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Power in the darkness: Taking a historical and critical employment relations approach in hospitality

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a theoretical framework and case study to illustrate the advantages of applying historical criticality in hospitality employment relations research. Based on extensive archival research and in-depth interviews with over 20 senior hotel managers and union leaders in New Zealand, the article presents an original research approach by triangulating multiple theory perspectives, using the work of Polanyi (2001), Burawoy (1978, 2010), Corporatism (Schmitter, 1974, 1989) and Strategic Choice Theory (Kochan, McKersie, & Cappelli, 1984). The research design "stacks" these theoretical approaches into three levels of analysis: a macro, global level; a mid-level, national view; and a micro, organisational and individual agency level. The rich analysis made possible by this approach is applied to a case study that focusses on 1990/1991, a key transitional period in New Zealand's employment relations environment. The paper concludes by demonstrating how critical historical research can provide tangible examples of new answers to old questions about poor employment conditions in the hospitality sector.

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1. Introduction

Recent government reports in Australia and New Zealand have highlighted escalating problems in the hospitality and tourism labour markets (Deloitte, 2015; Tourism Industry Association New Zealand, 2015). These reports contrast the rapid growth and economic success of the sectors (both being one of the largest export earning sectors for their countries) with long standing, yet steadily worsening labour market problems. This contemporary data highlights the intensification of problems around human resource management, employment relations and labour markets that are equally present in the international hospitality and tourism sectors (Baum, 2007, 2008, 2015; Baum, Kralj, Robinson, & Solnet, 2016; Deery, 2002; Enz, 2009; Lashley, 2016; Lucas & Deery, 2004; Robinson, Kralj, Solnet, Goh, & Callan, 2014; Solnet, Baum, Robinson, & Lockstone-Binney, 2015). These problems include skills shortages, high labour turnover, low pay, lack of full-time work and poor career path information (Deloitte, 2015; New Zealand Tourism Industry Association, 2015).

Despite its crucial economic importance and the fact that the international hospitality and tourism sector has a long history of problematic employment (Baum, 2007, 2008, 2015; Baum et al., 2016), historical and critical employments relations research in this field of remains scant. There is copious international research on the problematic nature of work in international hospitality and tourism, highlighting the well-trodden themes of high labour turnover, poor career progression, low pay, poor work conditions, poor work-life balance and weak occupation and safety systems (Baum, 2007, 2008, 2015; Ancheri & Kandasamy, 2009; Deery & Jago, 2015; Deery, 2002; Enz, 2009; Ladkin, 2011; Lucas & Deery, 2004; McGing & Connolly, 2007; Mooney, 2016; Poulston & Jenkins, 2016; Robinson et al., 2014; Solnet et al., 2015; Wickramasekara, 2011; Wood, 1997). However, little of the above research focusses on power relations among the tri-partite stakeholders in the employment relationship.

This article argues that applying a historical approach to employment relations research will provide new, innovative and critical theoretical perspectives to the study of hospitality work. Based on archival research and in-depth interviews with senior hotel managers and union leaders in New Zealand, the article presents a triangulated theoretical approach that brings a more critical and insightful focus to employment in this industry. The

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Table 1
Four level theory approach.

Theory and main authors	Level of focus
Polanyi - embeddedness, double movement **Burawoy** - labour process theory - despotic, hegemonic and hegemonic despotism	Macro level. International, global level, looking at long term change in capitalism and labour relations.
Schmitter - Corporatism	Mid-level. Mostly national, sector level focus on the structural relations between employers, unions and the State
Kochan – Strategic Choice Theory	Micro-Level. Intra-organisational focus. Looking at individual and organisational level strategic decision making and agency

article firstly provides some context to the study of work in the international hospitality and tourism sector, before highlighting calls for more critical and historical employment relations research. The article then outlines the theoretical framework used in this research and makes the case for the application a critical, historical employment relations approach to hospitality studies. A case study is finally provided of how this approach successfully provides new illumination to the analysis of work in hospitality.

2. The call for increased critical enquiry in hospitality

There have been long-standing calls for hospitality studies to take more critical paths of enquiry (McIntosh & Harris, 2012; Wilson, Harris, & Small, 2008; Wilson, Small, & Harris, 2012). McIntosh and Harris (2012) specifically call for increased engagement with critical theory in order to unmask power relations and create transformational change. This call to criticality is part of a growing discomfort with the 'presentist' and organisational/managerial focus of the majority of hospitality and tourism research (Lashley & Morrison, 2000). Hospitality research literature has undergone a period of strong growth and change since 2000. The publication of the seminal work, *In Search of Hospitality* (Lashley & Morrison, 2000), followed by *Hospitality: a Social Lens* (Lashley, Lynch, & Morrison, 2006) and the launching of the journal *Hospitality and Societ*y in 2011, has generated increasing international academic interest in the study of hospitality from a wider range of social science perspectives (Lashley, 2007). As part of this movement, reviews of hospitality and tourism labour have proliferated (Baum, 2015; Baum et al., 2016; Ladkin, 2011; McIntosh & Harris, 2012; Solnet et al., 2015; Walton, 2012; Zampoukos & Ioannides, 2011) along with new areas of research in hospitality labour including mobilities, meaningful work and control (Cockburn-Wootten, 2012; Duncan, Scott, & Baum, 2013; Lashley & Lynch, 2013; Rydzik, Pritchard, Morgan, & Sedgley, 2012).

Despite these calls for new perspectives and increased criticality, a review of recent literature in the hospitality space reveals that, although being wide-spread in topic, the theoretical approaches remain narrow. For example, international researchers have sought to illuminate high turnover in the hospitality sector through studies on leadership (Gatling, Kang, & Kim, 2016), depression (Boz, Koç & Kiliç, 2014), generational difference (Brown, Thomas, & Bosselman, 2015) and creativity and job satisfaction (Lu & Gursoy, 2016; Tongchaiprasit & Ariyabuddhiphongs, 2016). New Zealand based research has looked at exit interviews (Williamson, 2009; Williamson, Harris, & Parker, 2008) and expressive labour (Poulston, 2015). In addition to the work above, considerable new research has built on the foundations of Iverson and Derry's (1997) seminal work in hospitality turnover, including work focusing on retention strategies, job embeddedness and future skills planning (Deery & Jago, 2015; Robinson et al., 2014; Solnet et al., 2015). However, the majority of this turnover literature continues to conform to Baum's et al. (2016) critique that it focusses solely on the organisational and managerial level. There is scant research in this area that focuses on the broader effects of social, economic, political and legislative changes in the power relationships of employer and employees.

There remains a noticeable lack of hospitality research that focusses on critical perspectives. This lack of critical and extra-organisational focus tends to give rise to the sense that the hospitality research agenda, whilst heterogeneous and at times innovative, is not fundamentally moving forward (Baum et al., 2016). In some ways the research of hospitality can be seen to reflect the nature of the industry; as Ladkin (2011, pg. 1139) states: "the characteristics of the industry give rise to a certain image of hospitality work that has not changed over time". This article will argue that a successful way of meeting the call for innovative and critical research in hospitality is to use a historical employment relations approach. The following sections will argue that taking a historical employment relations approach allows for in-depth critical analysis that is otherwise impossible in presentist and inter-organisational studies.

2.1. Taking a historical employment relations approach in hospitality

One of the key critical social science approaches that post-2000 hospitality research publications call for is that of an historical approach to work in the hospitality industry (Lashley & Morrison, 2000; Lashley, 2007; Lashley et al., 2006; Lynch, Molz, Mcintosh, Lugosi, & Lashley, 2011; Lynch et al., 2011; O'Gorman, 2005). Lynch et al. (2011) specifically highlight 'historical approaches to hospitality' and 'hospitality as work' as two under-researched and highly valuable areas of potential investigation. Reflecting the desire of these authors for multi-disciplinary approaches, Lashley (2007) further calls for a critical, radical pluralist approach to hospitality employment relations. Lashley (2007) argues that this orientation is required to offset the "somewhat unitarist" perspectives contained in most human resource and employment relations research in the hospitality sector.

This call for an increased focus on the history of hospitality is in fact not new. Woods (1991) reviewed the contemporary state of hospitality historiography and declared "Despite the importance of the hospitality industry, virtually no scholarly work has been completed about its history" (Woods, 1991, p. 89). Woods (1991) suggests that future hospitality historical research could focus on the development of managerial practices, matching Wright's (2011) call for this focus from a labour history perspective. Little seems to have advanced in the area of historical hospitality employment relations, as O'Gorman (2005, p. 141) still describes hospitality and its history as "an under-researched area for investigation", and Walton (2012) concludes that the history of the hospitality labour force is important, and seldom investigated field of study.

This raises a key question: why has hospitality studies not taken a historical approach to employment relations? Walton (2012) suggests that tourism and hospitality literature has failed to pursue labour history for the following key reasons: the hospitality

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