

Léonard, E., & Taskin, L. (2024). 'Human resource management and the worker': employee voice in management. *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research*, 30(2), 127-142.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/10242589241260955>

'Human resource management and the worker': employee voice in management

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Summary

What room is there for worker voice in management, and more precisely, in human resource management, in today's companies? Against a backdrop of individualisation and financialisation of management, new claims arise that promise to give workers more voice, individually and collectively. In this article, we delineate the different options open to management in organising for worker voice. Going back to the influential work of Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939), we propose three different perspectives on how employee voice is considered in human resource management. Finally, we discuss managerial and firm governance options to show that there are a variety of practices in companies, but also that worker voice is under threat.

Résumé

Zusammenfassung

Keywords

Human resource management, employee voice, participation, real work, critical studies, management

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Introduction

Do employees have a say in companies today? To what extent do current managerial theory and practice provide room for worker participation, expression and voice?

These apparently simple questions are of particular interest nowadays because scholarly debates feature a variety of and sometimes even antagonistic assertions on worker voice. On the one hand, one hears or reads demands for more democracy at work (for example, by Ferreras et al., 2022) and studies of new kinds of worker participation, for instance in the form of the 'freed company' (Gilbert et al., 2017; Mattelin-Pierrard et al., 2020). On the other hand, studies show how human resource management thinking and practices reduce worker autonomy and voice (for example, Dupuy, 2020; Gomez, 2019; Taylor and Bain, 1999) alongside the long-term decline of trade union membership (OECD, 2019). Whether there is room for worker voice at workplace level is therefore under question. This deserves a special issue of *Transfer*.

To what extent a workplace is democratic depends largely on management's will, strategies and competencies. To begin with, the 'boss-worker relationship' can be seen as fundamentally undemocratic

because there is no requirement in corporate law that employees should have a voice in decision-making. For Malleson (2023), for instance, *'radicals over the years have referred to capitalist workplaces as "petty monarchies," "factory feudalism," and even little "dictatorships"'* (Malleson, 2023: 167). Such unbalanced power relations do not necessarily lead to 'dictatorship' in companies, but it is clear that the employer has a stronger power of initiative. Accordingly, the level of democracy at work can vary from one company to another, depending on workers' strategies, resistance and mobilisation, but also – and largely – on employers' strategies and decisions. There are managerial methods and strategies that contribute to determine a context in which workers have more or less capacity to express themselves, to meet and to participate in decision-making. But what are the processes and conditions under which workers can enjoy such participation, and influence their situation and the overall governance of their workplace? These are key questions with regard to the place for employee voice — in other words, expression and participation — in management practice and theory.

Management plays an important role in determining worker voice, and yet the issue of management is rarely addressed in *Transfer*. Apart from some articles on algorithmic management in recent years, one must go back to 2001 to find an article centred on managerial discourse. It was entitled *'New myths and old practices: postmodern management discourse and the decline of Fordist industrial relations'* (Alonso, 2001). This is why the contributors to this special issue of *Transfer* on management and the worker found it useful to identify current trends for or against worker voice in companies.

XXX Note to SAGE typesetters, please leave in all three names of authors when three are cited in the paragraph below and in the final paragraphs at the end as they relate to authors in the special issue; the mention of them later on is via citations in the normal styleXXXX

In this issue, Linhart outlines trends affecting 'human labour' today: there are simultaneous pressures to objectify work (through the financialisation of management and the introduction of indicator-based management) and to subjectivise it (through the individualisation of management and the introduction of emotion-based management). In this context, she explains, worker voice becomes isolated and limited. De Spiegelaere and Vitols support this observation by showing, based on the European Participation Index, that worker participation in Europe has weakened over the past 10 years. This may be explained, according to Gouzoulis, Galanis and Iliopoulos, by a shift towards non-participatory, market-based human resource management systems that undermine the role of trade unions. Focusing on organisational policies for diversity, equity and inclusion, Klinksiek shows the extent to which such inclusive practices may well end up in excluding some workers. Similarly, Helfen, Sydow and Wirth highlight how HRM in inter-organisational networks brings new challenges for worker representatives.

This introductory article looks at management thinking and how it leaves space for effective workers' voice. We use Heiland's (2020) definition of worker voice: *'voice includes, but is not limited to, collective and trade union forms of interest articulation, and can also include individual articulations and employer-implemented forms of representation'* (Heiland, 2020: 13–14). It includes collective institutionalised forms of

communication between management and workforce, and also '*provides employees with an opportunity to solve issues emerging in the workplace through communication with management*' (OECD, 2019: 16).

Accordingly, in this article, worker voice refers to employees' capacity to express themselves individually or collectively, through either formal channels of representation or more informal spaces of participation.

To address this question, we need to approach employment relations at workplace level. State regulation cannot fully explain the relevant practices (Malleson, 2023), and one needs to look at the level of the company to understand how firm ownership, human resource management and organisation shape worker expression. To this end, this article focuses on managerial thinking, which includes two categories of component: the literature *in* management (HRM textbooks and articles published in HRM journals), and the literature *on* management (that is, critical studies of management practices, discourses and tools).

The article first delineates the different options open to management in organising the company for more or less worker voice. Going back to the influential work by Roethlisberger and Dickson in 1939, in which the economic function of the firm was balanced with employee cooperation, the article proposes to consider three different perspectives in 'human resource management', according to their consideration of employee voice. The first section presents these three perspectives.

In a second section, we discuss managerial and firm governance options to show that a variety of practices exist in companies, but also that worker voice is clearly under threat from major management trends that are combining with one another. For example, simultaneous individualisation and financialisation of management produces isolation

and a more instrumental relationship to work (Hertz, 2021; Laurent et al., 2022). There is more focus on individual relations at work with notions such as well-being, comfort, psychosocial risks, engagement or meaning, all rooted in a scientific tradition of organisational behaviour that eludes collective expression. On the other hand, the potential democratisation of work is receiving growing attention from researchers in organisation and labour studies, as well as from some professionals (Battilana et al., 2017; Frega, 2021). Current trends are not homogenous but, overall, they tend to reduce employee voice.

While concrete implementations of democratic governance remain limited (De Ridder, 2021; Jégou, 2023), a shift from institutions – including trade unions – to organisations with regard to democratising work requires further exploration, especially within the field of HRM, in which employee voice experiments are designed and studied. These observations call for new proposals for workplace expression, but also for avenues for future research. These are discussed in a last section.

Considering the worker in HRM: a typology

Human resource management is regularly defined in the textbooks as the use of human resources or individuals to attain organisational objectives (see, for instance, Caers, 2021; Gomez-Meijia et al., 2010; Mondy, 2010). This involves getting a workforce together that, in terms of both quality and quantity, is capable of realising the company's strategy and goals (Ferrary, 2014: 23). If one considers workers as a resource to be used, of course, there is little room for worker voice. In this section, we first return to the origins of the place and role of workers in HRM,

before proposing to distinguish, within this field, three different perspectives on how worker voice is considered.

Rise of the worker in HRM

A grasp of Roethlisberger and Dickson's book *Management and the Worker*, published in 1939, is essential to any attempt to retrace the story of how workers have been considered in HR. This seminal book presented and discussed a series of experiments conducted within small groups of workers at the Hawthorne plant of the Western Electric Company in Chicago from 1927 until 1932. The 'Hawthorne studies', subsequently as much praised as criticised (Organ, 1986), paved the way for the introduction of a social science perspective into management. Roethlisberger and Dickson concluded their account of the Hawthorne studies by introducing a distinction between two functions of the firm: the 'economic' function, focused on 'producing a product', and assessed in terms of cost, profit and technical efficiency, and a second function consisting of '*maintaining employee relations, employee good will, co-operation, etc. From this standpoint the functioning of the concern is frequently assessed in such terms as labor turnover, tenure of employment, sickness and accident rate, wages, employee attitudes, etc*' (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939: 397).

That episode marked the start, in human resource management, of an endless quest to find methods, techniques, systems and discourses that should be capable of combining the great expectation of productivity with the desirable outcome of worker satisfaction and well-being – or the desirable outcome of productivity with the great expectation of worker satisfaction. Such an ambitious mission has, since the Second World

War, been entrusted to specialised 'human resource management' departments, in charge of recruitment, pay, evaluation and training, but also dismissal and the exercise of discipline, as well as, more broadly, encouraging workforce commitment and performance in a company or organisation.

In line with such a perspective, according to Hendry (2012), human resource management is related to the two different functions of economic output and worker cooperation. For him, HRM is represented in two principal schools of thought: one looks at corporate strategy and its implications for HRM; the other, influenced by the human relations school inherited from the Hawthorne experiences, '*sees improved work relations and opportunities as a necessary condition for present-day organisations to be effective*' (Hendry, 2012: 19).

Such profoundly ambivalent – or even 'schizophrenic' – missions for HR management find a strong echo in the field's popular works and in its numerous online avatars. As an example, '*Let's start with a brief definition*', the 'AIHR Academy' online wisely proposes: '*Human Resource Management, or HRM, is the practice of managing people to achieve better performance. For example, if you hire people into a business, you are looking for people who fit the company culture as they will be happier, stay longer, and be more productive than people who won't fit into the company culture. Another example is engagement. Engaged employees are more productive, deliver higher quality work and make customers happier. This means that if we can find ways to make employees more engaged, we help the company.*'¹ In the same vein, many HRM textbooks promote a narrow vision of human beings as

¹ <https://www.aihr.com/blog/human-resource-basics/> (accessed 3 November 2023).

resources to be exploited more efficiently in order to maximise the firm's economic performance, as shown by Taskin and Ndayambaje (2018) in their screening of nine best-selling HRM textbooks. In their phenomenological analysis, they explored how the HRM textbooks in most widespread use in the Anglophone and French-speaking areas (six textbooks in English and three in French) consider human beings. While phenomenologists have considered dozens of anthropological standpoints (political, relational and so on), one stood out here: workers are seen as mere resources or adjustment variables. In addition, they report that one human is not always equal to another (a manager may assess an employee's performance, hire or fire them, and so on) and that most of these books share the same content, pointing to a lack of variety in the available theories and models. In other words, workers are not the focus of these textbooks.

Nearly one century after Roethlisberger and Dickson's volume, what are the trends in human resource management today? What place does HRM give to worker voice?

Identifying three perspectives

Based on previous mappings of HRM (see Léonard, 2015; Léonard and Taskin, 2019; Taskin and Dietrich, 2024) and an additional integrated literature review, we propose three perspectives to distinguish the diverse approaches of this body of literature on workers: 'managing without workers', 'managing workers with feelings', and 'managing with humans'.

First, part of the literature sees 'human resources' as a pure object of management, with practices that reduce the workforce to mere

resources. This is 'managing without workers'. Second, 'managing workers with feelings' could also be labelled 'neo-human relations', in which people's emotions and feelings must be managed and find space for expression, but without any consideration for worker participation or collective voice. Third, 'managing with humans' sees 'human resources' as active players who have their own interests and a capacity to act individually and collectively in the company. This in turn requires managerial practices in which employees necessarily must have a say.

The three perspectives do not reflect a linear trend whereby recent conceptualisations or studies of management adopt the latest model and suppress older references. Rather the three perspectives coexist. Each constitutes an ideal-type and form, together a frame of reference. Fox (1971) identified three 'frames of reference', which are distinct normative systems in which individuals and groups think and act in employment relations. The first is the unitarist ideal-type, in which the organisation is seen as *'a team of people all pulling in the same direction, with connotations of a harmonious, energized, cooperative, high-performing organization united by common purpose, effective leadership, mutual gain, and team spirit, which thus yields healthy/productive industrial relations. People have different roles and positions, as in a football team or in a happy family, but the "one for all and all for one" spirit prevents performance-sapping frictions and conflicts'* (Kaufman et al., 2021: 212).

The second is the pluralist ideal-type, in which employment relations exist between *'occupational groups [that] are free to formulate and pursue their own normative aspirations'* (Fox, 1971: 153). Fox later introduced a third ideal-type, the radical framework in which two antagonistic classes confront one another: *'The radical organization is a team of people divided into two antagonistic classes, a high-paid/work-*

little group of powerful management order givers and a low-paid/work-hard group of dependent employee order-obeyers' (Kaufman et al., 2021: 212).

Our first two perspectives are clearly unitarist in Fox's terms, because they consider employer and workers as having common interests, whereas our third perspective is close to Fox's pluralist view. Nevertheless, our approach differs from the frames of reference defined by Fox.

First of all, the three ideal-types defined by Fox consist of paradigms, or ways of thinking, that shape actors' behaviour in industrial relations at company, but also at sectoral and national level. What Fox seeks to explain is how these frames of reference influence the industrial relations climate and outcomes. His intention is to develop '*an understanding of "the way people behave" by understanding the nature of the "total situation" within which their actions take place*' (Kaufman et al., 2021: 209). His ideal-types correspond to different ways of thinking about the relationships between occupational groups, and these different ways of thinking have an impact on actors' behaviours and relations. By contrast, our three perspectives refer to ways of thinking about management, and only in the literature.

Finally, our approach focuses on managerial thinking, either promoted by the managerial literature or analysed by studies of current managerial practice and discourse. We do not look at responses and strategies developed by workers and their representatives. Similarly, we do not study the different dimensions of employment relations, as Fox does, but only the space left or given to employee voice. As such, our analysis takes place within the field of HRM.

This leads us to highlight the fact that Fox's unitarist model of reference is still alive, albeit not in a homogenous form. It has found two different expressions. One takes the shape of neo-Taylorism, in the context of firms that have been financialised, networked and managed-by-processes. The other can be described as 'neo-human relations', with a focus on individual satisfaction and commitment. This is where we distinguish between 'managing without workers' and 'managing workers with feelings', a distinction made necessary by the fact that each is influenced by different schools of thought, and corresponds to distinct managerial practices. On the other hand, none of our three perspectives overlap with all or parts of Fox's radical ideal-type because management theory is widely inspired by a definition of management as '*the action, or activity, of running an organization, commanding it, planning its development and controlling it*' (Thuderoz, 2006: 14, our translation).

This definition, given in Thuderoz's book on a sociology of management, clearly underlines the fact that management, as a research and teaching field, as well as a set of practices, fully embodies and acknowledges the unequal roles found in employment relations in companies. Accordingly, focusing on employers' pre-eminence leaves little or no space for an approach to class antagonisms.

Three perspectives in detail

The first perspective here is 'managing without workers'. Human resources are seen as a pure object of management, while practices in companies tend to reduce the workforce to a mere resource. Cadin et al. (2012) call this perspective 'instrumental' because it tends to rationalise and even 'objectify' workers, considering them a mere factor of

production, an instrument, like machines or production lines, which exist for the sake of the firm.

In this perspective, management focuses on tools it can use to measure, calculate, control and rationalise human resources. To some extent, in practice, managing human 'capital' necessarily entails a degree of objectivation of workers because employers must organise volumes and flux, such as the number of jobs and working hours, payroll and wage costs. HR management practices, however, may also tend to objectify all dimensions of workers when they focus mainly on rationalisation, procedures, control and measurements.

This strand of practice and study is influenced, implicitly or explicitly, by classical management theory as inherited from Frederick Winslow Taylor. In this framework human behaviour can and must be organised in terms of organisational structures, processes and work organisation. It also prevails in neo-Taylorist contexts such as call centres or logistics plants. As Friedberg (2011) summarises, *'for classical organisational theory, human behaviour did not constitute a problem. [...] Improvements made in the relevant structures by systematic and rigorous application of a scientific approach to organisations would make these problems, and the behaviours that produced them, disappear. The behaviour of the worker conceived as homo oeconomicus thus became perfectly predictable, each agent being expected to respond in a stereotypical and quasi-mechanical way to changes in the physical conditions of his or her environment'* (Friedberg, 2011: 15, our translation).

In such a context, there is little room, from the management's perspective, for employee voice, except in compulsory bodies and industrial relations procedures. Worker voice can then be heard either

under the umbrella of legal constraints, or as the result of organised resistance by trade unions.

The second perspective, 'managing human resources with feelings', can also be labelled 'neo-human relations' (see above). It embraces the principles of the human relations school of thought, based on the conviction that the economic function goes hand in hand with the firm's capacity to promote workers' satisfaction. In this strand, much of the human resource literature focuses on the positive economic impact of workers' satisfaction, commitment and well-being on the company's efficiency. Accordingly, management focuses on practices that are supposed to contribute to worker satisfaction, motivation, engagement or even happiness, for the sake of company performance. Pursuing worker well-being, management also tries to meet fluctuating individual needs, such as the particular needs of so-called 'millennials' or of 'generation Z'. As an archetypal example, an international network called 'Happiness@work' *'aims to increase satisfaction and happiness in the workplace. It has been found that happy people are more successful, develop a strong sense of purpose and form authentic, cooperative connections with others.'*²

The workforce in this context is thus seen as a collection of individuals with emotions, feelings and affects, which should be managed by the employer to promote the firm's performance. Compared with the classical management school's approach, *'the "human relations" movement offers a richer vision of people at work: the individual here is not only driven by money, he or she is also motivated by more or less conscious affectivity and psychological needs. However, the movement*

² <https://www.happinesswork.eu/> (accessed 2 November 2023).

remains captive to a Taylorist vision, based on a passive individual who responds in stereotyped ways to stimuli. The human relations movement only adds affective stimuli to economic ones' (Friedberg, 2011: 16, our translation).

The underlying conception of humans is still unitarist, as Edwards (2003) notes. From a unitarist standpoint, employer and employees share similar interests, organise their relationships by means of individual contracts, and recognise managers as the most – or even the sole – legitimate players. Conflict is, in such a perspective, seen as pathological. Management's role thus consists of avoiding dissatisfaction or, even better, of favouring satisfaction which, in turn, should avoid collective action. A recent focus on the psychological dimensions of the employment relationship influenced by positive psychology (Godard, 2014; Budd, 2020) brings to bear more 'diluted' notions of power and conflict, favouring a more consensual vocabulary referring to well-being, onboarding, engagement, collective intelligence and even happiness at work.

According to Sievers (1990), this perspective is also associated with an Anglophone perspective on management that promotes the individual and their personal success, rewards, choices, needs and character. In that register, work as collective and organisational action does not exist as such; rather, it is reduced to inter-individual relationships and personal bargaining between one person and the employer (psychological contract, leadership). Furthermore, in her critique of this type of thinking, Linhart (2015, also 2024) illustrates how the over-emphasis on the individual character of leaders – what she calls the '*surhumanisation*' or 'overhumanisation' of management – contributes to an overall

dehumanisation of work (see also her contribution in this issue, Linhart, 2024).

Although this perspective insists on the importance of humans, it still serves the same functionalist goal whereby workers are apprehended as resources for the firm's economic performance, under the assumption that economic performance and worker satisfaction need to go hand in hand (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). In this approach, workers tend to be seen as passive, and if their individual voice needs be heard to decipher their feelings, it is not meant to contradict management, and even less to participate in decision-making. Management remains the key actor who decides what is good for the company, as well as what is good for workers, and therefore negotiates with the employees.

Finally, a third perspective involves 'managing with humans'. The important word here is 'with' because this third perspective does not consider 'human resources' to be mere objects of management. Rather, close to Fox's pluralist paradigm, the approach sees 'human resources' as active players who have their own interests and a capacity to act in the company, also in the company's interest.

Accordingly, management policies and practices not only have to cope with workers but must also establish processes that involve a variety of actors. Management also has to start to think critically about the ethical and moral assumptions and foundations of HR management, taking an 'ethical-disciplinary' perspective (Taskin, 2021 NOT IN REFERECES LIST). This implies that managers and worker representatives need to negotiate to find common ground.

The approach here is in line with what Friedberg (2011) calls the 'nice picture' proposed by Crozier (1964): 'according to which individuals at

work not only have a hand or a heart, they have, first and foremost, a head, a project, freedom. Instead of considering workers, more or less explicitly, as passive receptacles of social structures or victims of affectivity, the approach here is focused on the underlying rationality of observed human behaviors' (Friedberg, 2011: 16, our translation).

In such a perspective, managerial debates focus on how to favour and organise worker participation, expression and autonomy. While some call for the creation and development of 'liberated firms' (for instance, Carney and Getz, 2009) and other forms of neo-participative management in which individuals are involved in decision-making (Robertson, 2016), others insist on workplace democracy, in which participation in decision-making – and sometimes ownership – is collective and representative in nature (Battilana et al., 2017; Ferreras et al., 2022). This perspective encompasses a wide range of alternatives in the governance of organisations and in human resource management, including an ethical shift towards anthropological considerations other than 'resources' (Hallée et al., 2018; Malo et al., 2019).

Among the alternative approaches to traditional HRM, sustainable HRM is one important and well-established stream (see, for instance, Ehnert et al., 2016; Kramar, 2022). This perspective integrates sustainability-related concerns in HRM practices. Within this field, 'Common-Good HRM', 'Humanistic Management' and 'Humane Management' promote 'managing with humans'. These three approaches share an alternative anthropology to homo oeconomicus, involving reflexivity and justice, and a focus on the collective rather than the individual.

'Common-Good HRM' puts collective interests above individual interests. The logic is 'external-internal', in other words focused on the

environment (Aust et al., 2020). This approach integrates the values of the common good into all HR activities (processes, policies, structure), leading HRM to develop a culture based on the values of the common good and to implement HR practices based on values such as dignity, solidarity and reciprocity (see Hoffman and Shipper, 2018; Hollensbe et al., 2014).

'Humanistic Management' proposes to broaden our consideration of the human person by going beyond the reductionism inherent in theories of motivation or capabilities, and attaching original importance to human dignity. Applied to HRM, this humanist ethos can be broken down into four major principles that characterise humanist management and its practices (Melé, 2009, 2016): first, a conception of the individual as a conscious and free being, endowed with intrinsic dignity; second, a holistic conception of society, built by singular individuals and interacting intermediary bodies that seek to ensure the common good; third, a concept of the company as a community; and fourth, a conception of business activity as a source of enrichment for society by providing goods and services in a fair and efficient manner, while respecting ecological imperatives.

'Humane Management' refers to a set of human and social activities (practices and discourse) and theories aimed at including men and women in an organisational project. The human being is considered to be a reflexive being who contributes to defining collective action standards against which his or her actions and those of a working community will be assessed. This perspective reflects a collective search for confidence in these standards, in others and in oneself. The object of

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Humane Management is work, and its purpose is recognition (Taskin and Dietrich, 2024).

Human resource management is thus seen as necessarily 'political', involving multiple actors and multiple stakeholders beyond managers (Cadin et al., 2012; Léonard and Taskin, 2019). Collective bargaining therefore appears to be one of various ways in which workers can express their interests, albeit not necessarily the only one, because various forms of participation can be put in place, such as direct participation, co-management, workplace assemblies and board-level representation (see De Spiegelaere et al., 2019).

Why would workers voice be silenced?

In this section, we look at the current 'world of work' and trends in management practices and models with a view to considering what may drive the development of one perspective or another in the future.

We focus in particular on trends affecting 'management-initiated voice', which are analysed in greater depth by the other articles in this special issue of *Transfer*.

Combined contemporary trends

The two first perspectives – *managing without humans* and *managing human resources with feelings* – may be considered mainstream approaches because they are the most popular nowadays (Malo et al., 2019). The third perspective – *managing with humans* – remains emergent, but this perspective benefits from renewed interest in the

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fields of management studies and business ethics (Hallée et al., 2018; Taskin, 2021 NOT IN REFERENCES LIST).

Based on the various articles in this special issue of *Transfer*, we identify three trends that may explain the current limitations on worker voice in organisations: financialisation of the firm's management and its consequent distance from operations and real work; management-by-process; and neo-human relations in HRM.

First, financialisation increases the distance between firm owners, managers and workers, resulting in decision-making at the top of the company in which workers' interest is far from being a key criterion (see Gouzoulis et al., 2024). Those decisions can also be made far from where collective bargaining takes place, leaving few or no space for trade unions to discuss or negotiate (Appelbaum et al., 2013; De Spiegelaere and Vitols, 2024). In addition, when it is not the firm's owners who define its orientation and goals but rather financial intermediaries, managers themselves cannot get a real mandate to implement coherent and long-term human resource policies. Therefore, not only workers, but also middle management lose power (Appelbaum et al., 2013; Gouzoulis et al., 2024). This is correlated with 'distance' in Riordan and Kowalski's words (2020): *'Distance manifests in the growing divide between those who control the material and subjective conditions of work and those who labor. Its sources lie in today's prevailing organizational practices, forms, and means of governing the employment relationship [...]. Together these affect the distribution and balance of power in the employment relationship and thus how conflict is both perceived and acted upon.'* According to them, distance is driven by financialisation: *'the rise of financial capitalism in the 1980s led to the*

spread of business models and decision-making strategies that split apart firms' management and ownership, promulgating the notion of firms as shareholder-maximizing institutions' (Riordan and Kowalski, 2020: 588).

Second, procedures and processes used in managing large and complex companies also have an impact. Building on large sets of case studies and interviews conducted in France and the United-States, Dupuy (2011, 2020) shows that, driven by increased competition, top managers tend to take control of the company via processes and reporting in modes of management that increase control, but also resistance on the shopfloor. He argues that today's companies have lost the necessary trust and simplicity that workers need to be efficient.

Management-by-process, within the framework of which objectives, tightly defined processes and control methods are defined in offices far from day-to-day tasks, not only affects workers' roles, but also that of managers themselves. Thompson (2011) uses the notion of 'disconnected capitalism' to reflect the disconnection among managers: local unit or functional managers must meet performance objectives with their teams, but are unable to do so because there is a lack of continuity in employment relationships, whereas top managers – who Thompson calls 'corporate agents' – are driven by financial practices linked to the establishment of parameters. There are, then, among management itself, competing or even conflicting objectives; what is rational from a financial point of view is not rational at all from a human resource point of view. Klinksiek addresses these managerial contradictions (Klinksiek, 2024), in the specific case of diversity, equity and inclusion practices.

Thirdly, the growing importance of management-by-process goes hand in hand with the rise of neo-human relations thinking in human resource management: in the context of work organisation led by a variety of procedures and controlled processes, the role of HRM is reduced to supporting individual employees, with a view to promoting their well-being at work (see Linhart, 2024). But while individual employees are able to express their feelings, they cannot participate in decision-making or act collectively. This is why we call this third trend 'neo-human relations in HR management'. While well-being and social cohesion have been heralded as the number one concern of HR departments – which have become specialised through the fragmentation of their activities (Caldwell, 2003) – practices such as distributed workplaces, teleworking or distance management produce social isolation and worker 'invisibilization' (Hertz, 2021; Gomez, 2019). Between distant owners, on the one hand, and a fragmented workforce on the other, HR managers tend to respond with a focus on individual employees, seen as workers with feelings, but not as actors with interests. Neo-human relations HRM then refers to this focus on 'people seen as key assets', where *'[I] labour may be an asset with value, but talk of "people are our most important asset" nowadays is likely to bring merely hollow laughter'* (Thompson, 2011: 363).

Combined, these trends reinforce instrumental practices and do not allow the renewal of HRM practices and models in the short term, while weakening workers' voice.

Back to managing without workers?

De Spiegelaere and Vitols (2024), clearly show that the degree and forms of worker participation not only vary from one country to another because of national institutional characteristics – such as the system of collective bargaining – but also because firms use different types of governance. Their study demonstrates how company-level mechanisms give or leave more or less room for worker participation. Financialisation, with the pressure that it puts on wages, fosters managerial practices that reduce worker voice: there is no room here to consider employees' interests, especially in the area of wages (see Gouzoulis et al., 2024). Similarly, network organisations that lead to fragmented workforce organisation provide a context in which employees, de facto, cannot organise their collective voice (see Helfen et al., 2024). *'Distance alters actors' interdependence and their perceived and actual power in addressing conflict'* (Riordan and Kowalski, 2020: 580).

Looking at how teaching and research in the field of human resource management have evolved over recent decades, Godard (2014) observes that the field, initially multidisciplinary and closely related to industrial relations, has become more and more influenced by industrial and organisational psychology. In his view this has four major implications for teaching and, ultimately, the practice of management:

First, the general orientation underlying it is not just unitary, but also potentially totalitarian and repressive [...]. The intended consequence is to ensure more obedient and 'motivated' employees [...]. Second [...], the growing psychologisation of employment relations means that there is less and less possibility for actually understanding these relations. The problems of motivation and control, and the dysfunctions to which they may give rise, tend to be

attributed to individual or interpersonal phenomena that can be avoided through careful selection and training/socialisation procedures if not more directly through 'performance management'. [...] Third, [...], I-O psychologists are often ill-prepared and unwilling to teach or research in areas that require any knowledge of law, economics or institutions. [...] Fourth [...], there is virtually no space for analysing or even incorporating trade unions and collective bargaining – or for that matter any form of collective representation – within a psychologised HRM. Although it is possible to conceive of interest conflicts, these conflicts are individualised, attributable to individual self-seeking and assumed to be solved by aligning individual goals with those of the organisation through various incentive schemes. (Godard, 2014: 7–8).

Budd (2020) argues that Godard's pessimistic view might nevertheless still be too optimistic because, under the influence of the discipline of organisational behaviour, there *'is a shift away from seeking to understand formal organisational policies like selection and compensation systems toward an emphasis on analysing interpersonal and leadership dynamics, accompanied by similar changes in curriculum away from HRM to leadership and OB [organizational behaviour]'* (Budd, 2020: 74).

Psychologisation reduces organisational processes to individual phenomena and ultimately removes responsibility from the organisation. Where the causes of burnout are to be found in workload, career management policy or work organisation, this psychologising perspective puts more emphasis on individual prevention and support, overlooking organisational and collective levers. By doing so, it puts a lot of emphasis

on individual emotions and is not conducive to the development of voice in a collective and representative perspective. Therefore the movement to a conception of workers as a collection of individuals who are personalities to be managed, and with no apprehension of power relations in the firm, leads to management practices that 'foster a passive workforce' and, in parallel with teaching and research, to a limited extent to conceptualise the collective and active dimensions of employment relations.

In such a context, human resource management itself, charged with managing a diverse and dispersed workforce, is understood to be inefficient, because it is unable to take employees' interests into account and to conciliate the diverse interests in the organisation. As a consequence, the 'human resource function' loses credibility and legitimacy (Thompson, 2011).

In sum, there is a structural incapacity in financialised and networked companies, but also in parts of teaching and research in human resource management influenced by positive psychology, to take workers' interests into consideration and, even more, to include employee voice in decision-making.

But also new opportunities for workers' voice

The rather gloomy picture that we paint needs to be nuanced. While the discipline of HRM and its practices can, through the process of psychologisation described above and discussed by Linhart (2024), combine overhumanisation and dehumanisation, the process of financialisation analysed by Gouzoulis et al. (2024) means that new opportunities are emerging that are worth exploring.

First, a 'neo-managerial set of representations' has recently developed that promotes non-hierarchical and decentralised organisations, in which top management coordinates the firm by means of inspirational visions rather than procedures and control (Jégou, 2023). Such a perspective is present particularly in the discourse on the 'freed company' promoted by Carney and Getz (2009). According to Getz (2016), a major movement to liberate companies and public administrations emerged in France and Belgium. However, as Dortier (2016) wisely notes, managerial discourse on the 'freed company' is paradoxical because all the books and documentaries that promote it leave no place for workers' opinion. In addition, Jégou (2023) shows that, even if one can observe participatory practices in some companies, they do not suffice to democratise the workplace, because workers are not provided with the capabilities they need for effective participation. But, he adds, this is a first step towards democratisation.

Second, still in the field of management, and more precisely in HRM, Taskin and Dietrich (2024) propose a 'humane management', or a humanist conception of HRM, centred on real work and recognition, in which workers are regarded as reflexive human beings. The perspective seems promising in its capacity to promote workers' voice, which is the concrete application of reflexive anthropology. As already mentioned, other promising but less structured initiatives and communities have emerged, such as Common-Good HRM (Aust et al., 2020) or humanistic management (Melé, 2016). While this provides theoretical roots for such alternative ways of managing organisations and people, these perspectives are still in their early stages of development in practice, and there is little sign of them materialising.

Third, outside the field of management, Ferreras et al. (2022), in their manifesto, call for more democracy at work: power must be shared more equitably with employees, especially those who have historically been in a subordinate position, such as women and racial communities. This requires more democratic decision-making bodies within firms to rebalance power between shareholders and employees. Ferreras (2023) goes further by proposing the bicameral firm, which would include two chambers governing the company. Current boards of directors would be replaced by a 'capital investors' chamber of representatives', along with a 'labour investors' chamber of representatives'. Top management, seen as the executive branch of the firm's government, would be appointed by the two chambers together. Ferreras herself defines her proposition as a 'real utopia', but she argues for its implementation in firms across the globe. According to Malleson (2023), the project of the bicameral firm is a stimulating perspective that helps us to imagine a more democratic future. Having said that, the current balance of social forces makes us pessimistic about its real-life prospects.

In sum, while the current context does not seem favourable to the development of workers' voice in HRM practices, there are other trends that tend to combine and constitute promising opportunities for the development of such practices.

Conclusion

Our initial observation is that worker voice is necessarily, albeit implicitly, part of any human resource management approach. In this article, we investigate how the field of HRM takes worker voice into account, not only in terms of worker participation mechanisms, but more broadly as

an anthropological dimension that defines how workers as human beings are treated.

We identify three different perspectives on how management considers worker voice: managing without workers, managing human resources with feelings, and managing with workers. We associate various practices and fields with each of these perspectives, showing their internal consistency.

While, according to Fox (1971), the unitary view of industrial organisations has long been abandoned by most social scientists, we argue that the unitarist perspective is still alive, in both management theories and company practices. It has two forms of expression: neo-Taylorism, in the context of firms that are financialised, networked and managed-by-processes; and neo-human relations, with a focus on individual satisfaction and commitment. In both cases, there is little room for individual and collective workers' voice.

However, contemporary trends cannot be seen as linear and homogenous. Some policies favouring more participation on the part of specific categories of workers could be seen as a step forward towards greater recognition of various types of employee. But these policies do not necessarily bring the expected outcomes, and they also leave very little room for the employees themselves to express their own ideas and intentions (Klinksiek, 2024). Similarly, while some aspects of managerial thinking may insist on workers' autonomy and free speech (Carney and Getz, 2009, for instance), their actual existence needs to be confirmed by reliable empirical data.

It is therefore important to look closely at company practices, with a view to understanding what is happening 'behind' apparently similar

processes, in line with Dupuy's analyses (2011, 2020) published in his series entitled 'Lost in Management'. For instance, the recent diffusion of various forms of working from home are accompanied by a variety of responses at company level, leading to different degrees of employee commitment.

This is precisely what the articles in this issue are intended to achieve. The article by De Spiegelaere and Vitols includes a company-level dimension in the measurement of the strength of workers' voice at the workplace. The European Participation Index (EPI) that they analyse involves not only indicators such as union density and collective bargaining coverage, but also workplace representation and board-level representation. Their article shows that worker participation has become less prevalent in the EU over the past decade. From a different perspective, the article by Gouzoulis, Galanis and Iliopoulos highlights a shift towards non-participatory, market-based human resource management systems that undermine the role of trade unions. Similarly, Helfen, Sydow and Wirth study how HRM in inter-organisational networks brings new challenges for worker representatives. In addition, Klinksiek's article studies specific managerial policies that are, in principle, meant to increase diversity, equity and inclusion, but that, in practice, generate their own processes of exclusion. Finally, in her perspective article, Linhart outlines long-term trends that affect 'human labour' today, with simultaneous pressures to transform work into a mere object, but also a subjective feature of the individual. She explains that within the framework of this trend worker voice becomes isolated and limited.

All the articles in this issue therefore underline how managerial thinking and practices tend to reduce worker voice, even if this is not their intention.

This means that we clearly need future research that will analyse the expression of employee voice in current management practice and the extent to which room is made for it. Research is needed to go beyond managerial discourse on how workers are allowed or invited to express themselves, and to collect serious empirical data on effective practices. Jégou (2023), Terlinden (2023) and De Ridder (2021) paved the way for such investigations, calling for specific methodologies that bring the researcher as close as possible to the research field, that is, to the spaces in which workers express themselves at work and about their work.

Furthermore, there is a need to re-theorise the place for collective action in current workplaces, as advocated by Bellace et al. (2021). This requires multidisciplinary capacities to understand the various components of employment relations and how these are managed in companies. This need is part of a wider and necessary re-investigation of the Community dimension of work and management. This type of research requires a multidisciplinary approach.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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