

and for welfare benefits. But for the UK to be *third* in this measure of equality but at the same time *worst*, with the exception of Ireland, for welfare benefits will be a revelation to most. On a completely different level, as we compete more defiantly for space to live and park our cars, the reflection that Europe's population is melting away may provide some consolation.

Turning from these snatches taken at random and out of context, the materials presented are easy to read and yet extremely rich in insights that will be usable, making it attractive for reading lists. The familiar sociological dimensions of stratification, gender and race are present and the institutions of education, work, crime, healthcare, religion and leisure. But the writers take the opportunity to go beyond the normal parameters for these accepted sociological fields and in fact the pan-European context facilitates this.

Weaknesses stem from the difficulties in obtaining the most useful data, as mentioned earlier, which prevents, for example, full use of the newer Scandinavian members of the EU. This affects the chapter on gender to some extent. In the chapter on trade unions, however, it is presumably the generally messy state of industrial relations in Britain that leads the author to stick to a comparison of Germany, Italy and France. In healthcare all comparison tends to pale before a reminder of the World Health Assembly's 1977 declaration of 'health for all by the year 2000'. These are all agendas for discussion which will make the book all the more useful.

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Frank Dobbin, **Forging Industrial Policy: The United States, Britain and France in the Railway Age,** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, £15.95 (pbk), xii+ 262 pp. (ISBN 0-521-62990-X).

This book, first published in hardback in 1994, is an exemplary piece of comparative historical analysis. It is essentially an attack on the economic reductionist version of the theory of the state, arguing convincingly that politics matter – and that, furthermore, state economic policies are not merely politically constructed, but emerge from identifiable social relations and practices.

The vehicle (no pun intended) for this analysis is a comparative historical study of the development of the railway systems of the United States, Great Britain and France during the nineteenth century. In caricature terms, the United States lies at the *laissez-faire* end of the spectrum, with France at the opposite extreme where the state rationally planned and closely controlled both the development and the operation of the railway system. Britain lay in-between, proceeding by the state managing by meddling – never quite able to allow the market free rein, but never able, either, to develop a capacity for state planning.

These distinctions are set out in three, inevitably short, essays written to a tight analytical framework developed at the beginning of the book. Railway historians will inevitably cavil at the broad sweep of Dobbin's historical narratives, which perforce deal with broad generalisations, rather than the detailed minutiae. But this would be to miss the point of his book: like Barrington Moore's *The Social Basis of Dictatorship and Democracy*, written over thirty years earlier, Dobbin's real aim is to demonstrate the force of his analysis with reference to comparative historical material, rather than to engage in a detailed description of railway development; the latter is a means not an end.

Much more, therefore, depends upon the rigour of the analytical framework. Cynics might suggest that his polemic against rational economic theory is aimed at an easy target, but we have just witnessed two decades in which economic liberalism has been the dominant force among governments in Europe and North America and a number of Dobbin's arguments deserve re-stating,

not least when various mythical golden age notions of nineteenth-century capitalist development have become popularised on both sides of the Atlantic. Nevertheless Dobbin expresses his argument with great clarity and conviction and at the very least his three historical essays present their case with considerable plausibility.

From the turmoil of nineteenth-century railway mania Dobbin demonstrates that industrial policies, deemed economically 'rational' in each case, were very much social and political constructs. The choice of railway policy to illustrate this is astute: that development of railways everywhere faced governments with unavoidable issues of regulation, finance and, as it becomes known, line management (literally and metaphorically). Each case therefore provides unique insights into what Dobbin calls 'the institutionalisation of rationalised meaning' in public policy. Yet these are so variable that any notion of 'objective' interests and 'rational' behaviour is quickly rendered implausible.

It is ironic that these same countries are all now entering a new era of railway development, this time driven by a new allegedly 'rational' set of policies: privatisation, the separate management of infrastructure and operating companies, etc. The rhetoric of nineteenth-century economic liberalism is now being deployed in a new context. But is it any more 'rational'? Perhaps Dobbin should undertake a contemporary study to complement this fine book.

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Jennifer Platt, **A History of Sociological Research Methods in America 1920-1960,** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, £15.95 (pbk), x+333 pp. (ISBN 0-521-64649-9). Previously published in hardback (ISBN 0-521-44173-0).

A book about sociological research methods in America 1920–1960 might not seem to be required reading for contemporary practising and apprentice sociologists. But despite the title, the argument of this book (now more widely available in paperback) is very much about continuing central concerns in the discipline and about perceptions of its own history and character as it is about its nominal content. Indeed, much of the volume is a critique of what J. K. Galbraith calls the 'conventional wisdom' of the era, the relatively unexamined assumptions and prejudices that influence *present-day* thought and practice.

By means of a detailed analysis of available archives, relevant documentary sources such as monographs and textbooks, and through extensive and ingeniously procured interviewing of key informants, Jennifer Platt demonstrates that the alleged coherence that many subsequent 'theoretical' studies have given to the era, and its conception and practice of sociology, are intellectual caricatures or stereotypes that grossly simplify or even fictionalise the concrete complexity of actuality.

The discipline was much more diverse and contentious than is commonly allowed. Schools were not coherent and there were varying versions of 'scientism'. The 'Chicago School' covered a range of methodological approaches, although the grounding of research in the gathering of empirical evidence was a unifying theme. Participant-observation covered a range of meanings and practices and 'symbolic interactionists' did not all agree with the label bestowed on them by subsequent analysts. Methodological approaches, such as the 'case study' method, were not well elaborated. The proponents of particular methods did not follow their own precepts; the centrality of the survey approach in the latter phase of the period studied was never uncontested and its alleged affinity with functionalism was an ecological correlation rather than an actual or inherent relationship. The discipline as a whole lacked cohesion, with competing paradigms and power centres, sects and movements.

Through her diligent research Platt