Is Hybrid Working the way for participatory democracy in organising?

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In this essay, I reflect on hybrid working as an opportunity for participatory democracy in organising. While ongoing discussions on this new way of working focus on different aspects such as the workplace, work model, and even the benefits for individuals' careers and organisations' financial performance, I turn my lens to the ordinary and elaborate on how work is the basis of organising, aiming to explore a participatory democracy perspective around hybrid working. In dialogue with the Circle of Bakhtin and the Ergology, we introduce three points for further consideration. First, arrangements required for hybrid working to work necessitate dialogue and interaction. Second, we focus on meaning making as a political act to navigate the paradoxes permeating hybrid working. Finally, we propose a participatory democracy in organising for hybrid working emerging from ordinary acts in the activity of work.

1. Opening thoughts

From the very first time I read Stanley Deetz's texts on participatory democracy in organisations (Deetz, 1992, 1999), I became fascinated with the topic. It led me to my PhD research on coworking. At the time, I was sure that if there were a place where I could see the materialisation of a democratic workplace, it would be in a coworking space. Yet, research (others and mine) shows that coworking hosts some contradictions. For instance, while it's expected that a bunch of strangers would need a democratic approach to cohabit. Yet, with the focus of sharing the *place* but not the *space*, coworkers' form of cohabitation often relies on working alone together (Spinuzzi, 2012). Coworking is, as many, a polyphonic notion, and different 'waves' of meaning fight for the spotlight (Gandini & Cossu, 2021).

Despite such detour, I kept my interest in the topic, though. I had (and still have) a hunch on the link between working, learning, and living together. There must be a connection between these three actions, and somehow, they are one when we act. That is what I speculate, and it is why I wonder if a view foregrounding power relations is the way to think about democracies, especially workplace democracy. I did, and still do, recognise the relevance of approaching and questioning power in all sorts of organisations (Clegg, 1989; Spicer et al., 2009).

Nevertheless, on my journey, I became a **Bakhtinian** reader (and enthusiast). In addition, I encountered an approach called **Ergology**. Both views struck me with the beauty of the ordinary. Both perspectives turned my attention to the minor, daily transgressions, full of creativity and source of knowledge sharing and learning

processes. Finally, both perspectives attempt a more subtle form of observing the emergence of organising, one that inspires us to unveil everyday doings.

When the pandemic hit us and several discussions around hybrid working emerged, I felt like: 'wow, now, we'll have the opportunity to explore more democratic ways of organising'. Would we take it? Would we dare it? I kept my eye on the evolving discussions, and sooner, the conversations turned into a duel. Employees' desires against managers' needs; managers' desires versus employees' needs (Gratton, 2020; Trevor & Holweg, 2023). Since we are still in tension and still discovering the phenomenon, I asked myself:

(1) Can we think of Deetz's ideas on democratic organising from perspectives where power is not at the centre?

(2) How do these perspectives help us to understand hybrid working as a democratic way of organising?

However, before we move forward, I can imagine one might be pondering: why is participatory democratic organising a topic worth to be discussed? Also, how is it related to hybrid working? Well, if it is there, I understand the scepticism. Democracy in societies is failing to deliver equality and better life conditions to citizens worldwide. So, why would it be different in the organisational context? At the core of responses to these questions is our personal remark: how have *I* intended to participate on democratic processes?

While we all reflect upon our role on democratic processes, beyond the vote, of course, let's explore some of the existing ideas. For instance, Kerr (2004, p. 94) claims that "the role of democratic process is to enhance the competitiveness and performance of the organization". However, I ponder: how does this sort of marketisation of democratic processes contribute to our ways of making sense of collective efforts in the workspace? Adobor (2020), on the other hand, argues that democracy in organisations refers to employees' participation in the decision-making, an opportunity for them to speak up and have a say in the organisation's strategy. Yet, I wonder: is participatory democracy a matter of *having* a voice in organising? Or is it a matter of *finding* a voice within other voices?

In this essay, we will present some initial thoughts on finding answers to such questions. We want to explore a more grounded perspective on how work contributes to our sense-making around participatory democracy in the workspace, especially because the core interest is on

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organising hybrid working. We argue for such perspective because new ways of working, such as coworking or hybrid work, "emerge as responses to cultural tendencies of individualization, while recursively and creatively created, in never ending processes of development" (Aroles et al., 2021). This essay is our first effort to flip the coin, and focus on bringing work back in (Barley & Kunda, 2001). The first step towards our goal on theorising participatory democracy in organising hybrid work. Our pitch on approaching work from an ownership perspective instead of an empowerment one.

We'll start by briefly explaining what we mean by participatory democratic organising, and then address the first question by introducing core discussions on the ethical act (Bakhtin, 1999) and the ergological view on the activity of work (Schwartz, 2020). We'll conclude with primary, and provisory, considerations on participatory democracy in hybrid working.

2. What do we mean by participatory democracy in organising?

Direct to the point, by a participatory democracy in organising, we mean a deep dive in to understand the micro dimensions of work. The focus is on interactions at work as the core on organising. Let's jump in.

Starting point: A critical approach to communication in organisations

In a 2011 text available in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Management Studies*, Stanley Deetz and John McClellan shared their take on the available approaches to communication in the context of organisations. Back in the day, I got in touch with these ideas once they were translated into Portuguese, surprisingly, in a similar timeline to the original publication (Deetz, 2010). I want to highlight this because I come from the [defined] South of the world, and it's prudent to remind the readers that the time-space in academic [and others] traditions are diverse compared with the [defined] North (Alcadipani et al., 2012).

In the mentioned chapter, Deetz and McClellan present a matrix and a detailed outline of the four dominant perspectives to understand how communication and organisations come together: strategic communication, cultural management, liberal democracy, and participatory democracy (Deetz & McClellan, 2011). The latter got my attention instantly, and it will be the one we'll recollect *here and now*. For the others, I firmly recommend paying a visit to the chapter. In terms of context, it is important to prompt that as the book title

suggests, the text written by Deetz and McClellan (2011, p.440) focuses on topics dear to critical management scholars, such as "the emancipation of marginalised interests". The core ideas of an organisational communication approach emerging through a participatory democracy, the authors say, evolve around *power, domination, and resistance* (Deetz & McClellan, 2011, p.441). These are complex and intriguing notions. Yet, they were not the ones that made me fall in love with the text.

What really caught my attention while navigating the chapter was the underling of meaning making as a political act. Deetz and McClellan (2011, p. 441) explain: "Here [from a participatory democracy point of view], communication is not only a part of organizational life but is the inherently political and power-laden foundation by which all understandings of organizational life emerge". The more times I've read the quote, the more I thought: There is a door open for us to move beyond the triad power, dominance, and resistance. This is because their approach highlights the beauty of the ordinary and its role on grounding organisational life. Moreover, Deetz and McClellan (2011) argue for a political foundation to the emergence of organisations through communication. In my [incomplete] point of view, there is a call for a dialogical and intertwined approach. Let's explore it further.

3. Can we think of Deetz's ideas on democratic organising from perspectives where power is not at the centre?

To provide an answer to this question, we propose a dialogue between Bakhtin's notion of act and Ergology's approach to work as a human activity. Finally, we'll [provisory] articulate the ideas, which will help us on our next steps.

A dialogical understanding of a political act in organisations

When Deetz and McClellan (2011) present the idea of meaning making as a political act, I directly interpret the elucidation from the Bakhtinian philosophy lens (Bakhtin, 1999). Bakhtin is well-known for his approach to Dostoevsky's work, and the views around dialogism, carnival, and heteroglossia, among others. Still, the fascinating and foundational in Bakhtin's work emerges with the notion of ethical act.

Bakhtin identified himself as "a philosopher, more than a philologue. I'm a philosopher. I'm a thinker", he explained to Viktor Duvakin, on 22 February 1973 (Bakhtin, 2012, p. 42)[4]. This is important because even if nowadays Bakhtin remains centrally renowned for his contributions to

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4 I'm referring the translation in Portuguese, which was prepared from the Italian version.

studies on literature and the use of language in daily life, there is a philosophical warp and weft in his conceptual sewing, which is often not given enough credit. The ideas that the 'late' Bakhtin developed are linked to a dialogical philosophy, advanced by the 'young' Bakhtin in association to his comrades from the 'Circle of Bakhtin'.

In the philosophy of otherness, Bakhtin and colleagues argue for a radical responsibility around the act (*postupok*). In their view, act means a doing permeated by ideologies (Ponzio, 2012). At this point, it is important to clarify that "by ideology, we [the Circle] understand the entire set of reflections and interpretations of the social and natural reality that take place in the human brain, fixed through words, drawings, schemes, or other symbolic forms (signs)" (Volochinov, 2013, p. 138). Under the risk of losing some of the text's nuances through the translation from Russian to Portuguese to English, and assuming my ethical act on it, we will explore these ideas further.

Bakhtin (1999) argues that every act conjures the imbrication of two axes: the axis of the world and the axis of life. The axis of the world conveys the culture, what is built and sustained collectively, the dimension of the official ideology. When we act, our act emerges from the existing ideas, values, and perspectives expressed through different signs, such as words, draws, objects, and so on. Our act emerges as a form of reproducibility, featuring homogeneity and centripetal forces around the signs. We take a special responsibility on putting those signs forward because, invariably, we are part of a collective, and we can exist as an individual because we learn and reflect (move forward) with the signs already elected to constituting the collective (Volochínov, 2013).

However, the Bakhtinian (1999) approach to the act do not merely acknowledge the reproduction and the homogenous. The axis of life highlights how we destabilise things through our act. We exist as individuals because we are embedded in a collective, in a cultural ensemble. Yet, we move through the world of the culture in our own terms, reassembling the existing signs in unique, situated, and unreproducible ways. By considering the act an encounter, an in-between the two worlds, Bakhtin shows that we are inevitably part of both, and are also morally responsible for them. This is why ideology, the Circle authors argue, is about refracting or interpreting, and not only reflecting. Ideology is not only the official and broadly established but it emerges and unfolds from/in the daily life. The heterogeneous and centrifugal can only arise from the ordinary because the decision of how to refract (or interpret) the signs is ours; it's situated and defined on the confines of the *here and now* (Bakhtin, 2021; Volochínov, 2013).

The richness of Bakhtin's Circle understanding of the act comes from the postulation that beyond the morality defining the good or the bad, there's a morality of moving forward while staying put, a morality of the otherness. Acting is dialogical because there's no *I* without a *we*. The *I* can exist because interdependent, intersubjective with the *we*. It is a beautiful [and concrete] understanding of how we act in the everyday life. We are not merely reproducing signs that glue collectives together; we are part of the forces destabilising routes and creating new paths.

In that sense, a Bakhtinian perspective (re)invite us to turn the spotlight to **the act**. This is why the notion of activity of work as approached by ergologues (or scholars devoted to Ergology) becomes widely relevant to our discussion in this essay. In the following, we will dive in and navigate the context involving such notion and show how both perspectives help us to consider hybrid working in the context of democratic organising.

A perspective on the human activity of work

Ergology emerged in the 1980's in France as an interdisciplinary *démarche* to understand the world of work. "The university was poor in its culture, poor in comparison to everything that was happening in the world of work" (Schwartz & Mencacci, 2009, p. 13). Through their approaches, ergologues aim to connect the knowledge emerging from theorising to the knowledge engaged in field, where workers find themselves taking decisions at every single moment. More than that, Ergology's ambition is to break the hierarchy between academic and mundane knowledge; break with the hierarchy between those who are to think about work and those who are to perform the work (Schwartz, 2020). As one might notice, ergology dialogues directly with Scientific Management and its principles, which are spread around and softly explored over time by growing approaches to efficiency, productivity, and other forms of quantifying work(ers). Ergologues are guided by such ambitions and have been creating different forms to not only understand work but, *with* workers and *as* workers, transform it.

One of the dearest constructs to ergologues is the one of activity. It arises from the intersection of three core perspectives. First, Alain Wisner's emphasis on the gap between the prescribed work and the real work. While working in a Renault factory, Wisner learned that "there is an enormous distance between what workers are supposed to do and what they actually do" (Wisner, 2008, p. 12). Although we still live in a world supposing that every human act can be detained on rules (and code), and still focus on the layer that can be detailed and

transformed into signs to a reproduction, in the 1960's Wisner already proved us wrong.

Second, Ivar Oddone's approach at Fiat, through an enlarged scientific community, inspired a concrete strategy to bring workers' experience closer to the academic realm. Instead of enforcing the norms and the step by step of working methods, Oddone's team focused on understanding the live heritage embedded in the activity of work. Third, George Canguilhem influenced extensively ergology's understanding of work as a human activity evolving through debates of norms, emphasising *the* rapport between the *human* and the *milieu* (Schwartz, 2020).

The notion of activity, in ergological terms, unveils the interdependence between the collective and the individual, the *milieu* and the *corps-soi[5]*. According to (Canguilhem, 1952), the milieu is the perceived world, emerging from the limitations on *where (here) and when (now)* we act. It is the stage for the actual human experience. The worker is an enigmatic actor, a *corps-soi*, not constrained by its biology or cultural norms, but constantly debating norms to overcome the imposing limitations *here* and *now*. The workers own the milieu, instead of disappearing within it. This is because as humans, we want to be the masters of our norms. As Canguilhem (1947) more elegantly conveys: "*Tout homme veut être sujet de ses norms*" - *Every person[6] wants to be subject to their norms*. We want to assume ownership of our choices. Otherwise, we feel trapped, in a sort of prison that drains our energy (and health). In that sense, ergologues introduce a framework to approach the activity of work articulating three poles: the pole of norms (desadherence[7]), the pole of the situated (adherence), and the pole of debate (values).

At this point, I believe I have provided enough clues on the essentials of both perspectives, so that we can move to core elements of the dialogue intended in this essay: time and space.

Time-space, the act in the activity of work

So far, we have discussed the notion of ethical act (Bakhtin, 1999; Volochinov, 2013) and human activity of work (Schwartz, 2020). I'm aware of the direct and compact summary I have provided (although one may say it was also excessive). Still, I assume I could make both

notions understandable enough [for now] so that we can appreciate hybrid working as a door towards democratic organising. In that sense, what seems interesting in both approaches is the eternal movement towards different routes depending: a) on how we act and b) on what norms are more evident *here and now*. Although we have already mentioned the temporal and spatial boundaries of the act in activity several times, we waited to this point to explicitly articulate them within the frame we are putting forward.

From Bakhtin, we learned that the ethical act emerges from a philosophy of otherness, where we not only reproduce the existing in the world of culture, but we refract it considering the situated events. From ergology, we learned that the activity of work emerges from debates of norms, which take a form of a choice, and renormalise the milieu. In both cases, the interplay time - space is processual and rhizomatic (not like in Deleuze's terms, of course). Bakhtin and ergologues aim to break with the idea of hierarchies and put the actor on the spotlight. They also recognise the unicity of lived experiences and the impossibility of demarking clear points of start and end of an act or an activity, as they belong to the *other* as much as to the *I*, and the *I,* although unique, only exists on the capacity of existing with others, within a milieu.

A very ordinary example helps us to clarify. We usually have our alarms set up to a specific time, depending on the occasion it will serve. Let's say, you established you must wake up at 7:00 to catch the train at 8:00. You go to bed at 23:30, assuming you will have a restorative night of sleep. However, the opposite happens, and you constantly wake up, concerned with several things, maybe even unrelated to the norm (time to wake and catch the train) you had set up before going to bed. At 7:00 the alarm rings, and you have a decision to take. You can turn it off and get up; you can snooze it for 5 minutes; you can turn it off and stay in bed. Perhaps, many other options are available. The point is: although there is a norm, expressed through the alarm (sign), it's at the here and now (in the example, 7:00), that the *actual* act will take place. It will depend on a debate *where* other norms are considered, weighed, and settled. With Bakhtin and ergologues, we witness a view of time that is both processual and chronological, we witness a view of space that is perceptual and physical. Both perspectives assign some idea of continuity while highlighting the inseparability of time and space as constitutive of our act in activity.

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[5] I deliberately kept the term corps-soi (from the French) to avoid overlapping and misunderstanding on the understanding invested by ergologues to involve the worker in discussions around the activity of work. In his text Pourquoi le concept de corps-soi? Corps-soi, activité, expérience, Yves Schwartz (2011, p. 151) explains his choice of using this term: "It is to avoid engaging this e(ort of recentring [or the e(orts invested by workers to reorganise the milieu surrounding them] in too coded issues of the 'subject' and 'subjectivity,' an issue that could neutralize this dimension of a pursuit of life within us, that we have preferred this intentionally obscure term of 'soi'".

[6] Adapted to neutral gender in the translation.

[7] Instead of translating the term desadherence, I prefer keeping it on its original form.

Summing up...

Through the act, one not only reproduces the world of the culture, the source of norms, the dominant ideology, but interprets it, refracts it. The act in activity is centripetal because sustained on existing signs but it's simultaneously centrifugal due to the arrangement of signs in different ways. New norms emerge, and the act is always open to renovated debates. The act becomes a concrete event through the continuous debates of norms in a situated activity. The view of the ethical act in activity has at its core the interdependence of time and space on setting up the milieu. We foresee events and create norms aiming to frame the spatial-temporal features of a situation. This act, although in adherence, refracts norms in desadherence. We need concepts to exist together; we will reflect standard points because we belong to a normative world. However, we are not confined to it because we can always arrange the tiny things differently and transform the milieu where and when we exist.

Hopefully, the points addressed are sufficiently explained to guide our return to Deetz and McClellan's (2011) participatory democracy perspective. We argue that such perspective of the interactional process in organising can be read from an approach to work as an ethical act emerging from debates of norms. Moreover, understanding hybrid working from such a lens leads to asking different questions and unveiling the complexity involved with this flexible way of working. Let's move on.

4. How do these perspectives help us to understand hybrid working as a democratic way of organising?

We are still looking for a proper definition for hybrid working, one that highlights the complexity involved in this way of working characterised by instability and uncertainty (Haubrich et al., 2023). Although getting to this point still requires strong evidence from concrete data, we can already elaborate on how dealing with uncertainty requires different forms of dialogue. This is why we believe the views on participatory democracy interpreted in the light of the act in activity of work can provide some insights on how dialogues are needed. We identify at least three points for further consideration.

First, if it is not through relations of power, domination, and resistance, how?

If we consider organisations as bureaucratic structures embedded in a neoliberal system, we may approach hybrid working as an individualistic way of organising work. It is about the organisation allowing and empowering employees to choose how they prefer to work. What can we do if our work and relations evolve

mainly through digital channels, thus we can decide all by ourselves while others cannot? We can easily fall into the trap of feeling powerful or harmed depending on which side of the story we are. Moreover, we can fall into the trap of believing we do not need other to perform our work.

If we shift the interest and focus on work, we realise work is a collective effort, and consider the fabric we build together, contributing with one another. We cannot work alone; instead, we depend on others *to* whom we can respond and *with* whom we can share knowledge and learn. When organising for hybrid working, these interactional processes come to light. Finding a fair common ground encourages us to look for others because we need them and because they need us. Acknowledging the importance of our work puts us in a different position, from appraisal to searching for solutions. The arrangements required for hybrid working to work necessitate dialogue and interaction, not to highlight hierarchies but to clarify existing norms and review them, aiming for more democratic solutions where people can find their voices with others. Clarity and connection in the micro context of work host the potential to transform our experience of work, as we own our work, instead of being empowered by the organisation to be part of the organisation.

Second, meaning making as a political act is at the centre

Interactions are at the core of organising for hybrid working, and each act participates in it. Hybrid working materialises from the intersection between what we know and the situations we face. For example, as flexible schedules within teams get more common, it is prerogative for the emergence of processes to a) establish the terms of flexibility and b) let others know how we are doing it. If we can change plans hours before our agreed working schedule, how should we proceed? Hybrid working puts such decision-making processes in the spotlight because they might cause disruptions in the events that constitute work.

Paradoxes also permeate hybrid working. For instance, our choices on how to proceed with our tasks (e.g., individually or with others), where (e.g., from different locations along the week/day, using various apps) and when working (e.g., during the night), might make what we do more visible because we had shared with others, increasing the interactions among colleagues. These choices can also make one less accessible and isolated. In several cases, the "out of the sight, out of the mind" remains a stronger value to organising working practices. As it does in scientific management and its modern forms, handling and assessing these different decisions

can rely on managers, who have the power to lead the unfolding events. Alternatively, and this is at the core of our argument, it can depend on the group in a participatory way, where the members sit together to decide how they will proceed, collaborating on a concrete contract that supports their way of working. Hybrid working opens the opportunity for such collaborative discussions and democratic decision-making.

Third, organising for hybrid working emerges from ordinary acts in the activity of work

Finally, with Deetz and McClellan we learn about the possibility of participatory democracy in organising, while with Bakhtin, we understand the act and with Ergology, we comprehend the activity. In the dialogue, we understand the organising processes emerging from ordinary acts in the activity of work and becoming norms and directives relatively stable. Instead of approaching the organisation as an entity that enforces itself upon or against us, we assume we are part of what constitutes it. The organisation is not a fixed unit where we walk in, through and out. Rather, it reflects a world we belong to through how we refract it in our act. We are all builders of such organising. In that sense, hybrid working can emerge as participatory democratic organising because we acknowledge the act of every actor and how their activity connects to others. A whole new set of norms must emerge to guarantee coordination in a path towards a shared goal.

5. [Provisory] Concluding thoughts

The ideas shared in this essay are yet to be advanced, refined and better imbricated. It is a starting point, indeed. Our act will potentially open new avenues as we interact with the milieu, where editors, readers, and commentators participate in the evolving discussion. We aim to contribute to the literature that focuses on work as the foundational process of organising (Barley & Kunda, 2001). The notion of act in activity introduces an ontology based on the micro dimension of work, one of the choices and the tension of values that mobilise our decision. It depends on a never-ending and dialogical movement between norms we learn from the world and the *here and now*, the situation that requires updates to the norm. The authorship and ownership are evident because the spotlight is on the micro debates we invest in with the different existing norms. The approach we build on the essay invites each of us to consider how what we do evolves mainly around the interactions we constitute with the milieu, with the other.

New ways of working pose adversities and opportunities for studies on democratic organising mainly due to their recursive and creative nature (Aroles et al., 2021). Workers want to break free of bureaucratic structures that seem to imprison their activity by focusing on controlling and fitting the act into digital exhaust (Leonardi, 2021). And in that sense, the irony resides in the extension to which digital devices are the infrastructure for the emergence of new ways of working. Still, a participatory democracy approach to organising for hybrid working highlights the interdependence between us and the milieu. Moreover, it highlights meaning making as a political act, thus anchored on the *situated events*. The imbrication between the axes of culture and life can unfold in different platforms and lead to increased conflicts if we don't come together to set the ground, if we don't focus on the different actors with whom we interact through the micro dynamics of work.

Our goal with this essay is to inspire conversations around what we need for hybrid working to work, remembering that work is a collective effort. The new sets of norms necessary for it are still to be established, and we have the opportunity to learn how to proceed with democratic processes, fostering the participation of all, as what we do is interdependent in a chain of connected acts. Our activities are imbricated, and how we depend on each other can be a stressor to improve how we learn and live together. We don't build norms to limit our act. Instead, the norms we create together may foster our creativity and transform the results of our work. We invest most of our lives in work, doing something that will be delivered to others, often forgetting it also processually defines our worldviews and the values that constitute our act. Hybrid working can be a social game changer because it hosts novel processes yet to be created. What type of profits should we focus on? What does matter for a fairer social world? How do we participate in it? The smallest of the decisions open doors to new routes or new walks. Which ones will we take?

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