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A Review of Employment Relations Theories and Their Application

Keith Abbott

Abstract

New developments in the industrial relations and human resource management have moved management and employee bargaining down to the level of the firm. In doing so they have generated a growing level of interest in the conduct of employment relations, not just at the level of specialist managers, who have traditionally had the responsibility for dealing with issues in this area, but across management as a whole. There is thus a growing need for managers to place more emphasis on achieving a greater symmetry between commercial objectives and employment practices. This paper looks at the predicates of managerial authority and its legitimacy, and how personal assumptions and value systems (i.e., 'frames of reference') held by managers can predispose them to view the nature of work and workplace relations in particular ways. The paper also presents and aligns a range of contemporary theories within the province of such systems, with the aim being to show how judgements made about the worth or otherwise of a given range of theories are inevitably shaped by the type of value system and set of assumptions one holds towards the world of work. The paper concludes by offering a practical guide to managers on how to evaluate their own assumptions and value systems when applying the noted theories and concepts to real world circumstances. In doing so, the paper provides a tool kit of theories and concepts that should allow managers to avoid engaging in workforce management practices that are either ill-conceived or based on intuitive premises.

Key words: Employment relations, legitimacy, authority; unitarism, pluralism, Marxism, theory.

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Introduction

Work is fundamental to the human condition. It determines what we do for much of our waking lives and it preoccupies much of what we think about. It allows us to engage with other people and it helps us to define our sense of identity. It provides us with access to the material necessities of life, as well as to the advantages and achievements of civilisation. Its allocation, organisation, management and reward are therefore of no small importance. How these are undertaken in gainful employment tells us much about the views and values we hold as a society. What levels of unemployment are deemed tolerable, what manner of work is undertaken and how disputes between the two sides of industry are resolved, for example, are all matters about which we have opinions and which are often shaped by the prevailing cultural boundaries, economic circumstances and political understandings we hold towards our engagement with work (Thomas, 1999, p. v). For the purpose of the present discussion it needs only be stated that our views and opinions towards work and its management have undergone significant change over the past couple of decades, with much of it being the product of national contexts being increasingly subject to global economic influences. Managers, as a consquence, are being asked to think in new and more sophisticated ways about how to better organise and allocate work, and how to better direct and utilise those in their charge.

There are broadly two ways by which these tasks are achieved. The first involves the simple use of intuitive or experiential understandings to analyse and prescribe new policies and practices. This method has some merit in some situations, but the research has shown that its subjective and unsystematic basis all too often leads to policies and practices being built on the back

of crude assumptions, personal prejudices or simple wishful thinking. The second approach involves the application of conceptual and theoretical frameworks drawn from scholarly literature, and although there is a tendency among lay practitioners to assert the 'unreality' theory's relation to practice, it is the only credible method by which the organisation and interpretation of the disconnected facts of given workplace situation or issue can be truly undertaken in an objective and systematic fashion. Hence the purpose of this paper, which first reviews the main conceptual and theoretical tools used to analyse relations between managers and employees, before going on to set out how these tools might be practically applied to make sense of workplace situations and issues.

Defining Employment Relations

In so doing, it is first useful to look at what constitutes the definitional characteristics of the term 'employment relations'. And to this it can only be said that considerable and on-going debate has been over the meaning of the term (see: Teicher, Holland & Gough, 2002, p. 3). One needs only ask scholars in related fields such as industrial relations, human resource management, industrial psychology, industrial sociology, labour economics, labour law and labour history to appreciate how the term 'employment relations' is used in a variety of ways and contexts. The American HRM literature, for example, frequently refers to it when describing the corpus of HRM functional activities and associated interactions that exist between individual employers and employees at the level of the workplace. Used in this way it is typically held to describe something quite different to older forms of personnel management and industrial relations (see, for example: Beardwell & Holden, 1994). The British HRM literature, however, tends to apply a wider meaning that goes beyond the workplace, covering in its most extreme manifestation the type of interactions that can take place between the state, employer associations and organised labour. Employment relations conceived in these terms not only involves the micro-level relations that take place between individual managers and employees, as is predominantly the case in the American use of the term, but also the macro-level interactions that take place between extraneous institutions set up to govern such relations (see, for example: Gennard & Judge, 2002).

The notable thing about references made to wider institutional settings in the British usage is that these are areas that have traditionally fallen within the province of industrial relations scholarship. What most British literature in fact does is use the term in two senses. It uses it first as a normative and unitary concept to describe the functional activities and interactions of HRM. In other words, it replicates the orthodox American usage. The employment relationship in this usage is simply the sum of prescribed functional activities and interactions that are expected to manifest themselves in the form of collaborative interactions between managers and employees, in the flexibility, skill and loyalty of employees, in the absence of workplace conflict and trade unions, in the high performance outcomes of firms, and so on. The literature uses the term secondly as a positivist and pluralist concept when describing the existing institutional and regulative settings in which the functional activities and interactions of HRM take place. This second usage is a simple recognition that trade unions and state intervention in the form of substantive labour laws and industrial tribunals are an inescapable part of the British workscape – a part not so apparent in the United States (and so also the American literature). Applied in this way the employment relationship takes on a different meaning that acknowledges the plurality of group interests and the potential for workplace conflict, the manifestation of which is typically revealed in dispute settlement and negotiatory procedures that determine the formal rules and regulations, informal customs and practices, which govern the relationship.

This dual use of the term is apparent in much of the wider (West) European literature. Early chapters dealing with the functional activities of HRM invariably portray the employment relationship in terms of its unitarist and normative characteristics, whilst later chapters (usually only one or two at most) are typically devoted to trade unions, industrial courts and legal matters, where the employment relationship is portrayed more in terms of its pluralist and positivist attributes. This duality is hardly surprising. Most (West) European countries have legally protected trade union movements that cannot be easily ignored or suppressed. What is surprising is that this duality is rarely acknowledged, which may have something to do with the seeming paradox any

such recognition would seem to present. How, for example, can an employee be committed to the objectives of an organisation (a core functional outcome expected of HRM practices) and at the same time be a member of a trade union? Or how can the functional flexibility of a firm (another expected outcome) be squared with multi-unionism and associated skill demarcations that often exist between jobs and union territoriality? (Legge 1995, p. 247). The answer to these and similar questions has so far involved little more than changing the definitional criteria of employment relations to suit the particular subject matter being discussed.

This is a wholly inadequate use of the term, and this is not the place to resolve the problem. For present purposes we can simply define the functional activities and associated interactions of HRM as constituting the employment relationship, but only in so far as the sum of such actions occur in workplaces where there are no dual loyalties and internal conflicts, and where there is little or no outside interference in the way a firm decides to manage its employees. In workplaces where these characteristics are in evidence, by definition the functional activities and interactions can only be held to operate within a pluralist frame of reference (see below). In such cases, the employment relationship can again be taken to include all the functional activities and associated interactions of HRM, but under such circumstances the outcome of such activities and the behaviour of those involved are regarded as being contingent upon the influences and constraints imposed by internal and external institutions set up to regulate the relationship. Seen in this way we can move to suggest that because the terms and conditions of employment for the vast majority of British and European workers are regulated through the agency of trade unions, industrial tribunals, industrial courts, and the like, that it is a pluralist frame of reference and meaning of the term employment relations that is most pertinent. This being the case, it is from the field of industrial relations scholarship that the remainder of this paper is principally drawn.

The legitimacy of workplace authority

Having passed some comment on what constitutes employment relations, we can now move to look at one of the more basic elements that underpin such relations. In doing so we can frame the following discussion in terms of the following question: What features and influences serve to legitimise the authority of managers over those they manage in the workplace? Or as another way of putting it, you might ask yourself why any individual should accept the authority of another. In work for wages exchange you may readily answer that it is simply the power of one individual (e.g., the owner of the means of production) to deny another (e.g., those with only their labour to sell) a means of earning a livelihood. Whilst this is certain true, it fails to account for why so many people willingly subject themselves of another's authority. This 'willingness', it might be said, is a crude measure of the legitimacy conferred on the one exercising authority by those who are subject to it. By this I mean that if it was simply the power to deny another a livelihood, the resultant work effort would be engaged in begrudgingly or reluctantly, and the productive output by those so engaged would in all likelihood be tardy and inefficient. Labour conscripted under duress is never so productive as willing labour, and the willingness of labour is invariable contingent upon the degree of legitimacy accorded to those with the authority to direct its efforts. So stated, there is something more in the collective psych and social value systems of societies which seemingly precondition individuals to work together in an organised and willing manner to achieve goals collectively which would be otherwise unachievable if they acted individually. This appears to be the case whether the societies concerned are tribal, feudal, industrial, capitalist or socialist. Intrinsic to the achievement of such goals is the organisation of work, which itself invariably involves divisions of labour and responsibility. Such divisions of responsibility, whether formally or informally determined, will in turn require some people to have more authority than others to direct and coordinate the work effort.

In the middle ages this division was underpinned by a cultural and social value system that conditioned people to accept their place in the social order. The status of one's 'station in life' was ordained at birth and unchangeable thereafter. It also determined and legitimised the division of authority and subjugation between employer and employee – or master and servant in the terminology of the times. Masters were born to their position and had certain rights and responsibilities,

just as servants were born to their position and had certain rights and responsibilities (Teicher, Holland & Gough, 2002, p. 38). Whether for reasons of custom, or because of legal obligations or religious beliefs, servants were expected to provide faithful service to their masters. Masters were in turn expected to provide protection and welfare to their servants. The employment relationship was thus predicated upon a mutual obligation existing between employer and employee, with the legitimisation of authority of one over another being based upon the different status each held in the prevailing social order. The legitimacy of workplace authority in this status-based system was embedded in, and supported by, a mode of economic organisation centred primarily on agriculture. It was one that was to endure for centuries, and benefited from long-held cultural notions of 'blood and soil' and 'land and the lord', from political negotiations that fixed people's locality and occupation, and from a social consensus that endorsed and enforced class divisions between landowners and rural serfs, masters of trades and their apprentices (Tannenbaum, 1966, chapter two).

This type of social order and mode of production continued well into the nineteenth century, and only began to change as the industrial revolution began to spread throughout Europe. The growth of the factory system that accompanied this revolution ruptured previous rural relationships, forced a new political negotiation that enabled people to undertake new occupations and change their locality in search of employment, and breached centuries old social divisions by creating new factory-owning and proletariat classes. Cultural notions and social expectations of mutuality in the employment relationship gave way to new notions of 'freedom of choice' and 'managerial prerogative', and the legitimacy of workplace authority based on status gave way to a new legitimacy based on the 'contracted' position held by managers with respect to those in their charge. Employees were 'free' to negotiate a work contract to their liking within the context of accepting the 'prerogatives' of managers to organised and remunerate their efforts as they saw fit (Fox, 1974). Pockets of mutual obligation persisted in firms holding a paternalistic view of employment relations, and were more widely found in firms forced by the power of trade union to collectively bargaining. Elements of mutuality as a basis of legitimising workplace authority have emerged in more recent times as part of various employee participation schemes, industrial democracy decisional processes and HRM practices. But these have been largely piecemeal, or else provided only a superficial overlay to the contractual basis of the employment relationship. It is a type of legitimacy that is presently enforced in most, if not all, European law, is largely unquestioned in political discourse, and is culturally and socially accepted with little reflection or reaction.

The point in relaying some understanding of this shift from *status* to *contract* modes of legitimation is required to highlight three things insofar as contemporary employment relationships are concerned. It first helps explain, in addition to the achievement of purely material ends, why individuals are generally willing to accept the authority of others within modern capitalist organisations. It secondly alerts us to the complexity of influences that confer legitimacy on the exercise of authority in this type of context. In other words, it should warn managers that the legitimacy of their authority in the employment relationship is not an unmediated 'given'. It finally shows how such legitimacy is not predicated upon subjective notions such as personality or prestige (i.e., status), but on the positional requirements set out in formal obligations (i.e., contract) that are typically rationalised and objectively determined to suit the needs and expectations of the organisation.

Frames of Reference

People have all manner of opinions about the events they witness in their day-to-day lives. Such opinions are invariably shaped by their family and school circumstances, the jobs they hold and the organisations they work for, the churches and clubs they patronise, the circle of friends and communities they belong to, and so on. Because work is such a central part in people's lives, its nature and governance is one social phenomenon that often invokes intensely passionate debate. Such debates are frequently 'framed' in terms of the assumptions and values people use as 'reference' points when conceptualising the nature and governance of work. Hence the term 'frames of reference', a conceptual device first coined by Alan Fox (1966, 1974) as a means of categorising the different opinions held by people towards such issues. Fox claimed that three

such frames of reference captured the main currents of opinion, which he defined in terms of their *unitarist*, *pluralist* and *Marxist* credentials.

In seeking to lend a more precise understanding of what Fox meant by his 'frames of reference' concept, consider the following story:

Two people are standing on a hillside, one is a writer of romantic novels, the other is a scientist. Both are looking westwards at the end of a wonderful spring day. The writer turns to the scientist and says to her, 'I love watching the sun go down and the blaze of colour it stretches across the sky'. The scientists says, 'I would too if that was what I was witnessing'. 'What do you mean?' enquires the writer. 'Well', the scientist responds, drawing on her scientific experience. 'I am not watching the sun go down at all. What I am seeing is the earth turning. The sun is going nowhere – it is we who are moving in relation to the sun. Moreover it is not the sun that is blazing colour across the sky, strictly speaking, it is refracted light from the sun that is bouncing across the outer layer of the earth's atmosphere at a particular angle.' The writer retorted despondently, 'Is it any wonder that science takes the romance out of life'.

The point of this story is to demonstrate how two people can look at the same phenomenon and yet reach two very different conclusions about what they are observing. Both are witnessing the same sunset as an undeniable fact, yet each is drawing on very different assumptions and values to reach their conclusions – in this instance, one based on experiential reflection, the other on detached rationality. It is this meaning that Fox (1966, 1974) applies to his 'frames of reference' concept, namely, that different assumptions and values about the nature of work, workplace relations and workplace conflict lead to different theoretical and explanatory conclusions about what is going on. The remainder of this section looks at the three categories of assumptions identified by Fox, as well as theories and concepts that fall within their various ambits.

Unitarism

Unitarists start from a set of assumptions and values that hold workplace conflict is not an inevitable characteristic of relations between managers and employees. Conflict in the workplace may periodically emerge between the two, but such occurrences are believed to be aberrations in a relationship that is inherently prone to be cooperative. Those holding this perspective see managers and employees as having a common interest in the survival of their organisations, such that when conflicts occur it is unlikely to manifest itself to a point that will render the firm insolvent. Divisions that do exist are assumed to be the product of personality disorders, inappropriate recruitment and promotion practices, the deviance of dissidents, or poor communication. To ensure such divisions does not thwart the 'natural order' of things, it is thought that the rational management team must pay careful attention to removing the sources of potential conflict. To this end it must ensure that recruitment and promotion processes are fair and equitable. It must also ensure that communication systems are in place to alert employees of where their true interests lie, and that individuals who are 'difficult' or prone to personality conflicts are either suppressed or dismissed. It must finally ensure that the organisation is promoted amongst the workforce as the single source of authority, and that any alternative sources of authority, such as shop stewards and trade unions, are eliminated from the workplace (see Fox, 1966; Fidler, 1981, pp. 148-67).

Scientific management theory

Unitarist assumptions and values have played a significant role in three schools of theoretical and practical thought. The first is Taylor's (1974) theory of scientific management. As a management practice, this particular theory holds that the employment relations choices of management must start from the assumption that employees are immature in the ways of work, are prone to avoid it whenever possible, and have limited, self-centred aspirations and time-horizons. In so far as this conflicts with the aspirations and time-horizons of organisations, efforts to reduce the outward manifestation of internal tension are to be undertaken by direct and highly rigid control of the workplace activities of employees. Indeed it is the task of management to show rational

leadership when recruiting and directing workers, to have a clear understanding of the tasks employees are expected to perform, and to have untrammelled prerogatives to control the pace and processes under which they work. Companies subscribing to this form of management practice should reduce work to its basic elements, such that the skills of workers necessary to undertake tasks are kept to a minimum. Employees should be treated impersonally and collectively, with any workplace issues being referred to management. Under these conditions the management approach to employee relations is one that seeks to *suppress* internal tension over the distribution of organisational power by ensuring that management retains superior knowledge about the structure and organisation of work, and has the authority to direct workers as it sees fit.

Human relations theory

The second theory comes from the so-called human relations school (see: Maslow, 1954; Mayo, 1933; Child, 1967). In this case the reduction of organisational tension is held to rest on the ability of individuals to achieve self-fulfilment in the workplace. Workers are regarded as qualitatively different to other resources used in production. Thus, if workers are denied autonomy on the job, or are reduced to acting as mere extensions of the machinery they operate, or are given work that inhibits their capacity to create and think, it is argued that they will invariably find ways to subvert the methods of control that enforce these conditions. The principal task of management on this conception is to manipulate workplace relations in ways that enable employees to feel personal satisfaction with being involved with the organisation. To this end, companies operating on this basis are expected to recognise the right of employees to have a say in how they are governed. They are also expected to take an active interest in developing the skills of employees as a means of demonstrating a commitment to their personal well-being. In whatever form, the aim of this managerial approach to employee relations is one that seeks to *reduce* internal tensions by developing the sense of workplace satisfaction felt by employees through techniques that involve them in the organisation and regulation of work.

Human resource management

The third theory refers to human resource management practices (see: Stone, 1995; Blyton & Turnbull, 1992; Guest, 1989). This form of management practice differs from the previous two in that it starts from the belief that organisational tensions can be completely resolved by nurturing a psychological contract based on cooperation. The employee relations' choices in this instance are predicated on the belief that the forces uniting managers and employees are far stronger than the forces dividing them. It is the task of management to facilitate these unifying forces by establishing workplace conditions that encourage autonomous individuals, whether employees or management, to work collaboratively for the common good. Companies taking this approach are expected to regard workplace relations holistically, whereby collaboration between management and employees is encouraged through the development of a unifying culture, strong and pervasive leadership, and a clear vision of organisational goals. The employee relations aim of these techniques is to *resolve* internal tensions by breaking down workplace social classes, developing open lines of communication lines different stake-holders, and promoting a collective understanding that the interests of all are better served by working together and avoiding conflict. Collaborative management practices in the form of workplace teams, as well as performance appraisals, performance related pay and individual contracts of employment are activities that are thought to give content to this approach.

Pluralism

Pluralists differ from unitarists in that they start from a set of assumptions and values that workplace conflict is inevitable. Typical of those holding this perception is the view that business organisations are complex social constructions made up of different interest groups. Management and employees constitute two such groups, who, because of the very nature of the factory system, are seen as invariably subscribing to different values and objectives. From this frame of reference it is also assumed that there will be different sources of authority within an organisation, and that the potential for conflict between them will always exist over the organisation of work tasks and

the allocation of rewards. By recognising the inevitability of workplace conflict, those holding this perspective tend to regard conflict as necessary for the health of an enterprise as it serves to bring grievances held by workers to the surface. It is also argued that the potential for conflict provides a spur to managers to explore innovative methods for handling it in a way that will produce the best results. Acknowledging the existence of competing sources of authority, most notably in the form of shop stewards or trade unions, is held by pluralists to offer benefits by allowing organisations to deal with industrial relations issues on a collective basis. In this regard it is argued to not only provide management with the most efficient means for institutionalising employment rules and minimising the level of workplace conflict, but to also encourage fairer outcomes by enabling employees to organise and counter-balance the power of managers when negotiating workplace contracts. It is on the basis of these conceptions that pluralists generally accept the legitimate right of employees to bargain collectively and trade unions to act in this capacity on their behalf (see: Fox, 1966, Clegg, 1975).

Systems Theory

The most famous theory drawing on a pluralist frame of reference is Dunlop's (1958) systems theory, which argues that industrial relations are best regarded as a sub-system of the wider social system. The theory holds work to be governed by a wide range of formal and informal rules and regulations, which cover everything from recruitment, holidays, performance, wages, hours, and a myriad of other details of employment. It asserts that these rules are what industrial actors try to determine, that their establishment is influenced by the wider environmental context in which the actors operate, and that the actors themselves share an interest in maintaining the processes of negotiation and conflict resolution. On the back of these assertions four elements are held to make up the system of industrial relations rule-making. The first is industrial actors, which consists of employers and their representatives (i.e., employer associations), employees and their representatives (i.e., trade unions), and external agencies with an interest in industrial relations (i.e., government departments and labour courts). The second is the environmental context, which was made up of prevailing economic and technological conditions, as well as the distribution of power in wider society, each of which is thought to influence or constrain the actions of actors engaged in industrial relations. The third is a so-called 'web of rules' that governs the employment relationship and is held to be the outcome of interactions between the actors. The last is a 'binding ideology', which is a set of common beliefs and understandings that serve to encourage compromises on the part of each actor for the sake of making the system operable. An important aspect of this framework conceives the industrial relations system as self-adjusting towards equilibrium. In so far as change in one element had repercussions for the other elements, they are held to set in motion a range of processes that invariably restores a sense of order on the system.

Strategic choice theory

Another widely used and more recent theory drawing on pluralist assumptions is Kochan, Katz and McKersie's (1986) strategic choice theory. This particular theory picks up on the systems concept developed by Dunlop (1958) and advanced on it by accommodating a number of contemporary changes in the way industrial relations was being practiced. Three such changes are noted as being influential in determining the way managers deal with industrial relations issues. The first is identified in the recent decline in union membership and the rise of new industries not covered by unions. The second is noted in the way collective bargaining structures and outcomes involving trade unions have altered. And the third is recognised in the emergence of new managerial values and human resource strategies that encouraged information sharing, workplace cooperation, performance incentive schemes and autonomous work teams. The theory argues that these changes have made dealing with industrial relations matters far more complex than has traditionally been the case. First, the decline of trade unionism, the increasing decentralisation of bargaining processes and the advancement of human resource management practices have caused a redistribution of decision making authority over workplace relations. In this regard orthodox industrial relations specialists are held to have lost significant power to human resource and line managers when dealing with issues in this area. Second, the growing popularity of unitarist ideas in

techniques used by human resource managers have encouraged organisations to take a more pro-active approach to the management of employees. This was reflected, the theory argues, in the way senior executives are taking a more integrated approach to the development of human resource and business strategies. Third, and as a consequence of this, it is asserted that managers can no longer be regarded as merely the passive reactors to demands and initiatives put forward by organised labour. Indeed the integration of human resource and business strategies means that decisions about marketing, production, finance, investment, and so on, are all having more and more influence over the day-to-day management of workplace relations.

An important element of this theory is that it recognises the interrelationship between decisions and activities across different levels of the industrial relations system. Thus, a decision taken at the strategic level to introduce new technologically improved capital equipment will almost certainly have ramifications for the conduct of collective bargaining over future training and manning levels, as well as for the conduct of workplace relations if manning levels are to be altered or jobs reorganised. The theory also acknowledges the effects of strategic decisions on different actors in the system. Strategic changes made by government to macroeconomic policy settings, for instance, may influence a company's long-term investment strategy, particularly if it believes such changes will affect bank interest rates. If it is believed such rates will rise and thereby diminish the need to maintain existing manning levels, then it will almost certainly have consequences for the organisation's future employment strategies, human resource policies, collective bargaining position, and nature and conduct of employment relations in the workplace.

Marxism

A Marxist frame of reference may seem redundant in view of the break-up of the Soviet Union, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the decline of 'radical' thinking in the West. There are, however, a number of studies from this school of thought that remain influential. This is because they are based on vastly different assumptions about the nature and cause of workplace conflict, and second, because they act as valid critiques of the previous two frames of reference and their associated theories. Those arguing from a radical perspective draw principally from the work of Karl Marx (1950, 1967, 1978), who argued that capitalist societies were characterised by perpetual class struggle. This struggle is caused by inequalities in the distribution of wealth and the skewed ownership of the means of production. Wealth and property ownership, he observed, were highly concentrated in the hands of a small number of bourgeoisie (or capitalists), whilst the vast mass of the proletariat (or workers) lived in poverty and had nothing to sell but their labour. The dominant capitalist class controlled the levers of political and economic power and was forced to exploit the working class by extorting 'surplus value' from their labour. Capitalism generated this exploitation because, by its very nature, it required capitalist to engage in ruthless competition with each other. Each round of new investment placed increasing competitive pressure on profits and created the need to cut costs and rationalise productive operations. This dynamic was seen by Marx as forcing capitalist to perpetually drive down the wages of workers and reduce their numbers. As the latter constituted by far the larger number of those consuming the output of their own productive labours, each new round of investment produced its own inherent contradiction.

Marx argued that societies organised along these lines developed political systems and class-based values that legitimised the dominant position of the capitalist class and coerced the working class into a 'false consciousness' that accepted the status quo. At the same time, however, he argued that capitalist political systems and class-based values are incapable of indefinitely controlling the internal inconsistencies of capitalism. Consequently, the deepening impoverishment of workers eventually moves them to recognise their common class interests and spurs them to organise against their exploitation. Applying a Marxist frame of reference to employee relations, social conflict is viewed as a natural outcome of capitalism, the result of on-going struggle between two competing social classes, whilst industrial conflict is viewed as being a reflection of this struggle played out in the workplace.

Labour process theory

There is a wide range of 'radical' theories informed by a Marxist frame of reference. Some draw more prominently on economic assumptions pertaining to capitalist modes of economic organisation being inherently exploitative and prone to conflict. Others draw more on sociological assumptions pertaining to the existence of class-based value systems that serve to legitimise the dominant position of capitalist interests. Braverman's (1974) labour process theory is a widely referred to example of the former. In the manner of Marx, this particular theory argues that the primary role of management is to convert raw materials into products through the use of labour and machinery; that the only way management is able to do this is through the establishment of structures of power and control that convert the capacity of employees to perform work (i.e., labour power) into actual work effort (i.e., labour); and that it is only through this conversion that profitable production and capital accumulation can take place. It is on the basis of these three observations that the theory asserts that since the turn of the century the ability of managers to control the activities of workers has been increasingly facilitated by the advancement of technology and the spread of scientific management techniques. These developments, it is suggested, have changed the labour process by deskilling work and fragmenting the tasks involved until they are devoid of any meaningful content by those performing them. They have also served to centralise the knowledge of work in the hands of managers and diminished the autonomy of employees to determine the pace and conduct of work. In so far as these developments are intrinsic to the logic of modem forms of capitalist production, they are held to be the outcome of the ever-present necessity for business organisations to find new ways to employ labour more efficiently and more cheaply. The other side of this logic, however, is that the deepening alienation and on-going exploitation involved in such moves are perennially resisted by employees, either openly or covertly, making them unreliable contributors to the labour process and prone to act in ways that are against the interests of the organisations employing them. On this conception workplace conflict is not merely the outcome of the recalcitrant behaviour of individuals or inappropriate management selection and promotion practices, as unitarists assert. Nor is it simply the product of competing group interests in the workplace, as pluralists assert. It is instead the result of the very nature of capitalist industrial development itself.

Feminist theories

An example of the application of Marxist sociological assumptions can be found in feminist theories. Theories of this type typically frame their analysis by noting the role of patriarchy in capitalist modes of economic organisation. Although there is a range of interpretations in this school of thought, the common characteristic in each seeks to highlight how men act in ways that confine women to inferior positions. Thus it is not a class-based value system that serves to legitimise the dominate position of capitalist interests, as Marx once argued, so much as a gender-based value system that serves to legitimise the dominant position of men's interests – one of which just happens to be the ownership and operation of the means of production. To the extent that the dominance of patriarchy has pervaded history and seen the arrangement of society and its institutions to best reflect the interests of men, it has also propagated notions that link appropriate forms of behaviour to biological sex – notions that have served to socialise women into accepting their subjugation in a manner akin to Marx's concept of 'false consciousness'. Liberal feminist theories seek to establish women as the equal of men, and to this end argue the need for policy reform, the dispensing of sex stereotypes, and the removal of barriers to advancement in all areas of social, economic and political life. It thus accepts the existing institutions of society but seeks ways of improving the position of women through reforming actions that open up their opportunities and reduce gender-based prejudices and stereotypes. In the field of employment relations, this can take form in such things as equal employment opportunity and affirmative action legislation and management programmes (Kanter, 1983). Radical feminist theory sees no amount of reform being capable of changing the institutions and practices that reconfirm the dominance of male interests and power. It thus argues in favour of a new set of arrangements, one where women would function separately and establish organisations that practiced inclusive forms of decision making,

communal leadership, flexible and interactive job designs, and equitable distributions of income (Calas & Smirch, 1996).

Postmodernist theories

Postmodernist theories sit uneasily under any frame of reference and range over all manner of social phenomena beyond the world of work. Indeed those of the more extreme variety generally abhor categorisations of any type, offering critiques of theories and explanations that try to interpret the world in terms of a singular 'rationale' or a 'systemised' set of understandings – which, incidentally, embraces almost all of the theories we have so far mentioned. Theories of this type argue that there are many rationales, in fact as many as there are people, who each attach all manner of 'meanings' to their day-to-day lives and experiences in ways that make it impossible to generalise or systemise social phenomena with any degree of precision. This is because people construct the 'truth' and 'reality' of the world around them through language (or 'discourse', to use their terminology), which itself reflects widely varying assumptions, values and ideas. Postmodernist theories of the more moderate variety similarly argue that our assumptions and values about truth and reality are problematic, but tend to believe that certain rationalities can be corralled and thus analysed. In so doing they acknowledge the (possible) existence of certain types of system or systems. Typically, this acknowledgement centres on highlighting 'systems' of domination in the distribution of organisational power in capitalist societies, and it is in this sense that they owe some debt to Marxism (see, for example: Derrida, 1978; Lyotard, 1986-87; Baudrillard, 1981).

From this set of interlinking premises, postmodernist theories of the latter variety argue that the influence of a particular type of discourse on individuals conditions the way they think of themselves and how they experience work. In capitalist societies the construction of certain types of discourses built into the language of enterprise, work, employment, and so on, draws workers into a set of meanings and understandings that serve to justify to them the unequal position they hold within the industrial process. This linking of meaning and understanding to the way people come to construct their personal identities and notions of work are said to be exemplified in recent techniques used by HRM. Such techniques, it is argued, have focused on developing cultures, symbols and language as means of manipulating the behaviour and thinking of employees. Positive meanings of status and recognition are attached to notions such as teamwork and demonstrated compliance with the will management, the only 'legitimate' source of authority in the workplace, whilst negative meanings are attached to recalcitrant behaviour and thinking that aligns itself with alternative sources of authority such as trade unions.

In this regard it is argued that a supporting role is played out in politics, the media, religion, advertising and education, with all attributing positive meanings to the rights of business and the unequal distribution of power and wealth that flows from capitalist modes of economic organisation. At the same time negative meanings are attached to any challenge to these rights and any reforms of a substantive kind aimed at challenging or socialising the existing order. Such meanings are said to be generated via an all-pervasive set of ideas, beliefs and values, which are produced in language, meaning systems and symbols that are manipulated and controlled by those with most to gain under the prevailing economic order – namely, business owners, media magnates, corporate managers, shareholders, pro-business politicians, and the like. To the extent that this is the case, workers have simply come to 'accept' the 'truth' and 'reality' of their subjugation.

As a theory for explaining employment relations, postmodernism rejects the possibility that workplace behaviour can be understood through notions of objectivity and methods that seek to systemise or generalise that behaviour – thus, case studies and general theories are held to be almost worthless. It instead argues that because the behaviour of employees is relative and often contradictory, analysis must dwell on how the subjective individual establishes meanings through engaging with language on the job, and how this in turn shapes how that individual behaves. In other words, analysis of employment relations must concern itself with the subjective dimensions of work, and in particular how the subjective state of mind and how meanings are derived from the surrounding culture, symbols, rituals, language, and so on, of work.

By way of a closing comment to this section, it is conceivable that a person might subscribe to a set of assumptions across two or more frames of reference. But to do so to any significant extent would suggest some seriously contradictory thinking. It is more typical to find a person holding a cluster of assumptions within one or another of the three frames of reference. As a general rule, those believing in the merits of individualism in social and economic interactions tend to hold unitarist assumptions, and are typically found within the ranks of employers, managers and conservative politic leaders. Those holding collectivism to produce better social and economic outcomes are more inclined to be pluralists, and are more usually found among trade union officials, employees and labour politicians. Speculating about those holding capitalism to be economically exploitative and socially divisive is more difficult to determine, but could be notionally said to consist of a small but influential minority standing on the left-wing of a number labour movements throughout Europe. Even amongst this grouping the propensity is to subscribe to a Marxist interpretation of workplace relations without going so far as to advocate a Marxist (revolutionary) solution. One further distinction can be made. Younger managers tend to cluster around the unitarist frame of reference – perhaps a reflection of youthful idealism holding true to the optimistic view that all concerned *should* work for the common good. Older managers tend to cluster around the pluralist frame of reference – in this instance a possible reflection of their greater experience of working life, leading to a more sceptical opinion about the possibility of overlapping interests between employers and employees.

Theories and their application

Theories are 'an attempt to bind together in a systematic fashion the knowledge that one has of some particular aspect of the world of experience' (Ruse, in Honderich, 1995, p. 870). They can be made up of connected law-like statements and/or behavioural postulates which make claims about the real world, or they can be constituted by conceptual categorisations that serve to systematically organise disconnected facts about observable phenomena. In whatever manifestation, for a predictive or explanatory theory to say anything there must be a relationship between the statements made, the methods used to make such statements, and the frame of reference deployed to inform such methods. In each of these respects there are issues pertaining to the nature of reality (i.e., ontology) and how knowledge of that reality is possible (i.e., epistomology), the adoption of which will encourage the use of particular methods and the kinds of statements it is possible for a theory to make. To put it another way, the methods used and the conclusions reached via the use of theory are inescapably presupposed by some form of ontological and epistemological reasoning – in short, by the type of conceptual view one holds of the world.

What frame of reference is accepted, whether realised or not, is of no small importance. In the above we can note the very different conclusions one might reach about the management of labour when applying theories informed by unitarist assumptions as opposed to those informed by pluralist assumptions. The point to be made here is that awareness of these differences is necessary if analysis is to take account of its limitations and/or make explicit its taken-for-granted or background assumptions. That said, there is no single model for how this might be achieved, but one that may provide some guide as to how theory might be applied to practice is given in the following.

1. Theory – set out the *details* of the theory (or model/framework/concept/definition), including the key variables, categorical features, assumptions and any causal linkages between them.
2. Evidence – set out the *evidence* of the real world circumstances or events you are seeking to apply the theory (or model/framework/concept/definition) to.
3. Evaluation – weigh the *evidence* of (2) against the *details* of (1), noting any similarities and differences.
4. Application – use the evaluation of (3) to guide your analysis by using any *differences* in (3) to suggest what might be done to change the circumstances of (2) to match the theoretical premises of (1).

Using points (1) to (3) is useful for *evaluating* theories of explanation. In other words, it is useful for assessing whether a theory explains a given set of circumstances. Thus, applying Braverman's (1974) labour process theory may say something about the nature and causes of workplace conflict if the evidence (point 2) taken from a workplace accords well with the details of the theory (point 1). Using points (1) to (4) is useful for *applying* theories of prediction. In other words, it is useful for assessing the difference between a given set of circumstances and the expectations of theory, from which valid judgements might be made about how best to alter the circumstances to align with the expectations of the theory. Thus, applying human resource management theory may say something about why workers are dissatisfied with existing work practices if the evidence (point 2), say, of prevailing recruitment and promotion practices, is at odds with the alternative practices and outcomes suggested by the theory (point 1). Assuming the causal premises of the theory are correct, changing the existing recruitment and promotion practices to align with those suggested by the theory may offer a way to improve the workplace satisfaction of workers.

Both these modes of applications have their limitations. Both are built on underlying assumptions and values you need to take into account when drawing any conclusions. Theory and practice may accord with each other, for example, but the acclaimed causal influences may not be those flagged by the theory. You need also to be aware that no theory can ever hope to capture all the nuances and elements of social phenomena, whether in the workplace or otherwise – life, it seems, is simply too wonderfully uncertain and complex for such a concurrence. Yet without theory we would be left with trying to make sense of a mass of inchoate happenings. Theories, no matter how far from the literal truth they may seem, at least provide some way of organising such happenings into some workable sense. Those presented above have proven invaluable for making sense of employment relationships in contemporary work settings, even if none has had the capacity to explain them fully.

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