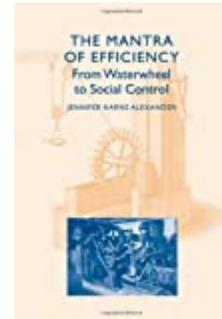




Jennifer Karns Alexander. *The Mantra of Efficiency: From Waterwheel to Social Control.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. xvii + 233 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-8693-5.



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What Does It Mean to Be Efficient?

Jennifer Karns Alexander has undertaken the ambitious project of trying to demonstrate how the concept of efficiency changed, from being applied only to machines at first to being employed as a means to control human behavior. Although the basic thesis of this book is not new, her way of approaching the topic is quite unique. Instead of writing a theoretical piece or a comprehensive historical account of the evolution of this concept, she attempts to explain the evolution of the concept through six historical cases. Perhaps if she had selected her cases more carefully and justified the reasons for their selection, her work could have made a better contribution. Her reliance on cases that might be extreme and her failure to acknowledge the potential social benefits of some forms of control targeted at improving efficiency undermine the potential benefit of her work.

The book is divided into eight chapters with six focusing on historical cases—two from the United States, two from Great Britain, one from France, and one from Germany. The introduction of the book struggles to present

its basic thesis and reverts instead to general comments and observations. Through an analysis of the use of the concept of efficiency to measure the effectiveness of waterwheels in Great Britain in the eighteenth century, the first chapter contends, with little support, that neither efficiency nor energy were quantitatively defined until the nineteenth century. The second chapter draws primarily on the work of Gerard-Joseph Christian to argue that efficient machines should contribute to the physical and intellectual well-being of workers without increasing the need for social control. The following chapter discusses the work of Charles Darwin and Alfred Marshall; it emphasizes that for the former, efficiency depended on a natural process, while for the latter, it depended on the rational choices of humans. In this chapter, Alexander ignores the vast literature that refutes the possibility of applying Darwin's theories to humans, while also not doing justice to the work of Marshall by failing to put his comments on race in historical context. Chapter 4 provides excellent technical descriptions of how efficiency

was measured in the Progressive Era in the United States, but it struggles to connect these descriptions to the intensification of social control. Next, the book turns to demonstrating how managers in Weimar Germany attempted to limit the body movements of their employees at work and their social habits at home in an effort to improve efficiency. Although the latter is clearly a questionable practice, Alexander fails to point out that when appropriately practiced, the former activity did, and still does, prove effective in limiting employee injuries and improving comfort at work. Chapter 6 discusses Robert William Fogel's work on the efficiency of slavery. Although Alexander demonstrates how Fogel's thinking on this topic evolved, she does not include anything about the debate that surrounded the topic when his original work first appeared. In the following chapter Alexander argues that the postindustrial world and the plural values that she contends it promotes could somehow liberate us from the demands of pursuing greater human efficiency. It is unclear how having a more plural and democratic society could, or even should, halt the drive for greater efficiency. The book concludes with an unfocused chapter that seeks, unsuccessfully, to summarize its main argument.

Although this book provides some interesting descriptions of how scientists sought to measure static and dynamic efficiency, its largest drawback is a failure to connect these descriptions adequately with its (rather superficial) discussion of how the concept of efficiency was used to justify attempts to alter human behavior. Alexander's book is not well organized. The chapters are not connected well to each other. Internally, the chapters tend to bounce from topic to topic, often incorporating discussions of subjects that are not connected well to the basic theme of the chapter or even to the general theme of the book.

If the author's real intent was to show how concerns about efficiency have come to penetrate many facets of human life, it is unclear why she needed to enter into detailed descriptions of different means for calculating efficiency in machines. If the author had hoped to show how different concepts that define the efficiency of machines, such as static and dynamic efficiency, have come to be used to analyze human behavior, she should have made this point clear and attempted explicitly to connect her discussions on these topics. Instead of pursuing either of these means for organizing her work, however, the author merely criticizes attempts to control and shape human behavior to make it more efficient. Given this stance, it is surprising that the book does not include any

discussion of the work of either Fredrick Taylor or Michel Foucault. While the former should be included in any discussion about efficiency and the control of human behavior, the latter might have offered an interesting model for describing how concepts come over time to be applied to different spheres. Instead of drawing on the work of these authors, Alexander picks figures who can be considered some of the classical villains—whether Darwin or scholars who argued that slavery was an efficient means of production—and seeks to make generalizations based on their ideas.

Because of this method of proceeding, Alexander fails more generally to explore the complexity of her topic. Despite the connections she makes between ideas of flow and efficiency in modern economies, she does not explore how forms of production have actually changed since the peak of mass standardized production in the late 1980s. Companies in the twenty-first century are sometimes willing to sacrifice the efficiency of mass standardized production and the strict control it customarily entails if they can introduce more flexible forms of production that enable them to meet the needs of their customers more fully. Efficiently serving the diverse needs of customers nowadays can require firms to produce a wide variety of goods and forgo the efficiencies that derive from classical Taylorist production. While these new forms of production generally seek to tap into the analytical skills of their workers and inspire their participation in the decision-making processes of firms, it should not be overlooked that new forms of flexible production can prove more taxing to individual workers. Paradoxically, firms pursuing this type of production can achieve higher levels of social control and efficiency by empowering workers with tasks previously performed primarily by managers. These changing practices for achieving efficiency also exercise a decisive effect on the social relationships related to production. One German firm that had implemented a flexible form of production actually had workers asking their managers to terminate a colleague whom they claimed was not pulling his weight.[1]

When one considers the possible benefits of efficiency in the work place, one is alerted as a reader to the author's silence on the matter of how some control over human behavior guided by principles of efficiency can actually benefit companies as well as individual workers. It would be difficult to argue, for example, that the entire field of ergonomics is either nothing more than a plot to squeeze more out of workers or solely a means for benefiting them. The desire of companies to control "unproductive behavior" also proves more problem-

atic than Alexander appears willing to admit. Although the increasing desire of companies to enter into the personal lives of their employees in the pursuit of greater efficiency is abhorrent, this type of control has to be distinguished from the control that any organization has to introduce in order to align interests of individuals to pursue a goal. Is it always bad for companies to seek mechanisms that would enable their employees to have more efficient interactions? Are there no scenarios where such activity might benefit workers by creating a more profitable enterprise? Does society as a whole not benefit from greater “human” efficiency? Is there a just way of improving human efficiency? These are just some questions that should be addressed in any serious attempt to

evaluate the need for controlling human behavior in the name of greater efficiency. Although the blind pursuit of greater human efficiency may be detrimental to humans, it is difficult not to acknowledge the potential benefits of making human behavior more efficient, particularly if it is done in a humane manner.

Note

[1]. Daniel Friel, “Labor Policy, Choice, and the Organization of Work: A Case Study of the Efficacy of Lean Production at a German Conglomerate in the United States and Germany” (Ph.D. diss., New School for Social Research, 2003).

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