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Kelly, John (2018) Rethinking Industrial Relations revisited. *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 39 (4), pp. 701-709. ISSN 0143-831X.

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Rethinking Industrial Relations Revisited

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Origins and Consequences

Rethinking Industrial Relations (RIR 1998) originated in the early 1990s as a series of lectures at the LSE whose aims were intimately connected with the contemporary industrial relations, political and intellectual contexts. The decline of the British labour movement showed no signs of abating: trade union membership and density had fallen every year since 1979 whilst the Labour Party in 1992 suffered its fourth successive election defeat. Employers were increasingly attracted to the newly emerging ideas of 'human resource management' and the associated unitarist narrative of shared organizational goals. The HRM agenda may not have represented a threat to a strong and vibrant union movement but the seemingly relentless reduction in union membership, collective action and bargaining coverage was already raising questions about the relevance of the traditional forms of union-based employment regulation. Further afield, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern European regimes and the continued decline of the world communist movement, all raised profound questions about the relevance of Marxist theory and the different forms of socialism.

The RIR lecture series was therefore conceived in 'bleak times' as an intellectual intervention with two broad aims: on the one hand, to explore new and radical ways of thinking about the employment relationship in a context of union decline; and on the other hand to critique new approaches that downplayed the salience of labour-capital conflict and the vital role of trade unions. Under the first heading, the lectures (and later the book) sought to re-orient the academic study of industrial relations away from the conventional Dunlop-Flanders focus on the shrinking world of institutionalized bargaining relations, increasingly confined to the public sector and large manufacturing plants, but largely absent from the private service sector (Kaufman 1993).¹ The focus of the field needed to shift, towards the increasingly pressing intellectual and political issues of how workers become collective actors in the first place and how they acquire the capacity to confront employers and the state. Traditional IR literature was still dominated by the shrinking industrial sector whilst employment relations in the growing private services sector was represented as an absence, it was the 'non-union' part of the economy, without union representation or collective bargaining coverage. Mobilization theory seemed to offer a positive and more fruitful way of thinking about non-union workers, centred around ideas of injustice, identity, attribution and the costs and benefits of different forms of action. It therefore provided a framework that could generate a wide-ranging research agenda built around testable propositions.

At the same time, the lectures also sought to challenge several emerging theoretical perspectives that suggested or implied trade unions were now locked into inexorable decline. The main bodies of work here were rational choice theory accounts of the irrationality of much collective organization and action, and post-modernist accounts of the rise of new social movements and the demise of their older counterparts such as trade unions. Another equally important target of *Rethinking Industrial Relations* was the growing influence of the unitarist perspective associated with some branches of the HRM literature. Indeed there were already signs in the early 1990s that the relative standings of HRM and Industrial Relations (IR) were in transition. Having started life as a specific approach within the broad field of IR, HRM was rapidly evolving into a major field of inquiry in its own right within which IR was becoming a small and subordinate area of study. Finally, RIR was also intended as a means of reconfiguring Marxist theory, moving it away from abstract critiques of capitalism, social democracy and trade union bureaucracy and shifting it towards a set of middle range propositions about worker collectivism, mobilization and counter-mobilization. This work was especially important in the 1990s as the radical left became increasingly synonymous with the Trotskyist movement, whose dogmatic Marxism I had criticised in an earlier book (Kelly 1988) as well as in a more recent publication (Kelly 2018). RIR sought to move beyond critique to try and say

something more constructive and substantial about how Marxists could analyze and change the world of industrial relations.

Mobilization theory now features in many textbooks e.g. Rose (2008), Williams (2017), and is widely taught at both undergraduate and graduate levels. The book has informed a significant number of PhD theses and published articles and been widely cited (almost 1,400 citations in Google Scholar, 17 November 2017). There are many ways of evaluating citation counts but one relatively straightforward method is to compare the RIR citation count with the figures for other books in the IR field. That comparison suggests only a handful of other books have scored as highly in citation statistics and they include the classic studies of Dunlop *Industrial Relations Systems* 1958 – 2,284 citations, Beynon *Working for Ford* 1973 – 1,328, Hyman *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction* 1975 – 1,031, Freeman and Medoff *What Do Unions Do?* 1984 – 4,966 and Kochan, Katz and McKersie *The Transformation of American Industrial Relations* 1986 – 2,764 as well as one recent publication, viz. Silver *Forces of Labor* 2003 – 1,449. Each of these works has generated a series of specific literatures within the field of employment relations, examining topics such as workplace trade unionism, the economic impact of unions, employer strategies and labour in the global economy. Further afield, *Rethinking Industrial Relations* was published in the same year the TUC launched its Organizing Academy (Simms, Holgate and Heery 2013) and mobilization theory has featured regularly in its teaching materials. The theory has also been used in training materials developed by the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) and presentations of the theory have been made to several unions including PCS, the Royal College of Midwives and the University and College Union.

Issues

Insofar as traditional IR had a theoretical core it was arguably a weak and underdeveloped form of institutional analysis, centred primarily around collective bargaining structures and processes and around the legal institutions of courts and tribunals. Paradoxically, institutional theory has undergone a renaissance since the 1990s, not least because of the centrality of institutions in the Varieties of Capitalism' framework as developed by Hall and Soskice (2001). A recent and major edited collection on comparative employment relations clearly located itself within a nexus of institutional approaches whilst an earlier and more general collection on institutional analysis included a number of very well-known IR authors such as Crouch, Rubery, Streeck and Thelen (Wilkinson et al 2014; Morgan et al 2010). In hindsight, RIR would therefore have been stronger if it had engaged more fully with both the strengths and weaknesses of different forms of institutional theory (historical, sociological etc). For example, it was clear even in the early 2000s that union strategies to organize and mobilize workers and thereby revitalize the labour movement were proving far more attractive in the 'liberal market economies' (LMEs) of the UK, USA and Australia compared to the 'coordinated market economies' (CMEs) such as Germany. One explanation for these differences is that German unions enjoyed far more organizational security than their British and other counterparts because of the denser network of industrial relations institutions – bargaining structures, works councils etc – often found in the CMEs (Kelly and Frege 2004). A greater engagement with institutional theory might also have opened up a discussion of how the mobilization and organization of workers could be solidified into enduring institutions, reducing the willingness and capacity of employers and governments to engage in counter-mobilization at a later date.

Within the parameters of RIR, employers were represented primarily as the legitimate targets of mobilization and as agents of counter-mobilization. For academics and trade union activists trying to revitalize trade unionism in slack labour markets, highly competitive product markets and in the face of sometimes visceral hostility to worker organization, this depiction of employers had some resonance, both in the advanced LMEs as well as in the newly emerging LMEs in Eastern Europe (Bohle and Greskovits 2012). Yet it can be argued this approach reflected an inadequate appreciation of the 'varieties of capitalism', marked by too close an engagement with

the 'liberal market economies' of the UK and the USA and too distant an understanding of the position of unions in the 'coordinated market economies'. Both employers and governments across Western Europe have continued to support, or in some cases, tolerate industry-wide collective bargaining and various forms of tripartism, notwithstanding their many attempts at labour market deregulation, welfare and pension reform and the ensuing conflicts with trade unions (Hamann, Johnston and Kelly 2013). On the other hand, the forces driving down trade union density have not spared the CMEs and increasingly unions in those countries too have been forced to engage in union organizing so the relevance of mobilization theory may not, after all, be confined to the LMEs (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013).

The conceptual core of mobilization theory is the idea of injustice, a perception of a social wrong that departs from 'widely shared social values' or from explicit contractual or other rights. This was often located within a collective action 'frame', a set of interconnected ideas about the causes of worker problems and the means for their redress. Some writers have objected to what they regard as the unwarranted and untenable subjectivism of this concept, preferring instead to theorize collective action as a spontaneous and solidaristic response to capitalist exploitation arising out of the social relations of the capitalist labour process (e.g. Atzeni 2009). The view set out in RIR is that any form of collective activity requires organization, however rudimentary: views are exchanged, issues are discussed, people submit proposals or suggestions for action and an agreed course of action emerges. Such activity does not necessarily require a formal *organization* but it does entail a process of *organizing*. If the phrase 'spontaneous' collective action simply denotes the absence of formal organization, then it is an uncontentious if infelicitous formulation; if however, it implies that organizing is neither necessary nor sufficient for collective action, then it is an error. In contrast, the claims about the role of exploitation and the solidarities that can emerge within the capitalist labour process are not antithetical to any of the propositions in RIR. One can accept that the capitalist system is rooted in patterns of exploitation and domination that will necessarily generate class conflict but also believe that the scale, forms, outcomes and consequences of such conflict depend *inter alia* on a variety of contingencies, including the activities of leaders and the beliefs of the protagonists themselves.

The role of leadership was discussed very briefly in RIR, perhaps too briefly, because although later research on leadership has found no difficulty in operationalizing and exploring the different roles of union leadership (see Darlington, this issue and Gall 2000), at least one critic of RIR complained that it offered a 'vanguard' model of trade unionism in which 'the leaders will lead and we will be led' (Fairbrother 2000a). Antipathy to national union leadership has always been apparent in Fairbrother's own work (e.g. 2000b), operating as it does within a crude dichotomy of 'centralized, hierarchical and reformist leadership' vs 'active, engaged and participative workplace unionism'. Not surprisingly, this syndicalist whimsy can shed little or no light on the complex relations between different levels of the trade union movement. That said, it is true that the *sine qua non* of effective leadership, particularly in voluntary organizations such as trade unions, is the willing and active support of followers and RIR devoted little attention to the processes by which workplace activists become leaders with followers as distinct from union officers simply managing a membership and an organization.

A more telling criticism of RIR is that it devoted too little attention to 'frames' and 'framing', a point forcefully and rightly made by Gahan and Pekarek (2013). The role of language in mobilization has become a significant topic of research within social movement theory, whether through the concept of 'frames' or through the related ideas of 'discourse', 'story' and 'narrative'. To some degree this development is simply part of the more general 'linguistic turn' within the social sciences but it also reflects the hegemonic status of neoliberal ideology and the difficulties faced by trade unions, leftist political parties and social movements in countering its baleful influence. At the time of writing RIR I did not devote the attention to 'frames' and 'framing' they perhaps deserved because I was wary of the book being misread as a postmodernist text. The new interest in language and discourse was then being deployed by some social scientists within an anti-realist philosophical

framework in which language became the only valid object of inquiry and the search for evidence about actual social processes was dismissed as a foolish epistemological error. More recent work on language has argued that union discourse constitutes one form of power and under certain conditions can prove highly effective in shifting public agendas in pro-union directions (Geelan 2015). This work is important in broadening our conception of power beyond the familiar categories of structural (labour and product market) and associational (trade union density and organization) power.

Whether the construction of ‘discursive power’ requires particular types of collective action frame, rooted in radical or Marxist world views, is an interesting and unresolved question (e.g. Gall 2000). Marxists have long been active in the trade union movement, and in the UK these were principally members of the Communist Party from 1920 until the early 1980s but increasingly Trotskyist militants have established bases in a significant number of public sector trade unions (Kelly 2018). Yet militant trade unionism both predated the rise of Marxism towards the end of the nineteenth century and has existed, and continues to exist, on the basis of many different world views, including the proposition that in a market society workers should exploit whatever market advantage they happen to possess (cf Allen 1966).

One chapter in RIR addressed long-term changes in patterns of employment relations through the prism of long wave theory. Although pioneered by Kondratiev and others as a way of understanding the cyclical character of capitalist production, long waves of economic activity appeared to be synchronized with dramatic cycles of labour quiescence and labour militancy as far back as the late nineteenth century. Some critics of RIR took exception to the promulgation of long wave theory, complaining that it substituted mechanical regularities in social behaviour for a dialectical appreciation of the contradictions of the capitalist economy (e.g. Nolan 2000). In this latter view, the apparent regularities in economic and strike cycles should not be analysed as the expression of a law-like, generative mechanism but could be better understood as the periodic and conjunctural results of specific clusters of variables. The period since the early 1980s has witnessed a secular decline in unionization and worker militancy, unprecedented in its longevity and its scale with no sign of any upsurge in trade union organization and activity despite several intervening periods of falling unemployment and steady economic growth. This evidence alone is certainly enough to question the regularity of long waves and although it does not, in my view, refute long wave theory it does mean the value of theory is now an open question.

Prospects

The continued decline of trade unionism around the advanced capitalist world has contradictory implications for RIR. On the one hand it underlines the continuing relevance of mobilization theory and its stress on the social processes implicated in the construction of collectivism, namely perceived injustice, attribution and agency. Yet on the other hand, the application of various organizing models of trade unionism, to which mobilization theory was one contributory element, have signally failed to halt, let alone reverse, trade union decline (e.g. Simms et al 2013). It is true there are rising levels of trade union membership and strike action in the southern hemisphere, particularly in China and South Africa, and on a global level the working class remains a vibrant and powerful social force (Liu 2013; Southall 2013; Silver 2003). But rising militancy in China is neither consolation nor compensation for labour quiescence in Europe and the USA. Counter-mobilization by employers and governments represents one potentially more illuminating line of inquiry and there is now a growing body of evidence on issues such as the government-inspired erosion and fragmentation of collective bargaining structures in some parts of Western Europe.

Nonetheless, the success of neoliberal policies and ideas still begs the question as to why political and ideological resistance has proved to date so limited despite years of wage stagnation, job insecurity and labour market fragmentation. Colin Crouch captured a widespread sense of puzzlement in the title of his 2011 monograph, *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism* in which he argued that the enormous power of multinational corporations had prevented governments and

other, non-state actors from pursuing a radically different economic and social agenda. Within the ambit of mobilization theory, another line of enquiry would be to explore the degree to which different groups of people feel a sense of injustice about issues such as wage stagnation or insecure employment, or whether these conditions are becoming normalized as inevitable attributes of contemporary capitalism, soluble only by individual exit not collective voice. In other words, how do employees themselves regard issues such as minimum wage rates and temporary work, which many critics of contemporary labour markets regard as socially unacceptable and economically dysfunctional? Even if employees are dissatisfied with their experience of work, it does not necessarily follow that they feel their plight to be unjust or unfair. Such critical beliefs require implicit or explicit benchmarks centred on high wages and security of employment that are currently unavailable to many young workers. Even when employees do face problems at work, their preferred current solutions appear to be overwhelmingly individualistic: take up the issue with their line manager or quit and find another job (Pollert and Charlwood 2009). Collective solutions are not absent from contemporary employment relations but they do not necessarily take the traditional forms mapped out by the mobilization and organizing literatures. For example, the construction of temporary, online communities or networks, using a variety of digital platforms, has sometimes proved effective as a means of exerting leverage on employers through the reputation damage emanating from adverse publicity.² In conclusion, the problems which originally stimulated RIR – the decline of trade unionism, the growing power of employers, the neoliberal policies of governments and the weakness of the political left – are still present and pervasive. In that sense, the intellectual and political agenda mapped out by RIR remains as relevant as ever.

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Endnote

¹ A later work, Kelly (2010), critically examined the theoretical and political work of Allan Flanders.

² One successful example was the online campaign against the Starbucks' prohibition against visible tattoos: <https://www.coworker.org/petitions/let-us-have-visible-tattoos>, accessed 17 November 2017.