



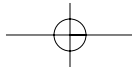
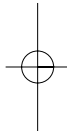
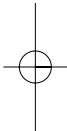
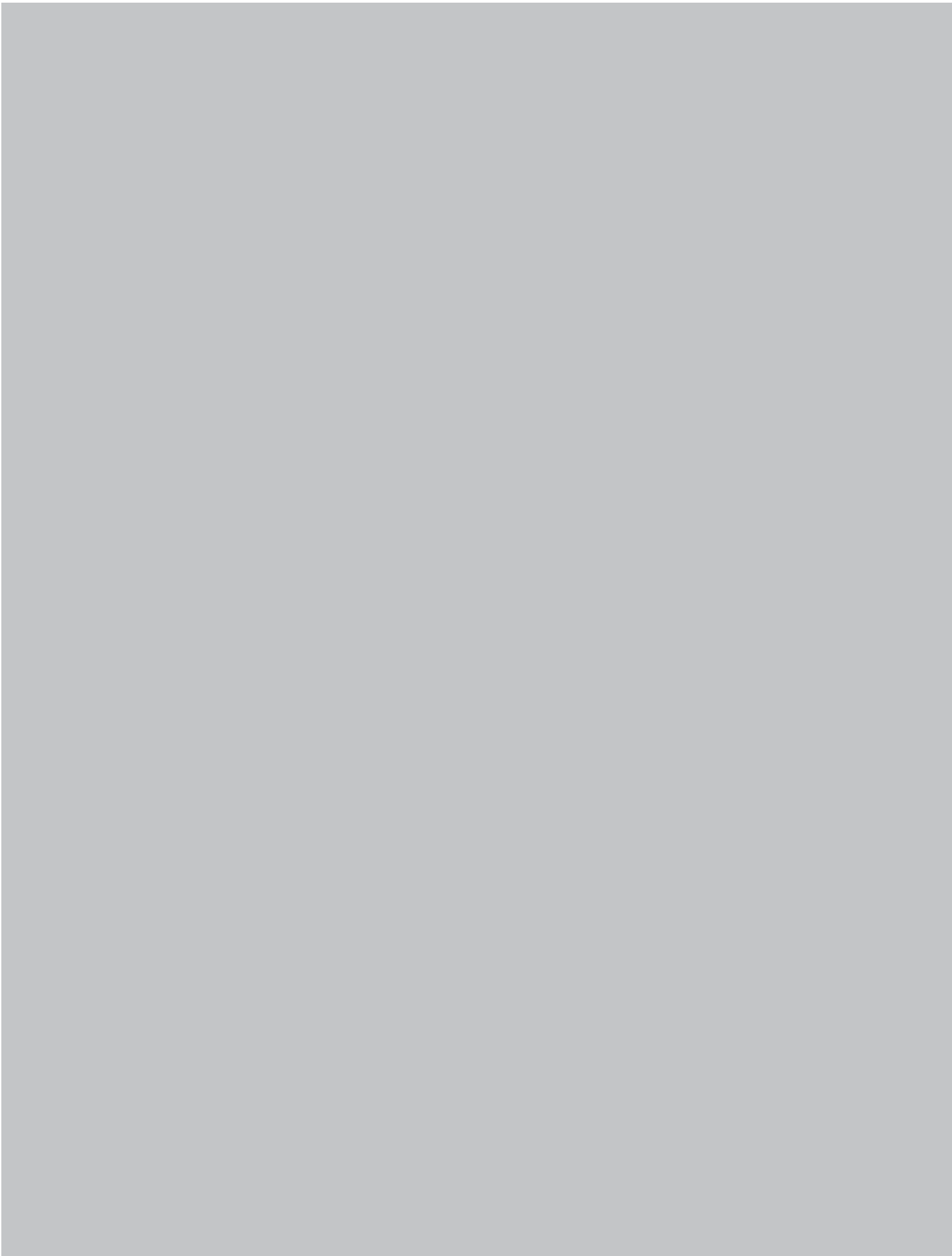
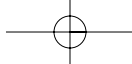
- Chapter 1
THE STUDY OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS
- Chapter 2
**THE CHANGING NATURE OF WORK
AND EMPLOYMENT**



part one

the **nature** and
context of
industrial
relations





chapter one

the study of industrial relations

learning objectives

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- Distinguish between the ‘commonsense’ and ‘theoretically-informed’ definitions of ‘industrial relations’.
- Provide examples of industrial-relations situations and events.
- Discuss the similarities and differences between three ideological perspectives on the nature of the employment relationship—namely, ‘pluralism’, ‘unitarism’ and ‘radicalism’.
- Identify the different analytical tools used in three approaches to the study of the employment relationship—namely, ‘neo-institutionalism’, ‘human resource management’ and ‘labour process’.
- Critically assess the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to the study of the employment relationship.
- Understand the approach to the study of industrial relations that is used in the rest of this book.



introduction

Everyone who derives an income through work or who becomes involved in the organisation and management of employees at work is immersed in the practice of industrial relations. The overall quality of the employment relationship and changes in industrial relations can have an important effect on the overall performance of an organisation. At the same time, the terms and conditions of employment directly affect the quality of employees' working lives and their capacity to enjoy many aspects of their lives outside of work. These issues of 'efficiency' and 'equity'—the contributions of industrial relations to the wellbeing of work organisations and even the national economy on the one hand, and the consequences of changing industrial relations for employees on the other—are central themes in recent national policy debates, in strategic deliberations in company boardrooms and in more everyday discussions in cafes and around kitchen tables.

A recent policy controversy in Australia, for example, has been the protection of employee entitlements. The failure of large corporations, like HIH Insurance or Ansett Airlines, has meant that employees may not have received accumulated entitlements like long service leave, holiday pay and superannuation because secured creditors gained first access to the remaining assets of those corporations. During 2002, a national policy debate unfolded that focused, on the one hand, on the capacity of alternative schemes proposed by different political parties to deliver protection to employees and, on the other hand, on the likely impact of increased costs and regulations that arose from those schemes on the efficiency of viable ongoing companies (Burgess and Baird 2003). A prime example of the efficiency–equity theme at the company level came from an announcement—in August 2003 by the chief executive officer (CEO) of Qantas, Australia's largest domestic and international airline—of a strategic move by Qantas to ensure that one-quarter of its workforce work on a part-time or casual basis. This ambition, which the CEO regarded as necessary for the viability of the airline in a constantly changing marketplace, has been disputed by trade union representatives as an unacceptable impost on the wages and employment security of employees (see the Qantas case study at the end of Chapter 5). On a more mundane but no less important level, many of the decisions of courts and tribunals—like payments to former employees for unfair dismissals or compensation to employees who are subject to discrimination—are publicised by popular television programs and become 'hot' topics of discussion in forums far beyond the workplaces involved.

At the core of industrial relations are different views about the most effective way to manage the relationship between an organisation, its employees and their representatives as well as parallel arguments about how governments should frame laws and policies to best encourage efficient and equitable industrial relations within organisations. At one extreme, many managers say that employees are their organisations' greatest assets and that, given the right environment, market forces and rational calculation, managers will invest in and properly maintain these precious assets to the mutual benefit of all. Governments increasingly see their main responsibility as withdrawing from direct interference in the employment relationship and providing a flexible and decentralised environment

that most effectively allows managers and employees to reach their mutually advantageous agreements. Both managers and governments of this ilk are opposed to institutions like trade unions and arbitration tribunals that reduce both the operation of free market forces and the capacities of managers and employees to embrace the full range of employment choices.

At the other extreme, many employees see their colleagues being made redundant and see themselves working harder and longer without an effective avenue to voice their concerns at work, let alone change the situation. Similarly, critics like trade union leaders condemn the trend in government policy towards flexibility and market forces as a prescription for managers to exploit their new found freedoms and thereby create growing inequality at work. Trade unions and state regulation are correspondingly considered essential for effective labour markets and a fair society.

These contrary views show how industrial relations is inevitably a site of competing ideas. It represents an area of social relations that affects everyone who works and about which almost everyone has an opinion, and often those opinions differ. Farnham and Pimlott (1979) put it this way:

industrial relations becomes both an academic and a political arena where the opposing ideologies and different value systems of individuals and of groups compete not only against one another but also for the minds . . . of the uncommitted (p. xii).

The many controversies about industrial relations demonstrate its great strengths as an academic subject. It is lively and passionate! It is relevant and compelling! It is everyday! But it is also concerned with great social movements; and it seems to require commonsense at the same time that it requires deep analysis and complex concepts.

To properly harness the potential of industrial relations as an academic subject, however, requires clear thinking and a set of concepts that allows students of the subject to see past the confusion of competing ideas and to understand the complexities of both its practice and its rhetoric. The aim of this chapter is to begin this task. The first step is to define the area of study by going beyond the commonsense and its often narrow conceptions of industrial relations to a more considered theoretical definition. The second step is to explain the key concepts that are used in this book to study industrial relations. The third step is to acknowledge that this approach is not the only way to analyse the world of work; the approach adopted in this book is consequently distinguished from alternative approaches like human resource management and 'labour-process' theory.

what is industrial relations?

Most people have some conception of what 'industrial relations' means long before they enter the workforce. This 'commonsense' meaning comes partly from everyday usage of the term by friends and family and partly from the mass media, both of

which tend to associate the term with sensational events involving trade unions and dramatic incidents of conflict.

The following news report provides a good example of the popular characterisation of industrial relations. The subject of this report, which appeared on the front page of a leading national newspaper, is a major industrial dispute in 1998 between waterside workers and their union, on the one hand, and their employers backed by major customers (represented by the National Farmers Federation [NFF]) and the Howard Government, on the other hand. While the report leaves little doubt that industrial relations are about work and the interaction of employees and employers at work, the report also leaves a strong impression that industrial relations are:

- ✱ *sensational*—in that the event is dramatic, having significant negative consequences for employees, the employer and especially the broader community
- ✱ *collectivist*—in that the event involves the activities of a militant trade union, which is portrayed as the main cause of the event and
- ✱ *conflictual*—in that the event involves the members of the union refusing to engage in their usual work duties in protest against their employer's actions and even becoming involved in a physical confrontation outside their employer's premises.

This relatively narrow and largely negative conception of industrial relations has been reinforced over recent years by some special-interest groups who have used



it's war on the wharves

Mark Davis

War on the docks was declared last night after a radical non-union alternative was offered to importers and exporters by the National Farmers Federation.

Pledging to slash cargo-handling costs to Australian business by up to half, the NFF president, Mr Donald McGauchie, said the new dock venture aimed to achieve major improvements in waterfront productivity.

Companies backed by the NFF took the first step in the new venture yesterday by signing a deal to take over cargo-handling facilities at Melbourne's Webb dock from the loss-making Patrick stevedores.

Late last night there were violent scenes at Webb dock as a bus carrying about 20 uniformed security guards equipped with crowd-control shields forced its way through a picket line of about 60 union protesters.

Business groups and the Federal Government declared support for the NFF move but the Maritime Union of Australia threatened to mount

in retaliation a massive industrial campaign that could target Australia's \$3 billion-a-year wheat export industry.

The MUA's national secretary, Mr John Coombs, said: "If our past practice of an absolute exemption of primary produce from industrial action is worth nothing, if these people [grain growers] don't take control of the NFF, then all bets are off".

The powerful Australian Manufacturing Workers Union's Victorian secretary, Mr John Corsetti, said his members would back the MUA "politically, industrially and financially" in its campaign against the NFF.

But Mr McGauchie warned unions that the NFF-backed companies involved in the venture—the PCS group—had significant financial backing and sufficient resources to hit back at any union resistance with legal action.

Source: Davis M. 1988, 'It's War on the Wharves', Australian Financial Review, 29 January. Reprinted courtesy of Mark Davis

the term ‘industrial relations’ negatively to criticise institutions and practices of which they disapprove.

In 1989, for example, the Business Council of Australia (BCA), the leading organisation representing major Australian corporations, argued that:

industrial relations assumes employers and employees are inherently at loggerheads, and that, in the public interest, the outcome of their relationship in the workplace must be regulated in detail, both to protect employees and to control wages and otherwise avoid disrupting the economy. As a result, the main concerns of industrial relations are with pay and conditions and the resolution of disputes (BCA 1989, p. 5).

The problem with the sensational, collectivist and conflictual approach to industrial relations is that it creates a false impression of the practice of industrial-relations activities in which employees, managers and union officials are engaged. In contrast to this impression, the reality is that the vast bulk of industrial relations consists of routine, everyday actions and practices that lack the drama of strikes and confrontations, which are in fact rare events. While collective action by groups of employees seeking to promote and protect their wages and working conditions is an important part of industrial relations, it is by no means the whole. The absence of a trade union or collective action by employees does not mean that suddenly industrial relations will disappear. Individual employees are constantly negotiating with their fellow workers and their supervisors over new patterns of behaviour within the workplace or over compliance with existing rules—the relations between individual employees and managers and within non-union workplaces have long been important topics in the study of industrial relations. Finally, the everyday world of industrial relations is dominated by routine cooperation rather than conflict. Employees on the shop floor or in the office are inevitably focused on ‘getting the job done’, while even the working time of union officials is mostly devoted to working with managers to resolve problems rather than calling strikes or directing picket lines.

The contest over the meaning of industrial relations in real-world practice is reflected in recent more scholarly debates over the definition and scope of industrial relations. In an assessment of American industrial relations, for example, Kaufman (1993) has argued that the association of industrial relations with the study of trade unions and collective bargaining, coupled with the decline in union membership and power, has prompted a decline in the ‘organisational and intellectual vitality of the field that began in the early 1970s and accelerated in the 1980s’ (p. 192). Similarly, the British scholar John Kelly (1994) has observed that industrial relations has faced three major challenges:

- 1 the rise of non-unionism
- 2 the emergence and growth of human resource management (HRM) as a related field of study and
- 3 the revival of quantitatively-oriented labour economics.

Whatever is the diagnosis of the ‘problem’, there appears to be consensus over the most appropriate solution among those sympathetic to industrial relations. Most

commentators agree that the field of industrial relations should take account of the wider aspects of the employment relationship; or, as Kaufman (1993) stated, the nexus of 'institutions, practices and outcomes associated with the world of work' (p. 194). In Britain, Blyton and Turnbull (1994, p. 28) noted and supported a focus on all employment relationships, and not merely the ones involving unionised male manual workers in manufacturing. In the Australian context, Lansbury (1995) has argued that the subject has been defined too narrowly, partly due to a preoccupation with the distinctiveness of the arbitration system, and recommends that scholars locate their analysis of workplace relations within a wider international context.

It is important, then, for the study of industrial relations to go beyond the commonsense approach to a more considered and systematic definition of the area that captures the broad reality of industrial-relations practices, rather than the narrow perceptions of the subject held by many people. The definition of *industrial relations* adopted in this book is that it concerns the study of the employment relationship. In its broadest sense, this means that industrial relations is about the interaction of people and organisations at work. It is concerned with how individuals, groups, organisations and institutions make decisions that shape or regulate the relationship between employers and employees. Before exploring the main features of this approach in more detail, however, it is useful to provide some examples of industrial-relations situations that are included within this definition.

In the work story opposite, Terry's situation is clearly one that is part of the study of industrial relations. His relationship with his employer was, until recently, harmonious. The underlying rules that regulated that relationship were a combination of formal and legally-binding minimum conditions set out in an award (for more details, see Chapters 4 and 8), complemented by more informal rules determined by management and/or negotiated individually between Terry and his boss. The disruption resulted from management's attempt to introduce a new, formal form of regulation (i.e. the individual contract) and from some of the substantive conditions contained in the proposed contract. The resolution of the resulting 'dispute' did not involve unions or the intervention of any external agency, like an arbitration tribunal, but it did involve forms of collective behaviour by employees (i.e. they talked among themselves and they acted as a group by refusing to sign the new contracts) and a degree of conflict between employees and management.

In the work story on page 10, industrial relations is the core of Susie's work duties. Recruitment and selection is the process by which the employment relationship is established and the key link between the external labour market and the workplace. Similarly, 'absenteeism', the focus of her troublesome project, is a key indicator of the state of relations between employees and employers (see Chapter 9). In many instances, it is a sign that something is wrong when employees regularly choose not to come to work—that is, employees are feeling unhappy in their job, often due to poor management practices. In the story on page 10, employees have been following the informal rules within the parks and grounds department—meaning that systematic absenteeism is accepted (even if it happens implicitly) by managers. More senior



WORK STORY

individual contracts at Pasta Co.

Terry is a sales supervisor for a leading national pasta company. During the past 13 years he worked for the company, he progressed beyond his basic salesman job of promoting pasta products to supermarkets and shops, to overseeing the work of seven part-time and full-time sales staff. Like the other sales staff and supervisors in the company, Terry had never been a member of a union, although his wages, working hours and working conditions were technically regulated by a New South Wales award—the *Commercial Travellers Award*. Unions and awards, however, had never been an important part of his working life because the company had treated him well and relations with management were cordial.

This pattern was suddenly disrupted in August last year, when the company issued new written individual contracts of employment to its entire sales staff. This shock move, apparently the initiative of a new national human resource manager (HRM), disturbed the sales staff. They had never been asked to sign a contract before and, among other things, the contract said that all staff would go onto probationary employment for six months before their continuing employment would be confirmed. For people like Terry, who had worked for the company for 13 years, this was not only insulting but also highly suspicious. Was the company looking for a reason to dismiss staff?

Terry's natural reaction to these events was to talk with the other sales staff and supervisors, both whenever they met at work and through evening phone calls at home. The staff all refused to sign the contracts and they eventually organised a meeting with their state sales manager, who was sympathetic and prepared to raise their concerns with senior management. By Christmas, it was obvious that management was not going to 'push' the contracts. No-one from management was prepared to admit that they had been poorly advised in this initiative, but early this year the company issued revised contracts that were much more acceptable to all. Things are now 'back to normal', but Terry and his colleagues still feel bad about the episode—several have now accepted jobs with rival companies and moved on, while Terry is not quite as committed to the company nor as motivated about his work as he used to be.

managers have started to realise the inefficiencies created by these local rules, but the problem needs to be treated delicately. Apart from Susie's difficult personal position, in that she might be alienating her immediate boss, the recommendations she makes to management need to strike a balance between improved efficiency and maintaining employee and union cooperation.

distinguishing different approaches to the study of the employment relationship

So far it has been asserted that industrial relations is about the study of the employment relationship and some examples of different industrial-relations situations are provided. But what is it about the employment relationship that is the key to understanding industrial relations? How do we go about studying the employment relationship? Further, it is apparent that others fields of scholarship—such as human resource management (HRM), organisational behaviour, economics, sociology, law, Marxism—also focus on some aspects of the employment relationship. What is



WORK STORY

absenteeism at Happy Valley local council

Susie is one of three human resources officers at Happy Valley local council, reporting to the manager of human resources (HR). Most of her work time is usually taken up with the recruitment and selection of new employees, but she has been given a project on 'absenteeism' to undertake. The council's CEO is concerned about the costs resulting from an average 10% absenteeism rate across the workforce—costs produced by the need to cover absent staff either with agency workers or with excessively high internal staffing levels. As well, absenteeism often produces poor service and customer dissatisfaction and it delays major building projects. Susie's task has been to gather detailed information about the extent of the problem, analyse its causes and suggest alternative remedial strategies by exploring the academic literature on absenteeism, contacting other councils to canvass their approaches, examining the internal statistics from payroll and talking to managers.

This research task has become a nightmare! The internal statistics are terrible, inconsistently maintained and confused by different definitions of absenteeism between departments and changes to the definitions over time, while the literature and the experiences of other councils does not seem to offer any consistent approach or obvious lessons.

Despite all the problems, Susie has discovered a couple of undeniable facts. First, absenteeism rates differ enormously between departments at council, with parks and grounds and transport departments being by far the worst. Second, these same departments have been staffed by long-term employees and managers who have been with the council for centuries! They seem to have developed what Susie remembers from her university studies as *indulgency patterns*, whereby managers and staff have come to expect that everyone has a right to use their full sick leave entitlements each year and that it is perfectly legitimate for staff to arrange a week in advance to be 'sick'. The result is 20% absenteeism in these departments, with a strong pattern of absences on Mondays and Fridays. Susie knows her report and its recommendations are going to get messy—the manager of parks and grounds is a mate of her HR manager. She is going to be delivering 'bad' news. To make matters worse, the parks and grounds department is strongly unionised and this important group of employees may go on strike if they see any management action as unfair.

10

distinctive about the study of industrial relations and about the particular approach to the study of industrial relations adopted in this book?

There are two main ways to understand the uniqueness of different approaches to the study of the employment relationship. Each approach has its particular:

- 1 'ideological perspective' and
- 2 'analytical tools'.

Stilwell (2002) makes a similar argument when explaining why economists differ:

Economists disagree about what they consider the appropriate methods of inquiry, and this is reflected in their different constructions of economic analysis. Their disagreements also derive from distinctive value judgments, based in rival traditions of political philosophy (Stilwell 2002, p. 355).

With respect to ideological positions, it needs to be acknowledged that different people perceive the employment relationship from different and competing positions about what is valuable and those different positions usually reflect deeper assumptions about the nature of organisations and society as a whole. It is helpful to

use a three-fold distinction between ‘pluralism’, ‘unitarism’ and ‘radicalism’ to understand the competing positions; a classification system first applied to industrial relations by Fox (1974 and 1966) and subsequently debated with considerable fervour (e.g. Clegg 1975 and Hyman 1975). A *pluralist* perspective takes the view that the potential for conflict is inherent in the employment relationship, but that it is manageable and can be contained by an appropriate network of rules and regulations. A *unitarist* view of employer–employee relations sees them as essentially harmonious, punctuated only by occasions of temporary and illegitimate conflict. *Radicals* see industrial relations in terms of an enduring structural conflict between employers and those who sell their labour to the employers. Temporary accommodations to this conflict, according to radicals, do little more than control employees in their exploited position and secure the stability of a system that continues to favour employers.

This taxonomy of ideological perspectives is an imprecise device because there is plenty of room for differences within each category and it is often difficult in practice to distinguish at the boundaries between, say, a conservative pluralist and a unitarist or between some pluralists and some radicals. As well, few people are completely consistent in their statements and actions, with the result being that they can be analysed as unitarists in one situation and pluralists in another. Nonetheless, despite these imperfections, the device helps to reveal real differences between the perspectives of rank and file employees, industrial-relations practitioners and scholars alike—differences that deeply affect their diagnoses of industrial-relations ‘problems’ and their prescriptions for remedies. Like the work of most industrial-relations scholars, the ideological perspective adopted in this book is essentially pluralist.

A discussion of the analytical tools used in different theoretical approaches focuses attention on the various sets of concepts used to analyse the employment relationship. Again, debates within economics between competing ‘schools of thought’ illustrate how the same broad empirical events and processes can be interpreted differently according to the analytical tools or theoretical frameworks adopted. Argyrous and Stilwell (1996) acknowledge the dominance of the ‘neoclassical’ school in economics, in which:

...the focus is on exchange relationships; on the role of markets as mechanisms for reconciling the objectives of buyers and sellers, setting prices which act as the signals for all economic agents and ensuring more or less efficient allocation of resources ... Embodied in neo-classical economic analysis are particular assumptions about “economic man” ... or homo economicus. Methodological individualism is pervasive (Argyrous and Stilwell 1996 p. 73).

Despite the dominance of this neoclassical school of thought, however, alternative and competing schools have emerged and continued, engaging different conceptual tools to analyse economic phenomena:

The neo-classical focus on market exchange leading to harmonious equilibrium can itself be seen, in part, as a reaction to the “dangerous doctrine” of Marxism and its world view of capitalism as inherently conflict-ridden and crisis-prone ... A long-standing challenge to the soothing and

increasingly elegant neo-classical paradigm has also come from institutional economists, who have stressed the need to study evolutionary change and power relationships embedded in capitalist institutions. John Maynard Keynes launched a highly successful (for a time) challenge in the context of the chronic unemployment of the 1930s; a problem for which the neo-classical school seemed incapable of providing effective explanations or remedies. A post-Keynesian tradition has sought to extend Keynes' insights which, together with the Marxist and institutional schools, have ensured that neo-classical economics has not gone unchallenged. These heterodoxies have provided foundations for the development of contemporary political economy (Argyrous and Stilwell 1996, p. 50).

This theoretical heterodoxy is also apparent in industrial relations. It is argued below that the common set of analytical tools adopted in this book, which builds on the work of earlier mainstream industrial-relations scholars, is essentially *neo-institutionalist*. This means the analytical tools used are the 'rules' that 'regulate' the employment relationship—how these rules are made and enforced, their substantive content and the impact they have on the social relations within the workplace and on organisational outcomes.

The approach to the study of the employment relationship adopted in this book, then, is *pluralist neo-institutionalism*—consisting of a 'pluralist' ideological perspective and the analytical tools that make up 'neo-institutionalism'. This approach, however, is far from unchallenged and is, therefore, compared with two alternatives, in the form of 'unitarist HRM' and 'radical labour process'.

a pluralist perspective: neo-institutionalism

The approach to the study of the employment relationship adopted in this book is pluralist neo-institutionalism. This label is not widely recognised, but it is argued below that it shares the pluralist ideology of earlier industrial-relations writers, who might be called the 'old institutionalists'. These writers include Sidney and Beatrice Webb and John Commons, who are widely regarded as providing the intellectual foundations of industrial relations as a field of study around the turn of the twentieth century in Britain and the US respectively (see Kaufman 1993), and more recent writers like Dunlop (1958) in the US and Clegg (1976) and Flanders (1970) in Britain. However, neo-institutionalism, which draws on the work of scholars like Edwards, Hyman and Blyton and Turnbull, develops analytical tools that go beyond those used by the old institutionalist scholars (who tended to deliver fairly descriptive accounts of trade unions and collective bargaining) to more theoretically-nuanced analyses of the employment relationship that incorporate a broader range of rules and regulatory mechanisms.

pluralism

Pluralism is, as Blyton and Turnbull (1998) have observed, far from a homogeneous or unified analytical construct. What unites pluralists, however, is the recognition that there is some underlying social structure that has the potential to create sectional groups and interests within organisations and to bring these groups into conflict with

each other as they seek to achieve their separate goals. In contrast to the unitarist approach, which admits only one source of legitimate power, pluralism points to the likelihood of diverse interest groups and multiple forms of loyalty and attachment. A pluralist framework of analysis suggests that employees in different organisations could have similar interests; and by creating horizontal links with groups outside the membership of their organisations in the form of trade unions, a loyalty and commitment to leaders other than the management of their own organisations could develop. The main features of pluralism are summarised in Table 1.1.

The British writer Alan Fox believes that it is important for management to recognise that there are other legitimate sources of leadership and focuses of loyalty within an organisation, and that they must share their decision-making authority with these competing interest groups (Fox 1971). Furthermore, he has contended that management should not regard industrial conflict as a pathological deviation from the natural harmony of industry, but it should recognise conflict as inherent in the employment relationship. Rather than trade unions being seen as introducing conflict into the workplace, they should be viewed as providing an organised and continuous way of expressing the sectional interests that exist. Fox believes that the pluralist framework makes more sense of industrial relations and provides

Table 1.1 **Main features of a pluralist perspective**

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>Pluralist perspective</i>
General philosophy	An enterprise contains people with a variety of different interests, aims and aspirations. Power is said to be diffused among the main bargaining groups in such a way that no party dominates the others.
The nature of the employment relationship	The employment relationship is open-ended and indeterminate, creating an underlying structural antagonism that has the potential to produce conflict in both the labour market and the workplace.
Role of the state	The state is regarded as the impartial guardian of the 'public interest'. Its role is to protect the weak and restrain the power of the strong.
Role of management	Management should not expect blind obedience or suppress any ideas or aims that conflict with its own. The aim is to reconcile conflicting opinions and keep the conflict within acceptable bounds so that the conflict does not destroy the enterprise.
Unions	Unions are viewed as the legitimate representatives of employee interests at work with the right to challenge the right to manage, but also with the responsibility to seek compromise.
Industrial conflict	Conflict is an inevitable and legitimate consequence of the variety of interests in the workplace.

management with a better understanding of the limitations to their power that exist. He sees it as a necessary basis for:

recognising that co-operation is unlikely to be achieved in modern industry through the attempted manipulation of team spirit, high morale and loyalty but needs to be engineered by structural adaptations in work organisations, work roles and work practices and that direct negotiation with work groups is an essential part of this process (Fox 1971, p. 408).

Cooperation and trust within organisations, then, is not something that can be assumed. Rather, cooperation must be created and trust must be earned by management by developing power-sharing and decision-making procedures and equitable policies that accommodate the potential conflicts of interest that occur between employees and management.

The pluralist ideological position has provided the theoretical perspective for the great majority of academic work in industrial relations. However, few scholars agree over the precise definitional properties of pluralism, as it has changed over time and between writers, and there have been many debates—some profitable and others less so—about the value of this approach. One of the major concerns, especially voiced by radicals, has centred on an alleged assumption by pluralists of an approximate balance of power between the competing interest groups within organisations or within broader society (Child 1981). Hyman and Fryer (1975) have argued, for example, that rather than there being some symmetry in the distribution of power between management and unions, power has been heavily weighted towards management. They feel that the starting point for any realistic analysis of industrial relations must be the substantial power imbalance between capital and labour. This derives from the fact that the productive system is, in the main, the private property of a small minority of the population. As Fox (1974, p. 274) has observed:

From this view, any talk of 'checks and balances', however apt for describing subsidiary phenomena, simply confuses our understanding of the primary dynamics which shape and move society—a useful confusion indeed for the major power-holders since it obscures the domination of society by its ruling strata through institutions and assumptions which operate to exclude anything approaching a genuine power balance.

A second, and related, criticism of the pluralist perspective is its emphasis on the promotion of rational, efficient and effective conflict management. Fox (1974, p. 282) has suggested that this may be little more than a sophisticated form of managerialism aimed at finding ways of containing conflict within a regulatory framework that promotes and maintains order.

Pluralism tends to focus attention on the types of rules, regulations and processes that are likely to contribute to the accommodation of conflict and ensure that disruptive pressures threatening organisations are countered effectively so as to restore and maintain the equilibrium of the system. Its emphasis, some have argued, is on social stability, compromise and granting concessions. Hyman (1975), a strong critic of this approach, has found this unsatisfactory:

To define industrial relations in terms of rules is to emphasise the relatively defined, stable and regular aspects of employer–worker and management–union relationships; by the same token it is to play down the significance of conflicts of control in the labour market and over the labour process as manifestations of a fundamental and continuous antagonism of interest (p. 34).

More recently, MacDonald (2003) has argued that the pluralist assumptions underlying much of the Australian research on enterprise bargaining have resulted in a failure to properly understand the processes and outcomes of workplace reform. In particular, he identifies the overriding focus on the ‘labour problem’, the preoccupation with institutions rather than workers and the conservative managerialist ideology underlying this research as being at fault.

These critics, however, often overstate their case and both real-world events and the development of theory since the 1970s have produced pluralist analyses that avoid the naiveties of earlier writers. In fact, contemporary analysts like Blyton and Turnbull (1998) and Edwards (1995b) have accommodated many of the radical critiques while retaining a largely pluralist perspective. Few modern pluralists, for example, assert an equal balance of power between employers and employees. At the same time, changing economic circumstances and the instability of many industrial-relations institutions over the last two decades have amply demonstrated the weakness of any theoretical approach that assumes stability and equilibrium.

neo-institutionalism

There is a common focus—which amounts to a common set of analytical tools—among most industrial-relations scholars on the formal and informal rules which ‘regulate’ the employment relationship and the social processes which create and enforce these rules. This common theme amounts to an assumption by all these scholars that these rules are a prime determinate of social relations at work. This analytical focus is easy to recognise in the early works of key scholars like Commons (1913) and the Webbs (1894), who explored the emergence of trade unionism, the role of employers and the development of collective bargaining and other forms of regulation; again, these writers might be referred to as the ‘old institutionalists’ (Gardner 1991). It is also explicitly stated in the work of the Oxford School in Britain (see Flanders 1970) and by Dunlop (1958) in the US. Dunlop, for example, stated:

Every industrial relations system creates a complex of rules to govern the workplace and work community. These rules take a variety of forms in different systems . . . The form of the rule does not alter its essential character: to define the status of the actors and to govern the conduct of the actors at the workplace and work community (Dunlop 1958, p. vii).

Flanders accepted Dunlop’s emphasis on rules, but went further by arguing that:

. . . “rules” is only a generic description which can be given to these various instruments of regulation. In other words, the subject [i.e. industrial relations] deals with regulated or institutionalised relationships in industry (Flanders 1970, p. 86).

This central focus on rules and the regulation of the employment relationship, however, is also evident in more recent works which claim to focus on broader concepts like the ‘processes of control over work’ (Hyman 1975) or the ‘employment relationship’ (Edwards 1995b). Hyman (1975, p. 11), for example, concedes that:

[r]ules of various kinds clearly do pervade the world of work and employment, and the institutions which devise and implement this network of rules are of central importance in the study of industrial relations.

Despite Hyman’s criticism of pluralism and the features of his work that place him firmly in the radical camp, his research focuses as much on the rules and institutions that regulate conflict as on the broader social structures that generate conflict and the patterns of class struggle.

Edwards (1995b, p. 5) quotes with approval Clegg’s definition that industrial relations is ‘the study of the rules governing employment’ and then goes on to deliver an account of rules and regulation that closely parallels the approach adopted in this book:

This [i.e. the study of rules] does not limit the subject [i.e. industrial relations] to the collective relations between managements and trade unions, for a rule can derive from other sources, and there are rules governing non-union groups; nor does it restrict analysis to one sector, for it covers all forms of paid employment. A rule is a social institution involving two or more parties which has its basis in law, a written collective agreement, a unilateral decree or merely an understanding that has the force of custom. In non-union settings, as much as in union ones, rules determine rates of pay, hours of work, job descriptions and many other aspects of employment. The subject [i.e. industrial relations] is thus about the ways in which the employment relationship is regulated. To regulate means to control, to adapt or adjust continuously or to adjust by rule. Regulation here is conceived in this broad manner (Edwards 1995b).

As Edwards argues, this ‘broad’ approach to rules and regulation, which we call ‘neo-institutionalist’¹, means that the ‘rules’ that regulate the employment relationship are more diverse than ‘commonsense’ often suggests. In fact, as Table 1.2 shows, there are many different types of rules. *Formal* rules are usually written and the result of a deliberate social process, while *informal* rules are sometimes consciously negotiated, but unwritten, agreements between parties or even accepted social practices at work, the origins of which no-one really knows. *Substantive* rules focus on the real terms and conditions under which employees are rewarded for selling their labour, while *procedural* rules govern the processes by which substantive rules are made and enforced.

One of the novel characteristics of the neo-institutionalist approach to industrial relations is a stronger emphasis than ‘older’ approaches on developing theory by locating the regulation of the employment relationship in a wider analysis of production and capitalist social relations, thereby directly addressing the criticism often made of earlier industrial-relations writers—that their work was excessively descriptive and

¹ Neo-institutionalism in industrial relations is similar to developments in other ‘disciplines’, like comparative politics and economics (see Bray and Wailes 1997; Gardner 1991; and Jacoby 1990).

Table 1.2 **Different types of rules that regulate the employment relationship**

<i>Type of rule</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Formal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✱ Awards ✱ Collective agreements ✱ Company policy manuals ✱ Union rule books
Informal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✱ Unwritten agreements between union job delegates and supervisors ✱ Shared understandings between employees and managers over appropriate behaviours, 'custom and practice'
Substantive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✱ Wage rates ✱ Working hours ✱ Holiday entitlements ✱ Other forms of leave
Procedural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✱ Grievance procedures ✱ Company practices for recruitment or dismissal of employees ✱ The procedures followed by conciliation and arbitration tribunals

'atheoretical' (Godard 1994). One important device neo-institutionalists use is to emphasise the 'open-endedness' or 'indeterminacy' of the employment relationship (Edwards 1995b). Under this analysis, the sale of labour is considered to be different to the sale of other goods and services. In other words, the employment relationship is distinguished from other 'market transactions' in which products are purchased for a negotiated price. In these latter exchanges, the product is finished and predetermined such that the purchaser knows at the time of the transaction what he or she is buying.

In employment, a market transaction certainly takes place, usually through an agreement between an employee (who agrees to work for the employer) and an employer (who agrees to pay the employee a wage in return for their work). But this is only part of the story because employees can only sell their promise to work in the future, their ability to work, rather than actual completed labour. It is usually impossible at the time of the market transaction to anticipate all the terms and conditions of employment that will apply during the forthcoming period of employment—the relationship is just too complex and ever-changing. Furthermore, it is up to employers to ensure that employees deliver on their agreements by working as hard as promised or with the promised skills when they enter the workplace. At its most simple, employers not only pay wages but they must also manage employees in such a way as they 'get their money's worth'!

In this way, the indeterminacy of the employment relationship establishes, at a general and abstract level, the structural source of conflict between employees and employers. Not only can the parties to the relationship disagree over the price to be

paid or the promises made at the time of the market transaction, but they can also come into conflict over the effort to be expended or the skills that are subsequently applied within the workplace. This is the inevitable potential for conflict that is characteristic of pluralism.

At the same time, the indeterminacy of the employment relationship also demonstrates the need for rules. Rules are needed to coordinate any human relationship, no matter how cooperative, but in the employment relationship rules provide the means by which the potential conflict can be avoided in advance or subsequently resolved. Rules between the parties to the employment relationship allow conflict to be accommodated. It is even better when there are rules that are the result of genuine compromise and agreement between the parties, because the parties are more likely to be committed to rules they have helped to create! Again, the distinguishing features of pluralism are obvious.

Understanding the role of rules and regulation as the analytical tools of neo-institutionalism also helps to explain several other theoretical and methodological features of research in industrial relations (see Table 1.3); these are features that also distinguish neo-institutionalism from its intellectual competitors (Bray 2000). Industrial-relations research, for example, tends to be strongly 'empirical'. Rather than being highly abstract, like neoclassical economists, for example, industrial-relations researchers have generally been preoccupied with the 'grubby reality' of practice; they are motivated to describe and explain what they observe in the real world rather than to polish and manipulate ideal models. This characteristic, identified by Cappelli (1985) as 'inductive' and by Kerr (1983) as 'neo-realist', is both a strength and weakness of industrial-relations studies. While it lays such studies open to criticism that they are descriptive and atheoretical, it also demonstrates a vitality and relevance to the real world that is missing in more abstract disciplines. Compared to many other intellectual pursuits, industrial relations is practical and its theory is only embraced to the extent that it helps to explain real-world situations.

Table 1.3 **Theoretical and methodological features of neo-institutionalist research in industrial relations**

Focus on rules	The main object of study is the rules that regulate the employment relationship.
Empirically-driven	The primary interest is to describe real-world events and processes and to develop theory inductively to explain those events and processes.
Holism	The explanations that are developed focus on the complexity of social situations rather than simplifying them; there is an emphasis on multi-causality.
Historical analysis	The present can only be explained by referring to the past.
Limited theoretical sophistication	The type of theory developed is mostly description, taxonomy and models rather than laws and causal explanation.

Connectedly, much industrial-relations research in the neo-institutionalist mould is holistic in the types of explanations it offers. Rather than being 'reductionist' and seeking neat and simple analyses that abstract from reality, industrial-relations studies are usually keen to emphasise the complexity of social situations and multi-causality:

The problem in industrial relations is that it has been impossible to specify precise, logical bases for most of the interesting relationships. This is perhaps most obvious with the long list of factors that are thought to play some role in shaping industrial relations systems, but where the precise roles cannot be specified (Cappelli 1985, p. 95).

This concern with complexity and multi-causality is reflected in the strong role of the case-study-research design in the development of industrial relations as a field of study (Kochan 1998 and Cappelli 1985). The widespread perception that industrial relations is a multi-disciplinary field also reflects this preference for holistic rather than simple explanations—to properly understand the industrial-relations phenomenon, many argue that it is necessary to be cognisant of economics, law, sociology and politics (e.g. Flanders 1970).

There is also a strong tendency in industrial-relations research towards historical analysis. In fact, many industrial-relations scholars almost automatically accept that to understand the present, you must understand the past; they believe in 'path dependency' (see Krasner 1988). This methodological trait was unambiguous in the earliest of industrial-relations research: one of the Webbs' two great books is entitled *The History of Trade Unions in Britain*, while John Commons' most enduring piece has traced the historical development of unionism among American shoemakers from 1648 to 1895 (Commons 1909). Similarly, the most influential among recent industrial-relations scholarship—including both original research and textbooks—rarely fails to locate contemporary events and trends in historical context (e.g. Kochan et al. 1986 and Flanders 1970). This characteristic is different from other social sciences (like neoclassical economics or much of psychology) that are largely 'ahistorical' and seek universal laws that transcend time rather than explanations of particular circumstances.

Finally, the type of research conducted by most industrial-relations scholars and their particular research objectives mean that the theory they develop is inevitably limited in its sophistication. If neo-institutionalist researchers are focused on describing empirical complexities, if they emphasise multi-causality and holism, if they value historical specificity, then the explanations they offer will inevitably lack the reduction and abstraction associated with high-level theory. Lewins (1992, Chapter 1), for example, has identified five levels of explanation, ranging from the lowest level of description, through taxonomy, model-building and universal laws, to the highest level of causal explanation. Neo-institutionalist analysis most commonly offers description, taxonomy and sometimes model-building, but universal laws and causal explanation are inimical to this type of analysis. Commentators on institutionalist research in other disciplines have recognised, and accepted, the limited nature of the theory they develop (e.g. Wilber and Harrison 1978, Thelen and Steinmo 1992).

Industrial-relations scholars, however, still seem to expect the elegance of theory in, say, neoclassical economics, while at the same time they attack the simplifying assumptions that must be made to achieve this level of theoretical sophistication.

These theoretical and methodological features of industrial-relations research do not mean that the neo-institutionalists' set of analytical tools is worse than or even better than alternative approaches. It is just different. All 'schools of thought' in the social sciences have their strengths and weaknesses—they are all partial and specific in their own ways. The important task for students of the social sciences generally, and industrial relations in particular, is to subject competing claims to critical analysis and to understand their respective strengths and weaknesses.

In summary the key features of the pluralist neo-institutionalist approach, which lies at the heart of this book, are a broadly pluralist ideological position and a neo-institutionalist set of analytical tools. These features inevitably affect the diagnosis of 'social problems' and the prescribed remedies offered as well as the characteristic types of research and theory building. These features, therefore, not only distinguish this approach from others—some of which are reviewed in the following pages—but they also provide the value and analytical foundations that underlie the rest of the book.

a unitarist perspective: HRM

Some of the competing approaches to the study of the employment relationship are based on a more conservative ideological position, which is called 'unitarism', and they draw on different intellectual traditions for their analytical tools. In fact, the history of management thought is replete with examples of such approaches. 'Scientific management' or 'Taylorism', associated with the writings of Fredrick Taylor, focused on the role of management in reorganising the production system and designing payment systems that gave employees economic incentives for cooperating with management. The human relations school, associated with the names of Mayo and his colleagues, drew on psychological analysis to stress the importance of work groups in achieving employee satisfaction and organisational efficiency. The neo-human relations school, usually associated with McGregor, Likert and Herzberg, again used psychological concepts to emphasise the individual (or egoistic) needs of employees and the type of work tasks and work organisations that can satisfy these needs (see Deery et al. 2001, pp. 9–12).

It is, however, the human resource management (HRM) school of thought that is used in the following pages to illustrate the differences between the unitarist and pluralist ideological perspectives. Human resource management is usually regarded as having emerged in the early 1980s through the work of scholars at Harvard University (Boxall and Dowling 1990), although Strauss argues that the term has a much longer history (Strauss 2001). During the late 1980s and 1990s, it caught the imagination of management scholars and practitioners alike and it found advocates and critics in Britain, Australia and its native place of origin, the US. In many ways the

new HRM replicated the unitarist perspective and the psychological/organisational analytical tools of earlier management writers, especially the human relations school and the neo-human relations school. It was considered that its novelty, however, lay in its emphasis on strategy and the 'strategic fit' between an organisation's human-resource strategy and its broader business strategies.

unitarism

The distinguishing feature that characterises the unitarist ideological perspective towards the study of the employment relationship is the assumption that each work organisation is an integrated entity with a common purpose and a shared goal (see Table 1.4). The employment relationship is based on mutual cooperation and a harmony of interest between employers and employees. There is no fundamental conflict between those who own capital and those who supply their labour; by definition, all are part of the same team. Where industrial conflict exists it is seen as temporary or the product of aberrant behaviour—something that has been induced by troublemakers, poor management or bad communications. Trade unions are usually regarded as unwelcome intruders and their presence upsets the unified and cooperative structure that exists within the organisation. Furthermore, unions are judged to be in competition with management for the loyalty of employees.

Unitarists support strong leadership by management in order to achieve the commitment of employees to the job and to the organisation itself. The unitarist perspective is predominantly managerially oriented. Managements' adoption of this view has much to do with the fact that it legitimates their authority. They are the organisational leaders and they represent a single source of authority and a single focus of loyalty. In the absence of aberrant events, employees can be expected to accept their authority.

Table 1.4 **Main features of the unitarist perspective**

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>Unitarist perspective</i>
General philosophy	Every workplace is an integrated and harmonious entity that exists for a common purpose.
Role of management	To provide strong leadership and good communications.
Role of employees	To be loyal to the organisation and its management in recognition of their common objectives.
Unions	Unions are seen to compete for the loyalty and commitment of employees.
Industrial conflict	Conflict is not inherent in the workplace. Conflict is seen to be the result of faulty communications, the work of agitators or a failure of employees to grasp the commonality of interests.

While there is considerable diversity within HRM and some commentators claim that HRM can be consistent with pluralism (e.g. Boxall and Dowling 1990), most scholars consider HRM to be fundamentally unitarist in its ideological position. It sees employers and employees as sharing similar goals and interests. As a way of managing people, HRM emphasises the goals of organisational commitment and policy integration with the needs of business (Legge 1989). Storey (1995) has described HRM as an 'approach to employment management which seeks to achieve competitive advantage through the strategic deployment of a highly committed and capable workforce' (p. 5). Because of this, Purcell (1992) believes that:

HRM is the visual embodiment of the unitarist frame of reference both in the sense of the legitimation of managerial authority and in the imagery of the firm as a team with committed employees working with managers for the benefit of the firm (p. 4).

In this way, the employment relationship rests on a mutuality of interests, and the organisation reflects integrated and fundamentally harmonious goals.

A major criticism of the unitarist ideological perspective on industrial relations, and the policy prescriptions that flow from it, is that it takes a narrow view of the nature of industrial conflict. It avoids fundamental questions such as conflict over the distribution of the proceeds of business, security of employment, the status of labour as a factor of production, and the issues of power and control in industrial decision making. None of this is to say that the determinates of conflict favoured by unitarists—such as poor management, poor communications or trouble-makers—cannot contribute to conflict in workplaces. Rather, conflict is far too prevalent in society and in organisations to be explained solely in these terms. A more realistic approach must acknowledge deeper structural sources of conflict.

the analytical tools of HRM

There is considerable agreement about the broad definition of human resource management and its subject matter, at a superficial level. Most textbooks and many commentaries accept that human resource management involves the study of how managers:

- ✱ plan for their human-resource requirements
- ✱ recruit and select employees
- ✱ train for, and manage, the performance of employees
- ✱ reward employees and
- ✱ dismiss or retire their employees (e.g. Nankervis et al. 2002; and Clark and Seward 2000).

This definition obviously involves the study of many aspects of the employment relationship and suggests considerable overlap with the neo-institutionalism discussed previously. But how does HRM analyse these aspects of the employment relationship? What are its distinctive analytical tools? How do these tools differ from those used by neo-institutionalism?

Several features of HRM and its emergence since the early 1980s make these questions difficult to answer. For example, the scholarly status of HRM (and consequently its distinctive analytical tools) is somewhat ambiguous and controversial. Kelly (1994, p. 20) has argued that HRM is particularly difficult to define because the term 'has been variously used as a concept, a theoretical framework, a metaphor, a topic for research and an ideology'.

Similarly, Storey (1995) regards HRM as 'an amalgamation of description, prescription and logical deduction'. In other words, it is questionable whether HRM embodies a coherent body of theory that has been used to describe and explain empirical data rather than a set of prescriptions derived from anecdotal evidence or personal experience about what management 'should' do when managing its employees (Noon 1992).

Connectedly, HRM is also difficult to define because of confusion over its scope: should it be considered a broad area of scholarly inquiry or a more specific normative set of strategies within that area? In other words, is HRM the study of all strategies used by management to manage its human resources or does it really focus only on a sub-set of these strategies with a particular normative approach? The latter is a commonly held position and, according to Storey (1995, p. 5), it is usually associated with 'a view of the importance of people as a strategic competitive resource; a belief in achieving the objective of employee commitment; and a determination to select and develop employees carefully'.

Similarly, Legge (1995) calls this 'soft' HRM, which reflects a form of 'developmental humanism'. Human-resource policies are aimed at treating employees as assets and as a source of competitive advantage through their commitment, adaptability and high-quality skills and performance. This narrower, mostly normative, approach implies that all organisations benefit from the same type of HRM strategy. It is a 'universal' prescription for management (Ferris et al. 1999), which Boxall and Purcell (2003) call 'best practice', and it largely extracts organisations from their context. By treating their employees well, training properly, designing their jobs and reward systems to elicit employees' commitment and skills, and by managing their performance effectively, management can develop high quality-and-performance organisations irrespective of their size, the technologies they use, their product market position and the regulatory environment within which they operate.

Human resource management as an academic subject, then, becomes the study of how this particular approach to managing HR can be implemented and improved. To the extent that this embodies an integrated theoretical approach, this 'narrow and normative' HRM tends to draw most heavily on analytical tools derived from psychology and organisational behaviour. The focus is on individual employees and the management initiatives and organisational policies that enhance employees' job satisfaction, motivation, work performance and organisational commitment. The parallels with earlier theories associated with the human relations and neo-human relation schools of thought are compelling. Employees are considered to have universal psychological needs for happiness, social interaction and intellectual stimulation that management

needs to satisfy if an organisation's workforce is to contribute most effectively to achieving the organisation's goals.

However, this relatively narrow and normative approach to HRM has inherent theoretical limitations. On the one hand, it embodies logical inconsistencies that make its basic assumptions implausible. Noon (1992, pp. 23–4), for example, points to three internal contradictions:

- 1 The emphasis on individualism, in terms of job design, training, performance and reward can easily come into conflict with the cooperation required to effectively implement favoured policies such as teamwork, quality circles, multi-skilling and workplace cooperation.
- 2 The emphasis on high performance, quality and commitment usually requires employment stability, trust and long-term training, but these often come into conflict with the necessity for organisations to retain flexibility in order to respond to adverse circumstances. The flexible response required may be down-sizing or restructuring.
- 3 Human resource management's championing of a strong organisational culture can come into conflict with the need for change and adaptability.

As well as these logical problems, this narrow approach to HRM suffers from a failure of empirical studies to confirm many of its prescriptions. The diffusion of best practice HR practices is limited and it varies considerably across countries, between industries and according to organisational context:

Overall, research suggests that the sort of HR practices that foster high commitment from talented employees are most popular in those sectors where quality is a major competitive factor and where firms need to exploit advanced technology (as in complex manufacturing) or engage in highly skilled interaction with clients (as in professional services). In these sorts of higher value-added sectors, firms need more competence and loyalty from their employees and are able to pay for them (Boxall and Purcell 2003, pp. 67–8).

An alternative approach to HRM acknowledges a range of strategies towards the management of HR. Legge (1995), for example, argues that as well as 'soft' HRM, there is also a 'hard' HRM that stresses a focus on the close integration of HR strategies with the achievement of business strategies. This leads to a view of human resources as a factor of production capable of generating wealth for the organisation, but this capacity will only be realised if the quantum and cost of those resources meet organisational requirements. The best practice HRM as outlined previously is high cost and many companies may choose not to treat their employees so well, but rather to cut costs, limit training and use payment systems and performance management systems to intensify employee effort where necessary; an approach clearly inconsistent with soft HRM.

Once it is recognised that management confronts choices among different HRM strategies—and soft versus hard is not the only way of conceiving the alternatives—then the scope of HRM as a subject becomes far broader. This is the 'contingency' approach (Ferris et al. 1999) or the 'best fit' approach (Boxall and Purcell 2003),

whereby HRM as an academic subject becomes the study of the HR choices made by managers and the development of explanations as to why managers make particular choices in particular circumstances. In fact, this broader subject becomes closer to what Noon (1992) called theory, because it offers a plausible argument that is capable of empirical testing.

The analytical focus of the best fit approach is still the relationship between employee and organisational policy, but there is far less emphasis on the former (i.e. universal psychological needs of employees) and more on the latter (i.e. management strategy and the consequent organisational practices). This approach is less normative/prescriptive and better suited for empirical research, especially on the diversity of management strategies and the many factors that affect 'strategic choice' (Boxall and Purcell 2003, Chapter 3). While the best fit approach to HRM appears similar to other academic fields, such as organisational theory or management strategy, it is also closer to neo-institutionalism than its best practice counterpart because it acknowledges and seeks to investigate empirical diversity, the dynamics of historical development, external contexts and the inter-relationships within an organisation between management and employees. In fact, the development of 'stakeholder' theory in strategic HRM (e.g. Boxall and Purcell 2003) raises the possibility of a more pluralist perspective in HRM.

a radical perspective: the labour process

A third alternative approach to the study of the employment relationship—radicalism—is based on an ideological perspective located at the other end of the political spectrum and it draws on intellectual traditions associated with Marxism. Scholars of this mould have been researching and writing about economic and social affairs since at least the nineteenth century and, like their pluralist and unitarist counterparts, they form a broad church in which disagreement and debate have often been as common as consensus. Nonetheless, they share some essential assumptions such as a belief in the deep inequality of the employment relationship, the inevitability of conflict and the impossibility of resolving conflict and achieving equality without fundamental changes in the underlying social structure.

It is the following analysis of the labour process that is used to illustrate the radical approach and its particular application to the study of the employment relationship. For many decades before the 1970s, Marxist research and writings focused on broad social, economic and political analysis of capitalism without exploring the implications of their analysis for the arena of the workplace. Braverman's book *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974) changed all that by rediscovering several neglected chapters of Marx's *Capital*—Volume 1, written almost a century earlier, and passionately demonstrating the value of Marx's ideas to the study of the modern production process. Braverman stimulated many new studies and much debate; the debates not only resurrected Marxism, but they also deeply affected the development of pluralist analysis of the employment relationship.

radicalism

There is one element of the pluralist perspective that is shared by those who adopt a radical perspective on industrial relations. This is the recognition of fundamental and inherent conflicts of interest between workers and employers at the workplace. But the pluralists assert that the conflict of interest is not total, that the parties share at least some common goals and that mutual gain can be achieved through negotiation and compromise. In contrast, radical writers see worker–management relations as only one aspect of class conflict in which the antagonism of interests between capital and labour cannot be resolved without changing the underlying social structures. The workplace is one arena in which class conflict finds its expression: between the property-owning class and the working class ‘there exists a radical conflict of interest, which underlies everything that occurs in industrial relations’ (Hyman 1975, p. 23). Conflict, then, is not just an industrial phenomenon. It is a reflection of class conflict that permeates the whole of society. The conflict that takes place at the enterprise level between those who buy labour and those who sell it is seen as a permanent feature of capitalism and one that is produced by the concentration of economic, social and political power in the hands of those who own and control productive resources.

This broader analysis means that few radicals are prepared to acknowledge industrial relations as a separate field of study; rather, they see ‘industrial relations as an element in the totality of social relations of production’ (Hyman 1975, p. ix). To say, as the pluralists do, that industrial conflict is inherent in the structure of employment relations is to stop short of a full explanation. Radicals argue that this evades the question of the extent to which an antagonism of interest is generated at the societal level and is embedded in the mode of production within which the employment relationship occurs. In fact, Hyman (1989a) considers the term ‘industrial relations’ to be both ‘vacuous’ and ‘incoherent’. He claims that:

the processes of “job regulation” can be adequately comprehended only as part of an analysis, on the one hand of the dynamics of production and accumulation, on the other of the broader pattern of social and political relations (p. 124).

Radicals are also critical of the pluralists’ preoccupation with the regulation of conflict. They feel that by concentrating on how conflict is contained and controlled, the pluralists divert attention from the more fundamental issue of why conflict is generated. In this context, Hyman (1975, p. 22) believes that ‘the question whether the existing structure of ownership and control in industry is an inevitable source of conflict is dismissed as external to the study of industrial relations’. Radicals believe that undue emphasis is placed on how employers, trade unions and other institutions cope with such conflict, and on identifying processes that can be implemented to maintain industrial stability.

Radical writers have paid greater attention to the notion of power than have the pluralists. This is not surprising, given the pluralists’ emphasis on conflict resolution

and procedural reform (Martin 1981). Radicals see the imbalance of power both within society and at the workplace as central to the nature of industrial relations. At the workplace, those who own the means of production have power superiority over those who sell their labour for wages. This is reflected in a substantial inequality in the distribution of rewards. The weakness of labour in the marketplace is said to be reinforced by the creation of social norms, values and beliefs that tend to sustain the existing distribution of power in industry and inhibit the development of working-class political consciousness (Martin 1981). As discussed in more detail in the following pages, this inequality in the marketplace is paralleled by the greater capacity of the owners and managers of capital to control the labour process.

Marxists also do not share the pluralist view of the role of the state as a guardian of the 'public interest', dispensing favours to the weak and curbing the excesses of the strong. For them, the state plays an integral role in protecting the interests of the power-holders and maintaining the major structural features of society that are crucial for the power, status and rewards of the owners and controllers of resources. The state's interest lies in developing institutionalised mechanisms for controlling conflict and achieving social stability. In this way, government intervention to protect the 'national interest' is said to be closely bound up with sustaining the health and strength of private enterprise. Where economic stability is viewed as an important precondition for a society's material wellbeing, it is claimed that governments of all political persuasions have an interest in maintaining the 'confidence of industry' and encouraging the accumulation of profit and the generation of investment. Table 1.5 summarises the main features of the radical perspective.

The radical approach has been criticised on a number of grounds. Some writers have argued that the Marxist perspective is overly preoccupied with the conflictual aspects of manager–worker relations. As a consequence, the role of trust in work relations and the dynamics of accommodation and cooperation between employers and employees have been seriously neglected (Edwards 1986). Others contend that, while

Table 1.5 **Main features of a radical perspective**

General philosophy	There is a fundamental and inherent conflict of interest between workers and employers, a conflict that derives from the unequal distribution of income and wealth in a capitalist society.
Power	Those who own the means of production have power superiority over those who sell their labour for wages.
Role of the state	The state plays an integral role in protecting the interests of those who own the means of production.
Unions	The vulnerability of employees as individuals leads them to form worker collectives. Unions challenge the control of management and the distribution of national product.

the Marxist focus on the polarised class struggle may have been a valid interpretation of nineteenth-century capitalism, it does not explain the complex economic, political and social conflicts of welfare-state or monopoly capitalism in the late twentieth century (Farnham and Pimlott 1979).

It has also been observed that capital is comprised of a number of heterogeneous and often competing elements, which belie its monolithic character. Dabscheck (1983) has argued, for example, that a concession gained from the state by one fraction of capital may impose additional costs and burdens on, or be at the expense of, other fractions of capital. Such may be the case with tariff protection, which provides aid to some organisations and businesses while at the same time increasing the costs of inputs to other owners and controllers of capital. Yet others have criticised Marxists for their views on the role of the state. Martin (1981, pp. 115–16) has argued that the Marxist analysis underestimates the independence of the state. He believes that the legislative action of Labour Governments is, in many cases, designed more to cement political alliances with the industrial wing of the labour movement than to serve the interests of capital.

class struggle and control in the labour process

28

The central analytical focus of Marxism generally is the class struggle. Capitalism is considered by Marx (and by those who subsequently wrote in his tradition) to be a form of social relations which is characterised by a fundamental division between two classes: the 'bourgeoisie', whose members (the capitalists) own the 'means of production', and the 'proletariat', whose members (the workers) own no capital and have only their labour power. The inevitable conflict between these classes is consequently considered to be the key to understanding all aspects of capitalist social relations from the organisation of the economy to the structure and operation of political structures to the very progress of history. In particular, the roles of social institutions (such as political parties, parliaments, the military and even the family) are explained by the roles they perform in the ongoing struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

An important body of contemporary industrial-relations literature (namely, that concerning the labour process) is derived from Marxist analysis and applies his general analytical tools to the study of the employment relationship. Marx saw the labour process in any society as the means by which raw materials were transformed into products through human labour and the use of machinery and other forms of technology (see Marx 1974, Chapters 7–18). The defining feature of the labour process under capitalism, he argued, is that capitalists own the machinery and technology and the raw materials, but not labour—they must buy this from workers in the form of *labour power*, which is the capacity of workers to work, not completed work. The central task of management then is to convert a worker's capacity to perform work (labour power) into actual work effort (labour) in order to contribute to profitable production and achieve capital accumulation. This problem has been summed up by Edwards (1979, p. 12):

Workers must provide labour power in order to receive their wages, that is, they must show up for work; but they need not necessarily provide labour, much less the amount of labour that the capitalist desires to extract from the labour power they have sold. There is a discrepancy between what the capitalist can buy in the market and what he needs for production.

This is the key manifestation of class struggle in the capitalist labour process that, according to Marx, explains social relations within the workplace. The structure of the employment relationship under capitalism means that there are two forms of class struggle: not only must capitalists bargain with workers in the labour market to buy labour power as cheaply as possible, but they must also struggle with workers within the labour process to extract as much labour as possible from the purchased labour power. This latter struggle is one of control; because the labour contract is an open-ended arrangement, the translation of this labour power into labour can only be resolved through the establishment of structures of managerial control.

Braverman's contribution through his seminal book *Labor and Monopoly Capital* in 1974 was to build on Marx's original work by placing it in the context of twentieth-century development. He focused in particular on the emergence of new methods of management control occasioned by the rise of monopoly capitalism. He saw the emergence of 'scientific management' and the de-skilling of work arising from the use of new technology as important means of exercising control over the labour process. He claimed that there had been a general and progressive de-skilling of work in the twentieth century and a long-term trend for jobs to become routine and increasingly devoid of intrinsic content. Under capitalism, technological change was seen to contain an inherent tendency to degrade craft skills and increase management's control of production. Braverman argued that the logic of capitalist production was to de-skill the labour process. Because employees could not be relied on to work in the interests of capital, it was, therefore, necessary to avoid reliance on their skills. The fundamental problem of control could only be resolved through the 'degradation' of work and the removal of knowledge, responsibility and discretion from workers in the actual process of production, and their transfer to managerial and supervisory employees. According to Braverman, de-skilling allowed increased capitalist control over production. It also enabled a considerable cheapening of labour and an increased rate of exploitation.

Braverman's provocative book stimulated enormous interest and many scholars in the radical tradition sought to develop and improve his ideas. One line of inquiry that was particularly relevant to industrial relations was the control strategies used by management to elicit work effort from workers. In his ethnographic study of an American engineering factory, the sociologist Michael Burawoy (1979) sought to address why workers did not perpetually resist management, but 'actively participate[d] in the intensification of their own exploitation' (p. xi). He argued that the expenditure of effort by workers could not simply be attributed to primitive or coercive methods of management control, such as harsh supervision or the threat of dismissal. While these forms of labour management had been prevalent during earlier

historical periods, the establishment of trade unions and welfare provision often meant that such methods were no longer effective. Under monopoly capitalism, according to Burawoy, different forms of management control were required in order to persuade workers to cooperate with management. In these circumstances, 'spontaneous consent combines with coercion to shape productive activities' (Burawoy 1979, p. xi). Burawoy's study illustrates the processes by which consent is actively generated at the workplace.

In his analysis of managerial control strategies, Andrew Friedman (1977b) made an important distinction between the strategies of 'direct control' and 'responsible autonomy'. The latter strategy seeks to harness the creative potential of workers or the 'malleability' of labour. Here, 'top managers give workers status, authority, responsibility and try to win their loyalty and co-opt their organisations to the firm's ideals . . . ideologically' (p. 49). By contrast, a direct-control strategy seeks to control and ultimately destroy workers' initiative and independence through the imposition of harsh discipline, coercive supervision and the progressive removal of workers' skills and responsibilities. Direct-control and responsible-autonomy strategies, however, are not wholly separate strategies for the management of labour. Rather, employers may seek to combine the strategies in different ways. For example, a responsible-autonomy strategy may be directed towards highly-skilled, non-manual workers, and a direct-control strategy may be applied to unskilled or semi-skilled workers. Edwards (1995b, p. 14) has observed that employers may seek to harness workers' creativity and problem-solving skills through the mechanism of employee participation schemes (e.g. suggestion schemes and quality circles) while also maintaining 'tight' control over discipline and attendance. Changes in the product and/or labour market, and the intensification of worker resistance, may also encourage employers to shift from one approach to another. According to Friedman (1977b), the dualistic character of managerial control strategies is a manifestation of a fundamental tension in the capitalist work process—that is, the need to control or coerce workers and the need to secure workers' commitment and loyalty.

Drawing on the work of Friedman (1977b) and Burawoy (1979), among others, Edwards (1986, p. 6) has sought to develop an integrated model of the employment relationship that takes account of the interplay between conflict and cooperation. He argues that there is a basic conflict or 'structured antagonism' in all work organisations, because 'workers' ability to work is deployed in the creation of a surplus that goes to another group' (p. 5). Against this backdrop, however, there is also scope for cooperation. At the very least, employers require workers' minimal compliance so that the objectives of the business enterprise can be realised. Conversely, workers depend on the enterprise for their employment and, therefore, they cannot jeopardise their livelihoods by engaging in permanent resistance. In his analytical treatment of conflict and cooperation, Edwards has drawn attention to a body of research that investigates the informal aspects of workplace relations, such as workers' negotiations around the work-effort bargain, the establishment of customary norms and the operation of *fiddles*, which are defined as 'secondary adjustments around the effort bargain'

(Edwards 1988, p. 190) and include behaviour as varied as pilfering, sabotage, output restriction and the manipulation of shift patterns and attendance records.

Like its competitors, the labour process school has been subject to criticism, much of which has actually come from writers who are sympathetic to the overall approach. The 'deterministic' nature of Braverman's schema, for example, has been rejected by researchers who have not been able to find a clear link between different phases of capitalism and phases in the work process. Many have questioned his insistence on a tendency towards de-skilling, his emphasis on consciously intended managerial strategies, and the adequacy of his analysis of the resistance offered by the labour movement to management initiatives. It is not the intention here to canvass all the issues raised in the debate on Braverman and the labour process; these have been covered thoroughly elsewhere (Thompson 1983; Littler and Salaman 1982; and Wood 1982). It is important, however, to point out that 'labour-process' theory has provided a valuable integrating concept for research. In fact, some commentators have argued that some of the better Australian industrial-relations literature has been informed by the labour-process perspective (Bray and Littler 1987).

Consequently, in the context of this book, a major contribution of 'labour-process' theory has been to refocus scholarly attention on the workplace and the role of management. Efforts to construct more adequate models of managerial strategies in industrial relations and to understand better the process of technological change and its effects on work owe much to the pioneering work of Braverman and to the research debates that have been sparked on the labour process. One of the benefits of this, according to Gospel (1983), has been to:

[widen] the boundaries of industrial relations to cover technology and work organisation which [are now viewed] not as a given constraint or exogenous variable but as a key element in managerial strategies and in management-labour relations (p. 167).

final observations

Among the many different approaches to the study of the employment relationship, this chapter has reviewed three in some detail. Each of these approaches has its own ideological perspective and its own analytical framework, which together produce distinctive interpretations of industrial-relations events and characteristic prescriptions for the remedy of industrial-relations problems. However, this does not mean that the approaches cannot, and have not, influenced each other. From a pluralist perspective, for example, unitarism is generally considered to be an unsatisfactory approach to the study of industrial relations, but Edwards (1995b) has argued that it serves a useful purpose by highlighting the fact that employer–employee relations are not permanently and completely conflictual. Employees and managers may share common interests on specific issues, such as the survival of the business, and employers may seek to harness employees' loyalty and cooperation, rather than merely their compliance, through a variety of mechanisms (e.g. employee involvement and profit-sharing schemes). This is not to suggest, as many unitarists do, that conflict at work is a pathological deviation from a 'norm' of social harmony and order. Rather, social relationships in the workplace are punctuated by both conflict and cooperation. An appreciation of this dual dynamic is, thus, essential to an adequate understanding of industrial relations. The emergence and popularity of HRM during the 1980s, with its substantive focus on the relationship between management and individual employees, also encouraged industrial relations as a field of study to broaden beyond the collectivist focus that was sometimes assumed in the post-World War II period.

The pluralist and radical perspectives feature some similarities. In fact, over two decades ago, Clegg (1979) observed that there was much in common between the pluralist and radical accounts, particularly in the emphasis on conflict in industrial relations. Edwards (1986) has noted that the two approaches share the view that the labour contract is an open-ended arrangement and that the work-effort bargain is subject to processes of negotiation and contestation. In fact, as previously demonstrated, Braverman and later labour process writers had a profound impact on industrial-relations writers during the 1980s, when critics were alleging a preoccupation in industrial-relations research with trade unions and collective bargaining to the neglect of management and its control strategies at work.

These historical influences aside, the pluralist, unitarist and radical perspectives are essentially competitors in the study of the employment relationship and any attempt at synthesis is misguided. Because the differences between the approaches can often be reduced to value judgments and because each approach emphasises different aspects of the employment relationship, they are incompatible. The mission of students is not to expect integration, but rather to respect difference, and to understand that each approach has its own strengths and weaknesses.

In the end, however, students of industrial relations must adopt some approach and it is pluralist neo-institutionalism that informs the rest of this book. In other words, the theoretical approach throughout is on the rules that regulate the employment relationship and the processes by which those rules are created and enforced, while the empirical focus of the book is on these issues in Australia. In applying this approach, the book endeavours wherever appropriate to acknowledge the contributions of alternative ideas and it attempts to locate the Australian experience not only in a theoretical context, but also in an international comparative framework.

summary

- ✱ The ‘commonsense’ perception of industrial relations is that it focuses on sensational conflict situations between trade unions and employers.
- ✱ There is a need to go beyond this commonsense perception to a ‘theoretically-informed’ definition of industrial relations that sees it as the study of the employment relationship.
- ✱ There are different and competing approaches to the study of the employment relationship. Each has its own ideological perspective and set of analytical tools.
- ✱ An understanding of the ideological positions of these competing approaches is assisted by distinguishing between ‘pluralism’, ‘unitarism’ and ‘radicalism’.
- ✱ The analytical tool used by ‘neo-institutionalism’—the approach adopted in this book—focuses on the study of the rules that regulate the employment relationship.
- ✱ ‘Human resource management’ (HRM) emphasises both the psychological contract between employees and employers and features of organisational structure and performance.
- ✱ In contrast, ‘labour process’ theory focuses on class struggle and postulates that the central task of management is to convert work (labour power) into actual work effort (labour), which is a task that requires management to establish structures of control.
- ✱ The necessary conclusion to any discussion of different approaches to the study of industrial relations is not that any one approach is right or wrong, but that each has its peculiar strengths and weaknesses.

discussion questions

- 1 Why are there so many approaches to industrial relations? Do these approaches have anything in common?
- 2 What are the main features of a pluralist perspective?
- 3 It has been said that the pluralist perspective pays insufficient attention to the real disparity of power that exists in society and in industrial relations. Do you agree?

- 4 What does it really mean when it is said that the neo-institutionalist approach analyses the employment relationship by studying rules?
- 5 Outline the main elements of the unitarist perspective.
- 6 Explain why HRM is considered to be unitarist.
- 7 What does it mean to have a radical approach to the employment relationship?
- 8 Discuss the contribution of labour-process theory to the understanding of industrial relations.
- 9 Why cannot the various writers in industrial relations resolve their differences and adopt a single, unified approach to the study of the employment relationship?



CASE STUDY

the 1989 pilots' dispute

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The 1989 pilots' dispute was one of the biggest and most disruptive industrial disputes of recent decades. It lasted more than six months, from the middle of August 1989 until March the following year, and it imposed huge financial and political costs on the parties concerned and the country more broadly. For a number of weeks, no commercial passenger planes flew in Australia and then services only gradually returned to 'normal' over several months. Clearly, the airline pilots, led by their union, the Australian Federation of Air Pilots (AFAP), and the two major domestic airlines, Ansett and Australian Airlines (later Qantas), were completely consumed by the dispute. But it also became a major political issue, dominating federal politics for months, while the tourist industry estimated a direct loss of over \$560 million, with the more general costs to the Australian economy being much greater. In other words, this was an unusual and dramatic event.

The dispute was ostensibly caused by the pilots' union demanding wage increases beyond those acceptable to both their employers and the Labor Federal Government. The airlines were seeking to contain costs in anticipation of the deregulation of the airline product market and they were concerned about the potential flow-on effects to other occupational groups in the industry. Since 1983, the Hawke Government had been running a 'tight' incomes policy that strictly regulated the wage increases available to all workers; and the government could not afford to let renegade groups like the pilots exceed the maximum allowable increases. The frustrations of the pilots, however, began to overflow by 1989. Used to relatively easy wage gains through strong union organisation and militant collective action, the pilots entered a course that brought them up against the combined forces of the two major airlines, the federal government and, ironically, the bulk of the Australian union movement, which had been working with the Labor Government under an arrangement called 'the Accord'.

However, underlying the disagreement over wages were the issues of managerial prerogative and labour productivity. During the years leading up to the dispute, the powerful pilots' union had established not only attractive wages and working conditions for its members, but it had also established extensive limitations on management's capacity to control the day-to-day work practices of pilots. In fact, one leading authority claimed in the late 1970s that the airline pilots had 'penetrated management decisions perhaps more than any other group in Australia'. A strict seniority system, for example, meant that long-serving pilots could virtually choose their own flights, it was difficult and costly for management to change flight rosters, and management was forced to consult closely with the unions over many operational issues. Unusually, many of these rules were contained in bulky and highly detailed awards (Bray and Wailes 1999).

When the initial wage dispute arose in 1989, the airline owners took the opportunity to attack these 'restrictive' practices. In response to industrial action by the pilots in August 1989, employers applied for and won the cancellation of the pilots' awards, suspended pilots and filed common law actions against the AFAP and individual pilots. Members of the AFAP responded to the employers by resigning en masse on 24 August. These resignations fundamentally changed the character of the dispute and provided the airlines with the opportunity to completely restructure their pilot workforce:

... the hard-nosed [Ansett] executives like Abeles, McMahon and Oldsmeadow realised that the decision of the pilots to quit changed the subject of the dispute with the pilots altogether, from one about pay to a restructuring of the airlines' operations well ahead of industry deregulation in November 1990. They considered the resignations a gift. Here was an opportunity they had wanted for years, albeit with some medium-term financial pain, to get rid of all the featherbedding from pilots' contracts, ruthlessly slash pilot numbers and crush the once invincible federation in one hit (Norington 1990, pp. 65–6).

Without any pilots in their employ and an award to regulate pilots' wages and working conditions, the airlines began recruiting new employees under conditions of employment dictated by the management. Initially, the new pilots came from overseas and from general aviation, but after Christmas an increasing number of striking pilots deserted the AFAP and sought employment. By March 1990, the two airlines claimed they had 'rebuilt' their pilot workforces. It was estimated that of the 1647 pilots initially involved in the dispute, 700 remained unemployed in mid 1990 and 600 found jobs overseas, leaving somewhere over 300 former employees who were re-employed by the domestic airlines (Norington 1990, p. 247).

The rules governing the employment relationship of the new pilots were radically different to the old rules. Pilots were put onto individual contracts that contained massively fewer clauses than the old award. Much later, the airlines applied for, and were granted, a new award that largely reflected the conditions of the individual contracts. More substantively, the new arrangements allowed management an almost unfettered right to allocate flights and other duties as they saw fit, without the need to consult with employees or the union. A new payment system also meant that the new pilots earned even higher wages than their predecessors, but they worked much harder. The two airlines were flying more passengers and more planes with a significantly smaller number of pilots: in 1991, Australian Airlines flew 26 316 more hours than in 1988 with 239 fewer pilots.

The AFAP was virtually destroyed by the dispute. From a total membership of 3500 (most of whom were financial) before the dispute, it had a financial membership in April 1992 of 1400, most of whom were employed in general aviation. Its income from subscriptions fell from \$1.4 million in the 1989 to 1990 period to just \$0.3 million in the 1990 to 1991 period (Bray and Wailes 1999, pp. 97–8). The union had virtually no members in the major airlines and it was forced to fight a lengthy and extremely expensive legal battle until 1995, when it lost its legal right—its practical role had long disappeared—to represent pilots in domestic passenger aviation.

issues for debate

- 1 Who were the winners and losers in the pilots' dispute? Were the outcomes fair?
- 2 The pilots' dispute clearly conforms to the 'commonsense' perceptions of industrial relations: it was sensational, collective and conflictual. But how common are disputes of this nature?
- 3 Could a dispute like that involving the pilots in the 1989 to 1990 period happen again in the 2000s?

continued →

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