

Alan Fox and the managerial “unitary” frame of reference in unionised companies: context, roots, elaboration, and international applicability

Abstract

Purpose: To investigate the origins and elaboration of the managerial “unitary” frame of reference associated with Alan Fox, focusing on unionised firms: the industrial relations context, intellectual roots, elaboration, adaptation by other writers, and international applicability.

Design/methodology/research: Tracing the above through contemporaneous sources.

Findings: Fox’s designation of the unitary frame needs to be understood in its 1960s’ context, particularly the promotion of “productivity bargaining”, and its furthering through management training and education. Fox’s specific contribution is identified. Subsequent UK writers have underplayed the importance of the legal dimension of managerial authority, especially relevant in the US context, while other extra-economic factors bolster the managerial unitary frame in authoritarian societies such as China.

Originality: Use of Fox’s neglected 1960s’ writings; tracking how Fox developed the unitary frame concept and how it was funnelled into the narrow parameters of non-unionism by subsequent writers; identifying its applicability beyond the UK (with the USA as a historical example and China as a contemporary one).

Type of paper: General review.

Introduction

British industrial relations thinking in the late 1960s was dominated by the output of the National Board for Prices and Incomes (1965–71) and the evidence-gathering and publications of the (1965–68) Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers’ Associations (Donovan, 1968). Both promoted productivity bargaining as the miracle cure for many of the perceived economic and industrial relations ills of the day. Alan Fox, a trade union historian who had recently been appointed lecturer in industrial sociology at Oxford University, played a small, but significant, role in this ferment with his Donovan research paper (Fox, 1966a). Intended as a contribution to a cultural shift in management attitudes, especially in unionised firms, this categorised the *unitary* and *pluralistic* “frames of reference”, stressing the latter’s superiority. [1] The research paper sold widely to business and was used in management training (Fox, 2004, p.249). According to Bill McCarthy (1974)

a few years later, “Since 1966 more managers have read or heard of Fox on pluralism than any other form of academic stimulant.”

Fox was to deepen his understanding of the unitary frame but this has been overshadowed by his auto-critique of pluralism (Fox, 1973). The latter saw him add a *radical* frame; the three frames of reference have been a staple of subsequent undergraduate textbooks. Fox applied these three frames to develop, in 1974, a six-fold classification of management–employee relations (discussed later in the article). This spawned another academic legacy, in the management strategy and style literature. Much academic debate, post-Fox, focused on industrial relations pluralism but very little on the unitary frame. Ahlstrand (1990, p.189) even argued that “the unitarist position and associated labour strategies have been buried under the weight of the pluralist debate”. Yet the unitary frame is management’s natural (certainly, default) position around the world, whether or not unions are recognised by employers. Employers’ and managers’ apparent embrace of pluralism, such as it was, in Britain from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s can now be seen, historically, as a passing “management fad” (as, ironically, Fox (1966b, p.377) had speculated that productivity bargaining might turn out to be).

In discussing these points, we consider, first, the British industrial relations situation of the early 1960s and how productivity bargaining dominated public discourse. Most of Fox’s 1960s’ writings cannot be understood outside these contexts. After spelling out his early “reformist” views, the academic roots of his research paper are examined. We then chart his development of the unitary frame, as he elaborated its theoretical underpinnings (Fox, 1966b) and the legal foundations of management prerogative (Fox, 1974).

When other academics adapted Fox’s 1974 schema, conceptual drift started and the unitary frame lost much analytical value in Britain, being equated with non-unionism rather than anti-unionism more generally. Increasingly, its use was confined to discussions of non-union firms (a growing phenomenon in the private sector from the early 1980s, as employers reacted to changing product markets). Our concern here, though, is not with the unitary frame *per se* (that would necessitate a much longer article), but with understanding the unitary frame for those employers which deal with trade unions. The elaboration of the unitary frame post-Fox is noted, but as this literature is generally about non-union firms it is generally outwith our scope.

Finally, the unitary frame, as developed by Fox to understand managerial attitudes in unionised firms, has, in our view, a wider applicability beyond these shores – especially when extra-economic factors are taken into account. Two brief and contrasting examples (one

historical and one contemporary; the first in a democracy, the other in an authoritarian society) will have to suffice of employers' unitary stance at critical periods of each country's industrial relations history. In the mid-twentieth century, the biggest companies in the United States, when facing what would have felt like a tsunami of unionism, had to grapple – ideologically and practically – with union encroachment on management “rights”. In China this century a huge market-based industrial relations system – the unitary frame hegemonic – has been created within a single generation, with all the challenges that entails.

The British industrial relations context in the 1960s

In the early 1960s, national industry-wide bargaining in the British private sector was still dominant. Despite the pressure of well over a decade of “full” employment and “wage drift”, generated at workplace level, there was little appetite from unions or employers' associations for decentralised bargaining. While much of the pay packet was settled by local bargains and “acts of local expediency”, employers did *not* accept “the fact of local negotiation”; instead, “they maintain a distinction between the present practices which are informal, constitute as little precedent as possible, and can be dropped when the tide of business turns” (Phelps Brown, 1962, p.xii). Henry Phelps Brown (1959, p.367) saw American-style “plant contracts” as the way forward, highlighting that “by agreements *within* the firm ... the insecurity from which restrictive practices spring can be allayed, particular changes in work-load or working practices can be directly connected with changes in pay, and ... managers and wage-earners together can raise the efficiency of the firm”.

The academic debate was measured, unlike that in much of the press. Exploding, like a Roman candle firework, illuminating the public policy terrain, was the publicity generated by the Fawley productivity agreements. Early in 1960, Esso had asked Allan Flanders (1964, p.17), Fox's colleague at Nuffield College, to undertake an independent enquiry into its “departure from conventional collective bargaining” at its Fawley oil refinery on Southampton Water. Hugh Clegg (1970, p.306) summarised the “novelty” of the Fawley agreements succinctly: “the negotiation with *workshop representatives* of *all* the unions concerned, of ... changes in work practices *throughout* the plant and their embodiment in a *formal agreement* with the unions.” The impact that Flanders's book-length study had on government thinking was faster than, though not as long lasting as, its effect on academia, where the topic had generated about 100 publications by the end of 1970 (Bain and Woolven, 1979, pp.147–151).

Kelly (2010, p.119) has claimed that Kuhn's American study of "fractional bargaining" influenced Flanders's thinking. Flanders argued that Kuhn had tried "to integrate the theory of the work group [then dominated by the unitary "human relations" school] into the theory of collective bargaining ... [T]his has not been done before ... [or] so explicitly. Has this been due to the artificial separation of industrial sociology and industrial relations?" (Flanders, 1963, p.429). This gap was something that Fox was to address, resulting from his close association with Flanders, who wrote to Fox: "Without your help ... I doubt whether I could have pulled it off", having used him as a sounding-board while working through the Fawley book's basic analysis (Fox, 2004, p.248). [2]

Fox's early reformism

Looking back, Fox described his 1960s' self as "reformist", working within a particular paradigm – "a framework of assumptions, attitudes, institutions and practices" (Fox, 2004, pp.243–244). Full employment had "enhanced the power of many unionized workers especially at the workplace" (Fox, 2004, p.242). Concerns of Conservative and then Labour governments included inflation, industrial peace, and economic growth and efficiency, the last leading to widespread condemnation of so-called "restrictive" work practices. It "made sense [to Fox] to help the reform process along ... I was among those who would have defined this as being 'in the national interest'" (Fox, 2004, p.243). He was, then, very much part of the historically dominant "problem-solving" wing of the British industrial relations academic community (Lyddon, 2003, p.89). The rest of this section draws from rarely cited writings of Fox. For readers to appreciate more fully the industrial relations paradigm within which Fox was working and in which his research paper has to be situated, there is substantial direct quotation. (All the emphases in the passages from Fox (and other writers) are added by this article's authors.)

One prominent consequence of Fox's 1960s' reformism was his advocacy of productivity bargaining, which could cover "any aspect of the methods and organisation of work which are *wasteful of labour*". But Fox worried that the technique could become "discredited", with "dubious deals"; "objective accounts" were therefore necessary "which encourage the virtuous and pillory the guileful" (Fox, 1966c, pp.446, 448). He elaborated: "worker restrictions and employer indifference have between them created a pattern of *wasteful labour utilization* which is a serious drag on our national welfare" (Fox, 1968, p.52). During that current period of labour shortage, "under-utilized labour *must* be combed out and re-deployed; tasks *must* be re-defined to minimize labour requirements; work patterns *must*

be recast to get more done with a given labour force” (Fox, 1968, p.57). Fox was in tune with his Oxford colleagues. Clegg (1964, p.10), for example, had written that “Under-employment of labour is one of the major scandals of the British economy.” Flanders’s research at Fawley led him to claim in 1963 that “systematic overtime” was always “associated with deliberate time-wasting”, moralising that “one must take a very poor and cynical view of humanity to believe that this can be a source of human happiness” (Flanders, 1970, p.57).

Fox believed that education and training were necessary for managers to replace their unitary, with a pluralistic, frame of reference. This comes out consistently, with his labelling of the unitary frame as the “wrong ‘mental set’” (Fox, 1966a, para. 38). Successful productivity bargaining required from managers “a constant intuitive awareness, *grounded in intellectual understanding*, of the diversity of group interests, objectives and motivations”. One reason for its slow progress had been “our [presumably, academics’] failure to promote and disseminate a valid understanding of the social organisation of industry” (Fox, 1966a, paras 40, 41).

Changes were needed to “the training and ideology of management” for “a more creative approach to labour utilization” (Fox, 1968, p.64). He elaborated, almost messianically: “business attitudes [are] beginning their slow, painful adjustment” to labour scarcity. “In terms of the *shift in mental attitudes* that this [adjustment to labour scarcity] requires, it could prove, if it became widespread, *to be among the most important general changes to visit British industry since the steam engine*”. Management could only “regain control by recognizing the reality of work-group power ... and by containing it within the limits of negotiated regulation”, through productivity bargaining (Fox, 1968, pp.57–58). Increasing unionization also could not be handled by unitary “images of team harmony”, which were “not a useful *mental and attitudinal framework*”. Finally, the more complex future would be “at risk if young managers are, however unwittingly, *trained in a set of attitudes inappropriate to the tasks confronting them*” (Fox, 1972, p.21).

According to Jeremy Bugler (1968, p.222), “Oxford group” members all stressed the importance of management education. Fox, among others, did some teaching at the new Oxford Centre for Management Studies (later Templeton College) and saw such work as critical in effecting attitude change. The management programmes being developed “should ... attempt to *demolish* the sentimentalities and misconceptions embodied in the current ideology”, but no existing text provided an “adequate” framework of theory. Until managers were offered a frame of reference “appropriate to their task”, any “creative initiatives in

labour relations” would be “slow in gestation” and their “birth pangs ... long and severe” (Fox, 1966b, p.378).

While seeing management as the main agent of change (Flanders’s position, later adopted by Donovan), Fox’s views on shop stewards were, by contrast, conservative. Greater bargaining at plant level meant “a need for new skills ... in the arts of workplace bargaining”. Stewards should be trained by adult educators “to pursue their interests, press their grievances, register their opinions, within an understood and accepted framework of *rational procedures and restraints* – surely *one of the most civilised social achievements open to man*” (Fox, 1965a, pp.13, 14). Where there were “closed shop” (100% union membership) agreements, there was a joint responsibility (on management and unions) for “understanding and dealing with the reasons work groups choose *disruptive* methods for registering their claims and grievances ... rather than through an agreed peaceful procedure”. Fox described such unofficial and unconstitutional (in breach of procedure) strikes as “*unruly* behaviour” (Fox, 1965b, p.8).

As behaviour was shaped by various factors, unconstitutional strikes were, in some cases, “much more difficult for management to avoid”. But there were “almost certainly ... situations where *behaviour can be modified*” (Fox, 1965a, p.14). There was “no substitute for sustained, patient inquiry into particular *trouble spots*; inquiry which, whether sponsored by industry, independent research institutions or government, is staffed or at least served by trained social scientists capable of communicating with non-specialists” (Fox, 1965b, p.8). More generally, Fox believed that larger companies were likely to design “organisational structure, work arrangements, controls, payment systems and personnel policies in general as *to evoke the optimum patterns of behaviour* most relevant to the company’s objectives”. He hoped that personnel management would provide this “specialism” (Fox, 1966d, p.15).

In January 1968, before the Donovan Report was published (in June that year), Fox and Flanders participated in an Engineering Employers’ Federation symposium. No doubt the pair performed similar duties elsewhere but there is a record of this one. Flanders saw the productivity agreement as, among other things, an “instrument for reconstructing workplace relations”. He believed it difficult otherwise to clear up “the accumulated disorder, ... the heritage of two decades of post-war growth in the unofficial system of collective bargaining”. It also forced upon management “a greater and better use of work measurement, of work study and all that is associated with a proper costing of the agreements”. But, overall, the “re-establishment of order and control ... may be *far more important* than the immediate gains ... of increased labour productivity” (Flanders, 1969, pp.14–15).

Fox complemented Flanders: “Part of the productivity deal ... [should be] the evolving of a much better system of control mechanisms by management”. He concluded: “if managements have to *sweat out a crisis* in order to *convince the shop stewards* that henceforth certain things must be negotiated and ... *not ... allowed to be infiltrated unilaterally* ..., so be it. The rules will then have been changed” (Fox, 1969, p.21). The pair were to collaborate in a theoretical paper (Fox and Flanders, 1969) to develop some of these points.

Roots and development of Fox’s unitary–pluralistic distinction

One danger when discussing the development of ideas and concepts in any discipline is to abstract a pivotal contribution from its wider milieu. Many later industrial relations writers’ concentration on the “Oxford School” of the 1960s has crowded out other, pre-Donovan, roots of the subject (Lyddon, 2003, pp.90–101). One of the most important was the extensive North American literature, used liberally by both Flanders and Fox, but there were others.

Perhaps the most significant influence on Fox’s (1966a) research paper was Norman Ross of Birmingham University. Ross had been part of a research project on the introduction of incentive payments into five Birmingham factories. In one longitudinal case study, the union branch secretary’s presence was “interpreted by the management as an *intrusion*” and other union officers believed that “local management resented the union and tried as far as possible to ignore its existence”, despite the firm being seen as a “good employer” (Ross, 1958a, pp.233, 259). This clearly coloured Ross’s more general claim that most managers saw unions as “an *intrusion* into what ... they believe to be a single, integrated system of relationships” (a “*unitary* concept”). What was needed, Ross argued, was “a theoretical approach to management which treats the firm as a *plural society* rather than as ... [an] organic unity”. Trade unionism “cut across the concept of the firm as a *unitary* or monolithic structure” (Ross, 1958b, pp.101–102).

Fox (1963) cited Ross on the firm as a “plural society”, contrasting it with the “team” image, which drew on military and sporting analogies. While managers’ view of the firm as an “organic unity” (Ross’s term) did not necessarily determine practice, it influenced the “*mental set*’ of many progressive managers”: “A more rigorous theory might encourage a *mental breakthrough*” and lead to “hard-headed bargaining aimed at maximizing the reconciliation of sectional interests”. This short article was a stepping stone to the more worked-out position in the Donovan research paper [3], in which Fox (1966a, paras 12, 32) quoted Ross at length, especially on conflict. But two well-known sentences (in para. 32), on

unions not introducing conflict but providing “a highly organised and continuous form of expression” for sectional interests, are almost verbatim from Ross (1958b, p.115) though were inadvertently not attributed. Another British source, cited by Fox (1966a, paras 34–35) for its discussion of “organised” and “unorganised” conflict, had also observed that “basic ways of thinking about industrial relations” tended to approximate to either “the ‘harmony’ or the ‘conflict’ outlook” (Scott *et al.*, 1963, p.10).

An article by Flanders, published in March 1966, prefigures wording in Fox (1966a): “The business enterprise does not have a *unitary* structure of authority; in some degree it is always a *pluralistic* society composed of groups with *divergent interests* and values” (Flanders, 1966, p.18). [4] Yet another forerunner of Fox’s ideas was Jack Barbash, who argued that “the manager’s idealized model is *harmony*” (seen as “the absence of open conflict”) and referred to “the *pluralistic* power structure within the plant” (Barbash, 1964, pp.73, 75).

Central to Fox’s unitary–pluralistic distinction was Flanders’s (1970, p.88) separation between *market relations* and *managerial relations* (that Flanders had first published in 1965), though Fox does not cite the source. [5] For Fox (1966a, paras 24, 28), the former was the “terms and conditions on which labour is hired” and the latter the “exercise of management authority in deploying, organising, and disciplining the labour force after it has been hired”. The unitary frame typified those companies that denied unions’ role in managerial relations but that *could* accept, because of “public support”, unions’ role in market relations (Fox, 1966a, paras 24, 28). Such practices fitted the UK experience of employers’ associations and multi-employer bargaining, namely the Whitley assumption of negotiation external to the plant, with in-house joint consultation (Clegg, 1970, pp.185–186, 190).

Overall, Fox was thus perhaps less original at the time than he has seemed in retrospect. His main contribution was to employ, in the industrial relations context, the “frame of reference” concept (Kaufman *et al.*, 2021, pp.207–208), “a familiar one in social science and ... obviously basic” but one that he spent several sentences explaining to the non-academic audience at which his research paper was aimed (Fox, 1966a, para 6). At the time, H.A. Turner (1968, p.348), professor of industrial relations at Cambridge, was generally dismissive of the Donovan research papers and claimed that Fox’s was “in essence ... a competent adult education pamphlet”. It was a “pity that its educational effect” on the commissioners “was not more pronounced”. Turner probably did not know the minor furore that the paper caused, particularly from representatives of bodies whose unitary outpourings Fox had described as an “orgy of avuncular pontification” (quoted in Fox, 1966a, para 11).

Fox responded to Lord Donovan, in January 1967, unpicking the claims of his protagonists (Phillips, 2007, pp.219–220).

On the paper's publication, the *Guardian* (23 November 1966) had reported: "Firms' view of team loyalty 'outdated'". McCarthy (1974) later confirmed this interpretation, observing that Fox was "best known as the industrial sociologist who made 'team-work' a dirty word". Yet, for academics and students, his research paper had to be read in conjunction with an academic article (Fox, 1966b) also published in November 1966. Here, Fox identified *scientific management* (deriving from Frederick Winslow Taylor) and *human relations* (promulgated by Elton Mayo) as providing the theoretical underpinning of managerial unitary attitudes. Given the contradictory views and solutions emanating from these managerial techniques, Fox (1971, p.125) later described the ideology of management as a "ragbag of assorted notions ... sometimes quite incompatible with each other".

After 1966, Fox broadened his conception of the unitary frame by explicitly including within it the legal basis of managerial authority over employees. Ross (1969, pp.10–16) had discussed the two strands of the "legal theory of the firm", namely property rights and contractual rights and duties, the latter including the master-and-servant legal concept. Fox (1971, p.40) was to cite this work by Ross when introducing the contract of employment into his discussion. Then Fox (briefly in 1973, p.191; more fully in 1974, pp.184–190) used Selznick (1969) to elaborate on this and how UK managers' right to discipline employees (under the criminal master-and servant laws, not repealed until 1875) carried over into the modern contract of employment, a point he returned to in his later writings (Fox, 1985a, p.6; 1985b, p.74). By 1974, Fox had thus produced a much stronger basis, than his original emphasis on team-work, for managers' unitary frame.

Although Fox used his three frames to identify six possible combinations of management–employee relations, it is not always appreciated that the unitary frame was omnipresent. Even where management showed pluralistic leanings, these were contingent on circumstances. In the *sophisticated modern* pattern, for example, "a formal acceptance of pluralistic patterns *may mask unitary convictions* ... Should management come to see the union as 'a negative force' ... management's whole perspective changes" (Fox, 1974, pp.303, 305). Regarding the *standard modern* pattern, managers could be split between the two frames. Alternatively, "a common phenomenon ... has been the employer who, at times of high labour bargaining strength or a fashionable mood ..., manifests signs of a shift to a pluralistic strategy, but who reverts to unitary attitudes and behaviour when a slack labour market returns or when the fashionable mood passes" (1974, p.307).

Clegg (1979, pp.162–164) was blunter, arguing that managers shifted frame according to the issue, and that the frame changed under “pressure of events – with a time lag”. The intensity of organised employers’ reaction to the 1977 Bullock Report on worker directors showed a predominant unitary frame (Phillips, 2011), even at a high point of perceived union strength. In the mid-1980 (by which time unemployment was rising rapidly, a union-unfriendly government had been elected, and employers’ support for unions was diminishing) a large survey of managers found an overwhelming preference for it (Poole *et al.*, 1982). Purcell (1983, p.11) even believed: “there are good reasons for suggesting that ... [the unitary frame] is the *natural position*” for managers. With the material foundations of pluralism within the workplace in free fall during the 1980s, its intellectual underpinnings were dealt a rude blow by Ahlstrand’s (1990) reassessment of the initial (and the post-Flanders) Fawley productivity agreements. He concluded that Esso management had been operating within a unitary, and *not* a pluralistic, frame. Flanders’s “feelings about the importance of democracy at the workplace may have coloured his ... interpretation”. More generally, Ahlstrand thought that industrial relations academics had a “slavish fascination with notions of pluralism”, whereas “unitarist based strategies have been, and continue to be, favoured by British managers” (Ahlstrand, 1990, pp.188–189). This important observation has effectively been lost to posterity (for example, it does not appear in Heery’s (2016) otherwise extensive survey).

Meanwhile, Fox’s (1974) classification had encouraged others to identify patterns (Bacon (2008) summarises the literature on management style and strategy). The most influential was by Purcell and Sisson (1983, pp.112–118) who modified Fox to suggest five “ideal-typical” styles of industrial relations management, which encompassed non-union companies. But the utility of such models was called into question with Purcell and Ahlstrand’s management style matrix (1994, pp.176–201). Here the managerial unitary frame was explicitly equated with non-unionism, rather than Fox’s view that it also included acceptance of unions’ involvement in *market relations* but not in *managerial relations*. *A Dictionary of Human Resource Management* took this further, defining *unitarism* and *pluralism* as “opposite[s]” (Heery and Noon, 2001, pp.272, 388), thus robbing the former of analytic value (this position was dropped in the second edition, though). Ackers (2021, p.273) has recently been even more explicit: “after Fox (1966), we often describe management style in organisations as ‘unitarist’ and ‘pluralist’, usually meaning little more than union or non-union”. Yet, anti-unionism by employers and managers is not exclusive to non-union workplaces, either today or in the period when Fox was writing his research paper.

Applicability, beyond Britain, of the unitary frame

It is surprising that – before his 1971 book – Fox never cited the international study on management by Harbison and Myers (1959), which drew on the experience of a dozen (industrialised and industrialising) countries across six continents. According to them, management, in the absence of constraints, would adopt a “dictatorial (or authoritarian)” or a “paternalistic” approach, the latter often forced on it by particular social or economic circumstances and not by choice (a point not generally appreciated by most later writers). As industrialisation advanced, pressures to change to a more “constitutional management” – with “consistent policies and procedures” for dealing with employees, and a framework within which management “must exercise its functions” – increased. The US, Britain, and Sweden were cited as leading examples at the time (the late 1950s). The pressures for change came from tight labour markets, legislation, strong unions, changing social values, the rise of professional management, and the influence of “progressive” employers. “Increasingly, the society with ‘constitutional management’ is also a pluralist society ... but management still considers itself ‘the boss’” (Harbison and Myers, 1959, p.63).

In the British case, at that point, “employers share their power ... with trade unions through industry-level bargaining but have as consequence won increasing control at the plant level, where a new form of paternalism ... seems to have developed” (Harbison and Myers, 1959, p.127). W.H. Scott, from Liverpool University, who contributed the chapter on Britain, termed this “constitutional paternalism”, management being “less constitutional than in America, less authoritarian and patriarchal than in France, and less paternalistic than in Germany” (Harbison and Myers, 1959, p.313). [6] This was perhaps the earliest attempt to classify British management behaviour in industrial relations. Importantly, though, and significant for any attempt at classification, Harbison and Myers (1959, p.50) emphasised that their terms were “ideal types”, “points on a spectrum or a continuum” rather than “exclusive” managerial philosophies: a “photograph of actuality ... would reveal a fuzzy picture”.

The “ideology of management”, the theme of our paper, is but one of the two broad paths that Fox’s frames of reference concept followed (the other, concerning the nature of industrial relations as an academic field, and with by far the bigger literature, is the subject of Heery’s (2016) exhaustive book). Since Fox, new frames of reference have been added mainly by non-British scholars but we are only concerned here with developments in the unitary frame. Godard (1994) divided this into a neoclassical and a managerial perspective. Budd and Bhava (2008) did something similar with their egoist (later neoliberal-egoist) and

unitarist theories. These separate out what, in our view, are integral aspects of Fox's unitary frame, reflecting what Fox saw as the different strands of management thought but often intertwined practice, broadly theorised in scientific management and human relations (with their "economic" and "social" views of worker behaviour). In a rare use of the frames for historical analysis, Kaufman (2016, p.7), in his examination of inter-war American "company unions", made a similar distinction between what he termed *faux* and *genuine* unitarism, based on whether co-operation was secured by negative means (coercion) or positive means (persuasion).

Building on Fox and later British writers, Cullinane and Dundon (2014) separated out not two, but three, "variants of unitarism" – traditional, paternalist, and human relations – in a 2007 survey of Irish-based (and mostly Irish-owned) non-union firms that had actively opposed union recognition claims. They found the first variant to be dominant, particularly noting employers' insistence upon "non-interference in property or managerial rights", summed up in the term "management prerogative", which Fox had added to his original teamwork conception of the unitary frame. Management prerogative, an ever-present (but often hidden) weapon in the employers' armoury, was to be a decisive battleground in the USA, to which we now turn.

USA: defence of the "right to manage"

The pressures (listed above) to change from some form of authoritarian or paternalist management to some form of constitutional management were concentrated in a relatively short period in the USA. The 1935 National Labor Relations Act (which gave most workers the right to organise and join unions and the right of these to bargain with employers) was critical. Once its constitutionality been confirmed by the US Supreme Court in 1937, companies had to react rapidly. Harris (1982, pp.23–37) identified three broad categories of response to the explosion of unionism in the late 1930s. These were: "persistent anti-unionism" (*belligerents* and *sophisticates*); "realistic accommodation and adaptation", unions being "accepted reluctantly, under pressure, and with ill grace" (p.26); and the (minority) "progressive approach", with "constructive accommodation".

In the 1940s, with a full-employment economy during the war and post-war, collective bargaining became more established. Many US firms in the mass-production and basic industries grappled – ideologically and practically – with union encroachment on management "rights", as the various factors favouring a "constitutional" labour philosophy came into play more fully. Very importantly, employers and managers had to develop their

“unitary ideology” to justify to the wider society, as well as to themselves (the “reassurance” function of ideology (Fox, 1966a, paras 16–17)), why they should have control over their enterprises. There was “the classical bedrock of property right, the common law, and the formal authority of owners and masters, delegated to their ... chosen management” (Harris, 1982, p.98). Collective bargaining and statute law now imposed some restrictions. A leading businessman, Lee Hill of Allis-Chalmers, advised managers that where these two forces were “silent”, managers should assume that “all of the right, and all of the power, was reserved to them” (Harris, 1982, p.98). This sentiment was likely embraced by managers across the capitalist world.

In practice, though, American companies had to be vigilant. For example, the giant General Motors, with separate divisions and multiple plants, had highly centralised labour relations to guard against the “inchworm tactics” of the union, which tried to “use concessions secured in one plant as a means of pressing its demands in others” (Harbison and Dubin, 1947, p.61). The “historic compromise” with unions in the 1940s “only went so far”; it was “a limited, provisional tolerance” (Harris, 1982, p.103), summed up in Harbison and Coleman’s (1951) finding that “armed truce” was the most common labour relations pattern at that time in mass-production industry. Walton and McKersie’s (1965, p.189) matrix of management–union “relationship patterns” showed a wide range of managements’ generally unitary attitudes in the ensuing years. Their five patterns (distilled from earlier writers) comprised conflict, containment–aggression (“grudging acceptance of each other”), (“hands-off”) accommodation, co-operation, and collusion (pursuing ends outside the law). When companies needed to bear down on costs, many accommodative patterns shifted into containment, though in a crisis “co-operative” programmes were sometimes required to save companies and related employment. Even during the boom years, when there was a “net movement towards accommodation and cooperation” (Walton and McKersie, 1965, p.200), many managers worked to weaken and defeat unions, believing they were not compatible with free enterprise (a standard unitary response). Those other managers who saw the interests of labour and capital as identical (another classic unitary position) used union leadership as “a helpful intermediary in the process of collaboration” (p.198) such as in profit-sharing and cost-reduction plans.

The overall accommodation, such as it was, of US unions in the 1950s and 1960s was “only temporary” (Kochan *et al.* 1986). Barbash (1987, p.168–169) called it “an uneasy armistice” before “the union-free environment became within reach” in the 1980s, through “union attrition, union avoidance and, curious as it sounds, union–management cooperation”

(the last policy prefigured in Walton and McKersie). In the USA, after the 1970s (Taras and Kaufman, 2006), the managerial unitary frame *without unions* increasingly supplanted the many forms of the unitary frame *with unions*.

China: the unitary frame reigns

In an observation not normally cited by other authors, Fox (1971, p.190) noted how managers derived “great advantage” in societies where the state and its coercive apparatus controlled the “market in ideas” and suppressed “those independent organizations which might promote and disseminate specially inconvenient opinions and attitudes”. China’s market economy today shows the unitary frame dominant in the largest-ever authoritarian regime, consistently held by the state, employers, and even unions. In the early 1950s, after the People’s Republic had been established, the state-owned sector strongly emphasised the mutual interests of management and workers through “practices, norms, and ideologies” that “appear akin to the assumption of classical unitarism” (Liu and Li, 2023, p. 13). Since the 1990s, there has been a pattern of HRM “with Chinese characteristics”, with the managerial “unitary framework” embedded in the traditional Confucian values of harmony and loyalty (Warner, 1993, p.51). This has even been called “unitarism with Chinese characteristics”, linked with traditional “Confucian beliefs in benevolence, harmony and loyalty to higher authorities” (Danford and Zhao, 2012, pp. 841–842).

It was once hoped that, under economic reform, the unitary frame might be weakened as Chinese workers became more aware of their own interests (Warner, 1993, p. 59). Growing workplace unrest in the 1990s and 2000s suggested the emergence of a more pluralistic model of industrial relations (Pun and Smith, 2007). For Chang and Brown (2017, p. 31), the 2008 Collective Labour Contract Law and workers pursuing collective rights indicated “a transition from individual ... to collective labour relations”. Yet a key aim of the collective contract system was to use “a unitary and political model ... to re-collectivize workplace relations for maintaining indirect political control”, associated with “an ethos of benevolent ‘managerialism’” (Warner and Ng, 1999, pp. 300–301). Collective contracts often only restate minima, with enforcement difficult (Chang and Brown, 2017). Union organising and workers’ rights are supported in law, but employers can effectively “ignore, evade or reduce their implementation leading to uneven enforcement of labour regulations in the workplace”, while the Chinese state has recently become “more authoritarian and less open” (Liu, 2020, pp.494, 496). The state is not holding the ring but actively taking sides.

In such a system, employers generally have free rein over *managerial relations*, with a distinct lack of internal procedures, though local governments tend to enforce some union involvement in *market relations* (mainly wage levels) (Chang and Brown, 2017). In the public sector, with employers strictly controlled by the ruling Chinese Communist Party, and “bureaucratic management behaviour ... partly a function of the size and legacy of government administration” (Danford and Zhao, 2012: 842), it is almost impossible to encourage or develop pluralistic values (Cooke, 2013). In the private sector or joint venture firms, more inclined to adopt Western-type policies, paternalistic management styles and unitary ideology still prevail (Nankervis, 2013, p.194).

The domestic unitary frame is also exported by Chinese multinationals. As shown in the documentary *American Factory* (2019), a Chinese company in Ohio adopted the American “adversarial anti-union” approach (Chan, 2020, p. 179). Although Chinese multinationals do not reject employee representatives from works councils and unions in Germany, the dealings are kept minimal and Chinese managers “do not contact interest representatives on their own initiative” (Bian and Emons, 2017, p. 169). While Chinese companies’ unitary ethos can be contested by local unions in Africa, managers react by adjusting to “social and political pressures” and learning to “accommodate each other’s work habits” (Lee, 2018, p. 94).

Finally, the Chinese state forbids unions being financially, organisationally or ideologically independent of employers. Unions have an official duty to engage in “collective consultation” with management, but have no real power – or intention – to organise industrial action (Liu, 2020), rendering them supporters of management. Further, the Chinese state’s prioritisation of *weiwēn* (stability maintenance) (Benney, 2016) supports and encourages unitary management attitudes by clamping down, buying off, or diffusing all forms of protest (including that of workers). The unitary frame (including in the workplace) is integral to Party–state ideology and practice in China and, in slightly different ways, in all other authoritarian societies.

Conclusion

The managerial unitary frame of reference will always be associated with Alan Fox: for a generation of British managers in the Donovan era, and for British industrial relations academics and students then and ever since. Fox was to articulate its prevalence in unionised companies in the mid-1960s, at a time when public policy emphasised the need for increased efficiency. His 1960s’ publications show him firmly rooted within the reformist paradigm of

the day and a strong supporter of the productivity bargaining, which his colleague Flanders had championed, that necessitated managers negotiating formally with workplace union representatives. Although a significant part of this project, Fox's (1966a) Donovan research paper was not especially original, being mainly a literature review aimed at a non-academic audience; in the event, it was widely used in management training and education. In retrospect, Fox's main contribution was to employ, in the industrial relations context, the "frame of reference" concept.

Along with Fox's move towards a radical pluralist stance in the early 1970s, his understanding of the unitary frame developed, in particular the centrality of the legal "right to manage". The reformist Fox had argued the superiority of a pluralistic frame but, even where this was apparently adopted, it was invariably, as the comments above from Clegg (1979) and Ahlstrand (1990) amply exemplify, a unitary frame dressed up in pluralistic clothes. In post-reformist Fox's own words, the pluralist position was arguably "no more, or no less, than enlightened managerialism" (1973, p.213), to be deployed when the economics and the mores of the times made it a sensible choice. From the mid-1970s, the academic debate within British industrial relations became dominated by the pluralistic, not the unitary, frame, even as managers' passing attachment to the former started to wane. Over time, Fox's use of the distinction between market and managerial relations vanished in other authors' discussions of unionised firms; his earthy characterisation of management ideology as a "ragbag of assorted notions" was lost in the search for ever more precise and exclusive classifications; and the unitary frame increasingly became associated with non-unionism rather than the much wider category of anti-unionism.

Superior business performance has often been seen as a key rationale in management embracing the unitary frame but this underestimates the importance of extra-economic factors such as the "right to manage" in democracies. Cullinane and Dundon (2014, p.2586), for example, highlight employers' "insistence on prerogatives and the freedom from 'outside' interference" in their recent Irish survey. This was also the central concern of American companies dealing with the unprecedented challenge of unions in the mid-century period. That accommodation of unions had been merely "temporary", in the broad sweep of history, so, when the economics and mores shifted in the 1980s, many US employers took advantage to move to a union-free regime. In the very different 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.

In summary, interest in the managerial unitary frame has long been eclipsed in British academic industrial relations circles by fascination with its pluralistic counterpart. Yet, once we accept that Fox's (1966a) Donovan Research Paper was not his last word on the subject, the unitary frame is a fruitful and widely applicable concept in the contemporary and historical study of unionised companies, not just in Britain but elsewhere.

Notes

[1] Fox used the term *unitary*: "oneness" is its most straightforward meaning. Later writers often used *unitarist* – relating to, or an advocate of, "a unified and centralized system of government" – and *unitarism*, its political theory.

[2] One of the authors of this paper has Fox's copy of Flanders (1970), inscribed: "To my good friend, Alan, with affection and gratitude, Allan, 18/5/70."

[3] Hyman (1978, pp.22–24) critiqued the early pluralist views of Ross and Fox.

[4] Fox (1966a, para 4) wrote "sectional groups with *divergent interests*".

[5] Flanders's earlier *job regulation* conceptualisation was not elaborated in a publication until 1965 (Flanders, 1970, pp.83–128), by when his terms had been used by McCarthy (1964, pp.95–97). Flanders (1964, pp.232–233) identified market and managerial relations in slightly different words.

[6] There was a detailed spin-off book on Britain, McGivering *et al.* (1960).

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