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Rethinking Industrial Relations: appraisal, application and augmentation

Gregor Gall¹ and Jane Holgate²

Introduction

It was just twenty years ago that John Kelly's *Rethinking Industrial Relations* (1998) was published. It is one of those rare books to be found on many of the bookshelves of people working in the field of industrial relations. To reflect on the book's significance, we have brought together a number of researchers and scholars to create this special issue to both celebrate, as well as constructively critique, the contribution it has made to subsequent studies of union organising and mobilisation. The contributors to this special issue hold that *Rethinking Industrial Relations* is one of the key and outstanding contributions to the study of employment and industrial relations in the last generation. Indeed, *Rethinking Industrial Relations* is more than a worthy successor to the radical *magnum opuses* of Richard Hyman's 1975 *Industrial Relations: a Marxist introduction*, and Paul Edwards' 1986 *Conflict at Work: A Materialist Analysis of Workplace Relations*. This is because the vista of *Rethinking Industrial Relations* is wider than these predecessors. It introduced mobilisation theory to industrial relations in an attempt to re-invigorate a declining and less-influential field of study, and made a political and intellectual contribution to the praxis of worker collectivism. With that in mind, many of the contributions in this special issue have—as part of an approach of constructive critique—sought to develop and extend the analytical (conceptual and theoretical) purchase of *Rethinking Industrial Relations* by fleshing out particular components of the main thesis contained within it. This introduction to the special issue provides some reflections on the changes in the political economy of employment, and industrial relations, since the mid to late 1990s when *Rethinking Industrial Relations* was being written. It then examines the initial reception to *Rethinking Industrial Relations* in terms of its scholarly reviews before providing an overview of the papers in this special issue.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose

At its heart, *Rethinking Industrial Relations* is a forceful and robust critique of the employment relationship and employment relations under capitalism. The book adopts a radical and Marxist perspective—not from the school of academic Marxism—but from activist and political interventionist perspectives, which explains why its interest has spread beyond the academy. Ten years after publication, we witnessed the enduring nature of capitalism despite the unfolding global financial crisis. In fact, capital has strengthened its hold as a result of the continued neo-liberal hegemony and the financialisation of economies. Employers, as the main body of the capitalist class, continue to hold the whip hand in the employment relationship, and the main organs of workers' representation, namely, unions, continue to be severely challenged in providing effective collective interest representation for their members and labour in general. Oppositional combativeness has largely been replaced by grudging acquiescence as unions have lost power and effectiveness. With the exception of Britain, the last vestiges of social democratic parties have adopted a form of social liberalism and the political challenge from the radical left has receded, with the examples of France, Germany, Greece, Spain and Britain showing, respectively, crisis, stasis, incorporation, decline and isolation.³ It is into this context, that the current epoch of capitalism should be seen in terms of how

¹ Gregor Gall is an Affiliate Research Associate at the University of Glasgow (Gregor.Gall@glasgow.ac.uk)

²Jane Holgate is Professor of Work and Employment Relations at the University of Leeds (j.holgate@leeds.ac.uk)

³ In terms of external international developments rather than internal domestic developments. Thus, should a Corbyn-led government come to pass, it would be an outlier within Europe, representing

it has a bearing upon reading *Rethinking Industrial Relations*. To put it bluntly, and notwithstanding systemic instability, neo-liberalism⁴ has strengthened its grip, making the situation identified in *Rethinking Industrial Relations* as not just the same but also significantly worse for the radical left as a combined intellectual and political project. Hence, the sense that ‘the more things change, the more they stay the same’ because the vast majority of innovations in society have been taken by capital and have strengthened its ability to increase the level of exploitation and oppression of labour.

The ‘gig economy’ and ‘employability’ are just two of the most obvious examples of where capital via financialisation has been able to transfer risks and obligations to labour in order to extend control over workers and increase the rate of exploitation. And whilst it has not all been one-way traffic for employers, as we have witnessed unions attempting to fight back, it is, nevertheless, apparent that developments and innovations in union organising, community unionism and social movement unionism have not been sufficient to turn back the tide of neo-liberalism and head towards a renewal, at the very least, of social democracy (much less anything discernibly socialist). Strikes against the likes of Amazon (in Germany and Poland), Lidl (Belgium and Portugal) and TFI Friday’s, Deliveroo and McDonald’s (in Britain) are still testament that, unfortunately, ‘two swallows do not make a summer’ and ‘mighty oak trees’ do not always grow out of ‘little acorns’. Workers’ economic insecurity and instability has grown as the safety net of the welfare state has shrunk and as workers seek to manage by having multiple jobs.

The organisational infrastructure for the joint (bilateral between capital and labour or trilateral between capital, labour and state) regulation of employment relations continues to be remade, with those institutions of collective bargaining suffering most as trajectories toward deregulation and ‘soft’ regulation gather pace. There have been shifts in the sectoral location of the extant workforce and further changes to the composition of the working class with a continuing decline in manufacturing in many countries and growth in the (private) service sector (especially with its incursions into the public sector). Here employers have taken the opportunity to further fragment the structure of the employment relationship by heavy use of sub-contracting. Meantime and reflecting developments in the organisation of the political economy of capitalism, the dominant spatial concentrations of the working-class continue to change—moving eastwards to south-east Asia, westwards to western Europe from eastern Europe, northwards from the Middle East and Africa to Europe.

All this makes difficult terrain for organising and mobilising, no matter how these tasks are conceived (see, for example, Holgate *et al.* this issue). And yet there is something particularly profound happening within this on-going crisis of working-class interest representation. The way in

the coming together of social discontent with historical accident (receiving enough nominations to stand as a leadership candidate within a vastly changed Labour Party electoral system).

⁴ The term, neo-liberalism, is used to denote the global process of the successful struggle by capital (and its agents) to redraw the frontier of economic and political control back in favour of itself in order to resolve the crisis of capitalist profitability. What is most distinctive about neo-liberalism, compared to liberalism, is its willingness and ability to use the state to deregulate the economy whilst also increasingly regulating labour in order to create conducive conditions for the return of capitalist profitability. The relationship of neo-liberalism to neo-conservatism is seen to be that neo-conservatism emerged as a rightward moving political reaction in the United States to the emergence of influential progressive social movements and social liberalism (such as the ‘Great Society’ and continuation of the ‘New Deal’) there. The emergence of neo-conservatism in the United States played a large part in globally promulgating neo-liberalism given the size and influence of the US economy as well as its imperialist project.

which capitalism continually restructures and reshapes itself—with all its attendant implications for employment and the employment relationship— does not abolish wage labour and the dependence of capital upon labour. What it has done is make some of the dependence more fragile, more rigid and more concentrated (see Moody 2017). It is in this context that it is perplexing that workers and their unions have not more fully realised the potential of using detailed power analysis to find the vulnerabilities in just-in-time systems, extended supply lines, and so on, to push back and advance against capital (see Gall 2013a, 2013b). Whilst appropriate worker organisations to carry out this task are critical, organisation comes out of and is reified by appropriate worker consciousness, as the bedrock upon which oppositional collective organisation rests.

Where does this leave *Rethinking Industrial Relations*? Are its premises and intentions confounded and challenged by this trajectory or, are they reinforced and needed ever more? The further tipping of the balance of power in favour of capital at the expenses of labour (and the state) and the rather one-sided nature of the current class-war suggests the scope of the intellectual challenge to *Rethinking Industrial Relations* is now greater than ever. Indeed, the absence of an expected upturn in working-class struggle, as set out by Kelly in his section on long wave theory, aptly makes this point.⁵ But this can be read as essentially a challenge for the application of the ideas contained within *Rethinking Industrial Relations* rather than for the core intellectual foundations of the book itself. Marxist ideas and theory are continually said by ideological opponents to be worthy of nothing other than confinement to the dustbin of history. With a little less regularity and occasioned by crises in their system, Marxist ideas and theory are sometimes acknowledged by the more thinking representatives of capital, like the *Economist* and *Financial Times*, to continue to have significant explanatory powers and, hence, undergo periodic revivals in (limited) popularity.⁶ However, if *Rethinking Industrial Relations* is viewed as being stronger on explaining how sectional struggles of workers can and do emerge, it can perhaps be suggested that the book is weaker on explaining how class-wide struggles of workers can and do emerge (and not because of the criticism of its use of long wave theory above). Here the issue of consciousness is critical, whether because of ebbs and flows of working-class consciousness or the colonisation of working-class consciousness by neo-liberal ideology.

Within the field of study of employment and industrial relations, the desire to research, analyse and explain the effects of neo-liberalism upon labour, work, and employment remains undimmed. The attendant and consequential breaking down of long-held patterns of attitudes and behaviours structuring the relationship between capital and labour, however, has also led to other intellectual developments in the field. These span the emergence and influence of intersectionality (McBride *et al.* 2014) making the case for a greater understanding of diverse forms of oppression and the impact these have on worker organisation; the publication of *Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage*⁷ (Hall and Soskice, 2001) as an intellectual intervention to support the concept of coordinated market economies, and the continued pursuit of partnership between capital and labour to elicit mutual gains. In some respects, these have been more challenging to, than reinforcing of, the theses of *Rethinking Industrial Relations* for they operate outside the theoretical framework set out by Kelly. But in other respects—with the exception of intersectionality—they have been re-treads of earlier arguments to which *Rethinking Industrial Relations* covered and responded, and again in the case of intersectionality, can be accommodated within the theoretical framework of *Rethinking Industrial Relations* (especially with regards to mobilisation).

⁵ Others like Clawson (2003) have also been disappointed with the absence of an expected upturn.

⁶ This was also the case on the occasion of the bicentenary of Marx's birth on 5 May 1818.

⁷ This work had been cited over 12,000 times by March 2018 according to Google Scholar.

Responses to *Rethinking Industrial Relations*

In this section, we review the responses and receptions to *Rethinking Industrial Relations*, primarily but not exclusively, in terms of the book's reviews. Elsewhere in this special issue various authors address a number of aspects of how *Rethinking Industrial Relations* has been used and applied. Starting with what was an unusual intervention, given the medium was a review of another book and seven years after the publication of *Rethinking Industrial Relations*, Fairbrother (2005) made something of an acerbic and dismissive attack upon *Rethinking Industrial Relations* from a radical position. This contrasts with other radical researchers and writers making equally searching criticisms, but from a far more fraternal and productive basis. Fairbrother (2005: 258, 261) argued with Kelly articulating a vanguardist view of union renewal and revival:

Put baldly, trade unionism is in a down period, but workers will eventually heed the call of progressive leaders and reorganise...Unfortunately, the Kelly analysis displays a regrettable partiality. Although there has been some critical assessment of the book, it has mainly been of a minor corrective kind rather than being a comprehensive assessment of the theoretical foundations of the analysis, which would challenge the partiality of union form advocated by Kelly. While there can be no dispute that the processes of mobilisation are important and must be studied, this theory is predicated on one form of unionism, namely a vanguardist conception of unionism...[A]ll is well, the leaders will lead and we will be led...This focus amounts to a partial and overly psychologised thesis that is misleadingly titled 'mobilisation', rather than 'vanguardist'.

In other words, Fairbrother (2005: 289) charged Kelly with creating a framework for analysis devoid of 'the considerations of class structure and consciousness, the examination of the social relations of production and service, forms of collective organisation and action, and the mosaic of solidarity and participative actions that define such processes. But all is well, the leaders will lead and we will be led'. This is not a reading of *Rethinking Industrial Relations* that we recognise or believe holds water (see also Moore 2011: 53). Indeed, and by contrast, Fairbrother suggested union democracy and participation were the key components of unions as collective organisations, and in doing so, was somewhat 'blinker'd' (to use Fairbrother's chosen adjective) to considerations of union effectiveness that do not directly stem from issues of democracy and participation (see also Gall 1998).

Again coming from a radical perspective, Nolan (1999: 575, 576) begins with some barbed comments before charging in a somewhat cursory review that *Rethinking Industrial Relations* 'promises much more than it delivers', that it 'contains a number of avoidable weaknesses' like overstating the weakness of those criticised, and does 'not succeed in augmenting the limited stock of theory and concepts in AIR [academic industrial relations], of which he is so critical'. His review finished by stating: '...it is difficult to escape the conclusion that this book will be remembered chiefly for its attempt at mobilising, mining and interpreting data rather than for its theoretical contribution. A worthwhile attempt at serious critical reflection, a sympathetic reviewer might say, but an academic 'tour de force' [quoting from Ed Heery on the back cover] it is not'.

We believe that subsequent developments in the literature, notwithstanding any critical observations in this special issue and Nolan's reasoned criticism of the chapter on long-wave theory, do not support this standpoint. From a feminist perspective, Wajcman (2000: 189) argued *Rethinking Industrial Relations* was gender-blind: 'Kelly's important book on mobilization and collectivism is a missed opportunity in this respect [gender issues]. He convincingly argues that academic industrial relations should 'redirect our attention away from bargaining structures and institutions and towards the social processes of industrial relations' (Kelly 1998: 38), thereby placing analyses of power and injustice in the workplace at the core. Yet his discussion of how individuals with a sense

of injustice coalesce into a social movement takes no account of power inequalities between the sexes and the way in which such inequalities are increasingly perceived as illegitimate. The possibility that the labour movement might have something to learn from the women's movement is not even considered'. Kelly (2000: 171) recognised this as an area 'unjustifiably omitted', suggesting Acker's (2002) charge of economism (see below) may have some validity as would subsequent writings on intersectionality.

By contrast to Fairbrother and Nolan, and not hailing from a radical but rather a self-confessed 'traditional pluralist' perspective (Martin 1999:1215), Martin (1999) provides one of the more extended and constructively critical considerations of *Rethinking Industrial Relations*. Concurring with Kelly, he begins by noting the absence of adequate theory of industrial relations and the absence of the adequate use of theory in industrial relations. However, Martin is heavily critical of what he believes to be Kelly's incomplete exposition of mobilisation theory and its weak links to long wave theory and the veracity of long wave theory itself. Although he argues Kelly's exposition of mobilisation theory is useful when seeking to explain conflict, Martin suggests it is partial when seeking to explain wider industrial relations. He also questions the strength of the empirical basis for validating the exposition of mobilisation theory. Nevertheless, he concludes that *Rethinking Industrial Relations* 'is an intellectually stimulating riposte to the proponents of the inevitable triumph of the strategic management of human resources' (Martin 1999: 2015). In developing a neo-pluralist framework for analysing and theorising employment relations, Ackers (2002: 14) upbraids *Rethinking Industrial Relations* for being a return to 'an old-style Marxist problematic as if nothing has changed in the world or sociological theory in the last twenty or so years' and which is essentially economic and vanguardist.

Turner (1999: 507) praised *Rethinking Industrial Relations* as:

... a first-rate book, an ambitious and wide-ranging attempt to bring mobilization theory into the mainstream of industrial relations and analysis. In this effort, Kelly criticizes much previous work in industrial relations as theoretically weak, and at the same time offers a persuasive alternative perspective. This is a book that advances our knowledge, pushing even the reader who disagrees with Kelly to re-examine, refine and revise existing theoretical frameworks. The arguments are innovative and fresh, a welcome addition, and stimulus, to contemporary theoretical debates.

Unlike Nolan, Turner (1999 :508) was also impressed by the chapter on long waves from a position of scepticism into 'at least agnosticism'. However, he then added that: 'There is, of course, a fly in the ointment of this otherwise excellent book' (Turner 1999: 508). This referred to Turner's social democratic type-perspective and his advocacy of co-determination and works councils as a form of labour-capital partnership (see Turner 1997, 1998), whence he expands: 'From everything else written in this book, social partnership would appear to be a concept—and a desirable way to consolidate union power for the long upswings and downswings following inevitably brief periods of broad mobilization—that the author would endorse, if he only understood it' (Turner 1999:509). Twenty years later, and with the continuing decline of co-determination in Germany, it remains far self-evident that Turner was correct and Kelly incorrect.

Gall (1999) provided an extended engagement with *Rethinking Industrial Relations* to which Kelly (2000) replied and Gall (2000) responded. It would seem there is some overlap with the analysis of Martin (1999) but from quite a contrasting intellectual and political perspective. Gall (1999: 328) argued *Rethinking Industrial Relations* 'will no doubt be referred as a seminal work by some within the fields of industrial relations and industrial sociology...and, while understandable because of its considerable strengths and because of Kelly's stature, this should not preclude a consideration of its significant limitations or omissions'. Foreshadowing a number of more developed observations and

arguments made by the likes of Holgate, Simms and Tapia as well as those of Darlington (both this issue), Gall (1999:331-332) considered that, *inter alia*, Kelly's use of Tilly's (1978) conceptualisation of mobilisation conflated two quasi-separate processes, namely, the construction of the resources for mobilisation and the deployment of those resources in the act of mobilisation itself, while also inadequately theorising leadership in terms of understanding why some leaders gain traction with some followers in some situations and not others even when the same process of preparing for mobilisation has taken place. Criticism is levelled at the use of long wave theory, and the sparse evidence based used to support his arguments against postmodernism (Gall 1999: 335-336). Gall's (1999: 336-341) strongest criticism is reserved for *Rethinking Industrial Relations* with regards to the issues of workers' confidence, the influence of political parties upon unions, and the creative or destructive nature of social movement allies upon workers' organisation and militancy. But the spirit in which these observations and arguments were made by Gall was to seek to help lay out the grounds for finessing, and therefore building upon, strong foundations, not suggest the foundations were weak, much less needed to be torn down and reconstructed. Indeed, the call was made for greater and tighter specification *within* the analytical framework of mobilisation that *Rethinking Industrial Relations* set out.

Kelly (2000: 167) regarded this critique as 'very thorough and generally fair' as well as correct in pointing out some areas that were 'under-theorised'. He responded to the three major areas of workers' confidence, the influence of political parties upon unions, and the impact of social movements for labour unionism, whereby he argued the former point could be incorporated within mobilisation theory and on the latter he provided a particularly strong and robust reply (Kelly 2000: 171-172). Gall (2000:175) recognised response as 'fraternal and constructive'. Gall (2000: 176) also noted at this early stage after publication that *Rethinking Industrial Relations* was being cited and used superficially by other industrial relations academics, arguing 'this is not because of the weaknesses of Kelly's thesis and arguments, which I argued can only be dissected once the underlying and overall strengths [of *Rethinking Industrial Relations*] are recognised'.

Finally, we now turn to consider the reception to *Rethinking Industrial Relations* amongst some other (later) writers of a radical bent. So while Ghigliani (2010: 15) observed that while *Rethinking Industrial Relations* 'offers a balanced theoretical framework for the study of workers' collectivism by taking insights from different sources', he argues that the framework for interest definition rests wrongly upon 'individualistic assumptions' because 'collective action is portrayed as an aggregation of individuals' and this leads to a narrower than needed focus upon injustice as the prime source of motivation to act. The thrust of the argument from Atzeni (2009, 2010) in this regard is similar but more extended. Atzeni questions the order of causation as per Kelly's exposition of mobilisation theory, and argues it is essentially premised on studying union organising and proffers a more structurally determinist approach to what is implied to be Kelly's voluntaristic and subjectivist one. Atzeni (2009: 15) concludes by saying:

By criticising the subjective nature of injustice and stressing the importance of labour-process-generated solidarity, this [critique] has contributed to a conceptualisation of mobilisation as fully inserted in the sphere of class action. Kelly's contribution remains very important as it is certainly a useful tool for trade unions' and leaders' action. However, a more structurally grounded conceptualisation is needed. This [critique] has tried to engage with it, and in doing so it may have reinforced Kelly's overall vision of the theory as framed by a Marxist logic of society and economy.

A similar criticism is made by Cohen (2006, 2011) in terms of the importance of the contradictions of capitalism providing the foundations for worker resistance. What is important to note in these three aforementioned critiques is both the tone of writing and the content itself. Compared to Fairbrother and Nolan, the tone is far more sympathetic and attentive because of recognition of the strengths of

Rethinking Industrial Relations while the content is constructively creative even it has some parallels with Fairbrother's criticism of the alleged undue emphasis on the importance of activism and leadership as well as presenting a reading of a key part of *Rethinking Industrial Relations*, which is not recognised by others (see, for example, Moore 2011: 56).

This section indicates that many of the initial responses to *Rethinking Industrial Relations* were not only mixed but quite sharply divided. Consideration of a number of later receptions to *Rethinking Industrial Relations* by other radical writers demonstrated that it continued to achieve sympathetic but not uncritical traction. Indeed, the two papers in this special edition by Gall, and Holgate, Simms and Tapia explore this aspect. And, with regards to the thrust of one part of the argument made by Gall, it is interesting to note that the leading Marxist or materialist theoreticians writing about workplace conflict between capital and labour like the aforementioned Hyman (2001, Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick 2013) and Edwards (2006, Edwards and Wajcman 2005, Edwards *et al.* 2006) have neither used nor engaged with *Rethinking Industrial Relations*, much less sought to develop any of its components.⁸

Appraisal, application and augmentation

In this section, we wish to bring out some of the common strands and themes that run through the papers in this special issue in order to show that not only should they be read together as an extended and inter-connected assessment but that their whole is also greater than the sum of their parts. Together, the papers help appraise the central theses of *Rethinking Industrial Relations*, examine their application and seek to augment them by development and refinement. We begin by reviewing the individual papers though.

Using a number of dimensions, Bruce Kaufman provides a searching critique of *Rethinking Industrial Relations* from what might be best described as a form of radical pluralist, maybe even social democratic, perspective. To our eyes, while the some of the questions raised are legitimate and productive, they can be convincingly answered and some of the subsequent papers help do this. Other questions posed may seem somewhat 'leftfield' in that while *Rethinking Industrial Relations* is grounded in the British experience of industrial relations (and the study of that), it is also of a greater generic purchase than Kaufman suggests (see Gall 1999: 328). Moreover, we believe, the similarities of various economies moving towards more decentralised and fragmented systems⁹ of employment relations under the neo-liberal era of capitalism as well as the transnational turn to union organising and social movement unionism for the revitalisation of organised labour increase this purchase.

In their contribution Jane Holgate, Melanie Simms and Maite Tapia consider how the mobilization theory outlined by Kelly has been used by other researchers and writers in order to distinguish between mobilising and organising with the consequent purpose of identifying the processes by which the power and participation of workers is generated and deployed. This is an exercise in all three of appraisal, application and augmentation. Mobilising refers to the application of usable power—or the attempt to do so—from an existing organisational base, while organising refers to the wider process of creating the organisational and associational forms from which mobilisation, amongst other things, may then take place. The authors argue there has been tendency to conflate

⁸ As one might expect, this has come without any explanation in these texts or in their earlier texts, leaving the reader none the wiser as to the reasons, especially when other conceptual and theoretical developments have been put forward by them in these texts.

⁹ Of course, employer structures even if formally decentralised and fragmented seldom are in practice as the *de facto* state differs from the *de jure* state in that employers have innovated in the ways and means of aggregating their power in order to reinforce their power.

the terms 'organising' and 'mobilisation', and this matters from both an analytical and a practical perspective. As such, they offer a distinction that can be useful for academics and trade unionists alike in attempting to analyse and implement organising and mobilising activities. The import of what they seek to do is clarify the constituent components of their preference for 'deep organising' (McAlevy 2016). But, as highlighted by their discussion of Atzeni's (2009) research, the order of causation maybe more complex than they suggest if mobilising is taken to be, at one time, the narrower process predicated on grievance resolution and yet, at other times, running in train with organising.

Holgate, Simms and Tapia discuss aspects of framing and leadership which Ralph Darlington in his paper develops further by concentrating on activism, leadership and followership, especially in the form of union activists and lay and employed union officials and officers. He seeks to flesh out some of the issues which *Rethinking Industrial Relations* left under- or undeveloped and others which, he argues, need refinement and clarification. Following his earlier work, Darlington's argument emphasises the importance of left-wing activism and leadership. The traditionally offered counters to this are the cases of where struggles have been led by moderates and the right, like, for example, the successful 'Drive for 35' (see McKinlay and McNulty 1992), where, despite being the leadership, the left has not been able to lead struggles, and where—without suggesting that it has been a case of 'despite of' or 'in spite of'—the left has led struggles, but the relationship between its wider politics and those of members remain discordant and unaligned. He also draws upon the conceptualisation of the 'union bureaucracy' as a conservative although not always omnipotent force which contrasts with Kelly's view of union leadership and organisation as more polyarchical than oligarchical (Kelly and Heery 1994).

In her contribution, Eleanor Kirk focuses upon how *Rethinking Industrial Relations* can help develop our understanding of the evolving myriad forms of worker mobilisation arising from conflict in the workplace, and especially those not based upon the strike method or via labour unions. This task is carried out by considering whether there has been a displacement effect at work with regard to the traditional methods for the expression and resolution of workplaces grievances *contra* more individualised, newer and unconventional methods. In particular, Kirk seeks to integrate the insights of the salient industrial relations literature with those emanating from labour process theory and sociology of work. To do this, Kirk makes some developments to mobilisation theory as laid out in *Rethinking Industrial Relations* in terms of trying to understand why certain methods may be chosen over others at certain points in time. However, in an accompanying piece to this paper (see Gall and Kirk 2018), it becomes clear that comprehensive data across space and time to test these new insights and propositions is currently lacking so that extensive fieldwork will be needed to augment what little that does exist. In that process, as Kirk alludes to in her conclusion, further clarification and amplification of the relationship of various inter-linkages between industrial relations and labour process theory will take place.

Ed Heery examines what may be the most under-considered chapter in *Rethinking Industrial Relations*, namely, that on postmodernism. He argues that it has continuing salience today despite the lack of engagement with the arguments. Drawing upon his own work on civil society organisations, he does this by examining the relationship between labour unionism and other social movements, especially in terms of that which was outlined *Rethinking Industrial Relations*, namely, fusion or replacement. But in doing so and using the work of others, Heery develops a classification which goes beyond this simple binary. This involves the categories of coalition, affiliation, mimesis and absorption. Perhaps, to these could be added non-engagement (even of a not unfriendly kind) and neutrality as well as a stronger sense that union positions (or those of any subordinate or superordinate levels within unions) will vary considerably over space and time due to changes in

leadership personnel and what order of priority is given to the different categories of relationship with other social movements and civil society organisations.

Though Gregor Gall raises the issue of whether Kelly's mobilisation theory can also explain its opposite, namely, the absence of mobilisation and by extension, demobilisation, little substantial criticism of the kind which Kaufman—or some of the aforementioned reviewers—levelled has been made (notwithstanding controversy around the contemporary application of long waves and that postmodernism did not make a significant impact on studies of industrial relations and HRM (with the exception of organisational behaviour)). The exposition of mobilisation theory is held to be Kelly's most valued contribution and it is on this basis that the less than expected quality and quantity of usage of *Rethinking Industrial Relations* is argued to be attributable to exogenous factors to *Rethinking Industrial Relations*. These specifically concern the nature of the dominant trends in union research as well as the nature of the dominant characteristics of research as a process of intellectual activity. The evidence to support this argument is based upon surveying the contents of journals of the study of employment relations. It is a provocative and, perhaps, contentious argument because it challenges the perception that progress has been made since the publication of *Rethinking Industrial Relations* in the quality and depth of our understanding of unions, union organising and workplace relations. Ironically, other than the likes of small handful of studies like those by Gahan and Pekarek (2013), the papers contained in this special issue can together be characterised as the largest and most extensive singular instance of the conceptual and theoretical development of the central ideas contained within *Rethinking Industrial Relations*.

John Kelly rounds off this special issue. He provides some reflections on the origins and influence of his work as well as receptions to it. One area that bears further examination is the relationship between long wave theory and capitalism's neo-liberal turn in terms of whether neo-liberalism represents something qualitatively different to the way capitalism is organised and whether this has had an influence on disrupting the expected pattern of upswings and downswings in workers' (mass or class) struggle since the late 1960s and early 1970s. There may be grounds for arguing neo-liberalism does represent something qualitatively different from that which has gone before although it may be may not be within the spheres of production and labour markets and may be more to do with the subjugation of the ideas and practice of social democracy. Another that bears examination, apropos of this, is the relationship between contemporary workers' struggles and historical trends in workers' struggles. Here, the primary issue concerns the nature of the connection between workers' collective agency and action over grievances and changing structural and environmental factors with capitalism related to the economic and business cycles. Some have charged that long wave theory is overly mechanical in explaining the ebbing and flowing of mass workers' struggles and linking the struggles at the micro-level to patterns of struggles at the macro-level.

We now turn to discuss some of the common strands and themes throughout the special edition with a view to seeking to identify remaining gaps and conundrums whilst acknowledging that any special edition on a chosen topic cannot pretend to be wholly comprehensive. One way of reading the papers by Kaufman and Gall is to suggest that the kind of take up of *Rethinking Industrial Relations* has had has also been coloured by the impact of Kaufman's point about its British centric nature, and specifically his point about its parameters being set by the debate between pluralists and radicals within Britain. If this is the case, then it might help to explain the lack of international presence and influence of *Rethinking Industrial Relations* within and without the English-speaking world, and of its limited incursion into debates on HRM and work and employment. Yet against this must be considered the influence of other factors such as the dominant nature of the way that *Rethinking Industrial Relations* has been used (see Gall, this issue); the unwillingness, if not also inability, of the many uncritical—in social science terms—researchers and writers on HRM to use

Rethinking Industrial Relations because it is grounded in a critical and radical perspective (of Marxism) where a central concern is, ultimately, with the rebuilding workers' collective power; and the shallowness and partiality of studies of what employers do in terms of new work practices and forms of organisation.

The potentially contentious nature of the thesis contained within paper by Gall is highlighted by the contrasting tenor of argument presented by Holgate, Simms and Tapia. This might be a case of simple contradiction of positions—or, it might result from using a different survey population and contrasting criteria. Any at rate, the value of *Rethinking Industrial Relations* within the wider academy is not beyond contention given the arguments presented by Kaufman concerning its more general strengths and weakness and the reception to it (see above). Yet, it is the case that the efforts of Kaufman (2010) to re-orient industrial relations in order that it can withstand and counter the colonisation of the subject of work and employment by HRM have been no more successful than those of Kelly (1998) in his task of achieving the rethinking industrial relations.

Given the continuing decline in the open, organised collective conflict on the part of workers since *Rethinking Industrial Relations* was conceived written and published, Kirk is correct to focus upon other less immediately collectivised means of combined worker voice and grievance resolution. The relationship between these means, especially legal redress (in the form of Employment Tribunal applications in Britain), social media campaigns to damage reputations, leverage campaigns targeting the contracting clients rather than sub-contracting companies, short-lived protests-cum-occupations, and strike action warrants examination because some of the most impressive advances against bogus self-employment in the neo-liberal era in Britain have been won by small, independent unions using the full array of these means (see Gall 2017). Yet the size of this development—even if replicated across other countries—still begs the question of whether it can be up-scaled to become something truly much more powerful. Here, Kelly's (Kelly *et al.* 2013a, 2013b) work on general strikes may present valuable insights into understanding the dynamics of mass worker struggle and, by default, what 'gaps' lie between it and the aforementioned struggles of workers in the 'gig economy'.

Although Heery's paper concentrates upon postmodernism, he makes clear that its theoretical foundations are to be found in another, earlier paradigm shift, namely of transition from the Fordist mode of capitalism production to the post-Fordist one. This again raises issues about the robustness and rigour of long wave theory to explain upswings and downswings in workers' struggles, such as whether there is any synonymity between post-Fordism, postmodernism and neoliberalism in accounting for the long period of downswing since the 1960s and early 1970s, and whether the time lag by which organised labour seeks to play 'catch up' to the new methods and configurations of capitalism production (as per Silver's (2003) product cycle thesis). Another issue which Heery's paper implicitly raises, but which is not addressed explicitly raised by any of the other papers, is that of what is meant by the term, movement (or social movement). The 'union movement' is a common appellation for the aggregation of all unions—or certainly those affiliated to the likes of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in Britain or the AFL-CIO in the United States—but little time has been spent trying to holistically understand the fusions, fissures and their dynamics and balance (other the political ones) that make such a body of men and women a 'movement'. Setting aside the issue of what constitutes a unified (sic) union, the vast majority of unions by membership are no longer 'trade' unions or even unions of trades. To that extent, and epitomised by the rise of the general 'super-union' in many countries, one could venture that there is now greater commonality and this may reflect issues like the deskilling and re-composition of work as much as unions seeking to maintain their social weight through merger and amalgamation. Yet is it the case that, at base, unions—in the eyes of their members at least—represent the contradistinction of interests of

capital and labour? And how does this stand with unions now representing a minority of workers? Does that merely mean that unionised workers are the more class conscious of workers?

Heery's paper on the substance of the relationship between union movements and other social movements enjoins with the paper by Darlington on framing and leadership for it can be expected that leadership has a clear role to play in creating such relationships. Yet, there is a potentially insurmountable challenge where it could be argued to be in the interests of the union movement to form an alliance with those who are not in a position to do so because they are not (yet) organised. Such an instance arises in the case of seeking to ally the producers of public services (public sector workers) and the users of public services into a coalition or movement to fight austerity and the neoliberalisation of the welfare state. Unemployed workers and benefit claimants have had their own organisation in Britain but these are now shadows of their former selves. Meantime, newer campaigning organisations to defend public services are not sufficiently well-rooted with a critical mass to constitute an able ally. This presents the union movement with a conundrum about whether it should try to help create such an ally, and what the implications and ramifications of doing so might be. The example of the 'green bans' by the New South Wales Builders Labourers Federation in Australia in the early 1970s may have some useful pointers here (see Burgmann and Burgmann 1998).

Conclusion

The special issue presented here is, in essence, a (retrospective) symposium of a significant book of which the use of symposia to discuss recently published books has become common in the last decade. However, we judge *Rethinking Industrial Relations* to warrant more than just a symposium within an issue of a journal and rather a special issue in its entirety. Rather than asking others to rethink their industrial relations, *Rethinking Industrial Relations* made the case for why industrial relations should be rethought and then proceeded to provide industrial relations academics with a substantive and particular response to its own self-made call for a rethinking. The way in which the call to rethink and the rethinking itself were carried out was to draw upon various literatures to produce a work that was more than the sum of its parts because, from a radical or Marxist perspective, *Rethinking Industrial Relations* crucially brought to the British shores of industrial relations an approach from outside the study of industrial relations. In one sense, that *Rethinking Industrial Relations* saw it necessary to do this is indicative of the then state of the study of industrial relations in Britain and the study of industrial relations by academics in Britain. John Kelly with *Rethinking Industrial Relations* gave others in 1998 a framework—even *the* framework—from which to analyse, understand and advance worker collectivism under late capitalism. This special issue, some twenty years on, has in part celebrated this, and in part sought to step up to the plate, and through the labour of others, flesh out and develop the insightful approach contained within *Rethinking Industrial Relations*. This could well be the necessary spur to the writing of a revised and updated second edition of *Rethinking Industrial Relations*. We would wholeheartedly welcome such a development.

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