

On Bosses and Politics

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The voice of businessmen invariably finds itself at the heart of electoral debates. Yet few businessmen remain permanently involved in politics. Between small businessmen and top managers of large firms, world view vary considerably. The only principle that seems to unite them is free enterprise.

Reviewed: Michel Offerlé, *Ce qu'un patron peut faire. Une sociologie politique des patronats*, Gallimard essais, 2021. 528 p. 22 €

With his latest book, Michel Offerlé, a professor of political science emeritus at the École Normale Supérieure, continues the vast study on French businessmen he began more than ten years ago.¹ His new opus fills a gap in the sociological literature on CEOs: the need for a thorough panoramic overview of businessmen's ordinary relationship to politics and, more broadly, the public sphere. Business leaders' efforts to influence society--which inspires fantasies of all kinds--have often been construed as the manifestation of a class that is conscious of its interests and can pursue them coherently. Offerlé takes the reverse approach, considering businessmen's political goals from an individual rather than a collective standpoint. He is wary of big collective actors (p. 18), preferring to study individual businessmen's relationship to social life. He also favors a capacious definition of the word businessmen (*patron* in French): "craftsmen, small businessmen, CEOs, founders, and top managers" (p. 14).

¹ Offerlé is also the author of *Sociologie des organisations patronales*, La Découverte, 2009 and *Les Patrons des patrons, Histoire du Medef*, Odile Jacob 2013, as well as *Patrons en France*, La Découverte, 2017.

Because he refuses to define the term at the outset, Offerlé can bring into his field of investigation all the common meanings of businessmen--from the CEO of a public listed company to the head of a bankrupt small business, by way of association directors, employers' organization staff, consultants, and senior executives. These choices are also the key to his methodology, which is based on eclectic interviews that provide often intimate insight into the actors' worldviews.

An in-depth field study

Offerlé has gathered substantial material: 220 interviews conducted by the author, and almost as many conducted by students and colleagues. To this must be added an examination of mail sent to President François Hollande, an analysis of books written and co-written by businessmen, as well as a wide range of information found in the press, authorized and unauthorized biographies, and even an interview with a tax inspector. At 528 pages, the book is a nearly exhaustive review of the various relationships businessmen maintain with the public sphere, broadly construed, and political life in particular--from the most radical forms of individual protest (such as suicide) to holding political office, by way of activity in employers' organizations, philanthropy, voting, tax evasion, payments, monetary relationships, taking public stances, political and religious commitments, and so on. In this laundry list, it can, at times, be difficult to find a guiding thread, particularly since the businessmen referred to in the title are not clearly distinguished in the analysis, but only sketched from a distance, to bring out their differences. Even so, it is possible to distinguish three moments in this book, which is structured around the divide between small and big businessmen.

The first moment consists of small businessmen actions that might be described as negative, as they express a break with the established order (chapters 1 and 2). The second moment (chapter 3) reverses this perspective, examining how businessmen bring political and religious values from civil society into their leadership practices. The third moment considers public activity that could be described as positive (chapters 4, 5, and 6)--in other words, that engages with institutions.

Bosses vs. society

The first great merit of Offerlé's book is that it recalls the extent to which businessmen relationship to the public sphere and political life is primarily negative. Whether it be the (often complaining) letters sent to President Hollande, small businessmen suicides that are exploited by the press to illustrate executive malaise, or the various ways that businessmen juggle with legality when conducting their affairs, Offerlé brings to light avoidance strategies--in Hirschman's sense²--that are very revealing. To these "exit" strategies must be added more radical forms of protest, represented by employers' protest movements, such as Poujadism or the *bonnets rouges* ("red caps") movement. Yet Offerlé, like Annie Collovald,³ sees no continuity between these movements, in a way that would make Poujadism the distinguishing trait of France's small business leaders. This form of protest, while uniting small businessmen, reveals most importantly the existence of opportunities for mobilization that elude the tribunician function of employers' organizations and their repertory of traditional actions.

Individual ethos or business morality?

How businessmen impart their political and religious values to their companies is a question that is of far too little interest to sociologists. Which prevails: a personal moral code or business ethics? The testimonials Offerlé has gathered leave no doubt: religious and political choices have little impact on how companies are run. Top executives who have worked on the staff of left-wing government ministers are no more "socially conscious" than those who served on the staffs of right-wing ministers (p. 132). Christian businessmen, for their part, say that they keep their beliefs to themselves (p. 157). It is when one looks at small businessmen or atypical employers that one finds leaders more in tune with their convictions. There is, for instance, the case of the owner of a small restaurant in Britany and erstwhile far-left activist who

² Albert O. Hirschman theorized that people adopt three kinds of behavior in relation to a problematic situation: exit, voice, and loyalty. See *Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1970. Offerlé refers to the first two types of behavior to describe bosses' oppositional attitude towards the state.

³ Annie Collovald, "Filiation, précédent: quelle continuité dans les mobilisations petit-patronales? Quelques hypothèses sur les relations du CIDUNATI au poujadisme," B. Gaïti and J. Siméant, eds., *La consistance des crises. Atour de Michel Dobry*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, pp. 223-244.

pays himself less than his three employees, since he benefits, in his view, from the advantages in kind his company provides. Then there is the example of Jean-Marc Bollero, founder of the association Groupe SOS (with 18,000 employees), which promotes a left-wing entrepreneurial style. Even so, both men recognize that being a business leader means having to exercise authority (pp. 139-149).

Offerlé next undertakes an absolutely essential analysis of the company as a political entity, which leads him to refer to contemporary debates about the status and purpose of companies. Yet his analysis does not get very far, as it gives insufficient attention to corporate law and the fact that most companies, because they are based on limited liability and legal personality, cannot be the property of a single individual (p. 170).

Contrasting relationships to politics and the public sphere

Few businessmen become permanently involved in the public sphere. When they do, it can happen unintentionally--as in the case of the chairman of a big bank who saw his responsibilities running a sector federation as an extension of his job (p. 196). Involvement in employer organizations results from extremely different motives, ranging from the defense of special interests to the pursuit of business relationships, by way of some notion of the common good. Here, too, the book tends to overgeneralize. But it implicitly suggests a distinction between small businessmen, who are more likely to get involved in public affairs, and big businessmen, who are more disposed to honorific positions. Media and literary interventions and philanthropy--two other forms of involvement--are primarily the domain of chairmen and chief executive officers of large companies, who see such activities as the noble way to do politics, immune from partisan compromise. The top executives that Offerlé interviewed keep themselves at a considerable distance from political life, not out of disinterest, but out of defiance to those who are politically active. Big business leaders believe that politicians lack competence on economic matters and are demagogic, while small businessmen tend to reject politicians out of hand, dismissing them as corrupt--and occasionally comparing them to big executives. Businessmen have no doctrine other than free enterprise, which is primarily a demand for autonomy from

the state. To the extent that such things can be measured, they do not constitute a homogeneous voting bloc.

Of course, a majority of businessmen vote for the right--and even the extreme right, in the case of a significant number of shop owners and craftsmen (p. 249). But the deeper problem is not determining how businessmen vote but identifying who businessmen are. The category "businessmen" ("=*patron*"= in French) does not exist in the statistics of the French statistical agency or in the typologies of pollsters. This category is constantly being assembled and reassembled from other, more or less well-defined categories such as shop owners and artisans, top executives, "big" and "small" and "independent" businessmen, and so on. The word "businessmen" starts to unravel as soon as one tries to grasp it as a collective entity. Fortunately, businessmen who get involved in politics are sufficiently rare that it is possible to examine specific cases. Once again, forms of involvement are very divided. While small businessmen find themselves pursuing elected office and occupying local positions, big business leaders are only willing to get involved if they immediately accede to government positions, as with Francis Mer (France's finance minister from 2002 to 2004) and Thierry Breton (finance minister from 2005 to 2007). If they occasionally hold local offices, this has more to do with family obligations than political careerism (pp. 307-308). Generally speaking, the conversion of "entrepreneurial capital" into "political capital" is, for both big and small businessmen, extremely costly. It often means that one must either abandon or considerably distance oneself from one's company. The boundary between the two spaces, as it relates to personal trajectories, is quite airtight. A notable exception is Serge Dassault, who for three decades has served as a mayor and senator.

At the end of the day, Offerlé shows that businessmen have contrasting and often frustrated relationships to the public sphere in general and politics in particular. In this way, he dispels the illusion that businessmen are the hidden *deus ex machina* of social life. Businessmen are not absent from public life, but their involvement is not a collective effort and results from very personal reasons and the existence of opportunities.

Understanding the variety of businessmen

One cannot help but wonder, however, what might have been learned from a more systematic treatment of the divide between small and big businessmen, which

resurfaces throughout the book. It would have helped, for instance, if excerpts from interviews had systematically included sociological data on the executives (age, education, and title--manager, CEO, chairman, etc.) as well as their company's size and legal status. This would certainly have brought to light, however minimally, a few of the collective characteristics of businessmen relationship to the public sphere. The difference between those who have broken with or who defy the social order and those who serve it as much as they are served by it is too pronounced not to be tied to social dynamics. Small businessmen's modes of action and intervention in the public sphere, which often assume a protesting, union-based, and local form, are far closer to the down-and-out than those of the big business leaders, who rarely get involved and do so only when it advances their careers.

Big businessmen are endowed with social attributes--as seen in their education as well as in their trajectories--that are far closer to those of top civil servants--a milieu from which they often hail--than those of heads of small businesses. One wonders why Offerlé examines neither the concept of "state businessmen" proposed by Pierre Bourdieu and Monique de Saint-Martin⁴ nor the deep continuities between the highest levels of the French state and the leadership of major companies. If he had, his view of "businessmen" would certainly have been significantly revised. This is perhaps what is most lacking in Offerlé's book: a clear definition of a businessmen, and a justification for using the same term for the CEO of a world wide corporation and the manager of a local pizzeria.

The very idea that a company's leadership should always be embodied in the same way, in the person of the "businessmen," is far from self-evident. Sixty years ago, André Siegfried observed that "for anyone who wished to understand the functioning of large American corporations, the traditional businessman, particularly the 'leader by divine right,' belonged henceforth to legend."⁵ The same reasoning can be applied to French companies. The bureaucracies that, according to Max Weber, characterize big capitalist enterprises have little to do with the forms of patriarchal domination found in smaller structures. The concept of "businessman" has undoubtedly become too narrow to grasp the complexity of economic power. Offerlé senses this when, in the book's final pages, he calls for the study, not of businessmen, but the transformation of the state and the hybridization of public and private spaces.

⁴ Bourdieu P. ; Saint-Martin (de) M., « Le patronat », Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales, n°20-21, p. 3-82.

⁵ Berle A., *Le capital américain et la conscience du roi. Le Néo-capitalisme aux États-Unis*, Paris, Armand Colin, Préface d'André Siegfried, 1957. p. vii.

Conclusion

Offerlé's book is a valuable contribution to understanding how company heads act in the public sphere and the limits of their collective action. Like French society, businessmen are often divided, lacking genuine ideological homogeneity and endowed with different degrees status and wealth. Their involvement in the public sphere and political life reflects this diversity--that is to say, it is extremely contrasted. This observation helps to dispel the myth that business leaders have seized control of the levers of political power and that they dictate their law to society as a whole. If the political realm often seems to yield to the injunctions of the economic order, the reason lies not in the involvement of business leaders, but in the more subtle and less direct ways in which the state penetrates the economic world.

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