Chapter 1: Overview
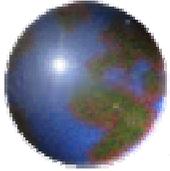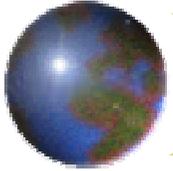
- Definition of employment relations (ER)
- ER: Levels & interest groups
- Frames of references
  - System approach
  - Social action approach
  - Conflict frame of reference approach
   - Radical pluralism & marxism, pluralism, unitarism

What is employment relations?

- It is concerned with:
  - Employment, unemployment & self-employm.
  - How individuals, groups, organisations or the state have their interests represented
  - What these interests are
  - How individuals manage & promotes their interest within an organisation
 - The way conflict is managed & regulated

Levels of employment relations

- The various levels of analysis provide different aspects & types of questions:
  - International
  - National
  - Industry
 - Organisational or corporate
  - Workplace
  - individual
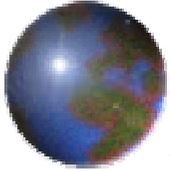
ER is contentious

- It is multi-disciplinary with many different & often conflicting angles on ER issues
- It is influenced by wider society changes & norms
- Our own perspective is based on an individual set of beliefs & values
  - We often align ourselves with those who share our views (media, employers, unions, etc.)
- Frames of reference: different ways of seeing ER
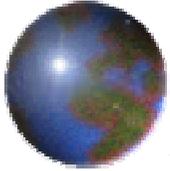
Systems approach

- Treats ER as a distinctive system although it partially overlaps & interacts with social, economic & political systems
- Emphasises the interdependencies & inter-actions between org. & their environment
  - Inputs => processes => outputs => feedback
- Concerned with how order & stability are established in a changing environment
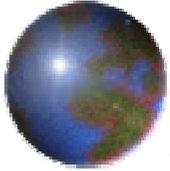
Systems approach II

- ● Rules & practices are key ER outputs
  - ▣ Written rules, oral rules, custom & practice
- ● Limitations of systems approach
  - ▣ More of a descriptive framework than an explanatory & analytical approach to ER
  - ▣ It is preoccupied with rules & stability
 - ▣ It tends to overlook the dynamics of interest divergence & conflict
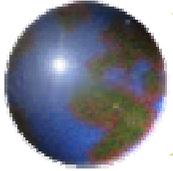
Social action approach

- It provides an individual, subjective & action orientated approach to ER
  - How does the individual 'see' or interpreter ER (be it changes, rules or empl. Relationships)?
- It recognises that people may not share similar ideology & often attach different meanings to ER interactions & changes
- It tries to explain individual behaviour
  - Motivation, bargaining, conflict resolution
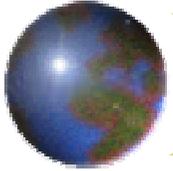
Social action approach II

- The strength of the social action approach is also its weakness:
  - Its explanations tend to be subjective and are often ideologically motivated
  - The individual & subjective angles tend to bypass structural or systemic explanations
 - It is difficult to obtain a comprehensive view of ER changes & interactions
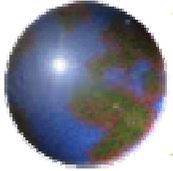
Conflict frames of reference

- Wide coverage: from unitarism to marxism

- Radical pluralism (influenced by marxism)
  - Social phenomena are interrelated
    - Isolated analysis of ER does not make sense
  - Conflict is inherent in ER
    - power imbalance between employer & employees
 - Unions can counter but not overcome exploitation of employees.

From radical pluralism to pluralism

- **Radical pluralism focusses on conflict, with little to contribute re: other outcome types**
  - Contributes to criticism of pluralism

- **Pluralism**
  - Has often been a 'favourite' of ER researchers
  - ER as a complex system with different 'actors' (groups, individuals) having different interests
  - 'mutual survival' overlays sectional interests
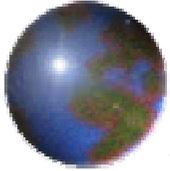
Pluralism

- Acknowledges managerial prerogative & employee rights: a continuous balancing act
- Collective & individual approaches
- Criticisms
  - may focus too much on conflict resolution & how to accommodate change & power differences
    - Need a more comprehensive analysis of conflict
  - Could put more emphasis on government influences & how power differences exist at all ER levels
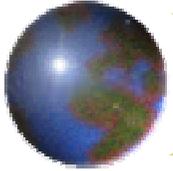
Unitarism

- Paternalistic approach: little 'room' for conflict, unions or employee influence
- Managerial prerogative is stressed
- Neo-unitarism: certain forms of HRM
- Criticisms
  - Harmonious understanding of ER & power
  - Bypasses different views & employee rights