop souvent malmené, parfois simplement incompris, par les gestionnaires et travailleurs. À preuve, ces débats souvent émotifs qui trouvent écho dans la presse populaire, où certaines personnes dénoncent les décisions rendues par le Tribunal des droits de la personne (TDP) ou encore les positions de la Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse (CDPDJ), notamment en matière de discrimination, d'accommodement et de reconnaissance de l'impact des stéréotypes et des préjugés, souvent insidieux, qui biaisent, par exemple, le jugement professionnel lors des processus de dotation.

Legault débute en rappelant que « l'égalité de droits et de traitement » obtenue lorsqu'on cherche à traiter l'ensemble des individus en fonction des mêmes règles produit, dans les faits, des résultats souvent décevants en matière « d'égalité de faits ou de résultats ». Ainsi, une règle peut avoir des effets différenciés selon le groupe d'appartenance qui reflèteront une certaine structure d'inégalité. Certains individus, par leur simple appartenance au groupe, seront avantagés par la règle, alors que d'autres en seront victimes. En effet, pour réaliser une égalité des résultats, il est souvent nécessaire de tenir compte des inégalités dans les positions de départ des différents groupes ce qui amènera parfois à réviser, de manière générale ou non, la règle afin que les résultats soient plus égaux. De telles préoccupations d'équité permettent de pallier les limites de l'égalité des droits et contribuent à combattre la discrimination ainsi qu'à garantir des milieux de travail plus inclusifs.