

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

KARL ULRICH MAYER and HEIKE SOLGA (Eds.) *Skill Formation: Interdisciplinary and Cross-national Perspectives*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, vii + 258 p., index.

This edited volume brings together researchers from the disciplines of political science, sociology, economics, and psychology to explore trends in education and training in Western Europe and, to a lesser extent, Canada and the United States. The book takes a cross-national perspective with most chapters focusing on trends in several different nations. Most chapters also attempt to locate trends in their historical context, with particular attention to whether education and training systems designed in the past are suitable for today's workforce and "knowledge economy." In this book, the editors seek to gather together empirical research on educational institutions, and access and returns to training, to inform policy-makers' efforts to reform education and training and ensure that economies have the skilled workers they need. Moreover, they hope to lay the foundation for future interdisciplinary and comparative research in the field.

The majority of the contributions in the book take a macro-level perspective looking at trends and practices in formal education and training schemes at a national level. For instance, chapter two by Pepper D. Culpepper and Kathleen Thelen takes a political science perspective that links national training systems with forms of capitalist organization and employer strategies for controlling labour. Their chapter focuses on training systems in Germany, as does another chapter by Christian Dustmann and Uta Schoenberg, while a chapter by Steffen Hillmert compares training regimes in Germany and the United Kingdom. Other chapters are more cross-national: for instance a chapter by Philip J. O'Connell and Jean-Marie Jungblut examines workplace training across member countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), while Walter Mueller and Marita Jacob look at returns to training across the life course in a number of Western European countries.

The book's title is a little misleading as the chapters are not really concerned with skill formation per se, but rather with formal education and training programs. The focus is on training systems, education, returns to credentials, and formal workplace training. There is virtually no consideration of skill development or the processes through which skills are acquired. Most notably, informal processes of skill development are largely ignored, and the link between education and skill – called into question and debated by many sociologists and economists (including Randall Collins, Pierre Bourdieu and Lester Thurow) – is treated as unproblematic. In their chapter, Mueller and Jacob acknowledge that informal learning at the workplace is an important source of skill for many workers, but still give it short shrift in their discussion. This is not really a book on skill

formation at all, since the actual processes through which workers and students acquire skills – whether those skills be formally or informally acquired, or explicit or tacit in nature – are not examined.

Given its focus, the book will likely appeal to scholars interested in education and training systems, and whether the systems in place now give adequate returns to workers and the firms in which they work. Scholars of the school-to-work transition will also find something of value here. The interdisciplinary and cross-national approach of the book has considerable merit. Sociologists will likely find the political science approach of Culpepper and Thelen, linking education training systems with capitalist organization and employer control strategies particularly interesting. Another strong contribution is Heike Solga's chapter that evaluates, from a sociological point of view, the reasons behind the increasing labour market vulnerability of low-skilled individuals. Her theoretical approach is innovative, and her finding that slightly different processes are at work in different countries is quite illuminating.

As a collection, the different chapters of this book work fairly well together, especially in the first two parts of the book which focus on education and training systems and returns to training. While I applaud the fact that most authors situate their empirical analyses in a theoretical context, readers may tire of hearing similar theoretical reviews – especially of human capital theory – in chapter after chapter. Further, given the macro-level focus of much of the book, the short final section on “individuals' acquisition of skills and competencies,” which actually touches on different philosophies of learning and the measurement of training systems, does not really blend well with the rest of the book; and its contribution to the book, and the field more generally is not clear. Like the rest of the book, these sections do not examine how individuals acquire skills – a topic which would have been quite welcome in a book of this nature.

This book will appeal most to a specialist and interdisciplinary readership interested in educational systems and returns to education and training. Both the writing in the book, and its focus, are too sophisticated for undergraduates. For sociologists interested in work, and even those particularly interested in skill, there are only a few chapters of interest here, Solga's especially. The book will also appeal to those interested in developing policy and restructuring training programs to ensure that those systems are as effective as they can be.

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