The new pluralism: interests, identity, and social change

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Abstract

Purpose

The paper reviews Fox's frames of reference against subsequent changes in the composition of the labour force, shifts in social values, and the arrival of the politics of identity.

Design/methodology/approach

A close reading of the frames of reference is placed in the context of Fox's writing on the search for managerial legitimacy. That search is then considered in relation to the subsequent revolution in equal opportunities and contemporary efforts to promote equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI).

Findings

At the core of Fox's frames lies the fundamental question of whether employers accept trade unions as a legitimate expression of employee interests. Changes in the composition of the labour force and the related arrival of identity politics has led to the emergence of a new set of interests based on social identity. These interests exist because of state legislation, social pressure from campaign groups, and the awareness of the right to equal treatment regardless of gender, race, sexuality etc. It follows that the emergence of these identity-based interests means that employers are all pluralists now. This new pluralism has the ideological challenge of gaining approval not only from employees but also from the public in a world where errant employers are vulnerable to hashtag activism.

Originality/value

By revisiting Fox's frames of reference, and emphasizing the role of employee interests, the paper shows that Fox's original insights on managerial authority and the need for 'legitimising sentiments' are still relevant even if his frames are now outdated.

Keywords

Ideology, legitimacy, social identity, equality, pluralism.

Introduction

At a time when there is a renewed interest in the role of ideas within employment relations (Hauptmeier and Heery 2014; Carstensen et al. 2022), it is worth revisiting Alan Fox's efforts to broaden the field of industrial relations by incorporating ideas from sociology. The most significant of these ideas was almost certainly his 'frames of reference' not least because they have featured in virtually every major British textbook on industrial relations, the sociology of work and human resource management (e.g., Edwards 2003; Legge 2005; Watson 2017). As Heery (2016, 2) has observed, Fox's 'frames of reference' is one of the few concepts that has passed tests of ubiquity and longevity in the field of industrial relations.

The background is that Fox sought to deepen our understanding of industrial relations as a social and political phenomenon by drawing on ideas from classical sociology about the limits of legal contracts and the legitimacy of managerial authority. He argued that regardless of how authority is defined, it invariably requires an ideology or coherent set of supporting beliefs and values. These 'legitimating sentiments' provide a basis for making decisions as well as a set of rationalisations for justifying decisions (1971, 135). However, the search for managerial legitimacy is always a work in progress not least because employers have to adapt to economic and social change.

In the 50 years that have passed since the publication of *Beyond Contract* (1974a) and *Man Mismanagement* (1974b), there have been profound changes in the composition of the labour force, in prevailing social values and, relatedly, in employment legislation. Employers have had to respond, however reluctantly, with policies on equality, diversity and inclusion. In doing so, they must demonstrate that the way they run their organisations not only complies with the law but is also socially acceptable to new generations of employees with vastly different attitudes towards gender, sexuality and race from those of previous generations.

Accordingly, the argument advanced here is that the traditional sectional economic interests of the labour movement upon which the frames of reference were founded are unable to incorporate additional interests derived from social identity. Though the dramatic decline in trade unionism since the 1970s era might suggest that unitarism is now the dominant approach (e.g., Dundon and Gollan 2007; Hann and Nash 2020) this is based on the assumption that union membership is the only possible sectional interest. I argue that the arrival of social identity-based interests means that Fox's typology is no longer congruent with the realities of organisational life in the 21st century. Recognising this does not mean that the field of industrial relations must be re-defined, but it certainly means that it should put more effort into recognising new axes of mobilisation if it is to remain relevant (Piore and Safford 2006; Tapia et al 2015).

I begin by outlining the classic problem of managerial authority that Fox introduced into the industrial relations literature, before describing aspects of the frames of reference. Here I argue that the key to the frames of references is that of competing economic interests and whether they are deemed to be legitimate. Fox would, however, label those frames that did not recognise the structural nature of diverging interests as ideologies. Those of which he approves are presented as 'frames of reference'. I then provide a brief historical overview of the rise of social identity as a distinct set of employee interests. This includes an evolving body of critical theorising on gender, race/ethnicity, and sexuality as well as new forms of mobilisation in the form of hashtag activism. Both are in line with claims that the old industrial relations regime

of collective bargaining has been replaced by a new employment rights model, one in which the axes of mobilisation are at least as likely to be a disparate mix of identity groups as through trade union organisation (e.g., Piore and Safford 2006; Tapia et al. 2015).

Interests and ideologies in the frames of reference

A central theme of *Beyond Contract*, much as the title suggested, is the Durkheimian (1893) insight that not everything in the employment contract is contractual. Of course, contracts of employment are always incomplete as they cannot specify a response to every possible work situation in advance. Into this space comes managerial authority since one of the defining features of the employment contract is a formal agreement by employees to place themselves under the authority of their employer. Again, taking his cue from classical sociology, Fox was inspired by Weber's argument that authority did not necessarily equate with power because the acceptance of that authority depended on shared beliefs and values (Weber 1947). In his textbook on the sociology of work Fox observed that authority might imply the right to expect and command obedience, but it does not follow that subordinates will always agree with the instructions or carry them out to the best of their ability (Fox, 1971: 34). What was required was a sense that the authority and its aims were desirable and appropriate and not just a reflection of economic self-interest. Even the fact that workers had little choice but to sell their labour as low status 'hands' under capitalism did not mean that their interests and needs could be ignored (Fox, 1985: 50-1). For them as well as others in 'high trust' roles, the exercise of power had to be perceived as appropriate within a framework of socially approved norms, values and beliefs that were not enshrined in the contract of employment (Fox 1971, 39-47; 1974a, 248-270; 1985, 51-64). In short, it raised a deceptively simple question: '… by what means do managers seek to induce subordinates to perceive their rule as legitimate, and thus extend willing compliance and cooperation?' (1971: 39).

For Fox, this question of how to ensure that the employment relationship was legitimised by workers was the central problem in industrial relations (see also, Cradden 2017, 68). His first attempt to answer the question came through the 'frames of reference' that formed the opening part of a submission to the Royal ('Donovan') Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations (1965-68). Fox had been invited to contribute a research paper on the basis that industrial sociology might provide some insight into management-worker relations, particularly in relation to the problems of strikes, inflation, and restrictive practices. The frames of reference were presented simply as the means '… through which management and the public view the problems of industrial relations' (Fox, 1966a: 1, 11). As the three frames of reference – unitarist, pluralist and radical - are well-known from textbooks, I shall not outline them in any detail. Instead, I want to emphasize two aspects that are frequently overlooked.

The first is that the frames were founded on the central concept of economic interests and whether, and to what extent, they are recognised (see also, Budd and Bhave 2008). The 'unitary system', for instance, has one central source of legitimate authority and a single focus of loyalty as it is founded on a common, shared interest. As almost every account of the unitary model indicates, the closest analogy is that of a sports team where 'team spirit and undivided management authority co-exist to the benefit of all' (1966, 3). By contrast, the counter frame of the 'pluralistic system' viewed the organisation as a plural society comprising sectional interests whose legitimacy was derived from the values of the 'democratic age'. The closest

analogy is that of a coalition government in which individuals and groups with widely different interests agree to collaborate on the basis that they can all get something of what they want (Fox, 1974a: 260-1). Trade unions were not therefore an intrusion into the private affairs of a company but another manifestation of the liberal democratic belief that interests have the right to free association 'and, within legal limits, of asserting their claims and aspirations' (Fox, 1974a: 262). These interests certainly have a common interest in the survival of the organisation, but their very existence means that they can never overlap fully. It follows that clashes may arise from time to time as groups jostle for rewards and as changes are introduced in response to business fluctuations. What was important, as he explained in his autobiography, was to recognise that such conflict was the legitimate expression of competing interests and 'not simply the result of ill-disposed agitators using their influence for political ends' (1990, 231).

The second overlooked aspect of Fox's contribution is simply that the frame that he wishes to criticise is described as an 'ideology' while the preferred perspective is described more neutrally as a 'frame of reference'.[1] Early in his paper he states that 'unrealistic frames of reference exist which distort reality and thereby prejudice solutions' (Fox, 1966a: 2;11). Furthermore, the opening discussion of the section on 'The ideology of management' begins with the question of why 'hard-headed and practical men' would subscribe to the unitary view when it was 'so at variance with demonstrable facts' (Fox, 1966a: 5). The answer comes in two parts with the first arguing that those who subscribe to an ideology cease to be analytical but rather think in terms of values. The second part would develop his enduring theme that managers need a set of ideas that will serve as '… a method of self-reassurance, an instrument of persuasion, and a technique of seeking legitimation in authority' (Fox, 1966a: 5).

The inclination to label what Fox deems to be a distorting or unrealistic set of beliefs as an ideology was confirmed when he rejected his earlier advocacy for the pluralist model in favour of what he would term the 'radical perspective'. Some years after his contribution to the Donovan Commission, Fox engaged in a series of informal debates with Marxist graduate students at the University of Oxford. The discussions with Richard Hyman, among others, would lead him to reconsider his position on class and power, a process that would eventually lead to an autocritique of his earlier arguments for pluralism (Ackers 2024). What is noteworthy here is that Fox begins to explore how social inequality interacts with managerial legitimacy, a subject that would become a central theme of *Beyond Contract.*

Fox's critique of pluralism concentrated on the assumption of a relative balance of power between employers and trade unions since the collective power of large numbers of workers meant that they could negotiate freely and equally on the terms of their engagement (see also Roche 1991, 98-99). The institution of collective bargaining was therefore central to the liberal pluralist approach model because every potential conflict would 'in sufficiently skilled and patient hands, be made to yield some compromise or synthetic solution which all the interests involved will find acceptable and workable' (Fox, 1974a: 264). Accordingly, pluralists believed that the parties to collective agreements had a moral obligation to honour those agreements when the balance of power was '… not so unevenly matched as to introduce the extenuating concept of duress' (1974a, 267).

Fox's view, on the other hand, was that collective bargaining served to legitimate an employment contract in which differences in bargaining power were such that the interests of

the labour movement could never be fully realised under existing economic arrangements (1974a, 275-277). The very fact the pluralist perspective was founded on the assumption of roughly equal levels of bargaining power would mean that any group of workers that deviated from agreements could be met with an authoritarian response. That is, the ideological content of pluralism was such that it 'leads logically towards categorizing all nonconformers in these terms' (i.e. as malicious and favouring disorder) (Fox, 1974: 287). In such instances, it would be neither unjust nor inappropriate to apply legal sanctions. For these and other reasons, he concluded that industrial relations pluralists, whether intentionally or otherwise, played a role of some ideological significance, which was to justify a *status quo* that was characterized by a highly unequal distribution of power, wealth, and privilege (Fox, 1974: 285).

Fox's analysis had become 'a much sharper-edged one that carried something of a Marxist flavour' (1990, 236). Even so, he did turn once again to Durkheim to tease out the relationship between the division of labour in society, economic inequality and social solidarity (see especially, Gold 2017). Two elements of Durkheim's theory stand out. The first, which we have just discussed, was that of equality in contractual relations. The second was equality of opportunity. For Durkheim, both were essential for creating a sense of meritocracy in which access to the leading strata would depend not on inherited privilege but on the competitive selection of the most able through the education system. As the pluralist approach did not consider economic inequality a decisive factor in industrial relations, and as it ignored the structural dimensions of power in capitalist society, then all it had to offer was fine-tuning 'at the margins' (Fox 1974a, 286).[2]

At this point, it is worth emphasizing that it is not at all unusual for an ideology whether major or minor, Marxist or Liberal, to contain a kernel of theory (Boudon 1989, 67). That is, they contain propositions that form a coherent outlook on the economic and social order. Crucially, this set of core propositions comes wrapped with a normative packaging as '… political ideologies always combine, felicitously, factual propositions and value judgements' (Aron, 1957, 236). However, as ideologies consist of value judgements as well as judgements of facts they cannot be proved true or false and it is for this reason that they have traditionally been distinguished from science and scientific knowledge (Boudon 1989, 18-19).[3]

Social change, managerial legitimacy, and the new radical ideologies

Fox was aware that these legitimating values and beliefs had to change in response to developments in the wider society. He observed that in the past obedience had seemed to be a direct consequence of being born into the lower social ranks where men were expected to doff their hats in the presence of their betters. But this sense of deference had been weakened by rising levels of education, increasing affluence and new social aspirations. The change in attitude towards authority was not only a challenge for work organisations but also for churches, schools, and universities (Fox, 1985: 53). If the unitary ideology originated in the 'master and servant' legislation of the 19th century, then the pluralist ideology emerged as part of the search for legitimation in industrial society. The arrival of mass production with its monotonous, low-discretion jobs and the post-war growth in the labour movement meant that employers had to find new ways of seeking consent (1985, 157-158; 1974a, 258).

Social change and the emergence of social identity politics in the workplace since 1974

The continuing search for legitimacy would meet a new set of challenges in the decades that followed Fox's 1974 publications. Though he was aware of the changing nature of employee consent, Fox had remarkably little to say about the workers as people. That is, he failed to address the social grievances that arose from people having a different gender, race or sexuality to the (white) 'male breadwinner' that had dominated the post-war period. Given his theoretical concerns, especially his interest in the interaction of inequality, ideology and managerial authority, this represents something of a missed opportunity.

In the mid-1970s, women accounted for one third (36.6%) of the UK labour force with just over one in two women engaging in paid employment (54.9%). By the end of 2022, women made up almost half of the labour force (46.5%) while the proportion of women participating in the labour market had increased to seven in ten (72.3%) (Francis-Devine and Hutton 2024). A striking aspect of this change is the increased willingness to return to work after childbirth (Smeaton 2006).

In terms of immigration, some 1.5 million 'New Commonwealth' immigrants arrived in Britain in the early 1970s making it a much more ethnically diverse country (Connolly and Gregory 2007, 145-147). Immigration would then decline until the early 1990s when the numbers arriving started to exceed the numbers leaving, a pattern that has continued into the 2020s. By 2021, an estimated nine and half million immigrants were living in the UK giving it a similar level of migration to that of other high-income countries. Before the Brexit referendum of 2016, the largest inflows came from Central and Eastern Europe but these have since been replaced by migrants from India and Nigeria, as well as those fleeing the war in Ukraine (Sumption et al. 2024).

A substantial shift in British social attitudes has also taken place. For instance, the public has become much less traditional in its views about working mothers as the belief that a man's job is to earn money and a woman's is to look after the home and family has declined dramatically. Roughly one in two held this view in 1987 but only one in ten did so by 2022 (Allen and Stevenson 2023). Another indication of a liberalization in attitudes is in relation to same-sex relationships. In 2022, two thirds (67%) of the population agreed that a sexual relationship between two people of the same sex was never wrong, compared with 17% in 1983 (Clery 2023). By contrast, the proportion of the public who described themselves as either 'very' or 'a little' racially prejudiced has never fallen below a quarter of the population since 1983 (Kelley et al. 2017).

Accompanying these changes were waves of employment legislation that tried to address what had been taken-for-granted inequalities of age, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation and disability. Most were introduced by Labour governments for whom, significantly, the priority was on providing and strengthening individual employment rights *vis à vis* employers (Dickens and Hall 2003). Some of the legislation of the late 1960s, such as that tackling racism in employment, housing and access to hotels and restaurants, had little support from voters and outright hostility from organised labour (Bleich 2003, 70). Gradually women's groups and others, such as people with disabilities, began to organise and speak for themselves in ways that initiated public debates, promoted greater tolerance and gained widespread support from politicians. Laws eventually followed to promote equal pay for women and provide public services for those registered as disabled (Thane 2005, 189-193). Joining the European

Community led to a new Sex Discrimination Act in 1986 and the Race Relations Act was extended following a European Union (EU) directive in 2000. The 2010 Equality Act consolidated and updated the existing UK legislation so that it reflected the four major EU equal treatment directives (Morris 2012).

Turning to the academic realm, the various strands of identity politics are going through a continuing process of renewal that stands in sharp contrast to the occasional burst of theoretical development in industrial relations (McGovern 2020). Liberal and radical feminism, for instance, have evolved to include postcolonial and postmodern thinking while intersectional feminism has emerged to analyse how different forms of discrimination (e.g., race, class and gender) combine and overlap to produce compounded forms of oppression (Disch and Hawkesworth 2016). Theories of race relations have been superseded by racial formation theory with critical race theory arriving alongside in the late 1990s (Back and Solomos 2022). Meanwhile critical disability theory and queer theory have emerged to challenge everyday understandings of the normal whether in the form of physical and mental capacities, sexuality, or gender identity (Siebers 2008).

Several aspects of these theories are worth noting for present purposes. For example, the underlying theories gain traction by being able to speak to specific interests in society. In his analysis of the relationship between theory and ideology, Boudon (1989) observes that theory becomes useful for social groups when it offers them a cognitive framework for understanding their position in society. Part of this process includes the recognition and embracing of other members of the same identity who may or may not have been aware that they shared similar experiences. In other words, theories that address the political situation of specific strata in society can raise a sense of self-awareness or group consciousness. The combination of shared experience and ideology influences the way people see, interpret and judge the world and so gives actors the authority to demand radical social change (Boudon, 1989: 117-121). It is in this sense of ideology as a doctrine derived either directly or indirectly from theoretical reasoning that is used here. Instead of treating ideology as a distorting falsehood, which is the position that Fox takes, the emphasis here is on the meaning that it provides for groups in society (Boudon, 1989: 54-7).

I present a simple mapping of some of these theories in Figure 1. Those selected share three characteristics. First, they insist that society is characterised by profound patterns of advantage and disadvantage that stem largely from social identity. Second, they develop a sense that they belong to a specific social group or constituency which sees their problems and experiences in a comparable manner. This sometimes led to the creation of campaigning organisations, such as Disability Rights UK, the Fawcett Society and Stonewall.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Third, each of these perspectives has departed from or even rejected Marxist analyses that view their inequalities as primarily economic in origin and, consequently, that their social identities should be set aside in the interests of working class unity. Instead they argue that treating racism and sexism as an epiphenomenon of class relations frequently means overlooking the way in which both are institutionalised across society in ways that could not be attributed directly to material interests (e.g., Gilroy 1987; Walby 1986). Instead of adhering to class reductionism, sociologists have been focusing on how 'white privilege' and patriarchy operate both as a set of social practices and as an ideology (e.g., Byrne et al. 2020; Scott et al. 2010). What this means for industrial relations is that women and minority workers have issues relating to their identity that are not reducible to the interests of workers generally. Or, to put it another way, doing away with class inequalities would not remove the sources of gender and racial inequality.

It's pluralism, but not as we knew it

What does all this mean for the unitarist and pluralist frames of reference? If it is accepted that search for managerial legitimacy is an ongoing process, then it must be acknowledged that the ideas and beliefs that provide that legitimacy must change if they are to keep up with developments across society. So, even on Fox's own terms, the frames of reference that he presented in 1966 should not be viewed as if they were permanently set in stone. A common observation here is that Fox's unitarist ideology, which he thought 'incongruent with the structural realities of industrial organization' (1966b: 375), is now the dominant approach following the dramatic decline in collective bargaining since the late 1970s (Van Wanrooy et al. 2013, 58-63; Hann and Nash 2020).[4]

But my argument is not about the fortunes of industrial relations institutions but about the interests that the frames of reference capture. According to Fox, the pluralist perspective is anchored on the 'crucial union role' (1966a: 7) and so the frames consider only the interests of employers and trade unions. Over the past few decades, however, various forms of identity politics have been able to establish new sets of interests across all spheres of society and not just in the workplace. Women, people of colour, and members of the LGBTQ+ community have framed political claims, promoted political ideologies and campaigned for social and political action. In doing so, they have raised multiple interests of identity that differentiate employees in ways that transcend their shared economic interests.[5] Employers, regardless of whether unionised or not, have had to respond out of a mixture legal compulsion, social pressure, and enlightened self-interest. The result is that most British workplaces now have a formal written policy on equal opportunities or managing diversity (Van Wanrooy et al. 2013).

At the heart of these changes lies the equal opportunities revolution. When the initial legislation appeared in the mid-1970s, it provided women and people of colour with equal access to all positions, occupations and careers for the first time in history. The legislation that took effect in 1975 had a dramatic and immediate effect of lowering occupational segregation by sex as more and more women entered male dominated occupations while some men entered what had been exclusively female roles (Hakim 2004, 151). Though progress on entering senior managerial positions has been slow, major inroads have been made into high status professions

such as law, medicine and pharmacy (Hakim 2004, 151-152). For racial and ethnic minorities, the impact has been less impressive and taken much longer. Only after a series of legal cases and consistent action by trade unions could modest changes be detected towards the end of the 20th century (Heartfield 2017, 62-66).

Today, the phrase 'equal-opportunities employer' appears so routinely on job adverts that it is barely noticed. But employers also take pride in listing their membership of voluntary certification schemes that promote equality and diversity through evaluation, training, and corrective action requests. Some of the better-known examples include those run by Athena SWAN (gender equality in higher education), Business in the Community (environment, and equality, diversity and inclusion), Race for Opportunity, Stonewall Top Global Employers programme (LGBTQ+) and the Two Ticks 'Positive About Disability' scheme. Of course, there are specialist associations for human resource management professionals, such as the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD), that have a long-established programme for supporting equal opportunities and diversity as an important aspect of good people management. Other professional societies, such as those in accountancy, marketing and public relations, also proudly state support for EDI on their websites.

Yet another development is that of employee resource groups (ERGs). Though these groups or networks may be sponsored by the employer, they are voluntary employee-led initiatives that try to promote diverse and inclusive workplaces by organising events, workshops and training sessions. They provide an environment where individuals facing similar challenges can interact and support each other by sharing insights and experiences. According to Welbourne and colleagues (2017), there are three broad types: social cause centred (e.g. environment), professionally oriented (e.g. careers in engineering or management) and social identity based (women, race/ethnicity, and sexuality). Originally, they were a response to the racial conflict that exploded across the US in the 1960s but they have grown substantially over the past 25 years, notably within the global brands that are part of the Fortune 500 (Welbourne et al 2017, 1817). Within the UK, some of the better-known ERGs are the Disability Confident Network, Spectrum - the LGBT+ network - and the Women's Leadership Initiative.

What this adds up to is a general picture in which diversity and inclusion has become 'mainstream'. A growing number of groups and networks have mobilised while organisations across public and private sectors are keen to feature EDI in their company profiles not only as a signal of the progressive nature of their employment practices but also as a means of attracting talent (Jonsen et al. 2021).

New axes of mobilisation in employee relations

More generally, an influential paper by Piore and Safford (2006) insists that the old collective bargaining regime has been replaced by a new employment rights regime. Their thesis is that this new regime is the product of a shift in the axes of social and political mobilization from economic identities that originated in occupation, enterprise and class to identities that are embedded beyond the workplace in the wider society: sex, race, age, disability and sexual orientation. With the decline of trade unionism, in other words, social identities are replacing workplace identities as the locus for mobilization (see also Tapia et al. 2015).

Under this new model, the rules of the workplace are imposed by law, judicial opinions and through pressures from managers and employees at local level. To illustrate the point, they note that some major US corporations like IBM and AT&T have formally recognised more than 50 groups as part of 'diversity initiatives.' These include Asian workers, African American, Jewish, disabled people, Christians, women, and even a group for employees over 40 years of age. They note that such groups are also found in professional associations where they press for rights and benefits in a manner similar to what unions did historically. A further illustration is the spread of same-sex partner benefits from employer to employer through the actions of grassroots gay and lesbian employee organisations (Briscoe and Safford 2008).

In the UK context, the claim that the collective bargaining regime has been replaced by a new employment rights regime is not as persuasive when trade unions still have a major presence in the public sector and when many of those unions have taken up identity interests in the form of equality bargaining (Heery 2006). In the years since Piore and Safford set out their thesis, however, the extraordinary advances by social media have included a development that is consistent with new forms of identity mobilization. Specifically, 'hashtag activism' has provided a powerful new tool for civil society activism. The term has evolved from the use of hashtags (#) on Twitter/X to draw attention to a specific social issue in a way that allows users to share information and opinions enabling others (followers) to interact and engage in conversation calling for change. One of the more powerful elements of hashtag movements is that people who might previously have felt isolated can find online communities where they can share experiences, develop tactics and mobilise (Ames and McDuffie 2023). For workers who belong to marginalised groups that are often numerical minorities in their workplaces, this opens up possibilities that did not exist for previous generations.

Perhaps the most well-known examples to date relate to the arrest and subsequent prosecution of the film producer Harvey Weinstein in 2018 following allegations of rape and sexual harassment, and the death of George Floyd in 2020 following a case of police brutality in Minneapolis. These led to unprecedented levels of online activism that turned the hashtag movements of #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter into global phenomena. Marches and demonstrations followed in numerous cities not only in the United States but across the globe, and, in the case of the #MeToo campaign, the campaign helped other victims of sexual harassment to come forward and share their stories.

Less well known but no less relevant was the worldwide walkout of 20,000 Google employees and contractors in November 2018. The #GoogleWalkout movement started after a report in *The New York Times* that Google had paid Android co-founder Andy Rubin $90 million even though an internal report found an allegation of sexual misconduct to be credible. As pressure continued to build following media coverage, Rubin left and the then Google CEO and its director of HR had to inform employees that 13 senior managers had been fired in the previous two years for sexual harassment. Unease with this and other aspects of company policy have continued with activist employees turning to online media to press their case (Kowitt 2019).

The advent of social media and the proliferation of identity-based social justice campaigns means that employers have further potential audiences to reach with messages about how they value diversity and promote inclusion. Another significant change since the mid-1970s has been the growth of multinational corporations and brands with global recognition (Fitzgerald 2015). These global behemoths are all too aware that the way they treat their employees, even

in sub-contracted firms that are alleged to be 'sweatshops', will be judged in a mediated world where their reputations can be damaged within hours. Historically, such firms were able to recover their reputations within a few years when the problem was an unsafe product. But there is a sense that mistakes or abuses in the area of identity politics today can draw organisations into the middle of the 'culture wars' where differences on values and ideology make it much more difficult for firms to rehabilitate their reputations (Penn 2023).

Discussion and Conclusions

One of the ways that Fox sought to broaden the field of industrial relations was by applying insights from Durkheim and Weber to raise questions about the nature of managerial authority and the problem of legitimacy. When Fox was writing during the 1960s and 1970s, much of the challenge to management came through demands for economic redistribution that were class-based and channelled through trade unions (e.g., Fox,1971, 132-4; 1974b: 150-1). Also, his frames of reference were devised at a time when the major industrial relations problems were deemed to be unofficial strikes, restrictive practices and informal wage bargaining, all of which centred on the question of whether trade unions, as an interest group, had too much power. While he recognised that the search for legitimising sentiment had to change in response to developments in the wider society, he failed to identify examples that would have supported his argument in the form of the growing demands by women and ethnic minorities for better treatment.

What followed were major changes in the composition of the labour force, a sea change in attitudes towards working women and waves of employment legislation designed to tackle deep-seated forms of discrimination. A key element of the legislation aimed to promote equal opportunities, which was a problem that the neo-Durkheimian Fox had emphasized in his account of the how social inequality contributed to the imbalance of power in the employment relationship (Gold 2017, 158).

Against this background, I argue that his frames of reference are not congruent with the realities of the world of work in the 21st century. As indicated earlier, Fox anchored his frames on the 'crucial union role' and so the frames recognise only employer and trade union interests.[6] My argument is that identity politics, and the way in which a sense of social solidarity has formed around gender, race, and sexuality etc., have established a new set of interests in the labour market, as well as elsewhere in society. Crucially, these interests do not have be formally organised and represented within the enterprise nor do they depend on the presence of EDI policies or employee resource groups. Rather, the interests exist because of social pressure from campaign groups, state legislation and the awareness of employees (and their managers) of employment rights (Meager et al. 2002). What this means is that employers are all pluralists now. If unitarism still exists in this respect, it is not as a set of ideas or values that will gain much credibility or social approval in the context of the changes described here.[7]

Of course, it could be argued that identity interests are conditioned by the employer and so what are apparently shared norms and beliefs about equality and diversity are subject to the prevailing balance of power in the employment relationship. There might have been an enormous expansion of individual employment rights but numerous equality cases remain unheard by Employment Tribunals because individual employees lack the resources and

resilience required to gain a hearing (Dickens 2012). It is worth remembering here that Fox made the same argument about pluralism in that the imbalance of power left only space for 'fine tuning' at the margins (Fox, 1974a, 278). However, that did not invalidate the fact that employees still had a distinct sectional interest and were free to join organisations that represented those interests. No doubt, there are multiple identity interests and identity groups that are not recognized within organisations, and so they have no process by which their grievances may be articulated and resolved (see especially Piore 1995, 57-58). Even so, the earlier examples of organisational certification of EDI policies along with the influence of professional bodies says much about the importance of achieving legitimacy in the eyes of potential employees, professional bodies and society at large.

None of this should imply that the discrimination experienced by any of the social identity categories has been eliminated, that equal opportunities have been achieved or even that the adoption of EDI policies has moved far beyond legal compliance in many instances. That is, there may well be a range of EDI policies in place which are frequently not supported by appropriate employment practices (Hoque and Noon 2004; Van Wanrooy et al. 2013). Furthermore, policies on EDI may be restricted to those instances where there is a 'business case' to show likely improvements in organisational performance, financial returns or recruitment. The challenge of having to prove the benefits of inclusion and diversity, especially when they are open to debate among managers, means that demands for transformational change are invariably diluted even if the value of diversity is recognized (Kirton and Greene 2021, 251-254).

The fact that diversity is recognised makes it difficult to dismiss this form of pluralism and the related EDI policies as intentionally or otherwise serving the ideological function of justifying the *status quo*. The long-term rise in the employment of disabled people, the increasing proportion of women entering management and the professions, and the growing opportunities for gay people to 'bring their whole selves to work' means that significant changes can occur (Thane 2005; Hakim 2004). Employment has become a somewhat more welcoming experience for most disadvantaged and previously discriminated against groups, and identity politics in its various forms must take some credit for that change.

In conclusion, the themes developed in Fox's work are relevant to contemporary discussions about possible new directions for theory and research that expand the range of actors and institutions that shape employment relations (Piore and Safford 2006; Tapia et al. 2015; McBride et al. 2015). Specifically, the interaction between social inequality, ideology and managerial legitimacy are all evident in debates about how to accommodate new axes of mobilisation that are based on *difference* at least as much as they are based on shared *economic interests*. One consequence, as Tapia and colleagues (2015) have argued, is that researchers have to adopt new concepts of identities, interests and collective actors, and these must now include actors from civil society. What this also means is that equality, diversity and inclusion can no longer be treated as marginal topics. Whether the general field of work and employment relations can rise to the challenge remains to be seen. For now, it is surely time to remember that one of Fox's greatest contributions was to recognise there are certain central problems in the social sciences, such as forms of authority and their interaction with social inequality, and that the field of industrial relations would benefit greatly from engaging with them.

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Figure 1 Radical identity-based perspectives (not exhaustive)

Ideology	Related theory	Key concepts	Interest groups
Anti-racism	Structural racism; racial formation theory; critical race theory	Colour blindness; intersectionality; post-colonialism; racial capitalism; racialisation; structural racism; whiteness; white privilege	Black, Asian and minoritized ethnicities; White anti-racist activists
Disability	Critical disability theory; human rights model; medical model; social model of disability	Ableism; invisible disability; neurodiversity; normativity	People with visible (physical) and invisible (e.g., mental) disabilities; Families with a disability; disability allies.
Gender	Liberal feminism; second wave radical feminism; difference and identity; intersectional feminism	Equality; difference; intersectionality objectification; oppression; patriarchy	Women; women of colour Pro-feminist men.
LGBTQ+	Lesbian and gay studies; queer theory; gender performativity theory.	Heteronormativity; genderqueer; transgender.	Lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, trans-gender, queer and others; Straight allies.

[1] There are a couple of references to 'radical ideology' in *Beyond Contract* (274, 286). For the most part, it is referred to as a 'perspective' and it is never analysed as an ideology that 'distorts' in the way that the others do.
[2] In a subsequent response to Fox, Clegg (1975, 314) insisted that pluralism was never based on an assumption of a broadly equal balance of power, but rather on the mutual recognition of rights and rules in a bargaining relationship.
[3] On this basis, it is difficult to understand the tendency to equate the frames of references with distinct theoretical perspectives when Fox would come to dismiss both the unitary and pluralist frames as distorting ideologies (e.g., Kaufman et al. 2021; Budd and Bhave 2008).
[4] Further evidence of the influence of societal shifts on the behaviour of organisations comes through the ballot box. Attitudes to trade unions were especially negative in the late 1970s and 1980s and this was reflected in the repeated tendency of the British public to elect governments that had the reduction of trade union power as a policy goal (Marsh 1992).
[5] It follows that the distinction that some writers make between 'old' and 'new' or 'hard and 'soft' unitarism fails to hold up when they are unable to accommodate social identity interests (e.g. (Heery 2016; Greenwood and Van Buren 2017).
[6] The interests of trade unions and their members may also diverge as Goldthorpe (1974, 430-431) demonstrated in his critique of the top-down reforms proposed by the Donovan Commission.
[7] A substantial strand of the literature on the frames of reference seeks to categorise some or other managerial theory as unitarist, neo-pluralist or radical pluralist (e.g., Budd and Bhave 2008, 2010; Heery 2016). Whatever the intellectual value of such exercises, they deviate sharply from the original aim of the frames which was to capture the way 'management and the public view the problems of industrial relations' (1966a, 1).