The Employment Relationship: A Research Agenda

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The employment relationship

- Relations at the point of production
- And the institutions that regulate those relations — historically, collective bargaining, shaped by the extent to which the state intervened to:
  [a] set employment conditions through law or
  [b] to influence how the parties to the employment relation managed their affairs
The dangers of futurology

- [Changes in technology are] ‘displacing traditional forms of asymmetrical dependence in the workplace [with] new forms of symmetrical dependence, e.g. semiautonomous self-managing groups. Even the wage relation is increasingly redefined as a salaried relation’.

- There are trends towards ‘democratizing industrial relations’ e.g. in Australia.
  1993 addendum
The easy part of a better answer

- Work relations in emerging economies
- New forms of working, e.g. virtual organisations and the fragmentation of organisational boundaries
- Changing work-life balance
- Methodologies: longitudinal studies, and placing work in context of e.g. prior labour market experience and social and cultural capital
Limits to the easy answer

- How do we know that what seems important now will continue to be so?
- The indeterminacy of the labour contract [!]
- The shifting context of 3 types of market [labour, product and finance] and of regulation at local, national, and international levels
A better kind of answer

- Methodological, not substantive:
  1. The causal powers of ‘the real’
  2. The moulding of these within the ‘relative autonomy’ of the employment relation
  3. Dynamics and agency at the point of production
  4. What’s the benchmark?
1. External causal powers

- **Forces weakening labour:**
  - Labour market: individualisation of employment contracts, requirements on workers to provide their own skills and training
  - Product market: supply chain pressures, ability of firms to set prices
  - Finance markets: M&A, financialization [and parallel forces in the public sector]
versus counter-tendencies constraining capital:

- Need for skills, and consent
- Consumer forces and social responsibility, e.g. pressures against out-sourced and off-shored call centres
- Other non-labour actors
- Regulation and legitimacy [the functions of the capitalist state and all that]
2. Relative autonomy

- The ‘semi-permeable membrane’
- What are the formal and informal institutions that strengthen the membrane?
- What processes contain, shape or even heighten the effects of external forces?
3. Dynamics and agency

- **Elements of action**
- Legacies and expectations from the past
- What conditions support independent agency?
- What are the drivers in relation to dignity, decency and voice?

- **Methodologically:**
- Patterns and types, not endless variation
- Identifying a type, e.g. workplaces with organised voice, and then mapping how common the type may be and the conditions for its existence
4. The benchmark

- The [very] tacit Marxism of William Brown, Quebec City 1991: the development of the forces of production and the potential social benefits thereof
- The generation of new jobs and opportunities
- What might workers reasonably expect in terms of autonomy and voice?
- What do people in fact expect? What is taken for granted about work?
And when you have found the answer . . .