

Industrial Relations as a Discipline and Field in France and the UK

Les relations industrielles comme discipline et champ de connaissances en France et au Royaume-Uni

Las relaciones industriales como disciplina y campo en Francia y en el Reino Unido

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Article abstract

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Industrial Relations as a Discipline and Field in France and the UK

PHILIP ALMOND

This article analyses the differences in the post-war study of employment relations in the UK and France, examining both the orientations of the main literatures, and more recent developments in response to the changes of recent years. Through a comparison of the literature, the article seeks to analyse the implicit assumptions behind research in the field. The predominant means of investigating employment relations in both countries are seen to have been over-fixed on normative assumptions drawn from the specific circumstances of the post-war industrial relations climates of the two countries. This provides a partial explanation for the emergence of new normative frameworks, including that of Human Resource Management, particularly in the UK. It is argued that in order for a move away from an explicitly managerial agenda to occur, researchers into industrial relations, particularly in English-speaking countries, must integrate their arguments within a greater awareness of wider societal change.

Much English language research in the general area of employment relations does not pay any great attention to the works of non-Anglophone academics. This fact may lead to a loss of contextual perspective, particularly (but not only) in the case of comparative research. It may also hamper intellectual progress. For example, Gallie (1988) contends that the labour process debate—in other words, the development of a Marxian approach to work organization (Braverman 1974; Burawoy 1982)—was delayed in Anglophone sociology until the 1970s because of a lack of familiarity

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with the classic French sociology of the early post-war years (for example, Friedmann 1946, 1956).

An improved international understanding of intellectual contexts would be useful because social sciences inevitably develop in a manner that is closely related to developments in the wider society. Indeed, one might argue that social sciences would be of little relevance if they did not reflect concerns within society at any given moment in time. This inevitably means that the development of social science research tends to mirror (even if it sometimes challenges) the dominant normative and ideological assumptions of its social setting.

This article therefore aims to analyse the dominant ways in which industrial relations, as a substantive area of academic interest, has been studied in France and the UK over the past half-century. It seeks to link research traditions and ideologies with their potential normative effects and causes. Additionally, we will attempt to move towards a preliminary evaluation of whether the frameworks within which industrial relations has generally been studied have a general practical adequacy (Sayer 1992), or one that is limited in time or space.

The article concentrates on the post-war period, covering the time when the study of employment relations, widely defined, became institutionalized in French and British academia, as well as the subsequent questioning of the beliefs of the predominant institutionalized forms of theorization of employment relations on each side of the Channel, namely pluralist, voluntarist industrial relations in the UK and the *sociologie du travail* in France. Schools of thought that have emerged since the apparent demise of the Fordist era, including the Regulation School, human resource management (HRM), and the recent moves towards the institutionalization of industrial relations research in France, are also considered. The article does not attempt to provide a complete genealogy of employment relations research in either country. Clearly, there is an interesting story to be told of the comparative early development of the field across disciplines as wide as law, sociology, economics, history, politics, and management science, but this is beyond the scope of this article. For similar reasons, research outside the mainstream schools of thought in the two countries cannot be explored in the detail it perhaps deserves. The predominant concern here is centred on the ideological causes and effects of mainstream research and theory, rather than on an attempt to reflect the full variety of theorization of the employment relationship in either country.

The analysis here raises questions as to the manner in which the trend of the past two decades towards human resource management, both as a normative “project” and as a field of study, may itself be a social

construction with specifically national identities (Clark 1996). For Britain, we are obliged to consider whether the partial (academic) substitution of HRM for industrial relations in part reflects the outdated, or otherwise inadequate, nature of some of the essential normative supports of the more established field. In particular, did the relative lack of attempts to develop a genuine comparative framework for the study of industrial relations allow very specific features of that country, such as voluntaristic pluralism and the degree of separation made between politics and economics by the important actors, to be treated as more normal than, they, in fact, were (Streeck 1992)? Equally, it is useful to gain an understanding of the means by which French social scientists have interpreted changing managerial and governmental agendas, both in order to examine the normative assumptions behind the mainstream of French studies, and to attempt to move towards an appreciation of the role that the study of industrial relations might be able to play in analyzing recent and current developments in industrialized countries with substantially different frameworks for the regulation of paid employment.

THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IN THE UK

The study of industrial relations has a long history in the UK, with university chairs being established as early as the 1920s. The major expansion, however, occurred in the post-war years (Brown 1992). Attracting both economists and sociologists, one striking feature of this field was the extent to which its participants resisted attempts at theorization. This is explicitly justified in the classic post-war account of the British industrial relations system:

We are aware that our concentration on the formal institutions of industrial relations may arouse criticism from those who have been affected by the teachings of the new school of "human relations in industry." This school applies the techniques of sociology and social psychology direct to "situations" which it discovers in factories and other places of work. There is no *a priori* reason why this method should not be preferred to ours. The school is, however, at an early stage of development, and has still to provide material which could be used for teaching. Moreover, much of its published work shows a deplorable lack of historical understanding and, sometimes, a failure to appreciate the nature of the "situation" studied due to ignorance of the formal institutions which surround it. Accordingly the study of the institutions seems to us a proper preliminary to the use of these more adventurous methods (Flanders and Clegg 1954: v-vi).

We have considerable sympathy with the view that it is important to have an accurate, historically informed account of formal work situations in order to understand realities in the workplace. Indeed, one might almost

substitute “human resources” for “human relations” in order to understand some of the problems of the academic study of HRM (Legge 1995). What needs to be emphasized, however, is that the concentration on formal institutions was not accompanied, in the great majority of cases, by serious attempts to theorize the means of strategy formulation by both public and private actors (particularly the state and management). Equally, the role of power within industrial relations was, and still is, largely neglected, at least by non-Marxist authors.

The Role of Ideology

Given the (quite conscious) lack of use of explicit theory within the field of industrial relations, it is necessary to reach some understanding of the more implicit ideological and normative underpinnings that dominated the subject. Here, an examination of Alan Flanders’ famous essay *Industrial Relations: What Is Wrong with the System?* (1965) is of considerable value.

Flanders, a liberal pluralist, was at the time primarily concerned with the lack of “orderliness” in the British system, as at a time of full employment and relative prosperity, orderly, industry-wide bargaining (the “formal system”) had become, at least for many groups of male, blue-collar workers, increasingly irrelevant. Real wages and working conditions were now largely determined by informal, unofficial agreements at the workplace level, which were often ill-controlled by either managers or the central bureaucracies of trade unions. For Flanders, it was necessary to reconstruct the system in order to create consensus and cooperation in the workplace.

To the extent that the British system was falling into a form of Durkheimian *anomie* (Lallement 1996: 31), it was clear that British industrial relations academics had to make some attempt at explanation. Why had the system that had been described and historically analyzed with such care suddenly become such an apparent “problem”? Perhaps bravely, Flanders in part blamed the pragmatism in which he would presumably acknowledge being a participant: “The pragmatic approach to industrial relations, so deeply rooted in our society, inhibits a comprehensive causal analysis of the growing dissatisfaction with our traditional system as a whole” (Flanders 1965: 7).

Even a pragmatist, however, has normative or ideological supports for his/her beliefs. It is widely argued that British pragmatism towards industrial relations was largely based on an extreme mistrust of direct state interference (Fox 1985; Hyman 2003). Indeed, to many, the fact that, in Britain, employers and trade unions interacted on an apparently voluntary basis to regulate wages and conditions of work was a reason for “smug compla-

gency” (Flanders 1965: 7), a sign of tolerance within British civil society, and consequently, following the ideas of (largely American) convergence theorists (Kerr et al. 1960), a sign that Britain was somehow more advanced, or at least more civilized, than continental European countries.

Even Flanders, in analyzing the problems faced by the system, remained resolutely opposed to fundamental changes in its nature. Simply, legal solutions would not work:

It is not the so-called voluntary character of the British system which is the source of its present malaise. Rather does this remain its strength. Certainly we are not compelled to abandon our long-standing preference for avoiding the rigidities and complication of legal solutions to industrial problems. [. . .] On the contrary we can be sure that changes in the law will not provide the kind of co-operation and consensus that the reconstruction of the system demands (Flanders 1965: 63).

The fact that this position represented the majority view among British industrial relations academics was underlined by the findings of the Royal Commission on Industrial Relations (Donovan 1968).¹ The consensus view was certainly that the system required reform, but that this was not best achieved by legal changes, but rather by voluntary attempts by employers and trade unions to move towards consensus.

This analysis was seemingly confirmed by the failure of attempts by the Heath Conservative government (1970–74) to regulate the system using a model largely inspired by labour law in the USA (the Industrial Relations Act of 1971). The Act was undoubtedly badly framed, and perhaps more significantly, ill-timed. In any case, it was largely rejected by both employers and trade unions, and rapidly repealed. The conclusion drawn by many industrial relations academics was not merely that this particular piece of legislation had failed to achieve its objectives, but that attempts at legal regulation ran counter to the merits of the voluntaristic British system, and were doomed to failure. Thus, the most prominent analysis of the Act famously concludes: “The law was judged on its utility and found wanting” (Weekes et al. 1975: 322). While this was undoubtedly true of the particular Act concerned, one is tempted to draw the conclusion that this sentence is deliberately opaque, in order to allow an interpretation that the “law” being referred to is general, rather than specific. Thus, the failure of the Industrial Relations Act had moved voluntarism from a traditional ideological preference almost to the status of ontology. Frequently, a preference to voluntary, “free” collective bargaining subsumed all else. In this, the ideology of mainstream industrial relations academics was close to that of most trade union leaderships; the protection and further development

1. For contemporary critical analysis, see Turner (1968) and Crossley (1968).

of free collective bargaining was, it seems, more important for both groups than was the existence of minimum conditions for those currently offered inadequate protection by that system. This may be a partial explanation for the relative lack of resistance for later state attacks on trade unions by many groups within the working class.

Nowhere is the ideology better illustrated than by reference to the issue of wage protection for the low paid. Hugh Clegg's (1979) textbook reports on an investigation by the Commission on Industrial Relations into the continued existence of the Industrial Catering Wages Council.² The employers, apparently concerned at the prospect of a heightening of price competition, warned of "a danger of wage cutting and consequential lowering of standards in the industry [. . .] there was no central body that could replace the Council on an industry-wide basis. A significant minority of workers would be left without any protection" (Clegg 1979: 428). Yet the relevant trade unions, at the time interested in wage protection only if it was brought about by increased union membership among the workers concerned, were "strongly opposed to retaining the Council." Clegg concurs, concluding, "[T]here would be a disadvantage in retention if it impeded the further growth of collective bargaining" (Clegg 1979: 428).

The author does recognize that there may be a need to protect the low-paid and unorganized through some other means. The possibility of a national minimum wage is raised, only to be immediately rejected in revealing terms:

It would involve a considerable administrative burden. It would be necessary to decide whether the minimum should apply on an hourly or weekly basis, whether or not overtime earnings should be included, and whether the minimum should apply to rates or earnings. The cost of applying the same minimum to men and women would be considerable [. . .] and the cost would also be affected by the attitude of higher-paid workers to the maintenance of their differentials. [. . .] The social contract would have provided an ideal opportunity for introducing a national minimum wage *if the unions had wanted it* (Clegg 1979: 431, emphasis added).

This underlines two significant problems with the ideology of the study of industrial relations by pluralist voluntarists at the time: firstly, workers' needs and desires were sometimes seen as inseparable from those of their trade union leaders; secondly, those outside the framework of collective bargaining, and particularly women, were not taken seriously and were

2. Wages Councils, established in 1909, offered wage protection to workers in many of the sectors inadequately covered by collective bargaining, by setting minimum wages for the industry under a form of statutory collective bargaining, until their abolition by the Conservative government in 1993. Wage protection for the lowest paid was re-established by the Blair government in 1998, via a statutory national minimum wage.

here seen as something of a problem. The concentration on free collective bargaining allowed low pay to be portrayed purely as an institutional problem rather than as one inherent within the dynamics of capitalist accumulation (Craig et al. 1982: 9), impeded arguments for social progress from alternative sources, and, as was to be seen shortly afterwards, entailed a lack of any protection for workers once free collective bargaining came under threat.

THE LACK OF INSTITUTIONALIZED ACADEMIC INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IN FRANCE

French research in the field of industrial relations has been characterized by weak institutionalization. There has been a lack of specialized academic training or recognition, or even, at least until the recent launch of *La Revue de l'IRES*, any specialized academic journal dealing mainly with issues covered by a narrow definition of industrial relations.

In some ways, this is not altogether surprising, given the failure of collective bargaining to establish itself securely as a governance mechanism in the post-war period (Howell 1992). Additionally, at least until recently, the field has been strongly marked by *éclatement disciplinaire* (Morin and Saglio 1998); the existence of strong epistemological and institutionally-based divisions between various academic disciplines (notably economics, law and sociology) has led to a lack of dialogue between researchers from different disciplines.

The early development of French studies of the employment relationship owes much to the field of labour law, and particularly to the venerable publication *Droit Social*. Many of the more prominent authors in the field had substantial roles as policy makers, and as founders of the French system of employment regulation. For instance, Pierre Laroque's analysis of collective agreements presented to the *Conseil National Économique* in 1934 was influential in the reform of collective conventions under the Popular Front government in 1936 (Machu 2000).

Equally, a small number of institutionalist economists were intellectually influential. These include Gaétan Pirou (Pirou 1910, 1940), an early analyst of collective bargaining whose work in this area was, to some extent, within the American institutionalist approach, and Elie Halévy (Richter 1967; Aron 1971; Bo Bramson 1971), a friend, and correspondent of Beatrice and Sidney Webb, the founding parents of pluralist industrial relations in Britain.

However, as the concern of this article is comparatively to analyse post-war hegemonic approaches in employment relations between the UK

and France, it is necessary to bear in mind that the origins of graduate industrial relations in France are best traced back to the publication, in 1946, of Friedmann's *Problèmes humains du machinisme industriel* (Caire 1996). This is in spite of the fact that Friedmann's work can more accurately be seen as the genesis of French *sociologie du travail*, which covered a vast area of substantive concerns of which industrial relations, as the term would be understood in Anglophone countries, has played only a relatively minor role.³ Given the late, albeit rapid, emergence of work in industrial society as a central concern within French sociology, it is unsurprising that it was not until the 1950s and 1960s that courses relating to the employment relationship were widely taught in French academia (Caire 1996). Works using the specific title *relations industrielles* did not appear until the early 1970s (Weiss 1973; Caire 1973; Sellier 1976), although this fact reflects the limited scope of collective bargaining, and the nature of compartmentalization of research between disciplines, as much as the limited volume of study being undertaken into "industrial relations issues."

Until the 1980s, the narrow industrial relations field was largely dominated by a small number of academics. Probably the most prominent analyst of the industrial relations system was Jean-Daniel Reynaud (Reynaud 1963, 1975; Adam, Verdier et Reynaud 1972), a pluralist liberal whose approach owed much to both Dunlop and the Oxford School. As Rose (1979) wryly observes, much of Reynaud's work, at least in the 1960s and 1970s, consisted of an attempt to determine whether France had an industrial relations "system", in Dunlop's (1958) sense of the term (see below), "and to decide that, no, such a 'system' did not exist (probably), but that it could appear (perhaps), and that it should appear (emphatically)" (Rose 1979: 137).

Defining industrial relations more broadly, French traditions in the study of the employment relations generally derived from two complementary sources. Firstly, the juridical tradition has historically been primarily concerned with positioning the constitution of collective law in opposition to theories of contracts and laws relating to individual relations (Morin 1993). Sociological approaches, until relatively recently, largely examined the labour process, and the role of labour in its (possible) attempt to transform society. Within the discipline of economics, some interest in the neo-institutionalism of Dunlop as a comparative framework in the structuring of wages (Goetz-Girey 1958; Brochier 1957/1966; Perroux 1957/1966), was marginalized by the domination of the macro-micro dichotomy, reducing agents to their simple, rational characteristics (Caire 1996). Important

3. The nearest "functional equivalent" of *sociologie du travail* in the UK is represented by the body of work published under the broad heading of "industrial sociology." Post-war work in the latter tradition is best reviewed by Brown (1992).

exceptions to this generalization do exist, perhaps most notably the work of François Sellier, both for his research into social conflict (Sellier 1961, 1970), and later for his contribution to the comparative socio-economic approach of the LEST group (Maurice, Sellier and Sylvestre 1982).

Morin and Saglio (1998) argue both that the dominance of the juridical and sociological traditions results from the specificities of the politico-judicial construction of the employment relationship in France, and that the emphases resulting from these sources partly explain the relative paucity of work, which takes proper account of the dynamics of labour markets. To this we must add the pragmatic argument that the weakness of collective bargaining as an effective instrument of labour control also plays a prominent part in explaining the lack of economic studies of its content. In other words, the socio-historical context of national mobilizations, and more visible class struggle and national politics have all been much more important for an understanding of employment relations in France than in the UK, and this has tended to favour sociological approaches based on class analysis.

Post-War Sociologie du Travail

Sociologie du travail is generally recognized as having its origins in a series of seminars on the labour process organized by Georges Friedmann in the immediate post-war years. In the rapidly modernizing French economy, it expanded quickly to form the largest field of sociological enquiry by the 1950s (Rose 1979). Its starting point was criticism both of Taylorism's denial of man's social role in work, and of the failure of the American human relations school to link the workplace or firm with the wider society (Friedmann 1946).

This rapid expansion brought about rapid fragmentation, such that it would be difficult to ascribe a particular underlying set of premises, which governed research within the subject area, other than to point out its largely Marxian, critical nature. Investigations tended to concentrate on the act of manufacture itself, and thus on the workplace (Tripier 1984). Equally, the workplace concerned was generally either the Fordist assembly line, or the advanced automated process plant, with the primary focus of substantive research being a critical examination of the organization of work. As Linhart (1994) argues, the articulation of the work situation with other social activities and roles was largely ignored. Finally, much research was concerned with what were the (implicitly inevitable) consequences of the existence or dominance of certain forms of work organization, whether this was deskilling and alienation (Friedmann 1946, 1956), a progressive dissociation between technical and social organization (Naville 1963), the

emergence of a “new working class” and its potential for revolution through its interest in control (Mallet 1963), or the emergence of first contractual, then *gestionnaire* trade unionism, demanding joint management at both local and national levels (Touraine 1966).

Viewed with the considerable degree of hindsight available today, it is not clear that the conclusions reached were always particularly well supported by facts. Grand theorization—or rather, grand prediction—sometimes rather dominated analysis. As Rose (1979: 19) argues, this could at least partially be explained by a “blissful ignorance” of economics, and the technological determinism that ensued. Much such work now seems imbued with an unwarranted sense of the inevitability of outcomes, and a failure to take full account of the role of actors within processes. The limited role accorded to industrial relations (except with regard to discussions on the revolutionary potential, or lack of it, of organized labour) is also notable. This is perhaps partially explained by the extent to which French trade unions recoiled from involvement in issues concerning the organization of work, being content, to a greater extent than their British counterparts, to dispute the division of value added between profits and wages (Boyer 1984). This was paralleled by a rigid adherence, on the part of employers, to relatively homogenous forms of scientific management, in order to ensure productivity growth (Linhart 1994). Hence, research was focused on the workplace more because the act of work was seen as the most important element in the construction of (post) industrial society, rather than for its own intrinsic interest. At least until the economic crisis of the 1970s, researchers in this area tended to assume that general sociology would be built upon the development of the *sociologie du travail*, rather than the other way round.

THE THEORETICAL SUPPORTS OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS: DISCUSSION

The brief review above reflects a relatively high degree of societal specificity in the hegemonic forms of investigation into the broad subject area of employment relations, for research between 1945 and around 1980. This poses a number of important questions for the methodology of industrial relations research. Not the least of these is the question of whether the subject can claim disciplinary status. For this, it is clearly not sufficient that the field of study is important; it must be demonstrated that academic industrial relations has its own technology of analysis, such that the question of a French working party, over whether industrial relations may be seen “as a method of analysis of social configurations relative to work and employ-

ment and as an open field of actors, practice and regulation” (Morin and Saglio 1998: 2) can be answered in the affirmative.

The work of the American neo-institutionalist John T. Dunlop (1958) remains one of the most influential attempts at the theorization of industrial relations systems, at least insofar as the subject is seen largely to represent formal relationships between employers, organized labour and the state. To summarize, Dunlop saw the industrial relations system as a sub-system of society, the function of which is the production of rules and procedures aimed at regulating labour relations in industrialized society. Three sub-systems are posited as determinants of the production of such rules and procedures: namely technological, economic and political systems. The technological and economic sub-systems are seen to produce *substantive* rules, while the political sub-system is primarily a determinant of *procedural* rules. Significantly, the industrial relations system is seen as autonomous from these other sub-systems and must therefore be analyzed separately.

Critiques of Dunlop’s work are so commonplace that it is unnecessary to re-iterate its problems here (but see Reynaud et al. 1990; Maurice, Sellier and Sylvestre 1982; Clegg 1979). For our purposes, however, it does raise important questions. Particularly, it essentially defines the subject as the production of rules regulating labour relations, while arguing that this element of socio-economic life has a necessary autonomy from the rest of society, serving a specific function (Streeck 1992). Whether such a compartmentalization can be portrayed as valid is perhaps central to the continued survival of industrial relations as an academic study with genuine disciplinary aspirations.

Perhaps because of the stronger disciplinary origins of the researchers concerned, or because of the more recent development of industrial relations as an accepted field of study, the question of the degree of autonomy of industrial relations has been better tackled by French research than it has in mainstream British studies. To those attempting to institutionalize a “new” field of research, with academics drawn from backgrounds in sociology, economics and law, it has seemed important to debate whether industrial relations should be perceived as an autonomous sub-system (whether or not within Dunlop’s framework), or whether the subject definition should be more restricted and tightly confined, without ontological claims as to the existence of a distinct and autonomous “industrial relations system.”

In concrete terms, the degree to which industrial relations systems *appear* to be autonomous varies between societies, and also across time. Particularly, the degree to which the “political system” influences the content of the industrial relations system can be seen to vary considerably. History shows many examples of incursions of the political system into the industrial relations system provoking reactions that may be interpreted

as emphasizing the autonomy of industrial relations. Examples of this arise both in more state-led systems such as France (e.g. the effects of the Auroux Laws, Howell 1992), as well as systems that appear, *a priori*, to be more autonomous (for the UK, one might cite the failure of the Industrial Relations Act, or even the less than total transformation of industrial relations in the face of Thatcherite reforms).

To the majority of industrial relations researchers, the fact that the contexts advanced by Dunlop fail to provide an adequate explanation of industrial relations systems in practice has been interpreted as confirmation of the autonomy of industrial relations as a field; "Industrial relations have a specific logic, and are not simple translations of general or universal social forces into a particular domain" (Reynaud et al. 1990: 281).

Yet the fact that, in practice, the dynamics of industrial relations systems cannot directly be imputed from any given determinant force within society does not necessarily suggest that the field is thus *particularly* autonomous from societal forces. To suggest that industrial relations systems have their own logic, may perhaps, at certain points in history, appear to be valid in practice. In theory, however, an exaggeration of the degree of independence of industrial relations systems is to take an excessively asocial view of the field. While developments in industrial relations systems do not follow a simple logic in response to any given set of determinants, this does not mean that the rationale of industrial relations "systems" lies outside that of the wider society; rather, industrial relations actors operate under a socialized and *contingent* rationality (Hall 1986), in the sense that actors are engaged in a continuous learning process as to the likely degree of success of various strategies within their own societies.

The more fundamental problem, however, is that the need to present industrial relations as an autonomous field has led to an excessively reductive view of what constitutes industrial relations. While the overall institutional shape of the industrial relations system may possess a "national logic" which primarily transmits compromises between industrial relations actors, an exaggerated concentration on institutions risks neglecting the issue of what industrial relations systems actually do. When analyzing the effect of institutionalized systems on the establishment of conditions under which paid labour is expected to work, it rapidly becomes apparent that "the creation of rules" does not simply emanate from an autonomous industrial relations system, even though it is often transmitted through this system. What occurs within industrial relations systems substantially reflects wider societal forces, in relation to educational systems, the gender division of labour and organizational systems, among other factors (Maurice, Sellier and Sylvestre 1982). This is not an attempt to impose new determinants on the industrial relations system. Rather, we need to emphasize that every

“sub-system” within society is closely interrelated, and the interactions between different elements of “societal systems” construct society, leaving the construction of sub-systems as an essentially heuristic exercise.

The recognition of such interlocking factors, and their effects on the contingent rationality of industrial relations actors, is of particular importance to comparative research and also in times of substantial societal, economic and political change. The last twenty-five years have been such a period, with considerable ramifications for the study of employment relations in both the countries under consideration here. We now turn to a consideration of these developments.

CRISIS, REGULATION AND RE-REGULATION

The economic crisis of the 1970s and early 1980s has given rise, directly or indirectly, to many of the refrains that continue to dominate the fields of employment relations, and particularly HRM, today. References to “globalization,” “flexibility,” the management of organizational culture and quality, the imperative to move away from Taylorism to team-based work organization, for example, remain commonplace across the various literatures on industrial relations broadly defined.

The most sustained attempt to analyse these changes has come from the Paris-based *Regulation School* (Aglietta 1976; Aglietta and Brender 1984; Boyer 1986a, 1986b; Boyer and Saillard 1994; Lipietz 1988; Jessop 2001). The Regulation School economists present a holistic vision of the dynamics of capitalism in a socio-historical perspective. Although their work, and that of sympathizers, enters territory well beyond the broadest of definitions of employment relations (Aglietta and Breton 2001; Jager 2003; Gorg and Brand 2000), the core of their analysis of the periodization of institutional forms of capitalist accumulation is an analysis of the wage-labour relation within a functionalist, Marxian approach. This attempt to offer an explanation for change in the wage-labour relation, combining economic, historical and sociological insight, implicitly challenges the established hegemonies of employment relations research in our two countries on several grounds. Most significantly, for French *sociologie du travail*, it firmly reintroduces the notion of circuits of capital into analyses of the employment relationship, thus highlighting the failure of the former to expand its research to economic relationships beyond the place of manufacture. While its direct impact on British industrial relations academia has been more marginal, the encompassing nature of the Regulation School also provides a strong challenge to assumptions concerning the autonomy of industrial relations systems (see above).

Without entering into debate on the finer points of the various theories of Regulation (Grahl and Teague 2000; Green 1992; Jessop 1990, 2001; Lipietz 1988), it is clear that elements central to the broad argument have been highly cohesive with changes in the nature of capitalism over the last 25 years. References to the end of a “Fordist” era, and to economic crisis provoking the move towards “flexibility” from the 1980s onwards, are far from confined to those acquainted with Regulation Theories, as the debate around potential successors to the Fordist production regime (i.e. the neo vs. post-Fordism debate and, more widely, that on forms of flexibility) became, at least implicitly, the point upon which questions of systemic industrial relations change became anchored. The question remains, how has employment relations research reacted to such potentially significant changes in the economy-wide understanding of the employment relationship? Here, while there are, unsurprisingly, certain common emphases in research, there are marked institutional differences between the UK and France.

Management and Managerialism: British and French Academic Responses

One challenge to established models of studying industrial relations stems from the changing focus of concrete industrial relations systems in terms of the desired outputs from the point of view of capital. From a role of maintaining social peace and managing employee status (in Streeck’s (1992) sense of “non-market” employee rights), the emphasis, at least rhetorically, shifted to the promotion of a (flexible) enterprise culture capable of supporting company strategy. With employers clearly holding the initiative, it was no longer tenable to examine one “side of industry,” i.e. management, only as a collective bargaining actor, as was traditionally the case in the British study of industrial relations (Bain 1983 for an example; Marchington 1982 for an early critique). Put simply, the crisis of academic industrial relations in Britain was exacerbated by a long-standing limitation of the subject to the study of relationships between collective actors. One result of this was that an extensive proportion of work in the employment relationship more generally has recently been conducted within the more explicitly managerial field of HRM.

Equally, in France, the sociology of work tended to be limited to study in the workplace, accompanied with relatively abstract theorization, while economic analyses often placed the firm in the infamous “black box.” To many social scientists from widely differing disciplines and perspectives, “the position of the firm in the market and the composition of capital were sufficient to explain its choices and strategies” (Saglio 1996: 570). Now, the apparent increase in the attention paid by firms to human resource issues,

combined with their increased autonomy to act, effectively “enlarged” the firm to make it, in the eyes of some, a genuine place of social production where management attempts to reconcile more or less contradictory logics (Sainseaulieu 1990).

The consequent “sociology of enterprises,” which emerged in France in the late 1980s and early 1990s, perceives the enterprise as an institution or community, carrying messages and values for society (Bernoux 1995; Sainseaulieu 1990; Segrestin 1992). At one level, this development can be seen as part of a general move from research in terms of social class towards research in terms of social groups (Durand 1987). It can also be said to attempt a more “concrete” analysis of change than earlier forms of sociological investigation.

Yet where *sociologie du travail* was, in essence, Marxian and critical, the sociology of enterprises has been almost uniformly pluralist and consensual (Coutrot 1998). It also adds little to theory, apart from its treatment of the firm as a micro-society. It can further be criticized for ignoring work itself, in its focus on change, and for emphasizing the effects of the firm on society at the expense of the reverse. In some ways, therefore, the development of this field, going hand in hand with the “glorification of the enterprise” (Dufour and Hege 1997) has parallels with the development of HRM in Britain.⁴ It is interesting, therefore, to note that interest has apparently waned from the late 1990s onwards, as it has become clear that the “rehabilitation” of the enterprise was only a very partial phenomenon. Attempts to create a vision of the future built on the consensual enterprise seemed, by the late 1990s, to contradict high levels of public mistrust in firms, and increased sociological (and to some extent political) interest in means of reducing unemployment which relied somewhat less on the free market paradigm.

Responses to the Crisis of Existing Approaches

The immediate causes of the British academic crisis in industrial relations can closely be linked to those of the crisis of the labour movement, and are thus familiar: anti-union legislation prior to 1997, and the apparent marginalization of trade unions within the firm, have led to the new “problems” of managing labour being apparently better (or at any rate, more

4. Although HRM is widely taught in French business schools, its influence as a stand-alone subject is far less hegemonic than in the UK, and is of less academic significance, with “critical” and analytical authors not taking institutionalised positions within the subject as has been the case within the UK, where probably the majority of those who consider themselves industrial relations academics work in HRM departments, often with HRM in their job titles.

attractively, from the point of view of those doing the managing) answered within the newly emerging field of HRM. As is implicit from our argument above, the crisis was possibly exacerbated by an increasing divergence between assumed and real *influences* on action, captured particularly in the failure to take issues of gender and the welfare state, to name but two, as seriously as more familiar determinants. On a more practical level, research funding declined, partly for ideological reasons under the Thatcher government, and partly because industrial relations is no longer seen by the state and capital as the central “problem” it once was.

Yet while industrial relations as an academic (sub) discipline entered something of a crisis in the UK in the 1980s, the last twenty years have seen an increasing institutionalization of the field in France. Although industrial relations continues to be taught primarily from within disciplinary boundaries (mainly within labour economics, law and sociology departments), concerted attempts have been made, perhaps for the first time, to develop genuine multi-disciplinary academic approaches. This is manifested both in the foundation of a standing research group in *relations professionnelles* within the CNRS (the state funded research body), dating from 1982, and more generally in an increased interest in crossing the rubicon between labour economics and sociology (see, for example, Michon and Segrestin 1990; Lallement 1994; Gazier 1998; Paradeise 1984, 1988).

The explanations for this arise from several sources. Firstly, despite parallel changes in the economy, the political climate has been considerably different to that in the UK. While Thatcher was attempting to remove trade union rights, the French Socialists (later reinforced by governments of the Right) attempted to legitimate firm-level bargaining, in an attempt to “normalize” the French industrial relations system while “re-habilitating” the public image of firms and creating negotiated flexibility within the system.

Understanding of these reforms had to be based on a socio-historical understanding of industrial relations actors and the choices they made. Certain strands within economic thought acquired an increased interest in institutionalist approaches, the role of the collective actor and the regulation of social and economic exchange (Favereau 1996), while the Regulation School (see above) attempted to re-introduce a broader Marxian analysis of the dynamics of capitalism with the wage-employment relationship at its core. In the field of labour law, the work of Alain Supiot (1994, 1999) on the transformation of work and employment, and its regulation in a post-industrial society is of international renown, and marked by a distinctive multi-disciplinary approach. The research centre “*Droit et Changement Social*” at Nantes is also responsible for a range of other multi-disciplinary research based in labour law (Héas 2000; Maggi-Germain 2002; Kerbouch and Wilmann 2002; Chauchard and Hardy-Dubernet 2003).

Within the discipline of sociology, the traditional and near-total dominance of studies on the conditions of work and employment, rather than on the division of the volume of employment (Saglio 1996), has become unsustainable in the face of an era of under-employment, the expansion of female labour force participation, and the problems facing young workers entering the labour market. There has developed a clearer understanding of the need to understand both work, understood here as the concrete exercise of paid activity (albeit that much work is, of course, unpaid), and employment, interpreted as the conditions of placement in the labour market and related phenomena (Kergoat 1980). This has led, in France, to the development of a sociology of employment, dealing with the experience of unemployment, conditions of access to work, atypical employment, and the sharing of work within society (Maruani and Reynaud 1993), in response to the failure of labour sociology to take account of the articulation between private and working lives, career dynamics and the gendered management of labour (Tripier 1991). We thus see convergence here with the interests of heterodox labour economists (cf. Lallement 1994), giving rise to a treatment of employment relations which is largely concerned with the regulation of the labour market.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

To summarize broadly, one may perceive two broad trends, which have been present on both sides of the English Channel.

Firstly, partly in reaction to events in the real world, but also in counterpart to theoretical deficits in some of the academic disciplines concerned, there has been a distinct move towards investigation of the firm or employer as an actor or institution. This cuts across disciplines and also across ideological differences, uniting, for instance, human resource management, the sociology of enterprises, elements of institutionalist economics and labour market segmentation theories (Cahiers du GDR 1991, 1993). However, and particularly in the UK, much research effort continues to be devoted to the merits, or otherwise, of various models of human resource management, with wider societal factors often being ignored or neglected.

Additionally, one important reason for a focus on industrial relations and the sociology of work has historically been the societal question of the integration of the (male-manual) working class within capitalist society. At the current time, however, strains on capitalist society do not appear to be primarily within the terrain of industrial conflict. Rather, concerns around the cohesion of capitalist societies now appear to revolve primarily around the crisis of employment, "social exclusion," and problems caused by the

segmentation of society along sexual, ethnic and other lines. Even though categories which are socially excluded may often be male and working class, the friction within society is not primarily to be found within the workplace. In France, as briefly highlighted above, this has given rise to new multi-disciplinary approaches to the crisis of employment. In the UK, where social exclusion is less visible (although not less present), and academia has become structured along increasingly managerialist lines, the overall result of this shift in the fault line of societal cohesion appears to have been an overall diminution in the volume of work on industrial relations, with much work being subsumed under the HRM banner. The development of approaches dealing with issues around social inclusion/exclusion is far less developed, and has not generally emerged from the industrial relations field.

Where does this leave the field of industrial relations? For those with an interest in the regulation of paid work within capitalist society, national industrial relations systems do seem to have become less autonomous from wider societal factors. Much greater attention therefore needs to be paid to societal factors, which lie outside the scope of what has generally been recognized as industrial relations. At the same time, industrial relations systems, in the narrower sense, continue to have distinct effects on the nature of outcomes within society (see, for example, Almond and Rubery 1998), and thus continue to merit detailed investigation for those interested in the dialectical interplay between actors, institutions and societal outcomes. Both these conclusions point to a need to perceive industrial relations as a field, to be cultivated with greater regard to the analytical methods of the social sciences more generally, rather than resorting to the ultimately defensive act of attempting to reinforce the disciplinary pretensions of the subject area by claiming a level of autonomy from the wider society that cannot be said to exist in any concrete form.

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RÉSUMÉ

Les relations industrielles comme discipline et champ de connaissances en France et au Royaume-Uni

Cette étude se veut une analyse comparative des façons dominantes dont la relation d'emploi, sous l'angle d'un champ significatif de l'analyse scientifique, a été étudiée en France et au Royaume-Uni au cours de la période d'après-guerre. En focalisant sur le caractère « impérialiste » de la recherche au cours de cette période, plus particulièrement sur la perspective pluraliste des relations industrielles au Royaume-Uni et celle de la sociologie du travail en France, cette étude évalue dans quelle mesure les approches de recherche en matière de relations d'emploi dans les deux pays ont été influencées par leur contexte idéologique, sociétal et scientifique. Ceci soulève la question à savoir si les nouvelles approches qui ont présidé à l'analyse de la relation d'emploi dans les deux pays au cours des vingt dernières années (principalement la GRH, et en particulier au Royaume-Uni, l'École de la régulation, l'éclatement de la sociologie du travail en France, l'intérêt pour la sociologie de l'entreprise et de l'emploi) se présentent elles-mêmes comme des réponses spécifiques de société. On fait état d'un contraste entre la désinstitutionnalisation partielle des relations industrielles au Royaume-Uni et leur développement comme champ multidisciplinaire dans un contexte français.

La présente étude soulève des questions à l'endroit des fondements théoriques des champs de recherche bien délimités ; plus particulièrement, la fausse dichotomie entre l'économie et la société, parfois présumée dans les travaux relatifs aux relations industrielles, et une préférence exagérée eu égard à la régulation volontaire de la relation d'emploi, qui est perçue comme imprégnée d'idéologie. Ce qui nous invite à poser la question à savoir si les théoriciens des relations industrielles en Grande-Bretagne au cours de la période d'avant-Thatcher ont particulièrement fait état ou non de la spécificité sociétale du système de relations industrielles britannique, si le « système » de relations industrielles au sens du terme retenu par

Dunlop est de fait aussi autonome du reste de la société qu'on se plaît à le supposer parfois. Cette question de l'autonomie prend de l'importance non seulement pour le déclin des relations industrielles au plan de leur traitement théorique en Grande-Bretagne, mais également pour les intellectuels en France qui se demandent si les relations industrielles sont le mieux décrites soit comme discipline, soit comme champ d'étude. On peut penser que l'hypothèse implicite qui sous-tend la recherche en relations industrielles dans une perspective pragmatique au Royaume-Uni a peu contribué à aider ce domaine à traiter de façon théorique du renouveau de la régulation de la relation d'emploi depuis 1979.

Pendant ce temps, la sociologie du travail d'origine française, tout en demeurant ambitieuse au plan de ses prétentions, a eu tendance à demeurer très empiriquement limitée aux lieux de travail et à privilégier la spéculation à l'égard de l'avenir du capitalisme industriel (et par-dessus tout la critique du taylorisme) au lieu de s'adonner à la recherche concrète. L'absence relative d'attention accordée à la régulation de la relation d'emploi fut aussi notée. Le déclin à la fois des relations industrielles et de la sociologie du travail depuis la crise économique de 1970, et par la suite, peut être au moins et en partie attribuée à une faiblesse commune aux deux approches : d'abord, le manque de considération à l'égard de l'intervention de l'employeur/dirigeant dans la structuration de la nature concrète de la relation d'emploi ; ensuite, l'absence d'attention accordée à la distinction chez les travailleurs entre leur rôle de salariés et les autres rôles sociaux. Souvent, l'attention se limitait à la classe des travailleurs de sexe masculin, parce qu'avant tout l'intégration de ce groupe à la société capitalisme semblait être le problème majeur de l'époque. En réaction à ce phénomène, on a observé au cours des vingt-cinq dernières années la venue d'une variété de nouvelles approches qui ne découlent pas des hypothèses. Celles-ci font l'objet d'une brève révision sur une base comparative, révélant à la fois des similitudes et des différences importantes chez celles retenues. Plus précisément, on constate des différences construites socialement entre le déclin du domaine des relations industrielles au plan théorique au Royaume-Uni et leur substitution par celui de la gestion des ressources humaines ; aussi, un dialogue multidisciplinaire de plus en plus fructueux s'installe en France.

Cet essai en vient à la conclusion que les relations du travail comme champ d'études ont besoin d'une révision qui ferait appel à des approches qui tiennent compte des effets d'envergure à l'échelle de la société, au lieu de celles qui amplifient l'autonomie des systèmes de relations industrielles.