

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Karl Ulrich Mayer** and **Heike Solga**, eds. *Skill Formation: Interdisciplinary and Cross-National Perspectives*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 264 pp. \$60.00 hardcover (978-0-521-86752-8)

In Canada, we have for some time been concerned about the shortage of workers in the skilled trades. An ageing workforce coupled with a lack of young people or new immigrants entering these careers is predicted to cripple industrial development in Alberta's oil fields and housing construction in all of our cities. The solution to these problems, however, remains mostly vague. Should we encourage more young people to enter apprenticeships? Should we encourage more employers to participate in skills development? Should we change our immigration policies? In any of these options, the solution is sought through the development of new or different forms of human capital. This is true in the above-mentioned concern about labour shortages, but equally applies to periods of unemployment and labour market instability, when concerns generally shift to the development of the "right" types of skills to redistribute unemployed who appear to have the "wrong" kind of skills. Rarely, however, do we pause and question the meaning of the concept at the very core of these policy measures: skill. This edited volume aims to fill this large gap from both an interdisciplinary and a cross-national perspective.

In their introduction, Mayer and Solga set out to answer three main questions: 1) What are the institutions in which skills are learned and why do they differ across national contexts? 2) What are the key issues regarding provision, access, and return to training and how are they related to larger problems of social inequality? 3) What actually do we mean when we talk about skills, qualifications, and competencies? To answer these questions, they assembled a group of mostly German authors with backgrounds in sociology, educational studies, political science, economics, and psychology. The nine chapters that comprise this book address national-historical factors that help shape differences in vocational education regimes, provide country-specific comparisons, offer a range of perspectives on Germany's much-lauded dual system of vocational education, analyze the conditions of learning at work, assess returns to skill development across the life course, consider inequalities in access to skill development, propose new ways of conceptualizing vo-

cational learning, and develop a framework for the measurement of skill development. Not all of these chapters will be of immediate interest to a sociological readership. Still, there is much to be gained from the multidisciplinary perspective of the book, which offers some crucial insights and perhaps unexpected findings regarding the potential of different vocational programs and labour market regimes to provide an economy with a skilled workforce and citizens with the skills and qualifications they can use to become productive members of their communities.

Most importantly, perhaps, the book's multidisciplinary and cross-national perspectives expand our field of vision with regards to vocational education and skills development. For instance, Dustmann and Schoenberg (Chapter 4) use a labour market perspective to show that economies with largely unregulated labour markets and relatively large wage differences between employers create disincentives for workplace-based forms of vocational education such as apprenticeships. In contrast, the fear of poaching trained workers is minimized in economies with compressed wages and where individuals have an incentive to become certified in vocational education because there is an employment and salary benefit associated with certification. Canada reflects the former type of labour market, whereas Germany is typical of the latter. Consequently, vocational education programs based on Germany's dual system are destined to remain marginal in countries like Canada where the necessary labour market conditions do not exist. We could then ask whether it would be in Canada's interest to provide more labour market regulations and to make more vocational qualifications mandatory for employment. Interestingly, however, Solga (Chapter 7) shows that such a move would likely hurt those in the population with low levels of formal credentials most. Her analysis of the vulnerability of low-skilled individuals (meaning individuals lacking formal credentials) in different national education and labour market systems shows that Canada's low-skilled workers suffer less from their lack of educational credentials than from displacement in the labour market, suggesting that the problem is not one of educational deprivation, but of poor employment opportunities and labour market conditions. Once again, Alberta's oil fields provide a striking example, where high-school dropouts can make six figure salaries. Foregoing such earnings during an apprenticeship seems unlikely to pay off, if the apprenticeship credential is not a prerequisite for high-paying employment. Yet, Mueller and Jacob (Chapter 6) document the accumulated life course disadvantages of those with low levels of initial education, as further workplace training, job security, long-term career prospects, and income potential rise with the level of initial education. This still holds true in Canada, as we have no shortage of evidence

for the long-term life course and labour market disadvantages of those with very low levels of educational attainment.

Readers interested in the skills debates in Canada and the potential of other training models to help solve skill imbalances will find this book an invaluable source of information and stimulation. Most chapters skillfully (no pun intended) combine conceptual and empirical analysis. The empirical chapters in particular challenge commonly held beliefs that all labour market problems can be solved through human capital solutions. Moreover, the chapters demonstrate that training programs need to be integrated into labour market regimes to be effective for economic purposes and to help those who seek to increase their employability through participation in such programs.

Some readers might object to the book's overemphasis on Germany's dual system as the starting point against which most comparisons are made. Furthermore, some cross-national comparisons lack deeper insights into the problems associated with specific labour market regimes. For instance, when Solga (Ch. 7) proposes that noncredentialed, low-skilled workers in Canada are less vulnerable than those in, for example, Germany, she underestimates the tendency of the relatively unregulated Canadian labour market to create contingent employment opportunities for the low-skilled, which creates a different kind of vulnerability to that found in Germany. Finally, not all chapters in the book are sensitive to the different roles played by different postsecondary educational pathways. Both community colleges and universities in Canada prepare young people for employment in occupations for which young Germans would enter apprenticeship training.

These minor criticisms aside, this is a highly valuable contribution to the skills debate and deserves a wide readership amongst academics and policymakers interested in the relationship between training, education, and labour markets.

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