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# Recognitive arguments for workplace democracy

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen the Hegelian idea of recognition applied to the sphere of work, with the aim of identifying social pathologies, lack of recognition, and the worsening of work life in neoliberal societies.<sup>1</sup> However, while recognition theorists have commendably managed to point out the pathologies marring work, explicit moves to argue for a democratization of work have been scarce. In his recent contribution, Timo Jütten (2017, p. 265) states that “the requirement of equal respect” establishes “limits to the power that others can exercise over us if we are to be recognized as persons.” Although it is the case that “work may become undignified when the authority that others yield over us is arbitrary or excessive,” according to Jütten it is still “implausible that significant decision-making power at work is required for a dignified life” (Jütten, 2017, p. 265). In this paper we want to claim otherwise.

Within the recognition literature there have been a number of arguments for the importance of democracy generally and for the just allocation of recognition in the workplace specifically.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, in the wake of the most recent economic crises, the old idea of workplace democracy has been rehabilitated in discussions outside of the recognition-theoretical analysis.<sup>3</sup> In this paper we have a twofold aim. First, we wish to show that commitments within recognition theory lend themselves readily to arguments for workplace democratization. This is done through arguing that authoritarian forms of labor organization go against fundamental recognitive needs, generating injustice and unnecessary social suffering that could be ameliorated through giving workers a proper voice. In conjunction with this aim, we offer a defense of the idea of workplace democracy from the perspective of recognition. Our goal is not to override other arguments for workplace democracy, but rather to provide additional reasons to democratize working life.

It is somewhat surprising that recognition theorists have not yet provided detailed arguments for workplace democracy. We cannot, of course, offer an exact explanation for other theorists' choices, but one potential reason for this could be that they, like Jütten, do not see workplace democracy as necessary for dignified life. A second potential reason is that the focus of the central theorists has been elsewhere. Axel Honneth has a very general and historical social theory, which understands modern society as a functional whole with differentiated institutional

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spheres. In this picture, democracy resides mostly in the politics of the public sphere and civil society—although it is also construed as a way of life (Honneth, 2017, p. 92). Moreover, while Honneth has focused on the market as a sphere of cooperation, there has been a lack of focus on the workplace as such and a concomitant lack of awareness of the firm as a form of private government. Third, when recognition theorists have focused on the workplace per se, they have been concerned with the experience of the work process itself and the potential misrecognition involved in it (see, e.g., Smith, 2009; Smith & Deranty, 2012). Although the recent literature also includes positive estimations as regards workplace democracy (Dejours, Deranty, Renault, & Smith, 2018, pp. 196, 203–204), the arguments are not fully fleshed out in terms of recognition. This is the gap that this article aims to fill.

We start by explaining what we mean by “recognition” and how it is related to work (Section 2). Here we cannot present a full argument for why one should adopt a recognition-theoretical perspective, but as recent literature has shown (e.g., Dejours, Deranty, Renault & Smith, 2018; see also fn. 2), recognition theory has proven promising in the context of work and we seek to drive the theory’s implications further. In Section 3, we argue that while work can be viewed as necessarily ambivalent, its current institutional manifestations (in particular, firms) are unnecessarily marred by practices and structures of misrecognition. We then show, in Section 4, how institutionalizing workers’ voice addresses such issues of misrecognition from two different perspectives: universal respect and evaluative esteem. There we also illustrate how democracy at work might appear in practice. We thereafter move, in Section 5, to consider the distinctiveness and feasibility, as well as the scope and limitations, of the recognitive argument for workplace democracy before concluding with a summary of its emancipatory significance (Section 6).

But first, why focus on work? We do so because there are multiple ways in which work can be considered as “central” to human life. The most obvious is work as a necessary element for the ongoing survival of society. Humans as natural beings could not survive without undertaking certain kinds of activities that ensure their material reproduction. In addition, it is a sociological truth about current societies that work encompasses large parts of individuals’ lives and their social identities. Evidence suggests that work continues—and will continue—to occupy a fundamental place within contemporary life.<sup>4</sup>

A stronger consideration for the centrality of work connects work to an ethical ideal of “human nature” that pictures human beings as essentially active beings. In the words of Karl Polanyi (2001, p. 75): “Labor is only another name for a human activity that goes with life itself.” Work can be understood as a transformative activity that both expresses and augments our human powers. According to this broadly Hegelian-Marxist understanding of work,<sup>5</sup> its transformative aspect is twofold: in work we transform the objects of the natural world, but at the same time we transform ourselves and our understanding of who we are. Work requires the development of practical intelligence in an attempt to apply technical and abstract know-how to a reality that resists our actions and manifests contingencies. As such, work is an arena that “reveals new powers to the body” (Dejours & Deranty, 2010, p. 171) and allows subjects to connect with and develop their skills and their capabilities (Smith, 2009, p. 49; Smith, 2012a, p. 194).

Further, work is also a sphere of action in which individuals find themselves embedded in social relationships. This makes work central politically in two senses. It is central politically in a broad sense insofar as, as with other social relationships, it requires cooperation and the coordination of activities across various people. Work is also central politically in a more restricted sense in that its organization has been and remains a core concern of state authorities and governmental action. The intrinsically political nature of work in both these broad and narrow senses creates an important space for normative considerations dealing with the organization of work. Below we present an ideal of recognition that can provide a normative direction for that purpose.

## 2 | INSTITUTIONAL PROMISES OF RECOGNITION

In this section we present certain key ideas that set the stage for the recognitive arguments for workplace democracy. These are (2.1) the general claim that human beings require social recognition in order to flourish and (2.2) the claim that institutions can be interpreted as being based on normative expectations of recognition, which can also

be harnessed to justify critique. We take these ideas as largely given, since they have been extensively argued for elsewhere (especially by Honneth, 1995, 2014, 2017), and aim to present a view that is widely accepted in the recognition literature.

## 2.1 | Social recognition as central

In its (neo-)Hegelian sense, recognition refers to interpersonal relationships in which one subject recognizes another (as something or someone), and the other accepts this evaluation. Recognition is commonly taken to consist of positive affirmative relations that respond to our specific needs as human beings, our status and capacities as moral persons, or our individuating features and achievements. However, recognition has at the same time a constitutive role in the development and realization of these very same capacities and features (Honneth, 2002, p. 510; Ikäheimo, 2007, pp. 227–228). Recognition is thus *responsive* to persons and *constitutive* of persons, and being recognized is part of becoming a human person, a “quasi-transcendental” human interest (Honneth, 2003, p. 174). Lack of recognition, on the other hand, causes real psychological harm and suffering.

Recognition is also considered to be a *political* concept. If recognition is required to achieve good enough relations to self, which fundamentally enable us to function as independent subjects, then the harms caused by lack of recognition or misrecognition can prompt us to find avenues through which we can attain the recognition we need (Honneth, 1995). Our desire for recognition can be harnessed as a force for social movements and political struggles. Political theories of recognition often connect the idea of recognition to the idea of justice and claim that recognition holds the key for determining the conditions of a just society (Thompson, 2006, p. 9). In short, recognition is a concept that deals with the constitution of subjects, and at the same time recognition theories aim to explain and motivate political struggles through appealing to the human need for social recognition.

The actual material and institutional forms that our societies and, within them, recognition relations take have shifted through historical developments. For the purposes of this paper we rely on two distinct modern forms of recognition: *respect* and *esteem*.<sup>6</sup> Demands for respect are demands for recognizing our universal and shared features—that is, our status as autonomous human beings and bearers of rights (Honneth, 1995, p. 108; see also McBride, 2013). The related constitutive claim is that only through respect–recognition can we learn to see ourselves as legal persons and right-bearers who share “with all other members of one’s community the qualities that make participation in discursive will-formation possible” (Honneth, 1995, p. 120). To foreshadow our argument for workplace democracy, it should be noted here that while recognition as a human need is not necessarily dependent on democracy, democratic societies require their citizens to be respected as co-authors of norms (Hirvonen & Laitinen, 2016, p. 5). Furthermore, if we are to defend the freedom and autonomy of persons, then we need to take into account the institutional circumstances that enable us to take part in collective self-rule and make our self-understanding as autonomous persons possible.

While respect is demanded and given on the basis of universal aspects of free and autonomous persons, esteem, differently, is directed toward particular individuating features or achievements. This requires a shared value horizon where abilities and achievements are judged according to their contributions toward culturally defined values (Honneth, 1995, p. 122; McBride, 2013, p. 83). Being esteemed by others supports one’s own self-esteem and enables one to appreciate one’s particular features or achievements. In modern societies, a central institution for finding esteem is the workplace, where individual achievements are constantly evaluated and judged from the perspective of contributing to the good of the firm and of broader society.

## 2.2 | Recognitive expectations and work

One of the central claims that contemporary recognition theory makes is that we can find a source—or a normative grammar—for immanent critique in the institutionalized expectations for recognition. Society as a whole can be seen as a system of recognition where interpersonal forms of recognition have been institutionalized (Honneth, 2003, p. 138). Social institutions require (often tacitly) acceptance by their members to exist and thus they rely on certain promises

and expectations that they need to fulfil in order to appear justified from the perspective of their participants. Above we already sketched the general importance of recognition and here we want to take a closer look at the actual recognitive promises present in the context of work. Here we accept the claim that recognition theories are both descriptive and normative (Smith, 2009, p. 47; Jütten, 2017, p. 263). They describe and map out the actual normative promises of the institutional realm and employ these underlying commitments as a critical tool for also evaluating that realm.

First, we side with Honneth (2014) who has argued for understanding the market and workplace, as well as other institutions, as spheres of “social freedom” where individuals are mutually dependent, the realization of the freedom of the other being a condition for the realization of one’s own freedom.<sup>7</sup> Jütten highlights two key conditions of freedom in the sphere of labor within Honneth’s extensive argument: “(i) discursive mechanisms through which workers can shape their cooperative activity, and (ii) the humanization of labor through the avoidance of work that is merely mechanical, repetitive and devoid of challenges” (Jütten, 2015, p. 199). That is, Honneth’s idea of social freedom in the context of work is taken to mean meaningful work that is within the reasonable control of workers themselves. Labor’s humanization connects with respecting the other as a meaningful partner in social activity. Cooperation, on the other hand, is at the core of collectively determining the shape of the institutions in which we take part—which is a key element of social freedom.

The second fundamental normative promise of work—which separates it from the other spheres of freedom—is that one’s contributions to society must allow for self-preservation and the satisfaction of one’s needs (Deranty, 2012, p. 157). The highly specialized modern division of labor demands that each of the interlocking individual work tasks be granted at least a minimum amount of recognition as a contribution to society. Honneth identifies this line of thought in Hegel and Durkheim, who he reads as claiming that “every adult member of society has an entitlement to make a contribution to the common good and to receive in return an appropriate living wage” (Honneth, 2010, p. 234). Jean-Philippe Deranty (2012, p. 157) notes that this interpretation of the normative dimension of work emphasizes the ideas of cooperation and individual expression. The same ideas recur in Beate Roessler’s characterization of the normative elements of gainful employment, which include self-preservation and the satisfaction of needs, self-realization in pursuit of shared goals, inclusion within contexts of cooperation, and the recognition of socially relevant contributions (Roessler, 2007, p. 139).

With the picture of work as a sphere of freedom, need satisfaction, individual expression, and cooperation in clearer view, it is now possible to spell out in finer detail how respect and esteem as forms of recognition are connected to work. First, from the recognition-theoretical perspective, workplaces (and markets) constitute “recognition orders” or “economies of esteem” that determine how esteem is distributed within them (Honneth, 2003, p. 141; Jütten, 2017, p. 262). Central to the contemporary market sphere is the principle of merit or “achievement principle,” according to which receiving social esteem is (ideally) based on meritorious contributions to society.<sup>8</sup> The idea is that work and the market should provide at least equal possibilities for everyone to aim to get esteem—although this is often realized in ideological, perverse, and pathological ways. The ongoing challenge is that certain types of activities either do not count as achievements at all or that esteem is given without justification, based simply on convention or disparities in social power, status, and rank. Furthermore, when esteem is closely tied to wage labor, unemployment closes people out of the relevant recognition order and robs them of possibilities to contribute to the collective good, as well as of opportunities to build self-esteem (Dejours & Deranty, 2010, p. 172; Gombert, 2007, p. 70).

Although the opportunity to make individual expressive acts count as achievements is central to work, these contributions make sense only in a cooperative social context. This means that “economic actors must have recognized each other as members of a cooperative community before they can grant each other the right to maximize individual utility” (Honneth, 2014, p. 192). This implies that work’s irreducible communal aspect is necessarily tied to respect for others as well. Making contracts and conferring legal rights can be interpreted as requiring our shared status as free human beings. If the workplace and labor market are institutions that are based on benefits arising from the interaction of autonomous individuals (as argued by Adam Smith; see Anderson, 2017, p. 4), then, for these institutions to function appropriately, their participants must be respected as such. The recognitive model of work is, thus, not merely founded on “a normative concept of achievement and merit, but on a conception of legal recognition” (Honneth, 2007b, p. 360),

and, moreover, subjects need to recognize each other “not only legally as parties to a contract, but also morally or ethically as members of a cooperative community” (Honneth, 2014, p. 182). Thus, work is essentially connected to both universal respect and individuating esteem.

We do not want to claim that work is only about social recognition, but rather that work as a social activity has necessary recognitive elements to it, which are based on the expectations of respect and esteem. Work is inextricably connected to our social status, but also to material production and (re)distributions of wealth. Thus, we want to emphasize that, first, recognition likewise entails material relations and is not merely about abstract statuses and, second, its importance has been underdeveloped in the context of work, which operates as a distinct recognitive institution directed toward specific ends and tasks. According to our view, work incorporates work on our “selves,” on who we are and can become in the social realm. Work certainly involves producing, but material production also involves changes in self-understanding and it is precisely social recognition that has a key role in this transformative character of work (Dejours & Deranty, 2010, p. 172; also Smith, 2012a, pp. 182–183).

### 3 | WORK AS A CENTRAL SPHERE OF (MIS)RECOGNITION

In order to justify claims for restructuring work (as a recognitive institution), we need to show that there is something wrong with the current world of work. As an initial observation here, one can see a certain form of suffering—exertion—as intrinsically tied to work, which is an activity requiring the application of physical and mental forces and which is met by resistance from the objective world (see, e.g., Dejours, 2007, p. 73; Deranty, 2009, pp. 79–80; Smith & Deranty, 2012, p. 60). The reality of work is full of all kinds of mishaps, accidents, and failures experienced when trying to realize prescribed tasks in practice (Deranty, 2009, p. 80). This frequent discrepancy between prescription, action, and the resistance of the world will always be present in work. However, such worldly resistance can also bring joy and imbue achievements with meaning when one realizes one’s ends through effort (see, e.g., Dejours & Deranty, 2010, pp. 170–171; Gomberg, 2007, Chapter 6; Tweedie, 2012, pp. 331–335). Work-related exertion is something that cannot be fully eliminated, but also something we would not really wish to eliminate. After all, if there were no resistance, nothing would count as an achievement.

Work as such is ambivalent. The ambivalence just described cannot be eliminated, but those social conditions that undermine flourishing through work can be changed. In other words, our main concern here is *arbitrary social suffering*. As work is intrinsically imbued with possibilities for recognition and self-realization, it also presents possibilities for misrecognition or lack of recognition and this involves social suffering in two relevant senses: not only does it restrict subjects from acting freely, but, as a vulnerability arising from the constitutive aspect of recognition, it also potentially “injures them with regard to the positive understanding of themselves that they have acquired intersubjectively” (Honneth, 1995, p. 131).

Before going into the particular recognition-harms related to work, we need first to identify the more abstract harms related to lack of respect and esteem. The starting assumption is that lack of a particular kind of recognition deprives one of the affirmation needed for maintaining the relation-to-self associated with that form of recognition.<sup>9</sup> With regard to *disrespect*, Honneth aims to identify those practices and experiences that affect the sense of moral self-respect. By these he refers to exclusion from possession of those rights that any full-fledged member of a particular community or member of an institution can legitimately expect to have (Honneth, 1995, p. 134). *Disesteem* refers to those practices having negative effect in relation to the social status of a person or a group, which is always related to a larger value horizon. When a value horizon is such that certain individuals cannot find a way to see their contribution or way of life as possessing positive value in the eyes of a broader community, their sense of self and self-esteem are rendered vulnerable and jeopardized (Honneth, 1995, p. 134).

The distinction between disrespect and disesteem is highly general, but we can nonetheless identify particular malpractices within workplaces that have precisely these effects. Jütten (2017, pp. 271–272), for example, identifies

precarization and poor pay as particular forms of disesteem. Precarization downplays the social and temporal dimensions of work and, as such, reduces esteemable characteristics of personal achievements to mere commodities that are traded in the labor market. With poor pay, the connection to esteem is even more direct: as long as money is taken to be a medium of esteem, poor pay shows that contributions are not esteemed enough to count as worthy to let the person have a living wage.

In relation to respect, it is clear that practices like “abuse, bullying and harassment, and dirty, dangerous, and demeaning work” present threats to dignity and personal autonomy (Jütten, 2017, p. 269). Similarly, work in which workers lack effective voice and control is also plausibly viewable as a form of disrespect (Arnold, 2012; Schwartz, 1982). Such work also poses a threat to people’s self-respect insofar as it denies them the opportunity to direct and determine their own actions and renders them subservient to others. As well as contributing to a sense of powerlessness and alienation from their productive activity, work of this kind can negatively affect people’s well-being and personalities as a whole. For example, Arthur Kornhauser’s classic study of Detroit car workers revealed that individuals confined to jobs lacking control and discretion suffered significantly increased levels of mental ill-health.<sup>10</sup> As regards workers’ personalities, Melvin L. Kohn and Carmi Schooler found that the degree of “substantive complexity” of an occupation, the extent to which it necessitated reflection and allowed for “self-direction,” had a palpable influence on individuals’ general cognitive and psychological functioning, complex work leading to increases in their intellectual abilities and work lacking complexity decreasing them. Furthermore, the effects of “the structural imperatives” of jobs, especially “those conditions that facilitate or restrict the exercise of self-direction in work,” were not confined to the sphere of work but spilled over to affect workers’ values, orientations to self and society, and cognitive functioning in other realms of life.<sup>11</sup> Damaging work of this sort embodies a form of disrespect because it weakens some individuals’ life chances and autonomy in ways not suffered by people enjoying more attractive jobs. Yet the more fundamental reasons why it is disrespectful—unlike, say, the dangerous tasks necessarily attaching to mining or firefighting—are that the lack of worker control is not dictated by necessity, and, second, that it is deliberately instituted by others claiming sole authority over the character and conduct of the work (Arnold, 2012, pp. 112–113; Braverman, 1998; Rueschemeyer, 1986, p. 3).

These examples merely scratch the surface of research on work, but what nevertheless emerges is an outline of how misrecognition variously appears within working life. Such experiences of social suffering can be harnessed as a motivating force for social struggles (Honneth, 2007a, p. 71; also Renault, 2017), but in themselves they do not necessarily prompt a particular direction of development toward countering misrecognition. In the following, we seek to argue that the particular direction required involves democratizing work and also that the recognitive view of work harbors within itself arguments for workplace democracy.

## 4 | RECOGNITIVE ARGUMENTS FOR WORKPLACE VOICE AND DEMOCRACY

In this section, we set out the two main recognitive arguments for workplace voice and democracy. Moving first (4.1) to the respect–recognition justification of workplace voice, it is helpful to explore how this ideal has been harnessed within recent egalitarian thought as a standard by which to analyze and critique social relations and institutions. At the second stage (4.2), we show how some of the harmful deterioration of the standards of social esteem can be counteracted through workers’ voice. This section finishes (4.3) with an outline of what the concrete institutionalization of workers’ voice and workplace democracy entails.

### 4.1 | Argument from respect

The ideal of recognition as respect is often taken to entail the social egalitarian perspective that everyone should enjoy an equal status as a capable and free person (McBride, 2013, p. 57). As explained by Fabian Schuppert:



*The idea of being equals ... expresses the idea of a society in which all persons recognize each other as reason-responsive agents with the capacity to act freely and to take responsibility for their actions. To treat another as an equal and to recognize her agency means to recognize the other as a legitimate source of claims and reasons. This entails that within a socially egalitarian society people should mutually recognize each other and respect each other's fundamental interests. (Schuppert, 2015, p. 110)*

For our purposes, this relational understanding of equality is significant for three reasons. First, it focuses attention on what is of basic concern in appeals to respect recognition, namely, the nature of our relationships within major social institutions and whether these are conducive or inimical to our personal dignity and self-respect. Second, in connecting equality and respect to individual agency, reason responsiveness, and responsibility, this perspective grants individual voice and institutionally mediated dialogue a foundational role in both our conception and analysis of social relationships. From a social egalitarian perspective, legitimate and just social relationships are those in which people can freely express their claims and interests, can question the claims of others, and can avail of mechanisms that ensure their views will find institutional register and be taken seriously in collective decision-making.

The third reason for attending to the relational understanding of equality concerns its attention to the suffering occasioned by unequal social relationships. These relationships are objectionable because they either directly give rise to or prevent the discussion and resolution of much of the individual suffering—alienation, powerlessness, physical and mental ill health, etc.—discussed in the previous section. They are also objectionable on account of the more general harms that flow from inequality itself. Following Schuppert (2015, p. 110) and Yeoman (2014, p. 114), the harms attaching to unequal social relationships include asymmetrical opportunity to articulate and satisfy basic needs, the stigmatization of those lower down in hierarchies, endemic possibilities for domination, the fostering of servile attitudes, and the decay of bonds of solidarity. However, perhaps the prime harm of unequal social relationships is their denial of equal personal standing and consequent deleterious impact on people's self-respect. It is precisely the concern for these harms, especially the denial of equal personal standing, that provides the ground for a critical standpoint. Namely, that all major social relationships should take an egalitarian form unless there are compelling reasons justifying specific inequalities (Néron, 2015, p. 323). Moreover, any deviation from this egalitarian baseline should be justifiable to all parties within a social relationship and must never be to a degree and extent that undermines their status as equal and free persons.

We are now in a position to draw the basic contours of the respect–recognition argument for workplace voice and democracy. The argument begins with the relatively uncontentious belief that most work in contemporary economies entails individuals being embedded in a set of social relationships directed toward a shared end, that is, the provision of particular products or services. The institutions in which these social relationships obtain are properly classed as major social institutions insofar as most people find themselves within them for a significant portion of their lives and because of their current functional importance for social reproduction. We can furthermore safely assume that the most prevalent context of work in the formal economy, namely, the enterprise or firm, is political in the broad sense explained above. The success of the work process requires the coordination of activities across various persons who together constitute the membership of the firm. It is also political because the coordination of activities and tasks entails that work relationships are characterized by individuals occupying different roles which carry varying levels of authority and power. Indeed, the fact that it is defined by hierarchical structures and managerial authority is for many the key distinguishing feature of the firm.<sup>12</sup>

How should we view hierarchy and managerial authority in the firm from a recognition–respect perspective? Recall that from this perspective, social relationships are illegitimate and unjust when they do not allow for the exercise of individual agency—understood in the sense of being reason responsive, of freely expressing claims and interests, and of questioning the claims made by others, etc.—or when individual agency, though permitted, finds no or little effective institutional register. Recall, as well, that any inequality, including authority relations, must be justified to those affected by it and, further, must never be of the sort that undermines our equal status. Together these principles enjoin that all parties to a social relationship should enjoy a right to effective voice. It follows, therefore, that because work



relationships are clearly social relationships, there is no a priori reason for thinking they do not fall under these general principles. Thus, if the inequality occasioned by the existence of managerial authority in firms is to be legitimate, all members of the firm, not least workers, must be able to freely express their opinions as regards that authority and have these opinions registered in collective decision-making. Moreover, as with adult and cognitively unimpaired parties to other social relationships, we have no reason for believing workers incapable of rationally voicing their opinions as regards their work and how it is coordinated.

## 4.2 | Democracy from the perspective of esteem

Respect for one's autonomy and equal status in decision-making lends itself readily to an argument for worker voice and a significant degree of self-governance, but the same argument does not necessarily apply in the case of esteem and the evaluation of achievement. Instead of a demand for universal equality, esteem is necessarily based on distinctions and ranking of achievements (McBride, 2013, p. 96). Yet while we therefore cannot claim a right for equal esteem, our aim here is to show that it is nevertheless possible to find support for workplace democracy from the perspective of esteem recognition.

First, it is important to make a distinction between the "job-well-done" type of esteem that is based on the internal standards of the task at hand and broader schemes of esteem that rely on socially shared value horizons within the work organization or within wider society (see Deranty, 2010, p. 186). The recognition literature often focuses on esteem across wider society in the form of the "achievement principle," which is set in the light of collectively shared notions of good. While this is an important perspective, we wish to concentrate on a more constrained sphere of esteem, which concerns recognition within the workplace and which is most often awarded by co-workers, peers, and managers.

However, before coming to our main contention here, we need to set two limitations to the scope of our argument. We do not want (a) to argue that within a democratic workplace all the standards of the "job-well-done" type of esteem would be fully up for the workers to decide. There will often be objective features to work—heart surgery must respect biological facts, for instance—which cannot be contested.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, (b) while we accept that there are always ongoing struggles over the general worth of different kinds of working activities within wider society (e.g., over care work or unskilled but necessary work), this part of our argument only deals with the local standards of esteem (or "value horizons") operative within particular workplaces.

It is also important to note that some standards of esteem are historically changing. Sharing esteem according to the achievement principle signified, in the move toward modernity, a general gain in recognition as esteem was decoupled from a pre-ordained social status (Smith, 2012b, p. 99). However, and decisively, coupling esteem with achievement has also led to misdevelopments. First, achievement and market success have become largely identical, turning the historically emancipatory concept of achievement into a tool for oppression in the name of market hierarchies (Smith, 2012b, p. 100; also Anderson, 2017, p. 33; and Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007). For better or worse, the social standing of persons has become "roughly proportional to their market value" (Anderson, 2017, p. 138). Parallel to this, there has been a shift in the standards of esteem from "appreciation" to "admiration" (Smith, 2012b, p. 101; Smith & Deranty, 2012, p. 57). Appreciation entails a long-term form of esteem for the sacrifices made by individuals for the work organization's *internally* shared goals. It is based on one's commitment and dedication in shared work tasks, which are open to all to cultivate. Admiration, quite differently, renders standards of esteem more competitive, comparative, and measurable by standards that are often set *externally*, and in our current context typically by management and employers (Voswinkel, 2012, p. 278). Competition, the imposition of external measurable standards of success, and the displacement of workers' local, peer knowledge of their work by managerial doctrine all contribute to suffering among workers through undermining task discretion, occupational dignity, and solidarity amongst peers, and by encouraging disengaged and measurable work that downplays the often morally relevant hidden and nonmeasurable aspects of work (Smith, 2012b, p. 102; see also Smith, 2009, p. 57).

It is against this picture of misdeveloped esteem recognition that an argument for democratizing work can be made. The idea is that as long as workplaces or firms can be construed—at least in part—as microcosms of esteem, that is,

as systems that determine what counts as a relevant contribution to the common good, the standards for conferring esteem ought to be defined or accepted by those who are members of these systems of esteem. The problem with the current conferral of esteem is, as just seen, twofold. First, the criteria by which achievements are recognized have changed in a way that enables fewer and fewer people to achieve self-esteem through work. Second, this change has been distorted by cultural prejudices and the interests of powerful groups, leaving control over the standards of esteem external to workers themselves. Giving a voice to workers tackles the latter issue directly and, assuming that workers have an interest in achieving self-esteem through work, makes it more likely that the standards of esteem formed through workers' voice are such that they would enable a more egalitarian distribution of the opportunities to attain esteem.

There are three caveats to be noted in connection with our argument from the perspective of esteem recognition. First, even though our argument starts from the consideration of what is counted as fair distribution of esteem at work, it still ultimately relies on respect recognition to succeed. The central idea at stake is the (expected) status as a co-constitutor of the norms of esteem. It can be claimed that all the recognitive claims for democracy rely precisely on the ideal of respecting persons as being of equal worth in constituting norms. This is analytically separate from the sphere of esteem. However, at the same time it is instructive to see that the analytically separate spheres of respect and esteem are directly linked.

The second caveat is to acknowledge that there can be efficient and stable systems of esteem even without democracy. Nondemocratic societies, institutions, and smaller groups can be very good at bestowing evaluative distinctions and commendations. Indeed, some might worry that democratization levels the field too much, since esteem is based on difference and distinction. However, from our perspective this is not a concern, as our claim here is not that everyone needs or should get equal esteem. Rather, we argue that competitive systems of evaluation ought to be set up in a fair and justifiable manner, and democracy, in our understanding, is a large part of that.<sup>14</sup>

The third is the contention that perhaps not all standards can be decided by workers because some standards for esteem are highly task related and therefore "objective." However, while there is truth to this, every task seems to require skills that are knowable only to workers themselves: one can fully appreciate the demandingness of work tasks only if one is oneself included in similar tasks (Deranty, 2010, p. 186). This gives reason to think that externally set economies of esteem represent arbitrary standards for evaluating work tasks and that it is workers who typically know better which of their achievements ought to be valued.<sup>15</sup> Workplace democracy is precisely an answer to the internal evaluation of achievements: that is, workers should be given a voice in how the evaluative principles of various contributions are set within the workplace itself. While this does not guarantee esteem, it levels the playing field by respecting workers as relevant (respected) co-authors of norms of esteem.

### 4.3 | Characterizing democracy at work

Our two assertions of a right to workplace voice remain, of course, necessarily abstract unless one specifies the degree of voice members of a firm should be able to avail of. We can get a clearer view of the degree of workplace voice required if we attend to the different levels of organizational decision-making that are likely to adversely affect workers' recognitive interests by exposing them to avertable harms (see Breen, 2017, p. 427; Hsieh, 2005, pp. 122–123; 2008b, p. 64). The first level relates to work tasks and how they are performed. For example, it is quite obvious that workers have an interest in voicing concerns over task pace and production targets, the allocation of duties, the extent and intensity of supervision, expectations as regards overtime, etc., because these issues can negatively impact on their experience of work and their wider lives. Workers likewise have a strong interest in voicing concerns over the general conditions of their membership (usually via employment) in the firm, ranging from remuneration and work incentives, through the quality of the workplace environment, to training opportunities and promotion policies, since these can lead to some workers being unfairly disadvantaged in terms of their prospects and personal advancement. A third level of decision-making of clear significance is that of overall corporate policy. Decisions to change product lines, to out-source jobs, and to relocate or close firms can severely affect workers, their families, and their communities, and are

thus appropriate topics for wide-ranging deliberation. The right to workplace voice should, therefore, apply to these three levels of decision-making, and there must be mechanisms to give that right life on each level.

Against the potential rejoinder that democracy at the state level would be a sufficient substitute to guarantee workers' interests in the workplace, it is somewhat of a leap to say that workers' enjoyment of democratic voice via their representatives at the level of the state renders redundant the need for voice at the level of the firm (González-Ricoy, 2014a, pp. 246–247). For one, the distance between these two institutions and the lack of spatial and temporal congruence between their decision-making processes are too great for us to reasonably think democratic state voice can substitute for workplace voice. The egalitarian ideal of respect recognition demands that holders of authority in a social relationship, no matter the type of social relationship concerned or the institution in which it is housed, be answerable directly to others within that relationship. Only internal member voice can satisfy this demand.

A further rejoinder, based on the substitutability of worker voice by a right to exit nondemocratic firms, similarly fails. This is so because the threat of workers exiting a firm is often implausible, given the dependence of many workers on firm membership for their income and the lack of alternative employment opportunities.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, our focus, following the ideals of recognition, should be not only what people can *exit from* but also what they should thereafter be able to *enter into*, namely, working relationships that uphold their dignity and self-respect by granting them a say within firm governance. From this viewpoint, without democratizing the governance of a considerable segment of the formal economy, the right of exit, though important in itself, amounts to a right to move from one disrespectful, inequalitarian workplace to another.

Thus far we have a relatively clear view of the various levels worker voice should operate on and of its nonsubstitutability. The next question to address is how worker voice can become institutionally effective. Here we can fruitfully draw from Philip Pettit's understanding of the democratic state (see Breen, 2017, pp. 435–436; Schuppert, 2015, pp. 116–117). For Pettit, our equal status as persons necessitates, as regards the narrow political sphere of the state, that we have the right to contest collective decisions and, just as importantly, the right to jointly share in "influence" and "control" over collective decision-making so as to ensure our interests are properly taken into account and thus to legitimate the political order itself. By "influence" here is meant the shared right and ability to contribute to decision-making; by "control," the shared right and ability to contribute to decision-making, plus the capacity to impose a direction on decision-making processes. This influence and control must be "individualized," that is, open equally to all; "unconditioned," that is, not dependent on the good will of governmental or other agencies; and "efficacious," namely, robust enough to resist intrusions from inappropriate parties or interests (see Pettit, 2012, Chapters 3, 4, and 5; 2014, Chapter 5). Such joint influence and control are what, in the end, make us free and equal citizens.

If enjoying a "regime of equal, effective control" (Pettit, 2014, p. 112) is what ensures our equal footing in the narrow political sphere of the state, then there is good reason for thinking that a regime of equally effective control is required in the firm. This is because work relationships affect people's basic interests in myriad fundamental ways. It is also because, as stressed above, that from the respect-recognition viewpoint all authority relations, wherever they arise, must be justified to those subject to them and must always uphold their equal status. In situations where these relations are unfettered by this constraint, those occupying authority roles will relate to others in the manner of superiors, with the result that those in subordinate positions are likely to see themselves as of lesser social value or worth (Dow, 2003, p. 36; Néron, 2015, p. 321). In order to maintain the ideal of self-respect within working relationships, and to enjoy equal opportunities for esteem, workers therefore must have a voice that is *at least* sufficient to counter the influence and control of managers and owners.

This has three practical implications. First, it means workers having power equal to or greater than that enjoyed by managers and other stakeholders in the firm. Second, such power can only be secured through the gradual reorganization of enterprises to ensure either that workers, managers, and owners share control equally, or that the members of a firm enjoy exclusive control. This entails that we should advocate policies favoring the institutionalization of either strong forms of codetermination defined by full parity between workers, managers, and owners, or self-governing worker cooperatives, where workers themselves decide on enterprise policy and own the firm's assets.<sup>17</sup> Third, the vast majority of our economy appears seriously deficient in terms of legitimacy and justice insofar as workers are

currently denied an effective voice within the authoritarian, capitalist firm. External mechanisms for worker voice, such as unions, collective bargaining, and labor courts, do lessen the degree of illegitimacy and injustice occasioned by authoritarian workplace relationships, but they do not absolve or exculpate it.<sup>18</sup> If mutual respect and equal opportunity to contribute to and achieve within work are values we take seriously, then effective internal voice and worker control should be a prime focus in rethinking the prevailing economic order.

## 5 | THE DISTINCTIVENESS, FEASIBILITY, AND SCOPE OF THE RECOGNITIVE ARGUMENT

Before concluding, it is worth clarifying our argument's relation to other arguments for workplace democratization, its feasibility, and its potential limitations. What we have presented above combines elements from two common arguments for workplace democracy—the “psychological-support” and “parallel-case” arguments—but is reducible to neither of them. The central claim of the psychological-support argument is that the vitality of democracy at the formal political level depends upon “forms of association ‘outside’ the state, particularly in the economy, that strengthen the forms of thought, feeling, and self-understanding that give substance to democratic citizenship” (Cohen, 1989, p. 28; see also O'Neill, 2008, pp. 42–47). The recognitive rationale for workplace democracy concurs that work experiences do spill over into other aspects of workers' lives. However, the recognitive case is not merely instrumental, that is, justified because it enhances democratic citizenship generally, since the focus of the argument is on the legitimacy of *intra-firm* relationships. Rather, our argument treats formal political equality, as well as workplace democracy, as one aspect of a more general social equality, which should extend across different spheres of social life.

The parallel-case argument justifies workplace democracy in terms of key analogies between the state and the firm that warrant treating them similarly (González-Ricoy, 2014b; Landemore & Ferreras, 2016). The recognitive position agrees that firms are government-like insofar as they involve authority and rule relations not dissimilar to those found within the political sphere. It also concurs that the firm should not be thought of as a private association separate from the public domain. Nevertheless, the success of the recognitive argument does not rest on any tight analogy between the state and firm. While the relationships between citizens within the institutions of the state can be viewed as the prime political relationships insofar as decisions emanating from them have a *de jure* claim and purchase on society overall, citizen relationships are not the only political relationships and state institutions are not the only institutions within which we need to arrange recognitive relationships. The justification of workplace voice in the recognitive view follows simply from the fact that work relationships entail authority relations that require legitimation in light of the ideals of mutual respect and esteem, not that these authority relations are the same in all key regards as those found within state institutions.

In general, under the recognitive view presented here, organizational voice is not viewed primarily as an instrumental means for advancing democratic citizenship or justified by analogies with other institutions, but rather as a right owed to us based on our status as equal and free reason-responsive beings who are constituted in dialogical—and institutionally mediated—relations with others. With voice conceived as a right expressive of our freedom, the recognitive viewpoint therefore provides an intrinsic grounding for worker voice focused squarely on the workplace itself.

Yet is our recognitive case for workplace democratization institutionally feasible? Although we cannot review every criticism of workplace democracy it is worth rebutting two here, the first being that democratic firms are inefficient in reducing productive output relative to units of input, the second that exercising democratic voice would prove costly for workers individually. As regards the first, critics of worker control believe, for example, that productive efficiency is undercut by either lack of discipline among workers (Alchian and Demsetz, 1972) or by the excessive cost of collective decision-making between workers who have heterogeneous interests which are difficult to coordinate (Hansmann, 1996). If our goal is to provide products and services effectively with minimum cost to consumers and society as a whole, then we should eschew the democratic firm.

Defenders of the democratic firm offer two telling rejoinders. One issues from economic theory and asserts that there are, contra the critics, good reasons to think worker-controlled firms could be as or more efficient than capitalist firms to the degree that they reduce costs associated with the latter type of firm. For example, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1993b, pp. 92–93; see also Johnson, 2006, pp. 251–253) cite positive participation effects, direct individual claims on profits, mutual monitoring, and democratically determined wages as reasons for thinking worker-controlled cooperatives would have notable efficiency gains in comparison to authoritarian capitalist firms.

Furthermore, it is an empirical fact that cooperatives do exist and have been successful (see Dahl, 1985, pp. 96–97, 123–125; Dow, 2003, pp. 50–76; and Landemore & Ferreras, 2016). The appearance and in many cases continued decades-long existence of these organizations suggest skepticism about discipline and coordination within worker-controlled firms is overblown. Cooperatives and other worker-controlled firms do face challenges that go a long way in explaining their scarcity relative to capitalist firms, including difficulties in securing credit, lack of support from professional and other associations, and various path dependencies. However, none of these have anything much to do with productivity and they are with appropriate policies remediable.

Efficiency considerations, therefore, give scant cause for rejecting workplace democracy. Yet even if there were reliable evidence that worker-controlled firms generate moderate comparative inefficiencies, such should not in itself rule them out. This is because once a level of efficiency is met that reliably meets people's needs and wants without environmental and other negative externalities, it becomes morally unreasonable to let this value trump all other values, especially the ideals of mutual respect and equal freedom definitive of the recognitive viewpoint. We may at times face trade-offs between efficiency and other values, but we should not, as Adina Schwartz (1982, p. 644) puts it, seek ever greater productivity "at the cost of depriving individuals of the liberties and working conditions that humans need for leading autonomous lives."

As regards the second criticism, it is assuredly true that democratic control would involve personal costs for workers, specifically the expenditure of effort, time, and energy in participating in decision-making processes. On account of these costs, some workers may therefore be reluctant to embrace democratic governance. However, this possibility needs to be viewed in relation to three other considerations. First, the preference of some workers to not participate in governance structures is not a justifiable reason for denying others a right to autonomous decision-making at work. Second, it is a mistake to think that workplace democracy equates with excessively time-consuming forms of direct democracy. All firms with more than a few members and of any sort of complexity will require a division of labor, and this, in turn, means that decision-making powers will be spread across various representative and coordinative roles, thus lessening the participatory burden on individual workers whilst respecting their right to oversight and control (Schaff, 2012, p. 397). Finally, the costs of worker control need to be set against the costs of working in authoritarian firms, which include, as we saw, powerlessness, alienation, and myriad forms of unnecessary social suffering.

That all said, there are nevertheless reasons for acknowledging certain limitations to the recognitive argument for workplace voice. One concerns the purpose of firms, which is primarily the provision of specific products or services, and only secondarily to give people the opportunity to experience particular forms of governance. This entails that anyone joining a firm must share and continue to exhibit a commitment to the provision of the products and services concerned, as well as the professional standards regulating their provision (Hsieh, 2008a, p. 90). Although there may be occasions where these standards are legitimately contestable, if they become subject to frequent dispute the firm as a productive organization will cease to function. There are thus good grounds for insulating professional standards from easy contention and for excluding those who reject or would undermine a firm's core productive goals.

A further reason for constraining workplace voice relates to firms and organizations providing key public goods (Malleon, 2014, pp. 43–44). Society at large has an overriding interest in ensuring that health care, social security, schools, transport services, postal and information networks, as well as policing and civil service functions, etc., are provided in accordance with the aims and level of quality collectively deemed appropriate. Thus employees and workers in firms and organizations delivering those goods ought not to have the right to override the decisions and wishes of the polity as a whole. While such does allow for significant workplace voice as regards the performance of tasks and the conditions of membership, it places strong restrictions on worker control as regards overall organizational policy

in various sectors. This reveals a further ground for constraining democratic control in firms, that is, the institutional pre-eminence of political over workplace democracy. For justice and common good reasons, the democratic polity possesses the right to impose restrictions on enterprise conduct in terms of general workplace regulations and worker protections. No democratic firm can disregard safety legislation, engage in discriminatory hiring practices, flaunt minimum wage requirements, and so forth. Likewise, and as with authoritarian workplaces, the polity can legitimately intervene where a democratically organized firm disregards the interests of citizens, consumers, and other groups within and beyond the polity's borders. These considerations together set important parameters on the scope of worker control as regards the performance of work tasks, workplace conditions, and general enterprise policy.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

The just organization of work is arguably one of the prime questions of critical social theory. If "one agrees that work is central to individual experience and social life," then, as Deranty (2015, p. 119) suggests, "this makes the problem of the organization of work one of the important problems of emancipatory politics, if not the most important problem." We have argued that from the recognition viewpoint the way to emancipation lies precisely in democratizing work. Our fundamental desire for respect and esteem, as well as social freedom, gives solid normative reasons for re-evaluating decision-making practices within work organizations in line with democratic ideals. However, the cognitive case for worker control also acknowledges necessary and desirable qualifications on such control. Nonetheless, the practical implications remain undoubtedly radical in comparison with the authoritarian mode of organizing work dominant within existing capitalism, but we hope to have shown that democracy at work is not unrealistic but rather represents a "real utopia" that can be taken as a goal for labor movements and for egalitarian political projects.<sup>19</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> These include Dejours, Deranty, Renault, and Smith (2018), Deranty (2009), Jütten (2017), Smith (2009; 2012a), and Smith and Deranty (2012).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Honneth (2014; 2017, Chapter 4), Hirvonen (2016), Hirvonen and Laitinen (2016), and Thompson (2006) for discussions on recognition and democracy. Work and recognition are discussed in detail, for example, in Smith (2009) and Smith and Deranty (2012).

<sup>3</sup> Recent arguments for democracy at work include, amongst others, Breen (2015; 2017), Ferreras (2017), González-Rico (2014a; 2014b), Landemore and Ferreras (2016), Néron (2015), and Yeoman (2014).

<sup>4</sup> On work's contemporary significance, see, for example, Jütten (2017, p. 264) and Dejours, Deranty, Renault, and Smith (2018, pp. 1–20). For a fairly exhaustive characterization of the ways in which work matters in everyday life, see Veltman (2016, pp. 4–10).

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, Hegel, and Marx represent the key thinkers in a tradition that emphasizes human nature as essentially active (Gomberg, 2007, p. 45). Of course, as Veltman (2016, pp. 61–70) makes clear, we can find similarly transformative visions of work in other philosophical and religious traditions. Hegel also famously developed the idea of recognition, and thus it should be no surprise that these two ideas fit within the same system of thought.

<sup>6</sup> It is common to distinguish these two attitudes (see, e.g., Darwall, 1977). However, many also identify a third form of recognition that can be described as "love" or "care." Here we bracket love from our considerations as it is often taken to be a private attitude that "cannot be extended at will, beyond the social circle of primary relationships" (Honneth, 1995, p. 107) and, thus, is not easily (or desirably) politicizable.

<sup>7</sup> The claim that the market—in contrast to the workplace, which is a distinct institution—represents a sphere of social freedom is, we concede, a controversial claim (see Herzog, 2013, pp. 54–55; Jütten, 2015, pp. 198–199) and one about which Honneth himself is sometimes ambivalent (Honneth, 2014, pp. 177, 249).

<sup>8</sup> See Honneth (2003, p. 140), Jütten (2017, p. 265), and Smith (2009, p. 55). Again, viewing the market as governed by the achievement principle is controversial. However, there is evidence suggesting that this is how people do view the market when they judge it to be functioning properly, as discussed by Miller (1992).

<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed analysis of recognition dynamics, see Ikäheimo (2014).



- <sup>10</sup> See Kornhauser (1965). For gripping confirmation of the deleterious psychological consequences of such jobs, see Ben Hamper's (1986) account of working within a GM assembly plant. On work and mental ill-health generally, see Tausig and Fenwick (2012), amongst many others, as well as reports from the ILO (2016), the WHO (Harnois & Gabriel, 2002), and the UK government (Stevenson & Farmer, 2017).
- <sup>11</sup> See Kohn and Schooler (1983, p. 297). For discussions of these and related studies, see Lane (1991, pp. 240–259), Schwartz (1982, pp. 637–639), and Veltman (2016, pp. 50–61).
- <sup>12</sup> On authority and command relationships as the main features distinguishing firms from markets, see, among many others, Coase (1937), Bowles and Gintis (1993a), and Dow (2003, pp. 92–101). While these authority relationships are typically justified on account of their being necessary for sustained cooperation over time and the economic benefits ensuing from such, our concern, with others (Herzog, 2018, pp. 62–69), is with the organization and normative character of these relationships, which are variable and can take disrespectful or respectful forms.
- <sup>13</sup> As suggested by two anonymous reviewers, we should note that there is always a social element to what counts as an “objective” feature of work. Professional standards and various ways of relating to objective external realities are socially constructed and this construction does not happen only within a single workplace or a firm, since there are broader institutions that also shape workplaces. Although this broader social construction does place limits on what can be effected through workplace democracy (see the discussion in section 5), we do not see it as contrary to workplace democracy.
- <sup>14</sup> Universities provide a fitting example here. The work and achievements of teaching and research staff are often subjected to evaluation through national or institution-wide standards, which can be efficient but are externally given, not easily transferrable from one subject to another, and not necessarily reflective of what staff themselves would count as success in their field. Therefore, even though the standards may be useful for ranking, they can be arbitrary and unfair at the same time.
- <sup>15</sup> The relevance of arbitrariness is well pointed out by Jütten (2017, p. 265).
- <sup>16</sup> On employee exit costs, see especially Hsieh (2005, pp. 128–132; 2008a, pp. 89–90), but also Breen (2015, p. 478), Dahl (1985, pp. 114–115), and Gourevitch (2013, p. 608; 2016, pp. 23–24). Note that many of these costs (loss of intra-firm social capital and knowledge, difficulty in securing alternative employment in one's community, effort expended in transitioning to new jobs, etc.) would not be averted by even quite extensive welfare and other social justice provisions.
- <sup>17</sup> On cooperatives, see, for example, Dow (2003, pp. 45–76). On codetermination, see Addison (2009), Dow (2003, pp. 83–91), and Müller-Jentsch (1995). For a novel argument advocating workplace democratization through “economic bicameralism,” see Ferreras (2017).
- <sup>18</sup> It might be objected that external voice mechanisms, such as unions, have historically been the means through which workers have fought for recognition and that this renders internal worker voice superfluous. However, this objection neglects the misrecognition occasioned by the internal functioning of authoritarian firms, which can only be countered by their reorganization.
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