

**CHALLENGE TO POWER, TRADE
UNIONS AND INDUSTRIAL
RELATIONS IN CAPITALIST
COUNTRIES**

Klaus von Beyme

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Comparative studies of industrial and social situations across national boundaries are encouraged by the increasing influence of multinational firms, by the decision-making importance of the EEC and by the stark contrast between the experiences of capitalist and socialist countries. We try to identify a correspondence and a link between the organisations and methods of Western capitalist countries to compare achievements and explore the possibility of copying or learning, one from the other.

Industrial relations has for long been a field where comparative studies seemed fruitful. As a symptom of the growing concern about strikes in the 1950s Americans studied international strike behaviour; when British governments expressed dissatisfaction with the fragmented character of the British trade union movement in the 1960s academic interest was directed toward comparisons with central wage bargaining institutions in Sweden and the Netherlands.

By and large the comparative aspect of the work has been limited. Mostly they have comprised sets of national studies, providing a source of data about foreign industrial relations. This was a useful function because there is a dearth of knowledge in Britain about foreign industrial relations. But there was little attempt at analysis.

Challenge to Power by Klaus von Beyme is one of the few attempts to examine industrial relations comparatively, without resort to national studies. It takes four main areas: organisation, ideology and programme, conflict and strike behaviour by the unions and state measures to integrate unions. The author has read widely and has drawn on data about all the Western capitalist societies. Understandably he has a 20 page summary, for the whole purpose of comparative studies* is to point to similarities and dissimilarities

with the hope that we will understand causal relations better. The summary ends with a 'Trend Prognosis'.

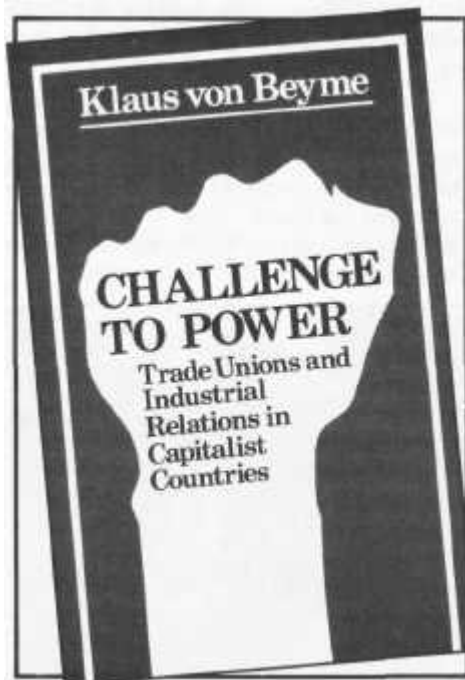
The usefulness of a summary and conclusions is directly related to the relevance of the initial assumptions on which the analysis is based. In this case the author makes his position clear at the outset. He sees labour relations as a power struggle with little prospect of achieving any balance. The power, however, has a pluralist base and is not determined by class relations. As pluralism is a description of empiricism, the causes of the power struggle are identified by the investigator, who examines situations in the belief that somehow the juxtaposition of the variable will indicate their causal relationships. Invariably we are presented with many correlations.

Pluralism is the vogue amongst writers about industrial relations. It is, above all else, plausible. It does not deny the existence of conflict. On the contrary, it insists, as Beyme does, that conflict is more or less permanent. It is not, therefore, a denial of reality. But it presents reality on its own terms, consistent with a belief in the permanence of capitalist relations. Conflict is a superstructural phenomenon, determined by observable phenomena such as managerial authority, technology, unsatisfactory work conditions, inadequate wages, arbitrary state intervention. It is permanent in the sense that it is highly unlikely that all the causes of conflict will be simultaneously resolved. But it does insist on the resolution of conflict and in the possibility of achieving equilibria, in the possibility of achieving equilibria.

Pluralist analysis as presented by Beyme is about as far as it can go without forfeiting an anti-Marxist stance. Perhaps Professor Beyme feels that he is entitled to deride the Marxist, neo-Marxist, left wing positions with greater justification for he loses few opportunities to do so. But it is not clear who or what he is attacking. We have 'a popular left-wing theory' popping out of the blue, left-wing literature arguing, left-wing critics, Marxist Leninists, various neo-Marxist schools and just the Left. The list is not complete.

The ideas to which Beyme is hostile are not stated explicitly. The motley crowd to the left of him are simply 'straw people' set up to prove his points. And, of course, he needs support, for his analysis is wholly concerned with observable phenomena. The chapter on 'Organisation' mentions unity in terms of types of unions without referring to the underlying pressures for solidarity. The neglect of environmental determinants of activity led Beyme to believe that whether a union had one form of organisation, say

industrial unionism, rather than another was a matter of choice. Unions, according to Beyme, were not operating in, coping with, and reacting to a constantly changing divisive labour force with a variety of skills and competing interests. And they were not seen, in consequence, as taking on forms over which they had only the barest influence. Maybe Professor Beyme was influenced by the post-war German experience, when out of the ruins caused by the Nazis, it was possible to decide which form should be established. The choice before German trade unionists was between a single, all-embracing union which the Allied Powers vetoed and an oligopolistic situation with a small number of



organised unions. There is no mention in the book of the real pressures for solidarity which arise from the contradictions in the workplace. The whole chapter on organisation simply involves categorising empirical data.

The chapter dealing with ideology distorts reality even more, for if ideology is not defined as a process of communication of ideas about any and every experience, but belonging integrally to that experience and instead gets its meaning from observable phenomena, then it must be about aims and programmes. And so it is. It is ideological to demand nationalisation. It is not ideological for a union to be pre-occupied with *ad hoc* improvements; that is progressive. The analysis at this level verges on nonsense. But then when pluralist works have their veneer of plausibility pricked they do contain nonsense.

The prime assumption underlying pluralist analysis is that reality has consensus, stability-making qualities and that conflicts,

though they are numerous and ever present, are aberrations. If reality is like this then all well and good. But both the contemporary and historical evidence points otherwise to a conflict arising from the social relations of production, permanent and all-pervasive. Causality is understood not by a classification of types which can be tabulated, as on pages 325 to 327 in Professor Beyme's book, but through the recognition of the priority of class relations, seen as a process, incomprehensible without reference to history, changing through its contradictions and enveloping all areas of experience through its ramifications.

What Professor Beyme was really attacking was a logically consistent theory of experience which shows that present forms are temporary, that present power relations are transient, that the capitalist system and all that it stands for in the lives of ordinary people, namely authoritarianism, inequality and elitism, is inevitably, inexorably being transformed. His work has validity only as an intellectual buttress, a legitimisation of capitalist power relations. It serves to divert people's minds away from the structural causes of their condition to peripheral matters.

The comparative basis of the work strengthens its academic facade but increases the distortion. It seems impressive when a writer draws on a detailed knowledge of the facts of different national experiences and presents an over-awing bibliography with references in different languages. The impression given, moreover, is that some capitalist countries have the answers to their industrial relations problems; others do not but could have. What Professor Beyme's work does not show is that the causes of trade unionism lie in the structure of capitalism and are universally common. Because of this trade unionists are a part of the transformation process and despite appearances are engaged in their own emancipation. The various institutional forms and practices in Western capitalist countries exist because the factors which mediate between structure and experience and interact with them vary. One expects the French trade union movement to differ from the British and the British from the Swedish. It is interesting to know the differences. But it is more important to recognise that while the various types may influence the timing and precise details of workers reactions to capitalist exploitation they cannot stop the inevitability of emancipation. There is no particular form of trade union organisation in Western capitalist societies which has answers to any of the real problems facing workers.