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The British Journal of Industrial Relations: Position and Prospect

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1. Introduction

It is five years since the *British Journal of Industrial Relations* last published a statement of editorial policy (Wood 2000), and we feel that it is time to revisit our vision for the Journal, particularly as the field of industrial relations, and the broader context of social science, have changed considerably in the intervening period. The statement is addressed to our readers and, particularly, to our contributors. Its overriding purpose is to signal the kinds of article we want to publish, in terms of substantive theme, method of research and form of presentation. To this end, the statement consists of a series of overlapping descriptions of the type of journal we believe the *BJIR* is, and the kind of journal we hope it will become.

2. Coverage

The *BJIR* is a general journal that seeks to publish a broad range of articles on the institutions, processes and outcomes of job regulation. As such, it differs from more specialist journals that focus on particular themes, such as gender, particular actors such as managers, or a particular locale such as Europe. This broad definition also means that we are not a journal that is dedicated to research on trade unions and collective bargaining. The Journal has an enviable reputation for publishing high-quality research on these core themes, which we are anxious to maintain; but it has never confined its scope to collective industrial relations, and we believe it must continue to broaden its subject matter, to reflect developments both in industrial relations research and in the real world of work.

The broadening of subject matter can be conceived of in three ways. First, new or previously neglected institutions of interest representation might be researched (see Heery *et al*. 2004; Osterman *et al*. 2001: chapter 5). On the side of workers, this might encompass social movement, campaigning, advisory and advocacy organizations on the one hand, and the burgeoning collective institutions of the semi-professions on the other. Both arguably play an increasingly important role in a more fragmentary system of worker representation. On the side of employers, it might embrace business service

organizations like management consultants and employment agencies, which seem to exert considerable influence over strategies of labour use.

Second, there is scope to examine a broader set of regulatory processes, especially those that are of increasing significance. The Journal has published a volume of work on management strategies and styles in recent years, much of it framed in terms of the 'high performance paradigm' (Godard 2004). But there is also scope to examine the increasing volume of legal regulation, particularly the expanding body of individual rights in many countries and how these are realized (or denied) in practice (see Harcourt *et al*. 2004).

Third, the field could be expanded by examining the links between paid work and other domains of social life (Ackers 2002), an issue that has risen in significance with the growth of interest in work–life balance, family-friendly practices and the transition to retirement.

3. Internationalism

The subtitle of the *BJIR* is 'An International Journal of Employment Relations', and the editors are committed to retaining the international authorship and readership it has developed in recent years. A very high percentage of articles published since the last editorial statement has come from beyond the UK and we want this to continue. Indeed, we would particularly welcome articles on employment relations in the East Asian economies and the developing world to set alongside the substantial body of work we publish on North America and Europe. We would also like to publish more material on international institutions and processes of job regulation. We have published articles on these issues in the recent past (e.g. Haworth and Hughes 2003; Lillie 2004), but as debate over global labour standards continues and interest in measures to regulate a globalizing economy grows, there is room to publish more.

The trend towards international authorship reflects the internationalization of academic inquiry, which has affected industrial relations as well as other fields. There are more international conferences, and there is more research collaboration and awareness of research traditions in other countries. The Journal has grown from a British root, however, and there is space in its pages for articles that address specifically British concerns.

Two types of article have been prominent in recent years, and we would like examples of both to continue to be submitted. The first are critical reviews of UK public policy, a form of research that continues to feature prominently in industrial relations not just in Britain but in all the Anglo-Saxon countries. Our contributors have assessed the UK's minimum wage, the reform of public services and union recognition law (Arrowsmith *et al*. 2003; Bach 2002; Oxenbridge *et al*. 2003; Smith and Morton 2001). In future, we hope they will assess legislation outlawing discrimination on the grounds of age, religion and sexuality, and the impending regulations on worker consultation in national-scale undertakings.

The second type of article concerns those papers that use the Workplace Employee Relations Survey (WERS), the most significant secondary data source for industrial relations researchers in Britain. The Journal has run a number of special issues on WERS in the past, and we plan to have another in the future when the results of the latest (2004) survey become available.

4. Pluralism 1: interests

Neither the *BJIR* nor the academic field of industrial relations is managerialist, in the sense that the (individual or collective) interests of the employer are taken unreflexively as the starting point for a programme of research and publication. The early years of the field in Britain were marked by a concern with the causes of industrial 'disorder' (Lyddon 2003), and in recent years there has been a focus on the relationship between industrial relations and business performance and competitiveness (see Nolan and O'Donnell 2003). The latter is obviously a legitimate concern of industrial relations researchers, and we have published articles that identify constraints on UK competitiveness within the employment system (e.g. Grugulis 2003).

But the field and the Journal have always embraced a broader set of interests and have examined questions that matter for workers and their representative institutions. For this very reason, we will continue to publish articles on the labour movement: trade unions are the primary institutions created by working people to advance their interests in capitalist societies. The Journal has published a substantial amount of conceptual and empirical work on trade unions in the past decade, and more contributions of both types are welcome in the future (cf. Blanden and Machin 2003; Willman 2001). Much recent work on trade unions has been concerned with the issue of 'revitalization', with the strategies that unions have developed to reverse decline (Heery *et al.* 2004). We have published articles on organizing and partnership (cf. Charlwood 2004; Munro and Rainbird 2000), two of the primary revitalization strategies attempted in recent years, and feel there is scope for more pieces that engage with a union agenda in this manner.

The Journal wants articles, therefore, that centre upon the interests of workers and their representative institutions. Not all workers are the same, however, and there are competing as well as common interests among those who sell their labour (Wacjman 2000). Arguably, one of the most pronounced themes shaping the world of work in recent years has been the strengthening of social identities grounded in gender, ethnicity, belief and sexuality. The effect within industrial relations has been the growth of studies examining how and with what degree of efficacy members of identity groups organize and seek to advance their interests. The Journal has published a number of studies of women workers and trade unions and anticipates more articles dealing with this issue (e.g. Kirton and Healy 2004; Parker 2002; Walters 2002). It would also welcome submissions that deal with other identity

groups and consider non-traditional forms of representation, as outlined above.

5. Pluralism 2: disciplines

Industrial relations is often defined as a field of study rather than an academic discipline in its own right (e.g. Müller-Jentsch 2004: 1), although in Britain, the USA, Canada and Australia it has the institutional trappings of a discipline, not least of which are peer-reviewed journals. The intellectual history of industrial relations has often been driven by the entry of core social science disciplines into the field, which have endowed a research agenda and methodology before retreating to be replaced by another. The strongest recent influence has been exercised by labour economics, the stamp of which has been particularly visible within the pages of the *BJIR*. Labour economics has influenced the field irrevocably in two particular ways. On the one hand, researchers have been taught to ask the economist's question and focus on outcomes: what measurable difference to productivity, the gender wage-gap, job satisfaction, union growth or any other dependent variable is a function of the strategy of a particular industrial relations actor or a particular institutional form of job regulation? On the other hand, they have learnt the economist's method, and there has been a marked rise in submissions to the Journal using sophisticated statistical techniques to analyse secondary data, sometimes to the disquiet of readers schooled in other research traditions.

In these and other ways, labour economics has strengthened the field and will continue to have a substantial presence in the Journal. It has never been sovereign, however, and the editors are receptive to influences from other bodies of social science. One source of growing influence that we are keen to encourage is politics and political sociology. We feel that industrial relations is being shaped from this quarter in two fruitful ways. The first is the growth of interest in theories of 'contentious politics', with their attempt to explain the rise, decline and effectiveness of social movements (e.g. McAdam *et al*. 2001; Tarrow 1998). British industrial relations scholars were introduced to this body of work through John Kelly's *Rethinking Industrial Relations* (1998), with its demonstration of the utility of 'mobilization theory' for analysing the strategies of trade unions and the counter-mobilizing efforts of employers. This influence, we feel, is helping to reinvigorate the radical wing of industrial relations scholarship, not just in Britain but in other countries, and the Journal is receptive to papers that employ social movement theory to explain industrial relations phenomena (e.g. Brown Johnson and Jarley 2004).

The second influence comes from comparative political economy, with its emphasis on the institutional embeddedness of markets and its research programme for analysing competing 'varieties of capitalism' (e.g. Hall and Soskice 2001). This is helping to reinvigorate the institutionalist core of the field, as well as to prompt a fresh wave of comparative industrial relations research

(e.g. Frege and Kelly 2004). From being rather shame-faced about the dry, institutional concerns of the field, scholars have confidently asserted that the proper object of study of industrial relations is the analysis of institutions (Marginson and Sisson 2004: xx), and there is a growing attempt to explain patterns of employment in terms of their location within a wider institutional matrix (Gospel and Pendleton 2003). For many industrial relations researchers in Britain the product market has long been the favoured explanatory variable, but increasingly, the systems of corporate governance and associated means of financing enterprises within different varieties of capitalism are taking its place. This is another line of inquiry that the Journal is keen to encourage, partly because it will connect industrial relations research not just with political economy, but with business school disciplines such as strategy and finance, which increasingly explain the behaviour of firms in terms of their regulatory and institutional setting.[1]

If institutions matter, then it also matters that we understand their genesis and development. In the past, industrial relations scholars frequently operated with a Whiggish set of assumptions, in which collective bargaining and associated representative institutions 'slowly broadened down'. Since this historical trend was thrown into reverse in Britain in 1979, these assumptions seem no longer tenable, and there has been a growth of inquiry into the origins of the industrial relations system and its component institutions (Fox 1985). One argument is that the latter's development follows a cyclical rhythm, driven either by the rise and fall of industrial conflict (Ramsay 1977) or by the more fundamental 'long waves' of the capitalist economy (Kelly 1998: chapter 6). Another argument traces the origins of industrial relations institutions to a basic 'historical compromise' between social forces that determines subsequent, path-dependent change (Sisson 1987). Theoretically informed history of this kind has a welcome place in the *BJIR*, and we would like more contributions from historians and sociologists, political and legal scholars with an historical bent on the origins of industrial relations institutions.

6. Pluralism 3: styles of work

The *BJIR* is noted for its publication of technically sophisticated articles that present quantitative data. Until recently this distinguished the Journal from our sister publication, the *Industrial Relations Journal*, though not from the North American IR journals. We are committed strongly to publishing work in this vein, and we hope that new developments in survey techniques and quantitative analysis will feature prominently in future submissions. A notable trend in large surveys in Britain and in other countries, for instance, is the use of multiple respondents (e.g. managers, workers' representatives and employees), and we are keen to publish articles that fully exploit the potential of this design. We would also like to publish quantitative articles that address non-traditional topics and pose the economist's question with regard to out-

comes for workers. Partly for this latter reason, we will shortly be publishing a special issue that presents quantitative economic and sociological studies of job satisfaction and work quality.

The *BJIR* has never been a solely quantitative journal, however, and the editors are committed to publishing work that uses a variety of research techniques. In the past we have published articles that make exemplary use of qualitative methods (e.g. Frost 2001; Martínez Lucio *et al*. 2000), and we would like more submissions of this kind. We would note, however, that some of the qualitative submission we receive are poorly designed, with a rather unsystematic analysis of evidence. It may be that researchers in this tradition need to pay more regard to questions of technique in the manner of their quantitative peers.[2]

A form of qualitative submission that we receive very infrequently, but which has an honoured place in the analysis of work, is the workplace ethnography. Ethnographic research can be difficult to undertake but can generate a level of insight into workplace relations that is unrivalled. To accommodate submissions of this kind, with their rich description of workplace processes, the Journal is prepared to relax its usual word limit.[3]

Other types of article that we feel we publish too infrequently are purely theoretical pieces (e.g. Willman 2001) and articles that present a novel and authoritative review of a particular issue or field of research (e.g. Frege 2002). Pieces of these kinds are often the most widely cited articles and exercise most influence on the evolution of the field. Many industrial relations scholars are researchers first and foremost and are reluctant to stray too far from empirical data, but we would urge contributors to be more adventurous and to submit reflective or critical pieces to the Journal. In adjacent fields such as organization studies articles of this kind are routine, and there is ongoing debate between competing meta-theories of social science, realism, constructivism and positivism. Very occasionally, the Journal opens its pages to work of this kind (e.g. Hamilton 2001), and we feel we could do so more frequently without compromising our basic purpose: to provide an outlet for empirical research on the employment relationship.

7. Conclusion

The *BJIR* is a general journal of employment studies, and the editors' vision for its developments reflects this. Our aim is to mix articles from different perspectives, disciplines and methods, addressing a traditional and innovative industrial relations agenda produced by scholars from Britain and overseas. The role of editors in this perspective is to balance the different interests that make use of the Journal, and to this end we will use special issues, symposia and invited (but refereed) contributions to steer the Journal's content.

As well as balancing, however, we also have a point of view, and we feel that two issues here deserve particular emphasis. The first is that we do not

conceive of the *BJIR* as a management journal, the content of which is responsive primarily to the interests of employers. Some have argued that the field of industrial relations should merge with human resource management and develop precisely in this way, but we feel that research on work should be receptive to the range of interests within the employment relationship. In any case, we do not think that a managerialist version of the field or the Journal is feasible: the commitment to researching on and researching for the labour movement and the interest in public policy are too entrenched.

The second is that we would like the field and the Journal to be more outward-looking and receptive to influences in the broader firmament of social science. Wacjman (2000) has pointed out that industrial relations research in Britain largely ignored the rise of feminist scholarship, which has transformed other fields, and we would like relative imperviousness of this kind to end. This is our final objective: for the Journal to connect empirical research on the employment relationship to wider intellectual trends, whether these are the new institutionalism, theories of contentious politics or a reflection on the status and significance of social science itself.

Notes

1. I owe this observation to John Purcell.
2. This point was made by Paul Edwards in a wide-ranging review of the field of industrial relations in Britain given at the 2003 conference of the British Universities Industrial Relations Association.
3. We are also willing to consider shorter Research Notes, a form of article that has occasionally appeared in the Journal but is rarely submitted. Notes of this kind, we feel, have particular value in presenting research findings that have public policy relevance.

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