EDMUND HEERY

FRAMING WORK

Unitary, Pluralist and Critical Perspectives in the Twenty-first Century

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To Janet, Catherine, and Patrick

Preface

The origins of this book lie ten years ago when I co-authored the Introduction to the *Sage Handbook of Industrial Relations* (Heery et al. 2008). In the Introduction, I and my co-authors identified the main 'normative orientations' within Industrial Relations (IR) and briefly reviewed the debate between them. A dominant pluralist frame of reference, we argued, had been subject to powerful critique by Marxism, feminism, and neo-liberalism from the 1970s onwards and had responded, partly through the development of counter-critique and partly by seeking an accommodation with critics. In the latter case, mainstream IR adjusted to critique by absorbing some of the assumptions and systems of argument of its opponents. The book springs from this seed and the conviction born at the time that it was possible to write an account of IR that made use of the time-honoured concept of frames of reference.

The book's first purpose, therefore, is to demonstrate the continued utility of the frame-concept by showing that there are unitary, pluralist, and critical currents within IR broadly defined and that much contemporary writing on employment can be allocated to one of these three traditions. Unitary, pluralist, and critical frames have evolved away from classic positions, as developed in the early years of the field, it is argued, but they are enduring and remain identifiable today. A second purpose is to examine the interaction between these three frames of reference. The book is distinguished by an attempt to identify the lines of fracture within IR as a field of study, rather than common assumptions that bind disparate traditions together, and to this end it examines several areas of current debate between unitary, pluralist, and critical researchers. These areas are worker participation, consumer culture, equality and diversity, and the impact of the global financial crisis on employment relations in developed economies. In all of these areas, the book identifies unitary, pluralist, and critical argument and notes the lines of contention that divide these positions and the sometimes surprising accommodation that occurs between them.

In writing the book I have received considerable help from friends and colleagues. Peter Ackers, Paul Edwards, Jean Jenkins, John Kelly, and Tom Keenoy have each read chapters and provided helpful advice that has contributed to redrafting. In a couple of cases the encouragement received by readers kept me going when finishing the book seemed a very distant prospect indeed. Parts of the book have also been presented to seminar and conference audiences at Warwick University, Loughborough University, Saïd Business School

in Oxford, and at the Universities of Macquarie, Melbourne, and Monash in Australia. A version of Chapter Three on pluralism was presented to the International Labour and Employment Relations Association (ILERA) conference in Cape Town, South Africa in 2015. I am grateful to all who participated in these events and who provided useful feedback. Especial mention should be given to Willie Brown who provided detailed written comments on the South African conference paper. A version of the pluralist argument has also been published by the *Journal of Industrial Relations* (Heery 2016). Chapter Three is much longer and different in a number of respects from the journal article but there is some overlap and I am grateful to the journal and its editors for their permission to re-use material. Finally, the book takes the form of an extended literature review and lots of people have kindly provided me with suggestions for reading, especially in areas where my prior knowledge was limited. Those who have helped me in this way include: Peter Ackers, Ismael Al-Amoudi, Peter Armstrong, Rachel Ashworth, Willie Brown, Andy Danford, Steve Davies, Tony Dundon, Jane Holgate, Jean Jenkins, Sarah Jenkins, John Kelly, Rebecca Kolins Givan, Jonathan Morris, Stephen Mustchin, Aoife MacDermott, Joe O'Mahoney, George Tsogas, and Jane Wills. If I have forgotten anyone who should be on this list, I apologize—'It's his age, you know'.

While many have helped me, I am the sole author of the book and all the errors, infelicities, and miss-steps (of which I'm sure there are many) are mine alone.

Edmund Heery

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Contents

List of Abbreviations

ACAS	Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service
AMO	Ability Motivation Opportunity
CIPD	Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
CLS	Critical Labour Studies
CMS	Critical Management Studies
CTU	Chicago Teachers' Union
EHRC	Equality and Human Rights Commission
GFC	Global Financial Crisis
HPWS	High Performance Work System(s)
HR	Human Resource
HRM	Human Resource Management
ICE	Information and Consultation of Employees
IEA	Institute for Economic Affairs
ILERA	International Labour and Employment Relations Association
IPRP	Individual Performance Related Pay
IR	Industrial Relations
NGO	Non-Government Organization
NHS	National Health Service
NMW	National Minimum Wage
RBS	Royal Bank of Scotland
RBV	Resource Based View
SEIU	Service Employees International Union
SHRM	Strategic Human Resource Management
TUC	Trades Union Congress
UK	United Kingdom
US/USA	United States of America
USDAW	Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers
VoC	Varieties of Capitalism
WERS	Workplace Employee/Employment Relations Survey

1

Introduction

The workplace is often the subject of controversy. Whether it be the actions of trade unions, the merits and demerits of a flexible labour market, the impact of employment law on business, or the impact of private equity investment on workers, developments at work frequently divide political and public opinion. These lines of division are echoed powerfully in academic commentary, where opposed perspectives on work play out a perennial contest of claim and counter-claim, attack and defence. It is this contest, that is the subject of this book. Its purpose is to review the academic field of Industrial Relations (IR), broadly conceived,[1] through the rival normative positions that underpin debate. IR is a field of contending voices, in which unitary, pluralist, and critical positions clash. In what follows, the characteristics of these perspectives, their contemporary expression, and the arguments between them are mapped and analysed.

This focus on contention has been missing from other accounts of IR as a field. These tend to stress IR's coherence, marked by shared values and perspectives on the employment relationship (Kochan 1998; Sisson 2008) or a distinctive methodology (Brown and Wright 1994; Edwards 2005). Where division is recognized, moreover, its roots are traced to different national research traditions, which themselves cohere (Frege 2007), or to the influence of different social science disciplines (Coyle-Shapiro et al. 2005). In fact, economists, lawyers, psychologists, and sociologists commenting on work range across the normative spectrum and all of these accounts of IR play down what to me seems to be its most obvious characteristic; that it is riven with dispute. Indeed, dispute defines all academic fields. In organization studies, for instance, there is a veritable Babel of contending voices, making competing claims about the nature of social reality and the manner in which researchers can gain knowledge of it (Reed 2006). Meta-theoretical dispute of this kind is rare within IR. Instead, contention tends to be normative, reflecting the applied, policy-oriented nature of the field. At its heart are competing assessments of the relative interests of workers and employers, which generate

very different standards for evaluating the real world of work and sharply contrasting programmes for practical action.

FRAMES OF REFERENCE

Since Alan Fox (1966) used the term in the 1960s, the main perspectives in IR have been labelled 'frames of reference'. Fox initially identified two such frames, the unitary and pluralist frames of reference, although in a celebrated auto-critique of the 1970s Fox added a third, the radical frame of reference (Fox 1974: 264–96). The core feature of these frames of reference has been noted by Budd and Bhave (2008: 93), who state that they consist of 'packages of values and assumptions pertaining to the interests of parties to the employment relationship—that is, the needs, wants, and aspirations of employees, employers, and the state—and the degree to which these interests are compatible'. Thus, in Fox's classic formulation the unitary frame of reference regards the employing organization as 'analogous to a team' (1966: 1), in which the shared interests of employer and employee provide the basis for cooperation at work. The pluralist frame, in contrast, regards the organization as 'a coalition of interests that in some respects are divergent' (1966: 1) and is concerned with the balancing of interests through systems of conflict resolution. The radical critique of pluralism, for its part, begins from an assumption of fundamentally opposed interests, founded on the exploitation of workers by the powerful, and regards the accommodation between interests applauded by pluralists as both fleeting and prone to collapse. Radicals also regard such an accommodation as undesirable: it reconciles those who are exploited to their condition, while leaving the structured inequality at the heart of the employment relationship unchanged (Fox 1974: 279–80).

Fox's concept of a frame of reference is one of the few within IR that has passed tests of ubiquity and longevity and it has been applied widely and continuously by commentators on work since he introduced the term. Application of the concept has followed two broad paths of descent. The first of these derives from Fox's use of frames of reference to analyse the 'ideology of management'. Fox noted that while managers were embedded in a set of institutions founded on pluralist principles they themselves often subscribed to a unitary frame of reference that emphasized shared interests (1966: 5–6). From this starting point, Fox went on to identify a number of different 'patterns of management–employee relations' (1974: 297), which formed the basis of the subsequent literature on 'management style' (Bacon 2008: 244–8). This term denotes the broad approach that employers adopt to managing people at work, including underpinning assumptions about the nature of the employment relationship and the interests that are integral to it. In much of

this work a key distinction is drawn between management styles that accept trade union organization amongst employees and those that oppose it and which are informed by a unitary frame of reference (e.g. Marchington and Parker 1990; Purcell and Ahlstrand 1994). The key thing to note, however, is that Fox's analysis of frames of reference stimulated attempts to theorize management beliefs and behaviour. On this path, there is a direct line of descent from Fox to the current preoccupation with strategic human resource management (Boxall and Purcell 2011).

The other line of descent has used the concept of frames of reference to reflect on the nature of IR as an academic field and it is to this tradition that this book contributes. In virtually all IR textbooks the main academic perspectives on the employment relationship are introduced as frames of reference (e.g. Godard 2000; Edwards 2003; Nicholls 2003; Blyton and Turnbull 2004; Bray et al. 2004; Williams and Adam-Smith 2006) and Fox's triumvirate of unitary, pluralist, and radical frames has been used repeatedly by IR scholars when commenting upon the history and nature of their subject (Ackers and Wilkinson 2003; Kaufman 2004, 2014; Heery et al. 2008; Cradden 2014). It has also migrated across subject boundaries and been used to reflect upon the nature of the adjacent field of human resource management; a field that has been attacked by critical scholars for embodying a unitary perspective of the employment relationship (Legge 2005).

Within this second tradition, Fox's concept has been subject to considerable elaboration. One striking development has been the multiplication of frames as scholars have sub-divided Fox's categories, relabelled them, or identified additional perspectives. Sub-division occurred earliest with regard to the radical frame of reference, with a distinction being drawn between a Marxist perspective, exemplified by the work of Richard Hyman (1975), and a 'neo-Durkheimian' position (Gilbert 1986). The latter category, to which Fox himself was sometimes allocated, identified a state of anomie in the employment system that stemmed from the decay of the traditional status order and the rise of an instrumental collectivism, through which unions strove to advance workers' interests and generated an inflationary spiral in the process. The solution, in classic Durkheimian fashion, was to create a new moral order that could restrain instrumental competition on the basis of a radical redistribution of income and power.

More recently, scholars have added new frames. Thus, Godard (2000) lists five: neo-classical, managerialist, orthodox pluralist, liberal reformist, and radical. This schema involves a division into two of Fox's unitary and pluralist perspectives. Godard distinguishes a 'managerialist' perspective, equivalent to Fox's unitary frame of reference and based on shared interests, from a neo-classical or neo-conservative perspective that emphasizes the alignment of worker and employer interests through market processes and economic incentives. He also distinguishes weaker and stronger pluralist perspectives;

indeed his liberal reformist position, which stresses 'elimination of inequalities and injustices', resembles the neo-Durkheimian radical perspective described above. This categorization is instructive in two regards. On the one hand, it distinguishes what might be thought of as 'soft' and 'hard' unitary perspectives, the one identifying a basis for shared interests in enlightened, progressive management and the other through systems of incentive that resolve principal–agent problems in the employment relationship. On the other, it points to the increasingly muddy and fluid boundary between left pluralist and radical perspectives; a meeting that has been prompted both by the need of pluralists to respond to a stronger challenge from the right and by the decline of Marxist scholarship since the fracturing of the Soviet bloc in the 1980s.

Another example is provided by Budd and Bhave (2008) who identify four frames of reference: egoist, unitarist, pluralist, and critical. In this formulation the egoist frame is equivalent to Godard's neo-classical perspective and its central, normative principle is that beneficial outcomes, the maximizing of utility, can be secured through the pursuit of self-interest in a freely operating labour market. The critical perspective is equivalent to the radical frame but Budd and Bhave identify three separate critical currents, Marxist, feminist, and race-based perspectives. The feminist perspective is based on the identification of gendered interests at work and the need to challenge the subordination of women to the patriarchal interests of both their employers and male workers. A 'critical race perspective', in contrast, 'emphasizes segregation and control along racial lines' and the need to challenge the subordination of minority groups, again to both employers and majority workers. The addition of feminist and race-based perspectives is also instructive. It points to an increasing recognition of fundamental divisions of interest amongst workers and acceptance that the analysis of interests within the employment relationship cannot be reduced to a focus on the worker–employer dyad (Heery et al. 2008).

Budd and Bhave's treatment is also notable for seeking to analyse perspectives on the employment relationship and isolate their constituent elements. One route this has taken has been to reflect upon and develop the key notion of interests. They argue that each of the four perspectives they identify rests on a set of beliefs about the substantive interests of workers. Thus, egoists assume that workers are driven by an urge to maximize utility, unitarists that workers' interests reside in a need for fulfilment at work or identification with a workplace community, pluralists emphasize a desire for equity and voice, and critical scholars the interest of workers in challenging their subordination and securing greater power and control over their working lives. These assumptions, in turn, provide the basis for different beliefs about the compatibility of worker and employer interests. In the first two positions compatibility can be achieved; in the one case through free exchange with employers in the labour market and in the other by progressive management that allows

workers to attain fulfilment through satisfying work. For the pluralist, equity and voice can be realized through a system of representation that requires managers to be receptive to stakeholder, not purely shareholder, interests, but for critical scholars compatibility can never be achieved because both workers and employers have an interest in maximizing power and control.

Another route that Budd and Bhave follow is to distinguish between the normative and explanatory components of the different perspectives. They note that perspectives have 'a large normative component—they represent principles and systems that *ought* to be true' (2008: 107). But they also note that perspectives have 'theoretical and analytical aspects' and offer explanations of the form of the employment relationship, the behaviour of employers, workers, and governments and consequent outcomes. Thus, they observe that:

> The egoist model predicts that market-based relationships maximize welfare. The unitarist model implies that providing opportunities for individual fulfillment boosts employee productivity. The pluralist model hypothesizes that unions can improve productivity. The critical model predicts that managers will pursue strategies that increase their control in the workplace. (Budd and Bhave 2008: 107; see also Godard 2000)

In each case, therefore, it is possible to identify an agenda consisting of empirical claims that, in principle, can be verified or falsified through research. Frames of reference in IR are, therefore, complex formulations. They rest on underlying assumptions about the interests of workers and their employers, which give rise, on the one hand, to formal ideologies; normative positions for evaluating the present and shaping the future. And, on the other hand, they generate theoretical models of the employment relationship, which offer explanations of institutions, behaviour, and outcomes and can be weighed and tested through empirical research.

ANALYSING FRAMES

The first part of this book is devoted to analysing frames of reference in the manner of Budd and Bhave. It isolates the common elements of frames and uses these analytical categories to describe how each of the classic positions identified by Fox has evolved and is expressed today. This process begins with a discussion of interests and, also like Budd and Bhave, notes that each frame is rooted in a conception of the substantive interests of workers and their degree of compatibility with the interests of employers. In addition, however, it considers the source of worker interests and the degree to which they are believed to originate in the innate properties of human subjects, to derive from

positions in a social structure or to be actively formed by discursive processes that construct social identities and associated interests. As we will see, unitarists, pluralists, and radical or critical scholars have tended to conceive of the origins of worker interests in different ways.

From this starting point the elements of frames are identified, using a conceptual scheme for interpreting social theory developed by Runciman (1983). According to Runciman, social theory performs four generic functions: to report, to explain, and to evaluate social phenomena and describe the subjective states of social actors. His scheme was created to analyse sociological method but can be applied equally well to other social science fields, including IR. All four tasks are discharged by the main frames of reference in IR though with systematic differences in what they choose to report, how they explain employment phenomena, the standards of normative evaluation they apply and their understanding of the subjective experience, or 'identity', of employment actors.

Reportage is the first function of social research identified by Runciman and consists of the simple recounting of social facts, including those actively generated by researchers through the research process. Reportage is never free of presupposition (Runciman 1983: 57), however, including presupposition about what is worthy of being reported. The primary source of this type of presupposition in the three frames of reference is their conception of worker interests and the degree of compatibility with those of employers. Thus, soft unitarists are drawn to the analysis of job satisfaction and employee commitment, which are held to underpin cooperation at work, while their hard counterparts tend to examine the structure of incentives that can align the interests of principals and agents. For their part, pluralists are drawn to the analysis of institutions that balance interests at work, whether trade unions or benign legal reforms, while radicals tend, on the one hand, to examine coercion or exploitation at work and, on the other, report conflict and repeated challenge to the status quo. In each case, therefore, the understanding of the substance and compatibility of interests systematically directs their adherents towards a different research agenda; towards the analysis of different aspects of the employment relationship. Expressed differently, each frame of reference identifies a particular explanandum or body of events, processes, and states of affairs that is deemed worthy of investigation and analysis.

The second function of social theory identified by Runciman is explanation. In each of the main frames of reference in IR a myriad of theoretical explanations of employment phenomena have been developed over the years. Nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish two aspects of explanation that differ systematically across frames. First are their understanding of the context that shapes patterns of employment relations. Unitary scholars, for example, have tended to explain the nature of the employment relationship in terms of a benign process of economic evolution, which draws worker and

employer interests into alignment. New forms of production, such as HPWS, or new economic imperatives, such as the need to respond to consumer culture, impose a requirement on businesses to adopt progressive forms of HRM that serve worker interests while also boosting performance. Pluralists, in contrast, tend to identify institutions as the primary contextual factor. Repeatedly in contemporary pluralist analysis it is argued that coordinated forms of capitalism are most effective in securing balance between worker and employer interests. Finally, critical writers tend to emphasize systemic, global forces, such as financialization and neo-liberalism, which both promote worker subordination to capital and elicit forms of resistance.

The second distinguishing factor concerns agency: each frame attributes primary agentic capacity to a different strategic actor within the system of employment relations. For unitarists, the critical actor is the employer, which is expressed in a preoccupation with management strategy and the emergence of the subfield of SHRM. For critical writers, workers have agentic capacity; or rather they do so in moments of crisis when worker resistance, expressed through social movements, can challenge existing economic arrangements and lead to their transformation. Finally, pluralists tend to accord agentic priority to the state, which has the capacity to regulate the employment relationship and, through law and other levers of policy, establish an enduring balance between the interests of workers and employers.

The third function of social theory is evaluation. In Runciman's book the emphasis is on the strategies of evaluation that are developed by social researchers. For example, comparing aspects of policy, behaviour, or outcomes with those in another country, at a different time or against a putative, ideal set of arrangements, what Runciman refers to as 'utopian evaluation'. In addition to examining strategies of evaluation of this kind, consideration is given in this book to three other aspects of the normative orientation associated with frames of reference. The standards of evaluation used by adherents of each frame are identified; for example, the increasing trend for pluralist writers both to advocate progressive reform on the basis of a 'business case' and to rely on explicit ethical or social justice arguments (Dickens 2005; Proctor and Rawlinson 2012). Also identified are the prescriptions for effective practice and incremental or radical reform that are advanced by frame adherents. IR is an applied field, with many of its practitioners engaged directly in formulating policies and advising businesses, governments, and trade unions. Their programmes for action are central features of the evaluative or normative component of the field. Finally, consideration is given to the public role of IR academics advocated by unitary, pluralist, and radical scholars, reflecting the wider concern with the function of 'public intellectuals' in the social sciences (Burawoy 2005; Brook and Darlington 2013). Again, as we will see, there are notable differences, ranging from the private consultancy of many unitary writers, through the public policy role of many pluralists and the traditional

orientation to trade unions and left political parties and factions of many critical scholars.

The final function identified by Runciman is 'description', the recovery of the subjective states of social actors. A common critique of mainstream IR is that it has neglected this feature of social research and has tended to reify social processes and concentrate excessively on the analysis of formal institutions (Greene 2001). This critique is valid to a degree but, if one searches, the analysis of the subjective experience of employment relations can be readily found in each of the three main traditions of IR. It is most apparent in ethnographic studies of the workplace, which have as their central purpose the capture of the lived experience of working life, but is also apparent in quantitative, survey research, which seeks to measure the attitudes and beliefs of workplace actors. As with the other functions of social research, the competing traditions have handled description in different ways. Work from the unitary frame of reference has tended to focus on the psychological rewards of work and the intrinsic satisfaction that derives from involvement in well-designed, high performance work systems. At the other pole, in contrast, critical scholars have tended to emphasize the stress and alienation of workers in contemporary work systems, on the one hand, and feelings of grievance and awareness of opposed interests, on the other. Pluralists, for their part, have also stressed the expression of grievance by workers but have tended to emphasize the partial, limited nature of worker opposition to their employers and to take critical researchers to task for exaggerating the extent of worker rejection of the prevailing system. The description of subjective states is an inescapable function of social science and, as such, has featured in IR research.

In what follows Runciman's framework is applied to the three main frames of reference in IR, the unitary, pluralist, and radical perspectives, the latter described as the critical frame reflecting today's nomenclature. The temptation to multiply frames, in the manner of other authors, has been resisted essentially because Fox's original typology captures the core feature of each of the frames; its grounding in a conception of the interests of workers and their compatibility with the separate interests of employers. Nevertheless, there is recognition that all frames contain disparate currents. Perhaps the clearest and most significant distinction is that between soft and hard unitary positions. Both of these claim that worker and employer interests are fully compatible but identify different mechanisms through which a unity of interests can be achieved; through sophisticated HRM on the one hand and an appropriate structure of incentives on the other. There are also differences in the other frames. Pluralists differ hugely in the reforms they hold are necessary to balance interests, approximating to a critical position on the one wing and coming close to a unitary position with calls for enlightened stakeholder management on the other. Critical writers similarly fall into different categories and in what follows a broad distinction is drawn between critical labour

studies (CLS), written by critical IR specialists, and a much broader array of critical management studies (CMS), which ranges across labour process theory, critical realism, and post-structural organizational studies.

In applying the framework the emphasis is very much on the contemporary expression of unitary, pluralist, and critical positions. It is a central claim that Fox's categories remain useful for interpreting the field of IR; that their assumptions underpin and continue to guide IR analysis. Thus, in examining the unitary frame of reference, attention is paid both to the rise on the soft side of the 'high performance paradigm' (Godard 2004) and on the hard side to the neo-liberal critique of employment relations and calls for a flexible labour market. In reviewing the pluralist frame there is an emphasis on comparative political economy, with its argument that different 'varieties of capitalism' (Voc) have a varying capacity to balance the interests of workers and employers (Gospel and Pendleton 2005). Finally, with regard to the critical frame there is an emphasis on the current manifestation of its twin impulses: to offer a critique of capitalist employment relations and to identify the potential for challenge. The former can be seen in a broad range of recent work that identifies new forms of management control of workers, while the latter can be seen in the debate over union revitalization with its objective of identifying effective union strategies that can mount a challenge to capital (Frege and Kelly 2004).

CONTENDING VOICES

Having introduced the frames in the first part, the second part of the book examines the contest between them. This examination is conducted across four chapters that deal respectively with employee participation, consumer service, equality and diversity, and the impact of the global financial crisis (GFC). These issues have been chosen because of their topicality within the field; they have been the subject of considerable research and debate. For all of these topics distinctive unitary, pluralist, and critical perspectives are identified, which have selected distinct themes for empirical analysis, offered particular explanations, and developed a normative evaluation, including recommendations for action and reform. The aim in these chapters it is to identify the lines of fracture that run through four of the main areas of research within contemporary IR.

Two of these chapters, however, also serve an additional purpose. Those dealing with the impact of consumer culture on work and with equality and diversity are concerned with how the three main traditions in IR have responded to the identification of additional interests within the employment

relationship that are not reducible to those of workers and employers. Thus, the chapter on equality and diversity is concerned with how the IR frames have responded to the identification of the distinct interests of women workers. In the past two decades there has been a gathering feminist critique of IR, a notable element of which attacks the use of 'gender-blind' categories that discourage analysis of the separate and distinctive interests of women at work (Wacjman 2000; Greene 2003). The starting point for this critique is that women possess interests that are not reducible to those of a generic 'worker' and that the employment relationship is gendered, such that women's (and men's) employment exhibits distinctive patterns and women (and men) are subject to particular forms of management. In the face of this critique, IR has changed, albeit at a slower rate than other areas of social science, and has begun to acknowledge gendered interests at work and to research the gender dimension of the employment relationship.

It is this response that is considered below. Each of the main frames of reference has responded to the gender challenge in different ways. On the unitary wing, the notion of 'managing diversity' has been developed, which rests on a core claim that employer receptiveness to the diversity of workforce interests, including the interests of working women, provides a basis for enhanced cooperation at work and improved business performance. In the pluralist centre, this managerialist project has been subject to critique on two central grounds: that employer self-interest in equality is variable and so cannot be relied upon as the principal means for countering discrimination at work and that equality of treatment and outcome are required on social justice grounds, regardless of any business case (Dickens 2005). The prescription that follows is that effective systems of law, supported by union 'equality bargaining', are needed to balance the interests of women workers and their employers. On the critical wing, these prescriptions, in turn, are subject to attack with a tendency to emphasize the persistence of inequality under the law and the uncertain commitment of trade unions to action on behalf of women workers. For writers in this tradition there tends to be a call for the mobilization of women workers in and against unions or through other social movements to challenge continued disadvantage (Ledwith and Colgan 2002; Kirton and Healy 2013).

IR has also faced a challenge from consumer culture and a critique that it has privileged the interests of producers at the expense of the interests of the purchasers or users of goods and services (Korczynski 2003). The response here has been more ragged, with many IR scholars remaining oblivious to the interests of consumers. Nevertheless, responses are apparent, and again these are spread across the main frames of reference (Heery 1993). The response of unitary writers has perhaps been strongest. The 'new service management school' has developed the argument that consumer interests are advanced by sophisticated HRM (Korczynski 2002), while hard unitarists

have attacked trade unions and legal regulation on the grounds that they reduce the responsiveness of organizations to consumers and have called for financial incentives to drive up service quality (Troy 2004). Pluralists, in contrast, have tended to argue that service quality is often dependent on regulation and is promoted by institutions that raise the quality of the workforce; systems of vocational training and education or unions that raise wages and thereby stabilize employment and provide employers with an incentive to train. For critical scholars, one response to the consumerist critique of IR, is to rebut it and present it as insidious, a means of legitimating action against workers and trade unions. Another has been to call for the joint mobilization of consumers and workers against employers as a means to defend standards, particularly in public services. Indeed, for critical commentators the creation of a mobilizing coalition is central to their normative response to both the rise of gender and of the consumer as distinct interests within the employment relationship.

MAKING A CHOICE

The primary purpose of this book is exposition. It seeks to map the lines of difference within IR and survey some of the main battlegrounds on which opposing positions have clashed. In a field defined by normative commitment, however, it is impossible to remain value-neutral. A choice between positions has to be made. In the pages that follow my own prejudices and preferences will inevitably be present though not, I hope, at the cost of dispassionate presentation of others' arguments. Given this, it is best to come clean and state from the outset what are my own choices with regard to frames of reference in IR.

I have least sympathy with a unitary perspective, particularly of a hard stamp. While I am in favour of professional and effective management, the more extreme statements of this perspective strike me as simply naïve, a Panglossian take on a system of work and employment that is sometimes brutal and often immoral. The arguments of unitary writers seem to conform to the old Marxist notion of ideology: they offer comfort to the powerful and present their particular interests as the interests of us all.

Choosing between the other two frames is not so easy and my own feet are probably planted in the muddy ground between pluralist and radical perspectives. Both traditions of writing about work have much of value. From the pluralist frame, I would point to the stress on institution-building and the value of incremental reforms that over time have helped civilize capitalist economies. I cannot envisage an effective form of industrial society that is not capitalist and so share the pluralist concern with reform. From the radical perspective, I would point to the appetite for incessant critique, unwillingness

to accept an always-imperfect present. I would also point to the concern with power and accept the argument that progressive reform often depends on mobilization and struggle. The single most important task in the real world of IR, I believe, is to revitalize the labour movement because working people need their own social movement to protect and advance their interests.

In IR there is often a dialectic between institution and movement (Heery 2002a). Institutions are built through episodes of conflict and mobilization. Once created though, they endure and shape the behaviour of employers, constraining their action and requiring accommodation to the interests of workers; including women and minority workers. The pluralist and critical traditions speak to these two moments. One celebrates institution, the other movement: both are of value.

NOTE

1. The term Industrial Relations (IR) is used broadly in what follows to denote employment studies, the study of the employment relationship (cf. Frege 2007; Kaufman 2014). The term is not restricted to the analysis of trade unions or collective relationships at work, although these have often been the primary focus of IR scholars. In what follows a catholic approach to source material is adopted and the argument draws heavily on Human Resource Management (HRM), the sociology of work, employment law, economics, and critical management studies as well as the work of self-confessed 'industrial relationists'. The three perspectives on work that are the focus of the book, the unitary, pluralist, and radical frames of reference, were first identified within IR by Alan Fox but their assumptions underpin work in other, adjacent fields and the argument reflects this.

2

Unitary Perspectives on Work

INTRODUCTION

For much of the history of Industrial Relations (IR), writers from a unitary perspective have occupied a marginal position (Ackers and Wilkinson 2003). Within the field there has been a small number of writers whose work has been chiefly characterized by a Hayekian critique of trade unionism and its disruptive effect on employment relations but they have attracted few adherents and failed to constitute a distinctive unitary school or tradition (Roberts 1987; Troy 1999, 2004). Beyond IR, academic statements from a unitary perspective have been much more common but have tended to come from disciplines with a stronger tradition of conservative thought, such as economics (Minford 1985), history (Barnett 1986), and politics (Shenfield 1986).

All this has changed over the past two decades, however, as unitary perspectives have come much more to the fore. Particularly if one adopts a broad definition of the field of IR, encompassing HRM, then the emergence of unitary writing on employment relations is a surprising but hugely significant event. Unitary perspectives are no longer marginal but occupy central ground and offer a challenge to which the hitherto more dominant pluralist and critical traditions have had to respond. The rise from obscurity of the unitary frame of reference represents a sea-change in thinking about work and employment: arguably a manifestation of neo-liberal hegemony within the realm of ideas.

As has already been explained, unitary perspectives on work follow two broad lines of analysis. On the one hand, there is a soft unitarism that draws much of its theoretical apparatus from psychology and which is exemplified in the now voluminous, orthodox literature on high performance work systems (Proctor 2008). On the other hand, there is a hard unitarism, exemplified by the new personnel economics, which is preoccupied with the role of immediate and deferred incentives in inducing effective worker performance (Lazear 1995). These alternative forms of unitarism are based on sharply contrasting assumptions and have their own unique characteristics, not the least of which is their discipline of origin. But they also share common features, such as a

stress on 'performativity' and a methodological individualism, in which the response of individual workers to management techniques is a primary focus of research attention. Their main common feature, however, is a conviction that the interests of workers and their employers are fully congruent thereby providing a basis for ready cooperation at work, the defining feature of the unitary frame. In what follows the main elements of soft and hard unitary perspectives on work are analysed using the framework described in the Introduction, beginning with the conception of interests that lies at the heart of each.

INTERESTS

Both soft and hard unitarists tend to view worker interests as the innate properties of individuals; they rest upon an essentialist ontology. For soft unitarists workers are possessed of intrinsic interests that are realized within the employment relationship. These interests are conceived of in a number of ways but include an interest in satisfying work that affords autonomy, the exercise of skill and the achievement of objectives, opportunities for personal growth and development, fair treatment and organizational justice, recognition and self-esteem, and the need for meaningful activity that allows identification with some broader purpose (e.g. Loher et al. 1985; Warren 1996; Cohen-Charash and Spector 2001). For hard unitarists, in contrast, workers tend to be conceived of as rational maximizers who experience work as a disutility and who are motivated to obtain extrinsic benefits from their employment; principally pay and other forms of 'compensation' (Grimshaw and Rubery 2007; Spencer 2009). 'The worker utility', Garibaldi bluntly states, 'is the expected wage minus the cost of effort' (2006: 135). Of course, this distinction between hard and soft conceptions of worker interests is not absolute and representatives of both schools have qualified their positions. Thus, some economists have recognized that workers are motivated by feelings of equity as well as by instrumental calculation (Carruth and Oswald 1989), while HRM writers recognize that workers have extrinsic interests, such as an interest in maintaining their employability in increasingly fluid labour markets (Hillage and Pollard 1998). But in broad terms, the distinction between a soft conception of interests as intrinsic to the performance of work and a hard conception of interests whose achievement is conditional upon, but not reducible to, work activity has validity.

   If soft and hard unitarists are divided in terms of their understanding of worker interests then they are united in identifying management action as the central condition for realizing these interests. For unitary writers, workers secure their intrinsic or extrinsic interests because employers apply

management strategies, techniques, and practices that enable them to do so. This is a notable point of contrast with the pluralist and critical traditions, which tend to emphasize the agency of other actors, such as government, trade unions, or workers themselves, in ensuring workers realize their interests. For soft unitarists it is the application of sophisticated HRM that is critical. Expert managers design roles that allow job satisfaction, training programmes that promote personal development, employee involvement programmes that offer empowerment, and reward systems that provide recognition. They can also use culture management to infuse work roles with a broader meaning and foster identification with the organization and its goals through secure, long-term employment. For hard unitarists, in contrast, the key management intervention is the design of incentive structures that allow instrumental workers to maximize the return from their employment (Lazear 1995). These include payment systems that link pay to performance but may also include 'tournaments' that allow workers to compete for the best-paying jobs, internal labour markets and other deferred benefits that reward loyalty and skill acquisition, and systems of financial participation that give workers a stake in the firm.

These same management techniques serve to align the interests of workers with those of employers. In the soft unitary tradition there is an emphasis on management techniques generating attitudinal change amongst workers that leads in turn to positive behavioural change. In Guest's (1987) influential model of HRM, for instance, a key output from the HRM system is worker commitment, which is associated with worker flexibility and other positive behavioural outcomes, such as reduced absenteeism. Other versions of the same argument stress the contribution of HRM to the development of organizational citizenship or engagement, both characterized by complementary attitudinal and behavioural change (Harter et al. 2002; Organ et al. 2006; Peccei 2013). In the hard unitary tradition, there is less emphasis on attitudinal change—the essential orientation of *homo economicus* remains unaltered— but management techniques can powerfully shape worker behaviour. Well-designed incentive structures, of whatever type, can eliminate the natural propensity to shirk or pursue sectional interests and motivate workers to pursue goals that are shared with the employer. They can promote a happy coincidence of interests between principals and their agents.

The interests of employers themselves, in both versions of the unitary frame, are assumed to lie in enhanced business performance. The latter may have a number of components and a variety of indicators have been developed to track whether employers are securing their interests. One can identify the immediate or proximate interests that employers bring to the employment relationship, described by Boxall and Purcell (2011: 12) as an interest in cost-effective HRM and measured by indicators of labour costs and performance and ratios that express their interrelationship, such as unit labour costs.

One can also identify more distal interests, such as a capacity of the organization to innovate or adapt or to secure long-term competitive advantage. However conceived or measured, the central claim of both unitary traditions is that if employers are to realize their essential interests they must develop management systems that elicit positive behaviours and (in the soft version) attitudes from workers, and which do so because they permit workers also to pursue and satisfy their essential interests.

RESEARCH AGENDA

One of the most notable features of the broad research agenda that has developed under the unitary frame is a pronounced imbalance. There has been a much greater focus on research that seeks to identify if employers are realizing their interests than if workers are realizing theirs. For critics of the unitary tradition (Delbridge 2011), this is often characterized as a preoccupation with 'performativity'. The overwhelming mass of unitary research on employment relations has been on the degree, manner, and conditions under which management strategies, techniques, and practices elicit improved performance from workers. This is true of both soft and hard variants of the tradition.

Research on worker responses to management has assumed a number of different forms. One strand has examined the response of individual workers to particular management techniques and practices. Thus, *The Oxford Handbook of Human Resource Management* (Boxall et al. 2007) contains a section on 'core processes and functions', with chapters summarizing research evidence on worker responses to employee involvement, equal opportunity, recruitment, selection, training, remuneration, and performance management systems. The equivalent volume published by Sage (Wilkinson et al. 2010) has a section on 'fundamentals of human resource management' with a very similar list of chapters. On the hard side of the unitary divide the same pattern can be seen with the principal textbooks summarizing research evidence on how workers respond to a series of management techniques, though with responses to financial incentives taking priority (Garibaldi 2006; Lazear and Gibbs 2009).

A second strand has investigated the response of workers to clusters or bundles of management practices, from a belief that such responses will be more positive when there is 'internal fit' (MacDuffie 1995) across separate management practices such that they form an integrated system. Work of this kind has reached its apogee in research on HPWS and their success in eliciting worker performance. There is no consensus amongst researchers in this tradition on the precise bundle of techniques that comprises such a system

but their success in meeting the employer's interest in cost-effective HRM has been the paramount research objective (e.g. Way 2002; Guthrie et al. 2009). Closely associated with HPWS has been work on the link between HRM and business performance. Since Huselid's (1995) pioneering work, which demonstrated a link between investment in HRM and the financial performance of American corporations, there has been a boom in HRM and performance research (Paauwe 2009). This has spread around the globe, with scholars from other countries following the American lead (Bae and Lawler 2000; Fey et al. 2000; Guest et al. 2003; Fabling and Grimes 2010), and extended downwards to capture the performance pay-off from HRM for employers in particular industries and types of firm (Ichniowski et al. 1997; Boxall and Steeneveld 1999; Hoque 2000; Gould-Williams 2003).

A third way in which unitary researchers have explored positive consequences for employers is by switching their attention to the 'dependent variable'; that is by focusing on the conditions under which favourable employee attitudes, dispositions, and behaviours are likely to be generated. This can be seen in research on organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behaviour, and employee engagement (e.g. Harter et al. 2002; Meyer et al. 2002; Organ et al. 2006; Peccei 2013). Another notable expression has been work on the psychological contract. This has been a prominent feature of work on HRM in recent years, with scholars examining both the antecedents and consequences of a positive psychological contract at work (Guest 2007). The latter is typically understood in terms of employee trust and confidence that management will deliver on implicit as well as formally specified aspects of the employment exchange. These implicit aspects may include encouragement of personal development, providing flexibility to secure work–life balance, and fair treatment when compared with other employees. Crucially, according to Guest (2007: 136–7), a positive psychological contract is dependent on management intervention and the application of an effective system of HRM. The prime research interest, however, has been on the effects of the psychological contract. Where the latter is breached or violated, researchers have pointed to reduced employee commitment, lower job satisfaction, lower organizational citizenship behaviour, and an increased propensity to quit. Where perceived employer commitments are honoured, in contrast, a series of beneficial employee attitudes and behaviours are identified (Conway and Briner 2005).

In Guest's (2007: 138) review of research on the psychological contract he notes that '[v]ery few studies have actually considered outcomes associated with workers' well-being'. His own work is an exception and suggests that a set of positive outcomes for workers, including greater work satisfaction, life satisfaction, and satisfaction with work–life balance stem from a positive assessment of the psychological contract, which in turn is associated with exposure to a greater range of HRM practices. Others writing in the unitary tradition have undertaken similar research, seeking to establish that high

performance work systems are beneficial for workers as well as their employ-ers (Harley et al. 2007). A significant stimulus to work of this kind has been the critique of high performance work systems developed by critical writers (e.g. Ramsay et al. 2000). A growing concern with the impact of work and man-agement systems on workers can also be seen in the hard unitary tradition, particularly in the interest in 'happiness' and the degree to which possession of a job and job attributes influence subjective measures of worker utility (Clark and Oswald 1994; Frey and Stutzer 2002; Clark 2011). Despite these trends, however, Guest's (2007: 138) assessment of the research agenda developed by both soft and hard unitary schools remains valid: there is an overwhelming concentration on outcomes and effects of HRM that are 'likely to be of more concern to the organization'.

SUBJECTIVITY

As the preceding discussion has made clear, a concern with the subjective experience of work and employment relations has been central to the soft unitary tradition within IR. There has been a steady focus on the pleasure derived from working life, seen particularly in research on job satisfaction but also in research on the contribution of work to feelings of self-esteem and broader well-being. There has also been a steady focus on worker attitudes to the employer, customers, co-workers, the employing organization, its mission, and to work itself and the degree to which these are infused with an affective tenor marked by identification and warmth. This is reflected in the central position within the unitary tradition of concepts such as organizational commitment and organizational citizenship, concepts that deal centrally with the lived relationship between workers and others.

   Three other features of the unitary approach to worker subjectivity are worthy of note. First, there has been a preoccupation with the antecedents of subjective states and the degree to which the latter can be generated by deliberate management action. For many in the soft unitary tradition worker subjectivity can and should be the subject of management intervention; perhaps seen most readily in the now vast literature on the management of culture (Deal and Kennedy 1988; Schein 1992). Second there is an equally pronounced concern with the consequences of subjective states and the degree to which they generate behaviours that are beneficial to employers. Indeed, many of the concepts developed by unitary writers to analyse worker subject-ivity, such as organizational commitment and citizenship, embody behavioural elements as well as attitudinal components. Third, it is accepted almost universally by unitary writers that worker subjective states can be measured through the application of reliable attitude scales that capture both satisfaction

with work and employment and the tenor of relationships between workers and their employers. Patterns of statistical association between these measures and others capturing management action and worker behaviour, moreover, are the primary means through which the antecedents and consequences of worker subjective states are identified.

In the hard unitary tradition the subjective experience of work is downplayed and much theory is constructed on the basis of a deliberately restricted understanding of worker motivation. Workers tend to be conceived of as rational, calculating agents that seek to maximize utility, often understood in terms of gaining freedom from (arduous) work and access to leisure (Block et al. 2004: 95). What workers believe or feel, beyond this restricted set of assumptions, is often deemed of little interest (Green 2006: 10). This is not always the case, however, and a recurrent feature of work in the hard unitary tradition is the introduction of a more expansive understanding of worker subjectivity to explain particular phenomena or forms of behaviour. Thus, Carruth and Oswald (1989) explain patterns of pay determination in the UK labour market by reference to workers' customary notions of equity, Akerlof (1982) attributes the 'efficiency' of high wages to the fact that they induce feelings of obligation amongst workers that in turn generate productivity, and even Lazear (1995: 48), the founder of Personnel Economics, testifies to the importance of 'guilt', arising from a social norm that accords value to work, in keeping shirking behaviour by workers in check.

Another example of the stretching of assumptions underpinning the hard unitary tradition can be seen in the growth of 'happiness' research mentioned above. Increasingly, labour economists have used measures of job satisfaction to gauge the quality of jobs, a notable shift from the hitherto dominant approach that focused on the wage as the premier indicator of job quality and eschewed measures of subjective experience (Green 2006: 11; Oswald 2010). In precisely the same manner as writers in the soft unitary tradition, economists have examined the antecedents and consequences of job satisfaction, exploring in particular its associations with quitting and labour mobility (Clark 2001). In this work, one can see the soft and hard unitary traditions coming together, displaying a shared interest in the subjective experience of work, seeking to capture that experience through attitude measurement, and identifying the consequences for worker behaviour and ultimately business performance.

EXPLANATION

It has already been stated that soft and hard unitary traditions draw upon different core disciplines: that much soft unitary writing is influenced by

psychology, while hard unitary argument draws primarily on economics. It must be noted, however, that neither economics nor psychology are necessarily associated with a unitary position. Just like IR, these fields are marked by contention and psychological and economic theories are deployed just as readily to support pluralist and critical arguments as the claims of unitarists. Thus, in economics there is a long line of pluralist work that has examined the positive effects of trade unions, which can be traced back at least to Freeman and Medoff's *What Do Unions Do?* (e.g. Bryson and Forth 2010), while heterodox economists continue to make the case for the critical analysis of the employment relationship (e.g. Spencer 2009). In psychology, research into 'dual commitment' to employer and union (Guest and Dewe 1991) is motivated by a pluralist concern to defend collective representation at work, while mobilization theory, a prime expression of critical work in IR, is informed by psychological concepts of attribution, social identity, and motivation (Kelly 1998: 29–34).

It remains though that psychology and economics are the disciplines of choice for most who work within a unitary tradition. Why is this and what function do these disciplines play within this tradition? The reasons for the affinity are probably threefold. Both psychology and economics are fields with a strong tradition of conservative social thought that predisposes analysis of the employment relationship to assume a unitary form. In addition, their common object of research is typically the individual and they provide a methodological foundation for research on worker responses to management techniques. They are also both disciplines with a pronounced concern with performance, of individuals, groups, and companies, and as such they can bolster the unitary preoccupation with 'performativity'.

The function that economics and psychology have largely played within the respective hard and soft unitary traditions has been to offer plausible explanations of the links between management action, worker response and individual and collective performance. It has been claimed repeatedly that HRM faces a 'black box' problem, which 'focuses on the critical human interaction inside the opaque and complex realm of organizations that account for performance outcomes' (Boxall et al. 2011: 1505). Psychology and economics have been used by unitary writers to simplify this realm—both disciplines favour parsimonious explanations—and render its processes transparent. Economics has done this by supplying models, such as principal–agent or tournament theory, in which management policy is conceived of as an incentive structure, to which rational workers respond with resulting performance effects. Psychology has furnished a broader array of models but common to many, as we have seen, is a claim that management intervention shapes worker attitudes, perceptions, and relationships, which in turn influence behaviour and performance. It is these economic and psychological models, or combinations of these models, that unitary writers habitually reach for when they seek to

explain the primary empirical regularity in which they are interested, that between HRM and performance.

Context

As we have seen, another way of thinking about explanation is in terms of the contextual factors that shape the employment relationship. Perhaps the predominant way that soft unitary writers have conceived of the IR context is through theories of post-industrialism. Since Daniel Bell's exposition of the original version of this theory in *The Coming of Post-industrial Society*, it has been restated in a succession of forms, all of which emphasize deep-seated and universal changes in economy and society that are bringing the interests of workers and employers into closer alignment. Examples include the notion of a knowledge-based economy (Edwards 2011), the belief that a quality imperative is forcing the adoption of new forms of cooperative service management (Korczynski 2002), the claim that post-bureaucratic, network-based forms of organization afford opportunities to workers for empowerment and mobility (Grimshaw et al. 2005: 4), and the belief that HRM itself constitutes a new and distinctive approach to the management of employees (Storey 1992). These claims differ in terms of the precise causal force that is promoting 'epochal' change—for some it is technology, for others changing forms of organization or fundamental shifts in the scope and basis for competition in product markets. The underlying structure of the argument is in all cases the same, however, with a belief that structural change imposes a selective pressure on employing organizations to adopt new forms of workforce management that are essentially benign and cement the common interests of workers and employers. It should also be noted that in arguments of this type there is little space for institutional effects or national variation. Change is regarded as universal, extending across the developed economies, driven in many cases by the forces of globalization.

In addition to benign models of universal change, unitary writers have identified a number of features of employing organizations themselves that promote common interests. Again, there are numerous examples of this type of argument that include claims that the nature of the employment relationship is a function of company size, structure, strategy, and management style or is bequeathed by founding fathers and mothers. Perhaps the most interesting version of this argument, however, is that which stresses the role of ownership and corporate governance in promoting cooperation at work. In a notable development of this argument Konzelmann et al. (2006) argue, and provide some empirical demonstration, that when external stakeholders occupy a dominant position in the corporate governance of the enterprise then employment relations will be less cooperative and HRM less effective.