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***Inventing Equal Opportunity.* By Frank Dobbin. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009. Pp. x, 310. \$24.95, paper; \$49.95, cloth.**

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*Racial Integration in Corporate America, 1940–1990.* By Jennifer Delton. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. vi, 313. \$25.99, paper.  
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*Inventing Equal Opportunity.* By Frank Dobbin. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009. Pp. x, 310. \$24.95, paper; \$49.95, cloth.  
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Histories of African American economic progress during the twentieth century tend to emphasize the impact of gradual convergence of educational opportunity and the episodic political and legal initiatives that reduced labor market discrimination by employers, customers, or coworkers. The active role of business leaders and the personnel profession in promoting (or resisting) equal employment opportunity has been less studied.

The two books under review fill the gap in important and often complementary ways. They share the same broad theme: the ambiguity of civil rights law and its enforcement created a space for progressive corporate leaders, human resources experts, and emergent personnel bureaucracies to shape the response of American business to discrimination and the civil rights movement. These private agents, more than public officials, are the ones who “invented equal opportunity.”

In *Racial Integration in Corporate America, 1940–1990*, Jennifer Delton, a historian, focuses on five company case studies, tracing the roots of equal opportunity policies and integration efforts to pioneering experiments by progressive business leaders at such firms as International Harvester and Pitney-Bowes in the 1940s and 1950s. Early fair employment policies at these and other companies may have been motivated in part by the desire to preempt potential antidiscrimination legislation and to compete with labor unions, but Delton insists on a central role for racial progressivism among business leaders in the postwar liberal consensus.

These businessmen found eager partners in the relatively new profession of personnel management. As other studies have shown, modern personnel management emerged from business objectives of managing or avoiding labor unions and improving employment stability and worker loyalty. Delton (as well as Dobbin) stresses the ways in which equal employment policies were often adaptations of personnel practices that evolved in the earlier industrial relations context. Examples included more centralized, systematic, and rule-based recruitment policies, as well as more systematic training for workers and managers; these measures reduced the discretion of line supervisors in hiring and job assignment, and allowed firms to promulgate equal opportunity values in the organization. But in a particularly interesting chapter, Delton also makes a strong case that many leading human resource management advocates had actually “cut their methodological teeth” in the sociology of group relations as applied to caste and race (p. 108). Thus the theory underpinning industrial relations management was itself an adaptation of the sociology of race relations.

The precedent of these pioneering efforts helped shape the response of firms when the federal government began to take a more active role in anti-discrimination efforts in the 1960s. Particularly influential were the so-called Plans for Progress—voluntary action plans developed and signed by defense contractors as part of the effort to comply with JFK’s 1961 Executive Order 10925 banning discrimination by contractors. The President’s Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity,

established under the order, helped act as a clearing house for information sharing in the design of the plans.

Delton emphasizes the voluntary or at least negotiated character of the Plans for Progress. “The cancellation of contracts was sheer madness” (p. 182), she writes, and therefore the government’s key enforcement threat against contractors was an idle one. “In the end, integration was as much the result of persuasion and negotiation as coercion and pressure” (p. 193). Yet Delton acknowledges that the evidence that Plans for Progress actually worked to achieve integration is mixed. In her view, their key accomplishment was to establish a model for integration that businessmen could live with and cite in their efforts to avoid more draconian federal interventions.

Frank Dobbin, a sociologist, has bigger fish to fry in *Inventing Equal Opportunity*. His book, like Delton’s, describes the historical evolution of equal opportunity and affirmative action programs in U.S. corporations, picking up the story in earnest around 1960 and extending it to consider the development of diversity, work-life, and sexual harassment policies in recent decades. Dobbin draws extensively on a career’s worth of research on the development of employment management, in particular longitudinal data from three retrospective surveys of employers conducted by the author and collaborators in 1986, 1997, and 2002.

Even more than Delton, Dobbin emphasizes the central role of the personnel profession in shaping equal employment policy—indeed, for him, “. . . the people who invented equal opportunity were personnel managers” (p. 1). But for Dobbin, the history provides the empirical support for a more far-reaching hypothesis in political sociology. Ambiguity in civil rights and equal opportunity legislation and executive orders, coupled with federalism and the separation of powers, created a vacuum in which professionals and bureaucrats took the lead in crafting policy responses; the courts and government officials usually followed, relying on corporate “best practice” to set standards for proper conduct under the law.

As the political and legal landscape shifted, human resource experts adapted tried and true programs to new but still vague legal demands. Equal employment opportunity and affirmative action programs were “rebranded” as diversity management in the 1980s, soon to be followed by work-life programs and sexual harassment policy. The story of sexual harassment policy is instructive. In a 1986 decision, the Supreme Court endorsed the feminist legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon’s interpretation of civil rights law—namely, that sexual harassment in the form of a hostile work environment could constitute unlawful discrimination. In the wake of this decision, human resources specialists pushed the idea that antiharassment grievance procedures and training could help protect employers against liability, although the court’s decision was silent on this question.

Remarkably, it was not until 1998 that the court finally ruled that personnel procedures could indeed be used in a defense against a hostile work environment suit. According to Dobbin, “The court accepted these procedures not because of their fit with abstract legal principles, but because they were ubiquitous in American firms” (p. 215). Meanwhile, he argues, research finds no evidence that harassment training actually reduces the incidence of harassment, nor that grievance procedures reduce harassment lawsuits (p. 219). The book ends on a cynical note: “. . . the ultimate irony of the history of equal opportunity is that compliance is a self-fulfilling prophecy” (p. 233).

Citations of secondary literature aside, neither book makes a systematic effort to assess the causal impact of equal opportunity programs and policies on actual racial or gender progress. To the extent that they do consider results, both authors often express

skepticism that the policies had much real effect. If true, this would constitute a serious indictment of the U.S. approach to equal opportunity law and would undermine Delton's defense of corporate voluntarism as a viable force for racial progress. Certainly the stagnation of relative economic progress for African Americans since the late 1970s suggests that these measures were far from sufficient, even if they had positive impacts at the margin (see Harry J. Holzer and David Neumark, "Affirmative Action: What Do We Know?" *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 25, Spring 2006, 463–90). But without some proper historical counterfactual, it is difficult to assess the policies' broader efficacy.

Although one can hardly expect a historian or a sociologist to frame the analysis around Gary Becker's models of discrimination, both books would have benefited from greater attention to the role of market pressures and incentives in shaping the actions of business owners and managers. Indeed, an alternative if potentially complementary account of black-white economic convergence during the 1960s and 1970s, especially in the South, is that civil rights law provided southern businessmen with an excuse to (profitably) employ black workers, despite a tradition of resistance by white customers, workers, and social peers. As federal pressures and tight labor markets tipped the balance of costs and benefits in favor of integration for some, the incentive to conform to discriminatory norms was moderated, and a "herd instinct" or bandwagon effect could tip the social equilibrium toward greater racial equality (on these themes, see Steven M. Gelber, *Black Men and Businessmen*. Port Washington, NY: National University Publications, 1974; and Gavin Wright, "The Civil Rights Revolution as Economic History." *The Journal of Economic History* 59, no. 2 (1999): 267–89).

Such limitations notwithstanding, the authors have made significant contributions to the history of employment discrimination and equal opportunity in the United States. For economists, Dobbin's book in particular will provide food for thought. It presents an alternative to the standard economic policy analysis paradigm, whereby optimizing firms respond to regulatory incentives created by political entities acting on their own agendas. In the world Dobbin describes, regulation was largely created in the space between the firms and the state, where a network of professionals made up the rules to protect and expand its own sphere of influence, and the firms and courts found it convenient to get along by going along.

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*The Evolution of a Nation: How Geography and Law Shaped the American States.* By Daniel Berkowitz and Karen B. Clay. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012. Pp. ix, 234 \$39.50, hardcover.  
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Spurred on by Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (New York: Norton, 1997), economists now seek to examine the economic effects of exogenous geographic forces. In this fashion, Daniel Berkowitz and Karen Clay examine how institutions affect economic performance in the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Moreover, they examine how geographic factors (e.g., climate, rivers) and other "initial conditions" create these institutions. Following in the lineage of Daron Acemoglu (e.g., Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James A. Robinson, "The Colonial Origins of Comparative Development: An Empirical Investigation." *American Economic Review* 91, no. 5 (2001): 1369–1401), Berkowitz and Clay argue