‘Frames of reference’ in Victorian England: What Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* reveals about perceptions of the employment relationship

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Abstract
Alan Fox’s conceptualisation of ‘unitary’, ‘pluralistic’ and subsequently ‘radical’ frames of reference has been outstandingly influential in the analysis of industrial relations and human resource management since the 1960s. This article demonstrates, however, that these distinctions long predate Fox even though he popularised the terminology. Evidence that observers used comparable frames of reference to categorise perceptions of the employment relationship goes back to the 1830s, and may be found in certain ‘condition-of-England’ novels that were set amid the social turbulence of the time. This article is based on close examination of one such novel, *North and South*, by Elizabeth Gaskell. It informs our historical understanding of Fox’s concept of ‘frames of reference’ through exploration of the relationship between three characters who broadly represent employer (unitary), union (radical) and middle-class (pluralist) perspectives. Their discussions about industrial conflict raise dilemmas similar to those analysed in contemporary industrial relations literature: how to forge closer relationships between employers and workers through processes designed to nurture high-trust dynamics while remaining aware of the underlying power imbalances between the two sides resulting from social inequalities of class and wealth.

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Introduction
Fox’s conceptualisation of what he termed ‘unitary’, ‘pluralistic’ (1966) and subsequently ‘radical’ (1974a) frames of reference has been outstandingly influential in the analysis of industrial relations (IR) and human resource management (HRM) since the 1960s. Even though the concept has had many elaborators and critics, it has ‘passed tests of ubiquity and longevity’ (Heery, 2016: 2) to become a fixture in the standard textbooks on HRM (e.g. Beardwell and Thompson, 2017: chap. 14; Carbery and Cross, 2019: chap. 5).

This article demonstrates, however, that the distinction between unitary, pluralistic and radical frames of reference long predates Alan Fox. The contemporary employment relationship and its control strategies emerged with the development of modern capitalism during the Industrial Revolution. By the 1830s observers were already using comparable frames of reference to categorise perceptions of these developments, evidence for which may be found in a genre of novels that emerged in early Victorian Britain. The 1840s (the ‘hungry Forties’) was a turbulent decade, with industrialisation and urban poverty underpinning the emergence of Chartism and the call for political reform, which duly attracted the attention of novelists. Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, Benjamin Disraeli, Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Kingsley featured among the contributors to this new genre, the ‘condition-of-England’ novel, that analysed and criticised these conditions. This article, by focusing on one such work (with others quoted as necessary), aims to demonstrate how literary studies can inform IR theory.

The novel is *North and South* (2003 [1855]) by Elizabeth Gaskell (1810–1865: for biographies, see Gérin, 1980; Uglow, 1993). This article argues that ‘frames of reference’ were already implicit in the discourse about IR in the 1840s and 1850s and structured debates around issues like strikes, pay determination, consultation, and health and safety at work. Nonconformist Christian faith and trade union mobilisation provided a cultural distance, or vantage point, from which to critique the nature of emerging laissez-faire capitalism long before the growth of Marxism as a political doctrine.

Analysis reveals that the clash of perceptions between employer and worker – their ‘frames of reference’ – has always been central to the capitalist employment relationship. Fox popularised its contemporary conceptualisation and terminology, but it reflects the ‘structured antagonism’ (Edwards, 1986) that has underpinned this relationship from the outset. However, Gaskell did not envisage the abolition of social classes or a society without ‘masters and men’. Her recommendation is rather a pluralist one, based on consultation and mutual respect, and
hence bears certain similarities to Fox’s (1974b) exhortation to management to change on grounds of economic expediency and moral conviction.

The article begins by outlining contemporary debates about frames of reference as context for the subsequent inquiry. It then examines the relationship between literature and social analysis before presenting a genre of 19th-century British novels – the ‘condition-of-England’ novels – as a potential source of insight into Victorian employment relations, with Gaskell’s *North and South* (2003 [1855]) as the prime example. Following a brief synopsis of the novel, the article explains how Gaskell’s Unitarian protestant background informs the development of her principal characters, before examining how representations of unitarism, pluralism and the radical critique play out through their changing attitudes and views. The discussion draws out the parallels between the use of ‘frames of reference’ in the novel and that in recent pluralist theory and its critics. The article concludes that Gaskell harks forward to the possibility of a different kind of capitalism, one based on reformist principles of trust and cooperation. For any contemporary reformer unwilling to rely on doctrinaire prescriptions of class struggle and revolution, the dilemma has remained the same since Gaskell – how far reducing inequalities between employers and workers can be pressed within the system.

Frames of reference: An outline

While Fox’s conceptualisation and refinement of unitary and pluralist frames of reference brought them centre stage into IR theory, by no means did he originate them. Fox (1966: 4) himself cites NS Ross, who some years previously had contrasted ‘the firm as a unitary or monolithic structure’ with ‘the firm as a plural society’ (1958: 100–101), concluding that ‘without the contribution of organized labour, a voluntary, self-governing industrial society would be impossible’ (1958: 132). Furthermore, in the remoter past, we find the following exchange in *A Manchester Strike*, a novella (1832) by Harriet Martineau, between Mr Rowe, a conciliatory industrialist, and Gibson, the union representative. Confronted by the prospect of a strike, Rowe states: ‘I am a friend of peace, you know. No man more so.’ To which Gibson retorts:

> Aye, sir: but there is more than one sort of peace. The masters have called it peace when they have had all their own way, and the men were cowed by the law and dared not openly resist. The men called it peace when the two parties have confidence in each other, and make a cordial agreement, and keep to it. This is what we want at the present time. (Martineau, 1832: 18)

A more succinct or heart-felt definition of unitarism and pluralism would be hard to imagine, and it clearly made sense to the reading public 134 years before Fox’s formulation. The dialogue continues with a terse observation from another union activist: ‘And if either party refuses peace, you know, sir, the next thing is war’ (Martineau, 1832: 19). Rowe is clearly a pluralist and – faced with the threat of
‘war’ – announces that he is happy to seek ‘a cordial agreement’, but his senior partner, Mr Mortimer, is an unflinching unitarist: ‘His sentiments were that the masters had been far too tolerant already of the complaints of the men; too tolerant, it was time the lower orders were taught their proper place’ (Martineau, 1832: 19).

Mention of ‘war’ and ‘agreement’ brings us to the central point: the emergence and gradual consolidation of pluralism over the 19th and 20th centuries as the principal means in the UK by which employers and unions came to negotiate pay and conditions, backed by the threat of strikes. By the 1960s, with collective bargaining firmly established as the principal rule-making process between employers and unions but in a perilous state of fragmentation, attention in IR circles focused on its reform through the Donovan Commission. The ‘Oxford School’ of IR specialists, with Hugh Clegg and Allan Flanders at its centre, was responsible for the research that informed the subsequent Donovan Report (1968), which ‘consolidated the hegemony of the Oxford paradigm’ (Ackers and Wilkinson, 2005: 447). This paradigm consisted of a pluralist perspective on reform which emphasised creating a new social order at plant, company and sector levels (Flanders, 1975). For Clegg (a member of the Donovan Commission), pluralist principles – based specifically on independent trade unions, single union channels and private property – were ‘both pessimistic and traditional’ because they argue that ‘the political and industrial institutions of the stable democracies already approach the best that can be realized’ (Clegg, 1960: 29). Writing during the Cold War, he feared that attempts to reform those institutions might instead lead to ‘the destruction of democracy, not its improvement’ (p. 29).

This defence of pluralism provoked a radical critique from a range of theorists who shared one set of assumptions but otherwise fell broadly into two camps. The shared assumption is that the system of IR – ‘trade unions, employers’ associations, management and the state institutions concerned with the regulation of employment’ (p. 2) – cannot be extracted from the broader social structures in which they are embedded in capitalist societies, including private property, legal frameworks that define rights and obligations, hierarchical pay systems and the nature of the state itself. These structures reflect fundamental class inequalities and conflicts of interest that – arguably – preclude Donovan-focused pluralist ‘solutions’ to IR problems unless they are themselves overturned:

Only a total transformation of the whole structure of control, at a level which transcends the conventional narrow definitions of industrial relations, can resolve the current contradictions within the organization of work and in social and economic life more generally. (Hyman, 1978: 203, emphasis in original)

Marxist theorists were not the only ones to share this critique. Another camp, with Alan Fox as a prominent member, shared Clegg’s pessimism over the potential consequences of ‘a total transformation of the whole structure of society’.
Fox (1973) notes that a critic may reject pluralism in favour of a more radical perspective, while still believing that our current society is,

for all its many morally disgusting features, an advance in important respects on most societies in the past, and that its master institutions should not be put at serious hazard until there is a high probability of something better replacing them. (p. 230)

Thirty years later he makes a similar point in his autobiography:

Where most Marxists [by implication Trotskyites and Communists] fell short was in emphasizing the exploitative power that derived from ownership of economic resources, but failing to show the same concern for the abuses and non-accountability deriving from positions in a bureaucratic hierarchy. (Fox, 2004: 259)

Fox fully understood how inequalities skew power relationships in capitalist societies, but he was also – like Clegg – unwilling to risk the costs of what might be lost through certain Marxist prescriptions for change (Gold, 2017).

Eric Batstone (1984) summarises the key issue: that although no British pluralist anywhere states unequivocally that employers and employees share an equality of power, they do focus specifically on ‘bargaining power’ and so tend ‘to isolate industrial relations as a relatively discrete subject for analysis...’ (p. 20). He argues that the radical critique therefore really centres on ‘how far it is possible to operate on the assumption of an institutional and real isolation of industrial conflict’ (p. 20). This observation raises the question about what might count as the ‘legitimate inequalities’ acceptable within a capitalist society (p. 21).

Fox argued in his later writings that broader inequalities, such as class, family background and education, led some groups within enterprises to identify with organisational goals (the ‘trusted’) and some not to do so (the ‘distrusted’). For him, this division is created and sustained through the exercise of power, which ‘enables the few [management] to minimise the discretion of the many [the workforce] in the making of decisions deemed by the few to be important for their purposes’ (Fox, 1974a: 14). Low-discretion roles within organisations – in which role occupants see themselves as distrusted by line managers and hence are subject to close supervision – contrast with high-discretion roles in which occupants see themselves as trusted. Such structural inequalities undermine pluralism because collective bargaining effectively takes place under conditions of unequal power and hence under duress: ‘Those who feel coerced feel no obligation’ (Fox, 1973: 222). Only the creation of high-trust relationships will lead to any degree of enduring organisational harmony, but Fox (1974a: 366–367, 1974b: 161–163, 175–176) himself is vague about how to achieve this end, relying rather generally on exhortation and education. In response to criticism on this score, he stressed his commitment to ‘a frontal assault on gross inequalities of wealth, income and privilege’ but warned against ‘tramline’ thinking, that identified radical analysis necessarily
with certain types of ‘illiberal prescriptions’ (Fox, 1979: 107, 109). However, his own view of the best means to reduce structural inequalities remained imprecise.

This overview of pluralism and its radical critiques demonstrates that the analysis of British labour theory and practice since 1945 has been nuanced. Nevertheless, it hints too that the multiple sources of pluralist ideas – ‘bubbling up from the down-to-earth activities of trade unionists, cooperators, religious Nonconformists and women community activists’ (Ackers and Reid, 2016: 11) – do deserve greater attention in a world post-Soviet Union. This article explores two of those sources – trade union activity and religious nonconformity – through an analysis of North and South, a novel that considers industrial conflict in a pre-Marxist environment.

**Literature and social analysis**

Though others have noted that North and South reveals ‘the grim working (and living) conditions of the time’ (Dundon et al., 2017: 12), no one has (to the author’s knowledge) attempted the task of exploring the specific ways in which Gaskell’s novel casts light on the nature of perceptions of the employment relationship, how these perceptions have remained remarkably constant since the novel’s publication and the lessons that may correspondingly be drawn.

Some observers have argued that literature can help to improve understanding of certain academic disciplines (Morson and Schapiro, 2017), while others believe it helps to cast light on current events in a way that the news cycle cannot (Coe, 2018). It has also been argued more generally that ‘good novels can educate better managers’ (Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthoux, 1994: 1), and that literature has ‘the ability to expand the reader’s knowledge by offering access to the value system of different cultures and historical periods’ (Domagalski and Jermier, 1997: 291). This is a crucial point, as an investigation into ‘value systems’ – the set of attitudes, perceptions and values that a group of people share – raises different issues from one into economic and material conditions. Victorian observers like Carlyle, Macaulay and Ruskin earnestly commented on the nature of industrialisation and its social consequences, but their works are couched in generalisations that do not adequately capture the everyday, routine concerns of the ordinary people affected, or the ways in which they made sense of their everyday lives. By contrast, a number of graphic eyewitness accounts reveal the nature of working lives in mid-19th-century Manchester in great detail: where people lived, what they ate and their terms and conditions (Engels, 1967 [1845]; Reach, 1972 [1849]; Taylor, 1842). These accounts are vivid and anecdotal: they convey a strong impression of the physical environment and people’s views, but do not attempt to systematise or categorise these views, nor do they illustrate how they may evolve over time in contact with wider experiences or social relationships.

Alongside these accounts, as a supplementary source of insight into the attitudes, perceptions and values of the 19th-century working classes, lie – it is argued
Literature is much more revealing than economic data for the understanding of the attitudes of contemporaries to the social gulfs of the 1840s. These gulfs were beginning to fascinate novelists in a decade when society novels were giving way to books about society . . . (p. 298, emphasis added)

In a review of the empirical tradition in UK workplace bargaining research, Brown and Wright (1994) highlight its ethnographic method: ‘the study of the workplace through observation, participation and interview, often over extensive time periods’ (p. 163). It does not seem too fanciful to suggest that the use of novels to investigate IR may be construed as a form of ‘fictionalised ethnography’. Novelists, like ethnographers (but unlike historians), explore the intricate interaction between action, meaning, character and the evolving nature of the society in which the action unfolds, but in their informed imagination rather than in ‘reality’. Hence in the days before evidence from scientific ethnography, ‘condition-of-England’ novels can help contribute towards our understanding of the ‘new field of enquiry’ stage in the emergence of IR as a specialist discipline (Ackers and Wilkinson, 2003: 7–9).

This article extracts understandings of what today are interpreted as unitary, pluralist and radical perspectives towards the employment relationship from the conversations and interactions between the principal characters in North and South in an attempt to show that such contrasting perspectives had as much validity then (implicitly) as they do today (explicitly). In doing so, it aims to refine our contemporary understanding of ‘frames of reference’, particularly the non-Marxist radical critique.

Condition-of-England (‘social problem’) novels

Thomas Carlyle, in the opening sentence of Chartism (1839; quoted by Kettle, 1990: 164), declares: ‘A feeling very generally exists that the condition and disposition of the Working Classes is a rather ominous matter at present; that something ought to be said, something ought to be done, in regard to it.’ Carlyle expresses the general mood in the country which engendered a set of novels that did indeed address the ‘condition of the Working Classes’. Known as ‘condition-of-England’ or ‘social problem’ novels, they are

essentially novels of a specific period . . . the period of Chartism, the [eighteen] thirties and forties, decades – all are agreed – of deep economic and political crisis, appalling poverty, and the first assertion of a vast, popular democratic social and political movement of the people. (Kettle, 1990: 166)
These novels deal with the challenges of industrialisation and urbanisation through the lives of groups of characters who represent, in one way or another, the social classes affected. Many attempt to present solutions to the challenges along a spectrum of laissez-faire to state intervention: ‘The question for legislators and writers was to define the nature of this intervention, moral or physical or both, and its extent’ (Kestner, 1985: 9). They are, to echo Batstone’s phrase, questioning the boundaries of ‘legitimate inequalities’ in the emerging capitalist system.

The most well-known novels from this genre include: *Shirley* (Charlotte Brontë, 2006 [1849]); *Hard Times* (Dickens, 2003 [1854]); *Sybil or the Two Nations* (Disraeli, 2008 [1845]); *Mary Barton* and *North and South* (Elizabeth Gaskell, 2003 [1848] and 2003 [1855], respectively); and *Alton Locke* (Kingsley, 1900 [1850]). Over the period covered by these novels, the reading public grew ever larger as innovations in publishing and distribution ensured relatively cheap and easy access to books and periodicals.

Centre stage among these writers stands Elizabeth Gaskell, whose two condition-of-England novels have attracted wide-ranging critiques from a variety of angles, notably feminist, Marxist and psychoanalytical (see Chapman, 1999, Matus, 2009, and Stoneman, 2006, for reviews of these critiques). This article focuses however on the dominant industrial theme contained in *North and South*, that of rebellion by the ‘men’ against the authority of the ‘master’, in order to explore the perspectives – the ‘frames of reference’ – towards IR among workers and their employers and families as they evolve during the course of a strike and its aftermath in a Manchester cotton mill.

**Synopsis**

This section outlines the plot of *North and South* (without reference to subplots), which is required in order to follow the subsequent analysis.¹

Margaret Hale is the only daughter of Richard Hale, the vicar of a church in a Hampshire village. She enjoys a comfortable life helping her father with his pastoral duties until he unexpectedly resigns his position following a crisis of faith. He relocates to Milton (as Manchester is named in the novel), a grimy, industrial city in the north, as private tutor to John Thornton, a prosperous, self-made mill-owner. Margaret and her mother, Mrs Hale, are horrified to find themselves uprooted to a city where they have no family, friends or connections. Mrs Hale languishes and falls ill, but Margaret – in an attempt to make the best of her new circumstances – begins to integrate.

Margaret meets John Thornton, with whom she establishes an ambiguous relationship. On the one hand she finds his autocratic views towards his workers repellent, but on the other there is clearly a strong mutual sexual attraction. She also meets Nicholas Higgins, a resolute and plain-speaking trade union activist. Margaret’s loyalties between them are torn when a strike, which eventually fails, erupts at Thornton’s mill.
Both Mr and Mrs Hale die shortly after. Margaret returns to London, but remains troubled by her turbulent relationship with Thornton. The plot resolves itself with two twists. First, Margaret receives a substantial legacy, which includes a property portfolio in Milton, as a result of which she finds herself Thornton’s landlord. Second, Thornton’s mill fails in the aftermath of the strike and an economic slump, but not before he has undergone a change of heart towards his workforce. Circumstances have thrown Thornton and Higgins together, and they come to realise in mutual respect their common interests in making the mill a success. But it seems to be too late – Thornton has lost everything. However, Margaret discovers Thornton’s plight and now, as a wealthy heiress, she loans him the money he needs to start again but on an experimental, consultative basis with his workforce. And so their romantic relationship is also at last resolved.

Elizabeth Gaskell: Novelist and Unitarian

This novel is very much about perceptions. Thornton, for example, is perceived as a ‘shopman’ by Margaret’s brother (chap. 31); a ‘great tradesman’ but ‘not quite a gentleman’ by Margaret (chap. 7), who later comes to regard him as an innovative businessman (chap. 52); a ‘manufacturer’ by Mr Hale (chap. 7); and ‘a hard, cruel master’ (chap. 39) by Higgins. Religion provides no firm basis for perceptions: Mr Hale loses his faith in the Church of England, Higgins abandons all religious observance, while Thornton’s religious beliefs are unspecified. Margaret’s faith, though also unspecified, is presumably Unitarian, like Gaskell’s, and politically she is described by a friend as ‘a democrat, a red republican, a member of the Peace Society, a socialist…’ (chap. 40). According to Miller (2006: xxi), being called a ‘democrat’ in the 1850s was similar to being called a ‘Bolshevik’ today.

This quality of openness to multiple and changing views in North and South can be explained largely by reference to Gaskell’s Unitarianism. As Christian dissenters, Unitarians deny the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, hence their name, which has nothing to do with unitarism and pluralism in the IR sense. Indeed, they would tend to pluralism because they doubt that any one teaching contains the whole truth and so regard diversity as potentially enriching. They ‘believed that truth mattered supremely, that men should use their reason to discover it and that without freedom of thought this was not possible’ (Holt, 1952: 16). Hence Unitarians believed that everyone had the right to education, women equally alongside men. They had faith in progress, reason and perfectability, but their views were regarded by other Christians as heretical and blasphemous (Webb, 1960). This background gave Gaskell her distinctive voice – ‘isolated and privileged, dedicated to the principle of individual independence and yet determined to ameliorate society’ (Lansbury, 1975: 15). It is likely that she considered herself a Christian socialist (Brantlinger, 1977: 144).

In the preface to Mary Barton, Gaskell – who lived in Manchester from 1832 until her death in 1865 – says she wrote about the people she encountered every day in the streets as she felt ‘a deep sympathy with the care-worn men, who looked
as if doomed to struggle through their lives in strange alternations between work and want’. In this Gaskell was exceptional. Charlotte Brontë was largely unsympathetic to the working classes, and Dickens, Disraeli and Kingsley had never lived among them. Gaskell’s working-class characters speak in dialect with the genuine cadence of Manchester speech, and her depiction of them reflects their own interests and perceptions in an open and unpatronising manner (Keating, 1971: 24–28). Indeed, Raymond Williams (2017 [1958]) declares: ‘Few persons felt more deeply than Elizabeth Gaskell the sufferings of the industrial poor’ (p. 126).

The romantic interest in North and South eases the middle-class reader into the plot. The industrial and romantic elements are intrinsically entwined not least because of their bearing on the conclusion. Margaret and John Thornton ‘unite against a background of class antagonism…Their union indicates there are no longer the Two Nations of Disraeli but the single industrialised Britain of Gaskell’ (Kestner, 1985: 170). However, this article focuses not on the dyadic relationship between Margaret and Thornton in their romantic entanglement, but on the triadic relationship between Margaret, Thornton and Nicholas Higgins. An analysis of this triad reveals significant insights into the nature of ‘frames of reference’ in early Victorian industrial life and correspondingly their enduring importance in understanding the nature of the employment relationship itself.

Unitary, pluralist and radical perspectives in North and South

This framework – unitary, pluralist and radical frames of reference – maps very accurately onto the views expressed, respectively, by John Thornton, Margaret Hale and – with some reservations – Nicholas Higgins in North and South. Mapping them in this way not only refreshes our understanding of the novel itself, but also provides insight into the enduring nature of the employment relationship in capitalist economies. The ‘objective’ features of the employment relationship, expressed through the nature of the ‘wage-effort bargain’, have been characterised as ‘structural antagonism’ (Edwards, 1986). However, the less often argued point is that these objective features are accompanied by perceptions of that relationship which are generally structured according to the part played by the actors within it (employer/worker). The conversations between three strong-minded and intelligent characters, John Thornton, Margaret Hale and Nicholas Higgins, reveal that these varying perceptions are as much part of the employment relationship as the wage-effort bargain itself and as relevant to it in the early Victorian era as they are today. The outline of their initial positions, and their subsequent evolution, is best analysed through close examination of key conversations.

Margaret Hale and John Thornton: Pluralism meets unitarism

John Thornton is a self-made mill-owner and proud of it. He expresses the classic unitary view to Margaret that: ‘my interests are identical with those of my
workpeople and vice-versa’ (chap. 15). This assumption was based on wages fund theory and the theory of beneficent self-interest: ‘According to these theories, even the most selfish employer was providing blessings for his workpeople. The more profits he made, the more was the fund augmented from which his workpeople derived their wages’ (Read, 1970: 33). Thornton refuses on principle to be accountable to his workforce as part of his identity as an entrepreneur. Margaret challenges him to explain to his workers the reasons for imposing a pay cut (trade is too weak) but he replies: ‘Do you give your servants reasons for your expenditure, or your economy in the use of your own money? We, the owners of capital, have a right to choose what we will do with it’ (chap. 15). Margaret persists: owners may have the human right to do what they like with what they possess, but maybe not a religious one: ‘there are passages in the Bible which would imply – to me at least – that they neglected their duties as stewards [if they wasted or threw away their money]’ (chap. 15).

Thornton is not persuaded. He asserts that ‘our people [are] in the condition of children’ and that ‘despotism is the best kind of government for them’. He makes ‘laws and [takes] decisions which work for my own good in the first instance [and] for theirs in the second’. At this juncture Mr Hale, Margaret’s father and a similar if rather more emollient voice than his daughter’s, points out an inconsistency in this form of paternalism. As children grow up into adolescence, strict obedience to their parents is no longer appropriate: ‘... a wise parent humours the desire for independent action so as to become the friend and adviser when his absolute rule shall cease’. He asks: isn’t this true for ‘the masses’ as well? Thornton retorts that it is not time for workers ‘to have any independent action during business hours’ and that ‘interference’ by employers in ‘the life they lead out of the mills’ would create resentment (chap. 15). This view is illogical because if mill-owners are ‘fathers’, as Thornton suggests, then they must have absolute control over all aspects of their workers’ lives both in and outside working time. Yet, as John Stuart Mill pointed out, ‘paternal care is connected with paternal authority’ (quoted by Ingham, 2003: xx). Thornton, in distinguishing between his control over work lives (paternal authority) and his lack of control over non-work lives (paternal care), actually demonstrates that he is not in a similar position to a father at all. Margaret mildly indicates the illogicality: ‘I am trying to reconcile your admiration of despotism with your respect for other men’s independence or character’ (chap. 15).

In fact, the illogicality arises because Thornton is not a paternalist employer at all if by ‘paternalism’ we understand ‘hereditary family ownership, personal relationships between employer and workers, a sense of religious mission, and a commitment to social welfare and public service’ (Ackers, 1998: 176–177). At this stage of his career, as a self-made man, Thornton scores zero on all counts. He accordingly repeats his assertion:

I choose to be the unquestioned and irresponsible master of my hands. During the hours that they labour for me. But those hours past, our relation ceases; and comes in the same respect for their independence that I myself exact. (chap. 15)
However, he has ‘reddened’ and is ‘much vexed’ by this line of questioning. Maybe the seeds of doubt about his own position are planted in his mind at this stage: both Margaret and Mr Hale have stated alternative perspectives during the course of the conversation. Margaret declares: ‘I see two classes dependent on each other in every possible way, yet each evidently regarding the interests of the other as opposed to their own’ (chap. 15). Both father and daughter argue for respect based on a pluralist understanding of the other’s position: ‘God has made us so that we must be mutually dependent’ (chap. 15).

**Margaret Hale and Nicholas Higgins: Pluralism meets radicalism**

Margaret meets Nicholas Higgins and his daughter Bessy while out on a walk in the fields. Discovering that Bessy is ill – she later dies of an industrial lung disease – Margaret takes to visiting her in her home. Margaret discovers that Nicholas is an active member of the Spinners’ Union and on the committee organising a strike against ‘five or six masters’ who are imposing a pay cut on their workers even though they had enriched themselves over the previous two years (chap. 17). Higgins is unable to keep his family on the reduced rate and refuses to ask the employers to explain the reasons for the pay cut because he knows (correctly) that they would not reply. He gives Margaret what may be construed as a radical perspective on the employment relationship:

> Ask th’ masters! They’d tell us to mind our own business, and they’d mind theirs. Our business being, yo’ understand, to take the bated [reduced] wage, and be thankful; and their business to bate us down to clemming [starvation] point, to swell their profits. That’s what it is.

When Margaret interjects that ‘the state of trade may be such as not to enable them to give you the same remuneration’, Higgins explodes:

> State o’ trade! That’s just a piece o’ masters’ humbug. It’s rate o’ wages I was talking of. [...] I’ll tell yo’ it’s their part, – their cue, as some folks call it, – to beat us down, to swell their fortunes; and it’s ours to stand up and fight hard, – not for ourselves alone, but for them round about us – for justice and fair play. We help to make their profits, and we ought to help spend ’em. (chap. 17)

The strike eventually fails, but Higgins offers a spirited and vigorous defence of trade unionism, unlike any other character in an industrial novel of this period. Thornton condemns trade union officials as ‘a rascally set of paid delegates’ (chap. 20) and as ‘demagogues and lovers of power’ (chap. 38), very much in line with his unitary perspective – and very much in line with the general view of trade unionists in contemporary novels, such as *A Manchester Strike* (Martineau, 1832), *Sybil* (Disraeli, 2008 [1845]) and *Hard Times* (Dickens, 2003 [1854]). By contrast, Gaskell portrays Higgins – and the rationales for joining a union – with understanding, even when it comes to enforcing union discipline: ‘Them that is of a trade
union mun [must] hang together; and if they’re not willing to take their chances along wi’ th’ rest, th’ Union has ways and means’ (chap. 28). Margaret is scandalised at the ‘tyranny’ of the union when Higgins explains that its ‘ways and means’ include ostracism, but Higgins continues with passion:

Their fathers [of the current owners] ground our fathers to the very dust; ground us to powder!...In those days of sore oppression th’ Unions began; it were a necessity. It’s a necessity now, according to me. It’s a withstanding of injustice, past, present, or to come. It may be like war; along wi’ it come crimes; but I think it were a greater crime to let it alone. Our only chance is binding men together in one common interest; and if some are cowards and some are fools, they mun come along and join the great march, whose only strength is in numbers. (chap. 28)

Higgins talks here of ‘oppression’, ‘war’ and ‘numbers’, which – translated into more contemporary terminology – come to exploitation, class struggle and working-class solidarity, which is where the principal difference between Margaret Hale and Higgins lies. While Margaret focuses on the individual rights of workers who break the strike, Higgins defends the union on the grounds that its ‘only strength is in numbers’. But does this give him a radical perspective on IR at the cotton mill? In a pre-Marxist world, how aware is he of the influence of class, wealth and privilege as major contributory features to workplace IR? In order to reduce inequalities, he is prepared to carry out more draconian measures to advance the strike than are remotely acceptable to Margaret and he speaks the uncompromising language of ‘war’ and tolerance of ‘crimes’. Though we do not know exactly when the novel is set, by 1855 (its publication date), Chartism was a spent force. Yet we can reasonably assume that Higgins – like John Barton, the principal trade union figure in Mary Barton (1848) – had most likely been an avid supporter. If so, when Higgins later enters limited negotiations with Thornton to improve working conditions at the mill, he proves both his ‘pluralist’ credentials, in taking the chance to make progress within the system, and his ‘radical’ credentials in remaining simultaneously well aware of the need for structural economic and political change. In this respect, the position of Higgins and later Fox is arguably similar (a point developed further below).

Higgins persists in his defence of the union even after John Boucher, a strike breaker, is driven mad by despair over his ostracism:

I ha’ read a bit o’ poetry about a plough going over a daisy, as made tears come into my eyes, afore I’d other cause for crying. But the chap ne’er stopped driving the plough, I’se warrant, for all he were pitiful about the daisy. He’d too much mother wit for that. Th’ Union’s the plough making ready the land for harvest-time. (chap. 36)

Later, when Boucher commits suicide, Higgins refuses to go and inform his wife. However, unlike Dickens who, in Hard Times, excoriates the union for its treatment of a strike breaker, Gaskell is non-judgemental over Boucher’s fate. Margaret
Nicholas Higgins and John Thornton: Radicalism meets unitarism

Following Boucher’s death, then, Higgins wants to be left in silence to reflect. John Thornton is also a reflective man. Placed in awkward situations, each requires time to take stock and reconsider. When, eventually, they are thrown together, it is therefore not so surprising that each finds common ground in the other, having recognised – maybe grudgingly – the other’s honesty and resolution.

Following the failure of the strike, Higgins is sacked by his employer, and – on Margaret’s suggestion – approaches Thornton for work. However, Thornton is aware that Higgins ‘is one of the leaders of the Union’ (chap. 38) and turns him down flat. Higgins persists, but to no avail: Thornton remains obdurate. Later, Thornton repents, feeling he had been unjust. He had admired Higgins’ outspokenness and persistence. He goes round to offer Higgins a job after all, which Higgins, after wavering, accepts. Yet he recalls that Thornton had called him ‘impudent … a liar and a mischief-maker’, while he had in turn called Thornton ‘a tyrant, an’ an oud bulldog, and a hard, cruel master …’, and finishes with the plea: ‘Measter, do yo’ think we can e’er get on together?’ Thornton replies they do not need to: ‘But there’s one comfort, on your own showing. We neither of us can think much worse of the other than we do now’ (chap. 39). They shake hands with mutual respect.

... And resolution

This handshake forms the basis of the relationship that subsequently develops between Thornton and Higgins. Some months later Thornton decides to build a dining room for his workers. The significant point is that he has consulted them about it first. Observing how ‘miserable’ their meals are, Thornton proposes buying food wholesale to improve them. Following negotiations, Thornton becomes the ‘steward of a club’, buys in provisions and supplies the cook, while the workers control the type and quality of food, and pay rent for the kitchen as the scheme is not designed as a charity. One day Higgins and some of his workmates invite Thornton to join them for dinner, following which it becomes a habit. Thornton comments to a friend: ‘They have such a sense of humour, and such a racy mode of expression! I am getting to know some of them now, and they talk pretty freely before me’ (chap. 42). A year and a half after the strike, his relationship with the workers has consolidated:

Once brought face to face, man to man, with an individual of the masses around him, and (take notice) out of the character of master and workman, in the first
instance, they had each begun to recognise that “we have all of us one human heart”. (chap. 50)

Thornton begins to plan some ‘experiments lying very close to his heart’ but fears they might be ‘roughly nipped off without trial’ as the future of his mill is looking increasingly bleak, the strike having undermined its future. Thornton resolves to curb his anger towards Higgins and meets him whenever appropriate:

And by-and-by, he lost all sense of resentment in wonder how it was, or could be, that two men like himself and Higgins, living by the same trade, could look upon each other’s position and duties in so strangely a different way. (chap. 50)

Furthermore, consultation improves too: ‘Besides this improvement of feeling, both Mr Thornton and the workmen found out their ignorance as to positive matters of fact, known heretofore to one side, but not to the other’ (chap. 50). Meanwhile, owing to a substantial legacy, Margaret has become Thornton’s landlord, shortly after which his mill does indeed go bankrupt. Matters are brought to a head at a dinner to which Thornton, Margaret and an MP, Mr Colthurst, are invited. Colthurst is a progressive and is interested in Thornton’s proposed ‘experiments’ in industrial organisation (though they remain unspecified). Margaret overhears their conversation, during which Thornton tells Colthurst about the improvements in IR at his former mill: ‘The advantages were mutual: we were both unconsciously and consciously teaching each other.’ He adds that his ‘only wish is to have the opportunity of cultivating some intercourse with the hands beyond the mere “cash nexus”’ (chap. 51). He would like to try a number of experiments – even though he is unsure how they would work out – which would bring ‘the different classes into actual personal contact’. He continues:

...I would take an idea, the working out of which would necessitate personal intercourse; it might not go well at first, but at every hitch interest would be felt by an increasing number of men, and at last its success in working come to be desired by all, as all had borne a part in the formation of the plan.

Even if the experiment subsequently lost vitality, ‘we should understand each other better...’. Colthurst asks whether the experiments would prevent strikes:

Not at all. My utmost expectation only goes as far as this – that they may render strikes not the bitter, venomous sources of hatred they have hitherto been. A more hopeful man might imagine that a closer and more genial intercourse between classes might do away with strikes. But I am not a hopeful man. (chap. 51)

Suddenly aware that Margaret has been listening, Thornton tells her that Higgins and other workers have made it clear that they would like to work for him again if he were ever in the position to employ them. The following day, Margaret informs
him that she will loan him the money he requires to resume operating the mill. And that she’ll marry him. At a stroke, industrial and romantic plots are resolved.

**Discussion**

Reviewers of Gaskell’s first novel, *Mary Barton*, criticised her at the time for focusing too heavily on the working-class characters. In fact, they are all of working-class origin, and the book contains scenes of destitution, police brutality, blacklisting, exploitation and the assassination of a mill-owner’s son by a trade union activist: ‘the Manchester millowners and the London Tory press were vociferous in their condemnation of the book’ (Gérin, 1980: 89). By contrast, the strength of *North and South* lies in its broader scope: Gaskell focuses not only on the growth of trust among the characters, but also in particular on the way in which its development alters perceptions (frames of reference) across all sectors of the industrial population, including Thornton (owner), Higgins (worker) and the Hales (middle-class ‘liberal’ observers). The role of the Hales here as mediators between Thornton and Higgins is striking. For Victorian writers like Lord Macaulay and James Mill, the middle class was seen as ‘the acme of history’, and its ‘messianic role is the liberal equivalent of the messianic role of the proletariat in Marxism’ (Brantlinger, 1977: 18). In addition, it may be assumed that Mr Hale – following his crisis of faith in the Anglican Church – is a Unitarian (like Gaskell) or at least has Unitarian sympathies, and therefore maintains ‘his faith in progress and perfectability, in the power of reason to effect change’ (Chapman, 1999: 78). From these aspects of their background stem the Hales’ pluralism and optimism.

Each character therefore has his or her own distinctive voice, and the novel carefully traces its development and interplay as it responds and adapts to the others. John Thornton reflects traditional unitary perspectives, and his refusal to address his workers over the strike until too late leads him to call in the police ‘to bring them to reason’ (chap. 22). The self-perpetuating cycle, in which Thornton’s refusal to communicate creates a workforce that can express itself only through riot, in turn, justifies his use of force. Yet he is given pause for thought when the Hales jointly point out the illogicality of his stance on paternalism, and – under the influence of Higgins – begins to consider whether his views are maybe ‘incongruent with reality’ (in the words of Fox, 1966: para. 12). Higgins, meanwhile, is upset by the brutality of Boucher’s death and by his desperate need to find work after he is sacked following the strike. Margaret’s (pluralist) observation – ‘I see two classes dependent on each other in every possible way’ (chap. 15) – begins to affect their frames of reference as their mutual dependence becomes clearer: if Thornton had avoided the strike, his mill might not have failed, while Higgins relies on the mill for secure employment.

While Thornton’s and Margaret’s views may be construed straightforwardly as unitarist and pluralist, respectively, those of Higgins present a greater challenge. He could be regarded merely as an embittered pluralist, having suffered wretchedly
at the hands of unitarist employers. Indeed, it is not clear exactly what he means when he refers to the union as the plough ‘making ready the land for harvest-time’ (chap. 36). By ‘harvest-time’, he could mean decent wages, secure employment, socialism or simply vengeance. Nevertheless, we must take into account the political context of the novel, which would have been taken for granted by the Victorian reader. The 1840s had been a period of turmoil. Mary Barton was published in the same year as the Communist Manifesto (1848), with North and South following only seven years later. ‘Marxism’ as a political doctrine did not yet exist, but EP Thompson (1982: 326) stresses that the contribution of textile workers (‘weaving communities’) ‘to the early working-class movement can scarcely be overestimated’. This is a point highly relevant to our understanding of Higgins’ character and motivation. Thompson observes: ‘It was as a whole community that they [textile workers] demanded betterment, and utopian notions of redesigning society anew at a stroke…’, which included ‘Owenite communities, the universal general strike, the Chartist Land Plan.’ It seems reasonable to assume therefore that, against such a non-sectionalist background, ‘harvest-time’ for Higgins may well have meant a ‘redesigned society’ involving cooperation, syndicalism and/or wide-ranging political reform. If so, his understanding of the significance of broader social inequalities would mark him out as a ‘radical critic’ even if he obviously predates Marxist understanding and terminology. So, while resisting the temptation to shoehorn his character into a late 20th- or 21st-century mould, we can argue that the iron discipline he exerts within his union, his unwavering commitment to the strike and his pragmatic response to later overtures from Thornton reveal an activist who is prepared to struggle as fiercely as possible within the system, while at the same time aspiring to change the system itself. If the Hales represent religious nonconformity as an independent source of pluralist values, then Higgins arguably represents their radical critique through the ‘down-to-earth activities of trade unionists’ (Ackers and Reid, 2016: 11).

Indeed, the ‘solutions’ presented by Thornton face similar challenges to those presented by Fox in Beyond Contract (1974a). Higgins lacks the means to ‘redesign society’, while Thornton naturally wants to preserve the capitalist order as intact as he can. Yet they both want reform. Fox is in a similar bind to Higgins. He recognises the structural inequalities that underpin capitalism, but he is no prescriptive Marxist (who can, after all, offer class struggle and revolution) and remains imprecise with respect to solutions.

The whole episode involving Thornton’s ‘experiments’ may accordingly be couched in contemporary terminology. The introduction of the dining room can be located along the ‘continuum of participation’ (Blyton and Turnbull, 2004: 255). Thornton informs the workers of his plan, consults them over its implementation and, following negotiations, cedes control over its daily operations, but receives rent for the premises and equipment. Though never specified, it has to be assumed that Thornton’s other experiments will follow the same pattern – indeed, his criterion for success is noteworthy as well: the dining room has created trust on both sides. Relationships cease to be purely transactional and adversarial,
and become more sympathetic and understanding. Thornton’s former stereotypes of his workers as ‘children’ collapse under the weight of his direct experience. He has morphed from unitarist ‘master’ into pluralist-oriented ‘employer’.

Thornton’s confidence is such that, he believes, even if some of his ideas fail, participation in the ‘formation of the plan’ would bring both sides together. In *Beyond Contract*, Fox (1974a: 120–151) uses case studies from existing sociological literature to illustrate the development of ‘trust dynamics’ – how low- and high-trust relationships result from changes in organisation that either undermine or promote discretionary roles at the workplace. Thornton’s experiments could be written up as one of these case studies, with Fox’s (1974a) comments succinctly capturing their essential quality:

> For managers who come to perceive the connection between, on the one hand, the design of work roles and relations and, on the other, the dynamics of reciprocity which shape the development of low- and high-trust relations…there may seem considerable plausibility in the recommendation to enrich work roles and thereby promote the employee commitment which appears so attractive and yet so elusive. (pp. 145–146)

Even after his mill has gone bankrupt, Thornton has further ideas for experiments as a means to move his relationship with his workers beyond the ‘cash nexus’, which inspire Higgins and his workmates to seek further opportunities to work with him if only he can restart the mill (which of course he does with Margaret’s loan).

Raymond Williams (2017 [1958]) is therefore too dismissive when he states: ‘Humanised by Margaret, he [Thornton] will work at what we now call “the improvement of human relations in industry”’ (p. 127). Actually, what is happening is potentially more fundamental. There develops a tacit understanding between Thornton and his workers that collective facilities like the dining room are not privileges to be granted by the owner but rather rights to be won and defended by the workforce through their union, and here lies the potential foundation of collective bargaining over a wider range of contentious issues. For these reasons, it is also too crude to condemn this burgeoning understanding as ‘little more than an impotent recognition that this is the way things are – master stays master, man stays man…’ (Lucas, 1977: 2). As Fox demonstrates, capitalist work organisation accommodates both low- and high-trust dynamics: IR conducted under a pluralist framework – without wanting to exaggerate its effects – offer a more equitable and humane working environment than those conducted under a unitary framework. This is so not least because pluralism may offer opportunities to increase control over working conditions along the ‘continuum of participation’, opportunities denied by unitary regimes. Indeed, this conclusion – that capitalist work organisation can accommodate a range of trust dynamics – has been reinforced more recently by the ‘varieties of capitalism’ literature, which ‘extends beyond the sphere of IR narrowly construed’ and focuses rather on ‘the organisation of the business system as a whole’, not least its financial arrangements and corporate governance...
(Cullinane, 2014: 234). As Lansbury (1975) notes: ‘Neither Marx nor Engels appreciated that capitalism was capable of modification, and it was people like Margaret Hale who helped to civilise it’ (p. 117).

**Concluding comments**

This article has revealed parallels between the understanding of unitarist and pluralist frames of reference in contemporary IR analysis and in *North and South* that invite serious reflection. Discussions between John Thornton and Margaret Hale exhibit contemporary distinctions between unitarism, in both its traditional and paternalist forms, and pluralism, while the emerging relationship between Thornton and Higgins demonstrates the practical benefits of pluralism and greater cooperation. If analysis of the novel stops there – that is, if Higgins is regarded merely as an embittered pluralist demanding higher wages and secure employment – then a ‘weak’ conclusion about its significance from the IR perspective would focus on how it charts Thornton’s gradual realisation that pluralism leads to more solid organisational foundations than unitarism and Higgins’ similar realisation that cooperation leads to a more stable future than conflict and strikes. That insight alone is striking as it predates the work of the ‘Oxford School’ by well over 100 years.

And yet there is a further ‘strong’ conclusion possible too if we speculate that Higgins is in some sense a radical, who advocates a ‘redesigned society’ as many textile workers at that time did. In that case, Higgins exemplifies Fox’s dilemma in *Beyond Contract* in that he is aware that the power of the employers as a class makes genuine social change extremely challenging (‘it may be like war’) and that he lacks adequate means to achieve it: ‘Our only chance is binding men together in one common interest’, he cries, despite realising only too well how strike breakers can undermine union solidarity. Meanwhile, he accommodates to Thornton’s pluralist overtures as a second best, even though Thornton himself knows his experiments may go wrong. Although Higgins in this ‘strong’ scenario yearns for social change, Fox – with knowledge of the ‘abuses and non-accountability’ of 20th-century Communist regimes – is rather more wary. Even so, he also holds firm that trust relationships, and hence genuine pluralism, would flourish only in a more egalitarian society. However, he has as little success in coming up with a convincing programme for change as the pre-Marxist utopian socialists.

Parallels between contemporary IR theory and 19th-century novels cannot be exact but, whether the ‘strong’ conclusion is accepted or not, even the ‘weak’ conclusion indicates that the terms of debate about ‘frames of reference’ and IR reform have remained remarkably constant since the early stages of industrialisation. The ‘strong’ conclusion underscores the intractable nature of achieving structural change through peaceful means.
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Notes
1. The novel was serialised in weekly instalments from September 1854 to January 1855 in *Household Words*, a periodical edited by Charles Dickens. It subsequently appeared in 1855 in a revised two-volume edition.
2. ‘There is one God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.’
3. Quotations from past commentaries may contain sexist language that is no longer acceptable today.
4. Gaskell does not specify passages, but examples include the parable of the talents (St Matthew, chap. 25, vv. 14–30) and the parable of the faithful and wise steward (St Luke, chap. 12, vv. 42–48).
5. The manifesto of the *Democratic Federation*, co-authored by HM Hyndman and William Morris in 1883, ‘was in effect the first thoroughgoing exposition of Marxism by an English political group’ (MacCarthy, 2010: 472).

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