Chapter 10 - Conflict and consent in work

Answers to end of chapter questions

1. What was distinctive about Braverman’s account of work relations, and what prompted early scepticism about his thesis?

Braverman considered not only the technical aspects of labour process theory but also the experiences and realities people within organizations.

2. How do workers exercise discretion, and create space for themselves, in constraining workplace regimes?

They do this through resistance and taking control of the space they have for themselves.

3. How does a structural perspective on the employment relationship explain workplace conflict?

Structural perspectives have continued to inform the labour process debate. For example, Edwards (1990) has developed a comprehensive account of workplace conflict and resistance. He suggests that ‘structural antagonism’ might be a better term than conflict, because conflict can imply that workers and managers are constantly and visibly at war. In reality a perpetual struggle for control in work is not always obvious or observable. The tactics workers adopt are versatile and often covert, so that an intimate knowledge of a workplace might be needed in order to be aware of resistance going on. Nor does resistance have to be manifest to be effective. The threat of resistance being offered if some change were to be initiated may be enough to maintain the status quo.

4. What is the evidence for consent in the labour process and employees’ positive accommodation to workplace rules?

Workers have the power to disrupt production and withhold co-operation, but also the practical abilities and know-how on which employers depend. Hence, the active role of groups in employment relations involves degrees of co-operation and consent as well as struggle on the part of workers.

5. How would you distinguish structural from subjectivist images of the labour process?

If the active subject becomes the focus of attention, ‘resistance’ and ‘consent’ become two sides of the same coin. Employees’ efforts to claim a rightful place in work may mean ‘resisting’ managerial priorities, but to the employee (and perhaps to other stakeholders like industrial courts or the media) it may appear as a progressive reform of working arrangements.
6. ‘Most analyses of the workplace have used gender as a synonym for women’ (Barrow). Why would this be a misleading assumption?

Traditional analyses of the workplace have not even considered women in the first place, assuming the worker to be a ‘male manual worker’.

7. Why is such a fuss made about strikes when they seem to have little direct economic impact?

In his thorough analysis of industrial conflict Hyman (1989) put forward two main reasons. First, the role of the news media of forming public opinion is very important. Certainly research has detected an element of straightforward bias in the reporting of strikes. Managers are often portrayed as reasonable and responsible, and greater authority is attributed to their views, while strikes are seen as ‘problems’ created by workers. But simple bias is not a complete answer. The way in which news is produced also needs to be taken into account. People in the media will argue that they ‘report the facts’. But news cannot just be seen as information about events transmitted to the public in some straightforward way; in a real sense news is manufactured. The raw material of events is processed—selected, edited, dramatized, presented—by the professionals who run the media. Ultimately it is their values that shape the version of events the public receives.

In seeking to present strikes as ‘newsworthy’, an artificial image of industrial relations is often conveyed. News coverage tends to reduce the complex process of strikes to a single issue. Only the precipitating causes tend to be brought out. It is only if a strike stays in the news for a long period that anything of its history or underlying causes will emerge—and then only in the ‘quality’ press, rarely on television or in the tabloids where most people obtain their information.

8. What are the arguments for and against the view that industrial conflict is neither appropriate nor viable in the modern political-economic climate?

The real challenge of HRM in mainstream companies is that it threatens to deliver for the individual what the union cannot. Trade unions need strategies and policies whereby they are seen to be pushing for individual development. (Bacon and Storey, 1996, p. 70). Rather than the old ‘pay and strikes’ agenda, Bacon and Storey suggest the union movement has had to redefine itself to serve this broader pattern of rights and advancement. The upshot has been to effectively sideline conflict as the first weapon of employee protection. Others, however, have wondered whether current work settings have changed that much. Ackers et al. (1996) have stressed the need for a careful sifting of the evidence before concluding that sweeping changes are under way. They point out that most of more detailed and reliable studies have been carried out in the longer-established new workplaces, and these studies have actually found that industrial relations based on union–management partnership deals has been limited. Here traditional union influence over pay and conditions has continued, and there is still plentiful evidence of informal and individual resistance.