

Foreword

This book emerged from a series of conversations during the summer of 2010 about the value of updating an earlier contribution, viz., *Empowerment and Innovation: Managers, Principles and Reflective Practice*. That was written in 2005, and initially published in 2006, pursuing an ambition to connect critical academic research on the nature and impact of employee participation schemes with practical efforts to improve the governance of modern organizations, enhance employment relations and experiences, and deliver more inclusive and effective ways of organizing and managing work.

Presented against a general backdrop of weak and insubstantial employee participation, certainly in Britain, and amid a profusion of designer models and prescriptions for top-driven participative working, *Empowerment and Innovation* called for a discourse on applied research that was sensitive to tacit knowledge and the self-improving and adapting activities of local work groups. Combining social realism with measured optimism, it drew upon some of the earliest references to empowerment, as an enabling framework to help disadvantaged people assert themselves and exert an autonomous influence on their own life experiences. It also dovetailed with earlier generations of scholarship, including action research (for example, by Trist and his colleagues on British coal mines), partly to demonstrate how employee self-activity can represent a dynamic and innovative force for work organizations, though also to illuminate some of the options, obstacles and struggles that confront those who would seriously strive to achieve participation. *Empowerment and Innovation*, in this respect, aimed for an engaged rather than detached form of scholarship that could speak to everyday concerns in a broad range of organizations. It was written with an interest in academic activism, in broad-ranging ideas about progressive change at work, and with a view to reaching and supporting principled practitioners, including actual and prospective managers, as well as colleagues in the research community and students in higher education.

Evidently, general interest in this sort of critical-practical approach to matters of organizing, managing and working remains buoyant, although contextual conditions have sharpened significantly since *Empowerment*

and Innovation was first published. The terms on which relevant debates are conducted and practical change projects introduced have also shifted substantially, raising basic concerns about the prospects for meaningful innovation, and even doubts about the lexicon of progressive intervention. *Empowerment* is now a more contentious and problematic appellation, as the first chapter will explain. A quick review of recent developments will confirm that much has changed over the past eight years or so, requiring something other than a second edition or fresh statement of earlier arguments to promote the research-based empowering activism anticipated in *Empowerment and Innovation*.

Casting a reflective eye over analyses of economic events (Cowan, 2011; Cho and Newhouse, 2011; Vaitilingam, 2011), the financial crises and scandals that triggered and sustained the Great Recession (from 2007 through 2012) exacted a heavy toll on workplace relations and the nature and experience of employment. As private and public sector organizations struggled to deal with the deepest slump since the 1930s, large numbers of managers and executives lowered their sights, or at least found an outlet for traditional concerns. The cheapening, controlling and intensifying priorities that dominated twentieth-century management thinking, especially during recessionary periods, blatantly and unapologetically influenced restructuring and modernizing strategies across the globe. More innovative, progressive and participative responses were difficult to detect, denting the expectation in some policy-making arenas that economic shock would force organizational transformations and deliver socially responsible management behaviour (European Commission, 2010, 2011).

Of course, there were some fresh examples of participative working, perhaps most obviously at Audi, with the production arrangements introduced at Neckarsulm, Germany, for the R8 sports car. These offered a variation on group technology, reminiscent of the dock assembly approach to manufacturing applied at Volvo's Kalmar factory in the 1970s (Audi, 2007a, b; see also Chapter 2). Emerging cars move through a series of interconnected production cells, where highly skilled work teams complete distinctive elements of the final product on relatively long task cycles. Employee reports seem to indicate that this work is challenging yet rewarding, providing genuine opportunities for discretionary effort, skill development and job satisfaction while exceeding the quality and flexibility outcomes of traditional job structures, a view endorsed by Neckarsulm managers and engineers (Audi, 2007b).

Such positive judgements about work and employment have been scarce since the Great Recession, with darker views of modernizing strategies and practices offered by large populations of workers across a broad

range of organizations and countries. A disempowering logic has influenced reactions to economic and financial difficulties in some of the most prominent employers around the world.

At one level, participative work arrangements and empowerment schemes, some of them celebrated for their effectiveness and presented as models for future competitive advantage just a few years prior to the Great Recession, were terminated. A notable example of this occurred in the United States, where two cellular production facilities operated by the kitchen appliance manufacturer, Maytag, one in Newton, Iowa, the other in Jackson, Tennessee, were closed. Through 2001, empowered work groups in these factories were heralded for their ability to respond rapidly and efficiently to fluctuating demand in key markets, particularly those for high-quality products that were considered to be strategically important for continuing sales in a globally competitive industry (*The Economist*, 2001). After competitor, Whirlpool, acquired Maytag in 2006, this assessment was rejected. The Newton plant was closed towards the end of 2007, followed by the Jackson factory in August 2009. Whirlpool executives regularly insisted that these were high-cost facilities, and were not economically viable given falling profits and global recession. Selected Maytag products were redesigned to be built on Whirlpool machine chassis at lower wage, non-union factories in Ohio and Mexico (Uchitelle, 2007; Hewett, 2008).

These developments are far from novel, of course, and do not signal the failure of participative forms of organization and management. As Swedish research on the closure of Volvo's group technology plants at Kalmar and Uddevalla during the early 1990s demonstrates, competing management ideologies and organizational power politics can have a greater bearing upon events of this nature than economic processes or the determination of the marketplace (a full account is provided in Chapter 2). Evidence about commercial gains and social benefits that genuinely flow from participative working can be lost or downplayed in struggles between controlling and empowering values and inclinations, as in the Volvo case where company performance figures actually favoured the plants that were closed (Sandberg, 1993, 1995). Nonetheless, executives and managers who were committed to participative working lost out in a power struggle with traditionalists at Gothenburg, who had their own position bolstered as a result of company merger and partnership ties at that time. These opponents of group technology issued statements about the relative inefficiency of the Kalmar and Uddevalla factories, presenting essentially the same justification as the Whirlpool executives (and numerous others) some 16 years later, although in this instance their public relations announcements actually contradicted company figures

released shortly before the closures were announced (Sandberg, 1993). Executive claims to authoritative comment are undermined by this episode, which demonstrates that the course of organizational change is mediated by political processes rather than set by markets and economics.

The political clash between competing management values and practical impulses remains important for modernization, and can be detected in some of the most ambitious projects of recent times, though with the cheapening, controlling and intensifying logic of twentieth-century orthodoxy exerting greater influence. The UK Royal Mail provides a good example. With severe constraints on public finances in the aftermath of the Great Recession, Royal Mail executives were pressurized by various government ministers to accelerate long-running change programmes and deliver fundamental improvements in the efficiency and responsiveness of their letters operation (Hooper, 2010; Beirne, 2011). Poor industrial relations had marred previous initiatives dating back to the 1990s, as executive overtures to union partnership agreements and direct employee involvement in the search for greater efficiencies were undercut by recurring attempts to force change through the mechanization and automation of sorting processes, alteration of delivery patterns and rationalization of the distribution network (Noon et al., 2000; Gall, 2005). Despite expressed commitments on the part of key executives to create better jobs and ensure co-operative decision-making, feelings of insecurity and work intensification fostered distrust and collective resistance, including strike action that frustrated, and occasionally thwarted, management plans (Beale, 2003; Gall, 2003).

The executive agenda for modernization following the Great Recession continued to express these schizophrenic tendencies, prioritizing both a 'leaner' letters business and a culture of commitment, cooperation and consensual industrial relations. The view from the top suggested that these were complementary elements of an integrated plan, first stabilizing the business with an efficient platform of work technologies and rationalized jobs, then establishing a constructive partnership with workers and trade unions (Hooper, 2010). In practice, however, unilateral and forceful management action towards the former rendered the latter problematic. Postal workers, and indeed some managers – especially those in support functions – raised questions about the direction and impact of change, highlighting personal pressures that sat uneasily with executive claims about 'pulling together to sustain the business' (Beirne, 2011). Against a background of Mail Centre closures, job losses and heavier workloads through 2009, feelings of stress and vulnerability accentuated divisions between executives and others, and soured employee relations (BBC,

2009; Channel 4, 2010). For those at the sharp end of Royal Mail modernization, regular references to participation and partnership by members of the senior management group amounted to empty rhetoric or little more than a gloss on heavy-handed rationalization.

Again, the Royal Mail case is not unusual. Top-driven change programmes are often torn between rationalistic and participative tendencies (Vallas, 2003a, b; Vidal, 2007), although this is not invariably the case. Employee experiences with restructuring in other major organizations have no gloss at all.

More basic efficiency drives were also evident through the Great Recession, especially with off-shoring and social dumping, terms which cover the flight of capital to areas or countries where labour costs are low and the social responsibilities on employers are considered to be attractively light or unobtrusive. This approach informed the Maytag closures, noted earlier, and subsequent relocation of Whirlpool production from Indiana to another non-union site in Mexico during 2012 (Greenhouse, 2010). China has also been a popular destination, attracting arguably the highest levels of investment in off-shoring and outsourcing in recent decades, with numerous multinational corporations creating their own facilities or establishing extensive sub-contracting networks.

Controversy has often surrounded the employment and labour control policies associated with these off-shoring and outsourcing decisions, certainly in Scotland where the much-discussed relocation of IBM manufacturing from Greenock to factories in Eastern Europe through the turn of the millennium was linked to a shift away from attractive jobs with generous benefits to much weaker terms and conditions (*The Greenock Telegraph*, 2006). In 2010, a series of well-publicized strikes at Honda and Toyota production plants in Foshan, Zhongshan and Tianjin (Jacobs, 2010), together with 11 distressing suicides at the Shenzhen electronics factory operated by Taiwanese firm Foxconn Technology (BBC, 2010; Barboza, 2010; Hurd, 2012), highlighted similar concerns about employment opportunities and the quality of working life in China. Insights into the everyday pressures of high-intensity, low-cost manufacturing, together with employee reactions to long hours, low pay and monotony – including absenteeism and turnover as well as collective resistance – added impetus to long-running political debates about the wider consequences of exploitative and abusive workplace relations. Particular attention was given to the impact on well-qualified younger workers who cover a high proportion of these poor quality jobs, in the West as well as the East, in services and manufacturing, in Apple retail outlets in the United States and in the Chinese Foxconn factory that

manufactures their products, for example (Keep and Mayhew, 2010; Cho and Newhouse, 2011; Segal, 2012).

Against this background, with rationalizing, cheapening and intensifying tendencies so prominent in the aftermath of the Great Recession, it would be naïve and insensitive to associate organizational change with meaningful and substantial employee empowerment. Prescriptive writers, management consultants and futurologists have not been deterred, however.

The guidance literature on empowerment remains highly optimistic, presenting it as a viable alternative to hierarchy and the only way of cultivating the key qualities – including front-line flexibility and responsiveness – needed to thrive in the knowledge economy (Carter, 2009; Fernandez and Moldogaziev, 2011). Some of the cruder versions of this seem oblivious to the effects of recession, ideology and managerial politics, insisting that traditional ‘command and control’ structures are breaking down and that organizations are reinventing themselves to provide greater freedoms and opportunities for their workers (Owen, 2009). This sort of determined optimism, and facility for assertion and exaggeration, characterized many earlier publications on participation and empowerment (including Slater and Bennis, 1964 and Purser and Cabana, 1998). It has also been challenged effectively and repeatedly by historical and empirical research (perhaps most famously by Ramsay, 1977, 1980). At this juncture, however, it signals a remarkable disconnection from the experiences of people affected by recession, suggesting almost a bunker mentality that shuts out any unpalatable or awkward realities.

Other promotional accounts at least acknowledge the continuing influence of management orthodoxy and, indeed, the role that remote, insular and self-serving leadership played in triggering and perpetuating the financial and economic difficulties of recent years (Cooper, 2011). Arguments for empowerment as a means of recovering from recession have tapped into wider demands for ethical leadership and socially responsible management, suggesting that orthodox policies and practices are out of touch with contemporary pressures and social values (Gadman and Cooper, 2009). From here, rationalistic preoccupations are anachronistic, and the challenge is to persuade practitioners to relinquish them for more conducive, effective and empowering practices. The Great Recession revealed the stranglehold that orthodox assumptions have on management thinking, despite the abundant literature on empowerment and participation. Hence, the call is for evidence-based management that can displace outdated assumptions and demonstrate the positive outcomes and performance advantages that flow from empowering management.

Unfortunately, the studies cited in support of this transformative project tend to be narrowly managerialist in orientation, concentrating on management roles, top-driven change and traditional measures of corporate performance. Cooper (2011), for instance, looks to Kotter and Cohen's (2002) linkage between managed empowerment and successful restructuring, and to Sirota, Mischkind and Meltzer's (2005) account of the stock-market benefits that can be realized if managers engender pride, camaraderie and equity among their employees. There is little in these texts to account for independent employee aims and interpretations, or to anticipate how contrasting and conflicting interests between stakeholders (particularly groups of managers and workers) may affect the course of empowerment initiatives. Instead, a unitary view predominates. Empowerment is reduced to a rational calculation about the most effective means of achieving conventional ends, on the assumption that this will be sufficient to encourage managers, as adaptive economic agents, to change the way they relate to employees.

Studies from the critical end of the management-studies spectrum continue to offer more nuanced insights into the tensions and constraints, challenges and negotiations, that influence work and empowerment in practice, correcting for the narrow agenda of prescriptive managerialism (Edwards and Collinson, 2002; Harley et al., 2005). Greater attention is given to the internal dynamics and realpolitik of empowering and modernizing management, recognizing the potential for slippage and for top-driven schemes to 'snap-back' to rationalism, or degenerate in terms of process and content to what Legge (1978) described as 'conformist innovation' (Spreitzer and Doneson, 2008; Beirne, 2008, 2011).

Organizational responses to the Great Recession have underlined the importance of extending critical research to provide independent insights into the cross-national, intricately networked and highly political nature of corporate modernizing and restructuring activities. Multinational academic ties and collaborative projects are now essential to appreciate how global interdependencies really affect work and employment, and to establish the precise nature and impact of local practices, experiences and reactions in different geographical contexts. With tighter international networks, critical scholars will be better placed to unearth the details of corporate service agreements and commercial alliances, and also to question the business interests and momentum behind prescriptive managerialism.

More extensive relational research on workplaces around the world can be expected to have a significant effect in refocusing public and practitioner attention, shining a spotlight on the everyday realities of modernization, loosening the appeal of mythical and rhetorical images,

and substituting actual life experiences for idealized notions of what ought to be happening within work organizations. Unitary frames of reference should be breached to a greater extent, stimulating wider discussions about principled rather than just evidence-based research, provoking interest in what constitutes desirable, feasible, acceptable and appropriate modernization, and making it increasingly difficult for people to take such issues for granted or leave them for incumbent leaders and managers to decide (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Collins, 2000).

Initial critical analyses of the Great Recession concentrated on underlying causes, and also employee experiences of sub-contracting and off-shoring, widening the focus from traditional industrialized countries via comparative studies of India and China, for example (O'Reilly et al., 2011). Progress in illuminating some of the key developments – including accumulating evidence about the large-scale rationalization and degradation of managerial as well as employee jobs (Hassard et al., 2009, 2011) – opened other areas for investigation, notably the significance of similarly impoverished work experiences for expressions of discontent among workers and managers (Beirne, 2011). The coping, adapting, resisting and self-empowering activities of the various populations of workers and managers at the sharp end of modernization remain relatively under-researched, however. This is an important area for further investigation, particularly as it relates to applied research and the prospects for developing a principled academic activism that can support authentic (rather than curtailing and controlling attempts at) employee empowerment.

The local knowledge and interventions of front-line staff were central to earlier generations of practically focused scholarship. Theorist-practitioners such as Kurt Lewin (1946), Eric Trist et al. (1963), Philip Selznick (1966), Tom Burns (1967) and Bjorn Gustavsen (1979) developed their academic work from a keen appreciation of employee experiences and propensity to act informally to change working practices and contest the rationalizing tendencies of management orthodoxy. Recognizing that pressures and options for organizational innovation emerge at different levels, and that attainable improvements need to connect with employee insights and aspirations, these researchers aligned themselves with 'natural work groups' (Fincham, 1989) rather than favour links to executive or management teams. They were not addressing problems that were narrowly defined by managers or shareholders. Instead, they channelled their scholarship towards practical activities that offered some potential to improve that situation of the wider population within work organizations, and they pursued this 'greater good' by aligning social science with the activism of employees themselves (to a greater or lesser

extent), locating and supporting grassroots changes that often emerged out of difficult or oppressive work situations.

The early research conducted by Trist and his colleagues on innovative forms of job design and group working in the British coal mines perhaps offers the clearest example of this logic of empowering academic practice (Trist et al., 1963). The ‘composite coal-getting teams’ that are famously associated with this fieldwork relied on changes pioneered by miners themselves, in opposition to managerial and engineering decisions, although this is often neglected in textbook discussions that reduce the project to a top-down, outside-in, consultancy exercise. Nonetheless, workers were primary collaborators in applied research that was decentralized and negotiated rather than subject to external ‘expert’ determination. Gustavsen subsequently expressed the underpinning logic of this empowering academic activism: The ‘liberation of work must be done by the workers themselves. The role of social research is to act as support and resource in such a process’ (1979, p. 349).

I have argued elsewhere (Beirne, 2008) that critical research has lost some of the radicalism and concern for practical activism that is evident in this classical scholarship, becoming more detached and coldly evaluative. *Empowerment and Innovation* offered some initial thoughts about the reasons for this, and reflections about the implications, arguing for a fresh appreciation of earlier priorities and more developed forms of critical academic practice. Despite some journal and policy discussion (Payne, 2010, 2011, 2012; Willmott, 2012), very little has changed on this front, which is why the Foreword to *Empowerment and Innovation* is reproduced below. The arguments remain pertinent, although some of the obstacles to re-balancing scholarship along these lines now seem more difficult to overcome.

Academic work has also been affected by rationalistic impulses and far-reaching managerialism in recent years, certainly in Britain. This has contributed to a narrowing of scholarship and the cultivation of what Mingers and Willmott (2010) call an academic monoculture that stifles diversity and originality and discourages younger researchers in particular from looking beyond analysis and explanation to address practical matters of innovating or changing work organizations. The roots of this lie in the funding arrangements for British universities and the effect of financial and commercial priorities on senior management efforts to influence research ratings and grant income.

Research assessment exercises that affect the distribution of public funds to universities have increasingly privileged publication in particular sets of academic journals, prioritizing specific editorial policies and

discounting other forms of output, including books, research monographs, conference presentations and practitioner workshops, for example. Journal ranking lists, impact factors and citation-based metrics are used to calibrate academic work, and these have been tied to incentive structures, targets and annual appraisal schemes as institutions resort to managerialism and attempt to control output, intensify working and increase productivity (Willmott, 1998).

Ironically, as research assessment processes have developed an 'impact' category that supposedly recognizes contributions to practitioner communities and work organizations beyond academe, the priority accorded to journal lists and attendant managerialism at an institutional level has actually discouraged wider engagement and research-based practice. The achievements of researchers are gauged by the approval of peer reviewers who judge their journal submissions according to academic values and the genre of scholarship perpetuated by the most highly ranked, 'elite' journals (Mingers and Willmott, 2010). This is compounded by the metrics and managerialism, which encourage 'the game to be played' with work on familiar topics, in established disciplinary silos, with conventional theories and accepted methodologies (Adler and Harzing, 2009).

Initial reports about the human impact of these rationalizing, intensifying and controlling processes in higher education correspond closely with studies of similar developments in other sectors, highlighting feelings of vulnerability, growing stress and slipping morale within academic communities (Barry et al., 2001). Researchers are expressing a sense of disempowerment, with fracture lines emerging between vice principals and a broad range of academics, from lecturers to professors (Morgan, 2012). There are also signs that 'bothered' academics are resisting, adapting and articulating more open and enriching notions of scholarship. In an early study of reactions to managerialism in the university sector, Barry et al. (2001) discovered that subject leaders and research co-ordinators who considered that university executives were behaving in an unpalatable or disingenuous fashion were intervening to moderate the 'harsher effects' of directed change as it moved down the hierarchy (p. 98). On an independent basis, they were acting to promote more collegiate managerial behaviour and sustain their alternative view of what scholarship involves.

These similarities in experiencing and also reacting to top-driven change will hopefully encourage increasing numbers of critical researchers to look beyond their own immediate employment and relate to like-minded practitioners (managers and workers) as potential collaborators in empowering projects, rather than just survey respondents or

interviewees. The ability of critical researchers to identify with the people they study in terms of predicament and reaction, from a shared sense of life at the sharp end of managerialism, may help to rekindle something of the spirit and activism of the classical scholarship noted above.

Of course, there are risks in this as well. Personal and professional dilemmas are attached to empowering projects, and these range beyond the issues and concerns that exercised academics in the past. Employment considerations and institutional affiliation have a greater bearing upon academic decisions, since attempts to breach the restrictions posed by approved journal output cut against the grain of university managerialism. Anxieties about academic freedom and independence from financial and commercial pressures previously centred on relations with external organizations and the dangers of dealing with managers who expect applied research to be congenial, useful on their own terms rather than challenging vested interests or established practices (Brown, 1967; Eldridge, 1981). Academics are now more likely to confront conservative influences and challenges to research orientations within their own employing organizations. Establishing a safe environment for practically focused empowering projects therefore involves more than negotiating access agreements and collaborative arrangements that maintain the integrity of applied research in host organizations (Beirne, 2008). It probably means claiming and defending space for academic activism in personal appraisal interviews and annual 'development' plans as well.

Whether all of this stimulates interest and nurtures an empowering activism among like-minded critical researchers, workers and managers or has an inhibiting effect is open to question. However, the logic that moved classical scholars such as Lewin and Burns remains compelling. It seems impossible to understand contemporary work organizations and their modernizing strategies without trying to change them. This book aims to promote the broader sense of purpose and practical agenda that characterized classical critical scholarship, and to encourage emerging and established critics of management and organization, whether in education or employment, to find new and effective ways of increasing the congruence between empowering values and work experiences. It remains positive about the scope for 'making a difference', and confident that sufficient enthusiasm exists among people in a large number of organizations who are in a position, and have the determination, to become activists for change.

The chapters that follow combine a sober assessment of constraints and difficulties with a measured sense of space for action and progressive intervention. Following the same logic and structure as *Empowerment*

and Innovation, critical research is linked to three levels of practical engagement over the course of the presentation. The first concentrates on critical thinking and reflecting, marshalling empirical research on the difficulties and constraints bearing upon empowerment to sharpen insights into the problematics of progressive practice, and nurture confidence and resilience among those inclined towards practical action. The second shifts the focus from thinking to doing, identifying options, possibilities and patterns of potentially viable intervention, especially from post-mortem studies of pioneering workplace initiatives and also community arts projects that support self-empowering activities among disadvantaged groups in the wider society. This dimension is explored in the second section of the book, along with the final aspect of critical practice, which relates to public policy and the shaping of the regulatory frameworks relating to work and management at the level of the state and the European Union.