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Taking Part, Contributing, Benefiting: Toward a Democratic Model of Employee Participation

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Abstract

Employee participation has long been a central challenge facing the management and governance of any company. It is considered a success factor for companies, as well as an important condition for employee empowerment and emancipation. However, most scholarship in this field tends to position employee participation as a simple add-on policy, rather than a reconceptualization of the collective work environment that can enable the convergence of individual needs and the common good. The challenge, therefore, is to better value the capacity of employees to manage their work environment in a collective and responsible manner. Our goal in this essay is to address this challenge by sketching a political perspective on employee participation. We rely on Zask's work on contributive democracy in this regard. We begin by discussing some of the limitations of the dominant approach to employee participation, especially financial participation. We then present the three different dimensions of participation highlighted by Zask to show how all three taken together can constitute a promising model of social control and self-government by employees. We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications of this model.

Keywords: *Employee participation; Corporate governance; Work experience; Democracy*

The nature and role of employee participation in corporate life is a prominent theme in the academic literature. Webb and Webb's (1897) discussion of industrial democracy offered the first forays into this topic, and their early work has been recently followed by proposals on such issues as economic bicameralism (Ferreras, 2012, 2017), B corps (Villela et al., 2021), the liberated firm (Carney & Getz, 2009; Getz, 2017), and mission-based companies (Ebrahim et al., 2014; Levillain, 2017). Over time, employee participation has become a central theme in political science and sociology (Barber, 1984; Fung, 2006; Martinez Lucio, 2010; Pateman, 1970), in the industrial relations movement (Ackers, 2010; Harrison & Freeman, 2004; Koch & Fox, 1978; Ramsay, 1980), and, more recently, in human resource management (Boxall & Purcell, 2010; Lawler, 1986; Marchington, 2015). As a counterpoint to the Taylorian model, which is intended to crush any desire for employee

participation,[1] these works attempt to rehabilitate the human factor to better value the capacity of employees to manage their work environment in a collective way. Rather than emphasizing the pure subordination of an employee, viewed as a quasi-physical factor of production, this line of reasoning focuses on the quality and enrichment of work (Gallie, 2013; Herzberg, 1968), the motivation, well-being, and satisfaction of employees (Miller & Monge, 1986; Van de Voorde et al., 2012; Wagner, 1994), the efficiency in decision-making (Guinot et al., 2021), the impact of employee participation on economic and financial performance (Lawler, 1986; Miller & Monge, 1986; Wagner, 1994; Wood, 1999, 2010; Zwick, 2004), and even the broader social benefits (Cludts, 1999).

[1.] Even if some proposals contained in the scientific organization of work may have appeared as advances in terms of participation at the time (Muhs, 1982).

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However, despite this enthusiasm for employee participation, questions arise regarding whether participation is, in fact, a means of satisfying the needs of employees while achieving organizational objectives, or whether something else is at play (Strauss, 2006). Indeed, current discussions tend to position employee participation as a simple add-on policy, rather than as a reconceptualization of the collective work environment that can enable the convergence of individual needs and the common good. This is particularly evident in financial participation, and, to a lesser extent, participatory management, in which participation is used primarily as a means to mobilize the workforce.

These reservations lead to two problems. Firstly, participation is not an immediate fact of society, but rather a catalyst for persistent tensions around the form and exercise of power (Perroux, 1970). Thus, we cannot rule out a possible decoupling between the formal participation commitments made by companies and their practical effects. The phenomenon of decoupling has been widely discussed by neo-institutional scholars, who argue that organizations conform to the norms depicted by their environment in only a cosmetic way without making any genuine changes to the way in which they operate (Bromley et al., 2012; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Secondly, worker participation is multidimensional (Dachler & Wilpert, 1978). It varies in depth (from simple consultation of employees to direct employee participation in organizational decision-making), as well as in scope (from minor and insignificant issues to more substantial problems) and form (from financial participation to participation in management or decision-making). It is clear, then, that even if employee participation can be converted into power of action and does enable those employees to truly take part in the management of their work environment, this is by no means automatic. In practice, we have witnessed periods in which the democratic impetus has led to employees' more direct participation in the management and direction of companies, as well as periods in which democratic principles and values have been instrumentalized by demagogic company management (Gomez, 2001).

In this essay, we shall demonstrate that these challenges can be overcome by drawing on Joëlle Zask's theory of contributory democracy (Zask, 2011), which proposes a pragmatic vision of participation that is marked by the desire to make all institutions function democratically. On this view, it is participation that allows each individual to take ownership of their environment and those professional matters that concern them (Chapas & Hollandts, 2017). The theory's underlying principles are inspired by political democracy, but corporate democracy is also important here, insofar as it includes and assumes a normative dimension, which makes it possible to outline the conditions required to foster a public and civic spirit at the heart of a company.

Relying on Zask's theory, our aim is to introduce a new understanding of participation by showing how employees can influence not only the means but also the ends of the company's activity (Ferreras, 2018). As we shall see, this approach could offer the basis for a research agenda whereby participation is not understood merely as an add-on policy or technical problem, but rather as a means by which people might exercise a politically active relationship with their work. It also sheds light on conditions for a pluralistic understanding of corporate governance, as well as a more responsible capitalism. Crucially, we are not looking for a perfect model of employee participation nor do we pretend that participation is a panacea that will ensure the smooth running of all companies. Rather, we hope to steer the conversation toward the conditions that are required for the realization of greater individual and collective responsibility at work, as well as the methods and resources available for this purpose in a given, and therefore contingent environment (Morse & Lorsch, 1970). From this perspective, we argue that employee participation is essential, because we are convinced that the more employees participate and express themselves, the better it is both for the company and for democracy.

The article is organized as follows. We begin the first section with a brief summary of the participation debate, in which we illustrate why a rethink of participation is required. The second section presents the three complementary dimensions of Zask's model of participation, the main idea of which is that the more individuals participate, the greater their freedom is and the stronger the institutions that protect them become—in the sense advocated by self-government theorists, as we show in the third section. The fourth section discusses the theoretical and managerial implications of this model. We then briefly conclude noting some limitations to our approach.

The participation debate

The debate regarding participation has a long history. From the very beginnings of industrialization to present-day capitalism, the defense of employee participation in corporate life has been expressed against the claims of the ruling classes who wish to grant political rights in an enterprise only to those who hold capital. More than two centuries after the Industrial Revolution, the ambition remains the same: to avoid the absurdity of a situation in which the struggle for political democracy leaves industrial and economic autocracy intact. The challenge is that the exercise of power of some over others is subject to public control in the workplace. However, for us, as for many observers, the various mechanisms that make employee participation in companies a reality have not yet solved this problem. Historically, it is not worker participation that has rebalanced power relations in companies and made socio-productive compromises

more advantageous for employees; rather, it is the political and trade union struggle, which has been considered the best means of defending the rights and interests of workers (Clegg, 1960; Maugey, 1971). Labor movements have often even gone so far as to denounce the mechanisms for the consultation and direct participation of employees in the workplace as part of a class collaboration to weaken the union struggle and convert employees to the pursuit of financial and economic objectives (Hetzel et al., 1998).

A question then arises: how do we move from this model, in which workers' democratic resources are primarily the product of the institutional conquests of the labor movement (Burawoy, 1979), to a more integrated model of participation? Many scholars have answered the question based on assumptions about the alignment of employees' interests with those of the company's shareholders and management. Many organizational theories adopt the positive theory of agency, which holds that employees should be more involved in the economic and financial performance of a company, notably through profit sharing, employee shareholding, stock option plans, etc. (Aubert et al., 2016). The objective is to stimulate employees' efforts with the promise of financial, fiscal, and social advantages, under the assumption that employees' motivation is to increase their personal wealth. Thus, we can see the growing shareholder culture within companies, which allows employees to benefit from part of the value created, while offering them a lever to act at the level of corporate governance. Governments have supported this development of financial participation and employee savings mechanisms in the private sector, not because this creates both purchasing power and pension capital, but also as a means by which to support the move toward a form of more inclusive capitalism.

However, although we might observe a positive relationship between participation, profit sharing, and company performance thanks to an increase in employee involvement and productivity (Doucouliagos et al., 2020), it should be noticed that this approach addresses only one dimension of participation in a company, namely the ways in which conflicts of interest between the parties are managed. It leaves aside the more political dimensions of employee participation in capitalist firms, most notably worker involvement in decision-making, as well as forms of participation that offer them real power to cooperate, or not, with a company's investors. In other words, employee participation is reduced to the rights attached to the holding of a part of the company's capital (namely, the right to dividends and the right to vote at general meetings). This type of participation, the objective of which is to balance the power between capital and labor, is something of an oxymoron, insofar as the capitalist firm is supposed to be naturally undemocratic and hierarchical, with a heavy emphasis on controlling workers (Braverman, 1974). There is no place in such a model for the idea that a community of work is based on a psychologically shared sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), and needs to be governed with the objective of communalizing the lives of members. Instead, the common good is constructed in accordance with Hobbesian logic, via a mode of government that takes the form of a pure disciplinary system (Walsh & Seward, 1990).

When participation is reduced to profit sharing or financial participation schemes, it is nothing more than an empty promise that offers no hope of bringing the company closer to a normal and more human social life. Profit sharing is a central recommendation of the contractarian theory of the firm, which is based on the anthropological model of self-interest. Therefore, it obscures the main characteristics of participation in communities, such as those defended by Charles de Gaulle, for instance, who wanted to use participation as the cornerstone of a social project aimed at rebuilding national unity and restoring France's standing in the aftermath of World War II. This does not mean that profit sharing is useless; in fact, if it is used well, it constitutes a benefit for employees and reinforces their adherence to a company's projects. However, it cannot guarantee employees' active participation in and useful contributions to the company's development if it is not anchored in living forms of participation and a genuine democratic culture (Crifo & Rébérioux, 2019). Studies have shown that, far from eliminating all class dualism through participation, the promises of employee savings plans have often been tactically designed to play on individual interests, with a view to improving productivity or profitability while bypassing union action (Renaud, 2021). This is a perverse effect of participation methods, when they are used not to allow the expression of diversity and pluralism, but rather to give a 'facelift' to Taylorian approaches. That is to say, participation is enriched in technical terms, but it is incapable of fostering real change in the behavior of company employees, change that is crucial to strengthening their ability to live and work together.

Empowerment and participative management practices suffer from similar drawbacks to financial participation (Lincoln et al., 2002). These practices have the dual objective of empowering employees and enhancing their human capital through a dynamic of greater management power. In reality, however, such participation rarely concerns the company's major objectives and activities, and is most often than not limited to micro-tasks (Eccles, 1993). In other words, participative management offers employees the chance to take part in collective action by creating spaces for exchange, or even places for deliberation, but it has minimal impact on managerial decision-making. Therefore, it can benefit employees only indirectly, in terms of employability or self-esteem, for instance, but will not have a direct impact on the company's business objective. This has led to suggestions that participation is intended only to dress the emperor with new clothes (Argyris, 1998), and surround capitalist domination with the veil of democracy in order to meet modern criteria of

good governance. We think that the time has come to face this 'challenge for the left', as Derber (1970) called it. We can begin to tackle such issues by promoting an enriched philosophy of participation that ensures that employees are not reduced to 'commodities at the service of capital' by instead giving them the tools they need to be effective actors in the corporate project (Ferreras et al., 2020).

Zask's model of contributive democracy: Participation as experience

Zask's model of contributive democracy places the individual actor at the heart of participation. The model departs from the functionalist and formal vision of participation that obscures the informal dimensions of participation, which are equally important for organizational performance (Litwin & Eaton, 2018). Without denying the role of the structures and processes that operationalize participation, contributive democracy views participation as both a project and a collective experience. Thus, the main contribution of Zask's model of contributive democracy is to shift our attention onto participation, to view it not solely as a technical problem, but more as a means by which to strengthen social actors' capacity for self-organization – in all imaginable social arenas, such as art (Zask, 2003), farming (Zask, 2016), and even urban planning (Zask, 2022).

Zask's model comprises three dimensions, which address the problems with the received view of participation highlighted here. Taken together, as we explain in the next section, they create the conditions necessary for the emergence of a form of genuine employee participation, which we refer to as 'social control' by a company's employees.

Taking part ('sharing in')

Participation cannot be the foundation of a collective without an acknowledgment that it is determined by our ability to listen to others and mutually reinforce our capacities for analysis and expression. It follows that participation is a question of establishing the conditions that allow each individual to take part in a company's life based on free and voluntary association. Whatever the motives of the individuals involved in an enterprise, it is necessary for them to develop this 'art of association', which is the condition of being human (Tocqueville, 1961 [1835–1840]). According to Tocqueville, individuals develop, through associative action, a reluctance to relinquish power that they are capable of exercising themselves. On this view, to participate is to express one's interests, not individual interests (because these would, by definition, be selfish and private), nor the general interest, that is found in a romantic vision of democracy (Buchanan, 1984). Rather, the term 'interests' here is used in the sense of a common interest that is capable of giving rise to forms of inter-individual trust, built on

the complementarity between self-interest and openness to otherness, and between interest in oneself and interest in others (Chapas & Hollandts, 2017).

There can be no social or civic control of the enterprise without its actors making themselves 'permeable to the innovative quality of experiences, and of activities deepened or enriched by the diversity of viewpoints, practices, and commitments that give rise to them' (Zask, 2011, p. 48). To take part is not to operate as an individual in the game of social relations; nor is it to be part of a group that pre-exists the individual and whose *raison d'être* may be foreign to them (like being part of a family, a clan, or a nation). To take part, on the contrary, is to redefine one's private interest in the direction of a common interest or higher principle (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991). The existence of the group is then subordinated to the project of doing things together, and the interests of the members are socialized because of the social origin of the activities undertaken (Sennett, 2013). Association is valued as an opportunity for individuals to conduct experiments that take them outside themselves, broadening their ideas and options as partners in a relationship – something that organizational theorists have posited through the notion of relatedness (Alderfer, 1972).

If this first dimension of participation conveys the image of a form of happiness experienced in being with others without any particular goal, an 'endless purpose' that indicates a quality specific to association, the question arises as to whether companies are capable of producing such surges of sociability—a playful form of socialization according to Simmel's definition (1981). This form of participation refers as much to Aristotle's *philia* as to Weber's idea of communalization (Weber, 1995 [1921]). It means that a mode of organization of social relations based on the subjective feeling of the participants belonging to the same community is conceivable only if fraternal relations based on tradition and/or shared values can be established between them (Cludts, 1999; Collins, 1997). If the company, through its activity, gives itself a mission that goes beyond manufacturing products or delivering services, the question at hand points to a great challenge now that the ordinary work conflicts between managers and employees are coupled with other forms of conflicts, arising from changing employment conditions (increased flexibility, *uberization*, etc.) and new social movements (including ecological, regionalist, feminist, student, and gender-related movements).

In this context, it would be naive to think that the inclination for social life, demonstrated by participation in the sense of 'taking part', is sufficient in itself, as if participation had a value of its own that can justify its extension from the political sphere to the economic sphere and the world of business (Dahl, 1986). For this reason, if it is to lead to solidarity, comfort, and complementarity to all the company actors, sharing in the group's social life must be associated with two other forms of participation, which Zask describes as participation in the

sense of 'contributing' and participation in the sense of 'benefiting'. These two dimensions, taken together and properly balanced, add to the ideal of a community of actors moving in the same direction. Actors commit themselves to this community by marking its evolution with their own imprint and personal investment (i.e., they contribute), as well as with the returns that they can expect from the modifications (good or bad, modest or not) their contributions will (perhaps) produce in the situation within which they take place (i.e., they benefit).

Contributing ('bringing a share')

Contributing makes possible a vision of participation that is less theoretical and more active. Specifically, integrating the personal contributions of the actors in an enterprise, owing to which the common good can evolve in accordance with the expectations and initiatives of those who take part in it, reinjects the element of choice into participation. The common good is the product of wills that seek out and adapt to each other. Participation in the sense of taking part is, therefore, coupled with an agreement of a practical kind, 'between activities' (Zask, 2011, p. 183), in support of an ongoing process of adaptation and rectification that allows for both association and individuation. It underlies the model of a society that is open to social change and sees the stratum of social relations continuously reshaped and redefined by individual contributions.

If a society, or a company, lives by the contributions of its members, it can be conceptualized in both theory and practice in terms of the contributions each member makes to all the others, and not only of a few members with the power to make everyone act in accordance with ends they have predefined. Although history is often told from the perspective of an aristocratic view of contribution, whereby the socio-historical role of large sections of the population is erased in favor of hagiographic readings of a few legendary self-made men, contribution is never the privilege of powerful elites, ruling castes, or top management alone. Despite the elites' claim that they make the most significant contributions to the communities they lead (Useem, 1982; Westphal & Khanna, 2003; Wright Mills, 1956), a democratic understanding of contribution consists of crediting, in law and in fact, each individual with the power to contribute to the common endeavor in which they participate. This does not mean that all contributions are equal, but rather that individuals are all capable of making their mark, even if only to a modest degree, on social relations in a manner that the future of the association differs from how it might have looked without their intervention (Zask, 2011).

For such a democratic understanding of contribution to be realized, a company must be prepared to accept the plurality of positions and value the experience of all members, as the means by which it can adapt its network of activities and practices to the more global goals it is pursuing (Bazzoli & Dutraive, 2020). As the human relations school teaches us, one of the challenges involved in attempts to humanize the company and its management is how to redistribute power to the level closest to its practical effects (Aktouf, 1992). It is not possible both to create a greater sense of belonging among employees and encourage a higher degree of personal voice, initiative, and creativity without giving real power to all employees in a given company (Budd et al., 2010; Jia et al., 2014). As managers have long understood (Walton, 1985), this is what creates the conditions for contributory dynamics that are limited only by what individuals themselves want to do or by what their abilities allow them to do. This does not mean that managerial authority disappears altogether, but rather that it is transformed, in the sense that what at first glance appeared to be a relationship between principal and agent becomes a relationship of reciprocity. The quality of interpersonal interactions between managers and employees is improved, as processes of sharing and communication come to be valued as the real drivers of the company's (global) performance.

The challenge, therefore, posed by the idea of participation through contribution is that companies must reconsider the nature of the relationships between the actors involved in the company and must value above all their resources and abilities. These resources and abilities can be put to good use by the work group immediately or in the future. For instance, it may be a question of developing critical thinking skills, soft skills such as emotional intelligence, adaptability, or empathy, or even skills and knowledge related to issues such as data protection or compliance. The objective, in all cases, is to ensure the best possible balance between the imperatives of the company's economic efficiency and the project of individual and collective emancipation, which structures the democratic imaginary by means of a logic of valorization of human, organizational, and relational capital (Chassagnon, 2019).

Here, we can see how the perspective changes when the idea of participation in the sense of 'taking part' is joined with the idea of participation in the sense of 'bringing a share'. While the former allows for the common goal, the *raison d'être*, of the group to be emphasized, the latter corresponds 'to the act of personal investment during which the participant commits himself with regard to this common point, for example, proposes to amend it, modifies the perspective of the group, takes an initiative' (Zask, 2011, p. 151). The two dimensions are thus inseparable because it is the combination of the two that allows individuals to take control of the events that concern or affect them as members of a group. The repeated calls for creativity and innovation that accompany most discussions of participation should be understood in these terms that anyone can make a useful contribution to the enterprise if the conditions to do so are met.

Benefiting ('receiving a share')

The idea of benefiting forces us not only to focus on the socialization of individuals and the adoption of a public spirit within the firm but also on its degree of democratization. Thus, it triggers the openness of the political structure and basic institutions of the firm (i.e., the instituted) to the innovative power of its human constituents (i.e., the instituting). Existing as it does in a precarious balance, it is the democratic regime that allows relations between singularity and the social institution to be articulated. Benefiting also holds that the encouragement of individuality is essential, so long as this does not adversely impact, and indeed – on the contrary – serve the requirement of solidarity. This system can be envisaged, however, only where the means of individuation are made available to the actors of the enterprise, allowing them to take personal initiative and affect the life of the group through contributions for which they will be responsible. We cannot consider participation without also considering the opportunities and resources that the company offers its members to enable such contribution. Individuals must have the capabilities, as Sen (1985) termed it, to satisfy their own interests vis-à-vis their membership of this particular community.

Following the model of strong democracy (Barber, 1984), the objective is for actors to acquire the political skills required to carry out the activities of deliberation and negotiation on the terms of the exchange. Without such skills, the presence of actors in any discussion on the company's activities and the means of collective action would be a mere sham (Munck & Ferreras, 2013). The power to contribute does not depend on strictly individual qualities, but rather on a form of integration between the individual and the social. This means, for instance, that work must be done to equalize the conditions of access to information and speaking out, improved communication and deliberation in companies, and greater equity in the organization of labor relations (Brenkert, 1992). These are the conditions that will enable each actor to play their own little piece of music in the company orchestra, while developing a sensitivity to others and a capacity to listen. Without these conditions, no organizational harmony is possible, as Sennett (2013) reminds us through his experiences as a cellist.

Benefit is, thus, a matter of adding a final layer to our definition of participation in the company. It clarifies that participation, in terms of taking part and contributing, is conditional on actors receiving a share from their environment of all that is necessary for them to integrate into the company fully and actively. Indeed, a contribution has value for the actor only if it provides social recognition, as well as opportunities for personal development (Honneth, 2013). It can take the form of a monetary benefit, such as a remuneration policy, which allows employees to trace the added value that they have been able to contribute to the production process—as is the case in the

framework of the creative communities piloted at Michelin (Chassagnon & Haned, 2013). Social recognition can also take other forms, so long as the objective is to induce a social dynamic of learning what the 'I' owes to the 'we', and vice versa. This is the principle of benefit: it is an opportunity for participation that allows individuals to form a social union and for the enterprise not to remain frozen in a state of immobility from which no innovation can spring. Financial participation alone cannot bring this about (Liu et al., 2012).

A model of employee participation inspired by Zask's theory: Contributive democracy based on social control

Discussions of participation at work have always oscillated between, on the one hand, the promise of corporate citizen control and, on the other, a suspicion of manipulation, whereby participation is a way to make employees work harder thanks to a form of voluntary servitude (Courpasson, 2006). In other words, though opposed in their aims, these two types of participation are sometimes difficult to distinguish, because participation is ambiguous. Indeed, participation is neither an obvious nor an automatic guarantee of progress for the company and democracy. For instance, it is not necessarily the shareholders of Total who are blocking the company's transition to so-called green energies, but rather, a whole section of the social body of this company whose skills, interests, and advantages are linked to fossil fuels. Involving employees in Total's governance then could slow down the transition and produce a disservice to both the company and society, in the sense of March's work on political coalitions (March, 1962). More generally, the structures that give a voice to employees and other members of groups (associations, mutuals, cooperatives, etc.) are not necessarily those that offer the best guarantees of the quality of democratic life or societal progress. This points to the possible disconnect between theory and practice in matters of participation at work.[2]

Beyond these general considerations, we still consider that companies need to align themselves with democracy, which is the way in which political institutions are governed in the modern era (Gomez & Korine, 2009). We also argue that participation is one of the best ways to do this. However, it should not be reduced to the myriad of mechanisms we have previously mentioned (such as financial participation, employee shareholding, mandatory presence of employee directors on boards of directors or supervisory boards, or other participatory management tools), but should rather be understood as a vehicle for a greater synergy between the personal projects of

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2. We thank one of our reviewers for these valuable remarks, which we include in our essay in order to recall the ideological underpinning of our thinking.

people and the social union that they form. We know that the existence of a subjective feeling of power favors commitment in exchange and affects productive behavior in a positive way (Lawler, 1986). Zask's theory enables an understanding of how we might create the conditions for such participation, which can make company actors more inclined to work for the common good and remind them of the importance of joint action and solidarity.

The three dimensions of participation discussed in Zask's theory rarely exist in a pure form and rarely, if ever, studied together. However, their combination is essential for the constitution of a mode of self-government that values exchange, cooperation, collaboration, reciprocal relationships, or co-production between actors. Zask (2016) uses the example of shared gardens to illustrate this point. She shows how these can be used to change citizens' sense of political action and teach them the art of working together as partners. The cultivation of the land is an activity that requires agreement between the farmer and the land they work. By becoming familiar with the 'discipline' of nature, the farmer respects its laws and attempts to follow them. This is the basis of a series of continuous and congruent social and political agreements that can initiate an endless dynamic of democratization. It is precisely this dynamic that allows individuals to conduct 'of themselves', 'by themselves', and 'for themselves' the experiences through which they discover, experience, and develop their skills and freedoms in the context of work. In the example of the farmer and the land, by cultivating the land, the farmer also cultivates a society and contributes to the production of common resources. In this respect, the culture of the land is an experience within everyone's reach; it is individual without being private, common without being collectivist, and something in which anyone can usefully take part and become, through it, an 'actor' whose contributions can generate an important personal and collective benefits. According to Zask, gardening can be notably 'a powerful antidote to self-enclosure, de-subjectification, and loss of initiative. It also counteracts extreme poverty, collapse, feelings of uselessness, isolation' (Zask, 2016, p. 119).

Admittedly, bringing together the three dimensions of participation in a model of self-government is more difficult in a company than it is in the case of shared gardens. However, the objective is the same: to find a balance between the three dimensions that makes it possible to create the conditions for social control, which must be understood as the capacity of a group to regulate itself (Janowitz, 1975). This does not mean control in the sense of power exercised by the group over the behavior of individuals, but rather control by the associates over the aims and dynamics of their own association. For instance, the involvement of an employee could be reinforced through training to enable them to access what is valued and valuable in the work environment. Such training is not only a recognition by the company of the individual's contribution but

also a way for the company to show that it intends to make further contributions possible. Indeed, when an employee is given the title of sponsor, mentor, or key member, this appointment rewards know-how, expertise, and the ability to transmit knowledge, which results in an increased commitment by the beneficiary to the life of the group (Tessier et al., 2014).

Self-government, which is the goal of the democratic experience, requires the active participation of each person in the organization, at both individual and collective levels. Thus, the figure emerging at the heart of the participation model we have just presented is an individual who acts on their own, with the consent and strength of an intelligent organization with peers. It is clear, then, that the exercise of this participation will suit only a flexible work environment, because the workplace must help to develop those skills favorable to collective work and the expression of greater professional solidarity. From corporate governance methods to management practices, everything should be subordinated to the fact that it is not efficiency alone that creates solidarity, but that solidarity itself is a source of innovation and efficiency. This is the reason some writers prefer a pluralist governance of the firm to 'governance by numbers' (Chassagnon & Hollandts, 2019; Supiot, 2015). No doubt it also explains the attractiveness of management models based on subsidiarity principles (sociocracy, holacracy, liberated firm, etc.). In these cases, the objective is to ensure the quality of actors' interactions and to value their interpersonal relations and the processes of sharing and communication; in other words, to create forms of inter-individual trust. In this sense, Zask invites us to reflect on a new political grammar. She reminds us that there can be no active, free, and voluntary participation on the part of the actors of the enterprise without proposing new political systems of decision-making that might result in the critical intuition of democratic justice. That is, individuals must be given a say in decisions that concern or affect them as members of a community (Dewey, 1927).

In short, the model of self-government based on social control is typically bottom-up and democratic, making it possible to place the political stakes of human association within the scope of action of the 'person in the street' or, in the corporate context, the ordinary employee.

Discussion

Theoretical implications

This essay argues that participation should be understood not as a set of discrete practices, but rather as a holistic, multidimensional concept. It must allow all company actors to discover a common object beyond that which separates them and to enter the world of values together. Consistent with previous work on participation, notably that of Perroux (1970), or more current work on corporate governance (Ferreras,

2012; Ferreras et al., 2020), Zask's model of contributive democracy is thus a step toward a more political understanding of participation at work, and an attempt to overcome contractarian approaches, which reduce participation to a vehicle for the sole satisfaction of shareholders' interests.

Indeed, the articulation of the three dimensions of participation leads to the idea that, far from being a simple tool that corporate elites wield to ensure as many people as possible work in conditions determined solely by the prerogatives of financial power, effective participation makes it possible to assert the social power of work collectives and, consequently, liberate intelligence through the broadest form of cooperative exchange (Battilana & Casciaro, 2021). The assumption is that the more opportunities individuals have to influence the association they form, the more they develop the requisite governing skills for responsible power and greater professional solidarity—in a virtuous circle familiar to self-government theorists since Jefferson (Chapas & Hollandts, 2017; Zask, 2010). If, on the other hand, workers feel that they are serving a collective purpose over which they have no control, which does not allow for their individuation or communalization and does not bring them any personal benefit, the risk is that they will retreat into private interests, and the democratic deficit of the company will be reinforced. An individual cannot feel bound by a common requirement if they feel that their contributions to the common work of production are not recognized at their fair value or, conversely, if they feel that others benefit unduly, having themselves contributed little or nothing to that work.

From this perspective, allowing employees to participate in strategic decisions (by giving them a collective veto over questions concerning profit sharing, the nature of services and products to be developed, the organization of work, the choice of management teams, etc.) is a way to live out the enriched philosophy of participation that we defend in this essay. Such participation should be subject to new rules of responsibility that are not derived from the right of ownership, with a view to allowing both new sources of legitimacy and new factors of collective effectiveness (Favereau, 2014). It also suggests that this goal can be achieved only with the willingness of its participants share in the common work. The chances of separating companies' formal participation commitments from their employees' actual activities (Bromley et al., 2012; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) are then close to zero. But when each employee applies their will and reason to transform their environment from a perspective that aims to associate the individual and the common good as intimately as possible, participation becomes a reality – and a great opportunity to create bridges between the world of affinity and the professional world (Chapas & Hollandts, 2017).

To this end, and as recommended by Ferreras (2012, 2017), who is in favor of bicameralism, greater attention should be given to the fact that from a self-government perspective, we need to work on the networks of relationships, norms, and values. Beyond (or below) the formal organization, these networks are essential to the social cohesion of the company, even if they have not been decreed hierarchically (Chassagnon, 2019). Ferreras neglects this informal dimension of the organization of participation to concentrate only on the form that, according to her, the government of the company should take. However, this is not automatic; these two dimensions must work together because it is one thing to formalize a political form or structure, but quite another to nurture a real culture of participation that can help company actors reach the compromise between capital and labor that is favorable to democracy.

This is also why the question of participation cannot be treated independently of the activities and people being governed, particularly because work takes its meaning at the intersection of the demands of the organization and the nature of the tasks that actors are required to perform. Participation in the sense that we understand it is not, and cannot be, a matter for specialists. It is everyone's business. Participating is acting together. This seemingly simple definition refers to a journey toward both independence and common life experience – two factors that are difficult for companies to guarantee, given the bureaucracy undermining work collectives and the ambivalence of employee empowerment discourse. It is true that participation is now being talked about extensively, but such discussion needs to be about more than just verbal exchanges. Participation requires a willingness to take action and must be both a resource and a professional skill in its own right, if it is to serve the purpose of building corporate democracy based not on some predefined model but rather on the experience of work itself.

Combining research into participation with research into work could also be a way to respond to the challenge of hybridizing social and business needs (Acquier et al., 2011; Akrivou & Sison, 2016; Battilana, 2018). This idea is reflected in works that make participation in business a criterion of corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Collier & Esteban, 2007; Slack et al., 2015). To associate CSR and participation is to say that common goals do not exist naturally, but rather exist as a function of a political process in which they are recognized and instituted as such by the partners. Indeed, we think that participative practices are the most decisive factor of good practice in collective action – as evidenced by the multiplication of participatory initiatives that value the eco-citizen, including responsible and sustainable behaviors in terms of production, consumption, lifestyle choices, travel, etc. In a world in which development needs are growing and the desire for social and climate justice is on the rise, we believe that employee participation in decision-making and governance should not be the exception, but the normal form of corporate governance (Favereau, 2019). It is, in any case, a promising way of deepening organizational citizenship (Smith et al., 1983; Van Dyne et al.,

1994) and one that can lead to a more responsible capitalism, whereby company actors are aware of the political nature of work and labor relations and, consequently, their personal responsibility for the future of the company and society (Davis, 2021).

Implications for practitioners

The discussion around participation at work proposed here has practical implications for both managers and employees. We know that participation, notably that of employees, is a problem as much as a solution for management, unless workplace community is promoted through the hypothesis of a natural identity between the governed and the governing, which would guarantee social and relational cohesion in a company. Workplace community does not exist automatically. Rather, it requires appropriate institutions and practices that create a spirit of free and voluntary cooperation between the various actors within a company. Such a spirit can be fostered by keeping employees informed through various modes of communication and consultation (e.g., company newspapers, company charters, office or departmental workshop meetings, company seminars, quality or problem-solving groups, direct expression groups). It can also be nurtured by the provision of supportive measures that improve the employee experience and quality of life at work (e.g., onboarding, mentoring, team building, teleworking, working from home), or even by means of participatory innovation mechanisms or collaborative events (e.g., creativity bubbles, virtual campaigns, learning trips, or other hackathons, cf. Teglborg & Glaser, 2018). In addition, financial participation has a role to play, as its importance has increased in recent years, not least given the multiplication of laws that are favorable to it.

Above all, it is necessary for company management to ensure that all these participation mechanisms work together. Taken in isolation, these mechanisms will be incapable of creating feelings of mutuality and reciprocity between company actors. As Aubert (2016) observes, the empirical literature on participation supports the thesis of the complementarity of different forms of participation to promote integrity, honesty, and social cohesion in the company. For instance, when financial participation is combined with employee participation in decision-making at several levels of the company, much better results are obtained. Indeed, employees have more confidence in their company when management implements practices that are conducive both to the economic performance of the company and good old-fashioned human relations in the workplace (including teamwork, training, job security, low level of supervision, and average level of remuneration equal to or higher than that of the market, see Hennestad, 1998). If we require participation to be managed, it is because each company is different

and there is no 'one best way' to implement it. In other words, the role of the organizational context, which generally refers to environment, technology, size, and ownership, will play an important role in the trade-offs and balances among the participation tools management it has at its disposal (Connor, 1992).

This means that managers must acknowledge that participation cannot be entirely built on artifacts; nor can the work experience be reduced to an instrumental dimension. This, we argue, is the most important lesson of Zask's model of participation for practitioners: the main objective for management, whatever the organization, should be to provide an environment that encourages autonomy and individual responsibility, expressing confidence in employees' competences and capacities so that they feel that their contribution is important and meaningful to the success of the company. This means flattening the hierarchy and reducing bureaucratic red tape, both of which dampen the enthusiasm of individuals to participate, and more generally, promoting a culture of participation that allows for the social control sought by many of today's workers (Chapas & Hollandts, 2017; Ferreras et al., 2020). However, it also means that participation will always be experimental, in that the success of a participatory policy is directly linked to the desire of employees to participate (Kaler, 1999). Participatory projects often rely on purely top-down decision models, with programmatic participatory approaches divided into unavoidable steps to be followed. They should, however, remain flexible and open to considering the experience of individual actors in the workplace community (Wilkinson & Dundon, 2010).

Thus, managers should keep in mind that encouraging participation does not mean encouraging everyone to participate in everything all the time; rather, it is about creating an organizational atmosphere or social climate that can enrich the work experience. Ultimately, it is a question of framing the democratization of organization through participation, not of imposing it. Actors may ultimately be tempted to leave the company (Hirschman, 1970) rather than attempting to negotiate work conditions more favorable to their emancipation (Thuderoz, 2019).

Conclusion and limitations

Although the question of employee participation has long been a central issue in the management and government of companies, we have shown that it is often reduced to a technical problem that prevents us from grasping how, and to what extent, participation can help to integrate employees more actively and sustainably into the company's production process, including from the perspective of greater corporate social responsibility. We have addressed this issue through the lens of Zask's work on contributive democracy to propose a

new—and we hope refreshing—conception of participation at work. This includes three different but complementary dimensions that are crucial to (re)vitalizing democracy in companies and consolidating a unity of purpose and interest between employees and their employers. Together, these three dimensions form the underlying principles of a self-government model based on social control. We hope that our appropriation of Zask's work can illuminate some of the critical attributes of a true culture of participation in business, with a view to meeting the criteria of a participation-ownership model that avoids the pitfalls of a participation-mobilization model typical of managerial government techniques (Chapas & Hollandts, 2017).

However, we are aware that our argument could be criticized on account of its underlying presupposition (and our conviction) that participation is a good thing for people and for the health of democracy. We acknowledge that this approach could be instrumentalized by actors, who may find that, in taking an active part in defining the company's objectives, the possible means to satisfy purely categorical interests emerge. It may, therefore, be unsuitable for uniting the needs of individuals and the common interest. Employees are not necessarily virtuous and inclined to engage in the participatory and shareable terrain, or at least, not any more so than anyone else. This can be evidenced by the individualization of social relations at work, which is a reality that is becoming increasingly palpable (e.g., we can think of the phenomena of the Great Resignation and quiet quitting). Thus, we should not be under the illusion that there are any simple answers.

To conclude, democracy – including corporate democracy – is based on the capacity and association of individuals, each with their own consciousness, as well as on intellectual and moral exchange, and thus can never be perfect. It is merely a goal and an ideal, in which everything depends on the quality of the interaction between the individual and their environment (Dewey, 2018 [1888]).

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