

Seeing Beyond the Myths at Work

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In October 2000 a group of 50 leading academics met at the University of Sunderland to examine the current state of work and employment, both in the UK and abroad. Perhaps more significantly they also met to examine how work and employment is being studied, researched and theorised. The conference was largely based on discussions generated from papers presented by four leading professors of sociology, each with a long history of researching employment, the workplace and workers. These were Huw Beynon of the University of Cardiff, Richard Brown of the University of Durham, Anna Pollert of the University of Greenwich and Paul Stewart of the University of the West of England. Whilst the authors of this article organised the conference to celebrate the publication of our new book (*Myths At Work*, 2000), and to raise issues relating to the academic study of work and workplaces, we found one of the most rewarding aspects of the day was that the conference attracted the attention of a range of practitioners, such as careers guidance staff, who find themselves at the 'hard edge' of the labour market.

There was a general agreement at the conference that during the last two decades there have been profound changes in the organisation of work, and in many respects the world of work has been turned upside down. Yet we also recognised that there is continuity in the world of work and that a number of influential new perspectives on what work is today are actually myths. Careers guidance staff are located at the centre of such discussions: they try to guide people into the rapidly changing world of employment, but often do this against a backdrop of ideological and political pressure.

Realities and myths

So, what are the realities of work, and what are the myths at work? We need to consider not only the causes and consequences of changes in work and workplaces (which we shall look at below), but also our methods for researching and analysing work and workplaces. Quite simply, a major problem facing anyone who is interested in work and employment today is: whose account of the modern workplace do they listen to? One of the problems in recent years has been in gaining access to research sites, particularly access to 'new workplaces', i.e. workplaces that are characterised by an absence of worker power and trade union influence, dominated by notions of human resource management and employment insecurity. Such environments are wary of researchers who may wish to view their workplace, interview their workers over time and ultimately publish what may be critical

accounts of their employment practices. Trade unions have lost the ability they had in the past to open doors for researchers who are compiling detailed case studies based on a comprehensive understanding of all social actors who feature in the workplace. Huw Beynon's study of industrial relations in the motor industry, *Working For Ford* (1984), and Anna Pollert's account of women tobacco workers, *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives* (1981), were only possible because of trade union support.

Frequently, good critical research has been replaced by work which is less than balanced and offers a 'top-down' approach that utilises only the views of managers, industry analysts or leading politicians. A prime example of this trend was *The Machine that Changed the World* by Womack, Jones & Roos (1990). This book examined the international

automobile industry and concluded that in order to survive, all manufacturers must adopt 'lean' work strategies, i.e. must cut back on labour costs, adopt team working and quality control, and curtail or eradicate trade union power. Despite the fact that the research took five years and several millions of dollars to complete, the views of the workers and trade unionists involved do not feature in any way in the book. Consequently, the work has been widely criticised by discerning researchers and employers, and its many recommendations have been disregarded by those who saw the work as an ideologically driven, one-sided account of new work strategies. Nevertheless this piece of research had an immense influence in the business world and contributed to the propagation of the myth that lean production was the only way forward for manufacturing.

Unbalanced and uncritical workplace studies

Links between business interests and the development of the study of work and industry are not new. There is a strong tradition of industrial sociologists and psychologists working as 'servants of power', and this is hardly surprising given that academics and researchers are frequently paid by the state, its agencies or business-financed corporations. Inevitably there is pressure to be 'accountable' to the paymasters and to produce work that is 'relevant' and 'useful' in their terms. But this tradition has coexisted with another one, namely that of critical studies of workplace relations: a tradition that has its roots in sociology and is informed by the countervailing ethos of academic freedom producing objective social science and value-free research. It was to that tradition that many of those attending the conference in October 2000 wished to see a return, arguing that it was simply too easy to focus exclusively on the accounts offered by the more powerful and privileged elements in society and to use them as a basis for the construction of theory.

Unbalanced and uncritical workplace studies, or simply management-speak turned into actuality, have amalgamated with the interests of business leaders and right-wing political perspectives, and this is the background to the emergence of the 'mythical' picture of work in contemporary society. These myths are 'at work' in two ways. Firstly, they are widely held beliefs about work that many feel cannot be challenged, but equally cannot be substantiated. Secondly, these myths are active components that influence future developments in organisations and government policies. In *Myths at Work* we have selected and challenged what we consider to be the most influential of these myths, but we recognise that we could have included even more. Those that we challenge and which need to be confronted in academia, careers guidance and training policy formation, include:

- the so-called 'death of class', where the working class and the unemployed appear to be less vocal, less dissatisfied and less worthy of study;
- the myth of the female take-over of the workplace, which portrays women workers as successful, achieving equality and replacing men;
- the myth that trade unions are now superfluous due to the achievement of harmonious workplace relations and an end to industrial conflict;
- the myth that non-standard work and employment flexibility is a good option for all workers, allowing greater choice and more freedom;
- the myth that UK training strategies support young and re-training workers and prepare them for jobs in the 'knowledge economy';
- the myth that technology and science can solve all workplace-related problems and provide suitable solutions to businesses facing crises;
- the myth that the world of work has been changed beyond recognition by external forces of globalisation that are wholly beyond our control.

All of these myths need to be challenged if we are to be able to offer an account of what work actually is today, and what it actually means to people involved in it. Unless we do challenge these myths, we will continue to perpetuate a situation where we, as groups of academics, practitioners or individuals, are inhibited by a lack of clear knowledge of what we are actually trying to focus on. We need to start from a level position that does not blithely accept the status quo.

The need to hear the voices of all those involved in work

In *Myths at Work*, we challenge the myths by drawing on our own case-study evidence and that gathered by others. We argue that it is vitally

important to hear the voices of *all* of those involved in work, not just the most influential. We also argue that we need to present *critical* accounts of what work has been and what it is now, rather than the normative accounts that we find prevalent today. From our research, and from the case studies of others, we would specifically challenge the key ideas about contemporary work in the following ways:

- Globalisation is an important factor in contemporary society, but it is neither new nor omnipotent. Too often employers will use globalisation as an unspecified factor that can be used as a stick to beat workers with. In addition, globalisation becomes an excuse for a lack of government intervention in both the public and private sectors. Effectively, we feel that globalisation is used as a smokescreen to pass risk from employers to employees.
- This clearly informs issues of flexibility and lean production, the two myths that have wrought the most overt changes in workplaces. Yet there is little or no evidence that lean production is a superior form of production, and our research would suggest that flexibility has serious negative consequences for workers who are forced to be flexible, as opposed to those who choose 'portfolio working'.
- Feminisation of work – the replacement of male workers by female workers – is claimed to have adverse consequences for men, but is also claimed to be inevitable. Stories about boys' relatively poor performance in schools and men's labour market disadvantage are common in the media, while politicians and educationalists are already devising policies to set things right. In reality, women continue to face enormous disadvantages in employment, not least because their role as unpaid domestic workers in the home, particularly for married women and mothers, remains unchanged.

- Class is still a major issue, and our research shows class to be the most significant factor in deciding employment outcomes and attitudes towards work. It is also the major social division in workplaces and a key determinant of the ways in which conflict in workplaces will emerge.
- We cannot deny that industrial disputes have declined in recent years. But it is simply foolish to claim that this means that we now work in harmonious workplaces. Much of our research points to continued and continuous resistance to, for example, rationalisation and endless change in particular workplaces. Again, we return to our main point that we need to listen to *all* voices involved in work to get a true picture of what is happening on the ground.
- Youth training policy is trumpeted as a major success by the current government, and on paper it certainly has achieved impressive successes. However, we have to ask the question, 'What jobs are we training people for?'. The perception that we have either entered or are on the brink of a 'knowledge' or 'information' society has become increasingly commonplace within managerialist accounts of workplace change, government public policy rhetoric and some academic texts. These are not new, and we have yet to see these jobs emerge.
- The idea that science and technology will 'rescue' failing companies or 'cure' workplace problems is also not a new one, but is so deeply entrenched in management 'science' that it has become the default option for change. Yet we can see that trying to use science and technology to solve social issues in workplaces will simply produce more problems.

Key themes

The challenges to the dominant myths about work which were made at the conference in October and in *Myths at Work* are contentious. However, our primary argument is that we must challenge these myths at the outset of any research or analysis of what work is, and we must actually look at workplaces and employment rather than simply assimilating accounts from other, often partisan, witnesses. At the day conference, two final key themes emerged:

- How can academics influence policy and decision making?
- How can academics feed something back into the workplaces and the people who make work possible?

In order to develop an accurate picture of work, there is a need for academics to build links with those who can help to develop an accurate picture of the problems facing workers. That includes practitioners at the interface of work and training who also wish to see beyond the myths at work.

Notes

One of the practical suggestions that emerged from the conference was the development of a website, which could carry information, and articles, which would be of value to academics, practitioners, trade unionists, etc. If you are interested in this development, please contact mark@bss1.bham.ac.uk

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