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Darlington, RR

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## **Introduction: Some of the Challenges Facing the Academic Study of Industrial Relations**

Ralph Darlington

### **Keele Protest Campaign**

*When executive members of the British Universities Industrial Relations Association (BUIRA) heard in early 2008 of the planned job cuts and restructuring at Keele University's industrial relations department, we were deeply shocked and outraged. In response, we immediately launched a vigorous campaign in opposition, the biggest in our nearly 60-year history. We sent letters of protest to the vice chancellor and national press, describing the proposals as a 'direct attack on the subject field of industrial relations within the university'. More significantly, we launched an open letter amongst members and affiliates across the world to raise awareness and build support for colleagues at Keele. In the letter we challenged the rationale for cuts and highlighted the extent to which it amounted to an attack on the legitimacy of critical social science – in the form of industrial relations scholarship – in management and business education and research.*

The letter clearly captured widespread support, with 435 academics from every continent signing, primarily in the field of human resource management (HRM) and industrial relations (IR). Amongst the signatories were 130 professors of human resource management, industrial relations, management, organisation studies, economics and associated disciplines. These included world-renowned scholars, like Arlie Hochschild and Sanford Jacoby, and editors of leading journals in HRM and employment studies.

A core feature of the rationale for cutting 38 out of the 67 academic posts in the economic and management studies school at Keele was the claim that the HRM/IR area was suffering 'disappointing' recruitment figures – despite their relative buoyancy. Senior management also claimed that the HRM/IR academics who were to be affected possessed inappropriate 'skill sets' to teach HRM. Of the 12 members of the HRM/IR group, 10 were earmarked for redundancy and all stand-alone courses in HRM/IR were to be closed. This was despite Keele's deserved international reputation for excellence in IR teaching and research, in particular its provision for part-time and distant learning courses for trade union activists.

In short, BUIRA found it incredible that IR (aka employee relations), a core, taught element for the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD) professional qualification, was deemed to be irrelevant in a modern business school. We also found it disingenuous to suggest that that individual academics with a background of teaching and research in industrial relations did not have the 'appropriate skill sets' to teach HRM, given that wherever HRM is taught in British universities, academics tend to combine *both* IR *and* HRM within their teaching portfolios, with the two strands complimenting each other and adding to the richness of their scholarship.

For BUIRA this was tantamount to dismissing the academic legitimacy of industrial relations as a field of study and the competence of its academics. It was deeply disturbing as it suggested a future where only academics and courses pursuing largely uncritical perspectives in business and management would be legitimate in business schools. Hence in our open letter, we argued: 'the stated rationale for selection of the job cuts is an attack on the validity of critical social science as a field of academic inquiry and teaching'.

Throughout 2008 BUIRA continued to exert great effort (alongside the campaign of industrial action and other protest activities of Keele colleagues) in lobbying for the retention of industrial relations courses at Keele and was pivotal in helping to keep the issue alive in the national press. As the situation deteriorated, it paid for a half-page advertisement, which appeared in the main section of the *Guardian*, on 13 May 2008, entitled 'Critical Thinking under Attack in Universities'. BUIRA then raised several thousands pounds from members and supporters towards the cost of this and also mobilised many of its members to a University College Union (UCU) national protest rally held at Keele which attracted some 300 people.<sup>1</sup>

The campaign culminated in December 2008 with a special one-day BUIRA conference held in Manchester on the theme of 'In Defence of Critical Social Science: The Continuing Value of Industrial Relations'. The conference, which took place in the wake of the sudden crash of the world financial system, brought together almost 100 academics, practitioners and policy specialists to hear arguments that IR and other critical social sciences offered the all-important intellectual vehicles for exploring and understanding events, and challenging many prevailing ideas on business and management. BUIRA also launched a collectively-written statement entitled *What's the Point of Industrial Relations?*, published in pamphlet form and distributed to all its members.<sup>2</sup> Following on

from this, BUIRA decided to produce a more substantial book, bringing together a number of the contributions that were made to the Manchester conference (in a more formal written form), as well as others that were specifically solicited, alongside a reproduction of the original BUIRA statement in defence of the field of IR. This book is the result of that effort.

In Chapter Seven Roger Seifert provides a first-hand insider's account of the origin, development and defence of the distinctive industrial relations contribution made at Keele, in particular its provision of part-time and distance-learning courses for trade union activists. Clearly the campaign over Keele, important as it was, touched a raw nerve for BUIRA members, as it appeared to be symptomatic (albeit in a sharper form than in other institutions) of the threat posed to industrial relations research and teaching *more generally*. As it happened, the combination of internal resistance at Keele (particularly an assessment boycott and petition to the University Visitor) and external protest (particularly UCU's national and international 'greylisting' of the institution) helped eventually to force Keele management into a negotiated settlement that avoided compulsory redundancies, offered much improved voluntary severance terms, and retained industrial relations delivery in different (albeit much changed and diminished) forms. But, as the chapters in this book testify, the specific campaign over Keele inevitably highlighted in sharp relief some of the other broader underlying challenges to the field of IR which have become apparent across institutions in recent years.

Five themes, some aspects of which are taken up in varying ways by the contributors to this book, are particularly noteworthy and can serve as an introduction to the chapters that follow: (a) the broader context of the marketisation and performance management of higher education; (b) the consequences of the trend towards the 'business-facing' university; (c) the changing world of work and employment and the threat posed by HRM; (d) the defence of critical social science more generally against the prescriptive 'toolkit' approach of HRM; and (e) the need for IR academics to be involved in the campaign of resistance to neoliberalism and market managerialism.

## **Marketisation and Performance Management in Higher Education**

To begin with there is the broader context in which industrial relations academics operate within and the overarching dilemmas about academic freedom and critical inquiry which are increasingly

being posed. This is a theme taken up by a number of contributors, but in particular by Alex Callincos and Roger Kline in Chapters One and Two. Of course, the neoliberal restructuring of higher education in Britain has been going on for well over 25 years. It began under Margaret Thatcher as an ideologically-driven cost-cutting exercise, with spending on universities held down as part of the Conservatives' broader attempt to reduce public expenditure. It has proceeded under John Major, Tony Blair and then Gordon Brown, albeit with the emphasis now shifted to massively expanding the total number of students in higher education, but on the cheap, with resources per student slashed.

As Alex Callincos has argued in *Universities in a Neoliberal World* (2006), the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), first introduced under the Conservatives in 1986, very much reflects the logic of neoliberalism - with the ranking of university departments and institutions used as the basis from which funding bodies allocate 'quality-related' (QR) money. In the process the RAE has been (as no doubt will its future 'REF' replacement) a key mechanism in internalising the 'logic of competition' within universities, with each academic knowing that their career prospects depend on how well they perform. It has encouraged a growing hierarchy among academics, with top researchers who have international reputations paid high salaries and little or no teaching and administration at one end, and the mass of underpaid and overworked 'ordinary' academics in the middle, and a growing number of temporary staff on short-term contracts or paid by the hour at the bottom. Likewise an increasing hierarchy has developed within universities, between the 'elite' of research universities (the Russell Group plus a handful of others) and those who fail to receive significant research funding, and who therefore are likely to experience a further decline in their competitiveness as they are pushed in the direction of becoming a 'teaching-only' institution.<sup>3</sup>

Such competitive pressures (and other similar ones, such as the competition for 'customer' overseas students who pay high fees) mean that university managers have had a strong incentive to make their institution as productive and competitive as possible. Hence the introduction of performance management systems throughout the university sector, with the objective of institutionalising a coercive mechanism of control and monitoring of work and even 'intellectual output'. Performance management operates in a variety of forms, for example with reference to teaching there has been the 'quality assurance auditing'. Invariably the stress on *process* that this type of overtly bureaucratic and prescriptive regulation involves – typified by the obsession with procedures, form-filling and box-ticking – is more about systems of management than the *quality* of

teaching. In fact the red tape actually diverts academics away from a creative engagement with their subject matter and the content of teaching.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, with reference to research, academics are required to set annual targets in line with school and university policies, and their performance against those targets is then reviewed on an annual basis. The RAE has meant that that great emphasis has been placed on how many papers academics publish and in which journals the work appears. The competition for research funding means that academics can often be judged by the size of their grants. Inevitably such research-directed performance management systems lead to an intensification of work, an undermining of the sense of autonomy associated with academic life, and provide little evidence (perversely) of any real positive effect on research performance. It often simply encourages cynicism and a loss of commitment. The short-term goals of such target-setting (and the insistence by funding bodies of specifying the 'impact' of research) have the effect of narrowing the scope of research and encouraging academics to play safe rather than be more creative and imaginative. In effect, universities no longer value academic freedom in terms of the ability of academics to pursue research questions which they themselves are *interested* in; instead the subject matter of research is being driven by issues related to cost and *external* interests. As one Oxford don, who sharply criticised the increasing imposition within universities of 'inappropriate corporate models intended for profit-orientated industrial production on a completely different animal', has argued: 'management techniques that measure false productivity via pseudo-performance metrics...[are] a simple, brutal and crude recipe for a chicken-run university'.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile the 'logic of competition has also led to an increasing concentration of power into the hands of a new army of highly centralised university managers who enforce the necessary policies of higher productivity on staff, in the process sweeping aside collegiality. This process reflects a government policy of modelling universities on how businesses are run, with the role of vice-chancellors, for example, who earn on average £194,000 a year (with some on considerably more), 'now more akin to that of a chief executive officer in an operation turning over hundreds of millions of pounds each year'.<sup>6</sup> This pattern is reproduced lower down the hierarchy, as heads of academic departments become line managers required to implement targets laid down by top management, funding bodies and the government. Thus, the 'new managerialism' in universities finds expression in:

...a strong orientation towards the customer and the market, at least in the language used by managers...an emphasis on the power of [the] top management team to bring about corporate change...devolution of responsibility within strict parameters...careful monitoring of staff and cost centre outcomes and control through fostering of internal competition.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond such considerations, higher (and further) education is currently on the frontline of the New Labour government's assault on the public sector. The current financial and economic recession, with its rocketing unemployment (particularly among young people), should mean that the government pours investment into education and training. Instead it is pushing through cuts in the public sector which are hitting universities very hard. In the April 2009 budget the Chancellor Alistair Darling announced universities and further education colleges would have to make 'efficiency savings' of £400 million; in May that increased to £520 million. As a result, in institution after institution management have been using the recession, or the results of the RAE, or the financial settlement from the Higher Education Funding Council (Hefc), to push through restructuring plans, effectively closing or merging schools and departments that are perceived to be 'inefficient' or 'loss-making'. The UCU has reported that around 100 institutions within higher and further education have made preparations for substantial redundancies, with the most severe example of this taking place at London Metropolitan University where up to 500 jobs have been threatened. Meanwhile, the Institute for Fiscal Studies has predicted that Britain will face a 'decade of pain' that will see the tightest constraint in public sector spending since the 1970s, with spending cuts of more than 16 per cent to key public services, such as higher education, if Labour and the Conservatives (whoever wins the next general election) are to deliver on their goals of protecting schools, hospitals and defence.<sup>8</sup>

So this is the broader neoliberal context within which academic industrial relations (as other subject areas and disciplines) is obliged to operate within. It is a context in which, for the foreseeable future there is likely to be further restructuring and new management control mechanisms modelled on the world of business, with accompanying concerns about academic freedom and job security.

### **'Business-Facing' Universities**

One sharp expression of the marketisation of higher education has been the recent trend towards 'business-facing' universities. Thus institutions are not just being managed like businesses - they are also being pushed to work more closely with them. Indeed, the New

Labour government has quite explicitly expressed its aim of encouraging what it calls 'knowledge transfer', universities conducting research that is of direct benefit to and is used by business. As part of this effort, in 2003 Gordon Brown commissioned Richard Lambert, former editor of the *Financial Times* and more recently Director-General of the Confederation of British Industry, to explore ways of improving the relationship between universities and business. Underlying this mission was Brown's concern to raise British productivity, chronically lower than that of other advanced economies. As a result, in an attempt to highlight the fact that British investment in research and development (viewed as a key determinant of productivity performance) was woefully inadequate, Lambert subsequently argued it was the job of universities and the state to pick up the slack left by companies. From this perspective, the academy should aid industry by forging university-business collaborations on the basis that: 'In this changing environment, universities are potentially very attractive partners for business'.<sup>9</sup>

Likewise according to Lord Leitch, former chief executive of Zurich Financial Services and author of a Treasury-commissioned review of skills published in December 2006, universities should be at the forefront of a drive to equip more than 40 per cent of adults with graduate-level skills by 2020 (up from 29 per cent in 2005) as a way of making workers more productive and the British economy stronger and more competitive.<sup>10</sup> In its formal response to the Leitch report in July 2007, the government said 'all higher education institutions will need to grow their capacity to engage on a large scale with employers', with 'business-facing' becoming a description 'which any higher education institution feels comfortable'. It wanted employers to become 'empowered', with 'the opportunity to influence the development of higher education programmes to meet their needs' and 'exert real leverage and decision-making' over both content and delivery of programmes. In addition it argued universities' work with employers should have 'equal status' to academic research, with greater engagement between employers and universities requiring a 'culture change' within universities who should be 'increasingly responsive to what learners and employers' actually want.<sup>11</sup>

In the wake of the Leitch report a number of (mainly, although not exclusively post-92) universities (including Anglia Ruskin, Hertfordshire, Salford, and Thames Valley) have described themselves as 'business-facing', indicating an institution that is supposedly focused on educating students to become 'employable graduates' by offering both vocational degrees and opportunities to get into industry for academic qualifications (for example via work



placements with major local employers); asking local employers what they want from graduates and reorganising curricular in line with such skills requirements; and by working with business to fund research and development. As Tim Wilson, vice-chancellor of the University of Hertfordshire, has explained:

A business-facing university sees everything through a business lens. It means radical thinking about teaching and research. It means taking a creative, problem-solving approach to learning, applying knowledge and skills in the workplace, integrating academic insight with practical expertise: business and academe learning from each other. It means an institution-wide focus on innovation and applied research – collaborative research and development, knowledge-transfer programmes, short-term R&D consultancy, spin-out and spin-in companies.<sup>12</sup>

The explicit university-business engagement drive was further underlined in 2009 with New Labour's decision to scrap the department that dealt with higher education and merge it with the business department to create a new 'super-ministry', a Department for Business, Innovation and Skills led by Lord Mandelson. Likewise it is anticipated that universities will be provided with funding incentives to provide courses that address the 'skill needs' of the economy.

Such neoliberal and 'business-facing' imperatives within higher education, in which universities are being driven by priorities shaped by the needs of business, have inevitably been viewed with alarm by many academics, including those within the field of IR, concerned about the function and future of higher education as a learning environment. In Chapter Ten, reflecting on the need for critical social scientists to become Business School Deans so as to steer them in a completely different direction, Bill Cooke reflects such concerns. As the critics have justifiably pointed out, the real danger is that by viewing universities as essentially the servants of business, whose primary purpose is to contribute to the economy and the labour market, neglects and disregards their non-economic benefits, such as their contribution to the character of society and the development of individuals within society. Even some of those committed to employer engagement have raised concerns about the narrow obsession with employment and the economy.

As Michael Thorne, vice-chancellor of Anglia Ruskin University, a largely 'business-facing' institution, commented: 'The linking of the world of work and universities is inevitable. That's just a reality that we can't deny', he told *Times Higher Education*.<sup>13</sup> 'We can't deny the context of university education now, and the context is obviously that students have to pay. One of things on their mind, and indeed on the minds of their parents paying for them, is how they will pay that money back'. Thorne believes it is important for

the government to strike a balance between meeting the demands of business and preserving the traditional role of the university. But while business leaders have told universities that they should teach soft skills, such as communication and teamwork, which can boost a young person's employability, Thorne has said this is not their job:

It's in businesses' interests to maximise the flow of people qualified and able to work in their business because then you have an oversupply and it reduces the price...I don't really think that is part and parcel of what a university is about, and it's the kind of thing that's not teachable. I think some of the demands are way over the top.<sup>14</sup>

Many academics, notably BUIRA members, would undoubtedly agree with this assessment. At the 2008 Universities Colleges Union (UCU) annual conference a motion was passed by delegates which expressed the widespread premise that education should be for all, not just for business: 'Congress believes that education should serve a full spectrum of aims, including cultural, social, personal as well as economic development, and the pursuit of knowledge which is not distorted by powerful interest groups. It expresses grave concern at the increasing dominance of business over education at all levels'. Likewise Sally Hunt, general secretary of the UCU, has said that the union has never considered universities to be the coal mines of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: 'We do not believe a university's role is merely to churn out graduates with huge debts. Higher education is first and foremost a learning environment, not a training camp for business'.<sup>15</sup> Lord Mandelson's recent claim that he goes 'not believe that the function of a university is limited to – or even primarily about economic outcomes. They are not factories for producing workers',<sup>16</sup> has done little to quell such concerns.

According to Patrick Ainley, Professor of Training and Education at the University of Greenwich, many students see university as a hoop to jump through on the way to a job. The goal is to pass the degree, rather than to learn, and the market for buying undergraduate essays online provides confirmation that the ends have become more important than the means for students. 'Instead of producing a learning culture, a "culture of instrumentalism" prevails where students from primary to postgraduate schools learn only what they need when they need it'. But paradoxically the culture created by focusing on employers is churning out graduates they don't want. Ainley's solution is to broaden the definition of vocationalism in a way that would allow universities to include a more general curriculum supporting students into work. This could include giving them a better understanding of the political, social and economic aspects of employment and work ('students need to learn about work as well as to work').<sup>17</sup> Stephen Rowland, Professor of Higher Education at

University College London, has made a similar convincing case for a system of higher education that celebrates a love of knowledge in pursuit of the common good:

Government policies have reflected a view that higher education pursued out of a search for truth may have been all right for the scholarly elites of a few cloistered institutions, but not appropriate to the masses that modern higher education serves. Such a view is narrow-minded and patronising to a public that is assumed to have little interest in the pursuit of knowledge. If the next generation of graduates is to address the problems of our increasingly complex global society, their curiosity and critical faculties need to be nurtured and directed toward the common good. Skills training for employment does not, on its own, provide a sufficient justification for a higher education.

The old dichotomy of employment versus knowledge for its own sake should be abandoned. In the longer term, the prospects for a prosperous as well as a more civilised society will be best served by valuing knowledge and the curiosity – with all its associated risks – that is characteristic of the best students and staff.<sup>18</sup>

### **HRM and the Continuing Relevance of Academic Industrial Relations**

The closure of the department of Industrial Relations at Keele University (it was actually termed 'Department of HRM *and* Industrial Relations') means that there is now not one department within any university in Britain which retains 'Industrial Relations' in its title. In 2006 the London School of Economics, set up by Beatrice and Sidney Webb who pioneered the study of trade unions and industrial relations in Britain at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, closed its Department of Industrial Relations, integrating it into its Department of Management. Although Warwick University, the other heavyweight of the study of industrial relations in Britain, retains its Industrial Relations Research Unit (IRRU), it only provides industrial relations degrees for postgraduate students. According to Gregor Gall (who was appointed as Professor of *Industrial Relations* at the University of Hertfordshire, although there are no IR programmes or modules as such at this institution), what happened at Keele 'marked another blow in the slow and lingering death of the availability of degree courses in industrial relations in British universities'.<sup>19</sup> Moreover if university departments of industrial relations, usually situated in business schools, have effectively mutated into departments of HRM or management, there has also been increasing pressures to question the relevance of IR and its distinctive approach to understanding work and employment.

Related to this has been the broad changes in the economy and society in Britain over the last 25-30 years and the threat posed to the academic study of industrial relations by HRM and associated managerial fields of study. According to Mike Emmott of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), the decline in trade union membership, collective bargaining and strikes, and the increasingly central role of management in working life, has marginalised the traditional IR analysis of joint regulation.<sup>20</sup> Not only does the term 'industrial relations; summon up today 'a set of employment relations that no longer widely exist, except in specific sectors and, even there, in modified form', but also 'there seems little energy left in a distinctive industrial relations field of study and few managers look to the literature for inspiration about how to manage better'.<sup>21</sup> Even some of those within the IR tradition, notably Peter Ackers and Adrian Wilkinson, have acknowledged that: 'HRM has 'filled the vacuum created by trade union decline and IR's lack of interest in management issues'.<sup>22</sup>

In many respects, it seems clear the threat posed to academic industrial relations from HRM has been somewhat exaggerated, although Keith Sisson's assessment, in his powerful public riposte to Emmott's dismissal of the field, that 'the study of industrial relations in the UK is in a pretty rude state of health – more so than it has been for a couple of decades',<sup>23</sup> is probably over optimistic. Certainly not only does membership of BUIRA stand at record levels, but IR academics' work is central to a number of journals across both IR and HRM, and has made a significant contribution to public policy (for example, informing the WERS surveys and Low Pay Commission). In Chapter Eight the results of Martin Upchurch's recent survey evidence of industrial relations teaching also suggests there is a significant institutional base for the field (albeit the responses were limited in number and probably more reflective of those centres where it is more firmly established than where it is weaker).

Nonetheless the well-documented decline of IR as traditionally constituted as an academic field in the United States, has led Tom Kochan to claim IR is in a state of 'profound crisis; due to its focus on 'past traditions, ideas and policy solutions that either no longer work or are not relevant to the workforces and economies our profession serves'.<sup>24</sup> Kochan has suggested a turn towards the study of management and the strategies and their influence on industrial relations practices as the means to develop a more relevant new industrial relations theory, away from the old fashioned preoccupation with unions, collective bargaining and strikes of the past.<sup>25</sup> Likewise Bruce Kaufmann has argued for IR to

incorporate into its theoretical core the teachings of HRM, so as to prevent the field perishing altogether.<sup>26</sup>

Peter Ackers and Adrian Wilkinson have also warned that IR scholars will become increasingly anachronistic if they 'continue to work within the comfortable but shrinking walls of its established paradigm and ignore the changing world of work and ideas'.<sup>27</sup> Complaining that academic IR has 'almost completely ignored the most crucial and pervasive form of employment regulation: employer and management regulation', they view the emergence of HRM not as a threat to the field of IR 'but its potential salvation'.<sup>28</sup> On the basis that fundamental changes in the nature of work and employment relationship have had the effect of widening the gap between the academic field of IR and the 'real world subject', they argue that by contrast HRM has provided a 'more economically relevant agenda, an aspirational vision and a new set of tools of analysis that are widely seen as more "relevant" to the world of work today':

With or without HRM, IR would have entered a decline. At least the advent of HRM raised the profile of people management within businesses and business schools and extended the field of inquiry into areas that IR had previously neglected and has now begun to grasp.<sup>29</sup>

From this perspective, HRM brings IR not only a broader employment canvas, but also new concepts (such as strategy) from management disciplines, and by expanding its range to include HRM industrial relations can regain its theory and policy cutting-edge and relevance. In this vein John Budd has advocated a meta-paradigm or organising map (not theory) which defines the parameters of an integrated IR and HRM field, with efficiency and voice and equity as the key objectives, thereby balancing the standard narrow HRM focus on efficiency by IR's normative concern for employees' entitlement to fair treatment and some input into decision making.<sup>30</sup>

Of course, the irony is that although HRM has posed a threat to IR, most teachers and researchers of HRM are members of BUIRA and the industrial relations' research tradition of critical empirical inquiry is often the dominant approach within HRM.<sup>31</sup> But arguably the whole notion of a 'managerial turn', that advocates 'turning Industrial Relations into an intellectual branch of HRM',<sup>32</sup> is a highly dangerous one. In Chapter Five, the BUIRA statement makes clear the way IR scholars in recent years have demonstrated the extent to which their teaching and research have adapted in line with, and at the forefront of making sense of, the rapidly changing nature of work and employment well beyond so-called traditional 'narrow' concerns with trade unions, bargaining and strikes. IR academics should not feel defensive on such matters. In Chapters Nine and

Eleven, in which Miguel Martinez Lucio and Tony Elger consider IR's wider engagement and overlap with HRM, organisational theory, and the sociological analysis of work and employment, underline such developments, although in Chapter Six Linda Dickens justifiably points out there is still much further to go along this broader pathway, notably in relation to issues related to gender (and ethnicity). But the problem with submerging IR into HRM is that, far from guaranteeing its continued distinctiveness as a field of study, it would turn the IR academic into somebody whose role was essentially to 'aid, advise and reinforce management in exerting unilateral control over the workforce'.<sup>33</sup>

The BUIRA statement, and other contributions in this book by Richard Hyman, Keith Sisson and Linda Dickens (in Chapters Three, Four and Five), amongst others, outline some of the central features of the field which mark it out as a distinctive from HRM. These are its *multi-disciplinary*, *multi-level* perspective that recognises the *unequal power* at the centre of the employment relationship between parties that have contrasting and at times *conflictual* priorities and interests. While it acknowledges that management is a key actor and worthy of study, IR also recognises that 'management is one form of organising; not the only one, or the end of history'<sup>34</sup>. Moreover, it does not equate one facet of the managerial function, HRM, with management. At the very least IR insists on investigating the employment relationship from a neutral vantage point and critically questioning fashion, as opposed to essentially accepting management's objectives in a highly partisan and uncritical manner, as does much HRM.

However, we should note that as Richard Hyman's body of work over 30 years has convincingly argued, the academic field of IR actually benefits from a 'political economy of industrial relations' which examines the relations of production and the employment relationship within its broader *capitalist* totality.<sup>35</sup> If this is your starting point, then issues to do with inequality, exploitative working conditions and social justice naturally and justifiably tend to figure rather more prominently than the problem of how to secure 'employee engagement' to managerial goals. As Howard Zinn has said, quoting Camus, 'in such a world of conflict, a world of victims and executioners, it is the job of thinking people...not to be on the side of executioners'.<sup>36</sup>

Certainly in a period when the relevance of academic industrial relations is being questioned both from within and from outside the field, there is much that can be done to both sustain and strengthen its intellectual core, and to validate its relevance within the academy and society generally. By way of illustration, in

Chapters Twelve and Thirteen, Tom Wilson and Gill Dix *et al* underline the particular contribution IR continues to make to the trade unions and Acas respectively. But arguably at the centre of any defence of the field of IR *per se* must be the argument that it has, and continues to have, a distinctive contribution to make to a systematic, wide-ranging and questioning understanding of the nature of the employment relationship within society.

### **In Defence of Critical Social Science**

The specific location of industrial relations teaching and research within business schools has become of increasing significance in recent years amidst the pressure to justify its 'relevance' in terms of its practical application by managers. Ironically as Chris Grey has argued, almost all business schools claim, and most – although by no means all – of their students expect, that management education produces better managers. Like studying law or medicine, management education supposedly contributes to the ideal of producing the professional manager. The implicit and usually explicit promise made to people who study in business schools, is that they will acquire a knowledge that equips them for practice. In fact there is absolutely no evidence that taking a management course has any effect at all upon making better managers, and it is even possible it makes people worse managers. This does not mean management education is useless; on the contrary – even if its use is different to what is typically claimed – it often makes its students more employable and higher paid managers. The fact that in the UK about a third of undergraduates study some aspects of management as part of their degree, and over 10 per cent study it as all of their degree, underlines the extent to which it is viewed as a path to economic rewards and social status. In addition, business schools play a pivotal role in legitimising management, specifically the ideological project of globalised capitalism. They act as a 'proselytiser and training ground' for socialising students into a sanitised representation of corporate management.<sup>37</sup> In turn business schools are increasingly questioning what exactly are the 'transferable skills' that industrial relations is able to offer of value to management.

As Grey has explained, the provision of a management 'tool-kit' that underlines many HRM modules assumes human behaviour is a variable that can be influenced by certain relatively simple manipulations: thus if you use leadership behaviour A and you will produce organisational performance level B. But in reality, of course, such a simple tool-kit approach does not work. The entire notion of a toolkit requires that the objects to which the tools are

applied are just that – objects. But they are not, they are people whose agency necessarily impacts upon, and can constrain, management. Therefore treating them as objects is likely to lead to very unsatisfactory results.<sup>38</sup>

Crucially what industrial relations offers is the value of asking business students to think for themselves, rather than to be provided with some simple ready-made solutions that can be taken off the shelf. As Linda Dickens comments in Chapter Seven (p. ??), IR 'encourages students to think, to criticise, to assess evidence, to grapple with concepts and contradictions rather than memorise prescription, to question established wisdom, to make informed judgements'. Of course, while asking critical questions may not always be popular with those in positions of power and authority, whether this is employers or management or even trade unions, such critical social science is the very essence of what universities and intellectual development should be about.

In this context we should note that although the message found in many corporate mission statements ('our people are our greatest asset') and HRM textbooks is that the human resource is crucial to organisational success, very few HRM textbooks give any consideration to working conditions, to the gross inequalities in pay and conditions, and to the underlying indignities of work and employment and the way in which all of this might impact on 'motivation' and 'commitment'. But surely such features are important?

Indeed, if nothing else the current economic recession highlights the need for universities in general, and business schools in particular, to step back and see how they could, and should, frame issues differently. They should move away from unquestioned allegiance to neoliberalism and market managerialism – and narrow technical questions - to recognise the importance of other stakeholders apart from management, to embrace insights from other broader social science areas, to locate the study of the employment relationship within its political economy context, and to recognise the unequal and contested nature of social relationships. Rather than operating as institutions that are slanted towards providing services for employers and to churning out a willing and compliant workforce, they should exist to develop students' abilities to think critically, to exchange ideas, to push back the frontiers of knowledge. It is precisely around these features that the academic field of industrial relations is pivoted and which makes its contribution distinct and of continuing value within business schools specifically.



## Education in Struggle

Finally there is the role industrial relations academics and BUIRA can play in campaigning against neoliberalism and market managerialism and in defence of IR. At a time when the government is cutting public expenditure to pay for the billions of pounds that was used to bail out the bankers, it is university academics (and other staff), as well as the young who seek to obtain a degree to broaden their education and improve their job prospects, who are being expected to bear the cost. But arguably those who have no responsibility for this economic (and political) crisis should refuse to bear the consequences. Resistance in defence of jobs, academic freedom, industrial relations and critical social science is not simply about the sectional and material interests of those on the frontline, but also about the defence of university education as a public good.

Fortunately, neoliberalism is facing increasing resistance in higher education, albeit more so elsewhere in Europe than in Britain. In the spring of 2006, students in France and Greece succeeded with the help of university teachers and other workers, in defeating pro-market government 'reforms'. In early 2009 French universities were paralysed by three months of student blockades and staff strikes, representing the biggest higher education revolt in modern French history, surpassing the protests of May 1968 in terms of the number of academic staff who went out on strike. While students barricaded colleges with desks and chairs, researchers and lecturers took strike action to oppose what they see as French president Nicholas Sarkozy's reform plans, which they see as an attempt to run higher education along 'capitalist lines' The president's leadership was accused of displaying 'contempt' for intellectuals. As Valérie Robert, a lecturer in German history at a Paris university, said: 'You can't measure' universities like a factory in terms of economic success. We feel our freedom as academic researchers is being totally curbed'.<sup>39</sup>

Britain has not seen anything so spectacular, although university academics did mount a three-month assessment boycott over pay in the spring of 2006. More recently there have been impressive campaigns of resistance mounted at Liverpool and London Metropolitan universities (amongst others) against cutbacks. Not only must IR academics and BUIRA play an important role in encouraging such resistance in the future, they must also increasingly take up the intellectual challenge posed from HRM and in defence of IR and critical social science generally.

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