Political Metaphors and Workplace Governance

Christopher Mackin
Adjunct Lecturer, Rutgers University
Faculty, Harvard Trade Union Program
Email: cm@ownershipassociates.com
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Abstract

Purpose - Political institutions and contemporary workplaces operate according to different rules. The seeming contradiction between these two spheres, one democratic and the other something else, presents an opportunity for productive speculation about the possibilities for reconciliation. The purpose of this paper is to provide a guide for future research investigation of this perennial topic.
Design/Methodology/Approach - The discussion of whether the workplace can catch up with the democratic achievements of political life requires an understanding of the status quo, the prevailing frames or metaphors that govern our understanding of organizational life. Four metaphors are put forward to describe the prevailing spectrum of thought. In addition to metaphors, analogies are introduced as an interpretive tool to help guide the imaginative transition between political and workplace domains.
Practical Implications - Democratic political cultures are supported by structures and institutions which encourage the expression of individual and collective voice. Workplaces, comprised of the same citizens who participate in the governance of communities, do not, with some important exceptions, offer the same opportunities for democratic participation. If a general analogy between political and workplace sphere is found persuasive, it should be possible to import and adapt democratic traditions from the former to the latter.
Originality/value - Discussions of workplace democracy often suffer from a certain naiveté, a bias against structure and toward informal consensus. Insofar as democratic workplaces are by definition smaller scale than political communities, this bias is defensible. This paper concludes however by asserting certain minimal "acid test" challenges to those who would promote the goal of workplace democracy.

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Introduction: Metaphors and Analogies at the Workplace

Given the centrality of the institution of work to social and economic life, it should be no surprise that the study of the workplace comprises a significant percentage of academic research. The consulting profession and much of the remaining popular book trade in publishing depend upon on a seemingly inexhaustible appetite to understand the world of work. The breadth and complexity of the world of work warrants the use of certain considered intellectual short-cuts, "heuristics" that can help us break through layers of received, conventional wisdom and into a fresh consideration of previously neglected themes.

This paper makes use of a specific and familiar heuristic, that of the metaphor, to help describe how work is understood. In the service of our general argument that the workplace deserves consideration as a political as well as a technical arena, we introduce an implicit developmental scheme charting the progression of four familiar workplace metaphors from a simple and familiar starting point (the workplace as family) through two familiar intermediate models (workplace as bureaucracy and workplace as contested terrain) toward a morally and technically complex endpoint (the workplace as democratic social institution).

The choice of these specific metaphors is idiosyncratic and explained further in the text. The choice of metaphors as a heuristic device however is also deliberate. It is premised both upon the capacity of metaphors to motivate discussion and on the ubiquity of metaphors as a "real life" method people actually use to make sense of or "frame" (Lakoff George, 1995) discussions of their circumstances -- in this case their experience of the workplace.

> "We may not always know it, but we think in metaphor. A large proportion of our most commonplace thoughts make use of an extensive, but unconscious, system of metaphorical concepts, that is, concepts from a typically concrete realm of thought that are used to comprehend another, completely different domain. Such concepts are often reflected in everyday language, but their most dramatic effect comes in ordinary reasoning." (Lakoff, 1995)[1]

[1] Metaphor, Morality and Politics, Or Why Conservatives Have Left Liberals in the Dust, George Lakoff; Social Research, Vol. 62, 1995.

The typology of workplace metaphors introduced in this paper are "ideal types" that can be expanded upon over time. They are introduced here to help start a discussion. A second order treatment of the idea of metaphors, introduced later in the paper and deserving of more complete treatment in future work, comes through the introduction of the concept of analogies. If metaphors are the photographic frames of this discussion, analogies are the movie, a more elaborate motion picture of ideas that can achieve a narrative arc than cannot be fully communicated through the use of metaphors.

In a paper entitled *Political Metaphors and Workplace Governance*, the narrative destination of that arc should not be difficult to imagine. The author believes that with assistance provided by the study of history and political science (MacPherson C.B., 1977) that a useful analogy can be drawn between understanding the emergence of democratic ideas and practices in the political sphere - or polity - and the possibilities for the same developmental emergence in the workplace - or economy. Democratic states evolved from feudal states. By analogy, democratic workplaces should be able to evolve from the feudal workplaces that dominate the economic landscape of our time. Mapping specific steps or stages of that developmental process is a key objective of this paper.

Political Metaphors

Reviewing the variety of frames that are revealed by workplace metaphors one is reminded of the range of purposes that work fulfills. Work has been described variously (Kohn Melvin, 1969, Weber Max, 1978, Lempert Wolfgang, 1988) as an instrumental sphere, where people trade their labor for economic value in order to survive, an associative sphere where people find – or do not find – community and as a developmental sphere, a social crucible where adolescents and adults develop competence, character and capability, qualities that are passed down through the child rearing process and shape the outlook and prospects of later generations.

Work and workplaces have also been described as a political sphere (Derber Milton, 1970, Pateman Carol, 1970, Dahl Robert, 1985, Ferreras Isabelle, 2012) where people deliberate in normative terms about their fortunes as individuals and as a group. Whether or not deliberation is encouraged or sanctioned by formal structures of involvement, it happens as a matter of course in the workplace. Workplaces function as miniaturized societies where relationships and careers are developed or thwarted, where discussions involving matters of fairness and justice are routinely conducted. Workplaces also function as miniaturized economies where scarce resources of time, talent, capital and imagination must be "managed" for success or failure under conditions of external competition.

Though contemporary usage in both the popular and academic press tends to strip the term of its political content and associate it with technical competence and the display of individual genius, the word "managed" as applied within the workplace also serves as a proxy for the word power. The exercise of managerial discretion in the workplace is a routine but often obscured example of the exercise of power. That power may be exercised effectively with subtlety and wisdom, through the use of persuasion and compelling argumentation, or effectively in a second sense of the word with force, through the power to marginalize, eliminate or fire opponents.

Persons in positions of power in corporations do not descend from the sky. They arrive at those positions through one or more at least partially plausible creation narratives we will discuss below. In that sense, managers almost always manage with some form of legitimacy. They may rule poorly or well. Under most prevailing corporate governance frameworks, their exercise of power operates largely unchecked. The central point is that however credible the path may have been that lead them to their jobs and however capable they may be in the exercise of their duties; management is a term interchangeable with the power to rule in day to day organizational life. Insofar as management is a profession involving the conduct of power,

it should not be difficult to understand why political metaphors may shed some useful and previously neglected light on the world of work. [2]

Under the standard textbook scenario associated with Jensen and Meckling (1976) that dominates the fields of economics and law, capital hires labor. Having established that basic fact, that standard model then elaborates rituals of corporate governance that one might presume to be pregnant with accounts of power and deliberation *within* the workplace as taking place *outside* the workplace largely between management and external shareholders. Management may or may not have been a party to the provision of capital by shareholders that is seen as the originating "at risk" event from which all authority must follow. However it is the narrow occupational circle of management which is typically considered to be the sole agent of capital whose interests should be aligned with shareholders in order to "maximize shareholder value." Without some form of independent representation usually associated with unions, workers are essentially spectators in this narrative, a variable cost to be "rented" in order to execute the production of tasks that create value for shareholders.

This organizationally and morally denuded depiction of the role of workers in the design of the firm that dominates textbook discussions may simplify the conversation about corporate governance but it does little to accurately describe what transpires in the contemporary workplace. Indeed, if the standard narrative derives from the above described structural premise, that capital hires labor then it should be possible to imagine an alternative model that could re-set the corporate governance conversation. If labor institutionally hires capital, a scenario that is not entirely imaginary when considering examples such as Mondragon (Whyte William & Whyte Kathleen, 1991), we might expect a more complete account of the actual dynamics of a workplace. Within that re-imagined abstraction that situates labor in the lead

[2] Recent radical critiques of power in the workplace, celebrated by champions of the Occupy Wall Street movement under the term "horizontalism", appear to be refutations not only of management but also of most forms of organizational hierarchy. Though apparently successfully applied in certain smaller scale enterprises in Argentina and elsewhere, this approach is challenged by organizations of scale where representative forms of democracy may present a more realistic model for viability. Though sympathetic with the critique, this paper adopts a more incremental approach that does not preclude the existence of hierarchy or leadership, democratically bound.

role of the corporate governance narrative we might be able to find a truer account of the complexity of what actually transpires. If such a reversal of accepted frames is allowed then it should bring with it a broad enough definition of "labor" to include all parties centrally involved in actual workplace deliberation, management and workforce alike. Using this new perspective we can expect to uncover a more descriptively rich account of what takes place within the workplace than is provided by the dominant model.

The use of political metaphors to understand or describe workplace governance which animates this effort is not entirely new but is something of a departure for contemporary organizational studies. Recent work by Ferreras (2012), for example, builds upon earlier work by Hirschmann (1970), Pateman (1970), Piore & Sabel (1984) and others to elaborate an explicit theory of how employee voice at the workplace might be institutionalized. Ferreras appeals to a theory of economic bicameralism involving institutionalized dialogue between a 'house of labor' and a 'house of capital'. Other schemes (Bernstein Paul, 1979, Dahl Robert, 1985) draw upon familiar insights from the political sphere regarding the doctrine of a separation of powers between executive, legislative and judiciary bodies within a firm. A particular adaptation put forward by Ellerman (1988) regarding the need for an internal "legitimate opposition" at work introduces a welcome level of complexity to the naïve embrace of the democratic firm as an oasis of interpersonal consensus. It is discussed at some length at the conclusion of this paper.

More on the Metaphor Method

The account that follows makes use of a sequence of select metaphors. This choice works backwards from a declared normative stance evident in the final metaphor, which in addition to being a metaphor also doubles as an "ideal type" (Weber, 1978) less clearly observable in the contemporary economy than the alternatives that precede it, of the workplace as a democratic social institution.

As previously admitted, this entire method is a short cut. The panorama of possibilities offered here is a prime example of what Kaldor (1961) referred to in another context as an

arrangement of “stylized facts” in support of theory development, in this case an emerging theory of democratic workplaces. Such a method must admit to limits. The choice of metaphors is limited. Few organizations can be seen as fitting absolutely within one category. In fact most workplaces make use of blends of these various types.

In addition to admitting to not having captured the full range of possibilities, there must be a further admission regarding a claim implied here for the existence of a developmental sequence of workplace metaphors from the relatively simple toward the more complex. Developmental sequences typically suggest two internal dynamics. First, that later stages incorporate or assimilate the achievements of earlier stages and second that higher stages while incorporating earlier achievement are nonetheless somehow higher or better (Kohlberg, 1984). Typically the province of individual psychological research exploring individual reasoning structures and patterns of persons, the export of the developmental method to organizations (Mackin, 1984) is fraught with peril. Organizations do not reason. Only individuals do. Individuals can, however, serve as ‘informants’ with respect to the organizations they inhabit. Their stories about what takes place within their organizations can reveal the norms and values of their members. Further “objective” ethnographic evidence in support of the presence of one or more workplace metaphors can be derived from documents and from participant observation of meetings where relevant statement can be recorded and analyzed. This evidence can corroborate claims that an organization resides within one or more of these metaphorical constructs.

Nothing in this litany of admissions and qualifications should suggest that what is presented here is an empirical investigation. Our use and choice of metaphors is admittedly conjectural. It does not make use of primary research data. It is entirely possible that research efforts informed by this account could be undertaken but that is a task for another time. Our journey begins with what the author believes are familiar frames or metaphors that guide workplace life. It is there where the act of persuasion toward democratic ideas must begin.

Workplace as Family

Arguably the most familiar and enduring workplace metaphor with explicit associative overtones is that of the family. Family life and family authority relationships constitute a near universal experiential background to organizational life (Entin, 1993). It should be no surprise therefore that an easily accessible inventory of family metaphors is where we are prone to turn in order to make sense of the workplace. Though applied to large as well as small organizations, the family metaphor makes more intuitive sense in face to face organizations of fewer than 200 members, a size range which statistically comprise the largest percentage of workplaces. Regardless of the size of the organization to which it is applied, the 'workplace as family' narrative is prominent but highly problematic.

The workplace as family metaphor can be found in strong or weak forms. Where strong, we can find uses that are disturbingly literal. In these settings grown adults willingly invoke norms, values and strategies to please, flatter and protect workplace "parents" – owners and/or senior management of companies – even when the persons who may have founded the firm – the natural owners – may no longer serve in positions of authority. Authority and expertise in these kinds of organizations are described in personal rather than professional terms. Workplace relationships are deferential. Advancement is more likely to take place through criteria of loyalty rather than merit. Personal norms dominate over professional norms.

A second, more benign and widespread use of the family metaphor can be distinguished in other organizations. In this "weaker" use, the narrative of parental authority is de-emphasized but often latent. What are emphasized instead are bonds of affection, reminiscent of family relations, that have developed over time in the pursuit of common goals in a workplace. This use suggests a certain communitarian ethos where authority relations are vague but presumably more consensual. While preferable, this model lacks structure and certainty. Without enforceable and consensually arrived at rules and procedures that can support its implicitly democratic norms, the positive qualities of this model hang in the breach, perpetually

threatened by crises that will reveal its underlying structure. Under stress, the benign organizational family may remain consensual or it may revert to the traditional-strong family model. Fate rests not in objective evaluations, transparent rules and processes of deliberation but in the subjective judgments of "parental-like" organizational leaders.

For better or for worse, the ubiquity of the family frame has made it the default frame for understanding workplace norms. Among its various important characteristics the feature most relevant to this discussion is the implicit claim the family metaphor makes with regard to the possibilities of unity. A family is presumed to be a unified group. The same aspiration can be found in most corporate vision statements. The critical question to explore is how effectively norms of unity that are relatively easy to evoke in the context of the family can translate to the more rough and tumble world of the workplace. Though the resilience of the workplace as family metaphor is evident, it remains a disturbingly simple and subjective frame for organizing the work lives of adults. Over time other frames have emerged to challenge this unified family frame and its hold on the organizational imagination.

Workplace as Bureaucracy

Bureaucracy is a concept that first emerged in discussions of government and the management of political power. It later migrated to workplace organizations, particularly larger scale organizations where face to face management practices became impractical or impossible. Formally bureaucratic organizations can, from certain vantage points, be seen as a developmental advance from the "family" metaphor. In these organizations, power, status and advancement are presumed to derive from more from objective criteria of merit, rationality and efficiency as opposed to subjective personal relationships and judgments. In a recent review of a book that attacks the foibles of bureaucracy, Rob Horning reminds us that "The hope of some of the French revolutionaries was that paperwork (and bureaucracy) would rationalize the state, that it would depersonalize power and destroy the corrupt networks of

aristocratic influence. "[3] Less evocative as a pure workplace metaphor than the concept of family, the bureaucratic idea nonetheless is regularly invoked to describe life within large and complex organizations.

Contemporary characterizations of bureaucracy are overwhelmingly negative and associated with impersonality and sluggishness. These critiques may be warranted but they tend to dismiss the laudably "scientific" and objective ideals of bureaucratic organizations. Weber (1978) described the promise of bureaucracy as the rule of knowledge over personal power. The historical context for the emergence of bureaucracy was essentially feudal; societies emerging from administration by royal edicts. Bureaucracy was therefore the name given to modern efforts to 'objectively' administer power. The concept of "civil service" in government administration represented the clearest example of its positive manifestation.

Outside the realm of the state, within the private economy, bureaucratic norms and practices accompanied the growth of large scale workplaces. Legendary research based organizations such as Bell Labs and IBM were once lauded as positive models of corporate bureaucracy involving hierarchy based upon expertise. The modern critique of bureaucracy at the workplace (Heckscher and Donnellon, 1994) generally acknowledges its superiority to familial, "personal" rule but critically challenges certain core bureaucratic assumptions about the need for hierarchy in favor of lateral networks and decision making through consensus rather than command. Knowledge based organizations have tended to move in this post-bureaucratic direction. However even in these more advanced organizations fundamental questions of governance and power remain ambiguous.

Workplace as Contested Terrain

Academic accounts of life in the workplace, particularly in the fields of management or organizational studies, tend to be stories told through the lens of leadership. A central theme

[3] Dissent Magazine, February 21, 2013. Book review of The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork by Ben Kafka Zone Books, 2012 by Paul Horning

of these disciplines is the management of people through coherent and unified corporate cultures. So is the mastery of technology, finance and contending with external threats of competition. Most of these accounts share an implicit premise that management as we know it is a legitimate and necessary role with attendant powers. Those powers may be exercised softly or firmly. In either case there is no questioning the so-called right to manage.

The legitimacy of management is usually traced to a specific creation narrative regarding the origins of a particular workplace or company. Those stories take place against a set of assumptions about the workings of a capitalist economy we have referred to as the standard model where capital hires labor where the central concerns of the organization revolve around deliberations between capital and their agents in management. Labor is regarded as a variable cost, hired in at will to achieve the aims of shareholders.

A common thread justifying the standard model describes an original act where one or more parties put "at risk" capital to work on a business idea. In order to implement the business idea, employees are hired to produce it. By virtue of their original risk taking, founding owners and their successors in management are seen not only as the rightful appropriators of profit. They are also entitled to serve as the architects of the organizational culture to be worked within and the arbiters of any and all terms and conditions of employment. Under this relatively friction-less creation narrative, the only constraints these leader/founders must endure are those imposed from without by labor market conditions and by local, state and national law. In the United States context, employment is generally classified as "at will" and at the service of employers. Employers not obliged to retain employees or include them in decision-making.

After several intriguing but largely overlooked decades of experimentation in the late 19th century with its own narrative of originating employment through democratically organized cooperative firms (Jones, 1984, Leikin, 2005), a new institutional actor began to assert claims in the early 20th century. That actor was the American labor movement. It complicated matters.

With the arrival of union structures, the idea of a unitary and presumably harmonious organizational culture, be it familial or bureaucratic, was for the first time challenged.

This challenge took the form of a second claim of allegiance for employees chosen by and working for employers. Unionization fostered the development of a workers culture distinct from, though not necessarily in opposition to the culture of the firm. The union role was both to represent the heretofore unrecognized voice of the work and through bargaining to extract a larger share of the economic rewards primarily through higher wages and more generous benefits. The act of securing the rights to represent workers has almost always involved an independent grassroots campaign acting against the preferences of management.
With the possible exception of a post World War II (1950-1970) epoch marked by heavy industrialization and successful unionization drives that lead to density of as much as 30% of private sector employment, the arrival of labor into the creation narrative of American capitalism has never been accepted by the management profession.

The arrival has generally been considered an intrusion. The concerns of labor, providing a voice to workers, being an advocate for justice and reaping a fair share of the rewards of common effort have been duly if somewhat begrudgingly noted and subsequently internalized by the curriculum of our modern business schools. It is generally presumed that these concerns are now the responsibilities of management. The success of union drives is therefore judged to be the failure of management. Judging by recent trends in private sector unionization in the United States, where union representation has dropped to 6.9%, the cultural divide introduced by the appearance of labor into the capitalist creation narrative would seem to have been averted.[4] The divide is now considered by many in the management profession to have been a several decade long cultural detour now residing safely in the rear view mirror of history.

Whatever other moral or practical advantages unions may bring to the lives of working people, it is hard to dispute the simple fact that the introduction of labor unions into established

[4] United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Union Members Summary, January 27, 2012 - http://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm

workplaces disturbs the normatively simple culture of capitalist enterprise. The presence of a union introduces a second and competing cluster of allegiances; a "workers culture" that must co-exist alongside a "company culture." The competition between these two cultures creates a workplace metaphor of internal complexity, the "contested terrain" that labor economist Rick Edwards vividly described in his 1979 book of the same title.[5]

Where they are successful in breaking in to pre-existing company cultures, unions also complicate the creation narrative that lends considerable weight to the legitimacy of management authority. By occupying an independent platform for the workers within a firm and by persistently making the case that workers should share more fully in the profits that their labor makes possible, unions suggest an alternative and overwhelmingly *implicit* narrative whereby the workers should be viewed as the true and legitimate *owners* of the firm.

However compelling this case may sound, it is seldom made overtly. Union leaders are generally aware that other factors are also responsible for success. Technology, capital and managerial talent are three such factors that labor cannot, under conventional circumstances, claim as their contribution. Overreaching on the claims that labor might make toward the success of an enterprise can also bring labor dangerously close to a role that they are typically reluctant to fill. Ownership implies responsibility, a responsibility that unions are generally not equipped and in most cases not disposed to exercise. Conventional collective bargaining may have its limits but it at least offers the prospect of near term increases in wages and benefits. It is rational therefore for a union to restrict the reach of its claims, to stay on the near side of a cultural continental divide they enforce with management where they willingly accept a more limited role as bargaining agent and potential critic of managerial authority.

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[5] Unions and their supporters recognize this complexity and typically frame their response according to the ideological dispositions of their leadership. One "collaborative" faction seeks to form "high road partnerships" that recognize the legitimacy of management and legacy ownership groups and seeks to work together on matters of common interest in order for the firm to succeed in the marketplace. A second "extractive" faction works harder to dominate the cultural competition with management and legacy ownership groups with only modest attention to marketplace consequences. A third "class struggle" faction is similarly extractive but motivated by a point of view toward history that sees the workers they represented as the primary producers of value regardless of the legal facts of actually existing ownership. This point of view generally extends to the water's edge of worker control over decision-making without assuming overall economic responsibility for the affairs of the firm.

Workplace as Democratic Social Institution

We have so far described a simplified progression of workplace metaphors that started with the family, moved through the idea of bureaucracy and while retaining elements of both familial and bureaucratic culture arrived somewhat awkwardly at the contested terrain that unions have introduced to the organizational dynamic where union cultures compete with company cultures for the loyalty of a given workforce.

The next step in this progression moves beyond a standoff between competing cultures of workers on the one side and managers/owners on another and presumes that the cultural divide unions enforce in conventionally owned organizations has actually been overcome in favor of the workforce as a whole.

What happens if the workforce as a whole, workforces that almost always are statistically dominated by "workers" over managers, actually becomes the firm? [6] What if they become its legal owners, or, in an alternative framing we discuss below, become the full fledged "members" of the firm with requisite corporate governance power? Does such a change simply return us to the simple organizational metaphor of the single culture family or does something more complex take its place? Does that more complex organizational metaphor resemble something analogous to our understanding of political democracy, consisting of structures and

[6] The circumstances described are not purely theoretical. There exists in most advanced industrial countries a cluster of firms that meet the criteria of being worker or member owned. In the United States, two starting points have given rise to somewhere near 12,000 firms, collectively employing over 14 million workers organized on this basis. The first of these is the familiar worker cooperative structure that comes about through the deliberate decision of groups of workers to self-organize in a democratic fashion. The U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives reports over 300 such firms, collectively employing over 3500 people. A second, larger cluster of firms in the United States come about through conversions of conventionally owned firms to employee ownership through Employee Stock Ownership Plans or ESOPs. The National Center for Employee Ownership reports 11,400 ESOP firms that collectively employ 13.7 Million workers make use of the ESOP structure. Of these, it is estimated that 40% of that total or approximately 4,500 firms own 100% of company stock. In Europe, Latin America and Australia, firms that meet the general criteria of democratic ownership or membership can usually be found using the cooperative ownership structure. Of these, the case of the Mondragon in the Basque country of Spain with 256 companies that collectively employ approximately 84,000 workers is the most renowned and instructive with respect to internal structures.

practices that do not merely tally votes but that also manage power? If they manage power then they presumably do so through an array of countervailing structures and institutions that have been developed in the political realm that are designed to disperse that power and promote freedom of thought even if that thought is potentially critical of incumbent leadership. To be more concrete, in these ostensibly democratic settings, how should budgets be decided? how should compensation be set? how should the power to include (hire) and exclude (fire) be managed?

These are questions that should be explored at both the level of practice, by examining experimental evidence produced in the field, and at the level of theory where an appeal to political metaphors and analogies to the evolution of political democracy should prove useful.

Practical Experience with Democratic Models

The realm of practice offers some compelling evidence for the workplace as democratic social institution model. Research by Quarrey and Rosen, (1987) and Kruse and Blasi (2000) has established a clear link between the legal fact of broad based employee ownership, usually through an Employee Stock Ownership Plan or ESOP, and corporate performance. The key intermediate variable that Quarrey and Rosen's research in particular isolated was the extent of participatory management in those firms. Those employee ownership firms with participatory management grew 8-11% per year faster than they would have been expected to grow.

Specific accounts of what constitutes participatory management are difficult to come by and are not uniform across companies. They typically involve some structure for participation in decision-making by employees. Those structures may be permanent or temporary. Those staffing the structure may be appointed by management or elected by employees. The subject matter for employee involvement in these settings to date more likely than not involves immediate work process or work environment issues and does not typically include issues related to either compensation or corporate governance. The structures themselves in most

cases are removable by management with no due process or appeal. In these and other ways, the standards for what constitute employee voice would seem to fall short of those established by unions in conventionally owned settings.

Comparisons of employee involvement practices within employee ownership firms and union representation structures should also, however, take into account very different originating circumstances. Union representation is typically a "grassroots" bottom up phenomenon usually resisted by management and aided by external union organizations. Where successful, they are then protected by a body of external labor law and administrative procedure enforced by government. Employee involvement practices, in or outside of employee ownership settings, are more likely to be top down initiatives inspired by a range of motives including an interest in common economic success, in realizing employee potential and, in some cases, helping to reduce the appetite for external union representation.

Leaving aside the historical era alluded to earlier when 19th century American unions explicitly advocated for and supported the growth of cooperatives, there are rare contemporary cases where unions have initiated worker ownership. A formal alliance announced in 2009 between the United Steelworkers and the Mondragon Cooperatives of Spain is the most significant such development.[7] This is a welcome development for a variety of reasons including the fact that by taking on this challenge unions, whose experience implementing participatory agreements with employers is considerable, will be forced to directly confront the distinctive challenges that democratic ownership structures bring to their traditional inventory of ideas.

How will the union as organizational architect adjust its role when its members comprise the firm? The familiar role of serving as an external critic of management efforts will no longer be sufficient. Ellerman (1988) warns unions against adopting a "Jekyll-and-Hyde" attitude toward ownership where workers are thought of as employees by day - protected by conventional collective bargaining provisions - and owners at night where their representatives on a Board of

[7] Press release describing the United Steelworkers-Mondragon collaboration, October 27, 2009 - http://www.usw.org/media_center/releases_advisories?id=0234

Directors may expand the conversation to more complicated matters. In a democratic firm, there should be no place to hide. He writes that under a democratic governance form "every topic is fair game: 'management prerogatives', investment, marketing, sales, productivity, cost control, business planning and corporate strategy."[8] If this is the case, then more elaborate ideas of democracy, beyond the confines of a collective bargaining agreement and beyond the purview of existing legal frameworks imagined by the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), must be introduced.

Democratic Theory: The Use of Political Analogies

As the world of practice involving broad based employee ownership proceeds with experimentation, it may be useful to appeal to theory for guidance. Pioneers in this endeavor include Pateman (1970), MacPherson (1977), Dahl (1985) and Ellerman (1992). The primary contribution that the political theorists mentioned have made to extending the democratic metaphor has been at the system level, arguing for economic democracy as an analogue to political democracy. A straightforward assertion made by the eminent Yale political scientist Robert Dahl in his 1985 book A Preface to Economic Democracy is representative of this discussion. In a chapter titled *The Right to Democracy within Firms* Dahl states "If democracy is justified in governing the state, then it must also be justified in governing economic enterprises; and to say that it is not justified in governing economic enterprises is to imply that it is not justified in governing the state." (Dahl, 1985). In this context Dahl proceeds to defend his use of political analogies against the likely objections of critics. He addresses objections regarding supposedly impaired property rights, exit rights of employees, and differential expertise.

The focus of this paper however is at a more micro level, in particular on how democratic distinctions proposed at a system level might translate at the level of an organization, clarifying what democracy means at the level of the firm. The primary analytical tool we have employed thus far to effect this translation is the metaphor. Dahl and others introduce a related and

[8] The Legitimate Opposition at Work: The Union's Role in Large Democratic Firms, David Ellerman, Economic and Industrial Democracy, Vol. 9 (1988), p.439

more sophisticated tool, the analogy. A complete discussion of the difference between metaphors and analogies as analytical tools is beyond the scope of this paper. Provisionally, we would claim that analogies serve as extended metaphors. While both tools serve the purpose of enabling translation or comparison from one sphere, in this case, political institutions, to a second sphere, economic institutions, analogies allow for more sweeping translations or comparisons. Metaphors provide a snapshot comparison. Analogies, particularly those informed by historical narrative, provide the movie.[9]

As described at the outset of this paper the introduction of political metaphors and analogies in the workplace finds particular resonance when the practice of management is understood to extend beyond the narrow administrative function described in mainstream economic literature (Jensen and Meckling, 1976). An alternative description of management extends the principal-agent descriptions of that literature to include what is essentially a political role. Management continues its traditionally understood role of husbanding the allocation of scare resource inputs. But it also and more centrally extends to include that political role, as the party that exercises power over the work lives of employees. Those functions and that role may be performed well or poorly. How might they be framed in light of democratic theory?

The primary concerns of democratic theory involve the design of structures and practices that effectively disperse or balance power. Emerging in modern times from the shadow of self perpetuating, divinely justified feudal rule, democratic theory concerns itself with how to direct power to the "people" and the people's representatives as opposed to the sovereign. The democratic firm has similar ambitions. In place of the people at large, it recognizes the workplace community of blue and white collar worker/employees in discrete firms as the members in whose interest power should be exercised. Once again, the central question that this paper takes up is how that democratic workplace can be viewed as distinct from the prior

[9] Here the author refers to a manuscript under development called Proceed by Analogy: Imagining Economic Democracy (Mackin, 2015) that makes use of historical accounts of the development of political democracy to illuminate similar patterns in the evolution of workplace democracy. This work is inspired by C.B. MacPherson's 1977 book, The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy (Oxford University Press).

workplace metaphors that dominate organizational life. How, if at all, is a democratic firm an advance beyond the standard of a family metaphor, a bureaucratic metaphor or the metaphor of the workplace as a contested terrain?

A common challenge when considering these questions in the context of the workplace might be characterized as the temptations of naïve democracy. Champions of workplace democracy regularly fall prey to vague aspirational proclamations of self proclaimed democratic organizations to "listen" to their workforces. Few, if any, structural demands (e.g. the right to vote for Boards of Directors, the right to influence policy, the right to a free press) are made upon those who choose to make use of the democratic label. Instead of taking to heart the demanding path that architects of democracy in the political sphere have taken to define and describe a credible democratic ensemble of ideas that contend with the challenges of power, many workplace democracy enthusiasts, often enamored with the illusory power of consensus decision-making practices, are willing to accept the lowest common denominator of espoused democratic intent.[10]

Overcoming Naïve Democracy: The Union as Legitimate Opposition

In a largely overlooked paper published in 1988 in the journal Economic and Industrial Democracy, David Ellerman, sketches out an extensive analogy from democratic political institutions of the firm as a democratic social institution.[11] The first step in his argument addressed to would be democratic firm advocates invokes Michels (1962) familiar warning about the "iron law of oligarchy" that consumes democracies that submit to any form of single party rule. Without checks and balances provided by countervailing institutions that may keep

[10] A notable recent effort to promote democracy in the workplace while remaining silent on clear structural characteristics that constitute democratic circumstances can be found by an exploration of a for-profit consultancy by the name of WorldBlu. This organization describes itself as "a global network" of democratic organizations that achieve their status by successfully completing a "WorldBlu Scorecard ™" survey judged by the staff of this organization who originated the survey and whose revenue appears to be drawn primarily from conferences . The idiosyncratic nature of the WorldBlu endeavor is fairly captured by the account of how WorldBlu received its name. In the words of its founder, Traci Fenton, "Why the name WorldBlu? Blue is universally recognized as the color of freedom, so we decided on "WorldBlu" as a way to capture our vision in a word."

[11] Ellerman (1988) op.cit.

the executive branch of a democratic firm in check, that branch will naturally, over time, identify itself with the 'General Will,' engineer its own permanance and tend to close ranks around critics. The result is a form of one party democracy that is difficult to distinguish from personalized, "family" organizational cultures.

In the course of specifying a series of measures that can work against the oligarchic temptation, Ellerman advocates for a constitutional model of the firm that revolves around his core thesis that "the acid test of democracy is the existence of a legitimate opposition … an independent power base for those who seek to express opinions and policies at variance with the current powers that be" (p. 438). Such a function is not, according to Ellerman, presumed to be adversarial. In a democratic firm after all, management itself has theoretically been appointed to their posts by a democratically elected Board of Directors and so enjoys that Board's – and by extension – the "people's" support. A legitimate opposition does not exist in hopes of toppling management. It exists to keep that management, the executive branch of an industrial government, honest.

The obvious candidate for fulfilling this crucial democratic role of legitimate opposition is, in his judgment, a radically re-designed union or union-like organization, appropriate for what he calls medium to large organizations of over 50 persons. The union role in a democratic firm would, according to Ellerman, be inclusive of both white and blue collar workers, all of whom should be engaged in constructive debate with their elected leaders in management. Certain traditional union functions such as representing individuals in grievance disputes with the organization would remain intact. Where a union as legitimate opposition would depart from tradition would be the conduct of economic bargaining. Given the new reality of a firm owned by its blue and white collar workers, the core economic debate does not pit workers versus managers. It instead pits the present against the future. In a successful democratic firm the central economic question becomes how much value should extracted now in wages and benefits (technically advances on profits or what Mondragon calls "anticipos") and how much

should be invested in the future for the benefit of present and future generations of worker/members.

Traditional concerns about distributive or relative fairness between management and a workforce do not disappear in these settings. In Mondragon however and in similarly inspired firms these concerns are channeled into transparent debates about the extent of the "solidarity ratio" between top and bottom salaries. The union as legitimate opposition would continue to weigh in on these kinds of conversations in the interest of fairness and viability. However the practice of slicing up the economic pie should only be one of the functions of a union in a democratic firm. More novel and more fundamental than the economic distribution conversation is a conversation about how this redesigned union structure should, according to Ellerman, help organize internal debates about the future of the enterprise, where and how it should invest, who it should do business with, how it should cope with issues such as technological change and international trade.

According to Ellerman, the union as legitimate opposition should be a structure that helps insure a thorough and healthy debate with management about the merits of their plans for the future of the enterprise. This new role, the union a "safe harbor" for the development and articulation of alternative views about the future of the enterprise, presumes an informed and trained leadership and membership. In order to keep current with management thinking Ellerman imagines that the leader of the opposition would sit as an "ex-officio" member of the democratic firms Board of Directors.

The conduct of debates about the future of the enterprise initiated by a newly configured union structure are presumed to not be disruptive, or adversarial. They should take place following a clearly deliniated process, focused on annual or quarterly membership meetings where debate about alternative approaches takes place in public. It should be entirely possible that as a result of these discussions and debates the opposition ends up agreeing with management and publicly voicing its support. The important point is that management, the indirectly elected

executive leadership of the firm, understands and accepts that their views about the future path of the organization should not be be implemented without the discipline of prior, internal, constructive debate.

Ellerman describes two likely and less burdensome alternatives that advocates of a democratic firm might bring to the idea of an institutionalized opposition. He judges both as naïve. First, is the idea of "pop-up" opposition where instead of speaking from within an abiding union-like structure that serves as a home for developing alternative frames, brave individuals, "pop-up heroes," can be counted upon to speak up at public assembly gatherings as necessary to challenge management. A second alternative also does without any abiding structures and relies on the virtues of the "Good Manager." Under this Great Man/Good Manager theory extraordinary leaders whose capacity for listening and resistance to self aggrandizement are beyond reproach can be plucked out of obscurity to selflessly serve. This second approach seems to be the default position of most modern business schools who identify managerial excellence with the kind of omniscient, super-human qualities that make structure unnecessary.[12] Neither of these alternative models enjoys what might be called conceptual gravitas.

A final and important structural element in the Ellerman model of the legitimate opposition is the existence of a free press which can serve as ready outlet for critical as well as praiseworthy opinion. Ellerman makes the important point that a genuinely free digital or physical news outlet should not be dominated by any group or faction within an organization. Most news outlets of this kind tend to be purely celebratory and lack critical seriousness. A regular column by the leader of the union or union-like legitimate opposition and/or a point/counterpoint debate feature can overcome that difficulty and win the respect of a workforce curious to learn what its fellow members are thinking on a regular basis. The John Lewis Partnership, a large (81,000 person) employee owned retail enterprise in England, features a weekly newspaper

[12] See, Khurana, Rakesh, Searching for a Corporate Savior: The Irrational Quest for Charismatic CEOs, Princeton University Press, 2002

called the Gazette which serves this same general purpose. Employee owners are encouraged to submit anonymous letters to senior management raising critical issues. Senior management is committed to respond to each letter in writing in the subsequent issue of the paper with the exception of rare submissions that might be deemed libelous. The overwhelming majority of letters are serious. The guarantee of anonymity and responsiveness has earned the Gazette an unusual level of respect unlike what can be found for most company controlled publications.[13]

A reasonable challenge to Ellerman's model asks whether the specific functions he delineates, the ability to represent individuals and uphold a standard of due process for grievances, the ability to constructively challenge management plans and the ability to protect and promote free speech through an independent free press could be achieved through structures other than a union. This challenge should be welcome, particularly if existing union structures are not prepared to cross the "continental divide" that Ellerman's model envisions. Certainly existing labor law, conceived to assert and protect rights within the context of a very different property ownership model that generally excludes workers, does not provide a hospitable environment for playing a substantively different role. In light of these facts, experimentation with independent models of worker representation within democratic firms should be encouraged. This experimentation should not, however, neglect another kind of "acid test" of democratic representation. Any alternative models should be able to demonstrate how they can protect their indepedence both for the individuals that serve in representative roles and for the institution of representation itself. Until or unless there are constitutional protections, conceived and memorialized at the organizational level, that prevent leadership from dismantling these structures in good times or bad, the challenge of democratic representation that Ellerman posits will not have been met.

[13] The John Lewis Gazette is described at length in David Erdal's recent book Beyond the Corporation: Humanity Working, The Bodley Head, London, 2011.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the role that metaphors - and in a more limited sense analogies – play in understanding life in work organizations. With the exception of the metaphor of the family that is readily cited for better or worse in organizations of varying sizes, our choice of terminology is an interpretation of how workers and managers view the workplace rather than an empirical reporting of alternative frames. The fleshing out of alternative frames is posed here as a necessary step in the project of imagining constructive alternatives. To break new ground, those frames should challenge status quo assumptions held to by both management and labor communities alike.

Despite the political character of much of our work lives where we readily engage in discussions of fairness and judge the conduct of managerial power, explicitly political metaphors remain outside the realm of most accepted workplace discourse. Wherever possible, management scrambles for vocabulary devoid of moral content, hoping to turn all workplace challenges into technical discussions of competitive necessity.

The late 19th and early 20th century entry of unions into the workplace in the United States and in most industrialized countries served as an exception that introduced a semblance of political dialogue and what might be called industrial government. In the United States however, collective bargaining between unions and mangagement introduced a ritualized, rule bound zone of deliberation that is clearly delimited in its democratic and political character. By common agreement between the parties, many of the larger issues of possible workplace deliberation, including investment plans and the selection and evaluation of company leadership have remained outside the tent in the realm of managerial prerogatives. Instead of bridling from this constraint, labor leaders from a variety of ideological perspectives, spanning from left to right, have often served as the enforcers of this continental divide as much as if not more than management.

Justifications for excluding political metaphors and excluding workers from exercising more control over the workplace can generally be traced to a standard model creation narrative celebrated and defended in our universites that restricts discussions of rights and power to founders who supply at risk capital and their agents in management. Workforces are technically considered by the law and by custom to be later stage guests invited to join these associations without the same rights as their counterparts in management and in the investment world who control the organizational conversation. While tolerated with more or less patience, workers are as likely to be considered interlopers in these conversations as they are to be considered partners.

The growth over the past 20 years of a sizeable worker or employee ownership sector of the American private enterprise economy has complicated this narrative and raised questions about how employee owners can and should join the workplace conversation. When labor or workers find their way inside the capitalist firm and begin to voice various claims or, even more clearly, when labor or workers decide to initiate and therefore become the firm, the glaciers begin to move. The seemingly iron logic of the standard model creation narrative begins to give way and an alternative institutional arrangement stars to come into focus. Instead of capital hiring labor, perhaps labor can hire capital. If that becomes the case, then new assumptions, new workplace norms can take effect.

Ellerman (2012) and Ferreras (2012) among others distinguish between the ownership of shares in corporations and various ways in which firms are governed by the apparent consent of different parties. A related movement favoring a “stakeholder” theory approach to corporate governance of corporations (Freeman, 2010) has also begun to contend with the standard model. Instead of narrowly focusing on shareholders, this model includes government, communities and employees it its vision of who should be the firm.

These thinkers provide the necessary scaffolding for a fundamentally alternative economic universe. The most far reaching difference they assert, made most explicit by Ellerman (1992),

is that corporations should not be viewed as property. Corporations may own property but they themselves should not be viewed as a commodity that can be bought, sold and traded at will. Corporations are instead properly understood as social institutions engaged in commerce. Entry to and exit from those institutions should be governed by clear rules arrived at by their members. The same general rights we recognize in the political sphere should be extended to workers and managers to govern themselves in the economic sphere.

These are not merely aesthetic distinctions. It is difficult to think ones way through to alternative arrangements using conventional frameworks. The rights of economic democracy at the level of the firm should be considered personal rights based upon membership in the firm, not property rights based upon capital stakes.

Claims such as these become more persuasive when they can be linked to non-standard models of economic structure and economic initiative, to creation narratives that are both fundamentally different from the standard model and economically viable. When groups of workers with access to appropriate sources of capital find themselves in the position to originate or purchase ongoing enterprises, when labor hires capital, an increased use of political metaphors in the workplace and a more widespread acceptance of democratic organizational arrangements should follow.

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