

The Workplace: A Forgotten Topic in Democratic Theory?

by David Ellerman

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Our topic is how one of the principal institutions in a society—the organization of the workplace—affects the political and economic development of individuals. There is a curious absence of this topic—a “dog that didn’t bark”—in many modern discussions of deliberative democracy. The emphasis in the literature is rightly on the associative activities of citizens who come together for discussion, dialogue, deliberation, and responsible action to address problems that they cannot resolve at the level of the individual or the family. There are many associations where people might come together: churches, charities, issue-oriented nonprofits, unions, social clubs, hobby groups, political parties, and ad hoc special-purpose groups. People might participate after-hours in these various Tocquevillean associations to accomplish together what they cannot accomplish individually.

But that list of associations leaves out the one association that dominates most people’s lives outside the family, namely, the workplace. Of course, some people work for themselves or in small family firms so those workplaces are only a marginal extension of family life. But most people work in larger organizations requiring the concerted activity of many non-family members in order to accomplish the tasks of the organization. These work organizations provide the primary sites, outside the family, where people acquire mental habits and social skills.

Do these primary sites for outside-the-family socialization foster the virtues of deliberative democracy? The answer unfortunately is “no.” Almost all workplaces are organized on the

basis of the employment relation. The older name of the relation was the “master-servant” relation but, aside from a few law books on agency law that use the “master-servant” language as a technical phrase, that usage was slowly replaced in the late 19th century and early 20th century with the modern terms *employer*

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and *employee*. The employment relation is inherently nondemocratic. The employer is not the representative or delegate of the employees; the employer does not manage the organization in the interests of those who are managed. The employees are not directly or indirectly part of the decision-making group; the employees have transferred to the employer the discretionary decision-making rights over their activities within the scope of the employment contract. When employees do have decision-making powers within the scope of the contract, it is a power delegated to them from the representatives of the employer.

Discussions of deliberative democracy will have a curious sense of unreality in a society where the principal outside-the-family socialization takes place in nondemocratic work organizations. Those who execute decisions have no official role in the deliberations to make those decisions so they will typically have no “ownership” over their actions and take no “responsibility” for the results. They are to do what they are told to do. (The top managers typically exercise the rights of the employer although they are technically employees when the employer is a legal person such as a corporation.) Those who make decisions need have no discussions or

deliberations with those who carry out the decisions. Some workplaces may nevertheless allow some semblance of joint decision making in certain areas in spite of the employer-employee legal framework—particularly in knowledge-intensive activities—but we are focusing on the structure of the relationship itself. The social skills and habits of discussion, dialogue, and compromise are not usually developed in the primary site for extrafamilial socialization.

This is not a new topic. In the historical development of democracy, economic and social subordination and its effects on the development of the capabilities for democratic self-governance were among the principal reasons given for limiting the franchise. When, in the past, the franchise often was limited to the owners of some minimum amount of property, the reasoning was that without some amount of property, a person would have to be dependent on and subordinate to another person: so that the subordinate would not qualify as an independent decision maker in social affairs. The subordinate position of employees (or “servants” in the older parlance) and women was given as a reason for the denial of the voting franchise.

Immanuel Kant, for instance, held that to be “fit to vote, a person must have an independent position among the people.” The person must “by his own free will actively participate in a community of other people.” Thus Kant distinguished between “the *active* and the *passive* citizen” where “the latter concept seems to contradict the definition of concept of the citizen altogether.” In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, he gave examples to clarify the lack of the independence necessary for a civil personality.

Apprentices to merchants or in a trade, servants who are not employed by the state,

minors (*naturaliter vel civiliter*), women in general and all those who are obligated to depend for their living (i.e., food and protection) on the offices of others (excluding the state)—all of these people have no civil personality.

For women, the legal framework for the subordination was not the master-servant relation but domestic law based on the concept of *pater familias* and the coverture marriage contract wherein the woman passed from the “cover” of the father to the “cover” of the husband.

Today, the democratic franchise is formally universal without regard to property ownership, employment status, or marital status. The old coverture marriage contract, which denied any independent legal personality to the “femme covert,” has been abolished. (While this type of marriage contract was abolished in the democratic countries in the late 19th century and early 20th century, the vestiges still survive in the practice of the wife changing her family name from that of her father to that of her husband, as well as the practice in the wedding ceremony of the father “giving away” the bride to the groom.)

The master-servant relation, however, has not

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been abolished although it has been modernized with industrial and labor legislation to the employment relation of today. Since the employment relation has not been abolished and since work in the nondemocratic context of the employment relation remains the principal outside-the-family activity for most people, the effects of that economic activity on democratic



practices is a topic for democratic theory that is of more than historical interest.

The concept of deliberative democracy distinguishes itself from the concept of democracy *simpliciter* by emphasizing the importance of active citizenship. Yet much of the modern literature shows the aforementioned inattention to the economic relations of subordination which, in the minds of earlier democratic theorists (such as Kant), were important enough to preclude active citizenship and even the right to vote. But this was not always so; some earlier theorists of deliberative democracy were well aware of the connection.

The concept of *deliberative* democracy is older than the phrase. In the 19th century, the concept was often treated under the name “government by discussion.” While a thorough intellectual history could go back to Socrates and Aristotle, for present purposes one could list more recent contributors, such as Alexis de Tocqueville, John Stuart Mill, Walter Bagehot, James Bryce, John Dewey, Ernest Barker, A. D. Lindsay, Frank Knight, James Buchanan, Bernard Crick, Charles Lindblom, and Jürgen Habermas. Some commented on the relevance

of the economic-political connection and some did not.

The towering figure in the 19th century was John Stuart Mill. Mill's contribution to government by discussion is best known from his books *On Liberty* and *Considerations on*

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Representative Government. In *Considerations*, Mill argues that political institutions should be judged in large part by the degree to which they “promote the general mental advancement of the community, including under that phrase advancement in intellect, in virtue, and in practical activity and efficiency.” Indeed, a defect of a representative government may be that it does not bring “into sufficient exercise the individual faculties, moral, intellectual, and active, of the people.”

As between one form of popular government and another, the advantage in this respect lies with that which most widely diffuses the exercise of public functions ... by opening to all classes of private citizen ... the widest participation in the details of judicial and administrative business; as by jury trial, admission to municipal offices, and above all by the utmost possible publicity and liberty of discussion, whereby not merely a few individuals in succession, but the whole public, are made, to a certain extent, participants in the government, and sharers in the instruction and mental exercise derivable from it.

Mill saw representative government as an “agency of national education” and mentioned

“the practice of the dicastery and the ecclesia” in ancient Athens as institutions that developed the active political capabilities of the citizens. In *On Liberty*, Mill emphasized how the “collision of adverse opinions” in discussion and debate (like the contestation or *agon* of ancient Athenian culture) had a “salutary effect” on people’s mental well-being.

In his *Principles of Political Economy*, Mill considered how the form of work would effect those capabilities and how the workplace association could become a school for the civic virtues if it progressed beyond the employment relation.

But if public spirit, generous sentiments, or true justice and equality are desired, association, not isolation, of interests, is the school in which these excellences are nurtured. The aim of improvement should be not solely to place human beings in a condition in which they will be able to do without one another, but to enable them to work with or for one another in relations not involving dependence.



Previously those who lived by labor and were not individually self-employed would have to work for a master.

But the civilizing and improving influences of association . . . , may be obtained without dividing the producers into two parties with hostile interests and feelings, the many who do the work being mere servants under the command of the one who supplies the funds, and having no interest of their own in the enterprise except to earn their wages with as little labor as possible.

One halfway house in this direction would be various forms of association between capital and labor.

The form of association, however, which if humankind continue to improve, must be expected in the end to predominate, is not that which can exist between a capitalist as chief, and workpeople without a voice in the management, but the association of the laborers themselves on terms of equality, collectively owning the capital with which they carry on their operations, and working under managers elected and removable by themselves.

Mill gave examples of such worker cooperatives in his time and they can also be seen today in the Mondragon cooperatives of the Basque country in northern Spain or the LEGA cooperatives in northern Italy. Under this form of cooperation, Mill saw an increase in the productivity of work since the workers then have the enterprise as “their principle and their interest.”

It is scarcely possible to rate too highly this material benefit, which yet is as nothing compared with the moral revolution in society that would accompany it: the healing of the standing feud between capital and labor; the transformation of human life, from a conflict of classes struggling for opposite interests, to a friendly rivalry in the pursuit of a good common

to all; the elevation of the dignity of labor; a new sense of security and independence in the laboring class; and the conversion of each human being’s daily occupation into a school of the social sympathies and the practical intelligence.

In striking contrast to modern economics, Mill would judge firms not only by their productive efficiency but by how well they function as schools for “the social sympathies and the practical intelligence.” This brings us back to the basic question about the political-economic connection: “each human being’s daily occupation” is what sort of school? Is it a school for being a good employee or a school for being a member of a democratic association?

John Dewey was the towering figure in deliberative democratic theory in the first half of the 20th century. From his earliest writings in 1888 to his mature years, Dewey saw democracy as a norm applicable to all spheres of human activity, not just to the political sphere. In *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Dewey argued that democracy “is but a name for the fact that human nature is developed only when its elements take part in directing things which are common, things for the sake of which men and women form groups—families, industrial companies, governments, churches, scientific associations and so on. The principle holds as much of one form of association, say in industry and commerce, as it does in government.” Thus Dewey rejects the use of the public-private distinction to quarantine the norm of democracy to the public sphere and would apply it to all associations.

After the Second World War, in his *Economic Basis of New Society*, Dewey repeated what he had said about social reorganization after the First World War:

It is so common to point out the absurdity of conducting a war for political democracy which leaves industrial and economic autocracy practically untouched, that I think we are absolutely bound to see, after the war, either a period of very great unrest,... or a movement to install the principle of self-government within industries.

Social-economic arrangements, he argues (along with Mill), are to be judged by how they hinder or help the development of human capacities:

Discovery of individual needs and capacities is a means to the end, but only a means. The means have to be implemented by a social-economic system that establishes and uses the means for the production of free human beings associating with one another on terms of equality.

But the widespread acceptance of political democracy as a norm did not automatically

lead to the idea of “free human beings associating with one another on terms of equality” being applied to other spheres of life. In *Democracy and Educational Administration*, Dewey observed:

After democratic political institutions were nominally established, beliefs and ways of looking at life and acting that originated when men and women were externally controlled and subjected to arbitrary power, persisted in the family, the church, business and the school, and experience shows that as long as they persist there, political democracy is not secure.

And when the “methods of regulation and administration in vogue in the conduct of secondary social groups are undemocratic ... there is bound to be an unfavorable reaction back into the habits of feeling, thought and action of citizenship in the broadest sense of that word”—i.e., into the aspects of citizenship that are the specific concern of deliberative democracy.

In *School and Society*, again he writes that perhaps the most important of the secondary social groups is the one where most adults spend most of their time;

I do not need to do more than point to the moral, emotional and intellectual effect upon both employers and laborers of the existing industrial system.... I suppose that every one who reflects upon the subject admits that it is impossible that the ways in which activities are carried on for the greater part of the waking hours of the day, and the way in which the share of individuals are involved in the management of affairs in such a matter as gaining a livelihood and attaining material and social security, can not but be a highly important factor in shaping personal dispositions; in short, forming character and intelligence.





Dewey explains in *Democracy and Education* that while “democratic social organization makes provision for this direct participation in control: in the economic region, control remains external and autocratic,” and in his *Ethics*:

Control of industry is from the top downwards, not from the bottom upwards. The greater number of persons engaged in shops and factories are “subordinates.” They are used to receiving orders from their superiors and acting as passive organs of transmission and execution. They have no active part in making plans or forming policies—the function comparable to the legislative in government—nor in adjudicating disputes which arise. In short their mental habits are unfit for accepting the intellectual responsibilities involved in political self-government.

This brings us back around to the point of factual agreement between Mill and Dewey on

the one hand and Kant on the other; “every one who reflects upon the subject admits that” spending the “greater part of the waking hours” as a “subordinate” in the employment relation does not foster the human capabilities for self-government. The difference is that Kant took it as a sufficient reason to deny the democratic franchise to the individual while Mill and Dewey drew the opposite conclusion that the ideal of democracy should be applied to the workplace.

While modern industrial and labor legislation has led to some amelioration of the effects, the legal basis for the nondemocratic governance over the people working in a firm is still the employment relation, wherein the suppliers of capital or their representatives hire the people working in an enterprise rather than those people jointly hiring or owning the capital they use. The nondemocratic workplace based on the employer-employee relation figured prominently in the thought of earlier democratic theorists, such as John Stuart Mill and John Dewey—and even Immanuel Kant. Given the centrality of the employment relation for most adults’ activities for the “greater part of the waking hours,” one would expect the nondemocratic workplace and the alternative of workplace democracy to also be major topics in the modern literature on deliberative democracy.

David P. Ellerman is a visiting scholar at the University of California/Riverside. During 10 years at the World Bank, he was advisor to the chief economist. He has authored five books, including Helping People Help Themselves: From the World Bank to an Alternative Philosophy of Development Assistance (2005).