

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Workplace democracy: The argument from the worker–society relation

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Numerous arguments have been offered for workplace democracy, that is, the idea that employees should have an equal say in governing the firm. Lately, relational arguments, particularly of a republican and relational egalitarian kind, have become prominent. These claim that workers should have a say in how their firm is governed in order to avoid objectionable, for example, dominating or subordinating, relationships within the workplace. While I find these views appealing, I also believe that they are incomplete. By focusing on the moral quality of workers' interpersonal relations within the firm, that is, to bosses and other workers, they ignore the moral quality of workers' relations outside the firm, that is, to the rest of society. Yet, this latter is of no less significance for the justification of workplace democracy. In this article, I argue that part of the reason why workplace democracy should be adopted is that it allows workers to exert appropriate control over the operations of the firm, thus maintaining a grip on the general character of the relation between themselves as workers of the firm and the rest of society. This argument from the *worker–society relation* is not intended to refute or replace republican and relational egalitarian arguments, but rather to draw attention to a hitherto neglected aspect of the relational value of workplace democracy which the aforementioned approaches usually do not incorporate. In this way, the present argument strengthens the overall relational case for workplace democracy.

The structure of the article is as follows. First, I introduce the concept of and arguments for workplace democracy, focusing on the most prominent relational arguments, that is, republican

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and relational egalitarian ones. Second, I introduce the concept of the worker–society relation and discuss its moral significance. Third, I present my argument for workplace democracy based on the worker–society relation. Fourth, I discuss the relationship between the argument from the worker–society relation and republican and relational egalitarian arguments for workplace democracy to show how the former differs from and complements these approaches. The last section concludes.

2 | EQUALITY AND DOMINATION IN THE WORKPLACE

Workplace democracy is an arrangement in which all employees of a firm have an equal say in how it is governed, much like in a democratic state where all citizens have an equal say in how the state is governed, except for certain specific groups, such as minors. This broad definition can be further specified in a number of ways. There are many models and institutional designs for workplace democracy but for the purposes of this discussion, I will remain neutral as to which of these is best to implement. I will not discuss whether under workplace democracy employees must exercise their democratic say directly or indirectly through representatives, whether the establishment of workers' councils is required, or whether employee's share in board representation would suffice as well, and so on. While these matters certainly have both practical and theoretical significance, they are not directly relevant to the following argument which is focused on the question of the justification of workplace democracy as such, in whatever way it is implemented.

Arguments for workplace democracy are numerous and varied (Frega et al., 2019). Examples include the arguments from the state-firm analogy (Dahl, 1985; Ferreras & Landemore, 2016; González-Ricoy, 2014a; McMahan, 1994), meaningful work (Yeoman, 2014), recognition (Hirvonen & Breen, 2020), and self-realization (Gould, 2004). In recent years, however, *relational arguments*, based primarily on the republican ideal of freedom as nondomination and theories of relational equality, have gained prominence (Anderson, 2017; Breen, 2015; González-Ricoy, 2014b; Gourevitch, 2013). These arguments begin with the observation that today's workplace is saturated by unequal power relations, particularly between workers and bosses. By “workers” I mean those who have no power to make managerial decisions, to order other employees to perform tasks, to hire and fire employees, and the like. By “bosses,” on the other hand, I mean those who do have such powers. Of course, it would be overly simplistic to say that everyone in all workplaces can be neatly sorted into these two categories. For example, middle management often has limited autonomy to make managerial decisions, and some workplaces may be organized in a less hierarchical manner. Still, relying on this simplification will greatly contribute to the clarity and conciseness of the following discussion and it is fairly straightforward how the argument may be modified to accommodate these complexities.

Considerations about power inequality in the workplace lead many republicans and relational egalitarians to the view that the relationship between workers and bosses today is usually characterized by relational inequality if not outright domination (Berkey, 2023). For example, Elizabeth Anderson (2017) describes contemporary firms, particularly in the United States, as miniature dictatorships with an all-powerful cadre of bosses ruling over the worker body. Of course, it is rarely the case that bosses have unlimited arbitrary power over employees in a literal sense, that is, in the sense a master has unlimited arbitrary power over a slave or a dictator over the subjects. Still, there is a clear sense in which the labor contract establishes a command hierarchy between the worker and the boss, in which one party has the ability to deprive the

other from what may be her only source of income. Such power relations easily engender relational inequality (Néron, 2015). It is true that whether this inequality further develops into domination, greatly depends on context and background conditions (cf. O'Shea, 2019). Still, one may very well argue that at least the *threat* of domination produced by workplace hierarchies, which pervades contemporary workplaces, should be a salient concern for advocates of non-domination and relational equality. Republican and relational egalitarian advocates of workplace democracy argue that the only way to rectify this inequality is to ensure that workers and bosses share equal power to govern the firm. This would subject workers and bosses under one another's mutual control, thereby precluding the emergence of domination or relational inequality in the workplace.¹

This argument, of course, can be challenged in various ways (Jacob & Neuhäuser, 2018; Kolodny, 2023, 145 ff; Taylor, 2019). One may argue that the threat of domination can be sufficiently mitigated without workplace democracy, for example, by workers' consent and adequate exit options (see Arenson, 1993; cf. Taylor, 2017), by strong state regulations, which, it is worth noting, workers do democratically control as voters (Jacob & Neuhäuser, 2018, p. 932), or by strong internal rules and contestatory channels, that is, *workplace constitutionalism* (Hsieh, 2005). Although the debate on the republican and relational egalitarian case for workplace democracy is certainly still ongoing, in my view, republicans and relational egalitarians have been able to provide promising responses to these criticisms (e.g., González-Ricoy, 2019). But even if republican and relational egalitarian views prove defensible, I would argue that they still remain incomplete.

Republican and relational egalitarian advocates of workplace democracy primarily focus on *intra-firm* relations, such as the worker–boss relation. They argue that it is the morally defective properties of these relations, for example, relational inequality and domination that make workplace democracy necessary. This is not to say that the unequal and dominating relationship between bosses and workers is confined to the workplace. Think about running into your boss in the coffee shop. Even though you are outside the workplace, the fact that this person has the power to fire you or assign you menial tasks during the workday is bound to affect your interactions. Still, the source of this effect is an intra-firm power inequality between a worker and a boss within a single workplace.

What this approach ignores are the *extra-firm* relations, such as the relation of workers to the rest of society. As I will show, this relation is centrally important in understanding the value and justification of workplace democracy; workplace democracy is necessary to ensure that not only intra-firm, but also extra-firm relations are in good moral order. This means that even if republican and relational egalitarian arguments for workplace democracy are sound, they do not give us the full picture of what justifies workplace democracy, given their focus on intra-firm relations. Once we consider extra-firm relations, we can identify new and distinct reasons for endorsing workplace democracy. This, of course, does not refute republican or relational egalitarian arguments. Rather, it contributes new relational considerations favoring workplace democracy which are compatible with republican and relational egalitarian ones but have hitherto received little to no attention in the literature. Thus, the following argument ultimately strengthens the overall relational case for workplace democracy.

3 | THE WORKER–SOCIETY RELATION

Firms embed workers into large-scale economic systems of production, consumption, and the circulation of goods and services, and through such systems, they connect workers with other

individuals outside the firm. Consumers use products and services produced and provided by workers. Workers cooperate and compete with employees of other firms, sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly. Direct cooperation or competition may occur, for example, when workers work together with employees of suppliers or subcontractors, or when salespersons compete for the same client. Examples of indirect cases may be workers using materials in production prepared at a far-removed element of the supply chain, or firms, although not particular workers directly, competing with one another for a market segment. Workers are also connected to regulators whose prescriptions they must comply with. Generally, by participating in the operations of the firm, workers enter into a particular kind of relation with the rest of society; I will call this the worker–society relation. Of course, in the case of many firms the relevant “society” extends far beyond the borders of a single state and encompasses the whole of the regional or even global economic system in which the firm operates, as well as all individuals who are affected by the firm’s operations. This should be kept in mind throughout the following discussion, even though, for the sake of simplicity, I will continue to use the term “worker–society relation.” That the term “society” should be understood broadly, potentially encompassing global economic systems, will be clear in many of my examples.

The worker–society relation is a morally significant one for all participants, that is, both to workers and members of society. Consider, first, the moral import of this relation from the point of view of members of society. Take consumers, one group within society, and their relation to workers in sweatshops whose products they buy. Although the debate on the ethics of sweatshop labor and consumer responses to it is ongoing,² for the sake of argument, I will take it for granted that sweatshop labor is exploitative, and consuming sweatshop products is wrong. One of the reasons why it is wrong may be that continuing to purchase the products of sweatshop labor acknowledges the exploitative firm’s standing as a legitimate economic actor, and thereby affronts sweatshop workers’ dignity and exhibits a certain form of disrespect toward them. In other words, the continued consumption of sweatshop products counts as a failure to take proper account of the moral significance of consumers’ *social connection* to unjust global structures of exploitation (Young, 2006).

The harm associated with consuming the products of exploitative sweatshop labor is not simply the agent-neutral harm of producing injustice; it also involves a *relational harm* (Malmqvist & Szigeti, 2021). Consumers do not simply act wrongly from an impersonal point of view in that they perpetuate injustice and exploitation. They also wrong sweatshop workers specifically; by acting in ways that betray insufficient regard for their dignity and wellbeing, they fail to relate to them in a respectful and caring way, indeed, they fail to relate to all other members of society as respectful and caring agents more generally. This relational harm seems to carry considerable moral import. It is part of the reason, for example, why consumers should not simply offset the impersonal harm they cause, for example, by donating to any charity to reduce the amount of injustice and exploitation in the world, but repair their relation to sweatshop workers specifically, for example, by refusing to legitimate their employer’s standing as a respectable business and by striving to improve their conditions specifically, rather than only justice generally.³

The worker–society relation has moral significance not only for consumers, and other members of society, but for workers as well. For example, just as consumers’ social connection to the harms and wrongs of sweatshop labor damages their relation to sweatshop workers, so too if workers partake in their firm’s operations when those operations result in harms and wrongs to members of society, their relation to society is in some significant sense morally damaged. One may find this idea most appealing in cases where workers are directly implicated in the firm’s

wrongdoing. Recently, Stephanie Collins (2023) provided an illuminating discussion on the various ways in which workers may be so implicated. A worker may be a principal or complicitous *enactor* of a specific wrongdoing that the firm commits; a worker may be an *endorser* of wrongdoing, that is, explicitly or implicitly endorse some goals of a firm which foreseeably involve harm and wrongdoing; or they may be *omitters*, that is, ones who fail to take action that could hinder firm's wrongdoing, thereby omitting to act in appropriate ways in response to their firm's wrongdoing (Collins, 2023, p. 135). In these cases, Collins argues, workers are culpably implicated in the firm's wrongdoing.

There are many workers, however, who do not fall under any of these categories; many workers, for example, in large corporations, which engage in wrongdoing may be neither enactors, nor endorsers, nor omitters in this sense. These are workers who "did nothing to contribute to the wrong, or they didn't support the wrong, or they couldn't have done anything to distance themselves from it." (Collins, 2023, p. 134) Collins's example is a cashier in a bank with no clear connection to the bank's objectionable operations, if there are any. We can also think of Kutz's (2000) example of a shipping clerk who works for an arms manufacturer that produces and distributes weapons to be used in unjust conflicts. Such low-level employees, Collins argues, are not morally implicated in the firm's wrongdoing, and are not blameworthy.⁴ However, this does not mean that the firm's wrongdoing is morally indifferent to them. For example, Collins claims, it would still be appropriate for such workers to experience what Bernard Williams (1981) calls *agent-regret*, that is, regret over their blameless involvement in the firm's wrongdoing.

I would argue that part of the reason why even low-level workers' participation in the firm's wrongful operations carries moral import is because it involves a relational harm similar to the one in the sweatshop case. Let me start with Kutz's instructive discussion of the shipping clerk working for the malicious arms manufacturer. The shipping clerk clearly has only negligible impact on what her firm does, her actions are not decisive factors in the production and sale of weapons in unjust conflicts. Still, Kutz argues, her continued intentional participation in the firms' operation has moral significance:

The shipping clerk may well be indifferent to the success of the company's arms business, may even hope for a disastrous loss. But, the shipping clerk intentionally plays his proper role in the company, adhering to procedures and meeting internal schedules. Any employee may disavow responsibility for the company's actions. But such disavowals are betrayed by the employee's own, functionally characterizable, conception of his or her agency.

(Kutz, 2000, p. 162)

Kutz's goal is to establish the shipping clerk's responsibility and blameworthiness for the firm's wrongdoing, something that Collins, as we have seen, denies. I will not take sides on this issue here. Rather, I want to focus on an important point that Kutz makes. He claims that regardless of the subjective attitudes of the shipping clerk toward the firm's wrongdoing, her continued participation in the firm's operations expresses a certain *functionally characterizable conception of agency*. I understand this as the claim that her actions convey a conception of what kind of agent she is, what kind of projects she is willing to participate in, and in what way she is willing to relate to fellow human beings. This conception of her agency is *functionally characterizable*, that is, it depends neither on her own subjective representation of herself nor on her subjective motivations and other attitudes, but rather on the way in which she acts in the world; that is, it is characterizable not by what she thinks, but what she does.

Regardless of her attitudes and commitments, through the practices she engages in, the shipping clerk manifests an objectionable kind of agency; she is a kind of agent who in her day-to-day activities contributes to a collective endeavor that harms others, and this *way of being in the world with others* establishes a certain relation with others, that is, a relation premised on a form disrespect or callousness toward the victims of the firm's activity to which these victims, indeed, anyone else, rightly objects. I do not mean that her continued participation shows that she secretly has disrespectful attitudes toward these victims. She may genuinely detest the fact that she contributes to the firm's harmful operations. What establishes a morally defective relationship between her and the victims is the way in which she functions as an agent within the firm and within society at large, that is, her functionally characterizable conception of agency. For the same reason, I do not think that she necessarily counts as an *endorser* in Collins's sense, that is, someone who commits to some goals of the firm that foreseeably involve wrongdoing. As Collins notes, firms may have many independent goals, and individual workers may only express commitment to some of them. The shipping clerk may commit to nothing more than the efficient handling of paperwork (Collins, 2023, p. 148). Still, similarly to how consumers do not necessarily commit to or endorse exploitative sweatshops' objectionable goals by buying their products, yet their actions may still express disrespect and disregard toward sweatshop workers, the shipping clerk's continued participation in the arms company's operations may still express a functionally characterizable conception of agency that is morally objectionable, and thereby damage her relation to the rest of society.

The moral quality of the worker–society relation is independent not only from workers' subjective attitudes toward their firm's operations, but also from society's attitudes. To say that the worker–society relation is morally defective is not to report on, say, the social standing and public perception of workers or consumers, let alone their subjective stance toward one another. Perhaps the firm's wrongful operations are entirely normalized in society, that is, seen by all, including workers and the victims of the firm's wrongdoing, simply as unpleasant, but unobjectionable or unchangeable “business as usual.” But, the weight people assign to the worker–society relation is not necessarily the weight they should assign to it. Just as consumers should care about their relation to sweatshop workers, even if, as a matter of empirical fact, they do not, the shipping clerk should also care about their relation to those harmed by the arms company's operations, even if, as a matter of empirical fact, she does not. Regardless of what she or others think, the fact that they continue to engage with the firm's harmful operations means that her practical engagement with society—*qua* worker—continues to be predicated upon and guided by indefensible principles of impermissible disrespect or callousness toward others' interests which damages her relation to said others and the rest of society.

The worker–society relation, then, has moral significance to workers whether or not they are blameworthy for their firm's wrongdoing, similarly to how consumers should care about this relation, whether or not they are not blameworthy for the injustice workers experience. Their firm's behavior should matter to workers not only because of their agent-neutral obligation to minimize harm and injustice, but also because the shape and quality of our interpersonal relations are of preeminent moral significance for us even when these relations are mediated by large-scale social structures. Eric Beerbohm explains this in the case of the moral significance of a democratic state's wrongdoing to its citizens:

When the citizen experiences a special reaction to the injustices of her own state, she is concerned about *her* individual relationship to unjust associations and structures. So understood, this attitude cannot be explained by an agent-neutral desire

to reduce the amount of aggregative wrongdoing in the universe. It is not intelligible without special reference to what she does and the special weight that she accords to avoiding wronging others by her actions or omissions.

(Beerbohm, 2012, p. 41)

The state's wrongdoing matters to citizens because their own agency is bound up with said wrongdoing which damages their relation to others who are thus wronged.⁵ Similarly, firms' wrongdoing matters to workers because their agency is bound up in it which damages their relation to society. We all have an interest in not relating to others as sources of their suffering and vulnerability.

Of course, the worker–society relation is often indirect and highly mediated. There are numerous intermediaries between the arms manufacturer and the harm of unjust war, including distributors, logistics companies, regulatory agencies, governments and international institutions, military leaders, and unjust combatants themselves. These mediating factors all affect the severity of the moral damage to the worker–society relation. The shipping clerk's relationship to the victims of unjust conflict is not as defective as it would be, had she herself joined the conflict as an unjust combatant. Yet, as I discussed, our connection to even distant and mediated harms, as, for example, in the case of sweatshop labor or climate change do nonetheless have moral significance for us (cf. Schwenkenbecher, 2014; Zoller, 2015).

In addition, the worker–society relation is often highly complex, making the implications of its moral significance far from clear. Consider, for example, coal miners whose work may inflict considerable environmental damage while making an important economic contribution to their local communities.⁶ To be sure, the worker–society relation has moral significance here, but which relation exactly? Does workers' relation to their local communities, which are kept afloat economically by their work, count for more or less than their relation to distant others who are perhaps most immediately harmed by the environmental damage their work causes? This is a hard question which I cannot hope to resolve in this article. Yet, the fact that this is a hard question indicates the moral significance of the worker–society relation. The way in which workers relate through their work to the rest of society matters morally, even if the question of *how precisely* it matters is an extremely complex one.⁷ These considerations, I believe, suffice to show what the worker–society relation is and why it is morally significant. In the next section, I turn to the argument for workplace democracy based on the worker–society relation.

4 | THE ARGUMENT FROM THE WORKER–SOCIETY RELATION

The moral significance of the worker–society relation provides a strong basis for an argument for workplace democracy. Members of society, understood broadly as encompassing all individuals within the large-scale economic system in which the firm operates, depend on workers' work for the availability of various resources to satisfy their needs and pursue their own projects. Their work may affect what opportunities are open to members of society and what life prospects they have. It is of preeminent moral significance that these relations between workers and society are in good order, morally speaking. Workers have a weighty interest not simply in minimizing the impersonal wrong of injustice in the world, but also in ensuring that they relate to those affected by their work as particular kinds of agents, that is, agents who are not indifferent about the way in which members of society are affected, but rather whose practical

engagement with society is premised on principles of respect and care. To use the terminology introduced in the previous section, workers have a weighty interest in their functionally characterizable conception of agency, *qua* workers, not being based on and not conveying morally defective attitudes in their relation to the rest of society.

This implies that the way in which their firm is governed is of great significance to workers. For it is the way in which the firm is governed that determines the nature and purpose of the collective activity that constitutes the firm's operations to which workers contribute and which ultimately determines workers' functionally characterizable conception of agency, at least *qua* workers. Take, again, Kutz's example of the shipping clerk working for a malicious arms company. The reason why her functionally characterizable conception of agency is morally defective is that the nature and purpose of the collective undertaking in which she participates, that is, the operations of the arms company, is the illicit acquisition of profits by supplying weapons to unjust combatants in bloody conflicts. It is for this reason why her mundane daily activities of going to work, handling paperwork, attending meetings, and so on, make her the kind of agent that, regardless of her subjective attitudes, through her actions expresses disrespect and callous disregard toward the interests of the victims of the firm's operations. Even though as a low-level employee she may not be blameworthy for the firm's wrongdoing, and even though she thinks of the firm's operations as morally reprehensible, by going to work every day and contributing to these operations, her agency conveys a functionally characterizable conception of agency which the rest of society, particularly victims of the arms company's unjust dealings, have reason to view as morally defective. This is what damages her relation to society.

There is little the shipping clerk can do to ameliorate her relationship to society. Since it is stipulated that she is not an ommitter, she cannot meaningfully thwart the firm's wrongful operations. She may quit, if she has adequate exit options, but this may not always be the case. Of course, the lack of adequate exit options may mitigate the problem of the moral defect of the worker–society relation, but it hardly eliminates it. In the case of workers who bear responsibility for the firm's wrongdoing, for example, as enactors, endorsers, or ommitters, the absence of adequate exit options may reduce their blameworthiness or absolve them from blame altogether, and this may impact their relation to society. However, as I argued, blameworthiness is not the central problem here. Even if the shipping clerk, for example, is not blameworthy for the firm's wrongdoing, her contribution to this wrongdoing through her work may still render her relation to society morally defective. In this case, the lack of adequate exit options condemns her to be the kind of agent who, in her daily practices, acts upon indefensible principles, unable to relate to society in morally appropriate ways.

The shipping clerk may protest the firm's activity *outside* work, for example, she may participate in demonstrations or campaigns for the stricter regulation of arms companies. This would certainly impact her *overall* functionally characterizable conception of agency, but it would still leave her functionally characterizable conception of agency *qua* worker morally defective which would still disturb her relation to society. To use a rather extreme example, assuming the wrongness of capital punishment, the hangman who, in his free time, campaigns against the death penalty certainly does better than one who moonlights as an assassin. Yet, the first one certainly does not offset the damage his occupation does to his relation to society; he is not on a par with his fellow campaigners who work as teachers or plumbers, for example.

Suppose now that the shipping clerk does nothing, but the company's management has a change of heart and adopts a new, more socially benevolent business model. Not only do they stop supplying arms to unjust combatants, but also make bona fide efforts to remedy the harm to which they contributed and hold responsible decision-makers to account. The firm may pivot

even more radically and decide to give up arms manufacturing for the sake of something more peaceable. Such changes in how the firm is governed would transform workers' relation to society; now the collective venture in which they participate daily has a wholly new, much more benign character. On the level of the day-to-day work of the shipping clerk, there may be no discernible changes. Her average workday may look much the same as before. Yet her relation to society changes; now she can rest assured that her functionally characterizable conception of agency, *qua* worker, conveys no disrespect toward anyone. The way in which the firm is governed, therefore, is particularly important for workers' functionally characterizable conception of agency, and, consequently, for the worker–society relation.

This consideration about the relevance of the governance of the firm to the moral quality of the worker–society relation is a strong reason for thinking that workers have a claim to control how the firm is governed through institutions of workplace democracy. This claim requires further argument, for, on the face of it, it is susceptible to a number of challenges. First, it is unclear why workers' interests concerning how the firm is governed should ground any claim to control at all. Workers may have an interest in the morally appropriate governance of the firm, but this may be achieved without workers controlling the firm in any way. Adequate regulations and benevolent bosses may be as capable of preventing firms' moral failings as worker control. But even if the necessity of worker control is established, it is unclear why this control should take shape as workplace democracy, rather than, say, some form of *unionism*, whereby workers are able to put pressure on bosses through petitions and strikes, or *workplace constitutionalism*, where managerial decisions are constrained by strict internal rules and workers have opportunities to appeal to an impartial body that can fairly arbitrate their grievances and penalize bosses for bad decisions. Such arrangements may also grant workers some degree of control; why would this not suffice?

One may offer *instrumentalist* arguments for workplace democracy by claiming that it is generally better at preventing firms from behaving badly and keeping the worker–society relation in good moral order. For example, it may be argued that workplace democracy is able to harness the beneficial epistemic effects of deliberation within large and diverse groups, thus ensuring that firms are governed better both from the economic and the moral point of view (Gerlsbeck & Herzog, 2020; Landemore, 2012). Workplace democracy could also contribute to the development of what Lisa Herzog calls “transformational agency” within the workplace; workers as transformational agents do not blindly execute their organizational role, but rather work toward transforming their role and their organization in ways that better align with the requirements of morality (Herzog, 2018, p. 193). This has the beneficial effect that both inefficiencies and the moral failings of the firm are detected and addressed more easily (Herzog, 2018, p. 253), improving the quality of the worker–society relation.

The success of this instrumental argument greatly depends on the particular empirical background conditions against which workplace democracy is implemented. Workers are as capable of making terrible decisions as bosses, and whether they do so depends on their preferences, values, incentives, culture, institutional surroundings, and so on, which vary greatly from context to context. Under the right background conditions, workplace democracy may be a more effective instrument of keeping firms from moral failures, but there is no a priori reason to think that such background conditions will always or even mostly obtain. Still, I would not deny that under the right empirical circumstances, workplace democracy could have important instrumental benefits. However, I believe that the instrumentalist argument fails to fully account for why workplace democracy matters from the point of view of the worker–society relation.

Workplace democracy does not only matter because, and insofar as, it makes firms behave less badly. It matters because of the way in which it transforms the character and moral quality of the relation between workers and members of society. Recall that the harm associated with the moral defect of the worker–society relation is not simply the agent-neutral harm of producing injustice, but also a relational harm. Workers have an interest not only in minimizing injustice in the world, but also in relating to members of society as particular kinds of agents, that is, as caring and respectful agents who do not go about pursuing their projects and personal advantage disregarding the way in which they contribute to harms that befall on others. But they cannot relate to others as such agents without having an equal say in collective decision-making on how the firm is governed, that is, without workplace democracy. For without such a say, they are at the mercy of other agents—or external circumstances—for the moral quality of their relation to society. Even if they can in some way contest managerial decisions, for example, through unionism or workplace constitutionalism, they lack decision-making powers themselves; it is up to benevolent managers or the impartial arbitration body to govern the firm in morally acceptable ways. The moral quality of workers' relation to society is in the hands of others.

Being so dependent for the moral character of our interpersonal relations on others is an extremely precarious position to be in from the moral point of view. The benevolent discretion of strangers should not be the sole determinant of the moral quality of our relation to others. Both because this makes one powerless to prevent the emergence of morally defective interpersonal relations, and also because it makes one incapable of conveying adequate care and respect toward others through one's functionally characterizable conception of agency. As I argued, one's functionally characterizable conception of agency, *qua* worker, depends on the nature of the collective venture she partakes in, *qua* worker, and this, in turn, depends, on how the firm is governed. Even if a firm governed by bosses bestows the right kind of functionally characterizable conception of agency on workers, thereby imposing a morally adequate relation to society, the relation itself remains, in a significant sense, *imposed*. Workers' functionally characterizable conception of agency remains objectionably divorced from their judgment and action and is therefore unable to convey adequate care and respect to society. For care and respect to be adequately conveyed through our functionally characterizable conception of agency, it must be, in a significant sense, *our own making*.⁸

This is achieved only under workplace democracy, and not unionism or workplace constitutionalism. Union members on strike, or workers contesting managerial decisions through the channels of workplace constitutionalism still *appeal* to others to set their relation to society right. In their case, it is still bosses, who eventually surrender to protests and contestation that make it the case that the firm is governed less wrongly. At the end of the day, workers' functionally characterizable conception of agency remains dependent on bosses' discretion. This dependence is resolved only under workplace democracy. Workplace democracy ensures that the worker–society relation is under the direct collective control of workers; the individual worker no longer *appeals* to others to improve their relation to society, but is herself a codecision-maker, a co-governor of the firm, capable of shaping this relation directly through co-governing the firm. Her agency is no longer divorced from the decisions that determine the moral character of her relation to society in the same way as in the absence of workplace democracy. This is a significant moral difference that distinguishes workplace democracy from all other arrangements, for example, unionism or workplace constitutionalism, where workers are not granted genuine decision-making powers over the governance of the firm.⁹

One may object that workers do have direct control over the firm as voters via the democratic state; indeed, perhaps it is the responsibility of the state, rather than workers, to prevent

corporate wrongdoing and ensure a good worker–society relation. However, outside command economies, the state usually regulates firms' economic activity by setting legal constraints and shaping their incentive structures. This leaves firms considerably free to pursue their goals within the boundaries set by the state. *Qua* voters, workers' control over the worker–society relation is not sufficiently direct; they can shape the regulatory environment in which the firm operates, but without workplace democracy, they remain at the mercy of bosses when it comes to the exact shape of the worker–society relation. They can still, at best, appeal to others to establish a good worker–society relation, rather than doing it themselves.

This is not to say that the democratic state and the regulatory environment it creates are irrelevant for having a good worker–society relation. In an ill-regulated economic environment firms may face extreme competitive pressure to stay in business by engaging in wrongdoing which may be hard to resist whether workplaces are democratic or not. This may especially be the case with firms operating in the global market. This means that in their role as voting citizens, workers have strong reasons to try to ensure, through democratic participation, that their state strives to create an economic environment, both domestically and internationally, which enables and facilitates establishing good worker–society relations, for example, through domestic economic policy, trade agreements, participation in international regulatory bodies, and so on. Still, if firms have any kind of autonomy from the state, then only under workplace democracy, in their capacity as co-governors of the firm, can workers themselves establish a good worker–society relation. In other words, even in a well-regulated economic environment firms will face various pressures to shape the worker–society relation in one way rather than another, and it remains important that it is not bosses alone who decide whether the firm succumbs to those pressures or not, but that workers too have a say in how their relation to society is ultimately shaped. This means that workplace democracy and state-level democracy, as well as other institutions and practices, for example, responsible consumer behavior, share and divide the work of creating worker–society relations in good moral order; workplace democracy may not be sufficient for this, but it is necessary.

This also means that even under workplace democracy and advantageous economic conditions, it is not guaranteed that the worker–society relation ends up being in good moral order. Even if the shipping clerk cares about this relation and wishes to ameliorate it, and even if the political and economic environment enables this, that is, there are no excessive pressures on the firm to engage in wrongdoing, workplace democratic outcomes may not reflect her individual judgment or preference. In a democracy one can always be outvoted, and as mentioned, workers are as capable of making terrible decisions as bosses. Although an individual worker may care about avoiding harms and wrongs to others, if their fellow workers do not, or if they strongly fear that refraining from corporate wrongdoing will put their firm at a competitive disadvantage and seriously damage their livelihoods, then they may implement harmful and wrongful company policies through the democratic governance of the firm. One answer to this problem would be that this risk is simply the price to be paid for ensuring workers' control over the worker–society relation, and thereby the adequate expression of care and respect through their functionally characterizable conception of agency. But this raises the question of whether this price is indeed worth paying.

I argued that in a nondemocratic workplace, workers' agency is in some ways divorced from their relation to society. One upside of this, one may argue, is that it allows at least some workers, for example, the shipping clerk, to maintain at least some distance from firms' wrongdoing. It is true that firms' wrongdoing may affect workers' functionally characterizable conception of agency, and thereby damage their relation to the rest of society, but their lack of control

may mitigate this damage. Under workplace democracy, their agency becomes much more closely tied to the firm's governance; if the firm engages in wrongful actions, workers now will share responsibility for this as co-governors of the firm. Perhaps there are good reasons to prefer not taking on this responsibility, and leaving their agency distanced from the firm's governance.

The key premise of this objection is that it is worse if a morally defective worker–society relation is workers' own *making*, as it is under workplace democracy, than if it is *imposed* on them, as in nondemocratic workplaces. I have my doubts about this claim. It is true that workplace democracy carries with it the disvalue of increased responsibility for the firm's wrongdoings. But, first, for any individual worker, this responsibility may be mitigated, and their functionally characterizable conception of agency improved, if the worker at least votes against and tries to persuade others to vote against the wrongful decision. Second, the nondemocratic workplace also carries with it a disvalue, that is, the disvalue of the powerlessness over the worker–society relation. It seems to me that the objection requires that the disvalue of powerlessness be lesser than the disvalue of increased responsibility due to workplace democracy. It is far from obvious that this is true. Generally, would we prefer powerlessness over our interpersonal relations for the sake of avoiding responsibility when these relations turn morally defective? This does not seem right. By doing so, we would renounce key aspects of our moral agency. As for the worker–society relation specifically, I argued in the previous section that this relation is of great moral significance to workers. Powerlessness over it may well be worse than the burden of responsibility for decisions resulting in the firm's wrongdoing, especially if a worker did all they could to avoid this in their capacity as a democratic co-governor of the firm.

To be sure, it is often extremely challenging to determine what exactly a worker should do to wield their democratic governing power responsibly. Think of the example of the coal miners again; once they gain democratic control over their firm, how should they govern it? Should they continue their extractive and environmentally damaging activity to secure economic support for their local communities, or should they prioritize reducing the environmental harm their activity does to distant others? Here, again, I cannot settle this question. But, the very fact that the worker–society relation raises such hard and complex moral problems testifies to the importance of workers' control over this relation. We all have a weighty interest in our judgment bearing on how such complex questions about our relation to others are settled; that others should settle these hard moral questions about our interpersonal lives affronts our standing as full moral agents and damages our interpersonal relations themselves. The worker–society relation is indeed complex. All the more reason why workers and not only bosses should have a say in what shape it takes.

5 | RELATIONAL ARGUMENTS FOR WORKPLACE DEMOCRACY

How does my argument and republican and relational egalitarian arguments for workplace democracy relate to each other? As noted, the latter tend to focus on intra-firm power relations between bosses and workers, especially insofar as these threaten with domination or relational inequality. My argument, in contrast, focuses on the extra-firm relation between workers and the rest of society. However, while my argument does focus on the worker–society relation, there is a sense in which it also criticizes a particular kind of unequal intra-firm power relation, that is, bosses' unequal power to determine the moral character of workers' relation to society. What does this argument add, then, to existing republican and relational egalitarian

discussions on workplace democracy, besides pointing out yet another way in which workers are dominated by or subordinated to bosses in the contemporary workplace? To answer, let us take a closer look at why exactly various arguments object to unequal power relations in the workplace.

Republicans object to intra-firm power inequalities because, and insofar as, they constitute *domination*, that is, a particularly objectionable interpersonal relation exemplified in its most extreme form by the relationship between the master and the slave (McCammon, 2015). The argument from the worker–society relation, in contrast, is not about domination; indeed, in the first place, it is not even about the worker–boss relation. First and foremost, it objects to workers' powerlessness to keep their relation to society in good moral order, for this precludes their expressing adequate care and respect toward the rest of society. If this powerlessness is engendered by bosses' unequal power over workers, then the argument objects to this power inequality too. But this does not presuppose that this power inequality constitutes domination. This is not to say that it does not constitute domination. Perhaps it does. If so, then there are republican reasons for objecting to it. But the reasons identified by the argument from the worker–society relation are not reasons of this republican kind. The argument finds this power inequality objectionable *irrespective of* whether it counts as domination or not. Something similar is true in the case of relational egalitarian arguments. These claim that intra-firm inequalities of power are objectionable because they prevent workers and bosses from relating as equals. But according to my argument, workers' powerlessness over the worker–society relation is objectionable *whether or not* bosses and workers relate as equals. This, again, is not to say that this powerlessness may not contribute to relational inequality between workers and bosses. Perhaps it does. But my argument does not presuppose this. The argument claims that this powerlessness is wrong in and of itself, regardless of whether it is also wrong by virtue of creating relational inequality.

Suppose that some objection against republican and relational egalitarian analyses of workplace power inequality succeeds, for example, someone successfully argues that workplace hierarchies, while involving power inequality, are sufficiently “tempered” not to constitute objectionable relationships of genuine domination or relational inequality (Kolodny, 2023, pp. 148–152). This would refute republican and relational egalitarian arguments for workplace democracy. But it would not refute my argument. For even if it were true that workers are neither dominated by nor relationally unequal to bosses, they may still object to the fact that bosses have unilateral control over the moral quality of their relationship to the rest of society; not because this makes their relationship *to bosses* morally defective, for example, dominating or relationally unequal, but because it makes their relationship *to society* morally defective. This is what constitutes the moral precarity to which the argument from the worker–society relation objects.

To illustrate my point, consider the case of coal miners again. Republicans and relational egalitarians argue that they should have a democratic say in how their firm is governed because otherwise they are dominated by or relate unequally to their bosses. On this view, what matters in the first place is the intra-firm worker–boss relation. On the argument from the worker–society relation, it is the other way around. The reason why they should have a democratic say in the workplace is because it is of great moral importance that they themselves shape the worker–society relation; what matters in the first place is the extra-firm worker–society relation. Of course, in the absence of workplace democracy, it is bosses who shape this extra-firm relation; bosses decide if the firm continues its extractive activities, benefiting workers' local communities, but harming distant others through environmental damage, or if the firm transitions

into less environmentally harmful activities which may not be as economically beneficial for local communities, or if they find some middle way. This shaping of the worker–society relation may or may not count as domination or relational inequality. If it does, then there may be republican or relational egalitarian reasons to oppose it. But *even if it does not*, my argument provides independent reasons for introducing workplace democracy, that is, the inherent wrong, independent of domination or relational inequality, of workers not shaping their relationship to society. The two arguments are not mutually exclusive, but they are independent; it is possible to accept both or one without the other. Thus, my argument does not merely add to the list of republican and relational egalitarian grievances about power inequality in the contemporary workplace. Rather, it identifies distinct and independent grounds for introducing workplace democracy.

Could republican or relational egalitarian arguments incorporate the argument from the worker–society relation? After all, extra-firm relations should matter to republicans and relational egalitarians as well. As Nicholas Vrousalis (2019) argues, for example, extra-firm domination pervades capitalist economies; firms and their bosses dominate other firms by exerting competitive pressure, and they dominate states through their power to disinvest and relocate. These extra-firm relations, he argues, should worry republicans too. Indeed, the coal company and its bosses may dominate not only their workers, but also their local communities and distant others on whom they arbitrarily bestow economic benefit and environmental harm. As Vrousalis argues, however, workplace democracy alone may do little to address these concerns; democratic firms can dominate society in the same way nondemocratic firms do. Democratizing the coal company would only mean allowing its workers to dominate their local community and distant others just as their bosses used to. Arguably, from a republican or relational egalitarian viewpoint, extra-firm domination and relational inequality need to be addressed by reforming the underlying economic conditions that make these objectionable relations possible,¹⁰ workplace democracy, in itself, is not a solution.

However, even if in the extra-firm case workplace democracy does not eliminate domination or relational inequality in the same way it does in the intra-firm case, the argument from the worker–society relation can still show why it matters for the moral quality of extra-firm relations. I argued that workplace democracy is necessary for workers to convey adequate care and respect through their functionally characterizable conception of agency to members of society they affect through their work. This is a relational gain even if the worker–society relation remains tainted by domination or relational inequality. That is, even if workplace democracy does not improve workers' extra-firm relations in terms of nondomination or relational equality, it may improve it along other dimensions. Of course, workers still have reasons to eliminate extra-firm domination and relational inequality by using their democratic powers as citizens to reform the underlying economic conditions through the democratic state. Still, these considerations suggest that the argument from the worker–society relation is not easily incorporated into republican or relational egalitarian accounts; it picks out a relational value distinct from nondomination or relational equality, and thus identifies reasons for adopting workplace democracy that republican and relational egalitarian analyses do not.¹¹

6 | CONCLUSION

Workplace democracy, I believe, is best justified by workers' interest to keep their interpersonal relations in good moral order. Republican and relational egalitarian arguments capture one

element of this interest, that is, workers' interests in relating in egalitarian and nondominating ways to their bosses and each other. But, there is another, no less relevant relation that grounds workers' claims for workplace democracy: the worker–society relation. Work embeds individuals in large-scale systems of production, consumption, logistics, and services; systems, through which they maintain and reproduce the economic bases of their shared social life. This system may bring flourishing to the people who are caught up in them, or it may produce deprivation, vulnerability, and injustice. Workers have an interest in promoting the former through their work rather than the latter, not simply because of the general impersonal imperative of reducing disvalue in the world, but also because they have an interest in relating to all individuals within this system as agents who are not callous or disrespectful toward them, but rather exhibit care and respect. This weighty interest grounds a strong claim on the part of workers for workplace democracy. For only under workplace democracy do they not depend on others for the moral quality of their relation to society and are able to convey adequate care and respect within this relation.

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The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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None.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ On the role of democratic control in eliminating domination in the political sphere, see Pettit (2012). For a discussion, see McCormick (2013). On the role of democracy in ensuring relational equality, see Wilson (2019). For a discussion, see Viehoff (2019).
- ² For a discussion, see Kates (2019), Meyers (2004), and Powell and Zwolinski (2012).
- ³ For further discussion on the moral significance of social connection, see Aragon and Jaggard (2018) and McKeown (2018).
- ⁴ Some argue that even insignificant individual contributions to collective harms, for example, climate change, may constitute sufficient basis for the attribution of responsibility—if not in the sense of blameworthiness, then in the sense of forward-looking responsibility for taking action to mitigate the collective harm to which one made an individually insignificant contribution (Broome, 2019; Sangiovanni, 2018; Young, 2011; see also Isaacs, 2011). If so, then low-level employees may bear responsibility. Here, I remain neutral on this issue.

- ⁵ On citizens' role in states' wrongdoing, see also Pasternak (2021), Stilz (2011), as well as Collins (2023, p. 76 ff.).
- ⁶ One could think of workers engaged in other kinds of extractive and environmentally damaging activities as well.
- ⁷ I am indebted to the an anonymous reviewer for the example.
- ⁸ An argument along these lines is presented by Shiffrin (2021).
- ⁹ Neuhäuser and Oldenbourg (2020) also offer a different argument to the effect that workplace democracy has both instrumental and noninstrumental value; they claim that it contributes to firms discharging their human rights responsibilities and grants them legitimacy to do so.
- ¹⁰ For Vrousalis, this requires nothing less than economic democracy or socialism. Here, I remain neutral on this question.
- ¹¹ More needs to be said about this value. Elsewhere I elaborated a concept of a relational value, distinct from relational equality and nondomination, as part of the value of democracy (Kapelner, 2022). I am uncertain that this account is directly applicable to the case of workplace democracy, but it may provide a useful starting point for further research.

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