5 Theory in Industrial Relations: Towards a Materialist Analysis*

Analysis of the organised interrelationships between employers and the collective representatives of labour was once conducted overwhelmingly in pragmatic and empiricist terms; the subsequent elaboration of ‘industrial relations theory’ was firmly rooted in the harmonistic presuppositions of functionalist sociology. But in recent years this field of study has attracted a variety of more radical interpretations, and in particular has become an arena for a growing range of Marxist and neo-Marxist arguments. This chapter explores the significance of such developments, raising in the process questions concerning both the nature of Marxism and the adequacy of the conventional category of industrial relations.

TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

The very term ‘industrial relations’ is indicative of the character of the subject which it denotes. It forms an area of study with no coherent theoretical or disciplinary rationale, but deriving from a directly practical concern with a range of ‘problems’ confronting employers, governments and their academic advisers in the pursuit of labour stability. On this pragmatic basis, research and teaching in industrial relations became established (often with the employer and/or governmental sponsorship) in institutions of higher learning in the US and Britain. Doubtless the location reflected material factors: the existence of a ‘labour problem’ stemming from relatively strong and stable trade unionism, and a laissez-faire tradition inhibiting direct strategies of containment by the state. The acceptability of this new field, within the framework of respectable academic endeavour, equally may be related to factors specific to these countries: most notably, the theoretical sterility of much academic work in other

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disciplines ensured that a new and unashamedly atheoretical subject would not appear out of place.  

At first sight, the past two decades have witnessed a marked shift in orientation. Dunlop’s pointed critique of his fellow-students – ‘facts have outrun ideas. Integrating theory has lagged far behind expanding experience’ – attracted a ready response; so too did his proposal that the concept of an ‘industrial relations system’ might offer the theoretical centrepiece of a coherent and distinctive discipline.

Why Dunlop’s shoddily constructed essay should have assumed such seminal status is perhaps puzzling: undoubtedly he must have articulated an extensive malaise within the industrial relations establishment. Possibly, with the decline of the post-war strike wave, American academics were less necessary to employers and governments in an immediate trouble-shooting role, and thus required a longer-term rationale for their existence; perhaps also, the influx of students with a range of social science backgrounds encouraged a search for a theoretical framework which would justify industrial relations academics to their colleagues in other disciplines. In any event, the ‘theory’ which was to become so widely and so rapidly embraced neatly combined the advantages of ready availability, academic acceptability, and complete compatibility with the existing focus of teaching and research.

Dunlop derived his model of the ‘industrial relations system’ explicitly from Parsons’s delineation of the ‘social system’. Arguably, he failed seriously to comprehend the Parsonian project; but it is clear that he drew from it a number of orientations – idealism, formalism, conservatism – very convenient for the task of rationalising and legitimising a field of inquiry which had developed primarily to assist capital in ensuring the productive, predictable and profitable exploitation of labour. As has been argued:

systems analysis offers an ideologically acceptable alternative to those who embrace the perspectives of the pragmatist but eschew his unsophisticated language and concepts. The selfsame problems of efficiency, practicality, constructive adaptation to change and the ‘orderly’ reform of industrial relations can be tackled in either framework. The principal concerns of Parsons’ sociology parallel closely the chief worries of those in authority in industry.  

In their search for intellectual legitimacy, industrial relations academics borrowed in other ways (though equally uncritically) from current social science orthodoxy. The notion of ‘institutionalisation