Organization

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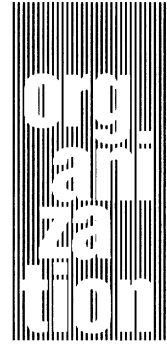
Representing People at Work

Karen Legge
Warwick Business School

The editors' declared intention in this special issue of *Organization* is to 'explore the human of human resource management' or, more precisely, 'the human of inhuman resource management and the inhuman of human resource management'. This is my focus here. In brief, I wish to argue that discourses about people at work, whether by managers, the press or academics, draw on two different ways of representing organizational life—those of the market and community—which conceptualize people at work in both human and non-human ways. The market discourse represents employees as both human 'customers' and non-human 'commodities' and 'resources'. The community discourse prefers images of 'membership', in particular, 'family' or 'team' member—images that assert humanity but potentially call into question the existence of autonomy, a defining characteristic of what it means to be human. In this paper I wish to explore the tensions associated with the often concurrent use of these different images, whether applied to the same group or to different groups of employees. Further, the ethical underpinnings of representations of market and community will be explored, together with their implications for the treatment of people at work. Finally, the editors ask contributors to be reflexive about how we use concepts and methods and about our forms and styles of writing. In this spirit I wish to deconstruct the binary opposition implied in the categories market and community and, indeed, in talking about the ethical (and, by implication, the non-ethical) treatment of people at work (or out of work).

What is it to be Human?

Whether consciously or unconsciously Derridean, dictionaries tend to define 'human' in terms of difference. For example: 'human being, a creature distinguished from other animals by superior mental development, power of articulate speech and upright posture', or 'the human race, having qualities that distinguish mankind, not divine or animal or mechanical; having mankind's better qualities (as kindness, pity etc)'

(*Oxford Paperback Dictionary*, 1988). Here we see very clearly that the concept of 'human' is inevitably a work of social construction: the attribution of superiority over other forms of life; the highly contentious assumption that other animals lack 'articulate speech'—or at least the implication that if people cannot understand intra-species communication it is of no importance; the identification of 'better qualities' that reflects an Aristotelian perspective on the nature of man; the assumption that '*man*kind' is a neutral label and so on. In defining what it is to be human, such acts of social construction imply different ethical positions. For example, a Kantian, from a deontological, 'duty' perspective would assert that the essence of humanity is rationality and autonomy; that as rational beings with the freedom of self-determination, humans should be accorded respect as ends in their own right. Humanity and individualism thus go hand in hand. In contrast, the teleological, 'virtue' ethics considers that to be truly human people must strive to achieve the desirable end state, in which their inherent potentialities are fully developed. Humanity is not achieved individualistically though—to be human is to be part of a broader social community, in which fulfilling one's potential involves developing wisdom, generosity and self-restraint, all of which help to make one a good member of the community. So is to be human to be an autonomous individual or is humanity only achievable with reference to others, in a community that itself defines what counts as human virtues? Are these two conceptions of humanity compatible? Can autonomous individualism live with the constraints implied in the view that 'I am my brother's keeper'?

In present-day discussions of human resource management there are echoes of both the individualistic, Kantian and collectivist, Aristotelian models of humanity in the advocacy of customer sovereignty and empowerment, on the one hand, and the development of strong corporate culture and teamworking on the other. But, in the recent past, the rise of the factory system and large-scale organization served to project a particular model of humanity. The dominance of the machine in imagery as well as in actuality and the symbiotic assertion of an instrumental, technical rationality gave rise to a view of people as a depersonalized labour input. Thus people became 'hands' and the act of working, the verb to 'labour', became the noun 'labour', to describe people at work. In bureaucracy, the whole person was subjected to rules prescribing impersonal relationships and a high division of labour. The outcomes attributed by Marx and Merton were the distortions to humanity of alienation (human estrangement rooted in social structures which deny people their essential human nature) and the bureaucratic personality (automata-like officials, carrying rule-following to pathological limits) (Marx, 1976; Merton, 1940; Bauman, 1991).

Today, both human and inhuman images pervade discussion of human resource management and of people at work. If the 'hands' and 'labour' of the age of electro-mechanical technology have been superseded by the

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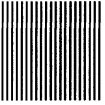
knowledge worker of electronic information communication 'smart' machines, the underlying themes of humans as autonomous individuals vs humans as 'members one of another' surface in the prevailing imagery of market and community to represent people at work.

Images of the Marketplace

The first market image of the employee is as 'customer'. From Adam Smith onwards, apologists for market society have privileged the choices of consumers over the skills of producers (O'Neill, 1998: 98). Admittedly, this is not always apparent. Indeed, in the recent celebration of the 'enterprise culture' in the Thatcherite UK society of the 1980s, a case could be made for the reverse, a eulogizing of the provider. The dual meaning of enterprise, as a noun ('the commercial enterprise') and as a verb (to be 'enterprising', by showing initiative, energy, independence, boldness, self-reliance and a willingness to take risks and to accept responsibility for one's actions) come together in the presentation of the entrepreneur (preferably Richard Branson) as hero (Fairclough, 1991; Keat, 1991). But this is to background the essence of entrepreneurial success—a recognition of the sovereignty of the consumer and the need to respond to (or manipulate) her demands. From a postmodern perspective the consumer is presented as the epitome of the autonomous individual, creating and re-creating successive identities through patterns of self-fulfilling and liberating consumption, where freedom of choice is exercised to the full. If postindustrial, postmodern society privileges consumption over production, the provider of the goods and services that fuel consumption is best portrayed in the language of consumption. Hence the employee-provider is represented as the 'internal customer'.

The employee as 'internal customer' has a complex and symbiotic relationship with the employee as 'external customer'. Thus the representation of employees as internal customers is intimately bound up with issues of quality and responsiveness to the external customer. This can be seen most clearly in lean[1] production systems, whether in manufacturing (e.g. car assembly) or in the service section (e.g. 'call centres' in banks and building societies). 'Lean' production is about organizing in such a way that value is added by (a) minimizing 'waste', whether of materials, time, space or people; (b) developing responsiveness to major stakeholders, most of whom—whether employees, suppliers or purchasers of goods and services—are also defined as customers. The route to leanness in this scenario is that favoured by a 'Japanese'/'excellence' model, involving a tripod of lean production techniques (Total Quality Management [TQM], Just-in-Time [JIT] production, supply chain management and so on), business process engineering, facilitated by information communication technologies (ICTs) and 'high commitment' HRM (Kinnie et al., 1996; Rees et al., 1996). The employee as internal customer, embedded in process-oriented organizing systems, has the 'right' to demand that inputs received conform to agreed specifications and as 'supplier' to the next

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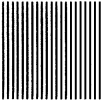
process, the obligation to satisfy the needs of the next 'customer' in that process. If the essence of a customer is to exercise choices, logically the employee, as internal customer, has to be afforded an element of job discretion and, as is appropriate in a world of customer sovereignty, this is represented as 'empowerment'. In fact, given the fragility of lean production systems and lean organization generally, if responsiveness to the external customer is to be achieved, this is not only desirable but necessary. The fragility of lean production systems make them highly vulnerable to workflow contingencies and employee lack of cooperation; hence, generating employee flexibility, commitment and trust is vital. This calls for a high-trust working environment, at least in theory, where employees can be relied upon to exercise their discretion in the employer's interest. The employer, also as customer, buys cooperation in order to achieve external customer satisfaction, the foundation of organizational viability. And, just as people at work are represented as customers, as du Gay and Salaman (1992: 621) point out, external customers are now represented as people at work, indeed, as managers, as 'customers are made to function in the role of management . . . as customer satisfaction is now defined as critical to success'. In fact, external customers often *are* people at work as, co-opted in the McDonaldization of society, they perform activities once the preserve of employees, through a whole range of self-service activities (Ritzer, 1993).

In summary, the representation of employees as customers has an upbeat ring to it: customers have choices (empowerment?), customers have to be listened to (participation), customers have sanctions (boycotting goods and services, read withdrawal of cooperation if the effort–reward bargain deteriorates) and, of course, 'the customer is always right'. In a Kantian view of humanity, customers as rational consumers deserve to be treated with respect.

Contrast this with the image of the employee as 'commodity'. This, of course, is not a new image as is only too evident from Marx's discussion of the commodification of labour. But, as is evident from recent work on the growth of the 'contingent' workforce (Purcell, 1996, 1997), another aspect of leanness, or the elimination of waste, is to conceptualize the workforce as a commodity to be bought and dispensed with as the dictates of the marketplace require. This is most evident in the increasing use of so-called 'outsourcing' and 'insourcing' of labour.

Both 'outsourcing' and 'insourcing' are predicated on the values of the marketplace as both signify a movement from hierarchy to market contract with the aim of reducing costs and enhancing profitability (Colling, 1995). 'Outsourcing' may take two forms: straightfoward subcontracting or buy-in of products (often from 'cheap' overseas suppliers) or 'facilities management', where the subcontractor takes over in-house facilities and often staff to provide a service (e.g. catering, security, transport, building maintenance) previously undertaken by the organization, but at a cheaper price. 'Insourcing' is where an employment agency sources people to

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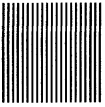
work alongside the client organization's existing staff and where, in the case of big contracts, the contract agency will place a manager on site to deal with issues of labour supply, such as absenteeism, lateness, payroll and replacement, while the client organization remains in control of workspace allocation, allocation of work and quality.

The commodification of labour is evident in both practices. Leaving aside the issue of freelance knowledge workers or Reich's (1991) 'symbolic analysts' who, while subcontracted, are more correctly independent entrepreneurs, the bulk of the labour in subcontracted organizations is a commodity in the sense of being an input brought in to minimize the costs and optimize the profits of the contractor organization. The visibility of this labour is not as people at work but as a costed labour input that may be reflected in competitive product pricing. A similar case exists with insourced labour. As Purcell and Purcell (1996) point out, agency contracts providing generic and easily replaceable skills are usually more concerned with cost than with quality, and there is real pressure for cost reduction. A worst-case scenario is where what is now termed the client organization's 'labour procurement' function itself becomes outsourced and needs to prove its worth by securing a reduction of agency charges in order to secure its own contract renewal. Labour as a commodity is seen in terms of a market exchange transaction, as a variable and minimizable cost and, indeed, hardly as human at all.

This is encapsulated in two examples cited by Purcell (1997). In a presentation by Addeco Alfred Marks, the key benefits of insourcing (naturally from the contracting client's perspective—a commodity has no views of its own) were presented on OHPs as (and I quote):

- enhances flexibility (turn on and off like a tap);
- no legal or psychological contract with the individual;
- you outsource the management problems associated with non-core staff;
- greater cost efficiency (on average 15 to 20 percent).

In other words, the image of the employee presented here is of a commodity ('turn on and off like a tap') and, if a commodity, the organization can wash its hands of responsibilities ('no legal or psychological contract, outsource management problems'), all in the interests of an economic rationality ('greater cost efficiency'). The words of an employment agency director (cited in Purcell and Purcell, 1996) underline this commodification of labour:

> There is a close relationship between E and F in the alphabet. E is for exploitation and F is for flexibility.

The third market image of the employee is that of a resource or asset. This is the image beloved of company reports ('our most valued asset is the people that work for us'), such as those of Marks & Spencer and Hewlett-Packard, of 'soft' HRM and human asset accounting. Hence the employee

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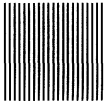
is presented as the source of the organization's value added and competitive advantage, an asset to be cherished and developed rather than a cost to be minimized. As an asset, there is a stress on developing reciprocal commitment. This is achieved on the employer's side by bundles of 'high commitment' HRM practices, namely:

● careful recruitment and selection, with an emphasis on traits;
● extensive use of systems of communication;
● teamworking with flexible job design;
● emphasis on training and learning;
● involvement in decision-making with responsibility;
● performance appraisal linked to reward systems (see e.g. Huselid, 1995; MacDuffie, 1995; Whitfield and Poole, 1997).

In return the employee, in theory at least, offers attitudinal commitment (rather than the behavioural compliance asked of the employee as a commodity), resulting in high performance. Rather than a backgrounding or denial of a psychological contract between employee and organization, it is seen as integral to the relationship and is often expressed in terms of a commitment to no compulsory redundancy.

Before considering the tensions and contradictions both within and between these images, let us consider an opposing image of community—the employee as part of the organizational 'family' and as a 'team member'.

Images of the Community

The values that underpin the marketplace images of the employee—of individualism, free choice and economic rationality—in communitarianism are backgrounded in favour of collectivism, consensus and a social rationality (i.e. stressing the importance of social bonds and loyalties). From this standpoint the employee is presented not as an actor in the marketplace ('actor' in the Actor Network Theory sense) but as a member of a social organization where the bonds are not those of contractual exchange, but of socially embedded reciprocities. The employee can only be fully human as part of a social community.

The communities to which the employee is portrayed as belonging generally comprise two representations: the family and the team. (The communities of labour solidarity, trades unions and professional associations, not surprisingly, rarely appear in managerial discourses, representing institutions that offer competing and potentially conflicting ideologies and loyalties. It was notable in the 1980s that the managerialist Thatcherite administration waged warfare on both unions and professional associations and referred to union members as a 'conscript army'. This very phrase suggests the invalidity of such representations of solidarity: employees, it is suggested, do not choose to join unions and are held against their will.)

The images of family and team are both essentially unitaristic, assum-

ing at the very least common goals, reciprocal loyalties and mutual support. The organization as family and the employee as family member are, of course, the model of paternalistic employee relations. The image relies on a very traditional (idealized?) and hierarchical model of the family, with the father (read management) having control over the children (read non-managerial employees). The image of the wife and mother has resonances with the personnel function, not only because of the latter's female/welfarist image, but, presented as the 'oily rag'/'man-in-the-middle', personnel also has the motherly image of intervening with the father on the children's behalf.[2] However, as in traditional families, although the father may exercise control, it is meant to be benevolent and for the ultimate good of all family members—hence the notion of benevolent paternalism. Further, this benevolence is not exercised solely in a Kantian mode of dutiful rationality but is softened by affective bonds that underwrite a concern to treat family members as ends in themselves, each person being valuable in their own right. The family may have its squabbles internally, but will fiercely protect each member against criticisms from outsiders and aim to present a united face to the outside world. Hence representing the employee as a family member simultaneously asserts the values of hierarchy—but each employee having her own value and place; control—but a caring management; unity against competition and in pursuit of managerially defined goals—with internal conflict de-emphasized, indeed, trivialized. Above all, just as individual family members' interests, in theory at least, are subordinated to what is in the family's interests as a whole, so employees, as members of the organizational family, in their own eyes (if they have swallowed the rhetoric) or in management's eyes alone (if they haven't) should subordinate their interests to those of the organization. As with families, this may be justified by arguing that the family's/organization's well-being is the best guarantor of each family member's/employee's well-being. This may invoke the language of 'tough love' (Barham et al., 1988) or even that of self-sacrifice for the greater good of the family community. Hammer and Champy's (1993) image of employees being called upon to 'man [sic] the lifeboats'—to go overboard to save the organization – is redolent of self-sacrifice to the greater good, but also deconstructs that image. The lifeboats here are not for the survival of women and children—rather, they suggest a sacrificial journey into the unknown. Captain Oates rather than Grace Darling!

This image survives for the same reasons that paternalism survives—the belief that caring and efficiency are mutually supportive rather than in conflict. As Edward Cadbury put it in 1912, writing of his welfare paternalism at Bournville: 'the supreme principle has been the belief that business efficiency and the welfare of employees are but different sides of the same problem'. But this image is under threat. First, the traditional picture of the family on which paternalism rests is on shaky foundations. Today the word 'family' is as often associated with the words 'breakdown'

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and 'dysfunctional' as with 'happy'—symbolically questioning not only the unitaristic consensus of organizations but the existence of a long-term relationship between the employee and organization. Gone are the jobs-for-life assumptions on which paternalism was predicated. Second, just as in a family one is accepted largely for what one is rather than for what one does, so in traditionally paternalistic organizations there was a tolerance of individual differences in (some might say, 'lack of') perform-ance, as long as it was accompanied by the appropriate attitudes of loyalty and deference. Today, as is evidenced even by the so-called sophisticated paternalism embodied in the bundles of 'high commitment' HRM prac-tices referred to earlier, although 'appropriate attitudes' are still to the fore (now defined as 'flexibility', 'a willingness to learn', 'team player' and so on), tolerance of poor performance is not. Selection is based on compe-tency in aptitude tests as well as on attitudinal correctness, and rewards are contingent on performance. Further, 'the involvement in decision-making with responsibility' flies in the face of paternalism's view of employees as potentially wayward children.

The 'team' image, in its principal manifestation, is in some ways an updating of the 'family' image. If we take the team as a sporting metaphor, we have a picture of employees working together in pursuit of a common goal, each member having a specialist role to play but recognizing that the interests of the team override those of individual members—the charge of 'prima donna' signifying disapprobation when these priorities are reversed. Again, there is the implication of reciprocal obligations sup-ported by affective bonds of comradeship, shared interests and even mutual enjoyment. And, just as the father is the head of a traditional family, so teams have 'captains' or 'leaders'. In several respects, though, the images differ. Following the sporting analogy, membership of a team is usually voluntary, for a limited period of time and dependent on perform-ance. Membership of a family of origin, notwithstanding earlier comments about family breakdown, from the children's perspective at least, is not chosen and conventionally is for life and only tenuously linked to perform-ance. Hence, as already suggested, while the family image appears to relate to earlier periods of employment, this team image satisfies the present-day demand for attitudinal correctness combined with a concern for high performance but recognition of the insecurities of employment. If the performance of the team falters, erstwhile 'stars' run the risk of being dropped or transferred, along with the sacking of the manager.

However, the image of the team has other connotations. As pointed out by Parker and Slaughter (1988: 4) the positive connotations attached to our everyday conception of teams rest on the assumption of the cooperation of specialists towards a common goal, rather than that of interchangeable members:

> In fact, the main place in our language where 'team' implies interchangeable members is where it refers to a team of horses—beasts of burden of equal

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capabilities yoked together to pull for a common end (determined by the person holding the whip).

In such a team—virtually a chain-gang—membership is not voluntary and the nature and pace of work are prescribed by whoever has the 'whip hand'. This projects an image of work being hard, not to say oppressive, and lacking in any potential for enjoyment. It also suggests that work will be the same day in, day out, relieved only by the odd rest day. This is very much the picture of teamworking at Nissan as painted by Garrahan and Stewart (1992) and typified in terms of peer surveillance and 'management by compliance'. Team membership is not voluntary in the sense that the alternative is unemployment and life on diminishing state benefits.

Ambiguities and Paradoxes

At first sight this language of representation appears, Janus-like, to produce two faces: the positive and the negative. I guess most of us would identify the positive images as those where the employee is presented as valuable, with a unique or at least specialist role to play and as being afforded choices. In their different ways employees as 'customers' (choice), 'resources' (value), 'sporting team member' (specialist role) and 'family member' (value) all have some positive connotations. Employees as commodities or as a team of interchangeable members (the chain-gang) have a distinctly negative ring. Images redolent of choice and value appear to embody the human face of HRM; those of commodities, its inhuman or depersonalized face. There is a tendency, too, to attribute these images to different groups of employees: positive images with 'core' employees and negative images with the 'peripheral' or contingent workforce. But let us look further into the downside of the upbeat images and the upside of the downbeat images.

The defining characteristic of the customer, so those who celebrate the market would lead us to believe, is the freedom to exercise choice. The employee as customer is human by virtue of autonomy. The internal customer in a TQM system can refuse to accept substandard inputs from an earlier production process and is empowered to stop the line to deal with process problems or product defects, before faulty work reaches another team/'customer' downstream. But to what extent is this free choice? Just as external customers through advertising, brand development, cross-selling and promotions are manipulated into 'freely choosing' the products and services that the selling organization wishes them to buy, so internal customers' choices are constrained by processes of organizational socialization and other covert forms of control. Thus, according to Garrahan and Stewart (1992: 5), although internal customers have the 'choice' to stop the line, operators often 'choose' not to, as they feel that if they regularly stop the line they will be identified as incompetent. As a result, they will rectify minor faults created by others upstream (empowerment?) because, if the line is stopped for a minor defect, the resultant check of all work might

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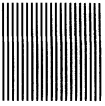
reveal defects of their own making. The tight control on all resources in lean production systems and resultant labour intensification can be presented as freely chosen by the employee as internal and external customer. To the employee as internal customer, 'surplus' resources are presented as 'waste', a product that a consumer, by definition, has rejected or does not want and, therefore logically, necessarily and so with consent has to be eliminated. To the employee as external customer lean production is presented as cost minimization, necessary to keep prices down. Thus, in Foucauldian terms, rather than free choice being exercised here, the employee as customer, through processes of examination and confession, internalizes and enacts management controls,

The employee as resource is valuable. But the other side of being a valuable resource is the imperative that it is used to best advantage, 'exploited' to the full. The exploited resource, by definition, becomes commodified and its potential humanity is degraded. This alerts us to a potential downside for valued 'core' employees—the long hours and workaholic lifestyle that may be the corollary to high salaries and benefits. In today's organizations, even if one has a highly challenging and potentially developmental job, and is part of an organization's core competency staff, the common complaint is of heightened pressure through increasingly demanding and shifting targets, in the context of diminishing resources in the effort to achieve 'lean' organization. To survive, many 'resources' develop a workaholic lifestyle before collapsing into 'burnt out'. This, in itself, may reflect three interrelated processes where market values collide with the communitarian, to the detriment of personal and social development. First, in organizations, we tend to engage with each other not as whole people but in terms of our organizational role and, in a highly differentiated organization, this can present only a tiny portion of our full selves. Second, the exigencies of these roles may require us to engage in inauthentic behaviour, both manipulating others and allowing others to manipulate us (Jackall, 1988). As MacIntyre (1981: 107) states—and he is not alone—'the most effective manager is the best actor'. Third, a workaholic lifestyle may prevent the development of ourselves in family and community roles that could allow a fuller expression of ourselves as a person. Hence the present-day maxim: 'No-one on their death-bed has said "I wish I'd spent more time at the office"—many have said "I wish I'd spent more time with my family".' MacIntyre argues that, as a result, in modern organizations and societies, we stand no chance of enacting the Aristotelian ideal of the full development of human beings' inherent potentialities as part of a broader social/organizational community, as role fragmentation, inauthenticity and an unbalanced development of potentiality deprive us of the opportunity of developing a substantial integrated narrative of our lives and, hence, of rendering our lives meaningful to ourselves and to the community as a whole. The paradox, therefore, is that the more we value employees as a resource, the very desire to exploit the resource to the full can lead to its consumption ('burnout') rather than

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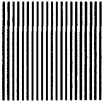
regeneration ('development'). Further, in their efforts to be defined as a valued resource, employees may well collude in this process.

The image of the employee as a member of a sports team is inherently appealing. Peter Wickens's (1993: 86) description of his vision of teamworking at Nissan would not have sounded out of place from Glenn Hoddle (the England football team manager at the time of the 1998 football World Cup) in describing what he sought to create in the English World Cup football team:

> A team begins with a group of individuals whose individual contributions are recognized and valued and who are motivated to work in the same direction to achieve clear, understood and stretching goals for which they are accountable. The best team results come with positive leadership and tough goals.

And, in an ideal world, if organizations really adhered to the lean production systems of the Japanese/'excellence', high dependency/high commitment model of organization, where empowerment was genuinely enacted, then teams might achieve this vision. But just as football teams disappoint their supporters, so teamworking, at least in UK manufacturing industry (see Ackroyd and Procter, 1998) rarely lives up to this sporting image.

To some extent one's evaluation of the nature of teamworking is similar to one's evaluation of a football team—it depends where your loyalties lie. Fans with opposing loyalties can watch the same teams and game and come to completely different evaluations of their nature and performance. Thus most of us are familiar with the partisan accounts of lean production and its associated teamworking, by Wickens (1987) and Garrahan and Stewart (1992), of the Nissan plant at Sunderland, UK. For Wickens, the then personnel director of the plant, the success of lean production at Nissan rested on the 'tripod' of flexibility, quality and teamwork. These are spoken of in glowing terms, laced with words such as consensus, commitment and trust. For Garrahan and Stewart, flexibility equates with work intensification and 'management by stress'; quality with control and 'management through blame'; teamworking with peer surveillance and 'management through compliance'. 'Management by stress' is an inevitable result of 'kaizen' or continuous improvement, as elimination of waste (especially labour) implies the intensification of work. 'Management through blame' arises through the stress on quality as the use of quality charts, SPC and sophisticated electronic systems of error detection that can trace faults back to the 'guilty' workgroup or even individual responsible tends to standardize work (conformity to specification), constraining workers' freedom to experiment with process changes (so much for choice and empowerment), while simultaneously acting as a system of surveillance to ensure compliance to managerial standards. 'Management through compliance' arises out of team-based working whereby, having made teams responsible for their own performance, it encourages them to harness peer pressure on delinquent members to secure compliance to managerially set targets, with the additional pressure of compliance to the

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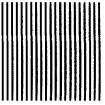
sovereign customer being linked to job security. Further, the nature of teamworking at Nissan, Garrahan and Stewart suggest, is far from that suggested by sporting imagery. The fragility of JIT production systems necessitates that workers can cover for each other to the extent of being able to perform the range of standardized tasks that fall within their team's remit. However, although Wickens might present this flexibility as involving multi-skilling and job enrichment, Garrahan and Stewart suggest that in reality operators experience job enlargement and task accretion through the acquisition of a limited number of cognate tasks that result in a work pattern characterized by routine variety. The nature of the job enlargement—taking on responsibility for some setting up of machinery, inspection and cleaning—combined with required flexibility, effectively eliminates downtime or porosity in the working day and contributes to work intensification. Further, such 'skills' as are acquired, being plant specific, do little to enhance the worker's value in the general labour market (or 'transfer market', to continue the sporting analogy), but rather serve to enhance their dependency on this 'exploitative' employer. In other words, the 'team' that in Peter Wickens's eyes resembles a sports team of talented individuals, in Garrahan and Stewart's eyes equates with a team of homogenized, interchangeable beasts of burden, redolent of the chain-gang.

Indeed, there is mixed empirical evidence as to what form teamworking generally takes, the best guess being that accounts reflect not just the partisan views of commentators with an axe to grind, but the contingencies of market situation and strategy, nature of product/service, employee relations history, management style and so on (see, for example, Ackroyd and Procter, 1998; Buchanan and McCalman, 1989; Marchington, 1992; Geary, 1993; Scott, 1994; Pollert, 1996; Edwards and Wright, 1998). Edwards and Wright have suggested that it is probably only teams designed on socio-technical systems principles and enjoying worker autonomy and job enrichment that enjoy any genuine empowerment in day-to-day decisions. This and the other studies cited suggest that the experience of teams lies somewhere between the sports team and chain-gang analogies, with the scales tilted slightly towards the latter image. The general picture, on the positive side, seems to be of employees welcoming some limited autonomy in day-to-day operational decisions and involvement in problem-solving, along with the substitution of team leaders for supervision. On the negative side, there seems a consensus that teamworking invariably leads to harder working and some stress, job enlargement rather than job enrichment and constraints on autonomy by the imposition of tight performance standards. The evidence is that employees now accept this work intensification as a fact of life and, in some cases, even enjoy working as hard as they do, if they believe that the work is organized efficiently and that, by making the company more competitive, they secure their own jobs. Hence rather than characterizing work in such situations as 'labour intensification', Collinson et al. (1998) suggest the idea of the 'disciplined' worker[3] might more appropriately describe their situation and reactions. However, the evi-

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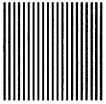
dence suggests that teamworking does not give rise to any greater feelings of organizational commitment or trust in management on the part of employees.

What has this to do with the downside of representing employees as members of teams analogous to sports teams? I would suggest that if management seeks to give teamworking this gloss (if only to counteract the beast of burden/chain-gang image) they run the risk of raising and subsequently disappointing expectations, given that teamworking, in the bulk of British industry, falls far short of this ideal, even if much of it rises above the very negative imagery. If expectations are raised but not fulfilled, it is not surprising that teamworking, rather than resulting in a high commitment/high trust organization, fails to improve either trust or commitment.

Finally, if the upside of 'family member' is 'caring', the downside is the range of problems associated with paternalism: that it cannot be relied upon to maintain a just balance between employer and employee interests and that it does not adequately respect the moral agency of the employee. In other words, as Anthony (1986) notes, paternalism, in its transformation from 'traditional' to 'costed' paternalism and finally into 'welfare management', can end up as a manipulative approach to employee relations. The image of the employee effectively as a child or at best a wayward adolescent (hardly as 'Big Brother'!) is one that denies autonomy and equality and, hence, self-respect at work (Warren, 1998). Hence the Kantian representation of humanity is violated.

At first sight it may appear difficult to see any upside to the downbeat images of the employee as inhuman commodity or interchangeable unit in a chain-gang. Although employees may be treated in this fashion, it is not the language that any present-day management would use publicly and face-to-face towards employees, even if in practice this comprises management's own mental picture of some of their subordinates. But for management, conceptualizing employees in these terms does have an upside: it represents an assertion and justification of the managerial prerogative. A commodity (and note, an interchangeable unit has many of the characteristics of a commodity) has no individuality or autonomy of its own. It is defined by others' assessments of its use or exchange value. Management, as the agent of the owner, buys the labour commodity and, as buyer, gains rights of direction, of how the commodity is to be used. Management, as user of the labour commodity, defines its function and attributes value. Until this happens, the commodity is inert and valueless—indeed, lacks the attribution even of commodity status. Conceptualizing employees as commodities and management as the buyer and use of that commodity justifies managerial prerogative and, by extension, the value of management.

The Ethics of Representation

As this century has unfortunately taught us, how we conceptualize and label people will both reflect and influence how we treat them—and people at work are no exception. The images derived from the marketplace

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and community reflect the latter's ethical foundations—and their critiques. The ethical justification of the market rests on the value we place on autonomous individualism—the right of the individual to freely exercise choices as long as those choices do not prevent others from exercising similar rights. The images of 'resource' and 'customer' are appealing to the extent to which we subscribe to the value of autonomous individualism. In theory, the market offers a neutral arena in which individuals are free to pursue the satisfaction of their own preferences, to have projects of their own that define their own identity and humanity. If the image of the customer appeals to the value of choice, that of resource appeals to the autonomous development of one's self-identity. In contrast, the ethical justification of the community rests on the solidaristic values of collectivism, of shared meanings about commitment and loyalty to other than self, about the importance of obligations as well as rights, about the value of being 'my brother's keeper'. Images of family and team (but not chain-gang) membership speak to these values, promoting an affective commitment to the collective, of recognizing the obligations of membership, of 'not letting the side down'. Each of the essentially positive images of the employee—'customer', 'resource', 'family' and 'team' member—is reflective of important values in our wider society about what constitutes the good life, and indeed what constitutes being human.

In contrast, the negative images of the employee—as 'commodity' and 'chain-gang member'—and the downside of some of the positive images—that customer choice is limited or illusory, that resources are exploited, that paternalism does not respect some family members' moral agency, may be seen as reflecting the libertarian's critique of communitarianism and vice versa. For example, attributing commodity status to and hence treating people like commodities, according to the communitarian, reflects a failure on the part of the market to recognize the value of the particularistic as well as the universalistic and of fraternity as well as liberty and equality. As Selznick (1995) states, a particularistic ethic, grounded in genuinely other-regarding commitment, care and concern for specific people in concrete settings has to be the foundation of social order—the Christian ethic of brotherly love must first be directed at one's neighbour, not at mankind in general (cf. Bauman, 1991, 1993). The same critique might be directed at the exploitation of 'resources'. But, against this, the market libertarian would retort that the downside of paternalism, the denial of moral agency to the employee, reflects the tyrannical possibilities of community, an indefensible form of heteronomy in which individuals find themselves simply defined by a history and tradition from which no proper distancing is possible.

The representation we make of employees is not just an exercise in rhetoric. Paradoxically, it embodies both relativistic and absolutist realities. By labelling people at work, through social construction, we enact one reality. In this action, whether consciously or not, we invoke competing ethical systems, each of which would lay claim to the absolute truth.

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Further Reflections

The editors asked that contributors be reflexive about how we use concepts and methods and about our forms and styles of writing. Considering what I have written here, I am only too aware that it says more about my academic style than about human resource management.[4] For what do I really know about the latter? There is my experience as a professional and managerial employee in a work organization, who as a result of these positions has 'experienced' HRM. There is too my reading of the discourses of other academics about their research and experience of HRM. But I have never worked in an HRM department or even talked to many personnel managers (at least recently). When I 'do' HRM, essentially I am concerned to develop discourses from the texts (literally and figuratively) that I encounter and hope that in my narratives readers will find echoes of their own knowledge and experience of HRM, but with a slant that may be unfamiliar but enlightening to them. My 'doing' HRM works if the reader accords my text a face validity. To me, writing HRM is like knitting a new garment from the wool unravelled from old and discarded pieces of knitwear. The raw materials do not change, but the function of the new item may and certainly it is likely to reflect the fashions of the day.

In some ways what I have written here reflects a tension I experience in academic writing. Universities, by and large, reflect the values of the Enlightenment—of rationality, whether as servants to the values of performativity or of critical reflexivity (Cooper and Burrell, 1988). As academics, even if of a postmodern persuasion, the language of expression is that of logical coherency—placing order and pattern on the messiness of life (cf. Burrell, 1993).[5] What I have attempted here is precisely that. I have used the control device of a framework of binary oppositions—market/community; upside/downside; the ethics of right/wrong—to develop (hopefully) a coherent argument about the human/inhuman in HRM (another binary opposition). The use of binary oppositions appeals to my desire to put form on my narrative while hoping that the resulting sharp contrasts may act as a thought-provoking heuristic for the reader.

But, this comes into conflict with my sympathies with postmodernism. Order is there to be challenged and overturned through acts of deconstruction. Are these binary oppositions really sustainable? Are market and community so very different? We accept that community rests on moral virtues such as cooperation and trust, but equally the market depends on the moral underpinnings of trust, promise-keeping and truth-telling. Without these pre-contractual moral foundations markets would fail as the transaction costs of highly policed systems, in the absence of trust, would be too high (Plant, 1992). Then, both markets and communities simultaneously can be oppressive and liberating. As employees we experience organizations as both markets where we sell our labour and as communities where most of us experience friendship, recognition and the achievement of identity. Binary opposition that offers us 'either/or' leaves

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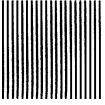
no room for the 'both' that is our general experience of organizations. And this notion of 'both' is essentially what HRM is all about: the simultaneous seeking to achieve control *and* consent, to engage in human *resource management* and *human resource* management.[6]

Notes

1   Note, too, the use of language here. Following Derrida (1978), the meaning of any word or phrase is derived from a process of deferral to other words that differ from itself—*différance* should be understood as the absence of the deferred meaning as well as the difference of opposed meanings. Hence 'lean' is the opposite of 'fat' but different from 'thin'. Both 'fat' and 'thin' in our society carry negative connotations. Both, for example, imply an undesirable state of potential physical, psychological and social unhealthiness. With 'thin' there are overtones of starvation, anorexia and poverty; 'fat' conjures up images of ugliness, greed, self-indulgence and heart attacks. 'Lean', in contrast, carries with it positive notions of healthiness (not over or underweight), of quality (the most expensive, 'better' cuts of meat are advertised as 'lean') and of what counts as aesthetically pleasing in a fashion-conscious world. 'Leanness' is what the consumer wants or aspires to. That a deferred connotation of 'leanness' is 'meanness' should not be overlooked either, nor the fact of its ambiguity, carrying both positive ('mean' machine) and negative (unkind, selfish) messages.
2   In traditional Roman Catholic teaching, praying to the Blessed Virgin Mary to intercede for you with God the Father is often justified to young children in terms that, if you want your father to give you something (or to avoid his wrath when you have done something wrong) you ask your mother to put in a good word for you. 'Ask Mum to ask Dad!'
3   With reference to the use of sports team and chain-gang images of team-working, Collinson et al.'s (1998) use of the concept of the 'disciplined worker' is interesting in that its dual meanings address both images. Thus sports team players are often urged to show 'discipline', in training, on the field and in their personal lives. Discipline in this instance equates with internal self-control. 'Discipline' in relation to chain-gangs refers simultaneously to punishment and external control ('the whip hand' – both literally and figuratively—to use Parker and Slaughter's imagery).
4   Indeed elsewhere I have argued that HRM, at least from a postmodern perspective, is largely an academic-invented discourse (Legge, 1995).
5   A valiant attempt to overcome this 'modernist' style of writing when constructing a postmodern discourse is Gibson Burrell's *Pandemonium* (1997), but few academics will risk publishers' and editors' prejudices, not to mention their ascent up the academic career ladder, to follow his high-risk example.
6   But note, even while attempting to overturn the binary oppositions I have employed, I unconsciously revert to such oppositions in comparing HRM's twin tasks of exercising control and generating consent!

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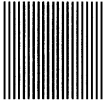
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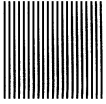
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Karen Legge   is Professor of Organizational Behaviour at Warwick Business School. She is working on a book with the provisional title *Postmodernity and the Ethics of Organizing*, which encapsulates her present research interests. **Address:** Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK. [irobkl@wbs.warwick.ac.uk]