



## Changing Perspectives in British Economic Sociology

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### Introduction

**1.1** What have been the key shifts of emphasis in the research agenda of British economic sociology over the last four decades? Any account is necessarily very partial, reflecting the experience of one particular participant in the broader collective endeavour. There have been diverse journeys across the period, reflecting differences in generation, gender and institutional milieu – witness the contrasting reminiscences in the special issue of *Sociology* in 2009 (for instance Eldridge, 2009; Wolkowitz, 2009; Thompson and Smith, 2009). In my personal experience, three changes stand out as having transformed the research field over the period. The first is the major extension of the scope of the subject. The second is a shift in theoretical perspective from a deterministic view of economic structures and behaviour to an increased emphasis on the role of choice. And the third is the growing importance of comparative cross-national research. It is impossible in such a brief essay to be comprehensive in the citation of the researchers or studies that contributed to these transitions; those mentioned are a selective choice from the many that have been treasured travel companions.

### 1. From 'Industrial' to 'Economic' Sociology

**2.1** When I first began research in the field, around 1970, the sub-discipline was entitled 'industrial sociology'. Its progressive transformation over the next decade and a half into 'economic sociology' was indicative of the successive waves of extension of its central concerns. In the male manual world of 'industrial sociology', the focus was on the internal dynamics of the workplace. The central issues were changes in skills, control at work, the role and power of informal work groups, and the implications of technology on the structure of work organizations. As the 1970s progressed, and neo-Marxian approaches became increasingly influential, the theme of control became ever more central to writers from quite diverse theoretical perspectives. By the beginning of the 1980s it had become the central organizing concept of many of the summaries of the field – take for example Stephen Hill's *Competition and Control at Work. The New Industrial Sociology* (1981); Graeme Salaman and Kenneth Thompson's *Control and Ideology in Organizations* (1980) and John Storey's *Managerial Prerogative and the Question of Control* (1983).

**2.2** The theme of control at work also led to a close interest in industrial relations, in particular with the growth of shop steward power. The marriage between industrial sociology and industrial relations was consummated in the fertile environment of the Industrial Relations Research Unit established at the University of Warwick in 1970 under the formidable tutelage of Hugh Clegg. The Unit was responsible for a remarkable research programme into issues of power and conflict in the workplace – with studies such as Eric Batstone *et al.*'s *Shop Stewards in Action*, (1977) and *The Social Organization of Strikes* (1978); and Paul Edwards and Hugh Scullion's *The Social Organization of Industrial Conflict* (1982). Both Batstone and Edwards produced major overview statements of their approaches in the mid-1980s – with the former's *Working Order* (1984) and the latter's *Conflict at Work* (1986).

**2.3** The agenda set in these years has stayed with us. A rough calculation I carried out on the themes of articles in *Work, Employment and Society* indicated that nearly two thirds of articles between 1990 and 2005 addressed this core agenda. There has been change of course in the mode of approach. The initial concern with the manual industrial worker broadened into studies of white-collar employees (Crompton and Jones, 1984; Prandy *et al.* 1982) and technicians (Roberts *et al.* 1972; Smith, 1987). The concern with technical skills was extended to take account of the growing importance of emotional and aesthetic skills in work. There were also important advances in the collection of evidence. Early research tried to address the issue of change in skills and control through case studies of so-called prototypical work settings that were thought to be indicative of the future. But this was always rather perilous. A key development from the 1980s was to take the study of change over time seriously through the development of series of nationally representative surveys – in particular the Workplace Industrial Relations Surveys, later renamed

the Workplace Employee Relations Surveys (*inter alia* Millward *et al.* 2000; Brown *et al.* 2009, and the British Skills Surveys, which were effectively quality of working life surveys (Gallie *et al.* 1998; Felstead *et al.* 2007).

**2.4** But, despite such continuities, from the later 1970s the scope of the research agenda began to widen beyond this focus on the workplace. An important driver of this expanded agenda was the dramatic rise in the labour force participation of women, which brought sharply into focus the tensions between work in employment and work in the household. The growth of feminism also nourished a sociology of work that both highlighted the significance of work outside employment (Oakley, 1974) and pointed to the distinctive characteristics of women's experience of employment (Pollert, 1981, Beechey and Perkins, 1987; Wajcman, 1998). Interestingly many of the major studies that opened up the field came not from university departments but from the research team of the Department of Employment, under its director Peter Brannen. Its most influential output was the 'Women and Employment Survey' (Martin and Roberts, 1984). However, alongside this central study, the Department supported a wide array of additional studies on work histories (Dex, 1984; Joshi, 1984), on gender segregation and homeworking (Hakim, 1979, 1987), and on payment structures (Craig *et al.* 1984; Craig and Wilkinson, 1985) that brought important innovations in both substantive knowledge and in the broader theoretical framework for labour market analysis.

**2.5** The growing interest in labour market dynamics in the early 1980s was reinforced by the dramatic rise in unemployment in the Thatcher years – leading to a plethora of studies on the social consequences of unemployment and the extent and causes of entrapment in unemployment (Harris 1987; Westergaard *et al.* 1989). The study of unemployment inevitably raised issues about the interface between labour market experience and the family (McKee and Bell, 1985, 1986). It also extended the field yet further into a concern with work, not just as employment, but in the broad sense – involving domestic work, household production and involvement in the informal economy. Particularly influential was Ray Pahl's research programme with Claire Wallace on the Isle of Sheppey, leading to his *Divisions of Labour* (1985) - which gave prominence to the notion of 'household work strategies'. The analysis of household work patterns in this broader sense stimulated a growing interest in the collection of systematic activity data in the form of time budgets – a development in which Jay Gershuny played a leading role, with his book *Changing Times* (2000) giving us our first clear picture of the changes in household work patterns over time. This process of continuing expansion of the field has been ongoing - most recently embodied in the work of Miriam Glucksman, with her advocacy of the notion of the 'total social organization of labour', opening up the study of the interconnections between production, distribution, exchange and consumption (Glucksman, 2000, 2005).

**2.6** In the mid-1980s the old and new agendas were brought together in what was then the largest scale project to date in the social sciences – the Social Change and Economic Life Initiative (Gallie *et al.* 1994). Conceived in the immediate aftermath of the near closure of the Social Science Research Council and at the time when sociology was still publicly vilified, this involved a huge concentration of funding resources (£3 million - £7 million at today's prices) into a highly integrated project involving 35 researchers from 14 different institutions. With its inter-connected surveys of employers, employees, the unemployed and households (using cross-sectional surveys, work and life histories and time budget diaries) and its linked qualitative case studies - it made possible for the first time the systematic study of the relations between employment, the labour market and the household in Britain.

**2.7** The research programme could be seen as having in a sense formalized the birth of the new field of the sociology of economic life (Roberts *et al.* 1985). At the same time, it recognized that its new scope required a much closer collaboration between sociologists and researchers in other disciplines – labour economics, psychology, history and statistics. The project also led to a substantial technical upskilling of the cohort of sociologists, many of whom received their first training in the methodologies of longitudinal data analysis.

## **2. From Determinism to Choice**

**3.1** The second key shift is the move from relatively deterministic explanatory schemas to increased recognition of the scope for choice. At the beginning of the 1970s, the dominant explanatory theories in industrial sociology were diverse forms of technological determinism. As the 1970s progressed this was joined by an equally deterministic perspective emphasizing the inherent logic of the capitalist division of labour. However, from the 1980s, there was an increasing acceptance that both employee and employer behaviour may be open to a significant degree of choice, although there remained strong disagreements about how free or constrained such choice was thought to be.

**3.2** The debate about choice with respect to employee behaviour entered the arena in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the Affluent Worker Studies (Goldthorpe *et al.* 1968). These presented a sharp critique of the assumption that employees were passive recipients of experiences generated by their work conditions. Instead it was claimed that they were to a significant degree able to exercise choice in selecting their jobs and that they did this in a way that enabled them to realize other life objectives, in particular with respect to consumption and their family lives. Given such choice, it was argued, there were categories of workers for whom the objective conditions of assembly line work were unlikely to have the negative subjective consequences that were usually ascribed to them. This led to an extended and still unresolved debate about the extent to which orientations to work were to be viewed as independent factors from the work situation or were constrained over time by work experiences themselves (Beynon and Blackburn 1972; Brown 1973; Daniel 1973; Fox 1980).

**3.3** Thirty years later a rather similar debate emerged around the issue of women's orientations to employment. Catherine Hakim's 1991 paper 'Grateful Slaves' argued that the large proportion of women with a 'homeworker' orientation choose the poorer employment conditions and limited promotion

opportunities of jobs in the 'flexible' or 'secondary' sector, thereby helping to explain the persistence of such a sector. This has some claim to be the single most controversial text of the period. Much as with the earlier debate on the work orientations of male manual workers, criticism focused primarily on the extent to which choice could be viewed as unconstrained or should be seen as itself structured by the options available, in this case particularly by the availability of adequate public childcare.

**3.4** These debates are still far from being resolved and are inherently very tricky to test. But the issues of diverse preference types and hence potential self-selection have become central to labour market analysis, involving the regular use of an armoury of statistical techniques to try to discount such effects.

**3.5** Turning to patterns of work organization, at the beginning of the 1970s the most influential British research was that of Joan Woodward and her colleagues – in particular *Management and Technology* (1958); *Industrial Organization: Theory and Practice*, (1965) and *Industrial Organization: Behaviour and Control* (1970). This argued that there were specific organizational forms that were most appropriate to particular technical situations. For part of the 1970s, the determinism of technology was reinforced by a determinism of the capitalist law of the detailed division of labour, influenced by the work of Braverman (1974).

**3.6** But, with the growing empirical evidence of wide disparities in developments in skill and control in broadly similar work settings, there remained few believers by the mid 1980s in general laws of organizational design or change. Instead, there was an increased interest in the diversity of employer strategies and the possibilities of organizational choice. An influential early theoretical contribution to the sociological debate was John Child's 'Organizational Structure, Environment and Performance: the Role of Strategic Choice', published in *Sociology* in 1972. And the view gained a much wider currency, including among those in the labour process tradition, with Andy Friedman's book *Industry and Labour: Class Struggle at Work and Monopoly Capitalism* (1977), with its distinction between 'responsible autonomy' and 'direct control'.

**3.7** The literature on employer strategies of the late 1980s and 1990s divided into two major currents that provided sharply contrasting models of how employers might handle their workforces under conditions of sharply increased international competitiveness and market volatility. The first, launched by a brief paper by Atkinson in 1984, focused on diverse strategies by which employers could achieve greater flexibility. The second, influenced by management literature in the USA (Walton, 1985), emphasized in contrast the advantages employers might find in improving the skills, responsibilities and involvement of the workforce in an economy where quality was likely to be an increasingly important factor in success. This spawned a range of diversely labeled, but rather similar models of 'high commitment', 'high involvement' or 'high performance' work organizations. The two bodies of research on employer strategies remained curiously segmented and their mutual implications have still rarely been explored.

**3.8** The 'strategies approach' however was not without its difficulties. There was extensive debate about what constitutes a strategy and how best to measure it (Hakim 1990; Hunter *et al.* 1993; McGregor and Sproull 1991; Procter *et al.* 1994). Further there was little indication of the factors that might affect the choice of one specific set of organizational principles rather than another. Was choice simply arbitrary? As Rubery and Wilkinson (1994) pointed out it was difficult to understand employer strategies without taking account of the institutional context in which they were embedded. This brings us to the third transition.

### **3. From national to comparative**

**4.1** The third shift in emphasis, which is still at a relatively early stage, is the growth of interest in comparative research during the last decade and a half. This is not entirely new. Particularly remarkable for its period was Ronald Dore's study *British Factory-Japanese Factory*, published in 1973. In retrospect, this must have had an influence on my own comparison of French and British workers (Gallie, 1978). In the 1970s, Peter Abell, Frank Heller and Malcolm Warner took part in a major comparative study of industrial democracy at work (*Industrial Democracy in Europe*, 1981). But these were relatively sporadic studies and it was not until 1990s that such work became more widespread in the discipline.

**4.2** In part this development could be seen as a response to the new puzzles raised by the changes in the discipline's scope and theoretical emphasis. By the mid-1990s, the transition from industrial to economic sociology had highlighted the interconnections between different institutional arenas. But within a single national framework it was difficult to know what, if anything, was distinctive about the forms of institutional inter-relationship to be found in Britain, and even more difficult to provide any sort of explanatory account. Similarly, relatively mechanistic explanations of employees' experiences and employer behaviour had increasingly given way to an emphasis on the interplay between structure and action. Yet, in studies confined to one country, it was difficult to assess whether there was pattern to the diversity of apparent 'choices' by labour market actors and it was difficult to judge how far such choices were influenced by specific institutional conditions. Comparative research appeared attractive as a potential way forward in improving our explanatory leverage.

**4.3** The comparative turn also had of course an infrastructural underpinning. In the first place, there was the notable development of European data sets, with the emergence of major cross-national surveys such as the European Working Conditions Surveys. Second, there was the rapidly expanding financial support for European comparative work provided by the EU's successive Framework Programmes.

**4.4** Finally, it was a period in which a number of landmark studies provided new theoretical frameworks for analyzing institutional differences and their implications. For instance, Gosta Esping-Andersen's *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, published in 1990, provided a powerful stimulus to thinking about the impact of institutional differences in welfare state provision. The extensive critical literature that followed led to

welfare regime typologies that brought a much tighter focus on the earlier debate about how far women's choices were influenced by the availability of good childcare provision. With respect to employers' strategies, the work of David Soskice (1999) and his colleagues – with its elaboration of the notion of different types of production regime – opened up the issue of how far employer choices of workforce strategies were influenced by wider cultural traditions of cooperation or competition, by historically derived types of skill formation regime, and by different product strategies. This in turn led to a wider debate about the institutional determinants of patterns of work organization (Gallie, 2007). In short, in comparative context, choice was no longer arbitrary, but rooted in cultural complexes formed by specific paths of historical institutional development.

**4.5** At all events what is clear is that there was a significant growth of British researchers' engagement with a comparative research agenda. This was particularly evident in the area of women's employment – with the research of Jill Rubery<sup>[1]</sup> and her Manchester colleagues on patterns of gender segregation (Rubery and Fagan, 1993; Rubery *et al.* 1998; 1999), with the involvement of Jackie O'Reilly, Colette Fagan and Catherine Hakim in comparative studies of part-time work (O'Reilly, 1994; O'Reilly and Fagan, 1998; Blossfeld and Hakim, 1997), Sylvia Walby's work on European gender regimes (Walby, 1997; 2004a; 2004b) and Rosemary Crompton and her colleagues on female employment, work-family balance and the relationship between employment patterns and the domestic division of labour (Crompton and Harris, 1997, 1998; Crompton and Lefeuivre, 2000; Crompton, 2006).

#### 4. Where are we at?

**5.1** Overall, British economic sociology has travelled a remarkably long way over the last forty years. It has become wider in scope, theoretically more sophisticated and with much stronger comparative understanding. It has seen huge advances both in terms of data sources and in the technical skills needed to analyse them. It is very well placed to meet the next major substantive challenge it must surely address: the impact of the current economic crisis on the structure of employment and the quality of work. Previous recessions have led to major changes in employer strategies and working lives – it would be strange if this were not the case with the current crisis. Will those national institutional systems that provided much stronger protection to their workforces in earlier recessions prove able to do so again or will we find that internationalization has finally brought about the convergence predicted by the classic liberal theorists of industrial society? The research programme is vast and the new generation of researchers can look forward to exciting times.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>My assimilation of Jill Rubery into the ranks of Britain's economic sociologists may seem controversial, but there can be no doubt about her influence on the field and I note that she is a member of the sociology section of the British Academy.

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