

Industrial Relations at the Millennium: Beyond Employment?

Anthony Giles

Volume 46, 2000

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt46art02>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Giles, A. (2000). Industrial Relations at the Millennium: Beyond Employment? *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 46, 37–68.

Article abstract

This essay explores the current state of the field of Industrial Relations. The first part of the essay traces the emergence of IR out of the general concern with the "labour question" to form a distinct field of study and research in the Anglo-American countries. The second part argues that the field has been plagued by a profound crisis of relevance in the 1980s and 1990s, registered by a decline in its importance within universities, a shrinking of its academic associations, a loss of interest on the part of its traditional audience, increased isolation from other disciplines, and a theoretical incapacity to come to grips with the sweeping changes that have occurred in labour markets, the workplace, and the wider political economy. This situation is leading to a redefinition of the field as "Employment Relations." In the third part of the essay, this drift towards Employment Relations is criticized for moving the field more squarely into the area of managerial science, for leaving it incapable of analyzing future waves of collective mobilization, and for its continued adherence to a geographically and historically constricted conceptual foundation. A better strategy, it is suggested, would be to go beyond employment by reconceptualizing the field in terms of "work relations."

Industrial Relations at the Millennium: Beyond Employment?

Anthony Giles

"from a materialist perspective ... the task ... is not to re-interpret but to transcend the very idea of industrial relations."¹

AS THE NEW MILLENNIUM approaches, Industrial Relations (or IR²), *qua* field of study, is barely a century old. Conventionally dated from the publication of the Webbs' *Industrial Democracy* in 1897 in the UK and the work of John R. Commons in the United States in the early years of the 20th century,³ the field of IR began to take root in universities during the inter-war years and then grew rapidly in the context of the postwar settlement and the ensuing 30-year economic boom. When, from the mid-1970s onwards, that boom petered out and the settlement began to unravel, IR too began to slide into a crisis, one from which it has yet to emerge. Indeed, for reasons to be explored below, IR in its present form is unlikely to survive for another one hundred years, and it may even be extinct much sooner than that.

In the first part of this essay, I take a brief backward glance at how IR emerged out of the general concern with the "labour question" to form a distinct field of study and research. In the second part, I take stock of the crisis of relevance that the field has been experiencing in the 1980s and 1990s and examine how that crisis is provoking a transformation of IR into "Employment Relations." In the third part of the essay, I assess this strategy of renewal and find it wanting in a number of respects. In its place, I argue that IR should be recast as the study of *work relations*.

¹Richard Hyman, *The Political Economy of Industrial Relations* (London 1989), xi

²To avoid any ambiguity between the notion of industrial relations as a field of study and as a field of social reality or practice, the former meaning will be rendered here by its acronym, "IR," whereas the latter will be written out in full.

³Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *Industrial Democracy* (London 1897); John R. Commons, "American Shoemakers, 1648-1895," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 24, 1 (November 1909), 39-84.

From the Labour Question to Industrial Relations

"industrial relations are in the nature of relations between human beings, arising in connection with the parties to, the terms of, and the working-out of, an agreement, expressed or implied, between Capital, Labor, Management, and the Community ... to unite in the work of production."⁴

Although the objects it studies are found around the world, IR as an institutionally distinct field of teaching and research was largely an Anglo-American invention. In most continental European countries, for example, research into the various aspects of industrial relations was long conducted by social scientists belonging to disciplines like law, sociology, and business administration, with little contact between them.⁵ Thus, although there are nearly 40 national associations affiliated to the International Industrial Relations Association (IIRA),⁶ and while there have been efforts recently in some countries to carve out a distinct identity for those interested in IR,⁷ the field remains very much an Anglo-American phenomenon.

In the Anglo-American countries, IR originated as a response to two problems⁸: the intellectual dissatisfaction with the way neo-classical economics treated wage

⁴W. L. Mackenzie King, *Industry and Humanity* (Toronto 1918), 534.

⁵See Richard Hyman, "Industrial Relations in Europe: Theory and Practice," *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 1, 1(1995), 17-46. Hyman detects something of a "loosening of disciplinary compartmentalization" in Europe and the emergence of a distinctly European "intellectual synthesis"; however promising these developments are, it is clear that they are embryonic. For an earlier assessment of the European tradition that draws similar conclusions, see Peter B. Doeringer, "Industrial Relations Research in International Perspective," in Peter B. Doeringer, with Peter Gourevitch, Peter Lange and Andrew Martin, eds., *Industrial Relations in International Perspective* (New York 1981), 1-21.

⁶Most of the 37 national associations listed by the IIRA outside the Anglo-American countries are obviously marginal since their membership is rarely more than a few hundred. In terms of individual members of the IIRA, in only five countries — the US, Australia, Canada, Sweden and the UK — were there more than 40 members; and in the great majority of the 86 countries with individual members there were fewer than 10. International Industrial Relations Association, *Membership Directory*, 4th edition (Geneva 1997).

⁷German scholars, for example, launched the journal *Industrielle Beziehungen* (subtitled — in English — "the German Industrial Relations Journal") in 1994.

⁸There are only a handful of historical treatments of the development of IR. At an international level, the two best synopses are Roy Adams, "All Aspects of People at Work: Unity and Division in the Study of Labor and Labor Management," in Roy J. Adams and Noah M. Meltz, eds., *Industrial Relations Theory: Its Nature, Scope, and Pedagogy* (Metuchen 1993), 119-160 and Hyman, "Industrial Relations in Europe." For Canada, see Anthony Giles and Gregor Murray, "Towards an Historical Understanding of Industrial Relations Theory in Canada," *Relations industrielles*, 43, 4 (1988), 780-810. For the US, the most thorough treatment is Bruce E. Kaufman, *The Origins & Evolution of the Field of Industrial Relations* (Ithaca 1993). British treatments include George Sayers Bain and H. A. Clegg, "A Strategy for Industrial Relations Research in Great Britain," *British Journal of*

determination, trade unionism, collective bargaining, and social legislation; and the "labour problem" itself, that is, the stirrings of working-class action and the threat it was thought to pose, particularly in its radical forms, to the established social order. In particular, IR was born of a desire to create a middle ground between the conservative implications of neo-classical economics and the radicalism of Marxism on the intellectual terrain, and between repression and revolution on the politico-industrial terrain. Like all species of reformism, then, IR has always faced the delicate task of reconciling what Richard Hyman has called its two faces — the problem of social welfare and the exigencies of social control.⁹

Although the roots of IR can be traced back to the wider concerns over the labour question, the field itself only began to take shape when employers and the state were faced with problems of industrial and political unrest during and immediately after World War I. Indeed, the first official use of the term "industrial relations" is usually cited as the US Congress' 1914 Commission on Industrial Relations — a term that was quickly imported into Canada when the federal government appointed its own Royal Commission on Industrial Relations in 1919.¹⁰ Comparing the 1919 Commission with its 19th century predecessor, the Royal Commission on the Relations of Labor and Capital, Kealey comments that the

very titles of the two Royal Commissions convey much about the transformation that had taken place in Canadian industrial capitalist society in the approximately thirty intervening years. The rather quaint, Victorian "Relations between Labour and Capital" with its echo of classical political economy gives way to the modern sounding "Industrial Relations," hinting now not at conflicting classes but at a system of mutual interests.¹¹

That this was more than a hint was confirmed by two treatises published in Canada around the same time: Mackenzie King's *Industry and Humanity* and R.M. MacIver's *Labor in a Changing World*.¹² Both of these works sit at the transition point between the "labour question" and IR. Although still couched generally in terms of social classes, the focus in both was not so much on the conditions of the labouring classes as on the problems of modern, large-scale industry. More particularly,

Industrial Relations, 12, 1 (March 1974), 91-113. The discussion in this section draws liberally on all of these sources.

⁹Hyman, *The Political Economy of Industrial Relations*, ch. 1.

¹⁰Gregory S. Kealey, "1919: The Canadian Labour Revolt," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (Spring 1984), 10. The British government too appointed a commission to study similar matters in 1917 (the Whitley Committee on Industrial Conciliation), although the first official use of the term industrial relations came later.

¹¹Kealey, "1919," 10-11.

¹²King, *Industry and Humanity*; R. M. MacIver, *Labor in a Changing World* (Toronto 1919). The following analysis draws on Giles and Murray, "Towards an Historical Understanding," 787-90.

alongside labour and capital, management entered the picture as an actor in its own right, one whose authority rested not so much on the justifications of property, but on technical and intellectual grounds. Thus, while both King and MacIver urged that labour be brought into "partnership" with management and capital, and advocated a more pronounced role for the state in this regard, the overriding concern was to quell industrial conflict and integrate workers into the social relations of large-scale industry through the creation of mechanisms of worker representation and labour-management dialogue — though not necessarily independent unions and collective bargaining.

Over the following two decades, these themes slowly began to find expression in academe. Courses in "labour problems" and similar subjects had been offered at universities for some time, but the 1920s and 1930s saw the first academic appointments in IR and the creation of the first academic units specifically devoted to the subject. In the UK, the first chairs in IR, endowed by the industrialist Montague Burton, were established in the 1920s.¹³ In the US, the Rockefellers underwrote the creation of an "Industrial Relations Section" in the Economics Department at Princeton in 1922, an initiative that was soon replicated, with the financial assistance of other industrialists, at Michigan, Stanford, MIT, and the California Institute of Technology.¹⁴ In Canada, Queen's University also benefited from the largesse of the Rockefellers, supplemented by the support of a number of prominent Canadian companies, when it opened an Industrial Relations Section in its business school in 1937, later to become the Queen's Industrial Relations Centre. Like its American forerunners, the section at Queen's was devoted primarily to hosting conferences, training managers, disseminating information and conducting research on topics of contemporary concern.¹⁵

The role of business benefactors in promoting and supporting these early centres and appointments was a conscious effort to mould the treatment of labour issues in universities. Clarence J. Hicks, an industrial relations manager who suggested the establishment of the Princeton IR Section and secured the funding for it, acted out of a concern that existing teaching about labour problems was too slanted:

There has been an almost universal stress in the universities on the importance and value of collective bargaining through labor unionism. This is a subject that deserves adequate treatment in any labor course, but it is hardly fair to the student, to the employer, or to the public to send a graduate out with an idea that militant collective bargaining is universally needed and is the only remedy for alleged unfair conditions. The graduate is surprised to find that in the majority of companies such unfair conditions do not exist, and that the average

¹³Bain and Clegg, "A Strategy for Industrial Relations Research," 98.

¹⁴Kaufman, *Origins and Evolution*, 45-46.

¹⁵See Laurence Kelly, *Industrial Relations at Queen's: The First Fifty Years* (Kingston 1987).

employee is being fairly treated, not because of collective bargaining, but because of the fairness and friendliness and good business sense of his employer.¹⁶

Besides wishing to correct the bias of university professors towards the trade union movement, business also wanted a wider and more practical approach that would include the coverage of issues that were of concern to management, particularly those touching on the personnel function.

Yet despite these efforts to shape the new field, writing on labour and industrial relations continued to be predominantly reformist in character. And an important characteristic of this tradition was its cross-disciplinary flavour. Indeed, the founders of IR in the US, Canada, and the UK were for the most part economists or sociologists whose interest in labour issues led them to favour an historically and sociologically oriented mode of research and thinking that was known as institutional labour economics. Thus, besides laying the foundations of IR, they also pioneered the field of labour history.¹⁷ In the UK, the Webbs published *The History of Trade Unionism* before going on to write *Industrial Democracy*. In the US, Commons and his associates at the University of Wisconsin produced *The History of Labor in the United States*. In Canada, one of the few scholars whose work falls into this tradition, H.A. Logan, is regarded as having been not only a pioneer in the development of labour history, but also a leading authority in labour economics.¹⁸ Straddling sociology, labour economics and labour history, this institutionalist approach naturally led the founders of the field to give considerable attention to wider social and policy issues, and thus the role of the state in the field of labour relations and the wider area of social legislation was a common theme in the interwar years.¹⁹

Despite this emergent synthesis, the labour economists-cum-labour historians were not the only academics to develop an interest in labour issues. The interwar years also saw the growth of a number of fields and disciplines that were guided by more managerial concerns with behaviour at work and its links to issues like productivity and motivation. These fields — industrial psychology, personnel studies and the human relations tradition in sociology — focused less on institutions and more on individual workers and small groups at the level of the shop or the firm, thus creating a stream of research that expressed the social control face of IR in contrast to the reformist orientation of the institutional labour economists.

¹⁶Clarence J. Hicks, *My Life in Industrial Relations* (New York 1941), 144.

¹⁷See David Brody, "Labor History, Industrial Relations, and the Crisis of American Labor," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 43, 1 (October 1989), 7-18.

¹⁸H. A. Logan, *A History of Trade Union Organization in Canada* (Chicago 1928). For a brief appreciation of Logan's contributions, see Mark Inman, "In Memoriam: Harold Amos Logan, 1889-1979," *Canadian Journal of Economics*, 13, 1 (February 1980), 123-24.

¹⁹For example, W. Milne-Bailey, *Trade Unions and the State* (London 1934); John R. Commons, *Legal Foundations of Capitalism* (1924; Madison 1957).

From the late 1930s onwards, in the context of the spread of industrial unionism in North America, war-time political and industrial tensions, and the struggle to establish collective bargaining, the field of IR spread rapidly. In the UK, more academic positions in IR were created from the late 1940s onwards. In the US, no fewer than twelve IR centres or institutes were created in 1945-1950 alone. In Canada, Queen's was not left long without competition. The University of Toronto, for example, established an Institute of Industrial Relations in 1943, although it seems to have had more of a sociological bent than one of IR.²⁰ The first full-fledged department in the field was created at Laval University within its Faculty of Social Sciences in 1944, and the University of Montreal followed closely on its heels in 1945.²¹ McGill University joined in this rush when it opened an Industrial Relations Centre in the late 1940s. More generally, scholars who identified with the emerging field began to be appointed to positions in economics or business in other universities, like Stuart Jamieson at the University of British Columbia; and the field of labour law began to expand in tandem with the emergence of a distinct field of collective bargaining and arbitration law and jurisprudence.

These were also the years during which the broader institutional apparatus of a field of study was fashioned. The first academic journal in the field, *Relations industrielles/Industrial Relations* (as it eventually came to be called²²), was launched by Laval University in 1945, followed in 1947 by the *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* in the US, in 1959 by the Australian *The Journal of Industrial Relations*, and in 1964 by the *British Journal of Industrial Relations*. Academic associations were also created in these years: in the United States, the Industrial

²⁰The institute's first director, the economist V. W. Bladen, who found himself "thrown into the muddy field of industrial relations," developed an interest in Elton Mayo's Hawthorne studies and "came under the spell of Chicago" and that school's concern with "what men do" at work and its tradition of detailed "in-plant studies." V. W. Bladen, "Economics and Human Relations," *Canadian Journal of Economic and Political Science*, 14, 3 (August 1948), 301-02. The current Centre for Industrial Relations at Toronto was founded in 1965, apparently as an unconnected development.

²¹On Laval, see Gérard Dion, "Les relations industrielles à l'Université Laval," in Georges-Henri Lévesque, Guy Rocher, Jacques Henripin, Richard Salisbury, Marc-Adélar Tremblay, Denis Szabo, Jean-Pierre Wallot, Paul Bernard and Claire-Emmanuèle Depocas, eds., *Continuité et rupture: les sciences sociales au Québec* (Montréal 1984), 65-85 and James Thwaites, "Évolution et développement (1943-1987)," in Albert Faucher, ed., *Cinquante ans de sciences sociales à l'Université Laval* (Sainte-Foy 1988), 183-217. On Montréal, see Émile Bouvier, "Les transformations des sciences sociales à l'Université de Montréal," in Lévesque et al., *Continuité et rupture*, 135-39.

²²Originally entitled the *Bulletin des relations industrielles de Laval/Laval Industrial Relations Bulletin* and published on a monthly basis, it became the quarterly *Relations industrielles/Industrial Relations* five years later.

Relations Research Association (IRRA) was founded in 1947²³; in Britain, the British Universities Industrial Relations Association (BUIRA) was founded in 1950²⁴; in Canada, the Canadian Industrial Relations Research Institute (renamed the Canadian Industrial Relations Association (CIRA) in 1978) came into being in 1964; and, internationally, the IIRA was founded in 1966.

In short, IR flourished in the postwar era, although in retrospect three tensions revolving around the identity of the field can be identified. First, was it a distinct, self-contained field of study or a multidisciplinary umbrella? Second, was it primarily a pragmatic and practical field geared to intervention or was it an academic area in which scientific goals would predominate? And, third, where did it stand in relation to the ideological issues that are inevitably bound up with class and labour-management conflict?

On the first issue, the dominant — or at least official — view in the early postwar years was that IR was a multidisciplinary meeting ground for scholars from any discipline who were interested in labour and employment issues. Thus, the IRRA's constitution stressed that the new association would encourage research "in all aspects of the field of labor — social, political, economic, legal and psychological — including employer and employee organization, labor relations, personnel administration, social security, and labor legislation."²⁵ BUIRA, for its part, merely stipulated that members should have "a primary interest in industrial relations."²⁶ And CIRA even more generously opened its doors to "all persons who have an academic or professional interest in the field of industrial relations in Canada."²⁷ However, although this loose conception of the field was sustained in the early postwar years, a period during which contributions to the field were made by economists, labour historians, labour lawyers, sociologists, political scientists and others, a second, narrower conception of IR eventually began to displace the multidisciplinary vision. Increasingly, those associated with the new IR centres and departments, as well as those teaching in business schools (where IR tended to be located in most universities), began to focus on the functioning and malfunctioning of the core institutions of union-management relations: unions themselves, the collective bargaining process, strikes, grievances, and public policy in labour-

²³William H. McPherson and Milton Derber, "The Formation and Development of the IRRA," in Milton Derber, ed., *Proceedings of the First Annual Meeting of the Industrial Relations Research Association* (Champaign 1949), 2-4.

²⁴BUIRA was originally called the Inter-University Study Group in Industrial Relations. See John Berridge and John Goodman, "The British Universities Industrial Relations Association: The First 35 Years," *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 26, 2 (July 1988), 155-177.

²⁵IRRA Constitution and Bylaws, in Derber, ed., *Proceedings of the First Annual Meeting*, 236.

²⁶Berridge and Goodman, "The British Universities Industrial Relations Association," 158.

²⁷Canadian Industrial Relations Research Institute, *Constitution*, article 3, cited in *Relations industrielles*, 19, 4 (October 1964), 519.

management relations. Theoretically, this narrowing was expressed in attempts to develop theories of industrial relations, notably by John Dunlop and Allan Flanders,²⁸ both of which essentially specified collective bargaining institutions and the outcomes of collective bargaining as the heart of IR.

The effect of this focus, in retrospect, was two-fold. First, it helped to entrench IR as a distinct academic speciality. Second, however, it weakened IR's claim to being a broad church that could bring together specialists from the full range of fields and disciplines that were concerned with the larger set of problems arising from work and employment. Thus, scholars who, despite an avid interest in labour issues, saw their professional identities and careers tied to one of the more traditional disciplines, began to drift away. As David Brody points out in his analysis of how labour history came to separate from IR in the 1950s and early 1960s, the movement affected a number of disciplines:

There was, at once, a retreat from the interdisciplinary scope and the methodological eclecticism that had for so long characterized labor scholarship. Sociologists, political scientists, and anthropologists lost interest in labor topics, while labor economics took up neoclassical analysis with a vengeance, applying it first to the study of human capital, then to whatever else could be subject to deductive, individual-level microanalysis.²⁹

To Brody's list we need to add another important group: increasingly, those associated with the fields of personnel and organizational behaviour also felt that the dominant IR approach excluded their concerns, and they too joined the exodus. The result, as Bruce Kaufman has stressed, was a "hollowing out" of IR.³⁰

A second tension that eventually emerged in the postwar years concerned the field's practical edge. Although the tradition of involvement in the practical aspects of IR continued, the distinctly reformist tradition of the founders of IR weakened as the new collective bargaining system engineered in the 1930s and 1940s now seemed to call for mechanics and administrators, a role that IR academics were happy to play. Indeed, many of the key figures in the postwar field fashioned careers bridging academia, practical involvement in the field as mediators and arbitrators, and consulting with (or even working in) government. This view of IR as both an academic and a practical sphere was reflected in the fact that both CIRA and the IRRA welcomed practitioners into their ranks (although BUIRA did not). And in the area of teaching, instructional programs were designed as much to train industrial relations specialists as they were to foster research. Even in Québec, where the two industrial relations departments were housed in social science faculties, they were

²⁸John T. Dunlop, *Industrial Relations Systems* (New York 1958); Allan Flanders, *Industrial Relations: What is Wrong With the System?* (London 1965).

²⁹Brody, "Labor History, Industrial Relations, and the Crisis of American Labor," 9.

³⁰Kaufman, *Origins and Evolution*, ch. 6; see also Adams, "All Aspects of People at Work," 128-31.

self-consciously practical in vocation, seeking to train, inform, and educate those involved in the field of industrial relations in modern techniques and thinking.³¹

This practical involvement in the field did not prevent the early postwar generation from developing a rich body of research. In Canada, for example, the two key figures of postwar academic IR, Gérard Dion and H.D. Woods, somehow found time not only for direct involvement in union-management relations as arbitrators, chairs of labour-management committees, and counsellors to government, but also to research and write about the evolving industrial relations system. Their style of research, inherited from institutional labour economics, was heavily descriptive and case-based, oriented chiefly to the formal institutions of IR, and frequently aimed, directly or indirectly, at the pressing policy issues of the time. However, as time passed, IR research gradually began to move away from this tradition and towards a superficially more scientific approach, one which stressed quantitative methods, deductive reasoning, and a focus on the individual rather than the institution.³² The result of this shift was a dulling of the practical, policy-oriented edge of IR.

The third tension within postwar IR was the longstanding rivalry between its two faces, social welfare and social control. Here, IR tried hard to achieve a "balance." Institutionally, the new centres and associations went to great lengths to hold themselves above — although not aloof from — the labour-management fray. The IRRA, for example, actually included in its constitution the statement that, "The Association will take no partisan attitude on questions of policy in the field of labor"; and BUIRA took a similar line.³³ However, neutrality did not mean that the field lacked an ideological slant. Indeed, while it was possible to be neutral with regard to particular issues or disputes, this could not be extended to the more fundamental question of collective representation and bargaining. Almost to a person, the field was shot through with a profound commitment to the social value — indeed, the inevitability — of union representation and collective bargaining. Thus, where these core values came under attack — as they did in Québec under the Duplessis regime — the new field of IR distinguished itself through its consistent defence of the rights of workers to organize, as in the case of the long and unflinching struggle waged by Laval's Industrial Relations Department in the face of government hostility.

But the conviction that collective representation was desirable did not prevent a drift toward a preoccupation with the exigencies of social control. Although there were some differences between national traditions, postwar IR was dominated by

³¹Dion, "Les relations industrielles à l'Université Laval"; Bouvier, "Les transformations des sciences sociales."

³²On this shift in research patterns, see Peter Cappelli, "Theory Construction in IR and Some Implications for Research," *Industrial Relations*, 24, 1 (Winter 1985), 90-112.

³³IRRA Constitution and Bylaws, 236; Berridge and Goodman, "The British Universities Industrial Relations Association," 172.

an approach that has been termed "pluralist-institutional."³⁴ This entailed an acceptance of the inevitability of a divergence of interest between labour and management, though not of a thoroughgoing division. Thus, the underlying contention of most IR scholars was that unionization brought with it a rough equalization in the power balance between employees and management, a view that at one and the same time provided a justification for state intervention aimed at facilitating union organizing and requiring employers to negotiate with unions, as well as the potential for industrial disruption. During the 1950s and 1960s in particular, the first issue — providing the mechanisms that would allow organization — seemed fairly well settled. True, there were problem areas, for not all employers meekly submitted to the dominant consensus; but on the whole, this part of what increasingly came to be called the "industrial relations system" seemed to be functioning well.

Thus it was the potential for industrial disruption that served as the guiding thread for IR in the postwar years. And here the task of IR was to contribute to the muting of this conflict, particularly through the analysis of the institutions of industrial relations and the way in which those institutions and the procedures they embodied could be shaped in a way that would promote the peaceful and mature handling of disputes. Hyman's comment on IR in the UK also applies to North America:

New disciplines are unlikely to gain admittance to Academe unless they display modesty and deference in the face of established subject areas, and due respect for conventional demarcations. In the case of industrial relations, the entry fee appears to have involved the abandonment of the broad social and political concerns of the pioneer studies. The problem of welfare was relegated to the periphery, while the preoccupation with job regulation brought the problem of control to the centre of the agenda.³⁵

Despite these various tensions, the years of the postwar boom were nevertheless good ones for IR. Working from the handful of academic beachheads established in the 1930s and 1940s, as well as within the expanding business schools of the 1950s and 1960s (and the odd economics department or law faculty), IR scholars began to build up a body of knowledge and research about labour-management relations such that, by the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s, IR had become a solidly established field of study. Housed for the most part in business schools or in cross-disciplinary teaching or research centres, self-consciously neutral as to the partisan battles between the labour and management communities which it saw as its clientele, blending scientific ambitions with a continuing, if somewhat weakened devotion to pragmatic intervention, and proclaiming itself as an interdisciplinary

³⁴Doeringer, "Industrial Relations Research," 10. Doeringer contrasts this Anglo-Saxon approach, which was oriented toward economics, with the continental European "class approach," which drew more heavily on sociology, law, and history.

³⁵Hyman, *The Political Economy of Industrial Relations*, 8.

meeting ground for all those who were interested in work, IR seemed to have come of age.

The high water mark in this tradition in Canada was almost certainly the Prime Minister's Task Force on Industrial Relations and the large research programme it sponsored.³⁶ The Report itself was a classic statement of the liberal-pluralist credo and a masterful attempt to calm the growing uneasiness of politicians about Canada's strike record and the apparent growing turbulence in industrial relations. With the advantage of hindsight, however, the call put out to IR academics to help decipher the first rumblings of what was to become, in Eric Hobsbawm's³⁷ evocative phrase, the "landslide" of the last quarter of the 20th century, also marked the beginning of what was to become a far gloomier period for IR.

From Industrial Relations to Employment Relations

Short of an unexpected resurgence of union victories academic IR will have to make major adjustments. Otherwise it may follow the example of the Cigarmakers and the Sleeping Car Porters, both leaders in their time.³⁸

The world of work, employment, and labour relations has undergone dramatic and far-reaching change since the mid-1970s. Whether interpreted as a transition from Fordism to Post-Fordism,³⁹ a second industrial revolution,⁴⁰ the advent of a "new economy" or a "network society,"⁴¹ a B-phase of a Kondratieff long wave,⁴² or in some other way, it is abundantly clear that the combined weight of globalization, capitalist restructuring, technological change, neo-liberalism, new social movements, and a host of other forces too numerous to list here, has undermined the seemingly stable IR "systems" that provided a focus and *raison d'être* for the field of IR in the postwar era.

Given these wrenching changes that have swept through IR's claimed territory, the world of employment, one might have supposed that the field would have been prodded into a thoroughgoing reexamination of its theoretical underpinnings; that

³⁶Task Force on Labour Relations, *Canadian Industrial Relations* (Ottawa 1968). See Appendix J for a list of the research studies commissioned by the Task Force.

³⁷Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991* (London 1994), Part 3.

³⁸George Strauss, "Industrial Relations as an Academic Field: What's Wrong with It?" in Jack Barbash and Kate Barbash, eds., *Theories and Concepts in Comparative Industrial Relations* (Columbia 1989), 257.

³⁹David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford 1990), Part II.

⁴⁰Michael J. Piore and Charles Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide: Possibilities for Prosperity* (New York 1984).

⁴¹Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, vol. 1 of *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* (Oxford 1996).

⁴²Terence K. Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein, eds., *The Age of Transition* (London 1996).

it would have provided a site for a lively, interdisciplinary exploration of the transformation of work; that it would have served as a magnet for students thirsting for an understanding of the topsy-turvy labour market; that it would have continued its tradition of pragmatism by guiding IR professionals and policy makers through the maze of changes that confront them. Unhappily, this has not been IR's fate.

Although the field continued to expand into the 1970s, by the 1980s and 1990s IR scholars were beginning to wonder openly about the continued viability of their field. Like other fields of academic endeavour, IR has of course lived through a number of episodes of intellectual soul-searching and internal battles over the orientation of the field.⁴³ However, the last twenty years have been characterised by a far deeper introspection and fretfulness about the future of the field. Joel Cutcher-Gershenfeld, for example, argues that the "field of industrial relations is at a crossroads regarding its substantive focus."⁴⁴ Mark Thompson suggests that "...we are at a turning point in our profession or to use the popular academic phrase, 'a paradigm shift.' Our continued concentration on the institutions and issues of the traditional industrial relations system puts us at risk of being marginalized in the broader communities of the academy and policy makers."⁴⁵ Thomas Kochan is blunter still: "the field of industrial relations is in a profound state of crisis."⁴⁶ Although not everyone in the field shares this pessimism and worry,⁴⁷ it is remarkably broadly shared.

One of the obvious signs of trouble is the decline of IR within the university setting, which has taken two principal forms. First, in the US in particular, there has

⁴³ An early example was the famous exchange between John Dunlop and William Foote Whyte, "Framework for the Analysis of Industrial Relations: Two Views," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 3, 3 (April 1950), 383-401; another was the debate on pluralism in the UK: H. A. Clegg, "Pluralism in Industrial Relations," *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 13, 3 (November 1975), 309-316 and Richard Hyman, "Pluralism, Procedural Consensus and Collective Bargaining," *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 16, 1 (March 1978), 16-40.

⁴⁴ Joel Cutcher-Gershenfeld, "The Future of Industrial Relations as an Academic Field: A Strategic Planning Approach," in Harry C. Katz, ed., *The Future of Industrial Relations* (Ithaca 1991), 152.

⁴⁵ Mark Thompson, "Industrial Relations: The Mother of All Disciplines," 1997 H.D. Woods Memorial Lecture, in *The Changing Nature of Work, Employment and Workplace Relations: Selected Papers from the 34th Annual CIRA Conference*, edited by Paul-André Lapointe, Anthony E. Smith and Diane Veilleux (Québec 1998), 5.

⁴⁶ Thomas A. Kochan, "What Is Distinctive about Industrial Relations Research?" in Keith Whitfield and George Strauss, eds., *Researching the World of Work: Strategies and Methods in Studying Industrial Relations* (Ithaca 1998), 31.

⁴⁷ The editor of the *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, for example, in his millennium editorial was stubbornly upbeat, claiming that "Industrial relations remains a vibrant inter-disciplinary field with a strong policy orientation." Stephen Wood, "The *BJIR* and Industrial Relations in the New Millennium," *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 38, 1 (March 2000), 1.

been an attrition in the number of independent IR institutes and degree programmes, either through abandonment or by being renamed Human Resource Management or Employment Relations.⁴⁸ Second, and more broadly, there has been a marked shift in the centre of gravity within business and management programs away from IR and towards HRM. In Canada, for example, although the 1980s saw the creation of the first English-language PhD program in IR (at the University of Toronto), a general decline in the standing of IR in business schools — both in terms of IR courses and academic positions — began in the mid-1970s and has continued through the 1980s and 1990s.⁴⁹ Where IR continues to exist, questions are raised about its relevance. Mark Thompson's students at UBC "wonder why they should be taking an industrial relations course at all" and "about a curriculum that requires an exotic and seemingly archaic course."⁵⁰ Even at Laval University, the home of the largest free-standing academic IR unit in Canada, the department has been grumpily discussing a possible change in the name of its undergraduate degree program from *Relations industrielles* to *Relations industrielles et gestion des ressources humaines*.

A second sign of difficulty has been the stagnant or falling membership in the major academic associations, especially in North America. In the United States, for example, the IRRA lost almost one thousand members between 1987 and 1998.⁵¹ In Canada, CIRA has been experiencing similar difficulties. Although it has always been a relatively small academic association, its membership has shrunk from over 400 at the beginning of the 1990s to less than 300 by the end of the decade. In addition, although it occasionally succeeds in attracting scholars from other disciplines to its annual meetings, it has suffered from the decisions of the Administrative Sciences Association of Canada and the Canadian Economics Association to hold their own free-standing conferences separate from the Learned, making it more difficult to promote CIRA as a multidisciplinary meeting ground. Finally, in contrast to the IRRA in the US, declining membership and waning relevance do not seem to have sparked any effort within the association to stimulate a serious dialogue about the future of the field in Canada.⁵²

⁴⁸Kaufman, *Origins and Evolution*, 143-48.

⁴⁹Anthony Giles, "Does Industrial Relations Belong in the Business School?" in Allan Ponak, ed., *Teaching and Research in Industrial Relations*, Proceedings of the 27th Annual Conference of the Canadian Industrial Relations Association (Québec 1991), 69-79.

⁵⁰Thompson, "Industrial Relations: The Mother of All Disciplines," 4.

⁵¹The difficulties of the IRRA are discussed in Kaufman, *Origins and Evolution*; Cutcher-Gershenfeld, "The Future of Industrial Relations"; and F. Donal O'Brien, "The State of the IRRA," in Paula B. Voos, ed., *Proceedings of the 51st Annual Meeting of the IRRA*, vol. 1 (Madison 1999), 1-17.

⁵²Outside North America, the picture hasn't been so bleak. The IIRA, for example, expanded strongly in the 1980s, though membership has been stagnant in the 1990s.

Third, there is a widespread feeling that IR has lost its audience. As noted above, IR has long prided itself on what Kochan calls its "problem-centred orientation" and its tradition of active involvement in public policy debates, participation in public agencies and links to practitioners. Managers, however, appear to have lost interest in promoting "good labour relations" and have become preoccupied instead with circumventing or avoiding altogether the model of industrial relations long favoured by academic IR. Similarly, the attention of state officials and politicians has been focused not on issues of industrial justice or conflict management, but on the challenges of competitiveness, productivity, and the fostering of workplace innovation. Thus, while IR scholars are still called upon from time to time — as witnessed, for example, by the Sims report or the Canadian Work Research Network supported by Human Resources Development Canada (the name of which speaks volumes in itself) — it is clear that their traditional perspective has much less resonance in management and policy-making circles than it once did.

The fourth sign of difficulty is IR's increasing isolation from other disciplines. Roy Adams, for example, writes that "Industrial relations has not been successful in unifying inquiry into labor and labor management. Instead of achieving recognition as the central institutional vehicle for bringing together those who probe into some or 'all aspects of people at work,' industrial relations has been challenged by the emergence of other interdisciplinary fields the most notable of which are human resources management (personnel) and organizational behavior."⁵³ This isolation is evident in the scarcity of contributions from outside the field to IR journals, to conferences and to the membership ranks of the academic associations. Indeed, John Godard contends that IR is unable anymore to serve as a meeting ground for those interested in work and is "collapsing in on itself."⁵⁴ As he notes, there is a considerable amount of IR-related research being conducted in fields like labour studies, sociology, and political studies, but most of it has not penetrated through the curtain surrounding IR.

Fifth, and perhaps even more fundamentally, there is a sense that IR theory has been unable to come to grips with the profound changes that have occurred since the 1970s. This problem can be traced back to the social and industrial turbulence of the late 1960s, which, as Hyman notes, "left industrial relations academics strangely unmoved. Across Europe, and in more muted form in North America, established institutions of class compromise were under challenge; yet academic industrial relations seemed caught in the time-warp of the transatlantic conservatism of the 1950s."⁵⁵ Having constructed a theoretical approach that was rooted in

⁵³ Adams, "All Aspects of People at Work," 120.

⁵⁴ John Godard, "IR After the Transformation Thesis—A Return to Institutionalism?" 1998 H. D. Woods Memorial Lecture, in Paul-André Lapointe, Renaud Paquet, Diane Veilleux and Terry H. Wagar, eds., *Institutional Transformations in the Regulation of Work Relations: Selected Papers from the 35th Annual CIRA Conference* (Québec 1999), 4.

⁵⁵ Hyman, *The Political Economy of Industrial Relations*, ix.

the material context of the postwar boom, IR was unable to comprehend the magnitude of the changes. Indeed, the most widely cited theoretical contribution of the last two decades — *The Transformation of American Industrial Relations*⁵⁶ — was merely an attempt to graft a “strategic decision making” component onto the older systems theory of industrial relations.⁵⁷ Thus, in addition to its other woes, IR is facing a crisis of theory: systems theory has been virtually abandoned because its material foundations have disappeared, with the result that “today ... theoretical disorientation seems even more apparent than when Dunlop wrote.”⁵⁸

The reasons for this angst about the future of the field are not difficult to fathom. The most obvious and frequently cited problem that IR has faced is the seeming decline in the salience of its traditional core objects of study — the formal institutions of collective labour-management relations. Chief amongst these, of course, is the institution of unionism. This is most clearly the case in the United States, where the union movement has been devastated since the mid-1970s, but, with a few exceptions, it is a world-wide phenomena.⁵⁹ Even in Canada, where IR scholars are fond of pointing to the relative stability of union density rates and are quick to rankle at any suggestion that it is the strong public sector union density that is propping up the union movement, there should perhaps be more disquiet than there is over the fact that in the private sector union density has declined to less than 20 per cent.⁶⁰

But the decline of unionism — and with it the subsiding of manifest industrial conflict — is only the proximate cause of IR’s loss of relevance. Instead, as many in the field have observed, the real source of the difficulties lies in the sweeping changes that have occurred in the political economy of capitalism. To begin with, economic and labour market restructuring has changed the familiar setting of industrial relations in a number of important ways: the structure of employment has continued to shift away from those industries in which unions were traditionally strongly entrenched; rising levels of domestic and international competition have created pressures on firms, unions and governments; the decline of the Fordist model of mass production and the increased importance of smaller and dispersed

⁵⁶Thomas A. Kochan, Harry C. Katz and Robert B. McKersie, *The Transformation of American Industrial Relations* (New York 1986).

⁵⁷See Anthony Giles and Gregor Murray, “Trajectoires et paradigmes dans l’étude des relations industrielles en Amérique du Nord,” in Gregor Murray, Marie-Laure Morin and Isabel da Costa, eds., *L’état des relations professionnelles: traditions et perspectives de recherche* (Québec and Paris 1996), 74-76.

⁵⁸Richard Hyman, “Theory and Industrial Relations,” *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 32, 2 (June 1994), 166.

⁵⁹See International Labour Office, *World Labour Report 1997-98: Industrial Relations, Democracy and Social Stability* (Geneva 1997), especially chapter 1.

⁶⁰Gregor Murray, “Unions: Membership, Structures, Actions, and Challenges,” in Morley Gunderson, Allen Ponak and Daphne Gottlieb Taras, eds., *Union-Management Relations in Canada* 4th edition (Toronto 2000), Table 4.5.

production units and networks of production among small and medium-sized firms have combined to alter the face of industry; and a host of new technologies are changing the way work is conceived and executed across a wide range of occupations. In this context, employer-labour relations and employment strategies have changed: employers are more willing to challenge openly the legitimacy of unions and the traditional models of labour-management relations, to bypass unions through direct communication with workers through a range of mechanisms designed to enhance loyalty and promote involvement, and to adopt any of a range of non-standard forms of employment that undercut the traditional patterns of worker mobilization, solidarity and identity formation. Mark Thompson sums up the implications for IR in the following terms:

The sectors where most of us have done our research are diminishing in importance as sources of employment and wealth. In some cases, they are shrinking in size absolutely. The events on which our discipline has lavished so much attention and analysis are less frequent and important. The institutions we study and support politically are not significant in the growing sectors of the economy. As a profession, we have very little to say to employees in those sectors whose working conditions are frequently precarious.⁶¹

These economic and market changes have been accompanied by changes in the political sphere, changes that amount to a political disavowal of some of the cherished assumptions of IR. The rise of neo-liberal ideology and its concomitant policy choices — the obsessive focus on inflation and deficit-cutting, privatization, deregulation, and “individual responsibility” have pushed the traditional concerns of IR to the back burner. More insidiously, perhaps, the focus on international competitiveness as a key overarching state policy objective has put IR on the defensive. In Canada, for example, although outright attacks on unionism and collective bargaining have been largely confined to the public sector, the shift to competitiveness as a policy paradigm has been used to justify a range of regressive steps in labour legislation at the provincial level, as well as a reorientation of labour policy toward the promotion of changes that fits comfortably into the competitiveness strategy: workplace innovation, “partnerships,” productivity growth, and stemming the brain drain have replaced wages and working conditions, employee representation, and strikes as the key considerations.

It is hardly surprising, then, that IR appears to be melting down. But despite all the doom and gloom, the field has not stood still, content merely to look back wistfully at the golden age of stable collective bargaining as its contemporary relevance crumbles. Instead, an examination of the literature reveals that there have been changes of three kinds: in the focus of IR research; in the conceptual models brought to bear on these subjects; and in the conception of the field itself. In the

⁶¹Thompson, “Industrial Relations: The Mother of All Disciplines,” 10.

remainder of this part I examine these changes, the first two briefly and the third in more detail.⁶²

Milton Derber once criticized IR scholars for their tendency to “follow the headlines,”⁶³ a trait that has been in ample evidence over the last twenty years or so. First, spurred by the resurgence of managerial opposition to unions and the perception that the initiative in industrial relations had shifted from unions and government to management, IR researchers in the 1980s and 1990s began to pay more attention to the role of corporate strategy and the factors influencing the industrial relations policies of firms. From here it was only a short step to another sphere that IR had long ignored — the workplace, and especially the issues of flexibility, employee involvement, and the propagation of new, “high performance” workplace models.⁶⁴ Although other aspects of the changing face of work and employment have also received considerable attention — including the various forms of non-standard or peripheral employment, work in the services sector, and globalization — it is the belated rediscovery of management and the workplace (or, perhaps, the management *of* the workplace) that has increasingly become the *leitmotif* of modern IR research. In fact, Kochan goes so far as to speculate that the wave of workplace-based research in the 1980s and 1990s “may serve as the contemporary equivalent of the Webbs and Commons in documenting both the problems and the promising features of the practices they observed at workplaces.”⁶⁵

Hyperbole aside, it is clear that in terms of the choice of research topics, IR has certainly not been treading water. However, there is more to the change than a simple enlargement, for associated with the shift in attention to the management of the workplace is a conceptual change of no little significance. In particular, the firm is replacing the “industrial relations system” as the key framework for research and debate in IR. This shift can be traced to Kochan, Katz, and McKersie’s reformulation of Dunlop’s systems approach. A central feature of their approach was the elaboration of a multi-level strategic choice model which identified three key tiers of industrial relations activity, all three of which — long-term strategy and policy making, collective bargaining and personnel policy, and the workplace — were

⁶²Two caveats concerning the following discussion are necessary. First, the intention is to identify a selected number of key trends in IR in recent years, and not to engage in a full-blown literature review. Second, the discussion focuses on mainstream IR and therefore ignores — for the moment — more critical approaches.

⁶³Milton Derber, “Divergent Tendencies in Industrial Relations Research,” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 17, 4 (July 1964), 605.

⁶⁴A leading example of this research is Casey Ichniowski, David I. Levine, Craig Olsen, and George Strauss, eds., *The American Workplace: Skills, Compensation and Employee Involvement* (Cambridge 2000). For an inspired critique, see John Godard and John T. Delaney, “Reflections on the ‘High Performance’ Paradigm’s Implications for Industrial Relations as a Field,” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 53, 3 (April 2000), 482-502.

⁶⁵Kochan, “What is Distinctive About Industrial Relations Research?” 40.

situated within firms.⁶⁶ On empirical grounds, there is little difficulty with such a focus, particularly in the US where the decentralization of industrial relations processes and the extraordinary latitude enjoyed by management is more pronounced than anywhere else. However, the effect of the conceptual focus on the workplace and the firm as the key sites of industrial relations has been to shift the thinking of IR toward micro issues, not only in the US, but in Anglo-American IR more generally.

Associated with the shift in focus is a subtle reconceptualization of the firm. In the older models of industrial relations, like systems theory, little distinction was made between the firm and its management: they were treated, together, as one of the "actors" or "parties" to industrial relations alongside workers and their organizations and the state. In contemporary IR research on issues like the high performance workplace, however, the firm is typically portrayed as a neutral site, its identity separated from that of its management. Thus, while there is still scope for a conflict of interest between managers and workers, this conflict occurs within the context of a firm to which all belong and whose survival and performance is not associated with one of those parties, but with all. The effect of this conceptual sleight of hand has been to elevate the goals of the firm to the status of neutral constraints which are imposed from the outside by the exigencies of, for example, global competition. And that external context has made one particular exigency paramount to mainstream IR scholars: how to foster and sustain workplace innovation, thereby shifting IR's conceptual focus away from the fashioning of the "web of rules" or the "institutions of job regulation" and towards the process of organizational change.

In turn, this has shifted concern more fully toward the promotion of co-operation, both in the workplace and at the bargaining table. This empties the employment relationship of even latent conflict, rendering it as a "problem" to be solved. Legitimate conflict remains, but it is now displaced to other fields: the conflict between work and family, between men and women, between the majority and minorities.

Finally, these changes have reinforced the methodological trends noted earlier. On the basis of a study of the contents of the leading IR journals in the US, Canada, the UK, and Australia, Whitfield and Strauss conclude that, beginning in the 1960s but more particularly since the 1970s, "There has undoubtedly been a shift away from research that is classed as primarily inductive, qualitative and directly concerned with policy problems and towards research that is quantitative, deductive and concerned primarily with theory building and testing (discipline-oriented)."⁶⁷ Despite some variations among countries, the overall trend, they argue, "seems to be toward making IR research methods resemble those of neighbouring fields, such

⁶⁶Kochan, Katz, and McKersie, *Transformation*, 15-18.

⁶⁷Keith Whitfield and George Strauss, "Methods Matter: Changes in Industrial Relations Research and their Implications," *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 38, 1 (March 2000), 145.

as labour economics and much American organizational behaviour research. The specific emphases may differ, but the approach to research probably will not. America may be the leader here, but Britain is moving in a similar direction."⁶⁸

At the same time that research topics, concepts and methodologies have been changing, there has been a shift at a still more general level — the definition and name of the field itself have come under some scrutiny. In particular, reflecting the above trends, but also as a more direct response to the perceived isolation and fading attractions of IR, there is a developing consensus around the proposition that IR as traditionally conceived is too closely associated with a narrow concern with unions and collective bargaining and that a more modern and wider appellation is needed. The leading candidate appears to be "employment relations."⁶⁹

Although the academic associations and existing journals have so far stoutly resisted efforts to get them to abandon their traditional names, a number of scholars in the field have advocated the replacement of Industrial Relations with Employment Relations.⁷⁰ In addition, books and articles that would have been styled IR only a few years ago are now being given the new label.⁷¹ Finally, several recently launched journals in (or close to) the field have opted for titles using "employment."⁷² However, beneath this seeming consensus, a considerable degree of ambiguity over the exact nature of this redefinition and its implications remains. Indeed, it is possible to discern at least three competing conceptions of ER, and thus, three different strategies for reinventing IR.

The first is a simple name change and a broadening of the field so as to include the study of phenomena that have typically been the preserve of Personnel/HRM. In this conception, the new Employment Relations would entail, as Joel Cutcher-Gershenfeld puts it, the reassertion of IR "as a core source of new ideas (though not the only source) regarding theory, practice and policy on all aspects of the employ-

⁶⁸Whitfield and Strauss, "Methods Matter," 148.

⁶⁹The term "employment relations" is hardly new. The IRRA itself, for example, published a research volume in 1960 entitled *Employment Relations Research: A Summary and Appraisal*, with chapters on the labour force and labour markets, selection and placement, compensation, public policy and dispute settlement, the history and theory of the labour movement and technological change and industrial relations.

⁷⁰Kaufman, *Origins and Evolution*, 167; Thompson, "Industrial Relations: The Mother of All Disciplines," 10; Cutcher-Gershenfeld, "The Future of Industrial Relations," 154.

⁷¹Richard Locke, Thomas Kochan and Michael Piore, *Employment Relations in a Changing World Economy* (Cambridge, Mass. 1995); Greg J. Bamber and Russell Lansbury, *International and Comparative Employment Relations* 3rd edition (London 1998) (the older editions of which were entitled *International and Comparative Industrial Relations*); Harry C. Katz and Owen Darbishire, *Converging Divergences: Worldwide Changes in Employment Systems* (Ithaca 2000).

⁷²*New Technology, Work and Employment, Employee Relations*, and the *International Journal of Employment Studies*. Bucking the trend, however, is the *European Journal of Industrial Relations*.

ment relationship."⁷³ Similarly, Mark Thompson endorses the idea of adopting ER, but cautions against trying to include "all of the topics traditionally within human resources management. It would focus on relations, not management, in keeping with the pluralistic tradition of our field."⁷⁴ In essence, then, this strategy — one favoured by the liberal-pluralist wing of IR — is to continue to differentiate IR from its main rivals while at the same time attempting to occupy some of their territory, chiefly that of HRM.

The second conception of ER uses the term as a new appellation for the broad conception of IR that prevailed in the early postwar years, implying a strategy of reconstituting a multidisciplinary alliance of researchers who are interested in problems springing from the employment relationship. As a president of the IRRA recently pleaded:

All of those who study the many aspects of work should be part of this association. Our tent is large enough to cover not just those with degrees in industrial relations, but also the psychologists, sociologists, economists, and lawyers who study the nature of work, the organization of work, the motivation of workers, and the resolution of disputes about work.⁷⁵

Although usually expressed as an appeal to the many disciplines that touch on the world of work, this strategy essentially represents something of a peace treaty between IR and HRM. Thus, within this rebuilt broad church, IR would continue to exercise a considerable degree of autonomy, though its distinctiveness would no longer rest on a specialization in unions and collective bargaining, but on institutions and collective action more broadly.⁷⁶

A third, much more ambitious meaning attached to the notion of Employment Relations is that of a unified IR/HRM paradigm rather than a multidisciplinary alliance. This strategy tends to be implied rather than articulated coherently. For example, Katz and Darbishire's comparative analysis of employment systems offers only a minimal definition — systems of employment relations, they write, govern "such matters as the rights of workers, unions, and managers; the nature of work practices; and the structure and mechanisms of union representation"⁷⁷ — and their analytical framework focuses on "workplace practices," including management authority structures, the role of work teams, compensation systems, career structures and relations with unions. For their part, Locke, Kochan and Piore focus on four elements of employment relations: employment and staffing practices, compensation, skill formation, and work organization. In both of these cases, the

⁷³Cutcher-Gershenfeld, "The Future of Industrial Relations," 152-53.

⁷⁴Thompson, "Industrial Relations: The Mother of All Disciplines," 10.

⁷⁵Donal, "The State of the IRRA," 5.

⁷⁶See, for example, Kaufman, *Origins and Evolution*, ch. 8; and Cutcher-Gershenfeld, "The Future of Industrial Relations."

⁷⁷Katz and Darbishire, *Converging Divergences*, 2.

conception of employment relations clearly is built on a synthesis of IR and HRM, although no effort is made to justify or defend the particular components.⁷⁸

The differences between these three approaches to ER have important implications for the future of the field, since each represents not only a distinct intellectual direction, but a particular strategy in relation to other fields and disciplines. For our purposes, however, what is important is the wider consensus around the need for a new definition of the field. Indeed, at all three levels, IR's crisis of relevance has provoked a shift away from industrial relations and towards a broader notion of employment relations: in its substantive focus, the field is more than ever willing to explore the firm and the workplace, the unorganized sector, and employment relationships that fall outside the dominant postwar model; in terms of the concepts and methodologies that it mobilizes in this task, there is an emergent focus on the organization and the individuals that work in these organizations; and in terms of self-definitions, there are attempts to redefine the field so that it covers all aspects of employment.

From Employment Relations to Work Relations?

"Employment is simply one form of work."⁷⁹

Is "employment relations" the right path to follow? The first thing that must be said is that "employment relations" is certainly preferable to "industrial relations." The widening of the field to include all forms of employment relations, as well as its new found interest in management and the workplace, are potentially welcome developments. On the one hand, it treats the non-union workplace as an arena in which, despite the lack of formal representation, employers and workers interact and manage to fashion arrangements for regulating work and determining the outcomes. On the other hand, the broader notion of employment relations also brings onto the research agenda dimensions of employer-employee relations that were almost wholly ignored in traditional IR research, notably the production strategies and practices of firms and managers and their impact on the capacity of workers to mobilize collectively. Finally, employment relations is vastly preferable to the execrable "human resource management," redolent as it is with the notion that the worker is little more than an *instrumentum vocale*, or "speaking tool," as slaves were regarded in Roman legal theory.⁸⁰

⁷⁸One exception to this implicit mode of paradigm building is Stephen Hill's elaborate construction of an employment relations approach that seeks to frame the issue in terms of a variety of human resource issues. See Stephen M. Hills, *Employment Relations and the Social Sciences* (Columbia 1995).

⁷⁹R.E. Pahl, "Editor's Introduction: Historical Aspects of Work, Employment, Unemployment and the Sexual Division of Labour," in R.E. Pahl, ed., *On Work: Historical, Comparative and Theoretical Approaches* (Oxford 1988), 12.

⁸⁰Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London 1978), 24-25.

There are, however, three broad reasons for doubting that salvation can be found by converting IR to "ER." First, as currently conceived, ER is in very real danger of becoming a managerial science only slightly more liberal than HRM, thereby having the opposite effect than that sought by those who wish to preserve a distinctive approach. Second, the rush to abandon some of the key analytical principles of IR overlooks the distinct possibility that the current era of transformation may well be followed by a resurgence of some of the old-fashioned tensions, problems and conflicts that were at centre stage in the "old IR," leaving the field as analytically ill-prepared as it was when the postwar settlement crumbled. Third, there are grounds for doubting that the concept of "employment" is much of an improvement over "industrial relations" as the conceptual touchstone of a field of study. After looking at each of these problems, I will argue that a better strategy is to go beyond employment and recast the field as the study of "work relations."

As should be clear from the discussion in the preceding section, the first problem is that ER, at least in its North American form, is rapidly becoming a more overtly managerial science, veering even more sharply than postwar IR to the social control face of the field's tradition. In fact, as John Godard has argued, the "new consensus" around the promotion of the high performance workplace bears an uncanny resemblance to the old human relations tradition.⁸¹ He cites three aspects of this drift toward managerialism: an overemphasis on the economic effects of new work systems and their impact on competitiveness, with a corresponding lack of attention to their impact on workers and the wider economy; a heightened risk that ER will simply be absorbed into HRM; and the fact that ER all but ignores the underlying conflictual dynamic of the employment relationship.

It is important to stress that these problems do not arise from ER's focus on the workplace or the firm. No one would suggest, for example, that labour process researchers or the new labour historians of the 1970s and 1980s adopted a managerial orientation by virtue of the fact that they sought to explore, *inter alia*, variations in managerial strategies for controlling work and workers. In other words, there is *nothing inherently wrong* — and much that is commendable — in studying management and its practices. However, when the study of the workplace and firm-level employment practices begins to adopt managerial perspectives and problem definitions as the fundamental point of departure in research, the risk becomes real that the wider issues of equity and social justice will fade away to the status of pious afterthoughts. Moreover, when the focus shifts to the firm, the connections between production, firms and the wider system of social relations in which they are embedded become hazy.

This is more than a mere risk in the dominant vision of North American IR/ER. Synoptically, this interpretation holds that globalization and technological change have conjoined to create a "challenge of competitiveness" that requires firms to

⁸¹Godard, "IR After the Transformation Thesis"; Godard and Delaney, "Reflections on the High Performance Paradigm's Implications."

take one of two paths. The first of these paths (the "low road") entails competition through cost-cutting, with a particular focus on labour costs, achieved through a mixture of work intensification, wage cuts, and opposition to unions. The second path (the "high road") is more progressive. As Batt recently summarized it:

The argument is that work organized under the logic of mass production to minimize costs alone is no longer compatible with current markets, which demand competitiveness on the basis of quality, cost, innovation, and customization High involvement systems, by contrast, produce better quality and efficiency because work is designed to use a higher-skilled work force with broader discretion in operational decision-making; human resource ... practices such as training, performance-based pay, and employment security provide complementary incentives for workers to continuously learn and innovate....⁸²

Admittedly, IR researchers are virtually all lined up behind the high road option, and much recent research in IR is a thinly disguised attempt to convince employers, unions and governments that this path is more profitable and socially beneficial than the low road. Yet despite this liberal tinge, the underlying message is clear: the *sine qua non* of the high performance workplace is the results for *employers*; and the way to achieve this is for workers and their unions to adjust to the new reality. The task of researchers is, first, to identify the factors that will lead to the successful implantation of new work systems and the conditions under which they can be sustained over time, and, second, to demonstrate (primarily to managers) that this option is more profitable, at least in the long term. The dynamic here is not one of give and take, of struggle around the modalities of new patterns of work, but rather one of abandoning the blinkered defence of old ways and joining management in the search for prosperity and survival.⁷

The second problem is with the assumption that the last quarter century represents a sharp and absolute break with the past that has seen a fundamental change in the nature of the employment relationship. On this view, the changes have been so profound that the world of work has irrevocably altered: gone are the days of "adversarialism," "inflexible collective agreements," and workplace rigidities. Unions may survive, but they will have to become partners with management in the relentless quest for higher productivity if they want to be able to offer anything to their members. Strikes will become oddities, registering a failure of communication.

Against this interpretation, it might be proposed that the events of the last quarter century, although obviously bringing about significant and, in some cases irreversible changes, represents as much a long-term cycle in the social relations of production. Disciples of Kondratieff will need no convincing of this alternative view, but even those who are more skeptical might admit of the possibility that history is replete with examples of extended periods during which class conflict

⁸²Rosemary Batt, "Work Organization, Technology, and Performance in Customer Service and Sales," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 52, 4 (July 1999), 539-40.

has seemingly been quelled, management has exercised a relatively unrestrained hand, the state has ceased to pretend to be interested in the plight of workers, and conditions of misery were said to be rapidly becoming a thing of the past. As John Kelly argues, the literature advocating social partnerships between labour and management is characterized by "an absence of any historical analysis of patterns of labour-management relations. Union cooperation with employers has been promoted repeatedly throughout the history of capitalism, and defended on the now-familiar grounds that union militancy is anachronistic and destructive Yet the persistence of industrial conflict and the regular outbreak of strike waves over the past century ought to have cast at least some doubt on the validity of these latter claims."⁸³ The problem, then, is the not inconsiderable risk that transforming IR into ER will leave the field unprepared to analyze the resurgence of conflict.

But there is a third, and wider problem entailed by the notion of employment, the fact that employment is not the only, nor indeed even the main social form through which productive work is organized. Thus, replacing IR with ER leaves the field with the same problem: a core definition that is linked to a geographically and historically bounded phenomenon.

To begin with, in historical terms the use of employment as a social mechanism for organizing work is relatively recent. Although there is no shortage of examples of paid labour in the pre-industrial, pre-capitalist age, it is widely recognized that the modern employment relationship emerged in intimate connection with the spread of capitalist social relations of production. Indeed, in some ways the distinction between work performed for remuneration and work performed in the context of, say, the home or the family farm, only took on importance at a late stage. "The notion that one should obtain most, if not all, of one's material wants as a consumer by spending the money gained through employment emerged for the first time in the nineteenth century."⁸⁴

To be sure, employment became the dominant form of organizing labour in the 19th and 20th centuries in the advanced capitalist political economies; and, although we might quibble over the details, in the industrialized communist countries as well. Yet, at the end of the 20th century, the majority of the world's working population still falls outside what the World Bank calls the "modern employment sector."

Of the 2.5 billion people working in productive activities worldwide, over 1.4 billion live in poor countries In poor countries 61 percent of the labor force works in agriculture, mainly tending family farms, while 22 percent work in the rural nonfarm and urban informal sectors, and 15 percent have wage contracts, mainly in urban industrial and service employment.⁸⁵

⁸³ John Kelly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations: Mobilization, Collectivism and Long Waves* (London 1998), 14-15.

⁸⁴ Pahl, "Editor's Introduction," 12.

⁸⁵ World Bank, *World Development Report 1995: Workers in an Integrating World* (Oxford 1995), 2.

Even in the middle-income economies, the proportion of workers in formal paid employment in industry and services is only 46 per cent.⁸⁶ Thus, outside the 24 high-income countries, the notion of employment is inapplicable for the majority of workers, or takes on such a different social meaning as to be fundamentally altered.

Furthermore, even in those countries where employment is the dominant social mechanism for organizing work, the last twenty-odd years have seen a pronounced shift away from the standard model of employment that informs much of traditional IR thinking. We certainly don't need to subscribe to the more fantastical versions of the end-of-employment thesis to appreciate that this trend is of key importance in understanding how work is organized. Although there is considerable debate over how to define standard as opposed to nonstandard employment, and despite a number of variations from country to country, it is clear that employment relationships have become, as Lowe, Schellenberg, and Davidman put it, "more diverse, individualized, implicit, deregulated, decentralized, and generally more tenuous and transitory."⁸⁷

Last, even if the concept of employment was loosened sufficiently to allow the various nonstandard forms (including some types of self-employment) to be included, it would still exclude unpaid work, that is, work that is necessary or socially useful but that is carried on outside the domain of the market — whether in the household, the volunteer sector or even in the workplace itself. As Anne Forrest has convincingly argued, the dominant theoretical traditions in IR have served to exclude unpaid work from the field.⁸⁸

In sum, then, although the drift towards "employment relations" as an alternative to IR is potentially positive, three problems raise doubts about its viability as a strategy of renewal. First, the current pattern of research suggests that the field might simply be subsumed under the umbrella of HRM and converted into an even more managerial science than it currently is. Second, the downgrading of conflict within the approach runs the risk of leaving it shorn of the capacity to analyse conflict in the future. Third, and more fundamentally, employment, for the reasons spelled out above, is an inherently constrictive concept that, although widening the

⁸⁶It might be argued that work in the urban informal sector should be included in the notion of employment, and even paid employment; but its unofficial, clandestine or illegal nature serves to exclude it from the commonly understood definition of employment current in IR/ER.

⁸⁷Graham Lowe, Grant Schellenberg and Katie Davidman, "Re-Thinking Employment Relationships," Canadian Policy Research Networks, Discussion Paper No. W/05. (Ottawa 1999), 4.

⁸⁸Anne Forrest, "The Industrial Relations Significance of Unpaid Work," *Labour/Le Travail*, 42 (Fall 1998), 199-225. For a thorough review of the problem of excluding unpaid work in various forms from national labour force and production statistics, see Lourdes Benería, "Le travail non rémunéré: le débat n'est pas clos," *Revue internationale du Travail*, 138, 3 (1999), 317-342.

boundaries of the field beyond its traditional obsession with formal labour-management relations, remains tied to an historically and geographically defined phenomenon. If IR is to survive for any length of time as a distinct field, then, it needs to go beyond employment. In the remainder to this section, I offer some thoughts on how this might be accomplished.

The obvious candidate to replace employment is *work*. Whereas employment is a geographically and historically specific social arrangement through which productive activity is organized, the activity of work is universal. To be sure, the cultural and social significance of work, and even its very distinctiveness as an activity separate from other aspects of life, has evolved over time and continues to vary across societies.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, it is the genus of which employment is a species and therefore provides a more secure foundation for the reinvention of IR.

Indeed, in some respects, it is not even necessary to *redefine* IR, for one of the most frequently cited definitions of the field — “an interdisciplinary field that encompasses the study of all aspects of people at work”⁹⁰ — already does so. More generally, just as “employment” has crept into the vocabulary of IR over the last decade or so, it is possible to detect a growing use of the term “work,” either alone or in conjunction with employment. A particularly telling example is the title of the IRRA’s recently launched magazine, *Perspectives on Work*, the editorial introduction to which actually contained more references to “work and employment” than to “industrial relations.”⁹¹

However, it is also clear that these references are not really meant to extend the purview of IR to all forms of work. As a number of commentators have observed, “work” is often used, within IR and more generally, as virtually synonymous with paid employment.⁹² Thus, while its growing use hints at a willingness to broaden the field so as to cover a wider range of contemporary remunerated activities, it still falls well short of the radical redefinition that is required to provide a foundation for a more general field.

This is not to argue that the widest possible meaning of work should be adopted. Raymond Williams, for example, notes that the general meaning of work — the sense of “doing something,” “something done” or “activity and effort or achievement”⁹³ — encompasses a range of activities that are more properly regarded as leisure or recreation. Instead, what is needed is an intermediate sense, one that is

⁸⁹ See, for example, G.M. Kelly, “L’emploi et l’idée de travail dans la nouvelle économie mondiale,” *Revue internationale du Travail*, 139, 1 (2000), 5-35.

⁹⁰ Thomas A. Kochan, *Collective Bargaining and Industrial Relations* (Homewood 1980), 1.

⁹¹ “Work and Employment Relations for the 21st Century,” *Perspectives on Work*, 1, 1 (1997), 2-5.

⁹² See Forrest, “The Industrial Relations Significance of Unpaid Work”; Peter Nolan, “Work,” in William Outhwaite and Tom Bottomore, eds., *The Blackwell Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Social Thought* (Oxford 1994), 715-17.

⁹³ Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London 1976), 281.

wider than paid employment or remunerated activity on the one hand, yet is narrower than simply the expenditure of effort. One such definition is offered by Claus Offe and Rolf Heinz, who seek to draw a line between “useful activities” and “work” by reference to largely subjective criteria: “with all due credit to the many utility creating activities outside the sphere of gainful employment, an activity can only be described as ‘work’ if it is directed towards an objective that is both *premeditated* and also *regarded as useful not only by the worker but also by others*, and accomplished with a reasonable degree of efficiency and technical productivity.”⁹⁴ On these grounds, they exclude from the realm of work purely leisure activities (like hobbies), “relationship work,” participation in voluntary associations, and so on. A wider definition is offered by Henrietta Moore who includes unwaged productive work, domestic work, welfare work, emotional work, and human capital work.⁹⁵ A third approach is to focus on the transformational character of work, as does Robert Cox:

Work can be defined as action toward the transformation of nature for the purpose of satisfying human needs and desires. The direct satisfaction of human needs and desires is not work, e.g., eating, conviviality, sexual activity, and sleep. Work is what is done to make these direct satisfactions possible — producing the food, building the physical structures within which actions to satisfy human needs take place, creating symbols that evoke such activity, and building the social institutions and moral codes that channel and regulate this activity.⁹⁶

Although these various approaches to the question are hardly identical, they have three characteristics in common: all seek to situate paid employment as just one type of a range of social arrangements through which people produce the material and symbolic conditions of human existence; all stress the social embeddedness of work⁹⁷; and all focus not on work in the abstract, but on the pattern of relations between individuals, groups and organizations that spring from the way work is organized. This latter point is crucial, for it indicates that Kochan’s definition — the study of “all aspects of people at work” — is in fact too wide. IR has never contemplated such a focus; instead, the traditional objective, although

⁹⁴Claus Offe and Rolf G. Heinze, *Beyond Employment: Time, Work and the Informal Economy*, translated by Alan Braley (Philadelphia 1992), 67.

⁹⁵Henrietta L. Moore, “The Future of Work,” *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 33, 4 (December 1995), 657-678.

⁹⁶Robert W. Cox, *Production, Power, and World Order: Social Forces in the Making of History* (New York 1987), 13.

⁹⁷As Pahl puts it, using the classic example of childcare provided by mothers in the home compared to that provided by paid caregivers, “clearly it is not the nature of the task that matters most in determining whether or not it is to be financially rewarded and whether it is to count as ‘work’, but rather the social relations in which the task is embedded.” “Editor’s Introduction,” 12.

too often narrowly interpreted, has been the patterns of social relations connected to work — in short, *work relations*. It is this focus on the social relations of work that can and should be extended outside of the walls of the standard employment relationship, outside the boundaries of the market and into the household and other sites of productive work, outside the borders of the small group of rich nations where IR has always been concentrated, and outside the limits of the specific historical epoch in which paid employment has held sway.

Although the intellectual advantages of such a redefinition seem obvious, what possible relevance would such a strategy have for the *field* of IR? Would a focus on work relations be any more promising than the current drift towards employment relations? In fact, it is possible to identify three clear advantages, each of which could contribute to a genuine revitalization of IR.

First, a focus on work relations would help overcome the limits of ethnocentrism that have long constrained the reach and appeal of IR. As we saw earlier, IR has traditionally been centred in the Anglo-American world, partly because of academic traditions and partly because its central concepts do not easily apply outside a relatively small set of countries. A focus on work relations, however, would have a wider resonance. On the one hand, it would lay the basis for a richer cross-fertilization with European traditions of social analysis, one of the characteristics of which has been to situate industrial relations phenomena within their wider socio-political setting. On the other hand, opening the field to the study of patterns of work relations outside the formal employment sector would open the door to its application to the vast regions of the world in which structured employment relationships are overshadowed by other modes of social relations of production.

Second, the study of work relations would loosen the influence of HRM and labour economics on the field and provide the basis for a more genuinely multi- or even interdisciplinary alliance of the kind that IR claims to want to foster. Although it would be naive to expect that a name change alone would have sociologists, political scientists, historians or labour lawyers beating at IR's doors, it is at least as likely to spark some genuine cross-disciplinary interest as is the current obsession with productivity in the "high performance workplace." Moreover, in a number of closely connected fields and disciplines, there are some signs of a parallel rethinking process that might lead to more openness to the fostering of the study of work relations from a number of different disciplinary perspectives. One natural ally is the field of labour studies, itself a cross-disciplinary effort to promote a wider understanding of labour. Indeed, in many respects, labour studies has assumed the mantle that IR used to wear, particularly in its orientation to the social welfare lens and its more rounded attempt to integrate the full range of social science disciplines. Moreover, as a precarious, even peripheral component of academic life, it too would presumably benefit from a wider alliance.

As for IR's ex-allies, at least some scholars in the fields of labour history, labour law, and even HRM have begun to consider ways of redrawing the conceptual maps of their analytical territories in ways that are not dissimilar to that proposed above for IR. For example, labour history underwent a transformation some time ago that saw a widening of its scope beyond the traditional labour institutions and incorporating a wider conception of work; and Christopher Tomlins has recently argued for the need to reconsider "the temporal and substantive bounds of American labor history" and has advocated an "approach that treats the social relations that structure production and reproduction as the subject for labor-historical inquiry and concentrates that inquiry in particular on the nature and character of the means by which human agents seek actively and continuously to characterize, construct and reconstruct those social relations, and thereby achieve degrees of influence and control over the social processes they structure."⁹⁸ In the field of labour law, there has been a shift underway for some time from the notion of "labour law" to "employment law"⁹⁹; and some are working to stretch the notion of labour law even further, to include a range of work arrangements traditionally ignored by their discipline.¹⁰⁰ Even in the field of HRM, there are those who have expressed disquiet over the state of their field.¹⁰¹ Moreover, there is a developing "radical" approach to HRM that takes it as an object to study and critique rather than as a practice to expound and ameliorate.¹⁰² In the UK, for example, the analysis of HRM often breaks with the pro-managerial, prescriptive style of much North American writing; and even in

⁹⁸Christopher Tomlins, "Why Wait for Industrialism? Work, Legal Culture and the Example of Early America—An Historiographical Argument," *Labor History*, 40, 1 (1999), 6, 12. See also the replies by David Montgomery, Daniel Nelson, and Howard Rock, as well as Tomlins' rejoinder.

⁹⁹In 1986, the authors of the leading casebook in the field widened the coverage beyond collective labour relations law to include "all three legal regimes (common law, statutory regulation, and collective bargaining) governing *work relations*" (The Labour Law Casebook Group, *Labour Law*, 4th ed. (Kingston 1986), vii, emphasis added.) By the 1998 edition, the title had changed to *Labour and Employment Law*. A similar evolution has occurred in Québec, where *le droit de l'emploi* has begun to replace *le droit du travail*. See, for example, Fernand Morin and Jean-Yves Brière, *Le droit de l'emploi au Québec* (Montréal 1998).

¹⁰⁰See, for example, Harry Arthurs, "Landscape and Memory: Labour Law, Legal Pluralism and Globalization," in Ton Wilthagen, ed., *Advancing Theory in Labour Law and Industrial Relations in a Global Context* (North-Holland 1998), 21-34; Guylaine Vallée, "Pluralité des statuts de travail et protection des droits de la personne: Quel rôle pour le droit du travail?" *Relations industrielles*, 54, 2 (1999), 277-312; Alain Supiot, "Les nouveaux visages de la subordination," *Droit social*, 2 (février 1999), 131-145.

¹⁰¹See, for example, Jeffrey Pfeffer, "Incorporating Social Context: Towards a Broader View of Organizations and HRM," in Paula B. Voos, ed., *Proceedings of the Fiftieth Annual Meeting of the IRRRA*, vol. 1 (Madison 1998), 228-235

¹⁰²For example, Barbara Townley, *Reframing Human Resource Management: Power, Ethics and the Subject of Work* (London 1994).

the US there are already some forums that seek to promote a more critical view, like the Critical Management Studies Workshop.¹⁰³

Third, recasting IR as the study of work relations would provide a stimulus to more serious theoretical reflection. Just as the shift from industrial to employment relations has led at least some scholars to explore the *terra incognita* of the non-unionized workplace and company unions (rather than simply dismissing them as irrelevant or the property of HRM), a broader shift to work relations would force IR scholars to engage in a more thoroughgoing rethinking of their key analytical categories.

Although this is hardly the place to engage in such an exercise, it is worth noting that a number of unconventional approaches that have so far remained marginal in IR (at least in the English-speaking countries) offer some intriguing analytical possibilities. For example, as Gregor Murray, Christian Lévesque, and Guylaine Vallée have recently argued, a core concept that bridges a variety of mainstream and critical analyses in IR is “labour regulation.”¹⁰⁴ Although they apply it only to advanced capitalist societies, the notion of labour regulation might easily be extended to other regimes of work relations, for, as Karl Renner once wrote, “No society has yet existed without a regulation of labour peculiar to it, the regulation of labour being as essential for every society as the digestive tract for the animal organism.”¹⁰⁵ Another potentially generalizable framework would be John Kelly’s recent argument in favour of a focus on “collective mobilization.”¹⁰⁶ Like the concept of labour regulation, collective mobilization, at least if it is understood as encompassing a wide range of forms of collective action, is applicable outside the narrow confines of employment-based systems. A final example of a potential framework for the study of work relations would be Robert Cox’s effort to redefine IR in terms of the social relations of production — defined in terms of “the power relations governing production, the technical and human organization of the production process, and the distributive consequences”¹⁰⁷ — which can be applied to a wide variety of work settings:

... production relations govern every kind of work. Production relations exist in subsistence agriculture and in domestic housework, as well as in the large modern factory. Production relations govern the itinerant peddler in India, the shoeshine boy in Mexico City, the pimps and prostitutes of Taipei, the advertising executives Madison Avenue, the stockbrokers of

¹⁰³ Visit <http://www.aom.pace.edu/cms/manifesto.html>

¹⁰⁴ Gregor Murray, Christian Lévesque and Guylaine Vallée, “The Re-regulation of Labour in a Global Context: Conceptual Vignettes from Canada,” *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 42, 2 (June 2000), 234–257.

¹⁰⁵ Karl Renner, “The Development of Capitalist Property and the Legal Institutions Complementary to the Property Norm,” in Vilhelm Aubert, ed., *Sociology of Law* (Baltimore 1969), 37.

¹⁰⁶ Kelly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations*, ch. 3 and 4.

¹⁰⁷ Cox, *Production, Power, and World Order*, 17.

Wall Street, the bank employees of Zurich, and the police, soldiers, and civil servants of all countries.¹⁰⁸

In sum, then, a focus on work relations is a promising avenue through which to develop a less ethnocentric, more multidisciplinary, and more theoretically provocative approach than would be the case if IR simply stays on its present path towards Employment Relations.

Conclusion

It will be recalled that the original purpose of the IRRA was “the encouragement of research in all aspects of the field of labor — social, political, economic, legal, and psychological — including employer and employee organization, labor relations, personnel administration, social security, and labor legislation.” In the mid-1990s, the association appointed a committee to re-examine that statement, and it proposed the following revision:

the encouragement of research on all aspects of work and the workplace, including employer and employee organization, employment and labor relations, employment and labor law, human resources, labor markets, income security, and other fields, including the international and comparative dimensions of the fields, in all pertinent disciplines — history, economics, psychology, sociology, law, management, and others.¹⁰⁹

Besides reflecting the changes that have been discussed above — note, for example, the replacement of “personnel” with “human resources management,” the addition of “employment” relations and law, and the inclusion of “management” as a “pertinent discipline” — this new statement of purpose, focusing as it does on “work and the workplace,” is entirely consistent with the central argument of this essay: that IR, if it can be broadened sufficiently and reopened to influences from all of the social sciences, still has a potentially vital role to play in encouraging an understanding of the social relations within which work and production are organized, modified, and transformed. However, if it continues to drift towards a managerial version of employment relations, the lofty ambitions expressed in the IRRA’s new statement of purpose will go unrealized. In short, if IR is to be rescued, it needs to go beyond employment.

Although he bears no responsibility for the analysis and arguments set out in this essay, I would be remiss if I were to fail to acknowledge the profound influence that my friend and colleague Gregor Murray has had on my thinking about these issues over the years.

¹⁰⁸ Cox, *Production, Power, and World Order*, 13.

¹⁰⁹ IRRA, *Newsletter*, 38, 3 (September 1996).