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Radical Change or Passing Fashion?

Edited by Jean-Pierre Durand, Paul Stewart and Juan José Castillo

From the International GERPISA Programme ‘Emergence of New Industrial Models’

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GERPISA (Groupe d’Etudes et de Recherches Permanent sur l’Industrie et les Salariés de l’Automobile: Permanent Group for the Study of the Automobile Industry and its Employees) was formed in 1981 as a multidisciplinary group of researchers from economics, management, history and sociology with interests in the automobile industry. The network was initially directed by Michel Freyssenet and Patrick Fridenson at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (School for Advanced Social Science Studies) in Paris.

In the early 1990s, discussions within the Group came to focus on debates about the emergence of ‘new industrial models’. The influential book The Machine that Changed the World, by J.P. Womack, T.D. Jones and D. Roos (directors of the International Motor Vehicle Program, IMVP, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology) argued that a new industrial model had been born in Japan. This model, which the authors called ‘lean production’, was said to be universally superior and transferable to other countries. It was set to become the industrial model for the twenty-first century, just as ‘mass production’ had been for the twentieth century.

The leaders of GERPISA therefore decided to invite colleagues from many different countries to participate in an international programme, The Emergence of New Industrial Models, which would seek a response to questions about the nature and dynamics of industrial models. GERPISA did not seek to imitate the centrally directed and costly research structures of the IMVP. Instead it launched on open network of international co-operative research, based upon common interests and the free exchange of ideas, focused on debates and discussions at a series of international meetings and seminars.

Almost two hundred researchers from twenty countries participated in the programme, to varying degrees. Four working groups were formed: trajectories of automobile producers, transplantation and hybridisation of industrial models, variety and flexibility of production, and teamwork and employment relations. The most active researchers in these groups became their moderators and the editors
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of the resulting books. Along with a representative of the French automobile producers, Jean-Claude Monnet, they formed the programme’s steering group. The scientific directors of the programme, Robert Boyer and Michel Freyssenet, were responsible for the overall co-ordination and leadership of the scientific debate. An annual meeting was held to present the results, to clarify theory and methodology, and to discuss successive theoretical analyses. The University of Evry and the Ministry for National Education and Research provided GERPISA with support for a secretary and two research staff, making it possible to establish a secretariat. These two institutions, along with the European Union (DGXII, Human Capital and Mobility Programme), the Committee of French Automobile Producers, PSA, Renault and France Télécom provided the financial and material support necessary to organise the meetings and international colloquia, and to co-ordinate the research.

At the end of the programme the participants reached the shared conclusion that both theoretically and in practice there have been, there remain today, and there will probably be tomorrow, several successful industrial models. The reasoning behind this conclusion is presented and discussed in the four collective books produced by the four working groups, which represent different elements of the integrated project.

Two of the books are being published by Oxford University Press. One Best Way? Trajectories and Industrial Models of the World’s Automobile Producers, edited by Michel Freyssenet, Andrew Mair, Koichi Shimizu and Giuseppe Volpato, analyses the trajectories of fifteen automobile producers since the 1960s and reveals the variety of solutions adopted and possible conditions of success. Between Imitation and Innovation: The Transfer and Hybridization of Productive Models in the International Automobile Industry, edited by Robert Boyer, Elsie Charron, Ulrich Jürgens and Steven Tolliday, analyses more than a dozen subsidiaries of Japanese, American and European manufacturers in nearly ten different countries. It reveals the particular historical conditions in which transplantation succeeds and shows in particular how the creation of a subsidiary most often gives rise to hybridisation and sometimes to a new industrial model as a result of the constraints and opportunities offered by the host region. Also under consideration for publication is Coping with Variety: Product Variety and Production Organization in the World Automobile Industry, edited by Yannick Lung, Jean-Jacques Chanaron, Takahiro Fujimoto and Daniel Raff, which defines,
dates and compares the evolution of product variety and analyses how firms have adopted different ways of effectively managing this variety in production, design and relations with suppliers and distributors. The present book, *Teamwork in the Automobile Industry: Radical Change or Passing Fashion?*, edited by Jean-Pierre Durand, Paul Stewart and Juan José Castillo reveals the wide diversity of practices, objectives and outcomes hidden by the general adoption of teamwork, through case studies of more than twenty automobile factories.

Each book has its own particular focus, but all explain the plurality of industrial models. The thesis of convergence towards a single model is based on the idea that success comes from combining the methods which appear to give the best results, assuming that the environment is largely common to all firms. But reality suggests otherwise. Successful techniques are so only under certain economic and social conditions. Although growing liberalisation of international trade and economic deregulation in many countries may have led to a convergence in competitive conditions, other factors are creating fresh sources of differentiation in both demand and cost structures. Indeed industrial models emerge from these partly unintended processes which result in coherence between strategies, organisational forms and practices, and the fit between these and the economic and social environment. It is the process of achieving internal coherence and external fit which makes companies successful, because it enables them to reduce the uncertainties in work and markets in the time and place in which they operate. Yet their very success often modifies the environment and the conditions which made their models viable. At this point, a new era commences in which firms must seek out new forms of coherence. Manufacturers in a common environment cannot simply copy the most successful company, since by definition the latter has a competitive advantage in having developed the appropriate strategy and model earlier than its rivals. On the contrary, the other producers must try to find a strategy which permits them to compete effectively yet avoid direct confrontation. Accordingly, not only is there no global model, but there is also no national industrial model which firms are obliged to adopt. There are, instead, a limited number of possible models in a given historical period.

While the members of GERPISA, and especially the members of its steering committee, reached agreement on these conclusions, they did not reach agreement on precisely how to characterise the
various models. Time and resources did not permit full development of the debates, and, therefore the contributors to the four books have adopted their own characterisations of industrial models, leaving the door open to further theoretical work in this area. The scientific directors of the programme, Robert Boyer and Michel Freyssenet, have, nevertheless, developed an analysis of the industrial models which have been used in the twentieth century automobile industry, based on the research undertaken during the programme and their own work, in an effort to create an appropriate theory. This will appear in a further book, The World that Changed the Machine, which follows the origin, development, diffusion and crisis of industrial models, and offers an explanation based on the evolution of markets and work in different contexts.

The results that GERPISA present in these books are the fruit of the patient and co-ordinated work of their fifty or so authors, as well as of the various contributions made by all the participants in the programme. Other material published by the programme includes over a hundred issues of the GERPISA newsletter, La Lettre du GERPISA; the publication of articles in the Actes du GERPISA; and the work-in-progress papers presented to the annual meetings. Many people have contributed to this large-scale international cooperative project and we thank them all. We would also like to thank the representatives of the French Automobile Manufacturers, particularly Annie Beretti of PSA, Frédéric Decoster and Jean-Claude Monnet of Renault, and Béatrice de Castelnau and Christian Mory of the Committee of French Automobile Producers, who were not content merely to follow the GERPISA programme on behalf of their companies or institution, but actively participated in the network’s theoretical development. The programme would never have been successfully completed without the liaison, documentation and editorial activities and the organisation of annual meetings undertaken by the members of the GERPISA secretariat, Carole Assellaou, Kémal Bécirspahic dit Bécir and Nicolas Hatzfeld, under the direction of Michel Freyssenet, the interpretation of Jacqueline Colombat’s team, the translations of Teresa Hayter, Sybil Hyacinth Mair, Jennifer Merchant, Eunice Nyhan and Mark Teeuwen, and the organisation of working group meetings at Lower Slaughter by Andrew Mair, Bordeaux by Yannick Lung, Venice by Giuseppe Volpato, Berlin by Ulrich Jürgens, Lyon by Jean-Jacques Chanaron, Paris by Robert Boyer and Elsie Charron, and Madrid by Juan José Castillo. We also wish to thank Sarah Gape of Cardiff Business
School for her secretarial assistance. The publication of these books bears witness to their contributions.

The steering committee of the GERPISA programme ‘Emergence of New Industrial Models’ is made up as follows:

Robert Boyer (CEPREMAP-CNRS-EHESS, Paris), Juan José Castillo (Complutense University, Madrid), Jean-Jacques Chanaron (CNRS, Lyon), Elsie Charron (CNRS, Paris), Jean-Pierre Durand (University of Evry), Michel Freyssenet (CNRS, Paris), Patrick Fridenson (EHESS, Paris), Takahiro Fujimoto (University of Tokyo), Ulrich Jürgens (WZB, Berlin), Yannick Lung (University of Bordeaux IV), Andrew Mair (Birkbeck College, University of London), Jean-Claude Monnet (Research Department, Renault), Daniel Raff (University of Pennsylvania), Koichi Shimizu (University of Okayama), Paul Stewart (University of Cardiff, Wales), Steven Tolliiday (University of Leeds) and Giuseppe Volpato (Ca' Foscari University, Venice).

Participants in the GERPISA Programme ‘The Emergence of New Industrial Models’:

Argentina: Martha Roldán (FLACSO University, Buenos Aires) and Miguel Zanabria (Ministry of Industry, Buenos Aires).

Australia: Greg Bamber (Griffith University, Brisbane), Russel Lansbury (University of Sidney).

Belgium: Michel Albertijn (Tempera, Antwerp), Leen Baisier (Stichting Technologie Vlaanderen, Brussels), Rik Huys (University of Leuven), Geert Van Hootegem (University of Leuven), Johan Van Buylen (European Centre for Work and Society, Brussels) and André Vandorpe (Stichting Technologie Vlaanderen, Brussels).

Brazil: Ricardo Alves de Carvalho (Minas Gerais Federal University, Belo Horizonte), Nadya Araujo Vastro (São Lazaro Federal University), Jussara Cruz de Brito (CESTEH, Rio de Janeiro), Edna Castro (Federal University, Belem), Afonso Fleury (University of São Paulo), Robero Marx (University of São Paulo), Mario Sergio Salerno (University of São Paulo), Rosa Maria Sales de Melo Soares (IPEA, Brasilia) and Mauro Zilbovicius (University of São Paulo).

Canada: Daniel Drache (York University).

Colombia: Elba Cánfora de Zalamea (National University, Bogotá) and Anita Weiss de Belalcázar (National University, Bogotá).

France: Délila Allam (University of Paris I), Annie Amar (IREPD, Grenoble), Michel Aribart (Ministry of Industry), Etienne de Banville
Foreword

(CNRS, Saint-Etienne), François Beaujeu (University of Paris IX), Kémal Bécirspahic dit Bécir (University of Evry), Marie-Claude Bélis-Bergouignan (University of Bordeaux IV), Muriel Bellivier (University of Marne-la-Vallée), Annie Beretti (PSA Peugeot-Citroën), Géraldine de Bonnafoss (France Télécom, Paris), Gérard Bordenave (University of Bordeaux IV), Robert Boyer (CEPREMAP, Paris), Christophe Carrincazeaux (University of Bordeaux IV), Béatrice de Castelnau (CCFA, Paris), Sylvie Célérier (University of Evry), Jean-Jacques Chanaron (CNRS, Lyon), Elsie Charron (CNRS, Paris), Bertrand Ciavaldini (PSA Peugeot-Citroën), Yves Cohen (CRH, Paris), Guy Cornette (University of Evry), Emmanuel Couvreur (Renault), Isabel da Costa (CEE, Paris), Frédéric Decoster (Renault), Gabriel Dupuy (CNRS, Paris), Jean-Pierre Durand (University of Evry), Joyce Durand-Sebag (University of Evry), Béatrice Faguet-Picq (INTEC, Evry), Simone Feitler (Renault), Michel Freyssenet (CNRS, Paris), Patrick Fridenson (EHESS, Paris), João Furtado (University of Paris XIII), Christophe Gallet (University of Lyon II), Annie Garanto (University of Paris X), Gilles Garel (CRG, Paris), Patrick Gianfaloni (University of Provence), Armelle Gorgeu (CEE, Paris), Nathalie Greenan (INSEE, Paris), Françoise Guelle (IAO-MRASH, Lyon), Dominique Guellec (OCDE, Paris), Cândido Guerra Ferreira (University of Paris XIII), Christian Guibert (France Télécom, Paris), Armand Hatchuel (Ecole des Mines, Paris), Nicolas Hatzfeld (University of Evry), Helena Sumiko Hirata (CNRS, Paris), Jean-Paul Hubert (University of Paris XIII), Marie-Noëlle Hume (University of Evry), Hee-Young Hwang (University of Paris X), Didier Idjadi (University of Paris XIII), Bruno Jetin (University of Rouen), Bernard Jullien (University of Bordeaux IV), Alex Kesseler (CRG, Paris), Gerson Koch (University of Lille), Alain Kopff (University of Paris), Daniel Labbé (Renault), Anne Labit (University of Rouen), Lydie Laigle (LATTS, Paris), Pascal Larbaoui (University of Paris XIII), Marc Lautier (University of Paris), Jean-Bernard Layan (University of Bordeaux IV), Nathalie Lazaric (University of Compiègne), Yveline Leclerc (IAO-MRASH, Lyon), Danièle Linhart (CNRS, Paris), Jean-Louis Loubet (University of Evry), Yannick Lung (University of Bordeaux IV), Jean-Loup Madre (INRETS, Paris), Olivier Maréchal (Rectorat de Créteil), Claire Martin (Renault), René Mathieu (CEE, Paris), Alain Michel (EHESS, Paris), Christophe Midler (CRG, Paris), Jean-Claude Monnet (Renault), Christian Mory (CCFA, Paris), Aimée Moutet (University of Paris X), Jean-Philippe Neuville (CSO, Paris), Jean-
Foreword

Pierre Orfeuil (INRETS, Paris), Alfredo Pena-Vega (Paris), Monique Peyrière (University of Evry), Jean-Marc Pointet (University of Paris XIII), Emmanuel Quenson (GIP Mutations industrielles, Paris), Jean-Philippe Rennard (Paris), Luiz Rothier Bautzer (University of Paris IX), Patrick Rozenblatt (University of Paris X), Frédérique Sachwald (IFRI, Paris), Laurence Saglietto (University of Nice), Jean Sauvy (Paris), Benoît Schlumberger (University of Paris IX), Klas Soderquist (ESC, Grenoble), Jean-Laude Thenard (GIP Mutations industrielles, Paris) and Benoît Weil (Ecole des Mines, Paris).

Germany: Peter Auer (WZB, Berlin), Bob Hancke (WZB, Berlin), Jörg Hofmann (IG Metall, Stuttgart), Peter Jansen (WZB, Berlin), Ulrich Jürgens (WZB, Berlin), Martin Kuhlmann (University of Göttingen), Steffen Lehndorff (Institut Arbeit und Technik, Gelsenkirchen), Roland Springer (Daimler-Benz, Stuttgart) and Frank Wehrmann (Volkswagen, Wolfsburg).

Italy: Giovanni Balcet (University of Turin), Arnaldo Camuffo (Ca’Foscari University, Venice), Aldo Enrietti (University of Turin), Massimo Follis (University of Turin), Stefano Micelli (Ca’Foscari University, Venice) and Giuseppe Volpato (Ca’Foscari University, Venice).

Japan: Tetsuo Abo (University of Tokyo), Hisao Arai (University of Shiga), Takahiro Fujimoto (University of Tokyo, Masanori Hanada (Kumamoto Gakuen University), Masayoshi Ikeda (Chuo University, Tokyo), Yasuo Inoue (Nagoya University), Osamu Koyama (Sapporo University), Kazuhiro Mishina (JAIST Institute, Tokyo), Yoichiro Nakagawa (Chuo University, Tokyo), Hikari Nohara (Hiroshima University), Masami Nomura (Tohoku, University of Sendai), Ichiro Saga (Kumamoto Gakuen University), Shoichiro Sei (Kanto-Gakuen University), Koichi Shimizu (Okayama University) and Koichi Shimokawa (Hosei University, Tokyo).

Korea: Myeong-Kee Chung (Han Nam University, Taejon) and Hyun-Joong Jun (Seoul University).

Mexico: Jorge Carrillo (Frontera Norte College, Tijuana), Patricia Garcia Gutiérrez (Autonomous University of Mexico), Sergio Fernando Herrera Lima (Autonomous University of Mexico) and Yolanda Montiel (CIESAS, Mexico).

Netherlands: Ben Dankbaar (Catholic University of Nijmegen), Frank Den Hond (Free University, Amsterdam), Winfried Ruigrok (Erasmus University, Rotterdam) and Rob Van Tulder (Erasmus University, Rotterdam).

Portugal: Paulo Alves (University of Lisbon), Antonio Brandão Moniz
Foreword

(University Uni-Nova, Lisbon), Ilona Kovács (University of Lisbon), Maria Leonor Pires (University of Lisbon), Marinus Pires de Lima (University of Lisbon), Pedro Pires de Lima (University of Lisbon) and Mario Vale (University of Lisbon).

Spain: Ricardo Alaez (University of País Vasco, Bilbao), Javier Bilbao (University of País Vasco, Bilbao), Vicente Camino (University of País Vasco, Bilbao), Juan José Castillo (Complutense University, Madrid), Juan Carlos Longas (Public University of Navarra), Javier Mendez (Complutense University, Madrid) and Manuel Rapun (Public University of Navarra).

Sweden: Christian Berggren (Institutet för Arbetslivsforskning, Stockholm), Per Olav Bergström (Metallförbundet, Stockholm), Anders Boglind (Volvo Car Corporation), Göran Brulin (Institutet for Arbetslivsforskning, Stockholm), Kajsa Ellegård (Göteborg University), Tomas Engström (Chalmers University of Technology, Göteborg), Henrik Glimstedt (Göteborg University), Nils Kinch (Uppsala University), Lars Medbo (Chalmers University of Technology, Göteborg), Tommy Nilsson (Arbetslivsinstitutet, Stockholm), Lennart Nilsson (Göteborg University) and Åke Sandberg (Arbetslivsinstitutet, Stockholm).

Switzerland: Ronny Bianchi (Bellinzona).

Turkey: Lale Duruiz (University of Marmara) and Nurhan Yentiirk (Istanbul Technical University).

United Kingdom: Philip Garrahan (University of Northumbria), John Humphrey (University of Sussex, Brighton), Arnoud Lagendijk (University of Newcastle), Andrew Mair (University of London), Mari Sako (London School of Economics), Elizabeth Bortolaia Silva (University of Leeds), Paul Stewart (University of Wales, Cardiff), Joseph Tidd (Imperial College, London) and Steven Tolliday (University of Leeds).

USA: Paul Adler (University of Southern California), Steve Babson (Labor Studies, Detroit), Bruce Belzowski (University of Michigan), Richard Florida (Harvard University), Michael Flynn (University of Michigan), Susan Helper (Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland), Harry Katz (Cornell University), Ruth Milkman (University of California, Los Angeles), Frits Pil (Pittsburgh University), Daniel Raff (Pennsylvania University), Saul Rubinstein (New Brunswick University) and Harley Shaiken (University of California, Los Angeles).

All other information concerning GERPISA activities can be obtained by contacting GERPISA International Network, Université
d’Evry-Val d’Essonne, 4 Boulevard François Mitterand, 91025 Evry cedex, France.
Phone: 33(1)69477023; Fax: 33(1)69477007.
E-mail: contact@gerpisa.univ-evry.fr. web page http://www.gerpisa.univ-evry.fr
Contributors

Paul Adler is a Professor in the Department of Management and Organization, Marshall School of Business, University of Southern California, USA

Michel Albertijn established the independent research bureau Tempera in Antwerp, Belgium

Steve Babson is Labour Program Specialist at the Labour Studies Center, Wayne State University, USA

Leen Baisier works for the Social Economic Council of Flanders/Flemish Foundation for Technology Assessment, Belgium

Göran Brulin is Associate Professor at the School of Business at the University of Stockholm and a Researcher at the National Institute for Working Life, Stockholm, Sweden

Arnaldo Camuffo is Associate Professor of Organizational Behaviour at the Ca’Foscari University of Venice, Italy

Guy Cornette is an Assistant Professor at the University of Paris, France

Michel Freyssenet is a Sociologist and Research Director at the National Scientific Research Centre (CNRS), Paris, France

Detlef Gerst is a Researcher at the Soziologisches Forschungsinstitut (SOFI) at Göttingen University, Germany

Masonori Hanada is Assistant Professor of Economics at the University Kamamoto Gakuen, Japan

Thomas Hardwig is a Researcher at the Soziologisches Forschungsinstitut (SOFI) at Göttingen University, Germany

Nicolas Hatzfeld is Researcher and Lecturer at the University of Evry, France
Contributors

Rik Huys is Senior Research Associate at the Higher Institute of Labour Studies at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium

Martin Kuhlmann is a Researcher at the Soziologisches Forschungsinstitut (SOFI) at Göttingen University, Germany

Anne Labit has a doctorate in Social History from the University of Rouen having spent five years in Germany in different research organisations

Andrew Mair is a Lecturer in Management at Birkbeck College, London University, Great Britain

Roberto Marx is a Lecturer at the Production Engineering Department at the University of São Paulo, Brazil

Javier Mendez is based at the Universidad Madrid, Spain

Stefano Micelli is a Researcher at the Ca' Forscari University of Venice, Italy

Tommy Nilsson is an Associate Professor at the University of Stockholm and a Researcher at the National Institute for Working Life, Stockholm, Sweden

Hikari Nohara is Professor of Political Science at the Graduate School for International Development and Cooperation, Hiroshima University, Japan

Ichiro Saga is based at University Kumamoto Gakuen, Japan

Mario Sergio Salerno is Associate Professor at the Product Engineering Department at the University of São Paulo, Brazil

Michael Schumann is Professor of Sociology and President of Soziologisches Forschungsinstitut (SOFI) at Göttingen University, Germany

Johan van Buylen is an expert of the Socialist Metal Workers Trade Union – ABVV, based in Brussels, Belgium
Contributors

Geert van Hootegem is Project Manager at the Higher Institute of Labour Studies at the Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven, Belgium and a Part-time Lecturer at the Nijmegen Business School, Katholieke Universiteit Nijemen, the Netherlands

Jean-Pierre Durand is Professor of Sociology and Chair of the Centre de Recerches Pierre Naville at the University of Paris-Evry. He is the co-author of *After Fordism* (1997) with Robert Boyer, and is a member of the International Steering Committee of GERPISA

Paul Stewart is a Research Fellow in the Sociology of Work and Employment at the University of Wales, Cardiff. He is co-author of *The Nissan Enigma* (1992), with Phil Garrahan. He is published widely in the Sociology of Work and the Labour Process and is a member of the International Steering Committee of GERPISA

Juan José Castillo is Professor of Sociology of Work at the University Complutense Madrid. He is co-director and editor of the Journal of Sciologia del Trabajo. He is President of the Research Committee 30 ‘Sociology of Work’, International Sociological Association. He has written widely in the areas of the Sociology of Work and Employment. He is a member of the International Steering Committee of GERPISA