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*The Changing Faces of Employment
Relations: Global, Comparative and
Theoretical Perspectives*
by David Farnham.
A Review

Chris Leggett *

Studies of employment relations and its antecedent industrial relations have depended on metaphor for their explanatory models, although not without contention — as to whether or not their seductiveness detracts from the strength of the idea (Dunn 1990). David Farnham's *The Changing Faces of Employment Relations: Global, Comparative and Theoretical Perspectives* offers the reader changing 'faces' for the intrinsic and extrinsic dynamics of employment relations and 'players' for the tripartite participants in those dynamics, once, to the irritation of trade union leaders, who did not believe they were acting, 'actors' in a 'system' by Dunlop (1960). It is unlikely that today's trade union leaders would regard themselves as 'players' in a 'game' of industrial relations. Changing 'faces', in Farnham's book replaces the morphological 'transformation' used to explain the emergence of new forms of industrial relations by the 1980s by Kochan et al. (1986) and the mutational 'global evolution' of industrial relations by Kaufman (2004). Your reviewer notes that *The Changing Face* [singular] of *Employment Relations* was the title and theme of a UK Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) conference in 2013. Farnham's text is aimed at graduate and final year undergraduate students ('often with little prior knowledge of the field') and 'seeks to provide a

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critical review and evaluation of employment relations as a field of study [of employment relationships] in the early twenty-first century...’ Following an introductory chapter the text is organized into four parts composed of Chapters 2 to 11 looking much like a systems model, and a ‘Conclusion’ (Part 4) a single chapter on ‘Employment Relations in a Global Age’. Part 1 (Chapters 2-4) is titled ‘Employment Relations as a Field of Study’, Part 2 (Chapters 5 to 7) ‘The Players in Employment Relations’, and Part 3 (Chapters 8 to 11) ‘Processes and Outcomes in Employment Relations’. Farnham introduces each chapter with a statement of its purpose and the means for fulfilling that purpose, for example for Chapter 1 ‘to provide the background’...’by highlighting some key issues’. This is particularly helpful to the student reader because, in spite of the logic of their sequence, the means for achieving its purpose vary from chapter to chapter.

Chapter 1 ‘Unravelling the Employment Relationship’ (an appropriate metaphor for the struggling student at this stage) ‘provides the background’ and sets the tone of Farnham’s book. It offers an extensive justification for the study of employment relations — largely of the discipline’s spread from the UK and North America to non-English speaking countries and to the employment relationship as fundamental to capitalist market economies, regardless of which model of capitalism, liberal market or coordinated market, is practiced. In this respect Farnham’s approach differs from (but is complementary to) that of the latest edition of Bamber et al. (eds) (2016), which has increased its emphasis from earlier editions on the Varieties of Capitalism (VoC) of selected countries. Farnham illustrates his themes with evidence from a range of countries and although his focus is on globalizations they are not without acknowledgement of the diversity of national phenomena.

Before he unravels the warp and weft of its themes and national, regional and global threads, Farnham identifies for the student reader the basic issues of employment relations: its dominance in organizing work, its concerning the application of power (and therefore its contentiousness), the displacement of the ‘industrial relations consensus’ by the ‘Human Resource Management (HRM) paradigm’, and the dynamics of internationalization. Its ‘changing faces’ include: ‘institutional, conceptual, methodological, theoretical, practical, ideological and disciplinary ones’ that are subject to the effects of what are the ‘distinctive features’ of the text: the impact of globalization, the use of cross-national comparisons, the ratchet effect of historical path dependency, the breadth of comparisons, the use of strong theoretical themes; the importance given

to political economy. The remainder of the unravelling is of distinctive features with a genuflection towards systems theory as a heuristic.

It is tempting to conceptualise Employment Relations as a loose composite of industrial relations and human resource management. In Chapter 2, 'The Origins and Development of Employment Relations' where Farnham explores the traditions and origins of employment relations, he is at pains to refine this simplistic conceptualization, devoting nine pages to 'The Human Resources Management Tradition'. He is well placed to do this because of his long association with the former Institute of Personnel Management (IPM), now the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), the premier and increasingly international association of human resource management professionals. Farnham distinguishes the Human Resource Management (HRM) — upper case and singular — paradigm from its earlier 'personnel management' and contemporary paradigms, such as 'human resources management' — lower case and plural, and he further distinguishes a 'contextual HRM paradigm' that searches for a wider, 'overall' understanding, one that is more contingent than strategic, more pluralist than unitarist, more driven by its environment than by employer needs at the firm level. Most of the rest of Chapter 2 is concerned with the history of trade unionism, the institutional tradition of employment relations, the revolutionary tradition and the labour process, the last of which generates academic and political debate.

In Chapter 3 'The Changing Contexts of Employment Relations', Farnham outlines and critically reviews the 'contextual faces' by applying them to the contexts of VoC theory — 'as a good starting point' and the theme of the Bamber et al. (eds) (2016) publication, following Hall and Soskice (eds) (2001), to labour markets and their institutions, to the nation state, and to technological change. The effect of environmental change on employment relations is continued in a more theoretical vein in Chapter 4 'Theories, Ideas and Research in Employment Relations'. This chapter discusses the specialist subjects employment relations theory building — economic and institutional theory, management theories, theories of change, and theory building and research that make up for the absence of an integrated theory of employment relations.

Chapter 5 'Employers, Managers and the Management Function', Chapter 6 'Workers, Employee Voice and Trade Unions', and Chapter 7 'The Nation State and International Agencies' analyse and critically assesses the 'changing faces' of each of the tripartite 'players'. These chapters however are more than institutional analyses of the 'players'; they provide reviews of the research and competing theoretical perspectives of management,

trade unionism and economic governance. By addressing his book to students 'with little prior knowledge of the field' Farnham has reinforced his 'changing faces' of theoretical employment relations and of the substantive employment relationships, particularly in these three chapters, but dispersed throughout the book with materials that almost amount to separate mini courses in 'A History of Management Thought', 'A History of Capitalism' 'Principles of HRM', International Industrial Relations, Comparative Employment Relations', International HRM and 'Social Science and Employment Relations'. For the naïve students there is, justifiably, a lot to get their heads around, so anxious is Farnham not to leave anything out.

Chapters 8 to 11 are devoted to the regulation function of employment relations. Chapter 8 reviews the 'changing faces' of the law as a regulator and is in effect a mini-text on labour law, including the protection, rights and enforcement, with examples from several countries. Chapter 9 reviews the employer as a regulator and builds on the explanations of the 'changing faces' of management in earlier chapters by drawing on sociological and psychological perspectives of work. Chapter 10 reviews the union as a regulator (taking in modes of industrial action and the concept of worker resistance. Chapter 11 examines and critically reviews the 'collective faces' of employment relations, from bargaining and European workplace representation to mediation and dispute resolution.

Chapter 12 'Employment Relations in a Global Age' forms the conclusion to *The Changing Faces of Employment Relations* and reflects on the national differences in employment relations and nations' responses to globalization and neo-liberalism, arguing that there is no universal model. The determinants of 'The changing faces of employment relations in a global and neo-liberal era' are reiterated as the importance of history and contexts, the sophistication and diversity of HRM, the decline of unions and collective bargaining (including TNC union avoidance and the phenomenon of growing income inequality as measured by the Gini coefficient), the resilience of, in particular, European institutions, the changing role of labour law, and both change and continuity in employment relations.

Supported by a formidable range of sources, *The Changing Faces of Employment Relations* by analysing (rather than synthesising) the industrial relations and HRM, global, comparative and theoretical perspectives on employment relations, very broadly conceived, and not without contradictions and critical review, should both engage and inform the students towards whom it is directed.

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