Guest editorial: Reframing Fox: the continued impact of "Beyond Contract" and "Man Mismanagement" 50 years on

Introduction: the rationale for this special issue

The influence of the so-called Oxford School of Industrial Relations on the development of British industrial (or employment) relations has been subject to increased attention in recent years (see Ackers, 2011, 2014). Yet the idea that this concentration of scholars represented a coherent school of thought has been dismissed (Clegg, 1990; Fox, 2004), and consequently the works of Hugh Clegg, Allan Flanders and Alan Fox – the three names most closely associated with it – have been subject to extensive individual re-examination (see, for example, Ackers, 2014; Kelly, 2010; Gold, 2017). Fox's work on the unitary, pluralist and radical frames of reference in particular continues to be hugely influential in both teaching and research. On the teaching side, the frames of reference continue to dominate introductory chapters of numerous employment relations texts (e.g. Blyton and Turnbull, 2004; Colling and Terry, 2010; Dundon *et al.*, 2017; Gold and Smith, 2023). From a research perspective, the influence of the frames is sustained (Edwards, 1986; Heery, 2016, 2024; Barry and Wilkinson, 2021; Dobbins *et al.*, 2021; Gold, 2021) and has resulted in a number of attempts at critique, development and extension (see Budd and Bhave, 2008; Ackers, 2014; Kaufman, 2015; Tapia *et al.*, 2015; Cradden, 2018).

Fox is arguably best known for his frames of reference. There have been two recent special issues on the frames of reference alone (Barry and Wilkinson, 2021; Ferguson, 2022), and there are several entries on the frames appearing in various dictionaries (Heery and Noon, 2017), encyclopaedias (Cullinane, 2023) and reference books (Blyton and Jenkins, 2007). However, Fox's influence on the development of employment relations is substantially broader, although arguably it has not received the attention it deserved (Edwards, 1998, p. 229). This year, 2024, marks 50 years since the publication of his two most significant texts – *Beyond Contract: Work, Trust and Power Relations* (Fox, 1974a) and *Man Mismanagement* (Fox, 1974b) [1]. Fox's analysis of the employment relationship in both *Beyond Contract* and *Man Mismanagement* is now central to how we define and understand employment relations as a field of study today (see, for example, Edwards, 2003; Gold, 2017, pp. 156–157; Dobbins, 2023; Hodder and Mustchin, 2024). Of the two texts, *Beyond Contract* has received the greater scholarly attention, with almost 3,500 citations since its publication, whilst the first edition of *Man Mismanagement* has received fewer than 400 citations [2]. Yet Fox's work has rarely been subject to thorough examination beyond the frames of reference (for exceptions, see Edwards, 2002; Gold, 2017; Roche, 1991; Wood and Elliott, 1977). So, in the 50th anniversary year of their publication, this special issue of *Employee Relations* is dedicated to the legacy of Alan Fox's work.

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The contributions to the special issue fall broadly into one of three categories. The first group of articles assesses the historical background to Alan Fox's concepts (their own origins, the radicalisation of Fox's thought and comparisons with another influential work published the same year, Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital*). Our second group of articles looks at the continuing contemporary relevance of Fox's work (to understanding the New Right, the enduring attraction of unitarism, strike waves since the early 2020s and the reform of corporate governance). Finally, our third set considers issues absent from Fox's assessment of the world of work (including a feminist critique of his work and revisiting his frames of reference in the light of the emergence of identity politics in contemporary employment relations). We briefly outline each contribution below before discussing Fox's legacy in general, though we turn initially to sketching his life story to discover a little more about his origins, influences and personality.

The life and work of Alan Fox

Alan Fox, who died in 2002, aged 82, would have been the despair of any contemporary university research director. Over an active writing career that spanned some 35 years – from 1955, when he published his first academic article, until 1990, the year in which his autobiography appeared – his output consisted of only half a dozen academic journal articles (and *not one* in an American journal), a stream of pamphlets, pieces in magazines and several books – in short, barely anything REF-able (for a list of his publications, see Fox, 2004, pp. 304–306). He rarely attended conferences and did not have a doctorate. Furthermore, he started late in his career, had no interest in promotion (declining several offers of professorships) and was a disaster at what we would call "networking". And yet, and yet . . . As we noted above, there is not a student of industrial relations (IR) or of human resource management (HRM) in the UK or other anglophone country who is not familiar with the terms "unitarism" and "pluralism" nor a theorist of management styles who has not examined "trust relations" between employers and workers. Fox's analysis of power and control, using these concepts, remains largely as fresh today as it did 50 years ago when he was publishing his most influential work. Towards the end of his life, when he was working unpaid for Oxfam, he could not help commenting on the management consultants – "young men and women in suits" – sent in to rationalise the work methods of the elderly volunteers: "our opinions were not invited". Following a reorganisation, he noted wryly that takings continued rising on the same gradient as before (Fox, 2004, p. 289). To the very end, Fox was using his own experience to inform his understanding, which is why his work is still so relevant for the study of HRM and IR and, indeed, blurs the distinctions between them.

The best source of material on Fox's life is his autobiography, first published in 1990 and reissued by the British Universities' Industrial Relations Association in 2004, which throws light on both his personal and intellectual development (Fox, 2004). It reveals a series of dilemmas in his life, some of which were resolved only after much torment. For example, he outlines the intense relationship he had with Sue involving an on-off affair that he shared with a rival lover and ended only when, after the Second World War, he realised she could not share the "intellectual journey" of his subsequent education (he was later to enjoy a long and rewarding marriage to Margaret). He writes of his love of books and learning, which created a rift with his parents, and his background, a drab suburb of east London in the 1930s. There is his obvious ability, but his failure to fit into an Oxford college. He describes himself throughout as "unclubbable", and his toe-curling analysis of the pretensions of life as a Fellow of Nuffield College is one of the most heartfelt passages of all. He resigned his Fellowship, being "unusually thin-skinned, and certainly unconfident and insufficiently adaptable" (Fox, 2004, p. 236), in favour of an Oxford University Lectureship in Industrial

Sociology in the Department of Social and Administrative Studies, where he spent the remaining 17 years of his academic career.

Fox writes about his life throughout with a keen eye to detail. His memories of east London are wonderfully evocative of the 1930s: home entertainments, fishing trips and the cinema, schooldays . . . the smells, scandals and boredom . . . Then his first real job making roll film at a factory in Brentwood . . . and the war. Almost two-thirds of the book are devoted to the first 26 years of his life and half of that is purely to the war years. As Fox was to title his autobiography, *a very late development*, perhaps, but the sheer concentration of living that he did as an aircrew photographer flying B25s in Burma is breath-taking. He escaped death when a B25 unaccountably took off without him – it later crashed, killing all on board – and he describes incidents that make *Catch 22* look positively normal. One flying officer, for example, liked to skim the airfield at six feet and brush the roof of the squadron offices until disaster struck (Fox, 2004, p. 128) – shades of McWatt in chapter 30 of Joseph Heller's novel (Heller, 1994[1955]), pp. 418-30). And his flight from the Japanese through the jungle reads like an adventure story.

Following demobilisation after the war, Fox spent a brief and miserable stint as a forestry worker in Scotland before going to Ruskin College, Oxford, in 1947 and subsequently graduating in Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE) from Exeter College in 1950 with a "respectable second" (Fox, 2004, p. 226). He married Margaret and was appointed Lecturer in Industrial Relations and Economic Organisation at Ruskin in quick succession. He soon acquired a B.Litt. in Industrial Relations and moved to Nuffield College, where he met Hugh Clegg, who invited him to write a history of the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives (Fox, 1958). He later co-authored *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889*, Vol.1, with Hugh Clegg and A.F. Thompson (Clegg *et al.*, 1964), which cemented his relationship with Clegg. At Nuffield too he met Allan Flanders with whom he was to develop a longstanding friendship.

Fox's academic career was now launched, not least because of his influential social network (not that Fox considered himself anything of a networker). In 1965, the Labour Government appointed the Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations (the Donovan Commission) to investigate failings in the British system of IR and labour law in order to propose relevant reforms. The Commission was heavily influenced by Hugh Clegg, one of its members, who invited Fox to contribute a research paper into the role that insights from industrial sociology could play in the reform of IR (Brown, 2016). The resulting research paper (Fox, 1966) established Fox's reputation as a major theorist in the field. The aim of the paper was, "among other things, to demonstrate that conflict within work organizations (where 'conflict' was defined in terms of 'conflicting interests', which might or might not result in open warfare, depending on how the situation was handled) was, in our pattern of society at least, likely to be endemic to the situation and not simply the result of ill-disposed agitators using their influence for political ends" (Fox, 2004, p. 249). Fox drew on the work of Norman Ross (1958) to develop a distinction between "unitary" and "pluralist" frames of reference, which have – as noted above – become the staple of research and teaching into IR ever since [3]. This sociological approach to understanding the employment relationship was further developed in Fox (1971a). In *A Sociology of Work in Industry*, Fox provided a level of "conceptual clarity" (Hill and Thurley, 1974, p. 150) to IR research by outlining a "theoretical framework for use in thinking about work relations and the social structures and mechanisms which govern and arise out of them" (Fox, 1971a, p. v). Central to this analysis was an understanding of managerial ideology, power and legitimacy and an extended discussion of conflict in organisations.

Yet in the course of subsequent teaching, Fox came to accept the critique of the "Oxford School" of IR – broadly a reformist approach to IR "problems" – that it failed to make explicit the capitalist class values and inequalities of power on which it was based. He accordingly

revised his treatment of power, in the process of which it "carried something of a Marxist flavour" (Fox, 2004, p. 258). This sharper analysis first appeared in his critique of pluralism (Fox, 1973) and suffuses books like *Beyond Contract* and *Man Mismanagement*. In Fox's own words, *Beyond Contract* "among other things examined different ways of organizing work and the consequences of the various choices" (Fox, 2004, pp. 262-3), whilst *Man Mismanagement*, "an analysis of the broad field of industrial relations, was written somewhat provocatively in the hope that it would serve as a lively instrument in teaching" (Fox, 2004, p. 263). Of course, both texts do substantially more than this. Writing in the second edition of *Man Mismanagement*, Fox noted that the first edition "sought to explore the management problems of control and the array of strategies applied down the ages in the attempt to maintain or enhance it" (Fox, 1985a, p. 12). Both books were published in the same year as a result of "the vagaries of printers' timetables" (Fox, 2004, p. 262), yet there are undoubted connections between the two texts, with Gold (2017, p. 132) referring to *Man Mismanagement* (at 179 pages) as *Beyond Contract's* "'lighter' version" (at 408 pages) and Edwards describing it as an "accompanying account aimed at a more managerial audience" (Edwards, 1998, p. 227).

Man Mismanagement is fundamentally a radical look at managerial strategies of control, coercion and consent and worker responses to such strategies. It builds upon Fox's previous discussions of power, ideology and legitimacy (Fox, 1971a), as well as his rejection of the pluralist perspective (Fox, 1973), to put forward a radical examination of how workers are *mismanaged* as managers choose between "what seemed to them appropriate strategies for securing compliance – and if circumstances rendered it desirable and possible, whole-hearted cooperation – from those they organized and controlled" (Fox, 1974b, p. x). In contrast, *Beyond Contract* is a more theoretically informed discussion of power and trust relations at work. As the book's title suggests, it acknowledges the indeterminate nature of the labour contract, outlining how "no employment contract could anticipate all relevant contingencies arising in work relations" (Fox, 1974a, p. 182).

Fox's analysis of trust dynamics forms the primary focus of the book, which also dedicated one chapter to the frames of reference and a further chapter to what Fox called patterns of management, which others have developed in studies of management style. Fox outlines the dynamics of trust relations at work, drawing on exchange theory. His treatment of trust focuses on what he calls institutionalised trust, put forward in contrast to more everyday discussions of trust between individuals. This institutionalised trust relates to the regulation of worker actions, "the rewards and punishments brought to bear upon them; and their relations with others in terms of interdependence, communication, inspection, supervision, and authority" (Fox, 1974a, p. 68). As part of this discussion, Fox distinguishes between managerial strategies towards low-discretion roles and high-discretion roles in organisations [4]. Those working in what are termed low discretion roles are subject to tightly controlled work relations and therefore not trusted by managers, which results in low levels of commitment to work and the organisation. In contrast, those in high-discretion roles have a greater commitment to the organisation. High-trust roles are then pursued in organisations "not for their own sake, but because they are thought to evoke commitment to managerial ends, improve performance, promote adaptability and receptivity to change, [and] stabilize the labour force" (Fox, 1974a, p. 363).

This insightful work anticipated later developments in HRM and employment relations (Edwards, 1998, p. 227). For example, Fox's work on high trust influenced much of the later work on high commitment workplaces. Whilst some have contested Fox's work on trust (for example, Roche, 1991), others have more recently called for trust research to engage more deeply with Fox (Siebert *et al.*, 2015). In addition, Fox's work in these two texts has been hugely influential in the subsequent broadening of the IR agenda in the UK to encompass the role of management. For example, the patterns of management presented in *Beyond Contract*

influenced Purcell's work on management styles (Purcell, 1981, 1987; Purcell and Sisson, 1983) and underpinned much of the early work on management strategy and British HRM (Bacon, 2008). From a theoretical angle, Fox explicitly acknowledged Durkheim's influence on his later work (Fox, 1974a, pp. 229–36), which underpinned and informed the development of radical pluralism [5]. His neo-Durkheimian approach to employment relations contrasts markedly with Marxist approaches and consequently bears different policy implications. Though Fox himself stated that he later became more interested in an "honest understanding" of employment relations than in its "practical reform" (Fox, 2004, p. 260), it is clear that his analysis does have policy implications – not least for our understanding of equal opportunities at work – and that these implications continue underresearched (Gold, 2017). Overall, Fox can be regarded as a "critical" sociologist in the sense that his work was ultimately guided by political aims.

But how was Fox's work received at the time? The initial reviews of *Beyond Contract* were generally positive. Downie (1975, p. 159) praised Fox, stating that he "does not come off as a radical or as a naïve academic polemicist, but rather as a thoughtful critic who has thoroughly researched the fundamental processes of work, power and trust relations". Goldthorpe (1975, p. 135) commended Fox for writing "an unusual, complex and provocative book". Eldridge too was extremely positive, opening his review by saying, "Here is a book which any sociologist would benefit from reading and no industrial sociologist can afford to ignore" (Eldridge, 1975, p. 158). Yet not all sociologists took such a positive view of Fox's insights. Nilakant and De (1976, p. 90) offered some minor criticism for the lack of international applicability of Fox's examples, whilst Burawoy (1976) wrote the most critical book review. Perhaps unsurprisingly given his later work (Burawoy, 1979), Burawoy (1976: 240) criticises Fox for omitting "an illuminating and detailed account of the organization of consent" and concentrated his analysis at the general level.

Further criticisms were also anticipated by Goldthorpe, who noted the challenge the text would offer to Fox's "former 'pluralist' colleagues" (Goldthorpe, 1975, p. 136), suggesting they may want to respond accordingly. This response was to be found in Clegg (1975), who strongly defended the pluralist position against Fox's radical turn. Fox's "radicalisation" of IR theory was also subject to critique from Wood and Elliott (1977), prompting Fox to respond (1979) [6]. Fox's short response was helpful in clarifying his own radical view, although he was to return to this again later (Fox, 2004).

In his autobiography, Fox carefully distinguishes between Marxist analysis, which he accepts, and Marxist prescriptions, which he rejects as "draconian" and "revolutionary". He refutes the view that the analysis entails the prescriptions, though the failure of commentators to make the same distinction sometimes led to his condemnation by Marxists and non-Marxists alike. It is important to understand why Fox rejected Marxist prescriptions. Apart from his concerns over abuses of power resulting from the non-accountability of bureaucratic hierarchies (he admired George Orwell), he explains he became increasingly aware of the "particularities" of societies, which impart their own "social texture and tone" and cannot be reduced to merely "essential" features common to all capitalist societies. These ideas are explored in detail in his last major book on IR, *History and Heritage* (Fox, 1985b). To this extent, Fox seems to transcend that old distinction – made by the ancient Greek poet, Archilocus, and echoed by Isaiah Berlin in one of his essays (Berlin, 2013) – between "foxes" and "hedgehogs": "the fox knows many things but the hedgehog knows one big thing". This particular Fox understood both one big thing in understanding employment relations (the problem of managerial legitimacy in capitalist society) and many things (the role played by individual people, events and institutions in the unfolding of history). His books should therefore, ideally perhaps, be read together, as a mutually supporting whole rather than as separate items exploring separate themes.

Historical background: IR since the 1970s

Before we introduce the articles that comprise this special issue, it is important to provide some historical context to the period in which Fox was writing. The 1970s, particularly the period of Edward Heath's Conservative Government (1970-74), will be remembered – unfairly or not – as a turbulent period in the UK, marked by high levels of inflation, strikes, power cuts, the "troubles" in Northern Ireland and rumours of political collapse. In 1974 alone, the year in which *Beyond Contract* and *Man Mismanagement* were published, the UK entered its first post-war recession and inflation soared to 17%, the Heath Government introduced a three-day week, there were two general elections, the Provisional Irish Republican Army carried out an extensive bombing campaign across Britain and several well-known companies went bankrupt (Sandbrook, 2010, 2012). Jonathan Coe refers acutely to the "ungodly strangeness" of the decade (Coe, 2001, p. 176). Domestic politics centred to a significant degree on the reform of IR. The Conservative Government had passed the ill-fated Industrial Relations Act in 1971, which was later repealed by the Labour Government of Harold Wilson elected in February 1974, which in turn enacted a series of laws designed to protect and enhance the rights of trade unions. The point here is that political debates and controversies at this time focused principally on class issues and the relationships between employers and workers, capital and labour. Other social fault lines – such as sexism, racism, sexual orientation and disability – were, of course, present and indeed extremely serious, but they did not occupy centre-stage as they do today as defining characteristics of political positions. The contemporary reader of Alan Fox – or of any IR theorist in the 1960s or 1970s – must make an imaginative leap into the mindset prevalent at the time in order to appreciate better his origins and concerns.

Fox was himself accordingly influenced by academics and commentators who reflected the intellectual currents of the day. In addition, over his 35-year writing career, his own views about authority and power in IR underwent considerable revision, for which he received both acclaim and criticism. Whilst we are able to read Fox's thoughts on Thatcherism (Fox, 1985a, b), his work came before the consolidation of HRM in the early 1990s (Gold, 2017, pp. 132–133). Indeed, the social, economic and political climate has meant the world of work has changed dramatically over the last 50 years. Space prevents a full discussion of these changes, but, in brief, Rubery (2015) argues that work and employment have witnessed four main developments: feminisation, flexibilisation, fragmentation and financialisation. Consequently, we are seeing what Wright *et al.* (2019, p. 315) called an "emerging patchwork of rules" with various forms of institutional experimentation as union power and influence declined (Nowak, 2015). More recently, the 2020s have been subject to widespread macro-level turbulence, affecting the world of work (Prouska *et al.*, 2023). High inflation and an increase in industrial action have led to some commentators drawing understandable comparisons with the 1970s, but there are also very clear differences in work and society, as we note above (see also Edwards *et al.*, 2023). It is against this context that we introduce the contributions to the special issue.

Our contributions

Our first set of contributions to this issue, by Andy Hodder, Peter Ackers and Niall Cullinane, focus on the historical background to Fox's theories. Although Fox's name is firmly associated with the development of management frames of reference on organisations, Hodder (2024) reveals in his opening article, *Understanding the frames before Fox: the development of unitary and pluralist views on organisations*, that Fox – who acknowledged his debt – drew heavily on the work of Norman Ross, a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Commerce and Social Science at the University of Birmingham. Whilst some academics have recognised Ross's contribution, they tend to focus on the single chapter cited by Fox himself.

In this chapter, Ross (1958, p. 100) criticises existing management thought that regards "the firm as a unitary or monolithic structure", central to which is the idea of "an ideal of corporate unity" (Ross, 1958, p. 101). In contrast, he proposes "the concept of the firm as a plural society" (Ross, 1958, p. 121), in which "separate interests and objectives ... must be maintained in some kind of equilibrium" (Ross, 1958, p. 121). Hodder's analysis goes beyond this chapter (Ross, 1958) and extends existing research through analysing Ross's wider academic contributions to research and teaching at the University of Birmingham. In doing so, Hodder demonstrates that the roots of "unitarism" and "pluralism" can be clearly identified in Ross's analysis.

His article therefore fills the gap by reflecting on Ross's contribution to IR theory, pointing out a contrast that, whilst Fox's (1966) research paper for the Donovan Commission was intended to provide a comment on the role of conflict inside organisations, Ross's work developed from studying management and the size of the firm and evolved into a more developed understanding of joint consultation and industrial democracy. Yet despite the similarities, it is Fox's work and not that of Ross, which has lasted. Hodder speculates on the reasons for this lack of recognition, which include the greater sophistication of Fox's work, the attention it gained through association with the Donovan Commission, Hugh Clegg's role as Fox's mentor in publicising it and the shift in IR theory in the 1970s from a basis in pluralism towards a more radical analysis of IR, which later became a dominant frame in which Fox participated.

Indeed, as this last observation indicates, Fox's own theoretical approach to IR itself underwent major change in the early 1970s toward radicalisation, a change that Ackers (2024) examines in his article, *Before the "Fall": Alan Fox's "intellectual crisis" and early pluralist history and sociology*. It presents a detailed analysis of Fox's early historical and sociological writing in his classical pluralist phase and a historical reconstruction of his subsequent radicalisation. Ackers argues that Fox was one key figure in the 1970s "sociological turn" of British academic IR, which involved his pioneering contribution to the theoretical framework of British industrial sociology, initially as a sociological restatement of established pluralist IR arguments. However, radicalisation soon made him an "apostate" in the post-war anti-Communist generation led by Clegg and Flanders.

Yet Fox's radicalisation was original because, although increasingly aware of the role played by the class structure in defining the unequal power relationships between employers and workers, he based his analysis not on the work of Karl Marx but on that of Emile Durkheim. Durkheim had highlighted the part played by "anomie" – the breakdown of regulatory norms between employer and worker as industrialisation comes to erode the moral and belief systems that bind interests together in traditional societies – in creating conflict at the workplace. In consequence, maintains Durkheim, only equality of opportunity and power would allow genuine consensual agreement and contractual solidarity to flourish in capitalist societies, which in turn require redistribution of wealth and restrictions on property ownership. However, as Ackers argues, Fox's radicalisation was seen as incomplete, as he carried over from his IR pluralist mentors, Allan Flanders and Hugh Clegg, a suspicion of political Marxism, a sense of historical contingency and an awareness of the fragmented nature of industrial conflict. Whilst recent academic attention has centred on Fox's later radical pluralism with its "structural" approach to the employment relationship (see for example, Gold, 2017), Ackers also revisits his early, neglected classical pluralist writing, illuminating his transition from institutional IR to a broader sociology of work, influenced by A.H. Halsey, John Goldthorpe and others, and the complex nature of his radicalisation.

Both *Beyond Contract* and *Man Mismanagement* represented Fox's attempt to diagnose the intractability of workplace conflict in industrial societies. They offered explanations as to how biases in job design undermined the creation of high-trust employment relationships.

As this special issue confirms, both books went on to be highly regarded particularly in British IR. However, as Cullinane (2024) explains in his article, *Alan Fox in the shadow of the labour process*, 1974 is also notable for another significant publication: Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. Braverman (1974), like Fox, sought to diagnose, as the book's subtitle indicates, the "degradation of work in the twentieth century", focusing on similar issues of job design. *Labor and Monopoly Capital* would have far-reaching influence, sparking developments in Labour Process Theory. "Bravermania" would describe the intellectual reach of the book across industrial sociology in the 1970s and 1980s. By contrast, Fox's (1974a, b) publications, despite addressing similar themes, were overshadowed by Braverman. Whereas *Labor and Monopoly Capital* remains widely in print in several languages, Fox's two works remain largely unavailable on the second-hand book market. Furthermore, whilst Braverman's legacy echoes in the annual International Labour Process Conference and persists in finding adherents, Cullinane argues that knowledge of Fox's (1974a, b) works is confined to a more select academic community of IR scholars and sociologists of work.

Fox and Braverman occupy complementary spheres of interest in job design and work organisation, but Braverman focused on the broader politics of production as exhibited in informal worker accommodation and resistance, which has proved more durable at international level than Fox's narrower focus on the UK with its web of institutional rules and ideologies. In addition, central aspects of Fox's concerns, such as inflationary spirals, assumptions of widespread collective bargaining and unionisation, have seemed to date in a way that Braverman's have not. Braverman's analysis too, arguably, is more elegant and offers class struggle as a solution, whilst Fox notoriously avoided discussing remedies. That said, many commentators continue to find much relevance in Fox's work: aspects of his work that remain central to understanding IR and HRM today include analysis of the "structured antagonism" (Edwards, 1986; Edwards and Hodder, 2022) that underpins the employment relationship and the part played by trust in high-discretion work and "good" employment relationships, as well as his categories of management styles. Indeed, our next section brings together four articles from Dave Lyddon, Xuebing Cao, Tony Dobbins, Tony Dundon, Melanie Simms and Chris Rees, all of which illustrate this enduring relevance 50 years on.

In their article, *Alan Fox and the managerial "unitary" frame of reference in unionised companies: context, roots, elaboration and international applicability*, Lyddon and Cao (2024) focus on the enduring nature of the unitary frame of reference across enterprises both domestically in the UK and internationally in the United States of America and China. In doing so, they go some way to address the criticisms of Nilakant and De (1976) as to the international applicability of Fox's ideas. Lyddon and Cao argue that it remains dominant both because it is allegedly associated with superior business performance but also because employers insist on the "right to manage" in democracies. Studies highlight their demand for managerial prerogatives and freedom from external intervention, a notable example being the case of American companies dealing with the unprecedented challenge of unions in the period of the mid-nineteenth century. The later accommodation with unions had proved merely temporary in the broad sweep of history; so, when the social mood shifted against unions in the 1980s, many employers in the USA took advantage to move to a union-free regime altogether. In the contrasting environment of authoritarian societies, such as China today, extra-economic factors are also paramount in influencing managers' attitudes and behaviour. State resources have been and are mobilised to control dissent, and bolstering management's unitary frame within the workplace has always been a key feature of this strategy. Overall, whilst interest in the managerial unitary frame has long been eclipsed in British academic IR circles by fascination with its pluralistic counterpart, the unitary frame remains a fruitful and widely applicable concept in the contemporary and historical study of unionised companies, not just in the UK but in other countries too.

In their following article, *Industrial relations, the New Right and the praxis of mismanagement*, Dobbins and Dundon (2024) home in on the insights provided by Alan Fox in his book, *Man Mismanagement*. There was dramatic social change in the UK between the first (1974) and second (1985) editions of this book, most notably relating to the rise to power of the Thatcherite "New Right" in 1979 and its espousal of unitarist managerialism. The issues that Fox pinpointed in the 1985 edition in relation to the rise of the "New Right" and political and employer mismanagement were prescient and, indeed, have become even more prominent following the rise of the second wave of New Right ideology since 2010. Dobbins and Dundon evaluate the contemporary implications of "mismanagement" since then, observing that IR in practice have become even more fragmented, disjointed and undermining of collective IR institutions, as Fox warned, not just in the UK but also across other liberal market economies. They argue that macho mismanagement praxis is now even more commonplace than when Fox wrote *Man Mismanagement*. The stripping away of the institutional architecture of IR renders the renewal of pluralist praxis, like collective bargaining and other forms of joint regulation of work, a formidable task.

Indeed, Simms (2024) focuses on the formidable nature of this task in her article, *Radical pluralism, high inflation and trust in historical context: the continued relevance of Fox in understanding the UK public sector strikes*. She uses key themes from Fox's writing to reflect on the wave of public sector industrial action that developed in the UK since the early 2020s, specifically the relevance of radical pluralism, historical context, understanding the effects of high inflation and the implications of a breakdown in trust relations. She argues that the radical pluralist frame of reference is a useful lens through which to understand the limits of pluralist institutionalism in the UK public sector when applying a historical perspective to the inflationary context of 2021 onwards. As in the 1970s, inflation undermined trust in pluralist IR institutions by making the slow and constrained reaction by employers evident as prices rose rapidly. Public sector unions responded to this challenge by increasingly focusing on mobilisation in the form of strike action. Simms maintains that what lies ahead seems to be a battle for the future of collective IR, which has involved many unions and workforces that would not previously have understood themselves as having a radical position. The context of high inflation has undermined trust in contemporary collective regulation mechanisms in many public sector occupations. The recourse to organising has given workers and their unions some of the resources and ideas to challenge dominant behaviours and narratives of capital and the neoliberal state. Radical pluralism can therefore be used as a lens through which to understand declining trust in institutions of pluralist collective IR in the UK public sector. An analysis of the industrial action in the early 2020s highlights the ways in which a period of high inflation – just as in the 1970s – can stress institutions of collective employment regulation, rendering visible the limits of conventional, pluralist IR.

Rees (2024) continues the theme – applying Fox's ideas to an analysis of contemporary employment issues – in his article, *Pluralism and corporate governance reform*. He considers the utility of a pluralist perspective in the context of current debates around UK corporate governance reform. Oxford School pluralism advanced both a description of how IR operated in practice plus a prescription for how it should operate. Whilst economic conditions are different today, a pluralist framing provides not only a useful way of understanding interests in corporate governance (description) but also, and consequently, a solid grounding for a pragmatic reform agenda (prescription). The article provides an outline of recent economic and political developments and considers how a pluralist framing helps explain company-level interests, challenging the dominant narrative of shareholder primacy. It then asks what policy interventions might flow from this analysis of capital and labour investments and how feasible they are in the current UK context, which allows a discussion of levels of analysis (evident in materialist theories such as "radical pluralism" and the "disconnected capitalism

thesis"). Rees also reflects briefly on the links between corporate governance and wider patterns of social inequality, suggesting the pluralist employee relations position is consistent with a Durkheimian sociology focusing on the potential of state-led regulatory interventions to tackle anomie and strengthen social solidarity.

In the final section of this special issue, the contributions from Patrick McGovern and Anne-marie Greene, Heather Connolly and Deborah Dean attempt to reflect one of the major changes that have taken place in the economic, political and social landscape since 1974. When Fox was academically active, the UK economy was dominated by the manufacturing sector, light and heavy engineering and mining. The industrial workforce was largely white, male and unionised. As noted above, politics and IR were predominantly class-based, with second-wave feminism still in its earliest stages. Even though legislation to outlaw sexual and racial discrimination was enacted in the 1970s, overt sexism and racism remained widespread, and homosexuality, though largely decriminalised in 1967, was barely tolerated socially. Indeed, campaigns to challenge these forms of inequality and discrimination hardly registered in mainstream politics. Since then, however, traditional class-based allegiances have fragmented with the rise of identity politics, the tendency for people to form political alliances based on gender, ethnic origin, sexual orientation and religion, among others, sometimes on an intersectional basis. The question therefore arises with respect to how helpful or insightful a theory remains 50 years on when it has been – or at least may appear to have been – superseded by trends in thinking on social matters that were deemed unimportant by many at the time.

McGovern (2024) focuses on this question in his article, *The new pluralism: interests, identity and social change*. One of Fox's insights was that the establishment and perpetuation of managerial legitimacy is always a work in progress. The frames of reference that Fox introduced in the 1960s described the managerial ideologies that were used to buttress authority from the challenges provided by trade unions and industrial conflict. However, by the time *Beyond Contract* was published in 1974, Fox had begun to emphasise the challenges that economic inequality presented to "good industrial relations". Since then, a series of further challenges has emerged based on social identity that originate outside the workplace and seek to question historical understandings of the position of women and minorities in society.

McGovern's article reviews some of these trends and notes the continuing development of theories of gender, race, sexuality and disability among others. So, whilst at the core of Fox's frames lies the fundamental question of whether employers accept trade unions as a legitimate expression of employee interests, more recent changes in the composition of the labour force and the related arrival of identity politics have led to the emergence of new sets of interests based on social identity. These interests exist because of social pressure from campaign groups, state legislation and awareness of the right to equal treatment regardless of gender, race and sexuality among other identities. It follows, argues McGovern, that the emergence of these identity-based interests means that all employers are pluralists now. However, this new pluralism faces the ideological challenge of gaining approval not only from employees but also from the public in a world of hashtag activism on social media. Yet policies of equality, diversity and inclusion are all evidence of a developing response to inequalities in the wider society. The main difference with the 1970s is that analysis of social inequality then focused principally on class and wealth, whereas today it is recognised that the origins of inequality embrace a far wider range of identities, interests and collective actors.

Greene *et al.* (2024) consider similar issues in the final article in our special issue, *Reframing: a feminist reflection on Alan Fox*. They agree that Fox's classic insights around frames of reference are undoubtedly some of the most important theoretical developments in the field of IR, but rightly point out that the premises that underpin his work have not

hitherto been analysed from a feminist perspective, which they argue is vital in moving the field towards greater theoretical clarity. They argue that, even though the concept of inequality forms the core of Fox's analyses, there is a lack of attention to gender or to other diversity strands in his work and that, despite the weight of feminist scholarship since, this has been largely ignored in the subsequent use of his work. They accordingly argue for the integration of insights from feminist methodologies, critical race theory and intersectionality into IR theorising, on the grounds that such an approach enables analysts to recognise the cumulative processes through which race, gender and other dimensions, such as disability and age, combine to co-produce forms of disadvantage that are compounded and differentiated, rather than additive.

They contend that such integration involves asking, when using unitary, pluralist and radical perspectives, whose dominant interests are represented for any actor and what differences exist. If not, the way class-based interests are constructed potentially minimises (at best) or denies (at worst) the ways in which foundational forms of oppression such as racism and patriarchy shape the very construction of class interests in the first place. Hence, the authors contribute to a feminist re-framing of Fox's work and advocate methodological approaches, which advance theoretical and empirical justice in the IR field.

Conclusions

The articles included in this special issue reflect the sustained contribution of Fox's ideas in *Beyond Contract* and *Man Mismanagement* and demonstrate the role they have continued to have in the fields of IR and HRM. There remains a value in a critical IR approach to the world of work that follows in the radical tradition advocated by Fox (Dobbins, 2023; Gold, 2017; Gold and Smith, 2023; Hodder and Mustchin, 2024). Beyond the continued interest in the frames of reference, rarely has Fox's work as presented in these two texts been subject to a detailed analysis in the same way that academics have engaged with other members of the Oxford School (Ackers, 2011, 2014; Kelly, 2010).

We hope that this special issue helps to address this gap, although we are aware that it has not addressed all of Fox's concerns to the same degree. We note some examples here. First, our contributions did not consider management style in any detail, and future research could build on the initial insights offered by Fox (1971b, 1974a) and Purcell (1981, 1987) to outline and evaluate the range of management styles that exist in the contemporary workplace. Second, also absent from the special issue was any discussion of high- and low-trust relationships at work, although interest in the area has increased in recent years (for example, Abgeller *et al.*, 2024; Brandl, 2021; Searle, 2013; Siebert *et al.*, 2015). Third, despite the insights offered by Lyddon and Cao (2024), future research could provide a detailed understanding of the reception of Fox's theories in the USA and elsewhere (although see Kaufman, 2015; Kaufman and Gall, 2015). Fourth, future research could examine the underpinnings of his analysis of structural inequality based on Durkheim in greater depth (Gold, 2017).

Overall, Alan Fox reflected deeply on the meaning of everyday experience. His fascination with trust – or lack of it – as a dimension of working life, for example, stemmed directly from his observation of the interaction of the ranks of the Royal Air Force. Indeed, this emotional intelligence informed the nature of his humanity. For example, Fox was an outstandingly dedicated teacher, an aspect of his life rarely commented upon. One of his former students, Andy Erlam, who graduated in PPE at Oxford in 1974, has said, "Alan Fox was so good I could answer any question in the political theory paper as well as industrial sociology [which Fox had taught]" (Erlam, 2024). Another, Roger Williamson, who also graduated the same year in PPE, commented, "He was an inspiring teacher both in the lecture hall and the more exacting confines of his study for tutorials. I remember him fondly, with great admiration for his life's achievement", adding, in an obituary in *The Times*, "Alan Fox was a great teacher,

a clear and incisive writer who brought to his work a fundamental sense that working people respond well to decent treatment [. . .] His great gift was not to talk down to people but to inspire a desire to find well-founded approaches to social issues which developed high-trust dynamics – not the spiral of mistrust characteristic of labour relations of the time" (Williamson, 2024).

Yet by the end of his life, Alan Fox was still unable to resolve the love–hate relationship he had with humanity in general and Britain in particular. If he were to go to heaven, he concluded in his autobiography, he would go part cheering, part weeping and part laughing. The rest of the time, he would "probably be emitting an extraordinary noise that is a mixture of all three" (Fox, 2004, p. 294).

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Notes

1. We acknowledge that Fox's use of the male noun/pronoun is outdated, and an example of "gender blindness" in industrial relations research (Greene, 2019, p. 239). However, we cannot escape the fact that this is the title of the book and use this term only when using the book's title. We note that on the back cover of the second edition of *Man Mismanagement*, Fox acknowledges this issue and states that the use of "man" was "in its collective sense to mean both men and women" (Fox, 1985a, back cover). Elaborating this point, he also comments in the text that: "I could wish, like many authors, that there were more gender words in the English language that cover both sexes; the reiteration of "him or her" is clumsy and wearisome. My use of the male gender must be taken to refer to humanity at large and not the male sex" (Fox, 1985a, p. 12).
2. Citation counts as at the time of writing (June 2024).
3. Fox argues that, under the unitary frame of reference, "Emphasis is placed on the common objectives and values said to unite all participants" (Fox, 1974a, p. 249). By contrast, in pluralist organisations, " . . . the enterprise is seen [. . .] as a coalition of individuals and groups with their own aspirations and perceptions which they naturally see as valid and which they seek to express in action if such is required" (1974a, p. 260).
4. Whilst there is some analysis of low- and high-trust discretion in *Man Mismanagement*, this is far less developed than the discussion in *Beyond Contract*.
5. Crucial to Fox's notion of radical pluralism is " . . . the belief that industrial society [. . .] is more fundamentally characterised in terms of the overarching exploitation of one class by another, of the propertyless by the propertied, of the less by the more powerful" (Fox, 1974a, p. 274).
6. Wood (1976) had also criticised Hyman's (1975) radical approach to the field in an earlier piece.

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