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Hard Times and the ‘Fact’ and Fancy’ of Modern Labour Management

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Abstract

Dickens believed that, played out in practical terms, the pursuit of a totally rationalised society devoid of ‘Fancy’ only served to benefit those in power to the impoverishment of those in their charge. He was appalled by a selfish and self-interested philosophy that combined with laissez-faire capitalism to reduce human effort to mere numbers for the sole purpose of determining its monetary worth. His story thus provides a rebuke to the dehumanising effects of utilitarianism and the way it is used to calculate workers in the manner of machines; reducing them to little more than a resource that is no more or less important any other resource used in industrial enterprise. Their modern-day counterparts live in similar Hard Times in being in the grip of laissez-fair economics of global proportions, which visits upon them similar conceptions of their worth, as evidenced by the current precariousness of their employment and their present exposure to the vicissitudes of arbitrary power exercised by managements still wedded to utilitarian principles. As a result, the ‘light of Fancy’ that at one time would periodically burst through in earnest storms of protest, is now refracted into cynical asides directed at rational systems that continue to standardise and homogenise all that ‘counts’ in working life.

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1. Introduction

Thomas Gradgrind is the central character in Charles Dickens’s (1854) *Hard Times*, and he is as he thinks, being indefatigably rigid, mechanised and monotone in attitude and appearance, with ‘obstinate carriage, square coat, square legs, square shoulders’ (HT 2015, book.1, chapter.1). He expounds a philosophy of calculated self-interest, viewing human behaviour as best governed by rational rules, such that he is ‘with rule and pair of scales, and multiplication table always, ... [and] ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you what it comes to’ (bk.1, ch.2). It is a philosophy that has yielded success, making him a fortune as a hardware merchant, a profession trading in hard materials, and so a hard reality. He was a member of parliament, a position that regularly dealt with tabulated statistical data as a means of deciding hard policy that effected the material circumstances of people’s lives, and so their hard reality. In short, he evinces the spirit of the early industrial age in regarding humans in the manner of machines, whose nature and behaviour can be observed as empirical ‘Facts’ and subjected to scientific principles based on the utilitarian philosophies of the likes of Hume (1738), Bentham

(1823) and Stuart Mill (1863). The sum of these philosophies prescribed a normative ethics that deemed any action to be moral if it maximised utility, defined as the greatest happiness for the greatest number after deducting the aggregate suffering of all involved in the action.

In the story Thomas Gradgrind propagates his philosophy of success to students. He is the bastion of 'Fact' and his model school teaches nothing but facts, with deduction, analysis and mathematics exhausting the curriculum, leaving no place for imaginative and aesthetic subjects. The same philosophy is propagated to his children, who he expects in every instance of their lives to apply his utilitarian principles. They as a result lead monotonous, uniform existences, untouched by pleasure, their fantasies and feelings dulled. They become almost mechanical themselves. In the early chapters Dickens's narrative is mocking and ironic in its treatment of Gradgrind, but as it unfolds a certain sympathy emerges. This occurs when his children admit to failures in their lives. His daughter, Louisa, confesses to him that she is missing something important in life and is desperately unhappy in her marriage. His son, Tom, robs Bounderby's bank. Bitzer, a model pupil, adheres unwaveringly to Gradgrind's utilitarian teachings and leaves school an uncompassionate egoist. These failures see Gradgrind eventually reflect on his system of education and causes a crisis of faith in his utilitarian god: 'The ground on which I stand has ceased to be solid under my feet. The only support on which I leaned, and the strength of which it seemed ... impossible to question, has given way' (bk.3, ch.1). He comes to feel love and sorrow, exultation and regret, and through it all becomes a wiser and humbler man, who in his daily affairs resolves to make 'Facts and Figures subservient to Faith, Hope and Charity' (bk.3, ch.9).

But there is more to this reflective revelation that animates the story. For *Hard Times* provides a requiem for the need to balance 'Fact' with 'Fancy' in its embellishment of the caricatures of 19th century utilitarianism. What counts as 'Fancy' is anything borne of imagination and beauty, anything not purely functional or instrumental. In the narrative it is epitomised by Sleary's Circus, which offers a counterpoint to the rationale of capitalism and its utilitarian values. In the bleakness of Coketown's smoke filled drabness, the location of the story, it is the Circus that offers fanciful respite from the hardships and monotony of industrial and bodily toil. It is a world in which horses dance the polka and fly about in the imagination for the simple pleasure of it all. Sleary is reckoned by Gradgrind to be a fool, but the wider narrative portrays him as being wise for understanding why people need to be amused: 'They can't be alwayth a working, they an't made for it'; and '...there ith a love in the worl, not all thelf-intereth after all; but thomething very different' (bk.3, ch.8). 'Fancy' is also found in the form of Sissy, the daughter of one of the circus performers, who does badly at school for day-dreaming and failing to remember the many facts she is taught. She is at the same time depicted as genuinely virtuous and emotionally fulfilled for it. The Pegasus Arms, the inn that houses the Circus troupe, also harks to 'Fancy' in its statue of a winged horse and like adornments (HT 2015, bk.1, ch.6), a place in the narrative where horses can 'walk up and down the sides of rooms' of the imagination (bk.1, ch.2). And finally, the factory workers, bedraggled and begrudge as necessary instruments of the machines they operate during the day, spend their evenings in the Coketown library reading of other lives in other places, their favoured flights of 'Fancy' being books that speak of 'human nature, human passions, human hopes and fears, the struggles, ... the lives and deaths, of common men the women.' (bk.1, ch.8).

2. Calculation begets control, begets predication, begets legitimacy

The following discussion draws on Dickens's story and its caricatures to highlight the paucity of 'Fancy' in modern labour management systems predicated on utilitarian principles. In so doing it

is a playful yet pointed coupling of a seemingly pertinent literary allegory with some personal reflections about the nature of such systems, the aim being to highlight an imbalance in their thinking. The contemporary application of these principles seeks to reduce the subjective behaviour and attitudes of workers to objective figures (e.g., Lumpkin & Dess 1996; Wall & Wood 2005; Darwish 2013). In concert with Gradgrind and his philosophical stand, they demur all-too-readily to his guiding principle: ‘Facts, Facts, nothing but Facts. ...Facts alone are wanted in life ... root out everything else...’ (, bk.1, ch.1). In so doing they are said to herald the most efficient use of labour, one that fixes accountabilities (Phillips 1999), is rationally based and morally justified (Greenwood 2011). Past systems of labour management simply involved the surveillance of men producing tangible product on assembly lines housed in large factories; places where leading hands, foremen, supervisors and their like, formed hierarchies of watching and control, with their avoidance through soldiering and striking providing labour with its greatest workplace sport (Abbott 2015). Workers under this regime lived the legacies of Gradgrind’s Victorian England. They were mere appendages to the machines they operated, thereby rendering them akin to the ‘Coketown [workers] generically called “Hands” – a race who would have found more favour with some people, if Providence had seen fit to make them only hands’ (bk.1, ch.10). The technologies involved made it easy to discipline and control workers, such that calculating personal performances was either meaningless or incidental to determining the performance of the machines they operated. Hence the ‘Facts’ of machines rather than of the people who worked them took all before it in determining productive efficiencies, measured in terms of speed, output and downtime. The ‘Facts’ of machines put into the service of industrial enterprise at the time sat easily with the prevailing dominance of science, thereby enforcing and supporting the view that what can be rationally calculated can be controlled, and what can be controlled can be predicted.

True there were feigns along the way from humanist thinkers who promised more spirited endeavours from workers if they were considered other than simply ‘Hands’. Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs, McGregor’s (1960) theory X and theory Y, and Herzberg’s (1966) hygiene factors all pointed in this direction. But regardless of whether the promise was embraced or otherwise, whether management conciliated or cajoled those in their charge, such efforts remained true to Gradgrind’s philosophical principles. The utilities and dis-utilities of the psychology of work were simply added to the utilities and dis-utilities of physical work. Calculating the outcomes of work carried on as before in simply measuring the tangible results of psychology and its attendant behaviour. Anything less ran the risk of performances being gauged by subjective standards or woolly asides, ran the risk of rendering measures suspect and so also the effective control of labour. Or as the ‘gentleman’ supporter of Gradgrind opined: ‘[Y]ou must discard [such] Fancy altogether,... must have nothing to do with it’(bk.1, ch.2). But if ‘Facts’ are the precondition for controlling labour, so also are they necessary for the legitimacy of managerial authority upon which that control rests. So calculation begets control begets legitimacy, with each partaking of and sustaining the other; akin to the triumvirate arrangements that sustained the monastic orders and ecclesial authority of middle Europe in the middle ages.

So has anything changed? In the materiality of enterprise much has changed, but in the rationales applied to justify managerial legitimacy and control there has been very little. The quintessential post-modern organisation now produces intangible services in vastly diffused workplaces, such that shadowing labour housed in a single location and calculating its tangible output is now no longer effective, or even possible. Hence, calculating the machines people once worked has turned more squarely towards calculating people themselves. Psychometric testing, bars

performance measures and bio-data questionnaires now reduce personalities to numbers, whilst managerial response loops, participation arrangements and quality circles provide readily observable access to thoughts and attitudes. These and similar measures are aimed at auditing performance and fixing accountabilities (Godard 2014), gathering and relaying 'Facts' (Boxall 2012), all of which are tabulated and scientifically weighed against current and future standards of expectation to determine their worth. Such a utilitarian calculus itself feeds off the unitarian assumptions of conflict-free work-zones, whereby the 'greatest happiness' is said to be realised for the 'greatest number' when all toil unquestioningly for the 'greater good'. Hence, Gradgrind's philosophical system marches merrily on to the tune of its 19th century utilitarian visionaries.

3. Conscripting moral justifications where none would otherwise exist

But in applying utilitarian principles to the management of labour a fundamental misunderstanding occurs, one eventually recognised by Gradgrind but still missed by his modern-day, real life counterparts. Much of this misunderstanding rests on the assumption that decisions based on the rational calculation of hard performance data are 'neutral'. Applied to the management of labour it is held to be the only means for its fair and equitable treatment (Ashdown 2014). As a view common enough ascribed, it is accompanied by the assumption that calculating the 'Facts' is 'naturally' ethical for the benefits such fairness and equality represents for the 'greatest number'. The paradox here is that the aversion to 'Facts' as a neutral and natural precondition for moral justification is itself predicated, not on fact, but on *belief*. It is an aversion similar to the way churches, priests and devotees have a materiality capable of calculation, whereas the edifice of religious conviction upon which these things rest can do little but appeal to belief. The unmediated reference to 'Facts' as a precondition to moral justification is simply asserted (Bhaskar 1989; Feyerabend 2002). For the reliance on performance data alone is in *fact* little more than a disinterested administrative method, one that allows 'Facts' to be *conscripted* covertly into the service of management by the measure of their interpretation, in the same way as priests interpret the bible in church sermons given to devotees. Such interpretation finds its equivalent in the observation made by the bank manager in *Hard Times*, Josiah Bounderby, who declares that '[w]hat is called Taste is only another name for Fact.' Applied in a contemporary context, rather than being natural through its neutrality in serving the ethical interests of the 'greatest number', the interpretation of hard performance data is more often reckoned for ends that are either personal (if career-minded) or corporate (if existentially ambitious). As a consequence, far fuller regard is paid by those in positions of power to the ends of data by comparison to the means by which the data are realised. Nowhere is this more evident than in the use of 'Facts' to justify actions taken in the service of a 'greater good', to be realised at some indeterminate time in the future, with the very same 'Facts' being used simultaneously to call on greater sacrifice by those providing the means over the interim; an interim, as so often happens, that is perpetually extended. And so it is here that utilitarianism has one of its greatest utilities in the way that it provides management with a covering doctrine of moral justification for its treatment of labour where none would otherwise exist.

But there is more to the story of a disinterested administrative method as a form of moral justification. Memory is always the enemy of such method, whether serving the more immediate aims of self interested managers or longer-term corporate ends. For it raises uncomfortable questions about distant rationales used to justify past administrative actions that are inconsistent with present-day rationales and actions (perhaps why so very little history figures in management text books and degrees) (Ralston-Saul 1992). Take labour management processes prior to the

modern adoption of human resource management and a time when industrial relations processes were justified in the name of *controlling the risks* of industrial enterprise. Calculated collective bargaining afforded predictable security for workers and a predictable future for business investment. Such calculations worked relatively well in a Bretton Woods world, when national economies were protected by tariffs and public policies ameliorated the worst excesses of capitalism. The rationale used for managing labour through collective employment contracts was hardly given a second glance, let alone questioned (Abbott & Kelly 2005).

Now it is *presentation of risk* rather than the prospect of predictability that is used to control labour. The uncertainty of an increasingly globalised and risk-fraught economy presents business with unprecedented opportunities to threaten labour into submission and undermine institutions formally established to protect its interests (i.e., collective bargaining, trade unionism, state welfare and labour tribunals). Such actions are now rationalised by the widely acclaimed and largely unquestioned need for ever-more flexible employment arrangements for the sake of corporate survival (Abbott & Kelly 2005). Forgotten to the administrative method of managing labour is the former understanding loosely held towards the moral need to provide some measure of security for those disadvantaged in the industrial process; if only to ward off the nebulous attraction of communism or as a paternalistic gesture consistent with Macmillan-style conservatism. Now it is the morality of the market, such that it is, under an assumed disinterested rationality that sheets very little, if any, moral responsibility back to the managers of labour, save only what is necessary to satisfy the short-term interests of shareholders. Certainly the management of labour and its performance is no longer the responsibility Teflon-coated directors who are contractually and administratively protected from such risks, even if those subject to their decisions and hard performance measures are not. All of this of course harks to the works of Beck (1992), Lash and Urry (1994), and others (e.g., Matten 2004; Mythen 2014), and their variously presented risk society thesis, which can be coupled with the presentation of such risk being used to justify and morally support risk-aversion actions - *inter alia* Foucault's (2010) governmentality argument.

Hence, the rationale and moral logic that now underpins modern labour management, and most notably so in its human resource management manifestation. Its rationale and moral logic is most pronounced in proclaiming dynamic and heterogeneous business environments require dynamic and heterogeneous work practices (i.e., flexible and de-standardised labour), which in turn require dynamic and heterogeneous knowledge workers (i.e., smart and self motivated labour), which in turn require dynamic and heterogeneous labour management practices (i.e., empowered and inclusive labour processes) (Martin 2010). Yet all this contains a certain dilemma for management: 'How do we maintain control over labour and its future direction and thus ensure our legitimacy remains viable, at the same time encourage bloody-minded workers to think and act autonomously in the interests of the firm'. In the past the control of labour was simply externalised through its on-going supervision and surveillance or via the pace of assembly-line machinery (Abbott 2015). The utilities and dis-utilities of labour under such arrangements were largely left to their own devices in line with Gradgrind's conception of human behaviour being akin to machines; labour's worth (its utility) was merely rewarded in accordance with what would attract and retain its services (its disutility); in short, its 'purchase and maintenance', to apply the analogy.

The trick is to now internalises this control at the same time convince workers to act on their own volition, but only insofar as acting flexibly and knowledgeably in the interests of their employers.

So how is this trick achieved? The utilities and dis-utilities of labour are simply no longer left to caprice, or to the market as the popular management myth would have, but are instead manipulated through organisational discourses, corporate culture and other labour management practices that are consciously and capriciously aimed at the interpellation of workers as to where their 'true' utility lies (Godard 2014). Gone are the days when the wage for effort exchange was calculated in accordance with labour laws or the reach of trade union power. Today the modern labour management technique aims to develop a psychological bond of loyalty and commitment that 'goes beyond the contract' (Martin 2010). It thus tries to befuddle old utilities, with common enough refrains proclaiming: 'Act in *our* best interests in this risk-fraught business environment or we will all be out of a job'; or, 'Remember we are a team and teams stick together'. By all means think independently and act flexibly, but only do so insofar as it is in the 'best interests of the firm', and most certainly not in ways that will identify you as a 'non-team player'. Such fare aspires to a 'manufactured utility', as it were, one in which workers come to voluntarily believe, rightly or wrongly, that their 'greatest happiness', indeed their very utility, is best served through close identification with their employing organisations (Abbott 2015). But for businesses this is a utility of a type that still needs to be closely monitored, lest the engagements involved find labour drifting independently into self-contrived backwaters. So the calculated outcomes of such engagements remain important, still need to be weighed and measured against standards of expectation in the manner of Gradgrind's 'Facts' determining 'Worth'. Hence the illusion of autonomy supersedes any independence in substance (Wilkinson et al. 2007). It is a 'false engagement' akin to a 'false consciousness', to parody Marx (or rather Engels 1893); or a 'contested terrain' that lives on under a 'simulacrum' of phoney consensus, to introduce Bendix (1974) to Baudrillard (1994). In short, calculated control based on the 'Facts' of engagement is still calculated control, whether it is recognised as such or masquerades under the banner of a 'manufactured' psychological contract.

But for all this, it has to be said, not all 'Fancy' in the workplace has been neutered by the unwavering focus on 'Fact'. For it finds its outlet in subdued and often subversive ways that go largely unnoticed. Workers know how things are. Although it may not be articulated as such, they know that utilitarian rationales and their associated accountabilities, the calculation and tabulation of figures, miss much of working life that cannot be accounted for. They know that relying on 'Facts' alone separates itself out from other 'human-all-too-human' characteristics, such as spirit, appetite, anger, trust, passion, compassion, humanity, jealousy, faith, intuition, will, recollection, and all manner of emotions, feelings and subjective traits that defy precise measurement and calculation. Such fare are of course abhorred by management in the manner as Gradgrind's children being pulled away by their father from their 'degraded position' when trying to witness the 'Fancy' of Sleary's Circus (bk1, chp.3). But it is in the slurry of this position that 'Fancy' is nurtured and sustained, where it finds its most obvious form. Not in the imaginative and creative cognition of workers in the manner that management would wish, but instead in the humour and carnival delivered in the rhetoric of irony, sarcasm and mockery; in the whispered tittering between the likeminded in office corridors and factory mess rooms that challenge the empty noblesse of the rationales offered in the name of their governance. It exists as a means of providing workers with moments of respite from the ever-present control that calculation bestows upon their efforts. Or to put it another way, 'Fancy' is that cynical distance workers maintain from the 'Facts' of their working lives, which allows them to cope, allows them to go on in spite of the rationales and accountabilities that are so obviously misleading and so objectively fallacious (Zizek 1989).

4. Conclusion

Reason applied to ‘Facts’ in utilitarian thinking is almost universally held to protect against injustice and act as a check against the illegitimate use of power. In the hands of humanist thinkers it was used to undermine religious dogma and the arbitrary power of monarchs in the 18th and 19th centuries (Ralston Saul 1992). Its encroachment in the industrial age began with Adam Smith’s (1776) pin factory, become pronounced with Alfred Marshall’s (1890) neo-classical economics and was given widespread practical affect with Frederick Taylor’s (1911) scientific management. Reason’s advance in this realm has continued unabated, finding form in all manner of contemporary management studies and business practice, from labour economics to human resource management, from organisational behaviour to Harvard School case studies. So much so that reason based on rational utility has now reached such mythical proportions that any human characteristic that falls outside its basic scriptures is driven to the margins of doubtful respectability (Alverson & Willmott 2012). Idealistic thoughts resplendent of imagination and the ‘Fancy’ of ‘horses running up and down walls’ (bk.1, ch.2), are thus rejected with the practical effect that reason is now little more than the embodiment of structure and an administrative technique that is easily manipulated by those with management expertise to define the nature, course and expected outcomes of the technique.

As a result, reason is now used by this quarter to shroud the arbitrary exercise of power; something it originally set out to destroy almost half a millennium ago. In contemporary organisational settings it is conscripted to legitimise a power based on ‘Fact’ over ‘Fancy’, of the reasonable over the unreasonable, of those possessed of education and managerial skills over those not so possessed (Ralston Saul 1992). In the hands of industrial managers its forms are now manipulated through a methodology based on specialised rational knowledge, which is selectively applied to endorse administrative means aimed at engineering predetermined ends that best serve particular purposes. In so doing its former links to advancing the cause of justice have been severed, with rational calculation becoming the servant of the self-serving. The world of work has consequently become short-sighted and sclerotic, bereft of any moral fixity and any viable ethical alternative (Klikauer 2013). Gradgrind’s failure in relation to the education of his children has thus become personified on modern relief, with workers finding their imagination and creativity stifled by rules of reason, one and all finding parallels in the utilitarian limitations imposed on life’s possibilities felt by Louisa and the cause of Tom’s rebelliousness towards his employer.

In the magazine that serialised *Hard Times* (1854), Dickens was moved to offer a ‘Preliminary Word’ that tied the central theme of story to the aims of the magazine:

No mere utilitarian spirit, no iron building of the mind to grim realities, will give harsh tone to our *Household Words*. In the bosoms of the young and old, of the well-to-do and of the poor, we would tenderly cherish that light of Fancy which is inherent in the human breast; which, according to nature, burns with an inspiring flame, or sinks into a sullen glare, but which (or woe betide the day!) can never be distinguished. To show to all, that in the familiar things, even in those which are repellent on the surface, there is Romance enough, if we would but find out: - to teach the hardest workers at this whirling wheel of toil, that their lot is not necessarily a moody, brutal Fact, excluded from the sympathies and graces of imagination; to bring the greater and the lesser degree, together, upon that wide field, and mutually dispose them to a better acquaintance and a kinder understanding.’

Dickens believed that, played out in practical terms, the pursuit of a totally rationalised society devoid of ‘Fancy’ only served to benefit those in power to the impoverishment of those in their charge. He was appalled by a selfish and self-interested philosophy that combined with laissez-faire capitalism to reduce human effort to mere numbers for the sole purpose of determining its monetary worth. His story thus provides a rebuke to the dehumanising effects of utilitarianism and the way it is used to calculate workers in the manner of machines; reducing them to little more than a resource that is no more or less important any other resource used in industrial enterprise. Their modern-day counterparts live in similar *Hard Times* in being in the grip of laissez-faire economics of global proportions, which visits upon them similar conceptions of their worth, as evidenced by the current precariousness of their employment and their present exposure to the vicissitudes of arbitrary power exercised by managements still wedded to utilitarian principles. As a result, the ‘light of Fancy’ that at one time would periodically burst through in earnest storms of protest, is now refracted into cynical asides directed at rational systems that continue to standardise and homogenise all that ‘counts’ in working life.

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