

## Mitchell's Musing 8-6-12: Advice and Content – from 1986

### Daniel J.B. Mitchell

Back in 1986, the UCLA Institute of Industrial Relations – now known as the Institute for Research on Labor and Employment – celebrated its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Actually, it was created, along with the twin Institute at Berkeley in 1945, so technically the celebration was a year late. But no one seemed to mind the arithmetical discrepancy.

The audio cassettes from that event disappeared into a backyard shed and also from memory until I had occasion to enter the shed for other reasons and uncovered them. One recording in particular was of special interest. The dinner speaker at the event was Arnold Weber,<sup>1</sup> then president of Northwestern University, past president of the University of Colorado, and - full disclosure – a co-author of yours truly.<sup>2</sup> Weber's topic was generally industrial relations – that term was still in use – and higher education. His talk came at a time in which programs in industrial relations were feeling under threat, in part because of the decline of American unionization. Despite the seriousness of the topic, the remarks were delivered with Weber's usual humor. I have posted a digitized audio of Weber's speech, made from the cassettes, at:

<http://archive.org/details/Uclalir40thAnniversaryArnoldWeber10-17-1986Part3> and it is worth listening to.<sup>3</sup>

The erosion of union representation as a percent of the labor force had actually been going on for some time – really since the mid-1950s - when Weber spoke, although, as he noted, the erosion had been masked to a degree by the rise of public-sector unionization. But the early 1980s saw an acceleration of the downward trend, which has continue since that time. Those years also saw a rise of “concession bargaining” in the union sector: union wage and benefit freezes and cuts.

Weber's academic background was in economics and industrial relations and he noted in his remarks that a number of university presidents in that era had similar backgrounds, a fact he regarded as no accident for reasons to which I return below. In his remarks, he provocatively asked whether the study of industrial relations in U.S. higher education would go the way of the study of home economics. Was it doomed, in other words? Weber noted that many of the industrial relations programs then in existence were created in the immediate aftermath of World War II, a period in which union-management conflict and strikes had surged. Creation of such programs – including the one at UCLA –

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://exhibits.library.northwestern.edu/archives/exhibits/presidents/weber.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Arnold R. Weber and Daniel J. B. Mitchell, *The Pay Board's Progress: Wage Controls in Phase II* (Washington: Brookings Institution: 1978). I was director of the UCLA Institute of Industrial Relations at the time of the event.

<sup>3</sup> A few words at the beginning of his talk are missing when the end of a cassette was reached and a new recording was started. The audio quality is not great but audible.

was seen as a way of promoting “industrial peace.”<sup>4</sup> With unions in decline in the 1980s and with strike incidence way down, the need for programs to promote industrial peace no longer seemed pressing. University presidents, feeling a funding squeeze, might easily see programs in industrial relations as something from an earlier era which no longer had budgetary priority.

The vulnerability of the industrial relations programs in the 1980s also stemmed from other factors. Weber argued that the academic programs had helped legitimize collective bargaining but unions never understood the value of that contribution. Indeed, they regarded anything regarded as critical from such programs as unwelcome. The legitimization of collective bargaining in postwar America often created a perception of industrial relations programs as being “pro-union.” That accusation that may not have mattered in the heyday of unionization, but it worked against the academic programs in a period of union decline.

According to Weber, the rise of business schools as academically respectable components of higher ed, a movement that began in the 1960s, created a competition with the industrial relations programs which, after all, were largely devoted to a study of one function of business. However, despite their focus on collective bargaining, the industrial relations programs did generally offer courses in, and produce research in, personnel management (increasingly being called “human resources”). Weber felt, however, that industrial relations programs had gone astray by offering PhDs – to some extent in competition with business schools – because for the PhD a strict disciplinary-based focus is needed.<sup>5</sup>

One thing that industrial relations programs had going for them was that they featured something that university presidents generally extol, but which is seldom accomplished: interdisciplinary work. That tradition in industrial relations had continued into the 1980s. Weber saw the study of labor markets - as practiced by the programs - as a welcome alternative to neoclassical models of those markets as taught in traditional economics departments, in part because industrial relations scholars did not analyze labor markets from an excessively abstract viewpoint. Indeed, the industrial relations work to some extent had contributed to a rethinking of the analysis of labor markets in economics. At the time Weber spoke, the field of “the new economics of personnel” was taking root.

Weber saw some avenues of redemption and survival for the industrial relations programs. He wanted their teaching and research to reflect the changing mix of jobs and industries in the U.S. economy – which were becoming increasingly nonunion. He saw business schools of that era becoming excessively finance-oriented and losing a grip on management strategy. Industrial relations programs, he advised,

---

<sup>4</sup> Weber also noted the earlier precedent at Princeton in which a program was created in the early 1920s in the aftermath of such events as the Ludlow Massacre:

[http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/rockefellers/sfeature/sf\\_8.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/rockefellers/sfeature/sf_8.html)

<sup>5</sup> It may seem odd to praise the interdisciplinary approach of industrial relations programs and then criticize their PhD programs as lacking a disciplinary center. My interpretation of Weber’s view is that it is best to have doctorates grounded in a particular discipline and then have scholars with those disciplinary doctorates collaborate in research and teaching.

should orient their analysis of the labor function to overall management strategy, particularly strategy at the level at which a CEO operates. Weber saw business schools as failing in that regard. Industrial relations programs should avoid what he termed “ideological entanglements,” i.e., they should not be either pro-labor (pro-union) or be so pro-management that they ended up offering course in how to be “union free.”

Finally, Weber thought that the study of industrial relations produced general skills that were transferable to other fields. Conflict resolution and decision processes taught from an industrial relations perspective were valuable elsewhere. That is why, as noted earlier, university presidents disproportionately at that time came from industrial relations backgrounds.

Twenty-six years after Weber’s remarks, we know that industrial relations programs – now often operating under other names (as at UCLA) – have remained under pressure from the forces Weber identified. Not all have survived intact. You can quibble with this or that aspect of the views he expressed. I suspect his observations on the PhD will raise some hackles. But overall, the speech was both thought-provoking and prescient.

---



Arnold Weber