HRM, critique, pragmatism and the sociological imagination

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Introduction
The organisers of the conference stream of which the present paper is a part have expressed the view that in the ‘mainstream’ HRM literature, ‘critical concerns are largely ignored and there appears to be little challenge to what we might call the “HRM paradigm”’ (Keenoy et al 2006). This paradigm is one which focuses on strategic ‘fit’ and is concerned with identifying ‘mechanisms to facilitate “high commitment” and “high performance” organisations’. ‘In short’, our colleagues say, ‘the field of HRM has become almost co-terminus with the new managerialism of the putative globalised economy’. This view is consistent with the argument that much of academic HRM writing is prescriptive, functionalist and uncritical and that, even when it does attempt to be ‘critical’, it goes little beyond the methodologically and theoretically naïve deployment of the popular ‘rhetoric versus reality’ cliché (Watson 2004). However, the producing of a politically-engaged or oppositional style of critical management studies would not be the most effective way of bringing together or ‘re-connecting’ the critical and the mainstream analysts of human resource management.

The alternative strategy which is advocated here is one in which we move away from both the ‘new HRM paradigm’ wing and the ‘critical studies’ wing back to a critical-analytical social-scientific centre. The notion of the sociological imagination is seen as a valuable starting point here. This will be discussed shortly. Following that, the importance placed upon historical context in this tradition will be emphasised. In connection with this, two requirements for a critical-analytical approach to HRM will be identified. The first is the need to work with a generic concept of HRM. The second is the need to recognise the essentially and continuing bureaucratic nature of HRM. The Pragmatist element of the sociological imagination – exemplified in the work of Wright Mills and Max Weber – will then be turned to, first to establish its distinctive critical-analytical strength and, second, to explain how a Pragmatist stance enables us to use concepts from a variety of social-science theoretical streams. In this spirit, a selection of ideas from several strands of existing theory will then be brought together to outline a preliminary and illustrative analysis of human resource management practices in a medium-sized business.

Critical-analytical study and the sociological imagination
A critical challenge to the normative and prescriptive tendencies of the bulk of academic work on the management of employment issues in modern work organisations (then called ‘personnel management’) was presented in the 1970s by Legge (1978), who turned to the social-scientific contingency approach as an analytical alternative and Watson (1977) who drew upon Weberian and Marxian concepts to provide a sociological analysis of the role of personnel management and personnel managers in industrial capitalist societies. This was an alternative to the earlier emphasis on identifying and recommending ‘best practices’ in labour management. Employment management practices, it was now being suggested, could be studied as important elements in the shaping of contemporary workplaces, and indeed societies, with a view to understanding them rather than advising managers on how to ‘do it better’. Yet the earlier ‘best practice’ emphasis has been revived in much of the writing on what is now called ‘HRM’, most notably in influential works by Pfeffer (1994, 1998). Such a purpose is also implicit in a range of studies which have looked for links between particular employment management practices and business performance (Becker and Gerhart 1996,
Delery and Doty 1996, Huselid 1995, Patterson et al 1997 for example). Once again, as in the
1970s, this fascination with ‘best practice’ has had to be challenged. The analytical weakness
of the ‘unitarist’ conception of the work organisation which this research tends to adopt has
been exposed by Marchington and Grugulis (2000). And Boxall, Purcell and Wright (2007),
in presenting their important and potentially influential HRM Handbook, argue strongly for
putting a notion of ‘analytical HRM’ at the centre of the mission of the ‘academic
management discipline of HRM’. This is an activity which has as its primary task the building
of theory and the gathering of empirical data ‘in order to account for the way management
actually behaves in organising work and managing people across different jobs, workplaces,
companies, industries, and societies’ (2007: 4).

Boxall, Purcell and Wright identify three characteristics of this analytical approach to
HRM. The first is a concern with the ‘what and ‘why’ of HRM; ‘with understanding what
management tries to do with work and people in different contexts and with explaining why’
(2007: 4). The second is a concern with the ‘how’ of HRM; with the processes through which
it is carried out. And the third is a concern with questions of ‘for whom and how well: with
assessing the outcomes of HRM, taking account of both employee and managerial interests,
and laying a basis for theories of wider social consequences’ (2007: 4). Each of these
concerns invites a social scientific style of research and analysis. The third concern,
especially, implies a critical purpose, with its questioning of how HRM serves, or fails to
serve, particular interests. It also invites the application of the sociological imagination, in its
linking of these matters to ones of ‘wider social consequences’ – those matters which Wright

Perhaps the best known aspect of what Mills called the sociological imagination
(which, he recognises, could equally well have been called the ‘social scientific imagination’)
was its call for links to be made between the personal troubles of individuals (a person losing
their job, for example) and broader public issues (the issue of unemployment in society, for
example). This imaginative move has clear and immediate relevance to HRM. It would
suggest, for example, that we link the personal troubles of an employee finding themselves
being told by the HR department of their employing organisation that their job is about to be
reconfigured, and that they will have to re-apply for their post, to the broader public issue of
how work generally is being restructured in a context of global competitive pressures and
shareholder interests. Equally, we might link the dilemmas of the individual HR manager
faced with implementing policies which follow from a ‘strategic shift’ of an enterprise about
which they have had no say and with which they have personal ethical qualms. To make links
of this kind, the researcher has to develop a capacity to ‘shift from one perspective to another,
and in the process to build up an adequate view of a total society and its components’ (1970:
232). And it is the possession of this capacity that ‘sets off the social scientist from the mere
technician’. The social scientist not only needs the imagination to combine ‘ideas that no one
expected were combinable’ (an important point to which we return below) but a ‘playfulness
of mind’ together with a ‘fierce drive to make sense of the world’ (1970: 232). When Mills
says that these are the qualities that the ‘technician’ researcher lacks, it is hard not to think of
the output of so many HRM researchers and mutter to oneself, ‘Oh, I know what he means’!

The basic project that Mills has in mind for social science is an ambitious one. The
intention is to produce analyses of aspects of contemporary life which help people become
more aware of the connection between ‘the patterns of their own lives and the course of world
history’ (1970: 9). This is necessary because people do not normally define the troubles they
endure (or the ‘well-being’ they experience) in terms of ‘historical change and institutional
contradiction’. Mills is anxious to see the social sciences encouraging people to engage with
public issues. Using the sociological imagination is a means by which ‘the uneasiness of
individuals is focused on explicit troubles and the indifference of publics is transformed into
involvement with public issues’ (1970: 11). He wishes to see people ‘grasp what is going on
in the world, and to understand what is happening in themselves at minute points of the
intersection of biography and history within society’ (1970: 14).

The analytical approach to the study of HRM identified by Boxall, Purcell and Wright (2007) earlier, can readily be connected to this kind of mission, especially if it is successful in assessing ‘the outcomes of HRM, taking account of both employee and managerial interests, and laying a basis for theories of wider social consequences’ (2007: 4). Such work could enable social scientists to increase their engagement in public debates. This is a move which has been strongly advocated by Burowoy in his address to the American Sociological Association (2004). Burowoy spoke of harnessing sociology’s ‘longstanding critical imagination, reminding us that the world could be different’. He took his inspiration here from Mills’ notion of the sociological imagination, looking back, in effect, to the earlier American critical tradition of Pragmatism (Mounce 1997, Putnam 1995, Rorty 1982). We will return to the question of what a Pragmatist style of critical-analysis would look like shortly. First, however, we need to consider some necessary conditions that would need to be satisfied before we could link the phenomenon of HRM to the sort of historical/ structural transformations that the sociological imagination invites us to consider.

Transformation, bureaucracy and a generic view of HRM

One of the most important issues needing to be settled before we can proceed to study HRM in a critical-analytic way is that of whether we are going to treat ‘HRM’ as an activity which has always occurred historically, in one form or another, whenever some kind of division of labour has been applied to the carrying out of work tasks, or as a distinctive ‘new’ kind of managerial activity emerging in the last decades of the twentieth century. It is proposed here that we treat the so-called ‘new HRM paradigm’, of which Beer and Spector (1984) were the pioneers with their ‘melding of theories and insights from OB/OD into traditional IR/PM’ and their concern to make corporate HR functions more ‘strategic’, (Boxall, Purcell and Wright 2007: 34) as just one historically contingent version of a much broader ‘HRM’. This, as Boxall puts it, means treating HRM as ‘a broad generic term equivalent to “labor management”’ (2007: 49). As Kaufmann points out, ‘Viewed as a generic activity involving the management of other people’s labor in production, human resource management (HRM) goes back to the dawn of human history’ (2007: 20). Indeed, human resources of hunting skill, knowledge of the location of berry-bearing bushes and simple physical strength needed to be co-ordinating, developed and managed by family heads or tribal chiefs among prehistorical cave-dwellers as much as do the equivalent resources in a twenty-first century enterprise (Watson 2005). Nevertheless, the forms of human resource management that we are likely to be concerned with in the contemporary social sciences are those associated with industrialisation and the institutions of bureaucracy and the capitalist employment relationship. Thus, we can usefully devise a generic definition of human resource management as *managerial utilisation of the efforts, knowledge, capabilities and committed behaviours which people contribute to an authoritatively co-ordinated human enterprise as part of an employment exchange (or more temporary contractual arrangement) to carry out work tasks in a way which enables the enterprise to continue into the future.*

In this conceptualisation is a recognition that human resource management, in the modern world, is utterly and absolutely a bureaucratic phenomenon. In Weber’s (1978) ideal-typical characterisation, bureaucracy involves the control and coordination of work tasks through a hierarchy of appropriately qualified office holders, whose authority derives from their expertise and who rationally devise a system of rules and procedures that are calculated to provide the most appropriate means of achieving specified ends. HR managers are ‘appropriately qualified office holders’ in this sense and are appointed, in principle, on the grounds of their experience and qualifications as the most suitable people to manage human resources. Ideal typically,
their authority to appoint people, instruct staff or make workers redundant derives from their technical HR expertise. Coming to terms with the fact that this sociological principle lies at the heart of HRM is vital if we are going to study HRM in a critical-analytical social-scientific way. The reason for this is that the bureaucratisation of work, in combination with the capitalist treatment of labour as a commodity subject to economic exchange (Watson 1977, Watson and Watson 1999), has been one of the most significant transformations affecting the lives of human beings over the past two centuries. But to acknowledge this is immediately to raise the question of whether a further transformation in the work aspect of people’s lives has been occurring as a post-bureaucratic era is entered.

There is an intimate connection between the claim that a ‘new HRM paradigm’ has been changing people’s experience of work and the claim that work is increasingly being carried out in post-bureaucratic organisations. This latter claim has been part of an outpouring of anti-bureaucratic thinking and the advocacy of post-bureaucratic forms that has been produced by a variety of managerial writers, social scientists and socio-political theorists (Reed 2005, Thompson and Alvesson 2005, Alvesson and Thompson 2005). These authors examine the evidence for the alleged moves towards ‘networked’ or ‘entrepreneurial’ post-bureaucratic organisations and conclude that the announcement of the death of bureaucracy is highly premature. They note that there never was a single and monolithic phenomenon of ‘bureaucracy’, just as we can argue that there never was a single pre-high-commitment type of human resource (or labour) management. And just as we might argue that current changes in the style of human resource management being made in some organisations are modifications or variations in the basic form of routinised and exchange-based labour management, the critics of post-bureaucracy thinking argue that the newer styles of work organisation seen in some cases are reconfigured or hybridised versions of the more traditional bureaucratic forms. Bureaucracy is being rejuvenated rather than being superseded by this hybridisation, according to Courpasson and Clegg (2006). They see bureaucracy continuing, in a modified way, to intermingle political principles of oligarchy and democracy within the context of the ‘perpetuation of elite power’. And we can present a very similar argument with regard to ‘newer’ HRM practices, suggesting that these practices are simply modifications in the balance between principles of discretion and control in the management of labour. These are variations which occur within continuing processes of the reproduction of social, economic and political patterns of advantage and disadvantage.

According to Kallinikos, ‘bureaucracy and modernity are … inextricably bound up with each other’ and the modernistic characteristics of bureaucracy are not ‘suspended by the trends subsumed under such catchwords as network, virtual or entrepreneurial forms of organisation’ (2004: 22). The key historical transformation with regard to individuals and their work was that into modernity and to the ‘non-inclusive terms’ on which people were subsequently to relate to the workplace (‘the distinctive mark of the modern workplace is the fact that humans are involved in it qua roles and not qua persons’, Kallinikos 2003: 597). And bureaucracy, from the start, was predicated on the ‘clear and institutionally supported separation of work from the rest of people’s lives’ (2003: 604). This continues to be the case. It is not changed by the fact that ‘current trends in employment forms’ put a ‘premium on qualities of malleability, flexibility and adaptability’ (qualities closely associated with ‘new HRM’ thinking). Again, we are encouraged to recognise that the changes to be identified at the surface level in bureaucratic forms and human resourcing practices cannot be read as departing from the essentially ‘modern’ conception of the worker as someone who puts only parts of their ‘selves’ into their work – the ‘human resources’ of effort, capability and knowledge, indeed.
Pragmatism and critique

This linking of HRM to bureaucracy and then challenging claims that we are moving into a new ‘post-bureaucratic’ and a new ‘HRM’ era demonstrates the value of a critical-analytical approach to HRM. We can say, in the spirit of Mills’ version of Pragmatism, that we are helping people to appreciate that their personal situations (whether these be ‘troubles’ or an experience of well-being) are not changing as a result of something new occurring historically but as a result of existing principles of social, political and economic organisation being applied in a different manner in certain circumstances. Such an understanding is vital if worthwhile public debate about social change and work is to occur. It is also of value to individuals themselves, as they try to understand the structural and historical context in which they are striving to manage their lives.

It would be to depart from the spirit of Mills’ version of Pragmatism, to point to the creators of that particular brand of American philosophy and slavishly adopt their approach to the world. Mills himself adopted the basic principles of Pragmatism in his sociological work, but he was highly critical of what that philosophical ‘school’ had become by the time he was applying it. As Eldridge (1983) establishes, particularly from his reading of the book based on Mills’ doctoral studies, (Sociology and Pragmatism, Mills 1966), Mills felt that the heritage of Pierce, James and Dewey had taken a form in which it had become an over-individualistic and over-harmonistic middle-class ideology. He was anxious to look back to the early days of the movement, when, Joas also observes, it was connected to political efforts to achieve social reforms and to preserve ‘the democratic ideals of local communities under difficult conditions – the hegemony of the great corporations and the central federal government’ (Joas 1993: 26).

The early Pragmatism was a strongly critical initiative and it inspired of the Chicago school of sociology with its interest in combining social science research and social critique.

What, then, is the basic Pragmatist position? As Joas puts it, ‘The guiding principle of Pragmatism changes the relationship between cognition and reality’. Truth is no longer to do with getting a correct ‘representation of reality in cognition’; ‘rather, it expresses an increase of the power to act in relation to an environment’ (1993: 21). This means abandoning any search for absolute truths (or sorting out the ‘reality’ from the rhetoric, as cliché ‘HRM-speak’ has it). Mills saw as crucial to the approach James’ view that as ‘splendid for certain purposes as the various types of human thinking available to us might be, they would always conflict with each other and would never be able to support a claim to absolute veracity’ and that therefore we are better to take the Pragmatist view that ‘all our theories are instrumental, are mental modes of adaptation to reality, rather than revelations [about the world]’ (James quoted by Mills 1966: 227). This view resonates with Weber’s notion of the ‘irrationality of the world’ (Watson 2003, Weber 1970). Weber’s ideas in this regard appealed to Mills, who identified the fundamentally Pragmatist assumptions in Weber’s work.

Eldridge emphasises the importance in Mills’ work of this bringing together of American Pragmatism and Weber’s European thinking. And, interestingly, it was Mills, together with Hans Gerth, who put Weber’s later thinking about the role of ideas in history in the context of Weber’s social criticism and his ‘increasing bitterness about German politics’ towards the end of his life. They tell us that it was during the First World War that Weber wrote those vitally significant words: ‘Not ideas, but material and ideal interests directly govern men’s conduct. Yet very frequently the “world images” which have been created by “ideas” have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interests’ (Gerth and Mills 1979: 63). Eldridge points to the same quotation in identifying Weber’s Pragmatist thinking. But he adds a further line from Weber’s Politics as a Vocation essay: ‘This allows some autonomy for reason and for the intelligent reflection on public issues where one might play the role of switchman’ (Weber 1970). Here is a clear
connection between Weber’s thinking and Mills’ version of Pragmatism as a form of social analysis which can contribute to public debate.

At the heart of Pragmatism is a conception of truth which denies any notion of absolute truth but recognises that some accounts of, or theories about, the world are truer than others. They are truer in the sense that they are better guides to effective action in the area of social life with which they are concerned (Rorty 1982, Urmson 1989, Watson 1997, Watson 2006). A Pragmatist critical-analytical study of HRM would, from the start, treat sceptically all taken-for-granted, received or conventional assumptions about labour management practices and their links with both their societal/global and organisational contexts. It would apply all the traditional scholarly criteria of rigour, debate, logical consistency and the setting of claims about human resourcing activities against the best evidence about them that the researcher can muster. But the outcome of all this will never be a final truth about HRM or a full revelation of the rhetoric-free ‘reality’ of any particular set of employment practices. What will be produced will be knowledge that people involved with HRM, whether they be workers, managers, policy-makers, trade union officers or HRM academics, can use to inform their understandings and hence their actions with regard to those HRM phenomena. The truth of any particular analysis, or piece of ‘HRM knowledge’, will always be relative to that of other available analyses. The piece of knowledge that more effectively informs the actions of its users is the ‘truer’ knowledge. The more helpful a guide-to-action a piece of HRM research proves to be to those who read it – whoever they may be and whatever the projects they are undertaking – the more valid it is, in Pragmatist terms.

This Pragmatist approach to the relative validity of studies is immensely challenging to anyone wishing to attach their critical work to a particular political agenda. It challenges those who believe in an ‘oppositional’ form of critical study or in critical management studies intended to ‘emancipate’ particular social groups (Alvesson and Willmott 1996, Grey and Willmott 2005). It undermines such possibilities because it recognises that a pragmatically worthwhile piece of knowledge has the potential to be helpful to anyone who reads it, regardless of their interests or concerns. We would therefore say that a pragmatically ‘good’ piece of research on, say, the human resource aspects of call centres has the same potential to be ‘helpful’ to a profiteering call-centre owner as it has to a progressive union representative or a potential employee trying to decide whether or not to take a job in that business. In effect, ‘good research’ gives whoever reads it a ‘good idea of how things work’ in the sphere of life that has been studied. If one has a reasonable knowledge of ‘how things work’ in an area of social life, one is as well placed to work to perpetuate the patterns that have been identified as one is to attempt to destroy them. A critical-analytic HRM study would give us a good idea of how things work in the employment sphere and, thus, be as useful a guide to action to the employer or the employed, just as a ‘good’ map of a country would be as valuable to invaders of that country as it would to its defenders. It is important to stress that this is not a simple matter of the map being an ‘accurate’ representation of the territory. Rarely is the underground railway map of a large city an accurate image of the location of the tunnels and stations under and around that city. Yet a ‘good’ underground map is an invaluable guide to action to the traveller fulfilling their project of travelling from A to B.

Pragmatism and conceptual pluralism

Having considered some of the epistemological aspects of Pragmatist thinking we must turn to the question of the selection of theoretical resources for analytical-critical studies, together with some ontological issues connected with this. We noted earlier (p.) that Mills associated with the sociological imagination a willingness to combine ‘ideas that no-one expected were combinable’ (1970: 232). This provides us with a Pragmatist escape from worries about ‘paradigm incommensurability’ (Burrell and Morgan 1979, Jackson and Carter 2007, Burrell 2002, Keleman and Hasard 2003). A pragmatic pluralist strategy, which is
helpful in this respect, involves the investigator of a particular sphere of social activity, like HR practices, drawing upon concepts and ideas from various disciplines or perspectives to build a conceptual framework suitable for that area of research (Watson 1997). In line with Pragmatist principles, theoretical resources are selected on the criterion of relevance to the issues arising in the investigation. It is vital, however, that the resulting conceptual framework has its own ontological, epistemological and methodological integrity. If one were studying HRM in business settings, for example, one could not, at one stage of the analysis, treat those businesses within the ontological assumptions associated with a ‘negotiated order’ (see below) view of the organisation and, at a later stage, adopt the wholly incompatible ontological position associated with the view of businesses as goal-pursuing systems or decision-making entities (‘the firm then decided to increase its production to further its goal of increasing market share’).

To illustrate some of the principles and proposals that have been put forward so far, we now turn to a small case study of an HR manager and some of the dilemmas she is facing in her work. The initial focus is on an individual, precisely as we would expect from a piece of work carried out in the spirit of the ‘sociological imagination’ and its concern to link the ‘personal troubles’ of individuals to issues at a more structural level (in this case, both organisational and global). The attention being paid here to the personal troubles of a managerial employee in no way suggests that the problems of people in such relatively comfortable positions in society are more significant than those of the relatively disadvantaged. It is simply a matter of expedience and the result of the particular research the present author has been doing. The principles being applied are no different from those that would be followed were the focus to be on the ordinary workers in the two factories that we now turn to examine. The information used in the following narrative was mainly supplied by the individual research subject, Lena Marker, in the course of a number of informal conversations and a formal interview in the setting of the business in which she was employed (an occasion which made possible a degree of direct observation of the business and conversations with other managers and workers, one of the latter being a union representative).

**Personal troubles and HRM change at JGE**

Lena Marker is a recent appointment as the Human Resources director of Jubilee Garden Enterprises (JGE), a company which supplies garden furniture and a variety of other garden-related products to an increasingly international market. The company had started off as a manufacturer of garden tables and chairs but later added to their range of other products such as garden sculptures, ceramic pots, hosepipes (‘domestic irrigation systems’) and decorative fountains (‘water features’). Some of these newer products are made within the company whereas others are purchased from outside – increasingly from companies located in less developed economies.

Recently, after much argument within the board of directors, Jubilee acquired Yardgreen, a business producing various chemical ‘garden consumables’. One of the first tasks that Lena Marker has been asked to take on is the integrating the workforce of the newly acquired business into JGE. Lena was told that because the two businesses were ‘practically next door neighbours’, the task of bringing the two firms together in HR terms would be quite straightforward. She is, however, finding this to be anything but the case and is troubled about how she is going to do it. Employees from the two locations are closely and suspiciously watching each other and comparing their relative incomes, terms and conditions. The Yardgreen workers generally feel that they are poorly paid compared to the JGE people and are pressing their trade union representatives to win them better wages and shorter hours. The Jubilee workers, only one or two of whom are trade union members, are aware of
this and wish to protect their advantage. They offer three arguments for their relatively better rewards.

(1) They say that they are more skilled than what they call the ‘chemical workers down the road’. They describe themselves as multi-skilled, in fact.

(2) They say they are essentially ‘team workers’ who to a considerable extent ‘manage themselves’. Their rewards should reflect this, they argue.

(3) They claim that the way they enthusiastically cooperated with Lena’s predecessor as HR manager in implementing the ‘JGE Skills Growth and Team-working High Performance Programme’ makes them much more valuable assets to the business than their neighbouring ‘process workers’. These other people, their spokesperson says, again echoing language used in discussions with them by the previous HR manager, operate with a ‘them-and-us factory culture’.

When Lena was at an early stage of dealing with these problems, she was visited, early one morning, by Jonathan Driver, the JGE Operations Director and aspiring future managing director. He laid out on her desk a drawing of the JGE site that he told her he was going to take to the next board meeting of the company. After just one glance at this it became clear to Lena that Jonathan intended to instigate a significant shift in JGE’s HR strategy. He clearly wanted to reduce significantly the space devoted to manufacturing in order to increase considerably the warehousing facility on the site. And before Jonathan started to explain the drawing, ‘a painful truth’, as she described it, began to dawn on Lena. If Jonathan was going to be successful in persuading the Board to make this shift, she is going to have to start making redundant quite a few of JGE’s highly committed team-working staff. She had already established good and trusting relationships with these people and felt considerable distress at the thought of becoming, as she put it, ‘their managerial enemy’. Also, carrying out redundancies is not part of HR work that she enjoys. It is something she did not expect to have to do in her new job – having had to manage redundancies in the two previous businesses she had worked in and having suffered considerable personal stress in the process. She realised, however, that the proposed increased warehousing space could mean only one thing: Jonathan was going to propose that the company ‘buy in’ from cheap-labour sources overseas a much higher proportion of its products. Does this really have to happen, she asked herself, as Jonathan started to explain his thinking? Could she oppose what she suspects he is planning? As a new member of the company’s board will she have enough influence? But should she oppose it anyway? Is it really in the long-term interests of JGE Enterprises to go this way?

An outline analysis

How can we apply the sociological imagination to Lena Marker and to these questions which were troubling her so much? We can only sketch out an initial analysis here and the most obvious starting point would be the observation made earlier (p.) that HRM is ‘utterly and absolutely a bureaucratic phenomenon’. This is the first way in which we can link the personal circumstances of the individuals working at JGE to their location in history and in the institutional structures of their time. In a Pragmatist manner, we can suggest that the most helpful way to understand Lena’s role as HR Director is to see her as a bureaucratic role holder. She is paid by JEG to apply her expertise to the successful continuation of that enterprise. But all bureaucracies involve a division of labour, the intention behind this being to ensure that the greatest possible level of expertise is applied to each discrete area of activity (accountants on the money side, engineers on the machinery side and so on). At this point Weber’s Pragmatist recognition of the ‘irrationality of the world’ becomes important and we see coming into play what he would call a ‘paradox of consequences’ as the individuals in the various sub-sections of the organization find themselves in competition with each other for scarce organizational resources and rewards. Both Lena Marker and Jonathan Driver are being
paid to ‘take forward’ and continue the growth of the JEG business. But there are already potential differences arising between the two managers about how to do this. And personal interests, preferences and values are important here. Jonathan, we understand, is ambitious for promotion and will therefore favour moves that privilege innovations in his functional territory.

We know that Lena would prefer not to get involved in the redundancies that she feels would be part of this. But she does recognise that the moving of production overseas might be the best ‘way forward’ for the business (i.e. that which the key shareholders will deem to be best for the business’s long-term future). But, equally, it might not. There is ambiguity here, as Lena clearly recognises. She once worked in a company where most of the production was moved overseas to make large cost savings but where all the advantages were lost as a result of the way the consequential mass redundancies so demoralised the remaining core workforce that the most valuable members of this core left the company, practically ruining it. This type of danger is a perfect example of the Weberian phenomenon of means subverting ends.

Emergent problems of bringing together the workforces of JGE and Yardgreen also suggest possible unintended consequences. Bringing together, on the same worksite, workers with different backgrounds (including trade union and non-trade union affiliation) as a ‘rationalisation’ raises difficulties that any seasoned HR or employee relations practitioner would be very sensitive to. And here, in the spirit of pragmatic pluralism, we can also turn to the Marxian tradition within social science and note that Marx classically envisaged class and then revolutionary consciousness coming about following a heightened awareness of workers’ common interests as a result of their being gathered together in a single factory. To recognise this is not to suggest that a revolution was about to start in JGE’s factory! But it could be that an unintended consequence of combining the workforces just might foster an oppositional shop floor politics, not least because experienced shop stewards would be imported into the JGE plant. If redundancies were in the air as a result of Driver’s moves, then this might be all the more likely.

It is clear that what is happening in these two companies relates to world patterns in trade and employment. And these patterns have very much to do with who are winners and who are losers in the share of benefits that economic development can provide. Both the Marxian and Weberian strands of social science stress the importance of these matters. But alongside all of these factors are issues of interpretation and the interplay of different discourses. This invites us to turn to concepts from post-structuralist or ‘discourse theory’ thinking to get a grip on this – something which the pragmatic pluralist can do without engaging with all the ontological and epistemological presuppositions of those traditions (Watson 2001b, Watson 2008, forthcoming). Thus, we can observe that the HR manager who preceded Lena initiated what Foucauldian theorists might label new ‘discursive practices’ of job design, multi-skilling and teamworking. A discourse of ‘high performance’ or ‘high commitment’ HRM was clearly used here by the managers to change practices. And we hear JGE workers themselves utilising discursive resources from that source to differentiate themselves from the potentially rival workers of Yardgreen.

Continuing the Pragmatist practice of drawing on concepts from different traditions of social science for analytical purposes, we could take insights from the Labour Process Analysis tradition to recognise the significance of the fact that the two groups of manual workers in the merged JGE organisation are likely to present different levels of uncertainty to the company’s managers, this having different implications for the type of human resourcing policy that might be applied to them (Friedmann: 1977, 1990; Watson 2004, 2005). But we would also note, in the light of insights from Child’s (1997) ‘strategic choice’ analysis of managerial decision-making, that a variety of other influences and sectional interests would come into play in the HR strategy-making that is going to occur. The potential difference of interest and value between Marker and Driver is just one dimension here. And to develop a
fuller picture of the conflicts, interests and meanings that would come into play we might well draw upon the concept of organisations as *negotiated orders* (Strauss 1978, Strauss *et al* 1963, Watson 2001a). This notion is central to the symbolic interactionist social science tradition but also (especially interestingly in the present context) a notion which Joas identifies closely with the Pragmatist tradition in American sociology, this perhaps being most apparent in its attention to the ways in which organisations ‘reproduce themselves in and through the medium of action’ (1993: 41).

**Conclusion**

The above sketched research study and outline analysis is intended to be indicative and illustrative of the principles that might underpin a new ‘re-connected’ tradition of critical-analytical HRM research and writing. Pragmatism invites us to assess knowledge, not in terms of how closely it ‘mirrors’ or represents objectively existing realities, but in terms of how effectively it informs the projects of the human beings who are informed by it. Accordingly, it is argued that studies like the JGE one (of which we have only scratched the surface) are superior to the bulk of the studies appearing in the current HRM mainstream. It is superior because any person who wishes to get involved with either with JGE specifically or with any other business shaping its HR practices in the light of human interests and global patterns of continuity and transformation, will be much better placed to ‘cope’ in such contexts if they read this kind of research rather than the bloodless ‘technician-style’ outpourings of mainstream HRM researchers. But what is meant by ‘coping’? It is a matter of the ‘users’ of the knowledge and insights here being equipped with insights and understandings which will help them further their particular interests and projects; as workers, as managers, as trade unionists, as shareholders, as social critics or as political activists (radical, reactionary or whatever). If, as we said earlier, particular pieces of knowledge give us a good idea of ‘how things work’ in any particular sphere of social life, then they will be helpful to anyone operating in that sphere of life, regardless of how worthy or unworthy, good or evil, we may judge those activities to be, in our own value terms.

HRM may not have quite the historical significance of the ‘world images’ which Weber saw as playing a role of ‘switchmen’ in human history and determining ‘the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interests’. Nevertheless, the Pragmatist tradition, exemplified *sans la lettre* in Weber’s emphasis on the relationship between interests and ideas and inspiring connected to the notion of the sociological imagination by Mills, gives us a firm foundation for a critical-analytical study of HRM practices. This would not only connect individual circumstances to historical processes and institutional formations but would strive all the time to identify patterns of interest in human action and then to attend to the ways in which ideas come to have - or fail to have - an *elective affinity* with the interests of those who take them up. What is meant here is that ideas – such as HRM ones - are neither simply used to bolster or legitimise human interests nor function straightforwardly to define people’s interests for them. Ideas like those presented as HRM knowledge are indeed used by interested parties to further their ends but, at the same time, elements of those ideas have an influence on how those interests are pursued – or, indeed, resisted. This then, as Weber put it, ‘allows some autonomy for reason and for the intelligent reflection on public issues’. Thus, it is suggested here that Pragmatist critical-analytical research on HRM can inform the social critic and allow them, as Weber hoped, to ‘play the role of switchman’.

**References**


