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The business and labour history case studies presented in this edited collection provide valuable insights into the field of work organization, the social relations of production, and the detailed division of labour in some key British industries and workplaces between the 1830s and the 1990s. These studies reveal the constant ebb and flow of power and influence between capital and labour, and the initiatives both sides took to defend their interests. Over this extended span of history such cases identify a series of constants that have come to reflect the unique qualities of the relationship between British capital and labour, and the sectors and industries that have given Britain such a distinctive and, as some might argue, skewed economic structure. Through the assemblage of key historic data, and the exploration of significant dynamics of change, each case contributes to the continuing debates about factors related to control over the labour process.

The case studies

For the first case, in Chapter 2, Peter Nicholls examines the early organizational and employment policies in the British railway industry. The chapter explores how the early railways pioneered ideas and systems of management organization and control that foreshadowed theories of organization, socialization and culture. Strong forms of paternalism, sectionalism and hierarchy all combined to create an all-pervasive culture of control. These regimes of control often provided a template for geographically contingent industries, and demonstrated some of the logistical advantages of adopting the status a of joint stock form.

Peter Wardley, in Chapter 3, explores how new technology in the British financial services industry impacted on the gender division of labour.
during the twentieth century. The introduction of electromechanical aids, including office equipment before 1914 and ‘mechanical banking’ in the interwar years progressing to computer technology in the late 1950s and beyond, was associated with the employment of greater numbers of low-cost female labour and the ability to centralize managerial decision making that enabled the implementation of new control systems.

The fight for union recognition that led to a six month strike is the subject of Chapter 4. Mike Richardson presents a micro level study of the conflict that took place in 1913–14 in the one-industry market town of Chipping Norton. Richardson examines the causes, conduct and consequences of this dispute. Changes in management style are explored as ownership of Bliss Mill moved from a seemingly benevolent proprietor to a public limited company under stricter managerial control. He concludes that, despite defeat, union activists were politicized and became involved in the formation of a local Labour Party branch.

The experience of two paper and print companies, John Dickinson and E. S. & A. Robinson, in the 1926 General Strike is the focus of the next study in Chapter 5. It examines the operation of management authority and the experiences of their workforces, before, during and immediately after the Strike. Despite the similarities in industrial relations strategy in Dickinson and Robinson, their responses to the General Strike took markedly different forms. The chapter explores why management at Dickinson derecognized trade unions after the General Strike and utilized a house union with which to consult workers on workplace and industrial relations issues, while Robinson continued to recognize and bargain with independent unions.

The way in which J. W. Arrowsmith, a traditional family-owned printing firm, conducted industrial relations from the beginning of the twentieth century to the end of the 1930s is the main focus of Chapter 6. Ownership control, as opposed to managerial control, features here where authority concerning long-term strategy and day-to-day decision making stayed with the individual owner. The mechanization of composing, the economic recession in the early 1920s, and the 1926 General Strike, proved to have a significant impact on the conduct of industrial relations and ownership authority. The ‘soft’ paternalistic management style practiced before the First World War was replaced first by an authoritarian approach and then, in response to workers’ resistance, by pragmatic solutions to industrial relations and aspects of control over the labour process.

In Chapter 7 Peter Nicholls explores the manner in which the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) evolved into a powerful public sector broadcaster possessing a range of distinctive features which were to shape
its organization and work practices. The case study provides an analysis of the formation and development of the BBC as an agency of the State. It demonstrates the existence of an uneasy relationship within itself, and with the central State, as its role emerges in the 1920s and 1930s when the first Director General set out to secure a degree of independence from political control. It also reveals some of the key features of the style of management control which appeared to recreate many attributes of Edwardian thinking in its forms of paternalistic methods of control.

In light of the debates on scientific management and the influence of Taylorism on British industry, in Chapter 8 Stephanie Tailby surveys changes in production technology, work organization and management in British coalmining in the first half of the twentieth century. She evaluates management interpretations of the work and production management systems that had been fashioned in mechanizing mines, and highlights the role of machine manufacturers in proselytizing a more complete reconstruction on Taylorist lines. Her analysis is concluded by assessing reasons why the take up of Taylorist techniques was rarely applied.

The final chapter, co-written by Mike Richardson, Andy Danford and Paul Stewart, is concerned with changes in production practices in automobile and aerospace manufacture across Britain 1950–82, and the considerable impact these changes have had on labour relations and control over the labour process. Despite disparities both between and within these respective industries, particularly the higher skill levels required by the aerospace sector, common experiences of the transformation of labour conditions of work were discernable. In mapping some key historical struggles of automobile and aerospace workers against management forms of authority and control, this chapter charts the critical dynamics prevalent in both industries.

The labour process

Notwithstanding the diversity of these cases, extending over both time and place, the common thread which connects them is that they examine changes in aspects of the labour process; such as scientific management, mechanization, deskillling, microtechnology, gender division of labour, work organization and labour relations in differing industries. The concept of the labour process is derived from Marx’s analysis.\(^1\) Marxian theory shows that the organization of the labour process, in its specific historical form under the capitalist mode of production, is premised on the need to extract and realize surplus value. Marx emphasized that capitalism is based on commodity production for exchange
values. Labour power is purchased and used to generate more value in commodities than it is paid. The measure of value is ‘socially necessary labour-time… required to produce an article under the normal conditions of production, and with the average degree of skill and intensity prevalent at the time’. Marx points out that after the capitalist has purchased the means of production and workers’ labour power, the labour process comes under direct capitalist control.

Accumulation of capital as the employer’s main objective is central to both neoclassical and Marxist theories of value. Marx stressed that the profit needs of capital, and the periodic crises that accompany the accumulation of capital, conflict with the social needs of workers. The exploitative situation that exists at the point of production is hidden through the cash nexus: ‘necessary and surplus labor time are not distinguished within the labor process…the wage conceals such a distinction.’ Yet, as Burawoy argues, the obfuscation of this exploitative situation is not sufficient to secure surplus value. Workers often pursue disparate interests from those of their employers and, therefore, ‘the labor process…must be understood in terms of the specific combinations of force and consent that elicit cooperation in the pursuit of profit’.

For around one hundred years, until the 1970s, the labour process as a subject of study was overlooked or dealt with scantily. Then, in 1974, Harry Braverman’s seminal work on labour process theory was published stimulating a debate that is still ongoing in the twenty first century. Braverman developed Marx’s theory by focusing on the degradation of work and tightening of managerial control under monopoly capitalism. He maintained that the ever-increasing pace in the introduction of automation and new technology, combined with new techniques in the organization of work, had resulted in an acceleration of deskilling. He argued that the simplification of craft work, through the separation of conception and execution of work tasks, had inevitably led to the diminution of craft control over the labour process, and increasing levels of alienation at work, as tedium replaced skill in the workplace. Subsequent contributions to the labour process debate have marked out areas of weakness in his analysis. For example, he does not take into full account variation and diversity, nor does he acknowledge the increase in semi-skilled workers who acquired ‘significant forms of expertise’ which they defended rigorously. Furthermore, he omits the impact of class struggle and worker resistance. Yet, Braverman’s thesis remains influential, is central to establishing the terms of the labour process debate, and, as such, provides the framework for understanding many of the issues raised in the case studies presented in this book.
The British economy and the power relations between business and labour, pre-1914

In concluding this introduction we provide a brief reading of the changing situation regarding labour relations, the maturation of capitalism and the economic position prevailing in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century. Space prevents us from extending this review into the twentieth century; but the object is to touch on important advances in the development of monopoly capitalism, and concerns facing capital and labour, in order to comprehend key issues that continued to surface at the point of production during the twentieth century.

Britain’s domination of the world market, following the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, was predicated on its technological lead, manufacturing monopoly, monetary orthodoxy, free trade imperialism, and high returns on foreign investment. The economic recovery following the 1847 banking crisis, and the collapse of Chartism in 1848, resulted in the Liberal Party, the party of industrial capitalists, being sufficiently self-assured to grant reforms that it previously regarded as obnoxious in the realization that it needed the assistance of the working class to complete its victory over the landed aristocracy. Thus,

[t]he Factory Acts, once the bugbear of all manufacturers, were not only willingly submitted to, but their expansion into acts regulating all trades, was tolerated. Trade Unions, lately considered inventions of the devil himself, were now petted and patronised as perfectly legitimate institutions….10

Primarily, this volte-face succeeded in bringing about the acquiescence of the ‘protected’ elements of the working class, the labour aristocracy, represented principally by the new model unions. They were attracted to the Gladstonian form of liberalism that mixed its belief in free trade with social and political reform. To a limited extent, these craft workers did gain some benefits from free trade imperialism in the golden age of Victorian capitalism; 1850–73. Real wages grew, particularly for skilled workers. Profits boomed and, for those in regular employment, the standard of living increased especially in comparison with the 1840s. The scale of manufacturing ballooned. Britain was indeed the workshop of the world.

The demand for fixed capital (plant and equipment), increased as industrialization gathered speed and large industrial enterprises
emerged. Key to the development of the latter was the consolidation, in 1862, of the Joint Stock Companies Acts of 1844, 1855 and 1856 which ‘allowed the liability of partners to be limited to the extent of their stake in the company without having to seek parliamentary approval’. These legal reforms mark another important point, as they make possible the separation of ownership and control in large enterprises by means of the formation of publicly traded companies. This ‘functional differentiation’ emerged ‘as a means of raising the ever-increasing amount of capital’ required to sustain and expand the profitability of public companies. Financial institutions, however, were accused of not providing long-term funds for British industry. Attracted by the promise of high returns, they ‘exhibited a strong predilection for holding overseas assets and financing international trade’.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Britain faced increased competition from the United States of America and Germany as these nations rapidly industrialized, establishing large modern enterprises. By the beginning of the twentieth century, while Britain had advanced economically, Germany and the United States, now its main rivals, forged ahead to become the world’s leading industrial powers pushing Britain into third place.

Thus the period 1873–93 witnessed the relative decline of the British economy apropos the United States, Germany and, indeed, Japan. This era is often referred to as the Great Depression. Britain endured a fall in prices and profits, increased unemployment, and an end of its industrial monopoly. Yet the standard of living for those in work rose, and mass production and mass consumption quickened. Firms began to expand faster than markets could grow. Price wars broke out. Competition intensified. This marked the end of the Gladstonian era of free trade. Modern British industry had to adapt to survive. Concentration of production followed. Mergers and acquisitions produced large industrial conglomerates. Trade associations were utilized to manage cartels in order to control prices and output. These were attempts to escape the laws of capitalist competition.

The emergence of monopoly capitalism in Britain should not be exaggerated, however, as this development was mild when compared to the American and German experience. Moreover, scientific management, adopted by several large plants in the United States before the First World War, did not attract the same level of interest in Britain. According to Craig Littler ‘this was because of the pattern of demand for many engineering products in Britain’. Despite attempts to promote ‘the value of scientific management’, such as the address given by Frank Gilbreth to
the Production Managers Association in London on 12 July 1913, its appeal was limited; partly because there was little demand for standardized repetition work in Britain until the outbreak of the First World War. Nonetheless, workshop reorganization and the introduction of new payment systems (piecework and the closely related premium bonus system), was a particular feature of the engineering industry after 1890 and generated opposition from workers and their unions.

Thus, as well as the strike waves of 1889–93 and 1910–14 executed primarily by non-craft workers, workers' resistance took the form of restrictive practices; particularly in the engineering industry. Here, employers sought to gain greater control over the labour process through the introduction of new payment systems. In 1896, to counter what they deemed as powerful and aggressive trade unions and to maintain managerial prerogative, they formed its Employer Federation of Engineering Associations. Unified, its employer were powerful and able to inflict defeat on the union, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE), in the national lockout of 1897–98. This victory paved the way for employers to weaken craft control through exerting tighter supervision of manufacturing operations and compelling the ASE into the formal acceptance of piecework. Dismay from ASE rank-and-file members led to a shift of power from union officialdom to work committees and shop stewards. Where this occurred, greater independence at the local level emerged enabling shop stewards and works committees to resist some of the worst excesses of the strike settlement by securing collective bargaining rights over piece-rates.

Elsewhere, during 1880s and 1890s, many employers’ organizations bolstered managerial authority by providing what the Shipping Federation termed ‘a permanent battle-axe’ against the emerging ‘socialistic unions’. By 1914, employers’ organizations ‘were relatively strong in coal, cotton, engineering, shipbuilding, printing and construction’.

The aspects of the British economy described above are some of the recurring themes that feature throughout the twentieth century. The persistence of relative economic decline, the rise of the corporate economy, the evolution of giant firms, and conflict and consent between capital and labour is the background against which the company or industry specific cases in this book are set.

Notes

2. Ibid., p. 47.
4. Ibid., p. 30.
7. The Bank Charter Act of 1844 established a tighter connection between note issue and gold reserves. The adoption of the gold standard, the convertibility of the pound sterling to gold at a fixed exchange rate, instituted monetary orthodoxy in nineteenth century Britain.
8. A good example of free trade imperialism was the enforcement of free trade upon India, the jewel in the crown of the British Empire. India’s local textile industry was demolished allowing the Lancashire cotton industry to penetrate the Indian market. See E. J. Hobsbawm, Industry and Empire (Penguin: 1985), p. 149.
9. See A. N. Offer, ‘The British Empire, 1870–1914: A Waste of Money?’, Economic History Review XLVI:2 (1993), pp. 215–38, for the debate on the costs and benefits of empire. The concern of this article is whether ‘the British Empire was producing an economic return lower than investment in Britain itself…’. Offer concludes that, on balance, the benefits of empire, particularly ‘from a private point of view’, outweighed the costs.
16. The Times, 14 July 1913, p. 10.
18. Ibid., pp. 84–94.
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