

# 1



## Globalisation, restructuring and the flexibility discourse



Industrialisation characteristically redesigns and reshapes its human raw materials, whatever the source ... The development of an industrial workforce necessarily involves the destruction of old ways of life and work and the acceptance of the new imperatives of the industrial work place and work community. (Kerr *et al.*, 1962: 193)

Industries and firms almost everywhere are said to be leaving behind the old, tired, boring, inefficient, staid past and entering into the new, highly efficient, diverse, exciting, and flexible future; and if they are not, they should be. (Curry, 1993: 99)

Throughout much of the twentieth century the social sciences have invoked ‘master concepts’ (Giddens, 1982) in the explanation and shaping of patterns of social change. The use of the action-process verb form<sup>1</sup> – in modernisation, industrialisation, globalisation – imbues the concepts with a sense of movement, logic and direction. Simultaneously, they operate as nouns that name and describe a historical condition, thus offering an elusive promise of a destination that can never quite be reached (Ashley, 2000). For a group of sociologists writing in the 1960s, the master concept of industrialisation captured the dynamics of transformation in a form that effectively enabled social change to be ordered and mastered. Industrial capitalism, with its inherent contradictions, was viewed as a temporary and transitory form of industrial society. The processes of industrialisation and technological advance defined all economic and social organisation, ultimately leading all societies passively to a convergent system of ‘pluralistic industrialism’ (Kerr *et al.*, 1962: 266). The concept of industrialisation itself acquired an imperative logic that named and defined the parameters of new forms of production, work and social life. It offered the enticing prospect of a defined destination, coupled with an explanation of the transformations that should be expected along the way.

In contemporary times the new master concept of globalisation has become the explanatory tool that is applied to all areas of economy, polity and society. The concept has become a kind of horse for every course, infinitely malleable and amorphous, ‘vague in referent’ and ‘ambiguous in usage’ (Jones,

1995: 1). Indeed, some have concluded that the term should be abandoned to prevent its reification in political, academic and corporate debates. However, it is precisely the amorphous and empty nature of the concept that gives it the capacity to exercise power. It can be filled with multiple meanings and used to legitimate a range of restructuring programmes, from labour market flexibility and mobility, to privatisation. Of course, the contemporary period of globalisation is commonly defined as a break from the logics of industrialisation, taking the form of, for example, the 'post-industrial society' (Castells, 1989) or 'post-Fordism' (Lipietz, 1987; Piore and Sabel, 1984). However, the representations of industrialisation and globalisation make common appeals to notions of technological externality, epochal newness and novelty and convergence in economic and social organisation. As devices employed to explain the human and social world, the concepts of industrialisation and globalisation as 'processes' represent highly simplified understandings of social change. They embody 'problem-solving' approaches to knowledge (Cox, 1981: 128), reflecting a preference for generalisable and codifiable modes of thought, and informing the terms of a policy discourse.

In the attempt to highlight the contested nature of globalisation in production and work, a first step is to question its role in underpinning and legitimating the all-pervasive discourse of flexibility. In this chapter the common discursive dynamics of the industrialisation and globalisation theses are explored. The analysis focuses on five common aspects that reveal a central dominant representation of social change: the identification of exogenous transformative forces, disciplinary imperatives, historical convergence, social prescription and the death of conflict. I argue that it is these assumptions about social change that underpin and perpetuate the contemporary discourse of imperative labour flexibility. Flexibility itself has an amorphous quality that allows it to be applied 'flexibly' to describe the many facets of the contemporary restructuring agenda. In line with globalisation, flexibility comes simultaneously to mean all things and yet nothing precise at all. The discourse on flexibility pervades the policy agenda of the competition state (Cerny, 1990; Porter, 1990), the restructuring strategies of firms (Ruigrok and van Tulder, 1995) and the everyday experiences of workers (Pollert, 1991; Beck, 2000b). The conception of globalisation as a process reinforces the assumption that the state is compelled to 'retreat' or adopt new policy instruments (Strange, 1996), the flexible firm in a 'global web' is the essential corporate strategy for a global era (Atkinson, 1985; Reich, 1991) and that workers must accept greater risk and insecurity as they 'make the leap' to new practices.

### **Transformative forces**

The proponents of the industrial society thesis identified exogenous factors as the central driving forces of industrialisation. A society is driven into adaptation by the challenges that exist 'on the outside' or 'by the exigencies of the situation

external to it' (Parsons, 1960: 138). Viewed in this way, the principal characteristic of all industrial societies is that progress is dependent upon the absorption of exogenous technological advances and the adaptation of social practices to their dictates. The assumption is that the 'more modern' is always the 'more superior' (Kerr *et al.*, 1962: 279) so that the diversity of the pre-industrial world is gradually homogenised through the advancement of technology: 'Technology is a unifying force. At one moment in time there may be several best economic combinations or social arrangements, but only one best technology' (Kerr *et al.*, 1962: 284). Technology is presented as a universal force that imposes common challenges on all advanced states and societies. The progress of science, technology and production methods essentially determine the actions to be taken by state actors, industrialists and workers. In a sense technology becomes both structure and agent as it simultaneously acts to initiate change and defines the structures within which change takes place. Transformations in social relations, practices and values are held to emerge out of technological change and this unilinear logic is never reversed.

The predominant image in the orthodox accounts of globalisation is of similarly exogenous forces that act upon states and societies. Conventional logic would have it that a series of conjunctural events in the 1970s effectively freed the globalisation 'genie' from his lamp and marked the emergence of a distinctive global era. The collapse of the Bretton Woods System, the oil shocks, the claims to US decline and the subsequent emergence of globalised financial and productive systems, all are offered as explanations of a transformed world order. However, it is not the events themselves that have informed the predominant explanations of global change. Rather, it is the technological and market forces held to lie behind them that are most commonly perceived as 'creating globalisation'. Susan Strange argues that 'technology has got ahead of regulation' (1997a: 54) with the effect that technological change has become the 'prime cause of the shift in the state-market balance of power' (1996: 7). Others assert that 'at the heart of the flexibilization of both production processes and firms themselves has been the explosive development of information technology' (Cerny, 1995: 615). Variants of post-Fordist analysis position technology as the driving force of change, arguing that the productivity gains central to the Fordist system become eroded by maturing technologies. The system of production itself then transforms from Fordist mass production and consumption with its associated technologies, to post-Fordist 'flexible specialisation' (Freeman and Perez, 1988). There is an overwhelming sense of inevitability in these accounts of the 'domino effect' of technology acting on states and societies that, in turn, act to restructure production and work. Strange writes: '*Accelerating technological change ... explains the rapid internationalization of production in the world market economy, a process which, inevitably, relaxes the authority of the state over the enterprises based and directed from inside their territorial borders*' (Strange, 1995: 59, emphasis added).

Globalisation is thus presented in terms of the opposing forces of, on the one hand, technology acting from without and, on the other, politics and society simply responding from within. The 'deterritorialised' forces of finance (Wriston, 1988; Cerny, 1996; McKenzie and Lee, 1991), production and trade (Porter, 1990; Reich, 1991) and culture (Fukuyama, 1992) are cast in opposition to the presumed territorial realities of state and society. States and societies are consistently positioned as passive receivers of technological transformation. We are left with the impression that global restructuring is nothing more than an effect of the 'global process' of technological interpenetration. As Marchand and Runyan argue, a mythical image is created in which globalisation becomes 'a process generated outside our own (immediate) environment' (2000: 7). When conceived as 'outside' our immediate experiences, the technologically-driven globalisation process becomes conveniently and safely insulated from the politics of negotiation, contestation and resistance.

### Disciplinary imperatives

To represent globalisation and industrialisation as the products of exogenous forces is to assume that transformation is to some degree an inevitable response to irresistible pressures. It is but a short step from this inevitabilism to the assertion that there is no alternative for states and societies but to adapt and restructure their policies, structures and practices. For the scholars writing at the peak of post-war growth, the most significant transition was considered to be that from traditional to industrial society. This shift represented the underlying movement in all state-societies as they responded to external pressures. Talcott Parsons' systems-centred social theory sought to understand the adaptation of social systems in line with pressures from 'outside': 'In the present situation, for the "diffusion" of this organizational type [*industrialism*] from the Western world to other areas, it seems clear that the most favourable conditions will center on the *right type* of political initiative' (1960: 128, emphasis added).

There is an in-built disciplinary imperative here – it becomes incumbent on states and societies to respond with the 'right' strategies. The imperative of industrialisation is expressed in terms of political responses that are 'essential', 'rational' and 'right'. A reading of Daniel Bell reveals a belief in a generally held consensus on the 'right' forms of political organisation: 'the acceptance of a welfare state; the desirability of decentralised power; a system of mixed economy and of political pluralism' (1961: 402). Viewed in this way there can be no impediment to, or contingency in, the processes of restructuring and transformation. Social relations, institutions and practices are at once structurally determined, yet rendered inherently malleable and adaptable: 'Even the most economically advanced countries today are to some degree and in some respects underdeveloped. They contain features derived from earlier stages of development which obscure the pure logic of the industrialization process'

(Kerr *et al.*, 1962: 33). Social change is characterised in periods or epochs of social arrangements that prevail until external conditions dictate that they undergo further transformation. The disciplinary dynamic of the process is reinforced by a presumed desire for modernisation that ultimately drives out difference and distinctiveness, leaving one clear route. Societies are assumed to absorb the imperatives of transformation such that they sustain them with their own thoughts, actions and desires.

The notion of an epochal shift and essential political and social adaptation is inherent within diverse accounts of globalisation. In common with the industrial society theories, the external forces of the global economy are viewed as creating imperatives for the restructuring of state and society. In contrast with these theories, however, the norms that are established are for the 'retreat of the state' (Strange, 1996), the 'hollowing out of the state' (Cerny, 1996: 91) and the rise of the 'competition state' (Cerny, 1990). The transformations from a perceived old to a new epoch are characterised in terms of shifts: from 'comparative' to 'competitive' advantage (Porter, 1990); from the 'decommodifying' to the 'commodifying' state (Cerny, 1990); and from 'industrial' to 'post-industrial' society (Hepworth, 1989; Block, 1990). While commentators do not agree on the normative aspects of such transformations (some celebrate the process, while others condemn it), both liberal and neo-Marxist theorists share common ground on the extent of global change. Among the more extreme formulations we read that: 'The nation-state has become an unnatural, even dysfunctional, unit for organizing human activity and managing economic endeavour in a borderless world' (Ohmae, 1990: 93). The dissolution of state authority and the rise of marketised frameworks of authority are presented as imperative transformations in a globalisation process. Fundamental breaks with the past are staked out and labelled in diverse ways, though with remarkably similar effects. Among the diverse perspectives on post-Fordism, common notions of epochal shifts are communicated, whether through 'regimes of accumulation' (Aglietta, 1979; Lipietz, 1987; Boyer, 1986), 'techno-economic paradigms' of the neo-Schumpeterians (Freeman and Perez, 1988) or 'industrial divides' (Piore and Sabel, 1984).

In process-centred accounts of globalisation there is a certain predilection for claims to novelty, the staking out of a capitalist 'crossroads' and the establishment of a qualitative break with the past. As Rob Walker observes '... it is undoubtedly tempting to exaggerate the novelty of novelty' (1993: 2). With the ethereal lure of industrialism or globalism on the horizon, it becomes possible to legitimate particular policy decisions on the basis of 'no alternative'. The very idea of an imperative process of change creates a sense of urgency that dictates a particular response from society. While acknowledging the competing normative views within the 'globalisation as process' perspective, there is an identifiable common emphasis on discontinuity. It is possible to either celebrate or condemn the process but still to agree that it is essentially inexorable. A sense of 'no alternative' prevails and politics becomes confined

to instrumental discussions of the 'right' and 'competitive' way to respond and harness the opportunities of the new stage. In effect, the 'no alternative' logic reinforces the sense of disciplinary imperatives. The hypermobility of foreign direct investment (FDI capital, for example, can be constructed and reinforced through the 'talked up' threat of exit (Watson and Hay, 1998). The state and public policy become disciplined by the need to prove their credibility and consistency and secure the confidence of their investors (Gill, 1999). In this way, sometimes wholly inadvertently, the 'disciplinary forces of neoliberalism' (Gill, 1995a) can be perpetuated and reinforced by the straightjacket effect of dominant modes of thought.

### Historical convergence

The assumption that technological advances force change, and that this change is part of an inexorable and inevitable process, has tended to lead to the perceived logic of convergence. From divergent historical and cultural viewpoints, diverse institutional arrangements and distinctive social power relations, societies are believed to become increasingly alike in their basic structures. As John Goldthorpe argues:

This is the general model of society most consistent with the functional imperatives that a rationally operating technology and economy impose: and *it is in fact the pressure of these imperatives which must be seen as forcing the development of industrial societies on to convergent lines*, whatever the distinctive features of their historical formation or of their pre-industrial cultural traditions. (1984: 316, emphasis in original)

Industrial society was said to take precedence over capitalist society because all technologically advanced countries displayed similar structures, whether capitalist or not (Aron, 1967). In this sense capitalist industrialisation was but a moment in a longer historical drive to industrialism. Much of this argument was based on the analysis of the ideologically divergent US and Soviet Union, arguing that they were following a convergent path of industrialisation, as in Talcott Parsons' work: 'Virtually the whole world has, within our time, come to assign to economic productivity a very high value indeed. The essential differences between American and Soviet orientations, which some feel is the deepest difference in the world, is not primarily a difference over the valuation of productivity' (Parsons, 1960: 100).

The suggestion is that despite divergence in ideologies, institutions and practices, the overriding trend is towards a convergence around basic organising principles. Societies may be 'travelling at different speeds on different roads' (Kerr *et al.*, 1962: 2), but the consensus is that the direction and destination are the same. The 'uniformity of texture' and similarities in 'patterns of behaviour' are considered to be the significant features of social transformation (Shonfield, 1965: 65). The focus lies firmly on the commonalties

between societies and these are then 'aggregated up' to form a systemic theory of social change.

The tendency to presuppose a process of historical convergence is characteristic also of many contemporary accounts of the globalisation process. It is striking that Susan Strange associates IPE with the study of the structural dynamics of the world economy as a whole: 'As an international political economist, I am more interested in the pace and direction of change in the whole world market economy than in the pace and direction of change in particular parts of it contained within the rather arbitrary territorial borders of states' (Strange, 1997b: 182). With a particular focus on the future of distinctive national 'versions' of capitalism, Strange argues that the 'common logics' of world markets would lead all states and societies on to a convergent pattern of change (1997b: 182). Of course, Strange does this to emphasise the extent of transnational sources of power and authority. However, it would seem problematic to represent globalisation as a singular process of political and social convergence and, in doing so, to ignore the many different interpretations of globalisation. Social change becomes a matter of common pressures promoting convergent solutions. Where difference is acknowledged this tends to be framed in terms of a 'pathway' that may temporarily diverge from the dominant route.

Within the convergence accounts there are specific policy instruments suggested as the common ground for states and societies. In the 1960s the convergent trends were identified as the extension of public power in a modern capitalist system, the preoccupation with social welfare and the acceptance of a steady growth in incomes and wages (Shonfield, 1965: 65). As discussion of globalisation took hold in the 1990s, convergent trends were mapped out that represented the complete reversal of these ideals. We see the extension of private power in the global system, the shift from welfare state to competition state (Cerny, 1990), and the acceptance of labour flexibility and wage restraint as policy doxa (World Bank, 1995). The global competition imperative is overwhelmingly adopted as a business mantra, provoking debates regarding the 'right path' for the twenty-first-century organisation of the production and labour processes (see Peck and Tickell, 1994; Peters and Waterman, 1995), and for nations to follow in their response to globalisation (Reich, 1991; Department for International Development, 2000). The overwhelming image is one of a convergence of state policy, firm behaviour, and societal response around a single 'best' solution. Much of this analysis subordinates the politics of restructuring to the economic imperative of particular policy responses. Distinctive social institutions, understandings and practices are neglected in the process of identifying converging agendas.

## Policy prescription

The defining of social change in ‘process’ terms – as industrialisation or globalisation – tends to avoid engagement with the inherent ‘messiness’ of social and political life. This problem-solving mode of knowledge simplifies and codifies social change into a series of identifiable (and predictable) shifts. In a pure form, this approach seeks to emulate the natural science model of observation, rule-generation and application. The post-war behavioural revolution in social science embodied a search for reliable causal theory that could explain social and political activity. The ambition was to simplify the complexity of social and political processes into a generally applicable theory. As Easton has it: ‘Industrialism need not force us into what we consider to be the evils of urban life. Knowing what the effects of undirected industrial development are, we can use relevant generalizations to help construct a new pattern of life’ (1965: 30).

The idea that if we can identify and know the process then we can learn how to respond to it is never far from view. There is a close relationship between process-centred models of social change and the desire to discipline or manage a political response. I am not suggesting that contemporary accounts of globalisation adopt a behavioural approach to social science, but the instrumental rationality of behaviouralism is echoed in many of the dominant academic, media and corporate claims about globalisation:

People who construct knowledge in secular, anthropocentric, techno-scientific, instrumental terms have generally exercised the greatest power in global spaces. Rationalist epistemology has reigned supreme in global enterprises, global governance agencies and the more influential parts of global civil society like think tanks and professional NGOs. (Scholte, 2000: 187)

It is at this point that we begin to see the power that is exercised within and through dominant representations of globalisation. As Palan has it ‘state or transnational firms are assumed to be rational, calculating actors, with clear ... preferences and goals’ (2000: 15). Where complex and contingent dynamics of change are presented in instrumental and rational terms *descriptively*, it becomes possible to use these generalisations *prescriptively*. The nuances and contradictions of contemporary global restructuring become obscured by a burgeoning literature prescribing ‘best practice’ policy models. Following from the identification of exogenous forces that demand imperative responses, there is a space opened up for the prescription of best practice models. As Winfried Ruigrok and Rob van Tulder have argued: ‘there is a grateful market for those who translate the “new complexity” into simple formulae and unambiguous recommendations’ (1995: 1). Those analysts, consultants and auditors who make it their business to offer global solutions become the key players in both state and corporate strategy. Their pre-eminence is difficult to challenge

from within a perspective that positions them as the problem solvers in the process. Academic analysis cuts across business management and political strategy and we see the rise of gurus who occupy central space in academic, political and corporate arenas (see Ohmae, 1990; Drucker, 1995; Toffler, 1980; Giddens, 1998). Borrowing from the generalisations of the industrial society school, everything becomes 'manageable', society becomes a 'social system', politics a 'political system' and global social relations part of a 'global system'. The emphasis has been predominantly placed on the mapping of the contours of global change so that a 'route guide' can be produced to ensure successful navigation.

### The death of conflict

It is commonplace in social science to find claims to the 'end' of particular struggles at particular historical moments. In particular, there seems to be a temptation to claim that a consensus around basic core values and ideas in a society brings the end of a period of social conflict or contestation. Thus, for example, the industrial society was conceived as a pluralist system of peaceful political competition and industrial negotiation (see Dahrendorf, 1959: 67). Daniel Bell's 'End of Ideology' thesis, proclaimed that the consolidation of a Keynesian compromise had effectively erased the grounds for disruptive class conflict, offering in its place a more manageable kind of conflict (see Bell, 1961; Lipset, 1960; Waxman, 1968). In these formulations the politics of negotiation, contestation and compromise represent the struggles of transition. They are ultimately by-products of social change and can only temporarily disrupt the process. The dynamic behind social transformation is argued to lie, not in the contradictions and tensions of capitalism, but in the rational progress of technology. The rationality, achievement, mobility and plurality of the adaptive industrial society signals the 'supercedence of capitalism' (Dahrendorf, 1959: 67). Kerr *et al.* similarly argue that analysis should move beyond a focus on conflict to an examination of the 'universal phenomena affecting all workers' (1962: 7). Ultimately, this view of social change envisages a role for contest and conflict only in an unstable transitional phase that will be followed by a new and stable order with the reconciliation of social groups.<sup>2</sup>

The contemporary globalisation debate operationalises similar ideas about the dissolution of sources of social and political conflict. Among IR scholars there is debate as to the extent of the 'triumph' of liberalism (Brown, 1999). Fukuyama's (1992) *End of History* thesis represents perhaps the strongest statement that disagreement over the form and nature of politico-economic and social organisation is now of marginal concern. In terms of party politics, there is the suggestion that advanced industrialised countries have witnessed the death of socialism and the convergence of left and right (Giddens, 1998). In terms of industrial conflict, it is argued that this is confined to an adjustment phase in which the corporatist arrangements of a

Fordist era are replaced by a 'yeoman democracy' of informal networks of trust (Piore, 1990; Sabel, 1992). The emergence of the 'network society' (Castells, 1996) has been heralded by some as the harbinger of individual autonomy and freedom in the workplace (Negroponte, 1995). In these representations, political thought, action, conflict and contestation are institutionalised phenomena; they are contained by ideological positions, party politics and formalised industrial relations. As a result, it is held that once the embedded norms of the perceived past era have been totally displaced by 'new' and individualised arrangements, conflict becomes a thing of the past. A wholly benign image of global restructuring is created, within which the conflicts and struggles that characterise and condition processes of social change are invisible.

### **The restructuring of work and the flexibility discourse**

Within the mode of knowledge that frames globalisation as an essential and inexorable process, there has been a central proposed solution to the conundrum of what to do. The answer that has come back from public and private managers is to 'flexibilise', to introduce flexibility into all spheres of social life. The emergence of a political, corporate, societal and academic discourse of flexibility has become a highly visible everyday face of the globalisation debate. Flexibility, as featured in the statements of international economic institutions, national governments and corporations (see, for example World Bank, 1995; OECD, 1996; Beatson, 1995; Department for International Development, 2000), has become a multifarious concept and a universal panacea. It is presented as synonymous with deregulatory government, lean production and the flexible firm, the decollectivisation of industrial relations and the overall dissolution of work and employment into a fluid and transient form. In its broadest usage, flexibility has come to define the properties of a society that has embraced the imperatives of immediacy and risk within globalisation and has accepted the required adaptations. At its most specific and precise, flexibility defines the techniques and practices of JIT production, kaizen (continuous improvement), teamworking and 'total quality management' (TQM). In its many guises, flexibility in production and work means that entire countries, individual firms and workers can respond without delay to shifts in global demand for a good or service, and to global market shocks.

In this section I will explore the close relationship between the ascendant 'common sense' representations of globalisation as process, and the contemporary preoccupation with all things flexible. The previous section outlined the key features of such a globalist mode of knowledge: transformative forces, disciplinary imperatives, historical convergence, policy prescription and the death of conflict. The section that follows will map out the terrain of the flexibility discourse through these features. In common with some other scholars, I propose that the study of global restructuring can reveal the power,

agency and contingency that is absent from much contemporary discussion of the 'G word' (Ruigrok and van Tulder, 1995: 130; Marchand and Runyan, 2000: 7). The formulae of flexibility present in global restructuring discourse offers a particularly powerful example of the reification of a particular representation of global social change.

### *Technology, markets and the restructuring of work*

It has become commonplace to locate the intensification of global competition and the onset of neo-liberal restructuring in a particular historical period, and in relation to apparently exogenous technological and market forces. For many commentators on the transformation of work, the 1970s represent a turning point in the regulation of the international system and a benchmark for contemporary globalisation. Despite fierce disagreement over the causes and implications of the unravelling of the Bretton Woods System, the oil crises and the rejection of Keynesian demand management and welfarism, there is general agreement that the nature of regulation, production and work underwent fundamental change in response. The competitive challenge of Japan and Germany, the consolidated power of the MNCs, the crisis of Fordism and the ascendancy of 'offshore' production and finance have all become emblematic of a new world order in which the buffers between production and global markets have been eroded. Furthermore, they have become central to explanations of the 'necessary' transformations in the policies and practices of states, firms and workers in response.

The question is not whether technological and market transformations have been significant in the restructuring of production and work; of course they have played a fundamental role. Rather, the central question raised here is how these transformations have been represented as external events that are somehow decoupled from the realms of politics and social life. The claims that nation-states have, by necessity, become 'marketised', that firms adopt 'lean' strategies (Womack *et al.*, 1990), and that labour must become more flexible (Oliver and Wilkinson, 1988), are established in the context of a linear and opposed relationship between technology/markets and society/politics. The globalisation of markets in goods, services and finance is presented as a reality that is imposed 'from without' and must be seized 'from within': 'International flows of goods, services, capital, and people bring new opportunities for most ... Some workers will indeed be hurt if they are stuck in declining activities and lack the flexibility to change' (World Bank, 1995: 4). In the World Bank's statement the 'flows' are presented as external forces that may 'bring' opportunities or threats into the lives of workers. States, industries and workers that fail to recognise the shifts in their external environment will be 'left behind' in the competitive race. Flexibility is itself defined as an attribute of rapid and adaptive responsiveness to 'outside' pressures. There is a strong emphasis on the embracing of new and superior technologies and the adoption of new and

flexibilised productive and working practices in line with their dictates (see Womack *et al.*, 1990; Hirst and Zeitlin, 1989). Fordist mass production is presented as technologically outmoded as new information and communication technologies (ICTs) increase the possibilities for flexibilisation and the geographical and temporal dispersal of production. The 'flexible firm' becomes the fêted site for global production, bringing with it new demands for the reorganisation of work (Atkinson, 1985). The combination of technological advances, intensely competitive markets and new models of production is discursively tied to 'new opportunities' for the organisation of work:

Three factors – human resources, markets and technology – have a fundamental impact on the way workplaces are organised ... The new flexible firm is a demanding form of organisation of work ... In the new decentralised and network-oriented organisations, workers perform a range of tasks, rather than pass the job on from one to another ... As workers develop a wider range of skills and become more adaptable, the new organisation of work will further facilitate geographical mobility. This in turn will enable workers to exploit their potential more fully and exercise their rights in this respect. (Commission of European Communities (CEC), 1997: 7)

The European Commission positions the restructuring of work as a direct response to exogenous technological and market forces. Indeed, the flexibilisation of work is represented in terms of the opportunities and rewards of 'up-skilling', training and greater labour market mobility. The discourse that has emerged and made flexibility 'common sense' for the global era has firmly positioned technological change on the outside, and states, firms and workers on the inside in a responsive mode. There is no acknowledgement that market competition and technological development may themselves be constituted in part by the social forces engendered by the production process in specific places and at specific historical moments (Cox, 1987). For example, the relationships between states, firms and financial institutions in a particular context may place limits on the development of particular technologies. To take this further we may want to question the alliance that is presented between high-tech/high-skill work and workers performing 'flexible' roles and tasks in the GPE. In many instances flexibility is associated with repetitive, low-skill and intensive working practices (Pollert, 1991; Anderson, 2000; Moody, 1997), and with sectors that are not internationally traded. Viewed in this way, the linear and deterministic relationship between techno-economic globalisation and the restructuring of work is tenuous. A consideration of the social relations that intimately bind 'workplaces' into the dynamics of 'world order'<sup>3</sup> reveals that the inside/outside dichotomy of the flexibility discourse is a convenient illusion that masks the political power and social contest that surrounds the restructuring of work.

*Flexibility as disciplinary imperative*

In recent times there has been a subtle change in the discourse surrounding policy responses to globalisation. That change involves a greater willingness to acknowledge the inequities and unevenness of globalisation. The British Government acknowledges that 'the impact of globalisation on poor people varies widely' (Department for International Development, 2000: 18), the United Nations equates a globalising world with 'new threats to human security – sudden and hurtful disruptions in the pattern of daily life' (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), cited in Held and McGrew, 2000) and the World Bank states that 'widening global disparities have increased the sense of deprivation and injustice for many' (2001: vi). In every case, however, the acknowledgement of inequity is qualified by judgements on which state-societies have most successfully 'harnessed globalisation', thereby avoiding the negative effects. Put simply, the message is that globalisation simultaneously presents opportunities and threats, and that individual governments, industries and people take responsibility for ensuring that they avoid the threats and embrace the opportunities. Thus, the World Bank refers to 'harnessing global forces for poor people' (2001: 179), the British Government seeks to 'make globalisation work for the poor' (Department for International Development, 2000), the British Prime Minister states that 'the global market is a good thing for us' (Held, 1998: 26), and *The Economist* puts the 'case for globalisation' (23 September 2000: 19).

The problems that are associated with globalisation are viewed as inherently 'treatable' in the sense that effective policy responses can be formulated. The 'golden solution' to 'make globalisation work' has been flexibility – providing both a disciplinary ethos and a concrete set of strategies through which to 'harness' globalisation. The central question on the global agenda becomes 'what reforms would improve the capacity of the labour markets to accommodate structural changes smoothly and rapidly?' (OECD, 1994: 12-15). The flexibility discourse thus has a strong disciplinary effect and becomes a 'no alternative' policy imperative. A failure to create flexible labour markets and flexible workers is presented as a failure to grasp the opportunities of globalisation and, in all likelihood, will 'incur the costs of inaction' (OECD, 1996: 21).

The dominant thesis in policy and corporate literature is that labour flexibility is the solution to the challenge of mobile global capital or, to put it another way, that firms will locate where labour is malleable and deregulated. What globalisation means, according to those who reproduce the flexibility imperative, is that 'old' systems of production, labour and regulation become rigid constraints in otherwise free markets. For the World Bank, for example, the countries that have achieved the greatest gains for their workers are those that decided early on to take advantage of international opportunities, and to rely increasingly on market forces rather than the state in allocating resources' (1995: 10). The neo-classical view, that the operation of the global market

stands in tension with the rigidities of an interventist or regulatory state, lies at the heart of the flexibility discourse. The major OECD governments become wrapped up in a constraining neo-liberal mantra that says 'make space for capital' and this is projected to less developed countries in similar terms. As the European Commission has it: '... firms must achieve global competitiveness on open and competitive markets. It is the responsibility of the national and Community authorities to provide industry with a favourable environment' (CEC, 1993: 57). A central feature of this 'favourable environment' is assumed to be a flexible and adaptable workforce. Part of the 'responsibility' of political authorities, then, becomes the task of removing regulatory impediments to a flexible labour market (Baglioni and Crouch, 1990). For policymakers and corporate managers this has signalled moves towards explicit (formalised and institutionalised) and implicit (informal and tacit) forms of flexibilisation in labour and work. Within the flexibility discourse it is possible to identify a number of interrelated conceptions of the nature and implications of flexibility.

*Functional flexibility* implies that working tasks and practices can adapt to changes in demand on the production process (Pinch, 1994). The focus here is on internal or firm-centred flexibility. The assumption is that traditional job demarcations and hierarchies create rigidities that should be eroded or 'flattened' to be replaced by multi-functional 'teams' or production 'cells'. In this model the firm becomes the locus for determining the necessary skills, and training is likely to be 'in-house' and task specific. In essence skills are owned and defined by the firm and are not carried by the worker in the wider labour market.

*Numerical flexibility* is a labour market 'textbook' term for the capacity of an employer to expand or contract the workforce in line with demand. This is said to be achieved through a variety of mechanisms such as working time flexibility, casual and part-time working, subcontracting and outsourcing and the use of temporary contracts or agency staff. The underlying imperative is that traditional employment relations must be dissolved via, for instance, the relaxation of dismissal, redundancy and benefits regulations. A parallel and related shift has occurred in the composition of the workforce, with an increase in women's participation in the workforce, the use of early retirement policies (Rubery, 1999), and the employment of unprotected migrant workers attributed with '... an uncommon willingness to work hard at unappealing jobs' (*The Economist*, 6 May 2000: 19). There is an underlying assumption that welfare and active labour market policies must be limited in order that there may be no disincentives to take on 'flexible' work: 'To ensure that most participants are poor and to maintain incentives for workers to move on to regular work when it becomes available, programs should pay no more than the average wage for unskilled labor' (World Bank, 2001: 156). This example, drawn from the World Bank's 'principles of successful workfare programmes', demonstrates the market-centred logic of the flexibility discourse. Taken to its

conclusion, so-called numerical flexibility has led to the use of child and sweatshop labour. Indeed, where this has arisen the response has been to appeal to 'corporate social responsibility' and the implementation of labour codes of conduct (Department for International Development, 2000: 156). It is difficult to see how this can be effective when numerical flexibility is designed precisely to limit the number of workers for whom the firm has direct responsibility.

The final major strand of the contemporary fixation with flexibility has been *pay flexibility* (read cost flexibility). The imperative of decentralised and deregulated pay bargaining structures has been constructed through the representation of embedded and unionised industrial relations as punitive and rigid (Treu, 1992). Ultimately, individualised employment contracts and performance-related or target-focused pay structures have become the model of pay flexibility. State-societies that sustain high wage and non-wage labour costs are presented as uncompetitive and inflexible. The overall effect of this multi-layered flexibility discourse is to create a disciplinary imperative that celebrates the dissolution of collective and stable employment relations and the rise of the self-responsible, risk-bearing individual worker (see Beck, 2000b; Bauman, 1998).

The central problem of the representation of flexibility as an automatic disciplinary feature of globalisation is that this closes down the possibility for alternative strategies and tactics. The message that flexibility is the best way to 'harness' globalisation, and that a failure to flexibilise will bring out the claws of globalisation, is a frightening and powerful one. Indeed, it serves to constrain political and social debate about the restructuring of work as people feel themselves to be faced with no alternative. The disciplinary character of flexibility warns that a failure to expose oneself further to the forces of global markets (through flexibilisation) will result in greater exclusion from the potential rewards on offer. The portrayal of flexibility as a way of dealing with the globalisation process has fundamentally oversimplified and depoliticised the problem. The definition, interpretation and experience of so-called flexibility is multiple, contingent and diverse. In particular, we do not find the archetypal blueprint of a 'flexible,' 'multi-skilled,' yet 'empowered' worker in all places (if, indeed, we find him or her at all). The disciplinary effects of flexibility are highly contradictory, not least because they are inseparable from the proclaimed 'rigidities'. Flexibility, when viewed in concrete practices, rests upon its antithesis – rigidity. For example, government policies that emphasise flexible labour markets require tightly defined welfare policies where there is little or no room for political manoeuvre, whether to raise taxes or to use active labour market policies. Similarly, firms that seek flexibility via the hiring of agency or temporary workers, accept greater constraints on skills, training and employee 'trust' (Rubery, 1999: 125). Workers that provide optimally flexible labour in paid work find simultaneously rigid constraints in their household and family life. Far from being an overarching solution to the

challenges of globalisation, flexibility comes at a high price that is paid across the realms of social and political life.

### *Competition and convergence*

The flexibility discourse that has emerged in pursuit of solutions to globalisation has cut across corporate, academic and policy literature. Flexibility has thus become an 'icon or incantation' (Curry, 1993: 99), strengthened by its discursive attachment to dominant representations of globalisation. According to the advocates of labour flexibility, the imperatives of globalisation make flexibilisation a necessity that is common to all societies. As a result it is assumed that the political and corporate agendas of different state-societies will be essentially convergent in their post-restructuring institutions and practices: 'The debate about reforms is not over a choice between reforms or no reforms ... Rather, the debate is on how reforms to build markets can be designed and implemented in a way that is measured and tailored to the economic, social, and political circumstances of a country' (World Bank, 2001: 62). While it is acknowledged, then, that deregulatory reforms take place in specific social and historical contexts, there is apparently no space for dispute over the need for restructuring – the diagnosis is the same and the 'medicine' can simply be adapted to suit. The policy priorities of the Washington consensus shape a convergence of government programmes around the provision of the optimal location for global capital. A central emphasis is on the removal of restrictions on the flexible organisation of work in order that FDI decisions might favour a particular location. As the World Bank has it 'the most important reforms involve lifting constraints on labor mobility and wage flexibility, as well as breaking the ties between social services and labor contracts' (World Bank, 1995: 109).

The neo-liberal deregulatory restructuring characteristic of the US and UK becomes the model around which it is assumed that all social change will conform and converge. The blueprint offered calls for a diminution in levels of regulation on labour relations, but also seeks to exert downward pressure on welfare and social benefits that are presumed to 'inhibit' the incentive to work. The OECD's *Jobs Strategy* typifies the policy recommendations that accompany claims to a flexibilised and competitive labour force (see Table 1.1).

Intensified global competition, according to those advocating neo-liberal flexibilisation, means that all state-societies must restructure along the lines of this model. Indeed, in a report that compares the relative success of member countries in implementing the Jobs Strategy recommendations, the OECD identifies the US, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Ireland as having made 'significant policy developments' in the flexibilisation of labour (1997: 8). The Economic and Development Review Committee (EDRC) applaud the UK for its 'reform of industrial relations', New Zealand for its 'reduced government intervention', Ireland for the lowering of the 'generosity of unemployment

Table 1.1 The OECD's 'Jobs Strategy' recommendations

- 
- 1 Set macroeconomic policy such that it will both encourage growth and, in conjunction with good structural policies, make it sustainable, i.e. non-inflationary.
  - 2 Enhance the creation and diffusion of technological know-how by improving frameworks for its development.
  - 3 Increase flexibility of working-time (both short-term and lifetime) voluntarily sought by workers and employers.
  - 4 Nurture an entrepreneurial climate by eliminating impediments to, and restrictions on, the creation and expansion of enterprises.
  - 5 Make wage and labour costs more flexible by removing restrictions that prevent wages from reflecting local conditions and individual skill levels, in particular of younger workers.
  - 6 Reform employment security provisions that inhibit the expansion of employment in the private sector.
  - 7 Strengthen the emphasis on active labour market policies and reinforce their effectiveness.
  - 8 Improve labour force skills and competences through wide-ranging changes in education and training systems.
  - 9 Reform unemployment and related benefit systems – and their interaction with the tax system – such that societies' fundamental equity goals are achieved in ways that impinge far less on the efficient functioning of labour markets.
- 

Source: OECD, 1996.

benefits' and the US for its policies 'consistent with flexible labour' (1997: 7-8). These countries are directly identified as converging around the OECD Jobs Strategy blueprint for labour flexibility. By contrast, Germany, France, Belgium, Denmark and Sweden, among others, are criticised for their structural impediments to wage flexibility, their high levels of social transfers, and their use of active labour market policies: 'It remains an open question whether a policy approach that sees public intervention in post-compulsory education, training and active labour market policies as a substitute for relative wage flexibility is effective, let alone cost-effective, particularly in a world of rapid structural change' (OECD, 1997: 12). The message is that a failure to converge around the policy requirements for labour flexibility will result in a failure to attract inward investment, persistently high levels of structural unemployment and an overall loss of competitiveness. A failure to adapt along neo-liberal lines is interpreted as a failure to change at all, as a kind of institutional stasis amid a changing world.

The convergence assumption is closely allied to teleological and depoliticised readings of globalisation (Amoore *et al.*, 1997). An 'inevitabilism' surrounds the construction of a flexible and deregulated reality, and the social and political-economic dynamics that frame this reality are never brought

into question. The suggestion that restructuring can, or should, conform to a menu of deregulatory reforms follows a highly simplified understanding of social change. The achievement of an 'attractive location' for business, or a 'flexible workforce', though presented as a convergent process by key public and private agencies, is a highly contested and contingent possibility. By way of example, governments may negotiate their policy agenda through established and embedded relationships with business, labour groups and employers' organisations.<sup>4</sup> Flexibility, for one society, social group or individual, may represent inflexibility, insecurity and intensified risk for another. Within the EDRC's analysis of the implementation of the OECD Jobs Strategy, the divergent emphases of member countries' policy agendas are presented as problems rooted in the failure to adopt the recommended strategies. However, there is an implicit acknowledgement that fundamental social and political questions may be interpreted differently in given contexts: '... representatives from some English-speaking countries saw low unemployment as an essential condition for, or element of, horizontal equity. And those from some continental European countries saw equity as a more fundamental goal than low unemployment' (OECD, 1997: 12).

While for the OECD such divergence represents a problem to be resolved, a different reading of the findings reveals that the identified aims of 'flexibility', 'mobility', 'equity' and even 'competitiveness' are interpreted, contested and given meaning in specific contexts. Space is opened up within the global restructuring debate that reveals a contingent and contradictory set of practices. So, on the one hand we see governments pursuing policies that do not conform to neo-liberal dictates, but that have grabbed the attention of the business press, as in the case of France: 'The 35-hour week may be a hassle, but at least many employers have managed to extract valuable concessions from employees on more flexible working practices in return' (*The Economist*, 1 April 2000: 13). This is a long way from a critique of neo-liberal defined flexibility and, indeed, the article later goes on to speculate: 'If the French economy can power ahead despite the tight grip of the state, just imagine what it could do if the state let go'. However, there is a tacit recognition here that the restructuring of work is negotiated and contested in the context of social power relations, that bargains may be needed and accommodation may be necessary, that politics may not quite be redundant.

On the other hand, and to reinforce the point, we see the archetypal neo-liberal competition states experiencing problems that are not anticipated by the flexibility rhetoric. The decision by US telecommunications corporation Motorola to close the Bathgate plant in Scotland with 3000 redundancies appears to defy the logic that the flexibility thesis proclaims. The decision, taken in April 2001, effectively closed a profitable plant of 'flexible' workers in favour of a lossmaking plant of 'high cost' workers in Flensburg, Germany. Roger Lyons, General Secretary of the Manufacturing Science and Finance Union, when interviewed by *The Guardian*, said that it was 'easier and cheaper

to sack workers in the UK than elsewhere in Europe' (24 April 2001). This example of the 'flight' of productive capital from an archetypal 'flexible' competition state clearly does not fit the picture of an inevitable competitive advantage through reduced labour costs. Such contradictory and contested dynamics of the restructuring of work cannot be understood by recourse to simplistic notions of a convergence around flexibility. They can only be revealed by an exploration of the social power relations that condition specific, contingent and divergent 'solutions'.

### *Prescription and human resource management*

Alongside the state-centred discourse of flexibility as a policy imperative, there has emerged a corporate management language that shrouds the restructuring of work in imagery that appeals to science. Human resource management (HRM), TQM and employee involvement (EI), among many other strategic instruments, have been prescribed in the reordering of the employer-employee relationship.<sup>5</sup> These management labels for the restructuring of work are presented as 'logical' and 'evolutionary' responses to the competitive pressures of the global economy (Williams, 1994: 5). Globalisation is offered as the context within which 'strategic' and 'rational' instruments are required to achieve changes in the production process (see Womack, Jones and Roos, 1990; Wickens, 1987). The HRM prescriptions recast the employment relation so that it is individualised, permitting optimal flexibility. Workers are not perceived as a collective group, or indeed as conscious people capable of apprehending the shape of change in the workplace: 'A management language has emerged which redefines workers as employees, individuals and teams, but not as organised collectivities with some interests separate from management' (Ackers *et al.*, 1996: 5).

In positioning workers as essentially malleable, adaptable and flexible commodities, the HRM literature offers itself as a scientific approach to the management of restructuring. In effect, it reaffirms the notion that objective knowledge can be acquired and applied in pursuit of global competitiveness. The ascendancy of management consultancies whose role it is to 'legitimate change in corporate practices' (Strange, 1996: 138), lends a strategic and calculable air to the restructuring of work. These agencies explicitly offer to simplify the complexity of global competition, as one human resources consultancy put it: 'to capture the upside of uncertainty', to make globalisation manageable and translatable into simple formulae. Corporate decisions can then be said to be based on the rational judgements of an objective expert who can prescribe optimal solutions to the problems of intensified global competition. Where once the large accountancy firms were seen to be concerned with 'sound' financial management, they now offer an auditory and advisory role in all aspects of corporate restructuring. Indeed, their roles have been constituted within the problem-solving mode of knowledge represented by

'globalisation as process'. The management consultancies market themselves as 'business process reengineers' capable of fundamentally restructuring 'old' practices in line with 'new' imperatives.<sup>6</sup> As Charlotte Hooper has argued, a kind of 'frontier masculinity' emerges which offers an inseparable mix of business and science 'to solve all our problems' (2000: 67). In this way restructuring is represented as a global challenge that can be tackled with the expertise of consultants armed with an arsenal of HRM strategies.

The HRM mantra of restructuring offers a menu of prescribed 'rational' solutions to the perceived process of globalisation. However, this presupposes that restructuring and social change will simply roll out as prescribed. Indeed, it implies that social relations can themselves be treated as factors in an equation. When the restructuring of working practices is viewed in concrete terms, the quasi-science of HRM is revealed as a construct that ignores the complex historical and social relations that underlie restructuring. Strategic and scientific management prescriptions for the reorganisation of work are decoupled from the prevailing practices of a particular workplace and, indeed, it is this abstractness that is deemed to lend objectivity to the strategic analysis. They are cast as though they represent pure and logical responses to the exigencies of globalisation:

The sources of management preferences do not come from some automatic and innate character to the task of producing and marketing a good or service, laying down the exact steps to reach corporate goals ... Instead, preferences regarding strategies derive from general practices in the industry, from technological and managerial knowledge, and from the society of which the firm and its managers are part. (Haufler, 1999: 201)

We are thus reminded that every apparent 'strategy' emerges from the context of social power relations, within which knowledge and power are inseparable (Foucault, 1980b). To reproduce HRM, and other strategic management tools, as automatic responses to the competitive pressures of globalisation is to obscure the power that suffuses such dominant modes of knowledge. So, on the one hand, HRM is not simply 'exercised' or 'implemented'. The softness of the language employed in notions of 'involvement', 'human' and 'empowerment' is bound up with a subtle power that brings workers into the monitoring of their own practices. As Garrahan and Stewart observed at Nissan 'success depends upon a tight nexus of subordination that can be read as control, exploitation and surveillance – the other side of quality, flexibility and teamwork' (1992: 59).

However, it is insufficient simply to seek to expose the power relations that are masked by the technical and scientific discourse of flexibility, for this may lead us to conclude that their dominance crushes all dissent in its path. Thus, on the other hand we find contestation surrounding the reorganisation of work around strategic management principles. A number of studies demonstrate that within a discourse of the flexibilisation of working practices,

spaces open up for the contestation and disruption of restructuring programmes (see McCabe, 1996; Waddington, 1999; Milkman, 1998). The scientific calculations of strategic human resource managers are confounded by the contingency of actual concrete working practices.

### *Industrial relations and the death of conflict*

The restructuring of work around the concept of flexibility has become almost synonymous with the breaking open of embedded systems of industrial relations. The process of deunionisation across advanced industrialised countries has been legitimated 'in the name of globalisation' (du Gay, 1999). The contemporary period of intensified global competition is widely understood to require competitive and open labour markets, a central element of which is a deregulated industrial relations arena. The shifts in employment from high trade union density manufacturing to low density service industries, coupled with a restructured core labour force and the rise of contingent labour, have contributed to a decline in union membership, density and, arguably, power and influence. The individualisation of employment contracts has been accompanied by a shift in union activity towards the representation of individual clients (Hyman, 1997). For the advocates of restructured employee representation, collective forms of representation are 'outmoded' and irreconcilable with workplace realities. Trade unions are cast as unrepresentative, rigid and inflexible, prone to 'monopolistic behaviour' and 'opposition to reform' (World Bank, 1995: 80). Resistance to flexibilisation strategies is held to be a phenomenon of organised labour and, by implication, can be eradicated through deunionisation and worker individualisation. Regulated and centralised forms of industrial relations become part of the 'burden' that must be shed in order that globalisation can be effectively 'harnessed'. Governments must create space for firms to flexibly manage their own individual workers through, for example, the use of 'no-union' agreements and decentralised pay bargaining (OECD, 1991).

Not only is conflict and contestation effaced by the flexibility discourse, but this is presented as an opportunity for workers to experience the 'empowerment' of individual self-management (Hyman, 1999a: 108). The advent of the digital age has been particularly strongly equated with emancipated labour and rewarding work (Negroponte, 1995). Similarly, adversarial industrial relations are held to obstruct the possibilities for workers to reconcile their interests with the corporate mission. Conflict in the workplace is represented as a transitory by-product of the process of work reorganisation. The collective and institutionalised politics of the trade unions is understood to be the only source of political activity in the workplace. Thus, deunionisation is equated with a depoliticisation of the workplace and, in effect, the death of conflict.

The discourse of labour flexibility draws upon a narrow conception of politics in its process-centred understanding of social change. The 'mechan-

ical solidarities' (Hyman, 1999a) of organised labour certainly represent one form of the expression of the politics of labour and work. However, it is not the case that the squeeze on traditional industrial relations has brought about the death of conflict, though of course this is a myth that is useful in driving restructuring. Removing union representation, though undeniably circumscribing workers' political expression, does not remove the social power relations of the workplace. Nor does the information economy inevitably lead to an empowered workforce (May, forthcoming), or reduce the contestation that surrounds challenges to working practices. First, the threats to institutionalised and organised labour have been resisted, both through the defensive strategies of labour groups in the social market economies (Scharpf, 1998), and by the informal and everyday tactics of workers (Elger and Fairbrother, 1992; Waddington, 1999). In a lean production system which lacks the buffers of inventory stock, the everyday practices and tactics of workers may have significant effects. In this sense, the formation of fluid 'organic solidarities' (Hyman, 1999a) may offer alternative sites of political struggle based on common (if fleeting) experiences and immediate controversies. Indeed, the politics of the workplace may lie less in the unitary actions of defined organisation, and more in the 'contradictions, contingencies and unintended consequences' (Walker, 1994: 672) that characterise everyday working lives.

Yet, and this brings me to my second point, there are also scholars who are observing a greater fluidity and mutability of the organised trade unions themselves. This 'global social movement unionism' (Lambert, 1999; Lambert and Chan, 1999) suggests a decoupling of trade unions from their roots in nation-states and a desire for a transnational representativeness. The technologies assumed to reduce the need for workplace representation and organised labour may be used precisely to reconstitute communication between labour groups (Hyman, 1999b; ILO, 2001). Viewed in this way the politics of the restructuring of work is not separable from the struggles of a 'globally conscious' civil society (Scholte, 2000) that transcends received boundaries. Finally, while not wishing to underplay the very real challenges that face organised and unprotected workers in the GPE, it is also important to avoid reinforcing the 'no alternative' logic that prevails in the flexibility discourse. Political agency and social contest are denied in the face of something that is 'larger than us' and thus 'cannot be resisted because the outcome has already been determined' (Marchand and Runyan, 2000: 7). While it is clear that conventional spaces of workplace politics are being closed down, we must question conceptions of politics that do not enable us to see the opening up of alternative political spaces.

## Conclusion

The dominant representations of globalisation and industrialisation as processes offer the alluring prospect of a name for our contemporary condition,

along with an explanation of how it should be managed. They make common appeals to economic and technological externalities that create imperatives for global restructuring. The understanding of social change is purely linear. It reads that globalisation exerts pressure on states and firms to ratchet-up their competitiveness through a downward pressure on social welfare, taxation and labour market regulation. The social practices of everyday life are assumed to be fundamentally and necessarily restructured and reshaped as a result. In this way, human and social relations are understood only in a responsive mode, and politics is conceived only in instrumental 'management' terms. The impetus of social change is represented as dwelling 'outside' of social and political life, thereby securing and insulating global restructuring from the politics of negotiation, contestation and resistance (represented as dwelling 'inside'). Indeed, the disciplinary imperatives of globalisation are assumed to squeeze political agency, social contestation and historical contingency to the point that they no longer matter.

The conception of globalisation as techno-economic process has done much to transform perceptions of the ways in which working practices should function in a global era. Whether or not we consider globalisation to be an 'ambiguous' and 'fuzzy' concept (Waters, 1995), its amorphous character gives it the power to legitimate much that is done in its name. It is this global restructuring conducted 'in the name of' globalisation that is in need of critical interrogation in our research. The contemporary fixation with flexibility is legitimated and perpetuated by its discursive attachment to dominant representations of a natural, automatic and irrevocable process of globalisation. There is an explicit assumption that globalisation can be 'harnessed', and that a central means to this end is flexibility in labour and work. If states, firms and workers adopt policies and practices of flexibilisation, argue the proponents of labour flexibility, they will reap the rewards of the global economy. The overall effect of the flexibility discourse has been to create a disciplinary imperative that celebrates the dissolution of collective and stable employment relations and the rise of the individualised and 'risk accepting' worker.

The disciplinary effect of the threat that the 'failure to flexibilise' will unleash the full fury of global forces constrains political and social discussion and contestation. The contestation that takes place within and through the restructuring of work is effaced by deterministic and teleological accounts of social change. The idea that state-societies, firms and workers may be differentially placed in global restructuring is anathema to this discourse. The unevenness, inequality and power that suffuse the experiences of flexibilisation in the workplace have been afforded insufficient attention. It is precisely the aim of this book to contribute to a conception of global restructuring that is open to contestation and contingency. In the chapter that follows I explore the contribution that the field of IPE can make to raising the visibility of the social power relations that condition and shape global restructuring.

**Notes**

- 1 Ian R. Douglas raised the significance of 'global[i]zation' as action-process verb in a paper presented to the International Studies Association, San Diego, 1996.
- 2 The diminution of conflict between social groups is argued to arise from the equality of opportunity envisaged to result from increased mobility within society and the labour market. See, for example, Durkheim (1964) for the origins of the idea that inequalities may be eliminated via mobility and the reordering of status according to skills and talents.
- 3 The interrelationships between workplace and world order are explored in Cox (1987) and Harrod (1987). See chapter 2 of this volume for further discussion.
- 4 The significance of established social relations and practices is evident from European case studies which illustrate that the historical evolution of trade unions remains a salient factor in contemporary policy-making. See, for example, Baglioni and Crouch (1990) or Nolan and O'Donnell, (1991).
- 5 These concepts function as labels for a diverse set of management practices. HRM can be traced to the use of individualised employment relationships in the USA from the 1960s. It became common currency in the 1980s, when it became associated with the strategic management of what had previously been known as 'industrial relations'. TQM is a concept that refers to the breaking up of quality monitoring and assurance functions into stages. These functions are then devolved through the workforce to the level of individual workers, implying that quality assurance becomes a task that is performed by all workers. EI seeks to connect workers (as individuals) to the needs of the firm. This includes, for example, problem-solving teams, performance-related pay and the use of video and pictorial illustrations of new practices.
- 6 Insights from interview with British-based international management consultants, June 2000.