

From Industrial Relations to the Employment Relationship: The Development of Research in Britain

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Article abstract

This paper uses certification data from the province of Nova Scotia to provide further evidence that convergence of industrial relations Systems between the U.S. and Canada is far from unavoidable. Contrary to arguments advanced by Troy, private sector organizing in Canada, even when operating under a U.S.-style legal environment, remains remarkably robust, posting a win rate of 68 percent over a ten-year period with no evidence of longitudinal decline. Furthermore, there is compelling evidence that international unions are unable to match the organizing performance of their Canadian counterparts.

From Industrial Relations to the Employment Relationship The Development of Research in Britain

P.K. EDWARDS

In contrast to gloomy diagnoses of the state of industrial relations in the United States, the situation in Britain is comparatively healthy. Reasons include the way in which the HRM challenge was met and the intellectual development of the subject from "old" industrial relations towards a deeper analysis of the employment relationship. These reasons are closely connected to the continuation of a case study tradition of research. Examples of such work illustrating this analysis, particularly those exploring management and the nature of HRM, are discussed. A future research agenda comparing national regimes of labour regulation is sketched.

Assessments of industrial relations scholarship in North America generally offer a gloomy diagnosis, though some suggest an optimistic prognosis. According to Kaufman (1993: 125-135) there has been a "hollowing out" of IR for four reasons. Three are internal to academia: a shift towards science building, especially in labour economics and organizational behaviour, which helped to increase knowledge but which reduced multidisciplinaryity; a lack of an integrating theory in IR; and a reduction in the uniformity of scholars' commitment to a set of reformist values. The fourth is external: a shift of interest away from the traditional concerns of

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— This paper is based on two papers. Both were given to seminars at the Département des relations industrielles, Université Laval, and one presented to the annual conference of the British Academy of Management, September 1992. I am grateful to participants at these sessions, and also to Anthony Ferner, Keith Sisson, David Winchester and two anonymous referees, for comments. The IRRU is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (UK).

IR (namely, the collective agreement between management and unions) towards the newer agenda of Human Resource Management. In order to survive, IR needs to change its focus to "employment relations", examining not just institutions but how the employment relationship operates in practice, and exploring the outcomes for efficiency and equity. This will include a recognition of the centrality of inherent conflicts of interest and an effort to broaden the definition of conflict to embrace shirking and quitting. Case study field research is a key method of inquiry (Kaufman 1993: 167-180). Cappelli (1991) offers a similar diagnosis, though with perhaps an even more optimistic prognosis: OB and labour economics have taken the individual employee as the key unit of analysis and have relied heavily on quantitative techniques, thus leaving space for IR to make a distinctive contribution through an analysis of the social institutions governing employment.

Reviewing developments in the English-speaking world, Adams (1993a: 150) concludes that the general picture is "one of isolated tribes of labor researchers carrying out their work either in ignorance of, or in deliberate disregard for, the work of other groups". His preferred approach (which may be a little tongue-in-cheek) is to find a new name for the field of labour relations research; drawing on the notion of mankind as a maker (*Homo Faber*) he suggests Faberology.

As Strauss (1993) points out, Kaufman's analysis would have benefited from reference to other countries' experience, particularly that of Britain where IR has been less narrowly defined than in the U.S. An earlier paper by Cappelli (1985) briefly addresses the issue. According to Cappelli, British research has retained an inductive approach to theory and an empirical focus on institutions, in contrast to the deductive and individually-focused research which has come to predominate in North American research. The key reason that he identifies in relation to research up to the 1970s is the way in which industrial relations retained its public policy importance. Analyses of the basic structures of industrial relations retained more relevance than was the case in the United States; the same may be true of Canada, though Cappelli addresses only the U.S.

If this is true for the 1970s (and there are some qualifications which might be made), it is plainly not true of the 1980s and 1990s. Public policy under successive Conservative governments has been to assert the importance of markets over institutions. How has IR research been able to survive in a climate that is fundamentally different from that of the 1960s and 1970s? This is the question addressed in this paper. Before proceeding, it is important to stress that the paper does not seek to offer a complete review of the field, but is instead more specific in its focus. First, it is about

research, and not the teaching of the subject. Second, it is not a straight review of recent research.¹ In particular it does not review quantitative work. Such work has certainly produced important findings on major issues including the union/non-union wage differential, the effects of the closed shop, and the links between unionization and productivity. Much of its theoretical orientation and its pursuit of the deductive model is, however, American, so that it offers no distinctive comparative insight. Relatedly, there is no discussion of the important and well-known surveys of British industrial relations.² Though these are a unique resource in measuring what actually happens, they were never intended to drive the subject forward in terms of the way in which industrial relations is conceived and understood.

Third, this last point raises questions of theory and methodology. Some issues of theory are reviewed by Cappelli (1985) and by contributions to a recent volume on theory (Adams 1993b; Godard 1993). The present paper does not address them, except by implication. Research is reviewed which, it is argued, enhances analytical understanding of central processes of IR and thereby exemplifies good theory. Some thoughts on the construction of theory through research programmes are sketched elsewhere (Edwards 1993). As for methodology, an earlier paper in this journal (Edwards 1992a) argued that case study research using the inductive methodology described by Cappelli can generate generalizable knowledge, and has indeed done so; the argument deals with the claim, which Cappelli appears to endorse, that case studies are weak on the testing, as distinct from the development, of hypotheses.

Instead, what the present paper offers is an interpretative essay. Two key features of the British research tradition enabled it to respond to the HRM challenge. The first is a critical and analytical perspective on management. Even in the pre-HRM era, the logic of managerial efforts to control the employment relationship was addressed. This was important in retaining a focus on the processes and contradictions of the employment relationship. It also meant that, though the public policy agenda shifted, IR did not lose relevance, for it addressed some of the central concerns of

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1. Substantive reviews on various topics include: on human resource management, Guest (1991); on trade unions, Kelly (1990); on conflict, Edwards (1992b); on the effects of legal changes, Brown and Wadhvani (1990) and McCarthy (1992); and on the development of the academic profession, Berridge and Goodman (1988). A major analysis of changing public policy and its links to IR is Davies and Freedland (1993).
 2. Examples of quantitative work include Blanchflower and Oswald (1988a, 1988b); Ingram et al. (1993); Metcalf (1989, 1993); and Stewart (1990, 1991). Surveys cover the workplace and company levels. For the latest reports see Millward et al. (1992) and Marginson et al. (1993).

the key actors on the IR stage. The second is the use of the case study method.

Neither characteristic reflects any original virtue of the scholarly community. Each is a product of the British environment. The critical view of management stems from difficulties in the various efforts at reform made by British managements. The use of the case study method reflects a key characteristic of Britain, its "voluntarism" (that is, the voluntary settlement of agreements between employers and unions with no role for the law and with agreements having very little of the substantive content of the typical North American contract). To discover what was happening called for an investigation of practice on the ground, in particular the ways in which shopfloor "custom and practice" filled in the silences of formal contracts. This approach became important with the arrival of HRM, as the claims to have transformed the conduct of labour-management relations were subjected to critical scrutiny.

The thesis underlying these two points is that the way in which the subject is viewed has shifted from a focus on IR in the sense of the institutions of collective bargaining towards a wider interest in the employment relationship. One implication is that knowledge is perhaps less fragmented, and the state of play in the discipline much more exciting, than Adams (1993a) suggests. A second is that concepts such as *Homo Faber* do not get to the heart of the IR contribution. Its distinctiveness lies not in the definition of an area of analysis (which is bound to be shared with other social scientists) but in the intellectual armoury which IR researchers carry with them. They have much to be proud about.

The paper has three main sections. The first outlines briefly the development of the subject, which is divided into the period up to 1980 and from 1980 onwards, and considers debates about its definition, especially the conflict between "pluralist" and "radical" perspectives. It also addresses the relevance of public policy and indicates a definition of the subject in terms of the employment relationship. The second section considers the case study tradition within the two phases of development. But perhaps the greatest challenge is that of management. In Britain, as in North America, it was claimed that HRM contained the key means of understanding relations between employer and employee. If, on the contrary, it can be shown that IR offers distinct insights, not only into HRM but into the very nature of management itself, then its value will have been demonstrated particularly clearly. The third section thus looks in some detail at the understanding of management. Finally, future prospects and a research agenda are considered.

DEVELOPMENT AND DEFINITION OF THE SUBJECT

Studies with a recognizable IR slant go back to the Webbs. The term “industrial relations” was first used in an official publication in 1926 (Hyman 1989: 4). But for present purposes it is convenient to take the publication of the Donovan Commission report in 1968 as a starting point. The Commission reported at a time when industrial relations problems were attracting considerable public attention and when a research community was beginning to evolve (see Bain and Clegg 1974). The Commission’s agenda of reform also shaped a good deal of writing over the subsequent decade. It thus marks something of a watershed.

The 1970s: Pluralists and Radicals

In the “Donovan model”, industrial relations comprised the bargaining relationships between unions and employers together with those aspects of the functioning of the parties that were relevant to bargaining activity. The state was also considered insofar as it shaped the operation of free collective bargaining, either directly through labour laws or indirectly through its management of the economy. In the post-Donovan period, from about 1969 to 1979, attention focused on the extent to which managements were able to reform their bargaining arrangements. This was a period of growing union strength, both at the shopfloor level and, during the period of the Labour Government (1974-79), at the national level. How to manage labour through formal institutions was the issue for employers, and scholarly debate considered the extent of reform and its effects, in particular whether managements were trying, and if so whether successfully, to “incorporate” shop stewards into new company-level bargaining institutions (Terry 1983). There was clear evidence of a move away from the formerly important national systems of bargaining towards the level of the firm (Brown and Terry 1978).

Within the academic profession, the pluralists associated with the Donovan approach, notably Allan Flanders and Hugh Clegg, came under attack from the “radicals”, who included Richard Hyman (1975) and Alan Fox (1974), the latter being a significant convert from the pluralist camp. The pluralists believed that the conflict between capital and labour was manageable through institutions such as collective bargaining and that it was possible and desirable to reform the system (Clegg 1975). The latter grouping was far from unified, embracing Marxists like Hyman and staunch non-Marxists such as Goldthorpe (1974). But they shared the view that conflict ran deeper than the pluralists admitted and that institutional reform could be mere tinkering. It was necessary to explore deeper relations of

power and inequality and to relate industrial relations to the nature of the capitalist economy.

In retrospect, what was important about this debate was that a potentially serious split between pluralists and radicals was avoided. Similarities should not be exaggerated. In particular, radicals stressed the structural bases of conflict while pluralists were more concerned with its management. Nonetheless, some rather neglected common themes can also be discerned.

Clegg (1979) responded to Hyman's criticisms in a measured way, arguing that for many purposes pluralism and radicalism were indistinguishable. This may be contrasted with Kochan's (1982) reaction to the same line of criticism (Hyman 1982), which was essentially to dismiss it as irrelevant. The pluralists accepted some of the key points of radical analysis, in particular as expressed through renewed attention to the labour process. The indeterminacy of the labour contract (the uncertainty of the process wherein workers' capacity to labour is translated into effective effort) became a standard theme in teaching in the early 1980s, with works like those of Richard Edwards (1979) and Andrew Friedman (1977) being widely studied. One index is the way in which many recent textbooks adopt a wider definition of the subject than their forebears (Farnham and Pimlott 1990; Salamon 1987).

Quite why pluralism should have been so flexible is impossible to establish with certainty. But one factor may have been the fact that there already existed a literature which contained a very similar analysis. Crucial here was the work of Baldamus (1961) and Behrend (1957) which had established the concept of the effort bargain. Baldamus argued that effort bargaining was a continuous and uncertain process, just as did the labour process writers. His work was well-known to leading pluralists; witness for example Flanders' (1964: 243-244) discussion of his work. When radicals argued that conflict was built into the employment relationship and that it involved a continuous struggle around the effort bargain, pluralists could readily agree. Brown's (1973) essentially pluralist case studies take informal bargaining as their central theme. A related factor may have been the evident fact that British collective bargaining, lacking legally enforceable agreements and being dominated by informality, involved a daily negotiation of effort and reward quite different from that in most other countries.

The "radicals" also developed, as indicated by a growing preference for "political economy" as a label (e.g. Hyman 1989). Though Clegg went too far in arguing for identity, radicals and pluralists did have much in common. Some of the early portentous writing, which saw the overthrow of capitalism as a reasonable possibility, was qualified or dropped, in favour of a more limited critique. Deeply entrenched in the approaches of most

IR scholars, whatever banner they organized under, was the view of the workplace as a site where the negotiation of order was a continuous and uncertain process.

The 1980s: New Challenges

The 1980s brought new challenges for pluralists and radicals. As in the U.S., a government of the radical right together with newly self-confident employers questioned long-standing assumptions. Public policy no longer endorsed collective bargaining as the best way to handle industrial relations while employers made sweeping changes in working practices. By the end of the decade many employers felt that the “bad old days” of adversarial relations with militant shop stewards had been replaced by a new and more co-operative atmosphere (for a considered employers’ view, see Hougham 1992). How has IR survived in such a climate?

One important legacy of the earlier period was an interest in the role of the employer. As early as 1974, Bain and Clegg had argued that if the processes of collective bargaining were to be understood, this role had to be given more attention. At the level of concrete practice, Flanders had argued in an oft-quoted dictum that if managers wished to regain control of the enterprise they must share it (1970: 172). By this he was not advocating a Machiavellian incorporation of shop stewards. The remark came in a passage in which he criticized the way in which managements had been “forced to yield to bargaining power on the shop floor while denying it any legitimacy” and noted the inadequacy of relying on exhortation. Regaining control did not mean returning to management’s hands a control that had been lost to shop stewards, but re-building authority in a situation in which neither side was effectively in control, and doing so on the basis of genuine co-operation.

As discussed below, a series of studies of Donovan-style reform concluded that managers either had not learnt Flanders’ lesson or were finding it harder to apply than he suggested (Batstone 1984; Edwards and Heery 1989). It was a short step to analyze the managerial activities of the 1980s. The approach developed in the 1960s and 1970s, of exploring new initiatives in practice, continued to serve scholars well in the 1980s and 1990s.

From the late 1980s a new development was interest in European and comparative issues. The European focus was stimulated by the effects of several European Community rulings on employment practice in Britain, notably on pensions and the concept of equal pay for work of equal value, and by the arrival of the Single European Market. Work with a European focus explores EC developments, and sometimes trends in specific

countries, together with the implications for Britain (*British Journal of Industrial Relations* 1992). Several texts on European industrial relations appeared (Baglioni and Crouch 1990; Ferner and Hyman 1992).

Underlying these specific issues was an awareness of the relevance of different regimes of labour regulation for countries' international competitiveness. Studies of corporatism had revealed the ramshackle and unsuccessful nature of British efforts at corporatist arrangements and had drawn sharp contrasts with countries like Sweden and Germany, where strong labour movements went along with low inflation and low unemployment (Goldthorpe 1984; Streeck 1985; Fulcher 1991). Careful inquiry showed that, even in sectors where unions were weak and where the usual bogey of "restrictive practices" could not be invoked, labour productivity in Britain was lower than that in Germany, for reasons to do with managerial organization and the quality of training (e.g. Steedman and Wagner 1987). A connected strand of literature examined the Japanese challenge, and the term "Japanization" entered common currency (Turnbull 1986). As discussed in the conclusion, the issue of regimes of labour competitiveness is a major one for the 1990s.

Consequences of the End of Reformism

A final issue of change over the period since 1968 concerns the objectives of research. As is well known, much research in the Donovan era was driven by questions associated with the "Oxford school" of how best to reform the "system". As Clegg (1990) argues, this approach has not continued (and in this respect it is incorrect to argue that the Oxford school moved to Warwick). Though Clegg is undoubtedly right, it does not follow that reformism has been abandoned or that the analytical concerns of the Oxford school have been forgotten. On the former point, there has been substantial debate about the consequences of Britain's decentralized bargaining, together with suggestions for co-ordination on the German model (e.g. Layard et al. 1991). On the latter, the school focused in particular on the duty of management to take the initiative in reforming the enterprise, and analysis of whether management is in fact capable of the task has developed, as discussed below. Nor does the absence of a reform programme mean that policy issues have been forgotten. The work discussed below has considerable policy implications, for example in pointing to the need for an integrated and determined approach if HRM initiatives are in fact to take root. Finally, it is not surprising that it has become harder to adhere to a reform programme. The focus of the Oxford writers was an overall system which, they felt, could be improved in the interests of all. With this type of reform now largely off the agenda (for it is unclear how managements pursuing decentralization might be

persuaded to engage in pay co-ordination, and the Confederation of British Industries has consistently opposed such moves), there is less opportunity for proposals which can be presented as being universally desirable.

It has been argued that the loss of any clear input to public policy, combined with the very different challenges of political economy and HRM, constitutes the passing of a “golden age” (Winchester 1991). It is certainly true that the world of IR is less self-contained than was the case in the 1970s. But the danger of golden ages is that they can encourage a narrowness of interest and even ossification. Any golden age in Britain was very short, and almost as soon as it was seriously in existence it was challenged by the radicals. The debates of the 1970s kept the subject vigorous enough to respond to the challenges of the 1990s. In particular, interest in what was happening on the shopfloor provided the means to address the effectiveness of new managerial initiatives. Yet this broadening of interest, to embrace issues such as managerial strategy and structure, raised the question of what IR was about: if it was no longer restricted to unions and collective bargaining, what were the limits of the subject and what distinctive contribution could it make to the crowded area of management studies?

The Nature of the Employment Relationship

During the 1960s and 1970s there were periodic debates about the boundaries of IR and whether there was such a thing as “IR theory”. Many of these discussions no longer seem very important. There has in effect been a quiet redefinition of what is actually studied. As Sisson (1991) puts it, there has been a move from a focus on unions and collective bargaining to an interest in the regulation of the employment relationship. Anticipating Kaufman, he notes that, were we starting afresh, we might use a label like “employment relations”.

What does this mean? Many disciplines apart from IR study worker-manager relations. As Kaufman points out, reliance on the traditional phrase “all aspects of the employment relationship” is too vague and is indefensible given that many other fields, such as organizational behaviour, are also involved. As indicated above, the device of *Homo Faber* may not escape this difficulty.

The subject of employment relations in Britain has developed a focus on the organization and control of the employment relationship: the processes through which employers and employees — who are tied together in relations of mutual dependence underlain by exploitation — negotiate the performance of work tasks, together with the laws, rules, agreements and customs that shape these processes. Though there can be

no sharp boundaries, an employment relations approach is distinctive in its focus on the nature of rules governing employment, the negotiation of order, and the structural context of the relation between employer and employee within which this negotiation takes place. This helps to differentiate it from disciplines like economics, which are more concerned with testing theories based on models of rational actors than with the social dynamics of the formation of rules. Moreover, because of their traditional interest in bargaining between opposed parties, IR researchers are more likely than those in fields like OB to take the inevitability of power and conflict as a starting point. Conflict is thus seen as inherent in the very fabric of the organization.

As well as the emphasis on rules and conflict there is in the IR tradition a strong assumption that managing organizations involves a process of negotiation. This is perhaps more developed in the British than the American case because, as noted above, British collective agreements have never been legally enforceable contracts. Negotiation has meant not an occasional and formal agreement but a continuous process of finding compromises.

In short, in the same spirit as writers such as Kaufman, Cappelli, and Adams, British researchers have developed their distinctive focus on the nature of the employment relationship. The focus on rules, conflict and negotiation gives IR researchers a perspective which is separate from that of other disciplines interested in people and work. The following sections illustrate how this perspective has been applied.

THE CASE STUDY TRADITION

The case study has been central to the understanding of the regulation of employment. The existence of this research tradition reflects the nature of British collective bargaining, but, as argued elsewhere (Edwards 1992a), it is of growing relevance in other countries as firms seek flexibility and as new shopfloor initiatives are made. The tradition in Britain has not stood still. It has developed in terms of substantive topics, analytical content, and research methods.

Substance and Approach

During the 1970s, the main substantive questions were the reform of collective bargaining, the behaviour of shop stewards, and the pattern of conflict and co-operation. The first representative survey, the Warwick Survey of manufacturing of 1977-78, showed how far firms had moved in

terms of formalizing their procedures and modernizing their practice through devices such as job evaluation (Brown 1981). Yet case studies revealed important limits to the operation of formalized institutions. Purcell (1981) showed that reform was often taken seriously only in periods of crisis and that managements could lack the will and organization to push through a thorough reform of practice. Shopfloor case studies (Batstone et al. 1977; Bélanger 1987) indicated the continuing ability of shop stewards to control the terms of the day-to-day effort bargain. Batstone's (1984) review of such studies underlined the contradictions of reform initiatives, with different managerial groups having different goals, with reform often being overtaken by other events, and with a model of a modernized and formalized set of rules and procedures being far from practical realities. When labour process writers (especially Friedman 1977) began to stress the contradictions of managerial goals, with regulation and control having to be balanced by the need to gain workers' consent, British IR scholars could well feel that they had been saying the same for some time (e.g. Brown 1973).

As for conflict, the fact that conflict was built into the effort bargain was an established starting point in these studies. Batstone and his colleagues (1977) significantly sub-titled their work, *The Organization of Workplace Conflict and Accommodation*: it was not a question of a separation of conflict from normal co-operation but of how the conflictual aspects of work relations were organized and articulated. Edwards and Scullion (1982) pursued this point by examining phenomena such as absenteeism and quitting and relating them to the structure of labour regulation within a plant. Such studies illustrate a view of conflict which goes beyond strikes and grievance mechanisms.

During the 1980s, scholars continued to address change at shopfloor level in the light of a more determined managerial offensive. An initial interest was the effect of managerial change on shop steward power and the frontier of control (Willman and Winch 1985; Terry 1989). A second focus was not just the attack on the old but the effects of new initiatives such as team-working and Total Quality Management. And interest embraced the effects on workers' commitment as well as the frontier of control (e.g. Geary 1992a, 1992b; Lowe and Oliver 1991; Wilkinson et al. 1992). A particular theme was the nature of workplace control in new Japanese-owned plants and the effects on British-owned firms (Oliver and Wilkinson 1992; Sewell and Wilkinson 1992). A key conclusion was that change was patchy and uneven (Elger 1990), that there was little evidence of a change of attitude (Kelly and Kelly 1991), and that much of the "new" depended on "old" forms of labour management. Though new labour

regimes often involved new technology and a better technical organization of production, they also brought new demands on workers.³

A related development was the growth of interest in workers outside large, heavily unionized firms. Studies of medium-sized (Armstrong et al. 1981) and very small (Ram 1991) firms tested out assumptions based on large enterprises. The key finding was that many of the same principles of effort bargaining operated here, but that the dynamics of power were different.

Turning to questions of analysis, the founding tradition of case studies in Britain was strongly influenced by an anthropological approach in which the details of workplace experience were the central issue (see Emmett and Morgan 1982). The limits of this approach, with its focus on workers to the neglect of management and on immediate experience as distinct from structural conditions, were increasingly recognized (Purcell 1983).

In response to this issue, the analysis of case studies has been broadened as researchers have aimed to link the immediate shopfloor level to wider questions of restructuring at company and industry level. The case study is no longer synonymous with the treatment of the shopfloor in isolation from wider developments. The studies collected by Tailby and Whitston (1989), for example, focused on shopfloor issues but then connected these to various structural changes at the level of the company, the industry, or the state. Similarly, the studies of Japanization do not consider the shopfloor in isolation but relate it to wider issues of competitiveness and corporate restructuring. Or consider Ferner's (1988) comparative case study of an industry in two countries (Britain and Spain) which teases out the effects of the political and economic contexts on management behaviour and hence on the structure of the effort bargain. As discussed below, moreover, the case study approach has been applied to the management process, with organizational and historical contexts being given particular attention.

Methodology

Finally, methodology has developed in two respects. First, reliance on the qualitative techniques of observation and informal interviewing has been complemented with semi-structured interviewing (e.g. Edwards and Whitston

3. Incidentally, several of these papers, and others cited below, were published in the journal *Work, Employment and Society*, which was launched in 1987. This journal has stimulated debate over many employment relations matters. Other new journals focus on HRM, though several, notably the *Human Resource Management Journal* and the *International Journal of Human Resource Management* (both launched in 1990), include papers adopting a critical social science analysis.

1993; O'Connell Davidson 1990). This helps to overcome one of the limits of qualitative methods, a tendency to take a given objective change and to assemble from workers' accounts a collective portrait of reactions. Systematic interviewing can reveal the range of responses as well as providing reliable data on such questions as whether workers feel that they are working harder and whether the disciplinary regime has changed.

Second, there has been a growing awareness of a need to consider what general lessons can be drawn from an individual case. There are several forms of generalization (Edwards 1992a), of which four may be highlighted. First there is the leading or critical case. Thus certain Japanese firms are viewed as "leading edge" examples, and studies of them ask how far they are indeed in the lead, the implication being that if change is not dramatic here, it is even less developed elsewhere. Second, processes can be investigated. Surveys test large-scale patterns of association, but to understand the mechanisms linking the phenomena in question calls for analysis of processes. The debate on unions and productivity, for example, has been advanced by considerations of the dynamic connections involved (see Nolan and Marginson 1990). Third, two or more cases can be analyzed so that the causes of differences, and hence the conditions promoting one outcome rather than another, can be assessed. Finally, the fact that a series of investigations has taken place indicates the development of something of a research programme. For example, the nature of a phenomenon such as "output restriction" can be refined and the conditions promoting it examined (Edwards 1988). Similarly, Ram (1994) was able to take his findings from very small firms and place them in the context of results from firms of a range of sizes in order to suggest how size and bureaucratization shape shopfloor regimes. In short, the conditions promoting certain processes and outcomes have been considered, and case studies do much more than paint in detail.

UNDERSTANDING MANAGEMENT

As noted above, an important strand of this research has been the light that it has thrown on the nature of management. This embraces a theoretical perspective and empirical analyses of the management process in general and the HRM phenomenon in particular.

Theory of Management

IR scholars, be they of pluralist or radical inclination, see work organizations as based on conflict. Given also their interest in bargaining, they place particular weight on the need to negotiate compromises. This

does not of course mean that every activity is seen as a zero-sum fight between manager and worker. Conflict is an underlying principle and at the concrete level it combines with co-operation. The analytical task – which contrasts with the managerialist assumption that conflict can simply be eliminated – is to show how different forms of workplace regime organize conflict and co-operation in different ways.

This approach informs the analysis of management in two main ways. First, there is the management process itself. This can be characterized as contradictory. This does not mean a logical incompatibility of principles but a relationship between two or more features of the organization, each of which is inherent in it but which exists in permanent tension with other principles. Friedman's (1977) study was important in systematizing and placing in a clear theoretical framework the point that approaches towards labour can be characterized in terms of the contradiction between a need to regulate, discipline and control and that of releasing workers' creative capacities. For Friedman, it is not a matter of moving from control to commitment but of two principles which are always present in a contradictory relationship. Hyman (1987) takes the analysis further by exploring elements of contradictions within firms and relating them to the external environment: apart from balancing what goes on inside the firm, management has to try to ensure that the result is compatible with selling the output profitably. All managerial strategies are, Hyman concludes, routes to partial failure, and management is thus a continuous, active, and uncertain process.

Second, there is the job of managers. At its most general level, an employment relations approach will examine how managers operate like any other workers, that is, as people subject to the contradictory processes of control and co-operation. Within the literature on management, such a perspective remains rare, though there is some recognition of its importance. In the field of multinational companies, for example, two experienced researchers note the conventional emphasis on grand issues of strategy and the need to "spend more time understanding the impact of our findings on the manager's job" (Bartlett and Ghoshal 1991: 14). Industrial relations researchers can only applaud this recognition, while also claiming some distinctive competence in following it through.

Within this broad agenda, Armstrong (1989: 311) asks what is distinctive about managerial work. As against conventional management theory, which equates management with certain activities such as co-ordination, Armstrong sees the generic problem as that of agency: "the problem of ensuring that managers, as far as is possible, make decisions which are in the interests of ownership". He goes on to show that conventional answers to the agency problem (Jensen and Meckling 1976)

are unsatisfactory and that it is necessary to draw on the IR concept of trust (Fox 1974). Because it would be impossibly costly to monitor everything that managers do, and more importantly because such monitoring contradicts the need to develop self-reliance and autonomy, owners have to trust managers. Key ways of developing trust include training, indoctrination and social assimilation. Some of the distinctive tensions within managerial work between control and autonomy can thus be placed in a wider analytical context.⁴

Empirical Analysis

Several case studies illustrate the application of these insights. On the contradictions of the management process, Cressey et al. (1985) used participation initiatives to examine the ways in which management was a continuous and uncertain process, in which getting by ("just managing") was more characteristic than the careful implementation of a clear strategy. Batstone et al. (1984) developed some similar arguments, with the added focus on the process of negotiation between management and the external environment: the environment sent certain signals which then had to be interpreted in action. A key analytical contribution, developed by Ferner (1988, 1990), concerned the active role of choice. As against much conventional contingency theory, which identifies external pressures that firms either follow or neglect to their subsequent cost, these studies showed that external signals can be interpreted in various ways and that different political projects, each in principle feasible, can be developed. External forces constrain but do not determine action. Ahlstrand (1990) examined long-term processes. His particular contribution was to show how managements can pursue a specific change policy even though its measurable benefits are questionable. As discussed below, he explains this in terms of symbolism.

All three of these studies were directly concerned with labour relations. A further study throws distinctive light on wider managerial processes. The study examined long-term processes of organizational change through a case study of one firm, Cadbury's (Smith et al. 1990). As against fashionable literature on turn-rounds and the pursuit of excellence, which can paint a bland picture of the unified pursuit of common goals, it

4. There are some unresolved issues in Armstrong's work. Trust is not peculiar to management, and indeed Fox's model related to lower groups. The argument would probably be that there are different kinds of trust: that ceded to any worker as part of a policy of generating creativity, and that which is distinctive to managers because they are carrying out the functions of capital (see Armstrong 1983). This differentiation might well be pursued in future work.

highlights the complexities and uncertainties of change and how change often involves certain groups losing power and status. The study gives particular attention to the way in which a new policy of labour management was central to the change process. Long-established paternalistic practices were swept away as the firm responded to competitive pressures by restructuring the organization of work. Change involved, not the promulgation of an agreed vision, but a conscious attack on past practices which was as unpopular with some managers as it was on the shopfloor.

The key analytical contribution of this study was its linking of management behaviour to labour issues and to the environment. The former meant that management's uncertain and contested grip on the production process was highlighted. As for the latter, the authors stress the firm's endeavours to respond to its competitors, who relied on a Fordist approach of mass production of standard items, by changing its own, different, approach. The authors refer to this as a "firm in sector" approach. This neatly illustrates the development of the case study method.

Turning to managerial work, three studies illustrate what can be done. Scase and Goffee (1989) surveyed managers from six organizations. They found substantial, and probably growing, pressures on the job: new demands were undermining established assumptions about job security and promotion opportunities as well as leading to longer working hours. From a case study and a wider survey of the literature, Dopson and Stewart (1990) analyze changing demands on the middle manager. There were some benefits, notably increased responsibility, but also new demands, as managers were assessed on how they used their responsibility. Finally, Storey et al. (1991) compared management development in Britain and Japan. Such a topic can easily be seen in bland terms: everyone is in favour of better training. This research, however, examined the tensions and conflicts in the process in two ways: contrasting managers' own perceptions with their firms' formal systems; and relating training and development activity to wider business policies, thus showing that claimed long-term strategies of career development were undermined by short-term pressures.

Analyses of HRM

Finally, specific analyses of HRM may be considered. To underline one introductory comment, the concern here is what we know about the phenomenon through research. Wider questions about teaching the subject are not addressed.

A critical analytical perspective on the pretensions of HRM has been emerging. Legge (1989) for example shows how different elements of HRM,

such as emphases on individual responsibility and on teamwork and collective loyalties, can fail to cohere. A recent collection of essays develops this theme by showing how rhetoric and reality often fail to match up and how much of HRM is about symbols and self-belief and not concrete change (Blyton and Turnbull 1992).

Empirical work has strengthened this argument. Guest (1990) provided an important critique of claims that, in North America, HRM had been widely adopted or had changed anything, concluding that much of it was about giving managers a sense of self-belief. The leading British study is Storey's (1992) analysis of 15 organizations. This showed that there was no one HRM model: identifying a list of possible concomitants of HRM, Storey showed that different organizations made their own combinations of elements. He also questioned whether any commitment to HRM was firmly established or long-lasting. There was plenty of rhetoric, and some specific changes had been made, but it was questionable whether many firms were really committed to a major shift in methods of labour management.

Perhaps the major significance of HRM, Storey's work suggests, is the way in which it acts as a symbol. It gives to management a language and a meaning to its own activity, even though it may not directly lead to any measurable outcome in terms of economic performance. Ahlstrand's work mentioned above points in a similar direction. In the plant that he studied, reform was pursued despite an absence of effect because it gave managers a sense of direction and a belief that they were changing something.

Such work on management illustrates the evolution of an employment relations perspective. New topics are being addressed, and new combinations of methods are being employed, within the unchanging methodological principle of understanding the contradictions of management and the conflict and processes of negotiation which arise from this fact.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The underlying message of the above discussion is a self-confident one. By contrast, there has been a long-standing discussion stressing the weakness of IR theory (Adams 1993a) and arguing that the very idea of industrial relations as a coherent focus of analysis is faulty. Such debates certainly touch on important issues, and the aim here is not to dismiss them. But it is possible to paint an unduly bleak picture of incoherence and disarray. A reading of a whole series of debates, ranging from workplace behaviour to corporatism and the role of the state, suggests that empirical work is advancing analytical understanding. We can hold up our research against too strict a standard, and can become enmeshed in

debates as to the meaning of "truth" and "knowledge". As indicated elsewhere (Edwards 1993), it is possible to assert that we have knowledge of our subject without sinking into positivism.

The specifics of the research discussed above reflect distinctive features of the British case. But many substantive and methodological points apply more generally. Substantively, the questions of the limits and contradictions of shopfloor change seem to apply to North America. The context here is the growing recognition in the U.S. that the original model of a clear "transformation" of IR (Kochan et al. 1986) has to be qualified in the light of the fact that the new "HR model" remains rare and that, even where it has been implemented, commitment to it is often shallow (Katz 1990; Kochan and Dyer 1992). A growing body of research on "high commitment" systems (Wells 1993) and Japanese transplants (Milkman 1992; Fucini and Fucini 1990) indicates that new forms of labour management have a strong component of managerial assertiveness. Guest's questioning of the impact in practice of HRM was cited above. In relation to managers in particular, Smith's (1990) study of a California bank points to growing demands on middle managers, and the tensions of increased responsibility, which parallel the British results.

Methodologically, the British tradition of case studies, and in particular analyses of the dynamics of actual practice, is well-suited to the consideration of developments in other countries. Traditionally, "in countries like Australia, Sweden and, to a lesser extent, West Germany, where the main structures of accommodation involve multi-employer groupings and multi-union organizations, many of the major features of workplace relations [were] fashioned beyond the factory gates" (Frenkel 1986: 76). With growing emphasis on the shopfloor, this is less true. As firms restructure, and place growing weight on flexibility in the use of labour within the enterprise, there will be a need to analyze what is happening within the firm. Studying how different regimes of labour regulation function at the point of production is a key part of the future research agenda.

Different countries have different regimes of labour regulation embracing law, the policy and organization of employers and the place of labour organizations. The analysis of these regimes calls for many of the traditional skills of the industrial relations researcher. In particular, the focus is not the traditional OB terrain of behaviour within an organization but the network of links between organizations and the ways in which rules regulating employment develop. It is, for example, necessary to understand the institutional structures of the German education and training system or the role of labour law in France. In short, institutions governing the employment relationship have to be examined (Streeck 1992).

As mentioned above, European and comparative issues are shaping current research in Britain, but several issues remain to be addressed. A key one concerns the balance between global pressures, systems of regulation within countries and how these systems vary in other countries. Are there uniform global developments, as writers like Womack et al. (1990) would suggest, and what do they imply for regimes like the Swedish or the German? What is the role of multi-national firms as carriers of new styles of labour management between countries? How far do, say, German firms adapt their national systems when operating in other countries, and how does this compare with what British or American firms do?

Answers to such questions call for research which is analytically and empirically rigorous. For example, to understand how multinational firms influence national systems of labour regulation it is necessary to try to identify what is distinctive about firms based in different countries, what are the key features of national environments, and how these two factors interact. The rarity of international comparative studies at the level of the firm illustrates the challenges facing the new research agenda. Developing it will be a significant task.

A second key issue concerns the boundaries of the subject. IR research has broadened its concerns enormously, in contrast to the very narrow agenda of the supposed golden age. But this brings new challenges. There are literatures on management organization and corporate control systems to understand, and new empirical questions to address. Maintaining a grip on these things, particularly in a context of tight research funding and growing pressures in teaching and research, will be a significant challenge.

The final challenge is the demand for relevance. The main British social science funding body, the Economic and Social Research Council, is increasingly stressing the need for its research centres to co-operate with the "users" of research and in some cases to consider co-sponsorship. In one respect, IR is well-placed to respond, given its long tradition of policy-relevant work. During the 1980s, a good deal of research explicitly or implicitly addressed important issues of managerial policy, for example the extent to which there was a coherent labour policy and whether different approaches did not send conflicting signals to workers. There was also considerable wider debate about the public policy in such areas as the deregulation of labour markets and the privatization of state firms. But independent, critical analysis may be more difficult to sustain if the research agenda becomes influenced by the policy concerns of particular interest groups. Questions of the conditions under which co-funding is appropriate, and of the problems of retaining complete independence from interest groups, may grow in importance.

As debate on the competitive advantage of different systems of labour regulation advances during the 1990s, however, it should be possible to delineate different models and to demonstrate their strengths and weaknesses. Critical analysis has a key role here, and IR research can play a major part. Governments concerned about competitiveness may well need to pay attention to its findings. If they do, the public policy role of research will be continued.

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RÉSUMÉ

Des relations industrielles à la relation d'emploi : le développement de la recherche en Grande-Bretagne

Plusieurs spécialistes notent l'affaiblissement de la recherche en relations industrielles en Amérique du Nord. Un aspect important fut le déplacement de l'intérêt envers les institutions et les processus vers l'étude des individus. Des disciplines telles le comportement organisationnel et l'économique du travail ont progressé. Un autre développement fut la croissance de la gestion des ressources humaines (GRH) qui a défié

l'approche traditionnelle, axée sur l'étude du syndicalisme et de la négociation collective.

Cet article présente une situation différente en Grande-Bretagne. Il s'agit d'un essai interprétatif et sélectif basé sur le développement de la recherche. Il ne s'agit pas ici d'examiner des questions théoriques plus larges. Une vue théorique est cependant implicite : la recherche a avancé par un programme progressif d'analyse et cela a produit de nouvelles connaissances. On peut de loin être plus optimiste quant à l'état de la discipline que ne le suggèrent certaines évaluations récentes de la théorie.

La force de la recherche britannique reflète plusieurs développements. D'abord, les chercheurs institutionnalistes et pluralistes britanniques ont été plus flexibles dans la définition de leur sujet que ne l'ont été leurs collègues américains. Cela leur a permis d'aborder les sujets associés à la nature de la relation d'emploi, plus particulièrement la négociation continue des dispositions du contrat de travail. Ensuite, l'absence d'obligation légale d'appliquer les conventions a laissé beaucoup de sujets à être réglés au niveau de l'atelier. Cela signifie que les relations de négociation sont demeurées centrales. Finalement, le résultat fut que la tradition d'études de cas est demeurée plus significative qu'en Amérique du Nord.

Cette orientation de la recherche a permis aux relations industrielles de contrer le double défi de la croissance de la GRH et du changement dans les politiques publiques, lesquels mettaient en cause les conceptions traditionnelles quant à la valeur de la négociation collective. La conception même de notre champ de recherche a évolué vers la relation d'emploi plutôt que le fonctionnement de la négociation collective. De là, les chercheurs étaient bien placés pour examiner ce que la GRH signifiait en pratique et comment on expérimentait de nouvelles initiatives sur les lieux de travail.

Cette approche est illustrée en considérant l'évolution de la méthode d'études de cas et l'éclairage particulier que la recherche en relations industrielles a jeté sur la nature du management. Les études de cas ont de plus en plus fait le lien entre le détail du site à l'étude et des questions plus larges sur la gestion des entreprises et les généralisations pouvant en être tirées. La méthode s'est aussi développée par l'étude comparative et par une plus grande utilisation de techniques d'entrevues structurées.

Sur le management, l'emphase que mettent les chercheurs en relations industrielles sur la négociation et le conflit favorise une analyse différente des politiques de gestion. Cela inclut la conceptualisation du processus de gestion et des études empiriques sur les pratiques des gestionnaires. Ces travaux empiriques ont appuyé une analyse critique de la GRH reliant celle-ci à ses contextes et explorant son rôle symbolique.

Les chercheurs britanniques se penchent de plus en plus sur des sujets européens et comparatifs. Les bénéficiaires de la tradition d'études de cas sont ici substantiels puisqu'elle permet d'explorer la dynamique de différents systèmes de régulation du travail. Cependant, la recherche doit rencontrer de nouveaux défis. Peut-on solutionner les difficultés théoriques et pratiques associées aux études transnationales ? De façon plus générale, à mesure que les relations industrielles ouvrent leur champ d'intérêt au management et aux questions internationales, de nouvelles questions de recherche seront soulevées. Évoluer dans cette voie, tout en conservant les forces traditionnelles de la discipline, représente un défi significatif.

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Positions

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