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Article information:

To cite this document:
Roger Seifert , (2015),"Big bangs and cold wars", Employee Relations, Vol. 37 Iss 6 pp. 746 - 760
Permanent link to this document:
http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/ER-06-2015-0101

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ER
37,6

Received 2 June 2015
Revised 2 June 2015
Accepted 9 July 2015

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Big bangs and cold wars

The British industrial relations tradition after Donovan (1965-2015)

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief and partial overview of some of the issues and authors that have dominated British industrial relations research since 1965. It is cast in terms of that year being the astronomical Big Bang from which all else was created. It traces a spectacular growth in academic interest and departments throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and then comments on the petering out of the tradition and its very existence (Darlington, 2009; Smith, 2011).

Design/methodology/approach – There are no methods other than a biased look through the literature.

Findings – These show a liberal oppression of the Marxist interpretation of class struggle through trade unions, collective bargaining, strikes, and public policy. At first through the Cold War and later, less well because many Marxists survived and thrived in industrial relations departments until after 2000, through closing courses and choking off demand. This essay exposes the hypocrisy surrounding notions of academic freedom, and throws light on the determination of those in the labour movement and their academic allies to push forward wage controls and stunted bargaining regimes, alongside restrictions on strikes, in the name of moderation and the middle ground.

Originality/value – An attempt to correct the history as written by the pro tem victors.

Keywords Industrial relations, Donovan report, Marxists

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

"It all started with the big bang" goes the song by the Barenecked Ladies as the theme tune to the American TV comedy of the same name.

In 1965 the Donovan Commission commenced work on a report that can be seen as the start of British industrial relations as a university subject, worthy of research, teaching, and embedded inside social science and business faculties. This essay discusses this beginning as having skewed subsequent debates away from a traditional Marxist account of really existing class struggle, towards a phoney war ranging between workplace job regulation and national incomes policies. The role of the state as an instrument of class rule was largely ignored in this traditional pluralist account (Lenin, 1917; Miliband, 1972). As a result the nature of working-class democracy, citizens' rights to challenge the power and influence of ever-bigger globalised business, was discounted as either street politics or communist conspiracies (Chomsky, 1999).

In 1965, the then Labour Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, ordered a commission into industrial relations in the UK (Donovan, 1968). This was set within the context of a narrow victory in the 1964 general election and efforts to "modernise" British capitalism at home and abroad (Morgan, 1990). A central tenet of the time was that comparatively low productivity (the persistent and insistent labour problem) was at the heart of our economic ills. This concentrated on worker performance as one key to unlocking sustainable British economic growth and meant a renewed focus on those institutions and factors that underpinned both the labour process and the labour problem. Hence the

Employee Relations
Vol. 37 No. 6, 2015
pp. 746-760
© Emerald Group Publishing Limited
0142-5455
DOI 10.1108/ER-06-2015-0101

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explosion of interest in, *inter alia*, work group activity, labour management, wage drift, trade unions, collective bargaining, state intervention and employment laws, and class struggle. Ecce industrial relations!

This spilled over into a vexed foreign policy direction in terms of arms expenditure, trade/investment, and the disaster of a large balance of payments deficit and a run on the pound. Such issues reflected the growing anti-colonial struggles with their culmination in the Vietnam War. All of this fed into the mix of calls for a more open democracy from the post-war generation with greater voices for students and workers, women, and ethnic minorities (this was the heyday of Powellism as well as the advance of the civil rights movements), and those living under the threat of nuclear war and experiencing the distorted reality of the Cold War.

As a revanchist capitalist movement was developing old wine in new bottles with the attacks on Keynesian consensus and the rebranding of what became monetarism (the forbear of neo-liberalism), so the labour movement was throwing off the shackles of Cold War leaders, cosy arrangements with either state bureaucrats or employers, and re-affirming a socialist heart along with a militant mind. The grand crisis of British imperialism had taken grip. New technologies along with modern management methods, reformed education and training systems, and a reappraisal of the role of direct state interference in the micro-economy all added to the debate about the generalised crisis of capitalism and fuelled a surge in interest in all things Marxist.

Donovan and beyond

The re-formation of international capitalist competition meant a new searchlight on the workplace and especially on workers' productivity in the advanced manufacturing sector. Thus, the Donovan commission was asked to investigate the deep-seated problems of work and recommend solutions to the labour problem. The focus was entirely on shop steward power on the factory floor, despite lip service to other aspects of industrial relations (Crossley, 1968; Turner, 1969; Goldthorpe, 1974). The service sector and the public sector were largely ignored. The group of academics brought together to dissect the body in question contained leading experts from Oxford and Warwick Universities. The main players are well known as Hugh Clegg, Bill McCarthy, Allen Flanders, Alan Fox, and George Bain. All went on to dominate British academic industrial relations for 20 years or more. Indeed their legacy is felt still, but much of their analysis and many of their recommendations are long gone.

When the group started their research activities within the narrow set of predetermined frameworks of analysis they wanted to be positive, collect large amounts of new data, and provide a solution to low productivity that reduced union power and curtailed worker rights – to focus on the use of worker energy as labour to improve productivity for the good of all. This pluralist win-win equation required, they argued, rational self-awareness by workers and their trade union leaders alike of the inner logic of profit-making systems and their sustainability in a competitive world (Flanders, 1965; Fox, 1966; Fox and Flanders, 1969).

Industrial relations was already becoming part of the institutional fabric of the university sector. The *British Journal of Industrial Relations* (*BJIR*) was founded in 1962 by Ben Roberts at the London School of Economics (LSE) (Kelly, 2015), only two years after the first British Universities Industrial Relations Association (BUIRA) conference in 1960. This went hand in hand with the setting up of the *Socialist Register* in 1963 edited at first by Ralph Miliband and John Saville, and soon after the short-lived *Trade Union Register*, edited by Ken Coates, Tony Topham and Michael Barrat Brown.

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It also corresponded with developments in the professional side of the subject with the emergence of the Institute of Personnel Management (rebranded as the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development, CIPD in 2000) and the more systematic use of academic experts as advisors and consultants to unions, large corporations, and soon after governments. By 1970 Brian Towers had set up the *Industrial Relations Journal* (*IRJ*) based in Nottingham, and post-Donovan the two sides of the industrial relations coin flourished.

Clegg began his seminal work on industrial relations with a definition of the subject: "so that industrial relations could be briefly defined as the study of job-regulation" (Clegg, 1972, p. 1). This became the standard work for a generation as it stated explicitly what was to be studied. Such a view of job regulation was only implicit in the earlier works of Flanders on collective bargaining and Clegg on joint consultation brought together in the first modern textbook on the subject (Flanders, 1954; Clegg and Chester, 1954; both building on Goodrich, 1920; Clay, 1929; Brown, 1997). In 1983 Bain paid tribute to these earlier works in the preface to his own (Warwick based) edited book on the subject. By now the Donovan Commission's work and recommendations were embedded into the academic tradition, if not in the real world of workplace and work group struggles. As a member of the Commission, Clegg himself had plenty to say about it in hindsight (Ackers, 2007, 2011, 2014). Sisson and Brown (1983), as was to be expected, were overly generous to Clegg's role in unpicking the formal/informal divide inside factories and the use of both methods to establish the web of procedural and substantive rules seen as the bedrock of the system (pace Dunlop, 1958). Thus the Bain book's account of industrial relations, although using a wider and more reliable data set, remained largely true to the narrow approach taken during the anti-communist (and be default anti-Marxist) period of commentary on industrial relations in the 1950s and 1960s. This was repeated less well in its successor volume edited by the prolific Edwards (1995, 2003), and despite efforts to "modernise" the subject matter and approach, the unrealistic concoctions of the critical realists and the fantastical nostrums of the post-modern pluralists remained. The "paradigm of the centaur" now ruled!

This was in contradistinction to the earlier works of Allen (1960), Hutt (1937), Page Arnot (1961), and Cole (1938) who, among others, built on a Marxist line of argument. Of course there was a revival in both the political sociology of unions (Nichols and Armstrong, 1976; Lane, 1974; Clarke and Clements, 1977; Crouch, 1977) alongside a sociology of work renaissance rooted in class struggle (Blackburn, 1977; Hunt, 1977; Nichols and Beynon, 1977; and later Beynon, 1984). These would soon morph into mainstream sociology, but much was lost along the wayside as the triumphant march of Thatcherism took centre stage.

During this period of intense class struggle there also appeared a cluster of contemporary books on some of the strikes of the late 1960s and 1970s. These included the disputes at Robert-Arundel (Arnison, 1970), at Pilkington (Lane and Roberts, 1971), at Fine Tubes (Beck, 1974), at Fords (Mathews, 1972), in the docks with the Pentonville Five (Dash, 1972), at Grunwick (Dromey and Taylor, 1978), the building workers and the Shrewsbury pickets (Arnison, 1974), and a first-hand account of the 1972 miners' strike (Pitt, 1979). There were further accounts of this period of industrial action by later authors specifically on the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders famous sit-in (Foster and Woolfson, 1986), teachers (Seifert, 1987), fire fighters (Bailey, 1992), alongside more general accounts (Darlington and Lyddon, 2001; Seifert and Sibley, 2012). All were written from the perspective of the strikers and all supported the actions, and portrayed them as the heroics of the really existing class war. The focus was around the movement against

the anti-union laws embedded in the 1971 Industrial Relations Act and the Communist Party of Great Britain's (CPGB) militant front organisation, the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions (Halpin, 2012). Much of this was ignored by both mainstream Donovan authors and their liberal counterparts in other academic disciplines.

It is a disturbing consideration that a major conference of leading lights in the field ("Industrial relations and labour and trade union history" summarised by Moher and Reid, 2011) spent their time discussing the works of Clegg and Flanders alongside those of Dunlop. Backward looking nostalgia for a time of influence and fame trumping the current need to assess the realities of trade union power, collective bargaining machinery, and the balance of class forces. Ackers continued his hagiography in praise of Clegg's revisionist (non-socialist) account of the role, function, and purpose of trade unions and collective bargaining (Bain and Clegg, 1974). Clegg's department building function was the dominant hallmark of his Keynesian desire to save the system by reforming it. The underlying strategy was to encourage micro-economic workplace productivity bargaining together with macro-economic incomes policy. As with most academics Clegg blamed others for the failure of his nostrums (Clegg, 1971). The key glossed over by Ackers was the central control over wages, and therefore over all those that sought to increase wages by whatever means. Kelly's (2010) account of Flanders was of a man driven by a bitter personal anti-communism rooted in a profound moralistic rejection of Marxism. Again unions, workers, even citizens that stood in the way of the triumphant march of state-sponsored managerialism were to blame for the productivity failures. Kaufman (2008, 2014) tried to temper the influence of the Webbs on this Fabianesque parody of social democracy at work with his party piece on the DNA of the true origins of industrial relations.

The purpose of the Donovan school was to studiously avoid any hint of Marxism let alone left politics that might be associated with an actually existing Marxist party. In 1966 the seafarers' held their famous strike (Thorpe, 2001) which prompted Wilson to name communists in the House of Commons (Seifert and Sibley, 2012), use MI5 to illegally spy on the CPGB headquarters (Andrews, 2009), and cry Red Menace! The bemused triangle of academics (based on Oxford, Warwick, and LSE) decided to ignore most Marxist writers and writings on the subject (they just disappeared into this triangle of illiberal waters). Despite adequately describing class struggle and class conflict on the factory floor, they declined to name it as such (Hyman, 1975, 1995; and later Kelly, 1988, 1998 were notable exceptions). The communists in particular were subjected to relentless attacks on their Marxism as well as their political and industrial strategies, guilty by association with the Soviet Union, from all groups to their right ranging from trade union leaders to typical Conservatives (Dorey, 2006), and from Cold War mongers disguised as liberals to hostile academics. But, of course, they were also condemned by their Marxist enemies from the ultra-left, self-styled Trotsyists (Cliff, 1975) as well as by the naïve and sentimental. Thus the Cold War at home was felt in university departments as well as among industrial relations academics embroiled in policy, practice, as well as academic research.

Indeed at one time in the 1960s MI5 not only had about 10 per cent of trade union officials spying on each other, but a higher proportion of industrial relations academics reporting back on communists. This was no glamorous world of dead letter drops, but a sordid McCarthy-style witch hunt through a network of the willing and less able. There is much accumulated evidence for this from both MI5 and MI6 sources (Andrews, 2009), and when Cathy Massiter blew the whistle in 1985 she unmasked Harry Newton (a lecturer active in CND and Institute of Workers Control) as well as Roger Windsor (a MI5 plant inside the NUM) as two among many more who had acted on behalf of the security services in both the trade unions and Universities.

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Here was a web of intrigue, double standards, and endless pretences at academic freedom in British Universities. When it was deemed to matter, then collegiality, rigour in research, control over syllabuses, and freedom of expression went out the door. The red scare was used in the UK as in the USA and especially in areas that dealt with class struggle and the organising centres of collective worker resistance (for accounts of spying on communists in the USA see Pinkerton, 1878; Foner, 1977).

So the works of both the communist historians writing about working class conditions of labour and industrially active Marxists in the field of industrial relations (Allen, 1964; Campbell and Ramelson, 1968; Ramelson, 1977) were left out of the model and the findings. This was repeated by McCarthy (Undy, 2015) in his talk at Warwick University on the 50th anniversary of BUIRA. No mention of those to his left, and no acknowledgement of the Marxist tradition and class forces. In contrast the Donovan creators did debate with those to their right, such as Roberts and other more obscure theorists inside conservative think tanks, but they mainly debated with themselves around the limits of job regulation, the nature of voluntarism in a state-centred economy, and the institutional function of trade unions and collective bargaining.

At the same time Thompson (1967) along with Saville (1969) and separately Hobsbawm (1963) began to rewrite accounts of the creation of a working class under early industrial capitalism in the UK. Using Engels' (1845) seminal work on the condition of the English working class in the 1840s as a starting point (itself based on accounts of working life from Cobbett and Cobbett, 1853 and the Chartists; Morris, 1951) they started to recapture the experience of forced exploitation in the factories of Victorian Britain through accounts of those involved and the analytical device of the nature of labour markets and inequality (Phelps Brown, 1977) to forge the modern employment relationship as between workers and employers (Wedderburn, 1965; Kahn-Freund, 1967; Ewing and Hendy, 2013). In this the core of the exploitative relationship was exposed so that it could form the basis of a Marxist analysis of work under any conditions as new industries replaced old ones, and new forms of work came into play with changing technology, forms of ownership, and world-wide markets (Braverman, 1974).

More class struggle at home and abroad

By the early 1970s the Cold War was at renewed heights both at home and abroad. The Marxist left, like the devil, comes in many disguises, and all were revealed and reviled by mainstream academic and political commentary. Some communists in university departments had to write under assumed identities to avoid persecution and, as union membership surged alongside industrial action, so the communists played their part to the full. This was the high noon of the red scare in British industrial relations, and forged the future splits with many academics and practitioners eventually seeking solace in the bland middle ground of compliance.

Cold War anti-communism spilled over, as we know, into academic life as Marxist style of analysis was ignored. By the early 1970s much of Donovan's practical side was seen to be both partial and confused. The minority report helped Heath to his blunder in the 1971 Industrial Relations Act, but before that the Labour leadership had been ripped open by Barbara Castle's *In Place of Strife*. Wilson suffered the humiliation of defeat by Heath in the 1970 General election and the admonishing comments from large unions and larger employers who wanted none of Donovan during a period of unprecedented zclass struggle and organisation (Darlington and Lyddon, 2001). When Wilson returned as Prime Minister in 1974, the Labour leadership had decided to appease the unions with the so-called Social Contract. A wage freeze for all seasons in exchange for favourable

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legislation (1974 Trade Union and Labour Relations Act, 1975 Employment Protection Act, 1976 Race Relations Act, 1975 Sex Discrimination Act, alongside the birth of ACAS).

This was the worst of all possible Panglossian solutions for Labour. It split the party, it unleashed industrial unrest, and it did not solve the productivity conundrum and its associated mate, inward investment. It allowed the trade union movement to grow rapidly, not least among white-collar and professional workers; it helped the left into office in many unions through a wave of militancy; it allowed the communists to gather support; and it finally brought down the government in the Winter of Discontent. Denis Healy and James Callaghan may have been the men at the top, but the long shadow of the inadequate Donovan report with its failed academic regime and political spawn with *In Place of Strife* was really responsible (Hay, 2009; Shepherd, 2013).

As the song goes: "it's expanding ever outward […]".

In the 1970s then industrial relations flourished as an academic field of study. New university departments emerged, the topic was included in the syllabuses of politics, economic, history, and sociology courses. Professors in the subject were ennobled and knighted, and their opinions sought world-wide (McCarthy, 1994b). But by now the Donovan brand was much diluted: debates on labour process, Marxist by nature but increasingly post-modernist in tone became mainstream; labour historians rediscovered their voice and revisited key moments from the past; labour economists became tangled up in a mesh of data sets and survey materials (Nolan, 1989, 2011, being a notable exception); and the Marxists were on the march again through industrial relations' departments as the Cold War ebbed and the wages' struggle flowed. The decade of experiments with expanded labour laws and state-controlled wages' policies ended with its own big bang with the strike wave dubbed the Winter of Discontent.

The working-class movement in retreat

Brown (1981) published his edited work summarising the current situation before the full force of the Thatcher years kicked in. Here was Donovan re-united with a focus on bargaining, workplace disputes and dispute resolution, and strikes as both an industrial weapon of mass destruction as well as a form of social protest. This matched an extensive self-regarding bibliography of the subject (Bain and Woolven, 1979), a useful ACAS (1980) handbook, and a backward looking account of the heyday of union power (Taylor, 1980). By the time, therefore, of Thatcher's first election victory in 1979, industrial relations was centre stage (the first workplace survey was published in 1980). This was to continue until the end of the century.

By the early 1980s Clegg was sent off to head up the short-lived Pay Commission, and Thatcherism had spread its petty bourgeois neo-liberal wings and turned to the hard arm of the law to finish off the miners and print workers, and by example and default, the others. While a lack of solidarity from other unions and the tactics of the employers helped undermine the strikes, nonetheless moral relativism aside, the defeat came from the use of the state apparatus by a rightwing government against a section of the organised working class in action. Law and policing became centre stage along with theories of mobilisation, revised syndicalist stories, and class struggle. The international scene, with the imminent collapse of Soviet and European communist states, the rise of China, and the bloody wars in the Middle East all added to the sense of proto-globalised markets and the coming of another Big Bang: free financial markets in 1986. Once done it cannot be undone, and the ramifications were increasingly clear: it paved the way for privatisation, financialisation, and the shift of power to the banks away from governments and the manufacturing sector.

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The City of London became the preferred place of business for USA and Saudi corporations as well as, soon after, for Russian billionaires.

The signature theme of these years for British workers was a sustained and brutal attack on all forms of working-class organisations, especially the trade unions. The 1984/1985 miners' strike, divided opinion, and gave rise to an immense sub-set of academic and quasi-academic writings and research. Books, pamphlets, and papers were churned out by the score (Green, 1985). With each subsequent major anniversary, there have been systematic revisionist accounts as memories dim and pointless counter-factual stories abound. In a recent interview with me a leader of UNITE the union stated that he was still surprised at the extent of the Thatcher victory, practically and ideologically, over the organised working-class movement!

The strike gave way to other equally bitter disputes among print workers, but by the end of the decade union membership was in rapid decline, fortresses in terms of collective bargaining and industrial action were dismantled, and the politics of left despair had taken root allowing for the re-emergence of a more timid and rightwing social democratic leadership in the Labour Party, to become in short order New Labour. This was reflected in academic writings and departmental developments. These events created an appetite for studies of all things industrial relations, and student numbers grew as research grants expanded. Vice Chancellors tolerated for a time the explicit left-leaning politics of industrial relations groups in their midst as long as they delivered the bacon.

The impact on British workers was stark and immediate. Wages, as a share of gross domestic product (GDP), would fall steadily for the next 30 years (Lansley and Reed, 2013; ONS, 2013). Public services would be eroded and hollowed out by stealth, and the main utilities and transport systems would be sold off. As expected this altered the composition of the working-class, the centre of influence of the unions, and the state of industrial relations. Management studies took over with HRM (Lucio and Weston, 1994), and the pervasive nature of class defeat and the triumph of the ruling ideas, along with reform of the university sector itself, meant that industrial relations experts (as well as industrial correspondents for the press) were less in demand, their theories deemed outmoded, their remedies irrelevant, and their studies out of place. By the end of the decade of class conflict, then, industrial relations departments in universities were flourishing, but the academic substance was beginning to fail. The best book on the subject came from a philosopher (Cohen, 1988) showing the logic inherent in systematic exploitation of workers at work, while ruthlessly exposing the cant around the individualism of the "free" worker.

Since the early 1990s the collapse of the USSR and its co-socialist European supporters allowed for notions, however flitting, of a mono-centred global regime under the USA flag of convenience. With this came the carpet-baggers into Eastern Europe and the transfiguration of the enlarged EU as the Franco-German axis believed its own propaganda that the world was now a three way split: North America; EU; and South East Asia. In this new version of the Great Game of imperial domination and the scramble for Africa and the Middle East, Marxist ideas of class struggle, organised working-class opposition to the power of capital, and a renewal of socialist visions of equality were rejected as variously having failed, always been naïve and counter-productive, and as irrelevant to the brave new world of globalised neo-liberalism with its post-modern academic spin and commodified world order.

This is the time of both an emergent HRM (Purcell, 1993) and an EU-sponsored social partnership theme. The unions in decline and panic resorted to a range of unclear models, both organising and servicing (Gall, 2003, 2006). Increasingly isolated academics joined in these debates as a way of coming in from the cold, but just added to the veneer of sense

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behind a reality of straw clutching. The TUC, late and worried as usual, tried to embed these in courses and academy training systems. Unions embraced them with various degrees of enthusiasm, but all with the same failed end-game. Until the Blair victory in 1997 the unions continued to decline in membership and influence. Left impulses had crossed over to anti-poll tax riots, anti-privatisation campaigns, varied social movements linked with new technologies in communications, and a re-affirmation of the rights in the workplace. The shift was to individual rights where collective rights had failed to protect and enhance existing workplace experiences. Such a bleak picture reflects national data sets based on varieties of workplace surveys (the three Workplace Industrial Relations Surveys of 1980, 1984, and 1990; and the three Workplace Employee Relations Surveys (WERS) of 1998, 2004, and 2011). But this ignores the rich vein of union resistance to cuts and closures, local victories against private sector outsourcing and public sector work intensification, and the re-organisation of the unions themselves into larger units through mergers (UNISON, 1993; UNITE, 2007, Public and Commercial Services Union 1998, University College Union, 2006) to combat changing employers strategies and structures, more expensive ballots and strike action, and to reflect both the skill mix and needs of the membership. Despite dissenting voices after the event, most mergers have served their members well.

Studies of such phenomenon filled the pages of the major journals (*BJIR* and *IRJ*) while Keele launched a new journal in 1996 (*Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*) to fill a perceived gap on industrial relations history proper. The first editorial stated: "the content should broadly cover the employment relationship and economic, social and political factors surrounding it, such as labour markets, union and employer policies and organization, the law, and gender and ethnicity" (Lyddon and Smith, 1996, p. 8). So no view that industrial relations remained "a consecrated euphemism for class struggle", but rather it was seen as the study of everything to do with workers at work. This was the high point of the influence of Marxist academics inside the university system. From Stirling and Strathclyde through Leeds, Salford and Manchester and down south passing Keele and Warwick on the way to London (Birbeck, LSE, Westminster, and Middlesex) and west to the University of the West of England. Colleagues researched, published, taught and supervised, and tried to help the labour movement within a varied set of Marxist traditions, but soon after most were fragmented, degraded, and talking to themselves.

Studies of strikes faltered, case studies of workers at work reduced, and the emergence of meta-surveys came to the fore with WERS (the 1998 survey changed "industrial relations" to "employee relations" in the title). One-dimensional assessments of new laws and EU directives alongside a tendency to fall back upon labour market regulation and training began the descent into helpful practical research with impact. The rise of HRM disguised for the moment the fall of industrial relations, at work and in university departments. Part of the horrible history of the late 1990s was that unions with TUC support started teaching shop stewards and activists about HRM and leadership, even awarding Institute of Leadership and Management certificates!

W(h)ither the class struggle?

As the song says:

> It's expanding ever outward but one day.
>
> It will cause the stars to go the other way,
>
> Collapsing ever inward, we won't be here, it won't be heard.

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When Labour was finally elected in 1997 there was renewed interest in the Labour-union link, trade union activity after the Thatcher repression of the labour movement, and another spate of final final reassessments of the role of the Marxist left in trade union politics and workplace action (McIlroy, 1995; McIlroy *et al.*, 1999). Renewed fantasies about the extent of rank-and-file discontent were matched by a lack of research into the modern shop steward, introspection and talking to each other about which left group did best in the past, which set of strikers were let down by their perfidious leaders, and how HRM had ruined everything. A far cry from the Big Bang of Donovan, and the centre stage for industrial relations of the earlier decades.

Such inward looking rewriting of history was brought together by Ackers and Wilkinson (2003) in a set of essays by leading lights on the full range of topics associated with the ever-shrinking field of industrial relations. Many of the contributions epitomise the loss of direction, the narrowness of engagement with the wider labour movement, and a tired account of Marxist analysis and class struggle. Really existing class conflict remains an elusive project among most academics, and the twin peaks of worker experience of work, exploitation and alienation, absent from their political vision.

Even as the dust settled on the 1990s so the worm turned again. The overthrow of fascist governments in South America and South Africa alongside the steady growth in power and influence of China and India, and the baffling contradictions in Russia, created levels of uncertainty for business and doubts among investors not seen for many decades. The severe reduction in the share of GDP going to labour in countries such as the USA and UK had created a weakened working-class movement associated with loss of trade union membership and confidence (Seifert, 2014), restricted application of collectively bargained agreements, and a fragmented class structure ever harder to unify behind common goals and values. This has undermined any pretence at equalising features of globalisation and the rhetoric of equal pain for all since the 2008 crash (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010; Piketty, 2014). Neo-liberalism had created the mass movement of labour inside the EU, propelling immigration and associated right populist politics to the foreground of concerns and debates. Divide and rule become the order of the day for anti-working class parties of both the right and the social democratic left. The fuel for such divisions, while objectively rooted in the scramble for low paid insecure work, and the pressure on publicly provided services, was further maintained by academic studies pitting one section of workers against others based on mistaken identity politics of gender, ethnicity, and skills.

Post-modernist illusions began to seep into some sociology of work and even trade union studies academic groups. Ahistorical in nature and anti-Marxist by design, such analytical devices sought to dismantle traditional capitalist categories such as class, state, and exploitation. These were to be replaced by subjective notions of self (self-regarding and selfish) that promoted the individual struggle for life over the collective struggle for a just life (Sen, 2011). Most of this tendency was smashed on the reality check of the 2008 crash, albeit with the usual agonising time lag where academics try to catch up with the world they purport to study.

The university sector, itself both a reflection and victim of public sector reforms from New Public Management (Hood, 1995) to self-serving senior management (Francis, 2013), began the long journey to the degradation of product as false competition for funds and students replaced centrally controlled and planned budgets. The academic labour process was degraded along with both teaching and research products, creating an army of casualised staff teaching fee-paying students and grants allocated on the basis of narrowly defined useful impact and/or ideologically confirming social partnership.

Despite at times heroic resistance, the forward march of Poppletonian values and managers has not abated (Darlington, 2009; Smith, 2011; Ackers and Wilkinson, 2005). As this pressure mounted so industrial relations as conceived by Cleggian social democracy and developed by Bain and his Warwick offspring morphed into HRM departments with residual IR courses. The subject split back into its original pre-Donovan pieces:technical employment law aimed mainly at managers (the notable exception since 1989 is the Institute of Employment Rights publications) and non-political trade union representatives; labour economics with the focus on wages and productivity, labour market mobility, and skills ladders; political labour history around Labour governments as well as trade union institutions; the sociology of work; the psychology of labour; and some very limited material on collective bargaining, negotiations, and grievance handling!

The 2008 crash has still to be properly and fully assessed. While traditional Marxists saw it correctly as a crisis of capitalism *per se*, others tried to reduce blame and analysis to regulatory failures and market inadequacies. None of which have been redressed. The consequences have been discussed more widely than the causes with more uneven growth as between rich and poor; more privatisation and less welfare; more social instability with more rightwing politics; desperate foreign policy adventures; and no changed remedies. In the UK, as elsewhere, the burden of the debt crisis put onto poor citizens and nations dressed up as either economic inevitability or national renewal.

In conclusion

Academic studies and research projects have failed largely to keep up as the newly increased commodified student experience does not respond well to change and challenge. In HRM departments the same tired prescriptions are still trotted out, new textbooks seem to take a secular view of the 2008 crash, namely that it changed nothing. The crushing blow dealt to living standards and social wage through cuts in public service provision and pensions are researched anthropologically as something that happens to the poor, political fragmentation of the working-class movement (particularly on the nationalist right) is seen as curiosity, but not linked to the system and/or its failures. Nobody appears willing and able to join up the dots of systemic capitalist failures (CLASS since 2012 has tried to remedy this weakness), traditional harsh remedies and outcomes, and introspective trade union policy making. The absence of struggle means an absence of coherent resistance, and with that both the movement and those in university departments studying the movement (at work and beyond the workplace) become bogged down chasing red herrings down dead-end allies.

Meanwhile, back in the department we rehearse long forgotten arguments over coffee served by students on zero-hours contracts, run by arms-length profit-making companies, and owned by multi-nationals that avoid their corporate taxes. There is a desperate search for new areas to study while denying the worth of trade unions, not as labour market institutions and not as funders of the Labour Party, but as purveyors of struggle. Even in trade union studies groups in FE colleges the courses are more technical than political, and this is reflected in most TUC and union own courses. There are, of course, important exceptions with political schools run by the Rail Maritime and Transport union and UNITE, for example, keeping some flames of more than just run of the mill how-to courses going.

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Within university departments little remains of the Clegg legacy (Ackers and Wilkinson, 2005), as academic research and dissemination in journals and the classroom descends into single-issue case studies (McCarthy, 1994a) and/or over-stated conclusions from meta-surveys and/or helpful suggestions for improved worker performance. There are no industrial relations departments left in British universities. There are functioning groups, but too many are in danger of further erosion as they focus on lost worlds, the retelling of past struggles, and as they prefer helpful impact over analytical substance. Cold Wars and Big Bangs have broken up the industrial relations traditions into further fragments, institutionally and academically. But as the reality of worker exploitation at the point of production remains and grows ever more severe so the mainspring of our subject will not wither, just as, indeed work, workers and the working-class themselves stubbornly refuse to disappear, as do some of us.

Note

1. Poppleton university is the parody invented by Laurie Taylor for the THES.

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