4.2.3 Taylorism or ‘Scientific Management’

Whilst the classical administrative writers were advocating what amounts to a set of basic

bureaucratic design principles for work organizations as a whole, E W Taylor and his associates were putting forward principles for job and workshop design which would apply to the ‘lower parts’ of these organizations. The details of the Taylor’s ‘scientific management’ approach were discussed in section 3.3.1.1 of this handout and it is easy to see how Weber came to see in these principles the most extreme manifestation of the process of work rationalization and the ‘greatest triumphs in the rational conditioning and training of work performances’.

Although Taylorist principles of work organization can be under‐ stood as part of the general

rationalising process hastening the bureaucratization of work organizations after the turn of the present century it is very important to note that these principles are only partly to be

understood as bureaucratic. This is pointed out by Littler (1982) who notes that the ‘minimum

interaction model’ of the employment relationship implied in Taylorism contrasts with the

career aspect of the principle of bureaucracy. An official in a bureaucracy has the potential to

advance up the career hierarchy but a shop‐floor worker, under scientific management, has no such potential. Different conditions therefore apply to people employed in the lower half of the industrial organization’s hierarchy than apply to those located in the upper part — which therefore more fully bureaucratic. And this has considerable implications for the way in which formal organizations are implicated in the social class structure of society as a whole.

The logic of work deskilling which is central to Taylorism is by no means an invention of the

scientific managers. They were only developing in a particularly systematic way principles of

work organization which were first written about by Adam Smith in 1776.

Smith recognized that part of what was later to be seen as the industrial revolution was a move beyond the principle of a general or social division of labour into crafts and occupations (as examined in our into what can be called a detailed or ‘technical division of labour’. Smith

recognized that enormous gains in efficiency were to be obtained if what might be seen as a

‘whole’ task such as the making of pins could be split up into a number of smaller scale and

less—skilled tasks or jobs. Each job would be easy to learn and each operation readily

repeatable. The employer would benefit enormously from the increased dexterity of the

worker, the reduction of time spent in preparation and changeover from one operation to

another and from the possibilities which were opened up for further mechanization. But it was Charles Babbage, in 1832, who pointed out that this kind of deskilling also reduced the cost of labour. If ‘whole’ tasks were carried out then you had to pay each worker a rate which was appropriate to the most skilful or physically demanding element of the task. You could,

however, ‘by dividing the work . . . into different degrees of skill and force . . . purchase the precise quantity of both that is necessary for each purpose.