

CHAPTER 2

ON THE SOCIO-CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM: WHY TRADE UNIONS MUST ENGAGE WITH SKILLS

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In a context where neoliberal capitalism, in both the North and much of the South, is shifting towards autocracy and right-wing populism is on the rise, this chapter poses the question: what can be done to defend democracy? Furthermore, how can we build a foundation for democracy that extends beyond individual liberty and the right to vote to genuine popular rule, where “all those affected by binding decisions can participate in their making” (Mota & Wagner, 2019:6)? These are questions that concern all true defenders of political democracy today, whether in academic circles, the broader political sphere, or among engaged families, friends, and workplace communities.

The current situation feels threatening and generates a sense of powerlessness. When a sitting US president is labelled a fascist by opponents, and such a description seems justified, it is but one of many indicators of an uncertain future. Drawing on the work of the American sociologist C. Wright Mills, who encouraged sociology to illuminate public issues that create private anxieties, this chapter, and indeed the entire book, engages with what is arguably one of

the most pressing challenges of our time. While it does not promise definitive solutions, it offers a possible starting point for (re)building the foundations of democratic participation to guide us towards a fair and sustainable future.

In summary, the chapter follows the tradition of the critical sociology of work to highlight the crucial role of 'decent work' in fostering democratic subjectivities. It critiques the traditional reluctance of trade unions to prioritise this role and argues that skills formation and participation in occupational communities serve as key institutional foundations for social recognition, self-worth, and individual self-determination. These, in turn, are essential for advancing social equality, securing decent work, and cultivating the self-confidence necessary for democratic participation in the workplace and society at large. However, this argument is rooted in a broader critique of democratic capitalism and an appeal for democratic socialism, not as a revival of historical models but as a vision for a society based on real democratic control over shared resources and common goods. How such democratic control should be institutionalised and safeguarded is beyond the scope of the chapter, but it is a crucial discussion for all who are committed to building a just and democratic future. What is clear is that democracy must empower participation from the bottom up, not just from the top down.

This may sound idealistic, even naïve. After all, in many countries in the Global South, poverty remains a stark reality for the majority, and youth unemployment exceeds 50 per cent. How relevant, then, is a focus on workers' skills, and beyond that, where are the social movements and collective will to push for change in this direction? I acknowledge that these ideas may seem distant from immediate struggles. Yet, precisely for that reason, we must explore how to stimulate and nurture individual and collective capacities for progressive social transformation.

The trade unions' one-sided emphasis on workers' rights *as employees*, concerned primarily with wages, conditions, and job security, rather than on workers' rights *as producers* with a stake in shaping the organisation of production, represented a major limitation

in the historical counter-movement that supported democratic capitalism in the Global North. By leaving managerial prerogative largely unchallenged, unions inadvertently accepted the capitalist claim that decisions over investment, technology, productivity, and organisational purpose should remain insulated from democratic scrutiny. This ceded terrain later made it easier for neoliberalism to reassert the dominance of market-driven management and weaken collective power in the workplace. Today, as global capitalism undergoes rapid technological and ecological transformation, unions cannot afford to repeat this mistake. Redistributing power not only over jobs but over production itself must be central to any contemporary democratic project. I will elaborate on this argument at the end of the chapter.

No return to democratic capitalism: Time to build a socio-cultural foundation for democratic socialism

The late Francis Sejersted, a prominent scholar of contemporary Norwegian history, introduced the term ‘democratic capitalism’ in 1993 to describe Norway’s social structure in the decades following the Second World War. In a broader discussion some years later, he proposed two simple yet insightful definitions of the term’s core elements, which are useful for our discussion. Drawing on Weberian ideal types, Sejersted (2003:195) argued:

Capitalism means that societal power rests with capitalists, or more precisely, with those who control the means of production. *Democracy*, on the other hand, means that power belongs to the people.

Thus, democratic capitalism signifies a partial transfer of power from capitalists to the people. How this is achieved depends on political pragmatism, power balances, and socio-cultural conditions.

In Norway, much like other countries in the Global North, this balance was historically maintained through the class compromise

of the 1930s. Strengthened by the growing labour movement, this compromise ensured workers received a fair share of economic productivity, social security through the welfare state, and democratic control over national common goods such as electricity, railways, broadcasting, and schools. If Norway embodied democratic capitalism more fully than many other nations, this can be attributed to its socio-cultural history. Unlike many industrialised countries, Norway in the 19th century lacked a dominant capitalist class. Industrialisation was largely driven by strategic decisions made by political elites, who were themselves shaped by Norway's long struggle for national independence. This cultivated democratic sentiments among a diverse set of leaders, civil servants, local entrepreneurs, farmers, and cultural elites.

After a period of intense class struggle in the 1920s, democratic-minded sections of the capitalist class and political elites accepted a compromise: collective bargaining and shared rules of negotiation with labour unions. Following five years of German occupation, the national unity that emerged from the war, coupled with broad political agreement on post-war economic recovery, laid the foundations for what Sejersted (2011) called Norway's 'social democratic hegemony' from the 1950s to the 1970s.

The socio-cultural foundations of democratic capitalism

The success of democratic capitalism in Norway rested on a social fabric woven throughout the early 20th century. The class compromise of the 1930s and the solidarity forged during and after the Second World War fostered mutual recognition across social and cultural divides (Olsen, 2018). Crucially, integration into this democratic system was not limited to the working classes. Employers and capital representatives were also socialised into institutional practices where negotiation and cooperation became the norm for resolving conflicts.

Additionally, workplace dynamics shifted significantly during this period. Growing recognition of workers' skills and their participation

in organisational development, combined with rising wages, welfare provisions, and social security, contributed to what historians have called a ‘silent revolution’ in workers’ self-perception (Olstad, 1991). This transformation was vital: it reinforced social equality, individual independence, and self-respect, key pillars of sustaining a democratic society (Olsen, 2018:198).

The decline of democratic capitalism

Yet, despite its success, this regime has experienced a deep and lasting crisis over the past 40 years. The same crisis has been experienced across the Global North in various forms of welfare capitalism, highlighting the inherent tensions in what Streeck (2014) calls the ‘ill-suited marriage’ between democracy and capitalism. Initially, the crisis was attributed to globalisation, which saw economic actors abandoning local commitments, relocating industries to low-cost countries, and increasingly engaging in financial speculation. This erosion of national economic control was already being described in the 1990s as an ‘assault on democracy and welfare’ (Martin & Schumann, 1996). However, deeper analyses soon emerged. Drawing on Rosa Luxemburg’s theories of accumulation, scholars such as Harvey (2003) and Dörre (2009) highlighted capitalism’s relentless need for expansion through accumulation by dispossession and *Landnahme* (land-grabbing). The neoliberal revolution, which swept through international and national political-economic institutions (from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank to Norway’s own financial and political elites), provided the ideological justification for this expansion.

Neoliberal capitalism did not merely seek new markets in post-colonial states or former Cold War territories. It turned public infrastructure, services, and common goods into commodities, opening new arenas for capitalist accumulation. By the 1980s and 1990s, power had shifted decisively back into the hands of capitalists. While protests erupted when profitable industries were shut down and jobs outsourced for greater shareholder returns, workers had little

recourse. These decisions were legally sanctioned, and political leaders insisted that “there were no alternatives”. Neoliberalism’s only promise was that some of the resulting economic growth would trickle down, a promise that, in some cases, was temporarily fulfilled. In Norway, for example, declining democratic power and rising social insecurity were offset by cheap credit, soaring consumption, and widening income and wealth disparities.

This period has been described as ‘post-democracy’ (Crouch, 2004) and ‘post-politics’ (Hochuli et al., 2021), emphasising how democratic institutions became dominated by technocratic elites trained in neoliberal ideology. Wendy Brown’s *Undoing the Demos* (2016) captures this transformation powerfully, noting that neoliberalism has systematically dismantled the fundamental elements of democracy, including its language, principles of justice, civic habits, and collective imagination. A demos without these capacities cannot rule itself, an observation crucial to understanding neoliberalism’s political trajectory.

The return of politics but not democracy

The end of the post-political era did not mark a revival of democracy but rather the rise of anti-politics (Hochuli et al., 2021). This shift unfolded in two stages, both devoid of democratic leadership. The first act began with the financial crisis of 2008, when governments prioritised rescuing financial capital over protecting ordinary citizens. Hopes that this crisis would prompt a political reawakening, particularly in former social democratic nations, were quickly dashed. Popular movements demanding democratic power, such as those in Spain and Greece, were crushed by the IMF, the European Commission, and technocratic politicians across the European Union (EU). Neoliberal capitalism soon rebounded, generating record profits for financial, industrial, and digital capital while deepening social inequalities.

The second act, anti-politics, emerged in 2016 with a dramatic shift in the United States. Years of disappointment, economic insecurity, and disillusionment with political elites fuelled a reactionary movement. Rather than rallying around collective solutions or

democratic participation, large sections of the population placed their faith in a leader who offered an anti-democratic, right-wing agenda. Since then, this movement has only grown. In Europe, similar dynamics are at play. The far-right AfD's (*Alternative für Deutschland* [Alternative for Germany]) success in Germany's 2024 regional elections was celebrated by like-minded parties across the continent. While democrats despaired and analysts struggled to explain the shift, the global far right watched the 2024 US presidential election with confidence, knowing they were advancing on shared ground.

What went wrong with democracy?

The social disintegration and political realignment of recent decades have sparked urgent debates in political science and philosophy. In this volume, Martin Kronauer provides a comprehensive analysis based on his book, *Kritik der auseinanderdriftenden Gesellschaft* (2020), while Alf Gunvald Nilsen examines the global spread of authoritarian neoliberalism. Ultimately, we must ask: what is wrong with democracy? How is it that, in free elections, people increasingly vote for leaders who threaten democratic institutions? If democracy is to survive, it must be more than just a procedural exercise in voting; it must be rooted in a socio-cultural foundation that fosters genuine participation, economic security, and social recognition. The challenge ahead is not to revive democratic capitalism but to build a new democratic socialism, one that ensures power truly rests with the people.

How can democracy be (re)built?

The question 'What is wrong with democracy?' is the title of a book by Ketterer and Becker (2019), which presents the findings of a debate on this very issue. The discussion features three prominent German sociologists, Klaus Dörre, Stephan Lessenich, and Hartmut Rosa, alongside the distinguished American political philosopher Nancy Fraser. From the outset, it becomes evident that none of the four debaters view the problem as an inherent flaw of democracy itself,

but rather as a consequence of capitalism, specifically, how global neoliberal capitalism has eroded democratic governance at all levels of society. While their critiques of capitalism vary, they all agree on this fundamental point. For the purpose of this chapter, however, their responses to a second question prove particularly compelling: “How can a sustainable democracy be rebuilt or restored?”

Klaus Dörre contends that the objective should not be the restoration of social democracy or democratic capitalism, but rather the development of a ‘transformative socio-ecological democracy’. He argues that such a transformation is impossible without addressing the issue of property rights. The private ownership of the means of production, which increasingly encroaches upon common resources, lies at the heart of capitalism and must be abolished if democracy is to prevail. Therefore, he asserts, the answer is democratic socialism, not democratic capitalism, a position he reiterates in other works. Nancy Fraser takes a similar stance, focusing on the structural conditions required for democracy and advocating for new institutional mechanisms to regulate global capital.

Stephan Lessenich and Hartmut Rosa approach the issue from a different perspective. While acknowledging the significance of social and institutional conditions for popular sovereignty, they concentrate on the socio-cultural prerequisites of democracy. Drawing on his book, *Living Well at Others’ Expense* (2019), Lessenich argues that democracy requires the emergence of ‘new democratic subjectivities’, a shift in people’s experiences, understandings, and mentalities that fosters responsibility for progressive, inclusive, and sustainable gender, environmental, and global relations. Rosa, on the other hand, bases his response on his resonance theory. As Ketterer and Becker summarise (2019:12, my translation): “According to Rosa, democratic collectivity (*Gemeinwesen*) is not constituted by shared values, but by relations of resonance among its citizens. In a successful democracy, the collective spirit (*Gemeinsinn*) and the common good (*Gemeinwohl*) are mutually reinforcing conditions”.

I do not conceal the fact that my personal position aligns most closely with Dörre’s. The capitalist paradigm of economic growth,

its foundational principle of private property over the means of production, and its relentless appropriation of common goods and the fruits of people's labour are fundamentally incompatible with democratic solutions to today's global socio-ecological crises. Democratic socialism is necessary. Yet the pressing question remains: why do most people not see it this way? Not only do they reject socialism outright, but many also venerate capitalists and billionaires who support right-wing politicians intent on slashing taxes and dismantling public oversight. When Elon Musk jubilantly celebrated Trump and pledged a million dollars to those who could secure extra votes for him, why did people not ask: where does that money come from? What entitles Musk to such vast wealth, derived from the labour of millions across the world, labour performed by workers denied the right to organise? How is it that one of the most notorious union-busters is also a close ally of the US president, who, in turn, is poised to reshape the state in service of private capital? And so on.

There are no simple answers. Among those voting for anti-social and anti-democratic politicians, we find trade union members, community volunteers, kind-hearted neighbours, people with a strong sense of solidarity, and those who dream of a more just society. Even individuals who believe in redistributing wealth and fighting injustice. The situation is, therefore, highly complex. However, studies on right-wing voting among the working class suggest that these choices are often driven by frustration and anger, born of being ignored by mainstream politics, of not being acknowledged in political discourse, and of feeling invisible to the elites who shape their lives. They rebel against those whom they perceive as looking down on them. From Rosa's perspective, we might say that the root of political polarisation is the lack of resonance, a disconnect between large segments of the population and the elites who govern them. These voters do not experience a fair share of wealth (*Gemeinwohl*) nor do they feel recognised for their identity and contributions (*Gemeinsinn*).

The issues raised by Lessenich and Rosa, the role of democratic subjectivity and collectivity, remind us of key elements in the socio-cultural foundation of Norway's 'social-democratic hegemony' in the

1960s and 1970s. At that time, the expansion of material and social security, coupled with a growing sense of mutual recognition and equal worth, provided the foundation for a form of democratic capitalism. Today, however, that foundation has crumbled. A new one must be built.

What is required, we might say, is the reconstruction of the demos. A new political vocabulary, fresh principles of justice, revitalised political cultures, new habits of citizenship, and, above all, renewed ‘democratic imaginaries’ (Wendy Brown) must be developed, imaginaries that transcend the limits of capitalism. Principles of justice and citizenship and new political subjectivities must be capable of fostering collective decision-making over common resources, production, and distribution. For this is the essence of democracy: ensuring that all people have a role in shaping the rules that govern the shared conditions of life (Castoriadis, 1997; Honneth, 2014, 2023a; Wagner, 2016).

History has demonstrated that democracy flourishes where people are free to participate, not only through formal political and individual freedoms, but also through social and cultural freedoms. It has shown that genuine democracy is rooted in a society where large disparities between the haves and have-nots do not exist, where individual and collective autonomy prevail. A truly democratic imaginary, as Marx and Engels put it in 1848, emerges in a society “in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all”. The question remains: how can a socio-cultural foundation for democratic socialism be built? Where should we begin? What practical steps can be taken? And perhaps most crucially, what kind of social collectivity can drive the mobilisation needed to bring about such transformation?

Widening the mandate of the labour movement

The organised working class, with its trade unions and broader labour movement, was once a formidable social force behind the development of democratic capitalism. Over time, however, it has lost much of its strength. Nevertheless, while social democratic parties in the Global

North continue to struggle and the radical left remains largely on the margins, efforts to organise unions, resist exploitative labour practices, and launch strikes persist. Networks of radical unions are expanding.

Despite its diminished power, I argue that the labour movement remains a crucial arena for collective action in pursuit of social security and equality, as well as for fostering democratic participation. Indeed, trade unions offer a uniquely significant space for democratic engagement. Traditionally, unions have activated their members through political education, collective decision-making, and participation in union operations. This role remains essential today. However, I wish to highlight another critical aspect: trade unions bring together individuals engaged in the most central social practice of their lives, aside from family and personal relationships, namely, work.

Work is not merely a means of securing income and social protection. It is also, in its best form, a site for creativity, self-development, and social recognition. Thus, unions must organise and campaign not only for fair working conditions, but also for meaningful and fulfilling work. The struggle along these two dimensions, material conditions and the quality of work itself, helps cultivate democratic agency. In the workplace, people can experience the necessity, utility, and rewards of solidarity, formed through collective discussions and shared action in pursuit of common interests. Furthermore, they can gain a sense of pride in doing a good job, completing tasks with excellence, and contributing to a broader community. These experiences foster personal growth, self-worth, and a deeper sense of self-determination – qualities essential for democratic participation.

Historically, trade unions have prioritised the economic interests of workers as labourers, often neglecting their interests as producers. This is not to say the latter concern has been entirely absent. For artisans and those in skilled trades, professional pride has always been integral to their collective identity. However, I argue that today, unions must incorporate this dimension across all sectors of working life. Doing so would provide a broader foundation for new socio-cultural conditions

that support democracy, in the workplace and in society at large. The second part of this chapter will explore this argument further.

Democratisation from below

The idea that workplace participation and experience can lay the groundwork for democratic subjectivity and capacity is well established. Thinkers such as Marx, Durkheim, and Dewey have long advanced this argument. Here, I will engage with contemporary contributions to this discourse.

German industrial sociology has been particularly influential in highlighting workplace conditions that hinder autonomy and meaningful participation. During the 1980s, there was optimism surrounding ‘postmodern’ management strategies, which introduced new production concepts and flexible specialisation, ostensibly requiring highly skilled and autonomous workers (Kern & Schumann, 1984; Piore & Sabel, 1984). However, research soon revealed that the so-called “new capitalism” sought to “have its cake and eat it too” (Schumann, 2000). What initially appeared to be an opportunity for autonomy and personal growth quickly devolved into a system that exploited workers’ full range of subjective capacities for capitalist gain. De-hierarchisation and decentralisation, rather than empowering workers, became frameworks for intensified surveillance and control.

At the same time, the resurgence of ‘the social question’ and the rise of precarious employment became stark realities in the Global North. In response, critical industrial sociology increasingly recognised the need to connect the study of work with a broader critique of capitalism, a perspective that gained even more traction following the 2008 financial crisis.

In 2012, scholars from leading centres of labour sociology convened in Jena to discuss how the discipline could benefit from a more explicit critique of capitalism. Their discussions culminated in the publication of *Capitalism and Labour: Towards Critical Perspectives* (Dörre et al., 2018). The editors argued for a multi-level critique, contending

that it is insufficient to analyse capitalism solely at the systemic or institutional level. Instead, scholars must also examine its impact on everyday life, at work and beyond, and explore the interconnections among these different levels of analysis.

They further emphasised the importance of studying all forms of work, not just ‘productive’ or waged labour, but also the full spectrum of reproductive and care work within socio-economic systems. The book offers a range of approaches for integrating capitalism critique into labour sociology and vice versa. It includes contributions focused on economic and political structures, as well as discussions on social and cultural aspects, subjectivity, and the legitimization of work under capitalism.

For our discussion, I draw particular attention to the editors’ concluding reflections on critical perspectives. They observed a growing sense of frustration with capitalism’s effects, yet also noted that much of this discontent manifests as a critique “with no place to go” (Dörre et al., 2018:418). In some cases, these frustrations translate into forms of “exclusive, competitive solidarity”, which distinguish between “us” and “those below” in increasingly aggressive ways (Dörre et al., 2018:419), a dynamic already exploited by right-wing populist parties such as Germany’s AfD. Others respond through individual coping strategies, seeking personal solutions to systemic problems.

Meanwhile, trade unions struggle to provide workers with responses that feel relevant and effective. The editors argue that sociology must play a role in addressing this challenge. To do so, the discipline must continue its tradition of rigorous analysis and detailed descriptions of the contradictions and paradoxes confronting workers, whether in the workplace, in companies, or in society more broadly (Dörre et al., 2018:419). The sociological critique of capitalism should not only document the erosion of social security and labour rights, but also empower individuals, workplace collectives, and trade unions to resist these trends.

Beyond defensive or pragmatic critiques, however, a more radical critique is necessary, one that interrogates capitalism as a specific

mode of organising the economy, politics, and society (Dörre et al., 2018:421). Such a critique must go beyond piecemeal reforms and instead challenge the system itself.

A critical obstacle, the editors note, is distinguishing between social movements that genuinely advance democratic and emancipatory goals and those that ultimately lead to reactionary or authoritarian solutions. In addressing this, they draw on Erik Olin Wright's argument that the key criterion should be the extent to which movements advance the democratisation of all social relations, including those within the workplace. They also highlight German scholars exploring the potential for a "new economic democracy" (*Neue Wirtschaftsdemokratie*) (Dörre et al., 2018:421).

Their conclusion is striking: while the principle that all individuals should have equal rights to shape their economic, political, and social lives may seem self-evident, under current conditions, 'equality and democratisation' can serve as a rallying cry against both right-wing exclusionary politics and the destabilising inequalities of contemporary capitalism. The response to disempowerment and authoritarian populism, they argue, must be the radical democratisation of all social relations, with workplace democracy playing a particularly vital role. Yet, the question remains: how can this be achieved?

Venture more economic democracy

Some answers to this issue had already been suggested by a group of scholars who reached similar conclusions, as mentioned earlier. Their arguments were presented in a book with the telling title: *Mehr Wirtschaftsdemokratie wagen* (*Venture More Economic Democracy*) (Meine et al., 2011). This book was based on a seminar featuring contributions from a broad spectrum of trade union representatives, alongside a few academic scholars, and was published by VSA Verlag. Two of the scholars involved were Oskar Negt and Michael Schumann, both of whom have long held prominence in the sociological study of work and democracy (note: I have translated the German citations from Negt

and Schumann/Detje). They also played significant roles in shaping intellectual discourse within the German trade union community. In the 1970s, both were engaged in discussions on co-determination and workplace participation. In the 1980s, Schumann became a leading advocate for new production concepts, which were seen as a potential foundation for more democratic workplace relations. However, as mentioned earlier, these hopes gradually faded in the 1990s. For both scholars, the 2008 financial crisis dispelled any remaining doubts about the need for a radical critique of capitalism and a call for genuine economic democracy.

Negt's perspective is rooted in deep resentment towards financial capitalism. He argues that, after illegally siphoning off enormous wealth from global markets and triggering a severe crisis, financial institutions were rescued with public funds – amounting to what he calls a “successful coup d'état and expropriation of those who, as paid labour, contribute to economic growth and provide tax revenues” (Negt, 2011:7). His frustration is further fuelled by the actions of undemocratic institutions such as the EU Commission and the IMF, which, he contends, have forced democratic states to privatise large sections of public assets and dismantle social welfare provisions. Meanwhile, social elites treat those in need with “despicable arrogance” (Negt, 2011:8), while politicians circulate within lobbying circles, pursuing future career prospects rather than addressing public concerns.

Negt highlights that 83 per cent of the German population believes “social equity” is fundamental to a peaceful and cohesive society (Negt, 2011:8), yet 68 per cent feel that politicians pay too little attention to ordinary people's concerns. Given this, he argues, it is unsurprising that trust in political parties is eroding and confidence in democratic institutions is weakening.

Negt's (2011:9) position is clear: participation in elections alone constitutes only a “half democracy. The only way to sustain a democratic system is to pursue the consistent democratisation of all areas of life”. In the world today, he asserts, expanding democracy

must necessarily mean expanding economic democracy. This implies that “citizens must have a stake in the products of their own labour” (Negt, 2011:9). Drawing on Karl Polanyi’s thesis on the destructive impact of disembedded markets, Negt argues that without substantial economic democracy, civil society itself is at risk of disintegration.

While he does not prescribe a definitive blueprint for democratic processes and institutions, he suggests revisiting the socialist tradition of workers’ councils and the cooperative model for production, consumption, and housing. However, he does offer a fundamental principle for any democratic institution to function effectively: “Democracy is the only political system that must be learned so that its participants develop the capacity for political judgement” (Negt, 2011:10). He insists that this learning must occur through “practical engagement in solidarity and cooperative co-determination across all areas of life”. Without such experiential learning, democracy is doomed to fail. “Only as a lived experience can democracy have a future” (Negt, 2011:10).

Negt’s argument is deeply informed by his lifelong engagement with theories of learning, political socialisation, and the intrinsic link between human dignity and decent work. In 2004, he advised trade unions to extend their political mandate beyond the workplace, engaging more broadly with people’s fundamental living conditions (Negt, 2004). Michael Schumann, a close friend of Negt since their joint trade union projects in the early 1960s (Wittemann, 1994), contributed to the VSA volume drawing on five decades of empirical research into work and labour in Germany. Alongside Richard Detje, editor of the journal *Sozialismus*, Schumann advocates for a democratisation of the economy from below, a fresh approach to systemic critique (Schumann & Detje, 2011).

Analysing the post-democratic character of neoliberalism, the legitimacy crisis exposed in 2008, and the widespread sense of political powerlessness, they reject the idea of restoring the social market economy. They argue that “at a time when systemic responses to existential threats are required, the social market economy is an outdated concept” (Schumann & Detje, 2011:73). Since this model

lacked safeguards against the neoliberal turn and its consequences, they see little point in relying on it for the future.

Instead, they call for a radical expansion of economic democracy, advocating for direct representation and influence at all levels of the company and across all aspects of production. Drawing on Aglietta and Rebérioux (2005), they reject the old Fordist compromise, where management controlled production while economic democracy was reduced to securing social rights. They insist that “democracy must encompass the entire enterprise”, fostering a collective interest that legitimises its economic activities (Schumann & Detje, 2011:76). This collective interest, they argue, must be rooted in the entire workforce.

Schumann and Detje acknowledge the challenges this poses for workers’ representatives. Decisions about production are not purely economic; they also involve societal, environmental, and ethical considerations. However, they argue that individual and collective capacities for addressing these challenges must be developed. Crucially, they contend that change must start from the shop floor. “The opportunity to shape one’s work remains a central issue” (Schumann & Detje, 2011:72). This is not about collaboration for the sake of corporate competitiveness, as seen in the 1980s and 1990s. Rather, it is about enabling workers to develop through self-determination. Creativity, flexibility, independence, and responsibility should not be mere instruments of managerial strategy but should thrive under conditions of autonomy. These, they argue, are the fundamental building blocks of a new model of economic democracy (Schumann & Detje, 2011:81).

This model, they assert, requires mobilisation from below. “It is about a new concept of representation within the firm and on the shop floor” (Schumann & Detje, 2011:81). Rather than relying solely on representative structures, there must be a stronger emphasis on self-representation. This does not mean abolishing representative institutions like the *Betriebsrat* (works councils) in Germany. However, Schumann and Detje warn that these structures often lead representatives to become co-managers, distancing them from those they represent. To counteract this, they advocate revitalising representative structures by

fostering self-representation – encouraging initiative, self-responsibility, and direct participation. They argue that without a strong connection to the workforce, representatives achieve little or even make decisions that workers do not support. “With self-aware, critical, and proactive colleagues, representation functions far more effectively” (Schumann & Detje, 2011:82).

Thus, Schumann and Detje conclude that co-determination must have a dual structure: combining self-determination and revitalised representative mechanisms. Based on this foundation, a broader democratisation of the economy and society can emerge. They suggest that the self-activation cultivated through workplace participation can inspire new ideas and perspectives for shaping society beyond the workplace (Schumann & Detje, 2011:83). These proposals by Negt, Schumann, and Detje build on a strong tradition of sociological thought on work. In their current form, they represent a radical critique of capitalism, arguing that democracy must extend beyond the core principles of capitalism. Their contributions provide concrete strategies for expanding democratic participation by fostering learning processes and enabling individuals to develop as self-determining participants in work and society. Their arguments are particularly compelling in emphasising workers’ experiences as a foundation for democratic engagement. They also align well with perspectives on societal solidarity and the power dynamics within trade union movements. To illustrate, I will briefly mention two key ideas in this regard.

Conditions for solidarity and labour resistance

The first perspective arises from a review of debates within the German academic left on whether the working class in the Global North still represents a potential force for social transformation. In his analysis, Martin Kronauer (2018) expresses scepticism, citing three key concerns: (1) the rise of nationalist and xenophobic sentiments, (2) the widening gap between the political leadership of the labour movement and the working class, and (3) the risk that workers in the North have internalised an “imperial mode of living”, leading

them to defend their relative privileges, which are based on the social and ecological exploitation of the Global South (Kronauer, 2018:2). While these are important points that merit further discussion, Kronauer's concluding remarks are of particular relevance to our theme. He advocates the possibility of a broad alliance spanning the hierarchy of the working and middle classes in a shared struggle for self-determination – historically, a core objective of any emancipatory movement. He argues that “self-determination fundamentally requires protection from markets and democratic control over capital” (Kronauer, 2018:12). Even for members of the wage-dependent middle class, flexibility becomes a burden rather than a choice when dictated by employers; self-determination, in this context, proves to be an illusion, as individuals find themselves increasingly dependent on market forces (Kronauer, 2018:12). The crucial point here is that grassroots democratic mobilisation has the potential to unite people across social divisions.

The second perspective draws from the extensive literature on the conditions for trade union organising and collective action within the international labour movement. A dominant strand in these studies has focused on the various power resources available to workers in their struggles, particularly structural and associative power. However, some studies move beyond the notion of power as a pre-existing resource that can simply be harnessed if workers possess sufficient awareness or effective framing strategies. Instead, they ask a more fundamental question: what compels workers to engage in collective resistance? What sparks their willingness to organise, act together, and defend shared interests?

A compelling example of this approach is the study *Working for Respect: Community and Conflict at Walmart* by Adam Reich and Peter Bearman (2018). As the title suggests, their research highlights how Walmart workers, despite their precarious employment, react with indignation and anger towards the arbitrary and intrusive behaviour of local and middle management. Low wages, while acknowledged as unfair, are perceived as an external reality beyond their influence. It is the experience of surveillance and managerial caprice that triggers

resistance and a desire to organise. Similar conclusions emerge from earlier studies, such as Rick Fantasia's *Cultures of Solidarity* (1989), based on working-class struggles in 1980s America, and Bridget Kenny's *Retail Worker Politics, Race and Consumption in South Africa* (2018).

These studies underscore that the struggle for autonomy and self-determination is a fundamental concern for workers across all industries and levels of labour stratification. This struggle not only fuels resentment, which can serve as the basis for unionisation and collective resistance, but also plays a crucial role in fostering workers' self-representation and self-activation, key elements in democratising workplace relations.

However, these studies also highlight an aspect of political learning and subjectivity formation that Negt, Schumann, and Detje do not explicitly address: the role of workplace collectivity. The research demonstrates that a critical precondition for collective resistance is the existence of meaningful social relations within the workplace. Yet, not all forms of social connection are sufficient; casual friendships alone do not necessarily translate into mobilisation. Rather, collective action depends on the presence of moral obligations among key initiators and organisers within the workplace community. In other words, successful mobilisation requires capacities of self-representation and individual initiative. Having examined the conditions for a new worker subjectivity, we must now turn to the question of collectivity, demonstrating, as I will argue, that these two perspectives are inherently intertwined.

Collectivity at work

If the capacity for self-representation and the willingness to engage in democratic participation develop through meaningful work in an environment of autonomy and self-determination, then a primary task of trade unions must be to foster both meaningful work and workers' autonomy. As argued, these ideas are central to Axel Honneth's "normative theory of work" (2023b). He reminds us that the concept of meaningful work is one of the classical origins of the critique of alienated

labour under capitalism. Following the tradition of the young Marx, he summarises, with reference to Andrea Veltman (2016), that meaningful work is that which develops and fulfils workers' skills, capacities, and talents; supports personal virtues such as pride, honour, and dignity; produces something useful or practical; and becomes an integral part of workers' lives through the formation of personal relationships.

The idea of autonomy, Honneth continues, represents a second paradigm of critique, directed at the restrictions and surveillance imposed on labour under capitalist heteronomy. Drawing on contemporary political philosophy, he gives particular credit to Elisabeth Anderson and her study, on *Private Government* (2017), for its contribution to this theme.

Both of these critiques, the call for meaningful work and autonomy, are well represented and extensively developed in the sociology of work, as previously discussed. The third paradigmatic critique Honneth examines, however, is what he considers the most fruitful: the democratic paradigm. This perspective aligns closely with what we have explored as economic democracy from below. Honneth argues that work is not well-organised, falling short of what the United Nations (UN) defines as "decent work", if it obstructs rather than strengthens citizens' participation in the "political formation of common will" (Honneth, 2023b:42). This highlights the necessity of good working conditions, not only in terms of job content and opportunities for self-determination but also regarding income, contractual security, and working hours. Echoing the radical critique of capitalism, Honneth asserts that democracy cannot exist within a disembedded capitalist labour market, where workers remain dependent on precarious employment. Advocates of economic democracy from a radical perspective argue that simply demanding fair labour conditions and social equality is insufficient, although these remain crucial struggles. Unions must go further, extending their demands to include the right of co-determination over what is produced and how production is organised, thus directly challenging managerial prerogative.

Up to this point, Honneth's work does not substantially alter the established contours of the debate. Yet his engagement with

what he terms the ‘democratic paradigm’ does yield two significant contributions. The first is theoretical, centred on his reworking of recognition as a precondition for democratic participation. The second is institutional, where he highlights the crucial role of skill formation systems in enabling individuals to exercise meaningful agency within the economy and democratic life. Honneth has previously engaged extensively in theoretical studies of recognition as an intersubjective process that forms the foundation for self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-worth, drawing on Hegel and George Herbert Mead (Honneth, 1995). This work has contributed not only to theories of socialisation and identity formation but also to his study of democracy and social freedom (Honneth, 2014). In his continuation of this broad inquiry, he has turned his focus to what he considers a “blind spot in political philosophy” (Honneth, 2023a): the ways in which the division of labour and people’s experiences at work shape the conditions for democracy.

In his 2023 article, *“Democracy and the Division of Labour”*, Honneth draws heavily on Hegel, Marx, and Durkheim. From the latter two, he references their argument that social integration occurs through “acknowledgement of mutual dependency and thus [...] a feeling of common belonging” in societies with a high degree of division of labour (Honneth, 2023a:145). Despite his critique of capitalist labour structures, Honneth notes that Marx maintained the view that “only through participation in forms of social cooperation, that is, only through the experience of working for each other, can we acquire an understanding of ourselves as members of a social community” (Honneth, 2023a:145). He argues that this remains a crucial condition for social integration. A further condition is found in Hegel’s ideas of recognition, from whom, Honneth states, we inherit the modern understanding that “active participation in the division of labour gives every citizen the opportunity to develop the feeling of being publicly recognised, and thus a sense of their own self-worth” (Honneth, 2023a:145).

Honneth expands this argument with reference to empirical studies demonstrating that participation in paid work has become essential for psychological wellbeing in modern culture, reinforcing

Hegel's thesis that "we achieve a consciousness of our own self-worth in and through our socially recognised contribution to the division of labour" (Honneth, 2023a:146). These arguments underscore the importance of 'decent work' (to use the UN's terminology) for social integration. However, Honneth acknowledges that they do not fully explain why decent work should foster individuals' willingness and capacity to participate in democratic decision-making processes (Honneth, 2023a:146). He attempts to answer this through what he calls a "shared intuition", asserting that most people would agree with the proposition that "the slimmer the opportunities for having a say in the shape of one's work, the lower one's primary income, and the worse the reputation of the work in question, the weaker the individual's faith in their own political efficacy" (Honneth, 2023a:146). On this point, Honneth cites sociological studies for support.

A central reference, on which Honneth also draws extensively in his book *Der arbeitende Souverän* (2023b), is Carole Pateman's *Participation and Democratic Theory* (1970), a seminal study on participatory democracy. Through a systematic discussion of democratic participation in the workplace, industry, and Yugoslavia's self-management structures, Pateman concludes that "the lesser one's say in the workplace and the less challenging the tasks defining the occupation, the weaker one's faith in one's own political efficacy" (Honneth, 2023a:147). Based on these findings, Honneth asserts that "the more members of a society have the chance to pursue complex tasks in secure workplaces where they can co-determine the character, organisation, and goals of their work, the greater will be the degree of political participation in democratic processes" (Honneth, 2023a:147).

When considering strategies to lay the groundwork for decent work, Honneth explores several possibilities, from task enrichment to self-governing teamwork, approaches well known from past projects in "work development" and "innovative labour politics". A more radical option aligns with Pateman (1970) and others who advocate organising work through employee-run, self-governing collectives or even through mandatory public service for specific age cohorts (Honneth,

2023a:157). Despite their diverse origins, these proposals resemble Oskar Negt's vision of workers' councils for self-management.

While Honneth's discussion largely aligns with established themes in the sociology of work, his particular contribution lies in highlighting the potential of recognition and the development of self-worth through work experiences. However, it is striking that he does not delve deeper into the role of recognition in the processes of socialisation and learning in the workplace. This omission is surprising given the theoretical threads already present in his work. Not only does he engage with Hegel and Marx, but also with Durkheim, John Dewey, and G.D.H. Cole, figures whose contributions relate not only to fulfilling and autonomous work as sources of self-worth, honour, and pride, but also to the institutional conditions necessary for these processes to take place. They are among the foremost theorists of socialisation, education, and collective skill formation.

Honneth does touch on this theme, but primarily from the perspective of education and its role in the democratic public sphere. Drawing on Durkheim, Dewey, and Kant, he highlights how professional skills, civic competence, and moral principles are not merely tools for securing an income but are instead "generalised media of social recognition" (Honneth, 2023a:134). Kant, in Honneth's interpretation, argues that individuals become aware of their own worth through pedagogical processes that instil technical skills and civic knowledge.

This argument reinforces the importance of social interaction in learning and self-development. It also prompts crucial questions about the social environment of the workplace: what forms of collectivity do individuals experience at work? What community relations foster self-worth? And how can workplace communities provide a foundation for learning democracy and cultivating a new form of democratic subjectivity among workers? The final section of this chapter will address these questions and explore why trade unions should actively engage in skill formation.

For a new economic democracy: Why trade unions should engage with skills

To suggest that trade unions ‘should care’ about skills development implies that they currently do not, which, in many cases, is true, both in Norway and elsewhere. As previously noted, unions have traditionally focused on issues directly linked to the employment contract, such as job security, wages, and working hours. While these concerns are undoubtedly important, they have often come at the expense of addressing workers’ interests as *producers*.

One compelling reason for unions to prioritise skills development is that qualifications serve as valuable assets in negotiating employment terms, both at the individual level and within collective wage agreements. The longstanding division between skilled and unskilled labour is a reflection of this reality, for better or worse. Historically, groups of skilled workers have at times displayed exclusionary attitudes and pursued sectoral interests, as evidenced in the history of the labour movement. However, this is by no means an inevitability. There are notable examples of strong, skill-based unions leading the charge in national and international solidarity efforts.

A second, and arguably more fundamental, reason is that skills are essential for fostering workplace autonomy and self-determination – both of which are critical for workplace democracy. Moreover, meaningful work is contingent on skills and how work is organised, as previously discussed in relation to the cultivation of democratic subjectivities. Two empirical examples serve to illustrate this point.

The role of skills in workplace democracy

In the 1960s, Norwegian industry saw attempts to introduce job enlargement and semi-autonomous work teams through union–employer cooperation. The unions’ motivation was to expand workplace democracy. While some early successes garnered enthusiastic worker

support, these efforts ultimately faded. A key reason for this failure was a lack of qualifications among the workforce. Training programmes were introduced in the specific workshops involved, but these ad hoc initiatives proved insufficient for broader implementation. My research from the late 1980s concluded that workers, not only those on the shop floor but also their foremen, lacked the technical expertise and the social and psychological readiness for a system that required a high degree of responsibility for the production process. The prevailing work culture was built around fixed tasks and routines, which made the transition to a more autonomous work organisation difficult.

Fast forward two decades, and the landscape had changed significantly. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the chemical process industry, one of the sectors involved in the earlier experiments, launched a national apprenticeship programme and training scheme for production workers. By the mid-1980s, a new category of skilled workers had emerged, not just in name but in reality. These workers were independent, knowledgeable, and confident, taking full responsibility for production processes and product quality. Crucially, they wanted this responsibility, and they were given it. Meaningful work and workplace autonomy were achieved through systematic skills development. Furthermore, trade union representatives, industry personnel, and local educators collaborated to establish a national network of institutions dedicated to developing the new occupational trade. This last point also illustrates the potential of trade-based skills formation, particularly through apprenticeship systems to embed a moral economy and foster long-term employer commitment.

The limits of organisational development without skills

A contrasting example can be found in the national agreements between trade unions and employers in the 1990s, which sought to promote ‘organisational development’. While this initiative was framed as an extension of workplace democracy, in practice, it became more focused on productivity improvements. These projects, spanning various manufacturing and service industries,

were overseen by local steering committees composed of union representatives, researchers, and employers. However, my analysis of project reports revealed a crucial oversight: none of these initiatives incorporated the principles or practices of the apprenticeship system or skilled worker training. The labour representatives involved focused on workers' employment conditions but neglected their role as producers. Consequently, the organisational changes lacked a foundation in the interests and self-reliance of skilled workers. This not only undermined the long-term sustainability of the projects but also missed an opportunity to foster genuine workplace democracy from below. To borrow from Schumann and Detje, the first example demonstrates how socialisation into a well-institutionalised category of skilled workers can create a foundation for workplace autonomy and self-representation. The second example, by contrast, shows what happens when this opportunity is overlooked.

The wider significance of skills-based union politics

Expanding the discussion to the broader significance of becoming a skilled worker, it is clear that skilled occupations represent more than just technical proficiency. They constitute communities of knowledge and practice, which serve as a basis for social integration and collective identity. In their seminal study, *The Second Industrial Divide* (1984), Piore and Sabel highlight this collective dimension of skilled work:

Organisations based on flexible specialisation solve [their] problem by linking the acquisition of skill to acquisition of membership in the community of the skilled. Craft workers are bred, not born; and the formation of their identity as persons is bound up with their admittance into the groups of producers, on the one hand, and the mastery of productive knowledge, on the other. (Piore & Sabel, 1984:274)

This perspective resonates with anyone familiar with skilled trades, whether from direct experience or research. The knowledge and skills

that inform workplace decision-making are not purely individual assets; they are social constructs, shaped by learning within communities of producers. This principle applies to all forms of work. Productive knowledge, like all knowledge, is far more collective in nature than modern individualistic ideologies acknowledge. For trade unions, this raises a critical point: the more work is organised around occupational principles, where workers are trained and socialised within a recognised trade, linked to national education and training programmes, and where unions have a say in setting standards, the stronger the foundation for workplace democracy. In such systems, skilled workers are competent professionals and active participants in shaping their work environment.

Apprenticeship and the moral economy

The case for apprenticeship extends beyond skills development; it also fosters social cohesion and collective identity. Apprenticeship systems prioritise work-based learning, which numerous studies have shown to have significant advantages. Learners gain confidence, experience recognition, and develop pride in their work, factors that enhance motivation, encourage further learning, and cultivate self-esteem. More importantly, apprenticeship integrates individuals into a nationally recognised community of producers, reinforcing a sense of collective belonging. It also strengthens trade unions by grounding them in the collective interests of skilled workers, providing a power base and security for members.

A final, often underestimated, benefit is the potential for apprenticeship systems to foster moral commitments among employers. When companies share responsibility for long-term skills development, they build relationships with local schools, teachers, students, and communities. This can create obligations beyond mere economic transactions, fostering a form of moral economy (Thompson, 1971). While there is no guarantee that companies will always act in this way, just as unions do not always pursue solidaristic politics, examples from Norway demonstrate that such commitments can and

do emerge when skills formation is embedded in broader institutional frameworks (Olsen, 2015).

Of course, traditions of apprenticeship and institutionalised systems of craft-based training exist to highly varying degrees across contemporary labour markets. In many regions, they have never been established. I am not, therefore, advocating the ‘export’ of ready-made models of skill formation to contexts without the historical or institutional foundations on which such systems rest. However, the underlying principles, of collective forms of training, communities of skilled practice, and work organisation grounded in shared knowledge, can provide inspiration and guidance everywhere, I argue. Relatedly, based on a highly critical analysis of the ILO (his former employer), and what he viewed as its narrow “labourism” which ties workers to the mast of capitalist employment relations, Guy Standing proposed an alternative politics of work built around the idea of “occupational citizenship” (Standing, 2009). Unfortunately, Standing’s proposals have not, as far as I can see, generated the broader debates and policy development they warranted.

Conclusion

My own argument in this chapter may be summarised as follows: workers are not only labourers, they are also producers. As such, they should possess the capacity and the right to govern their own work. Skills are therefore the foundation of autonomy in the workplace, and autonomy is in turn the foundation of recognition and the development of self-worth, conditions essential to democratic participation in any society. Moreover, learning is embedded in social and cultural environments. Communities of knowledge and skill can thus provide crucial bases for social integration and the formation of collective identities. The development of high-quality skills, however, requires high-quality education and training, and trade unions should take an active role in securing and shaping such provision. After all, skills are among the most important power resources workers have, both in the labour market and within the organisation of production.

Knowledge and skill formation are therefore indispensable not only for decent work, but for sustainable and democratically grounded economic development.

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