

“RANK AND FILISM” AND LABOUR HISTORY:  
A REJOINDER TO PRICE AND CRONIN

Few theoretical paradigms in labour history are so deeply entrenched as “rank and filism”. It was only to be expected, therefore, that a frontal assault on its assumptions would provoke a vigorous reaction. The responses to my article by Richard Price and James Cronin thus offer a welcome opportunity to clarify the theoretical claims of “rank and filism” and reassess its empirical plausibility as an interpretation of British labour history. But as in any clash between rival theoretical perspectives, the points at issue in this debate extend beyond factual disagreements to the meaning of basic concepts and the standards of proof involved in their assessment, and neither party fully recognizes itself in the account of their ideas presented by the other. No accumulation of discordant facts can conclusively disprove a theory, as students of scientific revolutions have demonstrated, but readers will have to judge for themselves whether the counter-evidence I have presented amounts to minor discrepancies which can be satisfactorily accommodated within the assumptions of “rank and filism” or fundamental anomalies which necessitate the abandonment of the paradigm itself.<sup>1</sup>

Three major issues are raised by Price’s and Cronin’s responses to my critique of “rank and filism”. What are the theoretical assumptions of “rank-and-filist” historians, and have these been accurately represented in my article? What are the implications for these assumptions of the empirical evidence discussed in my critique? And what is the relationship between “rank and filism” and “workplace history” or the “social history of the working class” more broadly conceived? The rejoinder which follows takes up each of these disputed questions in turn.

Whatever the broader interpretative ambitions of its proponents, it cannot be denied that “rank and filism” as a theoretical approach entails a commitment to a definite and influential set of propositions about the nature of trade unions and industrial relations. But before going on to restate these propositions and the deeper assumptions on which they rest,

<sup>1</sup> For the concept of scientific paradigms and the ensuing debate, see Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (rev. ed., Chicago, 1970); Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (eds), *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge, 1970); Frederick Suppe (ed.), *The Structure of Scientific Theories* (Urbana, IL, 1974); Barry Barnes, *T.S. Kuhn and Social Science* (London, 1982); and Paul Hirst and Penny Wooley, *Social Relations and Human Attributes* (London, 1982), pp. 265-7.

some preliminary caveats are in order. First, my article self-consciously abstracted and systematized the principles of “rank and filism” from the work of a variety of writers in which they are present to varying degrees of clarity and explicitness. Such a process of abstraction, I would argue, is always necessary if we are to assess the empirical validity of a broader theoretical approach rather than an infinite plurality of idiosyncratic individual positions. At the same time, however, I was also careful to call attention to the many differences among writers of this school, not only between Leninists such as James Hinton and “spontaneists” such as Price himself, but also between a “left-wing” variant which counterposes the militancy of the “rank and file” to the moderation of trade union leaders and a “right-wing” variant which shares the terms of the opposition while reversing its political sign. Second, it should have gone without saying that my critical strictures were directed against the “rank-and-filist” paradigm, rather than against the work of “rank-and-filist” historians *tout court*. As Price and Cronin rightly observe, not all the work of the writers discussed in my critique can be treated as a pure expression of “rank and filism”, nor can all “rank-and-filist” scholarship be dismissed as worthless. Indeed, as should be evident from my article, I have learned a great deal from the work of “rank-and-filist” historians – including Price and Cronin – though I have not always drawn the lessons from it that the authors intended. My critique was intended as a call to discard the assumptions of “rank and filism”, not to burn the books of its exponents.

## I

The distinguishing feature of “rank and filism” in recent British labour history, as I argued originally, is its insistence on a structural conflict between union leaders and their members rooted in the process of collective bargaining and in the contradictory position of trade unions in a capitalist society more broadly. Unions’ involvement in bargaining relationships with employers and the state, these writers maintain, necessarily leads their officials to become responsible at least in part for moderating the demands of the “rank and file” and securing their compliance with managerial prerogatives in the workplace. Workers’ exploitation at the point of production, by contrast, periodically provokes them to rebel against managerial authority and against the trade union structures and collective bargaining procedures which have become fetters on their self-activity.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See also my “Shop Floor Bargaining and the State: A Contradictory Relationship”, in Steven Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin (eds), *Shop Floor Bargaining and the State* (Cambridge, 1985), esp. pp. 5-8.

Neither Price nor Cronin take issue with this account of “rank and filism”, nor would they be well placed to do so, since these positions can be amply illustrated with quotations from their own writings and those of other “rank and filists”. Thus Price asserts that the “tension between discipline and militancy” which lay behind the “conflict relationship between official unionism and its rank and file” evident from the 1890s “was a *structural* not a behavioural tension, inherent to the negotiated compromise between labour and society that emanated from the acceptance of organised labour’s role as an agent with bargaining rights over industrial conditions”.<sup>3</sup> More theoretically, Richard Hyman explains, “those continuously engaged in a representative capacity perform a crucial mediating role in sustaining tendencies towards an accommodative and subaltern relationship with external agencies (employers and the state) in opposition to which trade unions were originally formed [ . . . ]. Because of their *ongoing* relationship with external parties, officials normally become committed to preserving a stable bargaining relationship and to the ‘rules of the game’ which this presupposes.”<sup>4</sup> And Cronin, too, observes that “the tension between entrenched union leaders and rank-and-file activists is a long-term, indeed structural, aspect of labour history, not peculiar to any particular moment but to those various periods when workers on the shop floor perceived a possibility of advance beyond what the leaders have come to expect”; although he characteristically fails to specify the structural roots of this tension.<sup>5</sup>

If for the “rank and filists” the position of trade unions in capitalist society is structurally ambiguous, that of workers and employers is instead structurally antagonistic. As Price asserts, the “effort to exert a control over the productive process is essentially a product of the nature of the employer-worker relationship; it is implicit in the subordination in which workers are placed [ . . . ]”; or as Hyman puts it, “between these two classes there exists a radical conflict of interests, which underlies everything that occurs in industrial relations”.<sup>6</sup> But collective bargaining cannot resolve these

<sup>3</sup> Richard Price, *Masters, Unions and Men: Work Control in Building and the Rise of Labour, 1830-1914* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Hyman, “The Politics of Workplace Trade Unionism: Recent Tendencies and Some Problems for Theory”, *Capital and Class*, no. 8 (1979), pp. 54-55. See also Keith Burgess, *The Origins of British Industrial Relations* (London, 1975), pp. vi-xi, 309-10, who places greater emphasis on the sociological and ideological differentiation of union leaders from the “rank and file” resulting from their bargaining relationship with employers.

<sup>5</sup> James Cronin, “Strikes, 1870-1914”, in C.J. Wrigley (ed.), *A History of British Industrial Relations, 1875-1914* (Brighton, 1982), p. 93, n. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Price, *Masters, Unions and Men*, p. 8; Hyman, *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction* (London, 1975), p. 23. For the Marxist analysis of the employment relationship which underlies these formulations, see Price, *Masters, Unions and Men*, pp. 7-9; and Hyman, *Industrial Relations*, pp. 18-27.

conflicts which are rooted in the structure of capitalism itself, and the discontents it generates can therefore be expected to resurface in new forms. Thus, as Price argues, “Ultimately, industrial relations are about power and industrial conflict is about class struggle, but even though collective bargaining systems are called into being by these imperatives they may not generally approach these issues at their most fundamental level and it is, therefore, hopeless to believe that they will fundamentally resolve conflicts that implicitly or explicitly address matters of power and authority.”<sup>7</sup> Or as Hyman more elegantly concludes, “the institutionalisation of industrial conflict does indeed achieve a *provisional* containment of disorder; but where workers’ grievances and discontents are not resolved, they give rise eventually to new forms of conflict [ . . . ]”<sup>8</sup>

Both Price and Cronin object that my critique caricatures the “rank-and-filist” position by attributing to its exponents theoretical assumptions which they do not explicitly hold. But there can be little real dispute that whatever their differences leading “rank and filists” are indeed committed to the assumption that trade unions as organizations ultimately have an interest in accommodation with capitalism while their members do not.<sup>9</sup> Contrary to Price’s objection, however, I do not suggest that “rank and filists” therefore believe trade unions to be “agents of capitalism” or that unions “comfortably settled down to impose the employer’s discipline in exchange for the right to bargain over economic conditions”. Unions, Price and other “rank and filists” argue, were constrained by their structural position to become involved in collective bargaining procedures; “the ‘discipline’ that was imposed was that of the industrial relations system in which the trade unions were partners”; and it was this discipline which brought them into conflict with their members’ inherent resistance to subordination at the point of production.<sup>10</sup> One could hardly find a clearer statement of “rank and filists”’ commitment to the notion of an objective conflict of interest between trade unions and their members. Few “rank and filists”, by contrast, have explicitly endorsed the view that workers are endowed with a vast reservoir of latent power which is contained by the institutions which represent them. Without this second assumption, however, there would be

<sup>7</sup> Price, *Masters, Unions and Men*, p. 17. Cf. the echo of this formulation, stripped of its explicit theoretical content, in Cronin’s discussion of “the great waves of militancy of 1871-3, 1889-90 and 1911-13”: “although on the surface the demands usually concerned wages, piecework, apprentices and similar narrow, ‘economistic issues’, the real issue was power, which is, of course, the essence of the entire history of strikes” (“Strikes”, p. 92).

<sup>8</sup> Hyman, *Industrial Relations*, p. 199; see also pp. 97-9 and 184-203.

<sup>9</sup> The quotation from Gramsci which illustrated this view was in fact taken from an earlier pamphlet by Hyman on *Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unionism* (London, 1972), pp. 43-44.

<sup>10</sup> Price, “‘What’s in a Name’”, pp. 10-11; *Masters, Unions and Men*, pp. 16-17.

no reason why the supposed caution of trade union leaders should become a point of *criticism*, as it clearly is for Price and Cronin, or why “autonomous regulation” and informality should always be considered “equally rational and natural” strategies for workers as formal organization and central coordination.<sup>11</sup>

As my original article observed, however, “rank and filists” often hedge their positions with significant qualifications and acknowledge many of the empirical difficulties highlighted by my critique. Thus Price, for example, admits that “we tend to oversimplify the categorical distinction between ‘officialdom’ and ‘rank and file’ ”, while Hyman as I have noted goes much further in accepting the impossibility of locating “the problem of ‘bureaucracy’ ” within trade unions in any “distinct stratum of personnel”.<sup>12</sup> Both writers are also aware that workers “in many situations may be more conscious of those interests which divide them from other groups of workers than of those that unite them”; and Hyman in particular is sensitive to the “need for both leadership and discipline” to overcome sectionalism “*within* shop-floor union organisations”.<sup>13</sup>

But the crucial question is not whether individual authors are aware of these difficulties, but whether they can be satisfactorily accounted for within the interpretative framework of “rank and filism”. For after all, such phenomena as unofficial strikes or membership revolts were hardly news to the institutionalist labour historians like the Webbs or Clegg, Fox and Thompson against whom the “rank and filists” initially defined their position (and whose views they arguably caricature themselves).<sup>14</sup> My own judgement, as I argued originally, is that the qualifications added by the more sophisticated exponents of “rank and filism” have expanded the paradigm’s empirical reference only at the cost of diluting its explanatory power.

## II

If “rank and filism” is to have any explanatory value, there must be some possibility of assessing the empirical validity of the substantive propositions

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25, 30.

<sup>12</sup> Price, *Masters, Unions and Men*, p. 17; Hyman, “Politics of Workplace Trade Unionism”, p. 61.

<sup>13</sup> Hyman, *Industrial Relations*, pp. 42-3; *idem*, “Politics of Workplace Trade Unionism”, pp. 59-60, 55-56.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, the quotation from Clegg, Fox and Thompson cited by Price, “‘What’s in a Name?’ ”, pp. 13-14. For a fuller discussion of these writers’ view, see my “From Labour History to the History of Industrial Relations”, *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, LI, 2 (1987).

to which it is committed. My original article identified four major difficulties for a “rank-and-filist” approach in accounting for the observable pattern of workplace industrial relations in Britain since the late nineteenth century: the absence of a clear distinction between trade union officials and the “rank and file”; the fact that leaders were often more militant than their members; the importance of central union coordination and formal bargaining procedures in sustaining job controls; and the responsiveness of even quite authoritarian unions to pressure from below. Both Price and Cronin accept that there is an element of truth in these contentions, but deny that they present major problems for a “rank-and-filist” analysis. Let us examine each point in turn.

Both Price and Cronin agree that “the dividing line between officials and members was often blurred and shifting”, “that the precise interaction between them has varied with the internal structure of the union”, and that “the term ‘rank and file’ does not entirely capture that complexity”.<sup>15</sup> Price also accepts that much conflict within trade unions has its roots in factional struggles for power among rival groups of potential leaders, each seeking support from sections of the membership, rather than simple struggles between the “leadership” on the one hand and the “membership” on the other. At the same time, however, he insists that despite its defects the term “rank and file” remains a better way to characterize the behaviour of “ordinary union members”, “the ordinary mason, bricklayer and others” than the term “interest group” (which nowhere figures in my argument). Before 1914, Price maintains, internal union conflicts in sectors like building or engineering had little to do with factional struggles for power, though presumably he would acknowledge that organized opposition groupings became more important during and after the First World War.

These claims are open to a number of objections. Contrary to Price’s assumptions, those most deeply involved in internal conflicts within trade unions were normally local activists or officials rather than “ordinary workers”. In unions such as the ASE, elections for office were hotly contested, and there was considerable turnover of officials from the district committee on upwards to the General Secretary; from the early 1890s onwards, such contests were strongly influenced by wider political ideas such as socialism and syndicalism, as well as principled disagreements over union policy. My argument, it should be clear, is not that internal debates over bargaining strategy were cynical manoeuvres in political contests for union office, but rather that such debates cannot be divorced from the process of factional struggle, nor active participants such as district officials

<sup>15</sup> Cronin, “The ‘Rank and File’ ”, p. 82; Price, “ ‘What’s in a Name?’ ”, p. 70.

or even shop stewards assimilated unproblematically to a “rank and file” of “ordinary workers”.

More importantly, perhaps, if Price continues to understate the heterogeneity of trade union leaders, he grossly exaggerates the homogeneity of “ordinary workers” or the “rank and file”. Industries like building and engineering were deeply riven with sectional divisions among workers – whether based on occupation, skill, locality, ethnicity or gender – and these played a central part in intra-union as well as inter-union conflicts. In his response to my article Price treats such divisions among workers as largely the product of manipulation by union officials, drawing on a case study of racial discrimination in the National Union of Seamen between the wars, though elsewhere he acknowledges the pervasiveness of sectionalism and exclusiveness within the nineteenth-century labour movement. But nowhere does Price really seem to take on board the significance of such continuing sectional divisions for his conception of a homogeneous “rank and file” set off from trade union officials: many types of job control, for example, were aimed as much at other groups of workers as at employers, such as the masons’ efforts to prohibit the movement of “worked stone” from one locality to another which he celebrates in *Masters, Unions and Men*.<sup>16</sup>

This diversity of actors and concerns within the categories of both union officialdom and the “rank and file” points directly to the second empirical difficulty highlighted in my critique: the impossibility of identifying the former with moderation and economism and the latter with militancy and the struggle for control. Both Price and Cronin accept that union leaders can on occasion be more militant than their members. For Cronin, however, this “hardly disproves the general point that leaders over time tend to become more cautious than those they lead”, while for Price, the crucial difference lies in the objects of militancy: the leadership may be more militant on procedural rules, the workgroup more militant on work control issues such as walking time in building.<sup>17</sup>

Despite Price’s assertions, however, this opposition between types of militancy does not fit well with the historical evidence. Not only were craft unions and their leaders in sectors like engineering, shipbuilding and even building itself deeply committed to job control objectives such as the regulation of apprenticeship, machine manning and demarcation, but we

<sup>16</sup> Price, “ ‘What’s in a Name?’ ”, pp. 16-21; “The Labour Process and Labour History”, *Social History*, 8 (1983), p. 61; *Labour in British Society: An Interpretative History* (London, 1986), pp. 83-8, 93-4, 127-30. For a valuable discussion of the sectionalism of job control practices on the waterfront, see John Lovell, “Sail, Steam and Emergent Dockers’ Unionism in Britain, 1850-1914”, *International Review of Social History*, 32 (1987).

<sup>17</sup> Cronin, “The ‘Rank and File’ ”, p. 82; Price, “ ‘What’s in a Name?’ ”, p. 72.

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can also find important cases in which shop-floor workers were more prepared to compromise with employers on job control issues than union officials themselves. In engineering, for example, the district committees of the ASE had long sought to regulate payment by results and overtime working by issuing unilateral instructions to union members within their territory, and after the abrogation of the Terms of Settlement in 1914 they were free to do so without the constraint of formal agreements with employers. But during and immediately after the First World War, workers in individual firms often proved willing to oblige their employers and augment their earnings by accepting overtime work or payment by results against union orders, and the great sticking point between the AEU and the EEF in the national negotiations on working conditions between 1919 and 1922 was the former's insistence that these practices should require the permission of the district committees rather than the shop stewards or works committee in the plant itself.<sup>18</sup>

Many disputes between union leaders and their members were thus rooted in differences in perspective rather than differences in objectives. Union leaders, whether at the national or the local level, were obliged by their structural location within the organization to take a wider view of bargaining strategy than individual workgroups, whose opposition to official policy could often be motivated by narrow and parochial concerns, as in the case of resistance to the admission of less skilled workers to membership in craft unions. Sometimes union leaders took a more militant stance on job control issues than shop-floor workers and sometimes the positions were reversed; but even in the latter case, as I argued in my original article, the reasons generally had more to do with the leadership's greater awareness of the objective constraints on union action than any fundamental difference in objectives.<sup>19</sup> And even where significant differences in objectives between national union leaders and sections of their membership *could* be observed, as on the Merseyside docks in 1911-12, these too were often rooted in the former's sharper perception of external constraints and their efforts to formulate a broader strategy which would also benefit the weaker sections of the union.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, the cases of Bow, McLachlan (Paisley), 1914: EEF Archives, microfilm P(2)19; William Beardmore (Dalmuir), 1915: *ibid.*, P(4)1; and "Overtime: Returns from Associations, September 1921", *ibid.*, O(7)28. The national negotiations on working conditions can be followed in the multi-volume transcripts held at the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, MSS. 237/1/13/1 and 237/1/12/4-13. For a fuller analysis, see my forthcoming book, *The Triumph of Adversarial Bargaining: Industrial Relations in British Engineering, 1880-1939* (Oxford, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, the discussion of the relationship between the ASE executive and unofficial strikers during the First World War, in Zeitlin, "'Rank and Filism' and British Labour History: A Critique", p. 50.

<sup>20</sup> Thus, as Lovell argues, "The limited and conditional recognition accorded to the



No empirical proposition has been more salient in recent “rank-and-filist” writing than the claim that official trade unionism and formal collective bargaining procedures have typically reinforced management prerogatives on the shop floor against workers’ informal struggles for job controls. And it is for this reason that the evidence presented in my article of the vital role for job control played by formal bargaining procedures and central union coordination seems to me so damaging to the “rank-and-filist” case.<sup>21</sup> Cronin, for his part, acknowledges that “ ‘autonomous regulation’ was not always effective” and “bargaining procedures often enhanced workers’ control at the workplace, at least for a time”. Price, on the other hand, simply ignores my arguments about the weakness of “autonomous regulation” during the late nineteenth century and the centrality of formal organization in sustaining job controls, while accepting that formal collective bargaining procedures in some sectors not only strengthened union organization, but once in place “could serve to conserve existing gains” or even “obstruct managerial freedom”. At the same time, however, he contends that the significance of such procedures should be judged not by their results but rather by their origins: the promised “stabilisation of industrial relations” which attracted employers and unions to them in the first place.<sup>22</sup>

Price’s argument about the origins and results of collective bargaining is little short of bizarre, and if accepted would be fatal to “rank and filism” as a whole. For as the closely related debate about “social control” has demonstrated, it is the outcomes generated by a strategy or institution which establish its historical significance, not the unrealized intentions and

national unions seems to confirm Price’s view as to the nature of formalised industrial relations systems. Yet for unions that aspired to more than a merely local significance, there was no alternative but to come to terms with the large steamship companies. The terms upon which such an accommodation could be reached might not, from the union standpoint, have been ideal, but some degree of joint regulation, on a permanent basis, was surely preferable to a continuance of unilateral managerial control, restrained only by intermittent outbursts of spontaneous insurgency [. . .]. National union leaders looked towards the transformation of the casual dock labour market as a whole, a comprehensive change entailing standardised conditions and greater regularity of employment for all dockers. Such a strategy, however [. . .] held greatest appeal for the weakest among them, so that work groups that had discovered a capacity to assert their sectional interests were less inclined to compromise their own immediate objectives in the interest of the long-run policy goals of the institution” (“Sail, Steam and Emergent Dockers’ Unionism”, pp. 247, 249).

<sup>21</sup> In addition to the cases discussed in my original article, see Lovell, “Sail, Steam and Emergent Dockers’ Unionism”, especially p. 246: “[. . .] formal procedures, in themselves, did not threaten traditional regulatory practices. They could in fact contribute to their amplification and more general observance”.

<sup>22</sup> Cronin, “The ‘Rank and File’ ”, p. 82; Price, “ ‘What’s in a Name?’ ”, pp. 67-9; 72-3; *Labour in British Society*, pp. 100-101.

mistaken expectations of its original promoters.<sup>23</sup> If formal collective bargaining procedures did not reinforce managerial prerogatives at the expense of workers' job controls in practice as well as in theory, at least in the longer term, there could be little substance to "rank and filism" as, in Price's words, an account of "the shift from an informal to a formal system of industrial relations, a consideration of how that transition occurred and of its implications for employer-worker and worker-union relations".<sup>24</sup> But neither Cronin nor Price presents any evidence to suggest that the constraints imposed on managerial freedom by formal bargaining procedures were a transitory phenomenon whose importance decreased over time.

The final problem for "rank and filism" raised by my critique was the abundant evidence of membership influence on union government and policy. Here again, Price accepts that trade union leaders could be subject to considerable democratic constraints, while arguing that my analysis ignores inequalities of power within trade unions and fails to recognize historical variations in governance structures which made some unions such as the ASE or the Boilermakers' Society markedly more open to membership pressures than others such as the National Union of Railwaymen in the 1920s or the Transport and General Workers in the 1950s. But even if my analysis of union democracy were correct, Price contends, it would merely reinforce one of his central contentions: "that the 'rank and file' are also among the determinant agents of labour's history".<sup>25</sup>

On this issue as on others, Price's response itself rests on a misleading caricature of my arguments. As my references to oligarchy and authoritarianism indicate, I was hardly unaware of inequalities of power within trade unions; rather I sought to show that even in relatively centralized and autocratic unions (as the Boilermakers, for example, have usually been taken to be), leaders were open to effective pressure from below. The subsequent evolution of the internal politics of the NUR in the 1930s and the TGWU in the 1960s and 70s, it should be added, both amply demonstrate the wider organizational and chronological applicability of this generalization.<sup>26</sup> But this evidence of internal democracy within trade unions can hardly be taken to support a "rank-and-filist" analysis, since it suggests that union policy was shaped not by an underlying clash between a moderate

<sup>23</sup> See Gareth Stedman Jones, "'Class Expression' or 'Social Control'? Reflections on Recent Trends in the Social History of Leisure", in his *Languages of Class* (Cambridge, 1983); and F.M.L. Thompson, "Social Control in Victorian Britain", *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, XXXIV, 2 (1981).

<sup>24</sup> Price, "What's in a Name?", p. 69.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Hyman, "Rank-and-File Movements and Workplace Organisation, 1914-39", in C.J. Wrigley (ed.), *A History of British Industrial Relations, 1914-39* (Brighton, 1986), pp. 149-52; Roger Undy, "The Devolution of Bargaining Levels and Responsibilities in the Transport and General Workers' Union 1965-75", *Industrial Relations Journal* 5 (1975).

leadership and a militant “rank and file”, but rather by a complex process of internal politics in which neither party can be sharply differentiated from the other.

No accumulation of discordant facts, as I observed at the outset, can ever conclusively disprove a theory. And as will be evident from this exchange, Price, Cronin and I disagree less about the facts of British labour history as such than about their interpretation and their implications for the empirical validity of “rank and filism”. Readers will have to judge for themselves which interpretation they find more persuasive and whether the “awkward facts” accepted by Price and Cronin themselves can ultimately be squared with the theoretical tenets of “rank and filism”. But whatever the outcome, two fundamental questions remain. What sort of evidence beyond that presented in my critique would be required to falsify the substantive propositions of “rank and filism”? And what explanatory power can be ascribed to a theoretical paradigm whose claims must be qualified so heavily to accommodate the findings of empirical research?

### III

Whatever the empirical validity of “rank and filism” as an interpretation of British labour history, both Price and Cronin agree that it can only be judged as part of a broader project: “workplace history” or “the social history of the working class”. In breaking away from labour history’s traditional focus on institutions and organizations, the aspiration guiding “rank and filists” was “to develop an approach, a methodology to recover the lives of ordinary people and their beliefs and practices”, to discover the role played in the historical process by “the actions of ordinary workers”; “the workplace was seen as a useful point of entry to study power and authority relations within the working class [ . . . ]. Workplace history hoped to capture at an intimate level one of the most important social relationships in society – that between worker and employer – and allow us to admit both agents into the historical process rather than seeing one or the other as passive or one-dimensional.”<sup>27</sup> Hence, they charge, the alternative paradigm for understanding internal conflict within trade unions put forward in my critique marks an unjustifiable narrowing of the “rank and filists” concerns; while the proposal I have advanced elsewhere to recast labour history as the history of industrial relations likewise represents an “avowedly conservative” attempt to “recap the bottle” and return the field to the narrow boundaries established by previous generations of historians.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Cronin, “The ‘Rank and File’ ”, p. 84; Price, “ ‘What’s in a Name?’ ”, p. 64.

<sup>28</sup> Cronin, “The ‘Rank and File’ ”, pp. 83-4, 87-8; Price, “ ‘What’s in a Name?’ ”, pp. 74-77; Zeitlin, “From Labour History to the History of Industrial Relations”.

Here, as elsewhere in our exchange, however, Price and Cronin fail to recognize the way their prior theoretical assumptions shape the definition of the points in dispute. Thus to recast “rank and filism” as the “social history of the working class” is merely to restate the original problem in different terms. For the claim that conflicts between trade union leaders and their members are an expression of the broader formation of the working class rests on the same questionable assumptions as “rank and filism” itself: that industrial relations and industrial conflict are “really” about class struggle whatever institutional form they may take. Between the “lives of ordinary people” or the “actions of ordinary workers” and the “social history of the working class”, moreover, stands a significant conceptual gap which the proliferation of research to which Price and Cronin allude has if anything helped to widen. For the more closely historians have examined the experience of working people, whether in the workplace or the community, the less plausible appears the received image of the working class as a latent collectivity united by objective common interests, and the more salient becomes the role of institutions such as trade unions, political parties and the state in defining the changing contours of collective action and identity.<sup>29</sup> In this sense, despite Price’s protestations, the concept of the “working class” is *inherently* teleological, if used as an analytical category rather than an empty descriptive term such as “ordinary workers”: it implies that all members of this category can be expected to recognize a common interest inscribed in their objective position (unless obstructed by some inhibiting factor), even if the political and organizational expressions of that interest are acknowledged to be more variable than in classical Marxism.<sup>30</sup>

Nor is it more helpful to the “rank-and-filist” case to redefine the problem as “workplace history”. For the differences between us, as Price sometimes recognizes, revolve not around whether to study the workplace but rather around the interpretative framework deployed for that purpose: whether, as he argues, the workplace should be seen as the site of an ongoing power struggle between workers and employers as distinct classes with objectively antagonistic interests, and trade union growth and other

<sup>29</sup> For recent discussions of the British literature, see Ross McKibbin, “Why Was There No Marxism in Great Britain?”, *English Historical Review* (1984); Alastair Reid, “The Division of Labour and Politics in Britain, 1880-1920”, in W.J. Mommsen and H.G. Husung (eds), *The Development of Trade Unionism in Great Britain and Germany, 1880-1914* (London, 1985); and *idem*, “Class and Organization”, *Historical Journal* 30 (1987).

<sup>30</sup> Price, “What’s in a Name?”, pp. 68-9. For a persuasive overview of the theoretical weaknesses of class analysis more generally, see Barry Hindess, *Politics and Class Analysis* (Oxford, 1987).

features of the emergent industrial relations system understood as “the product of workplace social relations between workers and employers”.<sup>31</sup> Far from showing disinterest in such big questions as “why British labour developed the way it did” or why workshop organization and job control became central features of British labour history, as Price charges, I have simply proposed different answers to those he favours. Thus as Price acknowledges, I have elsewhere argued at some length (supported by a body of evidence whose interpretation can no doubt be debated) that workplace industrial relations in Britain were shaped less by informal social groups or impersonal social and economic processes than by institutional forces: above all the organization and strategies of trade unions, employers and the state.<sup>32</sup>

This is not, perhaps, the place for an extended elaboration or defence of the neo-institutionalist interpretative framework which underpins this claim.<sup>33</sup> But a few points can nonetheless be made in response to the criticism levied by Price and Cronin. First, I do not suggest that labour history should literally return to the institutionalism of the Webbs or Clegg, Fox and Thompson, whatever the undoubted value of their work. The reconceptualization of labour history as the history of industrial relations, I argue, requires the abandonment of teleological models of institutional development – such as the idea that trade union growth was “the product of an inexorable process of associational maturity amongst workers” – as well as the determinist assumptions about the objective interests of social groups shared by institutionalists and “rank and filists” alike.<sup>34</sup>

Second, while Price is surely right to say that “institutions are the product of historical circumstances which include economic and social processes as well as other institutions”, this observation constitutes not a dilemma or “blind alley” for a neo-institutionalist approach to labour history, but rather an opportunity to develop its implications through historical research. For as Price implicitly admits, there can be no “zero hour” or “state of nature” in history when the origins and functions of institutions can be determined by economic processes or social interests, since the former always permit a variety of institutional responses while the latter are continually transformed by the operation of institutions themselves.<sup>35</sup> Thus, for

<sup>31</sup> Price, “‘What’s in a Name?’”, pp. 63-5.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63, 73, 75; Zeitlin, “From Labour History to the History of Industrial Relations”; “Industrial Structure, Employer Strategies and the Diffusion of Job Control in Britain, 1880-1920”, in Mommsen and Husung, *Development of Trade Unionism*.

<sup>33</sup> See “From Labour History to the History of Industrial Relations” for a fuller exposition.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 160-9, 178; Price, “‘What’s in a Name?’”, p. 64.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28. For an interesting discussion of this point in the context of “the economic theory of politics” and “the positive theory of institutions”, see Terry M. Moe, “Inter-

example, the study of labour history “before formalized institutions were established”, presents no special difficulties for such an approach, but simply requires us to be attentive to a wider range of institutions than trade unions and employers’ associations (whose importance eighteenth and early nineteenth-century historians are tending in any case to reassert): from parliamentary legislation, the magistracy, the courts and the poor law to guilds and chartered companies, religious organizations and political groupings.<sup>36</sup>

Nor, finally, is there any reason why a neo-institutionalist history of industrial relations should neglect other aspects of workers’ lives such as kinship, gender, migration, housing or leisure insofar as these have an impact on the changing relationships between trade unions, employers’ organizations and the state. And even when they do not, there is no suggestion that such topics do not merit historical study in their own right, though one might still insist, as I have argued elsewhere, “that social relationships, whether in the workplace, the family or the wider community, can never be understood without reference to the operation of formal institutions, just as the latter can never be determined by reference to the objective interests of pre-existing social groups”.<sup>37</sup> But without the theoretical assumption of the working class as a latent collectivity with common interests, there is no reason why such studies should cohere into a unified sub-discipline of “labour history” rather than contributing to the seamless web of history *tout court*.

ests, Institutions and Positive Theory: The Case of the NLRB”, in *Studies in American Political Development*, vol. 2 (New Haven, 1987), especially pp. 273-99.

<sup>36</sup> Price, “What’s in a Name?””, p. 76. For a useful survey of recent research on early trade unionism, see John Rule (ed.), *British Trade Unionism, 1750-1850: The Formative Years* (London, 1988); “While there might still be room for disagreement over what were the typical forms, objectives and contexts for eighteenth-century trade unionism”, the editor concludes, “there can be no doubt that by the time of the passing of the Combination Acts in 1799 and 1800, organised labour was an important presence in the manufacturing economy of Britain”: *ibid.* p. 10.

<sup>37</sup> Zeitlin, “From Labour History to the History of Industrial Relations”, p. 178.