



## Participation or Democracy at Work?

Peter Scott

review of:

B. Harley, J. Hyman and P. Thompson (eds.) *Participation and Democracy at Work: Essays in Honour of Harvie Ramsay*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. (PB: pp. xiv + 257, £25.99, ISBN 1403900043)

The academic study of forms of employee participation in workplace decision-making possesses a number of unusual (and unenviable) distinctions. There are few topics in the study of organisations and the workplace whose dominant scope has become so circumscribed and focus has changed so much over the past thirty years. In the UK, the discussions of the nineteen seventies about the prospects and potential of what was then normally termed 'industrial democracy' were framed in the context of the seeming economic success of continental models of corporate governance. However, the Anglo-American managerialist ideological revolution of the nineteen eighties and thereafter rapidly swept this away and, under the influence of human resource management, the locus of debate shifted towards much more task-specific notions of 'worker participation' or even 'employee involvement'. The principal terminology of the subject has been peculiarly prone to confused or interchangeable use, but this cannot disguise an overall dilution of meaning. The idea that participation should consist of joint negotiation and agreement between workers or their representatives and management has diminished to the notion that managers consulting with, or providing information to, the workforce about the business is sufficient. 'Democracy' in the workplace became distorted to mean the limited voice of the suggestion scheme, the team briefing or the quality circle, devalued in much the same way as the political choices available to Western electorates have degraded to little more than a form of consumer democracy.

While never viewing the limited experiments of the nineteen seventies through rose-tinted spectacles, several critics have always stood out against restricted visions of the extent of voice afforded to workers. Notable here are those authors associated with the annual conferences on the Organisation and Control of the Labour Process, the Critical Perspectives on Work and Organisations book series now published through Palgrave featuring some of the output from these conferences over the years, and the figure of Harvie Ramsay in particular, who was at the forefront of this academic field until his

premature death in 2000. Hence this edited book, dedicated to Harvie's memory, which draws together all these strands.

I feel the book is timely for a number of reasons, quite apart from the fact that it forms a more than fitting memorial to Harvie Ramsay's best known area of academic enquiry, from his influential 'cycles of control' thesis in the nineteen seventies through to his later work on the potential of European Works Councils. Firstly, while we now seem to be in an era where the spread of Western-style electoral democracy has moved up the political agenda, however cynical the motives for this may sometimes be, it is striking that the workplace is an arena increasingly characterised not by representative democracy but by managerial prerogative. The reasons for this are many and complex, and are well explored as part of Crouch's (2004) excellent elaboration of his concept of 'post-democracy', but the consequences can be frustrating. Concerned citizenship, and the voice that goes with it, is all very well as long as it does not step inside the factory gate or office doorway. In an admirable study, which sadly gets no mention in the volume under review here, Towers (1997) charts the retreat of worker representation in the UK and American workplace and its deleterious consequences for employees. He rightly regards its diminution as an atrophy of citizenship rights in a larger sense. Certainly, there is plenty of evidence that lack of effective oversight of major companies has failed to reveal a particularly responsible management: take the travails of the privatised rail industry as just one example. Secondly, and some might say superseding Towers' analysis as far as the UK is concerned, the 1994 European Works Council (EWC) Directive and 2002 Information and Consultation of Employees (ICE) Directive have put the subject of participation more firmly back into political and academic frames. The impacts of these measures, especially the latter, are likely to be considerable in the UK (see, for example, Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service, 2005). Yet much of the discussion of the purposes of EWCs and national-level consultative bodies is largely conceived in terms of their potential to 'add value' to the enterprise (to borrow from the title of Storey's (2005) recent edited collection on this subject), raising productivity and easing the path to industrial restructuring. All in all, if the workplace is not to remain an island isolated from more expansive concepts of citizenship and democracy, then the time is certainly ripe for the review and revitalisation of this field of study.

This book will interest anyone who wishes to know more about the current state of this field in its broadest sense or is looking for a text to recommend that encapsulates the scope of the subject. The frequent danger of edited books is that the substantive chapters can seem eclectic, with the editors struggling to impose a coherent theme on the contributions. Such an accusation cannot be levelled at this volume, which consists of an introduction by the editors followed by eleven substantive chapters from authors well-known in their fields that cover most of the aspects and forms of worker participation that one would expect to see. Thus, for example, Andrew Pendleton investigates financial participation through employee share ownership, Jos Benders writes on team-based forms of direct participation, and so on.

Several chapters pivot upon assessment of Ramsay's theoretical contribution to the subject, using the 'cycles of control' thesis (Ramsay, 1977) as a reference point. The 'cycles' thesis essentially argued that management willingness to concede worker

participation in industry varied in proportion to the ebb and flow of historical periods of high labour militancy. There is a potential danger here that participation could be viewed within purely functionalist terms: management will grant forms of participation insofar as they are deemed necessary to permit the continued functioning of capitalism (a Disraelian 'reform that you may preserve' approach). A number of chapters point out the consequent difficulty of reconciling the 'macro'-level 'cycles' approach with more recent management enthusiasm for introducing forms of direct participation in a period of labour quiescence. Harley, Hyman and Thompson's introductory overview chapter explains this apparent paradox by distinguishing between task-centred, power-centred and financial forms of participation and noting that different parties normally lie behind the impetus to push for each of these three types (employers, employees, and the state respectively).

In this and other chapters, the point emerges that while the decline of representative participation may be explicable within the terms of the 'cycles' view, it fails to account so fully for the expansion in the other forms. Notably, Marchington's overview of employee involvement attempts to synthesise the debate between Ramsay's 'cycles of control' thesis and his own view that internal differentiations within management have produced 'waves' of employee involvement based upon the waxing and waning of successive direct participation initiatives. Much of the current theoretical (and certainly the more managerialist) interest in worker participation and employee involvement derives from its alleged locus as one interlocking component of so-called high performance work systems. This new holy grail is addressed centrally and critically by Harley's and Danford's two chapters, and is also discussed in others. There are rather fewer chapters that cover indirect forms of representative-based participation: there is a chapter on EWCs, but nothing specific on company-level works councils, although it would be fair to argue that it is yet premature to draw too many conclusions about the latter. A number of chapters highlight relatively neglected aspects of the subject. For example, Sturdy and Korczynski investigate participation within the rapidly expanding area of customer-facing service work; Ramsay himself and Scholarios attempt to disaggregate the differing experiences of the two genders; Nigel Haworth presents an optimistic assessment of the potential of the international labour movement to enhance the voice of workers. A closely-argued chapter by Jonathon Payne and Ewart Keep puts the spotlight on the possible democracy implicit in the design of jobs and work systems themselves. They assemble much evidence detailing the relative neglect of this aspect in the UK compared to the record of Norway and Finland.

To my mind, Boreham and Hall's final chapter, entitled 'Theorising the State and Economic Democracy', forms one of the most important contributions of the book. This broadens out the ambit of workplace democracy to encompass the process and outcomes of the distribution of economic surpluses at an institutional, state level. Central here are the different policies that can be adopted through the interplay of state, labour unions and employers towards the provision of employment, decommodification of certain public goods, and the compression of income differentials. Although necessarily an abbreviated account, Boreham and Hall summarise the main developments in OECD countries in income and wealth distribution, social transfer payments, employment creation and skills development. Their overall conclusion is that 'the neo-liberal ascendancy has, on balance, had disastrous consequences for workers'

(p. 241). They attribute this to the decline and deinstitutionalisation of organised labour, and the conscious decision of states to abdicate from, or turn over to the private sector, many former responsibilities in these spheres. They argue that such trends have found less fertile soil in those states retaining more robust social democratic traditions, although this claim looks increasingly parlous when one surveys some of the more recent developments in mainland Europe.

This book takes us some considerable distance further in critically rejuvenating this subject and analysing the seeming paradox that there appears to be more 'participation' than ever in the contemporary workplace but that it is producing less and less real 'democracy'. The key for future theoretical work in this area, as Harley *et al.*'s introduction stresses, is the need to take account of the actors forming the prime movers for any instance of participation, their interests in doing so, and the context in which they are doing it. Recently, the main impetus has come from employers, keen to improve motivation and extract employee know-how within the current confines of power relations in the workplace, and from the state, which – as Harley *et al.* point out (p. 14) – needs to bring forward measures to promote its own legitimacy to a greater extent than does management. The omens for a new era of critical research into worker participation now appear more promising than they have done for some time. The EU-imposed resurrection of representative participation as a result of the EWC and ICE Directives sets us off into unknown territory, particularly in relation to the synergies or frictions with unionised forms of employee representation that may result. Overlaying this, recent evidence suggests the existence of generally low levels of job satisfaction in the high pressure twenty-first century workplace that have not been significantly mollified by such opportunities for participation present to date (Green and Tsitsianis, 2005). Assuming workers conclude that continued organisational 'voice' is preferable to the resigned silence of 'exit', worker demands for more meaningful opportunities for intervention in organisational decision-making are indeed possible. Harley *et al.* and their contributors have done us a considerable service in reasserting the salience of this topic of enquiry and emphasising its complexity. Hopefully, it will provide the inspiration over the next few years for renewed critical scholarship of the increasing variety of employee voice mechanisms now becoming available.

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