

## **The point of industrial relations. Rising to the Challenges<sup>1</sup>.**

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### **Introduction**

Part of the backdrop against which questions arise about the point of (academic) industrial relations (IR), and a catalyst for this event, is the closure of the Centre for Industrial Relations at Keele University, and, more broadly, changes in the context of higher education which are discussed by others at this conference. I do not wish to underplay any of this but I do not consider IR to be in crisis. The case for the study of IR has not diminished. However it needs to be made - and to be made externally, not just among ourselves. I begin by briefly noting some indicators of the health of our academic field, and then consider what might be needed to rise to internal and external challenges facing industrial relations.

### **Continued Vibrancy of Academic Industrial Relations**

There are many positive indicators of the health and continued vibrancy of academic IR. Over the period of my academic career (which is I admit is a long period) I have seen the subject become more widely studied, at all levels, in an increased range of institutions by an increasingly diverse student body. The number of academics who self-identify as teachers and researchers of 'industrial relations' (for example by joining the British Universities Industrial Relations Association) is larger than ever, even though some operate under other titles, including HRM. Membership of BUIRA (confined to those who teach and research in the field) not only continues to increase as the Association approaches its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary, but it displays a greater diversity. The current age and gender profile of BUIRA members mean it is a far cry from "an old boys' drinking club" as it was once characterised.<sup>2</sup> The multi-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary nature of the field is evidenced by, among other things, the contributions which IR researchers make

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<sup>1</sup> My thinking about the issues addressed by the conference inevitably has been shaped by discussions within Warwick IR over many years, and by the work of colleagues (particularly Keith Sisson and Paul Edwards) who have been far more active than I have in writing about these matters.

<sup>2</sup> Information on proportion of black and minority ethnic members is not available; I suspect there is under-representation in this area.

not only to mainstream IR and HRM journals but also to those aligned with other areas of social science and law.

In 2007 the UK hosted the International Industrial Relations Association 8<sup>th</sup> Regional European Congress. The success of the Congress, attended by a capacity of over 400 delegates from a range of countries within and beyond Europe, testified to the vitality and importance of industrial relations as a field of study and to the contribution of the UK within international IR scholarship. Furthermore, it is notable that IR academics continue to be called upon to provide an authoritative research base for public policy and to fill public roles.

### **Challenges**

Having said that, I want to identify two kinds of challenge – internal and external - and argue the need to keep making the case about the point, and value, of IR. Many text books in our field begin with a chapter defining and – implicitly or explicitly - defending the subject. Often critically reflective, these contributions stress the subject’s breadth and contemporary relevance, and indicate the nature and importance of the contribution which IR can make. It is important, however, that such messages are not confined to the largely converted (i.e. ourselves), and those students who have opted to study IR, but reach a wider external audience.

Arguably Keith Sisson is leading the way here. He is engaged on a series of papers written to be accessible to practitioners and not just academics, and is picking up gauntlets wherever he finds them (for example in public debate with Mike Emmott of the CIPD)<sup>3</sup>. The title of his project is apt - Employment Relations Matters. It encompasses both why employment relations matters (its relevance and importance) and what the matters of employment relations are (its meaning and scope). Some of what he says will be very familiar to those within IR – his stress on the distinctive characteristics of the employment relationship for example. But it is easy to forget that what we take for granted can be alien to many outside the academic field.

A lot of the valuable debate about the nature and contribution of IR has been internal, within the field and its cognate areas. This internal reflection is very important but addressing the non academic (non IR) audience is equally important, and perhaps more urgent. The audience to be convinced consists of those not within. However, I want to stress that the internal and external challenges are connected: critically constructive internal debate within the subject assists us to better meet external challenges to it.

The internal and external challenges our subject faces may appear similar, for example in raising questions about the ability of IR to address contemporary issues and its continued relevance in changed contexts. But while one type of challenge (internal) operates to strengthen the field, the other (external) aims to marginalise or even eliminate it.

### **Internal Challenge**

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<sup>3</sup> Warwick Papers in Industrial Relations. Available from the Industrial Relations Research Unit website.<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/wbs/research/irru/wpir>

Heeding internal challenges leads to renewal and revitalisation. It helps re-create and reinvigorate the field. Internal challenges are about developing, deepening and enriching the study of IR. Examples of internal challenges leading to re-invigoration would include that of weak or under theorisation<sup>4</sup> and the neglect of gender. Here I will give the example of at the latter.

We (by which I mean the academic industrial relations community) are still grappling with this challenge, although it has been made with increasing regularity over the past two decades. We are moving slowly, often slower than in other disciplines - but nonetheless we have come a long way. IR has moved from gender blindness, through 'adding women in' (but with men remaining non-gendered subjects), to an acknowledgment that gender matters, an awareness that IR institutions, processes and concepts are not gender-neutral. Such acknowledgement, however, does not necessarily bring engagement - following through the consequences of the acknowledgment in research and writing. This stage is what Danieli refers to as 'acknowledgement with abdication'<sup>5</sup> and is where many in the IR field seem to have got to. (This is not to imply that everyone has moved at the same rate; some remain at the gender-blind stage, while others have got way beyond acknowledgement and abdication. Further, although the critique focussed initially on the neglect of gender, there is now also more attention to the intersection of gender and other identities.)

IR writers now generally note gender as an important consideration but often do little more about this than providing a reference to an article by someone else where this is argued.<sup>6</sup> But it is true also that in recent years there has been an edging forward towards appreciating that confronting this internal challenge calls for a radical overhaul of the IR concepts, understandings and approaches developed from past male-centred research, and a need to reassess (adjust/justify) the focus and boundaries of the subject – and their permeability. Some researchers are realising the potential explanatory power of approaches and insights which gender research could contribute to IR. All this is making IR as a field stronger and enhancing its academic contribution and practical relevance.

The important point is that this development is being driven by feminists researchers and receptive others *within* IR, albeit (in keeping with IR's 'open paradigm' tradition) also bringing in ideas developed outside the field. It is a strength of academic IR that it has attracted people who can and do make such criticism internally, including by delivering

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<sup>4</sup> See for example G. Bain and H. Clegg 'A strategy for industrial relations research in Great Britain' *BJIR* 12(1) 1974; L-L Hansen 'Rethinking the Industrial relations Tradition' *Employee Relations* 24(2) 2002, P. Edwards 'The challenging but promising future of industrial relations: developing theory and method in context-sensitive research' *Industrial Relations Journal* 36(4) 2005

<sup>5</sup> A. Danieli 'Gender – the Missing Link in Industrial Relations Research' *IRJ* 37(4) 2006

<sup>6</sup> Often the reference made is to the same article: J. Wajcman 'Feminism Facing Industrial Relations in Britain' *BJIR* 38(2), 2000. This was also delivered as a plenary paper at BUIRA's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference. This brought before a mainstream (male-stream) IR audience material which was familiar to those who had taken an interest in such issues, but which was more commonly debated within IR conferences only in dedicated side streams, if at all.

challenging plenary papers at BUIRA conferences (rather than only in ‘gender streams’)<sup>7</sup> and by getting published in our mainstream IR journals. It is a further strength of the field that ‘gatekeepers’, such as UK journal editors, increasingly have been amenable to such critical internal challenges; indeed in some cases have sought actively to encourage the revitalisation that they bring.

This is positive given my contention that heeding the internal challenges - recognising and confronting our weaknesses – puts us in a stronger position to face external challenges. We need to ensure that the positive picture of contemporary academic IR portrayed in the valuable BUIRA booklet reflects the reality across the field.<sup>8</sup>

### **External challenge**

While internal challenges are about enhancing the field, external challenges often are based on a narrowing of the field in order to question or deny its relevance in changing times. External attacks are about minimising academic IR in order to marginalise it. The focus of marginalisers tends to be on the main topics of traditional IR study (unions, collective bargaining, strikes). They play down, or fail to acknowledge, the value of IR’s critical, multi-disciplinary, multi-level perspective; and the breadth and depth which its focus on the employment relationship involves.

We should confess, however, that we have helped our critics do this since work within the field – in the past if much less so now – often did lend credence to their description of a specific narrow focus.<sup>9</sup> But we have grown beyond that. Encouraged in part by internal critics, previously neglected areas have been and are being addressed. The external critics choose to ignore this and narrow down the field in an attempt to show it is no longer relevant – they suggest we are still stuck in the 1970s. By defining the subject narrowly, centring on features such as trade unions, collective bargaining and strikes, which have been in decline in the UK, the utility of academic IR can be challenged. On the narrow definition the IR researcher appears as an endangered creature faced with the disappearance of its natural habitat, whereas one of the strengths of IR is that it has demonstrated the capacity to develop so it can engage with, and interpret, the changing world of work.

Outsiders need to be convinced of what we as insiders know very well, namely that the narrow perception of IR is misplaced. As a label for practitioner activity within many employing organisations IR (or ER) tends to denote only collective relations, but this is

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<sup>7</sup> e.g. Plenary paper by Jane Holgate, Gail Hebson and Anne McBride at the 2005 BUIA annual conference, a version of which was published as ‘Why gender and difference matters: a critical appraisal of industrial relations research’ *Industrial Relations Journal* 37(4) 2006

<sup>8</sup> *What’s the Point of Industrial Relations?* BUIRA December 2008

<sup>9</sup> for example historically we find a relative lack of attention to management beyond its influence on workplace industrial relations; a dismissive stance towards personnel management and little attention to the non-collective aspects of the management of employees; and a neglect of non-union employment. This is discussed by, among others, J. Purcell ‘The Management of IR in the Modern Corporation’ *BJIR* 21(1) 1983; P. Ackers and A. Wilkinson (eds) *Understanding Work and Employment*, Oxford University Press 2003.

*not* the case within the academic field. We need to reply to what the marginalisers say in order to make this clear<sup>10</sup>. Here are some (non exhaustive) examples.

Marginalisers say – you are interested in trade unions. We say - yes we are (encompassing trade union organisation, structure, growth and decline, governance and democracy, strategies and impacts). But we are interested also in processes and mechanisms of worker voice and representation more generally. We are concerned with interest formation and articulation, and with workplace democracy and participation. Our interests encompass those within and outside unions and areas of unionised employment, including vulnerable workers.

They say - your interest is collective bargaining. We say – yes it is. But our interest is also in wider rules (both formal and informal), regulation and governance of the employment relationship. We are interested in management as a bargaining partner, but also more widely, and in the management of the employment relationship. Our study also embraces other IR ‘actors’, including the state (in various manifestations) and so called ‘new actors’.<sup>11</sup>

Marginalisers say – IR is about strikes. We say – yes we are interested in organised conflict (its causes, nature, trends, consequences and its regulation, resolution). We are interested in power and in analysing the structured antagonism inherent in the employment relationship. We are also interested in co-operation and consent, and in unorganised conflict and its varied individual and collective manifestations.

They say – your focus is institutions, by which marginalisers mean the formal institutions of collective bargaining. We say – yes, but our focus embraces also other formal and informal institutions broadly conceived to embrace social practices sanctioned and maintained by social norms. Further our interest extends beyond national boundaries to include transnational and supra-national institutions.

Marginalisers stress the first word in *Industrial* Relations, equating it to particular (diminished) industries such as heavy manufacturing, mines, docks. We explain that academic IR covers all sectors (as well as extending its gaze beyond the workplace) and includes firms of all sizes, those with unions and those without. We may still use the term ‘industrial relations’, but as a synonym for employment relations or work relations. In this we may be encouraged perhaps by the fact that the Secretary of State for Business, Lord Mandelson has decided to launch a personal campaign to reclaim the term ‘industrial’ ‘from the mills and the smokestacks’. In a recent RSA lecture he stated ‘when I talk about industry I mean the smallest high-tech start-up along with the largest companies making cars, jet engines or aeroplane wings. I mean modern manufacturing and knowledge industries...(and the)..services sector’<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> What follows is a rhetorical device – I am not suggesting that all who have a narrow definition of academic IR are seeking thereby to marginalise it.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. E. Heery and C.Frege ‘New actors in industrial relations’ *BJIR* 44(4) 2006

<sup>12</sup> RSA Lecture, A New Industrial Activism, delivered on 17 December 2008,

## Relevance and value

Demonstrating that the narrow perception of IR is misplaced helps address the related issue (and further external challenge) of academic IR's relevance and value.

I would expect at this point any good IR student to be murmuring, 'Relevance to what? Value to whom?' and asking 'Who defines this?' After all, asking this kind of 'says who?' question is part of industrial relations training. The IR perspective is about recognising multiple stakeholders; acknowledging the possibility of different valid perspectives on the same issue. The critical IR perspective recognises that how any 'problem' or issue is defined, and by whom, itself warrants examination. It does not necessarily accept the problem-definition of any particular actor.

### *Relevance to practice and policymaking*

Nevertheless, I want to argue that part of rising to the challenges involves the task of making clearer how our study of the employment relationship (broadly defined), and our understanding of people's experience at work, connects to a wide range of issues which are seen as relevant to practitioner and public policy makers. That is to say, we have to demonstrate that academic IR is relevant to the problems *they* have identified.

As Sisson notes, the employment relationship, the institutions or rules involved in its governance, connect to a wide range of social, political and economic outcomes. He lists 'business performance, individual wellbeing, human and social capital development and macroeconomic considerations such as inequality and productivity' as areas where employment relations is of importance.<sup>13</sup> One could add to the list, for example social inclusion, citizenship.

Peter Nolan in his first Editorial statement for the *Industrial Relations Journal* notes that 'the current global economic crisis has effectively called for a major recasting of established theories and concepts in political economy, state capital and labour relations'. He identifies an unprecedented opportunity for IR scholars 'to reveal the distinctive insights that can be gained into the contemporary political economy by a better understanding of work and employment relations'.<sup>14</sup> The *distinctiveness* of the IR contribution alluded to here is important. We need to demonstrate how IR can have distinctive explanatory weight. Paul Edwards has shown how an IR view is of value, for example, in considering connections between how people are managed and business performance because the IR view (unlike a non-IR-informed HRM approach) is sensitive to history and specific conditions; to constraints; to ambiguity, to tensions and contradictory pressures.<sup>15</sup>

### *Relevant to students*

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<sup>13</sup> K. Sisson 'Putting the record straight. IR and the employment relationship'. Warwick Papers in Industrial Relations no 88, April 2008 IRRU

<sup>14</sup> *Industrial Relations Journal* 40(1) 2009

<sup>15</sup> P. Edwards 'The challenging but promising future of industrial relations: developing theory and method in context-sensitive research' *IRJ* 2005 op cit.

Another part of the external challenge relating to relevance concerns teaching the subject. Here the argument may arise that IR is 'not what students want'. In these 'customer-focused' times student 'wants' have to be heeded. However, often there is misunderstanding of what constitutes the academic subject of IR (as discussed above) and, further, I would argue that there is often too simplistic a view, or interpretation, of what it is that students want or need.

There are issues to be addressed arising from the changing nature of the student body and their location within business schools. There has been a marked increase in non UK students. They rightly may question why they are learning about IR, a term with varying resonance internationally, particularly if the focus of our teaching appears to be British institutions. The growing comparative and international dimension to IR research and teaching as well as its increased attention to multi-national companies and supra-national institutions and processes, are clearly important in meeting this challenge. But we might need also to focus more on explaining *why* we are studying something. We need to articulate convincing rationales for what we include in an IR syllabus. These rationales might include the generic learning involved in IR study, even if focussed within a specific national context (which might be expressed as transferable skills). Further, it is important to draw out cross-nationally relevant analysis, and how our study illuminates the varying nature of employment regimes and the explanations and consequences of this.

Much IR teaching is now located within business schools, not within social science departments. The students are business school students often with clear vocational interests and career aspirations in management or finance, with limited, if any, social science background. Because of an understandable desire for material of practical, vocational relevance, students (particularly those on MBA programmes) may be thought to want toolkits. In many business subjects students are provided with prescription. Some HRM texts aim to satisfy this need. I am not talking here about the kind of HRM teaching and writing which comes from within IR and shares its critical perspective, but, rather, the kind of HRM which can be characterised as descriptive, prescriptive, unitarist, uncritical, soft on power, single (firm) level in focus (rather than multi-level), and which is concerned with teaching techniques and disseminating 'best practice'. IR (and IR-informed HRM) teaching does not offer a toolkit. Rather, it encourages students to think, to criticise, to assess evidence, to grapple with concepts and contradictions rather than memorise prescription, to question established wisdom, to make informed judgments.<sup>16</sup>

The contrast is between providing toolkits on the one hand and – on the other - helping students understand why the toolkits (the prescription) may not work in practice. IR develops an appreciation that there is no universal best practice to be applied to an organisation. It asserts the importance of institutional and broader contexts, of issues around implementation, of how expectations are shaped, how power resources are

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<sup>16</sup> I am not seeking to suggest that IR is the only academic subject taught within business schools which may display these features associated with critical social science. Also I wish to make clear that I am talking in a generalised way about business schools and their students, not any particular institution. Institutions of course differ.

mobilised and reproduced, how trust needs to be generated and managed (rather than assumed), how order is negotiated etc. etc. Arguably understanding this is of greater practical relevance.

Addressing issues of 'relevance' to business school/management students requires us to develop an appreciation among our students – and also more widely - that relevance to need not mean providing ready solutions to what are presented as problems. Rather, IR offers a critical perspective on the problems; it seeks to equip students with the analytic tools and awareness of influencing factors so they can think through the difficulties involved in managing people in securing their engagement. This may result in IR options in business schools appearing to be more difficult than other modules on offer since in IR there are no 'correct' answers. But if perhaps it does offer a harder path for students to tread than does the prescriptive approach, it is a more valuable one and, in my experience, one ultimately appreciated more by students when they come to apply their learning. And, importantly, the critical and questioning approach which academic IR offers is more in keeping with what higher education should be about and does not risk underestimating the ability of our students.