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BOOK REVIEWS

The History of Labour Intermediation. Institutions and Finding Employment in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries. Ed. by Sigrid Wadauer, Thomas Buchner and Alexander Mejstrik. [International Studies in Social History, Vol. 26.] Berghahn, New York [etc.] 2015. ix, 434 pp. \$120.00; £75.00.

Combining research on institutions of placement with research on practices of looking for a job, this book reflects the multi-dimensional approach characteristic of the project “The Production of Work”, directed by Sigrid Wadauer and based at Vienna University. Inquiries from the project have been carried into the field of labour intermediation, providing new and fruitful perspectives: What is perceived as work, as a proper job, as employment, by those looking for work, and by those acting as intermediaries? How do changes in these perceptions relate to changing forms of intermediation? Adopting the perspective of the users of placement services, the editors examine what possibilities existed for finding a job, and which opportunities jobseekers took up and which they avoided. The questioning is thus not confined to the unemployed, but also considers school graduates looking for their first job or an apprenticeship, domestic servants wanting to find a better position, and demobilized soldiers or seasonal workers hired by a subcontractor to work in a brickmaking gang. High levels of internal mobility and the organization of migrant work provide fascinating fields for exploring the role played by private “intermediaries” in “the making, the functioning and the transformation of labour regimes”, as in Amit Kumar Mishra’s study of the Indian Labour Diaspora. That said, institutions loom large in this book, as public employment services form the dominant subject, and placement services organized by trade unions another major theme.

The thirteen case studies assembled here vary widely in scope and interest, not all of them integrating the questions outlined in the introduction with equal success. Most relate to a specific national experience, the Habsburg Empire and the first Austrian Republic figuring prominently, while Ad Knotter’s essay provides an impressive overview on “Trade Unions and Labour Market Intermediation in Western Europe”, building on an extensive knowledge of the relevant literature and sources. The comparative perspective proves to be particularly useful and enlightening, as in Noel Whiteside’s discussion of the “British Experience”. David Meskill’s contribution on “the struggles to establish vocational counselling in Weimar Germany” would have profited from a glance at vocational counselling elsewhere, if only to explain what the specific interest of the German case is. Role models – German municipal labour exchanges, French *Bourses du travail* – are discussed in several articles, do not consistently adopt an explicitly transnational approach. What makes the book especially interesting is the wide array of different methods exploited and explained, like those used by Piet Lourens and Jan Lucassen in reconstructing “career histories of individual brickmakers”, or Irina Vana’s efforts to combine quantitative methods (Specific Multiple Correspondence Analysis) and text analysis in interpreting autobiographical sources – unfortunately, the reproduction of her graphics are of rather poor quality. Several contributions highlight the role of institutions in producing the data and sources historians rely on, and critically assess how these statistics and reports were produced, analysing policies as well as administrative practices.

Thomas Buchner, for example, examines the symbiotic relation between the invention of the concept of labour market and the establishment of public labour exchanges in Germany in the 1890s, presenting public labour exchanges as a scientific project, destined to produce the knowledge on which labour market regulation could be based. It is thus no coincidence that the contemporary discourse on the need to organize the labour market marks the title of Noel Whiteside's and Anthony O'Donnell's contributions. O'Donnell's study of the origins of the public employment service in Australia shows how widely the policy ideas proclaimed differed from administrative practices. Policymakers were discussing the development of public employment services in terms of organization of the labour market, providing each man willing to work with a stable, full-time employment, echoing the discourse of British reformers like Beveridge. But Australian government services "distributed available jobs in rotation over a large number of the registered unemployed in order to provide 'relief work'" (p.395).

Like O'Donnell, Buchner observes changing techniques of registration. Initially, jobseekers were "waiting for incoming job offers to be called out" (p.32), a procedure which forced jobseekers and employers to be present in the "exchange" serving as a market place. Gradually, the administration shifted from entering job requests into lists to establishing individual jobseeker's files and card indexes, though both techniques were used in parallel for a long time. Buchner also provides an example of how the professional logic of trade union placement services and the spatial logic of public employment services – a distinction developed by Bénédicte Zimmermann and taken further by Knotter – could be reconciled: During the Weimar Republic, counters at German labour offices were destined for a specific branch, meaning jobseekers gathered according to their professional speciality. Staff were supposed to have "experiences in the type of occupation they became responsible for in the labour office" (p.40), a requirement reflecting the internal organization of German labour offices only abandoned in the 1970s.

Because the book is not limited to a history of the emergence of public employment services, which have sometimes been treated as a necessary and therefore self-evident part of the welfare state, the persistence of traditions and rival institutions comes into focus. Ad Knotter gives a vivid description of older practices, pointing out the importance of public houses and lodging houses, run by trade unions or *Immungen*, in supporting the tradition of *Gesellenwanderung*, which defined the notion of wayfarers well into the twentieth century. Wadauer can show that relief stations, set up by provincial governments to provide board and lodging for people tramping in search of work, were mostly used by craftsmen, representing eighty to ninety per cent of users registered before 1914. Her skilful exploitation of relief stations' registries, painstakingly establishing and interpreting statistics, is a model of the sophisticated methods deployed in this field of research.

Providing an overview of the state of current historical research, the book also reflects the gaps, while some contributions show promising ways in which these gaps could be filled. The editors point out that too little research has been done on commercial and philanthropic placement services, and on unorganized job-seeking. As conflicts over commercial placement mark the history of placement services, Jessica Richter's analysis of legal proceedings against commercial placement services should be taken further. Subcontracting, which in Mansfield's study on the *Bourses du travail* appears as a problem for regulating the Parisian building trades, is treated as an important form of job mediation connected to group-based labour contracts by Lourens and Lucassen.

The contributions assembled here clearly demonstrate that institutions offering placement served many functions. Despite their name, the main purpose of the French

Bourses du travail was to offer premises for local trade unions and all their activities, of which placement was not the most important. In this way, they resemble a German *Gewerkschaftshaus* much more than a labour exchange. Trade union placement services' aimed, as Knotter very convincingly demonstrates, at wage control, defending the working conditions fixed through collective bargaining. Trade unions had an essential interest in ensuring that placement was offered at union rates and no intermediation took place during strikes. Nils Edling's contribution on "Public Labour Exchanges in Sweden, 1890–1920" links placement services to institutions of collective bargaining and arbitration. In Sweden, as in Germany, joint administration of public labour exchanges by delegates of trade unions and employers' associations became part of the regulation and pacification of industrial conflict. This link was personified by the director of the Bureau of labour statistics, Elmquist, who established the guidelines for Swedish labour exchanges, but also acted as "Sweden's leading arbitrator" (p.102). Edling, though, does not mention that wages and working conditions settled through collective bargaining and arbitration served as guidelines for placement. British trade unions, on the contrary, remained suspicious of public labour exchanges, as Knotter shows, precisely because Beveridge and other proponents of public placement services strictly refused to consider the payment of standard wages a condition of placement. As Whiteside explains, British politics of labour market organization were marked by "poor law mentalities" (p.86), bent on excluding the undeserving poor, not on protecting skilled labour.

With regards to the impact public employment services had on the "organization" of the labour market, the contributions tend to take a cautious view. As Wadauer, Vana, and Richter point out, the "success" of public employment services was always measured in terms of registered jobseekers placed, without taking into account jobseekers who never registered; for example, because they had no claim to state benefits anyway, but also because employers would not address public services when recruiting domestic servants, or, like Birmingham employers, refused public labour exchanges in general. Employers continued to advertise in newspapers, recruit dock workers on the waterfront, or preferred to give apprenticeships to their employees' sons.

Though the editors' note that ways "of searching for a job coincided with [...] recruiting practices" (p.3), only Lourens' and Lucassen's study of the Lippe brickmakers and Kumar Mishra's study of intermediaries recruiting workers for colonial plantations explore this dimension. Knotter, quoting from the British "Report on Agencies and Methods for Dealing with the Unemployed", demonstrates how widely practices varied from trade to trade. Perhaps the most important step for further research would be to inquire more closely into hiring practices and use company archives. Repeatedly, the reader is told that workers were hired at the factory gate or found a job through family connections, but without empirical studies of specific trades and branches, we cannot know where, to what extent, and for how long such practices prevailed.

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