

## **OXFORD SCHOOL OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS: FIFTY YEARS AFTER DONOVAN**

**NUFFIELD COLLEGE, OXFORD**

**24 OCTOBER 2015**

### **1. Oxford vs America**

- a) As my studies at the University of Manitoba for an MA in economics were drawing to a close in the early sixties, I began making plans to do further postgraduate work in either the USA or the UK. The New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University awarded me a teaching/research assistantship to do a PhD. Pembroke College, Oxford admitted me as a student to do either the BPhil in economics or the DPhil in industrial relations, and I obtained a Commonwealth Scholarship to fund three years of study there.
- b) I decided in favour of Oxford and arrived there on Friday, 27 September 1963. The following night my wife and I joined another Canadian Commonwealth Scholar, a political theorist who had been admitted to Nuffield College, and his wife for dinner. Afterwards, he suggested that since I was hoping eventually to transfer from Pembroke to Nuffield, we should call by the latter to take a look at it.
- c) As we entered the quad, we fortuitously met Ted Whybrew, who was a student of Hugh Clegg, and he invited us to his room for a drink. I told Ted of my plans and got his advice on the pros and cons of doing the BPhil or the DPhil. He suggested that the DPhil was probably the better option for me and that I should see Allan Flanders, the Senior Lecturer in Industrial Relations. The following week I went to see Allan in his office in Wellington Square, and he agreed to take me on as a DPhil student. I worked hard during my first year; read papers and gave critiques at the Clegg-Flanders-Knowles Thursday Afternoon Seminar; and in June 1964 got admitted as a student to Nuffield, thereby retaining Allan as my University supervisor and obtaining Hugh as my College supervisor.
- d) I have related this piece of personal history primarily to demonstrate how finely balanced were my decisions to come to Oxford rather than Cornell and to study industrial relations rather than economics. I was a great admirer of Allan Flanders' Penguin Special, *Twentieth Century Socialism*, published in 1956 by Socialist Union, and I was aware of some of Hugh Clegg's books; but I was more familiar with the work of those at Cornell since it related more closely to North America. What tipped the balance in favour of Oxford was the advice of my mentor at the University of Manitoba, Professor Ivan Avakumovic, a Yugoslav émigré who had been educated at Oxford and thought it was the centre of the intellectual universe, and the views of my wife Carol, who pointed out that to go to the USA was, in effect, to stay at home since the US was so similar to Canada, whereas going to the UK would provide a new learning experience.
- e) In short, what brought me to Oxford was not the reputation of the Oxford Group or the Oxford School of Industrial Relations. I was not aware of any such Group or School, and I doubt if many others, including the Commonwealth Scholarship authorities, were at this time. They asked you to list three universities from which they rather than you made the final choice; I listed Oxford and LSE, with a strongly stated preference for the former. In

spite of my wishes, they initially choose LSE for me, and it was only after lengthy correspondence and much argument that they finally accepted Oxford as the better choice. The Oxford School of Industrial Relations did not generally emerge as a descriptive concept and attract much public attention until the Donovan Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations was established in 1965, and Jeremy Bugler wrote his article on "The New Oxford Group" for *New Society* just before the publication of the Commission's report in June 1968.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. What Was the Oxford School of Industrial Relations?

- a) At its most basic, the Oxford School was a group of scholars at Oxford between 1949 and 1969 who analysed industrial relations primarily by relying on empirical research, and who were interested in applying their research to practical problems.<sup>2</sup> Those usually associated with the group in addition to Hugh Clegg, Allan Flanders, and Kenneth Knowles were: Alan Fox, John Corina, Bill McCarthy, Arthur Marsh, Derek Robinson, John Hughes, Otto Kahn-Freund, George Bain, and William Brown.
- b) Oxford had a greater concentration of teachers, researchers and graduate students in industrial relations by the 1960s than any other university in the UK. But "a concentration of scholars", as Hugh Clegg noted, "does not constitute a 'school of thought'. To warrant that title, there must be a common set of ideas to inform their teaching and research."<sup>3</sup> What were these ideas?
- c) The first idea or tenet was pluralism, which Hugh defined as a belief "that a free society consists of a large number of overlapping groups, each with its own interests and objectives which its members are entitled to pursue so long as they do so with reasonable regard to the rights and interests of others". But, as Hugh noted, that belief did not distinguish the Oxford School from most other social scientists at that time, except Marxists.<sup>4</sup> It was, however, a necessary if not a sufficient condition. Alan Fox saw himself as a member of the Oxford School in 1966 when he published his paper on pluralism for the Donovan Commission;<sup>5</sup> I doubt if he would have done so in the 1970s when he rejected pluralism and adopted a more radical perspective.<sup>6</sup> The same applies to Richard Hyman, one of Hugh and Allan's most distinguished students at Nuffield and colleagues at Warwick. Writing from a sensitive and sensibly informed Marxist perspective, he has forced those on the right to question their unitarism, those in the centre-left their pluralism, and those on the far-left

<sup>1</sup> 15 February 1968, 221-2. All further references to Jeremy Bugler are from this source. He used the adjective "new" because there was another "Oxford Group", a Christian organisation founded by Dr Frank Buchman that was popular in the 1930s.

<sup>2</sup> In Hugh Clegg's words, "we tended to be practical-minded – looking where possible for ways of improving things, and we tended to rely on empirical research – particularly in the workplace." See Susanne Lawrence, "Professor Hugh Clegg", *Personnel Management* (May 1979), 23.

<sup>3</sup> Hugh Clegg, "The Oxford School of Industrial Relations", Warwick Papers in Industrial Relations, No. 31 (Coventry: University of Warwick, Industrial Relations Research Unit, January 1990), 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 4

<sup>5</sup> *Industrial Sociology and Industrial Relations*, Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, Research Paper No. 3 (London: HMSO, 1966).

<sup>6</sup> "Industrial Relations: A Social Critique of Pluralist Ideology", John Child (ed.), *Man and Organisation* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1973), 185-233; "A Note on Industrial-Relations Pluralism", *Sociology*, 13(2), 1979, 105-9.

their crude and mechanistic Marxism; but he was not, and did not see himself, as a member of the Oxford School.

- d) A second characteristic mentioned by Hugh was egalitarianism. Members of the Oxford School were

egalitarians, wishing to see a shift in the distribution of wealth towards those with lower incomes, and a shift of power over the conduct of their working lives and environment towards working men and women; and, for both those reasons, emphasising the importance of trade unions in industry, in the economy, and in society. We therefore attached special importance to collective bargaining as the means whereby trade unions pursue their objectives.<sup>7</sup>

- e) The School's moral commitment to trade unionism and collective bargaining led to a third, and the most distinguishing, characteristic of the Oxford School – an idea that emerged from Allan Flanders' book, *The Fawley Productivity Agreements: A Case Study in Management and Collective Bargaining*, published in 1964: the structure of collective bargaining has a powerful influence on the conduct of industrial relations in the plant, and on the behaviour of trade unions and managers; and that the initiative in changing the structure of bargaining had to be taken by management. As Hugh wrote, "these, in my view, were the main contributions of Oxford to industrial relations theory, and of sufficient importance to justify the use of the word 'school' to describe those who accepted and upheld them."<sup>8</sup>
- f) As Hugh noted, he could not "confidently assert" that the above ideas were shared by everyone who was associated with the Oxford School. "For one thing, I am sure that one or two of them would have dissented from some of the ideas generally held by the rest of us; and for another, I am not sure what one or two of them thought on some of the crucial issues."<sup>9</sup> And Bugler quoted Arthur Marsh in 1968 as saying "we are not really a group but rather a collection of one man bands", to which Alan Fox added "though sometimes we are playing the same tunes." Clearly, some members of the group were more central than others. Hugh himself questioned whether Kenneth Knowles regarded himself as a member of the School; whether he did or not, he was marginal to its work. In general, however, pluralism, egalitarianism, and the moral and explanatory power of trade unionism and collective bargaining were the central tenets of the Oxford School.

### **3. Why Oxford?**

- a) The study of industrial relations began at Oxford in the late 1940s with the appointment of Knowles, Clegg, and Flanders to academic posts there. It began earlier in other universities such as Cambridge, Cardiff and Leeds, where Montague Burton established chairs of industrial relations in 1929-30. And by the time that the Social Science Research Council decided to establish its Industrial Relations Research Unit in 1969, five universities in addition to Oxford and Warwick had sufficient strength in the subject to be invited to make a bid for it: Cambridge, Cardiff, Glasgow, London, and Manchester. Yet in 1968, Bugler could

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<sup>7</sup> Op. cit., 4.

<sup>8</sup> Op. cit., 6.

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit., 3.

write that “the field of industrial relations is dominated by Oxford academics, to put it simply, as few disciplines are dominated by a single university.” Why?

- b) In trying to provide an answer, Bugler mentioned that some members of the Oxford School believed “the nature of Oxford itself is an important formative factor; they stress the obvious influence of the industry on the doorstep but also the Oxford tradition of concern in practical affairs.” These factors no doubt facilitated the development of the Oxford School, but they hardly explain its dominance: the universities that bid for the IRRU also had an interest in practical affairs, and many of them were located in much larger industrial centres.
- c) Bugler claimed that the Oxford School did “not form a group with a guru; there is no high priest, no acolytes.” That is broadly correct. But Hugh Clegg and Allan Flanders were undoubtedly the School’s most influential members. They were regarded as mentors by several members of the School who they had taught and whose doctoral theses they had supervised. As supervisors, they complemented each other superbly: Allan was the big picture man, the theorist; Hugh was the detail man, the critic of questionable facts and sloppy generalisations. Their lack of ego and pomposity made them easy to work with; they were generous with their time and ideas and in sharing authorship with colleagues; they were honest and trustworthy; they inspired great affection and loyalty. They were the founding members of the School and, not surprisingly, it began to disintegrate soon after they left Oxford. In short, their intellectual and personal qualities are the main reason Oxford came to dominate the study of British industrial relations.
- d) Hugh had one additional quality that was important: as his career at both Oxford and Warwick demonstrates, he was an institution builder. Although he and Allan both got their academic positions at Oxford in 1949, Allan’s was a university senior lectureship based in Wellington Square with little institutional backing; Hugh’s was a college fellowship at Nuffield, which had a large endowment that funded fellowships, studentships, and research assistance. And Hugh – who was charismatic, politically skilful, and highly respected by his peers within Nuffield – was able to access the College’s resources (as well as those from the Leverhulme Trust, with which he had a close relationship) to provide posts for the Oxford School and numerous research students in labour history and industrial relations. If Hugh had not been at Nuffield, I doubt if Alan Fox, John Corina, Bill McCarthy, Allan Flanders, and George Bain would have been there either.
- e) The presence of Hugh and Allan in Oxford also largely explains why the group of industrial relations academics at Oxford came to public prominence in the 1960s. In 1964 a Labour Government came to power under Harold Wilson and, among other things, it established a National Board for Prices and Incomes and a Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers’ Associations (the Donovan Commission). Allan was appointed as industrial relations adviser to the Chairman of the NBPI (Aubrey Jones); Hugh and Otto Kahn-Freund were appointed members of the Donovan Commission; and Hugh was later (1966) appointed a member of the NBPI, and he took with him as a research assistant William Brown, whom he had taught as an undergraduate at Oxford. Hugh wryly noted some years later that

apart from our professional qualifications, it may have been relevant to these appointments that Allan, like most of the industrial relations teachers and researchers at Oxford, was member of the Labour Party. So, I believe, was Otto. I had shied away from committing myself to another political party after leaving the Communist Party a year or so after the war, but I was a Labour supporter and voter.<sup>10</sup>

- f) Allan and Hugh's long-standing attachment to, and support of, the Labour Movement were clearly relevant to their appointments. And their appointments were highly relevant to what happened next. Bill McCarthy was appointed Research Director of the Donovan Commission, and most of its research was commissioned from members of the Oxford School; Allan Flanders submitted what is generally regarded as the most influential evidence to the Commission;<sup>11</sup> and, as Peter Ackers has demonstrated, Hugh Clegg was highly influential in shaping and, indeed, drafting the Commission's final report.<sup>12</sup> These developments led Bugler to write that Oxford had "emerged with as much hold over the positions which academics fill as industrial relations advisers to government or official bodies as Eton had over a Macmillan cabinet."

#### **4. Legacy of the Oxford School**

- a) After Hugh moved to the University of Warwick, to be followed by Willy, me, and Allan, some people quipped that the Oxford School had moved to Warwick. But, as Hugh pointed out, there are considerable differences between the two:

Industrial relations at Warwick has been concerned mainly with relatively detailed topics: problems of trade union organisation and government, company employment policies, payment structures, the operation of particular pieces of labour legislation, and with developing research techniques appropriate to the study of these topics. Much less attention has been given to the philosophy of industrial relations reform which occupied such a major position among the Oxford School's interests. . . .

If the term 'Oxford School of Industrial Relations' is taken to denote a group of scholars who thought that they had diagnosed the major defects of the British system of industrial relations and that they could design a programme of action to correct them, there is today no such school. There once was such a school, and there was a moment when it appeared that there would be an opportunity for its ideas to be proved right or wrong. But the opportunity was snatched away; and since then the world has moved on.<sup>13</sup>

- b) Hugh's conclusion is right: the Oxford School has ceased to exist, and the world has moved on. But the School has nevertheless left an important legacy. Although those who joined the members of the Oxford School who had transferred to Warwick were not much

<sup>10</sup> Op. cit., 7.

<sup>11</sup> It was submitted in November 1966 and later published as *Collective Bargaining: Prescription for Change* (London: Faber, 1967).

<sup>12</sup> Peter Ackers, "Game Changer: Hugh Clegg's Role in Drafting the 1968 Donovan Report and Redefining the British Industrial Relations Policy-Problem, *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 35 (2014), 63-88.

<sup>13</sup> Op. cit., 15-16.

concerned with the philosophy of industrial relations reform, most of them were pluralists who adopted a similar approach to studying industrial relations: empirically grounded research into the institutions of the labour market. This approach also informed the work of the Bullock Committee on which George Bain served and, much more, of the Low Pay Commission on which George Bain and Willy Brown served. Perhaps most important, it provided the basis for the teaching of generations of Warwick students, particularly on the MA Industrial Relations, who have gone on now for almost fifty years to take up a wide variety of positions in trade unions, companies, government, and further and higher education.

**George Bain**

**15 October 2015**