Academic Industrial Relations – Interdisciplinary Scholars in an Arid Environment

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Who and What is academic industrial relations?

Academic Industrial Relations in Australia and New Zealand is about forty years old – although, of course, aspects of the field have been studied for much longer. (see e.g. C. W. Goodwin, 1967 or A.E.C Hare or Mark Perlman or the inestimable The Australasian Manufacturer). Even from these we see that industrial relations is a social science discipline.

It is one of the social sciences because it deals with a central politico-economic activity in society – the nature of work and employment. As such it differs from much of the physical, natural, behavioural or business sciences, and studies in law or the humanities in its epistemological and methodological approaches. It differs from other social sciences which deal with work and employment in its multi-disciplinarity, its innate normative assumptions and its breadth. (Dogan and Pahr, 1989)

Academic industrial relations is an academic discipline because it is a focal point of research and teaching in which theories and epistemology rest on shared intellectual assumptions. (Such assumptions, of course, ignore older determinations of disciplines. Any iterative analysis of such determinations would lead to the view that almost nothing studied by the modern researcher is disciplinary – rather such studies are in fields of studies of sub-specialisms. Such semantics are not helpful in the study of ideas. (Graham, et al., 1983))

In general a field of study or discipline is comprised of an intellectual domain (the focal topics, theories, epistemology and methodology) a tribe of scholars, their outputs (conferences, journals and teaching) and a shared history. (Kelly, 1999)

The discipline of IR has always had many links with economic, legal, labour, business and management scholarship, as well as work psychology, political science, and sociology of work and industry.

Like political science, economic history and work psychology, our discipline has always been substantively based rather than methodologically based. Our bailiwick has been the administration and control of work and employment – in both the macro and the micro – drawing on multiple epistemological and methodological sources. The inclusion of both the macro and the micro has
been deeply important. Our abiding interests and concerns to integrate, rather than separate macro and micro make us unusual. All of these attributes have been our intellectual domain.

Many scholars in the field of intellectual ideas have likened the scholars of a discipline to a tribe. Each discipline has its own key language, witch doctors, elders, young guns and artefacts of power and influence. Like a tribe (or a culture) there are seemingly hidden messages of what is good and bad behaviour, what is considered bold, and what is considered bizarre or worse. (Becher, 1989, Platt, 1996)

Today, the scholars here in Queenstown comprise a fair number of the tribe of IR, and perhaps a few from neighbouring tribes who are interested in what we do, or who can see useful connections or synergies.

WHERE HAVE WE BEEN?

IR developed as an academic discipline in the 1950s and 1960s - first with occasional units/papers within economics or law courses, and eventually into full majors. As the teaching grew, so too did the number of scholars/teachers. For, according to the mores of the wider tribe of academia, the teacher must be a scholar too. The development of IR teaching and research has thus grown in tandem.

Underpinning an understanding of the development of all disciplines, is the concept of the transmission of ideas. This is because, alongside and bound to a discipline's dialect and mores, are notions of what are mainstream ideas, (acceptable) on the one hand, and and, on the other hand, what are 'radical' or heterodox ideas - those streams which question the core assumptions or theories or priorities of the mainstream. The ‘mainstream’ of IR has been through at least three watershed epochs.

First in the 1960s, in its initial development, there was the question of whether the study of management should be included. (It was initially, then eliminated in the 1970s, and recently has returned)

In the 1970s, the scholarly path forked. On the one hand there was the lure of labour process theory. On the other hand IR scholars in Australia and New Zealand evaluated the worth of the complex and particularistic British “Donovan” approach vis a vis the assumption that the positivist Dunlopian American approach to labour relations with its close links to neo-classical economics was superior. (If you believe the textbooks, Dunlop won!)

As an advance on this there were continuing efforts in the 1980s, especially in Australia, to make IR a positivist proto-economics discipline, but all the while labour process theory had driven a strong undercurrent and produced some
fine scholarship (Bray and Taylor, 1986) – albeit not one which has been without critics. (Nyland, 1989) Moreover in the 1980s the experiments in corporatism (a rich field for IR scholars) reveal another attribute of IR as an academic discipline – that we have been scholars able to deal with immediate issues – even a quick survey of titles of the NZJIR and the JIR reveal our ready willingness to investigate the events of the days with quite unusual immediacy.

The third watershed for IR (in this extraordinarily potted history of a discipline which is far more complex), was the great shot across the bows in the late 1980s - 1990 from HRM. I have argued elsewhere that despite the warning publications in USA and UK, the arrival of HRM (seemingly fully formed and totally confident of that discipline's superiority) was an intellectual shock for Australian and New Zealand IR scholars. Yet despite all the forebodings, IR has persisted and grown as an academic discipline.

THE ARID ENVIRONMENT

Meeting the shock of HRM has meant compromise and complexity for the Antipodean IR scholars – but it has also re-enriched the discipline – it has been a goad to better scholarship, it has forced us to take on debates we'd rather ignore, and consider values that many find irksome. (Kelly, forthcoming)

This has been because there is one more attribute of IR scholarship which is constantly present but not always recognised – that is the normative values of fairness and social justice. Even the Bolgers and BCA's talked social justice – they may not be the concepts of social justice held by everyone in this room – but as value laden concepts, social justice and fairness will always be subjective. Nevertheless, a commitment to social justice and fairness have long been core aspects of IR scholarship. In the main, and drawing on the long traditions going back to the Webbs and the like, our scholarship has given weight to what has been seen to be fair and just for employees and their families.

What has happened in recent years has been an increasingly impoverished environment for notions like social justice and fairness. It started more clearly in NZ before Australia - the incorporation of business values as societal values. The ECA in New Zealand showed the way - what was tantamount in that legislation were the values of business – those of the citizenry in general, and the employees in particular were to be suborned to those of business, in particular big business. (This has been a wonderfully curious stance in Australia where the Liberal Party has held fewer and fewer values of
liberalism-as-philosophy. (Keenoy and Kelly, 1998, pp.185-7) Concepts like “service” and ‘community’ have been distorted or marginalised, while foundation concepts of democracy like ‘moral citizenship’ have simply been eliminated.

Moreover, scholarship itself is in danger of becoming rigidified because the environment for universities has changed greatly. Education is for a purpose beyond its intrinsic worth. Now education is a means to an end – education is simply preparation for employment, and often the inculcation of business values.

Allied to these changes has been the immense effect of political spin doctors who aid public figures to promote slogans and simplism – in Australia slogans such as “the politics of envy” has been used to demean and diminish the stature and legitimacy of those who would question regressive income distribution.

And of course, the traditional negative media approach to trade unions has gained great ground from the relentless over-simplification – even in the currently milder climes of NZ.

For the IR scholars – with their interdisciplinary approaches, their commitment to social justice, and a ‘fair go’, their unquestioned assumptions that analysis of the micro cannot be undertaken without understanding the macro, their willingness to explore occupations or industries, pay equality or power, - this overwhelming and constant legitimisation given to the simplistic (rather than the complex) is indeed an arid environment.

And there is one more great problem – we are good – we know that – but we are nearly invisible. In my research for this and other projects I have read a great deal of the disciplinary literature of our neighbouring disciplines – rarely if ever do they cite IR material. That may have been understandable in the days when many of us examined labour law, trade union government and arbitration, but it is a disappointing surprise to see that these days. Only look at the topics and studies in this conference and you will see that we are most effectively seeping into areas that could provide great insights into those disciplines. I was particularly surprised to find a recent article by Flora Gill for example in the Journal of Socio-Economics which had the major title “The Meaning of Work” – without citing one IR contribution. This of course could reflect the bias of the writer – who has indeed attended at least one AIRAANZ Conference – but it is nevertheless symptomatic of our invisibility.

WHAT’S TO BE DONE?

In the face of the persuasiveness in all the ideas in the 1970s/1980s of the Dunlop/Donovan/ labour process rubrics, the intellectual domain of academic
IR changed shape and eventually drew on parts of all of these major strands – indeed, more than these. If there is an unsung and magnificent IR tradition, it has been the capacity to investigate the employment-environment nexus, no matter how rapidly things were shifting.

Under the current 21st century pressures in public opinion – national and global – our discipline (which has always been so responsive to changes in ideas or laws or policies about work and employment) will undoubtedly change again. But how it will change - how it will respond will depend on us - the tribe of scholars. In the face of this aridity, what must be done?

MOVING FORWARD?

AIRAANZ began in 1983 because a group of then mostly young scholars wanted to generate debate and questions the old ‘truths’. It began as a group of scholars - teachers who could see the richness of IR, and who wanted to take the tribe out of narrow concerns and well-worn methodological paths. They were hopeful young idealists who wanted to challenge the old guard and use their research and teaching to the benefit of both social science scholarship and the work relations in Australia, New Zealand and beyond. Now, perhaps they are the old fogies. At least they are still enthusiastic scholars who seek to make a difference through their scholarship.

To keep IR strong in Australia and NZ

A Prescription of seven - each necessary but not sufficient

a) Good scholarship – a value laden concept – what the historians see as great history is poor science for the neo-classical economist

b) Links to other disciplines

c) Publishing outside our discipline

d) Questioning big truths and small myths

e) Holding fast to the normative and interdisciplinary approaches

f) Continue to be critical AND supportive of our fellow scholars

g) Using our teaching to greater effect – in transmitting ideas the next generation are the most effective carriers

Conclusion
In the environment in which the founders of researched and taught, most of their ideals were quite widely accepted. Your task is much more difficult and yet much more important - I urge you, the tribe of 2002, to confront the arid environment and carry on the ideals of good scholarship, to the benefit of the academic social sciences and fair and just work relations in Australia, New Zealand and beyond.

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