



# BRITISH INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS PARADIGM: A CRITICAL OUTLINE HISTORY AND PROGNOSIS

PETER ACKERS\* AND ADRIAN WILKINSON\*

*This article reflects critically on the history of the British pluralist industrial relations (IR) paradigm, from its foundation by Flanders and Clegg at Oxford in the 1950s, through its development and consolidation in both public policy and academic circles. No sooner was the paradigm firmly established with the 1968 Donovan Report and 1970 foundation of the Industrial Relations Research Unit at Warwick University (among other markers), than it faced new challenges and, arguably breakdown. These challenges came, first, from 1970s New Left Marxism, riding on a tide of industrial and student unrest, and then from 1980s Thatcherism and the destruction of workplace industrial relations. The article concludes by outlining six main strengths of the British IR paradigm and looking forward to how IR can regain its relevance in the very different world of work that lies ahead.*

## INTRODUCTION

Academic industrial relations is at a crossroads. There is uncertainty as to its subject matter, its conceptual makeup, its relations to other scholarly fields, and the approach its researchers are taking. (Whitfield & Strauss 1998: 287)

As we are all aware, the collapse of US trade union membership has left a huge gap between the conceptual life-world of American 'labour relations', centred as it has been on trade unions and collective bargaining, and the central dynamics of contemporary employment relations (Kaufman 2003). Australian industrial relations (IR) remains much more robust and relevant, partly because joint regulation remains a central reality of working life (Lansbury & Michelson 2003). Britain lies somewhere in between, at a crossroads between the US and European models, but already well down the line to the former. As Terry (2003: 460) has recently concluded from both the decline in union membership and the 'hollowing-out' of workplace bargaining:

The concept of 'joint regulation', long seen as the normative cornerstone of British industrial relations, clear evidence of unions' capacity to influence the policies and practices of employers, has to be set aside.

---

\*Business School, Loughborough University, Loughborough, Leicestershire LE11 3TU, UK. Email: p.ackers@lboro.ac.uk; a.j.wilkinson@lboro.ac.uk

This article traces the rise and fall (and possible renaissance) of the normative world of British IR, from the formation of the Oxford Pluralist School in the immediate post-war years to the present day. Our argument is that British IR, for all its much proclaimed pragmatism, empiricism and distaste for fancy general theorising, did construct a highly distinctive way of looking at work, labour and management. The time has come to reflect more self-consciously on the 'taken-for-granted' intellectual world many of us have inhabited. Outside economic, political and social forces and new intellectual currents have contributed to the formation, development and breakdown of the British IR paradigm (Clarke & Clegg 2000). We argue that academics need to understand these processes, if we are to salvage our tradition and rebuild for the future.<sup>1</sup>

Industrial relations is one of the oldest and most established of those specialist social science disciplines that feed into business and management studies, with roots going back to the Webbs in Britain. Long before Business Schools had appeared on the British academic landscape, strong IR groups had formed at Nuffield College, Oxford, London School of Economics and Warwick, Glasgow and Cardiff Universities. Prestigious masters and doctoral courses were established, the former at London School of Economics in 1964 and Warwick in 1967. The discipline founded two leading journals, *The British Journal of Industrial Relations* (1963) and *Industrial Relations Journal* (1970) as well as a subject body, the *British Universities Industrial Relations Association* (1950) with an annual conference. In post-war Britain, the pluralist school of Allan Flanders, Hugh Clegg, Alan Fox and others was a major influence on public policy, most notably the 1968 *Donovan Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers Associations*. Perhaps, the formation of the SSRC-funded Industrial Relations Research Unit (IRRU) at Warwick University, in 1970, is as good a date as any to mark the discipline's full maturity. Certainly, the 1970s saw IR at the height of its powers, in both academia and public policy. However, already by then the established pluralist school, with its emphasis on collective bargaining and formal rule-making, faced a major challenge from a new generation of New Left Marxists who stressed workplace conflict over wages and job controls. A series of key texts and works emerged from this time, including Fox's (1974) *Beyond Contract*, Clegg's (1976) *The Changing System of British Industrial Relations*, Flanders' (1974) *Management and Unions* and *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction*. The institutional and intellectual grounding of academic IR appeared solid, even if the central paradigm was highly contested.

1979 marked a turning point for IR as a British academic discipline, however, as it has for trade unions and institutional workplace industrial relations in practice. This story of paradigm formation, breakdown and salvage echoes the history of other specialist social science disciplines (see Kuper 1996). Accordingly, the first, *new field of enquiry* stage begins with a new problem or subject in the 'real world': in our case the problem of industrial society and 'organised labour'. The 'problem' emerged and was first defined in the late Victorian period, initially by a loose-knit group of amateur investigators, some practitioners and academics in other, more established disciplines. The second stage is one of deliberate *disciplinary formation*. Funding became available, University departments were formed, and rapidly these

loose networks solidified into a tightly knit disciplinary core of intellectuals who specialised in this particular field of enquiry. Key individuals prescribed a research paradigm of theories and methods, which served to sharpen the empirical analysis of the disciplinary grouping, but also turned it inwards and erected barriers to theoretical perspectives from related social science fields. In the historical period concerned—mainly the middle decades of the twentieth century—the community of scholars was largely national in scope. Next comes the period of *paradigm breakdown*, through a combination of external shocks emanating from the outside world and related internal changes, as new generations of scholars entered the field bringing novel theories and methods. At the same time, the original research subject and sponsor—collective bargaining institutions and trade unions—ceased to exist in the same way. As the national paradigm struggled to cope, new often unwelcome ideas flooded into the discipline, from increasingly international and interdisciplinary sources such as Marxism, Feminism and Postmodernism. At this point, a discipline might dissolve entirely, except that old disciplinary traditions with strong academic institutional support die hard. Survival partly reflects institutional inertia, but it may also represent the value of academic theoretical memory, even where the subject of analysis has changed (Lyddon 2003). In that case, we begin a process of *salvaging the paradigm*, by drawing out its most useful concepts and theoretical insights and situating these in a looser, more open and permissive framework.

#### **BEGINNINGS: PRACTITIONERS, LAWYERS, HISTORIANS AND ECONOMISTS**

Industrial relations had a long pre-history before it consolidated itself as an academic discipline after the war (Lyddon 2003: 90–101). The 'labour problem' from the late nineteenth century also threw-up a large quantity of more practical arbitration and conciliation work, from which emerged early academic positions, such as the Montague Burton chairs founded at Leeds, Cardiff and Cambridge in 1930. The first IR textbooks had a strong descriptive character and centred on trade unions and bargaining institutions; features which were carried over into the mature post-war discipline. J.A. Richardson held the Leeds chair and the 'object' of his textbook *Industrial Relations in Britain* (1932: vii) was 'to give a descriptive account of industrial relations in Great Britain'. The book covered: The Economic and Social Background; The Trade Union Movement; Employers Organisations; Methods of Negotiation between Trade Unions and Employers Organisations; Works Councils; Industrial Welfare; Labour Management; and Cooperation in National Economic Councils. Although its descriptive tone and institutional emphasis anticipated the definitive post-war texts, they also point to significant gains and losses. On the credit side, later texts moved beyond Richardson's national industry-level viewpoint. On the debit side, the more unitarist dimension of employer regulation—including voluntary welfare provision, co-partnership and profits sharing, suggestion schemes, Industrial Psychology and Personnel Management, all discussed in Richardson's book, would increasingly fade from view in successive post-war texts. As a later Cambridge chair, H.A. Turner (1968: 348) reflected several decades later, at the high point of self-conscious disciplinary formation, IR 'had previously become academically a

somewhat traditional subject, dominated by institutionalists, historians and to a lesser extent economists’.

### DISCIPLINARY FORMATION: THE OXFORD SCHOOL (1954–1968)

Industrial relations was re-invented as a distinctive discipline by the ‘Oxford school’ at Nuffield College in the 1950s, centred on Flanders and Clegg. Indeed, one leading participant, McCarthy (1994) identified the birth of modern IR with the publication of their edited text, *The System of Industrial Relations in Great Britain: Its History, Law and Institutions* (1954). While Brown and Wright (1994: 156) write of ‘the emergence of industrial relations as an integrated field of study in Britain in the 1950s’ (see Brown 1997). Flanders and Clegg (1954: v–vi) announced their new project with a critical flourish, belying the book’s rather pedestrian contents: ‘Trade unions and employers’ associations are the chief institutions of IR. Their main relationship is through collective bargaining’. They eschewed both Human Relations—for ‘a deplorable lack of historical understanding and, sometimes, a failure to appreciate the nature of the “situation” studied due to ignorance of the framework of formal institutions which surround it’—and Personnel Management, as ‘an art’, which ‘requires a different treatment’.

In effect, Clegg and Flanders had established a new paradigm that drew the field away from Economics and Industrial Sociology, and back towards the sort of organisational analysis pioneered by the Webbs and Cole. At the same time, they distanced IR from Personnel Management; a legacy which was to have implications with the advent of Human Resource Management (HRM) in the 1980s (Storey 1989). At this early stage, however, the range of contributors was still interdisciplinary and drawn from various universities. The ‘Social background’ was by the Social Historian, Asa Briggs; a Professor of Law, Otto Kahn Freund provided the ‘Legal Framework’; J.D.M. Bell, an Economic Historian, covered Trade Unions; while Clegg and Flanders, respectively, wrote the ‘core curriculum’ papers on ‘Employers’ and ‘Collective Bargaining’. The substantial closing paper on ‘Joint Consultation’ by Clegg and T.E. Chester, a Professor of Social Administration, was designed to put this topic in the subordinate place it was to occupy henceforth.

The external impetus for this academic innovation came from the rise of IR as a practical problem of public policy concern in the late 1950s and 1960s (Edwards 1995: 7). In this respect, British IR was very much a child of the victorious war against Fascism, the first majority Labour Governments and the post-war social democratic settlement that emerged in the 1950s era of domestic full employment and international Cold War. This social and ideological background to the formation of Oxford industrial relations, has been sketched by an outside observer at Oxford in the 1950s, the eminent sociologist, H.L. Halsey:

the prejudices, predilections and politics of a generation which grew up in the slump years of the 1930s, was catapulted somewhat mindlessly into heroic war against fascism in the 1940s, fumbled towards an anti-Marxist social democracy in the 1950s, sought a post-imperial persona in the 1960s and struggled to find a new dynamic of post-industrialism in the 1970s. (Fox 1990: vi)

The 1965–1968 *Donovan Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers Associations* consolidated the hegemony of the Oxford paradigm, even in the eyes of its critics from the older, more diffuse tradition of IR. Clegg sat on the Commission, while Fox and McCarthy contributed research papers. Turner (1968: 347, 359), reviewing the report and research papers, quite clearly disliked the ‘distinct’ and ‘common approach’ of the Oxford group, with their ‘genuflections towards the Fawley Shrine or citations from its Chief Evangelist’. The ‘Oxford Line’ was:

an industrious extension of established lines of enquiry (and particularly a meticulous pursuit of institutional detail), a preference for the short-term rule of thumb over the broader generalization, a rather low awareness of those disciplines—in ascending order of sociology, statistics and economics—which may illuminate the field with normative observations, and a variety of propagandist mini-reformism which consists partly in leading people boldly in the direction they appear to be going anyway.

There is no doubt that Flanders was regarded as the chief theoretician of the new discipline. As Clegg opined after Flanders’ early death (Flanders 1974:7):

With the publication of *The Fawley Productivity Agreements* in 1964, Allan Flanders became almost overnight the outstanding theorist of industrial relations in Britain.

The new paradigm had five main features. First, the *research subject* was defined as organised labour, collective bargaining and other institutions associated with this. Second, the *interpretative framework* was institutional rule-making or ‘systems of job regulation’ (Flanders 1974: 8). Third, the *practical policy orientation* was towards third-party, state intervention in a primarily voluntarist system. Fourth, the *research methods* were either historical descriptions of institutions or case studies of the same, often prompted by state enquiries. Fifth, the implicit *epistemology and ontology* was an unreflective pragmatism and realism, centred on collective bargaining institutions, and geared towards the discovery of ‘useful knowledge’.

As Winchester (1983: 101) later observed, the IR literature remained dominated by fact finding and description rather than explicit theoretical generalisation. Even so, several domain assumptions (Gouldner 1971) rooted in the realities of the early post-war period, underpinned this perspective. One was that the employment relationship had been reshaped historically by the emergence of organised labour and would continue to be. Trade unions were conceptualised as manual, manufacturing and male (until well into the 1980s). And, in this respect, IR unconsciously adopted a ‘male breadwinner’ model, even in its more radical variants (Greene 2003). Another pluralist assumption was that social democratic institutional reform, in the British tradition, presented a third way between free market capitalism and Soviet Communism. Clegg and Flanders, in particular, shared this highly charged political agenda, which informed their IR thinking (Brown 1998; Rowley 1998; Kelly 1999). This, in turn, concentrated on distinctive employment institutions—Dunlop’s (1958) *Industrial Relations System*—as part of the academic division of labour, on the assumption that these enjoyed substantial leeway within a national economic system during a period of growth. Finally, IR absorbed a strong current of positivist Fabian social engineering, common sense and Anglo-Saxon empiricism.

However, the new discipline tended to ignore the practice of Personnel Management and the academic study of Human Relations, as was evident in Flanders and Clegg's (1954) preface. By and large, management activity outside collective bargaining (including non-union companies) was viewed through the normative prism of joint regulation (as with union recognition and wages councils) and neither 'employer regulation' nor consultation received much subsequent attention. Flanders and Fox grounded IR pluralism in Durkheim's notion of 'normative order', but the full potential theoretical and practical implications of this connection were left undeveloped (Ackers 2002). A deeper engagement with functionalist and social interactionist sociology would have suggested that cooperation at work also deserved analysis. This blind-spot was intimately connected to the summary dismissal of Personnel Management and Human Relations, and resulted in a partial understanding of the employment relationship, leaving large conceptually 'empty' areas to be colonised by HRM in the future. At this time, however, only the most prescient observers saw the potential threat from a future right wing, neoliberal backlash against social and industrial disorder. The real challenge seemed to come, instead, from the opposite side of the political spectrum, the New Left.

#### **PARADIGM BREAKDOWN: THE CHALLENGE OF MARXIST SOCIOLOGY (1968–1979)**

Perhaps, the most influential paper to come out of Donovan, in terms of the theorising and teaching of IR, was not the main report, but Fox's (1996) research paper on 'frames of reference. It became a standard fixture in IR textbooks, and central to how IR specialists saw themselves, both in relation to other academic schools of thought, such as Industrial Sociology and Occupational Psychology, and in relation to internal divisions within the discipline. The original version largely translated Flanders and Clegg's foundational prejudices into the language of the sociology of knowledge, by defining a pluralist outlook in contrast to a unitary managerial perspective. Pluralism recognised differences of interest in employment and suggested means of channelling and institutionalising these (through trade unions and collective bargaining), though never removing them. However, unitarism viewed the enterprise as a harmonious whole, with workers and management united by common interests and values. Almost by definition, there have been few IR unitarists. Crouch (1982: 18) could only identify two (B.C. Roberts and D.F. Macdonald), notwithstanding the abiding popularity of this approach among non-academic IR practitioners. Therefore, in effect, Fox's paper defined a united discipline against a common foe found lurking on its borders in other disciplines. Only in the 1980s, with the advent of HRM, did unitarism materialise into a more substantial protagonist—though even then it remained something of a chimera. Fox's (1974) later work, however, added a third, Marxian Radical frame, as he himself gravitated in this direction. In this way, frames of reference became a central way of conceptualising the internal challenge that came from Marxism in the 1970s and the external challenge from American-style HRM in the 1980s.

The 1960s breakdown of national bargaining, accompanied by strikes and the rise of shop stewards, forced an early revision of the Flanders and Clegg's (1954)

national institutional paradigm. An analytical framework designed to explain a centralised and ordered system of national bargaining, was re-engineered to restore order to the chaotic, fragmented system that emerged in the 1960s. The 1968 Donovan Report preserved the voluntarist tenor of the early Oxford school, by insisting that the state and law should do no more than 'hold the ring', leaving management and trade unions to regulate the employment relationship. It did recognise, however, that *national* collective bargaining, Trade Unions and Employers Associations were no longer up to this job. For this formal system had been undermined by an informal system of workplace bargaining between enterprise managers and lay union shop stewards, especially in engineering—where this analysis was grounded. The result has been a breakdown of the old normative order, reflected in strikes and wages drift. This was linked to the problem of inflation and the need for Incomes Policies, with Clegg and Turner sitting on the National Board for Prices and Incomes. In Donovan's view there was no return to old, centralised system (though critics have noticed subsequently that it survived in many north European economies). The Commission's recipe was to formalise the informal and to create a new normative order in workplace industrial relations. In practical terms, many firms pursued the Donovan recipe, developing more formal workplace procedures and committees, constructing bargaining relationship with shop stewards and providing the latter with time-off for training and facilities to conduct their legitimate representative role more efficiently. However, overall this proved 'too little, too late', both for practical industrial relations and for IR pluralism as an academic paradigm.

Unofficial strikes and militant shop stewards were not just practical problems to be addressed by a settled academic analysis; they also sparked new ideologies that sought to redefine the nature of the problem in industry and society. It is an historical irony that pluralist IR's 1968 recipe for a social democratic stabilisation of industrial society coincided with an era of industrial disputes and student revolts, which fostered an entirely new set of values and expectations among the rising generation of IR students. This 'challenge from below', in industry and academic life, also led to the 1970s rise of Marxism as an alternative radical IR frame of reference. Shifted the focus from stability and order to 'class struggle and worker's self-activity'. The radicalisation of intellectual life also affected established IR academics more generally. Fox (1990: 23–4), a former close collaborator of Flanders and Clegg, recalled 'the university and polytechnic political excitements of the later sixties' and Marxist criticisms of 'the Oxford stance'. The new mood matched his growing disenchantment with IR pluralism and empiricism and the 'itch for a theoretical framework of concepts and motivations which made sense of these facts and problems and related them to the wider society'. Along with the Marxist challenge, Fox's radical pluralism shifted the axis of IR from an analysis centred upon industrial reformism to one looking for industrial transformation. In this way, IR became close to the hope and illusions of the 1970s Bennite wing of the Labour Party and the trade union Left. When the real political challenge came after 1979, this time from the New Right, the discipline found itself looking in the wrong direction.

With the wisdom of hindsight, the Marxist revival of the 1970s was very much a mixed blessing in terms of the development of IR theory and research. Industrial relations pluralism, as an ideology of practical reform, was losing its grip in any case. The 'failure' of the Donovan voluntarist recipe as public policy, led to loss of credibility in practical management and government circles (Batstone 1984). Against this, a brand of sectarian and economistic IR Marxism predominated, linked to the 'Labour Process' school of industrial sociology, which continued, in its own way, the trend since Donovan to focus on the workplace rather than national rule-making systems. What this contributed in depth of understanding of work processes, such as job controls, it lost in terms of a wider understanding of the links between work and society. One positive legacy was a series of rich workplace ethnographies, combining IR institutions with a brand of 'factory sociology' (Beynon 1984).

On the positive side, the radical challenge forced Clegg to defend and define pluralism as a political and industrial project. Like Hobsbawm (1981), he seemed aware that things could not carry on in the same way:

Rights imply obligations, and, in return for this guarantee, pressure groups and trade unions should deal honourably with governments and employers... the increasing failure of the pluralist stabilising mechanisms to contain inflation, competitive greed and social disorder in some western societies, including Britain, is all too evident. (Clegg 1975: 314, 316)

Even so, the final 1979 version of his *The Changing System of British Industrial Relations* insisted, confidently, on 'the importance of the structure of collective bargaining to an understanding of industrial relations' (p. 444). At the same time, other leading figures, notably Fox and Batstone engaged at a deeper level with the *Sociology of Work*. This also translated into more sophisticated research studies, whether of the Ethnographic type pursued by Batstone *et al.* (1977) or the new survey methods pioneered by Brown (1981) at the IRRU and developed in the four Workplace Industrial Relations Survey (WIRS/WERS) studies of the past quarter-century and 1990s. At worst, some earlier IR 'research' had been closer to casual journalism than serious sociology. For all this, looking back at the 1970s today, in the light of a revival of national and supranational employment policy, Flanders and Clegg's 'rule-making institutions' seem to us to be of greater contemporary relevance than emphasis on workplace 'job controls'.

#### **PARADIGM BREAKDOWN: THE CHALLENGE OF THATCHERISM (1979-1997)**

The external forces that had helped to promote IR as a discipline, also, in their absence precipitated its decline. Thatcherism and the economic and social changes in its train dissolved the 'labour problem', marginalised trade unions and manufacturing industry, undermined the voluntarist system of collective bargaining and removed the opportunities for public policy interventions by IR academics (Hall & Jacques 1983; Ewing 2003). At the same time, the 'Enterprise Culture' saw major changes in the institutional and academic context of higher education, notably the spread of US-style business schools and the advent of HRM (Ackers



1994; Legge 1995; Redman & Wilkinson 2001). This 'shock to the system' marked the end of an era and undermined the intellectual confidence of the discipline, which limped on without a really attempting to rethink its paradigm until the mid-1990s (Blyton & Turnbull 1994; Edwards 1995; Kelly 1998), fighting what seemed like a desperate rear guard action. Adjustment to the new reality was very slow, and Bain's (1983) edited text was much more about the discipline's past—trade unions and collective bargaining—than its future. When IR most needed a theory, or a map linking the present to the future, it lacked anything that was serviceable (Batstone 1984: 342).

In the 1980s, radicals and pluralists suffered together, and radical pluralism became a sort of defensive common ground. As trade unions declined, so too did academic research activity (Brown & Wright 1994: 161). When Marxism, in turn, suffered a more serious damage in the late 1980s, following the collapse of Communism, the discipline's best, combined response to the New Right was a sceptical empiricism. Following political defeat, and in the absence of new ideas, there grew a highly quantitative new empiricism, centred on the WIRS (Daniel & Millward 1983 and its successors). Although these surveys provided valuable evidence about the state of British IR, IR's new emphasis carried a certain irony too. Rather like the scientist, who knows he has taken a fatal poison, and sets about recording with great rigour the details of his slow demise, IR spent much of the 1980s and early 1990s counting, measuring and at times denying the very obvious dismantling of Clegg's 'system of industrial relations'. Consequently, a quiet disciplinary transformation was taking place, particularly in the pages of the *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, as qualitative, case-study research was eclipsed by the quantitative, survey method and 'sociology as the key discipline within industrial relations tended to give way to economics' (Wood 2000: 3).

At the same time IR academics, such as Keith Sisson, David Guest, John Purcell, John Storey and Michael Poole, became leading figures in the new discipline of HRM, which now co-exists with IR in most business schools and management departments (we do not have space to deal with this complex relationship here: see Ackers & Wilkinson 2003: 14–20; and Bacon same volume). And there are instances not just of institutional survival, but even academic expansion—as with new journals, such as *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* and the *European Journal of Industrial Relations*. However, there remains a strong sense of intellectual marginalisation. Where IR specialists have moved into new areas, such as HRM, there is debate about how far the insights of their old discipline contributes to the new field of enquiry. Equally, excursions into Europe or the past, may be ways to avoid confronting fundamental changes in British society, which put into question the old IR agenda established in the 1960s and 1970s.

All this is not to argue that IR academics have been idle. Through the 1980s and 1990s, the Warwick IRRU produced a steady flow of empirical studies to temper the more extravagant claims of the new managerialism. Moreover, a series of edited collections—Bain's (1983) *Industrial Relations in Britain*, Edwards' (1995, 2003) *Industrial Relations* and Sisson (1989) and Bach and Sisson's *Personnel Management* (1989) and its successors, have carried forward the IR perspective. Reading the Bain book today, however, it still entirely moored in a 1970s world

of strong trade unions, shop stewards and workplace bargaining. It is only in the introduction to the 1995 volume that Edwards begins to excavate the discipline's long-standing, though implicit, focus on the 'employment relationship', from beneath the rubble of institutional description of Trade Unions and Employers Associations, many by now long dead. Even so, the full sociological significance of this concept has yet to be uncovered, a full generation after Fox's (1974) seminal work on 'trust' and 'contract'. In this way, the foundation texts of the 1970s have stimulated only a limited amount of further theoretical development. Some, like hymn to rank-and-file militancy, have proved a dead-end. Therefore, when Kelly (1998) calls for a *Rethinking of Industrial Relations*, it is almost as if he is staring back to an earlier time, which has little connection with the present.

#### **SALVAGING THE PARADIGM: NEW LABOUR, EUROPE AND THE NEW INSTITUTIONALISM (1997 ONWARDS)**

In 1997 it appeared that the cavalry finally arrived, with a new Labour Government. A discipline focused on trade unions and collective bargaining had found it increasingly difficult to conceptualise a society in which both were increasingly marginal to the world of work. Some lessons had been learned in the interim, but there remained unanswered questions. Many radicals now recognise that trade unions are highly perishable institutions, maintained by leaders and certain state regimes, rather than the near spontaneous expressions of worker collectivity. Only a few voices continued to advocate a 'phoenix' view of union revival, whereby rank-and-file workers regenerate union consciousness from the ashes of defeat (Darlington 1994; Fairbrother 1996; Kelly 1998). However, there remains little awareness that changes in society and workplace identity may have dissolved the very industrial conditions that produced union organisation in the first place. In Wood's (2000: 1) words: 'the institutions of industrial relations, once so central to core arguments within sociology, economics and political science, seem to have ceased to be of such consuming interest'.

In the short term, for practical research and teaching purposes, however, the arrival of New Labour and EU Social Policy, carrying pieces of a new institutional architecture, has allowed IR to side step these rather more fundamental questions. A new *raison d'être* has appeared in the shape of new institutions, problems and policy concepts. This has restored the public policy agenda to the heart of IR and exposed the Atlanticist assumptions of an HRM paradigm constructed entirely around the enterprise. The Low Pay Commission even echoed Donovan 30 years earlier. The Working Time and European Works Council Directives have also suggested new opportunities for institutional analysis and regulation involving trade unions. Statutory Trade Union Recognition offers to staunch the decline of collective bargaining. 'Partnership' suggests some return to pluralism and trade unions. For a moment, it might seem that IR can carry on regardless, as if the 18-year-long New Right nightmare is over, and the discipline can return to something like the 1970s institutional approach.

However, we would see this as a delusion. The search for the familiar—committees, procedures and so on—could blind the discipline to the relative sociological marginality of many of these new forms. Whereas collective bargaining in

1968 was a central social institution comparable to supermarket shopping today in its impact on the economy and ordinary people's lives, these new institutions are of lesser significance. Second, the discipline has already become too diffuse and interlocked with HRM, Sociology and Economics to be put back in the institutional box. Third and most important, the mainstream of what is happening to the employment relationship lies elsewhere, and, to a large extent, is a global trend, rather than just a domestic product of Thatcherism and de-industrialisation—as it appeared in the early 1980s. For instance, trade unions are declining in membership and power throughout the developed world. The danger is that British IR clings to one small log that is being washed downstream by a mighty river of socioeconomic change. The log is worth grasping, clearly, but IR needs to address the encircling current too.

### CONCLUSION

Classical British IR had a limited life cycle of roughly 30 years and was the product of one post-war generation and their times. All this begs the question: which element of the pluralist IR paradigm constructed by Clegg and Flanders in the 1960s are worthy of salvage and reconstruction. In other words, what specific theoretical contribution can the British IR tradition make both to the development of HRM and Organisational Behaviour within business schools and beyond? We see the following six main strengths, which can be further developed (Edwards 2003):

1. A focus on the *employment relationship*, which is still not fully understood as a human and social relationship, involving values as well as interests, ethics as well as economics.
2. The production of *critical but useful knowledge* for society, business and all its stakeholders, which informs public policy and contributes to effectiveness of organisations, but avoids a 'servants of power' managerialism.
3. An *empirical research tradition*, which develops theory in relation to evidence, producing a 'thick description' of employment institutions, still heavily based on case-study methods verging on an ethnographic 'dirty realism' (Brown 1998).
4. An *interdisciplinary openness* that distrusts the tight, closed paradigms found in more dogmatic social sciences, such as neoclassical economics and managerial psychology, and which helps IR to shape the broader interdisciplinary agenda, both within business schools and across university departments.
5. A concern with *practical procedural and distributive justice*, to improve wages and conditions for ordinary employees linked to feasible policy reforms, not only through trade unions but also by means of other rule-making mechanism, involving the state and employers.
6. An emphasis on *neoinstitutional regulation* through all manner of unions, bodies, teams, work groups, committees, procedures and as a means of making rules in detail governing the social relations of work.

This last strength suggests some natural, as yet underdeveloped, affinities with wider institutional theory in the economic and social sciences (Scott 2001), which we plan to pursue in our future work (see Ackers 2005). Edwards (2003), a staunch

defender of the British IR tradition, argues that IR has sold itself short and can offer a model for Social Sciences more generally.

At the very least, we can say that IR is consistent with those modern social theories which stress the connected nature of social phenomena, which refuse to privilege structure or action, and which argue that the 'causal powers' of certain forces are not invariable but depend on their context. (Edwards 2003: 31)

However, he also admits that 'IR insights receive no serious mention in the recent report of the Commission on Social Sciences' (Edwards 2003: 1). Therefore, IR still has to punch its intellectual and research weight in the British social sciences. This is certainly not a case for flirting with every modish Social Science ideas. Postmodernism, for example, goes against much of what is to be celebrated about IR (Eldridge 2003), as does rational choice economics. Both are powerful and expansive paradigms. British IR's academic future may depend largely on finding allies to defend and deepen its tradition of conducting critical empirical research in real organisations and making a practical contribution to the well-being of working people—as well as their employers.

#### ENDNOTE

1. This article is a shorter, modified version of the introduction to our edited collection, *Understanding Work and Employment: Industrial Relations in Transition* (Oxford, 2003). One of our referees has argued, very cogently, that IR never was, nor even aspired to being, a discipline or paradigm—as we have argued here—and that our argument is thus anachronistic. Our response is threefold: (i) the ideas of Flanders in particular were perceived, at the time, as a major innovation from the rather hotch-potch cross-disciplinary, descriptive and practical field that had existed since the start of the twentieth century; (ii) that despite the borrowing of theory from other disciplines, many IR academics occupied a highly distinctive life-world of concepts, journals, conferences and departments; and (iii) that commonsense empiricism and pragmatism can itself constitute a paradigm, especially when practical problem-solving and description disguises a strong normative commitment to the labour movement. Edwards (2003) rejects the notion of (a) an IR *discipline*, as to closed, in favour of (b) a *field of enquiry*, which is something more 'coherent' than (c) a loose interdisciplinary *area of study*. Our use of *paradigm* and *discipline* interchangeably lies somewhere between (a) and (b) and certainly does not suggest a virtually closed discipline, like neoclassical economics.

#### REFERENCES

- Ackers P (1994) Back to basics: Industrial relations and the enterprise culture. *Employee Relations* 16 (8): 32–47.
- Ackers P (2002) Reframing employment relations: The case for neo-pluralism. *Industrial Relations Journal* 33 (1): 2–19.
- Ackers P, Payne J (1998) British trade unions and social partnership: Rhetoric, reality and strategy. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* 9 (3): 529–50.
- Ackers P, Wilkinson A, eds (2003) *Understanding Work and Employment: Industrial Relations in Transition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ackers P (2005) Theorising the employment relationship: materialists and institutionalists. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*. 43 (3): 537–43.
- Bain G, ed (1983) *Industrial Relations in Britain*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Batstone E (1984) *Working Order: Workplace Industrial Relations over Two Decades*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Batstone E, Boraston I, Frenkel S (1977) *Shop Stewards in Action: The Organization of Workplace Conflict and Accommodation*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Beynon H (1984) *Working for Ford*, 2nd edition. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Blyton P, Turnbull P (1994) *The Dynamics of Employee Relations*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

- Brown W, ed (1981) *The Changing Contours of British Industrial Relations: A Survey of Manufacturing Industry*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Brown W (1997) The high tide of consensus: The system of industrial relations in Great Britain (1954) revisited. *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* 4: 135–49.
- Brown W (1998) Clegg, Hugh Armstrong. In: Poole M, Warner M, eds, *The IEBH Handbook of Human Resource Management*, pp. 847–52. London: ITP.
- Brown W, Wright M (1994) The empirical tradition in workplace bargaining research. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 32 (2): 153–64.
- Clarke T, Clegg S (2000) Management paradigms for the new millennium. *International Journal of Management Reviews* 2 (1): 45–64.
- Clegg HA (1975) Pluralism in Industrial relations. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 13 (3): 309–16.
- Clegg HA (1976) Pluralism in industrial relations. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 13 (3).
- Crouch C (1982) *Trade Unions: The Logic of Collective Action*. London: Fontana.
- Daniel WW, Milward N (1983) *Workplace Industrial Relations in Britain: The DE/PSI/SSRC Survey*. London: Heineman.
- Darlington R (1994) *The Dynamics of Workplace Unionism: Shop Stewards Organization in Three Merseyside Plants*. London: Mansell.
- Dunlop JT (1958) *Industrial Relations Systems*. New York: Holt.
- Edwards P (2005) The challenging but promising future of Industrial Relations: developing theory and method in context-sensitive research. *Industrial Relations Journal* 36 (4): 264–282.
- Edwards P, ed (1995) *Industrial Relations*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Edwards P (2003) The future of industrial relations. In: Ackers P, Wilkinson A, eds, *Understanding Work and Employment: Industrial Relations in Transition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Eldridge J (2003) Post modernism and industrial relations. In: Ackers P, Wilkinson A, eds, *Understanding Work and Employment: Industrial Relations in Transition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ewing K (2003) Labour law and industrial relations. In: Ackers P, Wilkinson A, eds, *Understanding Work and Employment: Industrial Relations in Transition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fairbrother P (1996) Workplace trade unionism in the state sector. In: Ackers P, Smith C, Smith P, eds, *The New Workplace and Trade Unionism*. London: Routledge.
- Flanders A, Clegg HA, eds (1954) *The System of Industrial Relations in Great Britain: Its History, Law and Institutions*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Flanders A (1974) *Management and Unions: The Theory and Reform of Industrial Relations*. London: Faber.
- Fox A (1966) *Industrial Sociology and Industrial Relations*, Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers Associations. Research Papers 3. London: HMSO.
- Fox A (1974) *Beyond Contract: Work, Power and Trust Relations*. London: Faber.
- Fox A (1990) *A Very Late Development*. Warwick: IRRU, University of Warwick.
- Gouldner AW (1971) *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*. London: Heineman.
- Greene A (2003) Women and industrial relations. In: Ackers P, Wilkinson A, eds, *Understanding Work and Employment: Industrial Relations in Transition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hall S, Jacques M, eds (1983) *The Politics of Thatcherism*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Hobsbawm EH (1981) *The Forward March of Labour Halted*. London: Verso.
- Kaufman B (2003) Industrial relations in North America. In: Ackers P, Wilkinson A, eds, *Understanding Work and Employment: Industrial Relations in Transition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kelly J (1998) *Retinking Industrial Relations: Mobilization, Collectivism and Long Waves*. London: Routledge.
- Kelly J (1999) Social democracy and anti-communism: Allan Flanders and British industrial relations in the early post-war period. In: Campbell A, Fishman N, McIlroy J, eds, *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: The Post-War Compromise, 1945–64*, pp. 192–221. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.
- Kuper A (1996) *Anthropology and Anthropologists*. London: Routledge.
- Legge K (1995) *Human Resource Management: Rhetorics and Realities*. London: Macmillan.
- Lyddon D (2003) History and industrial relations. In: Ackers P, Wilkinson A, eds, *Understanding Work and Employment: Industrial Relations in Transition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- McCarthy W (1994) The involvement of academics in British industrial relations. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 32 (2): 202–17.
- Michelson G, Lansbury R (2003). In: Ackers P, Wilkinson A, eds, *Understanding Work and Employment: Industrial Relations in Transition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Redman T, Wilkinson A, eds (2001) *Contemporary Human Resource Management*. London: FT/Prentice Hall.
- Rowley C (1998) Flanders, Allan. In: Poole M, Warner M, eds, *The IEBH Handbook of Human Resource Management*, pp. 860–5. London: ITP.
- Scott RW (2001) *Institutions and Organizations*, 2nd edition. London: Sage.
- Sisson K, ed (1989) *Personnel Management*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Storey J, ed (1989) *New Perspectives on Human Resource Management*. London: Routledge.
- Terry M (2003) Can partnership reverse the decline of British unions? *Work, Employment and Society* 17 (3): 459–72.
- Turner HA (1968) The Royal Commission's research papers. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 346–59.
- Whitfield K, Strauss G (1998) *Researching the World of Work: Strategies and Methods in Studying Industrial Relations*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell.
- Winchester D (1983) Industrial relations research in Britain. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 21 (1): 100–14.
- Wood S (2000) The BJIR and industrial relations in the new millennium. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 38 (1): 1–5.