

A Deliberative Case for Democracy in Firms

Andrea Felicetti¹

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Abstract The increasing centrality of business firms in contemporary societies calls for a renewed attention to the democratization of these actors. This paper sheds new light on the possibility of democratizing business firms by bridging recent scholarship in two fields—deliberative democracy and business ethics. To date, deliberative democracy has largely neglected the role of business firms in democratic societies. While business ethics scholarship has given more attention to these issues, it has overlooked the possibility of deliberation within firms. As argued in the paper, a combination of reforms based on the ideas of workplace deliberation and business deliberation is necessary in order to promote the prospect of deliberation in different business contexts. The paper also discusses the importance of more democratic firms for deliberative democracy at large and, in particular, for the recent debate on deliberative systems. Finally, the paper suggests new areas of investigation to better understand the prospect of democratic deliberation in business firms.

Keywords Deliberative democracy · Business ethics · Workplace deliberation · Deliberative firms · Ethical firms

Introduction

Business firms play an increasingly powerful role as social and political agents in contemporary societies (Scherer and Palazzo 2008; Wilks 2013). Debates on the profound

effects of this trend, far from being confined to scholarly circles, have caught the attention of the public at large. Highly popular analyses of some of the main challenges faced by contemporary societies, from environmental sustainability (e.g., Klein 2015) to the pursuit of social justice (e.g., Taibbi 2014), give vast and critical attention to the conduct of business firms, which are often seen as more important actors than governments themselves. Spurred by periodical eruptions of protests, some of the most popular recent debates have focused on issues relating to the growing power of businesses and how they use it. These include, for instance, controversies over workers treatment, involving giant firms like Amazon, a myriad of local mobilizations against the relocation of industrial firms, protests against the installation of large business in small communities and against highly controversial activities, epitomized, respectively, by anti-Wal-Mart and no fracking campaigns.

The increasingly central role of firms calls for new ideas to address the challenges related to their prominence. In this respect, a particularly important aspect is the effect of the rising power of business firms on democracy. On the one hand, this development poses serious challenges to contemporary democracies. For instance, Kobrin (2009) stresses that the increasingly important role played by corporations in the transnational context should call for an increase in firms' responsibility and the development of mechanisms to favor firms' accountability to the public. Similarly, Scherer et al. argue that firms' ever-expanding involvement in providing services and making decisions challenges the existing structures of democratic governance and raise questions about the scope of action that firms can legitimately engage in. At the same time, scholars and activists have envisioned in the democratization of business firms a means to address the complex challenges

✉ Andrea Felicetti
andrea.felicetti@sns.it

¹ Scuola Normale Superiore, piazza degli Strozzi,
50123 Florence, Italy

that business needs to face as they become increasingly important actors. Business firms are called to engage on a growing number of increasingly complex issues, which vary in terms of scale, relevant interests, affected actors with their different underpinning values, and power relationships. As argued by Schneider and Scherer (2015), globalization has weakened state regulatory powers and favored a shift toward production in states with weak regulations. Consequently, businesses have to directly face legitimacy challenges and can no longer rely exclusively on compliance with the regulatory environment. These developments directly affect corporate governance and question the centrality of stakeholders. Schneider and Scherer envision the democratization of corporate governance structures as a means to improve the redistribution of individual risks and counter legitimacy deficits.

To date, the field of business ethics has captured the relevance of democratic deliberation in firms and it explored the issue in great depth (e.g., Scherer and Palazzo 2011; Burg 2009; Palazzo and Scherer 2006; Gilbert and Behnam 2009; Parkins and Mitchell 2005). However, in keeping with a traditional Habermasian view of deliberative democracy, the debate has focused on the possibility of deliberative interactions among firms and between firms. Consequently, it has overlooked the potential for firms themselves to engage in internal practices of deliberative democracy. This paper argues that deliberation inside firms and deliberation between firms and other relevant actors in society provide related but distinct resources for the deliberative democratization of business firms.

Besides business ethics, this paper engages in depth with deliberative democratic theory. Indeed, another goal of this paper is to remedy a major flaw in recent democratic thinking. That is, despite the relevance of the theme, the latest debates in democratic theory have paid marginal attention to the analysis of the relationship between democracy and firms. The neglect of this topic is captured and firmly objected to by Carole Pateman in her recent APSA presidential address. As she argues: ‘There is little discussion either of the feasibility or desirability of workplace democracy today. ...the institution of employment, one of the most central institutions of our society, remains undemocratic’ (Pateman 2012, p. 10).

Unlike Pateman, who takes issue with the deliberative approach to democracy, this paper finds that deliberative theory, the main development in democratic scholarship in recent decades (Goodin 2008), is a valuable resource for the promotion of more democratic business firms. Deliberation in firms represents an intersection where participatory and deliberative ideas can meet to democratize contemporary societies (Vitale 2006).

To be sure, deliberative democrats have surely overlooked the importance of democratizing firms. This neglect

is particularly striking as some of the classics of democratic theory highlight that firms have a key role in any working theory of democracy and they also defend the idea of ‘workplace democracy’ (Pateman 1976; Dahl 1986). As Iris Young remarked some 10 years ago, workplace democracy has a central role in the prospect of any democratic project, be it participatory or deliberative (in Fung 2004).

Indeed, the democratization of firms through democratic deliberation is also discussed in early deliberative scholarship (Cohen 1989a). However, while the subject emerges periodically (see Cohen 1997; Gastil 1993; Elster 1997; Fung 2003) and there seems to be no overt opposition to the democratization of firms in deliberative scholarship, deliberative democrats have fallen short of engaging with the matter in any particular depth.

This paper redresses this grave shortcoming by arguing that a deliberative case for the democratization of firms both can be and needs to be made. The promotion of democratic deliberation in firms is necessary to enhance the democratic qualities of firms and to promote the prospect of deliberative democracy more generally. This paper aims to generate a long overdue debate on this issue among scholars of business ethics, democracy, and political theory in the hope that interdisciplinary dialogue in these fields may grow stronger.

The paper is structured as follows. After “[Introduction](#)” section, the paper takes stake of scholarship on deliberation in businesses. It questions the tendency to focus on deliberation between firms and other societal actors more than deliberation within firms and argues that promoting democratic firms requires engagement on both fronts. The idea of workplace deliberation (WD) is then illustrated in the next section. Following, the paper shows how forms of deliberation between firms and other actors can complement the quest for deliberative firms. These ideas are used in the second part of the paper to argue that deliberative firms are a fundamental step in building a more deliberative democratic society. The paper closes by identifying avenues for future research on democracy and business firms.

Firms as Sites of Deliberation

Consistently with its Habermasian origins, deliberative democracy considers argument and communication among equals as the driving forces behind democratic engagement. Deliberative democracy has expanded and developed greatly over the last decades. Yet, at its core, deliberative democracy remains committed to the idea that in a democratic polity, preference formation and decision making should be based on dialogue which is inclusive, competent, and respectful (Dryzek 2010, p. 3).

The importance of promoting public deliberation in institutions is widely recognized in deliberative theory. Deliberative scholars closer to the critical tradition have long questioned this preference for focusing on political institutions and procedural issues (Rawls 1993; Habermas 1996; Bessette 1997), rather than the public sphere and more substantive concerns (e.g., Fraser 1990; Dryzek 2001; Young 2000a). In fact, in mass democracies, the prospect of deliberation cannot be limited to state institutions only (Chambers 2012). Consequently, deliberative scholars have argued for the democratization of governance networks, media systems, social movements, civil society actors, and even family (e.g., Dryzek 2009; Mansbridge et al. 2012).

Despite the fact that deliberative democrats are increasingly acknowledging the political nature and relevance of organizations beyond traditional institutions of representative democracy—including, for instance, formal and informal governance networks (e.g., Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012)—the political dimension of business firms is still generally overlooked. With regard to firms, the divide between public and private organizations is usually taken as a given in deliberative scholarship. Firms are portrayed as belonging to the realm of private organizations. Thus, talk of deliberative reform is quickly jeopardized as private organizations are seen as beyond the reach of deliberative democracy (Papadopoulos 2012, p. 132). This is obviously problematic. To begin with, the very distinction between public and private has long been criticized by political theorists of different strands, including critical democratic theorists who question the impermeability of private organizations to democratic principles (e.g., Fraser 1990; Young 1996). Were firms found to be private actors, rather than assumed to be such, they would still not be exempted from all arguments in favor of their democratization. Yet, the very classification of firms as private organizations is doubtful as they embed fundamental aspects of public organizations (Néron 2010; Malleson 2014). Firms have long assumed social and political roles traditionally associated with governments (Lindblom 1977). Over time, firms have come to provide public goods and serve as political actors in policy making at all levels (Scherer et al. 2006; Scherer and Palazzo 2007). As explained by Ciepley, it is not only through their actions, as Lowi and Habermas rightly pointed out long ago, but by their very nature that ‘firms transgress the public/private divide’ (Ciepley 2013, p. 152). Overall, it is necessary for deliberative scholarship to move beyond the increasingly challenged assumption about the private nature of firms and start thinking of firms from a genuinely deliberative democratic perspective.

One way of taking up this challenge is by going back to the essential fact that deliberative theory starts as an account of democratic legitimacy (Parkinson 2003). In

particular, in a democratic society, a decision is legitimate when it is arrived at through the democratic deliberation of those affected by it, or their representatives (Cohen 1989b; Dryzek 2001). This fundamental principle of deliberative democracy allows us to draw one important consideration with regard to the issue of deliberative firms. To qualify as deliberative democratic, organizations, including firms, ought to host inclusive and effective deliberation (see Dryzek 2009; Milewicz and Goodin 2012). In fact, from a deliberative democratic standpoint, the criterion that makes a decision democratic remains the same, regardless of whether we apply it to institutions of representative democracy or other organizations, including firms.

Deliberative communication should: not be affected by coercion, induce reflection about the preferences that individuals hold, display claims that are systematically connected to more general principles, and exhibit ‘reciprocity’—that is, an effort to communicate in ways ‘that others can accept’ (Gutmann and Thompson 2009). Furthermore, in order to be democratic, a deliberative process needs to include the relevant interests and discourses. Inclusivity in terms of interests can be intended in a particularly broad sense and need not be limited to material ones. Finally, a deliberative democratic process needs to be consequential. That is, it should be able to generate collective or social outcomes (Dryzek 2010, pp. 10, 137). Having characterized deliberation in firms along a rather capacious and well-established definition such as Dryzek’s, it is important to introduce the fundamental distinction between the two approaches that this paper uses to reflect upon the issue of the deliberative reform of firms.

The deliberative democratization of firms can unravel along two axes: within firms and between firms and other actors. The reforms that focus on the first aspect go under the headings ‘workplace deliberation’ (WD). The reforms that aim, instead, at the second aspect are conceptualized as ‘business deliberation’ (BD). The deliberative democratization of firms can develop along both lines. However, as will be shown, both approaches present specific challenges and either of them can be favored, depending on the circumstances, in order to promote the deliberative democratization of firms. WD meets the expectations of those who call for the development of democratic organizations (Pateman 2012). On the other hand, BD is directed more specifically to those concerned with the quality of interaction among organizations with different degrees of internal democracy (Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012).

WD represents the more demanding form of democratization of business firms. Unlike BD, which aims at inserting firms as a component of a wider society-wide staged process of deliberation (see Goodin 2005), WD envisions firms themselves as organizations engaged in internal democratic deliberation. BD, in keeping with the

traditional Habermasian purview of deliberative democracy, does not demand firms, or public sphere actors generally, to deliberate themselves but to engage in subjectless communication processes feeding into procedures for decision making at institutional level. On the other hand, WD stems from a more critical approach to which in order to attain deliberative democracy it is necessary to create space for deliberation beyond institutions.

A New Focus on Deliberation within Firms: ‘Workplace Deliberation’ (WD)

The idea of WD builds on Iris Young’s insight that in a democratic system there exists a ‘presumption’ of democratic decision making in *all* institutions broadly intended, including firms (Young 2006, p. 94). This point resonates with Dryzek’s argument for discursive democracy in society at large and beyond state institutions, which meets with major limitations (1999, 2010). This makes it necessary for democrats to explore the space for democracy in those influential sectors of society that retain power over political life.

The critical approach to deliberative democracy of which WD is a manifestation does not renounce the Habermasian purview of democratic society as a ‘self-organizing community of free and equal citizens’ coordinating their common affairs through common reason (Habermas 1996, p. 6). Rather, it claims that while deliberation on policies and institutions is primary in achieving this idea, the role of workplace cannot be neglected. Indeed, a system characterized by non-workplaces seems poorly suited to provide for emancipatory dynamics.

The particular status accorded to firms is connected to the fact that firms are important components of the basic structure of society, and the workplace is crucial in determining the social division of labor (Young 2006). Deliberation in the workplace may provide a unique platform for questioning economic processes and affirming the conditions of social equality, needed to promote ‘substantial moves towards greater deliberative democracy’ (McLavery 2014, p. 49). Without engaging with WD, democratic societies will continue to ‘uncritically accept the relations of production that defined an economic system’ (Young 2006b, p. 21).

WD embeds the traditional and basic idea of workplace democracy with workers’ democratic control of firms, and the quest for greater participation of workers in the decisions of firms (see Dow 2003). Importantly, the outcome of the decision-making process has to fall within the boundaries of more general norms established through democratic deliberation at societal level. For instance, a firm that (with or without deliberation) resolved to evade taxation

would be at fault from a deliberative prospective to the extent that it would break the norms established through previous societal deliberation.

The idea of WD points in the direction of opening up space for authentic, inclusive, and consequential deliberation within firms. WD sees workers as having an important role not just in task execution but also task definition (Young 2006b, esp. Chap. 7). WD can be thought of as a guiding principle for those interested in democratizing businesses and it could be approached through different practical initiatives.

Real-life examples can contribute to an understanding what form WD may take and envisioning it in future developments. Cooperative enterprises scattered all over the world represent an interesting case for anyone interested in democratic workplaces (For instance, Rothschild and Whitt 1986; Malleson 2014). Mondragon Cooperative, in Spain, is probably the most popular among them. It offers a model of economically and socially sustainable business embodying a significant degree of deliberation in the workplace (Malleson 2013; Bernacchio and Couch 2015). These enterprises, which by their nature are sensitive to democratic values, are certainly important. Yet, the prospect of WD cannot be limited to these cooperative businesses only. Rather, it also needs to be promoted among organizations such as multinational corporations, whose operations greatly affect societal life at all levels.

Taken at face value, this task may seem insurmountable. Yet, there are arguably at least three distinct environments to work with in promoting WD. Discussing all potential strategies of action in each context is, also for reasons of length, beyond the scope of this paper. Yet, it is important here to illustrate how different environments provide different opportunities and challenges for workplace democracy.

First, some contexts are genuinely adversarial. In these business environments, interaction among the various actors of the firm displays little or no awareness of or interest in deliberative democratic ideas. In these contexts, WD can emerge sporadically in an otherwise deliberation repellent context. A case in point is provided by Baccaro’s (2001) pioneering study on the role of deliberation in industrial disputes in two Italian factories of the car manufacturing firm FIAT. Both case studies, such as industrial relations at FIAT more generally, seemed far from deliberative and dominated by hostility, virulent clashes, and blackmailing (see Caputo et al. 2012). Nonetheless, in one of the two disputes, deliberative leaders emerged that made it possible for successful deliberation between workers and management to occur. Adversarial business environments are most challenging for promoting WD. In this context, the best hope for change may lie in the action of deliberative entrepreneurs. The latter, essentially, are individuals who are not just aware of the potentials of democratic

deliberation but are capable of introducing or fostering it in real-world situations. Interestingly, both business ethics and deliberative democracy scholarship refer to these figures in their analyses of transformational leaders (Du et al. 2013) and democratic agents of justice (Dryzek 2015). Deliberation in adversarial environments, moreover, could also be promoted via external pressure, through forms of BD, discussed in the next section.

Second, there are deliberation-sensitive environments. These refer to contexts that already acknowledge that deliberative practice can contribute to the life of firms. German co-determination and works councils in particular provide good examples of this context (see Müller-Jentsch 2015). Service industry firms deeply engaged with co-determination host deliberative practices that enhance workers' conditions and economic performance (Doellgast 2012). Furthermore, in major multinational German corporations from Volkswagen to Daimler, and also in SMEs, deliberation positively affects decision making on various issues, including: strategic decisions on production and employment, production processes, and workers' competences (Kwon 2012). Deliberation-sensitive environments feature familiarity and openness toward experimentation in deliberative engagement, which allows an incremental approach to WD. That is, WD could be expanded to areas where structural change makes it necessary to develop new coordination mechanisms or where it severely challenges previously existing mechanisms. For instance, in the context of emerging forms of labor transnationalism, there seems to be substantial room for introducing successful deliberative interaction and solidarity, as evidenced by Pernicka et al.'s (2015) study of transnational employee cooperation during the crisis at General Motors/Opel. WD, moreover, can also be engaged with in professional communities that are open to experimentation beyond matters of organization and redistribution. An interesting example in this respect is moral case deliberation (MCD) being experimented with by healthcare professionals in a growing number of Dutch hospitals (e.g., Weidema et al. 2012; Stolper et al. 2012).

Finally, there are innovation environments. These are made of firms featuring markedly innovative and ethically driven business practices. A good illustration of an innovation environment is represented by the galaxy of emerging hybrid or blended social enterprises, which are created to pursue the typical objectives of for-profit corporations as well as selected ethical goals (Rawhouser et al. 2015; Gottesman 2007). Substantially different organizations fit in this category, from Social Enterprises to Community Interest Companies in the UK, from Social and Flexible purpose corporations to the particularly interesting case of Benefit Corporations in the US (see Hiller 2013). The ethical drive and the more dynamic legislation that frames the activity of these initiatives provide fertile ground for introducing WD.

For instance, the customary use of third-party certification to verify that these organizations are actually meeting their commitments is an interesting practice from a democratic standpoint (Reiser 2011). In fact, certification might be refined to increasingly focus on the extent to which these firms adopt WD practices. However, third-party certification, with its own strengths and weaknesses, is just one way to promote ethical engagement in firms. Another, possibly more far-reaching, instrument is represented by horizontal forms of mission-accountability whereby firms are accountable to stakeholders for their performance in pursuing their stated mission (Cummings 2012). For instance, Benefit Enforcement Proceeding provisions (see Reiser 2011), embedded in B-Corporations and intended to enforce their public benefit, may represent a formidable mechanism to give workers of B-Corporations committed to WD a means to hold their organization committed to this goal. Overall, fast developing innovation environments stand out as positive contexts to introducing WD practices.

Blended social enterprises also represent a potentially positive development in overcoming a formidable barrier to the democratization of firms: strong shareholder rights, which can overturn business decisions matured through genuine processes of WD. In fact, the above-mentioned provisions of horizontal accountability can be used to prevent firms from deviating from their original ethical commitments, even with respect to their decision-making processes. More generally, two features that converge in the blended social enterprise model seem instrumental in allowing for the prospect of WD. The first feature is a strong legal framework to protect WD practices. Greater recognition and legal protection of democracy in firms might be attained to the extent that society and business organizations develop growing interest in WD. The second feature is the fact that these organizations already feature extensive engagement in self-regulation and moral orientation (Scherer and Smid 2000). These two aspects together allow firms to experiment with arrangements aiming at reducing the weight of aggregation logics proper of shareholders' voting and strengthening involvement in democratic deliberation as the driving force behind decision making. The ever-expanding list of deliberative experiments (see Grönlund et al. 2014) could be used to draw raw models to develop forums specifically designed for legally recognized forms of WD.

A question still left open concerns the type of actors who would be deliberating in firms. This matter certainly needs more attention than can be provided here. Yet, it is important to note that promoting WD is essentially an effort to foster deliberative participation as a mechanism to steer business firms. The specifics of how this is best achieved will to some degree depend on the existing structure against which WD is to work. In this respect, one could imagine firms as standing along a continuum. At one end, there are those organizations

that grant workers substantial decision-making power. On the other, those with a managerial hierarchy in which shareholders have strong decisional power and workers have none. As the firms under examination approximate one or the other end of the spectrum, the challenges involved in promoting WT change.

In firms with strong workers' voices the goal is to ensure that the logic of democratic deliberation finds increasing space. In fact, the mechanisms that give a voice to workers may still allow little or no room for deliberation, where dominant forms of engagement consist of adversarial representative politics and direct participation without deliberation. This, for instance, may occur in firms where workers' unions retain remarkable bargain power without being particularly democratic. In hierarchical managerial firms, instead, the challenge is to promote WD as a means to redress the power imbalance between managers and workers when it comes to decision-making processes. In this case, workers representatives could engage in raising awareness of deliberation among both managers and workers, while developing strategic plans to introduce WD processes at least in some areas of the life of the organization.

The issue of who deliberates, however, cannot be limited to a matter between managers and workers, were it just for the well-documented tendency of outsourcing production (see Milberg and Winkler 2013). This phenomenon begs the question of whether and to what extent firms may effectively and legitimately promote WD within their suppliers' companies. The more simple case in this respect is provided by firms interested in WD. These could reasonably be expected to stipulate contracts with firms that satisfactorily meet desirable levels of WD in their own workplaces. Of course, firms with little or no interest in WD pose a considerably greater challenge. Such firms may well be uninterested in anything more than making sure that contractors comply with minimal working standards demanded by relevant legislation. In this case, initiatives from within the firm may be plainly insufficient to introducing WD. Instead, it would be necessary to induce WD by relying also on external mechanisms. That is, in case of induced WD, workers should seek to be involved in deliberation not qua workers but qua stakeholders on the basis of the idea that society should value the inclusive deliberation of those affected by the actions of firms. This logic is characteristic of the BD approach, which is discussed in the next section.

Fostering Deliberation with Society: 'Business Deliberation' (BD)

The second axis of democratization of firms proposed in this paper is BD, which seeks to enhance authentic, inclusive, and consequential engagement between the firm

and those affected by the decisions of the firm (or their representatives). The promotion of BD involves the creation of platforms for deliberative engagement. Similarly to WD, BD can also be pursued through different actions. Importantly, a vast literature in the field of business ethics has been critical of political engagement of firms and of corporate social responsibility measures in particular. Critics have observed that often such engagement provides little more than a façade under which firms are actually seeking profits without regard for other interests (e.g., Roberts 2003; Banerjee 2008). However, deliberative reforms should not be simplistically conflated with the forms traditionally taken by firms' engagement in politics (Palazzo and Scherer 2006; Seele and Lock 2014). Indeed, evidence from literature on business ethics suggests that deliberative practice may help promote greater democratic engagement between societal actors and firms (Rotter et al. 2014; Baur and Arenas 2014).

Importantly, WD and BD can be used in combination as powerful tools to overcome objections traditionally associated to the idea of democratic reform of firms. In this respect, the first major issue is the potential rejection of deliberation as a means to run the business of a firm. In thinking of this scenario, some refinements are needed. First, it is necessary to understand whether a firm objects to deliberation tout court or partially. That is, whether it rejects either WD or BD or if it opposes the development of deliberative practices only in certain respects. For instance, deliberation may be welcome on issues of management (intended as the deployment of labor and capital) but not of governance (intended as the power distribution) or vice versa. Second, it should be made clear that in at least two circumstances, a deliberative society committed to the protection of basic liberal rights—an important component of deliberative democracy—theorists should accept and indeed safeguard the option for firms to reject deliberation (Gutmann and Thompson 2009).

The first of such circumstances may occur when a decision on whether, how, to what degree and in what areas firms adopt deliberative forms of engagement is itself arrived at through a deliberative process. To be sure, a possible outcome of this deliberation may be a position extremely adverse to any democratic development in the firm beyond the legal minimum (e.g., Friedman 2007). Yet, in such context, the mere introduction of a deliberative process to make such decisions would represent a major development toward greater deliberation in firms. Were it to ensue from a deliberative democratic process in the firm, the rejection of WD would not be problematic from a deliberative standpoint. However, such choice should not efface the ability of the actors in the firm to ask for the revision of that decision in the future through alternative means such as the action of workers' representatives. Secondly, firms may be granted the

possibility to reject BD as long as they are not involved in formal deliberative processes with political institutions. Firms may, instead, be requested to accept deliberative engagement in societal deliberation when they take up an active role in directly accessing and affecting the decisions of political institutions. This seems needed since, from a systemic view, actors participating in decision-making processes ought to be connected to the public space through accountability and transmission mechanisms (Dryzek 2009). The extent to which political engagement of firms represents a threat or a legitimate activity depends largely on the communicative condition in which political processes unfold (Scherer et al. 2009).

The deliberative democratization of firms certainly could present a problem of capability. In fact, achieving a deliberative workplace involves challenges that not all organizations may be able to meet. With regard to firms' capability to display deliberative virtues, research has shown that even organizations committed to ideals consistent with those of deliberative democracy often fall short of a systematic implementation (Mansbridge 1983, esp. Part 3; Gastil 1993, Chap. 4; Rothschild and Whitt 1986). Such concern is certainly relevant. Nonetheless, we should not overlook two aspects that make the workplace a uniquely suitable venue to pursue deliberation in at least two respects. As noted by Estlund, in fact, because of its nature 'workplace discourse may be closer to the norms of public discourse than are the norms of discourse among family and close friends.' At the same time, the workplace is to many the most important venue where people are routinely exposed to 'dialogue across group lines,' which aspect is deemed to be an important resource for societal deliberation (Estlund 2003, p. 120). At any rate, when WD does not seem to provide a viable path, BD may be pursued as an alternative way to increase the deliberative capacity of firms. In fact, in achieving WD firms would have to rely only on their own resources. Instead, they may be supported by other societal organizations that are interested in the BD idea and willing to contribute to the effort to build platforms needed for deliberative engagement.

Finally, a very important objection is that deliberation may represent a competitive disadvantage or at any rate an unnecessary burden on firms. In this regard, this paper questions the assumption underpinning the above view, that is, that deliberation is necessarily at odds with the reality of business in which firms are immersed. As illustrated by Néron (2014), this argument rests on the claim that political rights and economic benefits are rival (Tomasi 2012). Adopting this assumption as a means to oppose deliberative democracy in firms seems doubtful. In fact, if this alleged tension is ascertained in a specific case and through democratic deliberation, a firm was to oppose deliberative reforms this would be acceptable. At a more general level, the idea that

deliberation is inherently harmful to business seems tenable only to the extent that democratic deliberation was found to systematically expose firms to inefficiency problems. Without the support of such empirical evidence, the objection to democratic deliberation in firms seems to be grounded in little more than a deeply engrained prejudice against the democratic reform of business organizations. Actually, as showed, for instance, by Berk and Schneiberg (2005), the history of American capitalism itself is characterized by a variety of associations. Besides industries that adopted markets and corporate hierarchies, there were also those organizations that successfully used deliberation to pursuing collective governance and enhancing their productivity. These firms shifted competition 'from volume and cutthroat pricing to innovation and improvement' showing capacity for reflexivity and learning. Indeed, one could think that the benefits usually associated with the idea of democratic deliberation in institutions, such as for instance, the superior epistemic quality of decisions ensuing from deliberation, may apply also to other organizations (Bohman 2006). Empirical work is certainly needed. However, as appears to be the case in general, also in firms deliberation may help in voicing expertise without excluding relevant interests but rather articulating them in a way that is acceptable to others (see Mansbridge et al. 2010; Dryzek 2009).

Having introduced the notion of WD and BD and clarified how they help address some fundamental objections to workplace democracy, this paper argues that without deliberation in firms, the prospect of deliberative democracy is unachievable in many respects. Toward this goal this paper shows that deliberation in firms is a necessary step, though not sufficient, to build a deliberative democratic society.

Deliberation in Firms and the Deliberative Society

The work of leading deliberative theorists shows that deliberation with regard to economic matters, including the organization of firms and their choices, seems desirable in several regards. To begin with, one of the earliest deliberative works by Cohen (1989b) claims that deliberative democracy provides self-management in the workplace and public control of investment. Later, Elster in a famous article not only distinguished between the logics of the market and the logics of the forum, but also argued that deliberation should have a greater role in decision making about genuinely economic matters (Elster 1997; Phillips 2008, p. 3).¹ In considering labor-related issues as relevant

¹ Thus, the focus of this paper is on business organizations that are conceptually and empirically distinct from the market. In order to grasp the political role of the former we should not conflate it with the latter (Néron 2010).

to deliberative democracy, Fung made a case for discursive democracy as a means to enhance labor standards globally. Overall, these works seem to suggest that deliberation can indeed contribute in different and still largely unexplored ways to the life of firms and economic organizations in general (Fung 2003).

By adopting a systemic standpoint, however, it seems clear that fostering deliberation in firms is far from sufficient in developing a working deliberative system. Even a society in which all firms hosted significant deliberation could still be non-deliberative or anti-deliberative in other respects. In fact, the democratic deliberation in firms does not of itself guarantee the existence of inclusive deliberative engagement in other spaces of the system. For instance, political institutions may be run by elites adverse to democratic deliberation. Far from realizing deliberative democracy, a system featuring substantial democratic deliberation only in its economic organizations seems prone to quite dramatic failures.

Although deliberation in firms therefore is not a sufficient means to achieving deliberative societies it remains to be seen whether the deliberative reform of firms represents a necessary step toward achieving a substantial level of deliberation in society. In this sense, a primary consideration is that the absence of deliberative firms significantly restricts the scope and depth of deliberative democracy. In fact, in a system characterized by non-deliberative firms, the opportunity for citizens to participate in deliberation upon matters that affect them diminishes consistently. With non-deliberative firms, the role of reason-giving among equals as a mechanism to steer democratic societies is excluded from key decisions (Habermas 1996). At the level of firms, the potential of deliberation as a means of clarifying the content of issues and individuals' views with respect to them is jeopardized (Steiner 2012). Firms are central in performing 'social cooperation' and provide more power to some people not only in terms of the ability to determine their own lives, but also in making decisions that will have major effects on the lives of others (Young 2004, p. 373). In fact, only a slight minority of those affected by important decisions has a role in the (not necessarily deliberative) decision-making processes leading to them. Decisions include, among others, occupational strategies, outsourcing, distribution of profits and loss, safeguard of the environmental and social conditions in the places where firms operate, and inequality in the workplace. All of these are matters that have collective effects and major impacts on people's lives. In a deliberative society, these issues should be deliberated upon. Deliberation in firms represents a unique way to enable such process. A society where such issues are instead taken as a given in societal deliberation seems ill suited to qualify as deliberative in a substantial way.

Another important aspect is that deliberation in firms may also provide an interesting resource for observers who are skeptical of the possibility of promoting deliberative democracy via institutionalized popular assemblies because of the high demands it places on individual citizens unprepared to deliberate (Rosenberg 2014). In other words, there is certainly opportunity for firms to perform a greater role in educating citizens about democratic deliberation than what is currently the case. On the one hand, this remark parallels the argument about the educational virtues of the workplace for democratic citizenship, most traditionally associated with participatory democracy (Pateman 1976). At the same time, promoting deliberation in firms is responsive to more recent appeals for 'nudging' people into democratic deliberation. This would involve finding democratic ways to develop peoples' deliberative capacity, rather than engaging them with extremely rare deliberative events that may appear both particularly unfamiliar and demanding (Rosenberg 2014).

The need to take deliberation in firms seriously is increasingly urgent also in contemporary societies. At a time when the decisions of non-state institutions significantly condition the life of communities around the world, the development of large-scale or global economic systems implies that the domain of those affected by decisions no longer tends to correspond with the scope of traditional political institutions (Goodin 2007; Scherer et al. 2009; Kobrin 2009). Furthermore, firms play a progressively more active role in the context of global governance (Wolf 2008). Countering the spread of ever more influential decisions showing little or nothing in the way of democratic legitimacy involves finding new frontiers to enhance democracy (see Dryzek 1999; Fraser 2014, esp. Chaps. 1, 7; Fung 2013; cf. Näsström 2011; Scherer and Palazzo 2011). In this respect, deliberative firms represent increasingly important resources. This may be apparent in the case of multinational corporations with operations in developing countries. For instance, in considering these organizations as part of a global-scale deliberative system it is hard to see how these components could contribute to the overall deliberative capacity of the system without a degree of deliberative democratic engagement. Actually, even in smaller scale deliberative systems, where there may be sites capable of carrying out some deliberative work, it may still be the case that a substantially deliberative capacity cannot be granted with deliberation repellent businesses.

The Deliberative System Approach and the Issue of Deliberation in Firms

The systemic turn is a major development in deliberative theory (see Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012). According to this approach, the prospect of deliberative democracy

cannot be limited to the promotion and refinement of democratic deliberation in assemblies. Rather, the quest for deliberative democracy depends on the ability to engage with the many actors composing contemporary mass democracies and to enhance the deliberative quality of the dynamics they establish among themselves (Chambers 2012). Accordingly, an influential definition describes deliberative system as follows:

a set of distinguishable, differentiated, but to some degree interdependent parts, often with distributed functions and a division of labor, connected in such a way as to form a complex whole. ...A deliberative system is one that encompasses a talk-based approach to political conflict and problem-solving—through arguing, demonstrating, expressing, and persuading (Mansbridge et al. 2012, p. 5).

Deliberative scholars endorsing the systemic approach agree that not all components of a deliberative system can or even need to be ‘deliberative.’ As argued by Thompson, ‘it is important to recognize that deliberative democracy includes many kinds of political interactions other than deliberation’ (Thompson 2008, p. 502; Goodin 2005). The quality of a deliberative system is not given by the sum of the deliberative qualities of its components (Mansbridge et al. 2010, p. 36). Rather, the overall quality of deliberative systems depends upon the interaction of a wide range of more or less deliberative sites and activities (Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012). Like any other system, a deliberative one is characterized by a division of labor among its different parts. Therefore, even ‘a single part, which in itself may have low or even negative deliberative quality’ may still contribute to the deliberative quality of a system (Mansbridge et al. 2012, p. 3).

At first glance, the argument on the division of deliberative labor in the system presents the risk of relegating once and for all workplace democracy to the realm of residual concerns in deliberative theory. To be sure, to date, the debate on workplace democracy seems not to have benefitted particularly from the deliberative turn. If not all components of a deliberative system need be deliberative, one may ask, why would we bother with the already neglected issue of deliberative democratization of firms? As shown in this paper, opting for leaving the deliberative reform of firms in a dark area of unexplored issues is tempting but ultimately unwise. The systemic turn itself is developed from a concern with the untapped potential for deliberation outside the platforms traditionally associated with the idea of democratic deliberation (Mansbridge 1999). Moreover, the systemic turn allows us to explore a fundamental question, which needs being answered before abandoning the debate on workplace democracy. To what extent can a system be

deliberative if its business organizations are not deliberative?

This paper thus does not question the principle of the need for division of deliberative labor within the system, which is generally accepted in literature (cf. Owen and Smith 2015). However, it shows that firms cannot be easily dismissed as actors whose deliberative reform is secondary to the overall ability of a system to be deliberative. Despite that the deliberative quality of a system may lie in the interaction of its more or less deliberative components, the deliberative democratization of some components may still be crucial in promoting a deliberative society. As argued in this paper, firms represent one such component. No part of a deliberative system can replace the workplace as a platform to structure deliberative communication and promote emancipation, both essential objectives to critical deliberative democrats (Bohman 1999).

One last point concerns the ability of deliberative systems to deliver on at least one of their fundamental functions. That is, until workplace democracy is established, it seems dubious that a deliberative system could perform its ethical function of promoting ‘mutual respect among citizens.’ In fact, according to Mansbridge et al. ‘To fail to grant to another the moral status of authorship is, in effect, to remove oneself from the possibility of deliberative influence. ...being open to being moved by the words of another is to respect the other as a source of reasons, claims and perspectives.’ The absence of deliberation in the workplace hardly seems to present us with a situation where people enjoy in their everyday life the ethical standards set out in the deliberative system literature. Indeed, the lack of recognition of workers’ dignity remains a dramatic problem in developing countries as well as in developed ones in the case of marginalized groups (Young 2004). Overall, in keeping with the systemic approach, the above arguments suggest that democratic deliberation in firms has a critical role in the interactions occurring in a system. For this reason, promoting democratic deliberation in firms is determinant in attaining deliberative democracy. Democratic deliberation in firms is necessary in order to achieve substantive goals of a deliberative democratic society. Such argument is thus not based on the idea that deliberation in firms is important because it ‘adds up’ to the overall deliberation existing in a system.

Finally, the case of firms suggests one way in which deliberative thinking may be refined with regard to the role of non-deliberative politics in a deliberative system. In fact, as argued by Owen and Smith (2015), deliberative democrats should be cautious in allowing in the deliberative system components that are non-deliberative. In fact, while other components of a system may obviate the lack of deliberativeness of other parts, the need for corrective deliberative institutions may increase exponentially as non-

deliberative organizations grow. In this sense, the case of firms suggests that there may be times when it is desirable to work to prevent the most problematic effects of non-deliberative politics *ex ante* rather than remedy them *ex post*. Non-deliberative firms, in fact, are net providers of non-deliberative politics. They actively contribute to the spread of non-deliberative forms of engagement and cause the emergence of justice claims that need to be included and engaged within the system. In this sense, rather than creating new deliberative platforms capable of redressing the shortcomings produced by non-deliberative organizations, the option of making firms as much as possible deliberative platforms in themselves may represent a more promising way to pursue a more deliberative democratic course for society.

Greater engagement between business ethics and critical democratic theory is certainly needed for scholars to better grasp the challenge involved in democratizing businesses. While business ethics scholars have been sensitive to include deliberative democratic concerns in their research agenda, more engagement with critical democratic theory might allow the development of a more substantial case for democratic firms. On the other hand, deliberative democrats should be more receptive to the relevance of business ethics in bolstering the prospect of a democratic society. Finally, this paper only starts the discussion on how deliberative democratization can be pursued in different workplace and business contexts. In this respect, future research will have to explore in greater depth the specific challenges involved in the introduction of deliberative democracy in different business contexts and envision the most suitable solutions. This effort calls not only for extensive collaboration between theorists in different fields but also for a tighter connection between empirical studies and theorizing on democracy in firms.

Conclusions

To date, deliberative scholarship has largely overlooked the issue of deliberation in firms. This is problematic as the deliberative democratization of firms is an important component in achieving more deliberative democratic societies. Firms have an important role in deliberative systems. Without democratizing firms, it is hard to meet some important objectives of a deliberative democratic society. Those identified in this paper include: the ability to deliberate upon important societal matters allowing democratic deliberation to have a greater role in steering contemporary societies, promoting emancipatory dynamics, enhancing people's ability to participate in democratic deliberation, expanding the capacity of people to affect decisions that, especially at the global level, are

increasingly beyond the reach of democratic bodies, and favoring the development of processes capable of promoting mutual respect among citizens. WD and BD have been identified as complementary means to achieve these objectives as well as conceptual tools to respond to important criticisms of the idea of democracy in firms. While further reflection is certainly necessary to envision the proper reforms to promote the deliberative democratization of firms, it is vital for democratic and ethics scholarships to give the matter due attention.

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