Chapter One

THEORIES AND CONCEPTS

INTRODUCTION

Industrial relations and human resource management (HRM), although related, constitute quite distinct approaches towards the management of labour. Their differences, both as practices and as academic fields of inquiry, revolve around alternative perspectives on the nature of work and workplace relations.

Modern workplaces often contain HRM practitioners with some industrial relations responsibilities, as well as specialists solely responsible for industrial relations. The term **employment relations** has come to prominence over the past decade or so, within academic circles as well as among practitioners, in recognition of the institutional and regulatory processes that impinge on most HRM activities.

Employment relations
A catch-all phrase covering the areas traditionally known as industrial relations, as well as the field of HRM. It covers individual, collective and institutional aspects of management/labour relations.

While most HRM literature is concerned with the discipline's various functional areas—such as recruitment, selection, training, development, remuneration and performance management—employment relations extends the focus to include the institutions and processes of industrial relations and how they impact on the management of labour.

But why are employment relations important? To answer this, we must understand why work is important, to both employees and employers. Human beings as a species are social beings, and nowhere is this more evident than in the world of work. While there are obviously examples of individuals working in isolation from others, the vast bulk of work the world over is carried out as a collective activity. Work generally involves numbers of people working together, ranging from a handful of people in small businesses to many

thousands in large corporations. How we work, where we work, and whom we work with and for, are important factors determining our sense of self. When meeting someone for the first time, it is common to ask 'What do you do?' This innocuous question reveals the extent to which our work is vital for our identity. In addition to the role of work in forming our identity, work is also vital for employees as a means to financial reward, providing access to the material necessities of life, as well as to the array of cultural phenomena pertaining to the advantages and achievements of civilisation.

For employers, with technology and capital readily available (to a greater or lesser extent), it has become increasingly recognised that a firm's competitiveness largely depends on its ability to harness the knowledge and skills of its employees (Wernerfelt 1984). This resource-based view of the firm has been taken up by the HRM and employment-relations literature, arguing that 'distinctive human resources' are the core resource (Cappelli & Crocker-Hefter 1996). This human resource, or **labour power**, is unique: it cannot be separated from the people in which it exists. The employment relationship is concerned with utilising or harnessing the labour power of workers to fulfil the productive aims of the firm in a way that satisfies (at least in part) the aims of employees. This relationship, because of the diverse objectives of the parties (management and labour), is necessarily ambiguous, open-ended and a 'blend of inherently contradictory principles concerning control and consent' (Edwards 2003: 4).

Labour power
The combined set of skills, abilities, and physical and mental energy that workers bring to a job. It is workers' capacity to work.

Therefore, how work is allocated, organised, managed and rewarded is very significant, and how these activities are undertaken reflect on the views and values that we hold as a society. What levels of unemployment are tolerated or considered acceptable, how work is undertaken, and how conflicts between management and labour are resolved are matters giving rise to an array of opinions, variously shaped by prevailing cultural expectations, economic conditions and political understandings related to our engagement with the world of work, and to society more generally (Thomas 1999: v).

Attitudes towards work—and especially to the management of labour—have undergone major change in recent decades in response to massive technological and structural change but, perhaps most importantly, in response to the rising dominant forces linked to globalisation. This has required managers to become more sophisticated in attempting to better organise and allocate work and, crucially, in how to more efficiently utilise and direct those in their charge.

Management thinking in these areas can take place in two ways. First, managers can rely on intuition or experiential understandings to guide or determine the way they go about managing labour. While such an approach has some merit in limited situations, it often results in sub-optimal performance and practices, stemming from personal prejudices, misguided or crude assumptions, or simple wishful thinking. Second, managers can instead apply theoretical and conceptual frameworks in an attempt to construct coherence

from the various disconnected aspects of labour management. This approach offers the only credible means by which the management of labour can be undertaken purposefully and systematically. With this in mind, the remainder of this chapter sets out the most commonly used theoretical and conceptual tools used to analyse the interactions between employees (workers) and employers (or managers).

▷ DEFINING EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS

Employment relations is a term commonly used to designate the study and practice of HRM in combination with industrial relations. With HRM focusing more on the individual aspects, and industrial relations focused largely on the collective aspects of management/labour relations, employment relations encompasses both individual and collective aspects of the management of labour. Despite this broad perspective, there has long been considerable academic debate over the meaning of employment relations. Part of the ambiguity over its meaning stems from the multi-disciplinary nature of its subject matter, attracting scholars from various fields of research, including labour economics, industrial sociology, industrial psychology, labour history and labour law. Thus, employment relations is a term that can be used in a variety of ways and contexts.

American scholars have tended to use the term employment relations rather vaguely, viewing it as identical with the thrust of HRM practices and related interactions concerned with individual employees and employers (or managers) at the workplace level. In this way, it typically describes something quite distinct from traditional notions of personnel management and industrial relations (see, for example, Beardwell & Holden 1994). A wider meaning of employment relations is generally provided by the British literature, which incorporates interactions beyond the individual workplace level, including the state, employers and organised labour. So where the US literature focuses on the micro-relations between employers and employees at the level of the workplace, the British perspective also includes a macro-level analysis incorporating interactions between the institutions established to govern and regulate such relations (see, for example, Gennard & Judge 2002).

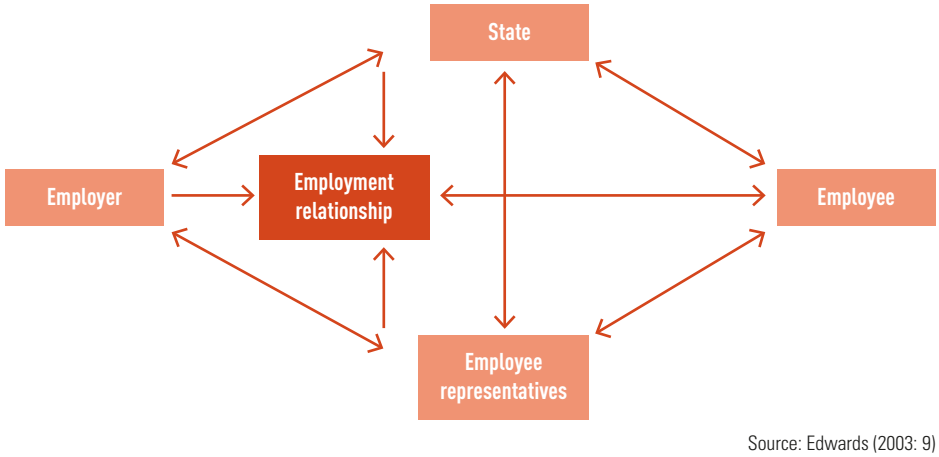
The incorporation of the wider institutional settings in the British usage of employment relations amounts to the inclusion of areas typically considered the province of industrial relations. The British approach thus uses the term employment relations in two senses. First, it employs a unitarist concept when describing HRM. (The terms *unitarist* and *pluralist* are elaborated on later in this chapter.) In doing so, it adopts the mainstream US usage, with employment relations synonymous with the sum of prescribed HRM activities and interactions, assumed to find expression through collaborative relations between employees and employers (and their managers), in the skill, loyalty and flexibility of employees, in a

union-free environment, in the high performance outcomes of firms, and all occurring in the absence of workplace conflict. Second, the term can be used in its pluralist sense, describing the institutional and regulative settings overseeing the functional operations and interactions of HRM. Used in this way, employment relations acknowledges the plurality of group interests and the inherent nature of workplace conflict, requiring dispute settlement and negotiation procedures that determine formal rules and regulations, customs and practices governing management/labour relations.

The use of the term employment relations in this book closely follows the British approach, recognising that Australia's system of industrial (or workplace) relations is overseen by relatively extensive regulative and institutional settings. In this sense, employment relations is something of a 'catch-all' phrase covering the areas traditionally known as industrial relations, as well as the field of HRM (see Bamber & Lansbury 1998; Keenoy & Kelly 1998).

Employment relations is used to describe all aspects of the interactions and relations between employers (or managers) and employees, as individuals, as collectives, at the workplace, industry, local, regional, national (or even international) level, and all the while cognisant of the regulatory and institutional settings that oversee such relations.

FIGURE 1.1 The employment relationship



Source: Edwards (2003: 9)

The employment relationship, while obviously a relationship between an employer and an employee, is a relationship often mediated by the state—through laws, regulations, tribunals, etc.—and trade unions, or other forms of worker representation. The role of the state and that of trade unions is discussed in later chapters.

▷ THE LEGITIMACY OF WORKPLACE AUTHORITY

Having discussed the meaning of the term employment relations and some key aspects of the nature of the employment relationship, we now turn our attention to one of the key components underpinning the employment relationship: the legitimacy of workplace authority.

Whether viewed from an economic, legal or moral perspective, the employment relationship is one whereby the employer is generally viewed as legitimately exercising power over the employee. What influences the legitimacy of such power? In one sense, the power of an employer (the owner of the means of production) to deny the employee (those who only have their labour power to sell) a means of earning a livelihood, gives effect to the golden rule: 'Them that's got the gold makes the rules.' But such an explanation does not explain why most people willingly subject themselves to the authority of others. More so, they generally do not do so begrudgingly or reluctantly; if that was the case, most workplaces would suffer from poor productivity, as willing labour is generally more productive than labour conscripted under duress. So there seems to be something in our collective psyche and social values that leads us to work together willingly in an organised fashion to achieve goals collectively that would be unattainable if pursued individually.

Achieving economic goals generally requires some division of labour and responsibility. Once divisions of labour occur, whether formally or informally, they require some people to have authority over others in order to ensure coordination and direction. In the Middle Ages, this division of labour was upheld by a social system and culture based on status and obligation. A person's 'station in life' was determined, more often than not, at birth. The authority of employers over employees was upheld, not by employment contracts as is the case today, but by the subjugation of the servant to the unchallenged authority of the master. This system, rooted in an agricultural and household stable economic structure, reinforced by custom, law and religion, was based on a clearly defined set of mutual obligations: the obligation of the servant to serve the master faithfully, and the obligation of the master to care for the welfare of the servant. These mutual obligations were generally deemed as permanent for the life of the parties. Such a stable and self-replicating system could be thought of as constituting 'a place for everyone and everyone in their place'. The authority of one party over the other was determined by their status in the social order. This conservative social order prevailed for many centuries in societies that fixed people's locality and occupation, and from a social consensus that upheld existing class divisions between landowners and rural serfs, masters of trades and their apprentices (Tannenbaum 1966).

The stability of this medieval system, based on a predictable, technologically stagnant agricultural economy, remained largely unchallenged until well into the nineteenth century, and only began to unravel with the onset and spread of the Industrial Revolution.

Industrialisation required the movement and flexibility of labour, particularly away from rural settings towards the cities where large-scale manufacturing began to take place. In order to get people 'off the land', the centuries-old system of obligations based on status was replaced with obligations based on contract. New notions of 'freedom of choice' and 'managerial prerogative' replaced notions of status-based obligations. Employees were 'free' to negotiate a work contract to their liking, while accepting the prerogative of employers to organise and remunerate employees to their liking (Fox 1974).

This historical basis of the legitimacy of workplace authority demonstrates that it is not based on subjective notions of personality or prestige (i.e. status), but on the formal obligations set out in employment contracts designed to satisfy the needs of the firm. These obligations—written or unwritten, formal or informal—are underpinned by a complex array of often dynamic, economic, social, political and cultural influences. Accordingly, they are somewhat of a 'moveable feast'.

▷ FRAMES OF REFERENCE

Understanding or making sense of this 'moveable feast' depends in part on your own individual perspective. Each person's view of the world is shaped by their background, friendships, age, gender, family, religion, politics, education, economic circumstance and general life experience. This leads to diverse opinions and intense debates, clearly manifested when it comes to opinions on the nature and governance of work. Debates of this sort are often 'framed' in terms of the assumptions people use as reference points when conceptualising the nature and governance of work. Thus, the term **frames of reference** was devised by Alan Fox (1966, 1974) to categorise the opinions held by people on such workplace issues. Fox argued that there were broadly three such frames of reference, which he categorised as unitarist, pluralist and radical (or Marxist). What follows is an exposition of these frames of reference and a discussion of the types of theories of employment relations they inform.

Frames of reference
The outlook or perspective people apply in framing the way they interpret issues around employment relations.

Unitarism

Unitarists believe that cooperation and harmony constitute the natural order, rather than conflict. The intellectual roots for this perspective can be traced to a particular social-philosophical view of society as a kind of super organism, with the various components of civil society interdependent, in similar fashion to the way organisms combine to give life to the human body (see Ely 1890; Carlyle 1911; Hobson 1920; Hayek 1960; Tawney 1961). Accordingly, there is a common interest for all individuals and groups to contribute to the survival and wellbeing of society. This harmony of interests overrides any self-interest, and concern for the common interest prevails.

Unitarism
A view of workplace relations that assumes employees and managers have a common interest in the success of their organisation, and that collective bargaining and trade unions create conflict in a relationship that would otherwise be peaceful.

Unitarists' starting position is that conflict is not an inevitable characteristic of the employment relationship. If conflict between managers and employees does occur, it is viewed as an aberration that is perhaps the result of poor communication, poor recruitment or promotion practices, personality disorders, or the result of outside trouble-making. Such conflict, to the extent that it occurs, is explained away as 'the result of misunderstanding or mischief; in other words as pathological' (Crouch 1982: 18). At its heart, unitarists consider the employment relationship to be a site of cooperation. In this schema, both managers and employees share a joint interest in the success of the firm. Any conflicts that arise, if handled appropriately by managers, are likely to be short lived. Internal 'dissidents', in particular, need to be either suppressed or jettisoned from the organisation. Therefore, unitarists place great stock on the importance of good recruitment, selection and promotion practices. Communication systems are also important to alert, educate and remind employees where their true interests lie. For this reason, management is promoted as the single unchallenged source of authority, requiring trade unions to be either marginalised, bypassed, excluded or suppressed (Fox 1966; 1974).

There are three broad management theories that reflect a unitarist frame of reference: **scientific management** theory, **human relations theory** and **human resource management** theory.

Scientific management
A model of process engineering based on making workers' tasks as routine and simple as possible so as to maximise productivity, enhance managerial control and reduce workers' scope for initiative. Also known as Taylorism.

Human relations theory
The theory that tension and conflict in the workplace is best reduced by the creation of an appropriate organisational environment, giving employees greater autonomy and control over how they work, thus making their jobs more fulfilling.

Human resource management
Systematic program of labour management that is linked to strategic business plans in a manner that benefits both employees and the organisation.

Scientific management theory

Unitarist assumptions underpin Taylor's (1911) theory of scientific management. As a management practice, this theory holds that the employment relations choices of managers must start with the assumption that workers are selfish, lazy, immature in the ways of work (which they are prone to avoid whenever possible), and have limited time-horizons. As this is in conflict with the time-horizons and aspirations of firms, managers are required to impose direct and highly rigid control mechanisms.

The task of management is to demonstrate rational leadership when recruiting, selecting, promoting or directing employees, to have clear understanding of the tasks required of employees and to have unrestricted managerial prerogatives to control the manner, pace and processes of work. Firms adopting scientific management theory in practice should re-engineer work processes to simplify employees' tasks to simple, repetitive processes that require little skill and enable easy management surveillance and control. By maintaining control and superior knowledge of the overall productive process, management authority is enhanced and entrenched, with employees simply working as directed.

Human relations theory

Human relations theory is derived from the discipline of industrial psychology, specifically the so-called human relations school (Maslow 1954; Mayo 1933: Child 1969). The theory initially grew out of a series of studies conducted by researchers at the Western Electric Company in the United States, who conducted numerous experiments and observations

on work group behaviour (Mayo 1933). The basic premise of human relations theory is that tension and conflict in the workplace is best reduced by the creation of an appropriate organisational environment, enabling employees to pursue and achieve self-actualisation through their work. Workplace conflict can be significantly reduced by allowing employees greater autonomy and control over how they work, thus making their jobs more fulfilling. In this sense, it offers a critique of the scientific management approach, which emphasises tight control and reducing employee autonomy.

The principal task of management—according to human relations theory—is to provide an environment where employees feel valued and where they have a say in how work is to be performed. Management should also demonstrate their commitment to their employees' wellbeing by taking an active interest in developing their employees' skills. This approach emphasises teamwork and group cohesion as the best ways to motivate employees (rather than pay incentives). Such an approach is expected to engender greater commitment by employees towards organisational goals, thus leading to greater efficiency and productivity (see Rose 1988).

A glaring omission in the Mayo studies was any analysis of the contested power relations within the firm, and the role of trade unions (Bramel & Friend 1981). This is quite surprising, given that Western Electric had spent significant amounts of money paying spies to report on and undermine pro-union tendencies among its workforce. In the early post-World War II period, human relations theory began to fall into disrepute because of a series of mixed practical results and theoretical inconsistencies. Nevertheless, it soon gathered a new lease of life under the banners of 'neo-human relations' or 'behavioural theories' (Maslow 1943; McGregor 1957; Herzberg 1966; Roethlishberger 1965). Providing a more sophisticated approach, these theories nevertheless remained focused on employee satisfaction and motivation, including the need for 'self-actualisation' through a 'hierarchy of needs'. The notion that high job satisfaction led to high worker motivation, which in turn led to high productivity eventually led to the development of an array of techniques aimed at 'job enrichment'.

Both human relations and neo-human relations theories share the same unitarist assumptions. In particular, they ignore the role of trade unions and the nature of workplace conflict. Nevertheless, they have been quite influential in identifying the link between employees' work efforts and the nature of the 'psychological contract' they have with managers (see Huczynski 1993).

Human resource management theory

Human resource management theory (Stone 2008) can be distinguished from the previous two unitarist theories by the premise that workplace conflict and organisational tensions can be completely resolved by nurturing a 'psychological contract' based on cooperation. It is the task of management—according to this schema—to provide strong leadership and

to develop a culture of teamwork and collaboration for the common good. A clear vision of organisational goals is essential so that employees can 'buy in' to the culture. Some of the features of collaborative HRM practices include workplace teams, performance appraisals, performance-related pay and individual contracts (Hearn Mackinnon 2007). Trade unions are an anathema, since they represent a barrier to the full employee adoption of the firm's—i.e. management's—organisational goals.

Pluralism

Pluralists commence with the assumption that workplace conflict is inevitable. Systems of employment (i.e. businesses and other organisations) are complex social constructions with divergent interest groups. The chief groups, being management and employees, have different interests because they generally subscribe to different values and objectives. Furthermore, the more complex an organisation is, the more likely there are divergent interests among parts of the organisation, if only because of the different sources of authority. In all organisations, large or small, there is likely to be conflict over the organisation of work and the allocation of rewards.

Pluralism
A view of workplace relations that assumes inherent conflict between employees and managers, which is best managed and mediated through the agencies of trade unions and collective bargaining.

By recognising the inevitability of workplace conflict, the task then becomes one of managing this conflict in a way that leads to the resolution of tensions and the improvement of workplace practices. Rather than viewed as a purely negative phenomenon, workplace conflict provides an opportunity for the identification of issues, enabling the organisation to learn and improve. Conflict can itself become the spur for workplace innovation.

Acknowledging alternative sources of authority, especially that of shop stewards, job delegates and trade unions, a pluralist approach by managers allows organisations to deal with workplace issues on a collective basis. Allowing employees to organise collectively in trade unions enables employees to counteract the employers' power in negotiating of employment contracts. The rights of trade unions and workers to bargain collectively is a hallmark of the pluralist position on employment relations.

Systems theory

Dunlop's (1958) **systems theory** remains the most influential pluralist theory of industrial relations. Employment relations under this schema is a subsystem of the wider social system. This subsystem includes a complex set of formal and informal 'web of rules' and regulations for governing the workplace. The actors—employers and their associations; employees, shop stewards and trade unions; labour lawyers; government agencies, tribunals and labour courts—are motivated to operate within these rules under the influence of the wider economic, technological, social and political environment. Finally, a 'binding ideology'—or set of common beliefs and understandings held by the parties—is essential for the system to promote compromises on the part of each actor, to ensure the system remains operable. This framework conceives the industrial relations system as self-adjusting towards equilibrium.

Systems theory
Dunlop's (1958) systems theory consists of a set of informal and formal 'rules' for governing the workplace, with all parties operating under the influence of a broader economic, social, political, technological and cultural environment.

Strategic choice theory

Strategic choice theory
Kochan, Katz and McKersie's (1986) alteration to systems theory, taking into account the decline in trade union membership; changes in collective bargaining structures; and new human resource strategies with a stronger unitarist bent.

Kochan, Katz and McKersie's (1986) **strategic choice theory** is a more recent theory based on pluralist assumptions and building upon–while departing from–Dunlop's (1958) seminal work. Whereas Dunlop's systems theory was largely a static theory, strategic choice theory offers a framework for incorporating the dynamic changes to employment relations that have taken place particularly since the 1970s. Three changes in particular are considered to have been major drivers for shifts in the way employers deal with employment relations. First, the decline in trade union membership and the growth of non-union sectors of the economy. Second, changes in collective bargaining structures and outcomes involving trade unions. And third, the emergence of new managerial attitudes, values and approaches, particularly evidenced by the influence of new human resource strategies with a far stronger unitarist bent.

The net result of these changes is that employers (and their managers) can no longer be considered as passive actors, simply responding to trade union demands. Instead, managers are making their own strategic choices, thus seizing the initiative in employment relations. In the face of a decline in trade union membership and influence, coupled with the growing influence of managerialist ideologies–whether framed in terms of adherence to neoliberalism, HRM or strategic management–the 'binding ideology' or 'glue' that previously held industrial relations systems together has been seriously weakened and, in many instances, abandoned.

This strategic choice theory, drawn from an examination of workplace relations in the United States, distinguishes three levels of decision-making for the parties: employers, unions and government. One of their key conclusions is that employers have taken the initiative by making long-term strategic choices, increasingly assisted by the retreat of government from providing balance to the industrial relations system.

TABLE 1.1 Three levels of industrial relations activity

Level	Employers	Unions	Government
Long-term strategy and policy-making	Business strategies Investment strategies HR strategies	Political strategies Representation strategies Organising strategies	Macroeconomic and social policies
Collective bargaining and personnel policy	Personnel policies Negotiation strategies	Collective bargaining strategies	Labour law and administration
Workplace and individual/ organisation relationships	Supervisory style Worker participation Job design and work organisation	Contract administration Worker participation Job design and work organisation	Labour standards Worker participation Individual rights

Source: Kochan, Katz & McKersie (1986: 17)

Radicalism (or Marxism)

The **radical** or **Marxist** frame of reference is largely based on the writings of the nineteenth-century German philosopher, economist, sociologist and political activist Karl Marx (1950; 1967; 1978). Marx argued that capitalist societies—market economies based on the private ownership of the means of production—are subject to the perpetual struggle between competing classes: the bourgeoisie (capitalist class, or owners of businesses) and the proletariat (working class). The skewed distribution of wealth and power in the hands of the few capitalists contrasts with the vast bulk of society, the working class who, with only their labour power to sell, are subject to exploitation and inequality. The interests of capitalists and workers are diametrically opposed, and can never be reconciled under capitalism. Only the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and its replacement with a socialist (and eventually communist) system based on the common ownership of the means of production can end class conflict, by ending the classes themselves.

Radicalism/Marxism
A view of workplace relations that assumes conflict between employers and managers reflects wider social conflict between competing economic classes, and that conflict can only be eradicated by overturning the capitalist mode of economic organisation.

Contrary to what is often thought, Marx did not consider capitalists to be bad people or even particularly greedy. Rather, capitalist competition forced businesses to squeeze labour costs and to intensify work processes, lest they lose market share and were ultimately forced out of business. Marx was also in awe of the dynamism of capitalism as an engine for rapid technological change. Furthermore, around 150 years before its popular recognition, Marx predicted the globalisation of capitalism because of its insatiable need for growth, through the development of and search for new markets.

The key contribution of Marxism to employment relations is that (unlike pluralism) it offers an explanation for the root cause of workplace conflict. The interests of employers and employees are diametrically opposed. Competition forces businesses to suppress wages growth and to continually find new ways to intensify work in order to protect or grow profits. Similarly, workers will always try to protect or increase their wages, and resist efforts at work intensification. Such conflict is part of the class struggle between the two main classes in society: the capitalist and working classes. Class struggle is a permanent feature of capitalism, which takes place at the workplace level, as well as in national and even international politics. Workplace conflict is therefore just a part of the society-wide class struggle endemic to capitalism.

Some twentieth-century variants of Marxist analysis also provide explanations for the ongoing power and authority of managers over workers. The Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci (1971) argued that the ruling class (i.e. capitalists) did not maintain their authority and power primarily through the use of force (although this was always an option), but rather through the maintenance of ideological **hegemony**. Thus, the ruling class ruled by having its ideology—values, customs and ideas—accepted by the majority of society. While key institutions such as the church and, more recently, the media, were responsible for maintaining this hegemony, Gramsci famously wrote that 'hegemony begins in the factory' (1971: 85). In the workplace, this would be achieved by managerial prerogative or

Hegemony
Process where the ruling class maintains power and authority by having its ideology—values, customs and ideas—accepted by the majority of society, without having to resort to or threaten the use of force.

authority being accepted by workers as being natural and normal. Similarly, the popular 1960s French Marxist theorist, Louis Althusser (1969), argued that such hegemony was achieved by **interpellation**: a process whereby workers came to accept their subordinate status as subjects.

Interpellation
A process where workers come to accept their subordinate status as subjects. A concept posited by the French Marxist Louis Althusser (1969).

These ideas of hegemony were at the core of the American academic Michael Burawoy's (1979) seminal work *Manufacturing Consent*, in which he argued that management techniques, now known as human resource management, had resulted in a transformation of managerial authority from a despotic to a hegemonic regime; from extracting effort through coercion and fear to extracting effort through the manufacturing or organising of consent.

Labour process theory

Labour process theory
Where employers or managers use a range of processes and technologies to control employees in order to convert employees' capacity to work (i.e. labour power) into actual work effort (i.e. labour).

Braverman's (1974) **labour process theory** builds on the Marxist tradition, but focuses on the workplace where employers (or managers) utilise a range of processes and technologies to control employees in order to convert the capacity of employees to work (i.e. labour power) into actual work effort (i.e. labour). It is only through this conversion of employees' capacity to work into actual work that profitable production and capital accumulation and growth can take place.

As a result of technological innovations and the adoption of scientific management techniques—including the deployment of sophisticated forms of workplace surveillance—managers have re-engineered production processes so that employees have been de-skilled and their work tasks so fragmented and simplified that virtually all meaning and satisfaction from work has been removed. This de-humanising results in deepening worker alienation and ever greater levels of exploitation. In keeping with Marx's standpoint, labour process theory posits workplace conflict as not just the result of competing interests in the workplace (as do pluralists), but the result of the very nature of capitalist development itself.

PRIMARY EXAMPLE 1.1

Power and authority at work

Gizmo Auto, a US multinational corporation, is a long-time car manufacturer operating a plant in Broadmeadows, on the northern outskirts of Melbourne, Australia. Since beginning its Australian operations in the late 1950s, it has become one of the leading automotive manufacturers in Australia. Its production methods follow the Fordist model of intense assembly-line techniques, combined with relatively low-skilled workers completing simple and repetitive tasks. This production method has proven successful in the car industry—and in the manufacturing industry the world over—leading to high levels of productivity, above-average wages and good profits. By all accounts, it seems to have produced a win-win outcome for both employees and employers.

Employing a largely newly arrived migrant workforce from non-English speaking backgrounds, Gizmo's managers have maintained a disciplined managerial style, in part by placing workers from different ethnic and language backgrounds alongside each other to minimise worker-to-worker communication. The company operated a strong system of workplace surveillance with video cameras, as well as a foreman walking the floor to ensure that all workers were focused totally on their allocated tasks. A feature of this surveillance system has been to restrict any stop in production to the designated morning tea and lunch breaks. No other breaks are tolerated.

Despite Gizmo Auto's strong managerialist style, the company recognised that trade unions have statutory representation rights in Australia, and so Gizmo regularly negotiate an enterprise agreement with the Victorian branch of the Vehicle Builders Union (VBU). For over two decades, this recognition of the legitimate role of trade unions has delivered increases in real wages for the workers, as well as an industrial relations climate relatively free of disputation.

For some time, however, murmurings of resentment among workers at the constant surveillance and management unwillingness to allow workers to take 'unscheduled' toilet breaks, has been festering. The language and cultural barriers to better communication among the workers at the plant seems to have contributed to an inability by the workforce to even get their complaints addressed by their own union. The VBU officials, based 25 kilometres away in Melbourne, seemed oblivious to these grassroots concerns, assuming that the delivery of good wages and reasonable working hours were good achievements by the VBU, especially considering the 'hard-nosed' negotiating tactics employed by senior management at Gizmo.

Early one morning, an assembly line worker, Mazhoor Fariq, was desperate to take a toilet break, but his foreman refused to allow it. Finally, Fariq could wait no longer; he abandoned his post on the line and headed to the toilets, 100 metres away from his spot on the line. As he walked past the line towards the toilets, his foreman was following, berating him and ordering him to return to his work position and wait another 25 minutes until the official morning tea break. Gradually more and more of Mazhoor's fellow assembly-line workers turned around with their backs to the line and began cheering on Mazhoor as he continued down the line, completely ignoring the screams of his foreman. Finally the foreman shouted 'You're sacked, towel head.' Hearing this verbal abuse and the sacking of their fellow worker, the other workers began walking off the assembly line and shouting abuse at management. Finally, one worker grabbed a nearby forklift vehicle and drove it straight at the management office at the end of the line, smashing a door and windows. Soon a full-blown riot was in place, with hundreds of rampaging workers demolishing management's office and part of the plant itself.

Soon mounted riot police were called up from the city to quell the riot, and in desperation, company management pleaded with VBU officials from Melbourne to talk with the workers to try to calm them down and resolve the dispute.

In the week that followed, the company and the VBU agreed to establish a site works committee, comprising representatives from the various parts of the assembly line. This Works Committee (WC) was to meet regularly, on the company's time, to discuss issues and hear complaints from workers at the plant. The WC would attempt to resolve issues directly with Gizmo management but, failing that, they would call in state officials from the VBU to resolve the matters with management.

As an immediate response to the violent outburst at the plant, the company also announced that all workers would be entitled to two additional 10-minute toilet breaks per day. If another break was needed, a worker would have to let their foreman know and they would attempt to get another worker to cover for them for the few minutes they were on a break. Furthermore, two extra toilet blocks were to be built, so workers would not have to walk so far to get to a toilet.

Postscript: This Primary example is based on real events that took place at a car manufacturing plant on the outskirts of Melbourne in the 1970s. A few months after the dispute someone who bought a new car that had been built at the plant returned it because it had a rattle, the source of which could not be identified, despite several inspections. Eventually the manufacturer completely stripped the car apart and found a small Coke bottle inside a door panel; a note inside it read, 'I bet it took you a long time to find this, you bastards'.

Questions

1 What frame of reference would you ascribe to Gizmo management?
2 What frame of reference best explains the outbreak of intense conflict at this workplace?
3 Who should have the power and authority to decide how and under what circumstances people work?

POSTMODERNIST THEORIES

Postmodernism
A catch-all descriptor for a range of non-structural theories of society. Generally, postmodernist theories emphasise the role of language and discourse in providing meaning, as 'truth' itself is a subjective phenomenon.

Postmodernist theories struggle to sit under any defined 'frame of reference', as they range over all manner of social phenomena beyond the world of work. Furthermore, **postmodernism** has tended to criticise any attempt to uncover theories or 'meta-narratives' as explanations for anything; arguing instead that all attempts at explaining the world in terms of a singular rationale or 'systematised' set of understandings is doomed to failure, if not downright dangerous. Rather, there are many rationales, as individuals will attach meaning to their day-to-day lives, making generalised explanations useless. Instead, people construct their own 'truths' and find the 'reality' of the world through language or discourse, based on their own values and experiences. No one's 'truth' is more valid than anyone else's.

Nevertheless, there are some postmodernist theorists, of a more radical persuasion, who acknowledge the existence of systems of power and domination in society. These theorists, while not always acknowledging it, owe something of a debt to Marxism (see, for example, Derrida 1978; Lyotard 1986–87; Baudrillard 1981).

These theorists generally focus on the use of language and discourse to condition workers into accepting their fate and position of subservience in the employment relationship. The language of 'enterprise', 'productivity', 'teamwork', 'flexibility', 'efficiency', 'commitment', etc., draws workers into a set of meanings that serve to justify the unequal position they hold within the industrial process. Sophisticated techniques employed by modern HRM

use symbols, myths and language to develop cultures aimed at manipulating employees' behaviour and thinking. Management employs these techniques to promote managerial prerogatives and authority, while simultaneously demonising alternative sources of authority, particularly trade unions.

Postmodern theories, while useful in focusing attention on the use of language and discourse by employers (or managers) to maintain their hegemony in the workplace, offer little in the way of explanations for workplace conflict.

A variant of postmodernism with some specific contributions to understanding modern (or perhaps postmodern) employment relationships in the emerging 'risk society' is to be found in the work of Beck (2000), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002), Giddens (1999), Bauman (2001; 2005) and Mythen (2005). Their work highlights the structuring or 'institutionalised individualism' (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002) that contribute to shaping individual, group, community, national and international relationships and transactions. In brief, this literature explores the way that late capitalism is breaking down all common bonds and leading (or forcing) individuals to assume individualist positions as contractors, casual workers, self-insurers, etc., thus assuming more and more 'risk' and consequently becoming further removed from the traditional protections of collectivism, particularly trade unionism. As an observation of actual trends, this literature is novel and insightful, but its value is less obvious as an explanation for most employment relationships.

▷ THE ROLE OF THEORY

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, cited in Honderich 1995: 870). Theories are only useful if they help us make sense of the world. If a theory is to offer some predictive or explanatory value, there must be a relationship between the statements or understandings arrived at, the methods used to reach such understandings, and the frame of reference relied upon to inform such methods. It's important to be aware that the different conclusions that can be reached when analysing employment relations depends on the frame of reference adopted.

Often the presentation of these frames of reference and their associated theories makes it appear that they are mutually exclusive and cannot be compared. Instead, this book argues that each frame of reference offers its own insights, and an appreciation of its associated theories, strengths and weaknesses is valuable in attempting to make sense of employment relations.

Unitarism, for instance, by emphasising the commonality of interests between employees and employers, provides a useful explanation for the day-to-day high level

of cooperation that takes place in most workplaces around the globe. The identification of many (if not most) employees with their organisation or workplace suggests that there are clearly some common or shared interests between employees and employers (or managers). What cannot be denied is that if businesses fail, the interests of both employers and employees suffer.

Even when evaluating the worth of scientific management or Taylorism, it is worth recalling that none other than Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik (communist) revolution in Russia, was full of praise for Taylor's management theories, and set about implementing them throughout industry in revolutionary Russia.

Pluralism, once the favourite frame of reference for most industrial-relations academics, has suffered in prestige, as trade union membership and strike activity has declined and collective bargaining has receded in importance in most advanced economies. Nevertheless, since the onset of the global financial crisis (GFC), as firms downsize (i.e. sack workers) and whole economies restructure, throwing entire sectors of the economy on the scrap heap, it should be clear that workers have their own particular interests, as do employers and managers.

Radicalism, and Marxism in particular, is often viewed as an anachronism, a hangover from the 1960s era of liberation movements and revolutionary fervour. Surely, since the collapse of the Soviet Union and other socialist systems in 1989 and the early 1990s, it should be apparent that Marxism is a dead end? It is worth reminding ourselves that Marx had very little to say about possible socialist or communist societies. Instead, he was preoccupied with analysing the logic and workings of capitalism. On a world scale, the gap between rich and poor has never been greater. Even within individual societies, such as the United States and Australia (see Wicks 2005), this is increasingly apparent. Witness the 'Occupy Wall Street' movement and its many variants around the world, proclaiming the rights of the 99 per cent against the super rich 1 per cent. Even those committed to the advantages of capitalism may find Marx's analysis insightful and 'on the money'. Some years ago an investment banker told *New Yorker* magazine that 'Marx's approach is the best way to look at capitalism' (Wheen 1999: 5).

As for postmodernism, since this term covers a wide range of perspectives and theories, it is the hardest approach to evaluate. Its contribution to understanding mechanisms of domination and power relationships through sophisticated use of language, symbols and discourse is certainly insightful. However, in the face of factory closures, wage cuts and high unemployment in most developed economies, it is hard to accept the notion that all that matters are individuals' own understandings and meanings. Quite clearly there are structural factors at play that postmodernism does not even attempt to explain.

▷ SUMMARY

Any understanding of employment relations must begin with an appreciation of the nature and role of work in modern society. Work provides a means of self-actualisation, fulfilment and identity for many people, as well as the means of providing a livelihood. For employers, work is a means of generating wealth via production and exchange through applying human labour to technology and raw materials, whereas for employees, work is a means to earn an income.

Employment relations is the study of the relations between workers and employers/managers at the individual, workplace, industry and national level. Employment relations incorporates the field of study traditionally called industrial relations, as well as modern human resource management. Owing to Australia's unique system of regulation, the term 'employment relations' is used in this book to cover the micro focus of workplace issues as well as the macro analysis.

The field of study of employment relations is contested terrain, as there are no right or wrong ways of analysing this multidisciplinary area. Importantly, explaining the outcome of employment relations depends crucially on your frame of reference, perspective or value system. The main frames of reference identified in the study of employment relations are unitarism, pluralism and radicalism/Marxism. The unitarist framework assumes that the existence of workplace conflict is evidence of a failure of management to weed out trouble-makers, enforce managerial prerogative or maintain effective systems of communication and workplace authority. Pluralists accept workplace conflict as the natural and inherent outcomes of the complex array of relationships and interests within all organisations. The challenge for pluralists is to manage conflict effectively, enabling it to lead to improved outcomes. The radical frame of reference, often linked to the Marxist outlook, considers workplace conflict to be the result of the class conflict inherent in capitalism itself. For such radicals, only the replacement of capitalism—a system that depends on the exploitation of labour—with a classless communist (or at least socialist) society can lead to an end to workplace conflict.

In more recent years, there have emerged other perspectives or theories, which seek to explain workplace conflict. These postmodern approaches shift the focus away from structural factors—such as notions of class—and turn their attention towards the use of language, symbols and discourse as a means of maintaining power, including at the workplace. The lack of a coherent analysis of employment relations by postmodernists has led us to simply note their contribution to theory, but not to place much emphasis on them throughout this book.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How do employment relations relate to industrial relations and human resource management?
2. What is the source of managerial authority or managerial prerogative?
3. What is meant by obligations based on status, as opposed to those based on contract?
4. What are the main features of a unitarist, pluralist and radical frame of reference?
5. What frame of reference underpins scientific management and human resource management?
6. What frame of reference underpins Dunlop's systems theory?
7. What frame of reference underpins labour process theory?
8. Given the dismal failure of socialist societies in the twentieth century, why might Marx's analysis remain useful in understanding employment relations?
9. Why does postmodernism tend to reject structural explanations?
10. What roles do language, myths and symbols play in legitimising managerial authority?

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CASE STUDY 1.1 UNDERSTANDING FRAMES OF REFERENCE

Management from a large telecommunications company running a call centre in Melbourne notified their employees that the centre would be closing down in six months, as the work would be subcontracted to a call centre in India. The telecommunications union called a lunchtime meeting at the call centre to consider what action, if any, the workers could take in an attempt to protect their jobs. At the meeting there were four main opinions expressed by workers.

First, some workers were willing to accept management's decision, arguing that it was management's right to make investment and business decisions, so the employees should just begin looking for other jobs. They were not happy with the decision, but argued that there was nothing they could do about it, and it was not their job to be telling management how to run the business.

Second, the overwhelming majority argued that the company should have involved the workforce and their union in discussing the company's options and future planning, and that by their unilateral decision-making they had made it clear that they had no concern for the welfare of their staff, many of whom would now face severe financial hardship, trying to pay off mortgages with few job prospects. Workers argued this case strongly, wanting their union to initiate immediate strike action to pressure the company into reconsidering its decision.

Third, a small group of workers was critical of both their colleagues and their union officials for being so naïve as to trust company management. They argued that big business will always 'screw us over' given the chance and, while they also supported the proposed strike action against the company, it was important that all workers learnt from this experience that the interests of big business and workers are diametrically opposed.

There was also one person at the meeting who disagreed with everyone else. He said that he was glad the call centre was closing because he never liked the job anyway, so now he would 'get off his bum' and find a better job. Trying to make himself heard among the boos and hisses from his colleagues, he left the room shouting, 'It's just how you all decide to look at it. Consider this an opportunity, not something bad'.

Questions

1 How do the alternative opinions expressed by workers at the union meeting relate to the main frames of reference?
2 Why might different workers at this call centre have different opinions on this dispute?
3 What theoretical approach would best explain the last person's lone view?

MANAGERIAL STRATEGIC CHOICE

CASE STUDY 1.2

Much of the mining industry today—particularly the non-coal sector—operates non–union workplaces, with management authority reigning supreme. But this was not always the case; up until the 1990s, mining was virtually 100 per cent unionised throughout Australia.

The company that led the way in first marginalising and then jettisoning trade unionism from much of its operations was the multinational corporation Rio Tinto. Its iron-ore mining operations were carried out under the banner of Hamersley Iron, in the remote Pilbara region of Western Australia.

Hamersley Iron had traditionally operated as a 100 per cent unionised operation, with the company ensuring that all its employees were union members. In mid-1992, an organiser for the Metal and Engineering Workers Union (MEWU) discovered there was a worker, Philip Beales, who was refusing to join the union. The organiser contacted company management and asked them to ensure Beales joined the union or else take appropriate action against him. By this time, however, a new direction was being led by company management, keen to restore what they perceived to be a loss of managerial authority on site. Breaking with custom and practice, the company refused to discipline Beales or ask him to join the union. On 17 June 1992, around 2000 workers went on strike, effectively closing down Hamersley's mining operations.

On Monday 29 June the company filed a writ against the unions and their officials for $49 million, as well as unspecified damages, representing the largest common law action ever taken against unions in Australia's history. They also sought an injunction against further threatened industrial action. The unions and their members were faced with the option of defying the courts and risk massive financial ruin, or cease their strike and return to work. They chose the latter.

Having 'stared down' the unions, management then set about weakening and marginalising unions altogether. They broke off all formal communications with unions, instead establishing a system of direct communication between management and employees. They dismissed

several union activists for 'harassing' non-unionists, and then set about a major restructuring, reducing their workforce by about 15 per cent. Union activists and militants were 'encouraged' to accept redundancy packages, recognising that they would have difficulty working in the new environment. Furthermore, Hamersley Iron offered significant salary increases for workers prepared to accept new (non–union) staff contracts. The unions were exposed as being impotent to offer any meaningful resistance to the management's new strategic direction. Within a matter of months, this former 100 per cent unionised operation was completely devoid of any real union presence.

The result was a company operating in an effective union-free environment, able to enforce its managerial power and authority at will without any resistance.

Questions

1 How would you characterise the 'frame of reference' dominating employment relations at Hamersley Iron, before and after the de-unionisation?
2 How did Hamersley Iron defeat the unions?
3 What mistakes, if any, did the unions make in responding to the company's tactics?

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