

# Book Review

## *Reassessing the Employment Relationship*

Edited by Paul Blyton, Edmund Heery and Peter Turnbull  
Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011



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*Reassessing the Employment Relationship* is an edited volume written by leading academics from Cardiff Business School. As a follow-up to Blyton and Turnbull's *Reassessing Human Resource Management* (1992), this book casts a similarly critical eye on key developments while surfacing and debating key tensions and contradictions. The employment relationship is the focus of attention given its 'continued centrality in work organizations' (p. 2). This new title is favoured as it represents a more inclusive term, which features prominently across industrial relations, organisational sociology and employment relations, while also offering more wide-ranging considerations than those traditionally associated with human resource management (HRM). The 'employment relationship' is therefore seen as the most appropriate lens through which to gain analytical purchase on the key developments which have unfolded over the last two decades. A brief introduction by Blyton, Heery and Turnbull provides a definition of the employment relationship, highlighting its indeterminate nature and key formal and informal aspects, coupled with its relevance for both employers and employees (p. 5). The introduction also details key changes framing the nature of the employment relationship, including globalisation, financialisation, new forms of work, and new modes of organising and controlling work. Following on from this, the book is structured around four key parts: perspectives, contextual influences, substantial developments and differing work settings.

The first section, on *Perspectives*, explores differing lenses for examining the employment relationship. Unsurprisingly, HRM features prominently although its treatment is refreshing. In a somewhat technical chapter, Sengupta and Whitfield examine the dominance of HRM performance studies, highlighting how a narrow focus on the bottom line has crowded out the perspective of other stakeholders, most notably employees. Instead they see much scope for debate around 'what constitutes good and effective performance'

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(p. 118). The chapter by Delbridge ably wrestles with this issue, exposing a managerial-driven, consensus orientation in HRM. Delbridge frames his argument by drawing on Burawoy's distinction between 'professional sociology' (allied to mainstream academic enterprise, instrumentalism and scientific legitimacy) and 'critical sociology' (allied to critical management studies, reflexivity and challenging structures of domination). It follows that HRM is in need of a critical orientation which will open up alternative perspectives and possibilities, including drawing in voices that have been traditionally marginalised. In recognition of the wider political economy of power relations, an extensive chapter by Reed explores the evolving and dynamic nature of control systems in organisations. Reed highlights the emergence of a neo-Weberian mode of control whereby the agency of workers is afforded greater significance and then moves to explore hybrid forms of network control. In making his argument, Reed uses the chapter as a platform to articulate the merits of his realist standpoint (Reed, 1997), while all the while appreciating that attempts at control are imperfect and likely to combine both hard and soft elements. The chapter by Heery looks further beyond the organisation to unpack debates concerning the impact of employment legislation. In so doing, the chapter deftly examines issues around the desirability of legislation (deregulationists versus regulationists), and illuminates debates concerning its efficacy by drawing on examples of the nature of bargaining and pay determination, while also exploring issues of implementation. The final two chapters in the perspectives section offer welcome additions to the more established themes of control, HRM and employment legislation. Marinetto provides a rich overview of ethics and the employment relationship contrasting consequential (business case) and non-consequential (emphasis on justice and equality) arguments. This chapter usefully draws on examples of Enron and 'dead peasants' insurance', while suggesting alternative philosophical approaches which render ethical considerations of the employment relationship more explicit, including via the existentialism of Sartre and Heidegger. Finally, the chapter by Thomas and Davies makes the case for an 'identities-turn' in employment relations (p. 149), destabilising that which is typically assumed as a given. In particular, they advocate an approach whereby individuals are understood to be 'situated in social contexts that both constrain and sustain identity' (p. 148). Overall, the perspectives section highlights the various theoretical lenses, ideological underpinnings and philosophical orientations that can shape, reinforce or renew our understanding of the employment relationship.

The second section examines key *Contextual Influences*. Here the chapter by Hauptmeier offers a robust and convincing case for the continued influence of markets on employment relations. This influence has been furthered by neo-liberalism and competition, but also via the internalisation of market mechanisms through the likes of performance-related pay and temporal flexibility. Nonetheless, the impact of markets cannot be neatly read, not least because 'companies can influence their own exposure to competition' (p. 185). Following a similar line of argument, Jenkins and Turnbull draw on the case of the clothing and port sectors to depict the differentiated position of labour in the midst of global forces. Through this discussion, they demonstrate that both local and global institutions matter to varying extents in providing leverage for workers within a more globalised employment

relationship. The chapter by Nash moves to examine the underappreciated role of governance, including the growing impact of shareholder activism and private equity, and the short-term orientation and incentives they impose on firms. Willmott extends the discussion to examine the theme of regulation in the hands of private organisation or what he terms the 'soft' governance of employability (p. 251). Here, self-regulating accreditation agencies such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) and the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) come under scrutiny, drawing attention to the integral role played by intermediating agencies in the governance of employability. Overall, this section captures some of the key tensions and interactions between structure and agency in shaping the context in which the employment relationship is enacted and sustained.

The third section of the book explores *Substantive Developments* in the employment relationship. Topics examined here include the acceleration of income inequality (Turnbull and Wass), the increasingly unilateral regulation of working time by management and the differential levels of access to work-life balance provisions (Blyton), and the evolution of workplace equality law and broadening equality standards (Foster and Williams). In the final chapter of this section on worker representation, Heery explores key debates in the context of the fundamental importance of workers' interests being represented and the realities of three decades of trade union decline. It is clear from this section of the book that 'development' was not meant in a normative sense; many of the substantive developments reviewed suggest even greater challenges, especially for those at the lower levels or periphery of both organisations and society. For example, Heery argues that 'many UK workplaces are effectively despotic, in which the interests of employers and managers hold sway' (p. 365), while Turnbull and Wass document that 'Britain is more unequal now than at any time since records began' (p. 274).

The final section of the book explores the management of the employment relationship in three *Differing Work Settings*. Ogbonna explores service work and calls for a greater integration of the employment and marketing literatures to better understand the dynamics of customer influence in this context. Edwards offers a timely assessment of knowledge work, concluding with the important rejoinder that 'knowledge is not a panacea, it is a social process, which continues to be subject to power relations and vested interests' (p. 419). Finally, Ashworth and Entwistle highlight the complex and uneven impact of public sector reform on public sector service work. They note that frequent contradiction and tensions create space for public sector workers to experience such reforms through reinterpretation and resistance.

#### ASSESSING REASSESSING THE EMPLOYMENT RELATIONSHIP

This book is wonderfully contextualised and appropriately captures the richness and dynamics of theory and research in the domain of the employment relationship. The chapters reflect a variety of perspectives and capture multiple levels of analysis, while drawing upon diverse theoretical traditions and research evidence. Nonetheless, the use of the term 'employment relationship' does invite some commentary. This broad lens captures the

legacy and tradition of industrial and employment relations, and accommodates context, while simultaneously giving due acknowledgement to the 'structured antagonism' of workplace relations (Edwards, 1986: 5). Yet this is both a key strength and weakness as the term risks casting a conceptual net so wide that it seeks to address something of a moving target. As a consequence, direct criticism and sustained conversation in the spirit of advancement proves difficult. Of course the use of the broader and more inclusive term 'employment relationship' relative to the reassessment of HRM of two decades previously (Blyton and Turnbull, 1992) may also be read as a damning indictment of progress in the understanding and conceptualisation of HRM in the years since. Indeed, the sentiment of the original 1992 collection is arguably still struggling to find a receptive audience today (see Batt and Banerjee, 2012; Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010).

With respect to specific content, the coverage is wide-ranging and bridges some of the more traditional areas of study with emerging topics such as networked control, identity, work-life balance, soft regulation, developments in knowledge work and the growth of new forms of employee representation. Relying on the palette of work and expertise present in one institution naturally invites a degree of pragmatism in topic selection which shields against criticism. Nonetheless, notable is a dearth of reference to the role and impact of technology, especially social media, in both framing and serving as a channel for managing the employment relationship. Interestingly, technology was strongly represented in the earlier collection, including a chapter dedicated to 'New Technology and HRM' (Lloyd and Rawlinson, 1992). Reference to globalisation and product markets acknowledged, the book is also relatively silent on the more international and cultural dimensions impinging on the management of the employment relationship (e.g. the role of multinational firms) and, relatedly, the underpinning values shaping the way knowledge about the employment relationship is created and disseminated. Finally, the collection clearly highlights and speaks of those groups most marginalised in society, albeit with the associated risk that it may be seen to inadvertently speak for them (Tatli, 2012).

In terms of book structure, some might call for more synthesis and comparison between chapters. For example Edwards' argument that the new economy exhibits many of the tensions found in Fordist regimes directly echo Reed's commentary on network control. Foster and Williams' discussion of the evolution of workplace equality agendas could arguably be underpinned by reference to Marinetto's distinction between consequential and non-consequential ethical arguments, while this in turn may be related to Delbridge's operationalisation of the distinction between professional and critical sociology. A focus on identity is also a common undercurrent in many of the chapters. Likewise, there is a sense that many of the contributions either explicitly or implicitly cling to some form of realist argument which recognises the interaction of structure and agency and the role of context (Edwards, 2005). However, while such overlap and layering of chapters is important and offers a strong basis for discussion, arguably the task of forcing comparison would sit uneasily with the spirit of the book and so is best left to the individual scholar of the employment relationship. In this respect, the book exemplifies the merits of pluralistic approaches to analysis which draw on multiple 'theories in concert' (Greenwood and

Miller, 2010: 82). Indeed, in his chapter, Delbridge cautions against synthesis or displacement and instead highlights the “‘opportunity of plurality” and “strength of difference” that can be found when incompatible approaches find ways to constructively engage’ (p. 36).

As a collection, this book provides a necessary reminder of the value of multi-disciplinary insight and critical reflection when considering an inherently complex phenomenon such as the employment relationship. Moreover, in a world of e-alerts, journals and blogs, it provides a timely reminder of the rich fabric and diversity of perspective that only a book can bring. Indeed, part of its success may come from the liberty inherent to the book chapter format, whereby authors do not necessarily have to conform, confront or manipulate content to meet the arduous requirements and vested interests of reviewers and journal editors. In his chapter on employment law, Heery argued that in ‘bringing to the surface debates that are often submerged, the aim has been to identify fault-lines of contention’ (p. 91). Arguably, the entire collection serves a similar purpose. In summation, this is an authoritative account of the employment relationship founded on chapters that are thought-provoking, lucid and well-informed. For the eager scholar of the employment relationship, this book will serve as a stellar referent point, the title and tone cautioning against simplistic answers or end points to analysis.

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