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Dobbins, Tony

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Why employment relations matter(s) for governance of problems *for* labour in the real world of work

Tony Dobbins 

Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this Research Insights article is to emphasise why employment relations matter(s) for governance of problems *for* labour in the real world of work. This article presents two main points of novelty. One is the contemporary contribution of ER in relation to emergent research themes addressing real-world challenges: the COVID-19 pandemic, climate emergency, intersectionality, technological change and good work. The conceptual boundaries of work and employment/industrial relations research have therefore expanded beyond a traditional focus on collective bargaining and trade unions (although these remain vital). These contemporary themes mainly concern problems *for* labour, rather than traditional perceived problems *of* labour. The second, related, contribution is that ER has developed its analytical apparatus so as to be sensitive to concrete real-world issues, like climate change, and new perspectives in social science, like intersectionality. So, overall, there is a new and evolving conversation between analytical perspectives and real-world challenges. [Re]asserting core ER perspectives and specifying a research agenda and road map around big picture themes and challenges, the article follows other critical scholars in suggesting that it is important that ER researchers continue to speak truth to power in pursuit of 'sociological imagination' relating to the world of work.

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Employment relations; ideas; political economy; sociological imagination; work

Introduction

The contribution of this 'Research Insights' article is to inform and encourage debate about why employment relations matter(s) for understanding governance of the employment relationship in the real world of work. The idea arose from the central theme of the 2022 British Universities Industrial Relations Association (BUIRA) conference: *Why Employment Relations Matter(s) for Democratizing Work*. The article is structured as follows. The first section identifies some leading proponents of why industrial or employment relations matter(s)¹ (Clarke et al. 2011; Darlington 2009; Edwards 2022; Hodder and Mustchin 2024; Sisson 2010, 2020; Wright 2023). The following section briefly outlines some core ER analytical tools for understanding governance of the employment relationship, which provide the bedrock for research, teaching and policy in the field (Dobbins

CONTACT Tony Dobbins  t.dobbins@bham.ac.uk

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et al. 2021; Dundon et al. 2017, 2020; Edwards 2003; Edwards and Hodder 2022). Section three illustrates why employment relations matter(s) with regard to various contemporary research themes relating to challenges in governing employment relationships. The fourth section suggests that the various concepts and themes identified in the article mean that an ER approach concerned with analysing governance of the employment relationship in its totality can define and position itself distinctly from conventional HRM approaches generally concerned with the micro-level (rather than 'analysing big real-world socio-economic challenges'). The article ends with some concluding thoughts and proposes a research agenda that includes a possible road map for researchers on how to use critical ER approaches in their own work.

This article offers two contributions showcasing why (and how) ER matter(s). One is the contemporary contribution of ER/IR in advancing understanding of emergent research themes addressing real-world challenges in governing problems *for* labour. Another related contribution is that ER/IR has evolved its analytical apparatus over recent decades to reflect and inform such concrete real-world issues. This reinvention and renewal of ER has been happening for some time, and research on various issues has been ongoing and building up to what is happening today. For example, debates such as that on trade union renewal have widened agendas but have been occurring for about 30 years (Murray 2017).

Governance of the employment relationship - why ER matters

Sisson (2010, 2020) comprehensively outlines why *Employment Relations Matters*. His text has a double intention: To ensure people are up to date with the issues that the study of employment relations deals with and to explain why they matter and to appeal to two main audiences: people who teach and study employment relations and practitioners and policy-makers. Sisson (2010, 2020) comments:

A focus on the employment relationship, a distinctive multi-disciplinary approach grounded in critical social science and a mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods means that employment relations is uniquely qualified to highlight the fundamental importance of the employment relationship, what is happening to it and the wide-ranging implications likely to be involved.

Sisson (2010, 2020, 3) observes that employment relations has an analytical focus on governance of the employment relationship:

If a more encompassing statement is required, it might be the institutions involved in governing the employment relationship, the people and organisations that make and administer them, and the rule making processes that are involved, together with their economic and social outcomes.

Unsurprisingly, IR associations like BUIRA have long argued that Employment Relations Matter(s). In the BUIRA publication 'What's The Point of Industrial Relations?' the message was clear (Darlington 2009, 57):

Where critical social science is under attack, industrial relations is likely to be on the front line, precisely because of the centrality and sensitivity of employment issues in contemporary society. Yet ironically, the growing complexity of the world of work, the intense debates concerning its role and purpose in modern society, the emergence of new institutions and

processes of regulation, the evident limitations to the explanatory power of single disciplines in making sense of modern employment relations, give industrial relations analysis a strong *practical* as well as theoretical advantage.

Clarke et al. (2011, 242–3) suggest that IR/ER consists of a focus on the regulation, control and governance of work and the employment relationship; providing a multilevel understanding comprising the workplace, company, sectoral, national and global levels; recognition that there are multiple-stake holders with ‘at times’ conflicting priorities and interests; and recognition of multiple and competing goals around such themes as equity, efficiency and voice, or productivity and workplace justice. In his plenary (*Why IR/ER now*) at the BUIRA conference 2022, Edwards remarked:

I have one central argument and one rider. The argument is that ER is in reasonably good shape, in part because many of its natural inclinations, notably sensitivity to politics and an interest in concrete ‘real world’ issues are in line with current developments more widely. ER has, moreover, broadened its approach from its traditional focus of trade unions and collective bargaining, as we all know. It is potentially more connected with other fields than it was in the past. The rider . . . is that other scholars and leaders of business schools are very unlikely to think that ER is the one answer to the issues that they currently face.

Most recently, a volume edited by Hodder and Mustchin (2024) identifies the enduring value of IR as a field for understanding contemporary issues in work and employment, while acknowledging challenges, including the status of IR within marketised neoliberal universities, the erosion of collective IR institutions, and the shift towards HRM and related fields.

Other IR/ER associations have also emphasised why ER matter(s). For instance, at the 2022 Annual Conference of the Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand (AIRAANZ), Wright (2023) sought to re-evaluate the industrial relations field, both as a field of scholarship and public policy, and to ask what the research community can do to improve it. He perceptively observes that the policy framework governing work and industrial relations in Australia and other liberal market economies is stuck in an outdated paradigm fixated on solving problems of labour that have diminished or no longer exist, such as alleged excessive union power and overt forms of industrial conflict. This policy approach is poorly equipped to address urgent problems for labour, such as growing inequality and workforce insecurity, Wright concludes.

Core tools for analysing governance of the employment relationship

The contributions above emphasise that employment relations as a distinct field is about helping us to understand the governance of the employment relationship in its totality, including in non-union contexts. This section briefly outlines some of the core ER analytical tools for examining governance of the employment relationship, which provide the bedrock for research, teaching and policy (Dobbins et al. 2021; Dundon et al. 2017, 2020; Edwards 2003; Edwards and Hodder 2022; Williams 2020). These are as follows: the structured antagonism underpinning the employment relationship and the organisation of conflict and cooperation (Edwards 1986, 2003, 2018; Edwards and Hodder 2022); the frontier of control between management and workers over the details of work organisation (Goodrich 1920; Hughes

andDobbins 2021); structural power imbalances among actors (Dundon et al. 2020; Lukes 2021); the reward-effort bargain and indeterminacy of the wage-labour exchange during the labour process (Baldamus 1961; Behrend 1957; Williams 2020); institutions, rules and regulations as the 'stuff of employment relations' (Sisson 2010, 2020; Williams 2020); balancing efficiency, equity and voice (Budd 2006; Thomas and Turnbull 2023). For example, central to Edwards' (2003) materialist ER synthesis is the 'fundamental nature of the employment relationship', based on structured antagonism, power imbalance and indeterminacy of the effort reward bargain. Antagonism is structurally embedded within exploitative capitalist employment relationships, deriving from 'workers [being] subjected to the authority of management and the need to plan production in accord with the needs of capitalist accumulation' (Edwards 1986, 5). Indeterminacy exists in labour processes/reward-effort bargains because employers require workers' creative capacities to labour which cannot be precisely specified in advance (especially in high skill roles) but cannot concede total autonomy because of the need to extract a surplus and maintain control over work activities. Therefore, a basic antagonism creating potential for conflicting concerns exists alongside a need for cooperation at work (or at least some basic compliance by workers).

These theoretical tools underpin persistent core elements of structure and agency and are fundamental for assessing continuity and change in employment relations. It is important not to mistake contemporary changes in the nature of work and employment relations for changes in these core fundamentals (D'Art and Turner 2006). However, the way each of these core fundamentals are viewed is clearly contested by people coming from different perspectives or frames of reference, notably, neoliberals, unitarists, pluralists and radicals (Barry and Wilkinson 2021; Budd et al. 2022; Dobbins et al. 2021; Heery 2016). The role of ideas is important for providing insights regarding continuity and change in employment relations (Budd et al. 2022; Carstensen et al. 2022; Morgan and Hauptmeier 2021). According to Carstensen et al., (2022, 17), for example, ER-scholars trying to understand shifting dynamics of change and stability in employment relations are increasingly focused on the role of ideas, discourses, and identities. Major societal transformations, such as identity politics, technological change, climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic, make ideological approaches especially timely.

Importantly, radical/materialist ER and labour process² analysis, along with the role of ideas, embeds the core tools in a broader political economy and politics of work, and can help us understand big picture contextual issues, such as the spread of neoliberalism and financialization under contemporary disconnected global capitalism and how this impacts labour processes and employment relations in different countries (Cushen and Thompson 2016; Omid et al. 2023; Thompson 2013). For example, Cushen and Thompson (2016) argue that financialization (including the pursuit of short-term shareholder value extraction) can heavily impact corporate and workplace change, causing erosion of the stable conditions required for workplace-based productivity bargains and investment in workers. This involves a triple disconnect: between employer objectives in the work and employment domains; between managerial levels within organisational governance; between corporate dynamics and state regulation in different countries.

Why ER matter(s) for governance of problems for labour in the contemporary world of work

A traditional and still common assumption is that industrial and employment relations are about trade unions, collective bargaining and strikes. These issues remain crucial, but, especially nowadays, the conceptual terrain of ER is much broader, as exemplified by the research themes identified below illustrating why ER matter(s) for governance of problems for labour in the contemporary real world of work, notably the COVID-19 pandemic, technological change, climate emergency, intersectionality and identity politics, and regulating good (and bad) work.

ER and the Covid-19 pandemic

ER scholars have been at the forefront and contributed extensively to research and public policy during the Coronavirus (Covid-19) public health pandemic to showcase why Employment Relations Matter(s) (Dobbins et al. 2023; Gavin et al. 2022; Hodder and Martinez Lucio 2021).

In a special issue on the 'Comparative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on work and employment – Why industrial relations institutions matter', Dobbins et al., (2023) assess the international impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on work and employment. The special issue outlines conceptually why industrial relations institutions matter for shaping policy choices across different countries. This includes countries in the Global South that are not covered by conventional varieties of capitalism theories. An important focus is what IR institutions and policies played a protective role in the decommodification of labour during the pandemic, notably short-term working (furlough) schemes, tripartite cooperative pacts, work councils, collective bargaining, and active labour market policies. IR institutions continue to matter, and the contributions in this special issue can inform future research.

Hodder and Martínez Lucio's, 2021 paper 'Pandemics, politics, and the resilience of employment relations research' in *Labour & Industry* suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has appeared to change the public narrative on work and employment and highlighted the continued relevance and value of employment relations as a field of study and research.

A special issue in *Labour and Industry* testifies to the relevance and originality of contributions drawing attention to the impacts of COVID-19 across various sectors and occupational groups in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand (Gavin et al. 2022). Gavin et al. (2022) observe that perhaps the point of departure for all IR stakeholders (researchers, employers, policy makers and trade unions) is that the pandemic facilitated greater attention on worker wellbeing. Future research might therefore assess the longer-term impacts of COVID-19 on worker wellbeing and the effectiveness of strategies to mitigate this, Gavin et al. (2022) conclude.

ER colleagues have conducted influential empirical research on the implications of the pandemic for working lives. This list is not exhaustive, but prominent here has been research illustrating that the pandemic has highlighted, in particular, how vital human work of social (not financial) value has been for keeping human life and society functioning and the role of essential workers in serving society. Human workers are not merely commodities or human 'resources' (J. McBride and Martinez Lucio 2021; Winton et al. 2020).

Other important research has revealed the effect of Covid on workers' health and safety in places like call centres (Taylor 2021). Taylor's, 2021 study of working conditions in call centres during the pandemic, informed by decades of earlier research, revealed the serious hazards to which workers were being exposed. Had such insights been accepted, unnecessary illness and even fatalities might have been avoidable. 'A powerful case can be made for the salience of critical social science', Taylor (2021, 203–4) concludes.

Another example is the analysis of furlough/job retention schemes (JRS) by ER researchers (D. A. Spencer et al. 2023). Spencer et al., (2023) argue that the experience of the (temporary) furlough scheme in the UK has highlighted the potential benefits to employers of retaining workers in crises and that job retention should be a core practice of people management, as an alternative to redundancies. At macro level, they call for a permanent national JRS in the UK.

ER and sociology of work researchers have also been at the forefront of research on the unequal impact of the pandemic on working patterns, including flexible working. Academic research during and after the coronavirus pandemic reveals a mixture of benefits and costs of flexible working patterns like remote and hybrid working, depending on the specific context and circumstances of employers and employees (Chung 2022; Dobbins 2021; Felstead 2022). Flexibility at work is a very broad concept and needs to be critically unpicked. This connects back to research and policy debates about whether flexibility at work is too one-sided in power relations in favour of employer-oriented flexibility, and whether a policy push is required to move to a more employee-oriented trajectory (Abgeller et al. 2022; Dobbins 2021; Rubery et al. 2016, 2023; Wheatley et al. 2023).

Climate emergency/green IR

Work and employment scholars are contributing to the thinking and public policy debates on green IR, just transition, and climate crisis, but this could be built on and extended (Clarke and Lipsig-Mummé 2020; Flanagan and Goods 2022). Clarke and Lipsig-Mummé (2020, 363) conclude that it is 'vital to re-connect work and political economy so that the transition to a low-carbon economy becomes an international driver for transforming the labour process to the benefit of workers'. Furthermore, Flanagan and Goods (2022, 479) identify four frontiers of scholarly development already underway regarding climate change and IR that reflect conceptual enlargement of this theme: 'critical engagement with the concepts of (a) "sustainable development" and (b) "just transition" (c) analyses of reconfigured union identities and strategies and (d) discussions of the roles and influence of employer associations and state actors in labour and environmental relations and transitions'. They observe that industrial relations have been shaped by a fossil capitalist context, but that contemporary climate instability necessitates critical reflection along these four frontiers. The importance of the implications of the climate emergency for ER was reflected by a special plenary session on 'Why green industrial relations matter(s) for climate emergency' at the BUIRA 2022 conference, involving Linda Clarke, Béla Galgóczi and Vera Trappmann. For instance, Clarke noted tensions in just and green transition to a carbon-neutral society, between environmentalists and employers and with unions balancing sustainability and production objectives.

Intersectionality and identity politics

ER has also begun to extend its contribution to social matters like intersectionality – the intersection of identities around issues like gender, sexuality, race and class (G. Healy et al. 2019; Lee and Tapia 2021, 2023; A. McBride et al. 2015; Moore and Taylor 2021; Rodriguez et al. 2016). Lee and Tapia, (2021, 2023) call for more IR scholarship and empirical studies that engage critical race and intersectional theory (CRT/I) to better understand how structural racism and other social identity-based systems of oppression influence labour and employment systems. Tamara Lee presented a plenary on ‘Why race and intersectionality matter for IR’ at the 2022 BUIRA conference to enhance our understanding of why this is so. Tapia and Alberti (2019) assess debates on migration and intersectionality in ER and trade union research, identifying problems with conflating different experiences of migrants under a homogenous depiction of the ‘migrant worker’ and calling for consideration of ‘migrant intersectionalities’ – including the category of migration status. Researching a dispute at British Airways, Moore and Taylor (2021) analyse the intersectionality of gender, sexuality, race and class among cabin crew. They illustrate the utility of an intersectional lens using a case study of industrial conflict, revealing the ways the crew mobilised various intersectional identities and class interests.

Technological change

New technologies that facilitate novel ways of coordinating production and mediating the relationship between labour and capital, including in the gig or platform economy, are another important research theme increasingly pursued by ER and sociology of work scholars. One similarity with all gig economy work is that labour is bought and sold through online technology platforms (Gandini 2019; J. Healy et al. 2017; Kaine and Jossierand 2019; Vallas and Schor 2020; Wood et al. 2019). The insistence of many gig employers to categorise gig labour as independent, self-employed contractors (to save costs) rather than workers or employees – even when the employment relationship is only with one enterprise – has generated casualisation and insecurity and provoked conflict (Gandini 2019; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020). Wood et al., (2019) illustrate that algorithmic control is a core element of online labour platforms in different countries. Although algorithmic management techniques can give workers high levels of flexibility, autonomy, task variety and complexity, deployment of technological controls by management can also facilitate low pay, social isolation, working unsocial and irregular hours, overwork, sleep deprivation and exhaustion.

This theme of technological change connects with debates about the impact of new technologies, automation and artificial intelligence on the future of work, including the impact on jobs, whether work will continue and if there will/should be an end of work (D. A. Spencer 2018). There are problems with claims that automation will wipe out jobs and eventually lead to the ‘end of work’ (Wajcman 2017). One is that although technology may displace some traditional jobs (it always has done), technological advances also create new jobs. Another is that the availability of new technologies does not automatically mean that employers will invest in it – many employers will continue to use cheap labour because it is less costly, especially in generally low productivity work contexts like the UK with low capital investment (D. Spencer and Slater 2020). This is shown, for

example, by Clark's (2018) research on hand car washes. It was cheaper for employers to use hand car washes and exploit low-cost migrant labour rather than invest in mechanised car washes. The threat to workers from technology is likely to result more from how employers may use it to erode the quality of work than from the loss of work, Spencer (2018) observes. More generally, futuristic end-of-work perspectives suffer from technological determinism. That is, technology is often too deterministically portrayed as something 'happening to us' and outside the control of human agency. This partly fuels the 'end of work' myth (Thompson 2020). Moreover, IR institutions in different countries matter in shaping the impact of automation. In a study of 25 OECD economies, Van Overbeke (2022) observes that countries like Belgium, Denmark, Germany and Sweden with robust institutionalised bargaining and cooperation between capital and labour (e.g. works councils and collective bargaining) have much more automation/robotisation but also more equitable (e.g. job guarantees) and innovative high productivity outcomes, compared to countries like the UK with weaker institutionalisation of cooperative bargaining.

Good work (and bad work)

Such debates also relate to the theme of regulating good work (and bad work), which ER scholars are assessing. This has arisen in relation to growing concerns among scholars and policy-makers in liberal market economies like the UK about the need to rectify the poor quality of many jobs, underemployment, and income inequalities, notably in the 'everyday' or 'foundational economy' (Adamson and Roper 2019; Dobbins 2022; Gibb and Ishaq 2020; Smith and McBride 2023; Warhurst and Knox 2022). Scholars researching good work distinguish between hard (compulsory) and soft (voluntarist) policy regulation (Gibb and Ishaq 2020), and both are increasingly relevant and necessary for enhancing job quality in the contemporary world of work. Soft policies lay out best practice for 'good' employers, like (voluntary) real living wages (Dobbins et al. 2021; Parker et al. 2016) or designing more meaningful work (Laaser and Bolton 2022). Hard regulations like banning zero/low hours contracts in Ireland (O'Sullivan et al. 2020) or regulating for sectoral collective bargaining in various countries to extend and strengthen worker voice (Brandl 2023) create a minimum floor for 'bad' employers (and implicitly prevent them from undercutting 'good' employers). An example attracting attention is New Zealand's Fair Pay Agreements, intended to establish sectoral collective bargaining standards (Kent 2021).

A distinct identity for ER (from HRM)?

This article [re]asserts (and updates) core ER analysis and follows other critical scholars in observing that ER approaches are better equipped than unitarist mainstream HRM and other managerial perspectives to provide insights into the bigger picture of real world of work challenges – for instance, regarding the themes above. This is because, for example, the former is grounded in the analysis of structured imbalances of power, equality and opportunity rooted in the political economy of work and labour processes under capitalist employment relationships, whereas the latter is generally concerned with managerial issues at the micro level rather than 'analysing big real-world socio-economic challenges'. Moreover, various commentators have expressed fears that ER is being displaced by

unitarist HRM/OB and managerialist perspectives, including an alleged psychologisation of employment relations, especially in the United States but also beyond (see Budd 2020; Godard 2014; Kaufman 2020; Korczynski 2023).

Commenting on such issues, Edwards (2022) observes that 'mainstream' and more 'critical' approaches to work and employment can engage constructively with each other, but cautions that whether this can work in practice is a different question. He suggests that the need for an ER perspective on the contemporary world is greater than ever, while recognising the spread of unitarist managerialist approaches. One example he cites is an essay by Harley and Fleming (2021) - Not Even Trying to Change the World: Why Do Elite Management Journals Ignore the Major Problems Facing Humanity? – which coded 5,500 articles published in 'top-tier' management journals between 2008 and 2018 and discovered that only 2.8% critically addressed 'grand challenges' like inequality, climate change, racism, and gender discrimination.

There is a disconnect because mainstream HRM/managerialist perspectives are often not analytically equipped to inform understanding of the real world of work challenges like climate crisis, living wages, good work, and policy responses, due to a narrow focus on the status quo and unitarist organisational performance metrics. This is also because HRM is one element of the managerial function, hence the name, HR Management. This is reflected in mainstream/managerialist HR research on topics like talent management, employee engagement, the psychological contract, strategic HRM, mostly trying to show the link between HRM and extracting the maximum contribution and effort from employees to enhance company performance – the fruitless search for the high performance 'Holy Grail'. Critical colleagues have pointed to the fundamental problems with the legitimacy of HRM – due to its hyper-individualism and pro-market ontology, it increasingly performs a role as a handmaiden for the corporate elite (Dundon and Rafferty 2018; Kochan 2007; Thompson 2011; Watson 2010). Nevertheless, such unitarist perspectives are arguably ascendant precisely because they pose no threat to the status quo in organisations and society and, indeed, often serve to reinforce and perpetuate the theology of the market as god (Cox 2016). In contrast, ER and associated perspectives are more likely to be seen as a threat to the status quo in work, employment and society because they shine a light on and critique the status quo.

However, this does not mean that all strands of HRM research, or even HRM practice itself, is uncritical (Boxall 2018; Bratton and Gold 2015; Dundon and Wilkinson 2024). Indeed, there are 'critical' and 'analytical' HRM' literatures challenging the mainstream HRM status quo, including, recently, 'Where's the 'Human' in Human Resource Management? (Gold and Smith 2023). Other examples of 'critical HRM' include the impressive provocation papers in Human Resource Management Journal (HRMJ) and the recent Special Issue on Mick Marchington's work concerned with 'humanising management and HRM through a pluralist value system' (Wilkinson et al. 2023). Accordingly, ER sits in an ambiguous position with HRM and much depends on the type of HRM being discussed (Dundon and Wilkinson 2024). This ambivalent relation between ER and HRM approaches means that what we are seeing now is not only a renewal of ER in itself but perhaps the capacity to stand outside HRM a bit more and define itself as a field more confidently, autonomously and distinctly. In fact, it is arguable that HRM is narrower than and a subset of ER, if it is accepted that HRM is one function of management prioritising the people management policies and practices of managerial actors, whereas ER refers to

the employment relationship in its multi-disciplinary totality and encompasses the concerns of multiple stakeholders. In that respect, the various dimensions and themes in this article represent a new stage of ER leading as opposed to being twinned or bedfellows with HRM.

Sociological imagination in the world of work

ER researchers can fulfil an important role in contesting the battle of ideas, challenging the status quo and speaking truth to power. The role of the critical public social science academic is one of preserving and extending the 'sociological imagination' (Bratton and Gold 2015; Brook and; Darlington 2013; Burawoy 2005; Mills 2000; Thomas and Turnbull 2021; Watson 2010). Sociology of work books uncovering the real of work are popular with the public (Bloodworth 2018; Ehrenreich 2010; Frayne 2015; Graeber 2019; Jaffe 2021; Kenway 2021; McAlevey 2016; Press 2021; Standing 2011). Nevertheless, this 'sociological imagination' is generally made more difficult because the mainstream media is largely subsumed in the status quo of pro-market ideology. This disconnect between the need for ER/sociological analysis to address real work issues is reflected, for instance, in contemporary media coverage of strikes, which fails to address the underlying causes of conflict and dissent at work, often takes the side of employers, and blames unions for disruption. Contrast this with the sociology of work analysis of the causes of dissent at work (Bailey 2023). This is accentuated by the virtual disappearance of industry and employment correspondents with specialist IR knowledge (Jones 2011). The status quo is reinforced through the education system, with a lack of education on workers' rights and working class history at all stages of the education life-cycle (Dobbins 2019).

Concluding commentary: an ER research road map

Evidently, the field of ER/IR and the conceptual boundaries of work and industrial relations research have expanded considerably thematically since the early historical focus on collective bargaining and IR institutions and rules. The article provides two contributions. The first is the contemporary contribution of ER in advancing emergent research themes addressing real-world challenges of governance of problems *for* labour in the real world of work: the COVID-19 pandemic and the aftermath, climate emergency, intersectionality, technological change, regulating good (and bad) work. The second, related, contribution is that ER has developed and updated its analytical apparatus to address such concrete real-world issues. Critical ER, infused with political economy and labour process analytical tools, is well placed to inform understanding of contemporary big picture themes. Arguably, this also leaves a critical ER perspective in a position to distinguish itself from (mainstream) micro-focused HRM by virtue of possessing the analytical tools to better comprehend the big picture real-world socio-economic challenges.

These real-world challenges are mainly problems *for* labour, rather than *of* labour. The UK Donovan report (1968) mainly considered problems *of* labour relating to heightened IR disorder and unofficial strikes in the 1960s (identifying two systems of IR, the formal and the informal). Today, there is arguably scope for a Donovan 2.0 addressing problems *for* labour, including the contemporary themes above that were not part of the IR landscape in the Donovan era and would not have been obvious to an IR researcher of the past.

Table 1. ER road map to research governance of problems *for* labour.

Core ER concepts: governance of employment relations	Researching real-world challenges & problems for labour in different country contexts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Structured antagonism ● The frontier of control ● Power imbalance ● Indeterminacy of reward-effort bargain ● Institutions, rules, regulation ● Balancing efficiency, equity and voice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Coronavirus pandemic and the aftermath ● Climate crisis, just transition, green IR ● Intersectionality, class and identity politics ● Technological change ● Regulating good (and bad) work <p>For example, how do these themes affect worker voice and dissent?</p>

Indeed, the BUIRA conference 2023 – Donovan 2.0: Industrial Relations and Policy in the 21st Century – asks what would a Donovan Report for the 21st Century look like?

Such contemporary ER themes, underpinned by core ER concepts, provide a fertile research agenda and road map for researchers in how to engage and use critical ER approaches in their own work (see Table 1). A particularly important research agenda is to understand and compare the complexity of real-world challenges and problems *for* labour in different country contexts (including, but not exclusively, the themes identified in this paper), especially comparisons of countries in the Global North and South (Almond and Connolly 2020; Bamber et al. 2021; Dobbins et al. 2023; Frege and Kelly 2020).³ Climate crisis, for instance, and actor and institutional/regulatory responses to it, is likely to impact differently in countries in the Global North and South. A specific research agenda relates to worker voice (and dissent) and related issues like trade union renewal; for example, what are some of the promises or challenges in different countries of researching, let us say, worker voice (and dissent) in the context of just transition and climate crisis, as well as intersectionality, technological change and so forth? Does voice (and dissent) take new forms, is it expressed through (new) institutions and regulations, how do we understand the complexity of worker interests, are class and solidarity still central, what are the implications for balancing efficiency, equity and voice?

The ER research agenda is necessarily fluid – for example, to reflect unanticipated events like a global public health pandemic, and unknowns like the ongoing impact of climate emergency in different countries. The ER field needs to continually react and update to address issues arising in the real world of work. ER researchers can play an important role in revealing what is happening and why. The challenge faced by academics in the field is to build upon achievements to ensure that employment relations issues remain central in terms of critical research, teaching and influencing public policy. There are challenges in speaking truth to power, but ER as a field hopefully has a promising future, with early-career colleagues conducting vital research and carrying the torch forwards for future generations.

Notes

1. Employment relations and industrial relations are interchangeable. In What's the Point of Industrial Relations, Darlington et al., (2009, 244) note that 'ER is simply a reformulation of the original conception of industrial relations, with its focus on the employment relationship; indeed, since most employment today is outside the industrial sector (if defined as manufacturing), it is arguably a more appropriate term'.

2. Thompson (2023) defines labour process theory as a post-Marxist framework for analysing the process of deploying human labour power to transform raw materials into products to sell for profit under capitalist market exchange relations. Core LPT outlines basic features of capitalist labour processes (such as structured antagonism between capital and labour) that inform ER approaches.
3. An example of this is a special issue (Dobbins et al. 2023) assessing the international impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on work and employment. It outlines conceptually why industrial relations institutions matter for shaping policy choices across different countries. This includes countries in the Global South that are not covered by conventional varieties of capitalism theories. More international and comparative research about why and how IR institutions matter, both in global crises and in 'normal' times, is required, especially in countries from the Global South.

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Notes on contributor

Tony Dobbins is Professor of Work and Employment Relations at University of Birmingham, UK. He researches employment relations, employee voice and democracy at work, good work, living wages, sociology of work, and labour markets. He is a former Parliamentary Academic Fellow in the UK Parliament, and former British Universities Industrial Relations Association president. Tony is visiting professor at the University of Malta and University of Limerick, Ireland.

ORCID

Tony Dobbins  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4159-5218>

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