Exploring Worker Participation in the British Interwar Management Movement

Mairi Maclean
kmm57@bath.ac.uk
University of Bath, UK

Gareth Shaw
G.Shaw@exeter.ac.uk
University of Exeter, UK

Charles Harvey
Charles.Harvey@ncl.ac.uk
Newcastle University, UK

Preferred Stream: Work/non work relationships and Corporate Social Responsibility

The interwar management movement sought to modernize management in Britain between the wars. Orchestrated by a network of businesspeople, foremost amongst whom was Quaker industrialist and social reformer Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree, it was founded on principles of organized cooperation, mutual service, and the free interchange of information (Maclean, Shaw, & Harvey, 2022). The socio-political conjuncture of the day, however, was characterized by industrial unrest, bouts of mass unemployment, and severe economic fluctuations, most notably during the long depression of 1929-1933. This collective exercise to improve British management was motivated in large part by fear of worker unrest. This suggests less of an altruistic ideal and more of a pragmatic grappling with the (relative) power of labour during the interwar years.

There were three main strands to the British interwar management movement. First, following the Quaker Employer Conference convened by industrialists Edward Cadbury and Seebohm Rowntree in April 1918 (Tibbals, 2019), Seebohm Rowntree organized the Rowntree business lectures. These aimed in novel fashion to bring together employers and employees from different levels of the organizational hierarchy, alongside speakers from various walks of life, to debate the issues facing industry. Second, Rowntree conceived the idea, following a visit to the US, that industrialists from different regions of the UK should meet regularly in groups of 10-15 to explore solutions to the problems before them. This initiative engendered the Management Research Groups (MRGs), formed as a vehicle for the interchange of ideas, collecting and disseminating information, and debating business issues (Keeble, 1981). The third strand to the movement concerned directors' dinner discussions, at first by invite only but later open to all.

World War I had generated "irresistible pressure for the reorganization and reorientation of society" (Marwick, 1965) on a more equitable basis, fomenting worker unrest and attendant demands for industrial democracy. A fundamental objective of the movement

was therefore to allow employers to hear the labour perspective, to discover what the workers wanted. To this end, the conferences attracted a wide range of speakers from assorted backgrounds, including artists, businesspeople, economists, foremen, forewomen, historians, industrial psychologists, musicians, organizational theorists, politicians, supervisors, unionists, and works managers.

From the beginning, dissenting voices were admitted to the conferences, since managers needed to hear workers' views. The movement was born in crisis avoidance and addressing worker unrest was fundamental to its mission. Yet as J. N. Mercer (1919) argued at the inaugural conference of April 1919, the roots of industrial unrest ran deep. There is evidence that some progressive employers involved in the movement did not always practice what they preached. Rowntree (1918; 1922) served as Labour Director in the family firm, yet some of his own employees did not earn what he himself specified as a living minimum wage. Documents collected from the Borthwick Institute reveal that labour standards at the Cocoa Works factory in York were sometimes found wanting. The practice of letting boys go once they reached adulthood, for example, was commonplace at the Rowntree factory.

Our ESRC-funded study of the British interwar management movement draws on extensive archival material collected from numerous archives over a period of three years (2016-2019). Interpretively, our aim in this paper is to question what this material tells us about the British interwar management movement, challenging its avowed aim to extend a new spirit of partnership to employees.

References

Maclean, M., Shaw, G. & Harvey, C. (2022). Business as Service? Human Relations and the British interwar management movement. *Human Relations*, 75(8), 1585-1614.

Marwick, A. (1965). *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War*. London.

Mercer, J.N. (2019). Oversight from the Workers' Standpoint. *Report of Lectures given at the Lecture School for Works Managers, Foremen, Forewomen*, 24-28 April.

Rowlinson, M., & Hassard, J. (1993). The Invention of Corporate Culture: A History of the Histories of Cadbury. *Human Relations*, 46: 299-326.

Rowntree, B.S. (1918). *The Human Needs of Labour*. London.

Rowntree, B.S. 1922. *Industrial Unrest: A Way Out*. London.

Tibbals, K. (2019). "Quaker Employer Conference of 1918". In Nicholas Burton and Richard Turnbull, eds., *Quakers, Business and Corporate Responsibility*. Switzerland: 61-77.