Democracy or Seduction? The Demonization of Scientific Management and the Deification of Human Relations

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The Human Relations ‘school’ (HRS) of management presented conservative managers with a subtle but powerful means of exercising authority which could challenge the democratic approach of progressive figures in the Scientific Management (SM) movement who sought to enable workers and unions to become more active participants in the labour process. We seek to answer is why extant historical accounts of SM and HRS have not told the story in this manner: how could it be that the democratic and participatory nature of the Taylorist movement came to be written out of this history? Current accounts obfuscate the fact that HRS presented managers with a means of resolving conflict and exercising authority in the workplace that focused on individuals, their productivity, and on firm performance, rather than on collective dealing with employees and so, was more attractive to conservative managers of the time. But the question begs to be asked: more attractive than what? Less well-documented is what actually prompted this rhetorical strategy: what was Mayo reacting against? Why does Mayo say what he says, to the audience he says it to, at the particular time he says it? My central purpose is to investigate how and why Elton Mayo and HRS came to be deified, whereas Frederick Taylor and SM were demonized in the 1930s and beyond.

I provide a richer social and intellectual context for Mayo’s ideas and explore what he was reacting to in terms of his latent HR knowledge claims; the attitude towards Taylorism at the time he left Australia, as well as that in the USA when he arrived. I demonstrate that Taylorism actively sought to democratise management and promote a rapprochement with organised labour in the interwar period. This deeply disturbed conservative business and making them more amenable to Mayo’s ideas. I demonstrate Mayo’s awareness of the democratic appeal of SM and then focus on what he was ‘selling’, who he was selling it to, and how he was able to ‘sell’ these ideas. In particular I explore the impact on Mayo’s rhetorical strategy of having John D. Rockefeller Jr. as his financial and professional benefactor for almost the entirety of his career. I also demonstrate how HRS actually diluted rather than promoted workplace democracy. In conclusion, I bring together these strands in order to shed some light on how and why the meta-narrative regarding SM and HRS became the received wisdom and who stood to gain; namely conservative, anti-liberal segments of the American business community seeking a return to the managerial hegemony they believed they enjoyed in the pre-New Deal era.