



**Were the 40 Years of 'Radical Pluralism' a Waste of Time?
A Response to Peter Ackers and Patrick McGovern**

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Editor's note

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Paul Edwards is at the University of Birmingham and remains an Associate Fellow of IRRU, where he worked for over thirty years of which has been the Director. This paper addresses in a vigorous way new turns into a now classic debate within industrial relations theory, between materialist and pluralist approaches. Whereas IRRU is theoretically open, it is not indifferent, as its research has always aimed to be theoretically informed and not merely descriptive or applied. Both pluralism and materialism have had a major role within IRRU historically, and clarifying the terms of the debate at a time when the research agenda has significantly changed can be extremely useful to the industrial relations research community.

Guglielmo Meardi

Abstract. This paper defends a materialist analysis of employment relations against two recent critiques, by Peter Ackers and Patrick McGovern. ‘Radical pluralism’ is Ackers’s preferred term. The critiques are useful in exposing some ritualistic uses of terms such as conflict, contradiction, and antagonism. Yet they do not damage the core of a materialist view, as opposed to some ways in which it has been deployed. Their central problem is a confusion of levels of analysis. Materialism does not say that concrete experience in the workplace can be read off from fundamental features of the employment relationship, and it does not assert or assume that conflict is the norm at the concrete level. Instead, it offers different levels of analysis. There remain, however, issues of its application to contemporary capitalism, and these are indicated.

Two recent critiques of an industrial relations ‘orthodoxy’ by Peter Ackers (2012a) and of practice in the sociology of work by Patrick McGovern (2014) aspire to find errors in these two closely related traditions and to suggest an alternative. They are very similar, essentially in aiming to delete various radical or Marxist-inspired analyses. Ackers is explicit in arguing for neo-pluralism (NP), as opposed to the radical pluralism (RP) of the orthodoxy; McGovern is less explicit, but also calls for a down-to-earth analysis without the baggage of concepts that are in his view unclear. As one of the targets – in Ackers’s words, the author of a ‘sociological account’ of the employment relationship ‘that placed the radical-pluralist synthesis at the heart of the Warwick IR orthodoxy’ (2012a: 8) – I want to enter some responses.

These responses will necessarily be self-referential, as I need to re-state and defend some arguments. Other exponents of RP may or may not take the same view, but I see little reason to think that they would differ substantially from what follows. The exercise is also necessarily backward-looking in re-stating a position, and it is not part of the objective to develop any significant new arguments; the conclusion, however, reflects on where analysis of the employment relationship may need to go.

The title of the paper reflects the fact that it is 40 years since the publication of one of the key texts addressed by Ackers, namely, Alan Fox’s *Beyond Contract* (1974). I take this as a reasonable starting point, in that it was also in 1974 that Braverman published *Labor and*

Monopoly Capital. Other foundational studies such as Beynon's *Working for Ford* (1973; see Edwards, 2014a) appeared around the same time. These works were followed in the next five years by several of the core texts of labour process analysis, as well as key empirical studies. Were these foundations in fact built on sand?

It is worth stressing at the outset what we are not arguing about. Ackers acknowledges that the sociological turn in British IR writing provides a 'distinctive' alternative to Human Resource Management: 'an achievement of global significance' contained in 'outstanding, authoritative' textbooks (2012a: 1-2, 8). As I have argued elsewhere, HRM lacks any cogent theory of the central object of inquiry, the employment relationship (Edwards, 2009). Sisson (2008) develops the point: some scholars (e.g. Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2005) equate an industrial relations view with an approach addressing collective relations between managers and workers, underpinned by a focus on 'conflict'. The focus is in fact much broader, and it puts in perspective accounts of the 'psychological contract', which claim to be broader but which in fact lack theoretical grounding. Likewise, we are in some kind of post-Marxist analytical space. The remaining lines of division are small but important; they turn to a considerable degree of the centrality of conflict.

My core argument is very simple. Ackers and McGovern want to restrict analysis to what is very directly empirically testable. They do so because they conflate levels of analysis. Because I claim that there is a 'structured antagonism' in the employment relationship (Edwards, 1986: a phrase now in common currency without its origin here being always acknowledged), I am supposed to hold that workers are 'alienated and exploited', be unable to grasp that workers have interests in co-operation (McGovern, 2014: 31), and hold that 'conflict is somehow normal and co-operation deviant' (Ackers, 2012a: 9). I clearly do not hold these things, as any reading of a range of works (including the original and for example Edwards et al., 2006) will show. The only plausible argument of the critics is that my position is incoherent, and that the analytical position around structured antagonism necessarily leads to the results stated. Such a view, given the critics' starting point, is of course ironic, for determinism and imperatives from the nature of the mode of production are anathema for them. Yet they find determinism having sought it. And they do so because they confuse concepts operating at the level of the mode of production with those relevant to more concrete empirical inquiry.

Orthodoxies are often constructed more from the works of critics than from their originators. There is thus, as is well-known, an alleged Labour Process Theory which has no bearing on what labour process writers said and yet it is reproduced as truth. It is thus best to sketch first what the orthodoxy in fact said. I termed it 'materialist', and I prefer to use that label over 'RP'. The label signalled two things: an effort to go more deeply into the material nature of the employment relationship than the analysis permitted by traditional or neo-pluralism; and a distinction between such analysis and Marxism. I then describe each critic's arguments in turn before offering a counter-critique and then some conclusions as to how analysis might proceed.

The Nature of the Employment Relationship: Reprise

I will not lay out in detail the substance of the 'orthodoxy', for this is available in many places and as the critics point out it informs several texts and is well-known (Blyton and Turnbull, 2004; Edwards and Wajcman, 2005). The point is to establish what it was trying to do, for the critics imply that it emerged autonomously and fully formed. In fact of course it was a response to other positions and an effort to grapple with issues that they did not.

Firstly, conflict. An initial observation was that 'conflict' at work means two things: overt disputation, and some deeper conflict of interest. As any serious scholar would acknowledge, the absence of overt conflicts does not mean that there is harmony or shared purpose. Workers and employers clearly have a conflict of interest over the division of rewards between wages and profits. There are other aspects of this that the orthodoxy set out to identify, but for the present this simple observation will suffice. The point of the concept of a structured antagonism was to discuss conflicts of interest separately from overt conflict, and thus to go beyond the standard observation that conflict takes many forms. What indeed is it, and why does it exist? The reason for preferring this term was spelt out: 'conflict of interest' can imply that there is some interest that workers can or should be pursuing, and hence that if they do not they are neglectful of this interest. The term 'structured antagonism' was intended to avoid such well-known difficulties in the 'real interests' framework developed by Lukes (1974). It also, I would claim, anticipated Lukes' (2005) later re-working of the idea (see Edwards, 2006). Lukes (2005: 148) now says that we should not assume a 'canonical' fixed set of interests; rather, interests are a 'function of one's explanatory purpose, framework and methods'. The structured antagonism identifies

the character of the employment relationship, in ways explained in detail in the original texts and touched on below. It does not say that workers have only interests in conflict or that the antagonism establishes what they might or should do in concrete situations. To assert that there is conflict in this deeper sense is to make no claim that conflict will be present empirically.

Secondly, privileging conflict. No sensible empirical study assumes that conflict is the norm. Hyman's works going back to the 1970s make the point repeatedly (e.g. those assembled in Hyman, 1989). Marx (1954: ch 13) himself recognized the centrality of co-operation. Theoretical statements identifying the connections between conflict and co-operation have been produced at the level of different societies (Wright, 2000) and that of the workplace (Edwards et al., 2006). Empirical studies of a broadly 'orthodox' kind do not seek out only conflict. Nichols and Beynon (1977) set out to establish how low levels of overt conflict were achieved at 'ChemCo' despite observable worker discontent to say nothing of deeper antagonisms. Burawoy (1979) for example famously asked why workers work as hard as they do, not why conflict was not ever-present. Edwards and Scullion (1982) deliberately entitled their study *The Social Organization of Industrial Conflict* to signal two issues: why does conflict take one form rather than another; and why does overt conflict arise in some situations and not others?

'Privileging' can only mean in analytical terms. Here, of course, materialism was trying to invest some deeper meaning in the observations of many pluralists, Ackers's favourite Hugh Clegg among them, that conflicts of interest are a fact of life. Yet, it was argued, such observations were mere truisms unless some grounds for the observation were offered. The grounds lay in identifying the way in which the employment relationship works. At a straightforward level, workers have interests in two things, the division of rewards but also the way in which work is organized: who exerts discipline and how, who decides the allocation and pace of work, and so on. At a deeper level, these interests reflect the fact that the worker works under the authority of the manager. At a deeper level still, this relationship is embedded in the pursuit of accumulation. The worker is exploited in the

specific technical sense that workers produce, in the labour process, what has value, and some of this value is appropriated by the capitalist.¹

The term 'labour process' also has an exact meaning, though as Armstrong (1989) pointed out it has tended to become a synonym for 'work'. A labour process is the means by which a society reproduces the material means of its own existence (Armstrong, 1989: 308). Labour process analysis is concerned with how this general process operates in different modes of production, that is, different ways in which it is organized. Materialism is embedded in this approach in trying to understand the employment relationship within relations around the creation of the means of existence.

Thirdly, therefore, capitalism. If we say that a structured antagonism lies at the heart of capitalism, are we saying anything that can be empirically refuted? There are two lines of argument here. The first is that capitalism is a distinct mode of production, and hence that the nature of conflict at the empirical level will differ from that in other modes. This is why Burawoy (1979) made contrasts with feudalism, and why *Conflict at Work* went into feudalism in more detail, and also addressed slavery and state socialism –themes that the critics do not mention. Consider the archetypical form of conflict, the strike. In old books on strikes, it was customary to open with some effort at drollery by mentioning that strikes are as old as the building of the pyramids, before diving into a dull analysis of recent strike statistics. But the strike, as a collective refusal of free wage labourers to work for a given

¹ This formulation is taken from Cohen (1988). It does not entail the labour theory of value but instead is based on what Cohen calls the plain argument: the labour produces the product, that which has value; some of this value is appropriated by the capitalist, and labourers thus receive less value than the value of what they create; hence the worker is exploited. Cohen deals briefly, at pp. 227-8, with the standard response, that in risking capital, making investment decisions, and so on the capitalist engages in productive activity. For Cohen, this means that the capitalist helps in producing but is not producer; capitalists can engage in productive activities without being producers. Much more on this idea would have been useful in identifying the *productive* but not *producing* role of the capitalist, but for present purposes the formulation does the job. We are concerned with why there is a structured antagonism at the point of production, with the argument being that it rests on exploitation in the sense given. This formulation does not mean that everything in capitalism is reduced to this basis: capitalists do productive things in developing the forces of production, but embedded in such activity is the need to address the antagonism so as to secure workers' effort in the labour process. This task is not merely one of creating what used to be termed consent but is now often labelled engagement in the sense of finding agreement in any social relationship. It also rests on the fact that workers produce things of value without seeing all of that value, so that the task is a distinctive one. Workers may be only dimly aware of the fact, but the awareness is present in the widespread sense that it is they who do the work and allow profit to be made. It is for this reason that Cohen takes as the motto of his paper the words of 'Solidarity' by Ralph Chaplin: 'it is we who ploughed the prairies, built the cities where they trade'

employer, is distinctive to capitalism. The other modes of production, including that involved in building the pyramids, do not have a class of free wage labourers who can bargain over the terms of their effort legally (and indeed, in many ways, in ways guaranteed formally in labour laws). Collective protests there certainly were, and, it was explicitly pointed out, they have similarities with strikes. Thus peasants' rebellions in feudalism were organized expressions of grievances, not random outbursts of discontent. Yet they were not strikes, because peasants were not free to change their employer. Moreover, there were non-economic obligations on the feudal lord that slowly disappeared with the rise of capitalism. Feudalism was a mode of production; capitalism is another. In short, the concept of a mode of production makes sense, and empirical phenomena can be traced back to the nature of each mode. (For a theoretical example about the derivation of deep essences of things, using strikes as an illustration, see O'Mahoney, 2011).

The second line of argument, and perhaps the one that critics have more difficulty with, is that, regardless of contrasts with other modes of production, it is possible to say things about capitalism as a system. This is because we expect the system to produce certain forces which may be detectable empirically. This is of course not easy, since the forces may work weakly or be counteracted by others. Smith and Meiksins (1995) developed a model of this, in which such 'system' effects interacted with others at a societal and local level. An application has shown that such effects can be detected (Edwards et al., 2013). Wright (2000) similarly started from a theory of class relations at the level of the mode of production, and then addressed how these vary in different national systems. It is possible to detect effects even where there is no source of variation. The essence of capitalism is, it was argued, determining in the sense of setting limits on what is possible at the empirical level and in shaping what occurs at this level.

It is thus entirely feasible and coherent to inquire into the nature of capitalism. The argument at this time was not embedded explicitly in any wider meta-theory setting out how this is possible. Subsequently, connections have been made to realism, which provides such a meta-theory (Edwards, 2005; Edwards et al., 2014). Realism explains how it is possible to identify an essence of something (here, capitalism as a mode of production) and to trace the causal powers of that essence without sinking into essentialism or determinism (Sayer, 1997; O'Mahoney, 2011). A materialist analysis of work relations was thus connected

to wider debates in social science, and not part of some self-contained industrial relations orthodoxy or a narrow 'industrial sociology' – though some scholars apart from those discussed here seem to have problems with this fact (e.g. Halford and Strangleman, 2009; compare Thompson and Smith, 2009, also Edwards, 2014b).

The Critics' Case

Ackers

Ackers identifies an RP 'conventional wisdom' by laying out 'classical' pluralism and identifying a challenge in three works. One of these, Fox's (1974) *Beyond Contract*, is an original piece of work but the other two are textbook chapters (Edwards, 1995 and 2003b) and a textbook (Blyton and Turnbull, 2004). The underlying ideas (Edwards, 1986) and related empirical studies (e.g. Edwards and Scullion, 1982 and Edwards et al., 1998) and more recent theoretical elaborations (Edwards et al., 2006) are not discussed. The reader is given the impression of some abstract assertions in texts, rather than an account of specific theory and evidence.

The explication and the critique are also run together so that very early in the article the central concept of the employment relationship is said to carry the risk of becoming 'over-extended, loaded and "lazy"'. But in essence the argument appears to be the following. Classical pluralism identified the centrality of the employment relationship, which it understood as embracing the setting of rules governing the wage-work bargain. These rules are created in the interaction of managers and workers, and also laterally between different groups of workers. It recognizes both conflict and co-operation, with the 'only presumption' being that issues of conflict 'can be managed by negotiation between management and groups of employees'. RP claims to look more deeply into the origins of conflict but it thereby privileges conflict over co-operation. It also tries to explain specific issues, such as in Fox's case Britain in the 1970s, using generic categories. He fails to explain for example why capitalist societies differ from one another.

RP's 'conventional wisdom claims structural insights into the fundamental nature of power and conflict for all paid work, when such issues can be explored *only* by empirical research into local context and institutions' (Ackers, 2012a: 2, emphasis added). These insights entail 'a-priori assumptions about power and conflict' and limit 'the public policy possibilities

available' to industrial relations actors (p. 3). Fox (1974) is then criticized for applying an overly schematic analytical frame to concrete issues. My own work is addressed in two pages, in the form of a one-page summary and one-page critique of a textbook chapter. There are two main points. Firstly, the separation of RP from Marxism weakens the former: Marxism addressed social class and had a view of the motors of history, whereas RP lacks such a focus, and ends up saying something unhelpful (everything turns on the structured antagonism) or obvious (managers and other actors negotiate with each other to secure compromises). Secondly, conflict is privileged and co-operation is treated as 'deviant' (Ackers, 2012a: 9). A similar exercise is conducted in relation to Blyton and Turnbull. Five 'empirical objections; are then entered. These all turn on such points as that the balance of power fluctuates over time and that capitalist societies differ from each other. Finally, a neo-pluralist model is sketched. This offers a simplified model of the employment relationship shorn of the above objectionable features, sustains historical and institutional inquiry, and suggests that co-operation can inform public policy options.

McGovern

McGovern's concern is the concept of contradictions. He demonstrates that the word has considerable currency in the sociology of work. Some of his points are well-taken. He thus shows that phrases such as 'conflict and contradiction' are widely used, even though their authors mean things like 'tensions'. Such redundancy should be avoided.

The main argument in relation to the orthodoxy turns on the derivation of empirical tools from fundamental analysis of capitalism. McGovern acknowledges the origin of the concept of contradictions in Marxist theorizing, which identified an 'interpenetration of opposites' (p. 21) such as the contradiction between the forces and the relations of production. There are three weaknesses in applying such ideas to the management of labour (pp. 31-2). Firstly, it has to be assumed that control and co-operation are incompatible or 'at least prone to undermining each other'. Secondly, we have to assume that workers are necessarily alienated and exploited. Thirdly, 'social action at the individual level' cannot be accommodated, since everything springs from underlying contradictions. The result is not critical analysis but 'wishful thinking'. McGovern's solution is to abandon use of the idea of contradictions entirely, though he offers no alternative apart from an implicit call for a return to a more concrete and empirically tractable agenda.

Parallels

Several common themes stand out. Firstly, efforts to differentiate sociological analysis from Marxism in fact fail because one is left with some of the baggage (contradictions, structured antagonism) while losing the breadth and coherence of Marxism. Secondly, conflict is privileged over co-operation. Thirdly, analysis at the empirical level is hamstrung. In addition, Ackers is concerned about public policy and the ability of all this analysis to engage with issues of importance to practice.

Counter-critique

Both writers identify two kinds of difficulty. The first is the use of concepts such as conflict and contradiction to mean different things. The second is the idea that capitalism can be analysed as a mode of production in ways that are both internally coherent and applicable empirically.

It makes sense to deal with the latter first. McGovern makes no attempt to deny the validity of the concept of a contradiction in general. As noted, he acknowledges core Marxist ideas such as the contradiction between the forces and the relations of production. He does not say whether this schema is faulty, but if he wished to do so he would need to engage directly with scholars such as Cohen (1978) who laid out and defended the schema. Some RP scholars also embraced the schema (Edwards, 1986: 60-69) while also saying that its specifically Marxist aspects were not required. At this level of analysis, the idea of a contradiction can be explicated and defended.

That said, McGovern's objection appears to be the idea of incompatibility between two forces, or that of their undermining each other. In the kind of analysis to which McGovern objects, control and co-operation (or, to be more exact, *strategies pursuing* control and consent, for co-operation is what happens at the empirical level as the result of strategy and tactics) are indeed said to be contradictory. A word such as 'tension' might be used, but the point of using the term 'contradiction' was to underline that the tension is built in to the fabric of the relationship in question; it is not just an empirical fact. They are opposing principles, and they may *tend to* undermine each other without necessarily doing so in practice. The contradiction poses certain issues for managers at the day-to-day level, but they may well succeed in handling the issues such that co-operation is generated. The point

of materialist analysis is of course to say that they have not resolved the issues, merely found a way of managing them. Thus Ackers's point that NP assumes only that conflict between managers is both trite and false. It is trite in saying that in practice accommodation is achieved. It is false in suggesting that 'negotiation' in fact occurs always or generally, and that it does so on moderately equal terms.

Clarity of language is certainly important. It does not add anything to label competing pressures as contradictions. Everyone faces different demands on their time, and we might want to discuss 'tensions' between, say, work and home. A contradiction means that there are two (or more) principles that characterize a relationship and that put competing demands on it; the resolution of these demands leads to a temporary accommodation that may evolve as the contradiction is worked through further. Balancing administrative, teaching and research demands in academia does not constitute a contradiction. Nor is a contradiction a concrete thing such as an appraisals process. That process may reflect and embody contradictions that operate at a deeper level. Some of these are specific to the labour contract, for example between control (use of appraisal to set and monitor targets) and consent (appraisal to encourage employees to develop skills and autonomy). Others lie in the mode of production, for example between accumulation and legitimation. Understood in this way, 'contradiction' is a meaningful concept.

To elaborate slightly, consider the study by Silva et al. (2014: 290) which refers, in language to which McGovern would probably object, to 'contradictions and tensions' in the way in which teams operate. Yet these authors underline that these are indeed contradictions because they are 'two sides of the same reality rather than polarized opposites that cannot be reconciled'. Three points stand out here. Firstly, it is necessary to say what principles exist and why they are contradictory, in this case principles of collectivism and individualism. Secondly, because they are inherent their tension cannot be reconciled permanently but instead has to be managed in the best way practicable; such efforts at management generate further patterns and expectations that are in their turn negotiated. Thirdly, this study implicitly says that contradictions exist in any kind of team-based work organization. A materialist analysis also says that contradictions exist at different levels, so that teams are embedded in national models of capitalism with varying effects (e.g. the compatibility of teams with individualized employment systems in countries such as the

USA) and then in capitalism as a mode of production (teams as a way to allow workers some autonomy, versus the need to secure profit).

We can develop this point further by considering McGovern's elaboration on the claim that control and co-operation have to be treated as incompatible. Workers can, he says, welcome firm control because they know who is in charge. This is not an original observation, and it was in fact made and elaborated through the concept of the 'disciplined worker' (Edwards et al., 1998). This concept says that workers like order over disorder, while the empirical analysis identified some conditions that promoted this result. The idea chimes with many other well-established ones in the sociology of work, embracing for example Baldamus's (1961) concept of 'traction', that is the satisfaction of being drawn through a coherent set of tasks. So there is no dispute about the idea. Is it, however, consistent with the idea of a structured antagonism? The authors presenting it were well aware of this question, which is why they insisted that systems that promoted autonomy and self-discipline were parts of efforts at what Geary (2003) called the re-organization of control, not its abandonment. It was a re-organization because it was a way in which managements sought to handle contradictions between control and autonomy, and not a resolution replacing conflict with co-operation. Empirical support for the idea came from a further analysis of the data around the idea of empowerment (Edwards and Collinson, 2002). Managers were very clear that they did not use this term, and preferred words like involvement, which they saw as engaging employees within objectives set by managers and controlled by them in terms of ensuring the delivery of results. There is of course much more evidence, around such things as the myth of the post-bureaucratic organization and the fact that firms do not use 'high commitment' practices despite their benefits, pointing in the same direction. At a more theoretical level, the idea is that control can be achieved in different ways, and that different combinations of strategies directed at control and consent generate different results. None of this denies that these strategies are at root based on different, indeed contradictory, principles.

It is feasible to argue that strategies based on control and consent are incompatible, in the sense that managements swing between one or the other. Friedman (1977) presents the most extended statement of this view, one to which he continues to ascribe (Friedman, 2004). My own approach, as laid out in one of the chapters discussed by Ackers (Edwards,

2003b), treats them as independent: it is possible to have a lot of both, as in systems giving workers autonomy and responsibility in task performance and also monitoring and regulating that performance, or not much of either, as where managers in effect abdicate responsibility. They are empirically compatible while being based on contrasting principles. They are based on and part reflect deeper contradictions in the management of the employment relationship, but they are not incompatible; they reflect the working out of the contradictions and are, as Hyman (1987) stressed, partial resolutions.

McGovern's second point, that RP has to assume that workers are alienated and exploited, parallels one of Ackers's arguments: does it make sense to say that all workers are exploited and, in an example which Ackers clearly thinks is decisive, is it sensible to lump together extremely highly-paid footballers with workers in sweatshops?

It is true that materialism does insist that some apparently different types of worker share the condition of being exploited; I return below to whether footballers fall into this category. The theory says that the structured antagonism exists because workers are exploited in a very specific technical sense, namely, that they generate value in the labour process, and some of that value is taken from them. They are not the only source of value. As the old and otherwise sterile debate about productive and unproductive labour established, some tasks performed by managers are productive because they co-ordinate the production process. I would add, from experience of studying small owner-managed firms, that these archetypal capitalists create value in recognizing business opportunities and organizing the means of production to pursue them. Exploitation does not, that is, mean that there is a class that produces all the value and another class that appropriates some of the value. It means that the class of workers has as its primary function of producing value under the authority of others and enjoying only some of the fruits of that value. Managers and entrepreneurs enjoy the fruits of their own labour and some of those of labour. It is convenient to speak of classes, but these really refer to the underlying principles of the organization of capitalism, and not to concrete groupings. Whether people who are exploited in the above sense, let us say highly-paid professionals, are exploited in the sense meant by McGovern, that is treated unjustly, is a wholly separate question. It is also an empirical question whether or not people feel 'alienated' and whether they believe that they are indeed exploited – which was of course Burawoy's (1979) question.

To return to the footballers, we could argue whether football is organized on lines relevant to the theory, that is, a labour process embedded in the accumulation of capital, and there might be some interest in such a debate though it would be a very narrow one. The theory never said that everything in capitalist societies reflects a capitalist labour process, and indeed some scholars such as Peter Armstrong (1989) have argued that much confusion about things like managerial work has arisen because many writers label it as a labour process when in fact it is not. Management in his view constitutes an agency relationship in that managers act as agents of other people. There are contradictions here, for Armstrong between using two different principles to control the agent, namely, granting trust and using performance monitoring systems. And the dynamic around these contradictions shaped how management evolves historically. Yet this does not make management a labour process. To use atypical examples like footballers does not establish a theoretical case, unless Ackers can show – analogously to the well-known problem for Newtonian mechanics of the perihelion of Mercury – that the theory should explain the case but in fact there are anomalies that show that the theory is at best incomplete. He does not show that footballers must be explained by the theory.

One might want to argue that footballers are in fact exploited in the technical sense given above, even though they are paid huge amounts of money. One could point to the fact that whether they play, and in what position and following what tactics is not determined by them. It is also possible to discuss how the treatment of footballers' work has changed over time; in the early 1960s, when there was a maximum wage and the players were often treated more as chattels than free wage labour so that their ability to leave one club for another was very tightly constrained (see Imlach, 2006, for an impressive account), they might well fit Ackers's view of what exploited labour looks like. But all of this is to debate empirical instances. Whether or not everyone is exploited in a sweatshop sense is a red herring.

Workers in capitalist labour processes (and also those in capitalist-like labour processes such as those in the public sector where value in the strict sense is not generated but where work is organized on cognate principles to those of capitalism, for reasons including the reproduction by the state of these principles) are thus exploited. Whether they are

alienated may be an issue for Marxist social theory, but alienation is not a part of the concepts of materialist analysis.

McGovern's third point about social action also relates to Ackers's view that RP cannot properly understand the complexities of work experience, such as the facts that workers express satisfaction with their jobs and on occasion engage in partnerships with managements. These arguments again seem to turn on what is seen as necessarily *implied* by an RP view: RP scholars, as well as those with a more Marxist orientation such as Nichols and Beynon, have struggled to understand such complexities in concrete workplace-level studies, and the only argument can be that such efforts are inconsistent with their underlying theory. The argument makes sense only if we read off action from underlying structural conditions, but RP was expressly set out to deny such a deterministic approach. Thus Fox is criticized by Ackers for failing to explain why some capitalist economies were more successful than others in managing wage inflation. But Fox never set out to provide a theory of everything. The idea of the fundamental nature of the labour process was at a higher level of abstraction than that of inter-country differences. Fox also of course wrote a subtle and multi-layered account of why British industrial relations took the form that they did (Fox, 1985). It is a pity that the comparative analysis here was sketchy, but there was some, and in any event Fox's main purpose was to say why British capitalism took some distinctive paths (Edwards, 2002). His discussion was an application of his wider method, not something separate from it.

Ackers also says that RP divorces itself from public policy by erecting an 'iron cage' which permits no escape from the determinist logic of capitalism. This is again empirically false if he thinks that RP scholars have not suggested policy interventions. Keith Sisson, who broadly accepts, I think, much of the RP analysis, has developed an extended argument about why employment relations matter, and what might be done to make them better (2010). I have made some direct policy interventions (e.g. Edwards et al., 2002) as well as addressing such practical questions as when practices such as team work might be said to work, and hence what conditions are needed to make them work (Wright and Edwards, 1998). And the making of such interventions is not inconsistent with RP, for it does not say that there is an iron cage. It says that there are constraints and that choice is not unlimited but also that there are different ways of managing the employment relationship, and that

public policy is in principle a lever for promoting some ways and not others. I would also want to argue, to underline the concluding remarks of *Conflict at Work* (Edwards, 1986), that policy grounded in a materialist analysis has more traction than Ackers's neo-pluralist preference for co-operation. As Thompson (2003) has shown, even when managers wish to make promises to promote co-operation they are often constrained from living up to them. If we start from a view that co-operation is dependent on important conditions for it to exist, we have a more reliable basis for policy advice than simply saying that conflict and co-operation both exist. The huge literature on experiments in industrial democracy is full of accounts of failures or a regression towards conventional management processes. This is certainly not to say that they are doomed to failure, only to offer a realistic account of their chances of success.

All of the above has remarkable echoes of Fox's (1979) response to two critics who in essence said that he was not radical enough. Ackers cites the piece but does not give it its due. Two points stand out. Firstly, Fox was accused of determinism when in fact he argued that certain structural roles did not necessarily imply certain kinds of social relations; and he discussed the orientations and choices of social actors. He clearly did not take the position ascribed to him.

Secondly, what does pluralism mean? A 'central feature' is 'a widespread diffusion of power such that no one class or group or stratum can dominate . . . the rest' (1979: 106), with the phrase omitted here stressing that domination is a 'slippery' term. This is a notable idea. RP is sometimes said to argue that the balance of power is skewed against labour; Ackers is much exercised by this point. The criticism is then that identifying such power imbalance is empirically impossible, with rhetoric replacing argument. But Fox is not speaking of power in the sense of the power of a particular management or trade union in relation to a pay dispute. He says that pluralism assumes a diffusion of concrete power in this sense such that 'domination' by one class cannot occur. 'Domination' clearly refers to deeper aspects of society on which specific power struggles are fought. To set out to study such aspects is not an empty project, as the stream of writing stimulated by Lukes's 'radical view' – also 40 years old – attests (Lukes, 1974 and 2005; Edwards, 2006). RP is embedded in projects of this kind, and Ackers and McGovern may have bitten off more than they can chew in treating it as a free-standing invention of IR scholars.

Fox also makes a key point in distinguishing between two meanings of 'pluralist': someone who is committed to pluralist values of freedom and democracy as a goal, and someone who thinks that those values present a factual description of present-day society. He assigns himself to the first, but not the second. His critics on that occasion are guilty of 'tramline' thinking in not making this vital distinction. The same might be said of Ackers. Materialism aims to analyse the situation as it is, and such analysis does not prevent commitment to pluralist values or engagement in public policy and other debates in order to pursue them.² Fox was also clear about what he called liberal pluralism, that is the 'liberal' belief in democracy, the rule of law and so on, appended to pluralism as defined. He ascribed to the goals of liberal pluralism but argued that the structure of society needed 'radical' tools of analysis. 'RP' is thus not a useful label because it conflates these two meanings of 'pluralist'. A materialist analysis can sustain liberal policy proposals.

Conclusions: Back to the Future

So, what are we left with? I defined at the outset the core tenets of materialism: structured antagonism, contradictions, and levels of analysis. It is not necessary to sign up to the whole package in relation to exploitation and surplus value to have a broadly materialist analysis. Sisson (2008: 49; also 2010) for example explains the core principles of the employment relationship, including ideas of contradiction, but without necessarily signing up to materialism.

That said, some principles are basic and we are indeed trying to characterize capitalism as a system. The validity, indeed necessity, of doing so has surely increased in light of the global financial crisis: capitalism has been seen to be a system that is indeed beset by contradictions of a profound kind (see Glyn, 2006, for a cogent and also foresightful analysis of all this, showing that the crisis was not the unanticipated event that much mainstream economics still sees it as). Yet these principles have also been enriched since the works of 40 years ago. As noted above, Smith and Meiksins (1995) identified 'system' effects in capitalism that interacted with the 'dominance' effects of leading nations and the 'societal'

² A comment of contemporary relevance concerns Fox's citing of the work of Ralph Miliband as someone who separated the values from the claim that they had been adequately met in current society. The relevance is the effort in the press to damage Miliband's son, the current leader of the Labour Party, by arguing that Miliband senior was 'anti-British' because of his Marxist sympathies. The argument was a particularly crass form of tramline thinking.

effects of individual countries. This SSD framework is richer and more flexible than the 'varieties of capitalism' approach that impresses Ackers; among other things, this is obsessed with the varieties to the neglect of the capitalist principles here. The SSD model is also empirically applicable; in other words, though there is only one capitalism, we can still trace out influences and test them, for example by assessing the extent to which there is some kind of global model that reflects common capitalist principles (Edwards et al., 2013).

There are many other ways in which a materialist approach has been developed. I have commented on these elsewhere, and many other scholars have argued on similar lines (e.g. Thompson and Smith, 2009). They thus do not need listing again. One of the purposes, however, was to connect the sociology of work to wider debates in social science. If we follow Ackers and narrow it down to neo-pluralism, we delete links to efforts to understand capitalism as a system. If we follow McGovern, we also end up with a flat approach dealing in nothing but contingency.

There remain many challenges in developing a materialist sociology of work. Perhaps a central one, the point of Thompson's (2003) analysis cited above, was to make connections between the different levels at which capitalism operates. How do we identify theoretically how the levels are connected, and how do we address the empirical challenge of gaining access to key actors who may be very hard to identify, in a world of complex organizational structures, still more track down and research? Within such a frame, how do we understand the 'global manager' and his, or possibly her, effect on life in organizations? Or how is experience among the 'precariat' being re-configured? Materialism offers some grounded means to address such questions. It can, for example, throw distinct light on the nature of front-line service work by considering how different kinds of such work are configured according to their emphasis on use or exchange value (Bélanger and Edwards, 2013). We thus aim to deepen the analysis of this phenomenon.

In relation to policy, Ackers sees an orthodoxy that cannot address practical issues. His review of the most recent Warwick text (Colling and Terry, 2010) argues that policy relevance has been lost, not least because traditional collective bargaining no longer exists as a foundation on which to build a model of industrial governance (Ackers, 2012b). If this were true, we would have seen a consistent decline in employment relations researchers' engagement with policy issues. In fact, there is substantial involvement around such

traditional areas as union organizing campaigns but also employee commitment and engagement and the work-life balance, as illustrated by the liveliness of contributions to the BERR Employment Relations Research Series and by scholars' work with ACAS, the CIPD, and other bodies. This at least tells us that the orthodoxy is not totalizing. But I would also argue that some of this work is informed by a materialist view. That is most apparent in the arguments of Brook and Darlington (2013) for a new 'organic' sociology of work, but it can also be discerned in the ways in which issues such as skills and training have been addressed recently. Many scholars have delved deeply into the political economy of skill, using broadly RP ideas, and then suggested ways of addressing the relevant issues, for example by looking at employers' demands for skills and how they can be better connected to the long-term needs of workers and the economy. Whether such analyses have purchase in the current policy environment is of course a question, but it is not the case that policy relevance has been abandoned or that policy ideas rest on unrealistic wishful thinking.

Finally, to return to the issue of understanding work, can anyone deny that the empirical studies of the last 40 years are richer and more sophisticated than industrial sociology *circa* 1974? And such studies take a good deal of inspiration from materialist-based industrial sociology. They consider, moreover, a very wide range of practical questions in relation to the quality of jobs and workers' commitment to work – questions that the focus 40 years ago on structures of collective bargaining scarcely recognized. Challenging established assumptions is certainly desirable, and Ackers and McGovern perform a useful service in promoting reflection and reconsideration. Yet the analytical tools forged over the past 40 years need development and refinement, not abandonment.

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