

## **Moral Economy and Human Resource Management**

Though familiar territory for political economists and anthropologists, ideas centred on the moral economy are relatively under-utilised in the study of work, organisation and management. And yet the concept of the moral economy offers various pathways of analyses central to contemporary debates on Human Resource Management; covering as it does issues concerned with modernity, economic structures and market society, and the role of agency and community within these structures. Moral economy has both material and normative dimensions that allow us to trace the Human in Human Resource Management – placing people within the material realities of a capitalist economy without losing sight of the normative commitments of community and social space.

Moral economy is capable of standing as a corrective to deterministic (not to say dismal) contemporary accounts of HRM, and the society in which operates, in two ways: 1. to address both the under and over socialised conceptions of Human in Human Resource Management by displaying the embedded nature of the economy in social institutions and human communities – note; that is the economy embedded in society, not society embedded in the economy. 2. to question the fundamental purpose of a moral economy – its processes and outcomes. It allows us to go back to basics and ask ‘What is the final objective of a market society?’. If it is geared towards generating surplus – creating wealth – who is this for? Is self-interest the only motivation? The developments in advanced economies have established a division of labour that endorses people as a means to an end – but what ultimate end? Even the strongest supporters of a market society believe wealth creation is for human good (Freidman, 1977). We might question how this is unevenly distributed but we cannot question how its distribution is effected by societal norms and beliefs (not always to the good of all parties – as ample evidence of inequalities along the lines of race, class, gender, disability show) and that we continually question ‘to what end?’ signifies that market society is not entirely unfettered and free of moral ties and/ or that self-interest has to be the only dogma (Booth, 1994; Sayer, 2000). As Sayer states: ‘The point of economic activity from this standpoint is to enable people to live well. What else could it be for?’ (Sayer, 2000: 90)

In proposing the moral economy as embedded in community, this analysis offers us a way out of circular arguments concerning HRM, its role, its management and its consequences. This is not to over-romanticise possibilities but it is to say that a critique (in the spirit of the history of critical theory) presupposes the possibilities of alternative, better ways of organising and managing the employment relationship (Sayer, 2005a) – even if a large part of us wonder if this is possible within the constraints of a vigorous capitalism. As Andrew Sayer points out: ‘The immorality of capitalism lies substantially in the fact that once our means of existence is dependent on market forces, the latter tend to trump considerations of the good’ (Sayer, 2000: 85).

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