



54th ITH Conference

Workplace Democracy Revisited: Labour and Practices of Participation, Workers' Control and Self-Management in Global Perspective

Linz/Upper Austria, 6-8 September 2018

Conference languages: German / English

CALL FOR PAPERS

The attempts to extend democracy from the political sphere to labour relations and the broader economy (*Self-Government in Industry*, as G.D.H. Cole wrote in 1917) keep resurfacing in various forms and under different names throughout the existence of both modern industry and agriculture. Producer cooperatives have been an alternative form of enterprise organization in capitalist economies at least since the 19th century. Very different schools of thought supporting workers' "associationism" – socialist, anarchist, Christian – have seen worker-run enterprises as the basis of a more egalitarian society. Communist revolutionaries envisioned workers' councils as the building block of post-capitalist political and social structures ever since soviets came to prominence in the 1905 and 1917 revolutions in Russia, but also a range of revolutionary stirrings in the aftermath of World War I (Germany and Austria 1918-19, Hungary 1919, Italy 1920, etc.). After the failed attempts of revolutionary change in Europe, the German, Austrian and Czechoslovakian states introduced new legislations enabling workers' participation and representation on the enterprise level to various degrees.

During the Cold War countries, such as Israel, Algeria, Peru and, most prominently, Yugoslavia, attempted to carve out a third way model of development by implementing workers' self-management structures in their economies. Many postcolonial state building projects in Africa and beyond fused the idea of workplace democracy with local communal traditions. Workers' self-management also served as an inspiration to dissidents in Eastern Europe (Hungary, Poland), while closely related terms such as *autogestion* and even *operaismo* became leitmotifs within the 1968 movement in Southern Europe as a vision of a more democratic socialism. Numerous welfare state models in the European countries, ascribed to the political "West", developed partly far-reaching legal bases for workers' participation, often relying on the concepts introduced by the legislative reforms immediately after World War I.

In the 1980s, the self-management ideals of liberation in the most developed capitalist societies and in factories worldwide often metamorphosed into management tools within the framework of neoliberal politics. While many activists in (state-)socialist Eastern Europe envisioned workplace democracy as an opportunity to introduce economic democracy from below, notions of workplace autonomy were also used by the pro-market reformists inside the communist parties to decrease guaranteed workers' rights. During the 1990s, when it seemed that the ideas of workers' engagement in economic decision-making lost validity, a movement of factory occupations emerged in Argentina and other

countries in Latin America, provoking a new wave of interest and debates about the perspectives of workplace democracy in the 21st century.

State of the Art and Research Gaps

As this short historical outline shows, initiatives for democratization of labour relations were carried by vastly disparate social actors under diverse types of labour regimes and political rule in many different parts of the globe. Not surprisingly, a substantial research literature on these phenomena has developed. Yet, studies of workers' activation tend to have a narrow focus when it comes to the socio-economic complexity and the geographical scope of workplace democracy. Firstly, the topic has traditionally attracted left-leaning social scientists and heterodox economists inclined to look at the political organizing of the working class and economic performance of the enterprises respectively, thus overlooking labour relations and the inner workings of workplace democracy. Secondly, the studies were habitually framed in the context of individual nation states with the most illustrious historical projects claiming workers' emancipation attracting the greatest attention. The attempts to produce overviews on the history of workers' participation, control and self-management practices in different countries usually amounted to collections of individual case studies with moderate comparison, disregarding mutual influence, transnational exchange and transfers.

Conference Goals

In order to contribute to closing some of these gaps, the 2018 ITH Conference poses the following two strategic goals (with some potential topics listed below):

1.) To unpack and categorise the often interchanging terms and conceptualizations of workplace democracy such as *self-management, control, participation, co-determination* and *autogestion* (in different languages) by tracing their evolution globally and relating them to particular geographic locations, cultural contexts and historical conjunctures:

- Classifying various examples of workplace organization without conventional management. We want to approach the debates about terms and concepts not only from a theoretical point of view, but as a theme of historical enquiry through concrete case studies. The categorisations should account for the aspirations of the involved actors (autonomous coalitions, trade unions, employers/management, and the state), aiming to realize their interests within the existing order, going beyond the given boundaries or various in-between solutions.
- The circulation of ideas about economic democracy across the borders of nation states. Did individual enterprises, labour movements or states that adopted workplace democratization as an official part of their policies make conscious efforts to promote their models internationally and what impact did they make?
- Experiences of workplace democracy in the periphery. What were the peculiar challenges that advocates of workplace democracy in the Global South, yet also in economically underdeveloped societies and regions of the Global North, and in the state socialist countries had to face? Factors to be kept in mind include the peculiar features of the working class, the lack of technical expertise for the daily running of the production process and the widespread informal economy.

- The inclusion and categorization of experiments to democratize and control the organization of agricultural work, service sector as well as the less known instances of workers' involvement in the industry, regardless of whether they portrayed themselves as revolutionary or not, such as the instances of cooperativism linked to traditional communal forms of economic organization in Latin America, Africa and Asia.
- The prominence of workplace democracy as a topic inside the transnational institutions and initiatives, such as the United Nations, ILO, socialist internationalisms, Non-Aligned Movement, etc.

2.) To examine workplace democracy beyond the political history of workers' movements or business history of alternative management models by investigating the actual practices of workers' involvement, decision-making and work conditions in concrete cases:

- The altered ways in which workers conceived of themselves, their enterprise and communities after the introduction of some form of workplace democracy. Was there an increased identification with the work collective, improved work efforts, appearance of voluntary labour, broadening of concerns for social or political issues, or different forms of inequalities within the enterprise?
- The main challenges associated with the collective participation in workplaces: mock involvement, contested decision-making processes, inefficiency, lack of accountability, parochialism, bureaucratization, clientelism, emergence of unofficial leaderships, etc.
- The new concepts and definitions of economic performance and individual work efforts: What were some of the ways in which workers' ran enterprises, defined ownership rights, measured and distributed net income, wages, social service funds, etc.?
- The relations between individual self-managed collectives and the broader economy and society: What were the models and difficulties of expanding democratic economic decision-making beyond individual enterprises, and connecting economic democracy to political institutions and everyday tasks in the surrounding communities? What effect does the market have on workplace democracy?

SUBMISSION

Proposed papers should include:

- abstract (max. 300 words)
- biographical note (max. 200 words)
- full address and e-mail address

The abstract of the suggested paper should contain a separate paragraph explaining how and (if applicable) to which element(s) or question(s) of the Call for Papers the submitted paper refers.

The short CV should give information on the applicant's contributions to the field of labour history, broadly defined, and specify (if applicable) relevant publications. For the purpose

of information, applicants are invited to attach a copy of one of these publications to their application.

Proposals to be sent to **Lukas Neissl**: lukas.neissl@doew.at

TIME SCHEDULE

Submission of proposals: by **28 January 2018**

Notification of acceptance: **9 March 2018**

Full papers or presentation versions: by **5 August 2018**

PREPARATORY GROUP

Dario Azzellini, ILR School, Cornell University, Ithaca

Frank Georgi, Centre d'Histoire Sociale du XXème Siècle/Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne

Goran Musić, Central European University, Budapest

Lukas Neissl, ITH, Vienna

Brigitte Pellar, Vienna

Anne Sudrow, Centre for Contemporary History Potsdam

Advisers:

Marcel van der Linden, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam

Susan Zimmermann, ITH, Vienna

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