

Book Reviews

Svein S. Andersen: *British and Norwegian Offshore Industrial Relations*. Gower: Aldershot, 1988. (225 pp.)

How firm is a firm system of social relations? Under what circumstances might which kind of agents change (or break down) what type of system of social relations and, if change does occur, then in what direction does it go? How much is the formation of social structures determined by agents and how are social structures reproduced or altered by the conscious, or unconscious, acts by individual and collective social agents. In many ways, this can be said to be one of the most demanding questions in social science. Debates about the usefulness of different functionalist explanations as well as the scope of different kinds of methodological individualism deal with this issue. One problem with this debate is that it is still merely theoretical. If empirical findings are taken into the discussion, they are deliberately constructed solely to strengthen the particular theoretical argument put forward. It is rare to see someone seriously trying out his theoretical argument with a critical empirical confrontation in this theoretical effort. This child of the social sciences has many names: micro vs. macro, game vs. structure, institutions vs. individuals, voluntarism vs. determinism, holism vs. atomism, essentialism vs. reductionism, etc. etc. Personally, I think Marx's statement of the problem is still the best, i.e. that men create history but under circumstances not of their own choosing. I also think that his analytical tools, i.e. to construct concepts that focus on power relations in institutional settings (e.g. the concepts of *relations of production*) are still the best way of handling the dilemma between action and structure. At the political and administrative levels of society, I think it is possible to use analogical concepts to those developed by Marx for the economic level, for instance *relations of* (political or administrative) *institutions*.

In his book, Andersen takes issue with these questions by choosing to compare two cases of change in systems of industrial relations, the British and the Norwegian offshore industry. When North Sea oil was to be exploited in the mid 1960s, both the Norwegian and the British governments turned to the big multinational oil companies that had the technical and logistical expertise to handle offshore drilling. However, and this is the main point, these companies' offshore drilling organizations were until then

Book Reviews

Svein S. Andersen: *British and Norwegian Offshore Industrial Relations*. Gower: Aldershot, 1988. (225 pp.)

How firm is a firm system of social relations? Under what circumstances might which kind of agents change (or break down) what type of system of social relations and, if change does occur, then in what direction does it go? How much is the formation of social structures determined by agents and how are social structures reproduced or altered by the conscious, or unconscious, acts by individual and collective social agents. In many ways, this can be said to be one of the most demanding questions in social science. Debates about the usefulness of different functionalist explanations as well as the scope of different kinds of methodological individualism deal with this issue. One problem with this debate is that it is still merely theoretical. If empirical findings are taken into the discussion, they are deliberately constructed solely to strengthen the particular theoretical argument put forward. It is rare to see someone seriously trying out his theoretical argument with a critical empirical confrontation in this theoretical effort. This child of the social sciences has many names: micro vs. macro, game vs. structure, institutions vs. individuals, voluntarism vs. determinism, holism vs. atomism, essentialism vs. reductionism, etc. etc. Personally, I think Marx's statement of the problem is still the best, i.e. that men create history but under circumstances not of their own choosing. I also think that his analytical tools, i.e. to construct concepts that focus on power relations in institutional settings (e.g. the concepts of *relations of production*) are still the best way of handling the dilemma between action and structure. At the political and administrative levels of society, I think it is possible to use analogical concepts to those developed by Marx for the economic level, for instance *relations of* (political or administrative) *institutions*.

In his book, Andersen takes issue with these questions by choosing to compare two cases of change in systems of industrial relations, the British and the Norwegian offshore industry. When North Sea oil was to be exploited in the mid 1960s, both the Norwegian and the British governments turned to the big multinational oil companies that had the technical and logistical expertise to handle offshore drilling. However, and this is the main point, these companies' offshore drilling organizations were until then

only used to operating in third world countries where, to say the least, industrial relations were (and still are) rather different from those in Britain and Norway. As could be expected, conflicts emerged between the oil companies' ways of management and the established system of industrial relations in both countries. The oil companies were neither used to dealing with strong unions nor with public agencies' and employees' demands for work safety regulations. And, of course, neither the regular unions nor government agencies had any experience in dealing with companies behaving in a late nineteenth-century capitalist style concerning the rights of workers to organize and to call in government agencies to establish and control work safety regulations.

Theoretically the author confronts his cases with two ideal-type (in a Weberian sense) models of political systems, corporatism and pluralism, arguing that Norway fits the former and Britain the latter. His explanations as to why the confrontations between the oil industry and the union movement/public agencies turned out differently are taken from these two theories. He argues that these two political systems generate different basic understandings or, to use his term, cultures in industrial relations and that this explains why the international oil industry in Norway had to adapt more closely to the traditional Norwegian system of industrial relations than to the British. I will come back to this argument after a few words about method.

First, by choosing to deal with the problem with a *comparable case method*, Andersen has given himself the task of making serious and critical test of his theories. Second, I think the two cases chosen are excellent material for this kind of study. It is worth emphasizing that this problem, to choose relevant *and* comparable cases with which to test one's theories is not easily handled and while the choice often seems rather natural afterwards, it takes skill and what I would call creative imagination to find them. The comparison of the two cases can, as he argues, be viewed almost as an 'historical experiment' because he can control for factors such as the type of challenge facing the established systems of industrial relations and for the kind of actors that has been involved (the latter is, however, more doubtful, see below). Third, following the methodological recommendations from Alexander George, Andersen sets out not just to adapt, or connect, his two cases to the theories about pluralism and corporatism; neither theory nor the empirical cases are treated *ad hoc*. Instead he carefully structures his cases to the theory and he focuses strictly on the relevant data to test it.

However, if this study in its 'logic of scientific inquiry' is an example worth following, I have some objections to the way the author has interpreted his results. Andersen's basic explanatory concept is *culture*:

Cultural paradigms are seen as relatively autonomous régimes developed around major

contingencies of capitalist economies rather than unique national traditions. Such regimes can be specified as a set of fundamental rules framing action, producing different rationalities.

But, as I see it, the main explanatory variable in his study is not that of culture but that of working class organizational strength. Cultural paradigms must be seen as a normative structure telling people three things: what is (or is not), what is right (or wrong), and what is possible (or impossible) to achieve. By giving different answers to these questions, a cultural paradigm tells people what to expect, what is possible and what to do (these workings conditions are fair/unfair, it is possible/not possible to change them, we should/should not organize ourselves). But what he actually studies is not culture as such, but two other things, (a) patterns of working-class organizational formation and (b) institutional practices in industrial relations that can be traced to different patterns of working-class organizational formation. Culture, as stated above, does not turn out to be a genuinely independent variable but is instead to be seen as the natural outcome of these two basic variables. Thus, what I get out of Andersen's study is not the importance of *culture* but that the differences between the organizational and political strength of the British and the Norwegian labour movements explains the differences in the outcome of the offshore industrial relations in the two countries. Thus, I do not agree with the author of this book that he with his method/cases succeeds in controlling for 'types of actors' because one of the main actors, the trade union movement, is different.

To take one example, the greater success of the Norwegian safety control agency in regulating the offshore industry as reported by Andersen. This has in my opinion nothing to do with differences in culture as such. Instead it is due to the fact that in Norway a politically strong union movement has been able to enforce public laws that give local safety delegates elected by the employees the right to immediately stop working processes which they find dangerous and also the right to call in the inspectorate whenever they want. The law further states that bipartite safety committees must be established in places where more than a specified number of employees are working. No such thing prevails in Britain where instead a system of external bureaucratic control of safety regulations exists. The Norwegian way of institutionalizing the implementation of work safety control has three important effects. One is that the position of the employees versus the employers/managers is strengthened. The second effect is that it almost forces the employees to organize themselves to be able to elect safety delegates and representatives to the bipartite local safety committees. The third is that it forces the employer to accept both the rights of the safety delegates and to establish local safety committees.

This problem arises because it is not clear, neither in Andersen's book

nor in many other texts that use the notion of corporatism, what this really means in questions of class-based political power. On the one hand the concept is used to characterize a political system where class polarization has been replaced by national consensus building (p. 6). This gives the notion of a weakened working class that 'so oder so' has been incorporated into the capitalist system and forced to accept it. On the other hand, it is obvious that the countries that rank high on most corporatist indexes (Austria, Norway and Sweden) also are countries with exceptionally strong labour movements when it comes to organizational unity and political influence. It is of course problematic for a study of industrial relations that uses the concept of corporatism if this concept is not specified concerning what it means in terms of class organizational strength. Andersen writes:

Our point of departure was a set of puzzling observations: British industrial relations are normally based on confrontation and exploitation of strategic contingencies, while in Norway industrial relations reflect fundamental assumptions about cooperation and compliance with institutionalized rules. Despite this, the unions and the public agencies for safety control in Britain have been less successful in dealing with aggressive off-shore companies than their Norwegian counterparts. (p. 26)

I would say that this puzzle is merely constructed by the way the notion of corporatism is used in this study. The reason why British unions more often than their counterparts are involved in *open* confrontation need not be because of their strength but, quite the opposite, because of their organizational and political weakness. And the reason why their Norwegian counterparts have been more inclined to co-operation might be that they have been able, by their political and organizational strength, to force their counterparts to deal with them in institutional settings which they themselves (i.e. the labour movement) have set up. The confrontations in Norwegian industrial relations might even be harder than the British ones; what the notion of corporatism points out is that these confrontations take place in *closed* institutional settings. From this point of view there is no puzzle at all why the Norwegians had greater success than the British in dealing with the aggressive offshore oil companies. In my opinion the author should not have accepted the notoriously vague definition that corporatist theory gives to the notion of the organizational strength of social classes. But, considering the methodological rigour with which this study is carried out I think this is a minor objection. The material presented is structured to give the reader an opportunity to take on serious theoretical discussion about important problems and that is, after all, what really matters.

Bo Rothstein, University of Uppsala