

*Inventing Equal Opportunity.* By Frank Dobbin. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009, 310 pp., \$35.00 (cloth).

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In 1961, President Kennedy signed an executive order requiring defense contractors to take affirmative action to end racial discrimination in hiring. That was followed in 1964 by the congressional passage of the Civil Rights Act, which outlawed job discrimination on the basis of race and sex (the latter added at the last minute by opponents to defeat passage of the bill). The trouble is that neither Kennedy nor Congress bothered to define “discrimination.” Nor did they establish powerful agencies to enforce the new law. Companies were left on their own to figure out what discrimination is and how to get rid of it. *Inventing Equal Opportunity* by Frank Dobbin tells the story of how personnel experts inside major corporations devised programs to identify and combat race and gender bias. According to Dobbin, virtually all of our current antidiscrimination policies can be traced to this one professional group, which explains a great deal about the uniquely American approach to equal opportunity.

The book begins by describing the deplorable racism and sexism that were common in workplaces prior to the enactment of the presidential order. This sociological overview of job segregation, blocked opportunities, and outright discrimination in hiring and firing is an important reminder of the vast changes in labor relations over the past fifty years. Both the presidential order and the Civil Rights Act were radical affronts to the authority of employers to hire and fire at will. But lacking clear guidance on how to end discrimination, executives handed compliance over to their personnel directors. They charged these officials with monitoring the changing law and how other firms were responding so that they would not be left out of lucrative government contracts. At the time, these professionals were housed in departments of “industrial relations,” and their major focus was compliance with union rules. According to Dobbin, these managers simply adapted the policies that protected union activists (a Wagner Act requirement) to cover minority workers. They also expanded recruitment drives to African American high schools and colleges—a strategy that quickly multiplied the representation of Blacks in major defense plants.

We can deduce from the historical account that Dobbin is only talking about minority men in this early period, since programs that addressed gender discrimination were still several years away. He notes that in the 1960s, companies would publish job ads claiming that they were “equal opportunity employers” under the gender-segregated heading, “help wanted—male” (p. 56). It was not until 1969 that the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) outlawed gender discrimination in job ads.

In the 1970s, personnel experts expanded their jurisdiction to cover gender and race discrimination. They issued a steady stream of innovative equal opportunity programs and policies. There is very little evidence that any of their schemes were effective; according to Dobbin, the compliance regimes promoted by personnel experts and institutionalized in U.S. workplaces have never been subjected to careful review. They spread and were endorsed first by executives and later by the courts without any “evidence of their efficacy in equalizing opportunities” (p. 21).

Dobbin’s accounts of the development of work-family policies and of policies intended to eliminate sexual harassment will especially interest *Gender & Society* readers. Dobbins argues that in both cases personnel experts designed and implemented programs without legal mandates to do so, and without input from feminist groups (although he wrongly equates the National Organization for Women with the entire feminist movement). In chapter 8, on sexual harassment policies in the 1980s and 1990s, he describes an internecine battle between lawyers and personnel experts for corporate control over the issue. Personnel managers argued in favor of implementing sexual harassment training programs and internal grievance procedures to protect companies from expensive lawsuits and negative publicity. They maintained that having such policies in place would convince judges that companies were dedicated to eradicating sexual harassment. Lawyers, basing their understanding of sexual harassment on past court cases, argued that these programs could backfire because they seem to discourage employees from exercising their legal right to sue. “In the end,” Dobbin argues, “personnel won this battle because executives were looking for a quick fix” (p. 206). And amazingly, the Supreme Court endorsed these corporate strategies in 1998, not because they were founded in legal principles, but because they had become ubiquitous in U.S. firms. The cart was pushing the horse.

Dobbin’s book is an eye-opening account of how a professional group used demands for equal opportunity to expand its professional jurisdiction. Personnel experts—many of whom were women—convinced corporate executives to implement policies on maternity leave, sexual harassment, and the recruitment and retention of women and racial/ethnic minority men before they were legally required to do so. The good news is that, through

their policies and programs, these experts heightened expectations for fair treatment and promoted a more sociological understanding of racism and sexism inside organizations. The bad news is that many of these programs do not really work. Although we have yet to figure out what does work, this book makes it clear that corporations should never have been entrusted with inventing equal opportunity.

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*Race, Gender, and the Politics of Skin Tone.* By Margaret L. Hunter. New York: Routledge, 2005, 150 pp., \$125 (cloth); \$35.95 (paper).

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Margaret Hunter's interesting book considers the ways colorism—particularly privilege afforded to lighter skinned women of color—offers significant, measurable advantages in various arenas. Using a mix of quantitative and qualitative data, Hunter offers a look at issues of race, gender, and beauty among African American and Chicana women and makes a compelling claim that these issues are hardly just black and white. Rather, she contends that opportunities for upward mobility, self-esteem, and cultural legitimacy come not in various shades of gray, but in beige, tan, and mocha.

The strengths of Hunter's book are the varied arguments she marshals to communicate the ways colorism produces advantages for lighter skinned people, particularly women. Using data from the National Survey of Black Americans and the National Chicano Survey, Hunter convincingly documents that lighter skinned women in these racial/ethnic groups enjoy concrete advantages in the marriage market and income attainment. While these findings echo work done by other scholars in this area, Hunter supplements these claims in a later chapter with interview data that further flesh out the ways skin color has a marked impact on women's self-esteem, particularly their sense of beauty, self-worth, and cultural authenticity. Her focus on Chicana and African American women also helps to show the ways in which colorism reflects a racial and gendered hierarchy that is broadly constructed rather than narrowly defined solely within the African American community. In short, the book's merits are in the sum of its parts. When taken together, these chapters paint a powerful picture of colorism as a nuanced manifestation of racism and show how it intersects with gender to create specific disadvantages for women of color.