

Still in search of organizational democracy: exploring new opportunities and constraints

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Introduction

In the past few years, there has been a growing movement among scholars around the world to promote the topic of the democratization of work (see <https://democratizingwork.org/>), revitalizing a long-standing debate through scholarly discussions as well as public engagement events in many different countries. The publication and spread in May 2020 of the democratizing work manifesto – supported by more than 7,000 signatures to date – highlighted that the success of such an initiative is in doubt without the democratization of the very structures in which work is executed i.e., in organizations.

In parallel, the growing interest in the topic has been sustained by the publication of a number of special issues (Chen and Chen, 2021; Frega et al., 2019; Rhodes et al., 2020), special forums in journals (Adler et al., 2023), literature reviews (e.g., Lee and Edmonson, 2017) and monographs (e.g., Diefenbach, 2020; Dukes and Streeck, 2022; Reinecke and Donaghey, 2023) dedicated to organizational and workplace democracy and to how much it currently matters *per se*, as well as for the more general state of democracy in society.

Given the current relevance and scope of the debate, this special issue aims to enter into conversation with the international scientific community, as well as with articles previously published in *Studi Organizzativi* (e.g., Sacconi et al., 2019; Butera, 1999; Butera, 2020) which have advocated for

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a fundamental reconfiguration of current modes of organizing in the direction of a more democratic governance and management. Furthermore, this special issue is intended as an ideal continuation of a previous special issue on ‘New Trajectories in Workplace Cooperation’ (see Signoretti et al., 2022), given that a substantial degree of cooperation around commonly agreed rules is deemed necessary to realize democracy, in organizations *and* in society.

The general objective of this special issue is not only to explore whether organizational democracy is possible, but also how it can be realized. Our aim is to discuss various forms of organizational and workplace democracy, while also recognizing potential advantages and constraints, the conditions that can sustain democracy in organizations, as well as its effects at the individual, organizational and/or societal levels.

It is not easy to draw the contours of the topic as organizational solutions to democratizing workplaces range from various forms of employee involvement and participation, including employee share ownership and profit-sharing, which have recently increased considerably in Western countries and companies (Mathieu, 2022), to systems of co-management and co-determination through workers’ representatives, or even the more radical experiments directly involving workers and, in some cases, other stakeholders, in the governance of organizations.¹ A relevant analytical distinction is made in the literature between democracy at the point of production, such as efforts to co-organize work and production on the shop-floor, and democracy in the administration of organizations, in the form of institutional arrangement that allows workers to be represented at the board level, thereby participating in corporate governance and influencing organizational strategic decision-making (Conchon, 2011).

Acknowledging the ambiguity and plurality of meanings surrounding the term, in this essay we adopt an open and inclusive definition of organizational democracy. Democracy has been broadly defined as a system of decision-making in which those affected by decisions participate at least to some extent in decision-making, instead of just being ruled by others (Bryde, 2011; cited in Reinecke and Donaghey, 2023). At the same time, to distinguish it from simple participation, we agree with Foley and Polanyi (2006: 174) that a substantial democracy in organizations “exists when employees have some real control over organizational goal-setting and strategic planning”.

¹ For a general discussion see also Baglioni, 2001; Carrieri et al., 2015.

It is also worth noting that, to date, debates on organizational and workplace democracy have spanned a variety of academic disciplines ranging from philosophy to organization studies, sociology, industrial relations, geography, political theory, organizational behaviour, management, and economics. Therefore, in line with the spirit of organization studies and current debates (see Yu and Pekarek, 2023) as well as, we believe, of the journal *Studi Organizzativi*, we intend the exploration of organizational and workplace democracy in this special issue to be an interdisciplinary dialogue that should foster curiosity for further cross-discipline and cross-level theorizing.

Building on these ideas, this introductory essay is structured as follows. In the next section we revisit some of the historical legacies around the notion of organizational and workplace democracy (without the pretence of being exhaustive), and then present the major debates on democratizing work. Finally, we introduce the contents of this special issue and then tentatively advance some conclusive remarks and possible ways forward.

1. Historical legacies

Robert Michels' famous "iron law of oligarchy" (1966 [1911]) argued that – no matter how democratic it was in the beginning – eventually any organization will develop oligarchic and hierarchical tendencies. Such classic accounts seem to be extremely discouraging for the possibility of realizing democratic organizations. However, for Weber (2019 [1922]), bureaucracy was one of the principal means through which to realize more democratic societies – although not necessarily democratic organizations – based on the equal treatment of citizens and their issues. One hundred years later, contemporary accounts confirm that bureaucracy and democratic ideals are not as mutually exclusive as originally thought and, instead, there can be participative, collegial and even emancipative forms of bureaucracy based on value-rationality (Monteiro and Adler, 2022). Nevertheless, even though most of its assumptions have been contested (e.g., Diefenbach, 2019), Michels' iron law still strongly conditions the collective imaginary around organizations.

Such pessimism is surprising considering that the idea to have democracy in organizations has been rather long-lived. Indeed, already at the end of the 19th century, the possibility to bring democracy to organizations was foundational for the Industrial Relations research field. With the publication of 'Industrial democracy', Webb and Webb (2010 [1897])

associated the idea of industrial democracy with democratic trade unions and effective collective bargaining. This notion of industrial democracy, shared by the British pluralist school of industrial relations (Clegg, 1976; Ackers, 2007) and further expanded in work on democracy in internal union organization (Lipset et al., 1956), is however much narrower compared to what most industrial relations scholars would now understand. Industrial democracy is, in fact, most often associated with co-determination at workplace level, through institutions such as works councils, and at company level, through worker participation in supervisory boards. Some authors even expand it to notions of economic democracy at sectoral and national levels, through economic councils and chambers (Müller-Jentsch, 2008), and to self-management and producer cooperatives, as in the extended model developed by Poole (1986). Most typically, however, the notion of industrial democracy developed in industrial relations scholarship focuses on indirect forms of participation mediated through representative institutions.

As regards classic management scholarship, as early as 1924 Mary Parker Follett advanced a theory of self-government, mainly intended for public administrations, considering the conflict endogenous in organizations and society as a ‘creative force’ (Follett, 1924). In a similar vein, the founder of the organizational development field – Kurt Lewin – investigated and contrasted the characteristics of democratic and autocratic styles of leadership (Lewin et al., 1939). Although motivated by social-democratic progressive ideals (e.g., Cooke, 2007), later critical commentators have highlighted how early management theorists endorsed a unitarist view of workplace relations that largely overlooked trade unionism and conflict (Desmond and Wilson, 2019; Hassard, 2012), thus arguing that they represented simple “lubricants” of Taylor-Fordism in workplaces (Bonazzi, 2016).

In the post-war period in Europe, especially during the late 60s and the 70s, democracy at the point of production i.e., the participation of workers in workplace-level decisions, gained traction, following the critique of Taylor-Fordist models of production. At the time, intensive scholarly and political debate explored how workers could have a say on their work, and two main ways were identified: the first, anchored in the industrial relations tradition, considered indirect-representative forms of participation through work councils or other joint consultative committees, which provide a voice to workers through elected representative bodies (Rogers and Streeck, 1995). The second departs from representative notions of workplace democracy, and conceives it as inextricably bound to forms of direct participation of workers, which ensure greater control over the way in which their work is

designed and executed through, for example, self-managed workgroups, and the redesign of jobs. Scholars in the socio-technical tradition (e.g., Emery and Thorsud, 1969) were particularly active in this regard, while contributing to the development of practices of workplace democracy through an action research approach and a close collaboration between researchers and practitioners. The Swedish *Industrial Democracy* movement and the German *Humanisierung der Arbeitswelt* programme were the most evident results of these attempts.

In the US context, instead, towards the end of the 70s it was the sociologist Joyce Rothschild – based on her studies, mostly conducted within cooperative organizations – who proposed a model contrasting the ‘collectivist-democratic organization’ with the ‘for-profit managerial firm’. The authors identified a number of distinguishing characteristics between the two ideal types, including the degree of workforce specialization, the type of leadership, differences in work values, organizational culture, etc. (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979; Rothschild and Whitt, 1986).

In Italy, the debate around industrial democracy lived several waves, always influenced by the specific industrial relations climate that characterises the country (see Carrieri et al., 2015; Leonardi, 2010). After the Second World War, despite the significant experience of “*Consigli di gestione*”, discussions on the introduction of forms of workers’ participation were restrained between diverging trade union positions and, most significantly, a fierce opposition on the side of employers. After the major gains obtained by the labour movement during the Hot Autumn, also in terms of a more pervasive capacity of control by workers over workplace organisation, proposals for organisational democracy resurfaced during the 1980s in the form of plans developed by trade unions (the “*Piano d’impresa*” formulated by Bruno Trentin, Giuliano Amato, and Michele Magno, all at the trade union research centre IRES, for the CGIL; Trentin et al., 1980) and agreements with publicly-owned enterprises (such as the so-called “*Protocollo Iri*”). It should be noted that, in a period of strong social and political turmoil, debates around organisational democracy not only focused on how to achieve more democratic workplaces, but also on whether these forms of workplace democracy fit within or work against the dominant socio-economic capitalist system, trying to reform or radically subvert it (Tomasetta, 1972) – a discussion point that remains open and debated to this day (see Wolff, 2012).

Discussions around organisational democracy re-opened in the 1990s and 2000s in Italy, this time mostly led by new management approaches which emphasised the need to foster employee involvement and direct

participation (Regalia, 1996). Such re-opening also fostered conceptual works which clarified the meaning and implications of different models of workers' participation (Baglioni, 1995; 2001) and, in some cases, fostered critical accounts questioning whether management-led programmes were anything close to participation (Cattero, 2016). During those same years, the work of the trade unionist Bruno Trentin (1997) aimed, among other things, to place work as a constitutional right of citizenship at the centre of political attention and to strengthen democracy and freedom at work, so that everyone could realise their own project of knowledge and life. Coming from a completely different background and career path, the sociologist Luciano Gallino instead offered reflections around the possibilities opened by new technologies for extending democracy into organizational contexts (condensed in Gallino, 2001 and 2007).

2. Recent developments

Although the momentum of the international debate on democratizing work seemed to wane during most of the 80s, discussions around different conceptions of organizational democracy resurfaced in subsequent years. In the 90s, scholars debated the contribution of new management models, such as High-Performance Work Practices and Lean Production, to the democratization of workplaces, asking whether they increased or actually reduced workers' autonomy and control over their work (Appelbaum and Batt, 1994; Rinehart et al., 1997; Rothschild and Ollilainen, 1999). Some scholars linked the answer to the existence and functioning of institutions favouring workers' participation in work organization: these models of work organization were found to assume different forms, more or less favourable to workers' participation, in different institutional contexts (Turner, 1991).

In the last two decades, many scholars have provided fresh arguments in favour of organizational and workplace democracy, focusing on its positive impacts on workers, companies and societies as a whole. For example, Harrison and Freeman (2004: 50) maintained that, among other things, organizational democracy aids the implementation of decisions, makes people feel more committed and responsible for organizational outcomes, enhances the organizations' capacity to innovate and change, improves the work climate, and develops individuals' skills and abilities more fully. Foley and Polanyi (2006) further pointed out that organizational democracy has a positive effect on employee health, reducing stress and burnout, as similarly

found in a study on Danish workplaces (Knudsen et al., 2011). In a comparative study on the call-centre industry in the US and Germany, Doellgast (2012) showed that even in low-end service organizations, workplace democracy is a central factor in increasing job quality. Regarding public management, Brugué and Gallego (2003) argued that a more democratic organization would improve public service efficacy and stakeholder involvement in public administrations.

Calls for the adoption of democratic forms of governance to improve organizational efficacy have further grown in recent years, in particular in knowledge-intensive firms (e.g., Grandori, 2016). Sachs and colleagues (2010) talked about an enlarged stakeholder governance of firms that, besides employees, should involve external stakeholders' representatives. The proposal by Sacconi and colleagues (2019) to establish firm-level 'work and citizenship councils' goes in the same direction, intending democracy as a way to make organizations more equal and 'really' socially responsible. In a recent essay, Grandori (2022) proposed a reconceptualization of corporations as 'republics of rightsholders' and to grant property rights to those investing labour and knowledge capital (typically employees), so that the internal diversity of ideas and backgrounds can contribute to improving collective decision-making. Similarly, inspired by political bicameralism and the principle of separation and balance of powers, Ferreras (2017) suggested a bicameral model of the firm in which two chambers, one composed of capital investors' representatives and the other by labour investors' representatives, should co-govern for-profit organizations.

Disappointed with liberal models of democracy, critical scholars have instead advanced a 'radical' view of organizational democracy, which should rely on conflict and dissensus to subvert current modes of organizing and to find alternatives (Rhodes et al., 2020). They have also highlighted the prefigurative potential of alternative organizations (Schiller-Merkens, 2022; Zanoni, 2020), conceptualizing prefiguration as the collective effort to reproduce in the present the model of society we imagine for the future (Monticelli, 2021). In the words of its proponents, radical democracy represents "an ethically motivated alternative to the potent marriage of the liberal democratic state and corporate power" which enables us "to fundamentally challenge and subvert the very foundations of the neo-liberal consensus that has generated the economic, ecological, humanitarian and political crises currently facing us" (Rhodes et al., 2020: 627-628). The search for alternatives has generated a new wave of studies on, for example, cooperatives of freelance and precarious workers (De Coster and Zanoni, 2023; Mondon-Navazo et al., 2021), employee-owned corporations and

worker-recuperated enterprises (e.g., Atzeni and Ghigliani, 2007; Vieta and Heras, 2022; Vieta, 2010), and other communal systems of organizing (for an overview see Parker et al., 2014). At the same time, expanding previous evidence on the paradoxes and dilemmas of participation and how it can be burdensome for employees (e.g., Kanter, 1982; Nurick, 1985), this literature has also acknowledged the difficulty and obstacles in realizing alternative democratic organizations (King and Land, 2018; Mondon-Navazo et al., 2021; see also Zanoni and Alakavuklar, in this Special Issue).

Recently, theoretical work has speculated on the possible futures awaiting organizations in light of ongoing digital transformation (see also Doellgast, in this Special Issue) and of the regime of public policy that constitutes their environment (Bodrožić and Adler, 2022). These works carry on the tradition of thought that considers technology as a key factor for enabling, or constraining, democracy in organizations (e.g., Gallino, 2007; Sørensen, 1985). For example, after identifying four possible future scenarios – digital authoritarianism, digital oligarchy, digital localism, and digital democracy – Bodrožić and Adler (2022) suggest that a key role is assigned to public debate and political struggle to shape the system's evolution towards either reinvigorating or weakening democracy.

Other recent empirical work, conducted jointly by scholars of industrial relations and organization studies, has focused on the changes in the supply chain practices of the garment industry after the Rana Plaza Disaster² in Bangladesh in 2013 (Donaghey and Reinecke, 2018; Reinecke and Donaghey, 2023). In particular, this research work has highlighted the conjoined roles of brand owners, trade unions, and NGOs in establishing a transnational regulatory regime that, in the long term, can enhance industrial democracy and labour rights in global supply chains.

In sum, there is ample consensus among scholars about the fact that more organizational democracy is needed, and that organizational democracy likely bears a positive impact not only on employees, but also on overall societal well-being. Several commentators have also talked about a possible spillover effect, with organizational democracy improving the democratic functioning of society as, for example, it can increase employees' participation in democratic processes, promote employees' active citizenship behaviours, and reduce people's willingness to support extremist political

² On 23 April 2013, even though large cracks had appeared in the walls in previous days and all the shops and service activities on the ground floor had been evacuated, the Rana Plaza building in Dhaka, Bangladesh, collapsed, killing 1,134 and injuring about 2,515 garment workers.

movements (e.g., Budd et al., 2018; Butera, 2021; Honneth, 2023; Timming and Summers, 2020; Weber et al., 2009). At the same time, there is still much debate around the ways in which organizational democracy can best be realized. This special issue contributes to this important debate.

3. This Special Issue

The articles selected for this Special Issue have been chosen for their contribution to the debate on organizational democracy and for the discussion of figures and cases that have significantly explored how it can be best realized.

The historical essay by Sabato Massimo discusses the political and intellectual legacy of Bruno Trentin, one of the protagonists of the Italian 20th century union movement. Trentin continuously advocated for sustained union engagement in the management and governance of companies as a means to realize more democratic organizations and workplaces. The article meticulously reconstructs and positions Trentin's efforts to pursue democratization of work ideals within their proper social and historical contexts. It also highlights the relevant implications of such efforts for reforming contemporary capitalism.

In his article, Borghi explores struggles for democratizing, decommodifying and decarbonizing the platform economy, comparing the mobilization of food delivery workers in Italy and the United Kingdom. By relying on concepts developed by the Democratizing Work movement (see Democratizing Work Italia in this Special Issue), the paper argues that the democratization of work and companies always rests on workers' struggles and the building of countervailing power on the side of labour.

Gabriellini and colleagues' article builds upon a 'militant' action research approach, in which the authors were not only engaged as detached data collectors but also as campaigners and active members in the studied organization. Although, as the authors affirm, theirs is primarily a study of 'democratic management of an industrial dispute', the past history, as well as the present struggle of the former GKN workers of Campi Bisenzio, offer valuable insights about workers' self-organizing practices in response to adversarial relations with employers and with the broader political environment.

The paper by Mori and Cavaliere digs into the individual level, providing a micro-level analysis of how workers' attitudes and perceptions

(particularly regarding job satisfaction) affect their voice behaviours and engagement with their organizations. By focusing on the context of cooperative organizations, the authors explore the mediating role of the employment relations climate and of employees' perceptions of their influence at work. Hence, the study provides evidence about the importance of participatory organizational practices for fostering constructive employee behaviour.

The last two articles focus on organizational democracy, taking universities as case studies. In the first, Guarascio and colleagues examine the role of Equal Opportunities Committees (CUGs), designed to combat discrimination and enhance gender equality, in strengthening academic democracy. The study, conducted in four Italian universities, highlights the importance of gender competences and empowerment structures, as well as bottom-up mobilization processes and investment in governance with respect to gender issues, to promote change and foster a more participatory organizational environment.

In the second article, Barbera and colleagues adopt a strategy-as-practice perspective to examine the participatory strategic planning process at a university in northern Italy. In particular, they identify four strategic practices – collective decision-making, platform and process alignment, emotional coordination, and organizational diplomacy – that can contribute to two key factors for organizational democracy: a synergistic approach and consensus on organizational change.

In addition to the six selected articles, the special issue includes three contributions on organizational democracy, the first two written by leading authors in the field of management and organization studies, on the one hand, and labour and industrial relations studies, on the other, and the third authored by a network recently formed in the Italian context within the broader global movement 'Democratizing Work'.

In the first essay, Zanoni and Alakavuklar criticize the focus on workplace democracy as a solution within capitalist institutions, arguing that it fails to address the fundamental problems of exploitation and dispossession inherent in capitalism. Instead, drawing from poststructuralist Marxist feminist debate, the authors suggest organizing social reproduction through non-capitalist economic practices and emphasize the importance of prefiguration in envisioning alternatives to capitalism.

The contribution by Doellgast instead focuses on mutual gains (for labour and capital) potentially delivered by organizational democracy in the new phase of digital capitalism. Far from providing a representation of irenic win-win solutions, Doellgast argues that democracy at work and the mutual

gains it conveys can only be established and sustained if institutional constraints are placed on employers that reduce their capacity to take unilateral decisions and strengthen labour's countervailing power. In the absence of such constraints, she argues, companies will have strong incentives to use new technologies to undermine existing regulation, intensify control over workers and promote deskilling.

The last of the invited essays presents the experience of the network Democratizing Work Italia, the Italian chapter of the Democratizing Work global movement, which served as inspiration for this Special Issue. By mobilizing the support of over 7,000 academics worldwide around the three principles “democratizing businesses, decommodifying work, and remediating the environment”, the Manifesto has been a powerful call to action, which has relaunched debates and initiatives to foster organizational democracy.

Finally, the Special Issue ends with two reviews of volumes that have recently addressed the topic of democracy in organizations and workplaces. The first, written by Guglielmo Meardi, discusses the volume *Democracy at Work: Contract, Status and Post-Industrial Justice*, published in 2022 by Ruth Dukes and Wolfgang Streeck. The second, authored by Simone Pulcher, provides his reflections around the volume *The Democratic Organization. Democracy and the Future of Work*, published in 2020 by Thomas Diefenbach.

Concluding remarks and ways forward

This special issue started with the general objective of understanding whether and how organizational democracy could be possible. We believe that the articles and contributions included in this volume reflect and extend current efforts to grapple with major questions relating to organizational and workplace democracy, stimulating further empirical research and theoretical reflection. Many of the interrogatives posited in the original call for papers have been touched upon to some extent, while others inevitably remain open. In particular, we encourage future research to further reflect on how to conciliate democratic organizations with the growing level of inequality in the distribution of resources in organizations and societies. Also, empirical research on practical cases of organizational and workplace democracy will be useful to understand the varied configurations that democracy can assume in different types of organizations.

In addition, we believe that there is much value in research on alternative organizations (e.g., De Coster and Zanoni, 2023; Mondon-Navazo et al., 2021; Vieta and Heras, 2022), especially because for-profit organizations constitute just a small minority of the estimated overall population of organizations worldwide (Parker, 2023). At the same time, business organizations currently represent the hegemonic form, which influences management principles, models and practices in many other types of organizations, including public administrations, social enterprises and NPOs. Thus, this crucial connection should be further investigated, with all its inherent problems and contradictions, adding to the few accounts that already exist in the literature (e.g., Lee and Edmondson, 2017).

In conclusion, we acknowledge that there is some degree of wishful thinking in developing a Special Issue on organizational democracy, at a time in which democracy appears to be frail, at both the workplace and societal levels. Nevertheless, we hope that the research results, arguments and theories presented in this Special Issue have some degree of ‘performativity’ (Cabantous et al., 2016) in advancing the cause of organizational democracy. Of course, we understand that this is not just a theoretical or research enterprise, but also a political issue that needs further alliances and collaborations with all those people, social actors and institutions committed to democratizing work and organizations.

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