Agonism and the Possibilities of Ethics for HRM

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Abstract This paper provides a critique and re-evaluation of the way that ethics is understood and promoted within mainstream Human Resource Management (HRM) discourse. We argue that the ethics located within this discourse focuses on bolstering the relevance of HRM as a key contributor to organizational strategy, enhancing an organization's sense of moral legitimacy and augmenting organizational control over employee behaviour and subjectivity. We question this discourse in that it subordinates the ethics of the employment relationship to managerial prerogative. In response, we suggest a different model of the relationship between ethics and HRM—one that finds the possibility of ethics in the contestation and destabilization of HRM. Such ethics arises through resistance to moral normalization and the constraint of freedom and difference. The contribution of our paper is in theorising the possibilities of a relationship between ethics and HRM that does not place HRM at its centre, as chief intermediary of the ethics of the employment relationship, but rather sees HRM as being a powerful player in a set of what Mouffe calls 'agonistic' socio-ethical relations.

Keywords Agonism · Human Resource Management · Employee Relations · Organizational Ethics · Politics · Resistance

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Introduction

The relationship between ethics and HRM has been the subject of much discussion in recent years as a response to what was, sometime ago, dubbed as an 'ethical turn' in HRM (Barratt 1999; see also Winstanley and Woodall 2000a). The turning point was the subsequently well-established proposal that ethics should be a matter considered central to the HRM function (Macklin 2006; Sloan and Gavin 2010). As it has developed, this amounts to a normative discourse that seeks to identify and prescribe what organizations should do to be deemed ethical in the way that they manage people (qua human resources). At its most sanguine, it has been suggested the HR function should aspire to being a 'guardian of ethics' (Lowry 2006, p. 173), an ethical steward (Winstanley et al. 1996) or the 'champion of corporate ethics' (Gilley et al. 2008, p. 193).

In this paper, we take issue with the way that ethics is understood within the mainstream discourse of HRM—a managerialist discourse that privileges notions of performance and organizational legitimacy (Alvesson 2009) and that has become the preferred way 'to frame employment management issues […] in the putatively globalized economy' (Delbridge and Keenoy 2010, p. 799). We argue that mainstream HRM discourse reflects a simplified, de-politicized and one-sided perspective on the nature of the employment relationship. We develop a critique of this discourse such that its 'managerialist assumptions and language may be denaturalized and challenged' (ibid, p. 800). We contend that this discourse is neither ethical nor practical in that it overestimates the power of HRM practice to drive an ethical agenda as well as attempting to set this agenda in a manner that privileges managerial prerogative as itself being the source of ethics. With such an approach, the ethical is subsumed under the managerial. If

such a subsumption is taken seriously, we argue, then the ultimate responsibility for the ethics of the employment relationship would rest entirely with a managerial elite which is beholden to pursue the instrumental business goals of the organization. Furthermore, this would mean that any ethics in HRM is a handmaiden supporting that pursuit.

Not satisfied with 'forms of criticism which only resist HRM', we respond by providing a 'theoretical alternative' (Janssens and Staeyert 2009, p. 143) as to how the relationship between HRM and ethics might be located in a radical democratic perspective (Mouffe 1996, 2000a). In suggesting this alternative we do not aim to provide a system of ethics nor do we seek to develop a normative position as to how ethics might be achieved. Instead, we consider the conditions under which ethics can be and have been practically brought to bear in and on HRM. These conditions are related to how ethics can arise through the contestation and destabilization of HR practice such that the yoke that has attempted to inevitably connect ethics with managerial prerogative might be uncoupled. We do so to open up the consideration of possible ethical practices related to the employment relationship that acknowledges HRM as only one player in a contested political terrain, a terrain characterised by multiple and potentially incommensurable interests, interpretations and ethical standpoints. We thus suggest that ethics can arise in relation to HRM through processes of political 'agonism' (Mouffe 2000a, b, c) whereby conflicting positions are brought together in democratic interaction and where the ethics favoured in the name of HRM represents but one of those positions. We conclude with a discussion of ethics practised through dissent and resistance to HRM.

Ethics and HRM

It has been argued (Greenwood 2002, p. 266) that the extant literature on the ethics of HRM is dominated by two approaches. The first focuses on making assessments of the normative systems of HRM at a macro level, for example, as they relate to the values embedded in HRM discourse generally. The second approach works at a micro level so as to evaluate particular HRM practices as they can be related to ethics (Scott 2005; Winstanley et al. 1996; Winstanley and Woodall 2000b). Such a distinction echoes Legge's (1995) more general contrast between the 'rhetoric' and 'reality' of HRM. By this account, it is suggested that HRM rhetoric is not so much an experiential reality of practice, but an exercise of confident 'managerial triumphalism' that expounds what its pundits would like HRM to be like (Legge 1995, p. 325). HRM is thus not just a practice, but also a 'discursive resource' through which practitioners can understand and direct their own practice

(Watson 1995). As such, HRM rhetoric is an articulation of the normative discourse that Greenwood (2002) associates with macro level perspectives of ethical HRM as well as being a part of a broader 'HRM project' (Mueller and Carter 2005).

It is this HRM discourse, specifically as it relates to ethics, that we are focussed on interrogating in this paper. In addressing this topic, we note that this is not just a matter that privileges theory over practice. It has long been accepted that with HRM, there is and should be, a close relationship between the academic and professional communities—forming as Adler and Bartholomew (1992) argue a 'community of discourse uniting academics and professionals' (p. 567). Such a 'community' is not formed through direct applications of academic theory to practice, but rather emerges from the more general 'HRM project' that is 'predicated on the notion that the discourse of HRM is closely intertwined with the shift in power relations between employers, managers, employees and trade unions from the early 1980s onwards' (Mueller and Carter 2005, p. 369). Constituting what has been called 'mainstream HRM discourse', the uniting focus is a managerialist orientation that prizes the functional and organizational benefits of HRM, most especially as it can contribute to strategy, organizational performance, job performance and cultural alignment (Alvesson 2009)

The way that HRM can make such a contribution has traditionally been understood based on two different conceptions of the strategic management of people, commonly referred to as hard and soft HRM. Although this terminology is less commonly used within scholarly HRM debate than it once was (Delbridge and Keenoy 2010), the central thrust of these concepts, and the models from which they were derived, remains pervasive in the contrasting strategies of command and control management with high involvement and high commitment management (see Bamber et al. 2009; Thompson 2011). Moreover, this historical distinction bears direct traces to how HRM discourse has been conceived in relation to the more recent development of a normative ethics for HRM.

The Michigan model of strategic Human Resource Management (HRM) as developed and advocated by Fombrun et al. (1984) is the basis of what has come to be known as hard HRM (see Guest 1987; Storey 1992). Hard HRM considers HRM as being a strategy the purpose of which is to derive the greatest univocal benefit for capital from the human resource (Storey 1989). This downplays the interests of stakeholders other than shareholders and avers that employees are solely a resource to be 'obtained cheaply, used sparingly, and developed and exploited as fully as possible' (Sparrow and Hiltrop 1994, p. 7). The overt exploitation of the worker prescribed by this model of HRM has been questioned ethically on the grounds that it

supports the pursuit of organizational self-interest over any other interests. It does so either by disregarding other interests or by assuming that organizational interests should be advanced at the expense of any other interests (Hart 1993). Consequently, it is claimed that such an approach is 'morally and commercially inferior to "moral management" in the new era of stakeholder accountable organizations' (Simmons 2004, p. 601). Indeed, much of the existing research into ethics and HRM is rendered from an explicit or implicit ethical critique of the hard HRM model—a critique that argues 'for a turn away from the "hard" school of HRM towards one that is ethically informed' (Ford and Harding 2003, p. 1131). It is thus the case that considerations of ethics in HRM discourse commonly extend from the more general advocacy of 'soft HRM'.

Soft HRM is a system of people management whereby benefits to the organization are realised by enhancing the work experience of the employee and supporting their interests (Guest 1999). This is so, it is argued, because organizations benefit from the heightened productivity, efficiency and compliance of satisfied and committed employees. The Harvard model (Beer et al. 1984) which inspired the concept of soft HRM adopts a putatively pluralist approach, identifying the centrality of stakeholder interests to the success of its long-term outcomes. Moreover, these outcomes include not only the effectiveness of the organization, but also individual well-being and societal well-being (see Boxall and Purcell 2011, p. 18–19). Prima facie the Harvard model has often been considered to be a more ethically justifiable model of people management than that of the Michigan model in that it was 'one of the earlier models to suggest that, as well as organizational well-being, HRM had to concern itself with the promotion of individual and societal well-being' (Winstanley and Woodall 2000a, p. 5). From a soft HRM perspective employees are 'moral stakeholders' such that the demand placed on management is to 'include both the moral treatment of employees and the engagement of employees in matters affecting their interests' (Greenwood and de Cieri 2007, p. 136).

A central way that the engagement of employees as stakeholders has been considered in soft HRM is in relation to fostering 'high commitment' amongst employees (Wood and Wall 2007). Advocates claim that HRM practice can impact positively upon the attitudes of the employee so as to align employee and organizational values and encourage behaviour that supports organizational goals (Walton 1985). Organizational commitment, it is argued, inspires 'increased effort, cooperation and organizational citizenship' (Bratton and Gold 2007, p. 25) and can be achieved by extrinsically or intrinsically rewarding employees for conforming to the values and associated behaviours

ascribed to the organization by its senior managers (Guest 1994). Alternatively, employees can be disciplined for behaving in ways that contravene those values. In relation to ethics it is suggested that the affective commitment of employees can be enhanced (Meyer and Allen 1991) if an organization can establish its 'own conduct standards, systematize its ethical obligations into clear, concise statements, and socialize its members toward understanding and conformity' (Boling 1978, p. 360; see also Sloan and Gavin 2010).

This conception of ethics and HRM aspires for the HRM function to play a central role in ensuring organizational ethicality as related to employment relations. In so doing, however, it is clear that the ethics within HRM discourse is very much positively associated with issues of employee control and performance. In relation to this more general debates over HRM have suggested that HRM is best understood as a 'third order strategy', determined by the activities and goals of the organization (first order strategy) and organizational structure and internal control mechanism (second order strategy) (see Purcell and Ahlstrand 1989, p. 398). In terms of ethics this means that what is deemed ethical at an executive level, especially as it relates to the values brought to bear on work, necessarily becomes ethical for the employee. There is then the desire for employees to be organizationally compliant and complicit in their behaviour and that not doing so would be deemed unethical outside of the discursive framework of the organization. At very least high commitment HRM (by its own criteria of success) seeks to ensure that employees neither determine nor question the ethical position of the organization but merely adhere to it.

An alternative approach to generating employee engagement considers HRM in relation to high involvement work systems (Lawler 1986; Wood and Wall 2007). This denotes a shift in managerial strategy away from low-discretion, control-based work practices towards more engaged, responsible and autonomous ways of working. The benefits of such an approach are argued to be the enhancement of the knowledge, skills and abilities of the employees, in turn enabling them to contribute to the organization more independently (Boxall and Purcell 2011, p. 134). Such involvement can manifest either in the extent to which employees participate in the running of the organization and/or the degree to which they are empowered to take decisions and reorganise their work in a manner they deem most effective. In terms of empowerment, the focus is on 'on-line' or 'on-the-job' levels of activity (Godard 2001, p. 781). Such HR practices are designed to deliver autonomy in terms of the local activity of workers and encourage them to take ownership and responsibility for their tasks.

High involvement HRM has been considered ethical in so far as it purports to enhance employee discretion and freedom—these being positioned as positive ethical values. The ethics of such empowerment have been subject to much debate (see Claydon 2000). Those supportive of the ethics of high involvement HRM suggest that the value of empowerment strategies is that they offer '"win–win" outcomes for organizations and their employees' (Claydon and Doyle 1996, p. 13). The goal here is to dismiss 'ethical frames of reference which […] reflect the structured antagonism of employment relationship' (ibid.) in favour of the creation of what are seen to be mutual interests. Traditional approaches to industrial and employee relations are thought to be built on a low-discretion and exploitative model engendering industrial conflict. What is said to be required is to increase the discretion and autonomy for the worker, in turn making them responsible for the outcomes of their work and ultimately for the success of the organization as a whole. Such an approach also increases the pressure on, and stress of, employees who are now entirely responsible for the task (Ramsay et al. 2000)—a stress that can be exacerbated if empowerment is construed as being morally righteous (Styhre 2001). The moral responsibility that high involvement work entails is thus a double-edged sword in that any benefits gained in terms of 'empowerment' and discretion are offset by the intensified work.

HRM Ethics as Fourth Order Strategy

As we have been discussing it is within soft HRM that the HRM function is presumed to be able to operate in a manner that seeks to ensure organizational ethicality as far as employee relations are concerned (cf. Greenwood and de Cieri 2007). At the heart of this conception of HRM is the goal of establishing a harmonious, or at least congruent, set of interests between employees and the 'organization' as it is understood in managerial terms. Moreover, with such a managerialist approach ethics becomes a matter of unitarism—that is, it is assumed that the ethics of all can be 'managed' by a single overarching managerial agency without the need for disharmony or contestation (Geare et al. 2006; cf. Delbridge and Keenoy 2010). Consequently, ethics becomes associated with a positive regard for the managerial/organizational agenda—such are the 'ethical pretensions' of HRM (Delbridge and Keenoy 2010, p. 807).

At issue with this conflation of management and ethics is the assumption that an organizational function such as HRM can and will behave in a manner that accounts for the interests of all of the others on their own terms rather than subsuming them within an overarching managerial imperative. At risk too is that ethics, as mobilized within HRM

discourse, can also serve to encourage employee docility (Townley 1994) through the co-optation of employees within managerial moral discourse (cf. Fleming 2009). In this sense ethics in HRM discourse can be seen as being 'deployed to legitimize […] inequalities of power and persuade social actors to accept and endorse managerial objectives' (Delbridge and Keenoy 2010, p. 801). How effective these deployments might be is contested, but empirically such modes of employee regulation and self-regulation have been identified in settings as diverse as team working in the insurance industry (Maravelias 2009), culture management programs in call centres (Fleming and Spicer 2004), performance assessments on oil rigs (Collinson 1999) and quality management in the banking industry (Knights and McCabe 1999).

It has long been the case that a key part of the control strategy associated with HRM concerns ethics in the sense that ethical 'values' might somehow be embedded in HR policies and practices in the hope that the people affected by them 'are likely to have a positive experience of employment' (Legge 1998, p. 27). Normative accounts of HRM and ethics are unapologetic in this regard, asserting, as they do, that HRM professionals should adopt a role of ethical stewardship by becoming 'more aware of their ethical duties to their organizations and more effective in helping their organizations to create increased wealth, achieve desired organizational outcomes, and establish work environments that are more satisfying to employees' (Caldwell et al. 2010, p. 171). Again, with such thinking ethics becomes subsumed under HRM which is in turn subservient to organizational strategy and focused on the achievement of bottom-line performance and competitive advantage (Becker and Gerhart 1996; Guest 2011).

As introduced earlier we should not forget HRM's status as a third order strategy abeyant to superordinate organizational goals and structures (Purcell and Ahlstrand 1989). So, if HRM is to concern itself with ethical matters such concern is also a part of this third order. This suggests that any ethics conceived by (or for) HRM is somehow at the service of an organization and that HRM can help ensure that this service is provided. It is thus the case that 'ethical management of human resources is conditional on an appropriate fit between it and the organization's strategy' (Miller 1996, p. 16). In considering the ethics in HRM discourse as derivate of and servile to business strategy HRM functions are invoked to assert their organization's moral legitimacy. This occurs on two levels, first in terms of the ethicality of the policies and procedures through which HR is implemented and second through ensuring that employees behave in accordance with an organizationally sanctioned ethics. HR managers are, then, beholden to 'have a responsibility for determining how ethical HRM is in any organization' (Macklin 2006, p. 211) such

that 'prescriptive accounts of HRM depict the HR manager as a type of guardian of organizational ethics' (Lowry 2006, p. 182).

Again we see that from this position ethics is at the service of business which is, according to the terms described above, a fourth order strategy subordinate to HR strategy, organizational structure and organizational goals. In this vein it has been asserted that 'HR can demonstrate a business-based rationale for the adoption of ethical corporate governance and HRM that is the key to sustainable organization development' (Simmons 2008, p. 19). This position that HRM and its practitioners are somehow to take on the responsibility for ensuring the ethicality of employee relations is notably one-sided in the sense that all of ethical agency is placed within a managerial function that deems itself fit to control and direct ethics. Moreover, this alignment has as its goal a certain 'ethical harmony' that is in the primary interest of management more generally. Even when stakeholder management is brought to bear within a more pluralist iteration of HRM (see Boxall and Purcell 2011, pp. 1–4), its focus is on how organizations can achieve a 'stakeholder synthesis' on the basis of decisions made by senior management (Simmons 2008, p. 18) and why organizations should recognise that other groups have 'valid needs and interests with respect to the organization' (Greenwood 2002, p. 267). Such an approach always assumes that the interests of others can be incorporated within those of the organization itself and done so without conflict, contradiction or hypocrisy. This is an ethics that seeks to 'to block off certain experiences that are, for various reasons, deemed to be unwelcome' (ten Bos 2003, p. 267)—in this case, the experience of dissent, resistance and difference more generally. As such, what are deemed as ethical HRM arrangements would occur when everybody is happy on the same terms—terms defined within HRM discourse in its function of validating managerial prerogative.

Managing Ethics?

A key dimension of the ethics of mainstream HRM discourse is the normative position that the HR function should take on the role of moral guardian of an organization's ethics as far as the employment relationship is concerned (Lowry 2006). We can thus assert that within HRM discourse it is posited that the responsibility for ethics rests in the hands of management who seek to bring employees into line with that for which they see themselves responsible. In order to guard the ethics of the organization, HRM discourse calls for the subsumption of the varied interests of other parties, most especially employees, into an ethical framework that ultimately serves the primary interests of

organizational strategy. What is prescribed is that the 'ethical demand' (Critchley 2007) that members of an organization must respond to can be circumscribed by the organization itself, care of its HRM functionaries. What goes unquestioned in such an arrangement of ethics is whether or not a congruence of values and interests between an organization and its employees can or should be achieved as well as whether those interests can be identified in a homogenous manner within so-called stakeholder groups.

We can understand these issues in relation to Critchley's (2007) discussion of ethics as concerning the fundamental question: '[h]ow does a self bind itself to whatever it determines as good?' With this question Critchley points to the idea that the motivation to act morally arises out of one's 'ethical experience'—an experience that gives rise to a demand for action in the name of the 'good'. This notion of 'good' is not ultimately determined, universal or inevitable—as Critchley explains, '[t]he question of the metaphysical ground or basis of ethical obligation should simply be disregarded' because it is 'not cognizable' (p. 55). What is cognizable, however, is that the demand is always issued by an other, a neighbour; ethics in this sense is in its most fundamental sense, non-selfish. 'The ethical demand is something that arises in relation to the particular other person that I am faced with' (Critchley in Critchley and James 2009, p. 15).

The person for whom this arises—the 'moral subject'—is involved in this to the extent that s/he approves of that demand and responds to it, a response that it turn shapes their ethical subjectivity (see McMurray et al. 2011). Further, it is this ethical experience that provides the 'motivational force to act morally' (Critchley 2007, p. 19). In these terms the issue we are taking up with mainstream HRM discourse is the way that it not only seeks to justify the morality of HRM and management more generally, but also that it proposes that this morality be distributed to all stakeholders (especially employees). This amounts to the assumption that organizations can and should try to influence, even control, individual morality and ethical subjectivity—in other words, its ethics become a politics directed at hegemony. Moreover, what is issued as the desired ethical demand is itself based on the values embedded in HRM discourse. The 'good' as far as HRM is concerned is something that can be organizationally defined and imposed on employees and with its ultimate justification being organizational performance. As such, the veracity of this demand is brought into question in that it appears more based on self-interest and prudence than it does on any concern for others on their own terms.

Such an approach to ethics 'represses rather than resolves the contradictory nature of the employment relationship interests and values' (Claydon and Doyle 1996, p. 14) and

ignores the plurality of goods that might be in place amongst the variety of people and groups who hold a stake in HRM practice. As we explored earlier dominant approaches to ethics and (soft) HRM concern a business-based rationale for ethically engaging with 'stakeholders', especially employees. In this way co-option works first to determine the ethical demand that others 'should' respond to and then to insist on the manner through which they should respond. This, in turn, marks the ethics of HRM as an attempt at subjective control at the level of ethics. In the case of high commitment HRM this operates in terms of the organization setting a system of values that employees are expected to internalize irrespective of their own personal values. In the case of high involvement HRM it operates in terms of the manner in which 'involvement' and co-determination become a smokescreen for employee co-option. With this in mind it comes to bear that the central moral thrust of both soft and hard HRM is remarkably similar to the extent that 'HRM-type practice might be both soft and hard at the same time' (Keenoy 1997, p. 837, 1999)—that is, what is to be done in the name of the 'good' is that which is good for the organization and that labour is resource to be deployed for that 'good'. Where hard and soft HRM differ is ultimately not on moral grounds but just on different views of what might be the best way to use HRM to ensure organizational success. Although via different means ultimately in both cases it is market values (Hendry 2004) couched in a callous ethics of neo-liberalism (Feldman 2007) that dictate the ethical terms for HRM (Keenoy 1997).

The dominance of 'market-managerialism' (Parker 2003) has clearly been the basis on which ethics is regarded in relation to HRM—a basis which ultimately privileges the sanctity of the market as represented by management. But to what extent can this be regarded as ethical? If we view ethics just as a socially constructed set of moral values then what we have been discussing can be considered as a matter of trying to influence how these values are constructed in organizations. In so doing, however, HRM discourse runs the risk of seeking to 'totalize' ethics in the sense of setting the terms by which ethics is understood and practiced such that this ethics is subordinated to the politics of market capitalism. It is imperative that we look behind such a constructivist approach, to consider the "ethical relation in general" (Derrida 1978/2001, p. 138) that underlies and precedes particular systems of morality. This basis of ethics is not in rule, law or custom, but originates in a generosity towards the absolute difference of each and every other person—a radical particularity through which each person is be respected and responded to as unique before systems of knowledge and categorization are imposed upon them (Levinas 1991). Moreover, considering ethics this way also suggests that the forms of ethical totalization favoured in HRM discourse are an anathema to

ethics in that they fail to acknowledge or account for difference in other people. While stakeholder theory approaches do appear on face value to acknowledge difference, closer interrogation reveals that they too seek to subsume difference. This is an ethics where it is necessary that 'effective governance can be reconciled with social responsibility, and that incorporating stakeholder views in HR systems enhances organization performance and commitment' (Simmons 2003, p. 129).

Picking up on Levinas's approach to ethics, Diprose (2003) locates injustice within 'normalizing social discourses' (p. 11)—for example, those that attempt to curtail ethical freedom by imposing their own morality on others. The concern here is not in establishing what might be considered 'good' in an overarching and universal sense, nor in establishing some kind of criteria for what is good, but rather in contesting the ways that such a constitution of the good is less about ethics and more about power and domination. Hence, what Diprose is calling to question are those powerful systems of knowledge that seek to determine and impose their own sense of what is thought of as 'good' and 'normal'. Such discourses, for Diprose, establish dominant conventions that deny difference by proffering rationalized prescriptions of what it means to be 'normal', with this normality being unquestioningly associated with the 'good'. Diprose refers to these conventions as 'familiar ideas'—ideas that produce a 'closed circle of totality' which enacts an 'imperialism and violence of self-knowledge' (p. 137) thereby limiting the possibilities open to others. Moreover, these limits extend not only to what other people should do, but also to whom they should be. And so, what passes as ethical in HRM is located in a powerful normalizing discourse that actually seeks to limit and control the 'moral impulse' (Bauman 1993) that is borne out of a respect for difference.

Where then might we locate ethics if it is not to be found in the drive for normalization that runs through HRM discourse? For both Diprose (2003) and Critchley (2007), it is resistance to power (rather than subsumption within it) that marks ethical action. As Diprose (2003) evinces ethics is that which opens 'modes of living and paths of thinking beyond the imperialism of familiar ideas' (p. 145). Moreover, in practice, this is a political matter—'a passionate politics and an impatience for justice' (p. 187) provoked by a respect for difference and a desire to reanimate different ways of being (p. 195). This very much resounds with what Critchley (2007) describes as an ethically committed 'politics of resistance' where 'ethics is the disturbance of the status quo […] the continual questioning from below of any attempt to impose order from above' (p. 13). For the purposes of our discussion the implication of this is that the ethical demand is to challenge and resist the unitarist and normative ethics portrayed in HRM discourse.

What matters here is not so much what HRM can or should do in order to be ethical (the predominant focus of current debates), but rather the de-centring of HRM as the focal point of ethical authority so as to bring HRM practice into ethical question from the outside. This ethics eschews the normality of the 'familiar ideas' (Diprose 2003) embedded in HRM discourse in favour of politics of dissensus that calls authority into question (Critchley 2007). And, by working through Critchley's more general discussion of politics we can surmise that this is a process of democratization emergent through political activism that seems to disturb and disrupt the 'consensual idyll' (p. 130). HRM discourse is then cast as an attempt at 'depoliticizing moralization' and as such requires, of scholars, 'the development of alternative frameworks' (p. 130).

Agonism and Ethical HRM

The alternative relationship between ethics and HRM that we have been pointing to is very much of the democratic type—one that understands HRM 'in the context of the wider socio-economic, political and cultural factors which shape—if not determine—those practices' (Delbridge and Keenoy 2010, p. 801). We use the term democracy not as it relates to the specificities of state politics but as it relates to the 'manifestation of dissensus' (Critchley 2007, p. 131) in society more generally. Having said that we are not suggesting that consensus is a necessarily 'bad' thing or that all forms of managerial practice should be challenged and contested. In this sense disagreement is not to be understood as a goal in itself but rather that it is necessary for disagreement to be articulated and acted upon when it arises. The need for ethical action presents itself precisely when people do not agree and when organizational structures institutionalise the repression and/or oppression of difference. To explore the possibilities of such a political dissensus we turn to Mouffe's (2000a, b) connection between democracy and what she calls 'agonism'—a term that refers to non-violent political difference and conflict as a central feature of democracy. Mouffe's discussion of agonism speaks directly to the core aspects of the ethical discourse of HRM. As she writes, what has become fashionable in recent years is a form of ethics, whose 'leitmotif is the need for consensus, shared values and involvement in "good causes"', all of which amount to a 'retreat from the political' (Mouffe 2000c, p. 85).

In contrasting ethical consensus with pluralist politics Mouffe registers that conflict is an important part of social organization and that such conflict is a necessary condition for democracy if differences are to be articulated and confronted. With agonism it is dissensus rather than (false or imposed) consensus that is valued as the basis for political interaction; it is valued out of an ethical respect for the particularity of every person and out of a political respect for structural and personal differences. It is in this way that agonism is related to, but different from, antagonism. The purpose of agonism is not the conquest over and destruction of the opponent, but rather the perpetuation of democracy through the respect for difference amongst legitimate opponents. Thus, antagonism is a 'relation between enemies', while agonism a 'relation between adversaries' (Mouffe 2005, p. 50). The political process is then to combat both false consensus and destructive antagonism so as to enable difference to be addressed through democratic means.

From where then does such agonism towards HRM arise? Of course, we are careful in not expecting organizations themselves to be the source, especially since what we are pointing to is an agonism that resists the power and authority of organizations and their imposition of 'non-negotiable moral values' (Mouffe 2000c, p. 92). Indeed, the shareholder value logic that dominates neoliberal market economies is such that internal reform of the moral position of HRM discourse in relation to that value logic is most unlikely (Thompson 2011). At best it might be possible that within organizations, those enacting HRM might act as 'deviant innovators' who identify with, secure authority for, and act upon, a set of norms derived from outside of the organization—for example, 'based on altruistic as well as utilitarian values' (Legge and Exley 1975, p. 61). The reality is, however, that despite the possibility of such deviance 'in practice, of course, few personnel specialists are able to change dominant organizational values' (ibid, p. 62). Indeed few seem to want to given that data reveal that HR specialists commonly fulfil the role of neither conformist innovator nor deviant innovator (Guest and Bryson 2009). In today's business environment where HRM is increasingly central to and incorporated within business strategy, the creation of an independent and socially responsible professional ethics for HRM that is prepared to contest organizational norms and values is even less likely to emerge, other than in highly localized settings.

Traditionally, of course, it is organized labour that has taken on the role of contesting organizations. It is precisely in acts of resistance, whether formally organized or not, that agonism (understood in relation to ethics) can be identified. So, it still remains the case that 'the essential conditions for resistance and misbehaviour are still present' (Thompson and Ackroyd 1995, p. 629). An attestation to ethics thus confronts assumptions that resistance to organizational discipline has been constrained in the contemporary organizational context (Hardy and Clegg 2006) as well as confronting that traditional industrial relations can be reduced to a 'Fordist cliché' (Fleming and Sewell 2002).

Considering industrial relations and trade unionism in terms of its resistance to management is of course also not unproblematic. Some time ago Wright Mills (1948, p. 119) commented that 'the leaders of labour will deliver a responsible, which is to say, a well-disciplined, union of contented workers in return for a junior partnership in the productive process, security for the union, and high wages for the workers of the industry' (quoted in Hyman 1971, p. 20).

Such promises have inspired many trade unions to sign partnership agreements with management, raising considerable concerns about the conflation of labour and management agendas (Marks et al. 1998; Johnstone et al. 2004, p. 367). Notwithstanding these accounts it remains that an independent trade union is more resilient to incorporation due to its fundamentally democratic nature. Hence, we contend that the greatest potential for ethics and HRM resides not in new innovations, but rather more mundanely in its acceptance of its personnel management heritage, embracing pluralism and traditional industrial relations. To realise ethical credibility the organization must have conflict: continual challenge to the party line. At a fundamental level the trade union represents an agonism with capital, or as Anderson (1976, p. 274) puts it, 'the very existence of a trade union de facto asserts the unabridgeable *difference* between Capital and Labour' (quoted in Hyman 1971, p. 25). With a powerful, independent trade union, management has not only a formidable adversary but also an ethical check on its prerogative.

As well as the articulations of the interests of workers through an agonistic form of industrial relations, we also recognise that HRM is a matter not just of organizations and employees but also something of concern within civil society more generally. Indeed the debates over CEO remuneration, unfair discrimination, downsizing and redundancies, the abuse of benefits programs and so forth all feature regularly in public debate. Again this attests to the idea that ethics and HRM is to be located in wider forms of contestation that actually seek to disrupt the moral consensus that organizations profess in the name of the ethical. Moreover, this also suggests that any project of critique of HRM and its ethics is 'an essentially "political" one [such that] a key task becomes one of seeking to intervene in public debate—debates involving Government, but also management' (Barratt 1999, p. 315).

Conclusion

In responding to a critique of the ethics in mainstream HRM discourse in this paper we have outlined an alternative approach that considers ethics as emerging from contestation over HRM practice and ethics. Following

Critchley (2007) and Diprose (2003), we have argued that difference, dissensus and resistance are the hallmarks of the manifestation of ethics as they relate to powerful institutions such as organizations as served by HRM. It is from this perspective that ethics cannot be located in repressive harmony wrenched forth by the hand of power but in the engagement with difference in a manner that resists the desire to totalize others within one's own system of ethics (Levinas 1991). This eschews the contemporary fascination with consensus-based ethics in favour of an ethics that manifests through an agonistic dissensus (Mouffe 2000c) at both the level of the organization and the level of civil society more generally. The ethical practice that we have tried to surface is not one that is pre-determined but one that might arise from such dissensus, most especially dissensus over what constitutes the 'good'. It is here that difference, resistance and critique are at the heart of ethics (Critchley 2007). Such an ethics is practiced through the resistance of the normalization of ethical behaviour and the constraint of freedom (Diprose 2003). Practically, this is an ethics that might manifest in the democratic experience of political 'agonism' (Mouffe 2000a)—an agonism that cannot be controlled by a function that is dominated by one of the adversaries.

Ethics arises not when HRM tries to enforce its own ethical systems but when HRM is brought into question through dissent and resistance from the outside (cf. Mouffe 2000c). On this basis the contribution of our paper has been to sketch the possibilities of a relationship between ethics and HRM that does not place HRM at its centre, as sole arbiter of organizational ethics, but rather sees HRM as being merely an actor in a set of socio-ethical relations. Amidst these relations ethics informs a politics of difference that contests the possibility of HRM functioning as moral guardian. We aver that the study of HRM and ethics should move beyond consideration of the conditions under which HRM can be regarded as ethical. In place, what is suggested is that surfacing the relationship between HRM and ethics is to be done as it relates to (a) resistance to organizational ethics within the HRM function, (b) the micro-politics of resistance to HRM within organizations, (c) the organization of labour in opposition to the moral self-foregrounding within HRM and (d) the contestation of HRM on a political and civic level. In one sense, such practices might be regarded as well trodden or even mundane but the key here is not to look for some kind of ethical entrepreneurialism, instead seeking to establish the political locations where HRM has and can be challenged and to consider and theorise these in relation to ethics. Such locations might include, inter alia, popular organizational counter-cultures (Parker 2006), public discourse in the media (Vaara and Tienari 2002), popular culture (Rhodes and Westwood 2008), activist movements (Hond and

Bakker 2007), social movements (Spicer and Bohm 2007), anti-organizational protests (Crossley 2003), challenges to anti-unionism (McCabe 2007), organizational misbehaviour (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999) and workplace incivility (Roscigno et al. 2009). The purpose in considering such matters is not just about how to 'achieve just and fair outcomes and to eliminate conflict between employers and workers' (Paauwe 2004, p. 175) but rather to expose organizations to the political process of democracy at a workplace level.

In concluding we note that while our discussion in this paper might on the surface be read as anti-HRM what in fact has animated our theoretical attentions is the possibility of a more affirmative, democratic and inclusive approach to ethics. It is such an ethics of the body politic rather than of the power elite that we attest to. An HRM function cannot act as the moral guardian for an organization's activities precisely because it is a subsidiary form of those very activities themselves. For democracy to prevail difference and dissensus are essential and any claims to govern morality on the behalf of powerful institutions such as organizations are best read as an affront to ethics.

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