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The (potential) demise of HRM?

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Abstract

This article seeks to provoke that human resource management (HRM), both as an academic field of study and as a form of professional practice, is at risk of impoverishment. The main reasoning for this is because of ideological individualism and marketisation with an attendant neglect on wider organisational, employee, and societal concerns. Following a review of the context of financialised capitalism, three contemporary developments in HRM are used to illustrate the argument: reward strategies, talent management, and high performance work systems. Implications for the practice of HRM and the way the subject area is taught in mainstream business schools are considered.

KEYWORDS

financialisation, HRM education, hyper-individualism, reward, talent management

1 | INTRODUCTION

The first wave of provocations in this journal suggest the subject of human resource management (HRM) is in a state of unrest: it has been plagued with conceptual problems (Thompson, 2011), theory is mostly inadequate to fully explain the links to performance (Guest, 2011), and the intellectual space may have been colonised by uncritical positivistic psychology (Godard, 2014). Alongside these provocations are the voices of others. Kochan (2007) warns of a crisis of legitimacy for the profession, having failed to establish authority among higher executives. Marchington (2015) argues that the human resource (HR) function has been “too busy looking up” (to the boardroom) by focusing on short-term performance metrics to the neglect of long-standing values and concerns of other stakeholders.

In this provocation, we advance the argument that HRM is at risk of intellectual and professional impoverishment because of a pro-market ontology rather than a more inclusive pro-business orientation. By pro-business, we mean a focus on longer-term sustainability of both organisations and people, rather than just immediate shareholder interests of profit-taking. As an approach, it embraces a fuller recognition of the interests of wider stakeholders beyond shareholders, including employees and community groups. The pro-business idea we advocate has potential contributions to make to public policy debates, wider societal challenges as well as workplace equity. A pro-business orientation recognises a multitude of stakeholders relevant to a business entity, even where some have interests that may differ to the immediate objectives of management or other short-term corporate goals. Pro-business stakeholders may include employees, trade unions, non-government organisations, civil society organisations, charities, suppliers, supply chain networks, and community groups.

The argument is that the pro-market ontology to the way HRM is conceptualised and taught, and in turn practiced, means the subject area is at risk of demise. We trace this potential demise to an "immiseration effect"[1] in the disciplinary field. In the next section, we briefly chart the neo-liberal framework by drawing on wider political-economic literatures behind investor capitalism as forces contributing to hyper-individualism that affect the way people are managed at work. Following this, we illustrate the ideological driven marketisation of HRM in relation to three contemporary areas of interest: reward and remuneration, talent management (TM), and high performance work system (HPWS) debates. Finally, provocations concerning the practice of HRM education (its teaching and research) are discussed.

2 | CONTEXT: INVESTOR CAPITALISM AND HYPER-INDIVIDUALISM

Several terms have been put forward to describe contemporary capitalism including "finance-led," "financialised capitalism," or "investor capitalism" (McCann, 2013). Epstein (2005: 3) defines the financialisation of the world economy as the increasing role of financial motives, financial markets, financial actors, and financial institutions in the operation of both domestic and international economies. One consequence of financialisation is that it has resulted in a shift in power away from managers to owners, or investors representing the interests of owners (Dore, 2008: 1102). Khurana (2007) talks of a movement away from post-Second World War managerialism to the investor capitalism of today. An implication is that fewer owners want or indeed need to have a cooperative relationship with their workforce, suppliers, or supply chain networks (Batt, 2018). For example, in recent times, the gig economy portrays an arms-length employee–employer relationship in which a greater share of the transactional risk shifts to labour, mediated by technology. According to one International Labour Organization (2016) study, employees in non-standard employment (e.g., part-time, casual, or self-employed) can face a wage penalty of 30%. Gig economy platforms utilising technologies to control work may actively by-pass regulatory labour standards with little evidence of such organisations nurturing talent or supporting collaborative human capital.

The pressures on HRM from investor capitalism are wide and varied. On the one hand, there are exemplar Multinational Corporations that consciously seek to address societal challenges such as poverty and inequality (Barrientos, 2013). Unilever, for example, pay the Real Living Wage to its UK workforce[2] and actively seek to mitigate casual or insecure employment among its supplier firms internationally (Wilshaw, Do Quynh, Fowler, & Pham Thu, 2016). On the other hand, such companies are often the exception rather than the norm and, where profit margins are lower than competitors who take a less socially enlightened approach, they can be succeptible to hostile take-overs or corporate raiding (McCann, 2013). It may be argued that under such a predatorary regime of financialised capitalism, the role of HR becomes poised not as a "strategic business partner" or "employee champion" (e.g., Ulrich, 1998) but as a "handmaiden of efficiency" required to push through coercive measures to extract greater shareholder value such as via labour rationalisation (Kaufman, 2015).

Financialisation has driven the imperative to extract value by squeezing labour costs and revenues, heightening the drive towards managerial command and control through a proliferation of performance metrics, both in the private and public sectors (Cushen & Thompson, 2016). Within this context, senior management have become more closely supervised by shareholders and private equity consortia. The function of HR may sometimes become little more than an "administration minder" for investors when minimising labour costs by implementing wage cuts, reducing employee pensions and benefits, or facilitating hostile takeovers and workforce restructuring (Palpacuer, Seignour, & Vercher, 2011). Managerial pressures for a HR strategy that supports short-term profitability may therefore lead to a "pro-market" focus that conflicts with longer term "pro-business" developmental objectives, including wider societal interests.

The rise of investor capitalism in the latter quarter of the 20th century can be contextualised within a cultural and political framework of neo-liberalism, which has influenced management thinking and HR practice. At an overarching level, neo-liberalism is an ideological doctrine of political economy that proposes human well-being is best progressed by "liberating individual entrepreneurship through strong property rights, free markets and free trade" (Harvey, 2005: 2). Neo-liberalism provides the ideological basis for greater individualism and free market principles to different areas of business and management, including HRM. In the political sphere, the Reagan and Thatcher governments of the 1980s, in the United States and UK, provide key historical points of reference for the establishment of market-driven individualism which has had a long-lasting imprint on the evolution of management. Underpinning the latter is neo-classical economic theory that provides the legitimisation for free market competition, self-interest, and individual greed. Arguably, in aping the natural sciences, the air of (quasi-) scientific authority afforded by mathematical formalisation rather than firm empirical evidence was attractive in advancing a more politically driven project that reasserted the rights of capital, clawing back post-Second World War concessions in employment rights and welfare (Standing, 1997). Neo-liberalism involved downplaying the importance of wider social and institutional agents, such as trade unions, in deregulating (and re-regulating) employment systems towards the interests of capital (Rubery & Rafferty, 2013; Standing, 1997). One consequence has been a suspicion of any positive collaborative role by coordinating agents along with a mistrust of "big government," say in relation to social or welfare expenditure, although not necessary in relation to coordinating modern day military investment or banking bailouts. Related social and cultural developments include the coming of age of modern consumerism, where the promotion of greater individualism and notions of customer identity take hold through market values that also dovetail into employment relations (Donaghey, Reinecke, Niforou, & Lawson, 2014).

In terms of practical application, the ethical rationale for increased individualism of HRM is played out through Adam Smith's notion that the pursuit of economic self-interest leads to the promotion of a greater collective good. The extent of market exclusivity pervading management thinking is epitomised in the Friedmanite doctrine that the only social responsibility of a business is to (legally) make profit (Friedman, 1970). Although many organisations would be reluctant to at least publically ascribe fully to such values, the result is an almost unquestioning ideological faith (cf. religious type belief) in the operation of unregulated individual competition over other forms of both internal and external managerial organising. Despite progress for better social regulation and corporate governance of organisations, much remains bounded by risk management and market value creation rather than ethical concerns.

The contextual reference point here is that these ideological assumptions are not inherently incorrect in their own right. Rather, they require analytical or empirical and ethical validation within the context in which they occur. For instance, a cursory glance at history highlights that the modern resurgence of individualism is a direct challenge to alternative social democratic models of managerial capitalism (e.g., Keynesianism), or the coordinated models of continental Europe (Standing, 1997). The paranoia of the cold war and the dash of capital supporting centre right governments (beginning in earnest in the economic crises of the 1970s) has culminated in an individualisation of work relationships. Alongside, such has been the burgeoning of a management culture, espousing ideals of excellence, quality, or self-identity as sources of market efficiency (e.g., Peters & Waterman's, 2004 *In search of excellence*). Workers are viewed as consumers and market assumptions applied as justifications for employment restructuring as well as workforce well-being. However, such market-led ideals are often devoid of critical reflection and management strategy rarely based on robust social science evaluations. Furthermore, these debates are not confined to liberal-market regimes such as the UK or the United States. In coordinated economies such as Germany, there has been a gradual political and economic increase in neo-liberalism. For example, economic and employment reforms have minimised job tenure and wage protections (Holst, 2013), paving the way for less secure temporary or so-called “mini-jobs” in Germany. In a comparative study (covering Spain, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, and Romania), Koukiadaki, Távora, and Martínez-Lucio (2016) report that postcrisis labour market reforms have advanced a more liberalised agenda across diverse and coordinated economic regimes.

Related to such change is a series of evolutionary managerial practices promoting individual people management, many shaped by marketised practices of consumption and competition (e.g., in pay). A preoccupation with things like leadership or performance management can mean other wider societal challenges are excluded or marginalised from the agenda—say concerns about gender pay gaps or inequalities from huge executive pay premiums. This may occur, for example, by viewing individualism as some form of baseline human condition predicated on evolutionary principles or quasi-scientific neo-classic economic laws, rather than seeing it as variable, socially constructed, and historically determined over time.

Arguably, extensive individual self-interest actually runs counter to the social nature of human beings as well as contrary to how most organisations actually function. Even Hayek, the doyen of free market principles, contended that people are inherently social and collective beings; at the same time as operating in more individualised modern societal contexts, people spent a large proportion of human history living in tribes or small collectives. In the grand scheme of human history, contemporary society and its modern market consumerism is a relatively recent development. Free markets, rather than being reified as somehow ontologically “natural,” were seen as part of an “extended order” to break down innate tribalism and minimise the risk of social conflict and economic instability it was perceived to engender (Hayek, 1988). In practical terms, it is simply too difficult for mangers to manage work relationships via absolute individualism. Indeed, modern initiatives for things like cooperative team-working or empowerment actually reinforces a collective structure to the way organisations are run and managed. A great deal of business activity also regularly relies on collaboration and coordination (e.g., across supply chains or alliance partnerships) rather than absolute individual competition.

Although people inside organisations provide a legitimate basis for HRM and employment research, this does not mean that all social phenomena can or indeed should be suitably explained in individualistic terms alone (List & Spiekermann, 2013). HRM in organisations cannot be fully understood in an atomic sense isolated from economic, social, and institutional interconnecting relationships. Part of the individualist ideological bias permeates from the fact that HRM as a field of practice has had an orientation towards promoting corporate objectives rather than wider well-being concerns. Literatures on organisational excellence and culture, such as Peters and Waterman (2004), illustrate the implicit tensions with organisations promoting a “double think” by, on the one hand, engaging with the seductive competitive sporting metaphors of “winners and losers” whilst, on the other hand, also seeking to align such ideals to a normative view of unitary organisational culture (Willmott, 1993).

The ontological and methodological dominance of hyper-individualism in HRM has not gone unchallenged (Harley, 2015; Rubery, Keizer, & Grimshaw, 2016). Calls for the development of collectivist approaches to HRM are not about redressing the demise of a weakened trade union movement but echo the need to better understand if or how HRM can transfer from dominant hegemonic contexts (e.g., the United States, UK, or Australia) to other diverse cultures (e.g., China, India, or Asia), where alternative customs and religious antecedents may not square-up with the hyper-individualistic principles of HRM (Ji, Tang, Wang, Yan, & Liu, 2011). In the following section, we draw out some of the effects of the aforementioned ideological assumptions in three selected HRM practice areas: reward strategies, TM, and HPWS. The argument we make here is not that market principles, individualism, and competition are somehow fundamentally bad or cannot have positive roles within HRM, organisational practice, or society; the provocation we illustrate is that such ideological hegemony elevates exclusivity for free market doctrines, yet so-called free choices are regulated by the power of investor capitalism to the neglect of other more collaborative and inclusive people management roles espousing well-being, fairness, and equality which should be embedded in HRM.

3 | THE MARKETISATION OF HRM IN PRACTICE

3.1 | The inequality of reward strategies

Reward strategies in many organisations legitimise the size of gaps in pay across the corporate ladder and reinforce a "winners versus losers" mentality. The development of HRM as a field of practice has been inextricably linked with the move away from collective relationships over issues such as pay-setting, towards choices reflecting a broader individualisation of the employment relationship. It has long been realised that reward management relates to perceptions of justice regarding the extent to which employees view as fair their remuneration (distributive justice), how resources are allocated (procedural justice), and the attendant impacts on social relationships (interactional justice) and ultimately employee satisfaction and commitment (Gelens, Dries, Hofmans, & Pepermans, 2013: 343). Although such judgements may be based partly on "objective" criteria (e.g., comparison of performance metrics between employees and market rates), they also have a subjective component (Hofmans, 2012). As such, they are culturally bounded by beliefs and norms regarding value creation and distribution, legitimising an assumption of natural rights of managers, or some other seniority principle within the social order.

The concern here is not just about the distribution and allocation of resources but the sheer "magnitude" of inequality. Piketty (2014) documents income distribution over the previous two centuries, showing that neo-liberal regimes have greater inequality. For example, since the late 1800s, the top percentile of the population owned around 90% of all wealth. Between the 1930s until late 1970s, the inequality gap narrowed considerably, in part because of government policy to provide social welfare, taxation, as well as collective bargaining that helped share the allocation of national income. However, since the late 1970s, the rise of hyper-individualism saw income inequality burgeon significantly. In the United States, UK, and elsewhere executive pay skyrocketed in the 1990s (Kaplan, 2012).

Discussions of poverty tend to be viewed as the remit of public or government policy, with a focus on the role of state institutions and welfare policy. The implications of HRM contributing to income and wealth distribution, or more recently in-work poverty, receive little attention. In the UK, there are now more people living in households where somebody is in paid work than in non-working households (Lupton, Rafferty, & Hughes, 2016). The role of HRM in shaping narratives about how economic value is created within organisations, such as through practices of "performance," "talent," and "leadership" affects equality and inequality in wider society, partly through redefining the discursive categories by which value is rewarded and remuneration apportioned across organisational hierarchies (Avent-Holt & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2010). Indeed, it is perhaps no accident that two of the countries in the developed world that have seen the largest increases in income inequality, the UK and the United States, are those where market-based incentives and an individualised employment relationship have dominated in HR models.

Although such issues are not restricted to upper organisational echelons, hyper-individualism has also provided an ideological justification for rewarding so-called "super managers" (Piketty, 2014) linked to the modern cult of leadership, or at least the individual leader. In this sense, the reward strategies of organisational HR systems and discursive practices are connected to social and economic inequality through valorising the contribution of executives within firms. There are at least two views that can be taken on super-managers' executive compensation. On the one hand is the individualistic assumption of free-market principles that suggests high income earners receive the market value for their labour skill and contribution (Dicks, 2012). On the other hand, a less politically and socially naive account may highlight how managerial power means that, in the presence of weak or unregulated corporate governance regimes, managers are able to extract rents due to their entrenched position of authority within an organisational or broader corporate world hierarchy, leading to higher levels of self-justified compensation. Rather than objective executive remunerated value, such rent-seeking behaviours occur across the economy, pushing-up market rates even higher (Bebchuk & Fried, 2004), augmented through discourses of value creation and leadership. The external equity defence that market value determines efficient rewards therefore overlooks that market rates are partly politically but also socially constructed. In this sense, the definition of skill (value) becomes determined by patterns of power and advantage, yet wrapped-up in a discourse of market rationalisation, individualism, and a cult of leadership. To this end, market ideology couched in managerial rhetoric masquerades or hides the true privilege of an executive group. It is not, we suggest, "pro-business" in that it distorts an understanding of productivity and remains exclusive to a dominant class. Research does show a questionable link between executive pay and performance, and ongoing shareholder revolt against excessive corporate remuneration appears to sit well with such an interpretation (Weijia & Young, 2016).

The argument about executive compensation highlights a fundamental problem that has broader implications for HRM: that is, the difficulty in objectively attributing value to labour, particularly in higher discretion roles where standard job evaluation tools are often too blunt as job performance criteria. In this regard, rather than positioning an empirical defence for levels of high executive remuneration, Kaplan (2012) concedes that it remains difficult to ascertain whether levels of managerial pay are in fact efficient. With the decline in collective bargaining to provide regulatory checks and balances to determine pay or distribute wealth, and with HRM either sitting too close to senior management or being powerless to disarm dominant ideologies, the argument for alternative models of reward to shake-up traditional notions of organisational privilege appear wanting at best. Despite the impacts on broader social inequality, a genuine evaluation of remuneration strategies is often conspicuously absent within CSR debates, as are levels of profit-taking compared with organisational and workforce reinvestment.

In sum, HRM and particularly reward strategies cannot be divorced from wider social class inequalities or the rise of in-work poverty. In this extracted example HRM underpins an individualistic determination of pay, shaped in part by hierarchical power, yet rationalised on false presumptions of market freedoms. It thus advances a pro-market privilege over pro-business inclusivity.

3.2 | Talent management and the cult of the individual

Talent management is a newer yet equally dominant lexis in the intellectual and practitioner HRM space. As a business objective TM emerged in the early 2000s, initially offered as a consultancy product by the likes of McKinsey to recruit and retain key staff in a "War for Talent" (McDonald, 2013; McDonnell, 2011). Academic curiosity and practitioner interest in TM has blossomed: research projects, monographs, doctoral theses, and special issues of peer-reviewed journals have all expanded (Al-Ariss, Cascio, & Paauwe, 2014; Farndale, Scullion, & Sparrow, 2010; Scullion, Collings, & Caligiuri, 2010). The European Institute for Advanced Studies in Management run a regular workshop dedicated to TM, whereas Oxford University Press now has a handbook *The Oxford handbook of talent management*. In the latter, Collings, Mellahi, and Cascio (2017) chart an upward trajectory for TM in terms of related publications, practitioner and scholarly interest, and a growing citation base. For example, Collings et al. (2017) report some 16,000,000 Google hits for TM (at the time of their writing, in December 2016). They explain that this is significant since the topic first emerged only in the mid-1990s.[3] It thus appears the subject is not only here to stay but is likely to grow.

A concern is not with TM per se but rather the analysis seeking to classify people in relation to some innate abstracted form ("talent"). Our argument is that TM projects a marketised discourse that favours capital, is mostly atheoretical, and neglects other legitimate stakeholder interests and wider societal concerns. We do not suggest these are absolute or definitive positions of fact: we present a counter view that is part of a broader argumentation about a potential immiseration risk to the field of HRM, of which TM is a newer explication.

There appears a disturbing lack of clarity about how to define TM (Lewis & Heckman, 2006: 140). It is generally regarded as a way to "attract, select and develop the best possible employees in more strategic ways" (Sparrow, Scullion, & Tarique, 2014: 27). A key issue here is a lack of theoretical pedigree, with Al-Ariss et al. (2014) concluding that theoretical development has at best been slow. A glance at the TM literature finds a strong association not to a new paradigm but well established and mostly unitarist ideals of what HRM entails: psychological contract, human capital, strategic value, or ability-motivation-opportunity (Collings, 2014a, 2014b).

Definitional and theoretical ambiguity aside, several hyper-market orientations can be traced in TM debates which we suggest, in part, may benefit from a more critical examination. First, there is a view that without any clear theoretical architecture TM is simply another label for HRM, writ large. On the one hand TM may be viewed as a fashionable "fad" with little distinctive contribution: that is, "old wine in new bottles" (Collings, 2014a). TM could also be seen as a project that seeks to colonise and take-over HRM, incorporating within it all the aspects of people management such recruitment, selection, development, training, and rewards (Lewis & Heckman, 2006). Such a concern may be indifferent or meaningless. After all, HRM has itself been labelled as refashioned personnel management with a stronger individualistic unitary posture (Storey & Sisson, 1993). On the other hand, however, TM contributions can take on an altogether different or more coercive undertone. For example an "inclusive" approach to TM may be equitable in seeking to appreciate all employees for their unique and discrete contributions, although there is no reason to assume that all employees want to move to more senior leadership or higher talent roles. In contrast is an "exclusive" model that advocates a differentiation capacity, where some individuals are deemed as top talent and selected to be in a talent pool (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2014). It is an issue that has not gone unchallenged (Thunnissen, Boselie, & Fruytier, 2013). Issues relate to "how, who and on what basis" employees are selected for the "exclusive" talent pool. Criteria is usually argued to be linked to value creation, profit and performance-enhancements, or based on strategic alignment to corporate goals. Examples range from customer-facing workers who are aligned with sales targets and customer satisfaction, to succession planning for key senior roles within organisations. However, we counter that TM is predominantly market (performance) driven, to the neglect of adding understanding about wider employment relationship dynamics, employee well-being, or organisational purpose. A corollary of the "exclusive" TM approach is that those employees who fulfil important (essential) back-office functions become undervalued, with attendant morale and productivity problems (Marchington, 2015: 177). Indeed, some of the deeper employment issues hardly ever receive attention in the TM literatures, such as actor and agency influences, institutional constraints, social relationships, cooperation and resistance, voice, participation, emotional labour tensions, stress, or worker dignity (Thunnissen et al., 2013).

It may be that the "War for Talent" is less abrasive or aggressive than when it was first touted by management consultants. Yet language sends signals and messages to employees and stakeholders about employer intent, providing the conceptual frameworks through which people construct their understandings of the social reality of the workplace. The idea of talent competition echoes an image of warfare between rival firms. In HRM, such a discourse can undermine constructive competition and collaboration within a workplace, with warfare "between" employees becoming normalised (Bunting, 2011). A stark illustration of these issues comes through the use of "forced rankings." When exclusive groups of staff are deemed "top-performers" ("A" star players) to be rewarded, based on un-negotiated rules or managerial views of market criteria, other people are devalued as "poor-performers" ("C" graded workers) and put on review plans or managed out of the organisation (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001). The emotional and equitable distribution of exclusive TM pools or forced rankings is rarely discussed. Indeed, counter-productive consequences may ensue with a vicious cycle of demotivation spill-over: those who do not receive the label "top talent" or "high potential" receive fewer resources, less training, and may become alienated if not actively disengaged. Just as in high school where the most academically talented are not necessarily those who are the best at competitive sport, it also does not necessarily follow that employees with the sharpest elbows also have the sharpest brains. In this way, TM practices may result in workforce diversity problems. For example, organisations that focus on fierce employee competition as a talent identification process can create a culture of work intensification and long hours. This may favour younger and male employees without children, whereas disadvantaging older workers and those with care responsibilities or women who, through an unequal division of domestic labour, may not be able to match the participation rates of such hyper-competitive norms. Therefore, excessive competition is not necessarily always the best way to identify or nurture talent and may even be damaging to longer-term strategic objectives.

In sum, it is argued TM is rather narrow, largely <u>a</u>theoretical and a one-dimensional approach favouring market (performance) rationality. We suggest that a more holistic and inclusive plural approach to HR practices is required to add legitimacy and equity to the topic or, better still, drop the nomenclature of TM altogether.

3.3 | High performance work system and shareholder sovereignty

The idea that HRM can positively affect firm performance has advanced considerably over the last decade. Although there is no accepted definition of HPWS, it is often taken to imply a non-Taylorist structure of management that includes a bundle of innovative HR practices and work processes that are mutually reinforcing, and which correlate to performance improvements at both the individual employee and organisational levels (Boxall, Ang, & Bartram, 2011). The story is well known. Early studies evidenced a strong statistical association between certain bundles of HR practices and profit, turnover, or productivity (e.g., Huselid, 1995). Many of the initial methodological designs were found wanting—either for relying on single managerial respondents using simplistic postal survey instruments, or for neglecting to consider worker attributions of HRM (Paauwe, 2009). Subsequent research has advanced the field: employee voices are now considered in the analysis; debates address issues about HR system strength; employee well-being is realised as an important outcome; and various mediating factor influences such as work climate, trust, satisfaction, and commitment enhance understanding (Farndale, Hope-Hailey, & Kelliher, 2011; Innocenti, Pilati, & Peluso, 2011). Systematic reviews and meta-analysis have developed better conceptual understanding about HPWS and the practical implications for the profession (see reviews from Combs, Liu, Hall, & Ketchen, 2006; Paauwe, 2009; Van De Voorde, Paauwe, & Van Veldhoven, 2012). Beer (2015: 417) comments that most "Chief Executives know HR improves performance, but what they need to understand is how to develop sustainable and positive work related systems." We do not disagree. However, we provoke that there remains, in part at least, a unitary orientation that privileges shareholder returns and marketisation over a wider plurality of sustainable and socially embedded practices.

There are debates about alternative ontological and methodological foundations used to unpick some of the core performance claims of HRM, including econometric modelling, behavioural psychology, labour process, or post-structural analysis (among others). Peccei, van De Voorde, and van Veldhoven (2013) point out that there are various knowledge paradigms to interpreting the rationale for HPWS. One is labelled the pessimistic (or conflicting) outcome approach, in which HRM leads to improved firm performance, although in so doing it results in harmful worker outcomes such as stress and work intensification (e.g., Ramsay, Scholarios, & Harley, 2000). In contrast is a mutual gains (or optimistic) paradigm, with HRM enhancing both firm performance while simultaneously boosting worker well-being (Boxall & Macky, 2014). However, there can be problems with mutuality, which may vary between weak or strong variants and as a distinct concept mutuality is not without concern (Peccei et al., 2013: 22; Boxall & Macky, 2014). For example, mainstream texts can dismiss critical findings about work intensification as unwarranted grumbles or that radical scholars misunderstand the true intentions of executives when they refer to mutuality or collaboration (Morrell & Learmonth, 2015: 527). Outcomes such as well-being, productivity, or mutuality do not constitute a set of free choices somehow selected by organisational leaders for and on behalf of subordinates. Dobbins and Gunnigle (2009) find that mutuality can be determined by various exogenous factors, some of which are beyond the immediate control of managers. Geary and Triff (2011) also show that while all parties can gain something from mutual collaboration, in practice it is highly constrained owing to the power resource allocations of management.

Nonetheless, the advancement of a more positive employment relationship with performance-enhancing and well-being outcomes remains a legitimate goal. Guest (2011) suggests that in order to better understand the HR-performance link there is a need to move beyond an exclusive market validation approach, when he calls for a more inclusive integration of actors with a specific employee interest agenda. Guest (2017) subsequently presents a framework to prioritise the promotion of better employment with a concerted focus on well-being. The approach is a potential game-changer. It argues, with aplomb, for better employment and better management as a legitimate ethical standard. It persuasively connects better employment to improved HR management and then firm performance. In other words, it prioritises the processes of people management ahead of prescriptive configured HR practices leading to anticipated market-based performance gains.

At the same time, however, there are issues to consider. One is the model remains normative and somewhat idealised, at least until researchers unpick its dimensions and test potential causal inter-connections. Such empirical scrutiny would be a welcome direction for the field. Another issue is much of the focus gravitates around psychological well-being, reflecting a particular disciplinary approach that may favour a micro-dominated positivistic epistemology to the neglect of context, politics, social networks, or the historical and macro institutions affecting performance decisions (Allen, Liu, Allen, & Saqib, 2017). It is known that the meanings and measures of employee well-being can differ by type, form, and level (Van De Voorde et al., 2012). Thus, an approach predicated on individualism may define well-being in very different ways to an approach that predicts collective voice or representation to be preferable or more important. Other approaches differ between well-being “in” work and well-being “from” work (Muñoz De Bustillo, Fernández-Macías, Esteve, & Anton, 2011). The well-being “from” work approach has a primary concern on the psychological and economic effects of unemployment. It captures issues around depression and/or self-esteem at community group and individual levels. In contrast, the well-being “in” work approach examines the effects of work reorganisation and change on employee job satisfaction as a facet of well-being as a link to organisational performance. Although both approaches may be mutually inclusive and drawn from psychological insight, the well-being “in” work approach may have a greater tendency to privilege economic performance for the firm ahead of wider societal or worker well-being objectives (Warhurst, Wright, & Lyonette, 2017). It may transpire, therefore, that different approaches to the study of employee well-being profit or disadvantage one category of worker over another; akin to the market-driven inequalities concerning exclusive TM pools discussed earlier (e.g., “core” individuals privileged over “peripheral,” or “casual” staff). Indeed, HRM is not necessarily received by all occupational groups in a uniform manner as manual, white-collar and technical workers have been reported to experience the impact of high-performance work systems differently (Cafferkey & Dundon, 2015). Guest (2017) further alerts us to wide variability about the meanings underpinning well-being, with up to 10 different antecedents[4] indicating the contestable ancestry to the concept of employee well-being.

Notwithstanding good intentions to embrace an employee-centric agenda, a potential immiseration risk is that workforce well-being may become associated with labour rights “green-washing”; that is, HPWSs may appear to promote employee well-being with a stakeholder-friendly or positive ethical orientation, but only at surface level. Under regimes of austerity and investor capitalism, it is usually labour that is sacrificed to market imperatives (Thompson & Harley, 2012). Methodologically, therefore, HPWS and employee well-being issues could be advanced further by expanding into areas of sociological inquisition, ethnography, or drawing on observational and participant observation research designs that are prevalent in other social science fields.

In sum, HPWS as a topic has advanced in terms of quality and the quantity of knowledge and research designs. Yet, for all these advances, the underlying ontology favours exclusivity towards market returns, which, we contend, can weaken the field. Guest's (2017) proposed framework offers a distinctively nuanced proposal. We further provoke that, even when worker well-being is premised on good intentions, it can appear managerialist in tone and depict an agenda of what employee well-being “ought” to mean in the eyes of managers, not necessarily workers, and it may further be ignorant of wider societal challenges. Attention towards the connections between how people are managed and objectives for equity, sustainability, and well-being remain important areas for the field which may be shaped by issues other than an exclusive market performativity.

4 | THE IMMISERATION OF HRM EDUCATION?

In this section, we make a final suggestion that the marketisation and hyper-individualisation of the theory, practice, and study of HRM risks a potential educational immiseration. We do not claim all who teach and research HRM (and employment and work related subjects) actively impoverish the field. The implication is that a marketised ideology has become manifest in some (many) business school structures of learning. Reflections on the nature of university business school learning have been advanced elsewhere (Dundon, Cullinane, & Wilkinson, 2017; Fernández-Rodriguez, 2014; Parker, 2015). We suggest here a pro-business manifesto for those concerned with employment and managerial goals, drawing on socially constructed notions of knowledge and social science rather than an exclusive pro-market rationale. There are of course other voices contributing and advancing these issues. The Academy of

Management has a critical management stream that scrutinises corporate issues and debates important societal linkages (Rowlinson & Hassard, 2011). In the UK, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development has an Applied Research Conference to try and better engage academic researchers and HR practitioners. We know also there exist knowledge streams among business schools in terms of sociology, politics, heterodox economics, critical and positive psychology, post-structural heuristics, or anthropology and ethnography (among others). Of importance is that business and management education remains a formidable force capable of shaping wider society and connections with policy-makers, agencies, charities, citizens, communities, governments as well as business practitioners. The value a society places on its citizens is not divorced from the way people are managed and regulated at work. Encouraging students to understand broader socio-political and social science reflexivities is not about abstract artefacts: these debates go to the heart of intellectual stimulation that will encourage a deeper cognitive engagement with things like strategy, planning, corporate governance, institutional constraints, and choices along with wider business objectives.

It is evident that there are divergent pedagogies; for example, in several European environments such as Spain, Germany, Italy, and Nordic states, a broader social science approach can be evidenced (Fernández-Rodriguez, 2014). We suggest, nonetheless, a bias towards a dominant market discourse traced to the likes of the Wharton School in the United States—named after Joseph Wharton, owner of the Bethlehem Steel Company that facilitated FW Taylor's scientific management theory—as the first business school in 1881, advocating the interests of capital (Grey, 2009). From the 1950s, American business schools institutionalised learning by transmitting, what Fernández-Rodriguez (2014: 186) argues, has been a particular “American way of business” that favoured a liberal capitalist model of accumulation and private ownership. The legacy has not abated and if anything may have heightened the push towards free market orientations and neo-liberal hegemony under investor capitalism. The lynchpin corporations at the epicentre of the 2008 global financial crash (e.g., Lehman Brothers) and other notable corporate scandals in recent history (e.g., Enron) were led by executives educated through a university business school model (Grey, 2009).

The legacy is students may be taught in ways that favour the exclusivist market ontology we have questioned in this provocation. In many programmes of learning, case studies offer great utility to apply context and issue-based sensitivities. However, students are usually encouraged to “step into the shoes of managers or leaders” rather than consider implications for other legitimate actor groups, or rarely address broader societal challenges connected to HRM and employer actions. Bridgman, Cummings, and Mclaughlin (2016) argue the legitimacy of business school education, especially in the aftermath of huge austerity, can be undermined by narrow pedagogy. They posit a counter historical narrative to the acclaimed Harvard Business School case study method of learning, favoured by many other business schools across the world as somehow best practice. Bridgman et al. (2016) advocate incorporating other key stakeholders to consider issues about performance or equity (e.g., labour unions) and reflective learning in order to learn about agency processes, rather than improve vested-interest (employer) objectives. Petrick (2012) shows how a wider plurality of stakeholder perspectives enhance deeper cognitive knowledge about issues and factors, rather than ready-made solutions presumed to fix the design of an inclusive or exclusive TM strategy or to incentivise executives via a bespoke remuneration package.

There is an evidence-based management movement that may provide a way forward for some of these tensions (Cascio, 2007). Evidence-based management seeks to apply all sources of information to help better inform learning and applied decision-making. At the same time, however, large quantitative surveys or comparative case studies are not necessarily in or of themselves any more evidence-based (Briner & Rousseau, 2011: 11). Executives also have ideologies, customs, and habits, and no matter what the extent of multiple sources of evidence they may simply not accept a suggested (evidence-based) recommendation should that feel unpalatable for a whole host of biased reasons. Take, for example, the role of trade union representation. Certain employers, no matter how many sources of data inform the case that representative voice can be effective and fair, some executives (and indeed governments) are simply not prepared to share power (Gall & Dundon, 2013). In this way, therefore, evidence-based management may not deliver what it claims. Morrell and Learmonth (2015) caution that such approaches can be narrow (e.g., data sources can be confined to a single or small discipline, such as a neo-classical economic or particular psychological view of HRM), or evidence-based research may be biased (e.g., managerialist because it sees corporate executives as fee-paying clients).

The implications of the foregoing are numerous for the practice and learning of HRM. One issue of note is that the potential demise (immiseration risk) of HRM we provoke is not definitive or certain. It may be that the teaching of HRM has neglected advances in wider and more critical social science knowledge, or in other ways it may incorporate them. Unless the interests of a particular scholar or an institutional objective ascribes to certain approaches and values, it may be rare for the typical business school student to get to grips with alternatives to hyper-individualisation and extreme forms of marketised governance. Pro-market orientations become normalised in the classroom, even if unintentionally. Students reading sociology, politics, history, heterodox or alternative economics, or those enrolled on a global development programme are probably more likely to understand broader contextual social issues such as the working conditions of those who are "coerced to live" in a supply chain factory dormitory. In contrast, HRM students can probably define a few prescriptive pros and cons of an appraisal system, a training plan, or the core and peripheral components of a (hypothetical) flexible firm model; all of which are usually rationalised as some efficiency tool for and behalf of market-driven client needs (e.g., shareholders). However, it is possible few will learn to reflect critically about fragmented organisational boundaries, supply chain networks, in-work poverty, gender and inequality, covert union de-recognition strategies, or whether an employer's motive for some new performance management system could be to reduce the wage bill or tighten disciplinary control over people (Taylor, 2017).

The future of HRM need not be viewed pessimistically. Some may caution about pressures from accreditation to standardise the field of HRM that may narrow the subject area to market-driven objectives. For many business schools formal management-led accreditation is typically considered a "must-have," which can raise tensions about what is and what should be taught on HRM degrees. It is perhaps more important to support the study "of" HRM and employment than prescribe to any standard efficiency rationale or stand-alone accreditation. Workplace equality; employee health, safety, and welfare; participation and fairness; dignity and respect are all core aspects of the ways in which people are managed. Universities and in particular the role of business schools within them can be diverse and creative. Friedmanite neo-liberal doctrines that emanated from the Chicago School may treat the subject much differently to those promoting a plurality of wider goals to embrace fairness as well as efficiency. Yet the richness of studying such diversity is what can make for a more informed social science anchor point to the study of work and employment in a global society. Indeed, there is good reason to be upbeat about the subject, its potential pedagogy, public policy contributions, the cognitive capability and imagination of students and future practitioners, and the positive learning inspired from also knowing what does not work instead of just reimaging investor returns as the alpha and omega of HRM theory and practice. To some extent, this is a call to academics and practitioners in the area to be bolder and push for more inclusive and socially sustainable practices.

5 | CONCLUSION

This paper is a provocation and as such many of its ideas are suggestive and purposely debatable. Many readers of HRMJ may disagree and have an alternative passion and better approach to how the subject is or ought to be taught and researched. We know that there are colleagues and institutions that underpin culturally rich research and socially engaging educational experiences that move beyond either an explicit or implicit reproduction of neo-liberalism. There are however others (many) who do not. Our suggestion for a pro-business focus is different to managerialism. Beyond investor returns it includes a greater reflection on business development and sustainability of wider stakeholders such as employees, their representative bodies (union and non-union), social agents, employer associations, NGOs, CSOs, and labour market institutions. In contrast, the pro-market ideology and hyper-individualisation of HRM we have cautioned risks both applied practice as well as an educational impoverishment. This of course is not certain. Academics, researchers, policy-makers, practitioners, and professional associations can reconfigure the way HRM is understood, taught, and potentially practiced in the future.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

ENDNOTES

[1] By "immiseration," we draw on sociological and economic ideas which predict that as capitalism grows and extracts greater wealth (capital value), the related conditions of those making the wealth (labour value) goes into relative material deprivation over time. The principle is applied here to a potentially impoverished practice and educational experience should HRM be taught (and researched) within a paradigm dominated by hyper-individualism and hyper-marketisation.

[2] https://www.unilever.co.uk/news/press-releases/2015/unilever-signs-up-to-living-wage-foundation.html

[3] For interest, we did a short comparison of citations on Google: "*Human Resource Management*" returned 68,200,000 hits; "Strategic HRM" 15,900,000; "Employment Relations" scored 64,300,000 returns; "Employee Voice" obtained 20,100,000 returns (as of December 2017, when "Talent Management" returned 61,100,000, which is a fivefold increase since Collings et al.'s search in December 2016).

[4] Different well-being antecedents include: "opportunity for control," "skill use," "work variety," "interpersonal contact," "externally generated goals," "environmental clarity," "money," "physical security," "valued social position."

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