

Unitarist and pluralist view (fox 1966)



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Introduction

In this assignment, I am attempting to analyse Fox (1966) perspectives on pluralism and unitarism. I will also look at some industrial relations issues such as, trade unions, collective bargaining, conflict, management frames of reference and market and managerial relations.

In the report, Fox describes the two rival theoretical perspectives in industrial relations, namely the pluralist perspective and the unitarist perspective. Fox is making an argument over standard managerial unitarist views. His aim was to change these views to pluralist.

Frames of Reference

Fox describes managers as having alternative “ frames of reference”, which can be understood like a lens through which one sees employment relations.

This paper implies that unrealistic frames of reference exist among many managers and the general public which distort perception of the facts, making solutions difficult. According to Fox, a frame of reference needed to be constructed through which the problems of industrial relations could be seen realistically, so that possible solutions could be found. (Fox p2: 5)

He questioned why so many managers retained unrealistic ideologies in the workplace, while acknowledging that they do help managers achieve organisational objectives. He proposed that ideologies serve three purposes:

Self Reassurance: Blame employees for anti-management actions

Persuasion: It is easier to manage when employees believe that enterprise objectives are worthwhile

Legitimacy: Management actions and sanctions are legitimate if all accept that interests are identical

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Fox implies that the “ ideology” of the unitary perspective has been abandoned as being “ incongruent with reality”.

Unitarists believe that conflict is unnatural and abnormal, and seek to eliminate it. They believe that conflict in the workplace is a result of possibly poor management or communication, or simply the work of trouble-makers. Unitarists emphasize a single (unitary) interest of all the members of an organisation, which if properly managed, will result in the harmonious functioning of the organization.

“ There are no oppositionary groups, therefore no rival leaders within the team”. (Fox p. 4: 9).

They believe that what’s good for the organization, is also good for employees, as both organization and employee goals are aligned. They see any trade union presence or collective bargaining as unnecessary; they believe it would lead to conflict, if introduced.

Pluralism on the other hand, is a perspective that suggests that in any organisation, there are multiple parties that are involved in decision-making, emphasizing the different interests of it’s members. It sees conflict as a

normal, inevitable occurrence, to be managed accordingly, and something that cannot be eliminated. The focus of all pluralist thinking is collective bargaining. Pluralism underlay the views of the Donovan Commission.

Fox's entire case is against the unitary view in organisations, stating that it teaches that there's only one interest and one focus of loyalty in the workplace, while in reality, organisations are made up of sectional groups with competing different interests. Fox saw that ways need to be looked at to find the most effective way of managing that competition, so a pluralist approach is by far the most effective approach. He points out that managers must be fully aware of the diversity of group interests, objectives and motivations, in order to achieve continuing success.

Fox compares the unitary system like a "vision" and resembling a "professional football team", that promotes strong team spirit and undivided management authority, all aiming towards a common goal. (Fox p4: 10).

However, though having common interests with Fox, Edwards points out that surveys have shown that managers, and indeed many workers, tend to see their firms in unitary terms. He points out that if workers and managers were totally opposed to each other, workplace relations would simply break down. (Edwards, pgs11, 12)

Indeed, unitarism should not be discarded lightly, as it provides subconscious foundation (the right to manage) for managers seeking to maintain clear distinction between those issues they prepare to negotiate and those they are prepared only to consult.

Fox disagrees with the Unitarist view that trade unions introduce conflict into the industrial scene (Fox p9), but sees conflict as “ endemic” to the workplace. Following from this, Flanders believes that managers must learn to regain control by sharing it. (pg 172).

In other words, if conflict is properly managed, both parties can gain, and collective bargaining is the best way to do it.

Cannon sees the possibility of properly contained conflict even being creative. “ Out of the many disputes the best agreements have been reached and the most effective methods of work created”.

Market Relations and Managerial Relations.

Fox sees the employer-employee relations as having two important but different aspects, namely market relations and managerial relations. Central to Fox’s argument regarding managerial relations, is the value of collective bargaining to society. Not because it distributes economic rewards, but because it’s a joint rule-making process and democratic in nature.

“ Market Relations are concerned with the terms and conditions on which labour is hired – they are therefore economic in character.”

“ Managerial Relations arise out of what management seek to do which its labour, having hired it. As they have to do with the exercise of authority, they are termed political in character.”

(Fox pg7).

In present day, according to Fox, employers and the public are used to discussions or arguments about how employees are being managed such as in relation to wages, hours rate, overtime, holidays, sick pay etc. But Fox suggests that employers should also be willing to discuss managerial decisions as well.

Fox suggests that trade unions originally became accepted by workers and the public, as a necessary protection for labourers, economically (market relations). It also gave a stronger voice to the individual worker, if he joined with his fellow workers, in collective bargaining, rather than in individual bargaining, which was the way things were last century.

Fox recognised the need for the development of even better bargaining techniques.

“ This leads on directly to the necessity of the pluralistic frame of reference for the development of more sophisticated bargaining techniques designed to reconcile management and work-group interests at a higher level of mutual advantage. Such techniques are now emerging under the name of “ productivity bargaining “. (Fox p8: 40)

A Balancing Paradigm?

The pluralist school of thought often embraces a balancing paradigm.

“ We have to see the organisation as a” plural society, containing many related but separate interests and objectives which must be maintained in some kind of equilibrium.” Fox (p. 5: 12)

Commons (1919, 43) recognised the need for an “ equilibrium of capital and labour, rather than the domination of one or the other.”

Kochan (1980, 21) emphasizes the importance of finding ways to achieve a workable and equitable balance among the separate interests in an organization to avoid negative outcomes, individual perceptions of balance or fairness can affect employee productivity, motivation, turnover, and other industrial relations outcomes.

Conclusion

In this essay I have looked at organizational conflict, trade unions and collective bargaining and managerial and market relations. I have discussed some of Fox’s views on unitarism and pluralism, and I feel I have succeeded in analysing his perspectives.. Consider the unitary view. This perspective suggests what’s good for the organization is also good for employees and it doesn’t see conflict as a normal occurrence. Many managers, and indeed many workers, tend to see their firms in unitary terms, and are happy with their situation.

The pluralists take the opposite view, arguing that what advantages the organization has, is a disadvantage for employees and vice versa. They propose that organization and employee interests are in fact opposed to one another, and in present times, with the presence of imperfect labour markets, powerful corporations or desperate competition among workers, can result in substandard employment conditions.

In order to create a balance between the competing interests in the employment relationship, Fox argues that companies need to adopt a

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pluralist perspective, as he was convinced this approach is the most efficient and effective approach.

It appears that each approach has some strengths and offers benefits to the organization and to employees. However it would appear that the greatest problems of either approach arise, when either concept is out of balance within the organization.

Certainly Fox's frames of reference is a very useful conceptual tool for managers, as it embraces both employers and employees interests, the attitudes to conflict between them and the role of unions as the operative variables in the employment relationship.

It would appear that most of Fox's views are still relevant today.

Biography

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