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ARTICLE

Union Democracy as a Foundation for a Participatory Society: A Theoretical Elaboration and Historical Example

Tom Langford

BOTH RONALDO MUNCK AND KIM MOODY have borrowed Karl Polanyi's notion of a "great transformation" to emphasize how profoundly workers and labour unions in advanced capitalist countries have been affected over the past 35 years by the globalization of production systems and neoliberal policies.¹ In the face of a shrinking membership and a sharp decline in economic and political power, private-sector unions have been forced to consider how they might reconfigure their structures and priorities to survive in the new political economy. Among the important questions broached in the "union revitalization" literature of recent years is the place of union democracy in efforts to rebuild union power. Analysts such as Moody, David Camfield and Stephanie Ross have made strong cases for rank-and-file democracy as the foundation for renewal.² In contrast, Kim Voss recently argued that unions should be "leverage-centred" (as in leveraging economic democracy in the broader polity) rather than "worker-centred" and asks the leading question, "To what extent does building greater economic democracy at a society level depend on union members directly participating in the process of internal democratic discernment?"³

1. Ronaldo Munck, *Globalisation and Labour: The New "Great Transformation"* (London: Zed Books, 2002); Kim Moody, *US Labor in Trouble and Transition* (London: Verso, 2007), 11.

2. Moody, *US Labor in Trouble and Transition*, 176–180; David Camfield, *Canadian Labour in Crisis: Reinventing the Workers' Movement* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2011), 119–120; Stephanie Ross, "Social Unionism and Membership Participation: What Role for Union Democracy?" *Studies in Political Economy* 81 (Spring 2008): 148–149.

3. Kim Voss, "Democratic Dilemmas: Union Democracy and Union Renewal," *Transfer* 16, 3 (2010): 371, 375–377, 380.

This recent scholarly engagement with union democracy is most welcome since the social scientific classic in the area, *Union Democracy*,⁴ is dated and surprisingly few researchers pursued this subject between the mid-1960s and the end of the 20th century, despite the expanding attention to theories of democracy, social movements, and civil society. My intention in this essay is to step back from the immediate issue of union revitalization and argue that union democracy (in the sense of active direct democracy at local levels in combination with highly accountable representative systems at more general levels)⁵ has the potential to do much more than revitalize unions – it could serve as a foundation for a participatory society that, once institutionalized, will endure even as particular unions rise and decline in response to technological changes and geographical shifts in economic production and population. Democratizing labour unions, in other words, can be a starting point for a thoroughgoing democratization of society along the lines suggested in the classic writings on participatory democracy by Carole Pateman, C. B. Macpherson, and Carol Gould.⁶

I am certainly not the first to suggest this line of reasoning. For example, in 1998 Elaine Bernard argued that democratic unions could be models for the gradual expansion of democratic expectations and processes throughout society. More recently Stephanie Ross contended that unions involving rank-and-file members in “deep union democracy” are prefigurative since they begin “to construct the very democratic institutions many would like to see developed in the rest of society.”⁷ Nevertheless, if the prefigurative democratic potential of labour unions is to progress from vague ideal to strategic goal, we need to clarify a number of analytical issues concerning democracy in labour unions and the theory of participatory democracy; and learn from historical examples where democratic unions have served as a template and training ground for the expansion of democracy into other institutions. This essay aims to contribute to both of these general tasks. First, I review the stream of scholarship that began with *Union Democracy* in 1956 in order to

4. Seymour Martin Lipset, Martin Trow, and James Coleman, *Union Democracy: The Internal Politics of the International Typographical Union* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1956).

5. “For a union to be highly democratic,” argues David Camfield, “members must be able to control union affairs. Union locals that hold frequent meetings open to all members and in which members are able to use these meetings to make important decisions are potentially highly democratic organizations” (*Canadian Labour in Crisis*, 45). The second sentence of this quote captures the direct democracy that is possible at the local level in unions.

6. Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); C. B. Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 93–115; Carol C. Gould, *Rethinking Democracy: Freedom and Social Cooperation in Politics, Economy, and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

7. Elaine Bernard, “Creating Workplace Communities in the Workplace,” in Gregory Mantsios, ed., *A New Labor Movement for the New Century* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 10; Ross, “Social Unionism and Membership Participation,” 149.

establish its relevance to the question of unions as a beachhead for a participatory society. Second, I rethink the concept of participatory democracy in light of three strands of recent democratic theory: feminist critiques of gendered conceptions of democracy, agonistic pluralism, and deliberative democracy. Third, I address the question of why labour unions should be a focal point for efforts to democratize democracy. And fourth, I sketch a historical example of how the combination of direct democracy and representative democratic accountability in the five United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) locals in the Crowsnest Pass, Canada, in the mid-20th century, served not only as a crucial source of working-class power in struggles against coal companies, the provincial and federal states, and an autocratic international union, but also as the foundation for the spread of democracy in this regional coalfield society.

Lessons from the Union Democracy Thread of Scholarship

SUCH WAS THE ACADEMIC INTEREST in labour unions during the high point of private-sector unionism in North America – from the mid-1940s until the early 1960s – that Alice Cook wrote in 1963 that trade unions had “become one of the more thoroughly researched private or quasi-private institutions.”⁸ Seymour Martin Lipset, Martin Trow, and James Coleman’s famous study of the internal politics of the International Typographical Union (ITU) was part of this scholarly upsurge; it identified the social and historical roots of the unique, institutionalized party system in the ITU that resulted in regular contested elections and periodic changes in union leadership. The ITU was a deviant case on the North American labour scene in the 1950s since it was the only union with such a party system at the central level and was thus the only union that met Lipset et al.’s restricted notion that party competition is the *sine qua non* of democracy; all other unions, and, indeed, the multitude of voluntary organizations like professional and business associations and cooperatives, were judged to fit the pattern of “one-party oligarchy.”⁹ Among the key social conditions that sustained the party system in the ITU were minimal differences in income and status among the membership of printers and the existence of an extra-vocational social system (consisting of printers’ clubs, chapel organizations, and informal groups) that served to inform ITU members about union issues and provide a training ground for union leaders.¹⁰ Lipset et al. celebrated the democracy of the ITU but pessimistically concluded that the conditions that created this democracy were so peculiar that there was little hope for parallel party systems to develop in other unions. “We have shown that there is much more variation in the internal organization of associations than the notion of

8. Alice H. Cook, *Union Democracy: Practice and Ideal. An Analysis of Four Large Local Unions* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1963), 1.

9. Lipset, Trow, and Coleman, *Union Democracy*, 1.

10. Lipset, Trow, and Coleman, *Union Democracy*, 161–162, 227.

an iron law of oligarchy would imply," they stated, "but nevertheless, the implications of our analysis for democratic organizational politics are almost as pessimistic as those postulated by Robert Michels."¹¹ Significantly they argued that although almost all voluntary associations were internally undemocratic, they nevertheless "operate to maintain democracy by acting as independent bases of power" in the broader polity.¹² *Union Democracy* therefore leaves us with the two-pronged conclusion that although internal union democracy is an unrealistic societal objective, strong, oligarchical unions serve a counterbalancing role in the plural elite system of governance.

Patrick McGovern recently argued, "*Union Democracy* was a path-breaking and provocative study that ought to have been succeeded by a series of studies that would have identified the conditions associated with oligarchy, democracy, and possibly even dictatorship, in other kinds of voluntary organizations. Instead, it was left on a pedestal, widely admired, but rarely imitated." According to McGovern, Lipset believed the theory of organizational democracy outlined in *Union Democracy* was ignored "in part because it was based on a study of trade unions."¹³ However, the theoretical contribution of *Union Democracy* was just as likely neglected because the book was entirely too pessimistic about the possibilities for "democratizing democracy" in contemporary societies. As detailed above, Lipset et al. saw democracy in the ITU as the exception that proved the rule of the "iron law of oligarchy." However their contemporary, Alvin Gouldner, had persuasively argued the year before the publication of *Union Democracy* that "even as Michels himself saw, if oligarchical waves repeatedly wash away the bridges of democracy, this eternal recurrence can happen only because men [and women] doggedly rebuild them after each inundation." Gouldner believed that "Michels chose to dwell on only one aspect of this process, neglecting to consider this other side" and Gouldner's criticism can be applied with equal force to Lipset et al.'s approach in the disingenuously titled *Union Democracy*. In an assertion that anticipated important cultural and political currents that emerged in the 1960s, Gouldner memorably stated, "There cannot be an iron law of oligarchy, however, unless there is an iron law of democracy."¹⁴

Studies following up on Lipset et al.'s research have successfully demonstrated that democracy is somewhat more prevalent in labour unions than suggested by the pessimistic conclusion of *Union Democracy*. These studies have employed one of two research logics. The first logic accepts Lipset et al.'s plural elite notion of union democracy as involving electoral competition for

11. Lipset, Trow and, Coleman, *Union Democracy*, 454.

12. Lipset, Trow and, Coleman, *Union Democracy*, 90.

13. Patrick McGovern, "The Young Lipset on the Iron Law of Oligarchy: A Taste of Things to Come," *British Journal of Sociology* 61, Supplement 1 (2010): 38.

14. Alvin W. Gouldner, "Metaphysical Pathos and the Theory of Bureaucracy," *American Political Science Review* 49, 2 (1955): 506.

senior leadership positions but attempts to show that the conditions that give rise to such competition are somewhat more diverse than those suggested in *Union Democracy*. The second logic rejects Lipset et al.'s conceptualization of democracy as too narrow and proceeds to demonstrate how unions, when judged against a broader set of criteria, tend to be reasonably democratic in orientation. Findings across both of these research logics are complementary.

An early follow-up study of electoral competition by J. David Edelstein and Malcolm Warner employed quantitative methods to identify the organizational structures and procedures that determined the extent of electoral competition in samples of 51 American and 31 British unions, studied between 1949 and 1966. The authors then deepened their analysis with case studies of the democratic processes in several unions, notably the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) in Britain. In reference to the NUM and AEU, Edelstein and Warner concluded:

What the two unions have in common summarises fairly well the basic explanation for their oppositions: (a) a status hierarchy and path for advancement which stimulate competition among relatively equal full-time officers; (b) a regional substructure which does the same; (c) limitations on the powers of national officials through specific rules governing their conduct, local autonomy, and other significant power centres in existence; and (d) a voting system which facilitates the combination of minorities against leading contenders for office.¹⁵

Of particular importance in this analysis is the identification of local and regional autonomy within a union as supportive of the development of electoral competition. In general, the literature points to subunit political autonomy as a key determinant of union democracy.¹⁶ Indeed in the conclusion of her study of four large local unions, Cook stated, "The assignment of some measurable degree of self-government to the subordinate units of the union is intimately related to union democracy. As much as any other element in the whole democratic compound it may be considered essential."¹⁷

Since the NUM and AEU each featured longstanding political competitions between left-wing and right-wing leaders, Edelstein and Warner were forced to address the relative contributions of ideological divergences and organizational characteristics to the extent of electoral competition. "The ideological splits within the Mineworkers and the Engineers have contributed the content to their electoral opposition," they noted, "and have added to the democratic processes a significance which they might otherwise have lacked. Nevertheless,

15. Edelstein and Warner, *Comparative Union Democracy: Organisation and Opposition in British and American Unions* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1976), 314.

16. Judith Stepan-Norris, "The Making of Union Democracy," *Social Forces* 76, 2 (1997): 489; Clyde W. Summers, "From Industrial Democracy to Union Democracy," *Journal of Labor Research* 21, 1 (2000): 11; Margaret Levi, David Olson, Jon Agnone, and Devin Kelly, "Union Democracy Reexamined," *Politics & Society* 37, 2 (2009): 221.

17. Cook, *Union Democracy: Practice and Ideal*, 235.

basically it has been the formal system which has provided the avenue for the expression of factional differences and a favourable environment for factional growth."¹⁸ According to other researchers, however, the preceding conclusion ignores the feedback loop between political advocacy and the structural/cultural conditions sustaining union democracy. For instance, Philip Nyden found that rank-and-file caucuses in large United Steelworker locals in North America studied between 1975 and 1983 played a school-of-democracy role that was analogous to that played by the extra-vocational occupational communities of ITU printers in the 1950s.¹⁹ Along the same line, a case study of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) in the United States ascertained that the union's leadership had promoted substantive debate over the years "through its newspapers, labour education, and open mics at meetings" and thus helped to create "a rank-and-file membership schooled in democratic practice and empowered to act on it."²⁰ In addition, Judith Stepan-Norris discovered that active electoral competition in Local 600 of the United Automobile Workers (UAW), studied between the 1940s and 1980s, was sustained by leaders with diverse political views who were based in different autonomous units of Local 600. She noted, "This diversity was made possible, in large part, by the involvement of outside organizations,"²¹ namely the Communist Party and the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists.

Does the specific content of a group's political advocacy affect the shape of union democracy? Nyden concluded, "Reform caucuses ... that adopt democratic structures and processes are the ones most likely to bring about democratic reform in the larger organization."²² Along a comparable line, Stepan-Norris stated, "Factionalism's impact on union democracy depends in part on the ideological orientation driving it."²³ In Local 600 of the UAW, both right-wing and left-wing political caucuses provided democratic training schools for interested workers. However, "Communist factions" were judged to be "*more* likely than non-Communist factions to contribute to union democracy" because they offered a meaningful, interesting platform and "favored democratic functioning in unions."²⁴ Finally, the stress on rank-and-file

18. Edelstein and Warner, *Comparative Union Democracy*, 314.

19. Philip W. Nyden, "Democratizing Organizations: A Case Study of a Union Reform Movement," *American Journal of Sociology* 90, 6 (1985): 1183, 1197.

20. Levi et al., "Union Democracy Reexamined," 221.

21. Stepan-Norris, "Making of Union Democracy," 490.

22. Nyden, "Union Reform Movement," 1183.

23. Stepan-Norris, "Making of Union Democracy," 475.

24. Stepan-Norris, "Making of Union Democracy," 492.

participation in the ILWU was an outgrowth of the ideological commitments of its “founding leaders and those who followed them.”²⁵

In summary, the literature that has challenged the pessimistic conclusion of *Union Democracy* suggests that union democracy depends upon two factors that are often mutually reinforcing: (1) features of organizational structure that allow oppositional forces to secure independent power bases in a union; and (2) a strong political push from a left-wing group or caucus that is committed to promoting genuine involvement by the rank-and-file.²⁶

At the same time, this literature has proposed a multidimensional conceptualization of union democracy that stands in sharp relief to Lipset et al.’s narrow focus on electoral competition. It is noteworthy that even Edelstein and Warner, who limited the focus of their own research to electoral competition, argued that the different dimensions of union democracy are sufficiently distinct that “no systematic way can be offered to arrive at a general combined measure of the degree of overall democracy.”²⁷ Cook likewise emphasized the complexity of union democracy, suggesting in the following quote that a gestalt approach is appropriate: “Democracy is not to be measured by any single element. It does not exist because a union practices majority rule or uses the secret ballot or relies on rank-and-file participation in the executive board. Rather, it is a complex cluster of practices and values which have to be seen in their totality.”²⁸

At this point in my argument, what is important is not the exact delineation of dimensions but rather the acknowledgment that any fair and balanced study of union democracy has to take into account multiple dimensions, each in connection to the others. The importance of multi-dimensionality is illustrated in John Anderson’s study of democratic processes in 95 municipal public sector local unions in Canada in the 1970s. He identified three dimensions of democracy: membership participation, the closeness of elections for local president, and the influence of members on the direction of the local. Among his findings were that “closeness of elections and member influence were not significantly correlated”; and that greater environmental uncertainty decreased membership influence while having no impact on the other two dimensions of union democracy. Anderson went so far as to suggest a hierarchical order to the three dimensions, concluding that measures of member influence were “more robust tests of the extent of local union democracy.” A key finding in support of this conclusion was that while organizational structure variables had no significant effects on closeness of elections in the local

25. Levi et al., “Union Democracy Reexamined,” 221.

26. Although this generalization is derived from studies of private sector unions, it should be applicable to public sector unions as well. Indeed my entire argument on union democracy is designed to be equally applicable to private and public sector unions.

27. Edelstein and Warner, *Comparative Union Democracy*, 30.

28. Cook, *Union Democracy: Practice and Ideal*, 4.

unions or membership participation, they were prominent determinants of membership influence in anticipated ways: specialization and vertical differentiation each had negative effects, controlling for other variables.²⁹ Therefore Anderson's study evidences that electoral competition is just one facet of union democracy, and not necessarily the most important one. Levi et al.'s study of the ILWU arrived at a matching conclusion. They identified "the combination of protected rank-and-file political rights and significant rank-and-file voice in and power over key union decisions" as being as important to the overall picture of union democracy as electoral competition.³⁰

The research that has followed up on *Union Democracy* therefore contradicts the overwhelmingly pessimistic conclusion about internal union democracy proffered by Lipset et al. and demonstrates why an exclusive focus on electoral competition is a myopic approach to theorizing union democracy. Whether this is enough to make us feel hopeful about the present-day prospects for union democracy, however, is an open question. On the one hand, the extent of the genuine democracy in many unions should not be ignored, and it is tempting to agree with the sunny conclusion of a 2011 paper by Linda Briskin: "Union initiatives around leadership, affirmative action, constituency, and cross-constituency organizing suggest that unions (despite their limits) might well be the most democratic of all institutions in liberal democracies, responsive to organized rank-and-file (grassroots) pressure in ways that perhaps no other institution has been."³¹ Yet on the other hand, the regime of industrial pluralism, introduced in Canada in the 1940s but often modified in anti-labour ways since then,³² has constrained the scope of democratic participation by union members through different layers of laws, regulations, and administrative oversight as well as by enhancing the power and status of a stratum of full-time union officials. Perhaps the narrowing opportunities for union democracy due to this bureaucratic vice grip is the important story,

29. John C. Anderson, "A Comparative Analysis of Local Union Democracy," *Industrial Relations* 17, 3 (1978): 279–280, 287, 292.

30. Levi et al., "Union Democracy Reexamined," 222.

31. Linda Briskin, "Trade Unions, Collective Agency, and the Struggle for Women's Equality," in Valentine M. Moghadam, Suzanne Franzway and Mary Margaret Fonow, eds., *Making Globalization Work for Women: The Role of Social Rights and Trade Union Leadership* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2011), 231.

32. Judy Fudge and Eric Tucker, *Labour Before the Law: The Regulation of Workers' Collective Action in Canada, 1900–1948* (2001; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 263–315. On court cases in the 1960s and 1970s that narrowed the rights to picket see Philip Girard and Jim Phillips, "A Certain 'Malaise': *Harrison v. Carswell*, Shopping Centre Picketing, and the Limits of the Post-war Settlement," in Judy Fudge and Eric Tucker, eds., *Work on Trial: Canadian Labour Law Struggles* (Toronto: Osgoode Society, 2010), 249–280; Eric Tucker, "*Hersees of Woodstock Ltd. v. Goldstein*: How a Small Town Case Made it Big," in Fudge and Tucker, eds., *Work on Trial*, 217–248.

rather than the alternate story I have sketched about continuing examples of union democracy in the post-World War II era.

The problem of the bureaucratic suppression of democracy inside unions is often understood in terms of a power conflict or fundamental clash of interests between union bureaucrats and rank-and-file members. The basic idea in this model is that full-time officials “have a vested interest in preserving the institutions that provide them with social power” and therefore tend to use their organizational power to seek bargaining compromises with employers and undertake conventional political advocacy rather than pursue a more confrontational, institution-challenging agenda. The defining perspective of union bureaucrats, according to Mark Leier, is the “belief that the working class must be managed, that the masses cannot determine their own struggles.”³³ If Leier is correct on this point, then union bureaucrats oppose strong mechanisms of representative democracy inside unions, let alone participatory democracy, simply because they think they know what is best for the rank-and-file.

David Camfield has argued that accounts of union bureaucracy that focus on full-time officials are “conducive to neglecting how union activity is socially organized more broadly.” His counterpoint is that union bureaucracy should be understood as different categories of formal rules that “can pervade the practice of unionism” and thereby constrain union members’ agency. The social roots of union bureaucracy include “the political administration of unions by capitalist state power.” It is interesting that Camfield circles back to ideas about union bureaucrats when he identifies “union officialdom” as an additional source of union bureaucracy (rather than being the bureaucracy itself).³⁴ Union officials cannot be ignored in any consideration of the prospects for union democracy, although their role cannot be understood apart from the underlying social relations of bureaucracy.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to give a full account of how union bureaucracy, understood broadly, has developed over the past seven decades and how it has altered the opportunities for union democracy. The crucial point is that democratic movements continue to arise inside labour unions despite the increasing density of union bureaucracy, thereby confirming Alvin Gouldner’s 1955 observation that oligarchical waves are often met by new democratic initiatives. Along the same line, David Camfield points to a “democratic countertendency” in many unions that “arises out of experiences of workers’ self-activity and self-organization.” This ever-renewing “democratic impulse” is

33. Ralph Darlington and Martin Upchurch, “A Reappraisal of the Rank-and-File Versus Bureaucracy Debate,” *Capital & Class* 36, 1 (2012): 79–87; Mark Leier, *Red Flags & Red Tape: The Making of a Labour Bureaucracy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 34.

34. David Camfield, “What is Trade Union Bureaucracy? A Theoretical Account,” *Alternate Routes* 24 (2013): 136, 138–142, 145, 146–150.

reason enough to focus on democracy inside unions even in the face of the bureaucratic social relations that constrain the rank-and-file.³⁵

My essay is ultimately aimed at showing how efforts to democratize unions can be an important foundation of efforts to build a participatory society. In the next section I explicate the classic version of the theory of participatory democracy. Furthermore I argue that while this theory continues to offer a valuable perspective on democratizing democracy, it contains three crucial weaknesses that must be corrected in order to renew the participatory democratic project. My suggestions for overcoming the crucial weaknesses draw upon insights from feminist understandings of democracy, agonistic pluralism, and deliberative democracy.

Updating the Theory of Participatory Democracy

THE THEORY OF PARTICIPATORY democracy envisions citizens actively partaking in the governance of the organizations that are fundamental to their everyday lives, and in so doing transforming both themselves and society. Carole Pateman recently emphasized that undemocratic authority structures of all types must be democratized as part of a project that will lead to the creation of “a participatory society.”³⁶ The process of participatory democratization is seen to begin with “lower level participation” that provides a “vital training ground” for citizens, enhancing their capacities for “higher level participation.”³⁷ Both Pateman and C. B. Macpherson identified democratic participation at work as a logical starting point for the process.³⁸

Pateman pointed to education as “the major function of participation in the theory of participatory democracy” and defined education as “including both the psychological aspect and the gaining of practice in democratic skills and procedures.”³⁹ The primary justification for participatory democracy, according to David Held, is that its educational thrust provides a means for equity in individual self-development.⁴⁰ For Pateman and Macpherson, however, equitable individual self-development is not an end goal of participatory democracy but rather a crucial step in the process of egalitarian social change. Specifically, as citizens in the course of participation begin to

35. Camfield, “Trade Union Bureaucracy,” 144.

36. Carole Pateman, “Participatory Democracy Revisited,” *Perspectives on Politics* 10, 1 (2012): 10.

37. Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, 35, 43, 107.

38. Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, 44; Macpherson, *Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, 103–105.

39. Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, 42.

40. David Held, *Models of Democracy*, Third Edition (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 215.

see themselves less as consumers and more as “enjoyers of the exertion and development of their own capacities,” they are expected to support democratic action to reduce social and economic inequalities.⁴¹ This occurs, according to Pateman, because “if inequalities in decision-making power are abolished the case for other forms of economic inequality become correspondingly weaker.”⁴² Therefore a participatory society is simultaneously an egalitarian society in the making. This brief exposition should make clear that the theory of participatory democracy involves much more than a set of procedures for making decisions. Indeed, it champions “a form of life as well.”⁴³

Carole Pateman published her influential 1970 book on participatory democracy as a graduate student. More than 40 years later she asked, “Now that democratic theory is enjoying such a vigorous revival, an obvious question is whether there [is] still a place for participatory theory, or is it now old-fashioned and outmoded?”⁴⁴ My answer is that the classical version of the theory has three crucial weaknesses that make it seem like it comes from a bygone era. The good news for those interested in participatory democratic theory, however, is that ideas from feminist theorizing on democracy, agonistic pluralism, and deliberative democracy can be used to address these weaknesses. I turn to this task after discussing each of the weaknesses.

It should first be noted that there are strong parallels between the theoretical weaknesses of classical Marxism and classical participatory democracy. Just as classical Marxism conceived of work and workers, class struggle and labour unions as gendered male, and paid scant attention to the oppression of women in domestic life,⁴⁵ classical participatory democracy conceived of democratic

41. Macpherson, *Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, 99–100.

42. Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, 107.

43. Held, *Models of Democracy*, 215. A participatory society would involve a great deal of decentralized, democratic control of resources and organizations, and would be committed to an inclusive egalitarianism. It therefore would blend anarchist, socialist, feminist, anti-racist, and queer visions of a good society. A participatory society would likely take the form of economic co-operatives working in concert with community organizations, equality-seeking groups, strong but decentralized local governments, and highly representative senior levels of government. It would only succeed if a strong majority of citizens had become committed to participation as a “form of life.”

44. Pateman, “Participatory Democracy Revisited,” 7. It is noteworthy that Pateman had even raised (but then dismissed) the question of participatory democracy as outmoded in the conclusion to her 1970 book (*Participation and Democratic Theory*, 111). This is a recurring question in the literature. Francesca Polletta recently noted that the scholarly consensus in the 1980s (prior to the current revival of interest in decision making that involves consultation) portrayed participatory democracy as quixotic since it seemed to neglect the issues of political effectiveness and economic efficiency (“Participatory Democracy in the New Millennium,” *Contemporary Sociology* 42, 1 (2013): 40–50.)

45. Elizabeth Faue, “Re-Imagining Labor: Gender and New Directions in Labor and Working-Class History,” in Donna Haverty-Stacke and Daniel J. Walkowitz, eds., *Rethinking U.S. Labor History: Essays on the Working-Class Experience, 1756–2009* (New York: Continuum

citizens as gendered male and failed to recognize that gender inequality “fundamentally and brutally undermines democracy.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, just as classical Marxism put forward an essentialist notion of the revolutionary proletariat, operated with a teleological view of progressive historical change and anticipated social harmony in the communist future,⁴⁷ classical participatory democracy put forward an essentialist notion of participating citizens, operated with a teleological view of progressive historical change and anticipated social harmony in the participatory society of the future. Neither theoretical approach was entirely determinist in historical outlook since the progressive future was never guaranteed. For example, in 1977 Macpherson handicapped the odds of “mov[ing] to a more participatory democracy” as less than 50/50 and termed his outline of a participatory future as “a glimpse of possibilities” rather than a “prophecy.”⁴⁸ However, the classical theorists of participatory democracy, like the classical Marxists, posited that should a process of progressive change be set in motion, it would track a determined path.

The classical statements of participatory democracy from the 1970s were thoroughly egalitarian in a generic sense and envisioned the spread of a participatory ethos throughout civil society. Nevertheless they ignored “the contemporary feminists’ insistence that personal and political life are integrally connected” and operated with conceptions of democracy and participation that were gendered male. By the early 1980s, Carole Pateman had recognized the gender bias of her classic 1970 book and was a staunch critic of the way that most advocates of participatory democracy resisted feminist arguments. This resistance was puzzling since feminism was entirely in step with the basic vision of a participatory society when it called for participatory decision making to be extended to families and other living arrangements. The resistance also was “particularly ironic because the contemporary feminist movement has, under a variety of labels, attempted to put participatory democratic organization into practice.” Pateman pointed to sexual harassment, occupational segregation by gender, and overt discrimination against women as three processes that impeded women from being able to “take their place as equal participants in a democratized workplace.” In an assessment that is as

International Publishing, 2010), 266–269.

46. Maro Pantelidou Maloutas, *The Gender of Democracy: Citizenship and Gendered Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 2006), 2.

47. Criticisms of the assumptions of classical Marxism can be found in a wide variety of works, including: G. A. Cohen, *If You’re an Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); and Frank Parkin, *Marxism and Class Theory: A Bourgeois Critique* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1979). For an argument that rejects my assertion that Marx had a teleological conception of history, see Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 146–178.

48. Macpherson, *Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, 107–108.

true today as when it was published in 1983, Pateman noted, “Women cannot win an equal place in democratic productive life and citizenship if they are deemed destined for a one ascribed task [childrearing], but nor can fathers take an equal share in reproductive activities without a transformation in our conception of ‘work’ and of the structure of economic life.”⁴⁹

Therefore the first major weakness of classical participatory democratic theory is that, despite the theory’s formal commitment to egalitarianism, it did not analyze how present-day institutional and cultural inequalities of gender distort participatory processes and consequently have to be consciously neutralized or eradicated.⁵⁰ It is noteworthy that classical participatory democracy was equally blind to the operation of other major types of social inequality inside democratic processes, including hierarchies connected to processes of racialization, ability/disability, and sexual orientation.

Turning to the second major weakness, Robert Glover recently argued, “Participatory democratic projects seek to uncover latent sources of unity and commonality” and termed this “a subtly hegemonic undertaking which seeks the *taming* of democratic energies rather than the re-vitalization of democracy.”⁵¹ For the theories of Pateman and Macpherson, however, it would be more accurate to say that thoroughgoing participation is theorized to create (rather than uncover) increasing unity and commonality over time. Nevertheless, even after registering this qualification it is fair to conclude that Glover has leveled a telling criticism of the classical version of participatory democracy. “The participatory conceptions of democracy insofar as they promote allegedly shared characteristics of community,” he contended, “actually negate the possibility of a politics receptive to modern pluralism – responsive to the claims of hitherto unrecognized and marginalized identities.”⁵² In summary, the second major weakness in the theory of participatory democracy is its exaggerated conception of the societal consensus created through participation. Expecting consensus, participatory democrats “tacitly promote uniformity of ideas” and are prone to blaming minority dissenters for being “bad” citizens.⁵³

Third, the research record indicates that the relationship between “lower level participation” in the workplace and “higher level participation” in the

49. Carole Pateman, “Feminism and Democracy,” in Graeme Duncan, ed., *Democratic Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 214–216.

50. Maloutas, *The Gender of Democracy*, 4.

51. Robert W. Glover, “Games without Frontiers? Democratic Engagement, Agonistic Pluralism and the Question of Exclusion,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 38, 1 (2012): 87–88.

52. Glover, “Games without Frontiers?” 88.

53. Peter Bachrach and Aryeh Botwinick, *Power and Empowerment: A Radical Theory of Participatory Democracy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 40; Frank Cunningham, *Theories of Democracy: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 134.

political system is both weaker and more tenuous than hypothesized by the theory of participatory democracy. This calls into question whether participatory theory should continue to put such a heavy emphasis on the workplace as the “vital training ground” in the building of a participatory society.

The education hypothesis in the theory of participatory democracy has been termed the “spillover thesis.”⁵⁴ It involves a two-stage process: (1) greater participation at work leads to an increase in political efficacy; and (2) the heightened political efficacy developed in workplace participation leads to an increase in participation in more general political forums.⁵⁵ Edward W. Greenberg, Leon Grunberg and Kelley Daniel conducted a well-designed, quantitative test of the spillover thesis that included interview data from over one thousand workers employed in producer cooperative, employee stock ownership (ESO), conventional union, and conventional non-union wood products mills in the United States. Contrary to expectations derived from the spillover thesis, they found that although workers in producer cooperative and ESO mills had a higher average workplace participation score than workers at the other mills, they had lower average scores on general measures of voting, campaign and community participation. The authors attributed this pattern to the declining economic fortunes of the producer cooperative and ESO mills included in the study: workers in those mills tended to feel considerable despair and futility about their economic futures, and this appears to have depressed their general political participation.⁵⁶ Setting aside the specifics of this explanation, its logic supports the idea that the size and even the existence of a spillover from workplace participation to general political participation is contingent upon a range of moderating variables.⁵⁷ Greenberg et al. also reported that “while the workplace is a significant socialization setting for political participation, it does not appear to be as important as other socialization agents ... especially education.”⁵⁸ This is further evidence that the creation of a generalized participatory orientation is more complicated than the simple spillover thesis of classical participatory democratic theory would suggest.

A different but complementary critique of the spillover thesis comes from Stephen Schweizer. He asserted that although workplace participation tends to have a positive effect on efficacy, “workers in participatory work environments recognize that political participation in republican political systems

54. See Edward W. Greenberg, Leon Grunberg and Kelley Daniel, “Industrial Work and Political Participation: Beyond ‘Simple Spillover,’” *Political Research Quarterly* 49, 2 (1996): 305–330; and Neil Carter, “Political Participation and the Workplace: The Spillover Thesis Revisited,” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 8, 3 (2006): 410–426.

55. Carter, “Political Participation and the Workplace,” 412–413.

56. Greenberg et al., “Industrial Work and Political Participation,” 314–315, 322.

57. Greenberg et al., “Industrial Work and Political Participation,” 322–323; Carter, “Political Participation and the Workplace,” 416–421.

58. “Industrial Work and Political Participation,” 324.

is less meaningful” and strategically choose against conventional political involvement. Indeed, Schweizer’s contention is that the spillover in contemporary liberal democracies is more likely to operate horizontally (efficacy created at work will lead to participation in community or social movement groups, for example) rather than vertically. Like Greenberg et al., he also questioned whether participation at work is the crucial training ground for democratic citizenry or whether participation in other social settings can play that role.⁵⁹ In short, these studies of the spillover thesis suggest that a wider range of participatory experiences need to be considered as potential starting points of the education process that creates citizens with the aptitudes and skills necessary for living democracy as a form of life.

With the three crucial weaknesses thusly identified, I now turn to feminist scholarship for ideas on the steps that can be taken to create a highly inclusive practice of participatory democracy. Feminist scholarship is both visionary of a transformed gender order and informed by the hard realities of movement successes and failures. Both types of knowledge are integral to minimizing the impact of structured social inequalities inside participatory forums and are essential to the participatory democratic project. I concur with Carole Pateman’s long-standing judgement “that a ‘democratic’ theory and practice that is not at the same time feminist merely serves to maintain a fundamental form of domination and so makes a mockery of the ideals and values that democracy is held to embody.”⁶⁰

In response to the male privilege that characterizes the current gender order, Maro Maloutas has argued that the visionary long-term goal should be “to find a way in which the gendered aspect of subjects can become acceptable in its multiplicity, significant only as one of the subject’s many special characteristics and particularities.” Special characteristics, in this conception, would not be organized in social hierarchies and as a consequence the existing stratified system of gender identities (as well as the stratified systems of identities connected to racialization, ethno-cultural heritage, sexual orientation, etc.) would be overturned. Maloutas envisions “multiple, fluid and non-mutually exclusive and non-divisive identities” in place of dichotomous categorizations, and thereby reaches towards a universalism characterized not by sameness but rather by multiple particularisms. Her admittedly utopian goal is to use manifold, non-divisive identities to devalue those traditional social identities “that violate the principles of democracy, equality and the respect of human existence.”⁶¹ This sort of a vision, when introduced into a direct democratic forum, would encourage group members to think beyond conventional social

59. Steven L. Schweizer, “Participation, Workplace Democracy, and the Problem of Representative Government,” *Polity* 27, 3 (1995): 369, 376–377.

60. Pateman, “Feminism and Democracy,” 217.

61. Maloutas, *The Gender of Democracy*, 4–5, 117.

identities while at the same time highlighting the invidious, anti-democratic character of those hierarchical identities.

In addition, feminist practices of movement building demonstrate approaches and techniques that should be directly incorporated into participatory democratic forums. One approach involves building solidarity among the members of a group that is grounded in the recognition of diverse experiences and identities, and the effects of different forms of inequality on people's capacities to participate.⁶² A second highlights the "ethic of care" informing feminist groups, whereby "members are treated equally but also with concern for each one's self-development."⁶³ Among the techniques recommended by Andrea Cornwall to facilitate and encourage inclusion in participatory forums are those deployed directly by different feminist organizations (such as assertiveness training and building argumentation skills) and by feminist-influenced participatory action researchers (such as the use of pictures, drama or song to give "people who are so often ignored a chance to have their say").⁶⁴

Agonistic pluralism, a branch of radical, plural democracy, provides insights that can help to overcome classical participatory democracy's second weakness – the assumption of exaggerated societal consensus. The agonistic perspective assumes that "relations of power are constitutive of the social" and believes the antagonisms created by power relations are "ineradicable."⁶⁵ In a pluralistic, power-traversed world, liberal democracies legitimately set limits on the exercise of popular sovereignty in order to protect human rights. The paradox of democratic politics, according to Chantal Mouffe, is that while the notion of setting limits to popular sovereignty is uncontestable, the actual content of those limits is forever contestable.⁶⁶ Since the social bases for politics are

62. Briskin, "Struggle for Women's Equality," 219; Andrea Cornwall, "Spaces for Transformation? Reflections on Issues of Power and Difference in Participation in Development," in Samuel Hickey and Giles Mohan, eds., *Participation: From Tyranny to Transformation?* (London: Zed Books, 2004), 85.

63. Francesca Polletta, *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 229.

64. Cornwall, "Spaces for Transformation," 85–87.

65. Chantal Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?" *Social Research* 66, 3 (1999): 752–753. In my perspective, the relations of power that constitute the social are grounded in multiple, interconnected structures of domination rather than, as argued by Michel Foucault, an all-encompassing rationalized system of administrative and social control. Peter Dews notes that Foucault's work denies that "there remains any progressive political potential in the ideal of the autonomous subject" (*Logics of Disintegration: Post-structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London: Verso, 1987), 160). In contrast, the theory of participatory democracy assumes that autonomous subjects have the capacity and agency to rationally construct a new form of egalitarian, participatory collectivity. I concur with Jürgen Habermas's judgement that "there is a dynamic of egalitarian solidarity which, although damaged and repressed, is no less central to modernity than the functional dynamic of money or power" (Dews, *Logics of Disintegration*, 196).

66. Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), 4–5.

antagonisms that cannot be eliminated, democrats need to adopt conventions that will prevent the degeneration of politics into endless antagonisms. This is why democratic political struggle is treated as “agonism between adversaries” rather than “antagonism between enemies.”⁶⁷

The agonistic pluralist ontology highlights that every democratic decision, regardless of the integrity of the process, marginalizes and excludes at the same time as it constructs a conditional consensus. Mouffe treats a democratic consensus as “a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power” and hence terms it a “conflictual consensus.” In recognition of the authoritarian possibilities that exist in situations of hegemonic decision-making, Mouffe advised, “A pluralist democracy needs to make room for dissent and for the institutions through which it can be manifested.”⁶⁸

Participatory democracy in small and mid-sized groups is especially susceptible to the exaggeration of commonality and the silencing of dissent. Furthermore, as noted above, the theory of participatory democracy has hitherto assumed that social antagonisms fade towards the insignificant as a participatory, egalitarian society becomes a reality. Agonistic pluralism therefore can serve as an important corrective to participatory theory, ensuring that the operation of power relations is never ignored even in organizations with governance procedures that include direct democracy.⁶⁹

The third crucial weakness in the theory of participatory democracy involves overemphasizing the importance of the workplace as the source of education for democratic citizenship. It is my contention that studies of deliberative democracy suggest ways to circumvent this problem. The heart of democracy in the deliberative model is consensus building and the development of shared understandings through carefully managed communication exercises.⁷⁰

67. Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?,” 755. There is a naïveté to this formulation since the definitional line between agonism and antagonism is itself subject to ongoing struggle. Indeed, powerful actors who claim to respect their adversaries’ legitimacy are often engaged in overt or covert actions to undermine those same adversaries. Hence, contemporary liberal democracies do not measure up to the agonistic normative ideal and instead are characterized by a mix of agonistic and antagonistic power struggles.

68. Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?,” 756.

69. In their 1992 defence of the theory of participatory democracy, Bachrach and Botwinick recognized the tendency of small participatory groups to squelch dissent but trivialized (and individualized) the problem by recommending that citizens who feel oppressed in one group be allowed to shop around for “decision-making groups congenial to their interests and temperaments” (*Power and Empowerment*, 40–41). In my judgement, insights from agonistic pluralism allow for a much deeper engagement with this fundamental problem and should encourage participatory groups to creatively experiment with countervailing organizational norms and rules of procedure to protect the right to dissent and thereby deepen democracy. Furthermore, protecting the right to dissent is consistent with the feminist “ethic of care” (mentioned above) that should inform how individuals are treated in participatory groups.

70. Mark Purcell, *Recapturing Democracy: Neoliberalization and the Struggle for Alternative Urban Futures* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 39, 47.

Deliberative democracy involves “a learning process in and through which people come to terms with the range of issues they need to understand in order to hold a sound and reasonable political judgment.”⁷¹

If deliberation is to follow Jürgen Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality and result in a shared understanding of the common good, then pre-existing power differences must be bracketed and participants must equally commit to setting aside self-interest.⁷² Nancy Fraser is among those who argue that such strictures are unrealistic. She cited Jane Mansbridge as the source of the idea that “the transformation of ‘I’ into ‘we’ brought about through political deliberation can easily mask subtle forms of control.”⁷³ The agonistic pluralist perspective discussed above postulates that such “subtle forms of control” will characterize all deliberations, including those that are part of participatory governance. However advocates for participatory democracy see their approach as superior to stand-alone deliberative democracy since it is oriented to the elimination and not just the bracketing of social inequality and, unlike deliberative democracy, takes a consistent oppositional stance towards neoliberalism.⁷⁴

Examples of deliberative democracy include deliberative polling, citizen juries, participatory budgeting and communicative planning.⁷⁵ David Held has classified the forms of deliberation along a scale that ranges from “renewing representative democracy” at one pole to “radical, deliberative participatory democracy” at the other.⁷⁶ An example that is invariably classified in the latter category is the participatory budget initiative of the Workers’ Party in Porto Alegre, Brazil following its municipal election victory in 1988.⁷⁷ In contrast, most contemporary examples of deliberation are aimed at “renewing representative democracy,” with a good example being the “21st Century Town

71. Held, *Models of Democracy*, 233.

72. Purcell, *Recapturing Democracy*, 45.

73. Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 60, 64.

74. Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 77; Purcell, *Recapturing Democracy*, 39.

75. Mark Button and David Michael Ryfe, “What Can We Learn from the Practice of Deliberative Democracy?” in John Gastil and Peter Levine, eds., *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook: Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the 21st Century* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 20–33; Mark Purcell, “Resisting Neoliberalization: Communicative Planning or Counter-Hegemonic Movements?” *Planning Theory* 8, 2 (2009): 140–165.

76. Held, *Models of Democracy*, 253.

77. Archon Fung, *Empowered Participation: Reinventing Urban Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 236–238; Gianpaolo Baiocchi and Ernesto Ganuza, “Participatory Budgeting as if Emancipation Mattered,” *Politics & Society* 42, 1 (2014): 33–39; Adalmir Marquetti, Carlos E. Schonerwald da Silva, and Al Campbell, “Participatory Economic Democracy in Action: Participatory Budgeting in Porto Alegre, 1989–2004,” *Review of Radical Political Economics* 44, 1 (2012): 62–81; Pateman, “Participatory Democracy Revisited,” 10–14.

Meeting” that was developed as a tool to allow elected representatives to “go beyond polling to connect quickly and authentically with citizens and listen to their voices.”⁷⁸ At the same time, the literature has pointed to examples of deliberative exercises that are cynically initiated to try to steer citizens towards a predefined consensus, to “reinforce the current status quo,” or to create a spectacle of public input devoid of substantive importance. It is therefore understandable why deliberative democracy has its critics.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, recent research indicates that even those deliberations held in social settings that are far from ideal can help participants to develop democratic skills and a democratic outlook, and therefore potentially serve the cause of a fledgling participatory society.

One illustration of this point comes out of Archon Fung’s research on participatory-deliberative initiatives taken by the Chicago Police Services and Chicago Public Schools in the 1980s and 1990s. These initiatives invited “residents to generate and deploy social capital to make their neighborhoods safe and improve their schools.”⁸⁰ Two of the general lessons identified by Fung are relevant here. First, the research design included cases of “participation and deliberation under some of the most unfavorable conditions that can be found anywhere in the industrialized world” in the sense that four of the six cases he studied occurred in resource poor and/or highly diverse communities. He found that deliberation “can be made to work despite such challenges” and concluded, “The ideal of deliberation is more robust, and so more potentially attractive, than previously thought.” Second, because deliberation occurred on “urgent and eminently tangible questions ... ordinary participation biases were reversed – there were more women than men and more poor people than wealthy ones.” This finding demonstrates that deliberative exercises need not be completely biased by differences in the socio-economic backgrounds of those who participate.⁸¹

Therefore it would seem that involvement in even modest deliberative exercises could have important educational value. According to Mark Button and David Michael Ryfe, “Deliberative democracy gives individuals the chance to live (however briefly) and to experience (however artificially) the essential meaning of democracy: free and equal citizens with an equal opportunity to participate in a shared public life and to shape decisions that affect their

78. Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer, Joe Goldman, and Steven Brigham, “A Town Meeting for the Twenty-First Century,” in Gastil and Levine, eds., *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook*, 156.

79. Christopher F. Karpowitz and Jane Mansbridge, “Disagreement and Consensus: The Importance of Dynamic Updating in Public Deliberation,” in Gastil and Levine, eds., *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook*, 245–246; Purcell, “Resisting Neoliberalization,” 155; Polletta, “Participatory Democracy in the New Millennium,” 49.

80. Fung, *Empowered Participation*, 15.

81. Fung, *Empowered Participation*, 135–141, 231–232.

lives.”⁸² Furthermore, in reference to cases where deliberation is incorporated into participatory governance, such as participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre and local school governance in Chicago, Fung and Wright have argued, “These experiments not only consist of fora for honing and practicing deliberative-democratic skills, but also literally establish schools of democracy to develop participants’ political and technical capacities.”⁸³

In conclusion, while the workplace is one potential setting for democratic education that could serve as the foundation for the creation of a participatory society, it is certainly not the only possibility and may indeed be a weak choice at the present time because most economic organizations in the neoliberal world have at best a token commitment to deliberative exercises. Promising alternative settings for experiments in democratic education include deliberative forums aimed at deepening the connection between elected representatives and constituents, local government initiatives in planning or practical problem solving, and governance reform initiatives in political parties and various civil society organizations. Key among the civil society organizations that are candidates for concerted democratization is labour unions. The final two sections of this essay focus on why and how the building of democracy in unions has the potential to serve as a pillar for the creation of a participatory society.

Why Pick Unions as a Focus for Participatory Efforts?

DEMOCRATIZING UNIONS is one answer to the question of how to revitalize unions. “Democracy matters,” stated Kim Moody in 2007, “because it helps mobilize members, develops leaders and keeps them in touch.”⁸⁴ Moody, David Camfield, and Stephanie Ross treat democracy in unions as the foundation for workers’ collective on-the-job-power, and list numerous ways that unions characterized by rank-and-file democracy are more powerful and more effective than other unions.⁸⁵ I am sympathetic to this argument, but it is tangential to my essay. Instead I am interested in the potential for highly democratic unions to make a significant contribution to the advancement of the movement for a participatory society. There are eight reasons to select unions as a focus for participatory efforts from amongst the various alternatives.

First, there is a strong tradition of rank-and-file democracy in the labour movement that goes back to the Industrial Workers of the World and other syndicalist/socialist unions that were highly influential in the early decades

82. Button and Ryfe, “What Can We Learn?” 30.

83. Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, “Thinking About Empowered Participatory Governance,” in Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, eds., *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance* (London: Verso, 2003), 29.

84. Moody, *US Labor in Trouble and Transition*, 224.

85. Moody, *US Labor in Trouble and Transition*, 175; Camfield, *Canadian Labour in Crisis*, 119–120; Ross, “Social Unionism and Membership Participation,” 148–149.

of the 20th century in North America.⁸⁶ This tradition can be drawn upon to inspire and instruct new initiatives at democratizing unions. Second, although labour unions often face limited options for action because of the superior power of an employer and are constrained by laws and regulations that fall short of being “labour friendly,” they nevertheless have a considerable degree of internal independence since members’ dues sustain them financially. This means unions have the freedom to shift governance structures and norms in a much more participatory direction, unlike civil society organizations that often are beholden to funders. Third, despite the decrease in union density in recent decades, the labour movement is still very impressive in size and has a volunteer activist base that is “a much larger group than the activist base of any other social movement.”⁸⁷ As a consequence, activists throughout the movement will pay attention to democracy campaigns in particular unions, and there is a realistic possibility of the diffusion of successful experiments in internal democratic change.

Fourth, as detailed in the first section of this essay, the structural and political conditions that promote union democracy are known. This means that the possibility of democratizing unions is neither a pipedream nor a project with entirely uncertain prospects. Specifically, democratization efforts should be focused on unions that have devolved significant power to local and regional levels and where either a leftist internal caucus or external political organization is in place to guide and stimulate the drive for enhanced democracy. Despite the contemporary decline of far left organizations and traditional opposition caucuses in unions,⁸⁸ this prescription is still applicable. This is because the leadership in democratization efforts in labour unions has been assumed by equality-seeking groups who “have organized in response to male and White domination; patriarchal, racist and homophobic union cultures; and hierarchical and undemocratic organizational practices in unions” and in so doing become “vocal constituencies.”⁸⁹

Fifth, unlike some other organizations in civil society, labour unions are relatively open to the agonistic pluralist warning about the way that democratic processes exclude and marginalize some voices in the course of arriving at a decision. This sensitivity to exclusionary processes stems from the need of labour unions to acknowledge and recognize as much of the socio-cultural diversity of the contemporary working class as is possible as a condition for successfully organizing and mobilizing workers, and the relative success of

86. See Paul Buhle, “The Legacy of the IWW,” *Monthly Review* 57, 2 (June 2005): 13–27; Camfield, *Canadian Labour in Crisis*, 107, 110n12; Stepan-Norris, “Making of Union Democracy,” 492.

87. Camfield, *Canadian Labour in Crisis*, 42.

88. Alan Sears notes that much of the previous “infrastructure of dissent” has eroded. *The Next New Left: A History of the Future* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2014), 2, 111.

89. Briskin, “Struggle for Women’s Equality,” 229.

feminist, anti-racist, and queer organizing efforts inside unions. Labour unions are therefore in a reasonably good position, relative to most other organizations, to apply the ontological insights of radical, democratic theory as part of campaigns for democratization.

Sixth, one of the lessons from research on deliberative democracy is that even limited deliberative exercises can have a demonstrable educational impact on participants. This means that any democratic initiative, whether it involves greater direct democracy in a local union, horizontal collaboration across locals in a geographic region, or enhanced representative accountability, will contribute to members' education in democracy and tend to spill over into broader political participation. Indeed, two recent research studies indicate this spillover process is already happening. A secondary analysis of survey data for the period 1973–94 found that, after controlling for other variables, American union members were more active than non-members in voting, protesting, signing petitions and joining associations but not on routine civic activities like donating blood and volunteering. Jasmine Kerrissey and Evan Schofer concluded, "It appears that unions build 'political capital' more than generalized 'social capital.'" Furthermore, a 2007 study of those members of a Los Angeles janitors' labour union (SEIU Local 1877) who had school-aged children found that labour activism spilled horizontally into enhanced participation in their children's schools. "When compared with inactive Local 1877 members," Veronica Terriquez reported, "respondents who participated in the union's social movement activities [e.g., mass protests] appear more confident and better equipped to exercise leadership and voice their interests within the context of the school site." It is interesting that, rather than being more likely to take on "plug-in types of involvement" managed by school personnel, the Local 1877 activists were more likely to take part "in critical forms of engagement that allow them to voice their interests and exercise leadership." This finding is consistent with the idea that democratic participation in labour unions builds political capital that is readily transferable to other political arenas.⁹⁰ In general, the union movement's complex structure allows for a variety of democratic experiments to be initiated that, although they may be quite disconnected from one another, have the potential to extend a democratic and participatory ethos not only within the labour movement but horizontally and vertically throughout society.

Seventh, the issue of democratic representation is crucial to unions since full-time staff and even volunteer officers may develop interests, loyalties and perspectives that are at odds with a membership perspective, especially given the bureaucratic social relations that have enveloped contemporary unions. As a consequence, labour unions are ideally situated to experiment with

90. Jasmine Kerrissey and Evan Schofer, "Union Membership and Political Participation in the United States," *Social Forces* 91, 3 (2013): 919–920; Veronica Terriquez, "Schools for Democracy: Labor Union Participation and Latino Immigrant Parents' School-Based Civic Engagement," *American Sociological Review* 76, 4 (2011): 591–598.

new deliberative techniques that can enhance membership participation in decision-making and better hold representatives accountable. For instance, a referendum could be organized after a citizens' jury reported on its deliberations regarding proposed reforms to the internal union structure. In this regard, unions could serve as schools of representative democracy making use of key insights from the theory of deliberative democracy.

The previous seven reasons emphasize the deliberative, decision-making dimension of union life. More than deliberation, however, unions are organizations of working-class struggle. When we apply the "school of democracy" label to a participatory union, we are not uniquely defining unions since any number of social movement organizations – particularly those that strive to represent the interests of human affiliates – could impart similar psychological advantages and practical, democratic teachings to members.⁹¹ What is unique about the democratic lessons learned by union members is that they are framed and tempered by class struggles at the workplace and in broader society. An illustration just detailed is the participatory learning of the Los Angeles janitors taking part in protests organized by SEIU Local 1877.

Early Marxian analyses stressed the educational importance of working-class struggle. Frederick Engels depicted unions as "schools of war" with a particular emphasis on the lessons learned by workers in the course of strikes. At that time both Engels and Karl Marx believed that proletarian revolution was on the horizon, but would be preceded by decades of societal upheaval. The lessons learned by workers in their workplace struggles, therefore, would be magnified by the lessons to be learned in the coming revolutionary movement. In a speech to the Communist League's central committee in 1850, Marx indicated that he was then telling workers, "You have fifteen, twenty, fifty years of civil wars and peoples' struggles to go through, not only to change the conditions but in order to change yourselves and make yourselves fit for political rule."⁹² This quote depicts a thorough and dramatic process of re-socialization resulting from involvement in a revolutionary movement. It contrasts with the modest and incremental educational process postulated in the theory of participatory education. While the revolutionary trajectory anticipated by Marx and Engels did not come to pass, their thinking provides a general proposition on working-class learning that is relevant to the present day: collective actions like strikes or extended protest campaigns can result in significant changes in how workers see the world and their level of commitment to political action. This is highly relevant to choosing unions as a focus for participatory efforts. It

91. Darren R. Halpin, "The Participatory and Democratic Potential and Practice of Interest Groups: Between Solidarity and Representation," *Public Administration* 84, 4 (2006): 923–929.

92. Frederick Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1892; Frogmore, St. Albans, Herts: Panther Books, 1969), 251–252; Karl Marx's 1850 remark quoted in Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution, Volume II: The Politics of Social Classes* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), 78.

is to be anticipated that the commitment of members to the democratization of their own unions, as well as the democratization of other aspects of their lives, will be regularly refreshed and deepened as the result of episodes of collective struggle.

A Historical Example of Union Democracy's Transformative Potential

MY OWN THINKING on the potential of union democracy to serve as a foundation for the development of a participatory society has been informed by the research I have conducted on the workers' movement in a regional coal-field society that straddles the boundary between southeast British Columbia and southwest Alberta, just north of the 49th parallel in the Crowsnest Pass through the Rocky Mountains. To conclude this essay, therefore, I present the mid-twentieth century workers' movement in the Crowsnest Pass as an example of how thorough-going democracy within local unions can "spill over" into the broader union movement as well other institutions in a regional society. While this case certainly illustrates my central argument, it should not be read as a blueprint for contemporary efforts to build participatory societies. For one thing times have changed, so what worked to extend democracy in 1945 or 1950 in the Crowsnest Pass cannot be transposed directly to contemporary situations. In addition, the participatory society built in the Crowsnest Pass had important flaws that should be avoided in contemporary projects – most notably the characteristic patriarchy of mid-20th century mining communities that limited women's participatory options,⁹³ and the failure to build alternative civil society organizations like consumer cooperatives. Thirdly, the strength of the coal miners' movement in the first half of the 20th century meant that a unique labour relations system had developed

93. A material foundation for women's subordination in coal mining communities was their legal exclusion from production work in and around coal mines. In Alberta, this exclusionary law stayed in place until 1975 (Tom Langford, "Working Class Power and the Collapse of the Domestic Steam Coal Market: Lessons from the Crowsnest Pass in the 1950s and 1960s," in David Leadbeater, ed., *Resources, Empire and Labour: Crises, Lessons & Alternatives* (Halifax: Fernwood Books, 2014), 245.) The 1951 census for the town of Blairmore, Alberta, in the Crowsnest Pass reported that of the 774 men aged 14 years and older, 83 per cent were working in the paid labour force, including 263 in mining. In contrast, of the 659 women aged 14 years and older, only 14 per cent were in the paid labour force with none of them in mining. The vast majority of adult women in Blairmore at that time (513 or 78 per cent) were classified as "keeping house" (Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Ninth Census of Canada, 1951. Volume IV, Labour Force: Occupations and Industries* (Ottawa, 1953), 9–17; *Volume V, Labour Force: Earnings and Employment of Wage-Earners* (Ottawa, 1953), 3–19). There is some evidence that male violence against women was a feature of this patriarchal gender order. For example, after the 1944 murder of a woman by her common law husband, a Crowsnest Pass miner, the RCMP learned from the woman's children that the husband had beaten their mother on previous occasions (Tom Langford, "The Hanging of Peter Abramowicz and Father John Duplanil's Efforts to Save Him," *Alberta History* 59, 4 (Autumn 2011): 4).

in the western Canadian coal industry that was considerably more favourable to labour unions and rank-and-file workers than the labour relations system of industrial pluralism that became institutionalized in Canada in the 1940s.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, historical examples such as this one reveal what has been possible to achieve in past circumstances, and thus complement “wish lists” of what an ideal democratic education of contemporary union members would look like.⁹⁵

As noted above, the academic literature has identified two mutually reinforcing bases for union democracy: (1) features of organizational structure that allow oppositional forces to secure independent power bases in a union; and (2) a strong political push from a left-wing group or caucus that is committed to promoting genuine involvement by the rank-and-file. Both factors existed in the Crowsnest Pass just after the end of World War II. Although the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) on the whole was a highly autocratic union,⁹⁶ District 18 in western Canada allowed for a great deal of local and regional union autonomy due to a power sharing arrangement between Communist Party and establishment power blocs that dated from the 1930s⁹⁷ and the formal organization of union locals into sub-districts (in the case of the Crowsnest Pass, the three UMWA locals in Alberta constituted Sub-District 5 and the two UMWA locals in British Columbia constituted Sub-District 8). Such was the extent of local autonomy in District 18 that prior to 1954 the union dues deducted by coal companies from workers’ pay were remitted to local union secretaries rather than the District 18 head office.⁹⁸

Furthermore, there was a strong leftist influence inside the five UMWA locals in the Crowsnest Pass at the end of World War II that was supported by agitation and organizing by the Communist Party (known as the Labor Progressive Party or LPP at that time). For example, the LPP regularly distributed a mimeographed newsletter titled *The Lamp* to coal miners in the Crowsnest Pass and other coal-producing regions in western Canada. Although the influence of the LPP had waned significantly by the early 1950s due to the Cold War,⁹⁹

94. Tom Langford, “Coal Miners’ Resistance to Industrial Legality in Western Canada, 1940–1955,” *Prairie Forum* 31, 2 (2006): 233–243.

95. For example, see Ross, “Social Unionism and Membership Participation,” 150–151.

96. See Saul Alinsky, *John L. Lewis: An Unauthorized Biography* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1949); Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, *John L. Lewis: A Biography, Abridged Edition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Robert H. Zieger, “John L. Lewis and the Labor Movement, 1940–1960,” in John H. M. Laslett, ed., *The United Mine Workers of America: A Model of Industrial Solidarity?* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1996), 151–163.

97. Charles Allen Seager, “A Proletariat in Wild Rose Country: The Alberta Coal Miners, 1905–1945,” PhD thesis, York University, Toronto, 1982, 463–464.

98. Langford, “Coal Miners’ Resistance,” 238–239.

99. Tom Langford and Chris Frazer, “The Cold War and Working Class Politics in the Coal Mining Communities of the Crowsnest Pass, 1945–1958,” *Labour/Le Travail* 49 (Spring 2002):

leftist leaders in the Crowsnest UMWA locals continued to wield considerable influence past that point. In some important cases, such as Sim Weaver who served as the secretary-treasurer of Local 7292 at the Michel Collieries between 1924 and 1957, this was because their leftist commitments predated the formation of the Communist Party, being the products of the milieu of socialist and syndicalist ideas that swirled through this coalfield society in the first two decades of the 20th century.¹⁰⁰

Three features characterized union democracy in the UMWA locals in the Crowsnest Pass: a strong participatory ethos and ultimate membership control over the acceptance of new collective agreements in the District; strong representative procedures and norms; and regular horizontal communication among local unions, both within and between regions. The mutually reinforcing combination of direct and representative democracy was evident during contract negotiations. Prior to the beginning of district-wide negotiations with the coal operators, District 18 would hold a wage scale convention, such as that held 17–21 November 1952. Before this convention, local unions held membership meetings to decide upon the bargaining ideas they would formally propose to the convention. Later, a local's membership received a full report from its elected delegates to the wage scale convention and regular updates during negotiations. Finally, up until 1955 negotiated agreements in District 18 were submitted to the membership for ratification or rejection. In 1953 this practice led to a membership rejection of a tentative agreement although the declining economics of the coal industry eventually forced the workers to accept the same agreement.¹⁰¹

Regular membership meetings were the foundation for direct democracy in the UMWA locals in the Crowsnest Pass. Local 2633 (Coleman, Alberta) met every second Sunday in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and the minutes of those meetings reveal that a wide range of consequential issues were discussed and often vigorously debated. The following excerpts from the minutes for 1947–48 give a sense of the scope of the decision making engaged in by the Local 2633 membership:

(1) From 12 January 1947: "A petition from a number of Bros. rooming in the Cameron Block regarding the sanitary condition prevailing in that building was discussed and on motion Sec. was instructed to find out from the Mayor and Council what steps are being taken to remedy this condition."

(2) From 13 March 1947: "Letters dealing with the strike of miners in Dist. 26 [Nova Scotia] from the C.C.L. [Canadian Congress of Labour], the Dist.

43–81.

100. Seager, "Proletariat in Wild Rose Country," 202–361.

101. For additional details see Tom Langford, "An Alternate Vision of Community: Crowsnest Miners and Their Local Unions During the 1940s and 1950s," in Wayne Norton and Tom Langford, eds., *A World Apart: The Crowsnest Communities of Alberta and British Columbia* (Kamloops: Plateau Publishers, 2002), 147–157; and Langford, "Coal Miners' Resistance."

Executive of Dist. 26 and from Dist. Office asking for financial assistance were received and brought up for discussion. After considerable discussion a motion was passed that an assessment of \$1.00 per month be levied against our membership for the duration of strike. Carried.”

(3) From 25 May 1947: “A resolution from the Blairmore Local 7295 dealing with the high living costs and the calling of a special convention of District 18 was received and brought up for discussion. After considerable discussion a motion was made that we endorse in principle the resolution but before a special convention be called that the whole subject matter be brought up by the whole Executive Board of District 18 and that the Blairmore Local be notified to that effect and also the Dist. Carried.”

(4) From 31 August 1947: “The Sec. was instructed to write General Manager J. J. McIntyre deploring the action of the company in allowing the afternoon shift to work on the day of the fatal accident to Brother James Walker and asking him to comply in the future with the old established custom which has prevailed in this company for the last 30 years that being everyone to cease work the day of a fatal accident.”

(5) From 11 January 1948: A special hospital assessment of \$1.00 for first half of the year was passed “after considerable discussion.”¹⁰²

With the exception of the special hospital assessment, these excerpts deal with Local 2633 taking action on important group conflicts, either close to home or in the broader movement of coal miners. In the preceding section I argued that a good reason for choosing unions as a foundation for developing a participatory society is because class struggles will tend to refresh and deepen workers’ commitment to participatory practices. The fact is that the Local 2633 membership was engaged in consequential decision making in its regular membership meetings, as opposed to either rubber stamping the decisions of higher ups or deciding on trivial matters. This is a decision-making environment that engaged participants, taught them important lessons about democracy, and potentially built their commitments to democracy “as a way of life.”

The norm inside the Crowsnest UMWA locals was that elected representatives had to give extensive reports after the conclusion of an activity. For instance, at the 27 July 1947 membership meeting of Local 2633, “Board member Enoch Williams ... gave a lengthy report of the Executive Board meeting held in Calgary. After he had finished a hearty vote of thanks was given Bro. Williams.” Enoch Williams, as the representative of Sub-District 5 on the District Executive Board, would have given similar reports to the Blairmore and Bellevue Local Unions. Similarly, the delegate elected to represent Local 2633 at a conference of Canadian Congress of Labour unions in Calgary in May of 1948 reported on the conference at the next membership

102. Official minutes of Local 2633 membership meetings, United Mine Workers of America, Local 2633 fonds (hereafter Local 2633), M 6048, ff2, Glenbow Archives (hereafter GA).

meeting.¹⁰³ The expectation that elected representatives would conscientiously act on behalf of the local union membership was further enforced by yearly elections. The Coleman Local 2633 executive election in June 1953 demonstrated the power of the membership when it was unhappy with a representative's actions. Earlier that month, Local 2633 had rejected the tentative agreement recommended by District 18 by a margin of 488 to 266. Some of the anger at the tentative agreement appears to have been directed at William J. White, the long serving secretary-treasurer of Local 2633 who at that time was also the Sub-District 5 representative on the District 18 Executive Board. White ran for re-election as secretary-treasurer in 1953, but was decisively defeated by a 424–329 count.¹⁰⁴

An important dimension of the membership meetings of Local 2633 was considering proposals or appeals from other local unions in District 18, distributed in “circular letters.” The example recorded above was a letter from Blairmore Local 7295 in 1947 calling for a special district convention, and there are many other examples of the discussion of circular letters in the minutes. This horizontal communication among local unions was built on the significant local union and sub-district autonomy in District 18 of the UMWA, and allowed for dissident locals to try to build opposition to particular policies of the District 18 or International UMWA leaderships. Opposition organizing was sometimes effective at the District level, although it could safely be ignored by the International because of the relative inconsequence of District 18 in the larger politics of the UMWA.

The final question concerning the participatory, democratic practices of the Crowsnest locals of the UMWA is the most important one for this essay: to what extent did this strong version of union democracy serve as the foundation for the more general spread of participatory democracy in the regional coalfield society? Undoubtedly there was a “spillover” from miners’ participation in union governance to miners’ (and their families’) participation in local governments and school boards; in efforts to build the labour movement in other sectors of the economy such as logging; in organizing for community services like hospitals and homes for the aged; and in leftist organizing at the provincial and federal levels, even at the height of the Cold War.¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless the democratic spillover in the Crowsnest region in the mid-20th century was limited by three important factors.

Firstly, the complex challenges of representing workers in the underground coal mining industry (including workers’ occupational health and safety issues, declining markets due to the dieselization of the railways, and technological change) meant that time was always at a premium for UMWA leaders and activists. Indeed, given this constraint those leaders and activists did remarkably

103. 27 July 1947 and 23 May 1948 Minutes, Local 2633, M 6048, ff2, GA.

104. “Union Elects New Officers,” *Coleman Journal*, 8 July 1953.

105. See Langford and Frazer, “Cold War and Working Class Politics.”

well in engaging issues away from the pithead and in promoting an alternative cultural heart of their communities. Secondly, perhaps since union-management relations in the coal industry were highly bureaucratized even before the dawn of industrial pluralism in Canada, the spillover in democratic participation tended to flow into established channels of governance. Rather than mass action at the community level, or the development of alternative organizations, the predominant strategy was to insert socialist or labourist union leaders in key positions of power in the community. These union leaders were sustained by regular victories at the polls (for example, Thomas Uphill, elected as the representative of the Fernie and District Labour Party, served in the British Columbia provincial legislature continuously between 1920 and his retirement in 1960; and Enoch Williams served as the mayor of Blairmore, Alberta continuously between 1936 and his retirement in 1951). Nevertheless it might well be the case that such consistent electoral successes caused complacency in the workers' movement and ultimately limited the extent of democratic spillover.

Thirdly, as the coal industry in the Crowsnest Pass contracted in the 1950s, passive (e.g., absenteeism) and active (e.g., wildcat strikes) worker resistance virtually disappeared while hundreds of younger workers left the area in search of more stable and better remunerated employment.¹⁰⁶ In this difficult economic context, union leaders were forced to join with coal companies in seeking enhanced government subsidies and to join local growth coalitions led by business leaders bent on establishing new businesses in the region. Successful examples of economic diversification were few, but included a sour gas plant and a heavily subsidized factory manufacturing telephone wire, both near Coleman, Alberta, and a new ski hill near Fernie, British Columbia. The unsuccessful efforts to develop new businesses included attempts to attract a heavy water manufacturing plant, a pulp mill, a coal-fired electricity generating station, a federal penitentiary, and even the 1968 Winter Olympics. In this context union leaders faded in importance; furthermore, even when union leaders stayed engaged in civic affairs, they tended to become junior partners in their Chamber of Commerce colleagues' boosterish schemes.¹⁰⁷ Finally, mass action by workers was viewed as inimical to business recruitment efforts.

Therefore the mid-20th century "spillover" of democracy from the UMWA local unions to other institutions in the Crowsnest regional society, while significant in many respects, was right from the beginning constrained by limitations in the ideology and practices of the labour movement of the time. Later the "spillover" was substantially disorganized and undermined by a severe economic downturn that caused proletarian out-migration, a sharp decline in the capacities and influence of many of the UMWA locals, and the ascendancy of municipal boosterism as an across-class political project. This historical example suggests the importance of embedding a participatory

106. Langford and Frazer, "Cold War and Working Class Politics," 53–56.

107. See Langford, "Working Class Power."

ethos in community and pan-community organizations that will serve to complement the democratic work of participatory labour unions. When unions wane in economic importance, they lose not only a considerable degree of their capacity to engage in class struggle but also their leadership potential in the movement to build a participatory society.

The original idea for this paper came after I immersed myself in archival materials and began to appreciate just how deeply democratic the mid-20th century workers' movement in the Crowsnest Pass was. I thank the long-deceased activists who led that movement for their inspiring example. I also thank three anonymous reviewers for Labour/Le Travail whose varied critical comments challenged me to make what I think are a number of helpful revisions to the paper.