

# Threats to and Prospects for Organizational Democracy Research

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*Extended Version of a contribution for the  
International Conference "Participation Between Markets and Organizational Democracy",  
Organized by Manfred Moldaschl & Wolfgang G. Weber  
University of Technology Munich, Feb. 16th / 17th, 2001*

## 1. What does "Organizational Democracy" mean?

I would like to discuss the following hypotheses:

- the threats posed to organizational democracy and its future prospects and organizational democracy research are closely interlinked.
- up to a point, organizational behaviour researchers and practitioners will have a role in deciding whether organizational democracy continues to exist or disappears from view, on account of practical man-made political and economic constraints.

I now would like to examine the prospects for organizational democracy research, chiefly from the standpoint of my own scientific discipline.

It appears from discussion that certain representatives of scientific research are surprised to discover that organizational democracy should be one of the areas of research in W & O psychology. As far as I am concerned, this subject is obvious. In all democratic societies with constitutions in which freedom, equality and fraternity are treated as fundamental values, a large part of citizens' time is spent in the work place and in organizations.

Why therefore should W & O psychology confine itself largely to questions of organizational "productivity", "performance", "effectiveness" or "best practice"? Should it not be equally concerned with issues like the effect of protecting or infringing democratic principles such as democratic decision making and human dignity on a company's employees?

At a time when employers, financiers, scientists and politicians are actively promoting globalisation, by no means everyone seems to be concerned with protecting democratic rights.

At the conference "On the way to a new civilisation", Fairmont Hotel, San Francisco, 27.9. – 1.10.1995, John Gage of Sun Microsystems said: "Anyone who wants to can work for us, for as long

as he wants. We don't need visas for foreigners, either. <...> We recruit our people by computer, they work on the computer and we also fire them by computer." (Martin & Schumann, 1996, translated back from the German).

Similar statements are almost daily accompaniments to the current political dispute over the planned reform of the German Industrial Relations Act. It raises the worrying issue of whether the practice of democracy can be blackmailed by the economically powerful. Threats of outsourcing and downsizing are almost daily fare in our news bulletins.

In the midst of all this, how does the concept of "democracy" appear in the context of W & O psychology? Over time, the notions of "participation" or "participative decision making" have replaced terms like "industrial democracy" (e.g. Emery & Thorsrud, 1976; Tannenbaum et al.; 1974; IDE, 1982) or "democratic decision-making" and "democratic leadership style" (Lewin, 1958; Coch & French, 1948).

The term "participation" should, for example, be understood to include such experimental arrangements as those described by Latham, Erez & Locke (1988) in their influential article concerning crucial experiments: Latham et al. compare "participative decision-making" with various unparticipative types of goal-setting, such as "tell", "tell-and-sell", or "do-your-best"-type instructions.

What "participative decision-making" really means (according to Latham et al.) is that a small group may, through discussion, come to a joint decision over the exact quantitative result meant to be achieved, with regard to brainstorming or course-scheduling tasks. However, these tasks were set out in detail for them by the experimenter.

I think that this is a fairly typical example of what many W & O psychologists understand by "participation". The formal design and internal validity of the four crucial experiments are indeed excellent. Their ecological validity, is, on the other hand, as in many participation experiments, somewhat lacking: the participation is limited to short and simple operational decisions. Decision-making based on tactics (e.g. voting and voting-out of superiors) or long-term decision processes of strategic significance for an enterprise (e.g. investment decisions) rarely come up in such experiments. It is also difficult to simulate them, and it is fairly typical that these crucial experiments should take place in 15-minute long sessions, with students as probands.

None of this would be so bad if the authors and many of their followers did not give the impression that participative decision-making had no advantages over undemocratic "tell-and-sell" management principles. Nor would it be so bad, if such unwarranted, context-free generalisations did not figure in many textbooks designed for managers and organizational behaviour researchers, and did not influence the way in which they think.

We therefore need human-oriented definitions of what is and is not to be understood by the term "democracy" in organizational behaviour research.

Democratic decision-making may refer to subjects of different extent representing different levels of the organization:

(1) *Operation-related decisions*, characteristic for (semi-)autonomous work groups, e.g., shop floor control, allocation of personnel and production resources, improvement activities, planning of training

(2) *Tactical decisions*, e.g., referring to manufacturing technologies, health and safety standards at work, system of education, personnel planning, system of profit-sharing, reduction in working hours, voting out of supervisors

(3) *Strategic decisions*, referring to company politics and policy, e.g., budget, investment and reinvestment, location, distribution of profit, product planning

Based on a well-known system of classification, in 1999 I made an integrated proposal aimed at reducing the problem of term-confusion regarding "participation" and "organizational democracy". Drawing freely on the IDE-International Research Group (1981, 1992), I have suggested (Weber, 1999) that we should distinguish between the following *degrees of participation* at each organizational level. Decision-making power increases from (1) to (6) (cf. Heller et al., 1988):

- (1) No participation,
- (2) Information,
- (3) The right to be heard (not binding),
- (4) Joint consultation,
- (5) Co-determination/Joint-decision-making
- (6) Self-management/Self-governance

Similar categories were transposed into a fairly elaborate questionnaire by the IDE International Research Group. Merely providing information, as well as human-relations management techniques – such as simple consultation with no obligations attached – are to be treated as pseudo-democratic from the standpoint of democratic theory, because those concerned have been given no right of decision-making (cf. Vilmar, 1999; Volpert, 1994).

To avoid putting an excessive gloss on certain organizational structures and cultures in an unscientific way, I suggest that the concept of organizational democracy only be applied from the fourth degree of participation: joint consultation.

Binding joint consultation can only be said to exist when it has been established through regulations when the right of consultation should be applied, and what procedure should be followed when there is a clash between what is proposed by the lower parts of the hierarchy and what senior management wants.

Setting joint consultation as the minimum form of organizational democracy means that senior managers must take account in their decisions of proposals and objections coming from below them in the hierarchy. These cannot simply be rejected without seeking agreement.

Co-determination or joint decision-making, on the other hand, means that lower parts of the hierarchy can participate in decision-making on the basis of equal representation. They are thus responsible, alongside the other parts of the enterprise, for the consequences of decisions taken. This more or less corresponds to Edward Greenberg's (1999) definition.

## **2. Five theses on threats to and prospects for OD research**

### ***Statement 1***

*The current opportunities for organizational democracy research probably lie more in the direction of scientific criticism of established ways of thinking, constructs, research designs and agendas than in the empirical investigation of democratic organizations.*

In my opinion, political and economic democracy is currently under threat on a global scale, owing to the following developments:

- concentration of economic power through mergers, including hostile takeovers of democratic corporations (e.g., Ben & Jerry's ice-cream in Vermont; Pfalz Aircraft Industry in Germany)
- autocratically controlled decentralisation (e.g., supply chain management; profit centres)
- international deregulation and elimination of state planning of the economic processes
- deregulation of employees' rights and negotiation based on the principles of "social partnership" in industrial relations
- dismantling of protective machinery of the welfare state, e.g. so far the European Community has lacked a unified social charter
- increasing differentiation between different kinds of employment contracts

- growing competition between pseudo-independent service and teleworkers, including social and economic dumping.

First, empirical investigation should take place at an *individual level*. In my view, more empirical research is needed on the effects of the working and living conditions of freelancers and the pseudo-independent self-employed on their personality and psycho-social health. If every workperson is forced to become his or her own "self-managing" profit-centre, as many representatives of management science are recommending, a number of questions are raised:

- what does this mean for his/her personality, creativity, life and job satisfaction? What does it mean for social interaction, for organizational knowledge transfer, for education and, last but not least, for her/his integration in democratic society (Volpert, 1999)?
- will it gradually remove the material basis for acts of solidarity between ordinary employees, due to the disappearance of long-term employment contracts and employment protection legislation?
- is there thus the danger of a universal and permanent general "struggle for existence" of everyone against everyone else?

Critical analyses of organizational democracy research refer to the *group level*: in an interview with a Swiss newspaper, Richard Sennett reports on the practice at Microsoft, where highly qualified research and development teams compete with each other in the development of software products. The successful teams are then rewarded, whilst the teams whose products were unsuccessful are downgraded or made redundant. As I see it, this is a remarkable example of how social-Darwinist behaviour can be provoked through specific management principles, and of how the disputed social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) can be shown to advantage. Through theoretical criticism and an empirical comparison of social-Darwinist and democratic organization structures, it can be established how far social-psychological phenomena deal with general anthropological constants, or with reifications of social phenomena that are the consequence of specific organizational characteristics. Jean Hartley (1996) has demonstrated this for the "social identity theory", by comparing laboratory with organizational settings.

Finally, scientific criticism can also be applied to psychological intervention strategies at the *level of the firm*. Large firms that have merged are currently showing great interest in the support that organizational psychology research can offer. More than half of these mergers appear not to achieve the hoped-for success, owing to the short-sightedness of shareholders. The top managers and their financial backers suspect that one of the reasons for failure is differences in the corporate cultures of

the merged companies. If W & O psychologists, as researchers, are to deal with the problem of discrepancies between two corporate cultures, they have two options:

- (a) They can use questionnaires and surveys to develop social techniques designed to overcome the opposition of managers and employees to mergers and their consequences. Participation techniques, shared visions, corporate values or symbolic leadership are used in certain cases to create the belief that all the members of a firm are in the same boat, while at the same time downsizing strategies are being drawn up as the inevitable consequence of such mergers. As many employees see it, W & O psychologists are surrendering to the interests of the shareholders. They are therefore supporters – whether consciously or not – of a one-sided "appeasement policy".
  
- (b) W & O psychologists can develop scientific precision instruments designed to analyse social technologies and make their workings transparent for those concerned. If top managers, management consultants or the authors of books on management recommend the implementation of partnerships, shared visions, corporate values or value drivers, it is of legitimate scientific concern to W & O psychologists to evaluate the relevant corporate culture concepts from a number of perspectives:
  - What are the messages being transmitted?
  - What other types of values should be shared with them? Who benefits from the sharing of these propagated values?
  - Who loses out?
  - What alternative types of values might be of use to disadvantaged members of a company?
  - Can the prevailing model be described as a democratic model of co-determination / joint decision-making model, or a form of pseudo-democracy?

The shaping of a firm's culture can be evaluated according to success criteria that have been formulated from the standpoints of different interest groups. Such a perspective-specific evaluation can also help to clarify the relevant scientific concepts.

***Statement 2:** As democratic "micro-cultures", firms that practice exemplary democracy offer W & O psychological research an important opportunity to review and widen its area of knowledge, and place it in a fresh context. As with cross-cultural research projects, it can be established whether the links between organisational characteristics, personality development, attitudes and other outcome variables in democratic firms differ from those in firms that are hierarchically organised.*

"Micro-societies" like the *kibbutzim* or certain communities (e.g. the German *Kommune--Neiderkaufungen*, cf. Shlomo Shalmon, 1998) offer organisational behaviour research many

opportunities that have not yet been exhausted to serve as social laboratories. For example, hitherto many organisational psychological relationship hypotheses have been investigated almost exclusively within the context of the dominant economic system (the capitalist market economy). To many behavioural scientists, especially W & O psychologists, the socio-economic rules of the game of this system appear to be immutable. In practice, they can hardly be varied in psychological laboratory experiments.

Quasi-experimental manipulations of democratic vs. hierarchical organisation structures are very difficult to carry out in complex organisational environments. More often than not, therefore, we do not know whether research findings will be equally valid in other types of firms within completely different socio-economic systems. For example, I very much doubt whether the dispute over the serious question of whether human beings are capable of unselfish prosocial behaviour can be resolved using the polished laboratory experiments of Batson and Cialdini. An alternative research strategy would be to study niches within the dominant economic system that have established, at least partly, other basic socio-economic conditions, e.g. the traditional kibbutzim (Leviathan et al., 1998), communes and inter-organisational networks of social embeddedness (Powell, 1990) and alternative economy (e.g., Birkhoelzer, 1995).

Moreover, cross-cultural studies on organisational participation with large sample sizes often suffer from under-represented sub-samples of enterprises with democratic constitutions (Heller, 1998), although the latter do exist in reality. It is not surprising therefore that on average the degree of formal as well as performed participation is only, at best, moderate. The risk is that those degrees of participation as well as those correlations that are empirically identified will be deemed to be the only ones possible. It is an open question whether the same findings would emerge from organisational settings that were characterised by self-governance or substantial democratic decision-making structures.

It would be of considerable theoretical and practical relevance to re-examine the findings and postulates of OB research in the specific field of democratic enterprises (e.g., prosocial behaviour, regulation of organisational conflicts or social loafing) and self-governing communities. For instance, Getz (1998) suggests that free riding, which is considered to be an universal problem in industrial organisations, is not an important problem within a specific industry, namely Kibbutz industry. Moreover, it would be exciting to investigate whether mobbing, hostile social categorisation between groups and selfishness are more the consequence of power structures in and around hierarchical organisations than of the reality of normal organisational settings (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) or human nature (Dawkins, 1990).

Therefore, "taking context seriously" (as Denise Rousseau & Yitzhak Fried, 2000 suggested in a JOB-Editorial) is a necessary step for organisational behaviour research.

**Statement 3.**

*Organizational Behavior research should enclose very different forms and contexts of organizational democracy. Possibly, applied Organizational Behavior research can contribute to the development and to the linkage of different forms and contexts.*

If subordination of more and more areas of life to “neo-liberal” economy proceeds, it will possibly become a question of existence for self-managed and other democratic enterprises to cooperate with each other and to form democratically organized alliances with other types of organizations that are influenced by democratic values.

Corresponding to this, if OD research would focus on mere „islands“, namely collectivist self-managed firms or democratically organized corporations this will hardly guarantee the survival of OD research, within academical psychology, at least. Therefore, it is necessary to identify nuclei or *fractals of democracy* and of social responsibility within conventional institutions of the economic system and within civil society. The principles of functioning of these democratic fractals and their influence upon psychological dimensions should be investigated. Findings may be established in w&o psychology.

Subjects like the following are suitable for research on organizational democracy (cf. G. Szell’s contribution to the present conference):

- structures and activities of civil rights movements
  - citizens’ actions and activities of self-help groups (“new voluntarism”)
  - activities of labor unions and employee representatives
  - socially responsible activities of employers and top managers
  - decision-making within interorganizational networks of small and medium-sized enterprises
  - workshop of democratic learning like Robert Jungk’s “Zukunftswerkstätten” (“future workshops” in which participants collectively design their future)
  - participative theatre workshop (e.g., Fritz Letsch)
- and so forth.

Organizational behavior research has a lot of resources and many abilities

- to *develop* and to *evaluate strategies* of cooperation and of *knowledge transfer* among and beyond diverse representatives of organizational democracy, like those who I have mentioned. For instance, Prof. Egon Endres and his co-workers have started a project with *social service* organizations and *conventional* firms in the region of Munich (Waibel & Wehner, 1999). The core idea of this project: Representatives of these very different organizations mutually participate in each other’s organization. The researchers study processes of communication, perspective-taking, knowledge actualization, knowledge transfer among those very different partners.

- to *support* regional and inter-regional *network formation* of heterogeneous organizations and institutions. Since the Eighties, large action research projects in the tradition of socio-technical systems approach were done in Sweden, Norway, and, nowadays, in Finland, for example. Although there may be some *methodological weaknesses*, the research reports include important informations about the development as well as about preconditions and problems of *inter-organizational* democracy.

Though many of the organizations that I have mentioned are no very *characteristical* subjects of organizational psychology until today, organizational behavior research including psychology would benefit *themselves* from studying these research fields (cf. statement 2).

**Statement 4.** *In the last decade -- in contrast to participation research -- many researchers and sponsors of research have not demonstrated much interest in organizational democracy as subject of research or of intervention. Ways of thinking within organizational psychology research are influenced by very specific models and concepts of business economy.*

*In accordance with this tendency, it seems that not all organization members affected by psychological methods of intervention benefit from those interventions. Scientific “styles of thinking” (Fleck, 1935), which are prevented from explicit, scientific disputes, restrict the range of possible discoveries.*

Nearly all areas of life are influenced by often *unreflected*, but in some way *effective* “neo-liberal” propositions. Not only labor is evaluated by means of business economic criteria like “value added” and so forth, but also sports (e.g., German football teams form joint-stock companies), health care (keyword: “wellness”), charity organizations, and the church, too, (a cue: “fund raising”).

Within organizational psychology publications, complimentary concepts can be found: Its terminology is clearly influenced by constructs of business economy, like “human resources”, “productivity”, “profit”, “process losses”, “effectiveness”, and “performance”. I suppose that organizational psychology does not restrict itself to take over mere *terms* or *slogans* -- this would not be very dangerous. However, I fear that researchers often adopt the whole *concept*. Those concepts contain objectives of business economy. For that reason, there is a risk that selection of research questions, criteria of research funding, and the way, how psychological models are constructed is influenced by those objectives that do not stem from psychology, primarily. Long ago, in his empirical case-study on medical research, Ludwik Fleck (1935), a re-discovered Polish nature scientist and philosopher of science calls this process the “development of styles of thinking”. Paul Feyerabend (1980) referred to him.

If organizational psychological research would loose its competence of a basic-research-oriented evaluation of organizational features and work tasks through application of criteria of humane work its right to exist *independently* of business economy can really be questioned! Like other scientific

disciplines, w&o psychology has to test in a self-reflexive manner in how far certain concepts do not represent psychological constructs but constructs of business economy. If such a theoretical reflexion is neglected, then there is a risk that fragments of other branches of science will invade theoretical language of psychology as well as those fragments will limit the range of possible discoveries.

According to my view, however, the problem is not a problem of normativity and value-judgements. Each applied science needs normative criteria if she wants to evaluate and to improve phenomena in favour of her target groups. Therefore, scientific responsibility suggests behavioral scientists to reveal normative decisions continuously, as well as normative connotations which are included in psychological research questions, constructs, or methods. In many cases it may be reasonable if representatives of *applied* psychology would deal with their concepts this way because different target groups within organizations are enabled to understand, to discuss, to criticize or to accept psychological interventions. Revealing scientific “styles of thinking” and normative decisions might be considered a significant contribution of w&o psychology *itself* to organizational democracy.

***Statement 5.*** *To a certain degree, organizational democracy research and manifestations of organizational democracy in practice are interdependent.*

*Democratic organizations offer a lot of possibilities for organizational behavior research to test models as well as research findings within a new context (cf. statement 3).*

*In a complementary manner, contents of academical education and further education exercise some influence over those actors who decide on rise or decline of democracy within companies.*

*If researchers intend to preserve the field of organizational democracy research, then they should cooperate with one another more intensively with regard to this subject. Even in times of ideological hegemony of business economy over democracy, researchers have high competence, power and academic freedom to bring questions, problems, and findings of organizational democracy into lectures and further education workshops.*

Compared to Lean Management or other pseudo-democratic management strategies, research on substantial Organizational Democracy and on Humanization of Work-Life is reported to a relatively small extent within psychological publications. I suppose, the same is true for literature within organizational behavior research or within research on humane resources management -- with the moderate exception of empirical studies on the instrumental potential of work-group autonomy for productivity enhancement.

Under the pressure of “neo-liberal” propositions this tendency of research contributees to an increasing gap in the students’ knowledge of conceptualization and realization of humane and democratically organized work. The *less* opportunities students of psychology, education, business economy, or engineering science get to gather knowledge about *alternative* and *practicable options* compared to “neo-liberal” proposals referring to the design of organizational structures or to the distribution of power, the *less* Organizational Democracy research will have a future.

Nevertheless, networks of researchers, like those who are participating in this conference, contribute to the distribution of theoretical knowledge and practicable, alternative options, within and outside of universities. At present, maybe, *preservation, further development, and defense of scientific and applicable knowledge* is the focus of Organizational Democracy research -- a preservation which may not only preserve our *field* of research but the *embodiment* of the research subject in the *real world*, democracy, namely.

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