Is Industrial Relations knowledge cumulative?

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Abstract

A recent collection of essays published in France asks an interesting question: do social scientists know more today than in the past? That is to say, the book assesses to what extent knowledge in these sciences is cumulative (Walliser 2009). The book has no chapter on law which prompted a legal theorist to imagine what such a chapter would have looked like had it been invited by the editor. As the collection also has no chapter on Industrial Relations, the present paper in a spirit analogous to the legal theorist, considers what such a chapter would have looked like by asking: Is Industrial Relations knowledge cumulative? Like the legal theorist and some contributions from sociology and anthropology in the French collection, the present paper is sceptical. However, the question is nevertheless of considerable interest as it generates a series of sub-questions around the existence or otherwise of paradigms in IR: whether there have been paradigm shifts and whether these amount to scientific revolutions in the discipline; what are the obstacles to cumulativeness and whether these inhibit knowledge advancement in the field.

Introduction

A recent collection of essays published in France examines the social sciences in an effort to inquire if knowledge in these sciences is cumulative (Walliser 2009). The notion of cumulativeness permits one, in principle, to compare two states of knowledge in order to evaluate if there has been an addition in knowledge in the transition from one to the other (ibid.7). In other words it permits one to ask the question: do social scientists know more today than they did in the past? Applied to industrial relations, one could ask: Did Allen Flanders know more than the Webbs?
Do contemporary industrial relationists know more than Flanders and the Webbs? The present paper is sceptical as to whether IR knowledge is cumulative. However, the question is nevertheless of considerable interest as it generates a series of sub-questions around the existence or otherwise of paradigms in IR: whether there have been paradigm shifts and whether these amount to scientific revolutions in the discipline; what are the obstacles to cumulativeness and whether these inhibit knowledge advancement in the field.

To answer the question ‘Is IR knowledge cumulative?’, the paper examines a number of contributions from the Walliser collection, namely the chapters on sociology, economics, demographics and history. This examination allows essential insights into some of the general problems associated with obstacles to cumulativeness in the social sciences. The first section discusses and summarises these arguing that the question concerning cumulativeness depends partly on how one defines a paradigm.

The central argument of the paper invokes Courgeau’s definition of paradigm (2009) which differs from Kuhn’s and builds on Granger’s work (1995). This notion of paradigm is used to compare and contrast Flanders’ ‘Industrial Relations: What is Wrong with the System’ with Allen’s ‘Militant Trade Unionism’. Granger asks: how do scientists transform lived phenomena into objects of science? For Granger, the object of science is not lived phenomena, but a schematic construction/model of the lived phenomena which science exploits in order to explain and predict the phenomena modelled (Samuel 2003:2). One factor making for cumulativeness in the natural and social sciences is the use of abstract models of real phenomena. The paper asks: how far does IR use this kind of modelling and how conscious are IR theorists of the epistemological issues surrounding this kind of modelling? Do they blur the boundaries of the realms of the ‘real’ and the ‘abstract’ and what impact does this have on cumulativeness in the field.

The paper explores the significance of this blurring of fact with theory, for the future of IR as a discipline. For example, if this blurring, found in the OS is detrimental to the epistemology of IR, it is much more damaging when found in the unitarist and ahistorical approach that underlies HRM and New Public Management. In these two new dominant models for workplace control, this blurring is taken to dangerous
extremes; for reality, rhetoric, theory, prescription and wishful thinking are all conveniently blurred in the Brave New World of commitment and performance.

Finally, the paper examines the work of Feyerabend (1975) in order to assess his claim concerning the dangers of cumulativeness and theory-building for scientific progress.

**Cumulativeness and paradigms in the social sciences: obstacles and difficulties**

In order to answer the question ‘Is IR knowledge cumulative?’, the paper starts by examining the views expressed in some of the contributions to the Walliser collection. The chapters in that collection (each asking the question of different social sciences including history, sociology, economics and demographics) demonstrate that the question of cumulativeness is not one of simply assessing if there has been a quantitative accumulation of data; it is a much more complex question because the facts, principles or laws that make up knowledge in any particular field, evolve in response to both external constraints and constant internal restructuring of disciplines (Walliser 2009:7). This means there are serious obstacles to and complex issues around assessing the presence or absence of cumulativeness in a discipline (or indeed its usefulness).

The editor of the collection stresses that the collection does not claim to offer a meta-theory of cumulativeness that would be universally applicable. In this sense, questions of cumulativeness, as he says, while central to the activity of science, have to be seen in relation to other epistemological problems. In other words, the question as to whether IR knowledge is cumulative, generates a series of sub-questions around the existence or otherwise of paradigms in IR; whether there have been paradigm shifts and whether these amount to scientific revolutions in the discipline.

Kuhn’s account of scientific progress or cumulativeness has been influential since its publication (Barnes ). However, according to Margaret Masterman, Kuhn in ‘his semi-poetic’ style, uses ‘paradigm’ in at least 21 different ways but which can be categorised into three main groups: meta-paradigms, sociological paradigms and construct paradigms. Meta-paradigms includes paradigms as a ‘set of beliefs’, myth, speculation, a new way of seeing and an organising principle of perception;
sociological paradigms include a ‘concrete scientific achievement’ and ‘accepted judicial decision’, and construct paradigms refer to paradigms as analogies or gestalt figures (1970: 65). Writing on the history of IR, Kaufman (2013:1) notes that

the field has evolved from a relatively narrow focus on unions and collective bargaining to a broader consideration of the entire employment relationship.

The question examined here is: can the work of the Webbs at one and the same time serve as the foundation for both the original and new IR paradigms?

Kaufman, it would seem, uses paradigm in the first sense above (the metaparadigm sense) as an organising principle or a way of seeing the focus of the field. And interestingly, Kaufman poses the same question as Courgeau in his study of demographics: has the discipline been underlain by one paradigm or have there been bifurcations in the evolution of the underlying paradigm such that progress has been marked by ruptures rather than cumulativeness. Courgeau, like Kaufman in IR, finds a high degree of cumulativeness in demographics, but this is belied, according to Berthelot, by a deeper examination of cumulativeness generally in the social sciences (2001: 245),

Both logically and historically, the movement underlying sociology, ethnology, demographics and psychology has been not one of consolidation, reinforcement through refinement and successive rectification, but a movement of dissemination, of alternative constructions, of increasing levels of complexity and ruptures.

This view of cumulativeness in the social sciences resonates certainly for sociology which is renowned for weak cumulativeness as it fails to correspond to the Kuhnian account of scientific progress whereby one paradigm succeeds another because it is able to resolve problems that its predecessor could not (Buvier 2009:293). Sociology in contrast, is pluri-paradigmatic; rather than progress through a conflict and overthrow of successive paradigms, it is characterised by the peaceful coexistence of paradigms, as exemplified by the relationship between Parsons and Merton (294; cf. Bernstein 1976). This is what Kaufman seems to be suggesting for IR (2013).
However, Buvier also sees plural paradigms in sociology as an obstacle to cumulativeness and as a sign of its pre-scientific status (293). An even more serious obstacle to cumulativeness is found in the lack of integration between the multiple methods, models, levels of analysis and programmes in sociology (302). The solution to this and a necessary condition for cumulativeness in the discipline lies in the formulation of a logical structure or architecture which could help to clearly articulate the relations between these levels and paradigm orientations (ibid.).

Berthelot’s account also applies to the discipline of history in which Popper’s falsifiability test would be extremely difficult to apply as historical models of explanation are not universal in their application but are limited to a finite class of events occurring in a specific time and place (Revel 2009: 103).

These accounts of cumulativeness in history and sociology would seem to apply in part to IR knowledge where although it may be possible, as Kaufman shows, to subsume 200 years of developments under an ‘employment relationship’ paradigm, a closer examination of the connections between branches and sub-divisions may well reveal a picture of partial revision and extension (Revel 2009: 103) and at times incommensurability and rupture (Berthelot 2001). As Samuel points out, much also depends on whether one takes a diachronic or synchronic view of the discipline (Samuel 2012). So, the question as to degree of cumulativeness will vary depending which level of analysis one examines (macro/micro); and on how one defines the field of IR and IR knowledge. And indeed Kaufman does acknowledge this (p.3) but as he is dealing with the historiography of IR as a field, his focus is different, albeit related, to the question of cumulativeness of knowledge in the field of IR.

Finally, the question as to cumulativeness will also depend, on how one defines paradigm. For as Bouvier points out: if one were to stick to a strict interpretation of the term ‘paradigm’, it would only be applicable to approaches satisfying elementary epistemological conditions (italics in original) which is not the case for most sociological perspectives. A similar point is made by Courgeau, who as noted above, found a high degree of cumulativeness in demographics. However, he does this by refining Kuhn’s definition of paradigm:
On the one hand, it [paradigm] stands for the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques and so on shared by the members of a given community. On the other, it denotes one sort of element in that constellation, the concrete puzzle-solutions which, employed as models or as examples, can replace explicite rules as a basis for the solution of the remaining puzzles of normal science’ (1970:175).

In the spirit of Granger (1995), Courgeau’s notion of paradigm consists of a response to the following question: how do scientists transform lived phenomena into objects of science? For Granger, the object of science is not lived phenomena, but a schematic construction/model of the lived phenomena which science exploits in order to explain and predict the phenomena modelled (Samuel 2003:2). In addition, Granger argued that sciences like biology and physics do not invoke an a priori definition of their object; rather, the object of physical science is defined through successive paradigms as illustrated by the passage from Newtonian physics to the physics of relativity in Einstein (Courgeau 2009: 244). Courgeau finds that it is this notion of paradigm which underlies demographics and it is this paradigm/procedure which fosters/permits one to detect cumulativeness in that discipline.

The two aspects hang together: fact construction and successive modelling of the ‘facts’ or object of science is as Samuel notes, predicated on what Granger termed ‘virtual facts’ (2003:1). However, due to the complexities involved and the synchronic micro-level focus of the present study, only the nature and importance of fact construction and virtual facts will be dealt with here. These are crucial for cumulativeness in that they permit abstract modelling of real phenomena.

The next section explores the presence or otherwise of cumulativeness in IR knowledge by comparing and contrasting the work of Allen and Flanders. Granger’s notion of paradigm and abstract modelling is used to compare and contrast Flanders’ ‘Industrial Relations: What is Wrong with the System’ with Allen’s ‘Militant Trade Unionism’. It is asked: how far does IR use this kind of modelling and how conscious are IR theorists of the epistemological issues surrounding this kind of modelling? Do they blur the boundaries of the realms of the ‘real’ and the ‘abstract’ and what impact does this have on cumulativeness in the field.
An inquiry into cumulativeness – Two sub-paradigms? Flanders and Allen

To use Kaufman’s tree analogy, this section examines two branches in the overall tree of IR knowledge in some detail in order to explore a number of issues related to cumulativeness in IR. Firstly the work of Allen is compared with that of Flanders, or in Kaufman’s terms, the Marxist radical school is compared with an offshoot of the Oxford School.

Two theoretical constructs, then, help provide unity and cohesion. The first, coming from Flanders (1965) and earlier, Dunlop (1958), is to conceive of the employment relationship and associated institutions and outcomes as a structured set of rules or regimes of regulation (Kaufman 2012:23)

Flanders and Allen were commenting on the same ‘problem’ – that of the increasing union militancy or industrial conflict of the post-war period that culminated in the Donovan Commission analysis. Merely four years between the two works yet, an immense gulf divides the two respective accounts of the same problem: for Flanders one major cause of the malaise is the ‘excessive institutional ridigity’ of the IR system which ‘creaks and groans’ under the new stresses of post-war economic realities; for Allen, the ‘meaning’ and ‘primary determinant’ of militancy is traceable to the market transaction which underlies the sale and purchase of labour. Using a Marxist analysis, Allen is neither surprised nor outraged at the phenomenon of union militancy; Flanders is. Flanders analysis, rooted in Dunlop’s work The Industrial Relations System, sees the problem as due to a neglect of theory in IR: the machinery creaks and groans because theory of IR has been ‘largely historical and descriptive’ (9). In sum there has been no ‘comprehensive causal analysis’ of the breakdown of the traditional system (8) because IR, he says quoting Dunlop ‘has lacked any central analytical content. It has been a crossroads, where a number of disciplines have met – history, economics, government, sociology, psychology and law’ (ibid). Theory is essential however if the right questions are to be asked for, fact-accumulation unguided by theory leads to confusion.

However, despite Flanders plea for theory, there is in practice, a constant slippage in his work between facts and theory: he slips, quite unconsciously in and out of talking about real v. theoretical machinery/systems/institutions/ rules of the IR system. In
other words, there is little understanding of the need to distinguish the theoretical abstraction from the concrete reality. The questions posed here are: is this a feature of OS thinking? Does this blurring matter and why? In order to answer these questions, we need to examine the nature of fact construction and virtual facts in more detail.

Samuel (2003) has employed Granger’s work to the discipline of law. Samuel argues that the claim that legal knowledge is knowledge of rules is inadequate for it fails to take into account the role of fact construction in legal knowledge. Employing a non-positivist epistemology, Samuel points out that legal facts are constructed and reconstructed as part of a pre-categorical procedure that adds a normative dimension to interpreting and applying rules. Thus, he continues, legal facts are not ‘real’ facts but ‘virtual’ facts; like the facts underlying the law of gravity, they are ‘ideal’ – true under laboratory conditions. Scientists, according to Granger, use these ideal or virtual facts to explain and predict the modelled phenomena (1995:70). Samuel argues that lawyers too construct a model of the social world so that object of legal analysis is not a particular and real car crash but ‘abstract’ concepts that function in both the real and legal sphere. The same goes for seemingly descriptive concepts such as fault, damage and interest’ (Samuel 2003:3).

It is argued here, that this is also the case in industrial relations but that Flanders and other OS thinkers constantly blur the ‘real’ facts of, for example, industrial conflict, collective negotiation, interest, system…with the ‘virtual or ideal’ facts of their models. And this, it is argued inhibits and limits cumulativeness and progress in the discipline and in its ability to shed light on the reality of industrial conflict. The blurring of real with ideal facts means that the focus of the OS is always within the system. So, restructuring of the IR system is seen as a major solution to industrial conflict. The model has limited explanatory power as a consequence of limited capacity for theoretical modelling. Flanders work is a classic example of this kind of blurring: he starts by stating the need for theory; he even says a ‘system’ is an abstraction (echoing Dunlop), but the rest of the book confuses and conflates the ‘real’ institutions of IR with the ‘abstract modelling’ of these.

In contrast Allen, in his study of the causes of militancy, succeeds in avoiding this blurring between ‘facts’ and ‘theory’. Using a political economy approach, he is much more adept at analysis and explanation than Flanders (although Wright Mills was
impressed by the appearance of Dunlop’s work, Wright Mills1970:107). The political economy approach is rooted in economics, and as Wallisser shows, economics has a high degree of cumulativeness due to three factors: the unitary ontology it assumes, its traditional empirical base of the relations between people and goods and its methodology grounded in conceptual schemas expressed in formal language (Wallisser 2009:225-241). But despite being based on a simple and relatively fixed conceptual structure, multiple interpretations of this structure are permissable and encouraged by the professional community (ibid. 227). There also tends to be a consensus around the permissable levels of theoretical abstraction. This encourages synchronic cumulativeness by providing a common language that helps communication and discussion between economists (ibid.). More significantly, it creates a communal lynchpin that defines orthodoxy.

However, Walliser argues that disagreement and heterodoxy is also possible when for example, Marxist economists reject certain constitutive elements of the conceptual structure; as when they stress the conflict between social classes. These disagreements occur during the process of articulating the basic principles of the conceptual structure (ibid. 227). It is almost as if Walliser is saying that the presence of orthodoxy and conceptual agreement are the basis for heterodoxy and disagreement.

Being rooted in economics, Allen’s political economy (PE) approach has more capacity for cumulativity, it is suggested: it is more adept at abstract thinking and abstract modelling. By invoking ‘virtual facts’, it avoids blurring reality and theory and hence avoids confusing policy prescription with explantion which is arguably the core of the Oxford School approach as witnessed by its influential role in the Donovan analysis of IR.

For example, a close examination of Flanders and Allen shows that whilst both are trying to explain union militancy, Flanders’ understanding of ‘cause’ is at a quite different level of abstraction to Allen’s notion of ‘cause’. For the PE approach is able to examine the ‘logic’ of union militancy by tracing it back to ‘market transactions’ and relations of production. Flanders on the other hand, traces the roots of militancy back to a dysfunctional IR system, one which must therefore be restructured in order to ‘control’ salary drift and informal bargaining, militancy etc…(the Donovan diagnosis). However, the search for the causes of dysfunction within the IR system
itself, ends in the tendency to equate ‘power’ with ‘bargaining power’ (Hyman 1976). Or in the terms of this paper, it ends by blurring the distinction between theoretical terms (power as a function of state, class and market relations) and lived phenomena (the negotiation process).

Conclusion and discussion: Can IR be cumulative and should it?

Dunlop’s IR system and its use by the Oxford school, by building on the Webbs’ work into the nature of collective bargaining and importing sociological, legal and economic concepts forms a insightful and extremely fruitful model for understanding the nature of both the functions and dysfunctions of IR in the real world. Concepts such as the ‘level of bargaining’ ‘size of bargaining unit’, ‘internal and external job regulation’, ‘procedural and substantive rules’ are the bedrock of IR research. However, it is perhaps a ‘heuristic device’ as Dunlop said, but it is limited in terms of its capacity for understanding ‘virtual facts’ and abstract modelling and hence it cannot provide the discipline with cumulativeness.

However, it is suggested that the PE approach both encompasses and surpasses IR systems (OS) thinking, whilst the reverse is not the case. This is evident in for example, Hyman’s comparative study, when he uses Flanders’ distinction between ‘market and managerial relations’ as well as the Webbs’ notion of the ‘common rule’ to critique the ‘paradoxes of market-oriented unionism’ (2001:13-15). Or to take another example, Seifert’s work into the public sector uses a blend of the ‘job regulation’ and IR system concepts with political economy concepts and labour process concepts in order to critique the neo-liberal public service reform agenda (1995). Without this blend, the detailed and historical demonstration of the degradation of public service IR would just not be possible. Or to take another recent example, Gill-Mclure (2013; 2014) uses this blend of political economy and IR concepts to explore the distinctiveness of public sector IR and traces the some of the roots of public service union militancy in the 1970s to the contradictory treatment of public service labour in a capitalist economy.

Hyman makes the following point (2004: 267), ‘while we certainly require more theory in industrial relations, it is neither possible nor desirable to pursue a self-contained theory of industrial relations’ (emphasis in original). Perhaps, the approach
outlined in this paper, viz. the critique of OS thinking through the criterion of cumulativeness, and the view put forward here that the PE approach is more cumulative and can include the IR system approach helps to meet Hyman’s argument?

Hyman’s comparative (2001) study would suggest further that the PE approach can fruitfully be employed in Comparative IR whereas Clegg’s comparative theory (1976), whilst ‘elegant’, is too Anglo-American with insufficient weight given to actors such as the state (Meardi: 2012: 106). However, Meardi finds Hyman’s theory whilst having ‘extraordinary theoretical elegance…is based on very high abstraction’ (ibid. 107). This is not surprising considering the broad historical focus, the postulation of theory and the range of countries covered. Interestingly, Hyman invokes the economists notion of ‘stylized facts’ which seems to resonate with the thesis put forward above regarding the importance of ‘virtual facts’ to cumulativeness. But, to come back to Meardi’s point, the argument developed in this paper would suggest a solution to the high level of abstraction in Hyman’s comparative study: that is, the further development and deepening of the theory through the combined use of PE and IR systems modelling. But, if the latter is admittedly too Anglo-American, then this would point to the need for a PE overarching model in tandem with distinctive empirical models for different countries to provide more detailed analysis? Meardi for example, suggests that national variations have persisted post-1992 as against Varieties of Capitalism theories and that distinctive political cultures and languages remains important. However, the analytical device of ‘style’ of IR is better-suited for capturing these variations which are fluid due to the existence of changeability and change (ibid. 118). 2

Finally, why should IR search for cumulativeness? Surely, this search has been debunked? For example, Feyerabend famously said ‘anything goes’ but perhaps, it is argued here, his methodological anarchism has to be seen in the context of the established natural sciences: methodological anarchism, in other words, assumes a background understanding of the rules and procedures of science (what Kuhn terms ‘normal science’). However, if the social sciences are considered to be in a pre-paradigmatic stage or on the ‘threshold of positivism (Foucault quoted in Lenclud 2009), should Feyerabend’s methodological anarchy apply to them? Against
Kaufman’s overarching paradigm thesis, one could argue that the field of IR is disparate and made up of a plurality of approaches and perspectives and disciplines. This was the Dunlop/Flanders thesis and it is pertinent and crucial to the question of cumulativeness to ask if the field has gained unity since their time. If not, what are the implications for the future of IR as a discipline? Perhaps, we should develop a more sophisticated model of cumulativeness which allows a diversity of approaches which nevertheless have common theoretical roots? This would permit experimentation with new ideas but within a common heritage – and surely, this is one definition of a discipline?

Notes:
1. This study of the epistemology in law is very apt for the present study as for Flanders too, ‘a system of industrial relations is a system of rules’. (1965:10).
2. Interestingly the need for notions of ‘style’ and ‘mentalites’, cultural and linguistic differences, interdisciplinarity and epistemology have all been discussed in the context of comparative law. See eg. Samuel 2014; Le Grand 1996

References:


