While the broad subject matter of Industrial Relations (IR) – the regulation of work and employment – is as topical today as it ever was, IR as a traditional academic field of study is under threat It is important to keep in mind the distinction between the *real world subject* and the *field of study*, while recognising that there is a dynamic relationship between the two..

The real world occasion for the birth of IR was the emergence of the organised working class or the labour movement in the late C19th industrial society of Britain and the USA. With the benefit of hindsight and historical perspective, we can see this as a particular period of industrial society, which, in America and Europe, has evolved into the *Post-Industrial economy* of recent decades.

We argue that such a fundamental shift in 'events' and 'ideas' means that IR analysis can only be reconstituted in dialogue with surrounding social science disciplines; not as a self-contained brand of institutional 'machine-minding' locked into a vanishing collective bargaining 'system', but as a theory-and-policy paradigm that speaks to the wider business and social science communities.

Thus for us, IR's institutional analysis of the employment relationship needs to be rethought and retooled, within a broader social science tradition of institutional theory. The twin dangers are that either the academic study of employment lifts entirely free from its old IR mooring, jettisoning a rich tradition of concepts and empirical studies; or, alternatively, that IR scholars continue to work within the comfortable but

shrinking walls of its established paradigm and ignore the changing outside world of work and ideas.

We begin by recalling the social science genesis of anglo-american IR and assessing the academic disciplines that flowed into it. Next, we consider the current dominant academic context of IR scholarship, throughout the world. Finally, we sketch a possible extended future life for IR, through an engagement with a wider social science tradition of institutional theory; one which enables IR to continue drawing on its own disciplinary past while moving forward confidently and combatively into a very different real world and academic context.