

Human Relations Theory and People Management

*The minutiae of the human soul ... emerged as a new domain
for management*

Nikolas Rose

Conventional textbooks often set up a simple story about organization theory which has a very appealing structure. In this story, there is a good guy and a bad guy. Who gets to play which role sometimes shifts, but most often the bad guy is the scientific management approach and the good guy is human relations theory. This is a flawed story in my view, and the way I will tell the story emphasizes the many connections and similarities between the two. But I suppose the fact that I am referring to 'the two' implies that there must be some points of difference as well. Maybe so, but it is a different sort of difference to that which standard commentaries identify.

Human relations theory (HRT) is normally thought of as having its roots in the Hawthorne Studies conducted in the 1920s and 1930s at the Hawthorne works of the Western Electric Company, near Chicago in the United States. These studies have now taken on an almost mythological status within the study of organization, so that the details of what happened there and even when they happened is reported differently in different accounts. For example, different books give 1923, 1924 and 1927 as the date the studies started. Related to this mythology is a disjuncture between these precise details of what was done and what was written and the received version of what human relations theory is. Since human relations theory was the work of many years and many people, it contains a huge amount of variation and nuance (some of it extremely interesting)

¹ This same disjuncture is present in relation to Taylor's work (and scholarly commentaries on it) and that of many other organizational theorists. It isn't a matter of saying that the received version is deficient in detail or scholarship. They are different things for different purposes. Apart from anything else, received versions are simpler and more memorable. In many ways my purpose in this book is to put out another version of organization theory, no more scholarly than the received version but hopefully no less memorable.

44 Studying Organizations

which is not captured by the received version.¹ Although it would certainly be worthwhile to look at the detail (if you fancy it, Schwartzman, 1993, is a nice place to start), it is perhaps more important to examine the received version, for it is this which figures most strongly both in textbooks and, consequently, in the way that human relations theory is used to structure understandings of organizations, especially on the part of their managers. Indeed, as Nancy Harding (2003) observes of the conventional canon of management thinkers:

... neither the writers themselves nor indeed what they wrote is important. What defines them as important ... is what they signify, i.e. conventionality, continuity, the conservative way, or, in one word, patriarchy. (2003: 117)

The basic suggestion of the received version of HRT is that through a series of experiments and interviews, the Hawthorne researchers and, most notably, the man who became their chief popularizer and canonical emblem, Elton Mayo, identified the importance of 'the human factor' in organizations. That meant that workers were now recognized as having social needs and interests such that they could no longer be regarded as the economically motivated automatons envisaged by Taylorism.

Within these terms, two parts of the studies stand out as being especially important: the 'illumination experiment' and the 'bank wiring room experiment'. In the first of these, lighting levels were varied up and down within an experimental group of workers, whilst light levels were left unchanged within a control group. Almost all of the lighting changes led to an increase in productivity and, most interesting of all, productivity also increased within the control group. What was going on? Apparently, it was the fact that something 'unusual' was happening and that the workers felt that they were part of it and that what they were doing was of interest and importance to the researchers. It was this which caused the increase in productivity and which demonstrated that the workers could not be regarded as mere parts in the organizational machine. Thus was born the notion of the 'Hawthorne Effect', a staple part not just of organization theory but of social science as a whole.

The other study I want to mention was that conducted in the bank wiring room. Here, a small group of male workers were engaged in producing electrical components. It emerged that the group set informal norms around production levels so that, rather than produce their maximum output (which would earn them a bonus) the workers performed sub-optimally. These norms were enforced by a mixture of peer pressure (including physical sanction) and an unofficial 'gang leader'. This suggested that workers were not solely motivated by economic

considerations and, moreover, that the 'informal side of the organization' was as important as, or maybe even more important than, the formal side (i.e. the rules and official hierarchy).

The discovery of the human factor, so the story goes, ushered in a new era in which workers' needs were acknowledged and met. This claim fits not just the 'good guy, bad guy' story, it also promotes a version of organization theory as gradually discovering and refining truths, much in the way that science is supposed to proceed. There is one tiny flaw in this, however: it's not true. It's not true for lots of reasons. One is that an interest in workers going beyond economic concerns can be found well before Hawthorne. It was present in the various attempts of nineteenth century industrialists, especially those of Quaker background, to meet the 'moral needs' of workers. This is evidenced by towns like Port Sunlight and Bourneville in the UK, where housing and religious and communal activities were designed to cater for workers' leisure time and to provide an environment conducive to good living. True, it was the new 'science' of psychology rather than paternalistic religiosity that informed human relations theory but they share a similar humanizing imperative, and the latter had a paternalism of its own.

The second issue is that the original impetus for the Hawthorne experiments was firmly located within the tradition of scientific management, well established by the 1920s. The desire to ascertain the effect of lighting levels on productivity was informed by the idea that management was about the control of physical variables, and in fact there were many other experiments designed to explore a whole array of such variables.

Finally, and crucially, it is simply wrong to think that Taylor had been unaware of, or uninterested in, the informal side of the organization. On the contrary, the heart of Taylor's project was an attempt to overcome its effects. For the output restrictions observed in the Bank Wiring Room were nothing other than an instance of what Taylor has identified as the systematic soldiering of the workforce. That is not to say that his approach was the same as human relations theory, it was not. For whereas Taylor sought to eradicate the informal side of the organization, the human relations message was to acknowledge its irrepressibility and to find ways of managing it into an alignment with the formal parts and purposes of the organization.

And so now human relations theory begins to take on a very different aspect. In one way, it is a response to the failure, or at least limitations, of scientific management as a means of organizational control. But it is a response which in many ways offers not an alternative to, but an extension of, scientific management. What I mean to say is that human relations theory bears the same footprint of formal or instrumental rationality as that to be found in scientific management. My colleague John Roberts wrote a

highly illuminating case study around this theme some years ago (Roberts, 1984). He contrasts the approaches of 'Dave' and 'Val' to managing their teams of telesales workers. Dave is a scientific management type of manager, who tries to avoid any human contact with his staff and treats them as economically motivated automatons. Val takes a more human relations type of approach. She tries to understand the problems and anxieties of her staff and to encourage their wider motivations to work. But, and this is the crucial point, they both sought to control their teams: one by avoiding human relationships and one *through* human relationships.

If this is right, then the difference between scientific management and human relations theory is a 'tactical' one. That's a real difference, and it would be crass to deny it, not least because the two tactics create different working environments which will be experienced as such by people within them. But it would also be crass to romanticize that difference. For how will Dave and Val be judged, by others and, perhaps, themselves? According to the extent to which their approaches yield higher or lower sales. This is why they are both instrumentally rational versions of organization.

Why, then, does the received version of human relations theory fight shy of acknowledging its commonality with scientific management? I think there are two reasons for this. One is straightforward and relates to some specific difficulties faced by management as an occupation or even, aspirationally, a profession. The other is much more complicated and is to do with the idea of 'humanism'.

Later in this chapter, I will talk quite a bit about management as an occupation. But what I want to say here is that the establishment of it as a respectable, let alone respected, occupation was by no means straightforward. Today, we live in a world where to be a manager is, in many people's eyes, to be recognized as a person of some consequence. But this was not always so. In the early nineteenth century, the term manager was regarded with some suspicion, much as we might use the word 'cowboy' today. As I mentioned in the last chapter, the new breed of scientific managers were also accused of undermining individual initiative and freedom. By the twentieth century, managers were much better established, but the legacy of scientific management with its conflicts and inhumane efficiency hardly made it a prestigious label. Satirized and derided in films like Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* and novels like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, management had an image problem in the 1920s and 1930s. It's not hard to see why. Imagine a manager going home and being questioned by his (for most managers of the day were men) child:

Child: What do you do all day, dad?

Dad: Well, I, sort of, exploit people.

Child: How do you mean?

Dad: Well, you know, I dehumanize them by making them work as hard as I can for as little money as possible.

Child: Oh.

It was embarrassing stuff. A much better picture was offered by human relations theory. Now, management could be reconfigured as an altogether more humane undertaking which ameliorated rather than inflamed social conflict and, perhaps most important of all, was about 'helping' rather than exploiting the worker. This latter point came out of the tendency of Mayo, in particular, to conceptualize worker resistance as a psychological maladjustment rather than a rational response to conditions of employment. Famously, or infamously, Mayo went so far as to propose that membership of a trade union was a sign of mental illness. In fact, in this respect, Taylor's writings show much more empathy with workers' experiences than those of Mayo. Taylor after all had worked as a machine operator, and he did not find worker recalcitrance particularly objectionable at a personal level, albeit that he wanted to overcome it. But that overcoming presented management as, nakedly, being about power. Mayo's less sympathetic account of worker resistance paradoxically cast the manager as assisting the worker to make a normal adjustment to factory life.

So now a different conversation becomes possible:

Child: What do you do all day, dad?

Dad: Well, I, sort of, help people.

Child: How do you mean?

Dad: Well, you know, if they feel unhappy at work I make them see that I care about them and that it's not so bad.

Child: Oh, dad. That's great.

We probably shouldn't discount the fact that being able to give a positive sounding account of one's work to family and friends might persuade managers to embrace human relations theory. But, in any case, there were wider constituencies to whom, in a less naïve way, a similar account could helpfully be given. In a society² racked by social and industrial conflict, and extremely fearful that such conflict might lead to an emulation of the 1917 Russian Revolution, managers really needed to present a more humane and less confrontational face than they had hitherto been

2 I mean Britain, the US and other industrialized countries between the world wars.

48 Studying Organizations

able to do. And there was more at stake here than the manipulation of image. It was also the case that the scientific management system had indeed thrown up new problems – sabotage, poor quality, high staff turnover, absenteeism – to which the human relations approach might offer a solution. ‘Technical’ and ‘ideological’ factors are never separable: they reinforce each other.

All of this is fairly easy to understand. What is perhaps less clear is the more general question of the place of humanism within western societies, of which human relations theory management is but one, specific, manifestation. There is so much that could be said about this that I hesitate to plunge in, but it is necessary for me to do so, because it is not possible to understand organization without seeing how it stands in this wider context.³

what is it to be human?

Part of what has made modern societies modern is a move away from traditional belief systems in which the social order was simply pre-ordained by the will of God. The eighteenth century Enlightenment had broken down much of this reasoning – for example, the belief that kings ruled by divine right – and, as mentioned in the last chapter, had substituted the idea that individuals could use their own reason, rather than rely upon the received authority of others. Clearly Weber’s charting of the rise of rational-legal, as against traditional, authority and of the development of the bureaucratic organization, was part of the same flow of thought. But if individuals, rather than God or his representatives in the Church or the Monarchy, were now at the centre of things – who were these individuals? There were many takes on this question, but they crystallized around the idea of autonomous human beings, complete and sufficient in themselves, capable of rationality, capable of choice, capable of moral conduct and, by virtue of all possessing these traits, all entitled to certain rights.

So we find, from the Enlightenment onwards, the understanding that people had the right to be treated in certain ways. This led to all kinds of reforms, including the ideas that people could (with certain restrictions such as, until the twentieth century, being male) have a say in who governed them; have a fair trial; speak their opinions without punishment;

3 In the pages which follow I am glossing a fairly freeform version of ‘post-structuralism’. It would disrupt my purposes to elaborate this but see, for example, Burrell (1988); Rose (1989); Hacking (1991) for some of the work which has informed my account.

own their own property; be equal in the eyes of the law and so on. These are all very familiar things. It is easy to see how central such ideas are to modern forms of organization. When we think of a worker agreeing to work in exchange for a certain sum of money, we are pre-supposing a whole series of choices and rights. It is a bizarre thought that, for someone of my age, some didn't always apply to my grandmother and almost none to my great-great-great grandfather. This should alert us to the historical mutability of the idea of 'personhood' – or, what a human being is. Who knows what it will mean for our great-great-great grandchildren, or even for our children?⁴

This idea of personhood substantially deepened in the twentieth century. It moved from a philosophical, political or legal notion to a much more embodied or personalized one. If the nineteenth century had established some ideas about economic and political personhood (or at least, as I have suggested, manhood) then the twentieth century extended this into the psychological sphere. The intellectual revolution associated with Freud (but, as with Taylor, no less attributable to others) established human beings as no mere conscious decision making machines but as possessors of an unconscious and of all of the complexities of neurosis, motivation, desire and so on that map us out as human in our present day understanding of that term. The 'I' had been given depth, so that we learned to understand our real selves as a complex, multi-layered thing, understandable only partially to ourselves but perhaps accessible through the expertise of a psychoanalyst. 'Sub-consciously,' someone might say, 'I think that what attracted me to my husband was the way he's an authority figure, a bit like my father'. It is a surprising thought that almost no normal person would have said such a thing, or have been understood if they had said it, as little as 120 years ago.

And, of course, at the same time that all this was going on, there was also a steady but sure erosion of the religious belief which had been the dominant way of understanding the self and its relationship with the wider world for several centuries, in its Christian form, and perhaps for all of history in one form or another. To be sure that change has happened slowly and, for a great many people, not at all. But, where it did, it placed the individual at the centre of the universe. It suggested that people – and perhaps society – were not just important but that they were all that there was. Life ended with death, and the authority of God was replaced either by the authority of society, most likely in the form of the State, or by no more than the individual pursuit of desire and pleasure. It

4 Consider, for example, the possible impact of developments in genetic science and technology for how we come to conceive of personhood in the future.

50 Studying Organizations

is easy to see that all of the main currents of western society in, say, the last century have been concerned to make sense of this: Fascism, Communism, Existentialism, Hippie Culture, Neo-liberalism and our present culture of individualistic consumption of material goods are all examples.

Did any of this add up to a better, more accurate picture of personhood or the relation of people one to another? That really seems like an impossible question to answer. I suppose that from a religious perspective there would be some answers (mainly negative) but, then, adherence to a religion might be seen as no more than a dogmatic response to the very question posed by the dissolution of certainty. I think that since the picture we currently have of personhood is so very different to that held even a relatively short time ago then it is likely that the future will have a different picture and that therefore it would be foolish to give undue weight to our present picture. What is certain is that modern understandings of the human being have had dramatic effects upon how we live, upon art, culture, politics – upon everything that human beings do.

And that, of course, includes organizations. How could it not? The puzzling thing is that these kinds of themes and discussions are so absent from most of the organization theory textbooks. How can it be that they just assume that the way things are round about now is some kind of immutable, stable truth?⁵ I suspect that most organization theorists would say that all the themes I have alluded to (in the most cursory way) are about ‘something else’ – politics, philosophy, society – but that is manifestly non-sense. How could organizations possibly be abstracted from these?

Returning to human relations theory, it seems clear to me that its appeal, its very emergence fitted into this shifting understanding of personhood like a hand in a glove. The invocation of ‘humanity’ is one obvious clue to this. For human relations theory engaged directly with emerging understandings about the ‘depth’ of personhood. It suggested that ‘beneath’ the economic motivations of Taylorist workers lay some more profound realities, realities which it took a very specialized kind of manager to understand (another reason why we should give managers respect, then). But understanding was only one part of the picture. Much more important, as for the psychoanalysts, was ‘adjustment’. The new domain of the psyche was also a domain in which problems occurred and had to be dealt with. The self was no longer something just to be taken at face value, but was a terrain of worry.

5 This is particularly weird given the way that most current texts emphasize how rapid is ‘change’ in organizations and their world. But change in that kind of thought is only considered in the most limited of ways. See Chapter 4.

That worry was both social – the problems of criminality, madness, delinquency, alcoholism, perversion and so on – and individual. Individuals, along with their autonomy, their rights, their choices, had acquired responsibilities and anxieties. Freedom, in Erich Fromm's (1942) haunting phrase, had brought the 'fear of freedom'. You can see exactly the same thing today, in very advanced form. On the one hand, there is an ever greater array of social worries about what people do with their freedom – molest children, plant bombs, take drugs? On the other hand, there is huge individual insecurity – am I earning enough, good in bed, living a healthy lifestyle? Have I got too much fat, too much debt, good enough grades?

All this is to say that a new terrain opened up, in organizations at least as much as elsewhere, into which management could now be inserted. This, I think, is the real significance of the Hawthorne Studies. They legitimated a new managerial arena. At one level it could be read as an imposition. Management was no longer concerned with what workers did – with, if you will, the body – but with what people are. Worker hopes, fears, motivations, anxieties, aspiration all fell into the locus of management. One reading of this would be to see organizations as becoming ever more intrusive. The private, non-work sphere gets progressively more eroded. For these new understandings of work began to break down the dividing line between work and the real, true self. I mean: under scientific management systems it might be possible to say that your real self was what lay outside work: your family, the pub, whatever. But human relations theory begins (although less dramatically than some of its successors) to say that that distinction is false.

However, if my earlier idea about the changing nature of personhood is correct, then it follows that neither the claim that the real self lies outside of work nor the claim that it lies inside work can be sustained. All we can say is that, at various times, different apprehensions of personhood hold good. So isn't it more to the point to say not that human relations theory invaded the territory of the private self but that it actually contributed to mapping the territory out as one to be either left alone or invaded? For it tells us that the human being is always, unavoidably present at work. This has profound consequences for organizations, but it is also highly significant for individuals. For if modernity left a pervasive void of meaning and a pervasive insecurity about identity, then work now stood ready to provide meaning and identity. After all, what is one of the first things we say when we meet a new person? We might start by asking their name, and then, perhaps, where they come from. But very soon we will ask: what do you do?

Once work begins to express and define who we are (and in the process of doing so, close certain things down as what we are *not*) a whole

52 Studying Organizations

new set of concerns becomes manifest in organizations. Once HRT had entered the world of organizations and organization theorists, a whole edifice of knowledge about people at work was gradually elaborated. Such knowledge is the staple of the conventional study of organizations and includes such things as personality type, motivation and job satisfaction, group dynamics, leadership and much more. It is tempting to see these as more or less descriptive accounts of people at work, but this is wrong for two reasons. The first is an extension of what I have already tried to say. There is no ultimate description of people but rather ascriptions which, if believed and enforced, are taken as descriptions – they constitute or construct reality. For example, is the difference between a child and an adult a real difference, or is it rather that where we draw the line and enforce it (for example, by conferring certain rights at particular ages) takes on the appearance of a real difference? We could say that people divide into those that are right-handed and those who are left-handed and confer different rights to them, but we don't. On the other hand, we can and do say that people divide into male and female and, in many societies, confer different rights accordingly. Or we divide people into different nationalities and confer different rights accordingly. These things are a matter of what is socially agreed and also of power – who has the power to draw the distinctions and to enforce the effects of these distinctions.

So when personality types are divided into, say, introvert and extrovert, or any of the many other variations on this theme in organization theory; and when on the basis of this ascription decisions are made about who to employ and who not to employ then exactly the same processes of distinction making and enforcement are present. The legacy of HRT has been to multiply these schema for making distinctions between people, and you can see in any organization theory textbook an endless array of models, typologies, 2-by-2 matrices and so on which replicate these distinctions but treat them as descriptions rather than ascriptions – as being rooted in a self-evident truth rather than being the outcome of a social process. In this way, organization theory is a part of making this social process happen. So, to take some well-known examples, the distinctions Maslow draws between different motivators; or Herzberg's distinction of Motivators and Hygiene factors; or the distinction of task and role orientation in management style; or McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y – all these serve to constitute or construct the organizational world and do not simply describe it.

Now, undoubtedly, the drawing of distinctions is almost unavoidable if we are to make any kind of sense of the world around us, including that of organizations (even to speak of 'the world around us' is to make a distinction). And it is not the case that this began in organization theory with

HRT. After all, Scientific Management draws all kinds of distinctions between efficiency and inefficiency, for example. However, because HRT draws the 'whole person' into the organizational ambit, the impact of all of these supposedly descriptive distinctions is potentially much greater. The stakes are very high when we think about organizations, just because work is so central a part of society; but the stakes get even higher when work organizations and personhood become inextricably linked. And this means that those of us who study organizations, and the much larger number of us who work in them, need to be much more sceptical than organization theory normally encourages us to be.

The constitutive or constructive nature of organization theory is one reason why we have to be cautious about the way we use its concepts to think about people in organizations. But there is a second issue, and this relates to the continuities between HRT and scientific management which I pointed to earlier. For not only does organization theory contribute to constituting what it claims to be describing but it does so in particular ways, for particular reasons. The impetus for HRT was that of organizational control and, more particularly, the attempt by managers to gain control over organizational processes. So the kind of knowledge produced and the uses to which it is put has to be read in the light of that aspiration for control. Organization theory is often, and certainly in the case of HRT, indistinguishable from theories of managing. Organization theorists have often been, to use Baritz's (1960) evocative phrase 'servants of power'. That may or may not be a good thing (I think it is a bad thing) but it must mean that organization theory has to be read with an eye to the purposes it serves, which means giving more attention to management than I have so far done.

the rise and rise of management

Management has been one of the great success stories of the modern world. As many writers have remarked – so many that it has almost become clichéd – the etymological origins of management lie in two terms – the French *menager* and the Italian *maneggiare* – the first denoting domestic or household organization, the second the handling of horses. The ultimate origin lies in the Latin word *manus* or hand. What this may be taken to point to (if you will forgive the pun) is the essentially humble and mundane meaning of management, the sense that it is something dispersed, done by everyone. This sense is recalled when we say something like 'I managed to catch the bus on time' or 'I managed to avoid arguing with him'.

54 Studying Organizations

But although we do use the word manage in that way, that isn't what we usually think of when we talk about management, and it certainly isn't the kind of thing with which 'management schools' and management studies are normally concerned. They configure management in an all together more grandiose way. But what is management? There is no straightforward answer to that question, and the problem is not one of definition. It is not that there is some 'thing' – management – to be described and, in being described, delineated from all sorts of other 'things'. As with personhood, what is at stake is a social construction in which competing claims are made about management and, at different times and by different audiences, are accepted. A good illustration of this is found in a study of management which has received far less attention than it deserves:

I was styled a 'manager' and my wife ... was a 'housewife'. I can remember well the blessed relief of leaving my house and its attendant chaos each morning to go off to my oh-so-demanding 'management' job. In what sense ... was my wife not 'managing' and in what sense was my work ... more essentially *managerial* than hers? At work I had another woman to make sure I managed properly ... This one wasn't styled a manager either, but the same essential question held good for her; in what sense is the work of a secretary *not* managerial? (Mant, 1977: 1)

I think that Mant's questions in this passage do two things. One is to remind us that management carries the embedded meaning of the daily accomplishment of life's 'business'. The other is that the way the line gets drawn between managers and others is an accomplishment of power. Some kinds of claims to be a manager don't register, and if they are demanded the response is: 'yeah, of course'. Other kinds of claims jar, and invite the response: 'oh yeah?'. So it's really no great surprise that the two people Mant identifies as being engaged in managerial roles without being awarded the title of manager are women – his wife and his secretary. *Their* kind of management is just boring old house management ('oh yeah?'). *Real* management is what the guys do, with spreadsheets and strategies and meetings and budgets. It's what managers do ('yeah, of course').

So, sometimes, management seems to mean a group of people – managers. In this way we may talk about 'the management', and mean, usually, a group distinct from 'the workers'. What makes them managers? Well one important answer might be just that they are called managers. I'll come back to this, but one thing which is notable about present day organizations is how the title of manager has become something of a

debased currency, so that what was once a loo cleaner might now be glossed as a facilities inspection and hygiene manager. This is interesting – on a fairly lax interpretation of the term interesting – because it points to the mutability of the status of managers. Over the last 100 years or more, and especially in the last few decades, we've got used to the idea of managers being fairly high status, a desirable career option, respected and well-paid. But as I mentioned earlier, this wasn't always so, and management had to go through a long process of what would nowadays be called 'image-building'. That process was ultimately successful, though:

Management will remain a basic and dominant institution perhaps as long as Western Civilization itself survives. (Drucker, 1955: 1)

This is heady stuff. To go from horsehandling to bulwark of civilization is no mean achievement and if the tone of Drucker's eulogy is rather breathless, it does no more than sum up what many others said and believed. Note that he is not talking about managers *per se*, but about management as an 'institution'. No doubt there is some overlap between the two, but the point is that it renders management as something more than 'the management'. How did management achieve this position? Analysts are divided between at least three competing explanations which I have outlined elsewhere (Grey, 1999). First, there is a 'technical' explanation – that management arose to solve the functional problems of large-scale organization. Secondly, there is an 'elite' explanation – that management arose to define and defend the interests of a particular group, namely managers. Thirdly, there is a 'political' explanation – that management arose in order to control and discipline workers.

Earlier I talked about the struggles that management engaged in to make itself legitimate in the eyes of society. These took two forms of which one was a kind of technical justification – that management made things more efficient; and the other a more ideological justification – that management helped to make things more humane. Of course these are not really separate so much as reinforcing justifications: scientific management had as part of its pitch a fair division of labour and a fair reward, whilst human relations approaches have always claimed, even if they have been unable to prove, that workers who are managed humanely are also more productive. In this sense, human relations theory is about humanization as technique.

Looked at in this way, it is easy to see the relationship between technical and elite views of management. If management is a technical necessity, arising from the functional requirements for efficiency in large-scale enterprises then this makes out a strong case for the elite status of

56 Studying Organizations

managers. A much stronger case than, for example, a bald demand for status, power and money. That may be what drives the elite explanation, but for it to work it has to be translated into terms with a greater legitimacy, and the two-pronged claims (technical and ideological) within the case for management do just that.

Of course, someone might object to this by saying that what is important is that it is true that management fulfils a technical necessity and because it is true then managers came to form an elite group. All my talk of legitimation is beside the point. Against this, I could point to the argument that management is really about control, not technical necessity. My imaginary heckler might then say that this too misses the point since it is precisely the delivery of control – whether delivered through hard systems or soft soap – which constitutes the technical necessity of management. But now I have a good put down line, which is that it is highly questionable whether management does in fact deliver such control, even accepting that this is its aim, because of the issues of resistance and unintended consequences I rehearsed in the first chapter; the idea that management is a perennially failing operation. And if my ‘theoretical’ arguments on this aren’t acceptable then just consider the fact that, despite well over a century of trying to find the answers to managerial problems it remains the case that organizations are continually chasing new solutions and new approaches – and the job of management appears never to be done.

So, at the very least, the truth of the technical necessity for management is endlessly debatable and requires the continual advancement of claims which may or may not be accepted by particular people at particular times. It is therefore quite sensible to look at the way those claims are advanced. And here I think we have to go into deeper water than simply talking about their content towards considering what it is that makes them, at least potentially, plausible.

management and modernism

It is no coincidence that Peter Drucker talked about management’s dominance in the context of western civilization. Earlier, I talked about modern understandings of personhood, and the way that the breakdown of religious belief brought with it a new accent upon the individual. But alongside – and in various ways linked to – that came another development. If the world and what happened in it was no longer thought of in terms of the will and design of God, it became possible to think of that world instead as something that could be ordered according to the will

and design of people. Social organization ceases to be pre-ordained but an arena for intervention and control.

Control is perhaps a key term here. The emergence of experimental natural science and the growing body of theory that went with it, which quickened from the seventeenth century onwards yielded the possibility of control over the physical circumstances of life. In its wake came a huge array of new technologies – from medicine to energy generation which fundamentally altered the relationship between human beings and nature. But if the physical world could be controlled in this way, then why should social organization be any different? It is from this basic question that, amongst other things, the positivism I discussed in the introduction emerged. For at heart, positivism is the attempt to apply the same reasoning to social phenomena as had been introduced to the physical realm.

Obviously the attempt to control social organization was not confined to the modern world that emerged from the scientific revolution. Rulers of all kinds have always sought, and often achieved, control over people, territories, money and so on. What was different, though, was the idea that this could be done systematically through the development and application of the new bodies of knowledge which emerge in the modern era – statistics, economics and sociology being some of the more obvious examples. To design society as if it were a machine, running according to rules which were fully understood and demonstrated – that was the dream. And it is easy to see that this dovetails in with Weber's observations about the rise of the bureaucratic organization, for what was this other than a rule-based social machine?

It should not be thought that this search for control was animated solely by a drive for power and again in this way it perhaps differs from other, pre-modern attempts at control. For along with the search for control was a strong ideology of progress. Just as the natural world could be controlled for the better, for a healthier, more comfortable and richer life, so social life could be controlled so as to yield improvements. Society could become more educated, more knowledgeable, more civilized and cultured (even 'society' conceived of as an object of analysis and a defined arena of behaviour is part of this modern revolution). This of course did require control, for it meant purging ignorance and bad behaviour. Perhaps this too could be thought of as an intervention in nature. Human beings might be naturally corrupt and vicious, just as mountains were naturally difficult to cross. But if you could build roads to cross mountains then why couldn't you build institutions to improve humanity?

Management is interesting to me because it precisely traverses these twin tracks of modern thought – the systematic control of nature and the systematic control of society. For if the revolution in natural science made

58 Studying Organizations

possible the steam engines and precision engineering of the factory, then the revolution in social science lent itself to attempts to control the factory workers. Or, to put it differently and perhaps rather better, there is no sharp distinction to be drawn in the modern world between the natural and social domains. Both, as Ian Hacking (1983) has it, become arenas which can be 'represented' and 'intervened' in. What that distinction points to goes beyond what I have said so far, and is worth pausing to consider.

At one level, and I think it is the one that we normally think of, when we think of such things at all, the modern world represents no more than the discovery of ways of intervening. That is, the dumb world was just sitting there, ready and waiting to have things done to it once people got round to working out how to do it. When they did, modernity got going. But this misses a crucial part of what happened. Before intervention could really get going there needed to be a new way of thinking about, and knowing the world – a way of representing it. That wasn't about discovering new things, so much as 're-presenting' old things in a new way. Was poverty part of the ordained world of God? Or was it because poor people were lazy? Or was it because rich people had grabbed all the wealth? Represent it the first way and intervention is at best pointless and at worse sinful. Represent in one of the other ways, and intervention becomes possible. More than that, it calls forth a multiplication of representations, for example, drawing the boundary between rich and poor and collecting statistics on how many people are poor, where they live and how they live. So now representation is both a new way of thinking and a new way of knowing. And it is a 'problem' to be dealt with or intervened in – perhaps by punishing the poor for their laziness, perhaps by castigating the rich for their greed, depending upon how the representation was effected.

A similar example, which I talked about earlier, is the constitutive role of organization theory with its distinctions and categories. But now I am talking about something more fundamental than organization theory: the very basic parameters of how modern views of the world operate. Now it is of course the case that this can be discussed in much more sophisticated ways than I have done here, and a host of social theorists and philosophers have done just that but I am not going to do so. One reason is just my own ignorance. But this necessity can become a virtue for the following reason. The camp followers of modernity, which includes most of the readers of this book as well as myself, don't operate with any very sophisticated grasp of their world, any more than medieval peasants were any great shakes at theology. But a received wisdom, a folk-wisdom, almost, informs our thoughts and actions and, in particular,

it informs the theory and practice of management. My concern is to show that this received wisdom is not just 'the way things are' but that it marks management as being embedded in a particular, historically bounded and philosophically informed, view of the world; the details of that history and philosophy I leave to those who are better qualified to discuss it.

For it must be obvious that management is all of a piece with this representation and intervention which I have talked about. At the most basic level, management assumes manageability – that the world can be known and operated upon, and these terms are virtually interchangeable with representation and intervention. In this sense management is something which literally could not have existed, and does not exist, outside of modernity. But, beyond that, management consists of a distinctive series of often extremely complex ways of effecting representations and conducting interventions. For example, consider a workshop in which 10 people are making, I don't know, tables. How can it be represented?

We could make a literal representation by drawing a picture, but that wouldn't be a distinctively 'management' representation because it wouldn't (or at least not obviously) allow any kind of managerial intervention. However, if we represented it as a series of inputs and outputs; or an array of costs and incomes; or, as a series of bundles of wants and needs (of customers, workers, etc) then this would be a management representation. It might take the form of a flow chart, a set of accounts or a treatise on marketing or personnel psychology. These are all management representations and they all allow managerial interventions, such as re-design of resource flows; cutting of costs; advertising campaigns to customers or motivation programmes for workers.

So, now, let's go back to managers. If I am right (something which can no means be taken for granted) then there is something more fundamental at stake than the technical, elite and political explanations for its emergence and functioning, even though it has a bearing upon these explanations. Managers are bearers of a particular kind of expertise – the capacity to represent and intervene in particular ways. But these ways are arbitrary and they are contested. They are arbitrary because it is impossible to say that representing the workshop as a balance sheet is more true to reality than painting the scene on a canvas. And because they are arbitrary they must be contestable, in the sense that it is always possible to say that a different representation should be made. This contestability is evident both within management (for example, between an accounting or a human psychology representation) and from without. For, apart from the possibility of representing the workshop in different managerial ways,

60 Studying Organizations

it is also possible to represent it as, say, a place of exploitation, power and conflict.

I'm going to bring back my imaginary heckler, who might say that I have done no more than say – at excruciating length and in pompous ways – that management is what managers do. Well maybe that's a fair comment, but I think I've done something a bit more than that. One is that I've hopefully shown at a fundamental level what it is that managers do when they manage. That might (perhaps) be interesting in itself, but it also helps to explain the way that these managers are hostages or, if you prefer, emblems, of a particular way of looking at the world; itself no more valid and no more enduring than any other. As the Peter Drucker quote suggests, by the middle of the twentieth century, this way of looking at the world was very much in the ascendant. That this was so was in no small part due to the combination of human relations theory with its supposed opposite in bureaucratic and scientific management approaches to organizations. For taken together these provided the technical and ideological justification for the managerial way of representing and intervening in the realm of organizations.

By welding these things together, it is possible to see how the rise of management is inseparable from the rise of *people* management, or to use what for many years was the preferred term 'man' management,⁶ which grew out of human relations theory. It is emphatically not the case that other kinds of management (for example, scientific management) were unconcerned with such people management and, indeed, it is impossible to see how it could be. But human relations theory filled out and made explicit just how extensive was the ambit of management in the modern world. It is no coincidence that the commonest definition of management is given in terms of 'getting things done through other people'. It is a revealing definition in the central role it places on people in management, the instrumentality of the way it apprehends people and its scope. For what are the 'things' that can be got done in this way? Why, anything and everything.

6 This usage now seems quaint but is by no means an historical curio. For one of the pervasive biases of organization theory, both mainstream and critical, has been to assume that male experience encapsulates experience in general and that 'man' is equivalent to 'human'. This is a very particular, and particularly important, instance of what I was talking about earlier in terms of the construction of meaning about what it is to be human: specifically, a gendered construction. See Harding (2003).

 conclusion

The classical approaches to organizations with which this first section of the book has been concerned both reflected and contributed to building a powerful and influential edifice. This edifice presents it as self-evident that we live in an organizational world – and moreover an organizational world of a particular, managerial sort. The significance of this is not, primarily, the rise of an elite group of managers but rather the rise of a managerial apprehension of the organizational world. I stress this because such a view is relatively detached from the fate of managers as an occupational group. As I will explore in later chapters, an increasing accent upon self-management relies upon this managerial apprehension even when it also threatens the position of managers as such.

It is normal when studying organizations as part of a management degree to understand things like bureaucratic theory, scientific management, human relations theory and management generally as entirely unproblematic. That is, to take the managerial representation of the organizational world as if it is the only representation (as if, in fact, it is simply reality). The account I have offered is rather different. I suggest that the orthodox story is a construction which conveniently excludes almost everything of importance. First and foremost, it excludes the way that it *is* a construction. Related to that, it also fails to understand how organization theory is part and parcel of a particular philosophical and historical context. And related to *this*, it fails to acknowledge the ways that organization theory provides a technical and ideological legitimization of management, rather than simply the analysis of organizational life it purports to be. Finally, by a relentless focus on a one-sided picture of instrumental rationality and control – whether overtly or, as with human relations approaches, covertly – it fails to understand the severe limitations, both in principle and practice of this picture.

Defective as this picture may be, it is the one which has been taken forward into the contemporary approaches to studying organizations with which the next part of this book is concerned. The entire tenor of the human relations approach is bound up with the idea of people management. So much so, that nowadays management courses always fall into three kinds of components. One is concerned with, precisely, people and is found in modules on organizations, human resource management or some variant of these. Another is concerned with management ‘science’ – operations, technology and so on. A third straddles the first two, for example, strategy or marketing. The second kind of module addresses ‘people’ by ignoring them in favour of some fantasy about organizations in which human beings are just removed. The third kind of

62 Studying Organizations

module usually adopts some quasi-economic model of people as, for example, rational consumers. The first, which is what I am trying to talk about, treats human beings as a recalcitrant but potentially manageable resource – the human resource as we say nowadays. The fact that to do so entails both an impoverished view of people and an at best optimistic and at worse immoral view of management has hardly dented the enthusiasm with which ‘people management’ has come to occupy a central place in the contemporary study, and practice, of organizations.