

## Book Review

**Stewart Johnstone and Peter Ackers (eds.) (2015)**  
***Finding Voice at Work? New Perspectives on Employment Relations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. xxvi+309 pages.**  
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Written by seventeen authors, the thirteen chapters in this collection discuss worker's voice inside managerial regimes from three well-known industrial relations models – unitarism (management knows what is good for you); pluralism (acceptance of conflict); and radicalism (the radical-Marxism perspective). Part one of the book is dedicated to “key concepts”, part two to “union voice”, part three to “European models and varieties of capitalism”, and part four “looks ahead”.

Johnstone and Ackers introduce “voice” when noting that “employee voice is a synonym for trade union representation [and] worker participation” (p. 1). Next to this rather limited view, industrial democracy is seen as a thing of the past, something that “was supposed to expand ... political democracy” (p. 3). Instead of industrial democracy as a real form of industrial voice, the collection relies rather heavily on an organisation that is rather non-democratic, namely the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (p. 4). Traditionally, the CIPD has favoured management, personnel management, and HRM rather than the democratisation of work. The collection also fails to “make a moral and political argument for a measure of democracy at work to complete political democracy” (p. 8). Instead, it eliminates democracy, replacing it with workplace participation and voice allowed by management.

Outside of non-democratic, if not outright anti-democratic, managerial regimes, the editors acknowledge “Europe, with its great democratic tradition [and] the most successful coordinated market economy, Germany” (p. 10). This occurs without any hint of the long periods of not-so democratic rule in Europe, ranging from Germany 1933 to Spain 1936 to the inhuman brutalities of other dictatorships. This “great democratic tradition” also avoids the not-so democratic state socialism of Eastern Europe and even the very recent and questionable developments in Poland and Hungary.

Inside managerial regimes, meanwhile, managerialism marches on with or without European Works Councils (EWCs), which the authors view as “cautiously optimistic as long as EWCs can continue to demonstrate their relevance” (p. 14). In reality EWCs are not even a remnant of what European workers once envisioned works councils to be. Under managerialism at factory level and under neo-liberalism at political level, EWCs have long been downgraded to management auxiliaries with very limited information and consultation rights for workers, eliminating workplace democracy altogether. Given this and many other industrial relations developments, the founding editor of the *European Industrial Relations* journal – Richard Hyman – offers a “highly pessimistic [view of the]

cancer stage of capitalism” (p. 15).

In the collection’s first chapter, Ed Heery rehearses the core industrial relations (IR) approaches of unitarism, pluralism and radicalism. Under the heading “critical perspectives on worker participation”, he mentions that Critical Management Studies (CMS) views “resistance as a kind of micro-emancipation” (p. 34). But the Frankfurt School of critical theory – Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Habermas, Honneth, etc. – which CMS on occasion claims to be based on, would reject the notion of “micro-emancipation”. Most interestingly, Heery concludes his chapter with a table showing “Unitary, Pluralist, and Critical Perspectives on Participation” (p. 38), without relating it to participation; he only outlines prescriptions, evaluation, research and theory.

Perhaps David Guest’s chapter on “Voice and Employee Engagement”, which views voice as “old wine in new bottles” (p. 50), is not off the mark. He concludes with what may be the core message of the current state of worker’s voice in Europe which is: the voice of workers is accepted only when it favours companies and corporations. In other words, employee voice is valued by management as long as it is for “the benefit of the organization” (59). But workers increasingly also see that wages are not keeping up with the productivity of workers, and that employers and management have successively removed the link between productivity and prosperity. At the same time under capitalism – whether with or without voice – it becomes increasingly clear that, far from trickling down, income and wealth are being sucked upwards at an alarming rate.

This somewhat damning indictment is not carried forward by Ann-Marie Greene’s chapter on “Voice and Workforce Diversity”, which presents “diversity [as] demographic and/or identity [related to] gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, and age” (p. 67). It discusses everything but class. Her contribution culminates in the highly enlightening statement that “diversity is not a fact of life in most UK workplaces” (p. 68). The section concludes with the statement that “individuals and groups within the workforce still face a representation gap and a democracy deficit” (p. 85) – impressive.

Peter Ackers’ chapter on “Trade Unions as Professional Associations” relies rather heavily on Max Weber. In his seminal book “Negations” (1968:165), German philosopher Herbert Marcuse indicates that Max Weber was the master theorist of the Wilhelminian Empire. Very much in line with Weber’s empire-support-sociology, Ackers argues that trade unions should become mere social organisations somewhat like, for example, the American Automobile Association, offering roadside assistance, spiced up with a little workplace voice.

Ackers’ proposal is counterbalanced by Melanie Simms’ chapter on organising trade unions. She sets Ackers’ “partnership model against the trade union organizing model” (p. 127). While noting that “partnership sometimes works” (p. 137), Simms recognises that “the idea underpinning union organizing rests on building collective interests between workers with the intention that those interests can be transformed into collective action” (p. 140).

Against Simms exquisite chapter stands Stewart Johnstone’s contribution, “The Case for Workplace Partnership”, which argues that “partnership is a strategy that merits serious consideration and has much wider potential reach as a model of employee representation in the private sector than many critical commentators suggest” (p. 154). Johnstone concludes that HR professionals no longer see themselves as “employee champions but [as] strategic business partners” (p. 169), making clear which side human resource management is on – if there was ever any doubt on this.

Perhaps one of the unexpected delights of the collection is Samuel and Bacon’s discussion of coordinated market economies vs. liberal market economies. They deal with Britain’s National

Health Service, which received legislative support for voice in Scotland and Wales after both nations received limited self-governing powers from London (p. 188). The authors view this newly introduced voice model as being similar to “the small-nations Scandinavian models” (p. 189).

With that, the collection returns to a not-so-small nation in Europe: Germany. Gold and Artus deliver a most comprehensive albeit sobering insight into “employee participation in Germany”, noting that there are fundamental disagreements among scholars as to whether it is eroding. Overall, Gold and Artus conclude that “German employers have both retained a commitment to core workers and attempted to weaken them at the same time by moving work to the periphery through outsourcing and vertical disintegration” (p. 212). This can and has been done within the German industrial relations framework, as it never included provisions protecting workers from managerial fads and capitalism’s quest to increase shareholder-value and profit-maximisation. For the most part, organised industrial relations systems support capitalism rather than challenging it.

Virtually the same can be said about the EU directive on information and consultation rights as noted by Tony Dobbins and Tony Dundon. Seemingly, the directive was introduced to flank the relentless move of the European Union towards neo-liberalism and austerity. The authors conclude that the EU directive “gave limited potential for collaborative knowledge sharing, employee engagement, and worker-management partnerships” (p. 257).

The final section starts with Richard Hyman’s four-stage model of democracy: a) political democracy as a universal right; b) a collective character of political life beyond parliamentary democracy; c) workplace and industrial democracy; and d) economic democracy with workers’ decision-making powers. But in Europe “markets became embedded in a systematic regulatory web” (p. 268) that later – under neo-liberalism – mutated from a state-embedded market economy into a market-economy-embedded state. Hence, we got German chancellor Angela Merkel’s neo-liberal measures that sideline democracy, arguing that democracy must conform to markets. While there might indeed be Hyman’s “cancer stage of capitalism” (p. 268), it seems as if capitalism has received somewhat of a blood transfusion under Herr von Hayek’s politico-ideological ideas, which seem to have a prolonged life span of more than forty years. Neo-liberalism’s ideological strength has been demonstrated during the global financial crisis, which it has successfully overcome if not mastered. Even for the much-defamed banks, it is now “business as usual” (*Guardian Weekly*, 23 October 2015, pp 26–28).

Hyman closes with “the urgent need to articulate a more humane, more solidaristic, and more plausible alternative to neo-liberalism” (p. 275). This does not quite hit the mark as over the past 500 years many have provided alternatives to capitalism in the form of workers’ cooperatives, hippie communes, alternative companies and so on. Formulating alternatives to capitalism has never been the problem. The problem might be the “blind spot of Western Marxism” which views the exclusion of the media in our analysis as detrimental to an understanding of capitalism. It directs our attention to the power of mass media. Underestimating this power remains a blind spot of many critical assessments of capitalism, workers and their voices. As a consequence, many have failed to conceptualise the power of corporate mass media that can not only circumvent democracy (e.g. Trump), it can also exterminate industrial democracy, and substantially weaken trade unions and workers’ voice at work.

What all of this highlights – and the critical industrial relations literature continually fails to mention – is the fact that the corporate mass media has inserted itself in the tripartite arrangement between trade unions, employers and the state with devastating effect. The corporate mass media

shapes many people's views of trade unions. Under the ideological, if not hegemonic, tutelage of corporate mass media, trade unions are almost always presented negatively – at times on a daily basis by tabloid television. It might just be possible that decades of endless and relentless negativity – with which trade unions are treated and mistreated – might have something to do with the almost global decline of unions frequently mentioned in the Johnstone and Ackers collection.

The collection's concluding part by Bruce Kaufman is a great example of the aforementioned blind spot. It discusses the “future of employee voice” without mentioning corporate mass media (p. 280). Workers and trade unions no longer have a voice in today's media society where “mass deception”, “manufacturing consent” and the “spectacular achievements of propaganda” prevail, thereby converting democracy into a mere stage-managed ritual. The same end is achieved inside managerial regimes when employee voice is downgraded to mere communication. Communication management all too often focuses on top-down communication between superiors and subordinates, constructed as delegating down and reporting up.

All this might contribute to Kaufman's pessimistic “forecast of further union decline” (p. 294). Unfortunately, *Finding a Voice at Work* neither conceptualises this by reaching beyond the narrow confinements of classical industrial relations nor does it deliver a comprehensive conclusion highlighting the contribution of workers' voice to the urgent articulation of a “more humane, more solidaristic, and more plausible alternative to neo-liberalism” (p. 275). Perhaps the collection marks an “a-theoretical” if not outright anti-theoretical field (that of IR) asphyxiated by inward-looking structural conservatism (focusing on its core values) and incapable of looking beyond its conceptual “self-incurred tutelage”, as the philosopher Immanuel Kant would have said. As a consequence, “immovably, industrial relations insist on the very ideology which enslaves them”, to paraphrase Adorno. Voice – the core ideology of the collection – is all one more example of an academic field in terminal decline.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

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