



**DUNLOP AFTER TWO DECADES**

**SYSTEMS THEORY AS A  
FRAMEWORK FOR ORGANIZING  
THE FIELD OF  
INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS**

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## Dunlop After Two Decades

### Systems Theory as a Framework for Organizing the Field of Industrial Relations.

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Since World War II the field of Industrial Relations has grown rapidly. Industrial relations institutes, some of which grant advanced degrees, are now to be found in the United States, Great Britain, Australia, Canada, India and other countries. These institutes have produced a growing number of scholars and practitioners who owe allegiance to none of the traditional disciplines of economics, sociology, psychology or political science. They are instead industrial relationists (an unfortunately awkward term).<sup>1</sup>

During the 1940's an Industrial Relations Research Association was formed in North America and since then similar associations have been organized in other countries. In the late 1960's an International Industrial Relations Association was founded. The growth of the field is also indicated by the expanding number of journals with the term industrial relations in their title. There are two such journals in both the U.S. and Britain and one each in Canada, Australia and India. A recently initiated European Industrial Relations Review reports

on events in Europe.

Despite this impressive growth there is still a widespread concern that the field lacks cohesion and is theoretically ambiguous. Neil Chamberlain has put the problem this way: "Our field is a peculiar one. We have defined a subject area with such apparent clarity as to warrant building a professional association on the definition. And yet the boundaries of that area are obscure and the reasons for drawing them not easily defined."<sup>2</sup> Even the term industrial relations is imprecise. As Heneman has noted, it "might appear to connote relations between and among industries."<sup>3</sup>

A new field needs to have a focus, a definition, boundaries, an organizational framework and a *raison d'etre* but in industrial relations there is a lack of consensus over all of these issues. The problem of definitional clarity and unifying theory is not merely an artificial issue designed to keep idle minds busy. Experience indicates that scholarly inquiry is most effective when scholars may relate any project to a coherent theoretical tradition. The most effective academic disciplines--the so-called "hard" sciences--all have well-developed theoretical structures. In the social sciences, the two most effective disciplines--psychology and economics--have the most well developed theories.

One might ask: "what is meant by "effective?" We suggest that all academic inquiry has as its goal the achievement of some combination of understanding, explanation, prediction and

control. Any discipline is effective to the extent that it has accomplished these objectives. Thus engineers can send men to the moon and back successfully, but industrial relations have been trying unsuccessfully for decades to design systems capable of achieving a combination of industrial justice and social peace. Many scholars have expressed dismay at the inability of industrial relations to achieve significant levels of prediction and control. Perhaps the most jaundiced view of the state of industrial relations research is held by Heneman. He feels that "much if not most of it is descriptive, prescriptive, poorly designed and generally worthless."<sup>4</sup>

The paucity of accepted theory has not resulted from a lack of effort. Many authors have attempted as a first step to identify a critical focus on which all in the field could agree. Although there was no identifiable field of industrial relations before World War II there were many scholars working on issues which we would now recognize as being squarely within the province of industrial relations. In two important essays in the middle 1950's Clark Kerr and his associates proposed that the pre-war focus of such research had been on the response of labour to the development of capitalism.<sup>5</sup> They went on to argue that such a focus was no longer valid and proposed instead, "the structuring of the labour force" in economic development. Another concept introduced by Kerr and Siegel was that of "web of rules." This concept was later developed more thoroughly by John Dunlop who is generally given credit for it. Dunlop nominated "the rules

of work" as the central focus of industrial relations. At present Dunlop's prescription (and the derivative concept of "job regulation" proposed by Flanders) is probably the most widely accepted central concept.<sup>6</sup> However, it does not lack for contenders. Margerison prefers "industrial conflict." Derber, while recognizing other approaches, has argued for "industrial democracy" which places him in a line of development which extends back to the Webbs and includes John R. Commons, Selig Perlman and others. Neil Chamberlain has suggested "Labour" in all its aspects Kingsley Laffer likes "bargaining relationships" and Gerald Somers has made a case for the more inclusive concept of "exchange relations."<sup>7</sup>

There has also been debate about the nature of the field. Is it (or should it be) an art or a science?<sup>8</sup> Is it (or should it be) a multidisciplinary field or an independent discipline?<sup>9</sup> Should it seek to identify basic patterns and relationships or should it be more applied and policy oriented?<sup>10</sup>

Before these issues can be sensibly appraised, what is first needed is, as Somers has put it, "a broad conceptual or theoretical framework serving to integrate the disparate strands of thinking and research now roughly juxtaposed under the banner of 'industrial relations.'"<sup>11</sup> The conception that has come closest to providing such a framework is John Dunlop's "industrial relations system." Dunlop's scheme, however, has come in for a good deal of criticism. Many of those in the field have found it to be inadequate and thus have either ignored it, or have utilized it only partially, or

have suggested alternative strategies.<sup>12</sup>

We believe that the industrial relations system concept as originally proposed by Dunlop is far too rudimentary and fragmentary to serve the needed organizing function. However, since the publication of Dunlop's book, numerous criticisms and alterations to the scheme have been made. With these modifications, and others we shall suggest here, we believe that the systems framework provides the most adequate scheme for organizing the field.

#### Evolution of the Systems Framework

The concept of Industrial Relations System first entered the lexicon of industrial relations full blown in 1958 with the publication of Dunlop's book. However, it had important antecedents and concurrent developments. Dunlop's work was part of a stream of development begun in the early 1950's when the Ford Foundation made a large grant to Kerr, Harbison, Dunlop and Myers to study labour problems in economic development. The first important theoretical piece to emerge from the grant was the paper by Kerr and Siegel on the "Structuring of the Labour Force in Industrial Society." That paper, as we have noted above, introduced the concepts of "rules" and rule making procedures.

Throughout the 1950's the Inter-University research team (as it was known) met continually to discuss the issue of labour in development and a good deal of research was carried out with the aid of the funds made available by the Ford Foundation. By the end of the decade two major theoretical treatises appeared. Dunlop's Industrial Relations Systems and Kerr, et al's Industrialism and Industrial Man.<sup>13</sup> The failure of the group to satisfactorily integrate the two has been problematic since then. We'll suggest one way of interpreting the

relationship of the two studies below.

One of Dunlop's principal motives in writing Industrial Relations Systems was to provide industrial relations with the integrating framework discussed by Somers. Early in the book he stated: "Industrial Relations requires a theoretical core in order to relate isolated facts, to point to new types of inquiries and to make research more additive. The study of industrial relations systems provides a genuine discipline."<sup>14</sup>

How well, one may then ask, does the Dunlopian scheme serve as a device for integrating "the disparate strands of thinking and research now roughly juxtaposed under the banner of 'industrial relations.'?" To address that question we first require some independent conception of the scope of industrial relations. If one wishes to identify the issues and problems which compose the field, the most appropriate place to look is in industrial relations journals and the proceedings of industrial relations meetings. These publications indicate what industrial relationists consider the appropriate subject matter to be. For an organizing framework to be effective it should be able to include the preponderance, if not all, of such issues and concerns. With this measuring rod in mind we may now turn to a consideration of the industrial relations system framework.

#### Rules and Actors

Dunlop began by prescribing "rules" as the central concern of industrial relations. They could be formal or informal, processual or substantive. Because these variations were not elaborated sufficiently, they have caused continuing debate. Some critics claim that Dunlop's framework does not take

unstructured workgroup relations into sufficient account and thus is unable to encompass the human relations and organizational behaviour literature although these topics are quite clearly of major interest to industrial relationists.<sup>15</sup>

The charge against Dunlop's system was given credence by the fact that Dunlop himself was somewhat contemptuous of the human relations stream of thought. Like economists generally he tended to disregard psychological aspects of behaviour and instead was more interested in explaining outcomes such as rules by reference to environmental determinants such as technology and market factors. However, several scholars have recently argued that the industrial relations systems scheme does not necessarily exclude a consideration of psychological and socio-psychological aspects of industrial relations.<sup>16</sup> Thus, if rules are understood to include not only laws and formal contracts but also custom and practice as well as all informal understandings which exist between employees and between employees and employers, the systems framework retains its usefulness. Moreover, to understand the operation of the system, one must understand not only the structure but also the perceptions, motivations and attitudes of those who compose the system.

Rules in Dunlop's scheme are made and changed by actors of whom three are denoted:

1. a hierarchy of managers and their representatives in supervision.
2. a hierarchy of workers (non-managerial) and any spokesman.
3. specialized governmental agencies (and specialized



private agencies created by the first two actors) concerned with workers, enterprises, and their relationships.<sup>17</sup>

This specification is problematic in several regards. First of all, for the scheme to be truly useful as an organizing framework a more precise breakdown of the actors is necessary so that there is a common understanding in the field about what is to be included and excluded. In the broadest sense Dunlop's three actors are management, workers and government. As workers' spokesmen Dunlop lists "works councils, unions and parties" as examples. To be complete professional societies such as those which exist for physicians and lawyers should also be included, as should the cooperative movement, workers' education organizations and other such associations which have long been of interest to industrial relationists.

The term "workers" may be too restrictive. Industrial relationists are concerned not only with job-holders but also with job seekers. If it is clear that "workers" includes both employed and unemployed we are on safe ground.

Dunlop's limitation of "and any spokesman" to workers is misleading. Managers have also formed employer associations which play a critical role in industrial relations.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the relationship of employer groups to political parties might also be more systematically studied within the industrial relations tradition.

The role of the government in industrial relations is certainly much broader than Dunlop suggests. The state affects the rules of work and the behaviour of the other actors not only

via specialized agencies, but also by broader policies including: fiscal and monetary policy, the legislation of labour standards, the imposition of wage and price controls, and the establishment and administration of labour market policy. The fact that Dunlop was an economist wishing to differentiate economics from industrial relations probably explains why he excluded such facets from his system. However, analytically their exclusion is unwarranted and empirically they are issues which have drawn the attention of many industrial relationists.

Another problem with Dunlop's explication is that he fails to note that the categories are not mutually exclusive. Thus, his qualification of workers as "non-managerial" has no basis. Managers are, at the same time, both order givers and order takers. Moreover, whereas managers are largely excluded from collective rule-making in the U.S., they are well organized into bargaining associations in other countries.

Governments, in addition to playing a regulating role concerning relations between managers, workers and associations, are also major employers.<sup>19</sup> Unions and political parties also employ workers and thus play a dual role.

By specialized private agencies Dunlop is presumably thinking of mediators, conciliators, factfinders, arbitrators, and consultants but, so that there will be no mistake, they should be listed.

#### Dimension

Given the concept of "actors" one may ask: "what attributes of these actors are of interest?" Just as a box has height,

width and depth, actors in an industrial relations system may and have been studied along many identifiable dimensions. Except for power and ideology, Dunlop however, failed to recognize the importance of "dimension" to the study of industrial relations. Later theorists began to take up the slack. Craig posited two addition attributes: goals and values.<sup>20</sup> Numerous industrial relationists have been concerned with these dimensions. Barbash, following up on the work of Commons and Perlman has, for example, conceived of the employment relationship as one of basic tension between the security consciousness of workers and the efficiency consciousness of management and the values and goals inherent in those outlooks.<sup>21</sup> Another important dimension which has drawn the attention of many scholars is that of method. The early work of the Webbs was, in part, an attempt to provide a typology of working class methods.<sup>22</sup> More recently, Sturmtal has presented an interesting theory on the generation of and relationship between the goals and methods an emerging labour movement might adopt under varying conditions.<sup>23</sup>

#### Perspective

One analytical tool which, to my knowledge, has not been clearly presented or discussed is that of perspective. In practice, however, industrial relations research and thought is focused in quite different ways. Some scholars conceive of industrial relations problems from the perspective of government when they ask "what needs to be done in order to accomplish this or that policy objective?" Much of the research on strikes, wages, unemployment, inflation and labour market policy is conducted from this perspective. Other scholars conceive of

industrial relations problems from a management perspective when they ask "what needs to be done to efficiently and effectively recruit, select, train, motivate and compensate workers?" The preponderance of the organizational behaviour and human resources literature is written from this perspective.

It is interesting to note that essentially no prescriptive literature has been produced from a trade union perspective. Thus, while large numbers of scholars have been very willing to put their skills to work on practical problems encountered by governments and employers, practically none have done the same for unions. The leftist or Marxist literature may, however, be thought of as prescriptive from a worker perspective.

All research and theory in industrial relations is not written from a normative or prescriptive stance. Much of it is written from a positive, or objective or descriptive stance. In such cases the researcher or theoretician adopts the viewpoint of an omniscient observer simply trying to understand and describe what he perceives relationships to be.

The attributes listed above do not exhaust the list. Trade unions, for example, vary on a multitude of recognizable dimensions. In addition to those listed, one may also note: membership density, structure, ideology, finances, leadership source, efficiency, etc. It is interesting to note that Kerr et. al. discussed several of these attributes in Industrialism and Industrial Man without recognizing or conceiving of them as attributes of the actors in the industrial relations system. One of the unfortunate aspects of the Inter-University study, as we noted above, was

the failure of the research team to perceive the possibilities of elaborating on the industrial relations system concept and making it central to their analysis. All of the researchers were, however, economists and were less enthusiastic than Dunlop (also an economist) about providing theoretical rigor to a new field or in assisting it to achieve disciplinary status. They were, it seems, more interested in analysing "labour problems" in a more conservative, institutional labour economics tradition. As noted above, individual workers also vary on several dimensions including: motivation, perceptions, job satisfaction, intelligence, skill level, age, sex, etc., and all of these attributes may, and have been, of interest to industrial relationists.

#### Process

A serious problem with Dunlop's presentation was his failure to develop the concept of interaction process. He simply reiterated the three types noted by Kerr and Siegel. In Industrialism and Industrial Man, Kerr, et. al., identified four more specific types: management dictatorship, management patternism, constitutional (e.g. collective bargaining and government regulation) and democratic (e.g. participatory management, workers' self-management).<sup>24</sup> Flanders gave the interaction process a name - job regulation - which is increasingly being utilized in the literature.

To make this concept more useful in its function as one aspect of a general organizing framework we must return to the idea of dimension. Thus, just as the actors may be studied on several

dimensions, so may the job regulation process per se. Within an industrial relations system we may identify many facets of job regulation including: establishment procedures (e.g. recognition, certification) the structure of job regulation (e.g. centralized/decentralized), its process, the scope of issues discussed within its confines, the way conflicts and impasses are resolved, and the interaction between various forms of job regulation. For example, in North America collective bargaining is established via very formal procedures while in Europe the process is more informal and dictated by custom. In North America bargaining structure is decentralized and fragmented; in Europe it is generally more centralized. In North America the scope of issues in any bargaining round is very great compared to European bargaining. Impasses in any system may be settled by strikes, arbitration, mediation, the "strike in detail" or in extreme cases revolution.

But we need not draw our examples only from collective bargaining which is, after all, only one form of job regulation. A similar analysis may be carried out of work group processes, individual employer-employee interaction, tripartite socio-economic decision making, and of German co-determination and Yugoslavian self-management. Each of these forms of job regulation have some way or ways of coming into being, some structure, some method of operation, some scope and some way or ways of handling conflicts. Nor does this specification mean that we are uninterested in motivation, perception and other forms of behaviour. To understand the process we need to also understand why those who are involved in it do what they do and feel what they feel.

### Other Processes

In addition to rule making processes there are other interactions which take place between the actors and may be encompassed within the industrial relations system framework. There are, for example, union-union interactions. In many countries, unions vie with each other for membership. In some cases one union will "raid" the members of another union. This facet of industrial relations may ultimately be traced back and related to job regulation but it is not a job regulation process per se. Other examples of non-rule making interactions of critical importance to industrial relations are party-union relations, union-member relations, government regulation of internal union affairs; employer-employer relations concerning job regulation, and employer-association relations.

We have found that by cross classifying each of the actors one may generate practically every issue of interest to industrial relations. To give a few examples:

employer - employee:	recruitment, selection, motivation, compensation, job security, job search, etc.
employer - union:	recognition, collective bargaining, strikes, collective agreements, grievances, dispute resolution procedures.
employer - employer:	employer associations, employer unity.
union - union:	jurisdiction disputes, wage competition, ideological competition.
union - member:	union democracy, union administration.
employee-employee:	work group norms, restrictions of output.

More complex combinations produce additional issues.

For example:

Government, employer,  
employee

manpower policy, antidiscrimination policy,  
unemployment insurance, labour standards,  
apprenticeship regulations.

### Levels

Dunlop suggested that one may consider industrial relations systems as operating at several levels: national, industrial, enterprise, etc. Thus, one may speak sensibly of the British industrial relations system or the British railway industrial relations system or the industrial relations system at British Leyland. In some of his writing Dunlop implied that the systems framework might be used as a methodological device for the systematic study of industrial relations in given industries. Some researchers have utilized the scheme in this fashion.<sup>25</sup> Such a use of the concept is not a central concern of this paper. However, it is worthwhile to realize that the scheme may be put to work in different ways for different purposes. One danger is that the methodological use may be taken as prescriptive. In other words, one might draw the conclusion that since the framework may be used as a methodological device, one should utilize it in this fashion wherever possible. We do not agree with this interpretation. For many problems, making use of the entire system would be cumbersome and perhaps of little value. However, being aware of the potential interactions between actors and environments should be useful to investigators at all levels.

Some writers have proposed that there is a need for "vertical"



synthesis between the various levels.<sup>26</sup> The systems framework, as such, does nothing to indicate how such a synthesis might be achieved. However, we do not believe this failing is a serious drawback to the use of the concept as a unifying framework. Full vertical synthesis would require a global theory of all knowledge. For example, to understand "Man" completely one would have to have a theory which subsumed not only psychology but also, in descending order, biology, chemistry, and physics and in ascending order social science (broadly conceived to include sociology, economics, political science, law, anthropology, history, art, music and literature) and philosophy. Philosophers of science have long been, and continue to be, concerned with reductionism (e.g. of psychology to biology, of biology to chemistry, of chemistry to physics) but they have not yet produced any general synthesis.<sup>27</sup> To require such a synthesis of an organizing framework for the field of industrial relations is simply a test that is too severe to pass.

### Contexts

In addition to his basic concepts of rules, actors and interaction processes, Dunlop also listed three "contexts":

1. The technological characteristics of the work place and work community.
  2. The market or budgetary constraints which impinge on the actors.
  3. The locus and distribution of power in the larger society.<sup>28</sup>
- This is one of the weakest aspects of Dunlop's presentation.

Because he was ambiguous there has been considerable debate about whether these contexts should be considered an integral part of the industrial relations system or as external to the system. The preponderance of opinion suggests that technology and market constraints should be considered external and we concur. These factors certainly constrain the actors and help to determine the rules which they make but they are not part of the rule-making process. The same cannot be said for power. As Wood et. al., note, it is critical to study both the power of the actors as well as the wider distribution of power in society.<sup>29</sup>

While the contexts noted by Dunlop are certainly important, the list is arbitrary and truncated. Craig has produced a much more satisfactory specification. He argued that the industrial relations system could be conceived of as one of many societal sub-systems. Others which he denoted were: legal, political, social, ecological and economic.<sup>30</sup> Craig viewed the industrial relations systems as receiving inputs from these other system and as generating outputs which in turn fed back to the other systems as well as the industrial relations system.

Even with the modifications since Dunlop the concept of outputs remains one of the least satisfactory aspects of systems thinking. Dunlop specified "rules" as the output. Craig prescribed wages, hours, benefits and working conditions. But these prescriptions are neither general enough nor (contrarily) concrete enough to encompass the concerns of industrial relations as a field. In fact, the interaction between employers, workers,

associations and the state produce a wide range of outputs which need to be identified empirically rather than specified by fiat.

Consider the following list of employment issues which are determined, at least in part, by the relations between the actors:

Compensation: level, distribution, composition, method

Degree of job and economic security

Productivity

The level and distribution of skills and abilities

The level, frequency and length of industrial conflict

The amount of job satisfaction

The amount of effort exerted by employees to produce.

In addition, the institutions and processes of job regulation may also critically affect other more general aspects of societal operation and structure such as:

The rate of economic growth

Inflation

The overall quality of life

Balance of payments

Class structure

Political power distribution

The amount and quality of democracy and justice.

Although none of these issues are the exclusive preserve of industrial relations, they are all of interest to industrial relations scholars to the extent that they effect and/or are

affected by the operation of the industrial relations system.

### Systems Variation

Just as actors and job regulation processes vary, so one may conceive of variation in whole systems. Thus, in economics there are two basic types of systems: market and command. In political science there are democracies, monarchies, autocracies, etc. The work of Kerr, et al., may be interpreted as proposing five types of national industrial relations systems which vary according to the stage of industrialism and the type of industrializing elite: dynastic, middle-class, revolutionary intellectuals colonial administrators and new nationalist leaders. The Inter-University group see only two as basic: middle class and revolutionary elites and these correspond roughly to capitalist democracies and communist command economies. In the long run they see the force of "industrialism" pulling these two together and producing what they call "pluralistic industrialism." This observation and prediction has become known as the convergence hypothesis.<sup>31</sup>

This Kerr et. al. conception is problematic in several reports:

1. It is difficult to fit actual countries into the scheme, especially after one leaves the communist bloc and western industrialized democracies.

2. There are major variations within given categories. For example, both Sweden and the U.S. are presumably within the middle class elite category but there is a great deal of difference between industrial relations practices in the two countries.

3. Many factors in addition to the type of elite have a major influence on the structure and process of industrial relations, including: the nature of the labor movement, the employer response to the movement and variation within and through time of the other societal sub-systems with which the industrial relations system interacts.

4. The scheme only encompasses those systems which emerge as a result of the process of industrialism. It is therefore, far from exhaustive.

A more recent and more adequate effort is the work of Cox and his group at the International Institute of Labour Studies.<sup>32</sup> They denoted eleven types of systems: subsistence, peasant lord, primitive labor market, enterprise labor market, enterprise corporatist, bi-partite, tripartite, state corporatism, mobilizing, socialist and self-employed. This scheme is more analytical than that of the Inter-University group. Thus, in any country there may be a combination of systems types. For example, job regulation in Canada is partly bi-partite (union and management negotiations) partly enterprise labour market (rules set unilaterally by employers but constrained by the market), partly self-employed (lawyers, accountants, small retailers, etc.) and now tending to some tripartism.

One of the most interesting aspects of this study was the attempt by the group to divide the world labour force by system type. They suggested that only 3% of the world labour force was regulated by bipartite systems and only 6% by tripartite systems Mobilizing systems (China primarily) accounted for the greatest

(25%) percent.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, this very creative approach has not been followed up, nor has it drawn the amount of attention which it deserves.

At the industry level industrial relations systems are generally classified by the type of goods or services produced, or by ownership and control. Thus one may speak of public and private sector industrial relations, or of industrial relations in mining as opposed to manufacturing.

The three basic types of relationship suggested by Kerr and Siegel (unilateral, bilateral and trilateral) as well as the more specific breakdown by Kerr, Harbison, Dunlop and Myers (management dictatorship, management paternalism, constitutional and democratic) may be applied at the enterprise level. Another method of classifying systems at the enterprise level is by the nature of the relationship between the actors. Thus one might think of a spectrum running from outright hostility, through armed truce to cooperation.<sup>34</sup> A good deal of work at systems classification at all levels is still to be done before a commonly accepted scheme may come into general use.

#### The problem of change

Some writers have been critical of the systems framework for being conservative. Dunlop derived his scheme from the work of Parsons which is biased towards stability of social structures rather than towards change. In a note at the end of chapter one of Industrial Relations Systems Dunlop applied Parsonian thinking to his scheme and highlighted survival and stability as goals of his

system. Moreover, in the same section he stressed the function of common ideology in holding the system together. But Dunlop did not limit his comments on change to this section of his work. In another passage he stated that if there were no common ideology an industrial relations system would be volatile and unstable.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, he devoted an entire chapter to the issue of evolution over time. In short, Dunlop's explication of this issue was poorly thought out and presented.

There is no reason why one must conceive of industrial relations systems as being necessarily conservative. If change is to occur something must be changed and the industrial relations system concept provides us with our unit of analysis. Indeed how and why systems change and how one may get from systems with undesirable attributes (e.g. high conflict, insecurity, denigration, and inequality) to systems with desirable characteristics (peace, security, dignity and justice) has long been a major concern of industrial relations research and thought.

#### Dynamism

Another criticism of the systems approach is that it lacks dynamism. It does not, in itself, generate propositions of the form:

If change in X  $\rightarrow$  change in Y

If level of X  $\rightarrow$  level of Y

or of more complex variants of the above type of statements.

This facet of the scheme is not, however, a serious drawback to its use as an organizing framework.<sup>36</sup> Despite a good deal of talk about the "need" for a "general theory" in industrial

relations, no field of inquiry has yet been able to produce a theory which explains all of the issues of concern.<sup>37</sup> If and when such an event occurs, all research in the discipline will cease because the theory (or law) will provide answers to every conceivable question.

Academic inquiry in every field is guided by many partial theories, some of which are broader in scope than others. Despite the lament of some authors about the lack of theory, industrial relations is no exception in this regard. To give a few examples there are:

1. Theories (or models) of union behaviour: Marx, Perlman, the Webbs, Sturmhthal, Clegg, Tannenbaum.<sup>38</sup>

2. Theories (or models) of industrial conflict: Ross and Hartman, Kerr and Siegel, Hibbs, Shorter and Tilley.<sup>39</sup>

3. Theories (or models) of bargaining processes: Zeuthen, Pen, Cross, Walton and McKersie, Hicks, Chamberlain.<sup>40</sup>

4. Theories of the interaction between managerial practice and employee attitudes and behaviour: two-factor theory (Herzberg), expectancy theory (Vroom), need theory (Atkinson and McClelland), scientific management (Taylor) and human relations (Mayo).<sup>41</sup>

The industrial relations system framework provides a vehicle whereby these and many other partial theories may be related to each other. Unfortunately, it does not automatically perform the function of theoretical synthesis. This very important and ambitious task is yet to be undertaken.

Despite a good deal of theorizing in industrial relations much of it is very restricted in scope. Indeed most theoreticians



have worked with data from a single country or closely related group of countries. If industrial relations as a field of inquiry is to be more effective in achieving prediction and control our range of observations and theorizing will have to be expanded both geographically and through time.

### Definition

Given the above, we may return to some of the theoretical problems mentioned in the introduction. After presenting the industrial relations system framework, Dunlop dictated that "the central task of a theory of industrial relations is to explain why particular rules are established in particular industrial relations systems and how and why they change in response to changes affecting the system."<sup>42</sup> But this prescription will not satisfy. It is simply an inadequate designation of what industrial relationists do. We are interested in much more as indicated by the contents of industrial relations journals, proceedings and the above discussion.

The suggestion of Heneman of "employment relationships in an industrial economy" is also inadequate.<sup>43</sup> There is no reason why industrial relationists should limit themselves to industrial society. We can identify actors, interaction processes, inputs and outputs in any society and where we can make such an identification we can do industrial relations.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, as noted above, one of the reasons why we have not been more successful in identifying enduring generalizations is because of the limited scope and historical depth within which much industrial relations theorizing and research has taken place. There has been little

research on industrial relations in subsistence, peasant lord, and primitive labour market systems; and essentially none on industrial relations before the industrial revolution.

The definition of industrial relations which we find to be most satisfactory is the one proposed by Cox and his collaborators. According to them "industrial relations are defined ... as the social relations of production."<sup>45</sup> This definition is broad enough to include employment relations, job regulation and all of the definitions and foci suggested to date. It also properly delimits our concern to people (social relations) at work (i.e. involved in production). The industrial relations system framework may be viewed as an analytical abstraction of the critical elements of the "social relations of production." One must, as Wood, et. al., point out, clearly differentiate between the concrete practice of industrial relations and the use of the systems framework as a theoretical abstraction.<sup>46</sup> Given this definition and framework, the purpose of industrial relations as a field of study is to investigate the behaviour of the actors and the interaction processes as well as the determinants and consequences of their behaviour. Not only do we propose that this is what industrial relations as a field of study should do, indeed, we suggest that this is what it now does.

#### Is Industrial Relations an Art or a Science?

This question is simply a matter of how industrial relationists go about doing their work. The defining characteristics of science is the way those in the field go about generating knowledge. If issues and problems are addressed by utilizing the scientific method

of abstracting theories and hypotheses and then carefully testing them against empirical experience a field may be considered a science. One need only read industrial relations journals to establish that industrial relationists do generally utilize such methods.

Should industrial relations seek to identify basic patterns or should it be more applied and policy oriented?

This seems to us to be a misconstrued issue. Policy makers have need of good advice and guidance if they are to successfully pursue their goals. But unless we have good, tested theories the quality of the advice we offer is likely to be suspect to the receiver and have erratic results in its application. In short, it is perfectly appropriate for normatively oriented industrial relationists to address themselves to solving concrete policy problems, but unless industrial relations as a field is able to generate enduring generalizations and analytical models its policy prescriptions are unlikely to be very successful.

Is industrial relations a discipline or an interdisciplinary field of study?

This question cannot be settled by academic fiat. It depends on the way it is organized and perceived by those in field.<sup>47</sup> At present it seems to us that industrial relations is in transition from interdisciplinary to independent status. Like traditional disciplines it has:

1. a framework for organizing and focusing perceptions, theories and research.
2. a rapidly developing body of independent theory.

3. a growing number of individuals exclusively trained in the field.

4. associations to group those in the field.

It still has several attributes which render its claim to disciplinary status less than entirely convincing:

1. Few universities have recognized it as a discipline deserving of independent departmental status.

2. Many of the most prominent members of the field were trained in one of the traditional disciplines and continue to owe their primary allegiance to their home discipline

3. It has no unique methodology. This last point is perhaps not serious. Certain types of method such as regression analysis are now becoming widely diffused in social science.

Within the next decade or so industrial relations will probably be accorded indisputable recognition as a discipline as more individuals are trained in industrial relations and as theory and research begin to be more universal in scope and depth and more integrated and accumulative. Certainly industrial relationists should continue to move the field towards disciplinary status because, as we have argued above, unified disciplines with clarity of purpose and definition and well developed theoretical structures are those which are most successful in generating effective knowledge.

#### Imperialism?

As defined by the above discussion industrial relations as a field of study transcends the intellectual territory of labour economics, industrial sociology, industrial psychology, labour law,

labour history, and at least part of interest group politics. Thus, economists, sociologists, psychologists, lawyers, historians and political scientists might very well draw the conclusion that we are attempting to be academic imperialists. This charge may be easily refuted by brief reference to the arbitrary nature of the established disciplines. Economists study the economic sub-system of society; political scientists the political sub-system and lawyers the legal sub-system. The division of labour for the study of the ecological sub-system has gone much further. There are geographers, geologists, biologists and others who are even more specialized. Logically, sociology encompasses all of these disciplines to the extent that they concern human behaviour but, in general, sociologists have concentrated their efforts on aspects of society not studied by other disciplines. All of the phenomena of concern to the above disciplines are also of interest to historians who have nothing in common other than tracing human developments through time. Anthropology also encompasses all of the above but anthropologists have limited themselves to economic, political, ecological, legal and sociological aspects of ancient and primitive societies. The great mother discipline of philosophy knows no accepted bounds. Even so, current day philosophers generally restrict themselves to an accepted range of issues and problems. In short, scholarly inquiry is not organized in a rational, well considered fashion. The established human disciplines emerged because it seemed likely that inquiry would be more effective if scholars specialized in certain aspects of perceived social reality.

By asserting that industrial relations encompasses aspects of many disciplines, we are not suggesting that those disciplines should

"hand over" to industrial relations part of what they now do. Each of the traditional disciplines may (and have) produced useful insights. But each perceives "the social relations of production" from a limited perspective, and through theoretical frameworks created to explain a wider spectrum of phenomena.<sup>48</sup> In short "the social relations of production" is of only partial interests to other disciplines; it is the central concern of industrial relations.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>No generally acceptable term for those who exclusively practice industrial relations has yet come into the lexicon. To the best of my knowledge, Kingsley Laffer was the first one to use the term industrial relationist in print. ("Is Industrial Relations an Academic Discipline?" Journal of Industrial Relations, March, 1974). Because it is at least clear and unambiguous we use it throughout this paper. However, for aesthetic reasons finding a better term may be the most important step in the ambition of industrial relations to achieve disciplinary recognition.

<sup>2</sup>Neil Chamberlain, "Issues for the Future," Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Industrial Relations Research Association, 1960, p. 101.

<sup>3</sup>Herbert G. Heneman, Jr., "Toward a General Conceptual System of Industrial Relations: How Do We Get There?" in Gerald G. Somers (ed.) Essays in Industrial Relations Theory, Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1969, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup>H. G. Heneman, Jr., "Contributions of Industrial Relations Research," Proceedings of a Regional Meeting of the Industrial Relations Research Association, August, 1968, p. 50. See also, Milton Derber, Research on Labor Problems in the United States, N.Y., Random House, 1967 and John T. Dunlop, "Policy Decisions and Research in Economics and Industrial Relations," Industrial and Labor Relations Review, Vol. 30, No. 3, April, 1977.

<sup>5</sup>Clark Kerr, Frederick H. Harbison, John T. Dunlop and Charles A. Myers, "The Labour Problem in Economic Development: A Framework for Reappraisal," International Labour Review, March, 1955; Clark Kerr and Abraham Siegel, "The Structuring of the Labour Force in Industrial Society: New Dimensions and New Questions," Industrial and Labor Relations Review, January, 1955. The latter paper was first presented to a conference at Cornell University in November, 1953.

<sup>6</sup>John T. Dunlop, Industrial Relations Systems, N.Y., Holt, 1958 and Allan Flanders, Industrial Relations: What is Wrong with the System London, Faber, 1965.

<sup>7</sup>C. J. Margerison, "What Do We Mean by Industrial Relations? A Behavioural Science Approach," British Journal of Industrial Relations, Vol. VIII, No. 2, July, 1969; Milton Derber, "'Industrial Democracy' as an Organizing Concept for a Theory of Industrial Relations," in Somers, Essays, op. cit.; Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Industrial Democracy, Longmans, London, 1902; John R. Commons, Industrial Government, Macmillan, N.Y., 1921; Chamberlain, op. cit.; Kingsley Laffer, op. cit.; and Gerald G. Somers, "Bargaining Power and Industrial Relations Theory," in Somers, Essays, op. cit.

<sup>8</sup>J. Douglas Brown, "University Research in Industrial Relations," Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Industrial Relations Research Association, 1952 and Sumner H. Slichter, James J. Healy and E. Robert Livernash who believe that "every industrial relations situation is more or less unique and must be explained as a whole." The Impact of Collective Bargaining on Management, Brookings, Washington, D.C., 1960, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup>See Laffer, op. cit.; Margerison, op. cit.; Hilde Behrend, "The Field of Industrial Relations," British Journal of Industrial Relations, vol. I, No. 3, October 1963; George Sayers Bain and H. A. Clegg, "A Strategy for Industrial Relations Research in Great Britain," British Journal of Industrial Relations, Vol. XII, No. 1, March 1974; S. J. Wood, A. Wagner, E. G. A. Armstrong, J. F. B. Goodman and J. E. Davis, "The 'Industrial Relations System' Concept as a Basis for Theory in Industrial Relations," British Journal of Industrial Relations, Vol. XIII, No. 3, November, 1975 and S. M. A. Hameed, "Perspectives of Industrial Relations," in S. M. A. Hameed (ed.) Canadian Industrial Relations, Butterworths, Toronto, 1975.

<sup>10</sup>See Dunlop, "Policy Decisions..." op. cit.; Heneman, "Toward..." op. cit.; Derber, Research... op. cit.; Lloyd G. Reynolds, "Research and Practice in Industrial Relations," Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Industrial Relations Research Association, 1955 and Thomas A. Kochan, "Theory, Policy Evaluation, and Methodology in Collective Bargaining Research," Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Industrial Relations Research Association, 1976.

<sup>11</sup>Somers, "Bargaining Power..." op. cit., p. 39.

<sup>12</sup>Probably the most condemnatory statement has been made by Fatchett and Whittingham who, although they recognize that the Dunlopian scheme has been of some value in "drawing scholars away from descriptive work to an attempt to place empirical data within some theoretical framework," still believe that "the perspective has tended to bedevil and obscure work at both a theoretical and practical level." Derek Fatchett and W. M. Whittingham, "Trends and Developments in Industrial Relations Theory," Industrial Relations Journal, Vol. 7, No. 1, Spring, 1976.

<sup>13</sup>Clark Kerr, John T. Dunlop, Frederick Harbison and Charles A. Myers, Industrialism and Industrial Man, Oxford, N.Y., 1964.

<sup>14</sup>Dunlop, Industrial Relations Systems, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>15</sup>For discussion of this issue see Somers, "Bargaining Power..." op. cit.; Sylvia Shimmin and R. Singh, "Industrial Relations and Organization Behaviour: A Critical Appraisal," Industrial Relations Journal, Vol. 4, No. 3, Autumn, 1973; A. N. J. Blain and J. Gennard, "Industrial Relations Theory -- A Critical Review," British Journal of Industrial Relations, Vol. VIII, No. 3, November, 1970; Ram Singh,



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<sup>16</sup>Blain and Gennard, op. cit.; Goodman et. al., op. cit.; Hameed, "Integrated Theory..." op. cit.

<sup>17</sup>Dunlop, Industrial Relations Systems, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>18</sup>See, for example, Peter Jackson and Keith Sisson, "Employers' Confederations in Sweden and the U.K. and the Significance of Industrial Infrastructure," British Journal of Industrial Relations, Vol. XIV, No. 3, November 1976.

<sup>19</sup>Ram Singh, op. cit., p. 67, also makes this point.

<sup>20</sup>A. W. J. Craig, "A Framework for the Analysis of Industrial Relations Systems," in B. Barrett, E. Rhodes and J. Beishon (eds.) Industrial Relations and the Wider Society, Collier Macmillan, London, 1975.

<sup>21</sup>Jack Barbash, "The Elements of Industrial Relations," British Journal of Industrial Relations, March, 1964.

<sup>22</sup>Sidney and Beatrice Webb, op. cit.

<sup>23</sup>Adolf Sturmthal, "Economic Development and the Labour Movement," in Arthur M. Ross ed. Industrial Relations and Economic Development, Macmillan, London, 1966. Several Essays which attempt to assess the validity of the theory are in, A. Sturmthal and J. G. Scoville (eds.) The International Labor Movement in Transition, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1973.

<sup>24</sup>Industrialism and Industrial Man, op. cit., p. 125-132.

<sup>25</sup>See, for example, M. A. Horowitz, The New York Hotel Industry: A Labor Relations Study, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1960; A. N. J. Blain, Pilots and Management: Industrial Relations in the U.K. Airlines, Allen and Unwin, London, 1972 and F. C. Munson, Labor Relations in the Lithographic Industry, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1963.

<sup>26</sup>Somers, op. cit., and Heneman "Toward..." op. cit.

<sup>27</sup> See Ernest Nagel, "The Meaning of Reduction in the Natural Sciences," in Arthur Danto and Sidney Morgenbesser (eds.) Philosophy of Science, World, Cleveland, 1960.

<sup>28</sup> Industrial Relations Systems, op. cit., p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> Wood, et. al., p. 298.

<sup>30</sup> Craig, op. cit.

<sup>31</sup> Industrialism and Industrial Man, op. cit., and by the same authors, "Industrialism and Industrial Man," International Labour Review, September, 1960; "Postscript to Industrialism and Industrial Man," International Labour Review, June, 1970, and Industrialism and Industrial Man Reconsidered, The Inter-University Study of Human Resources in National Development, Princeton, N.J., 1975.

<sup>32</sup> Robert W. Cox, "Approaches to a Futurology of Industrial Relations," International Institute for Labour Studies Bulletin No. 8, 1971 and R. W. Cox, J. Harrod, H. Gunter, R. Ray, G. Spyropoulos, R. Stavenhagen, M. Thompson and K. Walker, Future Industrial Relations and Implications for the ILO An Interim Report, International Institute for Labour Studies, Geneva, August, 1971 (mimeo).

<sup>33</sup> Future Industrial Relations, op. cit., p. 21.

<sup>34</sup> See Benjamin M. Selekman, Labor Relations and Human Relations McGraw-Hill, N.Y., 1947 and Arthur A. Sloane and Fred Witney Labor Relations (3rd ed.) Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1977, pp. 30-37.

<sup>35</sup> Industrial Relations Systems, p. 17.

<sup>36</sup> Hill and Thurley have argued that dependence on the scheme has contributed to industrial relations research being descriptive and anti-theoretical. No doubt, their conclusion was derived from an inadequate knowledge of the scope of industrial relations research and theory. S. Hill and K. Thurley, "Sociology" and Industrial Relations," British Journal of Industrial Relations, Vol. XII, No. 2, July, 1974.

<sup>37</sup> See Kenneth F. Walker, "Towards a Useful General and Comparative Theory of Industrial Relations," Paper presented to the 4th World Congress of the International Industrial Relations Association, Geneva, September, 1976.

<sup>38</sup>A. Lozovsky, Marx and the Trade Unions, International Publishers, N.Y., 1935; Selig Perlman, A Theory of the Labor Movement Macmillan, N.Y., 1928; Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Industrial Democracy, op. cit., and A History of Trade Unionism, Longmans, London, 1896; A Sturmthal, op. cit.; Hugh Clegg, Trade Unionism Under Collective Bargaining, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1976 and Frank Tannenbaum, A Philosophy of Labor, Knopf, N.Y., 1951.

<sup>39</sup>Arthur Ross and Paul T. Hartman, Changing Patterns of Industrial Conflict, Wiley, N.Y., 1960; Clark Kerr and Abraham Siegel, "The Interindustry Propensity to Strike -- An International Comparison," in A. Kornhauser, R. Dubin and A. M. Ross (eds.) Industrial Conflict, McGraw-Hill, N.Y., 1954; Douglas Hibbs, Long-Run Trends in Strike Activity in Comparative Perspective Centre for International Studies, M.I.T., Cambridge, Mass., August, 1976 and Edward Shorter and Charles Tilley Strikes in France 1830-1968, Cambridge University Press, 1974.

<sup>40</sup>For reviews of bargaining theory see, Alan Coddington Theories of the Bargaining Process, Aldine, Chicago, 1968; George de Menil, Bargaining: Monopoly Power vs. Union Power Cambridge, M.I.T. Press, 1971 and Oran Young (ed) Bargaining: Formal Theories of Negotiation, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1975.

<sup>41</sup>These theories are reviewed and assessed in most personnel and organizational behaviour texts. See, for example, A. C. Filley, R. J. House and S. Kerr, Managerial Process and Organizational Behavior, 2nd ed., Scott, Foresman, Glenview, Ill., 1976 and W. F. Glueck Personnel: A Diagnostic Approach, Irwin-Dorsey, Georgetown, Ontario, 1974.

<sup>42</sup>Industrial Relations Systems, op. cit., p. ix.

<sup>43</sup>Heneman, "Toward..." p. 4.

<sup>44</sup>This point has also been made by Laffer, op. cit., p. 71.

<sup>45</sup>Future Industrial Relations, op. cit., p. 1

<sup>46</sup>Wood, et. al., p. 296.

<sup>47</sup>Laffer and Hameed have argued that industrial relations should, at this point in time, be considered and independent discipline. Laffer, op. cit., and Hameed, "Perspectives..." op. cit.

<sup>48</sup>On the relationship of industrial relations to other disciplines see Hameed, "A Theoretical Framework..." op. cit.; Bain and Clegg, op. cit.; and Laffer op. cit.

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