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# Theoretical Approaches to Employment and Industrial Relations: A Comparison of Subsisting Orthodoxies

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## 1. Introduction

Theory could be viewed as a coherent group of assumptions or propositions put forth to explain a phenomenon. A theory is an abstraction of reality and is synonymous with perception, viewpoint, assumption, frame of reference or a perspective. The relevance of theory in any field of endeavour cannot be over emphasised. Theory attempts to observe, understand, explain, predict and control events or phenomena. "It helps in our understanding of events and problems in the practical world" (Fajana, 2000, p.21). Without theory, there is no practice, thus, according to Luthans "it has often been said (usually by theoreticians) that there is nothing as practical as a good theory" (Luthans, 1998, p.13). Hyman (1975, p.12) argues that the whole point of an explicit theoretical perspective is to provide a framework within which the complex detail of the real world can be organised. Hyman (1975, p.2) further asserts that "those who glory in their pragmatism and insist that they are immune from theory are simply unaware of their own preconceptions and presuppositions". Without theory men cannot act, for a theory is a way of seeing, of understanding and of planning. Phoenix (1964) as cited in Asika (1995, p.53) opines that "a theory or model provides an abstract pattern whose structure in relevant respects is congruent with the structure of the physical (and social) world, as demonstrated by agreement between observations and predictions made from the theory or model".

We view theory as the substructure upon which practice or action which can be likened to the superstructure is based. A Theory is different from a model. Thus, a model or paradigm refers to the representation of reality. Models are simplified descriptions of real situations (Waters, 1998). According to Cooper and Schindler (2001), there is a distinction between a model and a theory. Thus, models differ from theories in that a theory's role is explanation whereas a model's role is representation and simulation. Model is a representation of a system that is constructed to study some aspects of the system or the system as a whole (Cooper & Schindler, 2001). There are various typologies of models. Models could be iconic, analogue, statistical, mathematical, descriptive, graphical, as well as verbal. Theories and models abound in the field of industrial relations. There are multifarious theories of

industrial relations as a result of its multidisciplinary nature; looking for a universal definition of industrial relations may be as stressful as looking for an ocean in the desert. This is so because, over the years, the concept has been subjected to different conceptual treatment (Ogunbameru, 2004). According to Farnham and Pimlott (1995), there are five theories by which industrial relations institutions, structures and processes are analysed. They opine that the theories which individuals develop about industrial relations are attempts to construct logically consistent ways of understanding and explaining social behaviour and real–life activities in this complex field of human interest. These are the unitary, systems, conflict, Marxist and social action theories. Salamon (2000) posits that industrial relations theories are unitary, pluralist or pluralistic, Marxist, systems and social action. Green (1994) classifies industrial relations theory as follows: Unitary perspective and a more recent variant, the neo-unitarist perspective; conflict theory, including the Marxist and pluralist perspectives; systems approach and the contrasting social action perspective. No one perspective gives a perfect view but each illuminates our understanding of the subject. There are a number of variations on all these themes. Green asserts that generally, a viewpoint, perspective or theory is put forward and this is then modified in the light of experience, criticism and changing circumstances. According to Otobo (2000, p.42), "theorising is a continuous exercise and no one model has satisfied everyone in terms of taking into account all variables at play; attempts to provide more comprehensive theoretical expositions on the industrial relations system have not stopped". There are paucity of studies or researches on theoretical approaches to employment and industrial relations in the Nigerian context. This study is an attempt to address this gap. In addition, it will add to the limited theoretical knowledge in this exciting area of study in a developing country like Nigeria.

The objective of this paper is to attempt a comparison of the five most influential theoretical frameworks of employment and industrial relations and to bring to the fore similarities and differences in the theoretical formulations. The paper also examines a critical review of the theories and also highlights the major themes inherent in the theories. To achieve this objective, the paper adopts a theoretical approach.

## 2. Theoretical and conceptual framework

Employment relations is the study of the regulation of the employment relationship between employer and employee, both collectively and individually, and the determination of substantive and procedural issues at industrial, organisational and workplace levels (Rose, 2008). According to Kaufman (2010), industrial relations is viewed as the process of rule making for the workplace (Dunlop, 1958); job regulation (Flanders, 1965); social regulation of production (Cox, 1971); the employment relationship as structured antagonism (Edwards, 2005); social regulation of market forces (Hyman, 1995); process of capitalist production and accumulation and the derived political and social class relations (Caire, 1996 as cited in Kaufman, 2010); conflict of interests and pluralist forms of workplace governance (Kochan, 1998); class mobilization and social justice (Kelly, 1998); the advancement of efficiency, equity, and voice in the employment relationship (Budd, 2004); collective representation and social dialogue (European Industrial Relations Observatory, 2002). According to Bain and Clegg (1974), a traditional approach to employment and industrial

relations has been to regard it as the study of the rules governing employment, and the ways in which the rules are changed, interpreted and administered. We now turn to discussing the theoretical themes starting with the unitary theory.

### 2.1 Unitary theory

The unitary frame of reference is credited to Alan Fox (1966). The unitary perspective views the organisation as pointing towards a single or unified authority and loyalty structure. Emphasis under the unitary perspective is placed on common values, interest and objectives. Those subscribing to this view see all organisational participants as a team or family thereby implicitly emphasing shared values, shared goals and common destiny. Unitarism in essence implies the absence of factionalism within the enterprise (Fajana, 2000).Conflict is viewed as irrational and the sacking of striking workers is preferred to consultation or negotiation. Conflict is regarded as pathological or evil or bad. Trade unionism is outlawed and suppressed as it is viewed as an illegitimate intrusion or encroachment on management's right to manage. According to Rose (2008), under the unitary perspective, trade unions are regarded as an intrusion into the organisation from outside, competing with management for the loyalty of employees. The unitary theory tends towards authoritarianism and paternalism. It is pro- management biased and emphasises consensus and industrial peace. The underlying assumption of this view is that the organisation exists in perfect harmony and all conflict is unnecessary (Rose, 2008).

### 2.2 Conflict theory

Conflict theory is synonymous with the pluralist or the pluralistic frame of reference which is also credited to Alan Fox (1966). Conflict theory views the organisation as coalescence of sectional groups with different values, interests and objectives. Thus, employees have different values and aspirations from those of management, and these values and aspirations are always in conflict with those of management. Conflict theorists argue that conflict is inevitable, rational, functional and normal situation in organisations, which is resolved through compromise and agreement or collective bargaining. Conflict theorists view trade unions as legitimate challenges to managerial rule or prerogatives and emphasise competition and collaboration. This view recognises trade unions as legitimate representative organisations which enable groups of employees to influence management decisions (Rose, 2008). Rose further states that the pluralist perspective would seem to be much more relevant than the unitary perspective in the analysis of industrial relations in many large unionised organisations and congruent with developments in contemporary society

### 2.3 Systems theory

The concept of system derives from the structural/functionalist perspectives of social system (society). This also connotes the macro-sociological, order or social system view of society. There are several senses or meanings of the word 'function'. These are (i) teleological, where one asks about the goals or ends something serves (ii) mathematical, where one refers to the co-variation of a set of variables e.g. y=f (x); (iii) configurational, where one speaks of the interdependence of a set of elements within a system, and asks

what contribution each makes to the whole. The systems approach to industrial relations is configurational. Thus, Dunlop developed his theoretical approach of industrial relations on the basis of a systems concept and was heavily influenced by the prior work of Parsons (Fajana, 2000). According to Ogunbameru (2004), the American system approaches to the study of industrial relations were strongly influenced by structural/functionalist sociology. Dunlop based his model explicitly on Parsons social system, which assumed an inherent bias towards order and stability. Otobo (2000, p.17) posits that Dunlop began his explanatory model with a series of questions.

> "What meaning, then, is to be given to an industrial relations system"? (Otobo, 2000, p.17). "In what sense is a 'system' involved? Can the term be given rigorous and analytical definition, or shall it remain a perceptive phrase corresponding to the insights of practical experience? Are there characteristics common to all industrial relations system? What factors distinguish one industrial relations situation from another? Can the same concept be used to facilitate analysis among sectors within a country and also among countries?" (Otobo, 2000, p.17).These questions posed by Dunlop (1958) were then followed by six general propositions.

- "An industrial- relations system is to be viewed as an analytical sub-system of an industrial society on the same logical plane as an economic system, regarded as another analytical sub-system. The industrial relations system is not coterminous with the economic system; in some respects the two overlap and in other respects both have different scopes. The procurement of a work force and the setting of compensation for labour services are common centers of interest. A systematic explanation of production, however, is within economics but outside the scope of industrial relations. The full range of rule-making governing the work place is outside the scope of an economic system but central to an industrial relations system.
- An industrial relations system is not a subsidiary part of an economic system but is rather a separate and distinctive subsystem of the society, on the same plane as an economic system. Thus, the theoretical tools designed to explain the economic system are not likely to be entirely suitable to another different analytical subsystem of society.
- Just as there are relationships and boundary lines between a society and an economy, so also are there between a society and an industrial relations system. All analysis of the economy makes some assumptions, explicitly or implicitly, about the remainder of the social system, so also must an analysis of an industrial relations system make some assumptions about the rest of the social system.
- An industrial relations system is logically an abstraction just as an economic system is an abstraction. Neither is concerned with behaviour as a whole. There are no actors whose whole activity is confined solely to the industrial relations or economic spheres, although some may approach this limit. Neither an economic system nor an industrial relations system is designed simply to describe in factual terms the real world of time and space. Both are abstractions designed to highlight relationship and to focus attention upon critical variables and to formulate propositions for historical inquiry and statistical testing.
- This view of an industrial relations system permits a distinctive analytical and theoretical subject matter. To date the study of industrial relations had little theoretical content. At its origin and frequently at its best, it has been largely historical and

descriptive. A number of studies have used the analysis of economics particularly in treating wages and related questions and other studies, particularly of factory departments; have borrowed the apparatus of anthropology and sociology. Although, industrial relations aspires to be a discipline, and even though there exists separate professional societies, industrial relations has lacked any central analytical content. It has been a crossroads where a number of disciplines have met, history, economics, government, sociology, psychology and law. Industrial relations requires a theoretical core in order to relate isolated facts, to point to new types of inquiries and to make research more additive. The study of industrial relations systems provides a genuine discipline.

- Three separate analytical problem are to be distinguished in this framework (a) the relation of the industrial relations to the society as a whole (b) the relation of the industrial relations system to the subsystem known as the economic system and (c) the inner structure and characteristics of the industrial relations subsystem itself."(Otobo, p.17-19)

Otobo (2000, p.19) citing Dunlop (1958) argues that "An industrial-relations system at any one time in its development is regarded as comprised of certain actors, certain contexts, an ideology which binds the industrial-relations system together and a body of rules created to govern actors at the workplace and work community". According to Dunlop, systems theory provides the analytical tools and the theoretical basis to make industrial relations an academic discipline in its own right.

### 2.3.1 Certain actors

The actors that make up the industrial relations system are

- A hierarchy of managers and their representatives in supervision
- A hierarchy of workers (non-managerial) and their spokesmen
- Specialised governmental agencies and specialised private agencies created by the first two actors, concerned with workers, enterprises and their relationships.

### 2.3.2 Contexts

This refers to the setting which these actors operate, that is the larger environment which shapes the conduct of, and the rules established by workers, employers and the state. Dunlop highlights three aspects of the environment.

- **Technological characteristics of the work place and work community:** These influence the form of management and employee organisation and the problems posed for supervisors. Thus, the adopted technology will greatly determine the size and skills of work force as well as availability of labour. It also affects the health and safety at the workplace. The adopted technology has far-reaching consequences in determining IRs rule making.
- **Market/budgetary constraints:** The products market or budget is a decisive factor in shaping the rules established by an industrial relations system. More so, the market or budgetary constraints also indirectly influences the technology and other characteristics of the work place, including the scale and size of operations. In all, an industrial

relations system created and administered by its actors is adaptive to its market and budgetary constraints (Otobo, 2000). More so, the profitability of the enterprise depends on its product market.

- **The locus and distribution of power in the larger society:** The relative distribution of power among the actors in the larger society tends to a degree to be reflected within the industrial relations system. Thus, the distribution of power within the industrial relations system is affected by the distribution of power in the wider society. Dunlop is not concerned about the distribution of power within the industrial relations system, nor with the relative bargaining powers among the actors, nor their controls over the processes of interaction or rule setting, rather the reference to the distribution of power outside the industrial relations system. Thus, the wider society is seen as providing certain external influences and constraints but not as completely dominating industrial relations system.

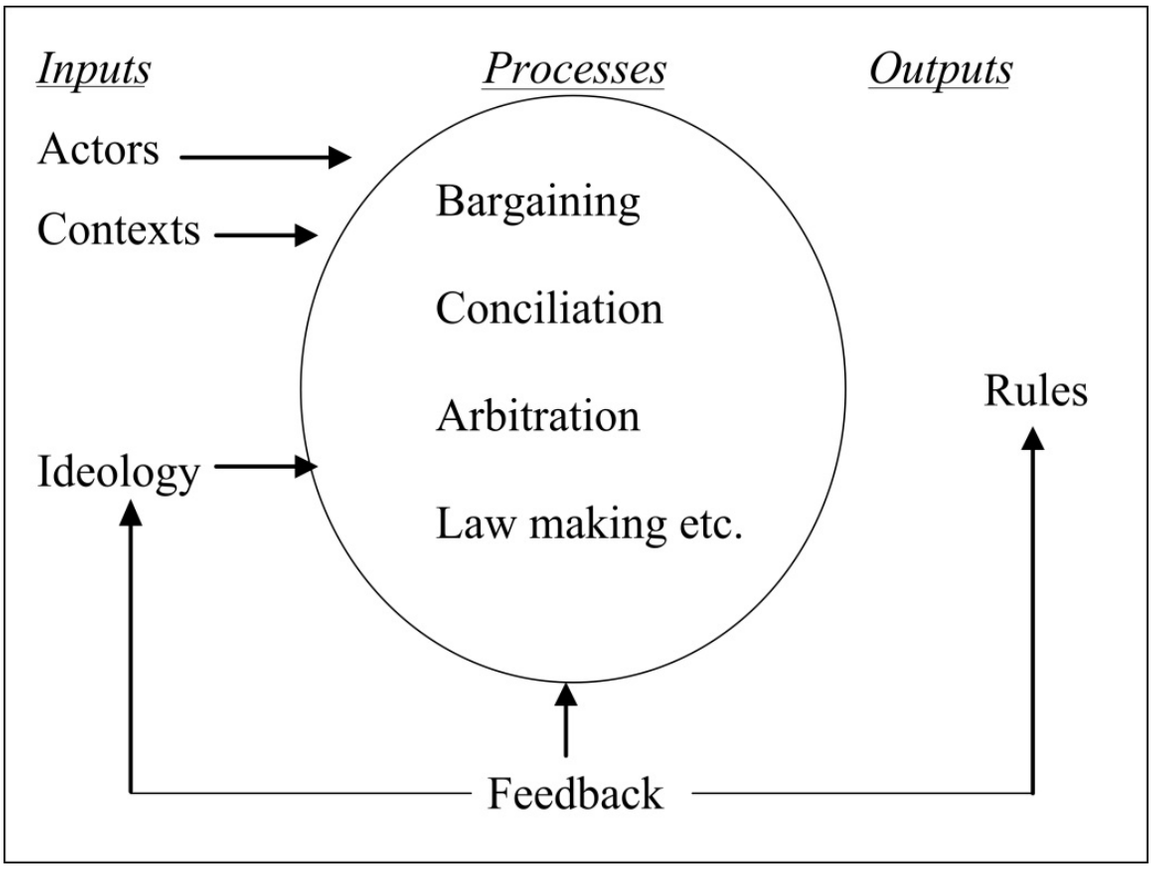
### 2.3.3 A body of rules

The actors in given contexts establish rules for the workplace and work community. Actors establish rules that govern their own interactions. Dunlop referred to this as the "web of rules" that governs the parties. There is no assumption by Dunlop that these rules are jointly made by the actors. These rules he referred to as the substantive and procedural rules. Thus, the creation of rules is seen to be the central aim of the industrial relations system. The substantive rules pertain to issues involving wages/salaries, hours of work and other terms and conditions of employment. On the other hand, the procedural rules relate to the rules governing discipline, redundancy, settlement of disputes, periodicity of meetings, renewal of collective agreements and the like. The rules of the industrial relations systems may be expressed in a variety of forms such as the regulations and policies of the management hierarchy, the laws of any worker hierarchy, the regulations, decrees, decisions, awards or orders of governmental agencies, collective bargaining agreements and the customs and traditions of the work place and work community. The rules may be written, an oral tradition or customary practice. Thus, the establishment and administration of these rules is the major concern or output of the industrial relations sub-system of industrial society.

### 2.3.4 Ideology

Ideology connotes a set of ideas and beliefs commonly held by the actors that helps to bind or integrate the system together as an entity. According to Otobo (2000, p.28) citing Dunlop "each of the actors in an industrial relations system may be said to have its own ideology. Dunlop insists rather strongly that all these ideologies must be sufficiently compatible or consistent to permit a common set of ideas which recognise an acceptable role for each actor". Dunlop assumes that the ideology of IRs system must be one or the same among the actors.

As could be deduced from the above model, there are three sets of independent variables in an industrial relations systems, the actors, the contexts and the ideology of the system, while the rules represent the dependent variable or the output of the industrial relations system. The dynamic model of the systemic paradigm, open system analysis and the oxford school are further elaboration of the Dunlopian model.




**Source:** Farnham, D. & Pimlott, J. (1995). *Understanding Industrial Relations*. (5thed). London: Cassell

Fig. 1. A Simple Model of an Industrial Relations System

### 2.4 The dynamic model of the systemic paradigm

The dynamic model of the systemic paradigm of industrial relations is a refinement to Dunlop's analytical framework. This dynamic model is credited to Blain and Gennard (1970). The duo adopted Dunlop's proposition of an industrial relations system being on the same logical plane as the economic subsystem. Their work centred on classifying the variables in an industrial relations system into dependent and independent variables, a task the Dunlopian model made difficult to achieve. They expressed the industrial relations system algebraically as shown below:

$$r = f(a, t, e, s, i)$$

Where, r = the rules of the industrial relations system

a = the actors
t = the technical context of the work place.
e = economic or the market/budgetary constraint

s = the power context and the status of the parties
i = the ideology of the system.

From the above equation, the rules can be viewed as the dependent variables being determined by the interaction of the five independent variables. Thus, the function of the industrial relations system is to establish a set of rules for the workplace and work community. In dynamic society the rules will frequently alter as a result of changes in the contexts or environment. Thus, the dynamic model emanated as a response to the criticisms levelled against the Dunlopian system model. It has been criticised as having a static view of industrial relations.

### 2.5 The open system analysis

Dunlop's systems theory uses the term 'system' in a too loose and undefined manner. The open system analysis is concerned with looking at industrial relations system in terms of inputs and outputs and the interaction with the environment. According to Koontz, O' Donnel and Weihrich (1980, p.19) "almost all life is a system. Our bodies certainly are. Our homes and universities are, as are our government agencies and our businesses." Systems have inter-related parts which work together to form a complex unity or whole. The features of a system are as follows:

- *Whole:* a system is more than the sum of its parts. It must be viewed as a whole.
- *Closed or open*: A system is regarded as open if it exchanges information, energy or material with its environment. A closed system is one that does not have interactions with its environment. All social systems are by nature open systems.
- *Boundary:* Every system has boundaries which separate it from its environment.
- *Input and output*: All systems which interact with the environment are amenable to receiving inputs from other systems and giving output to other systems.
- *Feedback:* An informational input that tells whether the system is indeed at least achieving a steady state and is not in danger of destruction.
- *Homeostatic:* This is referred to as dynamic homeostatic (steady state). Hence an organisation will not be able to survive if its inputs do not at least equal its outputs.
- *Subsystems:* With the exception of the Universe, all systems are subsystems. That is every system is a component of other larger systems.
- *Equifinality:* All open systems have common ends or objectives as everyone performs in a manner that will enhance the attainment of the broad objectives of the system
- *Differentiation and Elaboration*: As the system grows, it tends to become more specialised in its elements and to elaborate its structure. This is exemplified by the expansion of product lines or creation of new sales offices by an organisation.

Having stated some of the characteristics of a system, one would be apt to state that the Dunlopian model of an industrial relations system ought to have followed the open system concept in formulating an industrial relations system instead of seeing it as a system of rules, which appears too parochial. The systemic paradigm by Dunlop has attracted an avalanche of criticisms, some of which are as follows:

- The heroic assumption taken by Dunlop that an industrial relations system will necessarily be homeostatic has been criticised. This is because industrial conflicts are

never truly resolved and one problem arises after another. So, the system is not completely stable as claimed by Dunlop

- The model provides no explanation of the causes of industrial action but laid more emphasis on conflict resolution.
- Dunlop's formulation of an industrial relations system largely omits such behavioural variables as human motivation, perception and attitudes, personality and small group interaction. He laid more emphasis on institutions (trade unions, employers associations).
- Dunlop identified three main actors in the industrial relations system but failed to make reference to the owners of industrial property. It has been argued, that this omission stems from the fact that decisions in the industrial relations system are made by managers and not owners. Some have argued that the number of actors has to be increased.
- Another flaw is that Dunlop's idea of a system is a deterministic mechanism. Dunlop's actors are not persons. The model suffers from reification. No provision for the role of individual personalities was advanced.
- Limited predictive value associated with the systems model makes it difficult to forecast whether the system will experience more or less conflicts as a result of a given change in one or more of the environmental contexts.
- It suffers a handicap in that it does not take into account the processes by which the rules of the system are determined or made.
- One of the criticisms of the system approach is the difficulty in defining a system. There was no clear definition of what was meant by the concept of a system itself. This failure may have caused some writers to misrepresent the theory of industrial relations system. What is the substance of a system of industrial relations? This was the question raised by Flanders. Not until recently has it been stated that a system of industrial relations is a system of rules. However, a system of industrial relations as propounded by Dunlop is not a system of rules but a conceptual framework in which one component element is the rules. The systems approach has been misrepresented by a Sociologist, Eldridge who conceptualised the model as being comprised of only three elements (the actors, rules and ideology).
- The claim by Dunlop that the industrial relations system is on the same logical plane as the economic system is not correct, as Wood, Wagner, Armstrong, Goodman and Davis (1975) have pointed out, once Dunlop accepted the Parsonian social system that the social system is comprised of four functional sub-systems (the economic, political, integrative and pattern- maintenance) the industrial relations system could not therefore be on the same logical plane as the economic system, but it should be construed as on a lower logical plane than the economic system.
- It is criticised that the framework is static, not dynamic in time as processes are ignored.
- The systems theory concentrates on formal rules as against informal rules and processes.
- The systems model does not entail an account of the ways in which inputs are converted into outputs.
- Power could not rightly be a property of the external context of industrial relations system only, instead, power is considered central internally to the conduct of the parties themselves for the establishment and defence of rules and their application. It is a fact

that workers/union and management are involved in a power relationship within the enterprise and industry.

- Dunlop did not pay sufficient attention to all facets of conflict in the industrial relations system, his emphasis being on conflict resolution and not its generation. Why and how conflicts occur are likely to reveal more about industrial relations processes and institutions than how their manifestations are sorted out (Otobo,2000). The overall argument is that Dunlop misunderstood the Parsonian system analysis.

### 2.6 Oxford school

Since the oxford school does not necessarily have to constitute a self- contained approach, and has the elements of the systems theory, it should probably be viewed merely as a variant of the systems approach (Fajana, 2000). The oxford school emerged from the systems approach as both focus on institutions of industrial relations, although the point of difference is merely on emphasis. This approach is credited to Allan Flanders a British academic. According to Flanders as cited in Hyman (1975, p.11), "industrial relations is the study of the institutions of job regulation". He opines that the rules of any industrial relations system are seen as procedural and substantive. The procedural rules regulate the behaviour of parties to the collective agreements- trade unions and employers or their associations, whereas, the substantive rules regulate the behaviour of employees and employers as parties to individual contracts of employment. In fact, it is the substantive rules of collective bargaining that regulate jobs. Thus, the collective agreement is made up of both the procedural and substantive clauses. Some of the institutions of job regulation are internal as well as external. Internally, we have joint consultation, the grievance procedure, a code of disciplinary works' rules, a factory wage structure, and a host of others. Externally, there are other institutions which limit the freedom of the enterprise and its members in their rule-making activities, such as a protective labour legislation, the rules of trade unions and employers' association. The rules of the industrial relations system are viewed as being determined through the rule making process of collective bargaining which is regarded as a political institution involving a power relationship between employers and employees. The oxford approach can be expressed algebraically in the form of an equation. r = f (c)

Where, r = the rules governing industrial relations system.

c = collective bargaining

When the equation is compared with the equation of the dynamic systems model which states that r = f (a, t, e, s, i), it can be seen that the distinction between the dynamic systems model and the oxford approach lies in the right hand side of the equation. But both have the same output but different inputs. The oxford approach has stressed the process of rule making through collective bargaining while the dynamic system model emphasises the role of wider influence on rule determination. For the oxford approach, political variables are seen as of paramount importance but for the dynamic system model, economic, sociological and ideological variables are thought to be significant.

The criticisms of the oxford approach are as follows: (a) It is too narrow to provide a comprehensive framework for analysing industrial relations problems (b) It over-

emphasised the importance of the political process of collective bargaining and gives insufficient weight to the role of the deeper influences in the determination of rules.

### 2.7 Marxist theory

Marxism is, more or less, a general theory of society and of social change with implications for the analysis of industrial relations within capitalist societies and does not strictly explain the theory of industrial relations. The application of Marxian theory as it relates to industrial relations today derives from later Marxist scholars rather than directly from the works of Karl Marx himself (Ogunbameru, 2004). According to Hyman (1975) the contribution of both Dunlop and Flanders are giant strides in the formulation of industrial relations theory, but argues rather strongly that to define industrial relations exclusively in terms of rules and institutions for job regulation is far too limited or restrictive. What this implies is that industrial relations is all about the maintenance of stability and regularity in industry. He argues that the issue of conflict was not given proper analysis by the duo, as they focused on how any conflict is contained and controlled, rather than on the process through which disagreements and disputes are generated. Hyman asserts that the perspectives of the duo however influential, is one-sided and inadequate. Hyman (1975, p.12) defines industrial relations" as the study of the processes of control over work relations and among these processes, those involving collective worker organisation and action are of particular concern". Hyman further argues that unceasing power struggle for control is a central feature of industrial relations. To him, this struggle for control emanates from the nature and characteristics of capitalist society. He summarised the major characteristics of capitalism as (i) the ownership and or control of the means of production by a small minority (ii) the domination of profit as the fundamental determinant of economic activities (iii) the obligation on most of society to sell their productive abilities on the market as a commodity. Against this background, two major classes are located within capitalist industrial relations which are also a reflection of what obtains in society. Thus, capitalist industrialism bifurcate society into two classes. These are the owners of means of production which is the capitalist or bourgeoisie and the owners of labour, which are the workers or proletariat. This being so, the interests of employers and employees are diametrically opposed and conflictual. The capitalist endeavours to purchase labour at the lowest possible price whilst labour on the other hand tries to sell his only asset at the highest possible price in order to ensure his existence. The capitalists tend to maximise profit whilst the workers tend to maximise wages/salaries. Thus, in capitalist industrial society, the interests and aspirations of both labour and employers are divergent and in conflict. The Marxist perspectives typify workplace relations as a reflection of the incidence of societal inequalities and the inevitable expression of this at the work place. To sum it up, Hyman further states that industrial relations is all about power, interests and conflict and that the economic, technological and political dynamics of the broader society inevitably shape the character of relations among industrial relations actors which he described as the political economy of industrial relations. Conflict is viewed as a disorder precursor to change and to resolve conflict means to change the imbalance and inequalities in society in terms of power and wealth. Trade unions are viewed as

employee response to capitalism. Marxist theory emphasises exploitation and alienation. This perspective is critical of capitalist society and its system of production, distribution and exchange and emphasises the importance of collective action including strike action and action short of strikes (Rose, 2008). Hyman (1975) argues that given the nature of capitalist society, industrial relations can be analysed from a more radical perspective. This theory is also known as the radical perspective.

### 2.8 Social action theory

According to Green (1994, p.4), "the social action theory views industrial relations from the individual's viewpoint and motivation". According to Rose (2008), the social action approach considers the organisation from the position of the individual members or actors who will each have their own goals. This perspective regards conflicts of interests as normal behaviour and part of organisational life (Rose, 2008). It is credited to Max Weber (1864-1920); a German Sociologist. Social action theory represents a contribution from sociologists to the study of organisations. It attempts to view the organisation from the standpoint of individual members or actors of industrial relations. The theory seeks to analyse why the actors take certain lines of action. This contrasts with the systems approach which states that behaviour is a result of the structure and processes of the system. Social action arises out of the expectations, norms, attitudes, values, experiences, situation and goals of the individuals working in the system. Thus, according to Green while the system approach is up-down, the social action theory is a bottom-up approach. Salamon (2000) opines that the importance of the social action theory of industrial relations is that it weakens the fatalism of structural determinism and stresses that the individual retains at least some freedom of action and ability to influence events in the direction that he/she believes to be right or desirable. Social action theorists emphasise the use of interview, survey and participant observation in determining the reality of both society and of organisations.

## 3. Comparison of subsisting orthodoxies

The central focus of comparative analysis of these theoretical formulations of employment and industrial relations is to examine the degree of differences and commonalities or similarities between and among them. The heroic assumption by Dunlop that the ideology of the industrial relations system must be one, or compatible in spite of the fact that each actor has its own ideology has been challenged by Hyman. According to Hyman (1975, p.12), "if the system of industrial relations is so well integrated, and if the goals and values of the actors are so much in agreement, how is it that industrial conflict occurs at all?" Thus, while this may be true for the unitary approach, it is not true for the social action theory, conflict and Marxist theory. This is so because, the unitary theory emphasises common values while the others emphasise differing values, interests and objectives among actors. Thus, this assumption is spurious in reality even within the unitary perspective. The systems theory views industrial relations system as being stable regulated and in a steady state or homeostatis; again, this position is favoured by the unitary approach which emphasises consensus and industrial peace and views conflict as irrational. Marxist and other conflict theorists do not subscribe to this idea. Hyman maintains that the definition by the systems and the oxford school should be broadened to accommodate the sources as well

as the consequences or aftermaths of industrial conflict on the social partners. He views conflict as inevitable and rational in the industrial relations system. Conflict and disorder cannot be excluded from industrial relations system.

All five theories differ at the level of conceptualisation of an industrial relations theory, the Dunlopian model and its variants see the product or output of an industrial relations system as a network or web of rules (both substantive and procedural rules). To the system theorists, the central core or focus of an industrial relations system is the rule-making process to govern the actors and work community. Hyman and other Marxists see it as the study of the processes of control over work relations and among these processes; those involving collective worker organisation and action are of particular concern. Hyman's view is applicable to the unitary and conflict theorists. The unitary theory emphasises unified authority and loyalty structure whilst the conflict theory emphasises competitive authority and loyalty structures.

The social action theory contrasts with the systems approach. Whilst the systems approach opines that behaviour of actors is a function of the structure and processes of the system, social action arises out of the expectations and other attributes of the individuals working in the system. Salamon (2000) argues that the importance of the social action theory of industrial relations is that it weakens the fatalism of structural determinism and stresses that the individual retains at least some freedom of action and ability to influence events in the direction that he/she believes to be right or desirable. In reality, the actors in the system are influenced by the system and in turn they influence the system.

Dunlop's actors are institutions not persons. The systems theoretical formulation suffers from reification. This means that individuals involved at the workplace and whose activities are industrial relations have been relegated to the background, while institutions like trade unions, collective bargaining, employers' collectivities and various state organs have been employed in his analysis. This Hyman finds abnormal as it creates the tendency to conceive industrial relations solely in terms of relationships between agencies and organisations, rather than between people. To Hyman, this is a "mechanical and depersonalized approach to social analysis. In other words, treating abstract collective entities which are the creation of human activity, as the active agencies in social relations and in consequence devaluing the part played by human actors"(Hyman, 1975, p.13). Hyman argues that the analysis of industrial relations should not only focus on trade unions as organisations, but also on workers and their grievances and aspirations. Hyman's view is shared by social action theorists who stress that the individual retains at least some freedom of action and ability to influence events based on their aspirations, values and goals. Hyman states that the fact that labour is treated as a commodity is one of the causes of conflicts in industry. Thus, the subjugation, exploitation, and alienation of workers are the sources of workers grievances. To this effect, workers aspire to control their own work, rather than being subject to constant instructions and supervision. Hyman notes that the notion of regulation conceals the centrality of power, conflict and instability in the processes of industrial relations. With respect to the resolutions of conflict in work relations, the unitary, systems, conflict and Marxist approaches favour different methods. While the unitary favours coercion, the systems theory adopts the rule-making process, conflict theory favours compromise and

agreement and Marxists favours changing the imbalance and inequalities in society in terms of wealth and power.

Trade unionism is accepted by the systems theory, conflict theory, Marxist theory as well as the social action theory. However, the unitary theory views trade unionism as illegitimate intrusion or encroachment on management prerogatives and is outlawed and suppressed. The theories have the following commonalities: All five theories recognise the importance of context. Industrial relations does not and cannot exist in a vacuum. It exists at the micro, macro and global levels. The significant aspects of context are economic, technological, political, social and legal dynamics of the broader society. Despite the deluge of criticisms levelled against these theoretical formulations, they have been referred to as monumental contributions to scholarship (Onabanjo, 2001). The five theories have sociological etymology, suggesting that they derive their fountain from sociology. All five theories recognise that three actors or participants or social partners are involved in industrial relations in line with the concept of tripartism in industrial relations as proposed by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). However, with the emergent transnational organisations and the influence of host communities emphasis is now shifting to the concept of "tripartism-plus." None of the theories can boast of having a comprehensive coverage of the subject area of industrial relations. However, we take solace in Hyman's comment that "in defining the scope of industrial relations, it is necessary to define the subject more narrowly than the total network of social relationships in industry" (Hyman, 1975, p.31).

## 4. Conclusion

The practice of employment/industrial relations has benefited immensely from theoretical frameworks of leading theorists in the field of industrial relations. It has been observed that despite the criticisms levelled against some of these theories they have stood the test of time and have contributed immensely to scholarship and practice. Among these theories, there are areas of commonalities and differences as could be deduced from the comparative analysis. Although, Dunlop in the preface to his Industrial Relations System gave his objective as the advancement of a general theory for the examination of industrial relations (Fajana, 2000) ; this objective is yet to be achieved. Fajana (2000, p.21) argues that "a large number of industrial relations theories have been accepted into the body of knowledge of industrial relations, although each valid theory emphasises only little aspects of the field. There is yet to emerge a general theory of industrial relations". While giving kudos to Dunlop for his pioneering efforts, one may ask; can there be a general/ unified theory of industrial relations? This is food for thought for industrial relations academics and practitioners alike.

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