Workers' Control and Self-Management: Critical Learnings for an Alternative Democracy

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Abstract

This article examines some of the discussions and debates in the literature about workers' control and self-management, which have assumed an importance in the context of the search for an alternative to the prevailing global socio-economic, political and cultural system and its persistent crises. The article reviews and analyses a range of approaches to workers' control and self-management, their interpretations and purposes. This is done with reference to the historical and contemporary development of workers' control and self-management in the debates between thinkers and practitioners associated with workers' struggles both in the aftermath of World War 1 and more recently. These debates reflect on a complex array of issues arising from the challenges to capitalist production, situating it in the context of the struggles against capitalism in the early 20th century. They also raise issues concerning how the concepts of workers' control and self-management might be understood and interpreted in relation to contemporary forms of parliamentary democracy, the role of radical political parties of the left, and questions of leadership and bureaucracy in such parties in existing socialist states and in relation to cooperatives under capitalism. The article suggests that it is important to understand the potential for workers' control and self-management as an alternative to the dystopic social systems under the present regimes of neoliberal capitalist globalisation.

Keywords: workers' control; self-management; capitalist production; unions and bureaucracy; vanguardism; state power; alternative systems

Introduction

There were important debates about workers' control and self-management, especially immediately prior to and after World War 1 (Avrich 1973; Daniels 1967; Glickman 1984; Gluckstein 1985, 2011; Sirianni 1982). In South Africa, this issue was very much in focus at the time of the re-emergence of the trade union movement in the early 1970s and during the 1980s when workers' control was very much a part of the policies of the Trade Union Advisory Coordinating Council (TUACC) and the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), and later, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) (Buhlungu and Tshoaedi 2012; Byrne and Ulrich 2016; Moss 2014).[1]

TUACC and FOSATU discussed the issue of workers' control in the context of the prevailing debates introduced by the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) about the nature of the "colonial state" and the role of the working class in the struggles against apartheid. The idea of workers' control represented an alternative to the position espoused by the ANC and SACP alliance, and it was based on direct participatory democracy at the workplace and more widely in society, prefiguring a fundamentally different conception of democracy that was premised on

> mutual aid and self-reliance bottom up democratic practice and egalitarian structures in which "the people", "workers" or "the community" were regarded as the locus of transformative power in society, and in which their organisations were viewed as prefiguring a radically democratic future. (Byrne and Ulrich 2016, 369)

This conception of democracy was based on the development of democratic workplace structures and the political autonomy of the working-class movement as fundamental to the challenge against racial capitalism. It was premised on the collective action undertaken by workers directly involved in their organisational decision-making—as represented by leaders who were directly accountable to the rank and file (Hemson 1979). This was ensured by policies requiring that paid officials were controlled by elected leaders who were themselves directly accountable to the general membership, reinforcing the idea of workers' agency and control over their organisation, its political, economic, and wider strategies and campaigns. In FOSATU, direct mandates, the right of recall (of the leadership) and shop-steward meetings were essential in all representation and actions. These principles were extended, moreover, into the realm of civil and political life more generally. As Erwin notes:

> Further, there were ambitions to extend "workers' control" beyond production into the "reproductive" sphere, so that the unions' democratic practices would be "the basis for democratic organisation both within the areas of production and of social consumption (the community)." (Erwin 1985, 55)

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[1] Moss refers to the even earlier influence of the Industrial Aid Society (IAS) in the early 1970s.

Workers' control also signalled a commitment to an anti-capitalist struggle, which transcended the limits of nationalism and was an interpretation of the national liberation struggle as simultaneously anti-capitalist. In effect, as argued by Byrne and Ulrich,

> TUACC and FOSATU created a new type of unionism that identified workers and unions as the force to lead the challenge against apartheid and, in so doing, create an alternative, non-racial, deeply democratic, indeed socialist, future. (Byrne and Ulrich 2016, 382)

Despite these earlier aspirations around workers' control, and especially after the onset of the democratic political system in 1994, the ideas and practices relating to workers' control and self-management have largely been relegated to the margins of political and organisational discussion through a combination of historical circumstances, policies and practices—even though the actions of the miners at the platinum mine at Marikana in the North West Province of South Africa signalled some elements of a new political and organisational culture based on direct democratic representation. The effect of their actions was to challenge the established National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), offering

> both "a direct challenge to capitalist hegemony" and a reformist attempt which operated inside "the capitalist logic of profitability". (Sinwell 2018, 41)[2]

In Europe and the advanced capitalist economies of the world, post-War unionism and welfarist capitalism presaged the promise of prosperity and indeed the "end of history". Following Rostow's theory about the "stages of growth" (Rostow 1962), it was assumed by the dominant economic thinkers and political leaders in the West that the rest of the world, including the colonies, would follow Rostow's ideas and those of other "development" economists (Frank 1969; Hahn and Matthews 1964; Kagarlitsky 1995; Todaro and Smith 2012).[3] But the envisaged development has not been realised—not even in the developed capitalist economies of the West—to the extent that such development was anticipated for all the citizenry. Especially for the countries of the South, this failure now necessitates an urgent discussion about alternatives to the prevailing neoliberal policy and ideological regimes, about which there is a mounting body of critique (Brown 2019; Harvey 2005; Kaplinsky 2005; Martin and Schumann 1997; Slobodian 2018). Such a discussion can draw on the debates about an alternative social system prefigured in the debates about the nature and purposes of workers' control and self-management, which have concrete roots in the historical events over the last century and more, as suggested by Azzellini:

> Over the past 135 years, in all kinds of historical situations and during various political and economic crises and in different political systems, workers have taken control of their workplaces. Yet this story of workers self-administered production is rarely told.

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[2]   He refers to Ness and Azzellini (2011, 5).
[3]   As we know too, these theories of development and under-development were subjected to a withering critique (see Frank 1969; Kagarlitsky 1995).

> Capitalists, bourgeois governments and administrators of systems based on the exploitation of workers usually have little interest in disseminating the history of self-organized workers; those who have successfully run factories without bosses. (Azzellini 2015, 1)

It is instructive to examine a body of writings pertaining to workers' control and self-management historically and contextually—to clarify these concepts and to derive lessons regarding their meaning and application against the background of the contemporary crisis of capitalism (Castells et al. 2017; Rikowski 2018)[4] affecting proletarians and, more widely, the socially marginalised and oppressed majority of the global citizenry.[5] In South Africa, there is little or no writing and academic publication about the issues raised in this article, which have, in the writer's view, considerable importance for discussions around the wide-ranging socio-economic, political and environmental crises facing the prevailing social system. It is hoped that this and similar writings will stimulate a wider discussion about the nature of South African society and the possible alternatives that could be considered for dealing with these crises.

The method employed in dealing with the subject of this article is based on a document analysis of historical writings, especially writings that reflect on the views of some of the main protagonists—historical and contemporary—in the polemics and discussions about workers' control and self-management.

The Wide-Ranging Literature on Workers' Control and Self-Management

There is a wide range of literature on ideas and practices around workers' control in the discussions about the rise, development and weaknesses of factory committees, soviets, and workers' councils in the context of the revolutionary upheavals that took place before and after World War 1. A compilation by Ness and Azzellini (2011) presents a very useful review of workers' control "from the Commune to the present" and provides a historical overview of the debates around the Council movement, its development variously under "revolutionary" conditions, under "state socialism", in post-colonial struggles, in the context of capitalist "restructuring" in the 20th century, and in its development in several Latin American countries towards the end of the last century. Other writings deal with the development in the period between 1915 and 1920 in Russia

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[4]   I use the term "crisis" to denote a wide-ranging systemic failure in the institutions, social structures and characteristics (inequality, unemployment, health, education, food security, environmental, poverty levels) of the prevailing system and its inability to meet the basic needs of the majority of the population. See Castells et al. (2017, 205) for their definition of "crisis". The concept is also dealt with in some detail by Rikowski (2018).

[5]   In the case of South Africa, there is an overwhelming body of data about the range of indicators that show how egregious inequality (regarded as the highest in the world), unemployment, poverty, and food insecurity are in the country. Although these discussions and the data relating to them have many implications for education (curriculum and pedagogy) and the production of knowledge, these issues are not canvassed here.

and in Western European countries as a response to the crisis induced by war (Gluckstein 1985). Smith's archival study is about factory-level implementation of workers' control and the Bolshevik Party's programme (Smith 1986). Glickman provides a fascinating account of the life and struggles of women in the factory system in Russia in its early industrial development and their role in the soviets (Glickman 1984). Avrich provides an account of the role of the Anarchist movement in soviets and factory committees in the course of the Russian Revolution of 1917 (Avrich 1973). Daniels deals with the relationship between political parties and the Bolsheviks in the Petrograd Soviet during the Russian Revolution of 1917 (Daniels 1967), while Friedland discusses competing theories about the potential for mobilisation and organisation relating to the problems and prospects for revolutionary change (Friedland 1982). Sirianni (1982) studies the Soviet experience of workers' control and socialist democracy, while Spriano (1975) examines factory occupations during the "two red years" in Italy between 1919 and 1921. More recently, Azzellini and Kraft have examined developments during the 21st century, arguing:

> The last couple of years have seen an outburst in and a renewal of ideas and practices of radical democracy. From 2008 onwards, protests, riots and uprisings have erupted all over the world (from Tahrir to Taksim). As a direct response to neoliberal capitalism and post-democratic governance, new strategies and subjects of resistance have appeared. These new forms of workers' organisation and struggle have been precursors as well as part of these protest movements and have in turn been influenced by them. While traditional unionism based on a bureaucratic apparatus mediating between workers and capital is often no longer able even to defend past labour movement achievements against the generalised attack of capital, workers have shown all over the world how to wage offensive struggles. (Azzellini and Kraft 2018, 1)

Debates and Discussions about the Complexities of Workers' Control and Self-Management

The discussions in these and other writings reflect the ideas and interpretations of some of the major proponents and practitioners engaged in the struggles around workers' control and self-management in the 20th century and at present. They have considerable value not only in relation to workers' control but also concerning questions about the nature and limits of the dominant forms of democratic governance in contemporary developed and developing capitalist states. In what follows, I draw on these and other sources for a critical examination of workers' control and self-management. I also draw on radical interpretations of the idea of workers' control and self-management accessed from the publication workerscontrol.net, an "archive of workers' struggle" (workerscontrol.net n.d.) where a cornucopia of productive discussion and debate about these issues can be found.

I begin with Chris Kane's (2016) writing on workerscontrol.net. Kane argues that workers' control and management are necessitated by capitalism's commodification of all aspects of social life, resulting in the untrammelled and expanding power of the

market. It has led to a process of alienation for the producers of wealth, which is exacerbated by the state's failure to regulate the power of capital and commodification (Schimank and Volkmann 2012). This failure is exemplified in the "new type of left government, based on a Labour, socialist and communist majority in the Westminster parliament" (Kane 2016), which relegates the role of the masses to a subsidiary position in relation to the state through slogans about "democratic nationalization of strategic sectors of the economy" or "a new basis which ensures worker and consumer representation in management", ignoring the role of "the masses" by consigning it to the idea of "representation" within existing hierarchies of power (Kane 2016). At present, it is necessary to think more fundamentally about how the goals of democratic socialism might be achieved.[6]

Drawing on Marx, Kane reasserts the centrality of "the masses" in history, abjuring a reliance on iconic leaders and drawing on the struggles of "dissident" workers for self-management in the former Eastern Bloc countries as an alternative to both the "state-socialist" regimes and private capitalism. He is critical of "the parliamentary road to socialism" (Kane 2016), but also of the ideas of communists and socialists who insist on tying workers' control to the primacy of a communist vanguard party and to conceptions of nationalisation and "state socialist economies" under communist control. This he regards as a barrier to genuine workers' control, as

> [w]orkers' control means increased influence over the labour process and the erosion of the managerial prerogatives, but with self-management the workers would have total control: managers as such would be abolished, and management eliminated as a function separate from work itself. (Kane 2016)

Self-management was no less than a cultural revolution and was distinguishable from nationalisation dependent on state-owned enterprises. Kane argues that it could not be compared to state-sponsored cooperatives, since

> [o]nly socialisation of the means of production can produce real changes in the position of the working class. Social ownership is connected with socialist self-management … by workers' councils elected by all workers. (Kane 2016)

He is critical of two "core elements" in the approaches of "traditional revolutionary left" organisations. The first concerns the idea of "a revolutionary vanguard party", which "vitiates" the possibilities of workers' control and self-management. He is opposed to the idea (promoted by Alex Callinicos, a member of the Central Committee of the Socialist Workers Party [SWP] in Britain) that the seizure of power by a workers'

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[6]   He draws on a number of sources regarding the concept of democratic socialism, which is used to refer to a radical political philosophy that is committed to democratic politics and the social ownership of the economy simultaneously and as inseparable one from the other (Kane 2016). It also emphasises workplace democratic decision-making and self-management within a market socialist economy favouring decentralised socialist planning (Bilgrami 1965; Denitch 1981; Edelstein 1990; Hudson 2012).

party has precedence over other forms of worker organisation in the quest for a "worker's state", and that a party is essential to the realisation of socialist goals. Secondly, he is critical of the view that the "nationalisation" of the banking system is a first step towards getting rid of capitalism and the argument made by Chris Harman[7] that "the answer to the world's energy crisis … is nationalisation of the oil, gas and coal industries" (quoted in Kane 2016). Kane argues that these views negate the role of the masses as "conscious organisers of their own emancipation" (Kane 2016), which is not synonymous with the idea of a socialist framework dependent on a "vanguard party". He points to Marx's recognition of the role of the "masses" in the Paris Commune and of workers in the soviets in revolutionary Russia (Smith 1986) and the former Soviet Bloc countries where self-management emerged and supported the views of "dissident Marxists" who argued in favour of a "humanist", emancipatory communism as an alternative to both the "state-socialist" regimes and capitalism (Kane 2016).

In Kane's view, self-management contests capitalism through organising struggles by directly contesting the "antagonistic capital-labour relationship" and seeking to "obtain greater control over life at work; this arising directly in response to the conditions of alienated labour" (Kane 2016).

This conception of workers' control and self-management places an increasing reliance on self-activity and control against the prerogatives of management, and it seeks the abolition of management as a separate function in work. This could not be sustainable at a single workplace alone, as workers learnt in both Italy in 1920 and Poland in 1981. Nor could self-management be equated to "worker-owned cooperatives" in a "genuinely free and competitive market" (Kane 2016), where such cooperatives are required to compete for market share and adopt exploitative practices.

Atzeni and Ghigliani have argued similarly, regarding the case of Argentina, that

> the act of occupying a factory gives room to workers' control of the labour process and to a more democratic, collective decision-making, but workers' need to compete in the market reduces the sphere of collective decision, leading to centralisation of power and divisions between directive and productive workers, hampering the possibility for workers to enrich their job and avoid self-exploitation. (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2007, 653)

Kane is also critical of the anarcho-syndicalist approach, which seeks to establish areas of autonomy while ignoring the power of the capitalist state, given that "the objective must be to develop the organizations of self-management into an alternative governing force" (Kane 2016). The key principle of workers' control was thus the idea of social ownership and self-management in both society and the workplace differentiated from

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[7]   He was a member of the Central Committee of the Socialist Workers Party and an editor of *International Socialism* and *Socialist Worker*.

state socialism, because, although self-management itself does not transcend capitalism, it provides

> a framework within which the de-alienation of labour and creation of new production relations can be achieved. It is an axis of the communist revolutionary process which abolishes the class system, transcends the state, replacing it with communal self-management, and abolishes commodity production. (Kane 2016)

Kostas Charitakis too takes on the arguments of those who, in opposing the idea of self-management, reproduce the ideas of a "defeated world of ideology" (Charitakis 2016), by which he means Soviet-style statism. He counterposes these ideas to a "vibrant and outward-looking world of action that strives to disengage from the dominant relations" (Charitakis 2016). His argument is derived from the worker-managed factory Vio.ME in Greece, where "communist and anti-capitalist forces of the left" opposed to it responded to its self-management initiative by regarding it as no more than a form of "self-exploitation" and "collective capitalism" (Charitakis 2016). These critics sought a "'central' change through the conquest of state power" and relied on Marxist-Leninist texts to argue the "unscientific" and even "counter-revolutionary" attributes of such ventures (Charitakis 2016). For Charitakis, these criticisms expressed

> a whole cultural gap in the world vision that separates these views from the essence and spirit of self-management ventures. In fact, this controversy is very interesting as it lucidly and concisely expresses the difference between, on the one hand, the defeated world of ideology and all kinds of "-isms", of closed self-referential systems, gasping to catch up with the new reality, and, on the other hand, the living and outward-looking world of action that strives here and now to disengage from the dominant relations. (Charitakis 2016)

Echoing Kane, he sees conceptions of party and state-centred approaches from "above" and the power of self-organising from "below", the latter evincing how the very conditions of workers' lives could be constructed through their own creative contemporary struggles, as in the case of Vio.Me. His approach favours an orientation based on directly acting to shape a future society through practice, abjuring a reliance on "the 'auto pilot' of state-controlled, guided revolutionary process" (Charitakis 2016). It implies new forms of governance and self-management that evolved organically through the process of struggle, largely independent of the political role of party and state. He refers to Ranciere's view about the need to found a "new sociability between individuals who already have, each on his own, thrown off the servile passions that are indefinitely reproduced by the rhythm of work hours" (Charitakis 2016),[8] requiring actions in the present that seek ways to disengage from capital and the state and to develop self-management through

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[8]   Referring to Jacques Ranciere's *The Nights of Labour: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth Century France* (1989).

those solidarity and horizontal direct-democracy networks that will become the actual territory for social emancipation actions and the creation of our own commons. (Charitakis 2016)

The role of the political party is also the subject of an important debate between Cornelius Castoriadis and Antonie Pannekoek (Castoriadis [1953–1954] 2016; Pannekoek [1953–1954] 2016).[9] Castoriadis agrees with Pannekoek about the "autonomy of the working class" ([1953–1954] 2016), but disagrees over the role of a revolutionary party. For Castoriadis and his associates, workers' councils and soviets represented much more than factory-based organisations and were to be regarded as developments towards the reorganisation of society. They were not only relevant "after the taking of power" (Castoriadis [1953–1954] 2016), but were implicated in the very process of taking power. Theirs was a "primordial role during the entire revolutionary period, whose beginning is precisely marked … by the constitution of the autonomous organisms of the masses" (Castoriadis [1953–1954] 2016).

His difference with Pannekoek lies in what interpretation is given to the role of the party and its militants relative to that of the workers' councils. His concern arose from the existence of many competing political parties and organisations, which impeded their ability to represent the working class. He draws on the historical experience of the Spanish Civil War as exemplifying this problem where some militants were prevented from expressing their views freely in the context of a "still-confused revolutionary will and a minority vanguard" (Castoriadis [1953–1954] 2016). He avers that

> the party cannot be the leadership of the class, neither before, nor after the revolution; not before, because the class does not follow it and it would only know how to lead at most a minority (and again, "lead" it in a totally relative sense: influence it with its ideas and its exemplary action); not after, since proletarian power cannot be the power of the party, but the power of the class in its autonomous mass organisms. (Castoriadis [1953–1954] 2016)

He concedes that the party could have a role in instances where the workers' council itself is unable to resolve an issue. But the proviso is that in such a case the party acts with the consent of the working class and imposes its political will.[10]

Ernest Mandel (2016), one of the important theoreticians of Marxism and a former leading figure of the Fourth International, addresses the important question of whether workers' control and self-management could be limited to workplaces alone or must have a wider social and political orientation. He too begins by locating the question of

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9   Antonie Pannekoek was a Dutch astronomer, Marxist theorist, and social revolutionary. He was one of the main theorists of Council Communism (see also Castoriadis 2015).
10   The reference is to "what proportion of the class agrees with the program of the party, what is the ideological state of the rest of the class, where is the struggle against the counterrevolutionary tendencies within the councils, what are the ulterior perspectives, etc." (Castoriadis [1953–1954] 2016).

workers' self-management in the "bureaucratic degeneration" of the Soviet Union.[11] His argument for workers' self-management and the search for socialism arises from a rejection of the Russian model of socialism. The question he probes is whether "revolutionary Marxists" should support self-management given its representation, in some quarters, as

> a society in which relatively small groups, like workers in a single factory, organise all aspects of the running of their individual units. Health workers or teachers, for example, would thus organise at the level of their hospitals or schools, while consumers would be organised in boroughs or districts. (Mandel 2016)

He argues that this "simplistic" view of self-management is not derived from Marxism but is rather a product of the work of Proudhon and the adherents of anarcho-syndicalism. He argues for the fullest support for real self-management as opposed to its Proudhonist conceptions and the anarcho-syndicalist approaches in which it is no more than a "façade" that obscures "a whole series of fundamental questions about the dynamics of economic and social existence in our epoch" (Mandel 2016). He counterposes "bureaucratic socialism" to self-management through which the power of workers is exercised at every level of society—the factory, the economy, "in the non-productive spheres of social life and, above all, at the level of the state" (Mandel 2016).

Thus, the idea and practice of self-management cannot be reduced to a single factory or workplace alone, limiting its role to the management of an enterprise and the distribution of social surplus obtained. Factory self-management in Titoist Yugoslavia was an example of this form of self-management, which in reality concentrated power in the communist bureaucracy. He is similarly critical of the Taylorist approach to technology and the assembly line, arguing that there is an alternative approach that avoids autarchic controls in favour of autonomous production. He asserts:

> It is a bourgeois myth that there is no alternative to the technology presently utilised in production. It is true that this technology is the one which provides the highest return on capital, but this does not make it the only one possible. It is quite possible to conceive of a scale of technologies based on any particular level of political and economic development. (Mandel 2016)

Decisions related to the production of some services based on technology such as electricity could not, however, be left solely to electricity workers (or for that matter workers in the energy sector), because of wider social and economic interests in such services; such decisions could not be decided at the plant level alone. The choice available to workers was not between "bureaucratic centralisation" and "decentralised self-management". They could be centralised through "democratically-centralised self-

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[11]   He refers to an opinion poll in France which suggested that although there was a continuing affinity with the ideas of socialism, very few of those in favour of socialism regarded the Soviet model as appropriate. This was the case even though France had at the time a popular vote of 20% for the French Communist Party (PCF).

management", which is the same as planned self-management, to counter the anarchy of capitalist production consciously. Mandel's argument stands in opposition to the "factory-to-factory" self-management propounded by Proudhonists, because their approach leads inevitably to the "operation of market laws" and "spontaneous centralisation" in the absence of democratic planning (Mandel 2016). He explains why decisions taken in thousands of factories individually are likely to compound the anarchy referred to above:

> This is why a so-called "socialist" market economy, in which self-management is limited to the level of the factory, is doomed to reproduce a whole series of the evils of capitalism, including its greatest attack on the working class—unemployment. It is only necessary to look at the Yugoslav example to see that this is the case. (Mandel 2016)

He emphasises the importance of *democratic* centralised decision-making and planning as necessary to workers' democracy based on workers' councils involving the maximum possible number of workers. Mandel provides concrete examples of wider national planning in some instances, such as for the generation of electricity through a national energy system. These would necessarily limit the autonomy not only of individual workplaces but of the working class, because they are "indispensable" to the exercise of the "power of the class as a whole" (Mandel 2016).

More recently similar arguments have been made by Matt Bruenig (2019) about the difficulty of using the firm in socialist policy. He points to the limitations of "firm-based socialist ownership policies", arguing that

> workers and capital can easily be shifted between the firms without altering the productive process in any meaningful sense…. The solution to this problem is to own capital at a higher level than the firm, such as the society level. … Or, at minimum, the return on capital should go out to society as a whole, not just the workers in the firm where the capital is located. (Bruenig 2019)

He regards the taking over of factories by workers as representing the groundwork for workers' democracy and control over the society, preparing "today" for the tasks of self-management "tomorrow". The educational effect of this would extend beyond the technical needs of workplace organisation and self-management through "their collective class consciousness and solidarity" (Bruenig 2019).

Mandel stresses the power of ideology, the media and education systems in reproducing public conceptions that are dominant in capitalist societies. Self-management is not possible without the consideration of several other connected issues not directly related to production.[12] Among these is the issue of educational transformation—the need for a

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[12]   Mandel (2016) is critical of the Chinese approach to workers' democracy where, he alleges, workers participate only periodically in questions of management and managers have a limited role in participating in labour, thus perpetuating the division of labour in its present form and leading to its bureaucratisation.

minimum social, cultural and technical education, and to see education as a social question and consider the values it promotes.

Given the importance of Marx's ideas in relation to these issues, David Adam seeks to show that the ideas of the council communists were not antithetical to Marx's ideas and were in fact a concrete expression of those ideas. This contradicts some Marxists who argue that council communism is in reality a "self-managed capitalist economy" (Adam 2014). Contesting this view, Adam argues that the ideas of council communists sought to dispel the misinterpretation of Marx's views by emphasising "his distinction between measurement of labor under capitalism by 'value,' and measurement of socialist 'directly social labor' by time" (Adam 2014). Adam avers that Marx, in fact, proposed a system of labour-time vouchers as part of the first phase of communism in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, contradicting what he is alleged to have said in his earlier writing in *Grundrisse*. Although Marx was critical of the idea of "labour-money" propounded by Ricardians and Proudhonists, he was nevertheless supportive of the idea of tying consumption to work-hours that were certificated. This is not an affirmation of the persistence of the law of value in communist society and is consistent with the idea of "labour-money" and the transition to socialist society associated with self-management.

In the same vein, Castoriadis (2015) argues that socialism as exemplified in self-management is not simply an administrative matter, but is no less a matter of new social relations because the very content and form of work presuppose autonomy and workers' control. Self-organisation and political autonomy are a derivative condition of the development of socialist production, that is, "to institute the domination of mankind over the work process" (Castoriadis 2015). He argues that socialist production is not commensurable with production systems run by "managers", even if

> supervised by Councils, or Soviets, or by any other body "incarnating the political power of the working class". … Real power in any such society would rapidly fall into the hands of those who managed production. The Councils or Soviets would rapidly wither amid the general indifference of the population. (Castoriadis 2015)

Autonomy implies the control of production at all levels of the economy, from the local to national economy, and is intrinsic to the very structure of work and is not to be mistaken for the management of the production process on behalf of workers. Autonomy in this case represents the very alteration of the content of work so that it is not subjected to an external bureaucratic apparatus bound to a set of "abstract" and determinist rules covering issues such as the "norms of production, technical specifications, rates of pay, bonus, and how production areas will be organized" (Castoriadis 2015), even if these are revised periodically. In this way, the problem of alienation based on the technological "structure of work" is dealt with by workers themselves as a prelude to its further development as a transition to new forms of social organisation and not simply the development of a more advanced technological culture to meet consumer needs. As he argues:

> The hallmark of socialism is the change it will bring about in the nature and content of work, through the conscious and deliberate transformation of an inherited technology. (Castoriadis 2015)

Castoriadis provides a detailed explanation of the practical steps to change the very nature of work for the fullest development of human capabilities by changing the "edifice of the division of labour" and through this "man's relation to technique" (Castoriadis 2015). He is critical of a determinist, socially neutral view of technology, regarding it as a form of subordination and the "elimination" of human beings from the production process. Castoriadis is critical of the perspectives of some of the major theoreticians of socialist ideas about this issue too[13]:

> Of the sum total of technologies which scientific development makes possible at any given point in time, capitalist society brings to fulfilment those which correspond most closely to its class structure, which permit capital best to struggle against labor. (Castoriadis 2015)

Anne Daguerre, Dan Ozarow and Martin Upchurch (2016) examine self-management and workers' control as concepts that are inherently about the political economy and state. Because workers' self-management challenges the foundations of capitalism and its property relations, the state plays a critical role in facilitating or limiting it even under state socialist regimes such as those in Yugoslavia and Venezuela. Whereas in Argentina self-management emerged from "below", in the case of Venezuela, it emerged from "above", suggesting that movements for self-management are best understood along a spectrum of different conceptualisations. These range from "shared decision-making" in a cooperative operation within a capitalist framework intended to contain worker militancy to radical approaches arising from the socialisation of ownership following a factory takeover together with a socialist project to overthrow capitalism. In the latter case, the factory takeover is preparatory to a post-capitalist transformation through "labour commons" wherein

> associated labour acts with redistributive motives, adding socialist principles to the practicalities of co-operative working. Self-managed factories may thus deviate from the capitalist social relations of production as they may replace capital as the mediator between the worker and their labour power. (Daguerre, Ozarow, and Upchurch 2016)

The authors are mindful of the limits of some forms of self-management, as in worker cooperatives constrained by their existence within the capitalist system. But they point to Marx and Luxemburg who regard cooperatives as a practical demonstration of the possibility of avoiding the dependence on capital, the onset of "social production". To

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[13]   He is critical of both Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin on this issue, pointing to the weaknesses of their attention to the transformation of production relations in the factory and its centrality to the process of exploitation.

overcome their limitations, the ideas and practices associated with cooperatives must be a part of a wider socialist project.

Daguerre, Ozarow, and Upchurch (2016) examine several recent and historical examples of self-management and workers' control, arguing that self-management arises from both "endogenous" factors, which refer to internal economic and political crises (they cite examples of these from Germany, Russia and the *cordones* in Chile in the 1970s) and "exogenous" factors (which existed in the case of the United Kingdom in the 1970s and in Argentina's factory "recoveries"). They state:

> The relationship between the two processes must therefore be conditioned by interplay within the productive forces of the base and the ideological and social forces of the superstructure. (Daguerre, Ozarow, and Upchurch 2016)

They are critical of Holloway's view that social transformation does not imply "confrontation".[14] For them, such a perspective does not account for the power of the state, and they allege that his "voluntarist approach" also downplays the agency of social class for transformation, since the opposition to the state is diffused through a range of agencies and even classes and "in the development of autonomous community projects of all sorts" (Daguerre, Ozarow, and Upchurch 2016). Following these arguments, they reflect on several examples of workers' control and self-management from which they draw generalisations not examined here.[15]

Conclusion

As I have argued, the discussion of workers' control and self-management raises many complex questions about interpretations of the meaning and purpose of workers' control and self-management, their inter-relationship with and provenance in the ideas of Councilism, Proudhonist anarcho-syndicalism, and Marxism. The debates about these issues arise from readings of historical texts and conceptual and ideological differences about how democratic representation is understood in differing contexts. The authors of these texts rely on a clear distinction between capitalist labour practice and workers' control and self-management and examine the debates about the "seizure of power" by "vanguardist" political parties relative to the autonomy of workers' creative self-activity. In this the question of the role of the state, both capitalist and "commandist", is brought into contention with conceptions of workers' control and self-management, with state-led nationalisation as compared with socialisation as distinctive approaches to workers' control and self-management.

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[14]   Holloway is famously associated with the rejection of the idea of assuming power by capturing state power as part of a deeper process of rejecting the logic of capital through deepening "direct democracy" and seeking to "dissolve" power relations (Holloway 2010).

[15]   Somewhat surprisingly, the issue of social reproduction appears to be missing in these debates despite the resurgent and growing interest in it in the radical feminist and Marxist literature (Bhattacharya 2017; Federici 2004; Transnational Social Strike Platform 2020).

The debate also dealt with elements of the role and nature of cooperatives functioning within a capitalist system and the critical differences between those that are a response to the failure of the market or an outcome of "state sponsorship" relative to those that are associated with a longer term socialist objective and the creation of an alternative political culture dependent on the self-activity of the "masses". It showed the limitations of self-management as constituted by factory-level planning to the exclusion of wider social planning, the problem of bureaucratic centralisation, "value" relative to "social labour time", and the role of education, media and ideology as critical to any discussion about radical change.

Workers' control is much more than a reorganisation of production, because it has the capacity to unleash creative activity on a vast scale, obviating the alienating characteristics of capitalist production. In fact, it is premised on a fundamental reorganisation of social relations, not only in production but also in the sphere of social and gendered reproduction in particular. It has the capacity to unleash the innate capacities for socially useful work, under new and democratic forms of work as reconstitutive of wage labour and the relations it generates. Workers' control also provides possibilities for transcending the limitations of Taylorist approaches favoured by Lenin and others in the context of the Russian Revolution, and it is premised on workers' ability to learn new technological skills and competencies, recognising that "technology itself is not entirely an independent factor (and can) undergo a considerable number of demystifying , simplifying and decentralising changes, thereby undercutting pretexts for hierarchy" (Ness and Azzellini 2011, 25). It has the potential for overcoming technological determinism—the idea that technological developments are inherently limiting for democratising the workplace production system.

The lessons that can be learnt from the historical experiences of workers' control and self-management have far-reaching implications for rethinking democracy and an alternative state form. As Ness and Azzellini have argued:

> Through instant recall, and the fact that shop-floor delegates receive no special pay while being directly or immediately responsible to their electors, they offer a kind of democracy undreamt of by any conventional institution. As a collective expression of the working class they provide a means of overcoming the sham democracy of parliamentary elections under capitalism. (Ness and Azzellini 2011, 45)

Workers' councils are moreover subject to continuous regeneration and an ability to deal with any exigency arising from their development. The Paris Commune illustrates the innovations and creative responses to the context that accompanied the sociopolitical mobilisation that took place during the existence of the Commune.

The relevance of these issues is now being graphically demonstrated by recent events in the trade union movement in South Africa through the ruptures within and among trade union federations around questions of political party alliances, disagreements which have led to contentious debates and discussions within unions, and the disquiet

around financial management and the rise of bureaucracies and "business unionism", as evidenced by the disputes within the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA).[16] These antagonistic conflicts show that the issue of workers' control and democratic organisation remains critical to contemporary issues concerning the working class and its communities more generally. These contestations are no less an expression of the wider social contradictions that face contemporary political and social systems in many parts of the world.

In South Arica, regarded by many as one of the most unequal societies on earth, these contradictions are exacerbated not only by the existence of egregious inequalities, but also by the daily struggles confronting a society in which about 30 million inhabitants live below the upper poverty line, over 10 million are without jobs and without prospects of having one in the future, and where food, energy, water and other essentials of life present a daily struggle.

These realities exist within an ostensibly democratic political system lauded for the regularity and fairness of its electoral system; for its multi-party parliamentary assembly and the robust (though sometimes comedic and unruly) debates that take place in it; the proper demarcation between legislative, executive and judicial authority; and the independence of the judiciary and the much-lauded rule of law and Constitution.

But these positive attributes notwithstanding, the contradictions of the political economy and its institutions and systems have remained intractable and unmoved despite years of "democratic governance", suggesting that the particular attribute of a democratic polity evinced in the South African state is simply inadequate and needs reimagination. The present crisis cries out for an alternative to both the weaknesses of the democratic and parliamentary forms associated with capitalism and the inability of traditional unions to represent the interests of workers under the conditions of neoliberal globalisation. It calls for a democracy that transcends the limitations of "liberal representative democracy", because it does not represent a challenge to the "domination" of the global corporate regimes. In his Foreword to *An Alternative Labour History: Worker Control and Workplace Democracy*, Azzellini argues:

> If the world of work under capitalism is largely a realm of unfreedom, workers taking over the companies that employ them and running them under self-management is emblematic of the emancipation of labor. Yet the relation between such workplace "recuperation" as it is now known and broader social change raises a host of issues. What, for example, is the relation between the control of a single workplace by its particular employees and control by society over the economy as a whole? (Azzellini 2015, vii)

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[16] A spate of articles has appeared in the public media around the disagreements, legal challenges, claims and counterclaims made by disputing factions within NUMSA, leading to legal challenges around the decision-making structures and practices of the union and workers' control (see, for example, Stent and Lali 2022).

Similarly, Alex Demirović argues that workplace democracy transcends the limitations of political democracy and is an alternative to "liberal representative democracy", because the latter does not represent a challenge to the "domination" of the bourgeois class. For him, the limitations of "parliamentary democracy are therefore not simply incidental to it: they systematically contribute to the dominance of the bourgeoisie and its specific structure of ownership" (Demirović 2015, 33).

An alternative and wider conception of democracy must be substantive and represent especially the interests of the most disadvantaged in society who are, in societies such as South Africa, none other than the members of the working classes and the poor, socially marginalised by the systemic characteristics and structures of political, economic and social control. Workers' control and self-management, their theorisation and practice, are inherently about a fundamental alternative to the organisation of the prevailing regimes of power and social privilege based on ideologies and cultural memes, which have been fostered as normative social conventions.

The necessity for much greater openness to the ideas espoused by the proponents of workers' control presents opportunities for rethinking the social system more fundamentally, especially because of its reliance on the participation of the citizenry as a whole in the political, cultural, economic and social institutions that represent them. And these issues have a great deal of relevance to all of society because they also raise fundamental questions about the transition to a post-capitalist society given its continuing inability to meet the basic needs of the global citizenry through the continuous production of dystopic conditions in the lives of millions of people, the prevalence of war and civil strife, and the rampant levels of unemployment and poverty associated with the inequality spawned by the structural attributes of global corporate wealth production for a tiny global elite (Di Muzio 2015; Harvey 2003). Even more alarming is the reality that these very conditions have given rise to the most damaging ecological and climatic conditions, threatening the very possibility of continued life on the planet (Klein 2014; Steinberg 2010).

Discussions about a counter-hegemonic project such as workers' control and self-management point to concrete and realisable alternatives that could be mobilised to promote new forms of social life, livelihoods and relationships predicated on genuine democracy to build a social system that protects both the sanctity of human life and the very planet on which such life exists. The reorganisation represented by workers' control and self-management is very much about such possibilities and prefigures a new system of social relations premised on democratic arrangements built from below, constructing meaningful livelihoods and finding ways to use resources through sharing and caring and obviating the dominance of a globally oppressive and exploitative system.

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