

Managing the Modern Workplace: Productivity, Politics and Workplace Culture in Post-war Britain

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Ever since the rise of American and German challenges to British industrial hegemony in the late 19th century, stories of 'decline' have played a key role in narratives of British history, extending well beyond the narrow confines of the economy. Of course, declines have taken place. It is in the nature of industrial capitalism to experience a constant rise and fall of different sectors; Marx's classic account of the fate of handloom weaving could be replicated a hundred fold from the economic history of Britain for the last century and a half. Above and beyond the demise of individual industries we have also seen the decline of broader sectors - agriculture, obviously, in the 19th century - and much of manufacturing, in the de-industrialisation evident from the late 1960s. But British historical narratives have gone far beyond charting and analysing these shifts, into using them as evidence of economic and societal *pathology*; the stories of decline have underpinned a *declinism*, in which specific instances of decline are treated as symptoms of something much bigger and much more serious. Ultimately, we commonly have a history in which 'what went wrong?' is the spoken or unspoken question, to which the declinist narrative is the answer.

This historical narrative has been firmly rooted in the politics of the periods with which it deals. The original declinism of the late 19th century was inextricably interwoven with the protectionist challenge to the liberal international political economy of the age, and its alleged incapacity to sustain Britain's imperial hegemony. Joseph Chamberlain may rightly be seen as the first major political figure to seek power on a platform of 'reversing decline'. (1) In the inter-war period the decline of the old staples provided the grounds for similar pessimism about Britain's industrial future. Since 1945 declinism has become entrenched in part because,

like, in Freud's view, human sexuality, it is 'polymorphously perverse', not least in its politics. In the late 1950s/early 1960s post-war declinism was invented by the centre-left as a critique of Conservative failings ('13 wasted years'). In the 1970s it was revived and deployed to even greater effect by Mrs Thatcher and her allies in her assault on the post-war consensus.

Historians have, at least initially, tended to take their cue from contemporary polemics. Too often, the journalism and other present-grounded literature has indeed functioned as 'the first draft of history'. But eventually second drafts have been written, and these have progressively demonstrated the inadequacy of declinist accounts for each of the main sub-periods. For the pre-1914 era the once dominant declinist account, with its emphasis on 'entrepreneurial decline' has been radically undercut by a mass of re-evaluations, but above all by Sidney Pollard's *Britain's Prime and Britain's Decline*. (2) For the inter-war period it is now accepted by most historians that for all the agonies of unemployment and the decline of staple industries, this was a period when in the aggregate the British economy performed better than those of most other countries, especially in the 1930s. A similar 'counter-revolution' in interpretations of the post-war period is now underway, with recognition that the 1950s and 1960s were indeed, by any sensible standard, including growth rates, a 'golden age' of British economic performance. Further, that the Thatcherite story of her governments' policies rescuing Britain from terminal decline is political myth-making of the first order; the British economy performed worst on almost every measure after 1979 than it had in the golden age. (It performed poorly in the mid-1970s, though a major recession was avoided, but this was a passing phase, and was quickly corrected by c.1977).

Declinist history typically accompanies its 'what went wrong?' question with a list of the 'usual suspects', who can be blamed for causing the problems diagnosed as at the root of decline. Top of this list in many declinist accounts are the workers and their unions. Jo Melling's and Alan Booth's book can be seen as addressing this declinist demonology, but in doing so providing not just a critique, but also opening up positive avenues to a more adequate account of the role of workers and unions in post-war Britain.

The book consists of substantial introductory and concluding essays by the two editors, an individual essay by each of them, and two other essays, by Mike Anson and Andrew Jenkins. What unifies the book is a general skepticism about declinist accounts of Britain in the golden age, allied to a desire to use detailed empirical research to re-assess the role of labour and unions in the British economy and British society more generally in these years. Alan Booth's individual chapter draws on work presented at greater length in his recent book on the management of technological change, here focusing on the banking system. (3) This nicely integrates accounts of changes in technology (mechanisation followed by computerisation) with changes in the labour market. It shows how banks were in many respects technological innovators, and shows how this may have contributed to poor productivity growth because before the arrival of online systems key elements of service may not have been open to efficient automation. His essay is sensitive to the complex implications of the feminisation of the banks' work-force, a process which while replete with stories of women's segregation and subordination, opened up a space for some women to carve out a career well before the major legal changes concerning gender at work of the 1970s.

Jo Melling's essay seeks to re-assess the role of foremen in British industry without deploying the declinist incubus of seeing that role as part of a 'failed Fordism'. Contrasting the experience of Ford in the US and the UK, it is argued that the response of the former to the rise of supervisory unions was to improve the wages and conditions of supervisors while crushing their union. By contrast, in Britain supervisors offered much less of a challenge to their employers in part because of the hostility of manual unions to independent supervisory unions. What is important in this account is both the decisive break with the 'American mass production versus British craft production' dichotomy which so bedevils study of post-war manufacturing (and the analysis of the car industry in particular), but also recognition that the differences in industrial relations between the US and British cases have no straightforward relationship with differences in productivity levels. As Melling stresses, 'Difficult labour relations were not confined to less competitive enterprises and did not necessarily entail poor levels of productivity, profitability or wage gains' (p. 45).

Mike Anson analyses the much less well-ploughed field of industrial relations and productivity at the

Swindon locomotive works. He presents a compelling narrative of the complexities of wage bargaining involved in a 'classic' multi-union, craft-based engineering factory. He suggests that measured productivity at Swindon fell below that of the main competing supplier, Crewe, and sees this in part as a consequence of a failure to provide a system of independent rate-setting in a piece work environment where supervisors were too chronically overloaded to effectively police the 'effort bargain', but where also notions of appropriate product quality led to expensive techniques which may have yielded little functional benefit. The merit of this essay is that it tells a story of poor productivity against a sensible benchmark, where so much declinist literature is characterised by what we may call 'promiscuous otherdom'; the arbitrary use of benchmarks to draw unfavourable comparison with Britain. Plainly non-declinist accounts of Britain accept that productivity and efficiency vary and that some activities can reasonably be deemed relatively inefficient; but such accounts also demand clarity about what is being measured, especially in relation to the notorious shortcomings of labour productivity comparisons, plus plausible benchmarks and explanations of the differences which escape the declinist and pathologising stereotypes of generic 'obstructionism' and 'resistance to change' by the workers and unions, etc.

Andrew Jenkin's essay shows how the newly nationalised gas industry in the 1950s and 1960s responded to competitive pressures from oil (in industrial uses) and electricity (in domestic uses) to shape new oil-based gas production technologies. These technologies significantly pre-dated the discovery of North Sea oil, but allowed that discovery to be rapidly harnessed. The result was rising productivity based on consensual technical change, and with intelligent co-operation between the industry and government ministries. The story told here reads like the realisation of the dreams of many advocates of nationalisation in the 1930s and 1940s; the combination of economies of scale, technical innovation, increased productivity and good labour relations in what can accurately be labelled 'public enterprise' provides a compelling counterpoint to declinist stories about the failure of nationalisation.

All these individual essays form part of a consistent whole; unlike many edited books, this one hangs together, very much aided by the two joint essays by the editors. Together these essays show how pervasive, indeed insidious, 'declinist' notions of post-war industrial relations have been. Thus this reviewer, among others, is rightly criticised for framing discussion of the early post-1945 industrial relations system in terms of being an 'obstacle' to the drive for industrial efficiency, and in so doing exaggerating the extent to which unions acted as single-minded agents for the restoration of free collective bargaining. As is shown here, union attitudes to the role of the state cannot be captured by such reductive formulations, and if that form of bargaining did re-emerge from wartime controls it 'was an outcome that appears less as a strategic entente between union leaders and labour politicians than as an outcome on which employers, organised labour and politicians could agree as a default where more ambitious policies would meet active resistance' (p.146).

One particular aspect of declinist accounts of industrial relations which is well criticised here is the frequent use of allegations of 'defence of craft privileges' against British unions, and so representing craft unions as simply unthinking defenders of conservative, inefficient practices. This notion is unhelpful both because it ignores the crucial context in which unions in the early post-war were working - rational fears of the return of mass unemployment. In addition, it ignores the fact that craft forms of production might well, in context, be the best route to higher productivity. The 'obstructive craft unions' story is often embedded in a wider, and also highly problematic narrative of British industry as unwilling to adopt (American) 'mass production' methods because of conservatism among both employers and workers. But given that 'mass production' as a general description of American industrial practices is largely mythical, it follows that to set up accounts of Britain's industrial history as 'craft production' versus 'mass production' can do little more than recirculate ideologically-driven stereotypes.

In a slightly different register, the editors provide a persuasive account of the development of economic policy under the Conservatives in the 1950s which stresses the limits of Conservative acceptance of the post-war settlement. As they emphasise, while clearly on the electoral defensive initially, the Conservatives were willing to use both direct intervention in wage bargaining and unemployment to try and limit wage increases in these years, and would probably have used the latter more energetically if it had not been for the emergence of declinist critiques of stop-go at the end of that decade. This on the one hand rightly reinforces

recent critiques of the extent of the early post-war consensus; but it also rightly implies that declinism did form an element of consensual politics in the 1960s.

While it does not detract from the overall merit of this book, one terminological issue is treated somewhat unsatisfactorily, that is the role of 'culture' in shaping industrial relations behaviour. That role is suggested to be important, but this argument is never driven on very far, in part, it would seem, because the term is left somewhat ambiguous. Thus it is argued 'there were noticeable shifts in British business culture and management practices during the long boom' (p. 20) but the examples given are the growth of internal labour markets and 'institutional loyalty'. This seems to leave open the possibility that these developments could be explained in purely economic terms, as a result of tight labour markets, so that the specific meaning of 'cultural' remains opaque. If we are all cultural historians now, we need to be clear what exactly that term denotes.

But, to repeat, this criticism should not significantly qualify our appreciation of the contribution of this book to moving onto more productive grounds the historical understanding of British post-war industrial relations. The combination of detailed research and the capacity to 'think big' is precisely what is needed if we are, to paraphrase Marx, to reduce the deadweight of declinist thinking on the brains of the living.

Notes

1. D. Cannadine, 'Apocalypse when? British politicians and British 'decline' in the 20th century' in *Understanding Decline*, ed. P. Clarke and C. Trebilcock (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 261-84. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. S. Pollard, *Britain's Prime and Britain's Decline: The British Economy 1870-1914* (London, 1989). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. A. Booth, *The Management of Technical Change: Automation in the UK and USA since 1950* (Basingstoke, 2007). [Back to \(3\)](#)

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