Chapter 09 - Work—the basic theories

Answers to end of chapter questions

1. Weber was said to have been engaged in a life-long ‘debate with Marx’s ghost’. What do you think the conversation was about?

The ideas of alienation and rationalization. The debate would centre around the removal of the ‘human’ aspect of the workers roles, and the move towards a more ‘rational’ means to an end culture in work organizations. The debate would discuss the effect of this on society and social relations.

2. Can we apply an idea like alienation to modern social and economic conditions, or is that diluting the concept too much?

The idea of alienation can and has been applied to modern social and economic conditions. The capitalist system still functions in very much the same way as it did during Weber’s time. The forms of ‘control’ in order to ensure this rationalization is implemented have changed with economic and social conditions but the main idea is still applicable to modern work organizations.

3. How is the concept of a ‘labour process’ different from merely describing a process of organizing work?

The concept of ‘Labour process’ considers relations between many actors not just those immediately affected by the role such as the worker or the manager. It considers the affect of the work place on society more generally and on social relations.

4. In what ways can work systems be thought of as systems of control?

The bureaucracy and regulation built into many work systems act as a form of control as they define what people can do/think/say and what they can’t.

5. It has become a common criticism of modern work forms that they reproduce ‘insidious’ as opposed to direct forms of control. What is meant by this?

The criticisms levelled at certain management ‘fashions’ such as the idea of organizational culture, for example, have claimed these so called more ‘autonomous’ people-centred ways of managing are in fact more effective as control mechanisms as they are internalised and used by the workers themselves.
6. What brought about the historic emergence of the factory system of organizing manual work, and what factors cause it to spread to other types of work?

The emergence of this system of organizing was due to the pursuit of a more rational, organized, and controlled way of working. The factors that caused it to spread to other types of work was the increase in the importance of efficiency and productivity in the workplace.

7. Technology has long been seen as a key aspect of the development of industrial societies. Can you give three reasons why this should be so?

Technology enables the development of various aspects of industrial society for the increased productivity and efficiency of production.

8. What elements of Foucault’s idea of the Panopticon can be seen in modern systems of surveillance, especially in work?

The elements then can be seen are surveillance and control.

9. It seems crazy that industrial and organizational systems have recently become so much more productive yet we seem to be working longer and longer hours, and under greater and greater pressure. Can you think of reasons from the basic social theories why this might be so?

The industrial and organizational systems are more productive as a result of the greater and greater exploitation of people. The longer hours people are working are a result of the constant pursuit for ‘more’.