

## Book Reviews

*Inventing Equal Opportunity*. By Frank Dobbin. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009. Pp. 310. \$37.50.

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While civil rights activists and politicians were the agents of change, it was corporate personnel managers who actually shaped equal opportunity. In *Inventing Equal Opportunity*, Frank Dobbin reaches this conclusion after a thorough analysis of the institutionalization of corporate equal opportunity policy since the early 1960s. Perversely, he is not arguing that equal opportunity policy actually created equal employment opportunity, but rather that these policies and practices were invented by personnel experts as part of their professional project, or (more commonly) adapted from earlier personnel practices developed to deal with unions or the quality-of-work-life movement. That these policies were subsequently confirmed by the courts, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), and corporate CEOs further solidified personnel experts' professional authority.

The story begins in 1961 when John F. Kennedy signed an executive order mandating that federal contractors take affirmative action in the hiring and promotion of "Negro" employees. Since Kennedy was the fourth consecutive president to sign such an order, it was not the executive order as much as the political context—an increasingly effective civil rights movement and signals that this president was more serious than his predecessors—that changed employer behavior. Dobbin's careful institutional story follows both specific actors and organizational practices. Lockheed's Marietta, Georgia, plant is identified as ground zero for a set of institutional practices that diffused quickly to other federal contractors through an organization appropriately called Plans for Progress. The institutional practices promulgated during this initial invention of equal opportunity policy—nondiscrimination statements, targeted recruitment of black workers, and targeted training of these same workers—were recycled from the handbook of earlier generations of personnel managers. By the end of the 1960s, the EEOC and the Office of Federal Contract Compliance (OFCC), and soon after the courts, endorsed these best practices as evidence of "nondiscrimination."

In the early 1970s the regulatory context changed. Federal contractors were required by the OFCC to have written affirmative action plans for all jobs in all workplaces, and large firms became the target of compliance audits around these plans. Congress gave the EEOC the right to sue

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companies for discriminatory behavior, and the EEOC quickly targeted the largest firms. At the same time, the courts, the EEOC, and the OFCC defined nondiscrimination as conformity with best practices defined initially in the Plans for Progress blueprint. But through the 1970s the courts made the actual definition of best practices a moving target, and equal opportunity consultants and personnel managers became the corporate solution to managing uncertainty. As a result the personnel function was expanded and strengthened. These experts created offices to track changes in the law and in best practices, proposed new managerial evaluation strategies to monitor the equal opportunity performance of managers, and set up grievance procedures to intercept complaints before they became lawsuits.

While these practices were meant to signal compliance with nondiscrimination mandates, personnel managers also proposed and implemented a series of formalized employment practices to fight bias. These included tailoring employment screening tests to job performance, writing job descriptions that clearly defined qualifications, posting jobs to subvert network-based hiring, instituting performance evaluation to eliminate subjective bias, and developing salary classification systems to combat segregation-linked wage disparities. All of these equal opportunity innovations were borrowed from earlier personnel practices and eventually confirmed by the courts as evidence of nondiscriminatory workplaces. This is not to say that anyone was actually evaluating these practices to see if they prevented discrimination or increased integration, but that as best practices promulgated by an enthusiastic profession, they became institutionally legitimized and eventually were required even of the not-so-enthusiastic.

When Ronald Reagan became president the regulatory environment changed again, the EEOC and OFCC backed off their enforcement mission, and whatever commitment to equal opportunity that had once emanated from the executive branch stopped. While Reagan was blocked from completely gutting EEOC enforcement, it was clear that the pressure was off. The personnel profession responded by reinventing themselves as human resource professionals whose core goal was business efficiency. They rebranded the formalization-based EEOC policies as efficient human resource management and any practice that was race or gender targeted as productivity-enhancing diversity programs. This professional plasticity insured not only personnel departments' survival as affirmative action mandates faded but also a strengthened connection to core business goals, garnering increased support from CEOs newly committed to efficiency as they became overtaken by the shareholder value movement in corporate governance. Since the 1980s equal opportunity policies designed and diffused by the now primarily white female human resource profession widened to cover maternity leave, work-family policies, and sexual harassment. It is a historical irony that the civil rights movement was

institutionalized within corporations as sex, rather than racial, equal opportunity.

Frank Dobbin has written a careful institutional analysis of how human resource professionals invented equal opportunity. The book is a pleasure to read and a field guide for what historically careful institutional analyses should look like. For institutionalists and law and society scholars the book is necessary reading. *Inventing Equal Opportunity* is likely to become one of the definitive books on the history of equal opportunity law and corporate personnel practice. On the other hand, the book, like the human resources profession Dobbin examines, is not concerned with the actual inequality outcomes linked to these policies. To me this focus suggests the need for an institutional approach to social stratification so that we can figure out if the invention of equal opportunity as a legitimate corporate human resources practice has any connection with the actual employment opportunities for women and minorities intended by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. If Dobbin is right, and I suspect he is, the answer will be that white women benefited and African-Americans and others did not, at least after the 1980 withdrawal of political pressure for racial and ethnic equality from outside of the firm.

*Gendered Tradeoffs: Family, Social Policy, and Economic Inequality in Twenty-One Countries.* By Becky Pettit and Jennifer L. Hook. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009. Pp. xiii+236. \$39.95.

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Most people, including many sociologists, think about “women’s status” as a single entity. One problem with this understanding is that the commonly used indicators of progress often do not rise or fall together. During the last decades of the 20th century, women in industrialized countries made great strides on some measures of equality but hardly budged with respect to others. Patterns are also uneven across countries. On some indicators—occupational distributions, for instance—the largest gender gaps are found in those very countries reputed to be most gender egalitarian in their attitudes, family policies, and practices (see, e.g., “A Welfare State Paradox” by Hadas Mandel and Moshe Semyonov [*American Journal of Sociology* 111 (2000): 1910–49] and *Occupational Ghettos* by Maria Charles and David B. Grusky [Stanford University Press, 2004]).

In *Gendered Tradeoffs*, Becky Pettit and Jennifer Hook take this multidimensionality into account through a research design that distinguishes among four key indicators of women’s economic status. Their analysis covers 21 industrialized countries and spans the last three decades of the 20th century (1969–2000). To incorporate contextual variables that may explain women’s uneven inroads, Pettit and Hook supplement individual