

Editorial: Work and Democracy in Conflict

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The relationship between democracy and work under the conditions of a capitalist market economy is often described as conflictual. While democracy is based on principles such as equality, participation, deliberation and collective decision-making, the capitalist world of work is characterized by hierarchies, unilateral instructions, the logic of ownership and the imperative of profit maximization. These fundamental differences create a persistent tension between democratic ideals and the realities of work, and also, of course, between real democratic politics and the real economy in capitalist societies.

This field of conflicts invites the suspicion of an inherent incompatibility between democracy and capitalism that challenges the idealistic vision of their possible harmony. This vision was based on the observation that stable democratic systems have emerged primarily in capitalist economies in the West – and later also in economically powerful Asian countries like Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. It expressed the social-democratic hope that the conflictuous powers of the capitalist firm and competitive markets can be politically mitigated. Has the welfare state not provided an amazing amount of economic and social security, indirectly justifying the legitimacy of such efficient capitalist working-conditions under a democratic regime? The crucial point in this argument is its indirect proof-character: the capitalist economy is not per se democratic, but democratically legitimized through its impressive efficiency.

Two developments have shaken this social-democratic dogma, dissolving its decades-long comforting certainty. One development was the experience of the devastating consequences of both the neoliberal transformation, gaining speed in the 1980s, and the ever more incisive consequences of the globalized market. Work has become increasingly precarious, with declining job security and rising economic inequality in an increasingly financialized capitalism. A second development concerns the loss of trust in democracy. While this loss also has several other causes, the experience of national politics' helplessness in countering and mitigating the impact of globalization was one important reason for the loss of faith in the power of the democratic system. The structural changes in capitalism – growing

financial capital, growing low-wage sector, insecurity through digitalization – played a central role and reinforced the contemporary experience of an increasing loss of control, both collectively and, politically disruptive, individually.

These two developments, a narrowly work-related one and a democracy-inherent one, are the most important reasons behind the dissolution of the social-democratic attitude to make peace with the per se non-democratic working sphere. Once this attitude is dissolved, however, the perspective on work within democracy takes a radical turn. If the work-sphere cannot be legitimized indirectly, why not try to do it directly? This new turn is shown in the rise of a growing academic dispute about how to democratize work more directly and about how a democratized work-sphere might help in the midst of the faltering public credibility of the democratic system. Most recently Axel Honneth emphasized – in his 2024 book *The Working Sovereign* – that work contributes to the process of constant socialization, shaping dispositions that are fundamental to democratic participation. Different from the earlier view of democracy, now authors like Honneth highlight as its pre-conditions not only material stability but also engagement in democratic discourse and decision-making, the development of a ‘democratic habitus’ – a set of dispositions that foster and sustain participation. This includes, for example, a practical sense of democracy as a practice of egalitarian and fair conflict resolution, as well as what Honneth calls ‘epistemic self-confidence’ – the belief in the worth of one’s own contributions to democratic deliberation.

A democratic habitus, like any other system of dispositions, is shaped by everyday experiences and social interactions within institutional contexts. Against this background, it seems plausible to argue that the workplace is a central arena for the development of democracy-relevant dispositions, given the significant amount of time individuals spend at work. The extent to which the world of work is suitable for greater democratization is the subject of an extensive current debate. This debate is primarily divided into principled, normative considerations on the ‘structural similarity’ of democracy and work as well as the empirical documentation of old and new attempts to democratize companies. The first field of dispute includes discussions about the similarities and differences between the state and the political order, on the one hand, and companies, on the other. This discussion touches on the legal and moral foundations of democracy, this time separated from the old capitalism versus socialism alternative by being resolutely individualist throughout. Is the individual right to property normatively superior or subordinate to the most basic rights of freedom and equality? If democracy in the sense of the second alternative (freedom and equality being basic) also spans a normative umbrella over the possession and distribution of property, then there can only be attempts

of ‘democratizing the workplace’, not a full-blown and original democracy of work comparable to the political one.

This is how many empirical contributions to workplace democracy are understood. Democratization tendencies exist in varying degrees, from corporate co-determination, as in Germany, to worker producer cooperatives in different parts of the world. In Europe, as this issue again documents, reference is usually made to the Basque Mondragon Corporation as an exemplary enterprise that can be used to study the possibilities and restrictions of such collective capitalist production units. The existing studies demonstrate the possibility, but also the nature of the constraining forces for these types of democratized firms within a capitalist environment and under the pressure of global competition.

Alongside these two fields of discussion (normative, empirical) lies the interest in a hoped-for gain in the context of the democratic crisis, triggered by a ‘school of democratic action at work’. An individually freer and self-determined world of work is certainly not only, or even primarily, sought because of a profound enthusiasm for democracy. Rather, the immediate motives lie in the liberating experience of greater self-determination and individual control over a work activity that is experienced as meaningful. However, this new, partly hedonist expectation towards work initiated by liberal society could actually have consequences for an expanded, political form of workplace democracy with repercussions for society as a whole.

This hopeful ‘spillover thesis’ that workplace democracy supports political participation can only be evaluated empirically. Instead of guaranteeing non-alienated work ‘from above’, as under state socialism, the hope is for a reverse, now political effect of democracy ‘from below’. To which extent this may happen remains subject of empirical validation. Modern societies are characterized by a plurality of ‘value spheres’ (Max Weber), each governed by distinct substantive and normative logics (e.g., economy, politics, religion, science). It is conceivable that individuals compartmentalize these experiences, as they adapt to different normative expectations in different spheres. The spillover thesis, however, presupposes a change from the individual attitudes and experiences to a collective and social attitude. Thus, presumably, many conditions must be in place for the egocentric perspective to be transcended, which shows that the inquiry into the relation between democracy and work has just begun.