

# Research impact: making a difference

## Revolutionising the study of industrial relations

Research by LSE's Richard Hyman transformed the study of industrial relations by introducing Marxist analysis and a cross-national perspective

### What was the problem?

Until the late 1970s the study of industrial and employment relations in Britain was highly parochial, derived almost exclusively from English-language sources. Textbooks and courses were merely descriptive in content, and any discussion of theoretical issues was framed within the context of 1950s systems theory and the more amorphous 'Oxford school' of British pluralism, which posited good industrial relations as a dialogue between enlightened managers and representative trade unions.

### What did we do?

Richard Hyman joined the LSE as Professor of Industrial Relations in 2000. For more than four decades his qualitative and theoretical research had focused on developing 'new insights, effectively shared' across the field of industrial relations.

Among Hyman's central insights was that industrial relations must be analysed within the broader framework of political economy and not as a self-contained social sphere. His Marxist analysis demonstrated that relations in work and employment are dynamic and inherently conflictual. Managing these relationships brings together contradictory pressures that cannot be fully resolved. The diverse identities and priorities of trade unions result from similar tensions and contradictions.

Since 1993 Hyman's research focus had extended to exploring cross-national similarities and differences in approaches to industrial relations. He demonstrated the importance of interrogating Anglo-Saxon institutions and practices against experience in other countries, drawing on literature in a wide range of languages and applying a wider set of theoretical perspectives. His role in founding and editing the *European Journal of Industrial Relations* expressed this fundamental commitment.

Hyman's 2001 book *Understanding European Trade Unionism* was his most substantial output in this regard. Here he compared trade unionism in Britain, Germany and Italy, developing the concept of unions as a 'variable geometry' of priorities and purposes. In all three countries, he argued, union identities were constructed and replicated through the relative priorities attributed to 'market', 'class' and 'society'. Although these identities became relatively fixed, they were not immune to changes resulting from external pressures, internal politics and strategic choices.

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## What happened?

Hyman's research has shaped the ways in which industrial and employment relations are understood and taught today.

Hyman's two major works of the 1970s – *Strikes* (1979, with new editions in 1977, 1984 and 1989) and *Industrial Relations: a Marxist introduction* (1975) redefined the terrain. Subsequent approaches to teaching and analysis had to acknowledge that the subject was contested and that radical or Marxist perspectives made a distinctive contribution to collective understanding.

Hyman's influence can be traced in textbooks that followed this course, such as Salomon's *Industrial Relations: theory and practice* (1988, with subsequent revisions) and Bamber and Lansbury's *International and Comparative Industrial Relations* (1993, with subsequent editions).

More recently, some of the most important teaching texts have developed Hyman's analytical approach more systematically. A landmark was the publication in 1994 of Blyton and Turnbull's *The Dynamics of Employee Relations*. Now in its third edition, this is one of the most widely used textbooks in the field. It locates industrial relations within a broader political economy framework and stresses the contradictory dynamic of work and employment, particularly the complex interaction between conflict and accommodation – all themes which Hyman exposed through his research.

In just over a decade since its publication, Hyman's *Understanding European Trade Unionism* has achieved seminal status. It provides an indispensable point of reference for studies in comparative trade unionism, whether at the European or international level, and is increasingly used to compare trade unions within single countries. It is referenced in studies in a dozen different languages and used by scholars in every continent.

Hyman's impact has been recognised by the publication of special issues in his honour by two refereed journals: the *British Journal of Industrial Relations* (June 2011) and *Capital & Class* (February 2012). The editors of the former identified at least five major themes on which Hyman has exerted a substantial influence, from exposing the conservative implications of the pluralist theories that dominated industrial relations for much of the post-war period, to grasping cross-national differences in industrial relations.

While Hyman's main impact has been to change the way industrial relations is conceptualised, taught and researched, his influence has increasingly extended to practitioner audiences. Among organisations outside the UK that have sought his collaboration are the International Labour Organization in Geneva, the European Union and the European Trade Union Institute.

He has also given presentations to conferences and congresses organised by a wide range of European bodies, including: Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (Confederation of German Trade Unions), IG Metall (German metalworkers union), Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (a private cultural



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institution committed to social democracy), GSEE (General Confederation of Greek Workers) and the Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores Portugueses (General Confederation of Portuguese Workers).

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