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# **LA LUTTE CONTINUE**

**Closing Address**

**British Journal of Industrial Relations Conference**

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## LA LUTTE CONTINUE

Dear friends and colleagues

It is not easy to respond to two days in which I have been the focus of so much flattering attention. I have chosen to bring the proceedings to a close with a multi-media presentation – my first-ever attempt at this genre. Clearly Hegel was correct in writing that the owl of Minerva takes flight only at dusk.



[At this point there was a rendering (by an unknown group) of *Bandiera rossa*.  
Accessible at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KTqE9y0dTiU>]

My first task is to give my thanks to the *British Journal of Industrial Relations* for organising this conference, and specifically to Carola Frege, Pat McGovern and Sylvia Roesch; and the staff of the EROB office who have done so much to make the proceedings run smoothly. Next, to all of you who have given papers: the response to the call was so overwhelming that a one-day conference was extended to two days, and it was still unfortunately necessary to exclude many excellent submissions. Third, to the many other friends who have turned up for this event. Thank you everyone.

Obviously this has been a celebratory occasion, but several of you have asked me whether it has been rather like attending my own funeral. To which I can only reply: it is too early to judge. However, I do not intend to go gentle into that good night; and indeed it is possible that rumours of my retirement are much exaggerated.

I do not tend to believe in heroes, or even heroines; but if I did, Tom Mann would be high on my list. Even those of you from outside this country are probably familiar with the name: a socialist, trade unionist and internationalist, whose career as agitator, organiser and leader spanned six decades.



This picture shows him in gaol in Australia just over a century ago – one of his many periods of imprisonment – when he led a struggle for free speech in the city of Melbourne. One of Tom Mann's sayings which is often quoted runs: 'knowing what I know, I hope to become increasingly dangerous as the years roll by'. Being soon free of the wage-labour nexus, I hope that I can say the same. We increasingly need dangerous thinkers. We need them for both intellectual and political reasons. Let me start by referring to current material conditions.

Here it is unnecessary to go into much detail because the horrors of the current circumstances are so obvious. To highlight just three aspects: if one looks at the second half of the twentieth century – in some countries much longer – welfare states, relatively full employment and extensive collective bargaining were major achievements. They were achievements which in some respects were deeply flawed and deeply ambiguous, but nevertheless they were important gains to which labour movements through their struggles contributed a great deal. In the last couple of decades, these achievements have been under systematic attack from insurgent multinational capital and from neoliberal governments. The European Union, which for many progressives was once a dream, has turned into a nightmare. In this conference we have heard about the many failed promises of a 'social Europe', and about the quartet of judgments by the European Court of Justice which strike a blow at the heart of national systems of labour rights. Unrestricted competition and the prerogatives of capital are assigned absolute priority. The idea that social protection through European integration can be a major source of advance has been betrayed.

Of course the present global crisis demonstrates the inherent antisocial character of market liberalism. Deregulation of financial and other markets does not abolish rules, it enshrines a different set of rules: the rule of those with wealth and force. We have seen the responses of the rich and powerful who are responsible for the devastation. I was going to say that they are crying all the way to the bank, but they are *not* crying – indeed their obscene gravy train is already rolling again – and the banks have been bailed out with our money and by mortgaging our futures, and in particular the futures of our children and our grand-children.



We can see a range of reactions. The Italians in the audience will recognise the banner: *noi la crisi non la paghiamo!* It has by now appeared in translation at demonstrations across Europe. ‘We are not going to pay for *your* crisis!’ A fine slogan, but whether it is reality is a different matter. In large measure this depends on how people respond and what they do. There is certainly a lot of anger out there – David Marsden referred to some of this in his presentation today – but there is also a large amount of fatalism, despair and right-wing populism. Certainly in many countries of Europe, that seems to be the dominant reaction. So a key question is: how can the crisis be turned from a threat into an opportunity, an opportunity for constructive and solidaristic responses? And to raise that question is to point to the need for a theory of practice and the practice of theory.

That leads of course to the man with the beard (or here, the two men with beards). There are two ways of approaching Marxism. The photograph shows one of them: Marx transmuted into a monument, Marxism as official religion. To my mind this betrays the critical and dialectical character which gave the writings of Marx and those in the Marxist tradition all their life and meaning and resonance.



Of course there is an alternative conception of Marxism, which we may formulate in many different ways. One means of expressing this is as a volatile synthesis of intellect and will – often involving, as Gramsci used to put it, pessimism of the intellect but optimism of the will. It is precisely this combination, this interaction, this mutual support and mutual information between theory and practice, between sober analysis and aspiration and struggle, which gives Marxism its defining character. This cannot be reduced to simple formulae or to sacred texts.

Wittgenstein, at the end of the *Tractatus*, wrote: *wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen*. The most familiar translation renders this, somewhat archaically: ‘whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent’. Had Marx come across that, I think he would have retorted, as he did with Hegel: we must turn Wittgenstein on his head. Thus whereof we cannot speak, for that must we find new concepts and new theories adequate to its understanding.

Let me change gear again. Three-quarters of a century ago, the Nazis organised a mass burning of the books of which they disapproved. We live in more civilised times. We no longer burn books; we simply freeze them out of the research impact metrics. I recently discovered that the metricians have come up with a new measure,



with a title of which I think Dr Goebbels would have been proud: the *Eigenfaktor*. I cannot claim fully to understand it, but apparently the *Eigenfaktor* demonstrates scientifically that all industrial relations scholarship is second-rate. It is ironical that for a decade and a half, most of us have railed against the Research Assessment Exercise or RAE. I fear that when the new metrics-based Research Excellence Framework or REF is in place, we will look back on the RAE as some kind of golden age.

The Nazis, like the Stalinists, tended to liquidate heterodox thinkers. Today's business universities are more gentle: they simply suppress posts, reconfigure programmes and restructure departments. But it still amounts to what Paul Smith at Keele called disciplinary cleansing. There is a lot of disciplinary cleansing going on, and it is part of a more general drive to entrench 'normal science' at the expense of broader, more interesting and more imaginative – but also more challenging and perhaps even threatening – science.

Attempting to normalise science is particularly fatuous in times of crisis, when normal science across the spectrum of social research has been discredited. But there are still those who believe in the possibility of a return to business as usual, in academe as in the economy and society, insisting that the old theories and old analyses remain adequate if we only speak them louder and without needing to face dissent.





In the face of the pressures towards normalisation, it is essential to insist that as academics we are not sheep. Nor is our purpose the training of sheep – or even of sheep-dogs. Most of you will have read, and some of you helped to write, the BUIRA (British Universities Industrial Relations Association) pamphlet *What's the Point of Industrial Relations?* – to be published in July in book form. Our subject is under attack. We have to come to its defence; but we cannot defend it by being defensive. Mike Terry has just referred to my inaugural lecture at Warwick over 20 years ago, entitled *Why Industrial Relations?*, and some of the themes I addressed then are even more relevant today.

Why industrial relations? Despite what some post-modernists suppose, work is (still) important; and industrial relations scholarship is essential if we are to make sense of the world of work, of production, of employment. Why is it essential? First of all, it is multi-disciplinary, and no single discipline is adequate to capture the complexity of the world of work. Second, it involves a multi-level analysis, because the workplace is embedded in local, national and international structures and processes. Third, it addresses a terrain that involves multiple stake-holders; industrial relations scholarship denies that any party has a monopoly in defining either the analytical or the policy problems. Fourth, it recognises that we confront a terrain of analysis and practice that involves multiple goals. John Budd in his book defines these as equity, efficiency and voice, and these goals are often in conflict. Industrial relations specialists therefore insist that all questions are contested and all answers are problematic. We are not in the business of writing recipe books.

When teaching quality assessment was introduced, back in the 1980s, there was a long and complicated questionnaire for course teams to complete. One of the questions which caused us considerable difficulty asked: what are the transferable skills that your programme provides? Eventually one of us realised that the answer

was blindingly obvious: we teach students to think for themselves. Yet teaching people to think for themselves can be unpopular. Some students indeed, as well as some employers and politicians, and even some vice-chancellors, want us to provide pre-packaged answers to predefined questions. There is still a widespread view that employees – and even graduate employees – are not paid to think. Many of those who manage our industries and services and universities believe, with Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, that those who think too much are dangerous.

The London School of Economics has a proud motto: *rerum cognoscere causas* – to know the causes of things. The LSE proclaims that critical, not normal social science is our mission. Critical social science is a goal which we can trace back to the enlightenment tradition which saw knowledge as an instrument for human emancipation. In this tradition – of which Marx (though not all his followers) was certainly an heir – freedom and reason were inseparably linked. In the dark days in which we live, ideas of enlightenment and emancipation are often seen as dangerous. For some academics, not only in far away places, it can be dangerous to embrace them too openly. Yet across the centuries, women and men of idealism and principle have been willing to put their security, their safety, even their lives at risk for the sake of freedom and reason. We face grave challenges, but they are ones to which we can and must respond. Today the struggle!



[The session ended with a recording by Quilapayún of *¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!* Accessible at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uCC-venMtU>]