

*Inventing Equal Opportunity*. By Frank Dobbin. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. x, 310 pp. Cloth, \$37.50, ISBN 978-0-691-13743-8. Paper, \$24.95, ISBN 978-0-691-14995-0.)

Historians of civil rights and affirmative action may be familiar with Frank Dobbin's 1998 article in the *American Journal of Sociology*, where he argued that in a "weak state" civil rights reforms won in the political arena were actually created and implemented in the private sector by personnel managers and human resources departments (Frank Dobbin and John R. Sutton, "The Strength of a Weak State"). Dobbin builds on that argument in this book, which analyzes how

personnel managers developed policies that have defined what “equal opportunity” has meant in practice from 1960 to today. Dobbin’s evidence is drawn from interviews and surveys he conducted with personnel managers from a cross section of industries in 1986 (with 279 employers), 1997 (389), and 2002 (829), as well as published surveys and management journals. A sociologist, Dobbin cites few historians. Still, his book affirms and complements the recent work of Pamela Walker Laird, David Golland, Jennifer Delton, and others, who have similarly looked beyond politicians and activists to the personnel experts and midlevel government bureaucrats who translated the demands of the civil rights movement into policy.

According to Dobbin, corporations turned to personnel managers to develop policies that would put them in compliance with vague new legislation prohibiting discrimination against racial minorities and women. Personnel managers instituted reforms to make hiring and promotion procedures fairer and more transparent, including test validation, performance evaluation, clear steps for hiring, promotion, and firing, and the centralization of personnel decisions. They also institutionalized race-conscious affirmative action guidelines developed by the voluntary Plans for Progress program for recruiting and training minorities (and later, women). The courts approved the reforms, and discrimination came to mean the absence of such policies.

Dobbin shows that while personnel managers adopted race-conscious affirmative action policies, they eschewed quotas, which were incompatible with merit-based reforms. Affirmative action’s “goals and timetables” were aspirational and largely unmet by corporations. During the Reagan administration, personnel managers rebranded their equal employment opportunity programs as “diversity management,” moving away from arguments about compliance and fairness and emphasizing instead the economic benefits of diversity in a global marketplace. Dobbin suggests that these policies may not have been all that effective in workplace integration but that is not his focus; rather, he is interested in how these policies came to be defined as following the law.

This is an excellent, smart book attuned to the implications its argument has for our

understanding of social movements, racial progress, and federalism. For historians, Dobbin’s emphasis on the legacy of Plans for Progress stands out. This was a voluntary program created by major government contractors in 1961 to meet John F. Kennedy’s stepped-up antidiscrimination enforcement. For years, historians have belittled Plans for Progress as ineffective lip service, but its prescriptions have prevailed. Every innovation that companies adopted to put themselves in compliance with civil rights legislation was part of the original Plans for Progress program. Even more than the Philadelphia Plan (which required federal contractors to meet certain goals for hiring African Americans), Plans for Progress transformed the American workplace, insuring millions of Americans opportunities once denied.

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