

## **Industrial Relations in Britain**

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# Industrial Relations in Britain

Vincent Mosco

Tom Keenoy, *Invitation to Industrial Relations* (Oxford: Blackwell 1985).

Eric Batstone, *Working Order* (Oxford: Blackwell 1984).

Eric Batstone, Anthony Ferner, and Michael Terry, *Unions on the Board* (Oxford: Blackwell 1983).

Eric Batstone, Anthony Ferner, and Michael Terry, *Consent and Efficiency: Labour Relations and Management Strategy in the State Enterprise*. (Oxford: Blackwell 1984).

OVER THE PAST 20 YEARS academic social science has seen the growth of hybrid fields that have challenged the position of such established disciplines as sociology, political science, economics, psychology, and history. Criminology, media studies, and industrial relations now compete favourably for resources, students, and influence. Their claims of practical relevance have not been lost on policy makers, job seekers, and those who hold the purse strings for higher education. The promise of combining academic rigour with practical solutions to contemporary problems, as well as the prospect of providing a training ground for fast growing professions, has given these and other hybrids a privileged position in many universities, to the consternation of those in traditional fields. The latter have responded by defending the traditional academic division of labour, as their students stream elsewhere, or remodelling their programs to win back students with the promise of relevance and jobs.

Whatever the choice, it does not take long to learn that hybrid disciplines are not without their problems. Perhaps most fundamental is the promise to provide theoretically sound explanation and practical guidance in day-to-day conduct, to provide both text book and cook book in the same package. Hybrid departments try to deal with the problem by hiring both researchers and practitioners, who, whether or not they talk to one another (and my experience is that they do not), at least reflect the diverse leanings of the field. But this only displaces the problem and invites endless debates about whether

academic or vocational priorities should take precedence. It is even more difficult to maintain the academic/practice dualism in written work. In spite of numerous strengths, this set of books on industrial relations in Britain demonstrates the difficulty of trying to couple a commitment to a theoretically strong social science with an equal determination to pursue practical "problem solving" in industrial relations.

Certainly, these books would identify more strongly with the academic dimension. Each is nevertheless rooted in what are widely identified as practical problems that require attention or reform measures that call for evaluation. We are not concerned here with long term implications or strategies for labour, business, or the state. Rather, it is the short term question: has the introduction of plant bargaining strengthened or weakened the power of shop stewards? Does putting union members on the company's Board work? What impact does commercializing a state enterprise have on industrial relations in the enterprise? These are important questions and they are often addressed skillfully, but one also senses that were they not prompted by the demand for immediate relevance that drives such hybrid disciplines as industrial relations, they could be approached with more theoretical rigour and thereby help us to situate particular industrial relations problems within a wider social framework. It is to the credit of these books that they struggle with the tension of how to extend outward from the narrow problem of the day. At its best, this tension enriches these books; at its worst, I fear it will please neither scholar nor practitioner.

Since Keenoy's *Invitation to Industrial Relations* is a broad introduction to the field, we will begin with it and then turn to the three works from the Warwick Studies in Industrial Relations series. I hesitate to call Keenoy's book a text because it is short and, more importantly, because it is written in a breezy, journalistic style, unusual in text books. In addition to this readable style, the book contains several good chapters that try to situate industrial relations within a sociological/political science framework and much basic information on the state of industrial relations and the labour movement in Britain.

The book starts from the recognition that one's view of industrial relations depends on the particular "way of seeing" or theoretical framework one brings to the field. Keenoy rightly identifies the need to begin with the view that industrial relations are shaped not by individuals, however strong their personalities, but by competing social forces, principally business, labour, and the state, that mobilize their respective interests in a struggle to control the workplace. In essence, though his view is too quirky to define clearly, Keenoy adopts a radical pluralist perspective. This defines industrial relations as an arena of social conflict among competing interests without seeing these interests as irreconcilable. It is not the traditional pluralism of political science that would see a balance of relatively equal forces. Keenoy repeatedly acknowledges that the power balance, taking into account state activity, favours management. Nor, however, is this a Marxist perspective. There is little sense that capitalism, the accumulation process, contradiction, and class struggle are driving forces here.

Within his framework, Keenoy offers a guide to the industrial relations system in Britain, including a map of the major parties and tendencies in their relationships including material on the impact of Thatcher government policies. The book succeeds generally in showing that industrial relations entail far more than the bargaining and strike activity that receive most popular attention. In fact, one of the highlights of the book is a discussion of five myths about strikes: they are a major cause of economic loss; they are caused by trade unions and their shop stewards; employers do not benefit from strikes; there are never good reasons to strike; there is a clear distinction between political and industrial disputes. He concludes that all strikes are political in that they are one among several means to alter power relations in the workplace. The book is also rare among industrial relations texts in its treatment of the media as a major force structuring the popular conception of labour and trade unions. Drawing on the excellent research of the Glasgow University Media Group, Keenoy concludes that the negative image of the trade unionist is "enhanced by the constraints which are imposed upon the presentation of news."

He describes how media ownership (increasingly concentrated), links to the Conservative Party, and dependence on advertising, structure the popular view of labour. The book's major weakness is a tendency to make flippant statements that are either silly ("power, like love, is forever") or appeal to a reader's prejudices ("Big Brother may be bad for all of us, but there is nothing we can do to avoid him," and reference to "oil sheiks" that control the international economy). Additionally, the book's effort to steer clear from defined theoretical perspectives makes the concluding prescriptive chapter, particularly the discussion of honour and justice in the "moral order" of industrial relations, rather weak and out of place. Aside from these problems, Keenoy offers a useful introductory guide to the field.

The three studies from the Industrial Relations Research Unit at the University of Warwick examine the last decade in British industrial relations, one of the more turbulent in British history, marked as it has been by the decline of the Labour government and the rise of Thatcherism. *Working Order* offers an overview of the period, starting with an assessment of Labour-initiated reforms and on through the early Thatcher years that put labour under siege. *Unions on the Board* considers a major Labour government reform measure, the 1978-79 experiment that reconstituted the Post Office Board by installing seven full-time union members to match the seven shareholder directors. Such developments look like ancient history when compared to recent government actions that attacked labour with massive unemployment and legislative measures that have seriously eroded labour's organizing and response powers. *Consent and Efficiency* is a case study that identifies some of the impacts on labour and industrial relations in a state enterprise undergoing privatization and commercialization.

*Working Order* is the most general and the least satisfying of the three studies. The book's aim is to assess the state of industrial relations in Britain over the past decade or so with an eye to "fuller and more careful integration of conceptual and empirical argument." The first part addresses the industrial relations reform movement, chiefly the Donavon Commission, which sought to initiate a more formal plural-

ism in industrial relations by replacing what it perceived to be anarchic local bargaining practices based on "custom and practice" with "formal negotiation of work practices." This would decentralize bargaining to the company or plant level and strengthen the role of shop stewards. This is a prototypical liberal reform or, as the author puts it, "in the oft-quoted phrase, 'management can only regain control by sharing it'." The book provides a useful analysis of what prompted the reform movement, chiefly the pressures of trade unions and changes in corporate structure. The latter refers to results of a merger movement that saw large companies instituting a detailed division of management labour, including personnel specialists who sought to operate in a more formally rational system. The book concludes that reforms meant little in practice, conforming to neither reform hopes of a more peaceful and productive workplace, nor to radical fears of steward co-optation. The second half of the book examines more recent industrial relations history in which the new government changed labour law (the Employment Acts of 1980 and 1982 in particular) "to check and shape union power." As the book rightly concludes, Thatcher economic policies, particularly monetarism, "could only be effective if union power was reduced."

The author's research implies, however, that it was not so much a systematic attack on industrial relations that brought about these changes as the simple fact that between 1978 and 1983 manufacturing employment dropped 25 per cent from 7.1 million to 5.4 million workers. The author found little change in concrete workplace relations, though one must question the principle research technique employed, a survey of personnel managers. What is particularly lacking is some discussion of how these massive redundancies could be carried out with what appears to be meagre union response. We are left with remarkable understatements: "As in 1978, it has been found that union power — or perceived union power — has a considerable impact upon 'mainstream' management decisions, but little upon redundancy decisions." The research struggles to identify such influence over mainstream decisions, but it is unconvincing. The effort is part of an attempt to counter the

author's perception of the labour process perspective on the workplace. I say the author's perception because the presentation of that view is little more than caricature: "Much of the literature — notably in the labour process tradition — operates from over-simple deductions from a model of capitalist exploitation and the conspiratorial competence of management (and the idiocy of workers)."

There are numerous good critiques of the labour process school. This is not one of them.

Despite the weaknesses in theoretical argument, the book contains interesting insights, such as making the link between the attack on trade union power and the initiation of such "employee involvement" schemes as job rotation, quality circles, and the like. Actually, Keenoy provides what is perhaps the last word on these management enrichment efforts in a complaint from one chemical worker on the impact of a job rotation program: "You move from one boring, dirty, monotonous job to another boring, dirty, monotonous job. And somehow you're supposed to come out of it all "enriched." But I never feel "enriched" — I just feel knackered."

The book suffers from what might be described as a Ptolemaic view of the industrial relations literature: that it all pales in comparison to the work of the author and his colleagues. The conclusion contains a substantial and often bitter attack on various schools of thought culminating in this conclusion: "One of the few non-historical studies to go beyond exhortation, repetition or a priori and reified argument is Batstone *et al.* (1984)."

Though one cannot criticize the book for excessive modesty, it could be better organized. It reads more like a collection of papers, with the last chapter more a set of notes for some future work. The ensuing two case studies are stronger works.

*Unions on the Board* reports on one of the Labour government's last reform measures, an experiment in industrial democracy at the Post Office. The authors focus on the national level of experiments initiated at regional and local levels as well. Following the general recommendations of the government's Bullock Committee, the national experiment reconstituted the Post Office Board to include seven union-nominated members that would match

the seven full-time shareholder directors. The only limitation on trade unionist participation was that such members were not to have direct negotiating responsibilities. In addition to these full time shareholder and trade union directors, there were five part-time members including two consumer representatives. The experiment was one of the more progressive of its kind among Western industrial nations. In other cases, workers have joined corporate boards, but not in relative parity with shareholder directors, nor with such explicit trade union ties. Moreover, the experiment took place in a particularly important enterprise, the Post Office, which employs one in 50 British workers and is the site of major technological and organizational changes. These changes include massive computerization and automation, particularly in telecommunications, which the authors examine more directly in *Consent and Efficiency*. Organizational changes have taken place in the shift to a more commercial, private-sector-like operation. These date back to 1969 when the Post Office shifted from a department of state to a public corporation. It took an additional step in 1981 when the Telecommunications branch became a separate company, British Telecom, leaving the Post Office and the Girobank within the public corporation. At the time of the experiment (1978-79), the three were still relatively autonomous branches within the Post Office. The research consisted of observing Board meetings, supplemented with documentary data and unstructured interviews with major participants.

The book is most interesting in its discussion of the give and take that constituted the micropolitics of board activity. On the one hand we see a very reluctant shareholder group, eager to get on with privatization, doing what it can to keep trade union members in the dark and otherwise limit their participation. Meetings are shorter, fewer major matters are put on the agenda, much is turned over to the Management Board, an ostensibly subordinate body of top Post Office executives and no union members. As the authors conclude, "this filtering out of options was done in a deliberate and conscious way in order to restrict discussion at the Board." On the other hand, the trade union members spent considerable time

learning the ropes (there was no formal training in Board procedures) and trying to force personnel and industrial relations issues onto the agenda. They seem to have been well aware of the limitations on their ability to change things. One member's comment is a good evaluation of this and similar reform efforts: "The Board makes the decision whether to go to war with China but others make the preliminary skirmishes which determine that we have to go to war at all." The balance of power on the Board was often held by part-time members who generally sides with management. The most substantial benefit for the labour participants was that it provided insight into the workings of the board, which they shared with their union representatives and rank-and-file workers in meetings throughout the country during the two years of the trial. It is hard to say whether the experiment would have accomplished more had the Thatcher government extended it. But even this minor effort at industrial democracy was too much for a government eager to reduce trade union power and further privatize state enterprises.

*Consent and Efficiency* looks at the impact of such policies on labour relations in the post and telecommunications sector. This is a strong case study, if not meriting the praise which the principle author lavished on it in *Working Order*. The authors continue a general interest in the micropolitics of industrial relations, seeking to steer what they perceive to be a middle course between the view that, constrained by labour, management barely muddles through and the perspective that industrial relations are a simple function of the profit motive. Hence, much of the book is taken up with the development of labour and management strategies to deal with the changing technological (computerization, particular in telecommunications) and organizational (the drive to privatization) environments. The book is at its best in comparing differences in how industrial relations problems were addressed in the postal and telecommunications businesses, owing to different pressures operating in these two areas. The post office remained a labour intensive operation, grew more slowly, and was under less national and international pressure to modernize. Telecommunications, on the other hand, was undergoing rapid technological

change which threatened to erode the position of not only telephone operators, in decline for years, but also higher level craft workers. In addition, the telecommunications business felt more strongly the pressures of privatization and competition for domestic and international markets. These pressures affected trade unions in telecommunications which were split over whether or not to support the new technology and how much to depart from the traditional centralized structure of the union. The book is particularly useful in demonstrating the polarizing impact of privatization. Strikes and general militancy grew in both posts and telecommunications as pressures for commercial success mounted in both areas.

In sum, the book aims at two chief goals, one realized better than the other. The evidence is weak in support of their contention that unions are much more than reactive, but that they engage in "the independent and autonomous exercise of power on behalf of members." On the other hand, they make a good case for the view that a substantial price is paid for the narrowly defined efficiency that prompts privatization schemes. As they conclude, "the increase in 'efficiency' that greater 'commercialism' or privatization may bring with it is efficiency according to a private logic, and is often secured at the expense of the provision of social needs that market forces cannot take fully into account."

There are massive changes taking place in British economic and political life. Major cut-backs in government spending, privatization of state enterprises, monetarism, and the attack on trade unions are the primary, but by no means the only forces at work. Keenoy incorporates some of these developments in his introductory work. The Warwick studies do also, but in an oblique fashion. Reading these studies is like sitting through the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* to try to learn something about Hamlet. The angle is off. One sentence about how trade unions were ineffective in the face of millions of layoffs and what most see as an economic depression is followed by pages of material on how industrial relations have changed little. We learn something about micropolitics, but come to the conclusion that micropolitics matters less than the authors would suggest in understanding the

contemporary workplace. Doubtless, much of the difficulty lies with the development of this *hybrid discipline, industrial relations*, weak in conceptual development and tied, as it is, to a tradition of building industrial harmony by displacing fundamental labour-management conflict onto a set of formal rules and procedures. The Warwick group is to be credited

with acknowledging the problem even if their research falls short of addressing it satisfactorily: "To concentrate on those corporate phenomena labelled by the actors as 'to do with industrial relations' — collective bargaining, workplace relations and supervision, and so on — is to beg the question of what is relevant to or concerned with industrial relations."

# Social History

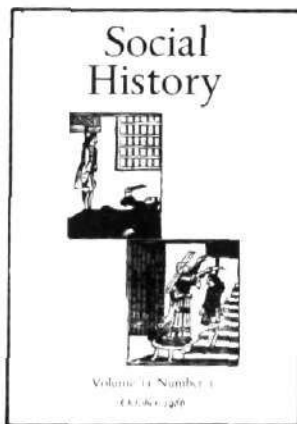
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