

BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA: GLOBAL IR HISTORY, THE BRITISH TRADITION, AND THE EUROPEAN RENAISSANCE

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The Global Evolution of Industrial Relations: Events, Ideas and the IIRA, Bruce Kaufman (Geneva: ILO, 2004, 600 pp. \$74.95(U.S.) (hardcover))

INTRODUCTION

Anglo-American academic Industrial Relations (IR) was born as a problem-solving field in response to the late nineteenth century “labor problem.” This appeared in all Western industrial societies and some others, but in continental Europe, economic and political backwardness, remnants of feudal antagonisms, militant socialist responses, and different state and intellectual traditions made it impossible to separate the “labor problem” from the wider “social problem,” in order to target it with new social science solutions. Thus Sydney and Beatrice Webb in the United Kingdom and John Commons in the United States were the intellectual founding fathers of a new IR field. The Webbs came first and made the decisive intellectual contribution, with *Industrial Democracy* (1897), but “the field of industrial relations was born in the United States in the late 1910s” (p.1).

The reasons for American leadership included the more advanced state of the University social sciences and the more modern outlook of U.S. businessmen, most notably John D. Rockefeller, who (along with others) funded the rapid institutional development of both the academic and policy arms of IR. Britain, by contrast, was slow to institutionalize IR—especially, and surprisingly, at the Webbs’ own London School of Economics. Moreover, our businessmen were less

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interested in harnessing or funding the social sciences to solve management problems, with the notable exception of Montague Burton who funded early IR chairs at Cambridge, Cardiff, and Leeds. Thus, "From its original North American base in the 1920s, industrial relations spread to the United Kingdom in the 1930s" (p.4).

With hindsight, the "golden age" of Anglo-American IR was during the post-war years, to about 1960 in the United States, but starting later and ending abruptly in 1979 for the British. In this time of triumph and hubris, however, lay the seeds of decline. Thus U.S. New Deal IR, founded on Institutional Labour Economics (ILE), settled on a trade unions and collective-bargaining toolkit for both theoretical and practical policy purposes and, consequently, excluded the Welfare Capitalist, Human Relations, Personnel Management strand that had been so central to the early foundation of the field. In Britain, the Oxford school of Flanders and Clegg followed this narrow, union-centered model by explicitly distancing IR from both Human Relations and Personnel Management. Fatefully, these Cinderella fields burst into a life of their own in 1960s America and now, as HRM/OB, dwarf the IR field from which they were excluded as core curriculum for business education around the globe. Meanwhile, trade unions and collective bargaining began a decline in the United States that has almost reached the point of extinction and looks as though it is being generalized into a global eclipse. IR is left without either labor problems of the old sort to explain or a theory and practice toolkit to analyze contemporary employment problems.

There follows another historical irony, for while U.S. IR was slowly discovering its feet of clay, the field was being generalized globally through the efforts of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the International Industrial Relations Association (IIRA), to the point where there are now satellite fields (thinly) spread across the continents. While the outlook for U.S. IR is bleak, as it faces HRM/OB on the organizational side and neo-classical economics on the labor market side, prospects elsewhere are better and the most dynamic region of IR is now in Europe, the continent that was so resistant to the field early in the twentieth century. The main reasons for this are that trade unions remain more central and viable than in the United States, while left-of-center social democratic politics continues to be strong and European Union (EU) Social Policy, with its collectivist notion of social dialogue, has given new funding and policy concepts, like European Works Councils, for IR to contend with. Equally, as communism has receded, the socialist panacea has

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lost its appeal and reformist institutional solutions are belatedly recognized as the only alternative to neo-liberalism.

This, in summary, is Bruce Kaufman's tale. His book is a remarkable personal tour de force at over 600 pages long, completed within two years of its commission, with a geography running from Peru to Japan and a historical frame stretching from the industrial revolution to the present day, and looking forward to the future. Commissioned by the IIRA and published by the ILO, *The Global Evolution* fuses intellectual history with business and labor history. The bibliography is rich with books and articles about British IR, for instance, that I had neither seen nor read before. Should a Martian social scientist come to earth and ask, "What is IR?," a week with this one book would leave him more knowledgeable than many of the field's longstanding academics! For an IR insider, the book's great merit, other than its sheer breadth and depth, lies in Kaufman's caustic, unsentimental assessment of IR's current crisis and the roots of this. Nowhere does he succumb to the illusion that things are not as bad as they seem. Even where he spies green shoots, as in Europe, he is sensible to the very real danger that we are just witnessing a time-lag and that neo-liberalism may soon come marching over the hill with U.S.-style business schools, neo-classical economics, and "science-building" HRM/OB in its train. For this reason, the book is a sobering and essential read for anyone who still thinks IR has something constructive to offer the modern world. At a general level, Kaufman insists, work and the employment relationship remains as compelling a focus as ever, for long-standing scientific, normative, and problem-solving reasons. But the "golden age" Anglo-American IR paradigm now seems completely out of synch with the types of employment problems that we face.

For me, the highlights of the book were the early chapters: explaining the ideas of the Webbs, Commons, American ILE, Dunlop and Kerr; exploring how the "labor problem" emerged differentially across the industrializing world; and analyzing the precocious development of the social sciences in American Universities. The last reminded me how backward, by comparison, British academia was in this period and what a negative influence the ancient Universities of Oxford and Cambridge had on the development of social science knowledge before the Second World War. It brought to mind the story of how A.J.P. Taylor, the great Oxford diplomatic historian, would not use his (German) Ph.D. title because it was considered bad

form in the British amateur tradition.¹ I particularly appreciated, as a sociologist, the clarity with which Kaufman explains economic ideas and debates, his home territory. Moreover, he makes a genuine interdisciplinary and comparative effort to bring together all that makes global IR. Naturally he misses the odd turning, especially in sociology. Thus he discusses Durkheim's notion of social cohesion in general terms, but not the important role that occupational associations play in his thinking about modern society. For those impatient with history, who want to hear the message for the future, there is a lucid summary of the Kaufman thesis in the final chapter, though they will have missed a fascinating journey.

The Global Evolution will become a colossus at the center of IR history, linking theory and practice, past and present, and nation unto nation. It is unlikely that anyone else will attempt such a synthesis, so it is likely to remain a monument that other IR historians work around. Moreover, it caps a fine American tradition of IR—rather than just trade union—history, including Kaufman's earlier work on academic IR and Sanford Jacoby's parallel studies of IR practice. For this reason, I will now focus on some interpretative limitations and weaknesses of this grand synthesis. The sheer size of the cloth means that the material must be thin in places. In my view, there are two major flaws in the fabric. First, the IIRA/ILO commission that made the book possible also distorts and bloats the handling of IR intellectual history. Second, Kaufman understates both the indigenous roots of British IR and its contribution to the European renaissance.

II. A COOK'S TOUR OF GLOBAL INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS HISTORY?

One consequence of the IIRA commission is that large parts of the book are devoted to the history of these international bodies when their real contribution to IR in its core centers is much less than this suggests. Most British IR academics, for instance, could complete their entire academic career without ever encountering the ILO or IIRA. I completed the Warwick University IR MA in 1981 and have been a lecturer since 1991, but attended my first IIRA event in 2003, largely because my work had moved into the more international field of IR theory. Ben Roberts from Britain was a leading figure in the

1. KATHLEEN BURK, *TROUBLEMAKER: THE LIFE AND HISTORY OF A.J.P. TAYLOR* (2000).

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IIRA, but there is little evidence that such luminaries as Clegg and Fox paid much attention to it. In short, the encyclopedic value of the book is enhanced by these ILO and IIRA chapters, but their weight in the volume distorts the overall thesis.

The IIRA commission has also forced Kaufman to be comprehensive (and descriptive) in a way that detracts from his central historical thesis. “Events” and “Ideas,” in the book’s subtitle, is a succinct summary of the task of intellectual history, but “and the IIRA” suggests another competing agenda. What is essentially a powerful, opinionated, theoretically-driven history becomes in places a mere descriptive tally of individuals, courses, and other superficial local institutional developments in, say, Canada or Korea—what we in Britain call a “Cook’s Tour,” after the travel agent of that name. In truth, from an intellectual and social science history perspective, the only IR that really matters, *as theory*, is Anglo-American IR and latterly European IR. Judged by Kaufman’s account, IR in all the other transplant countries is largely derivative and while it contributes to the research and policy agenda in those countries, it brings little or nothing back to the central paradigm. Take, for example, one of IR’s institutional strongholds, Australia. Even here, scholars have largely applied IR theories originating from Dunlop in the United States and Flanders and Clegg in Britain, to local conditions, without reformulating the broad IR perspective. Kaufman’s institutional historical criteria can lead to absurdities, such as the claim that from 1966, “In the next ten years industrial relations truly spread across the world” (p. 328), when the IIRA still had only 394 members mainly from its Anglo-American base. Many of the countries discussed here have no deep-rooted IR intellectual tradition and merit little more than footnotes.

IR is a problem-solving field not a science-building discipline, so there is a case for a wider comparative canvass that goes beyond “major contributions to global theory.” To take the same example, Australia has a large academic IR community and an important research tradition, with a *distinctive national IR model* involving centralized arbitration. Kaufman could have made the link between theory and practice and the potential for policy learning the major criterion in selecting his material. Oddly, however, population, land mass, and IR local association membership seem more important for inclusion than the existence of an interesting IR model. Thus Singapore and the Irish Republic barely figure, even though they have done very interesting policy work with concepts like social partnership. Indeed, Tony Blair’s first speech on partnership and

stake-holding was inspired by Singapore and not the EU, while the Irish have been very active in bending their anglicized IR to both the EU social model and American inward investment. Social Policy has paid great attention to the Swedish and Dutch models, Socialists have at different times looked to the Yugoslav model of workers control or the local government policies of Red Bologna, and Management has pursued various economic miracles from West Germany to Japan to China today. The list shows the attendant dangers, but in the language of neo-institutional theory, the mimetic or policy learning possibilities are obvious and size is no disqualification. In the large, central economies Kaufman grasps this, devoting plenty of space to Germany and France (but not Sweden) despite their miniscule official IR communities.

III. THE BRITISH TRADITION AND THE EUROPEAN RENAISSANCE

Kaufman misinterprets, to quite a large extent, the history and prospects of the other central and historic IR community outside the United States, the United Kingdom. This will appear a harsh judgment since he has made a huge effort to engage with our local field, in a way that few other U.S. scholars have and read far more academic British IR than most local scholars have. Moreover, some of Kaufman's sharp but measured judgments about our local field are salutary reminders to a tradition that had been very insular until we discovered Europe in the 1980s. Yes, the social sciences in our universities were very backward, compared to the United States, until the post-war period—something leftist anti-Americanism has expunged from the memory of many European Sociologists today. Yes, British management has been pragmatic, short-term, and disinterested in social science solutions to employment problems, as have British trade unions. Yes, European Social Policy may be a short-lived mirage that hides the onward march of global neo-liberalism, and even now obscures the direction in which Tony Blair is leading Europe. In these and in many other places Kaufman has put his finger on our frailties. Yet he has missed some essential features of British IR, past, present, and future.

First and foremost, British IR is not and has never been a "branch" of U.S. IR. Yet, according to Kaufman, "industrial relations was an American idea and only slowly rippled outward to other parts of the world" (p. 593). This saw, "the extension of the field . . . to the United Kingdom in the early 1930s" (p. 595). Again, personal experience tells me this is misleading. During three years at Warwick

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in the early 1980s, I read very little American IR. Our diet was Flanders, Clegg, and Hyman, not Dunlop or Kerr; and while Kaufman subjects the work of the latter pair to detailed analysis, he does not do the same for the former. For the next twenty years, I pursued the British traditions of IR, Sociology of Work and Labour History, with barely a side-glance to American IR books or journals. I am not proud of this, but I suspect it speaks for a tradition that, on the pluralist side was very “little Englander” and on the radical side was either influenced by European Marxism or by American radical sociologists like Edwards and Buraway. While the formative Oxford school may have drawn some of their ideas about “rule-making” from Dunlop, I would wager that a far more important direct influence was the work of the Webbs. The problem with Kaufman’s historical analysis is that he confuses the weak institutional presence of IR in British universities before the Second World War (the absence of departments and research centers) with a fifty year gap between the Webbs and the emergence of the post-war Oxford school. If “nothing important happened” in Britain between *Industrial Democracy* (1897) and Flanders and Clegg’s *System of Industrial Relations* (1954), while the Americans build on the Webbian framework for fifty years, it is easy to jump to conclusion that U.S. IR crossed the Atlantic in 1945 courtesy of Marshall Aid, the Cold War, and the “four Horsemen” (Kerr, Dunlop, Harbison, and Myers). However, the real turning-point for British IR was home-grown: the 1945 landslide Labour Government and the social democratic consensus it forged.

The historical case against Kaufman’s transplant view still needs to be made and many British IR academics are complacent about or oblivious to real American influences. This said, there are a number of reasons to question American hegemony. One I have already discussed, is the scant evidence for American intellectual influence on the writings of the Oxford School of Flanders, Clegg, and Fox and others. These were very English empiricists, immersed in a national academic community. Another factor is that if the Britain in the inter-war years lacked large IR departments or research centers, it had its own powerful progressive intellectual networks centered on the Labour party and the Fabian Society. The Webbs lived into the post-war period as a personal presence and were directly linked to Hugh Clegg by G.D.H. Cole, the major interwar Labour Party intellectual, who Clegg joined at Nuffield College Oxford in 1947 and who

commissioned his first published work for the Fabian society.² In other words, British IR ideas were not stranded in some unopened edition of *Industrial Democracy*. Rather they were part of a living heterodox British Socialist tradition that blended ethical socialist ideals with practical notions of institutional reform. This was a tradition that was not hostile to IR like European Marxism, but gave it a particular social democratic inflection that it has never lost to this day. As we have argued elsewhere,³ a new more cohesive British IR paradigm was constructed at Oxford in the 1950s, but from material bequeathed by the 1930s Montague Burton professors, by a close reading of the Webbs, by Clegg's direct engagement with both communism and G.D.H. Cole and by his and Flanders' engagement with revisionist social democracy. To the untutored eye, it may sometimes look like American IR, and it very likely borrowed words like "system" and "rules" from it, but it was British IR of a very different stripe, totally divorced, for example, from ILE.

Kaufman's claim that IR was an "American product" that sought "to accommodate capital and labour" (p. 392) is based ultimately on a combination of an historical sleight-of-hand that prioritizes certain American-style institutional measurements (university departments and research bodies) and a definitional fiat that strikes out the key figure in the British tradition that links the Webbs to Flanders and Clegg. "Cole's research strategy on labour, and his views on the cause of labour problems and their solution, were thus not compatible with American-style industrial relations and, indeed, were hostile to it" (p. 185). What this assumes is that the American IR strategy of promoting "greater labour-management cooperation within the context of the existing socio-economic system" was the *only practical, reformist* approach in the inter-war years. Because Cole was a guild socialist and "had little interest in the practical aspects of workplace management and organization" (p. 189) he is excluded from the IR tradition. Cole and the Webbs were leading figures in the British Labour Party, a very practical, moderate party that blended ethical socialist rhetoric and practical policy reforms (notwithstanding their own more fundamentalist socialist moments). Out of power through most of the 1930s, Labour's 1945 policy program emphasized welfare

2. Peter Ackers, *Collective Bargaining as Industrial Democracy: Hugh Clegg and the Political Foundations of British Industrial Relations Pluralism* (Loughborough University Working Paper, 2005).

3. UNDERSTANDING WORK AND EMPLOYMENT: INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IN TRANSITION (Peter Ackers & A. Wilkinson eds., 2003); P. Ackers & A. Wilkinson, *The British Industrial Relations Paradigm: A Critical Outline and Prognosis*, 47 J. INDUS. REL. 443 (2005).

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reform and pragmatic and selective nationalization where capitalism was failing. The architect of the post-war nationalization, Herbert Morrison, was also a very practical institutional reformer and the policy's major aim was to increase efficiency and create a new partnership between labor and management.⁴ It was only once the 1945 Labour Government had transformed British society by creating the welfare state and the mixed economy that Flanders and Clegg, along with other Labour Party revisionists, explicitly turned from socialism to social democracy. As Kaufman emphasizes earlier, the Webbs preferred legal regulation to collective bargaining even in 1897, and modern IR has adopted a more balanced emphasis on legal, employer, and joint regulation. Perhaps it is best to conclude that there were two main roads to modern IR: American New Deal Liberalism and British social democracy. They share a family resemblance, but only some of the same blood.

If Kaufman misleads somewhat on the British past, he also errs on the present and future. Once more, he gets many things right. For instance, British IR has regained vitality by its continuing dialogue with Marxism, heterodox economics and Sociology (in contrast to the U.S. field), while continental traditions and EU policies have brought new things to the party.⁵ This allowed, British IR has been a far more active agent than he gives credit, in a book that is dominated by American and latterly European agency. There are two examples of this, both of which Kaufman refers to but understates.

British IR with its very weak management tradition has shown great dynamism in claiming the field of HRM, in a way that, so far, has precluded the autonomous development of a rival HRM community in business schools. It is easy to see this as a desperate, last ditch opportunist response to 1980s Thatcherism, union decline, and the spread of U.S.-style business schools. In this sense, it could be a case of institutional capture that had no intellectual logic and, in the long-term, serves to hollow-out the content of the field. This is the reading of many embattled British IR radicals and Kaufman seems over-influenced by their skepticism. In fact, the turn to management began at Warwick under Hugh Clegg as part of the post-Donovan research agenda. His "theory" book on collective bargaining suggested the new direction and the appointment of Keith Sisson from

4. Peter Ackers & J. Payne, *Before the Storm: The Experience of Nationalization and the Prospects for Industrial Relations Partnership in the British Coal Industry, 1947-1972—Rehinking the Militant Narrative*, 27 *SOCIAL HISTORY* 184 (2002).

5. Peter Ackers, *Theorizing the Employment Relationship: Materialists and Institutionalists*, 43 *BRIT. J. INDUS. REL.* 537 (2005).

the newspaper employers' association laid the seeds for future developments.⁶ When the hard rain of Thatcherism fell, Sisson was ready to launch a new critical and research-based HRM tradition, both at the Warwick IRRU with John Storey (perhaps the nearest the United Kingdom has had to an academic HRM guru) and through the *HRM Journal*, which became a companion journal to the *Industrial Relations Journal* and has been edited by hardcore IR academics ever since. In a parallel development, Michael Poole created the *International Journal of HRM* at Cardiff. *Work Employment and Society*, a journal of the British Sociological Association, has been edited by Paul Edwards from the Warwick IR group and bridges IR and sociology of work. In this way, British IR entered the Thatcher period with two good academic journals (the IRJ and BJIR) and left it with six (the final one I discuss below). Moreover, British HRM, hitherto, has not just been institutionally captured by IR, it has been intellectually shaped by IR academics and the strong empirical research culture that began at Warwick in the mid-1970s under Clegg.⁷ As Kaufman observes, a major threat to the future of British IR comes from the more short-sighted adherents of its radical wing, who threaten to drive HRM out of IR even if the predictable price would be the loss of the mother ship with all hands.

Likewise, the renaissance of IR in Europe is neither a spontaneous continental growth nor mainly a product of the IIRA. In part, at least, the renaissance is an expansionist project of the British IR tradition, which has both learnt from Europe and pushed forward an IR theory and research agenda in Europe. Kaufman notes the central role of Richard Hyman in editing key comparative books on European IR and founding the *European Journal of IR*. My personal memory is that in 1981 Warwick IR had almost as little interest in European social science as it had in American IR. The shock of Thatcherism and the rise of European Social Policy forced the British Labour Party and Trade Unions to move from 1970s opposition to the EEC—supposedly a free market club for multi-nationals—to late 1980s enthusiasm for EU social protection. British IR subsequently actively built a new intellectual dialogue with continental academia; one as historically novel as the channel tunnel. Hyman, on the radical Sociological wing of the discipline, was ideally positioned to charm the continentals into this new engagement. Many of those figures that

6. HUGH ARMSTRONG CLEGG, *TRADE UNIONISM UNDER COLLECTIVE BARGAINING: A THEORY BASED ON COMPARISONS OF SIX COUNTRIES* (1976).

7. These comments are based on an interview with Keith Sisson, Former Director of the IRRU, Warwick University (June 9, 2005).

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Kaufman lists as key figures in continental IR passed through Warwick and the LSE in the 1980s and 1990s. But British IR also contributed something else to the rather scholastic continental intellectual approach: a powerful empirical research tradition. The EU became the major funder of social science research in Britain, while British academics probably led the majority of EU-funded collaborative projects.

In this Anglo-European context, Kaufman also mistakes the main enemy. Hence his rather schematic interpretation: “With the election of Thatcher, the neoclassical/neo-liberal influence swept over the United Kingdom and buffeted all collectivist-oriented social theories and programmes” (p. 613). This was true at the policy level, but the academic blow-back was much more complex. One major effect was to freeze academic funding, recruitment, and ideas, creating an ageing, left-of-center intellectual community. Business schools were one of the few areas of expansion, but they became much more intellectually diverse bodies than their American equivalents, with the unintended outcome that most of the critical sociology of work moved into them. In this environment, IR could re-make HRM as an empirical, non-managerial field. Looking forward, the EU *could* collapse into an American-style neo-liberal economic model, covering the recent IR bloom with heavy snow. But this is unlikely to happen and a more likely scenario is an EU convergence on Tony Blair’s type of “third way” reform of traditional social democracy. It is a nice irony for the left-wing, Anglo-centric world of British IR circa 1981 that so far the trinity of Europe, HRM, and Tony Blair have been the salvation of the field. In any case, most British neo-classical economists are tucked away in Economics departments where they cannot do IR that much harm.

Finally, due to his own base in American ILE, Kaufman tends to grossly inflate the specter of science-building neo-classical economics and managerial psychology and to ignore completely a more substantial threat within British academia, the rise of Post-Modernism. In the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise for UK Business Schools, HRM/OB will be covered by Paul Edwards from IR/HRM, John Arnold from Occupational Psychology, and Hugh Willmott from Critical Management Studies (CMS). The last is the fastest growing field within British HRM/OB in terms of Ph.D. students, new academic posts, and conference attendance. It is highly attractive to young people and women and reflects a wider academic turn toward culture and identity and away from economic analysis that has spread throughout the social sciences. Many sociology and

social anthropology departments are now dominated by cultural studies, and few of the former even offer sociology of work modules. American-style RAT Sociologists, such as John Goldthorpe, are almost extinct outside the Nuffield College and the LSE, while economic history departments are closing as fast as Cultural History is spreading. CMS is a heterodox blend of European social theories from the Frankfurt School to Foucault and the French post-modernists, which is also strong in many continental European countries. One British business school, Leicester, has expressly established itself as a critical management school. While CMS shares some common ground with IR and traditional sociology of work, in distrusting U.S.-style managerialism, it is essentially hostile to IR's emphasis on economic analysis, empirical research, and practical policy reform. So while British and European IR does face some challenge from the spread of the American business school model and managerial psychology, that is only one threat. European intellectual traditions and dynamics remain very different from America, even within business schools.

To conclude, Bruce Kaufman has done us all a great service by putting the total IR story down on paper for the first time. He has made Herculean efforts to do this with fairness to all the national traditions to the point of recognizing that the American IR century is over, but the European one may have just begun. In the end he could not get it all right, and I think he has underestimated the dynamism of sections of British IR and its ability to adapt to a very different real world. Moreover, he has underestimated how far the British IR tradition has created its own island story, only to transcend this once the European moment arrived. Contemporary global IR is a field with two deep roots as well as many other, more recent influences.