Democracy or Seduction? The Demonization of Scientific Management and the Reification of Human Relations in the 1930s and Beyond

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Extended Abstract

The emergence of the human relations 'school' of management (HRS hereafter) in interwar America was less a distinct break with Taylorism or scientific management (SM hereafter) than it was a decidedly right-wing and undemocratic outgrowth. That many of Taylor's disciples preceded Mayo and his associates in analyzing 'the human factor in industry' is well established in the history of management thought, but less so in general management textbooks (Bruce 2004). The conventional wisdom in 'popular' management thought is that HRS was the intellectual progeny of Mayo and his associates in and around the Hawthorne Studies, and that their concern with human problems in industry was both a reaction against, and solution for the shortcomings of SM. The fundamental question this paper seeks to answer is *why* the history has been written this way and, in particular, why it was that Mayo and HRS were reified, whereas Taylor and SM were demonised in the 1930s and beyond. Following Cooke's (1999) argument that all understandings of management thought are shaped by historiographical processes and these processes are shaped by prevailing power relations and attendant ideologies, the central purpose of the paper is to understand *how* and *why* the meta-narrative regarding SM and HRS became the received wisdom and *who* stood to gain from this establishment of managerial orthodoxy. This discursive exercise allows us, as Townley (1993) has earlier urged, to analyse the rules of formation of a discourse concerning SM and HRS; an analysis of the situations provoking the discourse, the consequences to which it gives rise, the institutional sites from which it derives its legitimation, and the position in which it places its subjects.

We argue that the standard depiction of HRS 'rising out of the ashes' of SM is a rhetorical distortion of historical events that cannot be reduced to the mere desire for simpler and smoother historical narrative concerning the development of management

thinking, however pedagogically noble this might be. Rather, and to paraphrase Jenkins (1991), this depiction, like all historical accounts, is 'not for itself, but always for someone'. Further,

> particular social formations want their historians to deliver particular things. (P)redominantly delivered positions will be in the interests of those stronger ruling blocs within social formations… . The fact that history *per se* is an ideological construct means that it is constantly being re-worked and re-ordered by all those who are variously affected by power relationships (Jenkins 1991, 17).

How the history of SM and HRS has been written to date, masks the fact that HRS presented managers with a more subtle yet powerful means of exercising authority in the workplace which could challenge the democratic approach of the scientific managers who sought to enable workers to become active participants in the management of the labour process (Nyland 1998), and hence, was more attractive to managers of the time (Rose 1978; Hurd 1987; Miller & O'Leary 1989; Miller & Rose 1990; Steffy & Grimes 1992; Miller & Rose 1992; Rose 1998). In short, the principles and practices of HRS were far less threatening to unbridled managerialism than the ideas of managerial tripartism being touted by leading Taylor disciples such as Morris Cooke, Mary Parker Follett, and Mary Van Kleeck. That Mayo and HRS championed the need for a managerial elite to govern the irrational, agitation-prone 'masses' (i.e. workers) susceptible to socialist ideas, made it all the more attractive to conservative managers (Miller & O'Leary 1989; O'Connor 1999). It also provided managers with a sound body of intellectual prize-fighters who would support them when they launched their post-WWII campaign to win back the "Right to Manage" that they believed had been challenged during the New Deal and who would ensure their undemocratic demands were painted not in the language of authoritarianism but in that of humanism.

The Undemocratic Seduction of HRS

As had Taylor and other proponents of SM in the first quarter of the 20th Century, Mayo and his colleagues in the HRS hereafter allied themselves with powerful business elites, legitimating authority and shaping conduct in the realm of human problems of production not through compulsion and arbitrary authority, but through the powerful appeal of 'scientific truth' and the allure of improved productivity. Mayo would become the mid-century industrial counterpart of Taylor (Rose 1978), but he and his colleagues'

'science' was no longer engineering, though, but psychology. In the coming decades, the workplace effort of the productive subject was to become couched in terms of worker attitudes to work, their feelings of control over their place of work, their sense of cohesion within the 'gang', and their beliefs about the understanding and concern that managers had for their worth. A new importance was accorded to regulating the internal psychological realm of the worker through the calculated administration of workplace human relations with the aim of transforming the personal wishes of employees from an obstacle into an ally of economic efficiency (Miller & O'Leary 1989; Miller & Rose 1990, 19; 22).

But HRS did more than merely legitimate extant power in the workplace; by rendering the inter-subjective space of the factory more 'governable' and by redefining the identity of the worker, HRS helped create a mode of workplace governance that could be deemed legitimate in the political culture of the 1930s and beyond. Just as Taylorism had earlier sought an alliance between wider, macro-political aspirations and the powers of expertise, HRS established a nexus between the 'government' of production and the 'government' of the social field. Mayo, the master publicist, problematised production at the junction of the concern with the regulation of 'the social' and a concern with the government of 'the self'. He established a connection between poor work performance and all manner of social ills/pathologies construed as a threat to good order and social tranquillity. Work was accorded a crucial role in responsible selfhood upon which free society depends: if an elite of socially skilled managers gave due regard to workers' psychological state and their relations with others in the workplace, then *anomie* and social disintegration could be averted (Rose 1978; Miller & Rose 1995).

In this context, HRS represented a new alliance between political thought and the government of the workplace, utilising the same political issue as the Taylorists had in the first three decades after 1900: the corporation. Into the 1930s, the large corporation continued to be problematised in relation to the concentrated and unchecked power of firms and their ruling elite, and the potential for class cleavage this posed. However, Mayo justified managerial authority in corporations as the natural order of things, reconciling it with democratic ideals by asserting that the individual was the fundamental unit on which all legitimate cooperative organisation is founded. The same social

contract melding citizens in the polity provided the model for the bond between the individual and the business firm. The corporation, together with the managerial authority it necessitated, could be thus represented as the perfect embodiment of the democratic ideals of the complex individuality that constituted the distinctly American way of life. Managerial authority did not hold society down, rather, it held together: the agitation-prone masses were deemed unfit for cooperation and had to be acted on by an elite leadership nurturing vital non-logical impulses amongst work-groups in order to stabilise their emotions for accepting responsibility (Rose 1978; Miller & O'Leary 1989; Miller & Rose 1995; O'Connor 1999).

This privileged position for a managerial elite, emphasised by Mayo, had not been identified by earlier Taylorist writers and so, it was not difficult to see why it was more appealing to managers than, say, Mary Parker Follett's espousal of worker involvement in workplace decisions as essential to the attainment of democracy in wider society. As Rose (1978) and O'Connor (1999) have observed, Mayo's work presented managers with solutions to their concerns about labour strife and the viability of the American socio-economic order amidst the threat of economic downturn, industrial conflict, and alternative political ideologies and class conflict. Further, he offered them elite membership of a fraternity of benevolent leaders. It is little wonder then that

> Mayoism emerged rapidly as the twentieth century's most seductive managerial ideology. What, after all, could be more appealing than to be told that one's subordinates are non-logical; that their uncooperativeness is a frustrated urge to collaborate; that their demands for cash mask a need for your approval; and that you have a historic destiny as a broker of social harmony? (Rose 1978, 124).

It should be noted that the privileged position Mayo accorded the managerial elite had vastly greater potential for authoritarianism – "corporate fascism with a human face" (Rose 1978, 121) – than any Taylorist ideas or measures, a point seemingly lost on many critics of SM, past and present. While Taylorism (notwithstanding Taylor's own exhortations for a great 'Mental Revolution') presented managers the potential to exert power *physically* over the human body spatially and temporally, 'Mayoism' offered a more a subtle and efficient means of exercising this power *mentally*, via workers' cognition and emotions. As Townley (1993, 538) has observed:

> Traditionally, the concept of personnel has been viewed as stressing the rights of labor and the importance of the human side of the organisation. But the discourse of welfare and the human relations school clouds HRM's role in providing a nexus of disciplinary practices aimed at making employees' behaviour and performance predictable and calculable – in a word, manageable.

Human Relations, with its foundations in the 'science' of organisational psychology and psychiatry, presented the potential for greatly restricted workplace democracy and participation. As Rose (1988, 1998) has noted, the 'psy' sciences have played a pivotal role in providing the lexicon, information and the regulatory techniques for the 'government' ('the conduct of conduct') of individuals and populations in the Foucaulvian sense. In this context, Steffy and Grimes (1992) have highlighted the subtle coercion of organisational psychology; for instance, rewards in the workplace go to those whose motions, energies and thought processes are congruent with task requirements. In other words, workers are required to adjust bodily, cognitively and emotionally to work. Further, from a Habermasian perspective, because organisational processes have become increasingly governed by objectifying technical rationality at the expense of inter-subjective, communicative action, then consensus in the workplace has also been diluted.

In sum, freedom, both in society and in the workplace, is enacted only at the price of relying upon the opinions of 'experts of the soul'; though we might be free from arbitrary prescriptions of political authorities, we are bound into new relationships with new authorities that are more profoundly subjectifying, as they appear to emanate from our individual desires for self-fulfilment (Rose 1998). And further,

> (t)he legitimacy and neutrality of management were to depend not only on its basis in practical experience, but also on a scientific knowledge that would cast this experience within the framework of technical rationality. …The language and techniques of human relations allowed management to reconcile the apparently opposing realities of the bosses' imperative of efficiency with the intelligibility of the workers' resistance to it, and to claim the capacity to transform the subjectivity of the worker from an obstacle to an ally in the quest for productivity and profit (Rose 1998, 140).

SM and Democracy

In stark contrast to the subtle dilution of workplace democracy inherent in Human Relations, SM actually had far greater democractic potential have than analysts have hitherto made allowance for. In this section, we challenge the uncritical equation of SM with anti-unionism, deskilling, and the exclusion of employees from workplace decision-making, highlighting that between 1910-1950, key members of the Taylor Society built and sustained an alliance with organised labour that centred on mutual-gains (Nyland 1998). We also outline the proposals for greater industrial democracy advocated by pivotal Taylor disciples such as Morris Cooke, Mary Parker Follett, and Mary Van Kleeck. We believe that this appeal for greater democracy in the workplace – challenging managerial hegemony head-on - resulted in SM being demonised in the 1930s and beyond, whereas HRS was very much reified.

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