

Unitarism, pluralism, radicalism ... and the rest?

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Abstract

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The academic field known in the English-speaking world as 'industrial relations' (IR) has little institutional presence in the universities of continental Europe and those other parts of the world where anglo-saxon modes of analysis are not dominant. Rather than focussing on wider questions of social relations, it has historically concentrated on worker and employer organization and collective behaviour, workplace conflict over work-related matters, and (in particular) the regulation of the formal employment relationship, whether via the law or collective bargaining. Thus, for example, during the 1980s, IR research in the UK was dominated by analyses of the effect of the Thatcher administration's labour law reforms on collective bargaining and industrial action and on the responses of unions to 'attacks' on their established institutional position and prerogatives.

One of the most important theoretical developments in this Anglophone research tradition was the publication in 1966 of a paper written for a UK government commission of inquiry into workplace relations. The author, Alan Fox, used this paper to introduce what he called the 'frames of reference' approach to IR. His book *Beyond Contract*, in which he added a third frame of reference to the two he had previously identified, followed in 1974. Since then, IR as an academic discipline has seen few if any truly significant theoretical developments. This paper argues that the essence of Fox's theory – the idea that subjective conceptual structures condition attitudes and behaviour in economic and organizational contexts – remains valid, but that there is a need both to broaden and to deepen Fox's work. First of all there is a need to add to the categorisation of 'ways of seeing' economic and organizational phenomena. Second, there is a need to better understand how social learning processes lead to the adoption or rejection of different frames of reference. These learning processes include both analyses of the functional efficacy of conceptual models and the evaluation of the outcomes of social action against normative standards. The principal aim of this paper is to address the first of these needs, although it will also make some proposals with respect to the second. The theoretical resources required for these tasks are drawn from the work of Jürgen Habermas.

UNITARISM, PLURALISM, RADICALISM... AND THE REST ?

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**UNITARISM, PLURALISM,
RADICALISM... AND THE
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**Why the frames of
reference approach is still
relevant to the study of
industrial relations, but
why we need nine frames
rather than just three.**

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As Kaufman points out (2004, p.435-6), it has frequently been remarked that the academic field known in the English-speaking world as 'industrial relations' (IR) has little institutional presence in the universities of continental Europe and those other parts of the world where anglo-saxon modes of analysis are not dominant. Kaufman traces this absence to a divergence in discursive convention in the 19th century (2004, p.32-35). Whereas in France and Germany, industrial unrest and the relationship between workers and employers was typically thought to be inseparable from the broader context of class, social relations and the political and legal structures of society, in Britain the tendency was to refer not to 'the social question' but to 'the labour problem', thus focussing much more narrowly on the conflict between capital and labour. In constructing social conflict as 'the labour problem', the cleavage between the owners of capital (and their agents in management) and the organised working class was identified as the most fundamental fracture in the social fabric, and, as such, as the appropriate locus of efforts at social engineering designed to mend that fabric. The field of industrial relations emerged specifically as a response to 'the labour problem' and as such has historically concentrated on worker and employer organization and collective behaviour, workplace conflict over work-related matters, and (in particular) the regulation of the formal employment relationship, whether via the law or collective bargaining. Thus, for example, during the 1980s, IR research in the UK was dominated by analyses of the effect of the Thatcher administration's labour law reforms on collective bargaining and industrial action and on the responses of unions to 'attacks' on their established institutional position and prerogatives.

While IR is defined by its object of study rather than by a disciplinary orientation – the methods of economics, political science, sociology and law are all freely used – it has arguably managed to maintain a kind of theoretical coherence around the crucial importance of the social context of work and workplace relations. For example, John Commons, the founder of academic industrial relations in the USA, was heavily influenced by the German historical school of economics, which privileged the analysis of the empirical and historical context of economic decision-making over the abstract logical or mathematical modelling of behaviour. In the UK, at least up until the 1970s, the explanation of outcomes was typically based on detailed, almost anthropological observation of workplace interactions. It was rarely if ever assumed that higher-level social and economic processes could cut through the specificities of each interaction situation and the participants' interpretations of those situations.

It was Alan Fox, a lecturer at Oxford University active from around 1950 until the mid-1980s, who best captured this theoretical tendency, arguing that *attitudes and behaviour in economic and organizational contexts are conditioned by contingent, intersubjective conceptual structures arising both from general processes of socialisation and from direct experience in the workplace*. Fox first set out his theory in his famous paper *Industrial Sociology and Industrial Relations* (Fox 1966), which was written as a background paper for a UK public enquiry into labour-management relations prompted by concerns about increased levels of industrial conflict and decentralised union action. In this paper, Fox introduced the 'frames of reference' approach to industrial relations (IR) in which he argued that it is always possible to conceive the employment relationship in either one of two incompatible ways. Either it is a relationship of social membership which exists to satisfy common interests (the unitarist frame of reference), or it is a negotiated, contractual relationship which exists to satisfy the interests of separate but interdependent groups (the pluralist frame of reference). In his book *Beyond Contract* (1974) he added a third

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conceptual possibility, the radical frame of reference, from the perspective of which the employment relationship is an entirely illegitimate relationship which exists solely to satisfy the interests of the dominant party.

Fox's frames of reference approach still structures much IR teaching and research. The years since it was first mooted have seen few if any similarly significant theoretical developments. In this paper we argue that this approach remains valid, but that there is a need both to broaden and to deepen Fox's work. First of all there is a need to add to the categorisation of 'ways of seeing' economic and organizational phenomena. Second, there is a need to better understand how social learning processes, whether those focusing on the functional characteristics of social systems or those focusing on the normative outcomes of social action, lead to the adoption or rejection of different frames of reference. The principal aim of this paper is to address the first of these needs, although it will also make some proposals with respect to the second. The theoretical resources required for these tasks are drawn largely from the work of sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1984, 1987, 1996).

According to Habermas, the fundamental building block of any theorization of social action, regardless of the context, should be the means of action *coordination*. He argues that there are three basic modes of social action coordination. Two of these modes of coordination are 'formal', which is to say they are based on legal or quasi-legal rules. These are markets/contracts and bureaucratic regulation. In action contexts governed principally by these formal modes of coordination we can talk about the existence of social *systems*. By contrast, the third mode of coordination – coordination on the basis of social norms, values and conventions – is entirely 'informal' in that it remains uncodified and is subject to unintended change and variation across time and social contexts. What remains unresolved within Habermas's work is the relationship between these different modes of coordination. Whereas his main argument is that a market or bureaucratic/organisational action context effectively insulates actors from the influence of more general norms and values, leaving only the empirical motivation of sanction and reward to guide action (Habermas 1987, p.308), he also suggests that the degree to which formal and informal modes of coordination influence any particular action situation is an empirical rather than a theoretical question (Habermas 1987, p.312).

The anglo-saxon IR tradition is surprisingly coherent with this analytic scheme.¹ On the one hand, IR in the English-speaking world has tended to privilege functionalist theoretical approaches that focus on the formally coordinated aspects of the employment relationship. Within this intellectual current, the unitarist-pluralist dichotomy also reflects certain aspects of Habermas's distinction between coordination via bureaucratic regulation (the rules of organisational membership) and coordination via markets (contracts). On the other hand, we also find within the anglophone approach to IR a strong current of research and teaching that insists that workplace behaviour is significantly influenced by informal norms, values and conventions, whether those arising in the workplace itself or those imported from the social world beyond the factory gates. As with the debate surrounding Habermas's work, no truly satisfactory conclusions have ever been drawn about the relationship between conceptualisations of employing organisations, the norms and values

¹ This coherence is perhaps less surprising if one considers that the principal intellectual influences on anglo-american IR – Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Parsons – are those whose work Habermas synthesises within his *Theory of Communicative Action*.

of the communities within which workplaces are embedded and social behaviour at work – whether that of employees or that of managers.

Given this ambiguity, it seems wise to start from the assumption that there is good reason for the different currents and sub-currents of IR research to co-exist. I want to propose that employment is susceptible to either pluralist or unitarist interpretation quite simply because it *is* simultaneously an exchange relationship within a labour market system *and* a relationship of membership in an organizational community defined and delimited by a system of bureaucratic rules. Similarly, I would argue that research focusing on informal social norms in the workplace has given rise to valuable insights because these non-economic values and conventions *are* much more than simply 'noise' in relationships governed principally by external forces.

If we want to maintain that these approaches can all be valid at once, however, there are two significant problems that need to be resolved. The first is that the simple distinction between unitarist and pluralist frames of reference does not adequately cover the variations in perspective that exist in practice. The radical frame of reference, for example, shares pluralism's central analytic focus on the balance of interests between those who work and those who own the means of production, but is distinguished by a pre-commitment to the impossibility of achieving a genuinely and durably fair balance in this respect. Similarly, the very different prescriptions of 'hard' and 'soft' human resources management arise from conceptual positions that are both recognisably unitarist.

The second problem is that the relationship between the different modes of social action coordination is not at all clear. We need to be able to suggest how the different modes of formal coordination interact, and what role is played by informal coordination mechanisms in contexts of action that are or appear to be primarily formally coordinated.

What follows falls into two parts. The first of these builds on Fox's approach, arguing that frames of reference should be understood as conceptual constructs that permit actors to grasp the functional characteristics of social systems. The second part builds on the proposition that the enduring appeal of the unitarist-pluralist dichotomy is a consequence of its reflecting the genuine ambiguity or duality of the employment relationship. It argues that employment is simultaneously an exchange relationship and a relationship of social membership, and that for this reason we can conceptualize different varieties of IR system by looking at the interaction between perspectives on market economic systems and perspectives on employment systems. Three possible categories of overall normative evaluation of formal social systems are identified, which in the context of the interaction between two different systems – the market economy and the employment system – give rise to a potential 9 different frames of reference.

Fox's dualism

Since the mid-1960s the distinction between unitarism and pluralism, proposed as two incompatible basic conceptualizations of the organisation and the employment relationship, has been the single most important element in industrial relations theory. Although similar dualisms had been suggested before – in particular Clark Kerr's distinction between the economic and the sociological perspective on the analysis of industry (Kerr 1964) – Fox clarified and contrasted the two approaches in his paper for the Donovan Commission (Fox 1966), locating them within a simple and compelling theoretical framework drawn from social psychology. Unitarism and pluralism were two 'frames of reference'; two conflicting and incommensurable ways of seeing the world which had very different implications for

practice. The essential difference between them is straightforward. The unitarist sees employment as a relationship between members of a single social group, a group with a common purpose or, to use Rousseau's term, a general will. The natural state of the relationship is co-operation, without preconditions, in pursuit of the group's aims and values. Crucially, these aims and values exist *prior* to any plans for action. Membership of the group is premised on the acceptance of these fundamental 'action orientations' (to use Habermas's term) and not solely on the particular component of the plans and strategies derived from them that it falls to any one individual to execute. The pluralist, on the other hand, conceives employment as a strategic relationship between strangers. Employee and employer have different and competing aims and values and hence cannot be said to form a single social group. They have no common purpose, and no general will can be attributed to them. Employment, then, is a relationship characterized by conflict and the resolution of conflict. Any co-operation that arises can only be based on the recognition of the participants' mutual need for the help of the other to attain their separate goals. Membership of the group is premised not on a prior commitment to any particular set of aims, but on a strategic recognition of mutual dependence and a willingness to seek to define plans and strategies which when carried out will satisfy the individual or sectional interests of all involved.

We want to consider Fox's work not merely as a theory of industrial relations, but as a social theory, albeit a rudimentary one, which attempts to explain the behaviour of actors in the context of the capitalist employment relationship. Fox recognized that both frames of reference were in a certain sense defensible, or at least that it was possible to understand why their advocates saw the world in the way that they did. He attempted to explain the factors that might lead actors to adopt one perspective or the other and what the consequences of this might be in terms of organisational structure. What we propose to do in the next two sections of the paper is to propose a reading of Fox's work that we will then use as the starting point for the development of a more complete picture of the frames of reference. For the moment we want to focus on his earlier position, before the introduction of what has become known as the 'radical' frame of reference.

The idea of 'frames of reference' as social theory

Fox's 1966 paper attempts to step away from the political arguments of the day in order to explain why the unitarist route to improved co-operation between workers and management in industry was to be objected to on strictly scientific rather than normative grounds. Implied in Fox's approach is a distinction between the structural determinants of behaviour and what we can call action-level determinants. The former set of factors is external to the individual actor, constraining his or her choices of action in a rather concrete, material way. The latter set is internal, affecting behaviour via attitudes, culture, socialisation, perceptions, definitions and other subjective and intersubjective means of making sense of the social world. In the absence of structural constraints, behaviour is determined by action-level factors.

At first glance, the 1966 paper would probably lead one to believe that Fox considers the structural determinants of behaviour to be the only important factors in the organisational context. These determinants

exert their effects irrespective of normal variations of personality and personal relationships. A brief statement of this approach might be that the industrial behaviour of individuals and relationships between them are shaped, not only by

their being the sort of people they are, but also by the technology with which they work, the structure of authority, communications and status within which they are located, the system of punishments, rewards and other management controls to which they are subjected and various other aspects of 'the structures of the situation'. (Fox 1966, para 60)

Fox introduces the concepts of the 'role' and of 'role behaviour' as mediating between structure and choices about action. Roles, he argues, are largely structurally determined, each a 'pattern of required behaviour' which 'in some measure... exists independently of the person filling it at any one time' (Fox 1966., para 62). Roles constrain and determine the behaviour of their occupants to such an extent that, regardless of who is filling them, the relationship between roles will always be more or less the same. Thus to change behaviour you need to change roles, and to change roles you need to change structure. In essence Fox's contention is that if the structures of the enterprise remain the same, then other attempts to change behaviour — whether through exhortation, incentives or threats — are futile.

However, while employees have little or no influence over the basic pattern of behaviour dictated by their place within the organisation, the questions of how they experience and interpret this requirement for conformity, the attitude with which they approach it, and whether and to what extent they may challenge it remain open. This is where action-level factors enter into the picture. Although Fox spends very little time defining or discussing the basic concept of a frame of reference, it seems clear that that frames of reference fall into the category of action-level factors. What distinguishes them from other factors of this type is that they arise only insofar as there is a need to grasp or understand what Habermas calls 'formally-organised' contexts of action. *Frames of reference give meaning to participation in the type of coordinated social action which arises not from shared aims and values but from 'the structures of the situation'. By applying a frame of reference, participants are able to understand their structurally-determined behaviour as something other than bare constraint or compulsion. Frames of reference are interpretations of structural role behaviour that explain, rationalise and provide normative support for – or normatively-motivated rejection of – a particular type and range of role requirements and constraints.* From the unitarist perspective, for example, the employment relationship can be understood as a kind of social membership; as the cooperative pursuit of common aims and values on the basis of a technically effective division of labour. From the pluralist perspective, employment is typically understood as participation in an exchange of a certain amount and type of labour for a certain amount of money. The different participants get what they need without having to accept the validity of the aims and values of the others. Thus frames of reference permit actors to understand social situations and relationships that would otherwise be meaningless.

Frames of reference also inform the work of those who design the organisational systems that give rise to structural roles. Crucially, the different frames imply very different workplace structures and relationships. Fox's 'diagnosis of the times' is that while the vast majority of organisations in the 1960s were structured from a unitarist perspective, the majority of employees had a pluralist perspective. He believed that the general lack of cooperation and high levels of overt conflict that characterised British industry were the direct result of a dissonance between structurally-constrained or required role behaviour and the action-level factors that would otherwise motivate social action, as mediated by the pluralist frame of reference.

There are two possibilities for the resolution of this dissonance. The first is to somehow to get workers to accept the unitarist frame of reference. Fox does not set out systematically why one frame of reference might be adopted as opposed to another, but the overall picture is clear enough. Frames of reference arise and are adopted on the basis of lived experience in the workplace; assessments of the state of power relations in industry and the balance of interests in the economy; general socio-cultural attitudes; and the norms, conventions and values held to be valid in actors' immediate social environments, whether within the workplace or beyond. Fox allows that in certain circumstances it may be possible to persuade or cajole employees to accept the unitarist perspective:

History and current observation show that management may succeed, with a judicious blend of authoritarianism and propagation of the unitary ideology, in moulding subordinates' perceptions very differently, particularly if it can draw support from the cultural values of the local community or wider society (Fox 1974, pp271-2; emphasis added).

However, he comments that the capacity of employers to produce this kind of 'legitimising sentiment' in employees is diminishing in the face of general cultural change and the shifting balance of power in industry. For Fox there is no question that the second possibility for resolving the dissonance that gives rise to industrial conflict, restructuring industry along pluralist lines, is the only effective solution in practice.

In short, then, Fox's advocacy of pluralist industrial relations is based on the empirically-grounded belief that cooperation can best be achieved by structural change in industry. The organisational structures of the 1960s, which had been inherited from Britain's industrial past, were based on the assumption of a unity of interest at the level of a stratified class society in which the majority of individuals knew and accepted their place. However the deference, poverty of aspiration and powerlessness that characterized the working classes in that society had disappeared. The roles that employees were required to take on as a consequence of the existing modes of work organization, work rules and work practices were therefore in conflict with empirical social reality. Work was a denial rather than an affirmation of workers' true social identity — the same, of course, could be said of managers — and hence the organization of industry was preventing co-operation rather than making it possible. In order to improve co-operation and therefore economic performance, industrial structures had to be redesigned. This obviously had to begin with a sober and objective assessment of the nature of contemporary society. Such an assessment clearly suggested that society was experiencing a major clash of values. The dominance of the capital owning classes (and their agents and collaborators in management), as well as their right to claim the fruits of collective labour for themselves was being openly and consciously challenged by organized workers. Fox saw little or no possibility that managers could simply persuade employees to accept their authority without demur. Indeed, as he measured it, the gap between the emergent social reality and the unitarist outlook was so wide that the unitarist perspective represented a kind of cognitive dysfunction. He talks about the high 'emotional yield' that managers got from their ideology, and the 'guilt' they may have experienced if they surrendered what they saw to be their proper decision-making prerogative. Managers could also demonstrate a 'genuine incapacity to understand' the conflict generated by pluralistic forces (Fox 1966., para 48-9). Perhaps most damningly, he comments that unitarism is "not an analytic tool for social diagnosis and prescription, but ... an instrument by which managers seek to reassure themselves and public opinion that

the cause of failure lies elsewhere" (Fox 1966., para 51). For Fox, the pluralist perspective was by far the more accurate reflection of social reality, and it was pluralism that should provide the conceptual basis for the reform of the structures of the enterprise and of industrial relations.

The radical frame of reference: values and the institutional dimension

In its earlier incarnation, the frames of reference approach remains firmly rooted in social psychology, the influence of the Tavistock Institute being particularly clear (see for example Fox 1966, para 16). As set out in the 1966 paper, the mechanism that drives conflict is not to be found at the level of interests or political consciousness, but, as we have just seen, at the cognitive level. Conflict is the result of a dissonance between workplace roles and the frames of reference that arise from the perceptions, definitions, beliefs, attitudes and assumptions that underpin wider social life. Aligning the structural and action-level determinants of behaviour would resolve the dissonance and remove the source of conflict, opening the way to improved cooperation with all the resultant economic benefits.

While *Beyond Contract* (1974) does not contradict this analysis, it adds two rather more sociological elements to the picture. First of all it recognises that the adoption of a frame of reference involves making significant normative judgements. Actors' choice of perspective is not made solely on the basis of a disinterested or technical analysis of society. Second, it suggests that the institutional dimension of the employment relationship — in the broad sense of internal enterprise procedures, employment law and the other institutions of IR beyond the workplace level — needs to be considered separately from the market dimension.

As is well known, Fox came to see the pluralist approach not as a potential solution to industrial conflict but as part of the problem. He became concerned about the values that were built into pluralist industrial relations and about the political purposes that it might thereby serve. As he himself argues, the pluralist perspective makes no sense unless it is accepted that freedom of (collective) contract is not a fiction — that the power of organised workers is such as to balance the inherent advantage of the employer in the employment relationship — and that the agreements struck between unionised workers and their employers are thereby morally binding (Fox 1974, p272). This assumption is implicit in the 1966 paper, but by 1974 Fox was ready to argue that a mere on-paper balance of power is not the whole story:

the "negotiation of order within the enterprise takes place only at the margins. Management and the employee interests do not jointly build up their collaborative structure from the ground floor up. Power and social conditioning cause the employee interests to accept management's shaping of the main structure long before they reach the negotiating table" (1974, p.286; emphasis added).

As a conceptual approach to public policy, then, pluralism lent itself too easily to co-option into a conservative sociology of work in which the overarching ideological goal was the preservation of the existing order rather than any emancipatory project: "the pluralist ideology would be the choice of a structural-functionalist seeking to identify the appropriate integrative mechanisms for industrial relations systems in Western societies — functionally appropriate, that is, whatever its professed intentions, in maintaining the status quo of highly unequal power, wealth and privilege" (Fox 1974, p.282).

For Fox the key aspect of the radical frame of reference is the recognition of this conservatism – the recognition that certain ‘anti-worker’ values and interests are inherent in the institutional structures of employment and IR and that for this reason no significant emancipation of workers can be achieved while preserving the essentials of the existing system. The radical frame shares the pluralist assumption that there are distinct and competing sets of values and interests at play within the enterprise. However, it also assumes that the capitalist employment relationship, together with the institutional IR structures that support it, cannot correct or compensate for this imbalance in the way that pluralism supposes. Only a fundamental restructuring of economic and social relations can correct the imbalance. We can argue, then, that there are in fact two dimensions to the choice of the radical frame of reference. First of all, there is the belief that the values of capitalism and the market economy are not universal; that capitalism involves the pursuit of the aims and interests of the few rather than of the many. Second, there is the belief that the institutional structures of employment and IR are themselves value-laden and do not permit an appropriate balance to be struck between the interests of workers and those of employers/owners.

Taking up where Fox left off

We have reached the point at which Fox alone can take us no further. What we want to do now is to clarify and expand on certain proposals that are implied by his work but that he himself does not make. We will begin with the distinction between the market and the institutional or regulatory aspects of employment.

One of the abiding characteristics of IR in the anglo-american tradition is the assumption that the employment relationship cannot be reduced to a financial exchange. This assumption is to some extent an inheritance from American institutional economics, which would argue that classical (or neoclassical) economic theory is inadequate to the explanation of concrete economic behaviour because it emphasizes monetary exchange at the expense of other, equally important forms of social interaction. The most important of these are the interactions that take place within enterprises. Commons, for example, argued that market exchange is only one of three forms of ‘transaction’ in which ownership is legally transferred (Kaufman, 2004, pp.104-9). The other two, the rationing transaction (the exchange of property rights commanded by a legal superior) and the managerial transaction (the exchange of the worker’s property rights over her labour power with the employer) require the presence of an institutional structure that goes well beyond the simple law of contract. The concepts of the rationing transaction – in effect, managerial plans and strategies – and the managerial transaction – the social organization of the labour process – allow the construction of a rather more realistic approach to economics in which the existence of positive transaction costs is recognized. As Kaufman argues, the ‘non-neoclassical assumptions of bounded rationality, imperfect information, incomplete markets and costly enforcement of contracts’ permit the conceptualization of the economy as a ‘mix of markets and organizations, including large hierarchical firms with an employment relationship’ (2004, p.105).

If we stick with Fox’s terminology, then, we can propose that when it comes to the employment relationship there are two aspects to the ‘structures of the situation’: a market/exchange aspect and an organisational/institutional/regulatory aspect. As we suggested above, we believe that in adopting a frame of reference, actors in fact assess the value status of each of these aspects separately. If this is the case, then frames of reference

are characterised by the interaction of views about two different, if interrelated, social systems: the market economy and what for the sake of brevity we will call ‘the employment system’.

The value status of social systems

Elsewhere we have argued that there are three possible assessments of the value status of social systems: positive, negative and meaningless (Cradden 2005).² Understanding a system as positive implies that conformity with the required role behaviour is a valid end in itself rather than simply a means to avoid sanctions or seek rewards. It needs no further justification. Working ‘with the grain’ of the system is not simply likely to be effective as a means of pursuing the aims and goals of its participants, it is effective because it is the right thing to do. For example, if wages are set at the level the labour market can bear, then by definition they are fair wages. If systems are given a positive value status, then from the political-ethical standpoint, resisting the required role behaviour is a culpable failure. To challenge the authority of an office-holder in an organization, for example, is to put oneself in opposition to the organizational community as a whole; to oppose a community to which one owes a duty of loyalty. Given that the aims and goals of the community have been determined via legitimate procedures, the only acceptable attitude is cooperation.

Systems can also be accorded a negative value status. From this perspective, the requirement for particular kinds of role behaviour can only be coercive because the aims and values built into that system are not those of the majority of participants. Actors will comply only for the empirical reasons of material necessity or the avoidance of sanctions. Since role requirements arise because of the (culpable) actions of other actors – those who design and manage the structures of the situation – giving a system a negative value status necessarily implies the existence of a ‘them’ whose interests conflict with those of ‘us’, and who have the social power to pursue those interests at the expense of other groups. There are two possible rational responses to negatively-evaluated systems. First, participants may engage in conflict, whether via ‘cheating’, sabotage, public protest or some other means of direct or indirect opposition to ‘them’. Second, participants may attempt to organize themselves so as to form a countervailing social power with the aim of reaching a bargained accommodation with ‘them’, thereby defusing the coercive aspects of the system.

Where social systems are deemed to be meaningless, the compulsion or constraint that they produce is given the same status as physical necessity. It is thought to be external to and separate from immediate decisions about coordinated action. Compliance with the required role behaviour is a means to an end rather than an end in itself and is no more a capitulation to other participants than taking shelter from the rain is a capitulation to the weather. The ‘ought’ of systemic action is entirely hypothetical. The vendor of a commodity who is obliged to sell at a loss because the market has moved to her disadvantage may not be happy, but her attitude is likely to be one of resignation rather than resentment. She will

² In making this argument we part company with Habermas and many others, who believe that social systems are by definition blocks of ‘norm-free sociality’ in which value judgements are, in the final analysis, of little or no consequence. Habermas argues that behaviour in economic and bureaucratic contexts is determined by what he calls ‘steering imperatives’ – the term ‘steering’ is taken from Parsons’ system theory – that reach ‘through and beyond’ the action orientations of participants in social action, i.e. the things they want to do and the ways of living and behaving they believe to be right. Actors recognise that their choices in these action contexts are constrained by forces external to them, but are unable to assess the normative value of these forces. By contrast, Fox implies that systems can be deemed either normatively positive or normatively negative, but seems to discount the possibility that they can remain without meaning.

not seek to blame another individual or group for her misfortune. Similarly, actors in organizations will have a pragmatic attitude to working with the grain of the system. At the political level, attitudes to systems are also likely to be pragmatic, stressing the need to avoid the 'politicization' of economic, administrative or organizational action.

Giving a value status to the market economy

It is easier to see how the negative and meaningless value statuses can be applied to the market economy than the positive status. The imperatives of the market are frequently depicted either as no more than the embodiment of the partial interests of the owners of capital, or as normatively neutral survival imperatives to which There Is No Alternative. To argue that economic imperatives can give politically and ethically legitimate direction to decisions about action seems difficult to sustain. On the other hand, however, the idea that a single exchange or price can be *fair* – that it reflects a reasonable balance between the interests of each party – is perfectly commonplace and comprehensible. If all exchanges were fair, then since the market is no more than an aggregation of historical information about exchanges that have already taken place, market imperatives would represent a guide to socially useful economic action. By complying with market imperatives, overall utility would be increased in a manner that did not produce sustained unfair advantage for particular individuals or groups.

It is also commonplace, of course, to recognise that a market price is not necessarily a fair price. Not all participants are oriented towards fairness and even if they were, economic institutions are imperfect and may introduce distortions and biases into the process of aggregating information. However, the fact that we can recognise that an exchange is not fair even if it appears to comply with market criteria means we are not tied to the dictates of an imperfect economic system. According to the market a positive value status involves accepting that exchange *ought* to be substantively fair, and that since fair exchanges are always possible in principle, it is the duty of market actors to interpret market imperatives through the lens of fairness, filtering out those possibilities for action that do not meet the appropriate normative criteria. This is the principle underpinning the fair trade movement, for example.³

Giving a value status to the employment system

Views about the employment system take the form of opinions about the value status of the internal order of the enterprise – what Flanders (1975) would call 'managerial relations' – as well as the legal and institutional structures that affect it. Opinions can range from a belief that the order of the enterprise is entirely valid or legitimate in itself, through the view that it is simply what is required in order that the individual aims and interests of members be satisfied, to the belief that it reflects the interests only of certain members, privileging these at the expense of those of the others.

Deeming the employment system to have a positive value status implies that the enterprise is a community founded on substantive aims and values. The relationships that exist within enterprises, for all that they would not exist in the absence of the corporate context, have an intrinsic value. We might say that they are the analogue in the economic sphere of legitimate political institutions. There is a presumption that decision-making procedures will conform to the same standards of legitimacy that apply in political contexts.

³ This is a very bare statement of a very complex argument. For a fuller explanation see Cradden 2005 and 2009.

Depending on how the market is conceived, this implies democratic-participative, consultative or bargained decision-making.

Where employment systems are interpreted as meaningless, then they are understood as having no legitimizable content beyond that borrowed from the goals they seek to realize. The relationships that exist within these systems have no intrinsic value, but the absence of such value is not experienced as a culpable failure. The employment system is therefore a purely pragmatic mode of action coordination that can be specified from a technical perspective. It is assumed that the design of effective systems is a matter of the application of expert knowledge. For this reason, democratic forms of organization are seen as inappropriate.

The unique feature of the negative employment system frames of reference is that participants believe that the 'normative order' of the enterprise and the institutions of IR privilege the aims and values of certain participants over those of the others. These frames of reference can therefore be characterized principally by the absence of any assumption that trust and understanding between the different members of the enterprise can or will naturally arise. The relationships that exist are premised on the belief that willing cooperation within the enterprise is more or less impossible.

Conflict is more likely to occur when participants perceive the employment system as having a negative value status than when they perceive the economic system as negative. No matter how large an organization is, it remains considerably smaller and easier to grasp than the economy. It is thus easier to personalize conflicts of interest, blaming the lack of balance in the corporate order on an internal, identifiable 'them', almost inevitably management from the employees' perspective or employees – especially if organized in a trade union – from the managerial perspective.

Negative employment systems can exist only because of the material need of participants. From the employee perspective, the sanction attached to non-compliance with management authority is exclusion from the enterprise and hence from the material benefits of membership. From the management perspective, failing to secure the compliance of employees with instructions will mean the failure to achieve corporate objectives. Mutual dependence is thus the only reason the employment relationship persists.

The 9 frames of reference

The interaction between the dimensions of the economy and the employment system gives rise to the nine ideal typical frames of reference that we want to propose, and which are set out in the table below. Each of the frames of reference represents a possible way of thinking about and understanding the enterprise and, by extension, the relationships that exist within it, although it should be clear that some are rather more apparent in practice than others.

Deliberative unitarism

The first frame of reference represents the interaction of a positively-evaluated employment system with a positively-evaluated market economy. The ultimate market

Table 1: The 9 Frames of Reference

Market economy	Employment System		
	Positive	Meaningless	Negative
Positive	Deliberative Unitarism	Bureaucratic Unitarism	Ethical Conflict
Meaningless	High Commitment Unitarism	Low Commitment Unitarism	Localized Conflict
Negative	Integrative Pluralism	Adversarial Pluralism	Radical/Class Conflict

goals of enterprise action, the intermediate plans and strategies of the enterprise and the social relationships by which those plans are realized are all deemed to have a positive value status. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of this frame of reference is the idea that the enterprise is connected to society via a legitimate market. Since market relationships are legitimate relationships, the enterprise and its members do not form an isolated group acting only on its own behalf, but instead are active participants in the social process of material reproduction. The enterprise exists both to satisfy the interests of its members and to contribute to the fair distribution of commodities across society as a whole. If it can be assumed that such a fair distribution is achieved, or that it represents a genuine overarching goal, then from the societal perspective the actions of the enterprise are not simply permissible or tolerable, but are legitimate in a highly generalizable sense. While participation in some particular enterprise may not be obligatory in itself, the actions of those who do choose to participate are socially useful and to that extent laudable.

From this perspective, and leaving aside any objectively technical or scientific aspects, the role of management is one of political leadership and representation. The actions of the enterprise, like those of any market actor, will have an effect on the legitimacy of the market. If it is assumed that the conditions for perfect competition do not obtain in practice, then market actors are likely to be faced with a range of choices of action in response to market imperatives. The valid choice is that which preserves or improves the fairness of the market as a whole. However, these choices are not simply given. Rather, they depend on interpretations of the economic system. These interpretations cannot be technical in the sense that medical or engineering knowledge is technical. They are inherently normative both in the sense that they rely on assumptions about the validity of aims and values in society as a whole, and in the sense that they embody the aims and values of the members of the corporate community. When viewed from the perspective of deliberative unitarism, to pretend that some kind of purely technical approach to management could uncover this normative knowledge of the organizational and market systems in such a way that it would be beyond dispute will appear rather far-fetched. This is not to say that certain individuals will not be capable of ‘reading’ a group; of grasping its self-identity in a way that the group’s members recognize as accurate. It makes perfect sense to suppose that actors could come to trust an individual to articulate ‘who they are’ as members of an enterprise and of society, and hence to trust in that individual’s recommendations for action. Nonetheless, whether or not individual managers have this ability is entirely an empirical question and it can be assumed neither that any such individuals will exist, nor that their capacity for leadership is transferable between different social groups, nor that this capacity can permanently be trusted. In the same way that it would be unwise to assume that it will always be possible to find a ‘philosopher king’ who is able to articulate the general will of a political community better than the members of that

community could articulate it themselves, from the perspective of the deliberative unitarist frame of reference only the procedural guarantee of democratic forms of management – together with the analogous procedural guarantee of free trade – can provide an appropriate degree of assurance that corporate action will be legitimate.

From the perspective of the deliberative unitarist frame of reference, there is no permanent preconceived idea of what that ideal employment system will look like. Instead, it will be the outcome of co-operation; of ongoing processes of consensus formation in language. The role of formal regulation is therefore extremely limited. Indeed one might even say that an effective employment system is best achieved by dissolving hierarchical administrative systems in favour of flexible systems of self-management. Thus, decisions about what the enterprise is to do can be focused on its responses to economic imperatives, but the identification both of what these imperatives are and the range of effective responses that are normatively acceptable will be a matter for all members of the enterprise to agree on the basis of open discussion and dialogue.

High Commitment Unitarism

Where a positive evaluation of the employment system interacts with a market economy deemed to be meaningless we find high commitment unitarism. Within the community that is the enterprise, effective market action is placed at the head of the social ordering of cultural values. From this perspective, there is no distinction between a strategy for market action that is technically effective and one that is politically and ethically legitimate. The background consensus of the community that pre-defines legitimate coordinated action simply refers to whatever aims and values make for effective action in the market. In practice, this reference is to managerial expertise.

Managerial expertise can be equated with technical effectiveness because of the objectivist conception of the economy that is characteristic of the high commitment unitarist frame of reference. The economy is seen as a non-normative phenomenon that has to be dealt with in the same way as physical necessity. From this perspective, to say we are coerced by the economic system only makes as much sense as saying that our bodies force us to eat or that the rain forces us to take shelter. At the same time, neither does it make any sense to say that the ‘ought’ in ‘we ought to eat’ or ‘we ought to take shelter’ is anything other than hypothetical. The interpretation of what the market demands from the enterprise is therefore conceived as a technical process and management as a profession whose members aim only to make the most scientifically effective interventions. Hence, the formal-legal specification of the scope of managerial competence coincides with the managerial definition of market effectiveness.

The objectivist understanding of the economy also means that the enterprise is conceived as unconnected to wider society. The fact that the market also involves other individuals is of little importance. They and their situations remain anonymous and impersonal. Taking action in the market is not an activity that connects one to others in anything other than the most superficial sense. For this reason, the goals of the enterprise cannot be generalized beyond its boundaries. It is an isolated group of actors whose values and interests, like those of the market, remain entirely non-generalizable from the societal perspective.

In this context, then, legitimate decision-making does not necessarily require what we would recognize as democratic processes. Since the commitment of participants to the order of the organization is essentially hypothetical, since the option of ‘exit’ always remains

open, and since managerial decisions are assumed to be effective, it can straightforwardly be assumed that community members actively consent to the authority of managers, whatever this should involve. They will have a positive normative commitment to managerial direction. In a word, the members of the organisational community are flexible. The other side of this employee commitment, however, is an open and liberal style of management. Flexibility is incompatible with a 'Theory X' approach to management (Pugh and Hickson, 1989, pp.156-61). From within the high commitment unitarist frame of reference, rigid, one-way authority relationships, the close pre-specification of employee effort, and surveillance-oriented supervision are all entirely inappropriate.

Integrative pluralism

From the perspective of the integrative pluralist frame of reference, the economic system cannot be represented as politically neutral or fair in itself. Rather, it embodies the values and interests of a limited group in society: the owners of capital and their agents in management. Just as the existence of competing interests in society does not mean that legitimate forms of political organization are impossible, this does not mean that the order of the enterprise cannot be valid. It simply means that validity must be the outcome of bargained compromises.

Those who adopt the integrative pluralist frame of reference see the demands of the market, articulated by employers or managers, as value-laden. They are pragmatic recommendations drawn up with the aim of realizing the values and interests of capital. As such, they may well be highly effective, but they will not be universally valid. As Flanders put it, 'Managerial initiative, even when it is intelligent and far-sighted, is taken to suit the aims of management and these do not necessarily coincide with the aims of unions and the people they represent' (1975, p.23). This having been said, it remains the case that the aims and values of management are perfectly legitimate in the sense of being socially permissible. Employers and the owners of capital are entitled to proper representation of their interests in the goals of the enterprise just as workers are. While it is not rational for workers to co-operate with employers (and vice versa) regardless of what the other wants to do, it is certainly rational to seek to strike a bargain in which each side gets as close to what it wants as is compatible with the same outcome for all; in other words, a bargain which is fair.

Since the validity of any bargain is defined in relation to this substantive standard, it cannot be said that a fair bargain is necessarily the best bargain possible for one side or the other on the basis of the empirical balance of power. The demands of the market have to be respected because they represent the legitimate interests of one group in society without the co-operation of which other groups could not pursue their own interests. The respect due, however, is limited by the need to accord equal respect to the interests of other groups. Once again, this kind of balance cannot be specified in concrete terms, but it is possible to draw up procedural parameters for negotiation that ensure that outcomes will be fair.

In the context of these kinds of bargaining procedure, the business plans and strategies of the enterprise are the concern of management alone, just as the aims and values of workers are no concern of management. What is of joint concern is the labour process, in which workers make the contribution for which they are compensated, and in which employers receive the value of the workers' labour power. The legitimacy of managerial authority depends not on the validity of the aims and values of management,

but on the validity of the compromise between these and the aims and values of employees. Where managerial instructions are coherent with a fair negotiated order, then they will be recognized as valid.

The conception of the economic system as a social structure that embodies interests beyond the organization means that the validity of the negotiated arrangements eventually agreed can be generalized beyond the organization. If the interests of employees are conceived in a solidaristic way, that is as a 'subset' of a workers' interest on a national or even international scale, then an organizational order based on fair compromise has a political-ethical validity at a high level. For those who have chosen to be involved, the rights and duties of the organizational order – in particular the duty to respect bargained agreements – represent not just mutual obligations, but obligations to society as a whole.

Bureaucratic unitarism

From the perspective of the bureaucratic unitarist frame of reference – in many ways assimilable to the classical Weberian model of political-administrative bureaucracy – economic success is seen as a positive social value, a benefit to society in general. However, the imperatives of the market are conceived broadly, in such a way as to be more or less self-evident. Much more important are the technical means by which these ends are achieved. This, rather than the interpretation of the market, is the focus of the expertise of management. The aim is to design and operate the most efficient and rational organization that is possible – to find something like Taylor's 'one best way' of organizing production. Corporate roles are conceived impersonally, in isolation from the capacities of individuals.

At the same time, the positive value status of the market means that conformity with the technical-bureaucratic requirements of organization is invested with an ethical value in such a way that the enterprise appears as a carrier of the values of the society in which it operates. The particular role of each employee may have no intrinsic value, but the fact of being a cog in the machine is nonetheless laudable, something to be proud of. The enterprise, with its extensive formal regulation and the culture that fixes an interpretation of these rules, is the focus of its employees' collective identity. The self-understanding of the enterprise is dominated by the technical needs of the employment system: what is good for the enterprise is good for its members.

The enterprise's role as a carrier of social values also means that it is likely to be accorded a de facto role in national economic governance. While enterprises may not feature in the legal structure of democracy, consultation with business leaders in advance of policy-making is entirely coherent with the idea that the economy is a legitimate social phenomenon.

Low commitment unitarism

Low commitment unitarism represents the most anomic possible conception of the enterprise: the meaningless corporate structure in pursuit of meaningless market goals. From this perspective, management is an entirely technical process encompassing both the interpretation of market imperatives and their translation into corporate action via organization structures and modes of production. Participation in the enterprise is wholly strategic and hence individuals will see duties as something to be minimized and rights as something to be maximized. The enterprise is likely to be characterized by rigid authority relationships, limitation of employee effort, and surveillance-oriented management.

The objectivist conception of both the economic and employment systems means that members of the enterprise will not consider themselves to be 'connected' to society via their participation in collective action. The two systems are not conceived as providing any normative linkage between actors. While normal social relations may persist outside the corporate context, within it actors are entirely isolated.

Adversarial (standard) pluralism

The key characteristic of the adversarial pluralist frame of reference is the belief that to act according to the demands of the economic system is to act in the interest of a certain social group of which employees are not members. Nevertheless, since employees, whether individually or collectively, can do nothing to change this situation, they are forced by their material circumstances to work within that economic system. It is therefore rational for employees to co-operate with employers – in the sense of working towards the fulfilment of market demands – if this co-operation is rewarded in such a way that their material needs are met. Similarly, employers can do little to change the politically or socially sanctioned ability of employees to resist their authority, whether this resistance takes the form of organized collective action or more individualized conflictual practices. Hence, it is rational for them to accept the power of workers as long as it is possible to maintain an adequate return on the investment in labour. The definition of adequacy here is tactical or pragmatic: an adequate reward or return on investment is the largest which is practically (politically) possible given the balance of power between capital and labour. Employees will carefully measure and restrict their input to ensure that the employer gains nothing for which she has not paid. For their part, employers will carefully monitor the behaviour of employees to ensure that their contribution is precisely as has been agreed.

On this view, both the demands of the economic system and the essentially non-economic individual or collective goals of workers or trade unions are reflected in the negotiated order that governs the enterprise. Perhaps most importantly, since market imperatives merely represent the intentions of a particular group, the viability of enterprises need not be damaged by the apparent non-optimality of enterprise action under these circumstances. All that is required is an adjustment of capital's expectations to the unavoidable social reality of worker power. Optimal corporate performance – from all perspectives – depends on the adoption of the most technically effective systems of collective bargaining.

Ethical Conflict

Where the market economic system is viewed positively, but the employment system is seen to be illegitimate – that is, the way in which action is coordinated is not thought to be rationally defensible – then the enterprise will experience political-ethical or even moral conflict. Participants will tend to blame the failure of the enterprise to construct a universally acceptable order on the other participants. Employees may blame corporate failure on managers, for issuing instructions that do not accurately capture the collective interest of the enterprise's members. Managers – who will consider that their instructions do properly reflect the collective interest – may in turn blame employees for refusing to comply, thereby unreasonably putting their individual interests ahead of those of the enterprise. In both cases, the blame has a moral character. The blamed participants are seen to be selfishly preventing the enterprise from effectively pursuing market goals, an activity of great value to society.

At the same time, the positive value status of the market may lead actors to remain within the enterprise despite its internal problems. The members of the organization will not persist with their conflictual relationships simply because of their individual material need, but because of the needs of the local community or society in general. While negotiated forms of organization may be seen as fundamentally forced, they will nonetheless be perceived as better than abandoning the enterprise altogether.

Localized Conflict

The distinction between the 'moral conflict' and 'localized conflict' enterprise frames of reference turns on the perception of the market. Whereas in the former case it is seen as social phenomenon, in the latter it is thought of as something objective. For this reason, the failure of participants in action to agree on modes of organization will not be considered an injury to society, but a matter of bad faith, ignorance or incompetence on the part of existing members of the enterprise. The conflict within the enterprise is therefore unrelated to any features of wider society. Members will persist with their participation in action only for as long as their individual situations mean that their interest in membership remains positive.

Class Conflict

Where the enterprise is conceived as the site of class conflict, participants' actions will be designed to pursue the partial values and interests of reference communities beyond the enterprise. From the perspective of this frame of reference, the enterprise is permanently and irrevocably divided into an 'us' and a 'them'. Division within the enterprise reflects the conflicting economic interests of capital and labour in wider society. An agreed definition of effective organization is simply impossible, as it makes no sense to argue that interests can be aligned even temporarily. Depending on whether one adopts an employee or managerial perspective, either the enterprise exploits the material need of the workers, or the workers exploit the initiative and organization of the enterprise. Each side coerces the other. The organizations of each side – employers' associations and trade unions – take on the aspect of conspiracies plotting to prevent the other from receiving its proper entitlements. Maintaining the enterprise in a minimally viable functional state is the best that can be hoped for.

Conclusions

In the author's opinion, Fox was by some way the most sophisticated exponent of the Oxford school of industrial relations research and the frames of reference approach has virtues far beyond its clarity and intuitive intellectual appeal. In particular, Fox drew essentially the same distinction between social action contexts that is at the centre of Habermas's social theory, the distinction between contexts in which social action is coordinated via steering mechanisms – contexts that for Fox are characterised by structurally-determined role behaviour – and contexts in which it is determined by the mess of beliefs, opinions, sociocultural norms and conventions that form the backdrop of everyday life. More importantly, Fox managed to suggest a mechanism, the frames of reference, by which those very different contexts are related and can influence each other, something which Habermas has never managed to do convincingly. Fox recognised that social systems and structures could be interpreted as something other than objective, meaningless phenomena; that they could be subject to normative as well as functional

evaluation and that these evaluations had important consequences for behaviour, most notably the willingness of employees to cooperate with their employers. As we have defined them here, frames of reference include models of system functioning, historical knowledge about the outcome of actions within systems, and evaluations of the overall normative character of systems. They are produced and reproduced through personal experience of participating in social action in systemic contexts, as well as through education and other socialization processes both within and beyond the workplace. They are simultaneously pragmatic and normative, not only representing (more or less rational) expectations relating actions to outcomes, but also according an overarching value-status to systems, giving direction and meaning to the social action carried out within them. For this reason we have proposed that social norms and values – informal coordination mechanisms – are significant precisely because they are key elements in the determination of which frame of reference is adopted.

In adding the radical frame of reference to the unitarist and pluralist frames Fox also touched on two important ideas. First, there is the idea that social systems may embody partial rather than universal values and interests and that the adoption of a frame of reference is influenced by an assessment of where the individual stands in relation to those values and interests. Second, there is the idea that the structures of the employment situation have a market economic aspect and an employment system aspect, and that normative assessments of each of these aspects can be made separately. What Fox does not seem to recognise is the possibility that social systems can be and frequently are interpreted as meaningless; as being insusceptible to normative evaluation. For these reasons he was unable to distinguish between the different types of unitarism and pluralism in the way that we have done here.

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