

RESPECT FOR PEOPLE IN THE ENTERPRISE CULTURE?

Kate Ness¹ and Stuart Green

School of Construction Management and Engineering, University of Reading, PO Box 219, Reading, RG6 6AW, UK

This paper investigates some of the assumptions that lie behind the text of the Respect for People reports (2000; 2004), part of the follow-up from the Egan report (DETR 1998). Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is mobilised to place Respect for People within its structural, institutional, and historic context, looking at why it was produced and what effects it had. Particular emphasis is placed on linking the specifics of the text to the wider social structures of which it forms part. Conceptualising people as an asset or resource encourages an instrumental view in which it is acceptable to treat human beings as means to an end. Similarly, the 'business case' argument for respecting people means that improvements to working conditions are judged purely in accordance with their contribution to efficiency and profitability rather than in terms of moral imperatives (not killing people) or fairness (not discriminating against them). Investigation of the context of the report reveals it to be a response to conditions at a particular historical moment: labour shortages; the desire to avoid or pre-empt regulation; changes in the wider prevailing discourse; and the need to give the impression that 'something is being done'. There is seen to be an underlying contradiction between the market status of labour as a disposable commodity and its status as a 'valued human resource'. The discourse of 'Respect for People' is shaped by social structures, but also contributes to shaping them. It contributes to sustaining existing power relations, yet it is also a resource which can be drawn on to improve conditions for people working in construction.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, human resources, respect for people.

INTRODUCTION

'Respect for People' has been presented as the response to the construction industry's recruitment and retention problems. The Egan report (DETR 1998) highlighted shortages of skilled labour, and identified 'commitment to people' as one of the essential 'drivers for change'. In response, the Respect for People (RfP) working group produced two reports: A Commitment to People 'Our Biggest Asset' (2000) and Respect for People: A Framework for Action (2004). The 'people issues' covered were diversity, working facilities, training, health and safety.

This paper offers a critical reading of the 'Respect for People' reports, inspired by various strands of critical thought and by the 'discursive turn' in the social sciences. No attempt is made to combine ideas into a coherent approach, merely to sketch out an example of how some themes from wider social theory might be applied to questions of interest to construction management researchers.

¹ k.ness@reading.ac.uk

THE CRITICAL APPROACH

There has been relatively little critical work within the domain of construction management research, though this is now beginning to change. Insights from the social sciences have long been drawn on in a somewhat selective way, but some have recently argued for drawing upon a much wider repertoire of critical social science thinking from the field of management and organisation studies (Green 1998; Bresnen 2005; Hodgson and Cicmil 2006). What is meant by 'critical', and how does this play out in an applied field such as construction management? According to Wodak (2002: 9), being critical means '...having distance to the data, embedding the data in the social, taking a political stance explicitly, and a focus on self-reflection as scholars doing research'. Specifically, this may mean asking questions about ends as well as means; questioning the privileging of certain values or outcomes over others:-

'productive efficiency over job satisfaction, for example, or value engineering over architectural merit' (Bresnen 2005).

Within management and organisation studies, the main forms which this critical approach has taken are labour process theory (e.g. Knights and Willmott, 1990) and 'Critical Management Studies' (Alvesson and Willmott 1992; Fournier and Grey 2000). There is a wide range of often contradictory perspectives which trace their origins back to radical humanist, Marxist, and post-structuralist ideas. However, all recognise the importance of the context of social relations in which action is embedded, and the contested nature of constructs such as management itself. Bresnen (2005) explores recent applications of these ideas within construction management, while Hodgson and Cicmil (2006) present various critical perspectives on project management.

There are some overlapping themes which emerge from critical work in the field. One of the first critical studies of construction management was perhaps Clegg's (1975) study of power on a building site; the recognition of the importance of power is central to the critical perspective. This leads to questioning the unitary view of organisations, exploring their complex, pluralistic nature and recognising that there are multiple stakeholders (Cherns and Bryant 1984; Green and May 2005). New management initiatives have been subjected to critical scrutiny, often pointing out gaps between rhetoric and reality; for example business process re-engineering (Green, 1998); partnering (Green 1999; Bresnen and Marshall 2000; Dainty et al 2001; Bresnen 2007); and lean construction (Green and May 2005). Fernie et al (2006) have written on best practice and benchmarking from a critical perspective, and McCabe (2007) takes a critical view on Respect for People. Some of this recent work takes a social constructionist view of the world and treats language as a source of power (Green and May 2005; Bresnen et al 2005; Rooke and Clark 2005). Commonly held concepts such as innovation (Harty et al 2007; Larsen 2005; Davies 2006) or competitiveness (Green et al forthcoming) are deconstructed.

A final important dimension of critical work is a reflexive view on research itself; questioning the validity of different forms of research and being aware of how we, as researchers, actively construct the social world we study (Seymour and Rooke 1995; Rooke and Clark 2005). Knowledge based on accepted understandings is not value neutral. Reflexive research requires 'a break with common sense', otherwise there is the danger that empiricism leaves the choice of the problem and the elaboration of concepts and analytical categories to the social world as it is, thus supporting the established order (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a well-developed approach in other fields, but, as discussed above, has only recently begun to be applied to issues of interest to construction management researchers. (Exceptions are Davies 2006 and Green et al forthcoming). CDA is not a single theory or method, but a family of approaches with certain common features. The principles of critical discourse analysis described here are drawn mainly from Fairclough (1992: 35-36); van Dijk (1997: 29-31); Fairclough and Wodack (1997: 268); and Wodack (2002).

CDA aims to show how discourse shapes social relations, knowledge and beliefs, and how discourse is itself shaped by ideology and power. The analysis of a text can cast light upon how and why it was produced, what lies behind it, what effects it has, and whose interests it serves. Discourse is seen as socially constructive—through their discourse, language users enact, confirm or challenge social and political structures. Discourses are seen not just as representations of the world, but also as (re)producing, (re)constructing and (re)transforming social practice and social relations. The relationship between discourse and society is dialectical; discourse not only shapes the social world but is shaped by it.

An example: accidents

As an example, take the word ‘accident’ as used to refer to injuries and deaths in the workplace. ‘Accident’ is a euphemism which does not directly refer to the resulting death or injury. It suggests a chance occurrence, an unfortunate mishap which is no-one’s fault. This use of the word ‘accident’ is so frequent that it is almost automatic. Yet this suggestion of a chance occurrence masks the fact that many workers are killed or injured as a result of a criminal act by the employer (Robertson 2004). Every use of ‘accident’ for an injury or death at work reproduces, and strengthens in a small way, this conception of it as a random event. This discourages real consideration of the causes of those deaths and injuries, suggesting that they are ‘just one of those things’. In this example the analysis seeks to make explicit the common-sense assumptions which underpin the text, and to clarify whose interests these assumptions serve, how they come about, and how they are reproduced or challenged by discourse practices.

Method: Fairclough’s approach; doing the analysis

Fairclough draws on traditions in critical theory, highlighting the link between language and power. One of the strengths of Fairclough’s framework for CDA is the interplay of micro and macro levels – looking at words and sentences in the text, at the processes of production and consumption of the text, and at the text in its wider social context. This approach emphasises the importance of detailed linguistic analysis on a textual level, but also places description within a web of interpretation and explanation which assists in understanding the connections. The aim is ‘to combine social relevance and textual specificity’ Fairclough (1992: 100).

Discourse analysis cannot be reduced to a set of procedures. Van Dijk (2002) stresses that CDA is a perspective rather than a method, and many leading critical discourse analysts are reluctant to describe a ‘method’ for doing CDA. It is possible to go through the entire text looking for examples of particular linguistic features, or to code it in terms of topics. But it may be more fruitful to select small samples for detailed analysis. The excerpts are selected so as to yield as much insight as possible into the question being investigated; Fairclough (1992) suggests concentrating on moments of

crisis, contradictions, sudden shifts of style. The analysis, as carried out here, ‘works’ by asking questions, by approaching the text in many ways, zooming in and out, moving between levels, trying various lenses or filters, forming impressions, counting words, reflecting, speculating, returning again and again to the text with different questions, with different aspects of the context in mind, asking ‘what is this all about?’, ‘what is going on?’, ‘what is the rôle of language here?’, ‘why do I react to this as I do?’ ‘what is implied here’, ‘what is the background to this?’ ‘what is hidden or missing?’ ‘how could this be different?’.

Research validity

Critical discourse analysis makes no claim to absolute truth, or to objectivity; ‘CDA is biased – and proud of it’ (van Dijk 2002: 96). The contention here is that no research can be neutral, apolitical, and objective. Researchers who claim neutrality too often simply take existing power structures for granted. As Seymour and Rooke (1995: 521) point out, ‘The researcher’s values are regarded as either irrelevant or self-evidently correct’. Yet researchers’ own beliefs and values inevitably affect not only their choice of topics and approaches, but how they perceive them. Analysts have different experience and different insights, and derive their analyses from different social theories; indeed part of the value of an analysis lies in that.

The analysis must be grounded in the text and built on previous scholarship, but the interpretation will also be informed by the researcher’s personal experience of construction. As Wood and Kroger (2000: 166) argue, the socially constructed nature of discourse means that it has shifting and multiple meanings, of which an analyst’s account is only one version.

RESPECT FOR PEOPLE IN THE ENTERPRISE CULTURE?

Respect for people: ‘our biggest asset’

Kant put respect for persons at the centre of moral philosophy, arguing that humans have an intrinsic value, and must be respected as ends in themselves. The opposing view is expressed in the concept of people as a ‘resource’ or ‘asset’, which implicitly endorses an instrumentalist view in which it is acceptable to treat human beings as means rather than ends. The first report is titled ‘A Commitment to People “Our Biggest Asset”’, and the concept of people as assets recurs throughout the text. Conceptualising people as an asset (referring to ‘investing in people’, ‘human capital’ etc) encourages people to be seen in economically instrumental terms – it is a discourse of accountancy.²

The context is one in which, on site, the ‘instrumental reasoning and objectification of people’ go so far as referring to bricklayers as ‘trowels’ or site workers in general as ‘bodies’, and the older use of ‘hands’ which Marx so objected to survives in ‘chargehand’. Construction workers are often seen as a variable cost rather than a valuable resource. The word ‘employment’ – literally meaning using – is completely naturalised. Thus, in its context, the ‘people as assets’ discourse comes across as progressive, yet each time it is used it reproduces and strengthens (by a miniscule amount) the instrumentalist view of people.

² Compare with the growth of a technocratic audit culture which attempts to measure the ‘value’ of everything through KPIs etc, thus deflecting attention from issues of defining value and purpose.

The business case for respecting people

Each section of the report has an introduction explaining the scope of the theme, then the ‘business case’ for why firms should take action. Typical statements are

‘A clear business case has been established for Respect for People. Respect for People is not altruism; it adds significantly to the performance of projects and companies.’ (RfP 2000: 4) ‘Improving the industry’s respect for people is not a high-minded aspiration; it is a business necessity.’ (RfP 2000: 9) ‘There are good business reasons for looking after people.’ (RfP 2000: 9)

The implication is that ‘altruism’ or (moral/ethical belief) is not a good or sufficient reason for making changes. If respect for people were only a ‘high-minded aspiration’ without ‘good business reasons’, then it would not, seemingly, be justified. Respect for people is only considered from the economic point of view. This is in line with the way in which only the financial performance of firms is considered important. The primacy of profitability is taken completely for granted, and the present economic structure of the industry is viewed as a given ‘state of nature’, ignoring the continuing political battles that shape it.

The use of ‘business case’ makes reference to the discourse of enterprise. During the 1980s and 1990s there were many inter-related changes in markets, technologies, employment practices and ideologies; ‘enterprise culture’ is the specifically discursive element of this. Enterprise culture is described by Legge (1995: 83) as pervaded by ‘individualistic values (and anti-union bias)’. According to du Gay and Salaman (1992) the language of the market has become ‘the only valid vocabulary of moral and social calculation’. Thus, it is now ‘common sense’ that those unfairly excluded from employment should be expected to show that it would be in the employers’ financial interest to stop discriminating against them.³

The concept of ‘business case’ could be said to have become part of the zeitgeist. Yet it is not completely naturalised; it is still contested in some quarters, particularly by the trade unions. The interdiscursive context here shows the unions quite consciously resisting the ideology carried by this new language. The following is from a magazine produced by the TUC (Robertson 2004).

‘Basically protecting workers health is a moral issue. It is wrong to kill and maim people. This is nothing to do with the fact that employers may, or may not, save money by not injuring us.’ [the ‘business case’ argument] ‘...gives the wrong messages to employers who have a duty to take action where there is a risk.’

The traces of one minute contribution to this struggle can be identified in the RfP report. A small section (2000:32) had been picked out in a search for contradictions and ‘moments of crisis’ because it seemed to ‘read’ differently from the rest and was felt to have probably had trade union input. This is the one place in the report where ‘business case’ is in ‘scare quotes’, thus: ‘This is often referred to as the “business case”.’ This shows resistance being expressed by the trade unions – it is felt to be part of someone else’s discourse, which does not come ‘naturally’ to them. However, the other 22 uses of ‘business case’ take it completely for granted, thus reproducing the instrumentalism which it expresses.

³ The ‘business case’ approach was the basis of both the ‘Opportunity 2000’ programme to improve women’s employment, and the CRE’s ‘Racial Equality Standard’ (Duncan et al 2002).

COMMITMENT OR CONTAINMENT? WHY RfP, WHY NOW?

The first part of the analysis has focussed on particular words and phrases, and has been mainly descriptive. This second part of the analysis will look further at the cultural, political and discursive context, asking why the RfP reports, and the respect for people discourse, were produced at a particular historical moment.

Labour /skill shortages

The RfP reports are set in a context of increasing labour or skills shortages. The Egan report had been commissioned by a new Labour government concerned that the construction industry might not have the capacity to deliver the new buildings it required. Government policies to encourage young people to stay in education were causing a significant decline in the traditional source of construction recruitment (boys leaving school at 16), and applications for construction degrees had fallen dramatically. In the late 1990s, construction had recovered from recession, but many of those who had been forced to leave the industry never returned. Construction was booming in Ireland, and the return home of many Irish building workers was contributing to a severe skills shortage in the UK. The fact that the concept of ‘respect for people’ seems to be a direct result of labour shortages leads a critical reader to ask ‘Will the commitment to diversity, and to improving working conditions last only as long as the shortages? What happens in the next recession?’⁴ As there is no underpinning moral commitment to improvement (RfP is ‘not a high-minded aspiration’), the enthusiasm for change may well evaporate as soon as there is an economic downturn to undermine the ‘business case’. Nevertheless, some of those involved are doubtless hoping that genuine and lasting changes can be brought about, using the leverage of scarcity.

The overt or ostensible reason then, is simply the need to attract and retain people to work in construction. But the ‘problem’ (for employers) of skills shortages may be an opportunity for others. As McCabe (2007) argues

‘respect for people may be viewed as an attempt to redress what employers see as the shift in power to construction workers whose skills are currently in short supply’.

The RfP initiative can be seen as a response to possible increases in construction employees’ and trade union power brought about by skill shortages and an increased workload, as well as a more direct response to the shortages themselves.

Pre-empting regulation?

An important part of the historical context of the report was that the new government had recently passed the Employment Relations Act. There had been some moves to change the regulation of construction self-employment, and there was talk of legislation on corporate killing. It can be suggested that in this context, construction employers were keen to forestall possible legislation on health and safety, employment protection, or equal opportunity by showing that they were taking action voluntarily. (Or at least by appearing to do so, using RfP as a screen.) It seems that much of the purpose of RfP is to convince people that the industry can regulate itself.

⁴ In fact there is some indication that the ‘commitment’ has not lasted even that long, as an alternative has become available in the form of East European workers, who may be ‘less trouble’ than local women or ethnic minorities, and obviate the need to pay higher wages and to improve conditions. This has always been the advantage of the migrant worker for construction employers.

However, the construction employers' fears of regulation were not realised. The government too was keen to show that 'something was being done'. As soon as RfP was published, it was being used by the government to defuse criticism and demands for action from its own backbenchers (Hansard 28/11/2000).

Changes in prevailing rhetoric and social attitudes

Discourse both shapes and is shaped by situations, institutions and structures, in a dialectical relationship (Fairclough 2001). Thus RfP is both a response to the zeitgeist but also an attempt to influence it. Clegg et al (2001) describe 'business paradigms', the changing discourses used to legitimise management action, as being 'not only of rhetorical significance but also of practical relevance in the way that businesses are run'. The meaning given to concepts such as work, management, efficiency, performance, quality, excellence, innovation and knowledge shapes relationships and procedures in organisations, as well as affecting what is considered morally acceptable, although 'no necessary relation exists between the words and the deeds'.

The RfP document can be seen both as a response to an emerging new business paradigm and as contributing to the creation of that new paradigm. Social attitudes to the acceptability of sex and race discrimination or of deaths and injuries at work were perhaps perceived to be changing after the change of government in 1997. Perhaps the rhetoric of 'respect for people' and of people as assets resonated more with New Labour's 'new language' than with the ideology of the previous government, more inclined to perceive labour as a variable cost. Fairclough (2000) cites (then) Education Minister Blunkett describing education as "investment in human capital". The close inter-relationship between government discourse and RfP is demonstrated by the way in which a phrase from a speech by (then) Minister for Construction Raynsford in a speech at the CIB⁵ in 1999

'Improving the industry's record on respect for people is not just a high-minded aspiration - it has become an industry necessity'

is closely echoed in RfP (2000:9) 'Improving the industry's respect for people is not a high-minded aspiration; it is a business necessity.'

Note, however, the difference in meaning given by the omission of 'just'. According to the government discourse, RfP is both a high-minded aspiration and a business necessity, though with the emphasis on the latter. In the discourse expressed in the RfP text, RfP is not a high-minded aspiration.

To sum up, the emergence of the RfP discourse served the needs of construction's dominant coalition in several ways. It was both a direct response to the need to recruit and retain more workers, and a response to possible increases in construction workers' bargaining power under conditions of scarcity. Construction employers' fear of regulation following the change of government coincided, it seems, with the government's own need for arguments to avoid being pushed into regulation. This was interconnected with responding to changes in the prevailing discourse, and attempting to influence that discourse. Finally, there was the employers' need to mask power relations and prevent construction workers' seeing themselves in terms of conflicting interests. The aim is to overcome recruitment difficulties and head off regulation or collective action by workers; either by making just enough concessions, or simply by

⁵ The Construction Industry Board ceased to exist at the end of June 2001.

having the working party and producing the document, convincing people that 'something is being done' without actually needing to change anything. For the critical reader, the velvet glove of respect for people too easily covers the iron fist of instrumental rationality

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Burrell and Morgan (1979) contrast consensus and conflict theories of society and organisations. Consensus or regulation theories assume society and organisations are characterised more by order than by conflict – conflict is a pathological state or a temporary (if sometimes necessary) way of re-establishing consensus. Conflict or radical change theories assume society and organisations are characterised by conflict and pressure for change – the appearance of order and consensus are due to suppression or indoctrination. Recurrent conflict is due to structural contradictions such as the private appropriation of wealth produced by employees' labour (according to the radical structuralists) or is due to contradictions within consciousness such as oppression and alienation (according to the radical humanists).

From this point of view, RfP can be seen as an agenda for suppressing conflict by 'managing the ambiguities arising from the contradictions of capitalism and patriarchy' (Legge 1995). It is a way of defusing critique, accommodating it, thus facilitating the continuation of social and economic inequality. Popular ideas about fairness and 'respect for people' may be drawn upon and even credited with a certain legitimacy whilst being contained within the dominant discourse. There is an element of concession, but the advance is contained within limits. RfP takes a 'progressive' view of people as a resource rather than a cost, but in doing so it reproduces an instrumental view of people as means rather than ends. Yet if the appropriation of the concept of 'respect' and the show of self-reflection by the construction industry were consciously mere fiction, then critical analysis could simply reveal the lies by comparing what is said with what is done, and studies of discourse would be unnecessary. However, the manifestations of power in language use are much more subtle and difficult to expose than the image of the outright lie suggests. Ideology is most effective when its workings are hidden, and to some extent the process may be hidden even from the text producers.

Yet people are not simply dupes. Watson (1995) stresses the way in which discourses function as menus of discursive resources which are available to individuals, and Hardy et al (2000) describe a model of how discourse can be mobilised as a strategic resource. Discourse is a resource which can more easily be made use of by the dominant group, but the RfP discourse can also be taken up by individuals, bodies such as trade unions, and coalitions within organisations. It can be drawn on, transformed, and integrated into other discourses. In the same way, individual organisations' own policy statements (on diversity or safety for example) which may be 'meant' as empty rhetoric can be drawn on as a resource by employees. The publication of the RfP report gives the ideas a certain authority and legitimacy, both by the status of the report itself and by the persuasiveness of its 'business case' arguments. This can be drawn on by those trying to advance agendas such as improving working conditions or moving towards gender equality, just as it is drawn on to mystify and legitimise existing power relations.

The RfP discourse thus serves both as a transmitter of management ideology and as a resource which can be drawn on to improve conditions for people working in

construction. The inherent contradictions, dilemmas and tensions within the ideology present opportunities for resistance, as well as repression.

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