

Heterodox Economics Newsletter

NEW DIRECTIONS IN THE STUDY OF WORK AND EMPLOYMENT: REVITALIZING INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS AS AN ACADEMIC ENTERPRISE; edited by Charles J. Whalen, Cheltenham, U.K.: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2008.

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Charles Whalen's excellent edited volume *New Directions in the Study of Work and Employment* is a conversation about renewing the academic discipline formerly known as industrial relations. The book is based on a symposium held at the 2007 meeting of the Labor and Employment Relations Association (LERA), the primary home for students of work and employment relations. Whalen is the former editor of *Perspectives on Work*, a principal LERA publication.

The study of work is an interdisciplinary project and has found temporary homes in business schools, economics departments, and elsewhere in the university system. Unfortunately, it has almost always sat uncomfortably among the disciplines which would seize its territory and subvert its priorities. The contributors to Whalen's book have a variety of diagnoses and solutions for the problems of employment relations as an academic field. They address questions of theory, institutions, and practice, thereby comprehensively covering the terrain of the discipline.

In the Introduction, Whalen describes the crisis in academic industrial relations (IR), the historic name of the field. The academic units housing industrial relations are unstable and in decline, particularly in the United States and English Canada. Some attribute this phenomenon to the decline in the power and membership of organized labor and others emphasize failures by IR academics (for example, the narrowness of research methods, or poor coordination with other fields). The world of work demands an integrated response, and yet the field and its professional association (LERA) are attracting insufficient support. Whalen hopes for a restructuring of the field to ensure the relevance of its research and pedagogy and advises active engagement with the world to make it better. Ironically, this means honoring the values and approaches of the founders of the discipline, scholars like John R. Commons and Edwin E. Witte, who were public intellectuals of considerable intellectual breadth.

In the first chapter, University of Illinois Dean and LERA President Cutcher-Gershenfeld suggests that employment relations is a better name for IR given the diminished role of the industrial sector in the changing economy. However, he calls for fidelity to the foundational concepts of IR: unity of theory and practice; a pluralist balance between labor, management, and emerging stakeholders; and a multi-disciplinary orientation.

Bruce Kaufman calls for a rededication to the original IR paradigm, which, in Kaufman's account, combines science-building, problem-solving, and normative commitments to fairness, human self-actualization, and efficiency (this entails the rejection of labor as a commodity). Kaufman believes that a community of interest can be forged on these principles and that it

would include human resource management practitioners, some of whom are now alienated by IR scholars' preoccupation with unionism. He hopes to rebuild the discipline based on the original themes. In the 1920s, he submits, IR had a broad tent and comprised personnel practitioners, academics, and social reformers who shared a commitment to restraining market forces to protect workers.

Kaufman may idealize early IR. The apparent unity was more linguistic than substantive or philosophical. That is, many disparate individuals chose the label industrial relations, but they were no more capable of unity then than now. The advocates of “American Plan” anti-unionism had little in common with anti-sweatshop reformers. Kaufman is nostalgic for a mythical “center,” an imaginary consensus that simultaneously met the needs of workers and managers. It is a variation on leading IR scholar John Dunlop's faith in the magnetic power of consensus.

John Budd instead reaches toward a larger domain where competing philosophies of the employment relationship coexist. He sees little unity but also little need to forge unity, other than propose a “meta-paradigm” that constitutes agreement to disagree. Borrowing from his book, *Employment with a Human Face*, Budd contrasts egoist, unitarist, pluralist, and critical models. Budd recapitulates his voice/efficiency/equity model and invites an eclectic mix to populate the IR community. He demands no conformity and, I think, accurately describes the contested terrain.

John Godard proposes a new focus for industrial relations, institutional environments, an application of the new institutionalism of Hall and Soskice (2001). Hall and Soskice have provoked considerable debate in economic sociology with their contrasting models of liberal market and coordinated market economies. Introducing this paradigm to industrial relations amounts to a proposal that IR affiliate with sociology and jettison most of its reformist dimension. Hall and Soskice argue that the U.S. and England share a durable mix of aggressively profit-maximizing capital markets and flexible labor markets. This is unfortunately a rather deterministic analysis that consigns the U.S. and England to a fixed model of political economy. In a later chapter, Nick Wailes and colleagues provide a reasoned critique of Hall and Soskice through a study of the world auto industry.

David Lipsky and Ron Seeber note that the decline of unionism has had “collateral damage,” weakening a set of allied organizations. They find the social infrastructure for labor in decline. A fundamental insight of the chapter is an understanding of the broad institutional network required to sustain unionism.

Subsequent chapters address myriad dilemmas for academic and practitioners. William B. Gould IV plainly identifies the conflicting assumptions that underlie labor law and complicate the task of restoring the promise of the Wagner Act. Immanuel Ness, Bruce Nissen, and Charles Whalen describe the problems of labor and IR journals given the pressures of corporate publishing. Daphne Taras explores the undervaluation of IR research and curricula in business

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schools. Taras is less optimistic than Michael Piore, who has found sustenance for IR research in informal networks at M.I.T. Unfortunately, M.I.T. is an atypical environment, and Taras' critique broadly applies.

The book concludes with three chapters illuminating a forward path for IR. Katie Quan describes efforts by contemporary garment workers to reconstruct a just labor relations system. Ken Wong describes significant new organizing in immigrant communities involving "worker centers" and university extension. Labor renewal is indispensable both for the affected workers and for the broader society, even including the industrial relations practitioners and academics who seek new opportunities for constructive endeavor. In the final chapter, Thomas Kochan synthesizes the disparate streams of the volume and provides reasons for optimism that industrial relations academics can help fashion a new employment model faithful to the enduring values of the field.

The chapters of this book are uniformly of high quality and provocative. I could not help pondering the Sisyphus-like nature of the industrial relations project. We may struggle to restore the discipline and a measure of social justice, but the work never ends. Employers' acceptance of unionism has been fleeting. Universities terminate labor studies programs, replace industrial relations with Human Resource Management, and then downgrade this last field. Participative management yields to outsourcing. Industrial relations academics may long for stable terrain upon which to base secure work as a neutral, but they must keep their picket signs ready.

I highly recommend *New Directions in the Study of Work and Employment: Revitalizing Industrial Relations as an Academic Enterprise*. It inspires the reader to engage and mend the world a bit.

References

Budd, J. *Employment with a Human Face: Balancing Efficiency, Equity, and Voice*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004.

Hall, P. and D. Soskice, eds. *Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.