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Automation and Workplace Democracy: Autonomy, Recognition, and Meaningful Work

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Building on the philosophical literature on the importance of workplace democracy, the article proposes a tripartite framework to conceptualise an ethically desirable course of automation. Three groups of argument are invoked: arguments from autonomy, interpersonal recognition, and meaningful work. These three groups of arguments are applied to analyse automation: whether automation extends or limits workers' autonomy, interpersonal recognition, and meaningfulness of work. The last section of the article illustrates the tripartite framework with contemporary literature on automation and technological change.

Keywords: automation, workplace democracy, autonomy, recognition, meaningful work

INTRODUCTION

Recent discussions on automation are mostly focused on its role in eliminating jobs. Automation is analysed as a threat to various forms of employment, and the destabilising effects this could have for contemporary societies (Frey 2019). Or automation is conceived as an emancipatory force that could deliver post-work societies (Bastani 2019; Srnicek, Williams 2016; Danaher 2021). In both cases, automation is approached from the perspective of eradicating some forms of work.

While automation obviously makes some forms of work obsolete, it also transforms existing employment structures and power relations in the workplace. Thus, a normative perspective is necessary that would allow to conceptualise an ethically desirable direction of such transformations. This article builds such a framework, drawing from various arguments that democratisation of workplaces is important for the well-being of the workers as autonomous rational agents and for the meaningfulness of the work itself. The debate on workplace democracy is extensive and many different arguments are produced in support for it (see Frega et al. 2019; Kepelner 2024 for useful summaries), yet automation is rarely considered as a factor that could either hinder or encourage democratisation of workplaces.

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In this paper, I focus on three different groups of arguments on why workplace democracy is desirable: first, workplace democracy is essential for the effective exercise of individual autonomy; second, workplace democracy strengthens the interpersonal relations of recognition; and third, workplace democracy is important for the overall meaningfulness of work. Therefore, democracy within these debates is understood not just as a formal or procedural element, but itself as a value, grounded in the ethical importance of participation and diversity (Sartori 1962). These three different arguments allow us to form a tripartite framework to conceptualise an ethically desirable course of automation. The proposed structure should not be understood as including all arguments for economic democracy. I introduce arguments that could be directly informative when considering automation, therefore some arguments for workplace democracy, for example, those that proceed from firm-state analogy (Dahl 1985), will not be included in the discussion.

The first three sections of this paper discuss the three different groups of arguments for workplace democracy and builds a tripartite framework to consider the effects of automation: automation can be either a threat to individual autonomy, interpersonal recognition and meaningfulness of work by destroying the structures of democratic control, or an opportunity to expand these dimensions by creating better conditions for democracy in the workplace. The last section draws on recent discussions on automation and technological change to illustrate the framework.

Before proceeding with the main argument, a comment on terminology is in order, as a difference can be drawn between the concepts of workplace democracy and of economic democracy. Workplace democracy refers to workers' control of the workplace via various forms of collective democratic decision making. Economic democracy usually refers to shared ownership, to a principle that the means of production should not only be collectively governed but also collectively owned. While economic democracy implies workplace democracy, whether workplace democracy requires economic democracy is a matter of debate. While convincing arguments are advanced that workplace democracy, in order to be effective, requires economic democracy (Vrousalis 2019), in this article I will retain an agnostic position as to the forms of ownership. The central focus will be on the forms of democratic participation in the workplace as a basic minimum of democracy in the economic sphere.

AUTONOMY AND WORKPLACE DEMOCRACY

Autonomy is one of the key categories of liberal political thought. Autonomy is usually understood as freedom of individuals to make their own life choices. It comes from the Kantian ethics, where autonomy is understood as self-determination, that is, as a rational power of individuals to give themselves their own moral laws, instead of following the injunctions of others (heteronomy). Autonomy is also related to responsibility: only autonomous actions are those actions that the individual is really responsible for. Discussions on autonomy also stress that only informed decisions count as truly autonomous, that is, those decisions that proceed from deliberation and knowledge of relevant information.

In the political sphere, autonomy is guaranteed via extensive liberties: leaving as much space as is possible and desirable for the agents themselves to make their life choices without undue interference. When applied to the economic sphere, autonomy can have two meanings. First, autonomy is exercised in the choice of employment when agents are free to choose what kind of employment they prefer and to freely enter or not to enter into that employment. Heteronomy here would occur when the agent is forced into working relations: for example,

in various forms of unfree labour, or when the agent has no other realistic choice than to enter a given employment contract. This latter aspect could be enlarged to mean that autonomy in the economic sphere also requires to have a choice not to enter into any employment at all. In this first level of autonomy, social security could be understood as guaranteeing at least some autonomy for individuals in the economic sphere.

Yet there is a second level of autonomy in the economic sphere, which concerns with what happens in the workplace itself. In order to fully exercise their autonomy, agents should have a realistic possibility to exercise it within the workplace. This second level of autonomy supports the demand of workplace democracy. A classical defence of the argument that is not possible to lead an autonomous life as a whole without exercising autonomy at the level of workplace was provided by Edina Schwartz (1982). More recently, Andrea Veltman has also stressed that 'whether workers exercise intelligence and autonomy *in* work is no less important than whether they exercise autonomy in an initial choice of employment' (Veltman 2016: 76, emphasis in the original). Without this second level, the overall individual autonomy would be radically curtailed, as it would entail choosing to enter into non-autonomous relations. When a workplace becomes a place to exercise autonomy, it also becomes a place to exercise responsibility: workers become responsible for the decisions reached in the workplace. Workplace becomes a niche for responsible agency (Sharov, Tønnessen 2021). As to the issue of how extensive democratic practices in the workplace are required to be by the principle of autonomy, is a matter of debate. Is it enough for a worker to participate in periodic meetings in which collective decisions are made? As for Veltman, her arguments seem to be limited to this level of autonomy. Schartz argues that the principle of autonomy also requires a collective ownership of workplaces.

RECOGNITION AND WORKPLACE DEMOCRACY

Axel Honneth's theory of recognition provides another influential argument for the significance of democratic relations in the economic sphere. Honneth (1996) has argued that the development of healthy human subjectivity depends on various levels of intersubjective recognition, of which he distinguishes three fundamental levels. The first level concerns the relationships of care and love when individual needs and desires are recognised and met: this level of recognition is exercised in intimate relations and forms of family. The second level concerns the recognition of individual as an equal and autonomous person: it takes the form of political rights and freedoms. The third level concerns the recognition of the individual as a specific subject with various skills and talents: this form of recognition is exercised through networks of cooperation and solidarity. Recognition in all the areas is mutual: only by recognising others as equal subjects with specific capacities, argues Honneth, can I feel recognised as such subject in return (1996: 38).

It is the third level of recognition, the recognition of individual as a subject with various skills and talents, that concerns work relations: 'the chances of forming an individual identity through the experience of recognition are directly related to the societal institutionalization and distribution of labor' (Honneth 2007: 76). Recognition through solidarity and social esteem depend on labour organisation and workplace relations. However, Honneth has mostly used the third level of recognition to critically examine labour markets, and for the most part has not connected the question of social esteem in labour with the question of democratising workplaces. Only in his later work Honneth connects the issues of recognition with democracy in the economic sphere. In his critical examination of the idea of socialism, Honneth

(2017) connects all levels of recognition with what he terms 'the democratic form of life' and argues for the need to democratise the personal, the political and the economic spheres. The idea of democratic form of life means that 'subjects cooperatively contribute in their personal, economic and political relationships to the task of maintaining their community' (ibid.: 92). Honneth writes in support of 'a community of solidarity between producers who recognize each other's abilities and contributions' (ibid.: 11). While in the market system individuals recognise each other only as egotistical subjects in the form of individual competition, economic democracy, on the contrary, entails recognition of each's individual needs in a form of democratic cooperation (ibid.: 17).

Other scholars have connected the issue of recognition with the principle of workplace democracy more directly. O. Hirvonen and K. Breen (2020), employing the theory of recognition, argue that the case for workplace democracy can be made from two arguments: an argument from respect and an argument from esteem. The principle of respect would demand that all workers have their say in workplaces, that all participate equally in democratic decision making, everyone's voice is heard and respected. While the argument from esteem claims that in order for workplaces to be locations where esteem for one's knowledge, skills and accomplishments is achieved, it is necessary to put workplaces under democratic control. The authors argue that workplace democratisation 'makes it more likely that the standards of esteem formed through workers' voice are such that they would enable a more egalitarian distribution of the opportunities to attain esteem' (Hirvonen, Breen 2020: 724). While the first aspect overlaps with the principle of autonomy, it is the question of recognising each other's contributions and skills that makes the recognition argument different. Democratic workplaces, by subsuming the labour process and the distribution of tasks under collective decision making, create better opportunities to distribute tasks and arrange the labour process in a way that allows for the best exercise of everyone's capabilities and skills.

MEANINGFUL WORK AND WORKPLACE DEMOCRACY

Meaningful work in recent scholarship is understood as a multidimensional category, containing various dimensions of meaningfulness, that often include autonomy and recognition among them (Veltman 2014; Smids et al. 2020). In the debates on meaningful work, arguments are also raised about the need to democratise workplaces: these discussions provide another distinct argument for workplace democracy. The first two groups of arguments were concerned with an individual exercise of autonomy and the mutuality of recognition. Here, the concern shifts to the working activities themselves: what makes work to be experienced as meaningful and fulfilling for the worker?

Ruth Yeoman (2014) gives a comprehensive philosophical defence on the value of workplace democratisation from the perspective of meaningful of work. She argues that workplaces become imbued with meaning by the workers as 'meaning-makers' projecting meaning to their work. Therefore, meaningfulness of work depends on workplace organisation that enables collective meaning-making: 'the proliferation of meaningful work requires the institution of a system of workplace democracy with the dimensions of democratic authority and agonistic participatory practices' (Yeoman 2014: 96). There are two key concepts in Yeoman's discussion on workplace democracy: democratic authority and agonistic practices. Democratic authority is necessary for the relations of non-domination in the workplace. Domination is inimical to the production of meaning: if the worker is only a subject of other's decisions and control, the work is experienced as alienated, as something done for

external reasons. Democratic authority means that decisions about workplace management and task performance are collective, arising from all the workers. Such authority is not based on domination, but on deliberation and shared agreement.

The second aspect of agonistic practice points to differences in the views of workers: because different agents have different sets of values and views, workplace becomes a place of shared meaning only through a process of continual negotiation between different views. Agonistic structures of deliberation respect the differences and encourage to bring them forward. The process of negotiating the interpretative differences, that workers have, necessitates creating structures in which different views can be freely expressed and due weight is given to all the perspectives. Therefore, resisting the asymmetries of power is essential, argues Yeoman, because such asymmetries easily distort the democratic process, by supressing some views and giving an undue weight to others. That is why hierarchical relations are inimical to the shared creation of meaning. Horizontal redistribution of power allows individuals to develop necessary confidence and self-respect in voicing their views and negotiating with others.

These agonistic democratic practices, Yeoman argues, should be extended to the level of the task: that is, workers must have a say on the way the tasks are allocated and performed (ibid.: 97). Thus, democratic deliberations extend from more general decisions about the workplace, let us say, pay share or investment of profits, to the more minute aspects on the way tasks are performed. This brings into public light what workers actually do in their jobs, making it a part of deliberation and negotiation. Agonistic structures allow one to continuously question how tasks are performed, allowing to negotiate especially those tasks that are often seen as having little meaning for the worker: 'to expose value-deprived work time-spaces, opening them up to challenge and contestation over means and purposes, advancing new ways of organising the work around different values, and enriching ontological diversity' (ibid.: 171).

While the issue of agonistic practices concerns the need of voicing differences and questioning established consensus, yet it is contained within a shared culture of democratic authority mediating between opposition and agreement. While voicing opposing views is essential, workplace democratic practices are 'mediating those differences into positive meanings' (ibid.: 154). The result should be not a monolithic view shared by everyone, but a 'differentiated polysensus' in which differences are not eliminated but articulated and sustained in a constant process of negotiation. A type of emotional investment that such agonistic practices produce, therefore, differs from contemporary corporations that seek to infuse their workspaces with leisure activities, team-building exercises and other practices in order to produce employee's emotional investment to their workplace. Such practices seek to produce a monolithic culture, as opposed to the agonistic and pluralistic culture of a democratic workplace.

AUTOMATION AS A THREAT TO OR AN OPORTUNITY FOR AUTONOMY, RECOGNITION, AND MEANINGFUL WORK

The three different groups of argument for economic democracy discussed in the sections above, point to three different aspects in regard to which the exercise of economic democracy is desirable. The first, the most basic level, is that of individual autonomy: participation in collective decision making is a way to exercise one's autonomy as a rational agent. The perspective of recognition points to interpersonal relations: democratic structures here are seen as sustaining

and expanding interpersonal recognition by allowing the collective decisions about the allocation of tasks. And thirdly, democratic structures are seen as essential for the meaningfulness of work itself, by opening the tasks to be redefined by those who perform them. These three approaches combined then offer a tripartite framework to conceptualise an ethically desirable course of autonomation. Automation is desirable if it allows one to expand the individual autonomy, interpersonal recognition, and the meaningfulness of work; it should be resisted if it restricts the autonomy, recognition, and/or the meaningfulness of work.

At the level of individual autonomy, automation might either restrict the chances for autonomous decision making, or it might provide opportunities for a better exercise of autonomy. Two aspects are involved here: first, the ability to make decisions at all; second, the ability to make informed decisions. An example of automation as a threat to autonomy can be found in the contemporary forms of algorithm-driven work when the tasks to be performed and the speed of work are dictated by algorithms, leaving no choice for the worker other than to follow what the algorithm is demanding. This is especially evident in various forms of services, like delivery or transportation, as well as in a variety of algorithm govern platform work and micro-work (Jones 2021). There, any kind of decision making by the workers is precluded. Yet, the same algorithmic technologies can also function in an enabling fashion. As Jones (2021) also argues, if taken under collective control, algorithmic forms of automating the distribution of work can actually help to make informed decisions. A similar point was also argued by Paul Mason (2015), who suggested that all the information gathered by contemporary forms of surveying employees and customers should be appropriated for collective control and use. Such technologies can enhance the knowledge of workers on how to reach the best choices of the distribution and the performance of tasks, combining the interest of efficiency with the autonomy of workers. More recently, Irene Sitiropoulou (2023) has considered measuring and quantifying technologies that would serve the interest of freedom instead of perpetuating the exploitation of workers and nature.

When approached from the perspective of recognition, workplace democracy is understood as creating conditions for individuals to cooperate as equally contributing agents with their skills and talents. If automation deskills works and makes workers more and more just and addendum to the machine, then it is inimical to the relations of recognition. Therefore, various Tayloristic practices, whose main purpose is to deskill work and to decompose tasks into smaller units that any worker could perform, destroy the conditions for recognition. Yet, automation can also play a positive role: if, for example, repetitive and dull tasks are relegated to the machines, workers are freed to engage in more creative tasks, including participating in the democratic control of their workplace. Furthermore, the theory of recognition, when applied to the workplace, concerns not only the relations between the workers, but also the relations between the workers and the machines, worker–machine interactions. As argued by I. Brink and C. Balkenius (2020), the relations of recognition in the workplace also demand that machines are not perceived as simply tools, but as collaborators in complex tasks.

The aspect of meaningful work directs our attention to the question of how much the tasks themselves are open to collective negotiations. Can the workers exercise control on the way the tasks are shaped and performed? The process of automation here can also play either a restrictive or an enabling role. If new machines are introduced to the labour process in an authoritarian manner, without taking into consideration the needs and knowledge of the workers, leaving the workers only to adjust to processes that are outside their control, possibilities for a meaningful negotiation at the level of task performance become quite limited.

Yet if workers could exert control on the process of automation, via a democratic authority that makes decisions on which technologies and where are introduced, negotiating the role of technologies in the performance of concrete tasks, then the possibilities of workplace democracy are enhanced. Even further, this democratic process could extend to the level of the design of the machines, with an intent of designing and introducing such machines that would correspond to the needs and concerns of those who perform the tasks. The concerns raised here would correspond to, for example, Andrew Feenberg's discussion on the need of democratic rationalisations in the way technologies are designed and introduced, opening the possibility for various social values to be reflected in the very design of technological devices (Feenberg 2002). Similarly, Ian Angus has argued that workplace democracy creates conditions for the workers to become 'social subjects of technical activity', freely and consciously shaping human-technology interactions (Angus 2019).

CONCLUSIONS

Building on the literature of workplace democracy, this paper proposed a tripartite framework to conceptualise ethically desirable effects of automatisation for workplace relations and production processes. Automation is desirable if it expands individual autonomy in decision making, creates better conditions for mutual recognition of individuals and their various skills and abilities, and enables the transformation of concrete tasks to make work more meaningful for the worker. This framework then allows one to respond to various concerns raised regarding AI, robotisation, and other processes of automation. Automation can pose various challenges and be a socially destructive force, eliminate not only some forms of work, but also change the relations in the workplace for the worse. Yet, as this article suggests, automation can also be a positive force, yet only if it is subjected to democratic practices at the level of the workplace. With the help of automating technologies, democratic workplaces can become spaces to exercise autonomy, recognition, and engage in meaningful activities.

The framework developed here should be understood as provisional and various other aspects could be considered and integrated in future discussions. It remains a matter of further discussion and empirical research of the process of automation in concrete workplaces to show in greater detail how automation affects the three aspects discussed here either positively or negatively.

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Automatizacija ir demokratija darbe: autonomija, pripažinimas ir prasmingas darbas

Santrauka

Remiantis filosofine literatūra apie demokratijos darbe reikšmę, straipsnyje suformuojama trilypė perspektyva etiškai pageidautiniems automatizacijos procesams konceptualizuoti. Remiamasi trimis skirtingomis prieigomis dėl demokratijos darbe: argumentais iš autonomijos principo, pripažinimo teorijos ir prasmingo darbo. Šios trys argumentų grupės panaudojamos automatizacijai aptarti: ar automatizacija plečia, ar riboja darbuotojų autonomiją, tarpasmeninį pripažinimą ir darbo prasmingumą. Paskutinis straipsnio skirsnis iliustruoja šią trijų lygių perspektyvą remiantis literatūra apie automatizaciją ir technologinę kaitą.

Raktažodžiai: automatizacija, demokratija darbe, autonomija, pripažinimas, prasmingas darbas