



PROJECT MUSE®

La dactylographe et l'expeditionnaire: Histoire des employes  
de bureau, 1890-1930, and: Organiser a l'aube du taylorisme:  
La pratique d'Ernest Mattern chez Peugeot, 1906-1919  
(review)

Ludovic Cailluet

Enterprise & Society, Volume 4, Number 1, March 2003, pp. 145-147 (Review)

Published by Cambridge University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/42056>

and safety, not privatization in itself. Gourvish also trenchantly points out that in the period of private operation, there has been a move toward geographical reconsolidation. We can observe similar trends toward combination elsewhere, implying that the government's geographical breakup of BR was also mistaken. Gourvish provides ample evidence that government intervention in the railway's internal affairs was always harmful, whether the government itself or private investors owned BR. Finally, Gourvish makes only one brief mention of BR's modal share, implicitly agreeing with its critics that BR was losing traffic because of its own incompetence and could have been saved through reform. Yet one wonders if the technical characteristics of automobiles, trucks, and airplanes compared to trains make it impossible for any railway to compete successfully in many markets.

Overall, Terry Gourvish has given us a thought-provoking, informative account of a very important period in the history of British railways. His book will remain the most important discussion of this subject until declassification of the relevant government documents. One hopes that an independent historian will tackle the job of writing the last years of the history of BR when all of the relevant documents become available in 2024. Before plunging into the archives, that person would do well to read Gourvish's account.

Alfred C. Mierzejewski  
University of North Texas

---

Delphine Gardey. *La dactylographe et l'expéditionnaire: Histoire des employés de bureau, 1890–1930*. Paris: Editions Belin, 2001. 335 pp. ISBN 2-7011-3045-X, €19.00.

Yves Cohen. *Organiser à l'aube du taylorisme: La pratique d'Ernest Mattern chez Peugeot, 1906–1919*. Besançon, France: Presses Universitaires Franc-Comtoises, 2001. 490 pp. ISBN 2-84627-041-4, €29.00.

---

Both these books are good examples of French contemporary business history. They represent continuity and change in the discipline, visiting the pathways of business from the perspective of the social historian, with technology and management integrated into the analyses. This element alone puts their work ahead of many traditional business and social histories.

A revised version of her doctoral dissertation, Delphine Gardey's volume lies at the crossroads of sociology, gender history, and the

history of technology. The subtitle clearly indicates her ambition to write a history of office workers (our translation of *employés de bureau*, an expression including everyone from tea ladies, cashiers, personal assistants, secretaries, and retail workers to accountants). The period chosen is 1890–1930, and the research is largely confined to archival sources (trade press and Renault archives). Gardey's work provides the reader with a great deal of information and some innovative angles for French historiography.

Gardey introduces her volume by analyzing the problems of definition faced by the social historian dealing with the population of the salaried men and women who formed the group of office workers. She explores the challenge of considering as a coherent social group public administration personnel, bank and insurance company staff, retail and industrial workers, and office clerks and accountants. More originally (in the French context), she insists on “gendering” the issue, since she deals with a group that “feminizes” during the century, starting from an almost entirely male population. Gardey argues rightly that feminization of office clerks must be linked not only to general social change in the workplace, but also to a Taylorization of office work, with growing mechanization and a decrease in workers' qualifications.

She dedicates the second part of the book to empirical research, using Renault personnel department files of employees who left the company before 1929. From almost a thousand individual files, she analyzes various factors. Using qualitative comments found in the records, Gardey describes the perceived status of female clerical workers and illustrates the atmosphere and the tensions in the offices. On the quantitative side, she calculates various statistics relating to the professional history, internal mobility, wages, and social situations of employees.

The title of the book might be the publisher's choice as a marketing decision, but in fact the focus of this volume is an important, but single, case study, the Renault car manufacturing company. A much-needed general history of office workers would call for a larger canvas, introducing a variety of organizations. Gardey seems to have equivocated among business, gender, and social history, and the result is sometimes unbalanced. As a history of the feminization of office work, however, the volume is valuable to the community of business historians.

Yves Cohen's dissertation served as the basis for *Organiser à l'aube du taylorisme*. His ambition was to write a history of the practice of organizing the plant: “Taylorizing” before Taylor. Interestingly enough, Cohen apologizes in his introduction for privileging

the character of the leader-organizer, ignoring in a way the voices of the workers. Yet the focus on his main character is certainly what makes Cohen's work innovative. Indeed, the research relies heavily on the personality and achievements of Ernest Mattern, chief engineer of Peugeot's car manufacturing plants, 1917–1922 and 1928–1943. He was a major figure and left an enduring mark on the company's rationalization efforts. Mattern wrote his 1941 "private" professional autobiography to benefit the top management of the company, and Cohen used this document and others from the Mattern family papers extensively.

One might be inclined to worry that Cohen merely replicates Mattern's words, but that concern disappears as one sees that he broadens his scope to tackle the history of technology, using comparisons with other places and times. He organizes the book chronologically, detailing the evolution of Mattern's responsibility and actions from 1906 to 1919. It is a very valuable addition to our knowledge of World War I industrial efforts in action at the shopfloor level. He provides a good analysis of the role of the plant manager and of the engineer, not only in terms of scientific organization but also in terms of research and development and process improvement. Technology has not frightened Cohen, and he tackles the evolution of management, accounting, and production techniques. In the conclusion he emphasizes an extremely important (and relatively unknown) aspect of business history: the role of middle managers. Mattern is archetypal of these intermediaries, people who actually implemented innovations in the plants or in the offices, dealing directly with technology, organizational structures, and the workers.

Cohen's volume represents very strong research, and it is full of information presented in a clear style with a strong thesis. It has, however, the same fault as Gardey's work: dissertations need reshaping to become books, including broadening of their focus from their initial, naturally limited object and updating of their references. Both are nevertheless excellent works, informative and innovative. I recommend them to any business historian interested in the interactions among technology, management, and social history.

Ludovic Cailluet  
University of Toulouse