

UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER

Better capitalists?
A Workers' Inquiry into democratisation and employee ownership.

Kieron James Smith

ORCID Number: 0000-0002-5262-4988

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2021

This Thesis has been completed as a requirement for a postgraduate research degree of the
University of Winchester.

DECLARATION AND COPYRIGHT STATEMENT

Declaration:

No portion of the work referred to in the Thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

I confirm that this Thesis is entirely my own work.

I confirm that no work previously submitted for credit has been reused verbatim. Any previously submitted work has been revised, developed and recontextualised relevant to the thesis.

I confirm that no material of this thesis has been published in advance of its submission.

I confirm that no third party proof-reading or editing has been used in this thesis.

Copyright:

Copyright © Kieron James Smith 2021 Better capitalists? A Workers' Inquiry into democratisation and employee ownership. University of Winchester, PhD Thesis, Page range pp 1 - 209, ORCID 0000-0002-5262-4988.

*This copy has been supplied on the understanding that it is copyright material and that no quotation from the thesis may be published without proper acknowledgement. Copies (by any process) either in full, or of extracts, may be made **only** in accordance with instructions given by the author. Details may be obtained from the RKE Centre, University of Winchester. This page must form part of any such copies made. Further copies (by any process) of copies made in accordance with such instructions may not be made without the permission (in writing) of the author.*

No profit may be made from selling, copying or licensing the author's work without further agreement.

Dedications and Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the challenging, dedicated, and inspirational booksellers I have worked with throughout my career. I was lucky enough to have some of them take part in this research, and it is all the better for it.

The generous assistance from the worker owned 'Company B' in the research was invaluable, they were expansive in their answers to many, many, questions. Thank you.

I would also like to thank Dr Simon Smith and Dr Paul Sheeran for their unstinting support in addition to their questioning and encouragement, which kept me on track.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank Sharon for her intellectual criticality, plus the tolerance she has shown for the sheer number of books which have arrived during this endeavour.

ABSTRACT

Better capitalists?
A Workers' Inquiry into democratisation and employee ownership.

Kieron James Smith

0000-0002-5262-4988

Doctor of Philosophy
May 2021

Purpose – The purpose of this research is to explore democratised strategic control within Employee Owned (EO) organisations. Methodologically it explores a new Workers' Inquiry approach to participatory research which combines democratic experience with reflexivity.

Design/methodology/approach – The research has at its core a Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) methodology combined with an Extended Case Method. These constitute a sympathetic and appropriately democratic approach to the subject. Research participants are booksellers from a business transitioning to becoming EO, with input and support from an existing EO company in the same industry sector.

Originality/value – The research makes a valuable contribution to understanding the interplay of control and power in the contemporary workplace. Through its use of praxis, it extends existing theories to expose how changes in bureaucratic structure have led to opportunities for democratisation, with a simultaneous challenge of reverse dominance hierarchy. This is explored through workers' own experiences of their changing roles in a firm undergoing succession to EO.

Findings - The findings of the research demonstrate how changing social relations of production, due to technological pressures and a need for flexibility and efficiency, are undermining long standing theoretical predictions of degeneration for democratised firms. It also throws light on power relations within a rapidly changing retail, and bookselling sector and how technology has impacted upon this. The thesis makes a significant

contribution in developing participatory research methodology with an innovative use of Workers' Inquiry.

Practical implications – This research challenges the one-dimensional view that organisations can only be democratised through structures which are then doomed to slow decision making and inclined to degeneration. It creates other avenues for research in ownership culture and more permanent changes in corporate structures beyond those within Employee Ownership.

Keywords – Employee Ownership, Power, Industrial Democracy, Marxism, Critical Participatory Action Research, Extended Case Method, Workers' Inquiry.

LIST OF CONTENTS

	Page Number
Declaration and Copyright Statement	1
Acknowledgements	2
Abstract	3
List of Contents	5
List of Tables and Illustrations	8
Chapter 1 Introduction	9-23
Context setting	9
Researcher positionality	9
Perspective	10
The economic context of work	13
Alternative organisations	15
Employee ownership	16
Methodology	18
The Research	19
A note on terminology	21
Thesis outline	22
Chapter 2 Literature Review	24-53
Introduction	24
Employee ownership typologies	25
Problems of Participation	29
The Degeneration Thesis & the 'Iron law of oligarchy'	34
Flexibility and Individualised Industrial Relations	39
The delegitimisation of management and questions of ownership	41
The current cycle of participation and the social composition of work	42
Participation and Democratic Theory	48
Summary	51
Chapter 3 Philosophical orientation	54-66
Introduction	54
Marxism and Critical Management Studies	54

Defining a Dialectical Materialist Approach	56
Dialectics and Agency	62
Hope and change for the better	64
Summary	66
Chapter 4 Methodology	67-93
Introduction	67
Dialectical challenges & Workers' Inquiry	67
Worker Inquiry and the Business School	72
Critical Participatory Action Research	76
The Extended Case Method	77
Reflexivity and Power	82
Criticality – what does ' <i>being critical</i> ' mean in this context?	84
Ethical considerations	85
Research planning	86
Judging outcomes	92
Summary	93
Chapter 5 Praxis and Inquiry Group Findings	94-120
Introduction	94
The process - pre-cycle one and groundwork	98
Cycle One - Teasing out the issues	100
Cycle Two – Building understanding	110
Cycle Three – Acting on knowledge	114
Intervention of the COVID-19 pandemic	118
Summary	119
Chapter 6 Analysis & Discussion	121-167
Introduction	121
A Note on Participation in Analysis	121
The Process of Analysis	123
The Specific Context	124
A New Perspective on the Cycles of Control	131
Job control, strategic control, and structure	135

Decomposition of hierarchy and fantasies of management control	139
Themes of Succession & the social reproduction of relations	141
Power and control in the organisation	147
The conditionality of workplace democracy and degeneration	154
A culture of ownership and reverse dominance hierarchy	157
Summary	165
Chapter 7 Contribution & Conclusions	168-191
Introduction	168
Reflections on methodology	170
Research findings	174
Conclusions	178
Contribution	182
Researcher personal reflections	184
Participant feedback on the analysis	187
Supplementary areas of research	190
Bibliography	192

LIST OF TABLES

	Page Number
Table one: Core Values of Participation	89

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	Page Number
Illustration one: 'A ladder of citizen participation'	30
Illustration two: Economic Growth no longer leading to rising earnings	45
Illustration three: Workers' Inquiry methodological summary	81
Illustration four: Planned and emergent theory	82
Illustration five: Summary of cycles undertaken during the research	103
Illustration six: Inquiry Group 'owner participation ladder'	103

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

Context setting

This is a study of a family-owned bookselling firm which is being bequeathed to its employees to become an employee owned business. It examines both the opportunities and challenges for democratisation within the firm through the experience of the workers within it. Through my own role within the organisation, this research was able to be established at a time when the business was preparing for the transition in ownership. The research methodology adopted enables employees to both experience the actuality of participatory democracy and explore its broader opportunities within the organisation at the same time. This places their own experience and thoughts, both at the heart of the research, and within the subsequent extension of theory.

The research comes at a time when company structures are in the process of change, many businesses are looking for greater flexibility, fewer managers, and greater agility within organisations. These changes are born of broader technological pressures, a shift to mass customisation in production and a need for greater efficiency. At the same time, there is less pressure from organised labour, as trade union membership and 'collective consciousness' is at a historic low. The timeliness of the research is important as it exposes new opportunities for extending the greater job control, which employees find themselves with, to a broader democratic control and worker ownership.

With the support of a company already owned by its employees, an Inquiry Group of research participants explored how they could design new mechanisms which gave strategic control to the soon-to-be employee owners. In this context the participants grappled with a range of challenges, including how their new role as owners should relate to existing management structures and decision-making processes, the opacity of power in the organisation and their own unwillingness to rebuild dismantled bureaucratic structures in order to achieve the control they wanted.

Researcher positionality

I have worked within the book trade for over twenty-five years. During this time, I have worked for many companies and seen the impact of changing technology, the growth of online shopping and the resultant pressure on book retail; this has forced consolidation, delayering, changes in job profiles and greater control given to, a smaller number of, front line booksellers. These changes have also wrought larger and more faceless corporate

bookselling companies, often much to the frustration of their own booksellers. When the opportunity arose to join BookCo, which had already announced the intention to be bequeathed by the owner to the employees, as an executive director I saw it also as an opportunity to help create a distinctive worker owned business.

The family owners had already announced a wish to gift the company to the employees, as they felt that the staff were the best people to protect the name and heritage of the bookselling firm. For both myself, and the family owners, it was important that the move to employee ownership would also protect the company from being absorbed by a larger business. My position within the business enabled me to have access to be able to establish this research to help begin a conversation about democratisation between employees, and to ensure this was had across the business prior to the business being gifted, rather than there being just a legal change of ownership. This was an important opportunity for the employees to have a say in the shape of the new organisation prior to becoming owners, granting them an agency previously lacking in the succession.

The research makes an important contribution in its democratised methodological approach as it consciously worked to address the balance between pure action based participatory research and the development of theory. By placing the booksellers' Inquiry Group at the centre of the study, it captures the challenges they faced and the solutions they developed as the means to extend existing theory. This valuable interrelationship has created theory which is more generalisable and useful to other organisations that wish to democratise, despite being built on a specific experience within a specific workplace.

The contradictions of higher job level control combined with feelings of powerless at the organisational level are in no way unique to bookselling and will be discussed within this thesis. With the impact of COVID-19 pandemic still to become clear, I would suggest that it would not be too great a leap to suggest that some of the emergent trends in the workplace may well be accelerated - but also that people may well take a fresh look at how they wish to spend their working days.

Perspective

This is a study of the potential for workplace democracy today and is situated in the workplace and methodologically self-conscious (Burawoy, 1998:16), engaging through a democratised, participatory methodology. At its heart is the concept of praxis, where theory and action combine to change the world around us (Freire, 1996 [1970]:40). The

research is focused on putting 'dialectical reflection into conversation with democratic participation' (Douglas, 2008:422) after the work of Marxists such as C.L.R. James who through engagement with both dialectics and the workplace looked to rediscover a 'democratic imagination' (Douglas, 2008:422, James, 1977:160-182) to change society. This conceptualisation of change is built upon experiencing democratic participation and grasping the agency inherent within it.

Engaging within the workplace has been crucial in extending existing theory and beginning to understand how recent changes in work organisation open up new dialectical opportunities for changes in the social relations of production. As Burawoy writes 'the activist who seeks to transform the world can learn much from its obduracy' (1998:17). The Workers' Inquiry Group worked to see how it could resolve the challenge of delivering democratic strategic level engagement without succumbing to outdated models of formalised bureaucratic control.

The structural changes reflected in the organisation are also emerging across many industries, as technology mediated transformations enable more flexible production and greater efficiency. This efficiency is sweeping away structures which - in the past - were seen as permanent; 'All that is solid melts into air...' (Marx and Engels, 2002 [1848]:223). Where once the rational logic of Weber's efficient and hierarchical bureaucracy ruled, making unemotional and scientific decisions (Leach, 2016:36; Rothchild, 2016:24), now distributed control is becoming an imperative for many companies. For example, Amazon-owned Zappos, a large US online footwear retailer has implemented 'Holocracy' which distributes decision making power across flexible teams throughout its business (Rothchild, 2016:13, Bernstein et al. 2016).

As hierarchy and bureaucracy begin to waste away, so too do the assumptions which underpinned them. Combined with the decline of the trade unions (Office for National Statistics, 2015) and the reduced identification with class (Hudson et al., 1996:9-10), this has led to a very different experience of work. Old antagonisms which assumed that that where 'the power of employees is strong, management will be weak and performance poor; conversely, if performance is strong then management must be strong and the employee power diminished' (Storey and Salaman, 2016:67) begin to look anachronistic and disconnected from the modern experience.

Unprecedented levels of delegated work design with the subsequent shift to 'intellectual labour' with an increasingly highly educated workforce (Holmes and Mayhew, 2012:11),

continues to demystify any concept of 'heroic leadership' the idea that leaders are born and not made. Grint (2010) describes how 'we now seem enthralled by its apparent opposite – distributed leadership: in this post-heroic era we will all be leaders so that none are' (Grint, 2010:89). Post the last recession, managers, rather than lauded, are often perceived as the very source of risk and short-term thinking (Galbraith, 2004; Kay, 2017; IPPR, 2018). Hamel underlines this when he writes that:

the typical management hierarchy increases the risk of large, calamitous decisions. As decisions get bigger, the ranks of those able to challenge the decision maker get smaller. Hubris, myopia, and naïveté can lead to bad judgment at any level, but the danger is greatest when the decision maker's power is, for all purposes, uncontestable (2011:50).

Hamel sees costly managers killing ideas and innovation, adding complexity and risk; this 'cost of tyranny' is more than 'the occasional control freak; it's the hierarchical structure that systematically disempowers lower-level employees' (2011:50). This is managerialism on its head, capitalist initiatives pushing for an end to hierarchy. If anything, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated these changes, those organisations that will be successful, writes Williams, will be those which 'double down on the experience of homeworking... and construct working cultures rooted in independence underpinned by trust' (2020:14).

Despite the shift away from managerial control, and despite the greater job level autonomy, employees do not tend to feel like they have more control over their working lives. Masquelier (2017) cites Bauman on 'the 'unprecedented freedom' this regime of production 'offers its members has arrived ... together with unprecedented impotence' (Masquelier 2017:61). As a result, employees can feel their lack of control more acutely, workplace stress has been rising 'inexorably in recent years' (IPPR, 2018:21). Whereas research tells us that 'People whose jobs allow autonomy to make decisions, opportunities to learn and develop, and a say over how work is organised and decisions are made, are consistently happier' (IPPR, 2018:21). Merely the *rhetoric* of control; working for yourself, flexibility etc. leaves many employees feeling more powerless and precarious (Masquelier 2017; Abílio, 2017). Rather than employees having the confidence to change things, the new relations of production have created a situation of atomisation and instability, this changing nature of work offers a rich context for research into workplace democratisation which does privilege the control of employees.

The economic context of work

Since the 1970s, extensive structural changes in production have been taking place (Baccaro and Howell, 2017:1-5; Streeck, 2012:27-47; Hamel, 2011) leading to delayered companies, more precarious work and the automation of tasks. These broader industrial changes demonstrate a transition which requires workplace and production flexibility, with a move from largescale (Fordist) manufacturing towards the service industries to adapt to a broader fragmentation of markets.

Streeck (2012) sees this mass production to services and mass customisation being driven by both worker's demands for a greater share of profits and a frustration with Fordist methods of production, following 'the refusal of growing sections of the working class to subject themselves to the discipline of Taylorist factories, together with claims for shorter hours, better pay' (2012:29) combined with a stagnation of growth and 'growing indifference to its mass-market production regime' (2012:30).

The resultant crisis in political economy led to a move to customisation, shorter production cycles and an escape from stagnation. These technology driven changes also rendered 'much manual labour dispensable' (Streeck, 2012:31) or at least open to being relocated to cheaper offshore production. For many workers, this has resulted in anxiety and feelings of powerless and insecurity, especially when it comes to influencing decisions which affect their working lives. For example, 72% of people think they have little, or no, influence on economic decisions (Dellot, 2016).

It is too early to say what impact COVID-19 related work changes will have on attitudes to work, there is certainly evidence of a split between those who can work from home and those who cannot. Those who can work from home earned, on average, 20% more than those who could not (Office for National Statistics, 2021) however they also experienced longer, unpaid, working hours with; '6.0 hours of unpaid overtime on average per week' (Office for National Statistics, 2021), a recent Microsoft Survey finds that; '20 per cent feel that their company doesn't care about their work-life balance, while 57 per cent feel "overworked" and 47 per cent are "exhausted"' (Stern, 2021). Given these figures it seems unlikely that working from home has addressed any substantive issues with satisfaction with work.

Post-Fordist structural changes have been labelled by some as 'Industry 4.0' (or the fourth industrial revolution), distinctively characterised by:

[1] Short development periods...High innovation capability...[2] Individualization on demand [3] Flexibility... [4] Decentralization: To cope with the specified conditions, faster decision making procedures are necessary. For this, organizational hierarchies need to be reduced...[5] Resource efficiency (Lasi et al., 2014:239).

In order to achieve contracted development periods and flexibility, the traditional bureaucratic model for business has started to decompose with a 'change towards decentralized self-organization' (Lasi et al., 2014:240). Baccaro and Howell see these changes as common to all contemporary capitalist economies with expanded employer discretion and an individualisation of industrial relations (2017:1-4, 222). They also note the characteristic of organisations within the post-Fordist economy of 'plasticity' with 'the mutability of function subject to context' (Baccaro and Howell: 2017:19). Where once the rational logic of Weber's efficient and hierarchical bureaucracy ruled, making unemotional and scientific decisions (Leach, 2016:36; Rothschild, 2016:24), now distributed control is becoming an imperative for many companies (Rothschild, 2016:13, Bernstein, et al. 2016).

The new job level decision-making power for workers has been concurrent with stagnating wage growth (IPPR, 2018) and a decline in organised labour (Office for National Statistics, 2015) within Western economies. The changing environment has, possibly counter-intuitively, also resulted in a new age of diminished agency, despite the greater job level decision making (Masquelier 2017; Abílio, 2017). As wages have decoupled from growth this has exacerbated the perceived gap in power, for many who feel denied access to economic resources. A journalist for the BBC's *Question Time* programme recalls a particularly apposite audience intervention:

When UK GDP returned to its pre-crisis peak in 2014, economists told the world the economy had 'recovered'... a questioner in Newcastle put straight one of the participants on the panel with the memorable line 'That's your bloody GDP, not ours' (Fraser, 2018).

This has created a more common anxiety within Western governments and institutions about the possible social impact of growing economic inequality, in 2014 the World Bank identified this as one of the principal risks to global social and economic security (Savage, 2015:3), and subsequently it has been seen as the driver for the resurgence in 'national populism' (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018).

Alternative organisations

To date, academic debate on alternative organisations could be accused of not fully addressing the new context of work and production, rather adopting a rather default acceptance of the 'degeneration thesis' whereby all democratic organisations are seen as inevitably succumbing to elitism and oligarchy (Michels, 1962; Webb cited Storey et al., 2014:626). Discounting any (particularly largescale) efforts to work together in an inclusive and distributed manner, this fixed orientation is failing to examine the new organisational plasticity in detail, something which this research looks to help address.

Jaumier (2017) points to a paucity of understanding of different, non-hierarchical ways to work together, asserting that 'our understanding of co-operation could be greatly improved if researchers' dominant focus on governance was complimented by studies anchored in the everyday experience of co-operators' (2017:218). This view is echoed by many writers, for example Diefenbach (2019), Chen (2016), Leach (2016) and Rothschild (2016), this research will help to help in addressing this missing voice.

Summers and Chillias (2019) write that '...the skills required (by both managers and non-managers) to work in EOCs [Employee Owned Companies] have received little scholarly attention' (2019:8-9). They highlight the difference in democratic skills, both economic and participatory, needed to operate in both working in democratic firms but also in co-ownership (Summers and Chillias, 2019:10-17). It could also be argued that challenges faced by those in 'new organisations' are increasingly faced by managers in traditional firms experiencing the new flexible reality of organisation, strategic ownership and participation.

The lessons of the idealistic and entirely structureless 1960s social movements have been learnt by many (Jaumier, 2017:219; Leach, 2016:37; Polletta, 2002) and more *rough consensus* (Chen, 2016:79, Leach, 2016:37-38), agonistic (Mouffe, 2009) or rhizomatic structures (Hardt and Negri 2017; Kokkinidis, 2012) are emerging, offering a liminal space for a reassessment of the possible. Contemporary discussions of democracy in society more generally have taken a negative turn, with warnings against populism and demagoguery (Müller, 2017), however these have not, more broadly, been reflected in the discussions of democratic participation in corporations.

This changing context and the contradictions of control and power embedded into capitalism today offers a potential for a re-examination of human organisation more generally. There are significant challenges in terms of the simultaneous lack of collective

power of employees, combined with a high level of job control and autonomy (Lasi et al., 2014:239). The rhetoric of control; working for yourself, flexibility etc. leaves many employees feeling *more* powerless and precarious in their positions (Masquelier 2017; Abílio, 2017), despite the delegated decision making, as the parameters for these decisions can feel ever more limited.

The elevation of employee control in the context of the dismantling of the traditional bureaucracies, combined with the simultaneous collapse of collective worker organisations *and* post the last recession, the lack of confidence within capitalism in its own ideological position has created a situation of atomisation and instability. This juncture could be seen as an opportune time for this research to engage with employee owned firms to examine how they are experimenting with form, control and responsibility, particularly with an approach which puts front and centre the idea that what workers lack 'is not necessarily an understanding of their own situation but a confidence and the support to challenge their circumstances' (Wellbrook, 2014:370).

Employee ownership

Despite the inherent challenges, Employee Owned (EO) businesses and cooperatives have been growing rapidly in the last few years. In the UK, the employee owned sector has doubled in size since 2010 (Smith, 2018). Notable recent UK EO announcements include household names such as cosmetics firm Lush (EOA, 2017), hi-fi retailer Richer Sounds (Robertson, 2019) and Aardman Animations (Butler, 2018). The Employee Ownership Association in the UK reports that:

...EO has secured a broad base of appeal across the private sector, with the Finance Act 2014 proving to be a significant driver. Research from the White Rose Centre for Employee Ownership [a strategic partnership between the Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York] reports that 60% of growth in EO has happened since 2010 (2018).

The logic of employee ownership in this environment, although still an alternative model, can be seen as less ideologically charged as it has been in previous decades. Any perceived threat from management-worker antagonism is seen as significantly diminished, if not absent entirely (Kelly, 1998) from most workplaces. Companies whose employees own a significant stake have a combined annual turnover of over £30 billion, around 3% of GDP with over 200k employees (EOA, 2021). The Employee Ownership Association (EOA) and Co-operatives UK have ambitions for 1m employee owners in the next ten years (Co-operatives UK, 2021).

The growing appeal of employee ownership today is significantly different to the growth of co-operatives in the past. Even accounting firm KPMG (2019) has recently established a unit to help advise founders on the tax and legal processes around transition to EO. Long-term commitment from employees to a firm is seen as offering both the loyalty and stability which finance capital often struggles to engender (Kay, 2017) and was seen as contributing to the last financial crash.

For many of these EO firms however - and indeed more established ones such as the John Lewis Partnership, (Cathcart, 2009, 2013, Storey and Salaman 2016:100) - the transition is just that, a legal one, rather than one of collective ownership (Ramsay & Haworth, 1984:303). On paper these organisations are owned by their staff, however in reality there is often a high level of technical managerial control. This can ultimately constrain these firms, for as the Nuttall Review asserts the 'benefits of employee ownership are most likely to be realised when ownership co-exists with wider drives for employee participation in decision-making' (Nuttall, 2012:24). The benefits of participation are often not being realised in EO firms at present, this research aims to address the opportunity to benefit from democratisation.

Pateman (1978, 2012) observed that people 'learn to participate by participating' (2012:10). In the current political context even if there is an appetite for further employee engagement, often the very peculiarity of political participation in society at large can make these processes and activities seem challenging. Fears of introducing conflict, slow decision making, and undermining management, along with tokenistic participation can all be seen to hinder progress towards any meaningful democratisation. To avoid these pitfalls, this research places a primacy on democratic participation within its methodological position.

The logic of employee engagement shifts in ownership and a new perspective on organisational structure may become the new orthodoxy as the UK grapples with a productivity challenge. Not caused by people not working hard enough, as it is sometimes reported (IPPR, 2018:74), rather too little power held by those 'Employee owners [who] ... have greater discretion over how they carry out tasks, along with more freedom to innovate and the responsibility to fix problems without referring things up the line' (Employee Ownership Association, 2018:15). What forms this new employee ownership will take however, and what organisational structures will follow, is less clear - this research therefore seeks to identify some available options for a new approach to employee participation.

Methodology

Workers' Inquiry has often been associated with seeking out the worker narrative, via questionnaires (as in Marx's original 1880 proposal), via interviews and investigation along the lines of Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (2009 [1845]) and more lately through ethnographic, or auto-ethnographic approaches. Examples of this include classics such as Romano and Stone (1947) and more recently Woodcock (2017). Today, when class and working experience is even more atomised, Wellbrook asserts that 'a largely dislocated sense of working-class identity bring[s] into question the representativeness of any particular worker voice' (Wellbrook, 2014:365). This research takes an important new approach to Workers' Inquiry with consciousness of both participation and its structural contextualisation.

Workers' Inquiry has recently been principally resurrected as a political route to 'discover' the 'class composition' of workers through their experience of work. These approaches, exemplified by Woodcock (2017), Cant (2020) and Ovetz (2021) broadly look to workers' self-activity and reject more traditional Marxist structuralist analysis. This research also uses Workers' Inquiry, however, takes a different approach by placing participation over ethnography and prioritising the development of a collective endeavour to create positive democratic change. Consequently, it avoids the trap of being purely about action (Burawoy, 2019:49-50) by placing the extension of theory front and centre and approaching the research from a dialectical materialist standpoint. Methodologically, Workers' Inquiry effectively became a form of praxis as the group progressed trying and rejecting various answers to their questions of how to effectively implement strategic overview from the shop floor.

Combining Workers' Inquiry, and its emphasis on human agency, with Critical Participatory Action Research offers a potential amplification of their democratic perspectives, towards 'a commitment to bring together broad social analysis, the self-reflective collective study of practice, and transformational action to improve things' (Kemmis et al., 2014:12). This may be specifically the case when it comes to an appreciation of participants' practice as situated in their particular historical, economic and social circumstance, in that 'participatory action researchers become alert to clues about how it may become possible to transform the practices they are producing and reproducing through their current ways of working' (Kemmis et al., 2014:21).

This research utilises a Marxist dialectical materialist philosophical perspective to place action *and* theory at the heart of the research. Making both methodological and theoretical contributions the research combines Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) with the Extended Case Method in order to prioritise liberatory action, and change, in the organisation, whilst simultaneously attempting to contextualise the findings within existing theory and, most importantly, extend current theory further. The resultant extension of theory owes much to the collective experience of the Workers' Inquiry Group.

This research takes the new economic context for workplace democracy and looks to extend the theoretical analysis of Ramsay's (1977) *Cycles of Control*, where a new perspective is offered; and succession within the firm, which extends the work of Gouldner (1955) and Burawoy (1982a). In addition, Rothschild (2016) and Rothschild and Whitt's (1986) conditionalities of avoiding degeneration are examined, and control and power in the organisation through the lens of the Tannenbaum's (1968) Control Graph and Lukes's (2005) exposition on power. These were all selected as they were totemic of dominant themes within both the literature and reflective of discussions from the participants themselves. In this way a dialogic relationship emerged between the theory and the actions taking place.

The antecedents to the research on the ground, and from the ground up, have been the inspirational work of industrial sociologists such as Gouldner (1955), Lupton (1963), Nichols and Beynon (1977), Pollert (1981) and Burawoy (1982a) all of whom spent time with workers understanding what it meant to do their jobs. These writers were broadly ethnographic in approach as opposed to the participatory approach taken here; however, their worker led orientation and commitment to listening to what people say has been a crucial foundation to this research too.

The Research

In order to examine the contemporary experience of work and the potential within a more democratic organisation within employee owned firms, the research questions have been formulated as:

1. How do organisational structures of participative democracy within employee owned companies enable workers to control, or have an impact upon, strategy?

2. In what ways does the diminishing of collective worker organisation and the changing nature of work create an opportunity for new organisational forms?
3. To what extent do people have more agency within employee owned firms?

The Inquiry Group worked together to investigate the question of ‘How do organisational structures of participative democracy within employee owned companies enable workers to control, or have an impact upon, strategy?’ through a Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) methodology. The Inquiry was supported by the experiences and views of those in another firm, operating within the same sector, already running as an employee owned business.

In an iterative approach, following the cycles of CPAR, the Workers’ Inquiry talked to colleagues across the business and constructed a report and plan, in order to shape participatory structures within BookCo. The work of this Group formed the basis for further philosophical reflection within this research, using the Extended Case Method to analyse the Inquiry Group findings and to extend existing theory.

Recent theses have focused on one (dominant) player, the John Lewis Partnership, in Cathcart (2009) and a narrow managerialist approach in Wren (2016) in addition to a well-being approach in Coutinho (2016) and individual feelings of control and security in Jervis (2016). None of these have fully examined the broader question of the architectures of democratic engagement and a broader critical approach has not been undertaken for some considerable time, something which this research looks to help address.

The two businesses participating in this research represent a mix of experience, size and structure. The principal site for the research, BookCo, is transitioning to EO. BookCo is a large UK retailer founded over 100 years ago, currently family owned, with around 220 employees and a turnover in excess of £60m. Assisting with the research is Company ‘B’, a small UK publisher founded in the 1970s with considerable experience of being employee owned after transitioning in 2015. Subsequent to becoming a co-operative in 1989 it has 11 employee owner directors and a turnover of around £1m.

The two businesses have differing models of workplace democracy, with BookCo planning a representative employee council and employees on the board, whereas Company B is organised around a non-hierarchical participative structure. These differing models, and different stages of employee ownership, offer a unique set of perspectives and interplay between worker-owners.

The rationale for the choice of Critical Participatory Action Research within this context is outlined in detail within the methodology Chapter. However, by way of an introduction, this research is undertaken with the specific view that *more* workplace democracy would be a positive thing and subsequently engaging clearly and unambiguously with those whom the research is with, in collaboration rather than, for example in a detached ethnographic study, is desirable. This also adheres to one of the tenets of Critical Management Studies that; ‘...the research process itself should be openly participative and involve the same qualities that are important for organizations themselves’ (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000:17).

A note on terminology

As Bernstein notes ‘industrial democracy, self-management, workers’ control, or participation... each has connotations, ambiguities, or other difficulties’ (1983:2-3) this thesis will situate the use of these terms with respect to their contemporary use or, where appropriate, with their specific historical ones. For example, industrial democracy in the 1970s being where trade unions and conflict were integral to its understanding. Participation is used, except where otherwise indicated, to explicitly refer to the role workers can play in strategic, rather than job level decisions, again as Bernstein (1983) and Ramsay (1980) write ““participation” tends towards vagueness ...the lesser forms of worker influence in management’ (Bernstein, 1983:3) and:

‘...academic discussions on the topic are agreed that participation has something to do with the making of decisions. It is rare, however to find accounts which progress much beyond this relatively facile observation...’ (Ramsay, 1980:46).

This thesis will not fall into this trap as it will largely hand the judgement of meaningful participation to workers themselves. As this thesis is concerned with democratic structures the legal forms of worker ownership, cooperatives and employee owned businesses are treated as one and the same, the principle sites for the research are, or going to be in the case of BookCo, Employee Ownership Trusts (EOT) where shares are held in trust for employee owners rather than them having an individual stake which they could buy and sell.

Finally, the thesis will follow Bernstein’s definition of democratisation of the firm:

workplace democratization, includes any system which attempts to increase employee influence in the management process, especially in decision-making. This influence can range from a manager’s solicitation of employee opinions to complete worker autonomy in running a wholly worker-owned firm (1983:3-4).

It does also recognise, and is a crucial part of the research, that not all these systems are equal.

Thesis outline

The thesis is organised into seven Chapters, this introductory Chapter has given a general overview and then will proceed to discuss the changing work environment in more detail, then describe how the plan for the research was constituted and detail the research questions. Chapter two is a review of the literature, as will be detailed there is a significant history of theory as relates to participation by workers in decision making. The Chapter starts with typologies of ownership then broadens the discussion out to examine perceived challenges, followed by the classic arguments against both employee ownership, and democratisation, in the degeneration thesis and the 'iron law of oligarchy' respectively.

The literature review then proceeds to discuss how the broader macro-economic changes have been discussed in the literature with a shift to individualised industrial relations and the role of management. Finally, it examines Ramsay's 'cycles of control' thesis and how the new social relations of production may break the pattern of previous cycles, alongside the shift in society from participatory democracy in the 1970s to deliberative democracy today, and the subsequent challenges this poses for democratic engagement.

Chapter three details the philosophical orientation of the research and discusses the component parts of dialectical materialism. It recovers dialectics as non-deterministic and demonstrates how they can be used to expose broader social relations which throws new light on the workplace, in addition to being fundamentally democratic, action oriented and privilege human agency. As an underlying philosophical approach, a dialectical positionality leads into a detailed discussion of methodology within Chapter four.

The methodological approach of the research places democratic participatory action alongside 'dwelling in theory' (Burawoy, 1998:5). Utilising Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) and combining this with the Extended Case Method, ensures the former is not purely action oriented and the latter, which often relies on ethnographic methods, is grounded in participatory action. The Extended Case Method is taken as a suitable vehicle for the dialectical positionality due to its dialogic and reflexive approach which looks to constitute 'situated knowledge into social processes, and it locates those social processes in their wider context of determination' (Burawoy, 1998:21) and to do this through the reconstruction of existing theory (Burawoy, 1991:6).

Chapter four also discusses how I propose this combination as a more effective way to construct a Workers' Inquiry (where I do accept Woodcock's distinction that 'there is an important difference between studies in a workplace and workers' inquiries, the first seeks only to research and the second is also a political project' (2014:503-4)) than those which look for self-activity of workers. The methodological approach synthesises the praxis of; dialectical theory combined with democratic participatory engagement resulting in change and extension of theory.

Chapter five outlines the actual process of research, the *praxis*, within the CPAR Inquiry Group within BookCo and demonstrates how the cycles progressed and the outcomes from these. As the research progressed the cycles of 'teasing out the issues', 'building understanding' and 'acting on knowledge' in cooperation with the additional employee owned business showed a development of thought as the Group grappled with issues of structure, decision making, power and control. This Chapter contains an overview of the CPAR cycles, which serves to expose the detail of the CPAR methodology which could not be defined prior to the iterative action itself. The Chapter consequently includes some data and examples of the production of knowledge within the research setting - however, the sense making and extension of theory within the overall analysis sits within Chapter six.

In Chapter six the full detail of the context for the participatory research and the context the participants found themselves in is detailed as is a discussion on participation in the process of analysis. The analysis then proceeds to challenge a number of pre-selected theories, including Ramsay's concept of Cycles of Control (1977; 1985; 1993), Tannenbaum (1961; 1968; 1986) and Lukes (2005) on power, in addition to Rothschild and Whitt (1986) on degeneration, utilising the Extended Case Method.

This Chapter also introduces additional theory to address unanticipated themes emergent from the research and the new relations of production. The praxis of the group exposed new fault lines in the organisation and contradictions within structures of control and formal hierarchy, which challenge the idea of conceptions of structures of control but also likely outcomes from successional situations today. To address these themes of succession Burawoy (1972; 1996) and Gouldner's (1955) theory is examined in this context. Additionally, the concept of the reverse dominance hierarchy (Clastres, 2013:207) is discussed to illuminate the Inquiry Group's desire to build more cultural forms of power as opposed to formal structures.

CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The practicalities of worker participation, and the differing levels of this participation from individual task control through to strategic decision making, has produced what Ramsay describes as 'vast' amounts of literature (Ramsay, 1980:46). This literature also has varying motivations, and definitions, much of which is extremely broad '[w]ith some notable exceptions, academic discussions on the topic are agreed that participation has something to do with access to the making of decisions' (Ramsay, 1980:46). Some of the literature is specifically related to employee owned, or co-operative enterprises, but much of it is not, yet still has relevance for a discussion on organisational control.

Since the nineteenth century, discussions of worker participation in commercial organisations have waxed and waned. Often these debates were a consequence of rising and falling levels of organised labour power, and subsequently pressure from workers on management, who then chose to 'regain control by sharing it' (Ramsay, 1977). Workplace democracy is entirely embedded in its 'historically specific political-economic settings' (Greenberg, 1983:191). This setting has dramatically changed since the last wave of interest in industrial participation, the nature of work has transformed as the economy in the UK shifted from industrial to a more flexible economy (Lasi et al., 2014). Ideas of participation in the 1960s and 1970s were intrinsically linked to those of more grass roots participation in society at the time, and to the collective power of the Trade Unions (also, to a degree, due to the examples of perceived worker control in countries such as Yugoslavia (Suvin, 2018). Out of scope in this review is the emergent literature on an entire economy of cooperatives, as a 'socialist alternative to capitalism' as exemplified by Azzellini (2018), Wolff (2012) and Jossa (2017) as their focus is on economic transition as opposed to, specifically, organisational challenges.

Throughout the literature there is an interplay between the broader social relations of production and the specific effects produced at the company or job level. In this way both employee owned and non employee owned firms attempts at participation, or even democratisation, will be subject to broader socio-economic forces, and these in term can produce varying results. As Ramsey writes:

This is not to say that a priori job enrichment must serve management, even if they fully comprehend its implications. Presumption to this effect is vulgar Marxism. The judgment must be an empirical one, allowing for the presence of contradictions,

and so of management's inability to predetermine outcomes; but this applies equally to more 'optimistic' views, which ignore structural limits and constraints on the potential for change. It would take a romantic to imagine workers would be motivated and empowered by job enrichment to storm the citadels of investment planning, for example (1985:63).

Without economic or worker organised pressure on management, the rhetoric of participation and democracy in industry today could be seen as having other impetus, resulting in very particular view on what these concepts mean in today's companies. With financial crisis following financial crisis, and low economic growth rates, there has been an increasing lack of confidence in the ability of capitalism to deliver. Mullan comments '...the acclaimed revival of free market values popularly associated with the governments of Reagan and Thatcher [was not] able to attain a firm intellectual or cultural hold on society... even before the arrival of the West's financial crash in 2008' (Mullan, 2017: 204-205).

This review will look to discuss some of the prevalent themes of employee strategic level participation and democratisation starting with those closest to the firm. Beginning with the typology of employee owned organisations, then moving on to examine the nature of participation within the organisation – for example, if it is 'meaningful' or merely a tokenistic approach. Arguments against democratisation of work have often utilised ideas of degeneration and the 'iron law of oligarchy' with ideas of an inevitable slide into bureaucracy, or succumbing to pressures (internal or external) which make them uncompetitive.

Then the discussion will broaden out to consider the changes in industrial relations, and work, as a result of the socio-economic shifts already touched upon in the introduction. The 'cycle of participation' (Ramsey, 1977) will be used to discuss the current context and how it differs from prior cycles. Finally the normative concept of democracy itself, and its resulting interrelationship with the firm and people's participation will be examined, by drawing on theorists such as Chantal Mouffe (2009, 2018).

Employee Ownership Typologies

The origins of the company are likely to influence its structure and culture and can be useful in analysing its likely attitude to structure and participation. The principal types of companies described in the literature are; endowed (or bequeathed), defensive and alternative (or mission based). The Employee Ownership Association identifies the first of these, which they term business succession or ownership succession, as the most common route for an employee owned firm to come into existence in the UK (EOA, 2021a) and is the

route by which BookCo, the firm central to this research, is also becoming employee owned.

Family businesses becoming employee owned companies may include inherited rules on how the business is to be operated in the future '...the benevolent former owner, true to the paternalism that prompted the handover, typically imposes strict conditions for the control of the enterprise that involve a representative structure and limited opportunities for higher and lower-level worker participation' (Carter, 2006:416). This can of course also influence the attitude of workers in the company who effectively become owners rather than making a positive decision to become one; '...participation has been imposed on them; typically the workforce will be divided between those who relish the opportunity and those who are uninterested' (Carter, 2006:417).

Defensive employee owned firms are where a firm is actively taken over by workers in order to save it from closing or becoming bankrupt, these often do not survive much beyond a few years after inception, workers 'seize on the co-operative idea, not because they have always wanted to run their own business, but because it offers the best chance of salvaging some jobs...' (Carter, 2006:416). Miller (1981) sees the pressures under which capitalism places worker owned firms as particularly acute in these cases, where access to capital is particularly difficult to obtain. Millar concludes this results in the necessary intervention of the state, in order to shelter or to support cooperatives from their intrinsic weaknesses, e.g., by providing an investment fund they can access. This view was echoed in the Bennite investments of the early 1970s and the Institute for Workers Control (IWC) of the same period. This has been revisited in the recent Labour Party discussion document which looks to support defensive coops (Labour Party, 2018).

Alternative employee owned firms are set up 'primarily for social or political (rather than economic) reasons (Carter, 2006:416). For Rothschild and Whitt (1986) these firms are those which represent the opportunity for truly different organisational forms, they 'begin to convince participants, and clients and onlookers, that 'workers do not need bosses to get work done' (Rothschild and Whitt 1986:185), or that the experience could be reflected within the broader economy (Greenburg, 1983:196). For alternative, or mission based companies a democratic or participative structure is likely to reflect a passion for what they do and a desire to collectively agree on how it should be done (Ferguson, 1991).

Rothschild-Whitt (1983) clarifies that within these firms ownership and control is not necessarily black and white, they note that;

[e]ach of the two dimensions is presented as though it is dichotomous in nature, when of course each is continuous. A firm may be owned from 0 per cent to 100 per cent by its work force. Likewise it may be controlled entirely or not at all by its workers... (Rothschild-Whitt, 1983:390).

The form of 'social organization' (Rothschild-Whitt, 1983:401) in the firm is likely to be different and more, or less, effective as a result of whether the business benefits from 'simultaneously high worker control and ownership' which will attract a 'different constituency' of workers (Rothschild-Whitt, 1983:401) as opposed to those companies that find themselves in a worker-owned firm almost by default. Rothschild-Whitt wrote of those who set up worker owned firms driven by not 'seeing the possibility of intrinsic satisfaction in the existing job opportunities in this society' (1983:401) who then create their own.

Carter (2006) also writes of job creation co-operatives which are an eclectic mix of companies established by unemployed workers or professional groups of 'lawyers or architects', however these are disparate, and cannot usefully be used to discuss co-ops or employee owned firms in general.

Within an employee owned enterprise looking to 'achieve consensus' (Blunden, 2017:4-5). There are 'four paradigms of collective decision making' those of 'majoritarianism', where minority views are tolerated but do not get to hold sway, 'consensus' which looks for nothing less than unanimity (and where time is not an object), sortation (or cleromancy) for random rotation and control. In addition to these Blunden writes about counsel (as opposed to command) where;

one of the participants – the CEO, the King or the Abbot, perhaps – takes the advice of the other participants, but bears sole moral responsibility for the decision. Counsel requires that the voice of every participant is attended to but specifically rejects notion of equality among participants...it is eminently capable of achieving rational decisions and should not be belittled for its lack of democratic sensibilities. And nor should it be discounted as a *collective* form of decision making: a king is only as wise as his counsel (2017:4-5).

Maeckelbergh (2011) writes that '[w]hat the movements of 1968 learned painstakingly is that democracy is not about who rules, but about setting up clear structures for how to rule, and that it consequently must become a perpetual process of learning and construction' (2011:332). Any organisation which attempts to solve the challenge of participatory democracy needs to have a level of 'democratic consciousness' (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979:522) and an appreciation that '[i]ndividuals learn to participate by participating' (Pateman, 2012:10).

Leach (2016) writes that the idea of consensus-based decision making is open to debate, that in its current form there have been some adaptations by organisations which can ensure effectiveness, possibly as more important than efficiency (Leach, 2016: 38-29). They write that:

[consensus decision making] ...is commonly presumed to be impractical and inefficient. This assumption is based on Weber's claim ...that bureaucracy is the most efficient form of organization and on anecdotes about the implosions of high-profile consensus groups (Leach, 2016: 36).

It may also be that it needs a healthy dose of imagination; 'habitually to equate hierarchy with efficiency to such an extent that there is hardly any room to imagine an alternative form of democracy that could be based on a participative and non-hierarchical structure' (Kokkinidis, 2012:238) and the ideological influence on our thinking which has created this (Blaug, 2009:96). Kokkinidis suggests a form of 'rhizomatic action rather than centralised control' (2012:239). Concepts of organisational forms *without form* are also problematic. Freeman, initially also writing in the 1970s, drew out some of the contradictions of democratic feminist organisations, in *The Tyranny of Structurelessness* striving for a 'structureless' group:

becomes a smokescreen for the strong or the lucky to establish unquestioned hegemony over others. This hegemony can easily be established because the idea of 'structurelessness' does not prevent the formation of informal structures, but only formal ones...Thus 'structurelessness' becomes a way of masking power...The rules of how decisions are made are known only to a few and awareness of power is curtailed by those who know the rules.

For everyone to have the opportunity to be involved in a given group and to participate in its activities the structure must be explicit, not implicit. The rules of decision-making must be open and available to everyone, and this can only happen if they are formalised (Freeman, 1984:6).

In order to address the balance between the 'leaders and the led', and also recognising the need for an organisation, Hardt and Negri (2017a:15) call for an inversion of the pyramid, whereby strategy would be set by the 'multitude' and leadership restricted to 'tactics', the technical aspects of making things happen. They also see that to do this then the *capabilities* of the 'multitude' need to be sufficiently developed in order for any restriction of leadership to be realistic (Hardt and Negri 2017). Like Rothschild-Whitt and Pateman they place primacy on participating to participate, Hardt commented 'how can we identify people's existing capacities for strategic political decision making or maybe better, how can those capacities be developed... this boils down to a very similar question about how

democracy can be possible, in other words how is collective self-governance possible' (Hardt and Negri 2017).

This also raises questions about the impact of authentic democratic engagement on individuals in trying to forge these new organisational forms away from the more atomised experience of the distributed organisation. Summers and Chillas (2019:12) recount how '...becoming an employee-owner was a transformative event where 'the concept of ourselves has changed' from individual workers, to being 'a shared realm', they see separate democracy skills as necessary and as distinct from economic ones.

These formulations could well be utopian. However alternative forms of organisation should be considered in more detail, as certainly the essence of what they articulate reflects the expectations of many within a democratic enterprise. More fundamentally, what can be said to be the case, is that within worker owned businesses workers are often 'disempowered by their lack of collective struggle' (Kasmir, 2017:207), they are atomised by their feeling of individual ownership and the representative structures. Also, within the literature, there are repeated statements about the *reasonableness* of workers for example; '[i]n all my work, I have yet to find employees who make unrealistic demands about empowerment' (Argyris, 1998:100). More 'unrealistic' demands should perhaps be considered, '...as Edward Thompson has so eloquently argued, in an 'infinitely assimilative culture'; in consequence, he insists, 'one must make one's sensibilities all knobbly – all knees and elbows of susceptibility and refusal – if one is not to be pressed through the grid into the universal mish-mash of the received assumptions of the intellectual culture' (Hyman, 1974:271-2).

Problems of Participation

Essential to the analysis of both participatory democracy and representative democracy within the organisation is an understanding of the necessity for the expression of agreement explicitly reached via a form of participation. Participation literature is replete with detailed barriers as to why delivering anything beyond pseudo-participation is fraught with insurmountable difficulties. These barriers include a dominant, principally managerial, assertion that workers are not capable of understanding the firm in sufficient detail, in a repeat of the themes of elitist theory. A John Lewis Partnership Manager quoted exemplifies this;

...they [the Partners] are no more capable of grasping the problems of a big business and of managing it in the real sense of the word than most of us, no

matter how long and carefully we were trained, would be capable of holding our own in the professional boxing ring... (Ramsay, 1980:51).

As Long (1982) asserts, where ownership is held by employees, but participation is not viewed as sufficient (as far as the workers are concerned), perhaps unsurprisingly, the 'impact of employee ownership is not positive' (Long, 1982:197). Long also identifies that the *circumstances* of the mechanisms of participation can be perceived as *more important* than the mechanisms themselves, recalling the inverse from Tannenbaum (1961, 1986) whereby; '[u]ltimately...it is control by members that distinguishes the democratic organisation from the non-democratic one' (Tannenbaum, 1986:279). In Long's example company the:

perceived value of two of the main participation mechanisms – the employee council and the quarterly shareholder meetings – declined sharply. Still, despite the employees' disillusionment about the usefulness of these mechanisms, virtually no one was in favour of their abandonment, perhaps indicating a feeling that these mechanisms could be effective under the right set of circumstances (1982:212-3).

Challenges also exist for workers who devote their time to gaining any management level understanding (e.g. by being full time board members) as they potentially cross the line and *become* management and not workers (Mintzberg, 1983:15) though as already discussed, in the contemporary workplace this may be an even less clear delineation. Additionally, 'worker representation' can have the effect of '*weakening* internal participation, by strengthening the hand of top management' (Mintzberg, 1983:12). Managers are sceptical about giving up any real power and that workers are equally reluctant about taking on additional responsibility (Argyris, 1998:98,102) in summarising the managerialist perspective Argyris states that: '[i]t is unrealistic to expect management to allow thousands of employees to participate fully in self-governance' (1998:100). With delayering and flexibility this decision may well not be as clear as it once was.

The reasons why management may indeed wish to support worker participation are well documented and numerous. Instrumentalist 'partnership capitalism' is found to increase the productivity level by about four percentage points, in a US study, compared to firms that do not adopt such practice, (Knyght et al., 2010:1314) Knyght et al. state that employee stock ownership plans (ESOPs), 'will put each worker in the position of improving 'his own efforts towards cost minimisation', thus enhancing the value of the enterprise and in turn, eliminating strikes, slowdowns, antiquated work rules and unreasonable wage-demands' (Knyght et al., 2010:1312). Although firms introducing 'participation' and ownership schemes can see broadly positive results, it has also been found that

expectations of control and participation are higher in worker owned firms, especially those with ownership of fifty percent or greater (Knyght et al., 2010:1315).

Carter (2006) uses Pateman's (1978) definitions of the different types of participation, defining three archetypes as pseudo, partial and full worker participation. 'Pseudo' participation comprises management schemes designed to gain acceptance for 'decisions already made' by management, are ruled out as not participative (Carter, 2006:416). 'Partial' schemes involve a level of influence between parties yet the final decision rests with management. 'Full' participation gives every member 'equal power to determine the outcome of decisions' (Carter, 2006: 415), it should also be noted that these also reflect popular models such as Arnstein's ladder (Arnstein, 1969:217) which are used to illustrate levels of participation from 'manipulation' at the pseudo participation end to actual 'citizen control'.

Image available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2018.1559388>

'A ladder of citizen participation' (Arnstein, 1969:217).

Like Ramsay (1980), Pateman also distinguishes between 'lower' and 'higher' management decisions in the split between shop-floor and strategic level decision making. Carter describes how:

Partial participation could occur without any democratisation of the authority structures in an organisation, as could full participation at the lower levels of management; but, a system of industrial democracy would involve full higher-level participation by employees (2006:415).

In terms of situating a discussion on participation, it is important to be clear on what is meant by this and the context in which it is to be examined.

Ramsay makes an important assertion about the non-deterministic nature of worker participation, dispelling the illusion that it was a natural evolution of capitalism, he identified trends towards both management and worker instigated participation schemes (Ramsay, 1980:48). Whereas Ramsay's assessment was a trade-off between efficiency in the eyes of managers and integration in the eyes of trade unionists, the current climate, it could be argued, is essentially one of instrumental integration rather than democracy and not any meaningful redistribution of power. The conflict-oriented forms are almost entirely absent.

In his 2017 book, former Waitrose (the food shops run by the employee owned John Lewis Partnership) Managing Director Mark Price, points to some of the differences which he perceived were present due to employee ownership at Waitrose. Similar to Hayday, Perryman and Robinson (Hayday et al., 2004:x), he outlines several key elements which drive individual 'happiness' subsequently driving business performance; reward and recognition, transparency, empowerment, 'well-being', pride and job satisfaction (Price, 2017:38). Price gives examples of a shift in attitude, when these elements are in place, where workers took a collectively individual responsibility, as distinct from having any collectivised power.

One of these examples is of staff policing others in order to deliver greater, shared profits, in a Somerfield store acquired by Waitrose. 'Everyone got the subtext...harm the business and you are only harming your own prospects. When you treat people as stakeholders they take on a level of responsibility that you don't see anywhere else' (Price, 2017:130). He continues:

...a cashier told the manager a colleague who had phoned in sick had really gone to see her sister. As the store was now her business she felt the action to be reprehensible. When the 'poorly' Partner returned to work, the manager spoke quietly to her, word got around, and absence in the branch fell from nine per cent pre our acquisition to under three per cent (Price, 2017:130).

The discussion of engagement, and the rather formulaic methods to encourage, and measure it, in order to achieve competitive advantage within the additional responsibility outlined by Price, seems somewhat reductivist in this context; where work owned by the worker is just an effective way of delivering efficient profit making with added self-interest. It also offers a panopticon of employees policing each other in an atomisation reflective of the individualistic logic discussed by Cederström and Fleming (2012) and Deleuze (1992). In this context working within an EO firms in no way means that workers are automatically granted some elevated form of participation.

The organisational challenges do not end with those already recounted. The structure required to deliver full participatory democracy is often seen as time consuming and unwieldy, and to many as inherently unstable. Rothschild-Whitt describes that, between business meetings, political meetings, and 'people' meetings there can be very little time remaining to do the tasks of the organisation (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979:520). As a result, the 'logic' is that any real form of democratisation is unsuitable for the majority of firms, Mintzberg, writing before the shift in the economic structure of many Western countries that;

...the problem lies in the nature of the work and the design of the structure, not in the distribution of power... were it democratization of Adhocracy or Professional Bureaucracy people wanted, there would be little problem. But that is not the issue. The proponents of participatory democracy are not lobbying for changes in universities or research laboratories. It is the giant mass producers they are after, in other words the Machine Bureaucracies...these are precisely the organisations in which the need for tight administrative control and coordination is paramount (1983:16-17).

Mintzberg's solution to this is a more limited level of participation, of 'consultation, authorisation and veto' (Mintzberg, 1983:16). Diefenbach writes that such approaches dismiss moves to more egalitarian or democratic structures as 'unrealistic, if not to say naïve ... Opponents of such initiatives then often refer to 'common knowledge' and 'established wisdom'' (Diefenbach, 2019:547) to dismiss such ideas out of hand. Cumulatively these assertions can seem almost monolithic and exemplify management theory as a political discourse in itself and its 'rhetoric provides not just a legitimisation but the *raison d'être* for what it is that some people are able to do to some other people' (Palmer and Clegg, 1996:3).

If it is accepted the idea that *without* any participation in decision making then an employee owned organisation's legitimacy with its staff can only be partial (Mouffe, 2009; Pateman, 1978, 2012; Kokkinidis, 2012) then 'actually existing participation' in its current form, has a tendency lead to either managerialist views of success – 'of 'involving' employees in its definition of the enterprises goals (efficiency, profitability, etc.)' (Ramsay, 1980:48) or of resulting in triviality, instability and apathy, as involvement is either insignificant or does not live up to the promise of control.

Bernstein (1983) in a broad survey of worker-controlled firms identified six key elements which, if '[i]f any one...is not present then democratization decays' (Bernstein, 1983:45). To summarise the six, (1) direct, or elected, involvement in decision making, (2) full financial disclosure to employees and frequent shared monetary benefits, (3) transparency

and sharing of management information and expertise, (4) individual rights along the same lines of 'basic political liberties' (5) disputes resolved by peers or independent of management and finally (6) a shared set of 'attitudes and values' (Bernstein, 1983:45). These six elements attempt to place workers within a clear position of control, as opposed to influence, avoiding any schemes or structures where employees are not involved in decisions e.g., such as suggestion boxes etc. where the decision making is opaque and removed (Bernstein, 1983:49).

This section has shown how a significant proportion of the literature on industrial and workplace democracy is situated within a continuum of power between managers and workers, this may of course still be the case, however the assumptions underlying much of the 'logic' of this may have been undermined by the changes in socio-economic context. Cornforth (1995) and Rothschild and Whitt (1986) were not unusual in situating their discussions of sustainable, democratic, organisational forms solidly within the 'logic' of Michels' Iron law of Oligarchy, who wrote that 'who says organization says oligarchy' (Rothschild and Whitt 1986:23-4, Michels, 1962) and the 'inevitability' of both bureaucracy and the role of technical specialists is seen as fundamentally opposed to participatory democracy in much of the literature. This will now be discussed in more detail.

The Degeneration Thesis & the 'Iron law of oligarchy'

The concept of the *degeneration thesis* is used to frame many of the discussions around both the employee owned firm and democratisation. Both the degeneration thesis and the 'Iron law of oligarchy', where the 'logic' of employee owned firms and the practical issues of management and control are perceived as leading to an inevitable breakdown of the business within a capitalist environment. This inevitable collapse is seen as driven by either internal pressures; leading to oligarchy and the diminishment of democratic ideals (Michels, 1962; Diefenbach, 2019); or external pressure from having to compete with non-democratic firms within capitalism (Storey et al., 2014:626, Cornforth, 1995:1).

The *Degeneration Thesis* originated with Sidney and Beatrice Webb in the late nineteenth century (Storey et al., 2014:626) who saw repeated failures of worker owned firms as an inevitable pattern, with inherent weaknesses within worker ownership, that they; 'suffer from indiscipline, lack of knowledge of the market and an unwillingness to adopt technical innovations, because they were democratically controlled by workers... they would either fail or be forced to adopt more conventional forms of ownership and management, and hence degenerate' (cited in Cornforth 1995:491) succumbing to the pressures of the

capitalist market outside the organisation. Michels's 'Iron law of oligarchy' (1962 [1911]) finds the seeds of destruction within organisations. He finds the existence of a power elite within an organisation of any size, and asserts that truly democratic organisations cannot exist:

Organisation is based on division of labour, and division of labour leads to specialisation... Specialisation makes specialists indispensable and, thus, leadership must be provided by specialists ('expert leadership')... Specialisation (differentiation of functions) leads to hierarchisation/stratification: to a minority of superiors ('the leaders') and a majority of subordinates ('the masses') ... Professional specialists become professional leaders who decide without consultation and are uncontrolled (Diefenbach, 2019:549).

These degeneration and oligarchical tendencies can be found throughout the literature (Carter, 2006:418) and are further echoed within arguments such as that the pressure on co-operatives and employee owned partnerships is the internal logic of 'maximisation of income per worker' (Millar, 1981:314) and subsequently they are subject to greater pressures to stay small and avoid risk, more so than 'purely' capitalist firms. This tendency can also be seen as creating a counter pressure on recruitment, as it necessitates a dissolution of any bonus, it also has the potential effect of reducing support for longer-term investment, '[t]heir interest is to maximise their total earnings from the co-operative' (Millar, 1981:315). Schweickart (2002) takes a similar view that worker owned firms will operate under their own logic, and that logic will disadvantage them when competing with more traditionally owned firms:

...democratic firms do not behave like capitalist firms in all respects. For one thing, since labor is not a cost of production in a democratic firm, *democratic firms have no interest whatsoever in lowering labor costs* – since those "costs" are precisely the incomes of workers. Technology will not be introduced, for example, so that a firm can reduce its workforce or replace skilled workers with unskilled workers (2002: 128).

Schweickart's interpretation is one where 'natural solidarity' (Schweickart, 2002: 129) keeps firms small and somehow insulated from the profit motive. His analysis is not however borne out by surveys such as Bernstein (1983) and it seems unlikely that working in a democratic firm enables the insulation which Schweickart suggests.

The complete opposite argument to Schweickart's has more recently taken the fore, as discussed earlier, with worker interests being considerably more longer-term than management (Galbraith, 2004:49-50). A great deal of this analysis, however, assumes workers (and management for that matter) are purely rational economic actors and that they do not place any value in other 'non-monetary' benefits of working in a worker owned

firm, '[a]mong such secondary goals might be more varied work, greater individual responsibility for the results of work, and a new balance between work and leisure' (Miller, 1981:321).

Managers, and leaders, in this context potentially lose both the legitimacy of representing owners' interests and contributing to the positive running of the business. Diefenbach (2019) highlights the previously unassailable position of management as one of the core elements of the internal oligarchisation thesis, what 'Michels outlined with his 'iron law of oligarchy' was actually a classic 'elite theory' – or the ideological justification of the dominance of a power elite' (Diefenbach, 2019:548). The division of labour within Michels, of specialists and experts, and of 'leaders and led' is based upon the idea of:

'expert leadership' [which] makes the case for leaders' learned experience and professionalism based on codified and transferable knowledge *and simultaneously* makes the case for their uniqueness and exceptionalism based upon some mythical special traits. The former requires submissiveness because of rationality, the latter because of 'awe' (Diefenbach, 2019:551).

If leadership and expertise can be learnt, and participation in decision making and control is possible without hierarchal command, then the *inevitability* of hierarchy and bureaucracy also become questionable. This shift in thinking could be seen as essential to challenging the orthodoxy of degeneration within democratic firms. The decline of organised labour enables employees to be recast in a position where participation and control makes them better, individual, capitalists.

Answering the question 'why they are not these types of firms [large EO businesses] not replicated more frequently?', Andy Street, a former Managing Director of John Lewis, commented that;

'...the unique thing is the scale they [John Lewis] have got to... the answer is to do with the structure of JL, it's this point that the executive lead are held accountable by the democracy it's not a perfect democracy, most cooperative business are a perfect democracy and it seems to impede their ability to grow to scale' (Street, 2017).

Storey and Salaman (2016) recently completed a longitudinal study of the John Lewis Partnership and are likely to have placed Andy Street comments within the context of the degeneration thesis for employee owned businesses, which they summarise as:

mutuality is always a transient phase on a deterministic trajectory either away from mutuality as commercialism takes the upper hand, or towards commercial failure as democracy takes the upper hand. Such a view posits an opposition between employee owned firms and effective management, suggesting that any constraint

on managers' ability or authority to manage reduces management efficiency, and thus the firm's performance (2016:67).

They question this perspective as a 'managerialist fallacy', which states that where 'the power of employees is strong, management will be weak and performance poor; conversely, if performance is strong then management must be strong and the employee power diminished' (Storey and Salaman, 2016:67). What emerges strongly from their book is that the infrastructure 'seem[s] somewhat managerial and hierarchic: top down...' (Storey and Salaman, 2016:100). The focus on the reward of the 'annual bonus' has diminished the role of the 'democracy' – one telling change being that representatives to Council are no longer 'elected', rather 'nominated':

[b]ut while the Council may *influence* decisions it does not *take* decisions and this is very clearly stated and understood. Senior management argue that partners do not attach a premium to decision making. Instead they are anxious to secure the chance to input at the formulation of proposals stage and have a say in the 'how' rather than the 'what' (Storey and Salaman, 2016:156).

The fundamentals of the conclusion in both this and the Storey et al., 2014 study is that the very longevity of the JLP and Mondragon (a large Catalan employee partnership) refutes the degeneration thesis. However as Cathcart (2013) and Willmott and Paranque (2014) have documented, the recent JLP 'democracy project' has further hollowed out the democratic structures at the firm. Cathcart describes how the 'management in the Partnership shaped the results of the trial in a way that led to dramatic changes to the meaning of democracy and a degeneration of democratic practices' (Cathcart, 2013:604). This is also reflected in many recent discussions of Basque region federation of cooperatives Mondragon (Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2014; Kasmir, 2017). It may be suggested that they have succumbed to what Ramsay (1977) described as the trap of triviality, of the 'tea, towels and toilets' syndrome' (Ramsay 1977:482).

When the John Lewis Partnership was gifted to its employees in the 1920s the drivers were quite different to those we are seeing today. John Spedan Lewis, the founder of the partnership saw the move as a response to rising class antagonism, describing industrial democracy in the subtitle to his book *Fairer Shares*, as 'perhaps the only alternative to Communism' (Lewis, 1954). The Partnership is only now significantly restructuring due to broader shifts in technology:

Sharon White [Chairman of the John Lewis Partnership] landed in the driving seat just weeks before the pandemic and swiftly had to make some tough decisions - closing stores, slashing jobs and cutting costs. She also had to tell partners that for

the first time in more than 50 years they wouldn't receive their much cherished annual bonus (Simpson, 2021).

This highlights the difficulty in making comparisons between different employee owned firms and the importance of examining the reasons for succession in ownership, and the resultant structures. It is out of scope for this thesis to comment upon the culture at John Lewis and whether this acted on power relations in the firm. What does seem clear, given the recent restructuring, is that the impact of the pandemic was one which enabled the senior management to enact sweeping changes to the business, whether these should have been earlier and whether these were inhibited by employees or management, or some other factor, would be interesting to explore. It also underlines that no employee owned business is immune from its broader economic and technological circumstances.

Rather than dispelling the idea of degeneration entirely Storey and Salaman attack its 'managerialist fallacy', and its inevitability, however raise serious questions about the efficacy of democracy within the John Lewis Partnership. Even if they do admire the company as 'different' possibly for the same reason that Oakeshott says their workers value it in that '...no one else owns it' (Oakeshott, 2000: 217).

What many of these writers attempt to contest is the *inevitability* of degeneration. When Rothschild and Whitt (1986) primarily look at 'mission based co-operatives' in order to examine 'to what extent cooperatives are able in practice to successfully evade the Iron Law' (Rothschild and Whitt, 1986:24) rather than disputing the 'law' itself. They identify a number of elements which could lead to an effective democratic structure, including; staying small (Rothschild and Whitt, 1986:11), shared purpose (Rothschild and Whitt, 1986:95) and 'shared knowledge and skills' avoiding specialisation and uneven distribution (Rothschild and Whitt, 1986:104).

Writing in the 1980s they also identified broad social support for workplace democracy except from 'managers and owners' (Rothschild and Whitt, 1986:186). Summing up their findings they write that '[w]e have pursued a dialectical analysis of organizational democracy, examining the contradictory forces within this form or acting upon it, and the potentials for reconciling such forces and synthesizing a viable form of democratic management' (Rothschild and Whitt, 1986:191).

There certainly are contradictory forces at play within organisations however with the acceptance of the premise of the oligarchic argument of Michels whereby 'any form of representative democracy or delegation is regarded as a sign of oligarchy' (Cornforth,

1995:492) leads them to, effectively, the same deterministic denial of organisational possibilities beyond hierarchical management control. As Lukes writes on the dimensional views of power, there is a need to move beyond purely behavioural, and structural analysis – although there exists manifold pressures on organisations and individuals there is still a place for an understanding of power; ‘[t]he future, though not entirely open, is not entirely closed either (and indeed, the degree of its openness is itself structurally determined)’ (Lukes, 2005:57), people still have autonomy and ‘could have acted differently’ (Lukes, 2005:57).

Flexibility and Individualised Industrial Relations

Kelly (1998), writes on the changing nature of industrial relations in a post-collective environment. They identify that in this new environment the interests of workers are not as clearly defined as they were in the era of trade union organisation, stating that ‘Whereas employers are necessarily and primarily concerned with profitability, because of market competition, there is no corresponding mechanism amongst workers that can assign equivalent priority to any one of their many interests...’ (Kelly, 1998:4). This could be seen as a ‘dealignment of class and purpose’ wherein ‘to be working class was more than a condition: it was connected to a goal, socialism’ (Heartfield, 2018).

The resultant individualisation of industrial relations can elevate self-actualisation over any collective goals, where *work* is the principal vehicle for self-worth and individual aspirations. This change also recasts discussions of power and control within the modern workplace, where it is more discussed in terms of an individual’s access to flexibility and self-management in the ‘gig economy’ or about the retention of ‘intellectual workers’ within higher paid roles. Cederström and Fleming write that “[t]he punitive boss who orders us about no longer has much purchase in the postmodern workplace. Rather employees find management taking great pains to ask us ‘how we feel’” (Cederström and Fleming, 2012:40). This does, however, emphasise the power of the narrative of *control* in the domain of work. Working for yourself and entrepreneurship have been elevated to the very highest of levels of ambition and respect, mythologised as a form of ultimate individual control, combined with the perceived opportunity to reap huge financial rewards (and ultimately often escape from work itself) (Marwick, 2013).

Stephen Bampfylde, founding chair, Saxton Bampfylde (a recruitment firm) commented:

...for me employee ownership [is] a 21st Century form of capitalism, we employ a lot of bright talented younger folk who arrive with a massive cynicism about most

corporate life post 2008, post all our friends in the city taking all the money and running, and looking for meaning in their lives alongside work...' (Bampfylde, 2016).

This individualised nature of work also complicates traditional organisational power analysis such as Tannenbaum's (1986) classic 'control graph'. It still stands that '[u]ltimately...it is control by members that distinguishes the democratic organisation from the non-democratic one' (Tannenbaum, 1986:279) however, how do you define control if organisations are no longer seen as having worker/management binaries. Tannenbaum's graphical conceptualisation attempted to ask the question whether control is a fixed sum. For Tannenbaum giving more control to someone, does not necessarily mean taking it from another. As he writes to:

control means to 'determine outcomes', 'act as a causal agent', 'have impact'. Control is a social process, an interaction; it is distinctly *not* a perception, cognition, or attitude; and it is a matter of degree (Tannenbaum, 1986:323).

What this fluid understanding of control also potentially exposes is that, more than the *structures of participation*, the reality of what *actually* happens (as opposed to what people are told will happen) plus their perceptions of this, are crucial. Tannenbaum writes that '...results show an association between the total amount of control perceived by members and the effectiveness of the organization...' (Tannenbaum, 1986:306). The importance of workers perception of control is expressed in Tannenbaum's earlier study too whereby despite lacking formal democratic processes '...nearly half the [workers] believe the organization is democratic, even though it is not' (Tannenbaum, 1961:35).

Much of Tannenbaum's *control graph* work assumed a hierarchy and a relatively fixed one, as discussed this is now a more contested territory. Cederström and Fleming see the potential of control having shifted to labour through the organisational crisis within capitalism, and the shift from manufacturing to service industries. This 'displacement of management function' (Cederström and Fleming, 2012:13) to workers has not inevitably led to positive change. They look to Deleuze where 'the factory in its *virtual form*, as a way of life, a gaseous ethos – that has infected our biosphere' (Cederström and Fleming, 2012:13-14, Deleuze, 1992:6). Work instead has become total:

...it is *never over*...working has assumed a universal presence – 'worker's society' in the worst sense of the term – where even the unemployed and children find themselves obsessed with it. This viral-like logic of the corporation has spread... (Cederström and Fleming, 2012:2).

From this perspective rather than the democratisation of business, the opposite could be seen to be true, the 'businification' of democracy. Mark Fisher wrote that '[o]ver the past

thirty years, capitalist realism has successfully installed a 'business ontology' in which it is *simply obvious* that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business' (Fisher, 2009: 17). In this context it is perhaps unsurprising that 'worker ownership' would be anything other than 'de-escalating' in terms of conflict (Greenberg, 1983:198) and can create a 'small business mentality' (Masquelier, 2017:56) without the broader collective political context that would question this logic.

The delegitimisation of management and questions of ownership

As part of the structural economic changes within capitalism, as it shifts to more flexible forms, there has also been a change in the narrative around both ownership and management. Galbraith (2004) writes of a collapse in confidence in corporations' ability to deliver in the absence of 'active owners', he accuses a lack of supervision or regulation causing the corporation to lose its way in society. Galbraith writes that 'the managerial thrust for power and self-enrichment [has led to] ... Enron, WorldCom, Tyco and others [...] the focus of widely publicized criticism, even outrage' (2004:49-50). Galbraith does not immediately turn to workers in order to recapture a more long-term perspective, although he does call on more active owners. Economist John Kay writes in the *Financial Times* that what is needed is not representation for workers but a more fundamental rethinking of how organisations are constituted:

...there is little reason to think that the avarice and vainglory of too many modern businesspeople will be tempered by an obligation to consult with representatives of workers. If we ask why tariffs were once simpler and zero-hours contracts rare, and why chief executives only recently began to pay each other millions of pounds a year, the answer is in earlier days reputable companies did not think it appropriate to do these things. So the best answer is not to attack a few topical symptoms of excess, but to restore a culture that recognises corporations are above all social organisations (Kay, 2017:12).

The IPPR *Economic Justice* report quantifies this as, in that between '2000 and 2016, the percentage of the market value of UK shares held by individuals, insurance funds and pension funds fell from 55 to 20 percent' (IPPR, 2018:37). Emergent discussions by government of the role of employees within traditional firms in having 'worker representatives on boards' in this context, can be seen as in the stead of absent owners. Workers interests are seen to be more in line with more traditional (long term) owners of capital, rather than anonymous and short-term finance capital, than 'self-serving' management, who are frequently cast as having succumbed to moral hazard, inhibiting

flexibility and placing their own interests above those of the organisation. The IPPR report asserts that within:

firms, too much power is concentrated in the hands of management, and too little is held by workers. Hierarchical governance models hold back productivity improvement and the spread of workplace innovation, and hold down wages and working conditions (IPPR, 2018:71).

The logic of employee engagement, ownership and a new look at organisational structure may become the new orthodoxy as the UK grapples with a productivity challenge, not caused by people not working hard enough, as it is sometimes reported, rather too little power held by those 'Employee owners [who] ... have greater discretion over how they carry out tasks, along with more freedom to innovate and the responsibility to fix problems without referring things up the line' (Employee Ownership Association, 2018:15). What form this *ownership* will take however, and what organisational structures will support them, is not clear.

The current cycle of participation and the social composition of work

Pre-pandemic, employee representation and participation began to appear on the political agenda again in the UK. The Conservative Party has repeatedly stated its commitment to worker representation asserting that:

listed companies will be required either to nominate a director from the workforce, create a formal employee advisory council or assign specific responsibility for employee representation to a designated non-executive director' (The Conservative and Unionist Party, 2017:18).

Similarly the Labour Party has also stated:

[m]ore democratic ownership structures would help our economy deliver for the many and lead to a fairer distribution of wealth...doubling the size of the co-operative sector and introducing a 'right to own' making employees the buyer of first refusal when the company they work for is up for sale (Labour Party, 2017:19).

In 2012 the coalition Government commissioned the *Nuttall Review of Employee Ownership*, at its launch the deputy prime minister at the time asserted that:

...employee ownership has long proved that the choice we face is not simply between dog-eat-dog, laissez-faire capitalism - or union-dominated, uncompetitive socialism. John Stuart Mill believed that employee owned firms, co-operatives and mutuals could help to end what he described as the 'standing feud between labour and capital' creating fiercely competitive firms, fighting for profits and customers in a competitive market but where employees have as big a stake in them as possible. (Cabinet Office, 2012)

At the time this was referred to as the 'John Lewis Economy' (Cabinet Office, 2012) prompting a comment in the *Financial Times* more recently that 'No amount of employee democracy protects against market conditions' (Eley and Hall, 2019) as John Lewis struggled along with the rest of the retail sector. Often these policy commitments are heralded as new initiatives, however they have a long history in the UK. Yet what is distinctive with its more recent incarnation is that it is definitively not driven by a response to worker power, as David Harvey (2010) points out the global financial crisis of 2009 was, unusually, not seen as 'greedy unions of excessive power of labour this time' rather too much power residing with finance capital. Rather the drivers appear to be that very separation of ownership and management in addition to concerns around where greater inequality in society may lead, this thesis will go on to explore these in more detail.

The expansive literature reflects the 'contradictions inherent in the concept' whereby it 'offers control of the dictates of capital on the one hand, and submission to its logic on the other' (Cressey and MacInnes, 1980:6). Although the underlying philosophical position of this paper is a critical one, the deterministic approach, taken by many Marxists is rejected. This deterministic position is exemplified by Braverman's 1970s labour process analysis, which regarded *any* democratisation within the workplace as merely a 'studied pretence' (Braverman, 1974:39) or that 'practitioners of 'human relations'... are the maintenance crew for the human machinery' (Braverman, 1974:87). This approach is regarded as overly simplistic in its analysis of all capitalist forms as Tayloristic and deterministic in terms of the (in)ability of people to change their own circumstances. Braverman was writing principally about non worker-controlled firms, but still saw calls for control within capitalism as 'delusory' without the change in the means of production *as a whole* (Braverman, 1974:445-446).

Ramsay asserted that '...some Marxist writers in the 1970s wrote off participation by reflex rather than from investigation, as irrelevant or as honeyed flypaper dangled out to capture the unwitting worker with little reference to the facts' (Ramsay, 1993:79). This thesis will also reject the position that the very essence of work under capitalism is entirely negative (Cederström and Fleming, 2012:3) or mostly pointless (Graeber, 2018). Rather it is taken that it *could* be possible to build an organisation which, if not in a 'prefigurative form' (Cressey and MacInnes, 1980:22), then one which is democratic, and that this undertaking is a fundamentally important experience which reasserts a positive role for human agency.

As I have touched upon Harvey Ramsay identified historical patterns of greater worker participation, where there was a correlation with greater organised worker power. However, the current context appears to represent a new paradigm. Until the structural decline in organised labour in the 1980s, Ramsay's (1977) thesis offered a trenchant analysis of the 'fads' of employee ownership, control and participation, summarised in his article *Cycles of Control: Worker Participation in Sociological and Historical Perspective*. Ramsay highlighted the frequency that 'participation' initiatives for workers are heralded as new, and that '...these procedures appeared at times when employers were put under pressure, in particular by tight labour-market conditions' (Ramsay 1977:483). Ramsay saw four historical waves of participation dating back to the 1860s, through to the 1970s;

...it is management who wield the initiative on offering participation or not, and this has shaped the unitary emphasis of most projects. Nevertheless the fact that management are usually reacting to a challenge against their authority, which compels this adaption of ideas and politics, injects the debate with its apparent confusion (1977:498).

In the new ascendant cycle the rhetoric is not about capitulation and inclusion, rather the new testimonies are of the importance of worker engagement in order to help employees find meaning in work. As a recent *Harvard Business Review* cover story proclaimed, for managers alone to 'internalise purpose' is not enough, employees 'need to help drive this process, because then the purpose is more likely to permeate the culture, shaping behaviour even when managers aren't right there to watch how people are handling things' (Quinn and Thakor, 2018:85). This need for individuals to internalise purpose increasingly important as organisations move away from hierarchical organisation in search of flexibility (Baccaro and Howell: 2017:1-5; Streeck: 2012:27-47; Hamel, 2011).

Although, at the time of writing, the current UK unemployment rate is at a historic low (Office for National Statistics, 2017a), what might in the past have been seen as a natural alignment between high employment and labour power is absent. In order to measure organised 'labour power' one possible method would be to examine days lost to industrial action and Trade Union membership figures. Trade Unions have been experiencing structural decline since the 1980s, when the Thatcher government successfully shifted the profile of the labour markets away from traditional manufacturing to finance and services. The Office of National Statistics comments that;

...the amount of industrial action has significantly reduced in the last 30 years. This is a stark contrast to the level of action seen when the miners went on strike in the 1970s and 1980s. The 1910s and 1920s saw even greater levels of industrial action culminating in the general strike of 1926 (2015).

Lack of worker pressure on management could also be reflected in the lack of significant wage inflation over a period of higher employment (Office for National Statistics, 2017b). This should not presuppose that wage growth requires industrial conflict, as it is also likely to be driven by other economic pressure such as scarcity and demand for labour, and the ability of firms to deliver growth. Current wage growth has not been as low in over 200 years, or as Gardiner puts it '...since the Napoleonic wars' (2017). Mullan (2017) asserts that '[m]ost wages are still connected to growth; they have simply been tracking the inadequacy of the productivity trend' (Mullan, 2017:41). The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) in their *Final Report of the IPPR Commission on Economic Justice* (2018) see an economy where earnings have 'decoupled' from GDP (IPPR, 2018:12), where, although the country is richer as a whole those in work are not. This decoupling has led to greater economic inequality, geographically and socially, and is reflected in a number of Western countries.

Image available at: <https://www.ippr.org/news-and-media/press-releases/economic-growth-no-longer-leading-to-rising-earnings-finds-ippr-commission-on-economic-justice>

Illustration two: Economic Growth no longer leading to rising earnings (IPPR, 2017)

Further change can also be seen in the composition of the labour market, including such structural changes as the growth in part-time self-employment, which a recent ONS report describes as one of the ‘...defining characteristics of the UK’s recent economic recovery’ (Office for National Statistics, 2016). The Resolution Foundation, a nonpartisan research and policy organisation, published a report in 2012 on *The Changing Shape of the UK Job Market and its implications for the Bottom Half of Earners* (Holmes, 2012), they commented that; ‘...the change in the occupational structure towards non-routine work has... led to faster growth of wage in top-end jobs and has depressed wage growth at the bottom’ (Holmes, 2012:11).

The Resolution Foundation also highlight a few other compositional factors which have had significant effects on the employment market, these being; a more significant drop in wages (and demand) for low skill routine jobs (Holmes, 2012:8), the expansion of higher education and the negative impact of a decline in trade union membership, which they highlight as having ‘[a more] negative effect...on the incidence of low-wage work [...] greater than the negative effects of a growth in low-wage service jobs’ (Holmes, 2012:11).

As a result of these changes, and concerns about what the outcomes of a greater stratification in society may be, there has been an emergent narrative which reflects an anxiousness to avoid societal instability. This is demonstrated in the popularity of such theses as Wilkinson and Pickett’s influential book *The Spirit Level* (2010), where improvements to social behaviour are engendered by people having an ‘ownership’ and a ‘stake’ and are seen as essential elements in creating a more ‘egalitarian society’ (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010:260).

They discuss specifically where benefits as diverse as ‘health, education, crime and social participation’ were all improved due to a significant density of (in a region of Italy) co-operative employed workers (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010:260). This participation ultimately extended beyond the boundaries of the corporation; ‘...people would learn the strengths and weaknesses of different structures and what forms of democracy best fitted...and how to represent the interests of consumers and local communities’ (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010:261) this echoes the ‘spillover thesis’ which is discussed later in this Chapter.

As well as social stability, concerns about workers having a 'fairer share' is seen as imperative for economic growth according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) which have 'found that economies with more equal distribution of income and wealth tend to have stronger and more stable paths' (IPPR, 2018:27). The impact of Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2017) which warned of both inequality and a return to patrimonial capitalism also serves to demonstrate how common these anxieties are within the West (The Economist, 2014).

As a result of this changing market composition, there is also a concern that 'workers are becoming increasingly well-qualified ... lead[ing] to their skills being underutilised' (Holmes, 2012:23). Benedict Dellot, Associate Director, Economy, Enterprise and Manufacturing at the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) writes that '[s]taggating wages for those at the bottom end of the labour market matters less if workers have a stake in, and receive dividends from, the companies that are becoming ever more profitable' (Dellot, 2016:28). Dellot writes that the proliferation of 'lousy' roles fail to compensate for the social benefits work should offer:

Today's service sector jobs, whether in tourism, retail or logistics, struggle to compensate for the loss of meaning or sense of community once offered by industry. There is little tangibility, few things to literally grasp. According to the latest results from the British Social Attitudes Survey, the proportion of routine and semi-routine workers who say they have no freedom to decide the organisation of their work increased from 42% in 2005 to 57% in 2015. And the proportion who *always* find their jobs stressful rose from 1% to 10% over the same period (Dellot, 2016:25).

Other writers have seen this trend for companies "[t]his subordination, however, can operate under new logics... Uberisation [whereby workers access short term or single pieces of work mediated by technology, and work for themselves, also known as the 'gig economy'] can be understood as a possible future for companies in general, that become responsible for providing the infrastructure to allow their 'partners' to carry out their work' (Abílio, 2017).

Much of the touted benefits of these 'Uberised' roles reflects a language of ownership and control for the individual. For example, a Deliveroo (a food delivery service) worker quoted on the BBC: 'I control when I work, earn enough to support myself and the only person telling me what to do is the app on my phone' (BBC News, 2017). Abílio writes that both David Harvey and João Bernardo describe how 'organisation through dispersal' (Abílio, 2017) does not mean any democratisation nor loss of control by capital. Masquelier (2017)

cites Bauman on the delayed flexibility of post-Fordism where 'the 'unprecedented freedom' this regime of production 'offers its members has arrived ... together with unprecedented impotence' (Masquelier 2017:61). Geissler also reflects the internal contradictions of this position when she writes that:

The present performance subject is identical to the Hegelian slave apart from the circumstance that it does not work for the master, but exploits itself voluntarily. As an entrepreneur of itself, it is both master and slave simultaneously (2018:211).

The intensification of work during the COVID-19 pandemic makes this research even more relevant, the Microsoft *Work Trends Index* reporting that technology has increased 'the intensity of our workday, and what is expected of employees during this time' (Microsoft, 2021:8).

Cant recounts of Deliveroo, it 'might be an authoritarian system which ordered around workers like a miniature dictator, but the user interface was shiny' (2020:85). Of course, these 'shiny' interfaces also offer an opportunity for cooperative coordination of control, technology is not inherently undemocratic. There is some evidence of worker run equivalents of platform capitalism, for example, Scholz & Schneider (2017) have written on platform cooperativism, companies such as Drivers.coop which describes itself as 'a driver-owned ridehailing cooperative in New York City'. However, currently, most of these experiments appear to reflect an individualistic orientation of the technology, yet they may offer opportunities in the future to support ownership and decision-making structures.

Participation and Democratic Theory

One of the most influential pieces of literature on democratisation and participation was Carole Pateman's *Participation and Democratic Theory* written in 1978, published in the midst of the last cycle of participation, and as such references both Yugoslavian experiments and negotiated participation in more hierarchical organisations. Pateman's original 1978 thesis was one of 'spillover' where participation within the workplace was seen as likely to lead to greater political participation in society more generally. The book was written during a high point of political activity in society more generally so it could be argued that it represents a very different period in how it relates beyond the boundaries of the firm.

Pateman, revisited her theory in 2012 and located a shift in democratic engagement with a new dominance of deliberative democracy:

In the 1960s defenders of a participatory conception of democracy, which had a politically active citizenry at its center, took up the cudgels against proponents of a

“realistic” democratic theory...Citizen apathy was seen as functional for the democratic system. By the 1980s the attention of most political theorists turned in other directions, interest in democratic theory waned and, in particular, participatory democratic theory became unfashionable (Pateman, 2012:7).

Her 1978 book could still be seen as contemporary relevant when she writes that ‘...a prominent feature of recent theories of democracy is the emphasis placed on the dangers inherent in wide popular participation in politics’ (Pateman, 1978:1). Deliberative democracy could be seen as requiring a rather narrow consensus, as the triangulations of policy within ‘left’ and ‘right’ removed both conflict and resulted in a further lack of participation within society. The waning of ideological conflicts subsequent to the end of the Soviet Union and Francis Fukuyama’s ‘The End of History and the Last Man’ (1992) has created a very different context for any discussion of ‘spillover’. Pateman sees this as inherently negative for creating participation in other spheres, ‘...for individuals to participate in decision-making in their everyday lives as well as in the wider political system. It is about democratising democracy’ (Pateman, 2012:10).

Masquelier (2017), Coutinho (2016) and Greenburg (1983) all find little evidence to support Pateman’s thesis in its original form, more recently Timming and Summers (2018) find to the contrary and do find a pro-democracy affect (2018:12-13), it is likely that both may well be the case and that broad generalisations cannot be made here, especially when measuring democratic engagement today. This may be as the ground continues to shift in specific social-economic terms, something all these writers (bar Greenberg) fail to acknowledge.

The shift towards deliberative democracy and the negation of political debate is exemplified by sociologists such as Giddens who, as Mouffe writes, sees the:

the development of a new individualism, [where] democracy must become ‘dialogic’. What we need is a ‘life politics’ able to reach the various areas of personal life, creating a ‘democracy of the emotions’ (2009:14-15).

This approach has no concept of power, nor a place for the primacy of debate, as exists within the pluralist democratic tradition. Deliberative democracy and peoples’ potential engagement though this method is seen by some to go some way to address the anxieties about a disconnected society but incorporating identity politics and hearing ‘individual views’ rather than those which are ideological or collectivist ones. However even this reality is simultaneously at risk where people do not follow the perceived ‘common sense’ view. Furedi (2018) elaborates on this with his observation that the:

Disappointment with the capacity of the people to vote the right way has led to the publication of a spate of anti-populist literature that questions the value of democracy itself...[t]hat so many commentators appeared to be so selective about their commitment to democracy indicates that one of the most fundamental values of an enlightened and open society is [in] danger of losing its moral authority (2018:vi).

Mouffe, identifies an essential part of the democratic process in the pressure for agreement and 'too much emphasis on consensus' which can lead to a rejection of the whole process and create a dangerous context where 'an explosion of antagonisms that can tear up the very basis of civility' (Mouffe, 2009:104).

This push for agreement and the normative ideology of democratic participation has extended to all parts of society, for example, even the World Bank has published a *Participation Sourcebook* (Pateman, 2012:7) seeing it as a standard for development. The negation of what Mouffe calls the 'agonistic pluralism', essential to active democracies, could be traced to recent democratic upheavals where the entire legitimacy of representation has been questioned by the public. As a result, many may not see it as representing their views, and consequently resulted in the continued delegitimisation of representative democracy. Mouffe sees this as part of a broader technocratic move within the West:

Popular participation in the taking of decisions should rather be discouraged [under deliberative democracy] since it could only have dysfunctional consequences for the working of the system. Stability and order were more likely to result from compromise among interests than from mobilizing people towards an illusory consensus on the common good. As a consequence, democratic politics ... began to be envisaged from a purely instrumentalist standpoint (Mouffe, 2009:82).

There were other greater ideological ideals of an active participation in a democratic process as part of the debates in this area for most of the twentieth century, although there has often been a strong undercurrent of mistrust in the results of large-scale participation. As Pateman made clear in her original thesis '...the tendency for 'participation' to become linked to the concept of totalitarianism rather than that of democracy' (Pateman, 1978:1-2). Since the end of the Cold War, a more limited sense of democracy has emerged which some have characterised as post-democracy: technical enfranchisement but effectively disenfranchised (Crouch, 2004). In any discussion on the importance of democratising the organisation, challenges around consensus building and debate may well begin to reflect the experience within society more generally in the balance between majoritarianism and, say for example, technical expertise.

As a solution for this democratic deficit, Mouffe suggests the conscious creation of opportunities for agonism, different to antagonism which she sees as taking place between enemies with no shared 'symbolic space' (Mouffe, 2009:13), agonism takes the form of:

a relation not between enemies but between 'adversaries', adversaries being defined in a paradoxical way as 'friendly enemies', that is, persons who are friends because they share a common symbolic space but also enemies because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way (Mouffe, 2009:13).

In this way, a pluralism of opinions can be recognised, power relations acknowledged, and a constructive democratic commonality constructed.

Summary

Shaking off the idea that bureaucracy and hierarchy are both necessary and desirable ways to organise has been central to the neoliberal project of productive flexibility. With this paradigm shift underway the twin idea that democratic organisational forms inevitably collapse into degeneration or oligarchy also has the potential to be challenged in practice. The atomised nature of work, of the emergent forms of platform capitalism, of 'lovely and lousy' (Dellot, 2016) work, an increasingly educated workforce and only superficial job control (despite the rhetoric) combined with the continued lack of confidence in management and capitalism more generally creates the very definition of a new organisational reality. Beyond practical considerations and opportunities for testing new forms of workplace democracy there is broader democratic challenge around the idea that people have the agency to create something new.

Mouffe's critique of deliberative democracy (2009, 2018), and its dangers, has significant lessons for any implementation of effective participatory democracy within the organisation today. The ability for differing views to not only be heard, and discovered, but to form an essential part of the process, and the outcomes, of democracy are essential to build both collectivity and legitimacy. A consciousness of the necessity of conflicting ideas needs to be considered when looking at new organisational forms, which could deliver participatory democracy today. Reasons to not implement participatory democracy are manifest, however, as Ramsay (1977, 1983) has demonstrated, things change, contexts change, and social relations of production are specific to the moment. Understanding why degeneration takes place in worker owned firms can only assist in developing new ways to organise to avoid this fate. Pateman's assertion that people learn to 'participate by participating' (2012:10) still stands, and with participation more generally in retreat, may well be the most significant hurdle within the organisation.

Democratised work has been typologized extensively yet leaves us with only a shadow of what went before, as the working environment changes. Envisaging that which people could create, can be built on the understanding of what has worked, and perhaps more importantly, has not worked before. The narrative of anti-capitalism *within* capitalism, alongside the emphasis of the individual over the collective has muddied the paradigmatic waters, as even significant worker owned enterprises such as John Lewis and Mondragon succumb to individual pressure in the absence of collective identity. Somewhere between the 1970s and the contemporary position, industrial democracy stopped being a worker's dream and became a managerialist fantasy.

Historically, calls for workplace democracy were in periods of high employment, with organised labour able to exert influence on managers and owners of capital (Ramsay, 1977). This is not the case today, with both trade union membership and industrial action at its lowest in the last century (Office for National Statistics, 2015) with a stagnation of growth and wages. Benefits of employee ownership today are often presented as intrinsically having 'longer term thinking' (Hill, 2018) and creating a more socially responsible corporation (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010), and as an antithesis to the motivations which led to the last global economic crash (Galbraith, 2004, Kay, 2017).

This review has shown how changes to contemporary capitalism have rendered much of what has been written on previous experiences of industrial democracy redundant. The specific combination of the decoupling of wages and GDP, an absence of significant collective worker organisations, combined with an emerging narrative for alternative forms of organisation, creates a new context for a discussion of workplace democracy. Much of the prior literature, specifically relating to employee owned organisations, assumes the old conflictual context of workers vs. management and fails to account for the new, more fluid paradigms.

The emphasis on identity politics and the individual in society for example, over collectivist visions for work, has changed the narrative to one which emphasises individual, often emotional, experience (Cederström and Fleming, 2012). With worker owned firms on the increase and a political appetite for a more mixed economy, potentially this could offer a space for people to create a new perspective on democratising work, and if approached consciously, opportunities to examine the organisation afresh.

This is not to underplay the challenge of delivering 'full participation' in a form which can work for more than the smallest of ideologically committed companies, whilst at the same

time avoiding a slide into degeneration and managerialism. There are very practical challenges of structure and control, in addition to more fundamental philosophical ones of agency and our ability to change work to be more democratic. By engaging within the workplace today and with businesses grappling with the day-to-day challenges of participation, and change, it may be possible to explore some of the new opportunities for democratisation. The weight of the previous ideological logic which came with the transition to bureaucracy has not kept up with the changes underway with the move away from it.

CHAPTER 3 – PHILOSOPHICAL ORIENTATION

Introduction

As elaborated upon within the literature review, changes within political economy do not lead to a straightforward, one dimensional, reality for work, rather it is evident that production 'is simultaneously a technical and social process in which 'technical' matters are constrained and indeed defined by social relations of which they are part and parcel, and vice versa' (Ramsay, 1985: 62). In this Chapter, what it means to take a dialectical philosophical position in organisational research today will be explored. It is argued that having this perspective enables research to explore the context more effectively, including the resultant contradictions, in the social relations of production created by the interaction with the broader socio-economic context. Throughout this thesis, the challenges of using both theory *and* practice in order to surface potentiality for change, democracy and human agency are discussed, a concern that is also shared by dialectical materialism - as Marx writes in the *Theses on Feuerbach*; 'the reality or non-reality of thinking which isolates itself from practice is a purely scholastic question' (1976 [1845]: 6).

Famously Marx and Engels' concept of the dialectic is, in a fixed sense, ill defined. E.P. Thompson wrote that this was for good reason:

...it was not a method but a practice, and a practice learned by practising. So that, in this sense, dialectics can never be set down, nor learned by rote. They must be learned only by critical apprenticeship within the same practice (1995:153).

Marx underlines this too in his comment that '...as if the task were the dialectic balancing of concepts, and not the grasping of real relations!' (Marx, K. (1857) as cited Sayer, D. 1989:vi), as *real relations* change then so does their dialectical relationship. That said, if this research is to refer to its own philosophical position, then that position also needs to be defined, at least to the extent that it makes sense within its own context, not as a rigid analytical framework but as a starting point for this new analysis.

Marxism and Critical Management Studies

Much of the recent, and conventional, approaches to examining employee owned organisations limit outcomes and scope excessively and consequently offer little in the way of new perspectives. It will be argued that a Marxist dialectical approach to the examination of employee ownership should be taken as a deliberate action to force a new perspective, which will incorporate human agency and a broader democratic perspective. In recent theses, Coutinho (2016) takes a social network approach and looks at individual

well-being, Wren (2016) takes an explicitly managerialist approach and Cathcart (2009) a discourse analysis and ethnographic one. All of these theses are concerned, ultimately, with performativity or the individual well-being of employees within their businesses. It is argued, following Benson (1977), Ramsay, (1977, 1993) and Storey (1983), that:

The study of complex organizations has been guided by a succession of rational and functional theories and by positivist methodology. These efforts have proceeded on the basis of uncritical acceptance of the conceptions of organizational structure shared by participants (Benson, 1977:1).

The study of organisations often also has the challenge of balancing practice and analysis, which can result in the production of 'easy formulas and quick fixes' (Mintzberg, 2004:1). Consequently, they can suffer from a lack of criticality, a-historicism (Rowlinson et al., 2009:286) and a preponderance for managerialism with a resulting tendency for faddishness (Pascale, 1990:20).

Critical Management Studies (CMS) has emerged as an alternative within the academy since Benson wrote in the 1970s it embodies a large number of perspectives both 'of, and sometimes *against*, management' (Alvesson, et al., 2009:1) and includes areas as diverse as Critical Theory, Feminism and poststructuralism. All of the theses mentioned above include some elements of these critiques, however it could be argued that they fail to break the boundaries of managerialism.

Taking a dialectical approach attempts to address some of the limitations of these perspectives within CMS, which include there being an 'institutionalised canon of acceptably critical perspectives' (Hartmann, 2014:611) and not being 'critical enough' (Rowlinson et al., 2009:286), whilst still meeting the requirement for a critical analysis to deliver 'in a way that in the longer term will facilitate action that will enable the construction of fairer and more democratic processes, be they at... the organizational or societal level' (Hopwood, 2009:523).

CMS is a broad church which shares a number of themes with a Marxist approach, such as a 'skepticism regarding the possibility of an objective and disinterested foundation for any knowledge' (Duberley and Johnson, 2009:345) and an orientation against the 'Positivist stance of mainstream management studies' (Duberley and Johnson, 2009:345). For many branches of CMS there is an inherent conundrum of this anti-positivist stance as a result of questioning 'the epistemological credibility of its own discourse' (Duberley and Johnson, 2009:346). This 'inherent conundrum', it could be argued, is as the result of CMS not having a *specific* defined philosophy, rather it has broad tenets of 'the critical questioning of

ideologies, institutions, interests, and identities (the 4 I's) that are assessed to be (i) dominant, (ii) harmful, and (iii) under-challenged' (Alvesson et al., 2009:14).

Taking a critical approach to examining employee owned organisations is also an attempt to avoid any accusations of romanticism, or as Hill (2018) calls it Britain's 'utopian fetish' with the mutual model. This also encompasses the rejection of *purely* materialistic analysis represented by an Owenite approach, identifying access to wealth and/or societal position as intrinsic to improving society.

The study of management by some Marxists has also been guilty of significant superficiality and determinism, especially a fixation with Fordism (as exemplified by Braverman, 1974, expanded upon in Smith, 2005) and an elevation of a simplistic search for contradiction within firms and capitalism more generally. This has resulted in theories proclaiming management to *be a distinct class* (Burnham, 1945, Duménil and Lévy, 2018), in technological determinism (looking to technology as the solution to the limit to growth within capitalism) (Mason, 2016; Srnicek and Williams, 2015) and a rejection of work entirely (a good example being Graeber, 2018 although it should be noted he took an anarchist perspective as opposed to a strictly Marxist one) or limiting it significantly (Gorz, 2005).

Marxist analysis, it is also acknowledged, can be deterministic and unhelpful if it is merely used to look for Hegelian 'patterns' in history, or for simplistic expressions of class antagonism without finessing this analysis or simply looking for data to support conclusion *post hoc* (Furedi, 1990). However, these criticisms, certainly those relating to simplification or post hoc justifications, can be levelled at most methods if poorly applied. Dialectical materialism when used effectively should throw new light onto a particular abstraction, and with the combination of both theory and practice enable a fresh understanding of social relations.

Defining a Dialectical Materialist Approach

A number of management writers have identified dialectics as an effective foil to the challenges faced when examining business within academia. Storey (1983) asserts that '...a *dialectical* approach... offers the best chance at this time of understanding the dynamic nature of the control of production' (Storey, 1983:6). He defines the core of this analysis to be built around totality, social construction, contradiction and 'struggles and resistance' (Storey, 1983:7; Benson, 1977).

Rather than just assert that dialectical materialism is being used it shall now be discussed what this means from both a philosophical and practical perspective. As Ollman writes:

The dialectic, as such, explains nothing, proves nothing, predicts nothing, and causes nothing to happen. Rather, dialectics is a way of thinking that brings into focus the full range of changes and interactions that occur in the world. As part of this, it includes how to organize a reality viewed in this manner for purposes of study and how to present the results of what one finds to others (2003:12).

In order to do this, it is worth revisiting the three component parts of dialectical materialism those of German idealism (principally from Hegel), French materialist socialism and English economics - Marx saw this combination as a way to address both 'pure empiricism' and 'pure idealism' (Cohen 1996). Cohen describes how Marx's use of the Hegelian dialectic was to invert it 'the content is now materialist, since history is not, as in Hegel, the history of the world-spirit manifesting itself in human consciousness, but of human industry' (1996:3-4).

The change Marx effected in making materialism central to human progress and not ideas was not to remove consciousness from progress, but to situate the consciousness of mankind in its specific historical social relations; '...both the contemplating man, himself and the world contemplated were products of history' (Ilyenkov, 1977:283). This development in understanding through the analysis of capitalism, its inherent contradictions and dynamic nature, were rooted in 'the historically specific character of labor in capitalism' (Postone, 2003:88) and in doing so 'Marx both grounds the possibility of his critique in a self-reflexive, epistemologically consistent manner, and breaks with all notions of the intrinsic developmental logic of human history as a whole' (Postone, 2003:88).

Rather than see human history as inevitably one of progress and a linear development of human thought Marx was able to identify that:

The consciousness that emerges from the confrontation between human thought and social reality can potentially become an element in the transformation of that reality. Marxist theory is a means of endowing action with consciousness, which can then contribute to the development of a subjective factor capable of making history (Furedi, 1990:xxii).

Marx's most well-known phrases encapsulates '[p]hilosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it' (Marx, 1976:8 [1845]), an appreciation of which is supported by the choice of research methodology. Having placed the subject as central in making history, it is illuminating to extend this in examining the

nature of a dialectical critique of social reality. John Rees (1998) writes that the dialectical critique:

involves, first and foremost, three principles: totality, change, and contradiction. Taken separately these principles *do not* constitute a dialectical approach. Only when they are taken together do they become dialectical (Rees, 1998:5).

Totality represents the interconnectedness of any object within society and in order to analyse this it 'is necessary to examine all of its relations, connections and meditations to others' (Furedi, 1990:xi). It is this understanding of totality which is able to then appreciate the dynamism within society as opposed to a 'static definitional approach' (Furedi, 1990:xi) evident within much of social science. I will return to the concept of changing social relations of production often throughout the thesis, so feel it is worth quoting Marx at some length on both the *dynamism* and *totality* of these relations in order to clarify what is meant by the use of this phrase:

We have seen how the capitalist process of production is a historically specific form of the social production process in general. This last is both a production process of the material conditions for human life, and a process, proceeding in specific economic and historical relations of production, that produces and reproduces these relations of production themselves, and with them the bearers of this process, their material conditions of existence, and their mutual relationships, i.e. the specific economic form of their society. For the totality of these relationships which the bearers of this production have towards nature and one another, the relationships in which they produce, is precisely society, viewed according to its economic structure (Marx, 1991:957 [1894]).

The fundamental interrelationship of society and production and reproduction of those relationships, in the *specific* production context, as well as within society more generally, are the very relationships this research is looking to examine.

As Berman writes the 'intense and relentless pressure to revolutionize production is bound to spill over and transform what Marx calls 'conditions of production... and, with them, all social conditions and relationships' (1999:106). This understanding makes starting an analysis with 'the whole' crucial. The changing nature of ownership, the shifts in capitalism to more flexible production and subsequently of working lives leads inevitably to changes in social relations of production, which creates contradictions and opportunities for change.

In addition to totality, crucial to understanding the nature of capitalism and human development is 'change' and in 'addition we have to provide some general indication of *how* such change originates' (Rees, 1998:7). This change is not a simple cause and effect

relationship; rather, if 'change is internally generated, it must be as a result of contradiction, of instability and development as inherent properties of the system itself' (Rees, 1998:7).

Zelený (1980) writes that Marx was keen to express 'the capitalist mode of production as a self-developing, self-generating and self-destroying structure' (Zelený, 1980:9). This inherent self-destructiveness was borne of many contradictions including the:

separation [...] between the means of production concentrated in the hands of the capitalists, on the one side, and the producers, possessing nothing but their labour-power, on the other. *The contradiction between socialised production and capitalistic appropriation manifested itself as the antagonism of proletariat and bourgeoisie* (Engels, 1987:258-9 [1894]).

This also creates alienation which can be seen as 'fundamental to the Marxist dialectic because it involves an account of how a subject arises that is able to resolve consciously the contradiction thrown up by social development' (Rees, 1998:10). Insisting upon a critique in which totality, change *and* contradiction are all examined therefore avoids a superficial analysis as:

it is an internally contradictory totality in a constant process of change. The principle of contradiction is a barrier to reductionism, where linear notions of causality are not, because two elements that are in contradiction cannot be dissolved into one another but only overcome by the creation of a synthesis that is not reducible to either of its constituent elements (Rees, 1998:7).

Marx's development of dialectics was a transformation of Hegel's ideas, who identified inherent contradictions in all human development. For Hegel the contradiction could be resolved (the negation of the negation in his terminology) through a purely metaphysical understanding of these contradictions. For example, Hegel saw self-knowledge and consciousness as enabling this negation and creating progress in human history (Cohen, 1996:2). Hegel writes that within history '...we find the great collisions between, on the one hand, the system of established and recognised duties laws and rights, and, on the other, the possibilities which stand opposed to the system' (Hegel, 1988:32 [1840]).

Marx disagreed that purely metaphysical ideas (or world-spirit) transformed human history, rather than they were 'real material forces' (Cohen, 1996:3). As a result of this change, in the shift from world-spirit to a materialist view, 'the central growth is not, now in self-awareness, but in productive power, in sovereignty over nature rather than over the self; the unit of development is not, now, a culture, but an economic structure' (Cohen,

1996:4). This shift also gave agency to people so that they can change their own circumstances, and history is no longer perceived as a series of random events.

The idea of change combined with historical specificity also places any investigation and engagement with the world in a context of transition were it:

...it helps us see the present as a moment through which our society is passing, because it forces us to examine where it has come from and where it is heading as part of learning what it is, and because it enables us to grasp that as agents as well as victims in this process, in which everyone and everything are connected, we have the power to affect it (Ollman, 2003:20).

In this sense, knowledge of society is 'is not given but is appropriated through practice' (Furedi, 1990:xxiii) and contains the inherent 'power to affect it' of which Ollman writes.

Contradictions within capitalism are as seen as inherently limiting, but also provide the very possibility for radical change (Benson, 1977:4). Despite the dynamism which capitalism requires it 'cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society' (Marx and Engels, 1976:487). This requirement for reinvention and dynamism is also often recognised by non-Marxist thinkers, for example Schumpeter (Mullan, 2017:155).

Contradictions within dialectical thought are not regarded as a 'logical contradiction' i.e., they do not undermine the thing being examined, rather they are understood to be an essential part of it:

In *Capital* these antinomies were not done away with at all as something subjective, but prove to be understood, i.e. have been *sublated* in the body of a deeper and more concrete theoretical conception. In other words, they are *preserved* but have lost the character of logical contradictions, having been converted into abstract moments of the concrete conception of economic reality (Ilyenkov, 1977:330).

Since the nineteenth century, when Marx and Engels were writing, capitalism has changed a great deal. Some, such as Marcuse, have argued that these changes have led social relations to become more dominant as a form of control. Writing in the 1960s, he asserted that capitalism's 'Mass production and mass distribution claim the *entire* individual, and industrial psychology has long ceased to be confined to the factory' (Marcuse, 2012:12 [1964]). Many others, such as Deleuze (1992), have written on the social factory since. Mattick writes, '[n]ot only has capitalism undergone extensive modifications through its own development, which have found their reflections in bourgeois economic theory; Marxism, too, has altered its character in the course of the shifting fortunes of capitalist

society' (Mattick, 1983:5). Naturally elements of Marx's analysis have been differently emphasised by different Marxists for their own times and circumstances.

Žižek (2012) locates the challenge with the use of the dialectic in a more fundamental sense, asserting that in historical specificity, contradiction and totality can lead to 'fetishizing abstraction' (Žižek, 2012:398). For Žižek the danger is that in the attempt to avoid the abstractions of capitalism a new set are created:

when we observe a thing, we see *too much* in it, we fall under the spell of the wealth of empirical detail which prevents us from clearly perceiving the notional determination which forms the core of the thing. The problem is thus not how to grasp the wealth of determinations, but precisely how to abstract from them, how to restrict our gaze and learn to grasp only the notional determination (Žižek, 2012:398).

Capitalism, Engels argued back in 1892, had already moved to a point where salaried employees and managers actually carried out the 'functions of the capitalist' and that the owners were extraneous to the process. Irrespective of this, 'the transformation...does not do away with the capitalistic nature of the productive forces' (Engels, 1995:66 [1892]). This system logic, Žižek asserts, has enabled the abstraction of capital to a much greater degree that the 'ideal capitalist today functions in a wholly different way: investing borrowed money, "really owning" nothing, maybe even indebted but nonetheless still controlling things' (Žižek, 2012:252).

Benson (1977) argues that the dominant models within current approaches to examining organisations 'rely on abstraction' (Benson, 1977:10) and that the outcome from this particular theoretical approach reinforces a 'conventional administrative view and function as ideology justifying, rationalizing administrative actions as well as a normative model or goal of administrative actions' (Benson, 1977:10).

For a discussion on ownership and worker control, these layers of abstraction could create an obfuscating picture for both workers and management if they are truly able to grasp how to change things. For management, this can result in ideas become overly functional and managerialist - Storey (1983) points out that:

Managerial stress and anxiety may paradoxically be increased by the 'success' of its own ideology. The inviolability of the managerial rights paradigm and the glossy corporate histories tend to be blind to the occurrence of past resistance...In consequence, each generation of managers is made to feel peculiarly responsible for the 'deteriorating' situation (1983:95).

A managerialist methodology can result in making it unclear why a simple cause-and-effect action does not work in management. Dialectics can help us uncover the various intrinsic contradictions which exist within any of these systems and expose the processes which lie underneath. As Zelený writes 'Marx recognizes nothing *a priori*, no logic external to the object' that it is not about 'attempts to abstract from *Capital* a 'dialectical' methodology applicable to all objects...' (Zelený, 1980:114), the essence of dialectics is to grasp that it is a set of:

processes, in which the apparently stable things, no less than their mental images in our heads, the concepts, go through an uninterrupted change of coming into being and passing away, in which, for all apparent accidentality and despite all temporary retrogression, a progressive development asserts itself in the end — this great fundamental thought has, especially since the time of Hegel, so thoroughly permeated ordinary consciousness that in this generality it is now scarcely ever contradicted (Engels, 1990:384 [1886]).

Benson (1977) in his paper *Organisations: A Dialectical View* places as core to any analysis the 'process through which organizational arrangements are produced and maintained' (Benson, 1977:1) in this, the analysis is also committed to progress and change. He writes that 'social arrangements which seem fixed and permanent are temporary, arbitrary patterns and any observed social pattern are regarded as one among many possibilities' (Benson, 1977:3). This embeddedness of both the concept of changing social relations and change more generally, within Marx's dialectic, as discussed has, inherent to it, a potentiality of change in the future. This inherent opportunity for change can be seen as diametrically opposed to a contemporary disillusionment with enlightenment values and democracy. The hope would be that the position of human agency in this approach would necessitate outcomes which refuse to be reductivist, in that it has no less a desired objective than that of enabling people to enact changes to their own circumstances.

Dialectics and Agency

Many Marxists have written on worker control within capitalism. These writers tend to recognise that such examples of control exist within capitalism and can result in a level of control *within* the organisation. However, inevitably this cannot extend to the rest of society without a more extensive change. Given that central to the understanding of dialectics is that people have agency and can change history and their circumstances, many see this as a crucial understanding from any experience of control. Mattick quotes Rosa Luxemburg '...it is only through the experiences of self-determination, in whatever limited ways at first, that the working class will be enabled to develop towards its own

emancipation' (Mattick, 1978:230). Cleaver (1992) writes how this experience is essential, and juxtapositioned with negative experience of resistance, 'the power of creative affirmation, the power to constitute new practices' (Cleaver, 1992:129).

As already discussed, the collective concept of the worker and the collectivity of the working class is contested territory, with a more atomised and individual experience of work more common. Yet a broader and more general position could be taken that in a time of anxiety, and apparent lack of belief in human agency, that employee control of work could be formative. Gorz (1970:31) asserts that in 'the very process of struggling, having learned to submit the process of production to their control, to their own needs and their own goals, unless they have experienced the capability of self-determination in self-organization', then there can be no conception of a new way to organise human labour.

David Harvey (1996) sees, within the current stage of capitalism, an emphasis on flexibility and on employees being able to make 'swift, decisive, and well-informed decision-making' for themselves (Harvey, 1996:157). Organisations which are able to have access to 'information and the ability to make swift decisions in a highly uncertain, ephemeral, and competitive environment become crucial to profits, the well-organized corporation has marked competitive advantages over small business' (Harvey, 1996:158). This change has been accompanied by the rhetoric of control for employees both at the more technical end of work, of an 'uberised economy' and for more 'white collar' workers. Some have seen this tendency as one with an inherent contradiction which opens a potential for meaningful control, an early example being Piore and Sabel (1984) who saw the end of the Fordist production model leading to a new division of labour and 'flexible specialisation' at the company level which requires more co-operation in delivering innovation.

Social relations change - Engels saw management in large scale production as unavoidable although Marx was less certain (Marx, 1990:449n [1867]), their views representing both the experience of their time and the contradictions within work to control, coordinate and have personal power over what we do. They also saw the inherently productive power of social labour as requiring that workers had to be (physically) together (Marx, 1990:447 [1867]), of course technology today means this is no longer the case for many workers. Žižek writes of the challenge to break free from the logic of capitalist production this 'is why Hegel was right to insist that the owl of Minerva takes flight only at dusk; and also why the twentieth-century communist project was utopian precisely insofar as it was not radical enough – that is, insofar as the fundamental capitalist thrust of unleashed productivity

survived in it, deprived of its concrete contradictory conditions of existence' (Žižek, 2012:257). The relations of production remained, with state ownership attempting to remove the contradictions which existed within capitalism.

Hope and change for the better

Ernst Bloch wrote that Marxism had within it both 'cold and a warm streams', the former representing the analytical, dialectical nature of analysis, this works to as a 'process of unmasking and disenchantment' (Levitas, 1997:73). The 'warm stream' is as important and represents 'the 'liberating intention' of Marxism, 'towards whose goal all these disenchantments are undertaken' (Levitas, 1997:73). In this conception Bloch attempted to capture a 'praxis-oriented category characterized by "militant optimism"' (Levitas, 1997:71). Žižek and Thompson (2013) considering Bloch's idea of Concrete Utopia, of creating a better future based on what people know of the present, of an 'educated hope', call on a greater engagement of philosophy with the changing work context. They write that:

...the Blochian idea that it is in our dreams that the hope for a better world shines forth. The desire/hope for a better world for all arises from the dissatisfaction with existence as well the uncertainties in individual lives... It is quite possible that this may result in kitschy (sentimental) dreams that aspire to and are intended to pander to an entirely personal happiness and that can be readily realized through adjustment to the 'given' (Žižek and Thompson 2013:297).

They assert that it is 'clear that only the democratized empowerment of work processes can lead to improvements that we dream of, that are developed and shared in the workplace, and that serve as a basis for the promotion of active participation of those involved' (Žižek and Thompson 2013:297). Even if our objectives can be toned down from the delivery of a 'better world', in the short term at least, the introduction of hope and agency is an important part of the praxis of dialectics and its necessary activity, this liberatory perspective in itself can be seen as 'introduc[ing] cracks, contradictions, something indelible' (2013:298).

This hope for a something else, something better can be seen reflected in the experience of unsatisfactory work, in the idea of something different and better. Geissler (2018) writes about her experience working as a 'seasonal associate' in an Amazon fulfilment centre in Germany. She sees the role as providing 'everything a person can find out about the working world in its most common form' (2018:112-3) its hard work and unrelenting it is

'about sheer endurance, about presence, about translating your time and energy into money' (2018:101). The work is all consuming:

But something inside you believes unshakably that a huge pile of money will one day come to you, far exceeding any demand for unconditional basic income and with no connection to any work you might have to perform. Something inside you dreams ready-made dreams; you'll have to take a look at that soon and read about it in Bloch, for example. We can do that later (Geissler, 2018:46).

Geissler's dreams of 'huge piles of money' is a dream of escape from a horrible job, it is abstract and offers no real escape. As Levitas writes, the progression from our daydreams of this type of escape, is human activity, where 'abstract utopia my express desire, only concrete utopia carries hope' (1997:67). Bloch refers to this as *docta spes* or 'educated hope'; for this to come about it requires:

knowledge and removal of the finished *utopistic element*, ... knowledge and removal of *abstract utopia*. But what then remains: the unfinished forward dream, the *docta spes* which can only be discredited by the bourgeoisie, - this seriously deserves the name utopia in carefully considered and carefully applied contrast to utopianism: in its brevity and new clarity, this expression then means the same as: *a methodological organ for the New, an objective aggregate form of what is coming up* [I: 157] (Bloch cited Levitas, 1997:71).

I would argue that placing a belief in human agency as central to positive change is essential and this requires a level of hope. In the almost photographic negative representation of the present which Žižek and Thompson present they see 'the very absence of any light in the hollowed-out spaces of modernity which provide hope in the form of the negation of negativity' (2013:14) in our context it is the engagement with change which can become the negation of the negation, to rediscover agency.

Marxist C.L.R. James also saw within dialectics the opportunity which the combination of theoretical analysis and engagement offers when combined. The situating of peoples experiences within a broader understanding of social relations, combined with 'seeing the world in terms of contradictions that cannot, or should not, sustain themselves' (Douglas, 2008:421). The dialectical way of thinking for James was also an essentially democratic one which would help overcome a disconnection, and disillusionment with the idea of democracy (Douglas, 2008:438). James's understanding of dialectics was then one of recapturing participatory democracy and for rejuvenating the 'democratic imagination' (Douglas, 2008:440). It is this 'democratic imagination' that this research is also looking to capture with its use of dialectics combined with participatory research methods.

Summary

A study of employee owned businesses and workplace democracy can legitimately be about how the abstractions of ownership structures affect individual workers, whether work is more rewarding and what sense of personal ownership people have. Businesses such as these can be investigated using standard empirical data sets and qualitative interviews. What is argued here, however, is that these approaches are inherently reductivist in that they are unlikely to distil underlying contradictions within such organisations and are to uncover new relations of production. Dialectical materialism offers an alternative which forces a critique which includes its totality, its contradictions and, both, opportunities for change, and the placing of the current changes within capitalism at their specific moment in time. Underpinned by a conviction that people have the agency to change things for the better; 'the genuine future involves risk, because we are not certain what lies out there beyond us' (Zipes, 1997:11). Inherently participative, this philosophical orientation places peoples' experiences, and engagement with their practice of work, at the centre of the research. This is done without ignoring the importance of the interpretation of the broader theoretical context within which it can be understood, and in this way, it is dialogical between action and reflection.

In order to retain the potential for a development of 'democratic imagination' the following Chapter explores the methodology and methods chosen to compliment the philosophical underpinning of the research. This is necessarily participative, democratic and focused on change through both thought and action.

CHAPTER 4 - METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This research combines Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) with Burawoy's (1998) Extended Case Method, under an umbrella description of a Workers' Inquiry. The combination of these approaches is designed to be democratic in its use of participative research but also has an orientation which explicitly wishes to extend theory; in order to share the outcomes in the workplace, the academy, and with other democratic projects (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 2008:9). The ground-up change and the intended outcome of democratisation within the firm distinguish the study from being purely one of research in the workplace from one which seeks to transform it. The role of dialectics in this research will be discussed within this Chapter, in addition to the hopefully fruitful, dynamic between CPAR and the Extended Case Method.

CPAR is, by definition, collaborative and it would be antithetical to lay down strict rules as to how the research will work prior to starting (Heron 2010:120-121). CPAR is also designed to be fluid and iterative, the aim of this Chapter, therefore, is to define some of the broad methodological themes and to anticipate some of the potential challenges in implementation, as a result some of the methodological detail can be found in the following Chapter which exposes the CPAR process as defined by the participants. This Chapter will also outline the role of the Workers' Inquiry as an extension of CPAR in order to benefit from the philosophical underpinning of this study. The Chapter will additionally consider ethical challenges implicit in my own role within company BookCo and how CPAR might be used to help to mitigate some of these issues. It concludes by defining some of the cycles likely to be taken and how output will be judged.

Dialectical challenges & Workers' Inquiry

The potential inherent in a dialectical approach has not necessarily been realised within its application, for example Cohen (1987) writes that Storey (1983) correctly identified the inability of many critical engagements with the workplace to develop a broader theoretical impact. Critiquing the use of the labour process theory Cohen finds it:

...lacks the theoretical foundations necessary to unite 'structure' and 'agency' and thus by now amounts to not much more than, in Storey's words, 'the accumulation of empirical studies which reveal the immense variety of labour processes but seem incapable of generating any theoretical generalizations' (1987:41)

The solution to this, Storey writes, is a dialectical approach to organisational analysis (1983:7). However, Cohen takes the view that although this is a 'constructive development' in reality its focus is still too narrow where the; 'dialectic' here is simply the interaction between 'control' and 'resistance' (1987:41). This narrow antagonistic view is reflected within much of the recent research utilising Workers' Inquiry; this will be examined next.

The decision to label the methodological combination utilised within this research study as a Workers' Inquiry is for both epistemological and political reasons. Those utilising Workers' Inquiry trace its origins back to Marx, who wrote in 1880:

We hope to meet in this work [of inquiry] with the support of all workers in town and country who understand that they alone can describe with full knowledge the misfortunes from which they suffer, and that only they, and not saviours sent by Providence, can energetically apply the healing remedies from the social ills to which they are a prey (Marx, 1880).

The form of Marx's own inquiry, a questionnaire, being less important than the situating of research within the worker experience. However, it can hardly be said that Marx relied on this for his own analysis to capitalism. Workers' Inquiry has taken a number of forms in its rediscovery as a method of engagement with the working class in the Twentieth and Twenty First Centuries. Principally this has been through the activity of groups such as *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in France, the Johnson-Forest Tendency in the US (Haider and Mohandesi, 2013) and 'autonomist' groups in Italy, in the 1960s and 70s where 'Proletarian experience' was put front and centre of their theoretical development of Marxism (Wright, 2017:29-58; Hastings-King, 2015; Tronti, 2012). As Wellbrook writes:

[Workers' Inquiry] remains appealing because, in spite of the many efforts to democratise and make research more participatory on the part of radical researchers, an essential 'structural separateness' between academia and workers remains (Wellbrook, 2014:361).

Placing the participant's experience at the centre of the research, and looking to collaboratively explore solutions, was a way to bring a voice to working class experience. In some instances, this surfacing of 'voice', if it is that alone, could attract the criticism that it culminated in narration rather than transformation: 'what does this really offer participants, even in the most activist oriented models of research inquiry, other than an alternative narration of the largely fixed circumstances that they continue to find themselves in?' (Wellbrook, 2014:366).

The concept of Workers' Inquiry has been most recently resurrected as a political route to 'discover' the 'class composition' of workers through their experience of work. Different

projects have necessarily had different foci – a recent application explored the idea that party politics were ahead of the ‘shop floor’ and looked to a recomposition around those politics (Cant, 2020:179), whereas other theorists have attempted to record experience in order to try to create a shared understanding of what the lived experience is of a worker today (Woodcock, 2017, Holland, 2020, Ovetz, 2021). The overriding theme however, is one of sharing worker experience to build solidarity and resistance:

Why workers’ inquiry?...The aim is to share stories, strategies, and tactics, in order to start building networks based on our collective experiences of work and the struggles against them (Notes from Below, 2020:3-4).

They do not tend to be explicitly collaborative, nor focused upon specific objectives of change, more that they are explicitly *workerist* in expecting there to be an emergence of autonomous action or ‘self-activity’:

...the workers’ inquiry is a method for workers to understand their own power, self-organize, and act autonomously against the rationalization of work with the aim of reducing exploitation or achieving their liberation from it (Ovetz, 2021:11).

Mario Tronti (2019:70-1; 2012), as one of the key theorists of operaismo (workerism) has been influential on the development of the idea of worker inquiry. Operaismo is primarily built upon the concept that capitalism’s development is built on class struggle and not forces of production (Söderberg and Netzén, 2010:99). There are various streams of Marxism which have been influenced by this interpretation, including Autonomist Marxism which has a ‘rejection of structuralist explanations and in their polemic against the allegedly reified categories used by mainstream and Marxist sociology’ (Söderberg and Netzén, 2010:110). This research takes a more traditional Marxist position, as outlined in the philosophical orientation in Chapter Three. It sees value in the historicist tradition, with an empirical approach where the experiences and actions of those in the research are influenced and productively contextualised by the changes in capitalism more generally.

This approach of many of the recent applications of Worker Inquiry can be seen to have been limited by this lack of contextualisation and subsequent structuralist critique. This can result in finding a workplace context which is often frustrating to those undertaking the research. It has not delivered the ‘self-activity’ that the researchers have been looking for, an example of this can be seen in the work of the German Kolinko group which :

...faced a difficult quandary in conducting their inquiry: absent any observed forms of struggle should they organize such struggles and then use the inquiry to inform them? Frustrated at the lack of existing worker cooperation, Kolinko ultimately decided to end their workers’ inquiry and document it in *Hotlines* rather than

organize the struggle themselves. Reflecting on the difficulty of inquiring into something that doesn't exist they asked, "What is the point in leaflets and other kinds of intervention at all if there is no workers' self-activity to refer to?" (Ovetz, 2021:17).

Similarly, Woodcock (2017) in his call centre inquiry found that 'attempts to build organisation would have been pointless if the other workers were not interested or prepared to be involved' (2017:152). As written previously, research approaches which take either a labour process theory or, as seen here, a class composition approach tend towards a narrower investigation of conflict and not of the broader theoretical context. Workers are often more focussed on the extrinsic work experience, for example, pay, job security and the nature of work. As a result, these investigations and people's 'concern with immediate problems in earning a living has, indeed, been so consistent as to earn many a shake of the head over their lack of more 'political' consciousness' (Cohen, 1987:43).

There of course *are* naturally arising conflicts within capitalism all the time, especially around the most exploitative and intensive work. The 'gig economy' has been at the forefront of some of these challenges where there has been a rising militancy and challenges to conditions; ones which capitalism has also sought to regulate. Whether these will continue once basic economic demands are met is yet to be seen. As Wright (2017) writes:

At its worst, *operaismo* [workerism] would substitute its own philosophy of history for that of Marx's epigones, abandoning the confrontation with working-class experience in all its contradictory reality to extol instead a mythical Class in its Autonomy (2017:4).

Arguably, this can lead to a fatalistic position which looks to encourage 'self-activity' whilst waiting for struggles to break out. Merely supporting and sharing industrial disputes has the danger of leaving the politics at the door. Workers inevitably come into conflict with capitalism and the 'self-activity' is seen as a response – avoidance, refusal, strikes etc. that tends to an economic perspective; i.e., on improving the material conditions of work. This can, of course, be positive; however, it can find a natural limit on its *political dimension* without an additional catalyst as it fails to challenge the situation people find themselves in and it can limit what people believe they can change.

The most recent history of Workers' Inquiry has seen all conflict in the workplace to be endemic between 'workers and bosses' (Cant, 2020:13,41-43, Monaco, 2015:224); however, I will demonstrate that this is too narrow a perspective and, after Burawoy's

extension of industrial sociology, that the Workers' Inquiry should also expose that 'activities on the shop floor cannot be understood outside of the political and ideological realms of the organization of production' (Burawoy, 1982a:4).

Once the basic economic needs of workers have been met, then the impetus and context for understanding the workplace becomes more of a complex interplay, as one worker recounts from a UK Amazon warehouse:

Higher pay really should be an obvious thing to organise for, although I don't hear many workers actually complaining about that, we're still all paid slightly above the living wage and many people's expectations are low enough to consider that acceptable. The biggest thing people are unhappy with is the complete lack of control they have to decide anything in their workplace – the excessive surveillance, arbitrary rules, aggressive management methods, and so on. Aiming to get management off our backs and just make this a more pleasant place to work would probably be more galvanising (Holland, 2020:21-22).

Today, when class and working experience are even more atomised, Wellbrook asserts that 'a largely dislocated sense of working class identity bring[s] into question the representativeness of any particular worker voice' (Wellbrook, 2014:365), even though these many voices are more easily accessed than they were in the past. Hudson et al., (1996:9) identified that the end of trade unions and a reduced identification with class has resulted in a 'disaggregated mass', and furthermore that 'changes in the way that work is organised ... lead to changes in the way that work is experienced' (Hudson et al., 1996:9-10).

Excellent individual worker narratives are more available than they were, see for example Geissler (2014). Wellbrook correctly concludes that what workers lack 'is not necessarily an understanding of their own situation but a confidence and the support to challenge their circumstances' (2014:370). In order to challenge these circumstances, the core of the Workers' Inquiry can be applied *from within the organisation* utilising a participatory research methodology in order to affect change on their own terms. This is the point where the line between *research* and *action* becomes blurred. Cohen asks a question of the limitation implicit in many traditional critical research approaches:

if workers concentrate their resistance on immediate issues of subsistence and labour intensification, what implications does this have for any long-term development of conflict at work towards a fully political struggle for workers' ownership and power? (1987:45).

The potentiality of the democratic praxis of the Workers' Inquiry is here situated in a position where it could rediscover agency in Marxist research and actively assist in

challenging the 'largely fixed circumstances' (Wellbrook, 2014:366) which people find themselves in. It can also avoid the dichotomy which Burawoy exposes:

I am not... going to restore the working class to its messianic role, but nor do I intend to abandon it to the vicissitudes of some putative logic of history. I am not going to replace one metaphysical imputation (the working class as saviour of humanity) with its opposite (the working class as incapable of shaping its own destiny) (1985:7).

The application of Workers' Inquiry within this study is explicitly one of praxis, of a deliberate intervention to change something which may not change otherwise. Without the Workers' Inquiry at BookCo there may be a legal change in ownership in name only, with no significant intervention from the new worker owners. It is also an intervention intended to not only share experience but rather engender collective action and change – and for that change be one defined by the group and the wider workplace - 'Political ideas, ideas of transformation, do not descend from above, but arise through struggle, through praxis' (Cohen, 1987:50).

Rather than place the Workers' Inquiry primarily within the operaismo tradition, I would propose it as a fruitful method to extend industrial sociology, structuralist critiques and to engender legitimisation through collaboration. This would orient specifically away from ethnography, as per the critique by Söderberg and Netzén (2010), to adapt it to be a conscious democratisation of research in the workplace. This study utilises the concept of Workers' Inquiry but not in the manner described by the workerists rather as route to placing democracy at the front and centre of the project, in common with Freire (1996) and the ideas of both Fals-Borda and Rahman (2008).

Worker Inquiry and the Business School

It can be argued that Worker Inquiry also presents a powerful challenge to Critical Management scholars. Tourish (2019:141) is concerned about the Business School's drift into iterative and abstract theory, which he claims is of little use to businesses:

One study has concluded that no more than 9 per cent of the theoretical presentations published in Academy of Management Review articles are ever tested. Actually testing theories has come to be seen as an eccentric hobby pursued by the maladjusted.

Both Tourish and Parker (2018) are in agreement that Critical Management Studies (CMS) has become too used to 'comfortable carpets' (Parker, 2018:16) and well rewarded positions. For Tourish the failures of CMS to engage is the lack of engagement with society he sees in the Business School *writ large* as '...CMS has retreated into the comforts of faux

theorising ... what is mostly absent is any compelling account of the world in which we live, and *some serious suggestions of that we can do about it*' (2019:246). For Parker (2018:16) it is that 'dissent has become so thoroughly institutionalized' as to become unremarkable and unchallenging.

The Business School, and business research, is also to be placed within its historical and social context. Schools' role as income generators for an expanded and possibly overextended HE sector is somewhat inevitable. As a business unit '...funders are increasingly looking for a real return on their research dollars, euros and pounds' writes Green (2019), formally Head of Publishing and Impact Measurement at OECD, cautioning academics to produce research with impact and get it in front of those who matter, his examples being people of 'influence and power', not a mass audience.

Even the Editors of the *Academy of Management Journal* made a recent call for:

scholars to take advantage of the breadth and variety of approaches to qualitative research. In 2011, Bansal and Corley lamented that qualitative research was norming around a single approach – often, case-based positivist research with systematically coded data – and called for methodological diversity (The Editors, 2018:1189)

They, and Tourish, point to the obsession within the Business School for positivist approaches to research. Peters and Thomas (2020) cite Thomas and Wilson (2011) where they 'describe management educators as having 'physics envy,'" and ask why 'business schools have embraced the scientific model of physicist and economists rather than the professional model of doctors and lawyers' (Peters and Thomas, 2020). Peters and Thomas conclude their response to the criticisms levelled by Tournish by repeating the recommendations made by BizEd (from the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business) in a recent paper on the *Essence of Scholarly Impact* (2018) that Business School academics need to:

- Engage more deeply with practitioners to attack meaningful problems faced 'on the firing line.'
 - Create broader definitions of impact beyond simple counts of A-journals and citations.
 - Place much greater weight on publications in practitioner journals.
- Invest in incentives to improve impact through the translation of research for practitioners and responsible research audiences (Peters and Thomas, 2020).

The abstraction of research more generally is not unique to the Business School (nor indeed a particularly modern challenge), however it is one where a debate would be useful. Burawoy levelled a similar challenge at sociologists, calling for a *public sociology* (Burawoy, 2007:23-64):

This categorization of sociological labor redefines the way we regard ourselves. I'm engaging in what Pierre Bourdieu ... would call a classification struggle, displacing debates about quantitative and qualitative techniques, positivist and interpretive methodologies, micro- and macrosociology by centering two questions: for whom and for what do we pursue sociology? (Burawoy, 2007:34).

Perhaps the same question should be asked of the Business School, especially given how central work is to our lives. For critical management researchers, myself included, the narrower question of one's own intellectual relevance and praxis is an ongoing reflexive challenge. As Brook and Darlington write on CPAR, given the 'orientation on participation, active agents and social change, it is surprising that action research has had modest take-up in industrial relations and sociology of work' (Brook and Darlington, 2013:238).

Contemplating my own position, working and engaging with others and transcending my own personal experience to one of collaboration, has been essential in challenging my own ideas and developing reflexivity, in addition to the objective of being able to clearly explain my thinking in non-academic language. Freire writing on the centrality of praxis to education expresses well the benefits of Participatory Action Research for the democratic researcher:

Functionally, oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force, one must engage with it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it (1996:3).

Combining Workers' Inquiry, and its emphasis on human agency, with Critical Participatory Action Research, potentially offers an amplification of the key perspective on both, towards 'a commitment to bring together broad social analysis, the self-reflective collective study of practice, and transformational action to improve things' (Kemmis et al., 2014:12). This may be particularly the case when it comes to an appreciation of participants' practice as situated in their particular historical, economic and social circumstance, in that 'participatory action researchers become alert to clues about how it may become possible to *transform* the practices they are producing and reproducing through their current ways of working' (Kemmis et al., 2014:21).

Both Workers' Inquiry and CPAR share the imperative of Marx's famous dictum that; '...philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to

change it' (Marx and Engels, 1968:667 [1845-6]). Lake and Wendland write that: 'the goal to *change* the world, not simply to *study* it... participatory action research is characterized by many practitioners as a reaction to – and rejection of – traditional, hierarchical Western models of the academy' (Lake and Wendland, 2018:18).

The importance of a group orientation, rather than solely working with individuals has been underlined by Lewin (1997:99 [1944]), one of the earliest founders of participatory action research, and the Institute for Workers' Control (1977). Gorz (1970) also emphasises group interaction when he writes of:

Goldthorpe [a sociologist researching the Vauxhall car plant] made a major mistake: he interviewed each worker separately and found each worker to be individually *resigned to*, if not *reconciled with*, his condition. And then he concluded that all these thousands of individual resignations made for a collective apathy...as they [the workers] discussed things, they found they all felt alike (1970:21).

Most importantly, in this context Critical Participatory Action Research 'creates forums in which rationality and democracy, can be pursued together, without an artificial separation ultimately hostile to both' (Kemmis et al., 2014:20).

The crucial interaction between theory and action, it could be argued, is also central to the position of effective critique itself. As Butler argues critique 'is always a critique of some instituted practice, discourse, episteme, institution, and it loses its character the moment in which it is abstracted from its operation and made to stand alone as a purely generalizable practice' (Butler, 2002:212). It is this 'generalizable practice' which could be seen as neutralising the critiques of much of CMS within the Business School. Böhm et al., (2001) highlight the stultifying use of organisation as an edifice within business for 'the corporation, the business enterprise' (Böhm et al., 2001:6). Rather, they argue, 'it is not just the noun, monument... but a verb, process, fluid and smooth plane' (Böhm et al., 2001:6). It is the *verb* organisation which sits at the heart of this research.

I believe that democratisation of work has a great potential. As Martin Hägglund writes: 'democratic ownership is decisive for the actual possibility of a society that would privilege meaningful work in free association with others' (Hägglund, 2019:280), it is the potentiality of this experience which I wish to further. Where this experience may then enable 'the cautious 'realism' of the workers turns into unrealism, and reformism into utopianism' (Mattick, 1983:304).

Critical Participatory Action Research

The objective of this research, in addition to addressing the questions posed, is to make a difference to the way in which people experience their working lives. This difference constitutes addressing both the absence of agency in the workplace where many feel a lack of control and greater stress (Dellot, 2016:25) despite greater 'job level decision making' (Masquelier 2017; Abílio, 2017), in addition to the stagnation of wages which has resulted in greater economic inequality (IPPR, 2018:71).

This research is partial in that I believe that changes to the architectures of participation within organisations can enable a sustainable democratisation of work, based upon a conscious engagement of those involved. Consequently, a sympathetic research methodology needs to both be able to contribute to the structure and form of the research but also help enable change, in addition to cleaving to the subject matter under investigation. To collaborate with people on democracy should be a democratic exercise in and of itself if it is to be both ethical and true to its subject.

There are several challenges the chosen methodology needs to, if not to fully mitigate, then recognise head on. As both a manager and researcher in my own organisation there is, for example, a risk that I, as researcher, could use participation as a way to merely legitimise changes which suit management, rather than effect truly democratic change.

These hierarchal problems need to be recognised and the challenges which this may place on equitable participation understood. Participants need to be able to clearly determine what would be merely a superficial engagement with employee-owners on the basis of 'empowerment' or engagement in the process, to avoid their co-opting into the *rhetoric* of control when none exists.

To address these issues head-on CPAR enables the central role of the participant:

critical participatory action research aims to help people to understand and to transform 'the way we do things around here'. In particular, critical participatory action research aims to help participants to transform (1) their *understandings* of their practices; (2) the *conduct* of their practices, and (3) the *conditions* under which they practise, in order that these things will be more rational (and comprehensible, coherent and reasonable) (Kemmis et al., 2014:67).

The use of Critical Participatory Action Research sits largely outside of the business discipline. Here, Action Research and Industrial Research (e.g., that of the Tavistock Institute (Kemmis et al., 2014:10)) is more prevalent, but tends to not be directed at liberatory practice. Much Critical Participatory Action Research literature has emerged

from development studies (Cernea, 1985, Chambers, 1997) and educational routes (Freire, 1996; McNiff, 2017).

The Extended Case Method

This research also utilises Michael Burawoy's Extended Case Method as a methodological approach which places theory at its heart. The dialectical orientation of the research defined its philosophical and theoretical perspective however it was also anticipated that this would require a conscious approach to the use of theory in both the research and the analysis.

The Extended Case Method is utilised as an effective way to explore theory without it becoming an afterthought. CPAR as a Workers' Inquiry had already situated the research as a bottom-up collaborative, and liberatory project. Adding the Extended Case Method to this was intended to compliment these by providing a methodological framework which ensures the centrality of theory.

Much has been written on the challenges of utilising CPAR methods within the academy (Moore, 2004; Cancian, 1993). One of the issues expressed within these is the disconnect between an activist methodology and more academic requirements, although CPAR also embodies more positive research approaches, such as 'reflexivity and acknowledgement of subjectivity, as well as attentiveness to power differentials and contextual specificity' (Klocker, 2012:154-155). For Kemmis et al., (2014) those working with CPAR are:

...inclined to say ... we are not so much interested in data (the scientists' word) as in evidence (the historian's word). We are interested in gathering evidence to show us how we are doing – and whether we are doing better than before – and we are interested in documenting the evidence so we can analyse and interpret it, reflect on it, share it with others involved or affected by what we do, and interrogate it in the public spheres we form (Kemmis et al., 2014:69).

This approach explicitly recognises that 'Data do not exist, except under the social conditions of their making' (Brennan and Noffke, 1997:37). Given the strong philosophical orientation of this research, and its partial nature in support of democratisation, I wanted to ensure it was not 'just' action oriented by 'dwelling in theory' (Burawoy, 1998:5).

Burawoy writes about participatory ethnography, not CPAR specifically, although highly interventionist, as he writes 'writing about the world from the standpoint of participant observation' (Burawoy, 1998:6). He has developed the idea of the extended case method which recognises 'inescapable context effects' of survey research and other methods, and

explicitly making 'context and dialogue the basis of an alternative science [which] unavoidably brings into prominence power effects' (Burawoy, 1998:7). With an explicit appreciation of context whether social, historical, or political the method:

...calls for intervention of the observer in the life of the participant; it demands an analysis of interaction within social situations; it uncovers local processes in a relation of mutual determination with external forces; and it regards theory as emerging not only in dialogue between participant and observer, but also among observers now viewed as participants in a scientific community (Burawoy, 1998:16).

The objective here is to be able to produce situated social knowledge, collectively produced (Gorli et al., 2015:1350) so that the:

...idea is to help practitioners realize that organizational reality is socially constructed and therefore mutable. Change thus becomes a possibility (2015:1366).

In this, there is much shared with a dialectical understanding of organisations, where change, and people's appreciation of their own positionality within broader social relations results in an understanding of their own ability to change things.

The use of the Extended Case Method in this research is to add the additional methodological perspective of refuting and extending theory. The Extended Case Method itself shares much with CPAR in its participatory orientation, although most practitioners utilise an engaged ethnographic approach rather than CPAR, however where it differs is its explicit centring of theory and of the extending of the research itself:

... in order to extract the general from the unique, to move from the "micro" to the "macro", and to connect the present to the past in anticipation of the future, all by building on preexisting theory (Burawoy, 1998:5).

The Extended Case Method uses the empirical concept of *reflexive science* for this approach which fully recognises the partial nature of knowledge and the research process and helps to expose the power effects at play in this context. As Wadham and Warren write:

...key social, economic or organizational questions are explored through their incarnation on the ground in a particular setting, such as a factory, company, or community. Crucially, the link between the macro-level context and micro-level action is established via preexisting theory... (2014:6).

The processes of the Extended Case Method are those of *Intervention, Process, Structuration* and *Reconstruction*. Recognising the disruptive action of the research and participation itself, the intervention is one which does not pretend to have a separation

between 'scientists and the subjects' (Burawoy, 1998:4) it also puts front and centre the role of dialogue with participants and the collective nature of knowledge production from this engagement. Essential here is 'working more closely with those whose interests the study purported to serve' (Burawoy, 1998:24).

Process is the 'aggregation of *situational knowledge into social process*' (Burawoy, 1998:15) in this research this was carried out by the Inquiry Group collectively, looking both internally and in dialogue with the external employee owned business. This enabled the Group to focus in on the data which they needed to progress in answering the focus of their inquiry, the specific process was enabled by the cycles within CPAR.

The third context of *Structuration* is to:

'...move beyond *social practices to delineate the social forces* that impress themselves on the...locale... Viewed as external to the observer these social forces can be studied with positive methods that become the handmaidens of reflexive science' (Burawoy, 1998:15).

Understanding the social forces acting upon BookCo and the impacts that technological effects were having upon retail more generally. This and the final context of *Reconstruction* were, as discussed in more detail within the analysis, progressed in a separate branch of work to the Inquiry Group, although they were very aware that I was undertaking this additional analysis and that it would be shared with them too. As Burawoy explains:

We are interested not only in learning about a specific social situation, which is the concern of the participant, but also in learning from that social situation. In contrast to the participants, we want to be able to make causal claims that have validity beyond the situation we study. It is the task of *methodology* to explicate methods of turning observations into explanations, data into theory (1991:5).

Within the Extended Case Method the context of *Reconstruction* is in order to:

Instead of inferring generality direct from data, we can move from one generality to another, to more inclusive generality... We do not worry about the uniqueness of our case since we are not as interested in its 'representativeness' as its contribution to 'reconstructing' theory (Burawoy, 1998:15).

Theory has been central to the entire research process as it 'constitutes situated knowledge into social processes, and it locates those social processes in their wider context of determination' (Burawoy, 1998:21) and ultimately 'refuted, and extended' (1998:15). In this way the Extended Case Method recognises not induction 'from the ground up but through the failure and the *reconstruction of existing theory*' (Burawoy, 1991:6) in that the:

goal of research is not directed at establishing a definitive 'truth' about an external world but at the continual improvement of existing theory. Theory and research are inextricable (Burawoy, 1998:28).

In the application of this blended approach there is a unique contribution which may assist other researchers in considering options for methodological application within the workplace. Burawoy has recently situated social science on two axes, its:

scientific dimension is composed of the interaction between theory and data, itself embedded in an academic field. Its *reflexive dimension* involves the interaction between participant and observer, itself embedded in a field of power. Suppressing the reflexive axis and pretending we are not part of the world we study, leads us back to some form of positivism, while suppressing the scientific axis leads to postmodern interpretations or the transformative projects of participatory action research (2019:49-50).

Implicit within this description is that the use of the Extended Case Method is a more balanced approach than these two 'extremes'. However, this is a rather stark presentation of the epistemological options researchers have, so rather than either/or, there is an 'and' which looks to be greater than the sum of its parts. This then perhaps meets the 'objective set by Italian socialist Antonio Gramsci of transforming "common" sense into "good" sense or critical knowledge that would be the sum of experiential and theoretical knowledge' (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 2008:9). A summary of both the entire methodological framework in addition to the relationship between planned and emergent theory are both illustrated below.

A Workers' Inquiry

Philosophical orientation

Use of dialectics to situate the philosophical perspective of the research in totality, change and contradiction – so as to expose the potential for democratic change *within* the constraints of the forces of production in society.

Intervention



Use of Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) to enable a democratic, worker led, methodological approach which emphasises change and human agency. A site of potential democratic change is selected for intervention.

Process



Creation of knowledge legitimate to the site of the research and the participants themselves, through Cycles of CPAR led by participants, in a democratic process.

Structuration



Emphasis on the dialectical interrelationship of the local knowledge and a structuralist understanding of context.

'...move beyond social practices to delineate the social forces that impress themselves on the...locale' (Burawoy, 1998:15).

Data is selected which the Inquiry Group has itself checked as part of each cycle and is then coded by the researcher for pre-selected theory.

Reconstruction



'We do not worry about the uniqueness of our case since we are not as interested in its 'representativeness' as its contribution to 'reconstructing' theory' (Burawoy, 1998:15) through its *refutation* and *extension*.

In this way data is transformed into theory.

Experiential and theoretical knowledge is combined and then returned to the participants and made generalisable for other democratic use.



Illustration three: A Workers' Inquiry methodological summary.

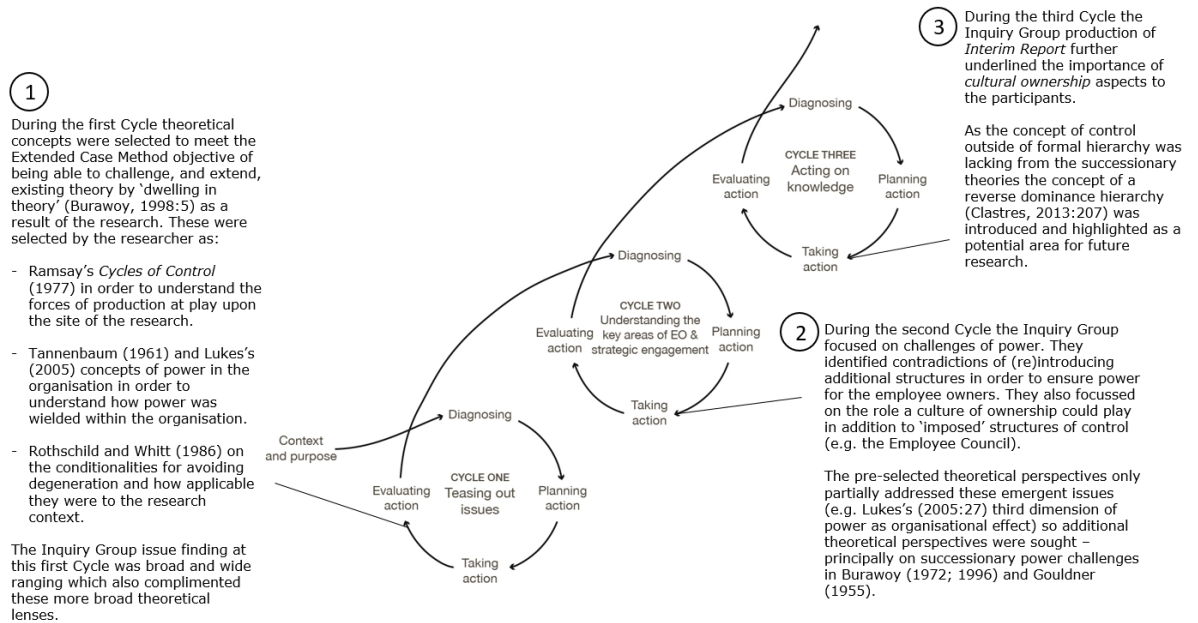


Illustration four: Planned and emergent theory.

Reflexivity and Power

I have constructed this collection of methods to form a methodology which attempts to both recognise the risk of my own potential power and influence as a practitioner-researcher, but also to explicitly expose and take account of this. As Luttrell writes 'I don't believe that researchers can eliminate tensions, contradictions, or power imbalances, but I do believe we can (and should) name them' (Luttrell, 2000:500). Even with this inherent appreciation of power within Critical Participatory Action Research this does not mean that it can be assumed as resolved. As Bansal et. al (2018) write, this approach recognises the potential effects of the 'very presence of a researcher' (Bansal et al., 2018:1191) and that these 'connections between researcher and the researched can be considered a strength for insights' (Bansal et. al, 2018:1191). Kemmis et. al (2014:5) write that:

Some in the research literature think that being an insider involves a penalty – not being able to see things in a disinterested or 'objective' way. By contrast, we believe that insiders have special advantages when it comes to doing research in their own sites and to investigating practices that hold their work and lives together in those sites – the practices that are *enmeshed* with those sites.

Critical Participatory Action Research rejects the concept of purely 'objective' research, rather it takes '...a very active and proactive notion of *critical self-reflection* – individual and collective self-reflection that actively interrogates the conduct and consequences of participants' practices' (Kemmis et al., 2014:9). This individual and group reflexivity is central to understanding people's context and seeking out the action needed to change these practices and outcomes.

It is also worth noting the reflection within Cathcart's (2009:84) own research into democracy at an employee owned firm (the John Lewis Partnership) with her 'significant regret... that I did not fully embrace a Participative Action Research methodology', she elaborates:

...following Whyte (1991: 21), I believe that 'it is possible to pursue both the truth and solutions to concrete problems simultaneously'. While I analysed and observed as an outsider, albeit one that tried to see the company from the perspective of those that inhabited it, I missed the opportunity to demonstrate my own commitment to the concept that my thesis actually explored, democratic participation. Ultimately, I rejected the term 'voice' with its poorly defined meaning, and its offer of contribution but not of shared power (2009:84).

Cathcart's own learning has been instrumental in highlighting the essential synthesis between researching and actively participating in a democratic project.

Within the planned research it was also proposed to enable the Inquiry Group to be able to access knowledge from within an external employee owned organisation. This was designed to both assist the Group in accessing expertise and experience, which was by definition *outside* of BookCo, but also outside the influence of both researcher and the power structures within which they were operating. This hand-in-hand work with another organisation, or Employee owned firm, is somewhat unorthodox for CPAR, although could be seen as falling within what Heron describes as 'open boundary' research (Heron, 1996:44).

This method also helps to address some of the potential challenges around organisational access (Heron, 1996), and the trust and ethical considerations inherent in the researchers own hierarchical position within the business designated for change and action. Indeed, Company B were also more open to help due to the nature of the participatory research being undertaken, as opposed to a 'top down' inquiry. Action research, by definition, is emergent and iterative, and the research design would therefore be collaborative. Initial stages entailed detailed discussion and planning with both BookCo and business 'B' on this approach and working with them transparently on the method.

Central to both the recognition of power imbalances combined with the Group's own judgement of the efficacy of the outcomes whereby a:

...crucial feature of the work of critical participatory action research is that it must be considered legitimate *by participants themselves* – not on their behalf by their delegates or representatives, or on the advice or the judgements of experts, or the judgement or instruction of their supervisors or managers' (Kemmis et al., 2014:36).

Criticality – what does 'being critical' mean in this context?

The *critical* element of participatory action research is contested territory (Kemmis 2013; Kemmis et al., 2015) and there 'is no uniform body of literature characterizing this worldview' (Creswell and Creswell 2018:8-9). Writers such as McNiff (2017) and Heron (1996) see criticality as integral to action research and currently under threat from what they perceive as incorporation into the academy in a 'domesticated form' (McNiff, 2017:55, Lake and Wendland, 2018:24). Subsequently it has an instrumentalist orientation rather than emancipatory one. Additionally, as previously discussed in the last Chapter, Critical Management Theory, in this context as exemplified by Kemmis (2013) Kemmis et al. (2015) situates action theory within a broadly 'progressive' context and not a *specifically* Marxist, or dialectical one (Cunningham, 2017 has attempted to equate the Marxist concept of praxis with participatory action research). Kemmis et al. (2015) summarise the engagement orientation of participatory action research as:

The emancipatory face of critical participatory action research is its aspiration to make a *better* history than the history we face if things go on as they are. It is the eternal other of human suffering – hope (Kemmis, et al. 2015:463).

Given the philosophical orientation of this study it is closer to Freire's (1996 [1970]) concept of critical action. The emphasis on context, history and dialectical analysis required by this philosophical orientation are central tenets to situating this study in the modern workplace with all the resultant pressures, they could also be seen as central to critical theory and to action research (Kemmis, 2013:123). Consequently, the challenge to deliver a critical approach *is* a transformative one:

critical participatory action research takes a particular view of what it means to be *critical*, emphasising, in particular, a collective intention to make our practices, our understandings of our practices, and the conditions under which we practise more rational and reasonable, more productive and sustainable, and more just and inclusive (Kemmis et al., 2014:85).

The criticality which the dialectical perspective adds, in its philosophical and contextual analysis - is the addressing of the question of whether there is a broader potentiality for change. Appreciating the current historical and socio-economic context, with its emphasis on human agency.

Ethical considerations

The research is also undertaken with the specific view that more workplace democracy would be a positive thing, and subsequently engaging clearly and unambiguously with those whom the research is in collaboration with, rather than a detached ethnographic study. This also adheres to one of the tenets of Critical Management Studies, in that; '...the research process itself should be openly participative and involve the same qualities that are important for organizations themselves' (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000:17).

This adheres to the guidance from the Economic Social Research Council (ESRC) which makes the point that research should be: '...more co-productive forms of research (i.e., research undertaken with rather than on people in a collaborative, iterative process of shared learning) offer particular potential for impact academically and socially' (ESRC, undated).

It would, however be presumptuous to believe that CPAR is *inherently* ethical, and that emphasis on participant agency is used to 'deny the possibility that their work could be exploitative' (Lake and Wendland, 2018:28). Lake and Wendland, citing Khanlou and Peter (2005), assert that; 'ethical research commonly has seven requirements, including social and/or scientific value, validity, fair subject selection, favourable risk-benefit ratio, independent review, informed consent, and respect for the participants' (Lake and Wendland, 2018:33-4).

Social validity in this context, because of the emergent nature of CPAR, can be that determined by the participants. There are several ethical challenges which have been identified, specifically for this research:

- a potential power imbalance between participants. The mix of management and staff could mean that participants may feel pressured towards certain outcomes
- unequal knowledge of existing systems - as facilitator I may expose certain biases
- how external input from the other businesses is mediated to ensure results are presented in a certain way to the research group

- if the other companies are represented by management, they may also present a biased report
- the external business is also a supplier of the transitioning company, so may feel obliged (or that it is beneficial) to take part
- anonymity within the final report will be maintained, however working with peers means that within the business it will be known that certain individuals are working on this project
- CPAR necessitates group production and reflection, however the ultimate output in this instance not group produced (i.e., this thesis)

In the first instance, being able to explicitly recognise these ethical considerations and work with the Inquiry Group to expose any other additional ethical challenges is essential to a transparent and democratic process. The collective sharing of reflections, in addition to the involvement of the third-party employee owned business, in confirming a fair representation of their own businesses though transparency is also essential. All these areas of risk, potential contention and power should be continuously examined and form the basis for an active reflexive dialogue.

Research planning

Within BookCo, the family business transitioning to Employee Ownership, there was a call for volunteers from across the organisation who were asked if they are willing to participate in an Inquiry Group. These volunteers were in no way be compelled to take part, and due to the nature of the business, a national retailer with many sites, there was a very real challenge of who could be released from where and for how long, both due to location and work profile (i.e., difficulty for smaller shops to release staff and maintain shop floor cover). To help reduce these challenges a neutral, non-company, location was planned to be used for some of the meetings, technology for those who could not travel, and travel costs covered for those who could. These challenges are unlikely to be unique to the research and are also likely to reflect those of a multilocational organisation in any future democratic participation.

Planning the research although important to enable participants to have an idea of, for example, likely time commitment, and practicalities of location, there was also an awareness that there should be a little caution on how much planning should be carried out on the participants behalf. As Heron writes use of 'proper method ... will produce

conformist, but certainly not co-operative inquiry' (1996:67). This could be seen as a challenge in achieving the right balance between Apollonian-Dionysian approaches (Heron, 1996:45) in the research, and that the objective was that it should as far as possible be determined by the context, and the participants.

The concept of cycles within CPAR, although not set in stone, form an important scaffold for moving the process forward. It was also important to be able to give the external business, Company B, a picture of how the overall process might work. As Heron points out 'every inquiry will need to map out in advance its overall time structure: how many hours, days, weeks or months it will last...simply so that people can get their diaries organized' (1996:51).

An example set of cycles are broken out below (from Heron 2010:120-121). Traditionally these cycles of reflection and action are central to Critical Participatory Action Research, however, though a particularly useful structure they should also not be seen as restrictive to the participants.

Kemmis et al. (2014:9) question what they see as the more strictly cycle based Lewinian view as potentially privileging 'the individual steps of planning, acting, observing, reflecting, re-planning (and so on) and their reiteration' rather for: 'critical participatory action research, the criterion of success is not whether participants have followed the steps faithfully, but whether they have a strong and authentic sense of development and evolution in their *practices*, their *understandings* of their practices, and the *situations* in which they practice' (Kemmis et al., 2014:18-19).

With this caveat of the danger of form over function, it was still proposed to broadly follow these cycles unless the Inquiry Group considered them as either restrictive or counterproductive.

Stage 1 - reflection

- The focus of the inquiry (the question of strategic co-production agreed or an alternative chosen)
- A launching statement of the inquiry topic
- A plan of action for the first action phase to explore some aspect of the inquiry topic
- A method of recording experiences during the first action phase

Stage 2 - action

- Exploring in experience and action some aspect of the inquiry topic
- Applying an integrated range of inquiry skills
- Keeping records of the experiential data generated

Stage 3 – second reflection

The inquirers share data from the action phase and:

- Review and modify the inquiry topic in the light of making sense of data about the explored aspect of it
- Choose a plan for the second action phase to explore the same of a different aspect of the inquiry topic
- Review the method of recording data used in the first action phase and amend it for use in the second

These cycles are repeated as necessary and are planned to end with a major reflection phase for pulling together threads, clarifying outcomes, and writing a co-operative report.

Sharing a broad outline of likely structure was especially pertinent for the contributing business for practical planning reasons. The objective of working with another business was in order to help in enriching the research in several areas, it was designed in order to underline the some of the aims of looking for broader applicability however it also helped with building understanding that what is currently 'done around here' can change.

Practically it was also important to plan as to whether there would be permeable organisational boundaries and who would be willing to meet whom so as to avoid any feelings of conflict or competition. In the end, a single point of contact in Company B, with one of the owner directors, was established as the most straightforward option and it was understood that they would represent all of their company's views to the Inquiry Group.

The importance of the interaction of participants, both the colleagues within BookCo and within the collaborator business meant that the Group was not to be overly reliant upon the researcher's own interpretations. As Lewin writes as 'a rule, group discussion brings out a richer, better balanced, and more detailed picture of the situation' (Lewin, 1997:99 [1944]). This dialogue extended the discussion in a productive way and it was helpful that

Company B had an orientation which specifically emphasised the sharing of its own (political) decisions around structure.

From the start, the plan was for issues and challenges to be surfaced through discussion; Heron citing Reason summarises this well:

[t]he attitude of the initiators should be: This is our idea about what we want to look at together. This is an outline of a co-operative inquiry. Let's talk about all this and see if we have a basis for co-operation (Heron, 1996:39).

Below is a table adapted from McNiff (2017:37-38) showing how the core values of participation were central within each step within the research.

Research Action: What do you do?	How does your research develop?	Where do values feature in your research?
Identify a research issue.	There is a lack of strategic level involvement of employees.	Participation and ownership are key values in the research.
Identify research aims.	Aim to find more ways for employees to be involved in organisational strategic level planning, through questioning the current situation and barriers.	Increasing participation is the aim of the research and thinking about how external collaborators can contribute and how their practices differ.
Draw up a research design and action plan.	Given the methodology of CPAR then this is carried out collectively with the participant-researchers. Explanations of methodology and challenges clearly shared, objective of a collaborative agreed final report agreed (or not).	Values of participation essential to the process of planning the research design. Flexibility and collective decision making privileged here.

<p>Gather data.</p>	<p>Gathering of initial data to show current strategic participation levels.</p> <p>Gather data in other EO firm around how participation is managed there.</p> <p>Feed this data back into the collective process and take action as agreed. Continue to gather data.</p>	<p>Democratic data gathering to be in line with values and methods. Demonstrate how this collaborative approach adds value.</p>
<p>Establish criteria and standards of judgement.</p>	<p>How to measure levels of participation, how demonstrated, how much, what kind.</p>	<p>Values transform into criteria and standards of judgement. Localised knowledge and acceptance as valid by the Inquiry Group the key indicator of standard.</p>
<p>Analyse and interpret data.</p>	<p>Analysis is undertaken according to the established criteria within the Group but also by the researcher using an Extended Case Method.</p>	<p>The data are utilised by the Inquiry Group to establish their own categories and begin to build a set of answers to address the question agreed.</p> <p>Researcher analysis clearly defined and agreed with the Group and shared so as to not undermine the process or trust.</p>

Come to some provisional conclusions.	Begin to come to some provisional conclusions about the success of the research in terms of demonstrating the achievement or potential for greater participation.	Showing how the potential value of participation, and its possibility to be realised in practice as a core feature of knowledge claim.
Make a claim to knowledge.	Claiming full engagement with the research question and have delivered on the objective of greater participation at a strategic level.	Demonstrating the value of participation has been 'realised in practice' and is central to knowledge claims.
Submit the claim to critique.	Critical feedback on the research staying consistent with the value of participation throughout the process.	Democratic participation a key principle within the process of critical feedback.
Explain the significance of the research.	Explain why participation is important for organisational planning within BookCo and get broader legitimisation within the business.	Value of participation acts as a conceptual framework for demonstrating the significance of the research and for the concept of participation.
Disseminate the findings.	Making the findings public.	Participation extended to all stakeholder and worker owned organisations more generally.

Evaluate the findings	Invite responses from a wider audience about the potential of the research to help others develop their own thinking.	Value of participation and democratisation within EO firms debated.
Link new knowledge with existing knowledge	This <i>formal</i> process is at an end.	Action continues to evolve in the transitioning company.
Modify practices in light of the evaluation	Demonstrable learning from both the application of methodological approach and also of the results actions taken.	Further evolve participatory activities and work towards sharing participatory values.

Table one: Core Values of Participation

Judging outcomes

Being able to collectively judge success within the research was also important to ensure that participants felt the process to be worthwhile. To be able to assess the ‘social validity from a community perspective’ (Khanlou and Peter cited in Lake and Wendland 2018:33) with ‘goals established jointly by the participants in the beginning of the project are met, at least to some degree, by the end of the project’ (Lake and Wendland 2018:34).

Kemmis et al. (2014:36) suggest four validity claims for research from Critical Participatory Action Research groups where they may deem it to be (a) comprehensible to them (b) they believe to be true, (c) to be ‘sincerely stated’ authentic and not deceptive and (d) to be ‘morally right and appropriate’ under the participants current circumstances. Lake and Wendland (2018:23), citing Brydon-Miller (2013), recommend that advocates carefully weigh their work against Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of citizen participation, which clearly shows a progression from (at the lowest level) manipulation all the way to citizen control

(and power), above delegated power and partnership. As part of the process a clear, yet also mutable, set of stated outputs was agreed by the Inquiry group.

Summary

In summary, the methodological approach is one which places democratic participation at its centre, which is reflective of the research itself, in looking to extend democratisation of the corporation. A combination of CPAR and the Extended Case Method looks to balance both action and theory in a praxis which can both enable change and create critical knowledge through the extension of theory. As a cross-organisational Workers' Inquiry it takes a unique and new approach to ground-up research, with the researcher acting as collaborator. The outcomes will be judged by how legitimate the Inquiry Group find them and their view on the parallel analysis by the researcher which will also be shared with them for feedback, this will then be incorporated into this thesis in the concluding Chapter.

CHAPTER 5 – Praxis and Inquiry Group Findings

Introduction

There is an inherent challenge in writing retrospectively about process within Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR), as there is a danger *post hoc* to make decisions, changes in direction and missteps appear as more linear and planned than the iterative steps, adjustments and discussions that they were. As Gorli et al. write, the ‘journey is not linear and may well include detours and steps backward in the path through ...reflection is conceived as a transformative process and not as an end in itself’ (Gorli et al., 2015:1365).

To avoid the artificial presentation of the CPAR methodology as something imposed upon the participants, this Chapter exposes in some detail the decisions that the participants made, and how the research developed to address their concerns and the critical examination of their own practice. Consequently, this Chapter adds methodological detail to the outline of methodology in the prior chapter, the next Chapter contains the data analysis and extension of theory.

As the Inquiry Group started out on the research, there was an understanding of the idea of cycles, of diagnosing- planning-action-reflection; however, there was also an understanding that the Group did not want to let this define the entire process either, for;

...critical participatory action research, the criterion of success is not whether participants have followed the steps faithfully, but whether they have a strong and authentic sense of development and evolution in their practices, their understandings of their practices, and the situations in which they practice (Kemmis et al., 2014:18-19).

This description is not to privilege process over engagement and the self-authorship of the participants. The Inquiry Group, and the discussions within the Group, and arising from it, became the principal narrative of the transition to employee ownership within the business. *They* were the instigators of conversations, *they* were the people directly dealing with colleagues’ concerns and doubts. The questions they asked of directors, colleagues and the external employee owned business gained its own dynamic. There was a focus on keeping a momentum and being the driver of the conversation within the business to an extent that the Inquiry Group is likely to remain central to the final transition and structures, which fall outside of this piece of research.

The research also exists in the context of my own role as a researcher ‘dwelling in theory’ (Burawoy, 1998:5). I have utilised Burawoy’s extended case method as a framework for a

dialectical analysis – which will follow this more process-led overview, placing CPAR as the central *technique* for investigation. These combined, given the centrality of ground-up research constituted a Workers' Inquiry. In this context there was an examination of what Kemmis et al. (2014) describe as:

...not so much ... *data* (the scientists' word) as in *evidence* (the historian's word). We are interested in gathering evidence to show us how we are doing – and whether we are doing better than before – and we are interested in *documenting* the evidence so we can analyse and interpret it, reflect on it, share it with others involved or affected by what we do, and interrogate it in the public spheres we form (Kemmis et al., 2014:69).

The research was carried out over a twenty-one-month period between January 2019 to September 2020. Evidence was gathered using a combination of research log, meeting notes, emails and other data/evidence. Participants in the group would engage across the business with colleagues and question them on their thoughts, they would read and circulate articles and write their own notes. The Inquiry Group, existed, and indeed exists to not primarily fulfil the research requirements of this thesis, rather to address the role of worker voice in what would otherwise be a top-down transition to employee ownership.

The methodology used for the research necessitated the centrality of participants in determining its direction and focus. As discussed in Chapter Four, on methodology, there was a conscious reflexivity around my own positional power within the company and within the participatory research. Throughout activity was used to help surface what was important to the participants rather than let my own views lead the group. There are of course positive and negative elements to my role as researcher/insider in this context, as Kemmis et al. (2014:5) write:

Some in the research literature think that being an insider involves a penalty – not being able to see things in a disinterested or 'objective' way. By contrast, we believe that insiders have special advantages when it comes to doing research in their own sites and to investigating practices that hold their work and lives together in those sites – the practices that are *enmeshed* with those sites.

It was less my insider positionality which I was looking to mitigate, rather the positional power I had, both as a director and as a researcher, which I wanted to recognise within the process and within the techniques applied and chosen by the Inquiry Group. Continuous checking of my own notes of meetings with the Group also served to let them lead in the direction that they felt was most productive. This was a conscious effort to avoid what Wallerstein and Duran (2006) describe - 'a challenge with PAR (and aim of praxis) is for mainstream researchers to move beyond ventriloquism—where mainstream researchers

‘speak on behalf of others’ (cited in Blodgett et al., 2011:529) rather to create opportunities for people to ‘speak on their own behalf’ (Blodgett et al., 2011:530).

Participants often arrived at meetings with lever-arch files full of emails and notes they had printed so they could reference them, in addition to their own diaries and notes of conversations with colleagues. These reflected ‘...a very active and proactive notion of *critical self-reflection*’ (Kemmis et al., 2014:6) which enabled the Inquiry Group to begin to take very active ownership over business practices which had appeared immovable before. As Gorli et al. (2015) recount the; ‘idea is to help practitioners realize that organizational reality is socially constructed and therefore mutable. Change thus becomes a possibility’ (Gorli et al., 2015:1366). Notes and diaries are personal to the participants so not directly referenced within this thesis, however demonstrated how seriously they took the research.

The Inquiry Group’s move to embrace change was underlined in their attitude towards structures, the shift in tone which embodied a distinct change in their own perceived positionality. One example of this was their clear-headed solution to avoiding being seen as ‘worker representatives’ on the board, and thereby (possibly) emphasising difference or create antagonism where there was none, by renaming those positions as owner directors. Additionally, actions such as the Inquiry Group issuing formal thanks to executive directors who had answered questions, which demonstrated a very visible change in how they were perceiving their evolving and developing role in the company.

Working with co-researcher/participants in the study was continually challenging, but in the most positive ways. Their commitment to the process created many questions and reflections, but these were always combined with a drive to reach solid actionable conclusions. Repeatedly they questioned their own thinking, my thinking, how things worked in the business at the time, and how they should work in the future. They frequently rejected their own ideas with good humour and looked for new and better solutions.

Their own discussions with others across the business, in addition to their additional reading added significant evidence, commentary, and reflection to the process. This made me question my own assumptions and they often surpassed my own expectations significantly, and further heightened my own sense of responsibility to the group. For example, their willingness to come up with solutions, ask questions and then abandon something as not suitable and begin to work on an alternative. Their commitment and

additional reading and questioning increased my own commitment to the Group and its outcomes.

In addition to the Inquiry group – with its obvious internal access to workers within the business, there was external support in the form of a director from a smaller Employee Owned (EO) business within the book trade, who kindly agreed to answer questions from the Group as they arose. This offered an invaluable external perspective that very much helped to shape the *Inquiry Group Interim Report* the Group produced. One comment from this other EO business was shared by the Inquiry Group verbatim in the company's internal *Bulletin* to all staff as the Group felt it expressed particularly well their own view on what was important in the move to Employee Ownership.

The Group mostly worked to a consensus position, and in many ways came to embody the decision making which they envisioned post-transition democracy in the firm to take, using the feedback from Company B they used three positions; 'yes I agree', 'not a vote for but no problem with it' and 'no' which also appears within the *Interim Report*. They are fiercely protective of the *Inquiry Group Interim Report* and when it was passed to the executive directors for comment in September 2020 some of the participants commented that even if the directors disliked it or wanted it changed it would not be.

It was not only my positional power which I was keen to recognise in the research process, it was also crucial for the Group to not to have their voice or conclusions used by me in ways that they felt was antithetical to the democratic process, i.e. in how I was to record it in this thesis, or that my theoretical analysis was to be in any way exploitative of the role they played. Once the analysis had been written it was therefore shared with the participants for comment and their views also included within this thesis, as these feedback loops form an essential and central part to the entire CPAR methodology, and this work as a Workers' Inquiry.

The central question of this thesis could be seen playing out in the contradictions and interplay between the power of owners, of democratisation and culture within the organisation which were all present in the deliberations of the group, and the impact they had. The work carried out by the Group, perhaps because of its commercial setting, was often more focused on drawing conclusions, of making recommendations and moving the process forward than I anticipated it would be. This was naturally helpful to the formal process of the research however was an organic result of the ownership taken by the participants rather than any pressure from myself.

The process - pre-cycle one and groundwork.

Initially the research was to have more than one external EO business to support the Inquiry Group, however despite positive responses from two additional companies in January 2019 they had withdrawn from the process by the February. Interestingly both businesses felt that their involvement would not be useful given their own limited internal democracy, where neither had formal representative structures nor board representation, despite being employee owned. The company which did agree, referred to from now on as Company B, had a significant consciousness of their own democratic processes, publicly referring to themselves as ‘...the world’s largest publishing collective’ as ‘a world-leading example of alternative business practice’ and ‘owned and managed by its workers, who are all on equal pay’ [Company B publicity document 2019].

One of their directors was kind enough to meet three times during the research, once prior to the first cycle to understand the project, and subsequently during Cycle One and Cycle Two in order to answer numerous questions and clarifications from the Group. The Inquiry Group found this cooperative work helpful in defining alternative options from those arising internally, but also in the support and encouragement which it offered.

The combination of perspective with workers collaborating across organisations adds a unique perspective to the research. This transparency, and external access was planned to help further address any issues around power imbalance between my role and the participants, but to also give the Inquiry Group a supportive external view, something which they then drew upon in the *Inquiry Group Interim Report*, including the request for external support for Owner Directors and Council members.

Given my own position in BookCo, as an executive director, it would seem reasonable to assume almost automatic ‘access’ to carry out the research, however this was not the case. The business’ owner had announced in 2010 that the company would transition to EO when several ‘triggers’ had been met, the most significant of these being that of reaching profitability. Given that almost ten years had elapsed since this initial announcement there was growing concern that, despite nearing profitability, that even discussing transition to EO could form a distraction for ‘the business’. In an internal publication, funded by the owner, summed this up concern of ‘distraction’:

Are we nearly there yet? Traditional plea of a child ten minutes into a three hour car journey. Nearly there? Nearer to profitability? Nearer to partnership?” (Internal BookCo document, 2015).

This overtly infantilising tone brushes away the concerns of staff on something which many of them were unlikely to feel they could influence significantly. It is also underlined, in the same publication, that the future under partnership may not actually look that much different to the past:

‘getting there’ doesn’t mean ‘leaving here’; it’s taking what’s best about [BookCo] confidently into a changing world...it would be madness to throw away what has, for decades, been best about the firm – its professionalism, reputation, and the accumulated learning of its people (Internal BookCo document, 2015).

During the research one of the group members relayed back the feelings of many employees on the position they found themselves in:

most of these same people felt partnership was still a pipedream and some even went as far to say that they’re bored of hearing about it

Participant email to the Inquiry Group

Plans to consult across the company had failed to materialise, so the proposal to undertake organised research in a ‘closed’ Inquiry group, where management would not have access to discussions, was met with some concerns – especially on what the ‘action’ element of the participatory action research might consist of. However, permission was granted on the understanding that the initial action would be the production of an Inquiry report for the business, and the Group understood this to be colleagues in the first instance, to consider next steps.

Little or nothing had been defined to staff as to what would change post a move to partnership, so understanding people’s perceptions of what will change and how things will work was an exceptional opportunity. Crucially - as per the research undertaken by Gorli et al. (2015) - the:

participatory intervention would prepare the ground for the imminent change so that it was not merely implemented top-down but was also interpreted and adapted by the practitioners concerned... (2015:1353).

As a firm which was to be ‘bequeathed’ by its owner to the employees, the active nature of the Inquiry necessarily constituted a new form of grass roots agency in the process. This, irrespective of specific outcomes, constituted an important step towards ownership in and of itself.

In June 2019, a request for volunteers was placed in the company *Bulletin* which went to all staff, from this there were fourteen staff members who came forward to take part. Two withdrew prior to the process starting due to childcare commitments, one left the business

for a new role. The remaining eleven constituted the core Inquiry Group and all but one remained involved until the production of the Inquiry Group's *Interim Report*. There was no necessity for the Inquiry Group to be 'representative' of staff, merely attract those who wanted to be involved in the research. However, the Inquiry Group did in fact represent a selection of roles, geographical locations, experience, and seniority. They included; a deputy shop manager, two shopfloor booksellers, a distribution centre manager, a content editor, a designer, three software engineers and two business-to-business booksellers and ranged from under a year's service with the company, to over thirty.

Given that a reason for potential participants withdrawing was the childcare commitments of attending meetings, participants were very aware as a group of the responsibility to represent those staff who could not be in the room. Similarly, all the staff involved were full-time so there was a constituency of those who could not be there due to the part-time nature of their roles. It was always recognised that anything the Group produced would have to be able to be engaged with by the rest of the business.

From the outset the challenge of arranging meetings, and the most basic of communication highlighted some of the potential hurdles of co-operating across the company; for example, only some staff had internal email addresses and on a normal day at work were with customers and not at a computer. Additionally, Inquiry Group participants were based in a number of locations, including, Oxford, Edinburgh, Gloucester and dispersed across London. This made arranging face-to-face meetings a challenge and resulted in these meetings being in various locations over the course of the research. It is worth noting that the COVID-19 Pandemic has made video conferencing technology far more commonplace, and it could well be used to mitigate some of the meeting challenges in the future, and people be more comfortable with it, in addition to making sure that no one is excluded.

Cycle One - Teasing out the issues.

<p>Cycle One</p> <p>(The first stage of this Cycle was run twice with two halves of the Inquiry</p>	<p>Teasing out the issues</p>	<p>Steps</p> <p>Agreeing context and purpose of the Inquiry Group, understanding our methodology.</p>
---	-------------------------------	---

<p>Group due to locational and time challenges prior to the Group combining for the subsequent stages).</p>		<p>Diagnosing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Where do we see the impediments to be to involving staff in strategic decision making? - How do we imagine Employee Ownership (EO)? - Examining 'blockers and solutions'. - Card writing and sorting questions. <p>Planning Action</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individual writing, then group sorting questions for the assisting EO company. <p>Taking Action</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Asking questions to worker-owner of another EO business. <p>Evaluating Action</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reviewing answers and asking for clarifications & elaboration. - Review of answers with comparison to original 'diagnosing'.
---	--	---

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Card writing and sorting to highlight key issues for the Inquiry Group.
--	--	---

Due to the initial logistical challenges the Inquiry Group was split into two for the first session, these were held on the 26 July 2019 at the Political Studies Association in London and 15 August in company offices in Oxford. At these meetings, an overview of the CPAR methodology was given so that participants could question this and how they would be in control of the process, and to review a suggestion as to the 'question' it was proposed that the Group address. As I wrote to them in an email outline of the project prior to meeting in July 2019:

You would be participants in the research, not subjects of it, all recording/written notes from our deliberations would be collectively agreed as an accurate reflection of our views. We would work to recognise and mitigate any differences in power/knowledge etc. in the group... e.g. I can't just say 'this is the answer!'. The same democratic principle would apply to the companies we're working with.

It was emphasised that although the method suggested cycles of reflection and action that participants were the principal drivers of the process and it could be adapted according to their direction. The Inquiry Group did find the idea of reflection and action useful and oriented themselves around this. The Cycles elaborated on in this overview would most likely look more 'manufactured' to the Group, as the formal beginning of one and end of another would be less defined in reality, but still reflects the course of the research.

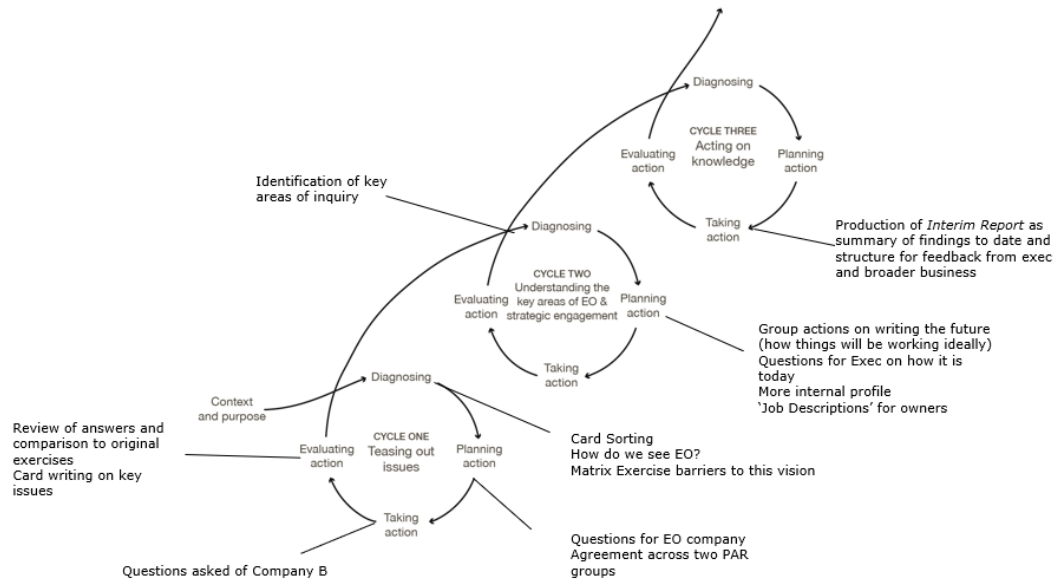


Illustration five: Summary of cycles undertaken during the research.

The participants discussed Arnstein’s ladder (1969) in both first sessions as relating to the research work of the Inquiry Group, and it then also became useful for the Group in its own analysis. They would refer to it to gauge the efficacy of decision-making processes, both existing and proposed, and it was also included in the *Inquiry Group Interim Report* produced near the end of the formal research phase adapted to represent the proposed growing participation of booksellers in the business.



Illustration six: Inquiry Group ‘owner participation ladder’ (after Arnstein, 1969).

Notes were taken throughout every meeting, by myself and participants as they wished, and were circulated, edited by the Inquiry Group and agreed as a fair summary of the discussion and work undertaken. The first two sessions utilised participatory exercises to begin to shape the thinking of the Group and to help crystallise what they wanted to be

their next steps in investigating the question of how staff could be involved in strategic decision making under EO.

In session one the first activity was 'what do we think an employee owned business should look like?' This was subsequent to an ice breaker and constituted a post-it note activity, which was then sorted into themes by the group (Chambers, 2002:99). These they defined as: information, structure and culture. This served to show the group that they already shared a great deal of the same vision for the business as employee owned. A summary, agreed with the group post session of the constituent parts of these themes, are shown below:

Information

Wider and more interlinked network for strategy, advice etc. + a framework to facilitate that.

Company Strategy, Finance etc. to be completely transparent, accessible, and comprehensible.

All employees understand the company strategy.

Open books, access to information.

Influence over business direction but perhaps not implementation.

Democratic control of ethical direction. (Direct).

Our Customers should know we are employee owned. Shout about it!!

Engaged with our local communities in which our staff work + ethical, environmental etc.

Review meetings to establish consensus on – what we want/objectives, how we get to it, who would do what, how it is going, change.

Anonymous but moderated feedback and proposals.

Actionables to be circulated to everyone for feedback.

Structure(s)

Elected/delegated Heads / People who can challenge leadership.

A board of reps that represent the various channels + demographics of our business.

Board open to communication.

Easy to communicate concerns and ideas.

'Assemblies'/Juries

Refocus management structure.

Employee Directors on the board.

'Recall' powers.

Clear understanding of what the point of the exec board is, and their relationship with Partners.

Live management collecting, setting direction, strategy -> delegating responsibilities through existing structures?

Culture (best word?)

Ability to learn about all aspects of the business.

Understand what my role is locally, and as part of the wider business,

Employees feel trusted, valued, respected as part of the business community.

Every employee should feel involved.

Have access to a channel to voice concerns etc.

Ensuring rights, knowledge, skills and experience.

Transparency & knowledge of actions at all levels.

Inclusion for everyone in important business decisions.

Working practices and responsibilities to one another.

The second technique was mapping of power structures (Chambers, 2002:116), which did not go as successfully and will be returned to shortly, and matrix drawing (Chambers, 2002:136-7). All these activities were given with as little specific guidance as possible to allow the group to utilise them in the way they felt most useful and appropriate.

The second activity was designed for the Group to work on drawing a map of existing power structures, this transpired to be a very difficult task, given the complexity of structure, 'divisions' etc. As a result, the conversation itself became the focus over an actual drawing, which was started and abandoned three times. In fact, this was examined in far more detail in the second Cycle as the Inquiry Group grappled in much more detail with how decisions were made in the existing pre-EO structure, how management was organised and had been armed with a set of questions to ask from their interaction with the external EO business.

Exercise three was to look at perceived blockers to participation across the business and possible solutions. It was very much recognised that the Group were at the beginning of defining thoughts at this stage, which would go on to become more detailed questions for the Employee Owned business.

Blockers	Possible Solutions		
	Formalised Training	Technology	Employee Ownership Champions
Location		X	X
Attitude			X
Time	X		
Knowledge	X	X	X
Lack of Strategic (Participative) Structure		?	X

The last activity was card writing, sorting, and consensus (Chambers, 2002:123), given the prior tasks and discussions, asking the question 'what do we need to know to help us progress?'. The Group decided that they would individually write card questions at this point and then compare them, these questions when combined with the ones produced in session two would comprise a set of questions for the external EO company in order to try to shape people's thoughts on way forward. This initial session produced thirty-three distinct questions.

The second session (15 August) repeated for the other half of the Group the same tasks. The power mapping exercise which had not been possible in session one was repeated

despite the issues the first Group meeting had with it, both so it was a shared experience, but also that it helped inform the questions the Group wanted to ask. This half of the Group tackled it differently, not even attempting to 'draw' the structure of power and decision making, rather referring to Arnstein's ladder as offering a useful way of measuring the current situation. They mapped the business onto the ladder with levels of 3 (informing), 4 (consultation) and 5 (placation) depending upon area and function. It was also commented that shops (and Distribution Centre) often do try to ensure that all staff can operate in all roles even when this is unlikely to be the case at company level, i.e. across technical functions such as development/finance, and that there was a collective responsibility taken.

The post-it note exercise on 'what we think an employee owned business should look like?' was repeated with this part of the Group and produced similar, although not entirely the same results, with themes of; structure, culture or emotional benefits and participation.

Structure

Well structured

Elected board representatives

Real living wage implemented / Ratio between top & bottom earners only 1:3

Opportunities to decide how the company is run (elected people as representatives?)

An opportunity to have an input into decisions within the company

Decisions not made by voting. Discernment instead.

Knowledge / communication /interest

Shop representatives

Employee council

More communication of what exactly roles in head office look like e.g. a day in the life of...

Questioning

Employees have the power to speak their minds + be heard

Shopfloor booksellers actively participate in board meetings

Culture or emotional benefits

United

Long-term thinking

Successful

Happy

Passion about the company we own

Attractive to customers and publishers

Empowerment (x2)

Supportive (x2)

Advertise and shout about Partnership to the World/customers

Ethical

Establish a greater diversity – race/ability/disability in the company

Proud

Open and freedom to speak

More shop investment

Participation

Co-operative

Engaged

Knowledge sharing

The perceived blockers to engagement and solutions were also similar but, again, not identical;

Blockers	Possible Solutions			
	Formalised Training	Technology	Representative support	Geographical sections

Time & money		X		
Skill set/ Knowledge	X		X	
Geographical location		X		X

Combined with those in session one this gave the group the following:

Blockers	Possible Solutions				
	Formalised Training	Technology	Employee Ownership Champions	Representative support	Geographical sections
Location		X	X		X
Attitude			X		
Time		X			
Skill set/Knowledge	X	X	X	X	
Lack of Strategic (Participative) Structure		?	X		

This session produced a further twenty-seven questions for the external EO company. These were consolidated and then de-duped by the entire Group over email into 56 distinct queries, agreed collectively and then communicated to the external business. This also prompted additional reflection within the Group as they debated whether to engage with the questions themselves, one Group member writing that:

I'd be interested in discussing some of the questions themselves more. Is there any value in answering some of these questions ourselves individually and discussing those answers in the context of [BookCo] as an EO company at the next meeting?

Perhaps selecting a handful of questions each (trying not to only pick our own questions!), quickly noting why we feel that question is important, considering any possible answers we can think of, and then writing Pros and Cons for each? Or is that in danger of looking quite similar to the 'What do we think an employee owned business should look like?' task in the get together?

They reflected upon the questions and brought their thoughts to the next session.

Cycle Two – Building Understanding.

<p>Cycle Two</p>	<p>Building Understanding</p>	<p>Steps</p> <p>Diagnosing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identification of key areas of interest at this point, both from a review of answers received from the external business, group discussion and interaction with colleagues. <p>Planning Action</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The answers received prompted a step back for the group to examine the existing structure and decision making in more detail. - Group set writing the future to share individual visions of what the company could look like. - Reflection on how to address conflict over decision making. - Reflection on role of individuals and as a collective ownership. <p>Taking Action</p>
------------------	-------------------------------	--

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Questions written for the Exec on how decisions are made today. - Sharing of supporting business statement to all the company. - Individual exercises on 'imagining the future'. - Agreeing a 'job description' for an employee-owner.
--	--	---

The consolidated set of questions were sent to an owner director at Company B. Company B responded in writing to these questions, these were circulated to the Group who fed back queries and clarifications which were discussed at a meeting with them at the Royal Society of Arts on the 15 November. These were then edited onto the original response re-circulated and confirmed by Company B on the 27 November, this was with an additional note from them that:

I did think a bit more about the relationship between the Reps and specifically the Execs that are responsible for operational aspects in your potential set-up (as far as I understand it). I think this is a key area, in the sense that it will probably be a site of tension. So clarity around who is responsible for what there will be crucially important. Not sure if the notes cover that, or if you would want them to, but thought it worth mentioning anyhow

Owner Director Company B

With the answers to the questions asked by the Inquiry Group, and the first few sessions having been relatively structured with techniques designed to both pull the Group together and let them start to lead the process, ideally the next combined meeting would have them lead the process more organically. I was extremely nervous about this step as I was not sure how far I could step away, but I need not have been as they embraced this fully and led the meeting with me there more for questions and support than structure. One Group member asked to meet prior to the meeting as they could not make it, this took place on the 24th January 2020 – he had pages of notes which were discussed and then relayed to the Group, and has also reassured me that that the participants were engaged enough to lead the process themselves.

This session itself was productive after a bit of a slow start, a review of all the answers from Company B prompted a lot of detailed discussion and challenges about how similar process or structure may or may not work at BookCo. Most people contributed to the discussion and there were several challenges on me as a manager as to how decisions were currently made in the business.

The bulk of the session comprised of reviewing the replies from Company B and card-writing, to record important points and agree further questions. A set of actions were decided upon and that the group should try to complete these and then meet again in Feb/early March. It was also noted at that point how difficult it was to meet over a significant geographical area (London being the most straightforward for this group) and juggling shop-floor and other time commitments, both things likely to be a challenge for systems in place post transition too. There was quite an extensive discussion on company culture(s) where different shops and divisions were recognised as having different cultural aspects. Having an idea of tradition could be used to mitigate some of these challenges (but not others). It was recognised that the combination of 'tradition + democracy (might) = inertia' whereas the ideal would be to leverage both these to deliver the opposite.

The group felt that it would be valuable to have access to tools to facilitate values which supported Employee Ownership and a common language for these. The group felt there was a need to be clear on 'why the business was becoming an EO' rather than just that it is being 'gifted' to staff. There was a discussion on the need for clear delineation of what different things could be decided on collectively (or indeed even shared) there could be some reserved matters e.g. private health issues etc. to respect colleagues privacy.

Examples of well delivered projects were discussed within the Group e.g., a particular new system which met a company, and customer need, had feedback acted upon and were well trailed and announced. It was less clear how these projects were initiated and chosen as strategic projects. It was decided that if it was not clear where strategic decisions are made in the business, then it will be hard to find a space for employee owners to be included in these. For example, if the Board is a reporting and not a 'decision making function' then having employee representatives present would not, in fact, deliver the desired engagement.

People were keen to start to gauge the feeling of other members of staff and felt that running a survey or interviews would not be appropriate at this stage as (i) people do not know much about it, or feel that it has been so long coming that it 'just won't happen' (ii)

that it is difficult to take time out behind a till to answer questions like this. However, there was a general consensus that people would benefit from hearing some of the comments from 'Company B' and hearing about the work of this Inquiry Group and that this could be used to raise questions about how to change decision making *now* and generate a sense of *ownership* prior to transition. There was an agreement that many elements of employee participation could be in place prior to the shares moving to a trust.

Also, it was discussed that ownership should not be automatic upon being an employee, rather there should be training delivered, and time served (a year was loosely discussed). The idea of having an 'owner-mentor' (not a line manager) to help with this was thought to be a good idea.

Outcomes from the group at this point included (i) a desire to make it clearer to colleagues in the business *what* this group was discussing with a piece to be published in the company *Bulletin* and prompt for other employees to ask questions and get involved (ii) a draft 'owner' job description to be written and circulated for comment (iii) each person to write a page on how a decision might be made post-EO (iv) notes written up and circulated with the card writing from the question review and (v) individual directors to be asked to feedback to the Inquiry Group on how exactly decisions are currently made and agreement reached. There was an extensive discussion on 'power', which will be looked at in more detail in the analysis section of this thesis, that focussed more on structures than many of the proceeding discussions.

I was particularly interested in the discussion on next actions as they were united in not wanting to use a questionnaire as (a) people not really aware enough to comment in the right context and (b) difficult to get everyone behind the counter to answer questions (c) time. They were also keen to get the group together more quickly next time to move it forward, times and roles and commitments continue to be a challenge. The group much preferred to go and have individual conversations with other colleagues on the issues. I felt this showed the strength of this approach combining both the shop-floor access that the participants had with their domain knowledge that, for example, a questionnaire, would not deliver the data they needed.

Asking formal questions as a Group to the directors and requesting written answers, in addition to the Group statement in the *Bulletin* was a far more visible set of actions than some of the previous discussions with colleagues or with Company B. Each director did

submit a written response and to a degree this reflected the group’s concerns that strategy was not the specific remit of the board, one commenting:

On a personal level I think it’s better not to have specific vehicle charged with being the place ‘we do’ strategy. In [BookCo] strategy is often initiated by individuals and then discussed and adopted collectively. This depends on a huge number of factors - does it cover all or part of the business, time, cost, expertise, skill, individual authority, opportunity, threat, shareholder support etc. As such the inception and delivery of some strategies are very collegiate and others almost entirely individual. However there is a shared collective responsibility amongst the Exec team (and wider management) to ensure the success of whatever strategy is adopted. It is equally critical that there is alignment and support for the strategy from and amongst the non-exec. The Board meeting is the primary vehicle for stress testing that alignment.

It was also communicated to me that there were some concerns being put to me about where ‘this might be going’, the question asked was a very open one 'how and where do you believe strategic decisions are made within the business?' yet it appeared to put some of the directors on the defensive. I reflected in my own research diary at the time that I felt this concern was most likely around expectation building and a mismatch with their own, uncommunicated (undiscussed even) vision of Partnership. I have also noted down ‘there is an article which says that CPAR is dangerous - think that's right. It also takes on a life of its own!’, participatory research:

...is revolutionary sociology. It is not business as usual. As such it is dangerous.
(Stoecker and Bonacich, 1992:8).

Cycle Three – Acting on knowledge

Cycle Three	Acting on knowledge	<p>Steps</p> <p>Diagnosing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Looking to address key areas of ambiguity and tension. - Settling on a key focus of ‘ownership’ of collective agreed vision and deliberate surfacing of responsibility.
-------------	---------------------	---

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recognising tensions as fruitful areas of deliberation. <p>Planning Action</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Agreement on core principles to share with the business for further discussion and collective agreement. - Proposals for decision making, next steps and objectives. <p>Taking Action</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Writing and agreeing the <i>Inquiry Group Interim Report</i> as a Group. - Sharing the Inquiry Group Interim Report with the explicit position that feedback may not be incorporated when given by the Exec. - Request to sit in on the board and observe to further disambiguate power relations/decision making in the business.
--	--	--

The group meeting on the 27th February was informed by the engagement with the external EO business, the responses from the executive to the group question and engagement with colleagues over the transition. In addition, the group reviewed the draft 'owners' job description and their own individually written vision of the future way the business would work. The group agreed several key areas which should be addressed in what was to be an initial, *Inquiry Group Interim Report* for the business to engage with, this drafting of thoughts to date should help to identify gaps/areas of disagreement publishing an initial report might also assist with the idea of observers that the group have requested to join the board, effectively demystifying the Inquiry to the executive directors.

The group also discussed an article about the collapse of a Mondragon subsidiary (a large cooperative in Spain), and an article on how organisations make decisions submitted by one of the participants. All the group were keen to not try to hinder the 'fluidity' of decisions through control structures which would slow down the business. As one group member wrote:

Following the bulletin piece I had the chance to chat about partnership with a few people across the company, and all have shared a key concern; that being a major concern of any changes affecting the speed in which decisions are made. They want to be sure that they still have control of the "local" decisions they make now, and that even with the bigger company decisions we need to be sure to be responsive to the outside world. Essentially, they don't want decisions to go through layers and layers of bureaucracy and for the company to become sluggish.

Group areas of discussion included the agreement that:

- i. Do not want there to be a gap in knowledge for staff if attending the board (or other formal meeting) so need to be able to have training and support to do so.
- ii. Autonomy should be clear strategic responsibility at every level.
- iii. For meetings and interaction over management responsibilities for booksellers then there should be support to organise documents and manage emails as this is difficult to manage on the shop floor.
- iv. Clear and not technical language should be used with the avoidance of all acronyms and abbreviations.
- v. Where there is a 'vocabulary of employee ownership' this should be a conscious decision and clearly defined and communicated to everyone in the business. This also included things like strategy/strategic objectives etc.
- vi. There should be a clear understanding of the benefits of communicating company strategy.
- vii. Partnership is currently a pretty vague idea and the length of time to come to fruition in the business could be damaging the 'spirit of the partnership'.
- viii. Currently most people could be disengaged when transition.
- ix. Clearly communicate financial (or not) impact upon staff, what would happen if... (e.g. make a loss) under EO.
- x. Loss of 'paternalistic security' could cause issues.

- xi. Be better to shout about what we have achieved as a business in order to demonstrate we can do this, e.g. VIP [an internal customer order system].
- xii. Celebrate the closing of the gap [to profitability] over the last few years as this is not as evident to staff as could be.
- xiii. Training and induction to support ownership and decision making. E.g. everyone should be able to understand a P&L at least to a basic level.
- xiv. Would ownership form part of the performance review? If so who judges your performance as an owner – ideally other active owners rather than ‘management’.
- xv. If an active owner should not be made ‘worse off’ by attending meetings/time taken etc. but also not expected to receive different pay/financial reward.
- xvi. Ownership ladder to communicate how people can engage.
- xvii. There should be a defined time-limit on how long you can sit on the board as a representative.
- xviii. The owners job description should be for all (i.e. everyone in the business irrespective of level, exec directors included).
- xix. Initial Council – possibly not fully elected but put in place to set up first meetings and elections and to help define representative structures/timeline.
- xx. The current decision making and formal structure to also be clearly communicated, e.g. how trading/exec. meetings/board fit with new bodies.
- xxi. Need above all to develop a culture of engagement.

Additionally, the Inquiry Group asked me to formally thank the executive directors for their submissions, this felt like a real shift of power and how they thought of themselves. They also requested two observers to the board, which will also go into the *Inquiry Group Interim Report* ‘next steps’. I needed to think how to manage the politics of this as I was unsure what response it would provoke in the full board, in the end we agreed that it should form one of the proposed next steps in the report. We also discussed if having a session at Conference would be useful, it was agreed that this should not be the formal launch as conference is mostly attended by branch managers so could be seen as too manager oriented.

Intervention of the COVID-19 pandemic

Along with other 'non-essential' retail BookCo had to close all its shops to the public on 23 March 2020 due to Government measures to combat the spread of COVID-19, as a result many staff involved in this CPAR process were put on furlough, and this continued throughout 2020. The conditionality of the crisis, still ongoing, has exposed the fragility of the perceived 'paternalistic' support of family ownership, to the executive although not necessarily to staff more generally. There were also immediate steps taken to close five shops permanently, leaving BookCo with twenty-three shops across the country, this led one anonymous staff member, in one of the closing branches, writing in a trade journal:

Now we have been let go, and it is too late to give us the role we deserved in steering the business into the black. It strikes me that for an employee-led partnership model to be a success, the employees who will take over should be the ones to reach the profitability conditions to make that happen.

BookCo Bookseller

This sentiment reflected those of the CPAR group, however with most employees furloughed the management of the business inevitably contracted to the executive, with the remaining staff being limited to those working on the website and temporary contract staff in the distribution centre, the latter falling outside of any future employee ownership structure.

For the group this new context meant the postponement of any launch of the *Inquiry Group Interim Report* to the full business, throughout April and May as time allowed the report was reviewed and edited by them and then in September circulated to the executive team for comment. Given the continuing environment, as I write this, shops are closed again (November 2020), so this has not yet moved further forward. One of the group members has summed up the challenges implicit within the current situation and the perceived conflict between fast decision making and democratic decisions, which has been a recurring theme throughout the research:

... a perfect example of a situation that the company needs to remain agile in its decision-making processes; it points to me, even more clearly than before, that it should be outlined during the transition to EO what sort of decisions go through which decision-making process – reacting to a crisis like this cannot be held back by a potentially sluggish, democratic process.

Naturally, no-one could really predict something like this happening; it would have been hard to state in advance "in case there's a global pandemic here's who will make decisions", but there can at least be a structure in place to facilitate rapid response when needed. This probably asks more questions than answers them,

such as who would that decision team be? Who would make the decision that a rapid response was needed, and therefore that the democratic decision-making process put in place by EO could be circumnavigated? Or perhaps, what qualifying factors trigger such circumnavigation without it needing to be a personal judgement call at all?

BookCo Senior Manager

The group have agreed the *Inquiry Group Interim Report* is ‘the start of a conversation, not the end’ and it now needs broader engagement with the rest of the organisation to bring it to fruition through participation of everyone working within BookCo.

Summary

The Inquiry Group found the ‘action – reflection’ cycle structure of Critical Participatory Research to be a useful scaffold to their deliberations and activity. This helped the Group progress through the stages of questioning the external employee owned business and discussions with colleagues. As a result, they began to focus in on the actions that they felt were important to them and would be central to democratising decision making in the business post transition to employee ownership.

Given their early concerns about how the ownership was changing, and whether a lack of agency inherent in the bequeathing of the business would be detrimental to engagement, this was not evident within the group at all. Where there were concerns expressed by other booksellers, they were on the timings for transition, or indeed if it would happen at all given the length of time it had taken so far.

The Group was pleased with their *Interim Report* which they felt represented their thoughts and proposed next steps well, sadly, this was not launched at the planned company conference due to the impact of COVID-19. However, this is still planned for a future event. The Group were keen to share their report with others in the company as part of what they also felt was an important conscious step towards ownership by booksellers.

The production of the *Interim Report* by the Group was a first step, an important one, but only one. The challenges of enacting the ownership culture and democratic engagement envisioned by the Group is not to be underestimated. However, the continued existence of the Group itself should assist in the transition to some of the formal structures of employee governance, e.g. the Council, but also in their own democratic consciousness and their reluctance to introduce bureaucratic solutions to questions of power and control.

The next Chapters will proceed to analyse the research by extending relevant theory. Chapter Six, as well as placing the direct lived working experience of booksellers in context, will also discuss the danger of any significant disjuncture between participatory research and individual analysis.

CHAPTER 6 – ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

Introduction

This Chapter will analyse the data from the research and undertake sense-making through the contextualisation of the research setting. It will begin by discussing democratic research and the challenges of participation within analysis. It will then give an overview of the process of the analysis utilising the Extended Case Method, reflecting on the dialectical philosophical orientation of the research as a whole. Both the Introduction, and Literature Review, gave an overview of some of the changes underway in the broader political economy, within this Chapter the specific economic environment within which BookCo operates will be examined, exposing how broader technological pressures are exposed through changes within the organisation.

The theories which have been chosen to be extended within the analysis are those of Ramsay's cycles of control, where a new perspective is offered, and succession within the firm, which extends the work of Gouldner (1955) and Burawoy (1972). These are in addition to Rothschild (2016) and Rothschild and Whitt (1986) on the conditionalities of avoiding the degeneration thesis, along with control and power in the organisation through the lens of the Tannenbaum's Control Graph (1986) and Lukes's (2005) exposition on power. These were all selected as they were totemic of dominant themes within both the literature combined with the themes emergent from active discussions with the workers themselves; those of succession and a culture of ownership. In this way a dialogic relationship emerged between the theory and the actions taking place within the participatory research.

A Note on Participation in Analysis

Throughout this research there has been an emphasis on democratic engagement with the participants being the key drivers of the research. As Nind (2011), citing Walmsley and Johnson, writes 'one of the most important questions in evaluating whether research has been inclusive and empowering is, 'who analyses the data and how?'' (2011:354).

Throughout the research there has been continuous participant validation or member checking (Nind, 2011:355) and at each point of the cycles, as elaborated on in Chapter Five, participants were engaged in extensive 'collaborative 'sense-making' (Nicholls, 2009:124).

This 'collective-reflexivity' entails:

simultaneously being receptive to new cultural domains of understanding and attempting to maintain space for this throughout the entire research process by

ceding researcher control beyond the initial phase of negotiation, and extending participation into data collection, analysis and distribution (Nicholls, 2009:124)

The iterative reflexivity that was required by the group formed an essential part of the production of *knowledge* and *transformative action* within the Inquiry Group (Cordeiro et al., 2017:401).

There is a criticism of some, more managerialist, perspectives of Participatory Action Research (PAR), which are deemed not to 'necessarily make them [the participants] conscious of the social constraints they are subjected to' (Cordeiro et al., 2017:403), however this carries with it an implicit assumption that 'consciousness' is introduced to the group by an external party, rather than it emerging organically. The approach that is taken throughout this research, which is very much informed by its liberatory potential, was one whereby the Inquiry Group was led by the participants with an explicit understanding that their conclusions, actions, and development of knowledge were to be legitimate if they deemed them to be so, and not introduced from the outside.

One of the criticisms of PAR is that there is 'the assumption that critical reflection will automatically lead to learning and action and ultimately to social transformation' (Chiu, 2006:184) and that 'Seldom are social theories drawn upon explicitly to support analysis' (Chiu, 2006:184). The use of the Extended Case Method is to explicitly designed to address this criticism, as well as drawing on the 'dialectic tradition of Marx and Hegel to analyze the historical and structural forces that shape society as a whole' (Wadham and Warren, 2014:8).

This analysis Chapter rests heavily upon the analysis already undertaken by the participants, the evidence gathered throughout, internal documents and the *Inquiry Group Interim Report* written with their recommendations, reflection and actions. The further discussion undertaken here reflects what Walmsley and Johnson refer to as 'an element of theorizing that involves connecting data to the wider world of ideas' (2003 cited Nind, 2011:358). The Inquiry Group understood that my positionality as a researcher, as well as a colleague and manager, would result in my analysis too, and that this would potentially be from a different perspective. This analysis has also been shared with the Inquiry Group for their views too, although, again they appreciated that the *Inquiry Group Interim Report* and the continued work of the Group would fork away from this and continue to be developed as the company transitioned to employee ownership. In this context the knowledge continued to develop and emerge within the business rather than being 'extracted' (Nind, 2011:359) for the research alone.

The Process of Analysis

For the analysis in this Chapter I will develop the stages defined by Burawoy (1985, 1991, 1998) within the Extended Case Method, whereby researchers:

are interested not only in learning about a specific social situation, which is the concern of the participant, but also in learning from that social situation. In contrast to the participants, we want to be able to make causal claims that have validity beyond the situation we study. It is the task of methodology to explicate methods of turning observations into explanations, data into theory (1991:5).

As discussed within Chapter Four, the Extended Case Method has four elements of reflexive science, namely *Intervention, Process, Structuration* and *Reconstruction* (Burawoy, 1998:14-15). Conscious intervention within the business in the form of dialogic research 'enjoys what positive science separates: participant and observer, knowledge and social situation, situation and its field of location, folk theory and academic theory' (1998: 14). The process chosen for the 'aggregation of *situational knowledge into social process*' (1998:15) was the collaboration utilising Participatory Action Research creating a democratised and locally valuable view of the single case.

The further steps of *Structuration* and *Reconstruction* are to broaden the context to 'move beyond *social practices to delineate the social forces*' (1998:15) and then to return to its impact on the individual or specific situation. Essential within all these steps is 'dwelling in' theory (1998:5) whereby:

Theories do not spring tabula rasa from the data but are carried forward through intellectual debate and division. They then reenter the wider world of participants, there to be adopted, refuted, and extended in intended and unintended ways (1998:15).

Within the Extended Case Method the development of theory 'is realized not through induction of new theory from the ground up but through the failure and the *reconstruction of existing theory*' (Burawoy, 1991:6). Utilising this approach this analysis approaches the key theories explored within the literature review to code the evidence gathered with the:

theoretical categories adopted ... seek[ing] to locate the social processes observed within a wider determining context. In so doing, the study both tests and extends the theory (Wadham and Warren, 2014:10).

This coding of theory within the evidence is specifically designed to look for refutation, however this is not in order to dismiss the theory in question, rather to "refute the refutation" by making our theory stronger' (Burawoy, 1991a:10).

The Specific Context

This research was carried out in a regional bookselling chain comprising of thirty shops, originally founded in the nineteenth century. The company is currently a family business now transitioning to become a wholly employee owned enterprise, with shares held in trust on behalf of workers. For this analysis the company has been anonymised as BookCo and identifying features amended to reflect this. Any quotes from media sources about the business have been paraphrased to maintain this anonymity and are referenced accordingly.

The research at BookCo has been undertaken at a time where the retail industry is in flux, where jobs are under pressure due to falling consumer spending, rising proportional fixed costs and widescale transformation as a result of technological change and online competition. In this environment there has been a necessity to move away from traditional hierarchies to more empowerment/responsible autonomy within job design. This context has required companies to look to intrinsic engagement is due to fewer managers, higher customer service expectations (a move to 'experiential' service (Wallace-Stephens and Lockey, 2019:12) driven by low financial reward, declining sales in High Streets and the ascendancy of online retail (BRC 2016:5). Although the analysis will be abstracted to be specific to the bookselling context where it is situated, and does not profess to draw conclusions more broadly, it does necessarily reflect the pressures within the industry as a whole. The precariousness of retail work, growth in flexibility and delayering, for example, are common features in all advanced economies (Karambakhsh. 2020:119) and are themes that will be drawn upon to analyse and contextualise workers' social relations in production.

The UK retail industry is being transformed by the impact of changing technology on the sector. The British Retail Consortium (BRC) has predicted the loss of as many as 900,000 jobs in retail by 2025 (BRC 2016:5), and have further reported 2019 is the worst year on record with overall sales falling (Butler, 2020), it is likely that the impact of COVID-19 in 2020 will have only worsened this position. A shift to online shopping since 1998 has seen declining consumer spending on the high street (BRC 2016:5) this, combined with government action to increase the minimum, or national living wage, has resulted in a high proportion of fixed costs, with a resulting impact upon profitability 'Average profit margins (EBITDA / sales) have fallen from 8.7% in 2013 to 6.6% today [2018]' (BRC 2018:2). This

declining profitability has created a “structural shift’ in the composition of their businesses’ (Wallace-Stephens and Lockey, 2019:3) resulting in a change in profile of jobs away from front line customer service towards warehouse, delivery and logistics roles (Wallace-Stephens and Lockey 2019:4). For retailers, job flexibility has also become central to a restructuring of the industry because of technology shifts with a vision of ‘Simplification of business processes without loss of quality or customer service’ (BRC, 2016: 13).

Although the sector has seen some of the faster increases in wages than the national average (BRC, 2018:2) in recent years they remained well below all industry averages with average pay in retail in 2018 only £8.80 per hour, which is only 69% of all industry average of £12.73 per hour (BRC, 2018:2). With high turnover of staff, a fifth of workers ‘enter or exit the sector each quarter’ (Gardiner and Tomlinson 2019:7), ‘...the overall picture of the industry epitomises contemporary precarious work, particularly that of retail workers in advanced economies, with characteristics such as low wages, underemployment, and ‘flexibility’” (Karambakhsh, 2020:119).

The industry’s need for flexibility, in addition to low pay, is also combined with a desire from retail companies to raise levels of customer service in competition to pure play ecommerce as; ‘one retailer suggested, “customer expectations will be so much higher, so our staff will have to be much more credible, otherwise people will just shop online”’ (Wallace-Stephens and Lockey, 2019:12). This poses a challenge to companies about how to achieve this. It is not unusual in retail, or other service industries, to ‘use customers to control workers’ (Burawoy. 1996:298) as Wallace-Stephen and Lockey recount:

...retailers expressed scepticism about ‘whip cracking managers’ suggesting that ‘data will be more of a carrot than a stick, more about incentives for high performance’. Retailers suggested workers would embrace what might amount to a ‘quantified self’ movement, with data improving job design and empowering individuals (2019:16).

The other reason for this scepticism may well be the lack of managers within retail to crack any whips (BRC, 2016a:8), with cost cutting leading to the removal of a significant proportion of previously existing hierarchy within organisations. This restructuring has resulted in many retail workers finding it hard to progress with diminished opportunities to do so available (Tait, 2017:26). Many reports (BRC, 2016, Tait, 2017, Wallace-Stephens and Lockey 2019) suggest that the structural shifts in the industry will result in fewer but better jobs with the potential for improved productivity to be shared with staff with retailers ‘rethinking how they deploy and engage workers, actively trying to restructure

employment... seeking to engage their employees in driving forward the business' (BRC, 2018:2).

Burawoy writes that Edwards (1979) shows 'how new institutional arrangements for the control of labor are created in response to the pressures generated by new technologies and changes in the labor process' (Burawoy and Olin Wright, 2002: 477). Retail is in the midst of such a change and the ideological changes underway as a result of this transition should assist in exposing the effective changes in relations in production.

Bookselling as a subsector within retail faced the impact of technology comparatively early, with Amazon.com launching with books as their core product offering in 1995. In 1995 there were 1,894 bookshops in the UK (Flood, 2020) now there are fewer than half that number, however the Booksellers Association (BA) have reported a recent change to this trend with a modest rise:

to 890 shops – up from 883 in 2018 and 868 in 2017, when indie bookshops increased by just one. Just seven extra shops may seem like a small victory, but this year-on-year increase comes after more than 20 years of decline and marks the third consecutive year of growth (Flood, 2020).

In this sense then bookselling could be seen as representing the more 'transitioned' part of retail. Bookshops broadly exist within a delayed and consolidated industry that already has access to a staff profile with a 'definite disjunction between the knowledge and skill envisioned for the ideal bookstore staff, and the low, retail-level wages generally paid' (Miller, 2006: 207). In this sense, booksellers represented the more educated and autonomous staff which retail wishes to replicate.

Over the period of the study BookCo had 457 staff, of which 251 were female (55%) and 206 were male (45%). This reflects the gender split within retail more generally with 46% of roles being held by men (Gardiner and Tomlinson, 2019:7). Of the employees 243 (53%) were full time and 214 (47%) were part time – including 93, nearly half of all part-timers, on zero hours contracts (only 24 of which are male). Some of the shops which BookCo operates are seasonal and dependent upon casual labour for booksellers at this point, and they form the bulk of the zero-hour staff as opposed to having staff working on zero hour contracts every week. The company's median gender pay gap was 1.9% in April 2020 (Company Statement) the mean gender pay gap of 13.06% was higher, and reflects that the highest earners are predominantly male, which is reflected in three of the five executive directors being male.

Average years of service was 8.64 years and ranges from 50 years to new starters. 156 staff (34%) have worked for BookCo for ten years or more, 64% of them full time workers. This group, including management, has an average wage of £11.62 per hour (£10.67 for those with fewer years' experience), the average age being 39. 203, 44% of booksellers at BookCo are earning £8.72 per hour (the current UK minimum, or national living, wage rate) 245, 54% earn less than the 'real living wage' of £9.30 with the entire business having an average hourly wage of £11.07. In this regard the company is consistent with BRC figures on average earnings in retail (BRC, 2018). It is also recognised that low pay to one member of staff may well not be to another, as Ussher points out there are different attitudes to pay based upon the different segments of low paid employees (Ussher, 2016:10) e.g., transitional student employees are unlikely to regard themselves as low paid.

As with the macro changes seen in the shift in roles in retail, BookCo now has a significant contingent of temporary distribution centre staff who are employed as agency workers, which can comprise of up to 100 staff in any day, and a smaller group of more technical ecommerce personnel. The latter are employed directly and earn a significant premium on bookshop staff. This bifurcation could result in a number of workers in the company having little or no role in any future participatory democracy. This raises a question about the importance of the removal of division of labour within worker owned firms, with increasingly technical staff, something that will be returned to be examined later. BookCo's staff turnover is relatively high with 36.27% (Internal email July 2020) although this places the company at around eight percent below the retail sector, with low wages prevalent, and few opportunities for promotion, often the best course of action to improve pay is to leave (Ussher, 2016:11).

With the extended tenure of some staff, with over a third having more than ten years' service, this also potentially splits the business into those looking for a more extended career and those looking for temporary work, which could have implications for structures of representation and ownership if such a large proportion of employee owners are transitory. With 47% of staff in part-time roles this also raises challenges for communication and representation, in addition to the geographical split of staff across many shops across the country, all of which are elements that have contributed to low unionisation in retail (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2020).

Booksellers, along with other retail workers 'face an increasingly challenging trading environment, with many being reported as falling within the so-called JAMS ('Just About

Managing’ (Cebr, 2017). There has been a significant trend to consolidation of the larger and mid-sized chains in recent years with investment company Elliott Advisors acquiring Waterstones, the UK largest specialist book retailer in 2018 (Campbell, 2018) then subsequently buying Foyles also in 2018 (Page and Jones, 2018), Barnes and Noble in the US in 2019 (Chandler, 2019) and online retailer Wordery in 2020 (Comerford, 2020). For BookCo this has added to a sense of battling to retain their independence and feeling that they are competing against Amazon and the more faceless chains. When Waterstones staff, with a similar staff pay profile to BookCo, carried out a very public campaign to raise wages, this was not publicly echoed within the smaller BookCo. In a booklet produced by Waterstones staff profiling forty booksellers’ lives, one worker writes how:

Recommending books, discovering new ones, reading to help your knowledge and give better service (and help wonderful authors), these are really great parts of the job. Unfortunately it can be difficult to see it positively as that when we don’t earn enough. It makes giving great customer service a real challenge when you feel undervalued and overworked. There’s potential for great careers out of bookselling, but it isn’t worth it if you cannot afford to eat or pay rent (Waterstones Staff, 2019:9).

Contributing to the antagonistic staff relations at Waterstones was the announcement of a profit – something BookCo has not delivered in recent years - in addition to the remuneration of its CEO which was perceived to be out of kilter with the low paid staff. As a Waterstones bookseller writes, ‘to say that we are rewarded with a stimulating job, when in 2016 the directors were rewarded with a stimulating £2 million bonus, is a slap in the face to anyone who has dedicated years to the company on the shop floor’ (Waterstones Staff, 2019:14). Similar conflict was evident at the, now closed, Borders book chain who were in receipt of:

...poor pay and lack of benefits that characterize bookstore work in general. But their resentment was fuelled by the evolving corporate culture at Borders, which put a premium on satisfying investors by producing high profits, and by the company’s ambitious plans directed at capturing market share (Miller, 2006:205).

Bookselling, although it is directly comparable with other retail on broader context of pay, profit and precarity of many of its jobs, does tend to have a very distinct view of itself. This view is broadly reflected by individual booksellers, whether they be employees of a chain or working in independents, as Stevenson writes ‘Bookselling has always attracted eccentric and interesting employers and employees’ (2021:212).

The Booksellers Association in its *Bookselling for Britain* report (2016) records the book trade as not only making an important financial contribution to the economy but also that:

Bookselling helps underpin excellence in education and research, promotes literacy and reading for pleasure, develops present and future authors and writers, while preserving those of the past, and helps drive innovation and excellence in new forms of reading (Booksellers Association, 2016:2).

There is always a danger of a romanticism of those who work in the 'book world', however it is also true that for many people there are distinct roles to be played for booksellers in the culture of a society and this also attracts particular people to these types of role.

Booksellers were described as Christophe Charle as '*des hommes doubles* experts who participate in both highbrow and popular culture, who build bridges between producers and consumers of cultural goods while acting as critics and filters' (Cocaign, 2012:221).

Many publishers play a far more glamorous role in the history of the trade and are often presented as pioneering or entrepreneurial individuals driving their companies, and the cultural wealth of the country, forward; for example, Allan Lane of Penguin or Victor Gollancz (Cocaign, 2012:220). Booksellers were more often cast in the role of 'mere shopkeepers, with their handling of books lending an added dignity to their 'honest trade' (Cocaign, 2012:221), and as such Cocaign writes that the 'decisive role of booksellers as political and cultural mediators remains largely unexplored' (2012:221). It would be easy to generalise about those attracted to bookselling, indeed, to also rely on a stereotype of what bookselling means today, with significant direct sales via the internet, supermarkets and other more general routes to customer (Flood, 2021).

However, those who *identify* as 'independent booksellers', and many of those working for BookCo would typify this, demonstrate a level of being what Miller (2006) defines as 'reluctant capitalists' who have more concerns than 'a single-minded focus on profit' (Miller 2006:165). BookCo does not currently make a profit, indeed the pre-requisite for it becoming employee owned is for it to do so, and for this to be sustainable. This presents a challenge to some in the business and may present a further one within a culture of ownership where questions of strategy and profit intersect.

All the statistics reported within this Chapter so far go some way to describe the low paid positions and the precariousness of retail, but do not do the people who work in the business justice, who are often erudite, educated and believe passionately in the craft of what they do. When describing the possible typologies of employee owned businesses within the literature review there existed both 'mission based' businesses, often driven

more by passion than profit and those 'bequeathed' by founders or family owners.

Recognising that BookCo has elements of both is important in understanding the engagement of staff with the idea of employee ownership.

This hybrid position may well also pose additional challenges to the company in addition to those more commonly experienced by employee owned businesses that come into being as a result of being a bequeathed family firm. For example, engagement with the idea of the change to employee ownership seemed to be less of an issue than some have reported with bequeathed firms, however this brought with it potentially higher expectations on engagement, and a level of cynicism too, as will be discussed.

In the long quote that follows a BookCo bookseller sums up their feelings about being a bookseller which paints a picture of both the business, and of some of the staff that work there. This was written unpromoted whilst on furlough from the business with the shops closed due to the pandemic:

What's amazing about BookCo is the trust it puts in the hands of its staff.

Some of my colleagues are students and recent university graduates. Some are immigrants and expats. Some are life-long residents. For some this was their first job. Some have been selling books since long before I was born. There is a diverse constellation of different ways we are connected to the city and university, and the bookshop recognizes what a strength this is.

I first started working here shortly before I turned twenty, after volunteering with the Literary Festival. And from the week I started at BookCo I was made to feel my input counted. Everyone who works here can and does contribute to the look and culture of the shop through displays, events and promotional ideas. All booksellers are pushed to contribute to the structure of the shop. BookCo recognizes the value in different perspectives, and we have slowly built a vast and spacious shop we can use to promote authors whose voices we value, through free and paid events. We've hosted open mic nights, a reading group for teens, and charity quizzes.

And because genuineness is prioritized, there's a culture of integrity. We're not just going to smilingly point you to the same three Sunday Times bestsellers no matter your query.

My colleagues are experts in their departments, and we all work together as a shop to provide recommendations that are both knowledgeable and from the heart.

I love my role, particularly, because I'm involved in the problem-solving aspect of the shop. I'm on furlough currently, a kind of luxurious but disconcerting limbo I'm sure a lot of us are familiar with. But this what I think of when asked to describe my role, besides the general stocking, shelving, tidying and re-tidying that we all participate in to keep the shop alive.

My days consisted of helping people figure out the books they want, reserve the books they want, order the books they want, and ship the books they want to loved ones. I invoiced books to college fellows and issued gift cards to prize-

winning students. I wrapped gifts. I arranged for books to be mailed all over the world. I processed endless online orders and reservations.

I helped people track down books when they can't quite remember the title or author, or both. I gave out free promotional tote bags with the purchase of buzzy books. I answered the same two quiz questions for countless tourist groups. I gave directions to nearby attractions. I gave directions to the loos. I gushed about our upcoming events, some of which I ended up hosting. I took many, many calls each day and I transferred even more. I came to know so many regulars.

They told me stories and jokes, and gave me book recommendations.

And I miss it dearly.

During my short time in [...], my life has gone through some difficult and painful upheavals.

I was disowned by my family, due to our differing views on sexuality and religion, and I lived with an abusive landlord for a time. And I cannot overstate how helpful it was to go to work every day at a place where I knew I'd be valued for who I am, not just the tasks I fulfil.

I've worked on the faceless, spin-cycle side of retail before. I understand what it's like to robotically upsell to a weary audience who simply wants to get on with their day. That's why I'm grateful to work here.

We have the autonomy to be sincere. To evolve. To specialize. To truly connect.

(Shopfloor Bookseller, 2020)

The analysis of the research will now proceed to examine the data by revisiting selected theories; Ramsay's *Cycles of Control* (1977), the concept of 'succession' from both Burawoy (1972) and Gouldner (1955), power and control utilising Tannenbaum (1974, 1986) and Lukes (2005) in addition to Rothschild and Whitt (1986) and Rothschild (2016) on avoiding degeneration in worker owned firms. These theories will be shown to fall short in being sufficiently able to fully explain the data as found in this research, however each theory will also be reconstructed and improved through this process (Burawoy, 1998:15).

A New Perspective on the Cycles of Control

Situating this research in relation to Ramsay's (1977) *Cycles of Control* theory, as previously examined within the literature review, is to both further develop the idea that participation is *negotiated, partial and historically specific* and to reassess the theory's contemporary applicability. Ackers et al. (1992) previously critiqued the use of the concept of cycles of control, during a period which they describe as a 'radical disjuncture' (1992:281) from the old industrial relations and a new era when 'management converts to a new individualist HRM agenda' (1992:281) in the late 1980s, early 1990s. The new context they saw as one where the actions and motivations of individual firms and management could not be

explained by more macro, systemic, changes within capitalism. This analysis takes the position that both are necessary, as would indeed did Ramsay (1993:78).

The booksellers in this research find themselves in a very specific context due to the decline of the high street and pressures upon profitability, combined with their experience of beginning to transition to employee ownership. Additionally, with the decline of organised labour (and perhaps even before that) the more traditional industrial relations stance of taking of workers' collective objectives as being the 'primacy of democracy itself' and managers' the 'goal of efficiency' (Ramsay, 1977:498), is questionable – the very ascendancy of participation today being reframed more by technological shift than counter-pressures inside the firm.

That is not to say that the objective of the 'representatives of capital' (albeit that managers would be unlikely to see themselves in such stark terms today) is *not* efficiency. In the rationale for transition for BookCo to employee ownership was explicitly that:

I believe that every single one of our people is important, and can, if respected and encouraged, contribute ideas to make [BookCo] more efficient and innovative
(Owner and member of the founding family).

Losing over £9m in the year prior to the announcement of a transition to EO, BookCo was in dire need of profitability and being more 'efficient and innovative'. As Cohen (1987) writes '...managerial activity in the pursuit of 'profitability' may entail 'control', the organisation of the labour process has very little to do with 'control' in the sense of a power struggle, and everything to do with 'efficiency' (1987:43).

Ramsay reflected upon the cycles of control thesis amidst the beginnings of the shift towards more use of technology in the 1980s, questioned whether the sharing of power was an indicator of the process of change rather than new 'fixed' social relations:

Instead of assuming that a major technological transition ushers in a new era, for some sort of enhanced autonomy for the worker, would it not be reasonable to posit autonomy and the problematic nature of labour control for management as a particular phenomenon of the transitional period in any industry itself? In the early stages of routinisation and monitoring of tasks is still in development, and information technology tends to appear in a somewhat higgledy-piddledy fashion. This 'organic' situation may appear for some time, particularly as the new technology continues to be elaborated and refined; but one would not expect this to be necessarily a permanent state of affairs (1985:73).

Edwards (1979) wrote how 'new institutional arrangements for the control of labor are created in response to the pressures generated by new technologies and changes in the

labor process' (cited Burawoy and Olin Wright 2002:477). Whether it can be determined if these changes are permanent, or just part of the necessities of technological change is another matter, however as long as workers interests appear aligned with those of efficiency there would appear to be no good reason to change them. Burawoy has written that:

Institutions reveal much about themselves when under stress or in crisis, when they face the unexpected as well as the routine. Instead of prohibition against reactivity, which can never be realized, reflexive science prescribes and takes advantage of intervention (1998:14).

Here the longer-term industry transformation is combined with another variable in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic where the business' technological transformation was accelerated even further, for BookCo this resulted in further redundancies of traditional senior roles and five shop closures.

The transformation happening within retail may have resulted in two very different experiences of control. Those in even quite poorly paid and precarious roles being incorporated into the organisation so extensively that there has been an internalisation of the idea that 'there is no alternative'. Here there is a bifurcation between those individual workers with greater autonomy (but no *power*) and those who exist within a complete panoptical monitoring system which has 'replaced' human management with technological control. For example, at the 'softer' end of this total control, Amazon has looked to 'gamify' fulfilment centre work with 'FC Games' where employees are 'vying for digital rewards that allow them to buy virtual narwhals, dinosaurs and other electronic pets' (Martineau and Stefano, 2021) whilst meeting pick and pack requirements dictated by the mobile technology they carry.

Even companies using these control techniques have begun to question their relations with the humans at the other end of the interface. Jeff Bezos, outgoing CEO of Amazon, wrote in his last annual shareholder letter that 'it's clear to me that we need a better vision for how we create value for employees – a vision for their success' (Bezos, 2021). The solutions he offers are still fairly functional in their approach:

We're developing new automated staffing schedules that use sophisticated algorithms to rotate employees among jobs that use different muscle-tendon groups to decrease repetitive motion and help protect employees from MSD risks (Bezos, 2021).

As Peers (2021) notes Bezos points to ‘value creation’ for each stakeholder and for employees this can be measured by looking at ‘compensation’; ‘Compensation is pay for work done, so it’s a transfer of value, not “value creation”’ (Peers, 2021).

As these different approaches and experiences show, it would be deterministic and unhelpful to try to extend the idea of cycles with a single-minded determination to look for worker pressure on capitalism resulting in the current interest in socialising the firm. In BookCo’s case, rather than constituting an oppositional force to be placated by further incorporation of workers in the firm, the employees were seen to represent the long-term interests of the owning family possibly *more* than management. This is an idea discussed before from writers such as Galbraith (2004) who questioned the more natural alignment of *owners and management* as opposed to *owners and workers*.

In Ramsay’s *Cycles of Control* thesis, the history of participation and its distinctive ‘waves of participation’ (1977:496) evident within it, exhibited three distinctive qualities; to have arisen from a ‘managerial response to threats to management authority’, that they ‘emphasize almost without exception a consensual unitary philosophy, and bear related hallmarks of management ideology’ (1977:496) and that the outcomes of these schemes has been; incorporation to management authority, a decline into ‘triviality’, instability or incorporation (1977:481-2). In his 1977 article, written at a point where he considered participation and industrial democracy ‘rediscovered – again’ (1977:493) he did not address specifically the employee owned or cooperative business, however he did make clear later that he considered that ‘the cooperative is unlikely itself to transform the nature of internal authority relations’ (Ramsay and Haworth, 1984:299-300).

Although management gets to define the flavour of participation in Ramsay’s analysis, what is crucial is that it is in direct response to pressure from workers, resulting in management ‘regaining control by sharing it’ (Ramsay, 1977:494 citing Flanders). Fundamentally, although participative schemes had been extended with the rhetoric of greater profitability ‘the nature of control... stresses ideological gains rather than directly profitable or productive ones’ (Ramsay, 1985:61).

If it were determined that there was currently a fifth cycle of participation, with a growing consensus for more worker participation from both government (Cabinet Office, 2012) and industry (Hamel, 2011), including an increasing number of retail firms (e.g., Richer Sounds, Lush), it would be more problematic to trace this as a direct consequence of worker pressure. As discussed previously, organised labour is at an all-time low in membership

(Office for National Statistics, 2015) - despite high employment. Antagonistic industrial relations have not disappeared entirely, but they would hardly correspond to one of the previous cycles of control identified by Ramsay. The real power therefore in Ramsay's analysis was an insistence on looking at *broader contextual factors* in order to understand local struggles for participatory democracy:

...that progress was neither radical nor irreversible; that the pattern of history showed periods of management concession to labour pressure (though as far as possible on terms preferred by capital) followed by a retreat from these when the challenge receded; and that the resulting schemes had a high failure rate, floundering on the contradiction between the search for consensus and the reality of conflict (Ramsay, 1993:77).

For this reconstruction of theory to move beyond superficial criticisms it is necessary to recapture the theoretical perspective that Ramsay brought to the analysis of participation where it rejected attempts to '*deduce or define* how it worked without proper reference to empirical reality' (Ramsay, 1993:79). This research was undertaken at an intersection of number of crises that of the broader economy, of the retail industry and of the pandemic itself.

Job control, strategic control, and structure

The Inquiry Group found that colleagues were keen to retain the job control and devolved decision-making that was the result of the closure of BookCo's head office in 2010, which was already using the language of employee ownership as the motivating factor for the 'power shift to the stores'. Both the first and second sessions of the Inquiry Group made this point quite clearly:

When discussion what an employee owned organisation could look like, it was agreed that it could actually look exactly as it does now. That the business as it stands is, certainly in terms of day-to-day management and decision making quite well devolved to those at the front line. On a number of occasions, it was pointed out that the reduction on size of 'Head office'/Central Support in 2010 necessitated this shift.

Although the business predicted a return to profitability in 2011/12 it has subsequently failed to do so, with resultant environmental pressure leading to the closure of a number of bookshops - the further five closures in 2020 reducing the chain to 23 permanent sites (down from 37 in 2010). The gap between promises of a quick transition to employee ownership and what has been delivered has not been lost on many staff. This is especially

true for those whose roles have been made redundant, one commented to the trade press that there is a plan to:

transition to a John Lewis-inspired employee partnership model after reaching consistent profitability. In the meantime, frontline booksellers, goods-in staff, accountants, and others have had little say or insight into the direction the company is taking. I have often felt that the bosses in [...] didn't realise how much knowledge, insight, and experience they had on their hands in the staff at my distant branch. Now we have been let go, and it is too late to give us the role we deserved in steering the business into the black. It strikes me that for an employee-led partnership model to be a success, the employees who will take over should be the ones to reach the profitability conditions to make that happen.

Bookseller in a closing branch

Ramsay questioned whether a meaningful distinction could be made between job level control (also called responsible autonomy) and strategic control:

...it is open to question whether control at difference levels, if it were possible to talk in such terms, would be commensurate at all; if the separation can be made, the comparability is also lost, and it becomes meaningless to try to 'sum' the two (1985:61-2).

It is certainly true that the Inquiry Group struggled to pinpoint control, to measure it (one commented that it was not a 'bucket of control') yet they did want to protect what they had, often on an individual or small team level as opposed to any introduction of a collective structure – even if this was employee not management driven. It was also the case that, as has already been referenced, there was a recognition when control was absent and when employees had no control over a decision.

In the sense that control is an ideological construct then it is difficult to define whether people felt they had *more* control than they did than - for example ten years prior when head office was closed, but they did vocalise the removal of management as leading to more autonomy, which they valued. Although it is true that control cannot easily be quantified or mapped – as the task the group failed to do in one of the early sessions – it is also true that the requirements on the business to become 'more efficient and innovative' in order to compete were central to the shift to the sharing of control. In this regard it would be true to say that:

to separate job control from social relations of surplus creation is precisely to fragment the 'circuit of capital', and to detach work itself (a technical process) as one arena of struggle from organisational (social) control (Ramsay, 1985:62).

This also reflects, at a purely instrumentalist ideological level, the greater efficiency and ownership which Price (2017) argued that the structure of the John Lewis Partnership

enjoyed, reflecting the idea of 'self control' taking the place of control by others (Tannenbaum, 1986:284), in addition to mutual and peer control (1986:285).

The Research Group certainly placed a great deal of weight on the existing ability for speed and responsibility that they had in their roles, and indeed they saw employee ownership as a potential extension of this, as opposed to a dramatic shift from how the business ran now. However, as the quote from the bookseller whose shop was closed, not everyone felt this way, and at times of even more pressure and contraction than there was little in the way of autonomy or agency for the individuals involved. As one of the Inquiry Group commented after the pandemic had started:

The current situation gives a perfect example of a situation that the company needs to remain agile in its decision-making processes; it points to me, even more clearly than before, that it should be outlined during the transition to EO what sort of decisions go through which decision-making process – reacting to a crisis like this cannot be held back by a potentially sluggish, democratic process. Naturally, no-one could really predict something like this happening; it would have been hard to state in advance “in case there’s a global pandemic here’s who will make decisions”, but there can at least be a structure in place to facilitate rapid response when needed.

Bookseller April 2020

This starts to draw out some of the numerous contradictions which the Inquiry Group attempted to address, if not resolve. The Group were keen to retain, to not reintroduce levels of control and decision making which had been removed. They suspected any reintroduction of hierarchy would make the business less agile and interfere with their own job level autonomy. However, they were also clear that there did need to be more than just a 'culture of ownership', although they saw this as important, as there would need to be clear and transparent ways for people to be involved in decision making:

...if the Board is a reporting, not a decision making function, then having employee representatives does not deliver this.

Inquiry Group Session Three

This was also reflected in the response to the question asked of Company B by the booksellers:

Is it practically feasible to achieve consensus, if sought, without wasting a lot of time and resources?

No.

The overriding *logic* of the financial position of the business was also inherent in the devolution of power also informed the conclusions the Group made about how the business should operate under EO. There was a broad consensus around the 'need' for a level of professional managerial co-ordination. This was even more true when discussing specifically *technical roles*, in a sizable business e.g., the expertise required for software engineering, finance and distribution and from people in those roles the bookselling on the shopfloor. Consequently, it was accepted that there was no likelihood that people could be skilled enough to change easily between them. This was one of the stipulations Rothschild and Whitt (2009) made for a cooperative workplace to survive and this thesis shall return to their contingencies later in more detail. Rather the Inquiry Group highlighted that:

...shops (and DC) often do try to ensure that all staff can operate in all roles even when this is unlikely to be the case at company level (i.e. across technical functions such as development/finance) and that there was a collective responsibility taken

Inquiry Group Session One

This area was highlighted as a potential area for further discussion in the support from Company 'B' which also had many specialised roles within its smaller business:

The tension created between 'technical' and 'owner' roles can be fruitful.

Also think about how the elected representatives may relate to technical functions where different views arise.

Company B Director

This gradually led the Inquiry Group to place an emphasis on developing ownership as a shared understanding for all staff irrespective of role. Additionally, that becoming an owner should not be an automatic function of being employed, rather 'there should be training delivered, and time served (a year was loosely discussed)' (Session Three). As the Group progressed there was more emphasis placed upon starting to move towards a democracy as soon as practicable, and not waiting for the formal, legal, transition to EO. Central to this thought was the desire to make sure that it should be clear to all 'on 'why becoming an EO' rather than just that it's being 'gifted' to staff' (Session Three).

Decomposition of hierarchy and fantasies of management control

The current mood music of capitalism is neatly summarised by the editor of *Wired* magazine:

Hierarchical management configurations were already being replaced by structures that devolved responsibility to teams that were judged not on how long they sat at their monitors each day, but how they could work together to produce results. The rise of trust within business could be the most lasting and impactful trend to emerge from the Covid-19 era (Williams, 2020:14).

Aglietta (2015) has written of both the driver for the decomposition of hierarchy within the firm, but also of the broader societal impact of this, where 'Fordism more or less provided the conditions in which individuals could vie to assert their individual aspirations in the legitimate belief that they were contributing to social progress' (2015:422). Already referenced is the difficulty in gaining promotions within a delayed retail, with traditional career paths closed off and wage increases hard to come by as a result. For many employees, increases in the living wage driven by the government have become the key driver for pay rises and those with small pay differentials for supervisory work finding that the difference is even smaller than it was prior to the increase as companies decline to maintain the difference.

BookCo had been no different in offering this potential progression:

...all apprentices 'had director's pens in their pockets'; they had every chance to end up on the Board. His father had drawn his managerial colleagues from the 'floor', and this tradition continued. In 1969, when [...] took over as chairman, there were no less than five former apprentices serving as directors.

BookCo Company History

In the new economic reality, it is not only workers who find this path removed from them, the delayering and erosion of hierarchy is also:

penetrating every socio-professional stratum. No longer do qualifications, seniority or hierarchical responsibility guarantee recognized positions in organizations (Aglietta, 2015:424).

Aglietta sees this as leading to the abandonment of the idea of incorporation, 'a remodelling of the division of labour in the light of technical progress and global competition... chronic symptoms of exclusion... in which the integration of the labour force is no longer on the agenda' (Aglietta, 2015:425). The counter pressure to this is the fear of instability and of social destabilisation, however it is possible that this fear is a component of the forces driving the new flavour of participation.

The Inquiry Group in BookCo, as already discussed, were keen to retain the control shift which had taken place due to the decomposition of hierarchy, which also raises a number of other contextual questions. There was a recognition and desire to avoid a new, starker, distinction between manager and managed within any new structures of control. For example, descriptors such as 'worker representatives' or 'partner director' as a title for the board were strongly disliked as in both underplaying the role as merely 'representative' and also for, what was perceived as its inherently divisive nature; those who are *not management*. Consequently, the group opted for the title of 'owner directors' combined with an owners job description to apply to everyone, managers and booksellers alike, who worked in the organisation.

Conversely existing directors and the non-executive representatives of the family owner appeared to take a range of positions on what might happen post transition. In the last few years, the close monitoring of the executive directors and frequency of board meetings had become a source of contention. As a result, the directors mostly reported that strategic decisions happened outside of the board and there was a recurring theme that once the business had become employee owned that these potentially difficult meetings would become a thing of the past. It certainly was not clear whether management, in particular directors, felt they would get a free hand post transition, but it also was clear that they felt that the employee owned business could be *managed*. One senior manager commented:

On a personal level I think it's better not to have specific vehicle charged with being the place 'we do' strategy.

In BookCo strategy is often initiated by individuals and then discussed and adopted collectively. This depends on a huge number of factors - does it cover all or part of the business, time, cost, expertise, skill, individual authority, opportunity, threat, shareholder support etc. As such the inception and delivery of some strategies are very collegiate and others almost entirely individual. However there is a shared collective responsibility amongst the Exec team (and wider management) to ensure the success of whatever strategy is adopted. It is equally critical that there is alignment and support for the strategy from and amongst the non-exec. The Board meeting is the primary vehicle for stress testing that alignment.

Discussion with senior manager February 2020

The board could be seen as having merely symbolic power however that symbolism did not appear to be diminished in the transition to employee ownership. How this would be resolved is yet to be seen. The use by the group of 'owners' rather than workers or partners demonstrated a strong understanding of the inherent power in this descriptor, despite it not 'realisable' in terms of selling shares or the true ownership of capital in the

traditional sense. This echoed the power of a shared ownership 'vision' from the Inquiry Group, for both management and for workers, in order to share and create strategic objectives outside of technical specialisms, and as a way to resolve conflict.

We find ourselves not in a position whereby Ramsay's (1977) *cycles of control* are to be dismissed, rather that the perspective that participation is *negotiated, partial and historically specific* exposes a new fifth cycle born of a combination of the very decline of organised labour, in combination with changes to the organisation accelerated by industry shifts in production and technology. Whereas in the past the underlying pressure was to 'regain control by sharing it' (Ramsay, 1977:494 citing Flanders), the new cycle is more focused on regaining profitability by sharing the responsibility. This new participation does appear to be a more permanent feature of the implementation of new technology and of 'industry 4.0' (Lasi, et al., 2014:239), however the outcomes from these changes are still undetermined. The inherent contradictions within these changes of control in this cycle offer opportunity for change as well as serving the needs of production.

Themes of Succession & the social reproduction of relations

We might call this a deep notion of social reproduction as it depends upon the internalization of the principles of the social structure (Burawoy, 2012:190)

Within the initial literature review there were typological references to various employee owned company types, this included that of the bequeathed company. Growing in popularity (EOA, 2018) due to tax benefits, if not ideological ones, with individual capitalist owners, employee owned businesses are often 'sold' to employees as the best way to ensure the continued survival of the owner's legacy. This route is seen as far less risk than the transition of ownership to another, more traditionally structured, company. The literature on these bequeathed companies often characterised them as having less democratic engagement (Carter, 2006:416), often due to the lack of worker agency in their establishment and falling foul of Ramsay's outcomes of triviality and apathy as a result.

One of the explicit roles of the Critical Participatory Action Research was to engender some of the active discussions and input into how the company should be run by the new employee owners. This had the potential to open new and conflictual spaces to question how things were done, and how they should be done. The very act of succession has not been significantly investigated in the current literature and this does appear to be a fruitful area of further investigation.

Gouldner (1955) and Burawoy (1972) wrote about different types of organisational succession, managerial and colonial to post-colonial, respectively. Our task was to consider a different sort of succession, that of a change of ownership from family to workers. In this change there was a defined structure, a stipulation that employee ownership be, broadly, reflected in a mirroring of the representative democracy in place at the John Lewis Partnership. Given this was defined in advance of the formation of the Booksellers' Inquiry Group it remained throughout as something for the Group to test their suppositions against. Would, for example, having employee representatives on the board help address our agreed challenge of involving the new owners in strategic decision making? These structural restraints were not defined in detail, consequently they afforded the Group an opportunity to keep revisiting them as the inquiry progressed.

As far as they were defined these, proposed, representative structures appeared to embody qualities which the family owners wished to bequeath to the new owners, those of stability, success (having been stipulated prior to the John Lewis Partnership's challenges in more recent years) and, ultimately, whether consciously or not, managerial control. Given that the John Lewis Partnership had their structure established in the early Twentieth Century the challenge of superimposing this on a retailer in the Twenty First could well be seen as both eccentric and raise questions as to its efficacy in a business struggling to adapt to changing circumstances.

Given the period of time which had elapsed between the announcement of the desire to transition, and the time of the inquiry, the proposed structure had not changed but the business had. When it was first announced in 2010 there was a sizable head office, a traditional hierarchy and significant retail estate, in the intervening years all of these had diminished. The changes in retail, necessitated by broader industry shifts, resulted in the significant pairing down of the hierarchy and almost abandonment of 'head office' outside of finance support. New roles and teams had grown, ecommerce being the principle of these, with internal software development, but also a sizable contingent of temporary staff in the distribution centre and customer service. Somewhat paradoxically the board had remained at the same size, out of kilter with the changes in the rest of the business.

As already discussed, this external industry pressure had resulted in changes which brought with them a combination of effects. These included what was perceived as greater job control and autonomy for front line booksellers and a greater speed of decision making as a result. There was concern from the Inquiry Group that changes around structure and

representation could put at risk what were seen as positive changes around this greater autonomy. During the COVID-19 Pandemic it was asked by the Group how an Employee Council could have responded quickly enough, in this context the management team was granted significant leeway to centralise and make quick decisions on behalf of the employees.

For the business, the explicitly agreed strategic objective was one of survival and reaching profitability, a goal that would also trigger the move to employee partnership. Given the context of significant retail closures on the high street and the increasing precarity of roles in bookselling the environment also contributed to underline this stated objective. This context led to shops, although holding the power to manage their budgets locally, not increasing hourly pay rates for booksellers, the logic of their own context empowering and disempowering simultaneously.

In Gouldner's (1955) examination of a *natural succession* he described the appointment of Peele as a new manager at an American gypsum plant and the change this succession engendered. The subsequent move from 'an indulgency pattern' of control to a punishment bureaucracy (Gouldner, 1955:72-73) is exposed as the key driver of greater bureaucratisation to achieve 'rational control' and efficiency which Gouldner sees as tending 'to reinforce the contention that there is a close connection between succession and a surge of bureaucratic development, particularly in the direction of formal rules' (1955:94). Gouldner also associated greater succession, or turnover of senior management with greater bureaucracy (1955:96).

Burawoy highlights that Gouldner largely ignored external pressures on the plant he was studying; and that the company had just made a major investment in new machinery. In order to help illuminate the additional contextual rationale behind the move to a punishment bureaucracy, Burawoy criticises Gouldner for 'divorcing ... 'social processes' and bureaucratic types from their conditions of existence' (Burawoy, 1982:836). Burawoy does not however question the principal conclusion that *greater* bureaucracy, and control structures, were as a result of the succession. The technological shift in retail to ecommerce is also necessitating a *change* in control structures and a change in 'technological and efficiency imperatives for the business' (Burawoy 1982:835) although they may not naturally be bureaucratic ones.

Burawoy builds upon Gouldner's work in his development of the idea of a *forced succession* in the copper mines of Zambia, and the enforced Zambianization as a post-colonial move.

He traces external factors as the primary drivers of this succession where managerial succession was used in 'normalizing what was in effect a transfer of control' (Burawoy, 2009:60). The obstacles to succession which Burawoy explores include the level of legitimacy which the succession is granted, based up expectations of different constituencies within the organisation, 'that a particular set of interests will be protected or a set of demands fulfilled' (1972:50) the demands of those supporting the succession and lastly 'and crucially, what access does the successor have to organizational controls to cope with resistance and conflicting demands?' (1972:50).

Family businesses succession, primarily to younger generations, can be seen as a site of tension (Wang et al., 2004) and has been examined in a number of studies, however there is little available research on the succession from family owned businesses to employee ownership. Within BookCo there are elements of both natural succession; the family having stepped away from day-to-day management positions in the company, but also a forced succession; as although employee ownership may gain significant legitimacy it is not fully in the control of either managers or workers and is primarily driven externally to them.

Although the current CEO of BookCo has been in situ for several years, prior to their appointment the business, driven by the family owner, the management team had changed frequently - with a resultant change in focus and direction each time. This did include varying levels of internal control and delegation, however in recent years internal changes have been principally driven by external pressures. The current incumbent of the CEO role has 'come up through the ranks' and the more recent stability in tenure necessarily suggests a level of support from the family.

Harris et al. (2004) looked at employee involvement in family owned firms, they highlight a number of common factors, these include that 'Non-family managers are kept on a tight reign' (2004:49), perhaps unsurprisingly, high levels of paternalism and an emphasis on a 'particular culture that is strong on trust, loyalty...' (2004:49). When family firms grow in size devolved managerial systems are used to deliver 'a more sophisticated paternalism' (2004:51) they cite Wray that this sophistication is 'remains loyal to the familial culture of traditional paternalism, becoming "sophisticated" only in attempts to maintain that culture in the face of the contingencies of modern industrial society' (2004:51). Harris et al. survey of UK data highlights that family owned firms can view employee involvement (EI) as less necessary than traditionally owned firms as they consider 'workers are looked-after and do not need EI – and even less so trade union representation' (2004:54) and that additionally

employee involvement can be 'seen as a greater threat to the culture of the family-owned business if it engenders rent-seeking and challenges to the way the business is run by family members' (2004:54).

The traditional paternalistic 'rewards' of increased remuneration and security of tenure (Harris et al., 2004) are more tenuous at BookCo, as already highlighted, national living wage increases being the principal driver of pay, the removal of hierarchy offering fewer opportunities for promotion and advancement and pressure on retail more generally leading to the closure of shops and loss of tenure of long serving booksellers. However, the Inquiry Group were nevertheless concerned that a loss of 'paternalistic security' could cause issues' (Inquiry Group Session Four) for employees during and after transition. Culturally, family owned firm paternalism and employee ownership do share some characteristics, for example the focus on more long-term objectives, if the company's financial position allows it.

The particular context of this paternalistic culture, with management implicitly tasked with maintaining this at the same time as taking the business to profitability and transitioning to employee ownership raises some challenges for succession. As Gouldner highlighted there can be a tendency for growth in bureaucratic control for successors. The Inquiry Group debated the possible use of committees or other additional representative structures but rejected them in favour of effective use of the imposed structures of the employee council and board membership *in addition* to a concerted effort to transition to a culture of ownership, less was discussed on what the culture was to move *from*, the Inquiry Group had also recognised that:

... the combination of 'tradition + democracy (might) = inertia' whereas the ideal would be to leverage both these to deliver the opposite.

Inquiry Group Interim Report

Getting the balance here right could be crucial to the development of the culture the Inquiry Group wanted to see. Gouldner discusses what he calls the 'Rebecca Myth' (named after the novel of the same name by Daphne Du Maurier) where the new successor attempted to co-opt the past for their own uses and represent themselves as legitimate heir in this regard and not have it as 'idealised' past' (1955:79). For BookCo this could be an important factor in asserting ownership interests over/with management. The owner-director from Company B also identified the importance of these shared cultural myths:

...do need to be able to fall back on the 'non-commercial' drivers where there is conflict, to be able to have the stories, the brand and the vision as a place to go when there is conflict a 'reliable logic' not necessarily the most (immediately) profitable one.

Owner Director Company B

In Gouldner's case study 'Rules were the successor's defence of his status interests' (Burawoy, 1982:834) in the case of BookCo the 'rules' are imposed by the previous owner, nominally in the interests of workers but create a site of potential tension, but also potentially, a structure for management to ensure that not a great deal would change.

Burawoy poses the question 'what access does the successor have to organizational controls to cope with resistance and conflicting demands?' (1972:50). In BookCo's case employees will be inheriting a far more complex route to remove senior managers compared to the family owners, this in addition to the continuing external pressures mediating the use of additional control structures, with their impact on decision making speed and cost, this could create challenges of legitimacy for both owners and management.

Gouldner's solution to bureaucratic controls is not to do away with them but rather a 'representative bureaucracy' which, although not democratic, 'entails a proto-*democratic* process of legitimisation' (1955:221) whereby the 'expert' which Weber predicted would emerge as the authority within bureaucracy 'is validated only when used to further the workers' ends' (1955:221). This could be seen as reflecting the positionality of the manager operating within a firm with a decomposing hierarchy as they are required to hold an expert position, as opposed to a specifically managerial one.

As the transition to employee ownership proceeds, a conscious analysis of the social processes of control would be a valuable additional research area, unavailable here due to the position of the company at the time of this research. At this point it could be that the organisation gets trapped in a form of *pseudo succession* where the paternalistic culture is maintained by management and substituted for participation or, alternatively, that employees take the opportunity to use their agency to show themselves as the 'legitimate heirs' (Gouldner, 1955:79). Here it could be that there is an additional successional framework where workers take strategic ownership of the organisation in a *democratic succession*, this would necessitate the resolution of a number of potential tensions within the succession itself. These would include:

- (i) Cultural transition – for the workers to reform sophisticated paternalistic control measures to collectivised control.
- (ii) Rewriting myths – for the employee ownership to utilise a mythical past in order to create both mediating mechanisms for agonistic disagreements, but also to legitimise the new ownership.
- (iii) Control structures – effective use of imposed organisational structures of control, such as the Employee Council and board membership, so as to create a new relationship with management.

If these tensions are not addressed then there could be a crisis of legitimacy which permeates both management relations with the new employee owners, and the employees own view of their authority. The 'new' relationship with management and the latter's extrication from its maintenance of a sophisticated paternalistic culture is likely to take time and a conscious reframing of existing relations. In both Gouldner and Burawoy's succession work there is an element of inescapable bureaucracy, succession with the *absence* of significant bureaucracy seems likely to place an even greater emphasis upon social relations of production and a tension between formal and informal relations during this change. The desire by staff to retain their job level autonomy and control and *not* have greater bureaucracy imposed, even if nominally 'in their name', is also a potential area of contention with management if other clear chain of command and communication routes are not established.

Power and control in the organisation

In 1968 Tannenbaum published the 'control graph' in order to illustrate the distribution of power, and the resultant control, across the organisation. The graph showed the basic hierarchical shape of power:

...authority is distributed hierarchically in organizations. Individuals at upper levels have more power and exercise more control than those at successively lower levels. This distribution of power in the hierarchy has an important impact on job satisfaction (Tannenbaum et al., 1974:7).

The utilisation of a graph for Tannenbaum was, principally, to challenge the assumption that power in an organisation is a 'fixed quantity' and subsequently that 'leaders and followers are engaged in a 'zero sum game': increasing the power of one party must be accompanied by a corresponding decrease in the power of the other' (1968:12).

Tannenbaum, working from what was to become known as the 'human relations school'

perspective, was keen to 'enhance workers' exercise of power' (1986:295) and measuring this:

...industrial democracy...is nothing if it is not workers determining outcomes, having impact, acting as causal agents; in other words, playing a substantial role in the control structure and exercising *real*, and not merely perceived or imagined, influence (1986:288).

Tannenbaum's analysis was built on the belief that greater worker control has a demonstrable productivity benefit to firms where there is an 'increased commitment and responsiveness of persons in a system in which they themselves exercise some control' (1986:294). He based this analysis on extensive questionnaires carried out across hundreds of organisations from a social psychology orientation. Tannenbaum's emphasis on a non-zero-sum distribution of power and control enabled a call for a greater distribution of power, at the same time as not requesting that managers relinquish theirs, nor find their position undermined. Indeed, he writes that in his research there is 'very little indication that they [workers] prefer this enhanced control to come at the expense of the control exercised by managers' (1986:295), he goes further and endorses the degeneration thesis whereby 'equalization is likely to have a short half-life as Michels ... and others have argued' (1986:296).

Tannenbaum was also a behaviouralist (1968:5-8) and although he acknowledged Michels's 'iron law of oligarchy' and Weber's understanding of bureaucracy, he argued that organisations were moving towards a greater reliance on a more educated and technical workforce where, combined with the professionalisation of management, the requirement was more for 'discussion and persuasion rather than on command exclusively' (Tannenbaum, 1968:10). In this conception Tannenbaum pre-empted many more contemporary organisational theorists (Cederström and Fleming, 2012:40).

The growth of the post-war technocratic bureaucracy which Tannenbaum defines, and reflects, in his own 'scientific' analysis has been a dominant paradigm in our understanding of the organisation and as Cardinal et al. write:

...research appears to over rely on theories and approaches based on an understanding of organizations that dates back to the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, thereby limiting our ability to better understand organizations and advise managers today and in the future (2017:560)

As organisations, and society, has changed so has the approach to understanding control; 'Decades ago... control mechanisms could be simpler, more coercive, and more formal...In more recent decades...control mechanisms have needed to be more holistic, enabling, and

informal' (Cardinal et al., 2017:562). However much as Tannenbaum, reflected the scientism of his age, contemporary analysis is often defined by themes of complexity and unpredictability, constantly shifting structures render the hierarchy less useful as an x-axis; 'organizational structure – which specifies to whom individuals report about their pursuit of strategic objectives- relates to but is not control' (Siktin et al., 2020:342).

Paradoxically contemporary literature talks both of the decline of coercive control (Cardinal et al. 2017: 570) yet, also, how new controls have enabled 'controllers to conduct low-cost tracking of on-and-off-the job employee behaviour' (Siktin et. al., 2020:360), although perhaps potentially invidious controls are not necessarily coercive ones. The emphasis on flexible control and power distributed within the organisation has resulted in a focus on individual mechanisms of control rather than more high-level concepts of power. Cardinal et al. see opportunities for future research with the use of:

complexity theory... [whereby] behaviour is nonlinear and is typified by unpredictable outcomes, so the focus should be on adaptation rather than static forms of organizations...The root cause of non-linearity is lower-level agents interacting and creating new feedback loops, which in turn create more interactions and unpredictability (2017:582).

With the decline of conflict models of organisational research, and industrial relations more generally, discussions of power have also waned, indeed within Cardinal et. al (2017) extensive survey of the literature the word 'power' is not used once in relation to organisational research (nor, it should be noted was there one mention of democratic or democracy).

The Inquiry Group understood that there is indeed complexity in how organisations make their decisions, and in the distribution of power and control, in two group sessions they were unable to define the multitude of decision-making processes. However, they also understood that they needed to know where strategic decisions were made so that they could have an opportunity to be a part of them:

If it is not clear where (strategic) decisions are made then it will be hard to find a space for employee-owners to be included in these. For example if the Board is a reporting not a decision making function then having employee representatives does not deliver this.

Inquiry Group Session Three Summary Notes

As the Group progressed it was more explicitly understood that if there was to be any shift of power at all then there needed to be a combination of both formal and informal

structures. Any structural solution to large scale strategy setting would need to retain the job level decision making already established in BookCo:

I had the chance to chat about partnership with a few people across the company, and all have shared a key concern; that being a major concern of any changes affecting the speed in which decisions are made. They want to be sure that they still have control of the “local” decisions they make now, and that even with the bigger company decisions we need to be sure to be responsive to the outside world.

Essentially, they don’t want decisions to go through layers and layers of bureaucracy and for the company to become sluggish.

Email to Group from an Employee Group Member

For us to understand how to make democratic changes within the organisation it is important to be able to have an understanding of power and control, for as Tannenbaum writes; ‘Ultimately...it is control by members that distinguishes the democratic organisation from the non-democratic one’ (1986:279). The hierarchical power within the business, even if it was latent, was particularly evident as soon as the COVID-19 pandemic impacted, and that power was exercised by the executive directors to take direct control of the business.

The ‘ownership ladder’ developed by the group attempted to acknowledge the complexity of control by progressing through steps which also included a transition from ‘being an owner’ as a more passive position, although one which had to be earned through time served and training, to those of more formal roles of ownership, e.g., the owner-directors. In this context the use of democratisation in the business was to formalise this power holding, and the legitimisation of these roles to ensure that if the more informal power was not enough, either for access or voice, then it could, potentially, be wielded.

The Inquiry Group discussed a number of formal ‘theoretical’ pieces as part of their research. The Group reviewed Basterretxea et al. (2020) on corporate governance which prompted a discussion on the balance between management expertise and workers on the board. Tannenbaum’s Control Graph (1986) where this contributed to ideas of power in the organisation and formal/informal structures, and Arnstein’s (1969) concept of the participatory ladder in terms of both their own participation and that which they wished to engender more broadly. In addition to these, one participant also circulated a McKinsey report on *Untangling your organization’s decision making* (De Smet et al., 2017) which greatly emphasised the importance of retaining decentralisation within organisations.

The group also engaged with the *Tyranny of Structurelessness* (Freeman, 1984) at least in overall concept and did wish to ensure that a level of structure was there to support Employee Ownership, the *Inquiry Group Interim Report* reflects this in outlining that:

...in order to avoid any individual personalities dominating, or people not feeling they are able to engage, then formal structures were also [in addition to culture] regarded as crucial to clearly demonstrate how people could be involved as owners within the business. Clarity on the structures of ownership in terms of the role they play, and what people's responsibilities are, were seen as essential. Equipping everyone in the business with the right tools, training and support to effectively contribute and challenge was seen as central to creating both an effective culture and representation.

The question of how much control, and what the relationship between owners and management was to look like, was unresolved. There were concerns about the role of Owner Directors on the board hence also the importance of a power of recall so that there could be a level of reassurance around their continued representativeness to those who appointed them. These concerns were often less about incorporation or becoming 'management', rather they were about competence, of being able to access the required skills (this was also reflected within the Employee Council where the Inquiry Group requested an ability to appoint members to the council if necessary) to hold management to account.

There are often unresolved tensions around ownership and control irrespective of employee ownership, Basterretxea et al. (2020) discuss both agency theory and stewardship theory in relation to governance at employee owned firms and draw a conclusion that 'the role of the board is paradoxical, that boards must both control and support management' which seems unlikely to be unique to this particular ownership context, however they see cooperatives as more likely to 'lack the expertise and skills to exercise effective influence' (Basterretxea et al., 2020:5) in this context. They note that 'the governance of cooperatives, and in particular of worker cooperatives, is relatively under-researched in the scholarly field' (2020:2) but with their own examination of the collapse of a large subsidiary of Mondragon, FED, they point to a number of causes, including slow decision making, the employee council not making difficult decisions and a lack of co-responsibility (2020:10). Basterretxea et al. suggested solution to this challenge was to limit participatory democracy and that '...large cooperatives should limit the power of General Assemblies and move to a stronger form of representative democracy' (2020:20). The Inquiry Group recognised the challenges of access to appropriate skills and knowledge in

this context; however, their solution was the appointment of additional experts to the employee Council:

The Council should be able to appoint up to a third of its own number from within the business to help support technical decision making. For example if it felt that there was insufficient financial expertise within the elected group then to appoint as it sees fit.

Inquiry Group Interim Report

In the Group discussions finance was specifically mentioned in this context, and in addition that:

externalising HR support would enable 'neutral' or at least pro-organisational decisions to be to ensure the organisation was looked after for all as opposed to decisions which could be made for partial reasons.

Inquiry Group Interim Report

It is interesting that rather than absenting themselves from these more difficult technical challenges the Group actively recognised potential issues and looked for solutions which meant that they could engage in the bodies they saw as having decision making power.

Tannenbaum (1968), as already noted, took a behaviouralist position on power in the organisation, this power could be considered as principally one-dimensional, using Lukes's definition whereby this 'view of power involves a focus on *behaviour* in the making of *decisions* on *issues* over which there is an observable *conflict* of (subjective) *interests*' (Lukes, 2005:19). Lukes sees two-dimensional critiques as also wedded to behaviourism in that they are still:

committed to behaviouralism – that is, to the study of overt, 'actual behaviour', of which 'concrete decisions' in situations of conflict are seen as paradigmatic. In trying to assimilate all cases of exclusion of potential issues from the political agenda to the paradigm of a decision, it gives a misleading picture of the ways in which individuals, and, above all, groups and institutions succeed in excluding potential issues from the political process (2005:25).

Lukes builds upon these conceptions of power with an additional perspective, a third-dimension of power, built upon an awareness of organisational effect, where action and policy is 'not attributable to a particular individuals' decisions or behaviour' (2005:26). These instead being born of 'systemic' or organizational effects', to ignore the impact of such effects is to 'ignore the crucial point that the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent such conflict arising in the first place' (2005:27). This dimension of power also retains a crucial understanding that the other dimensions do not, in that they frequently:

focus on the locution ‘power to’, ignoring ‘power over’. Thus power indicates a ‘capacity’, a ‘faculty’, an ‘ability’, not a relationship. Accordingly, the conflictual aspect of power – the fact it is exercised *over* people – disappears altogether from view (2005:34).

As Lukes recognises these conceptions of power:

...pose particularly acute problems for the researcher. As I have argued such an exercise may, in the first place, involve inaction rather than (observable) action. In the second place, it may be unconscious (this seems to be allowed for on the two-dimensional view, but the latter also insists that nondecisions are *decisions* – and, in the absence of further explanation, an unconscious decision looks like a contradiction). And in the third place, power may be exercised by collectivities, such as groups or institutions (2005:52).

These were also research challenges for the Inquiry Group in attempting to situate power and control in BookCo, where it was naturally more straightforward to identify behaviours and structures. Additionally although it was clearly understood that actual power was required, of the importance of ‘being in the room’ when decisions were made, there was also – certainly in the earlier sessions emphasis placed upon how employees *feel* within the business too; that they should ‘feel trusted, valued, respected’ (Inquiry Group Session One), as the Inquiry progressed these were still believed however more specific and defined actions became concretised in preference to ‘feeling’.

The way forward for the Inquiry Group appeared to be ‘not how to eliminate power, but how to constitute forms of power which are compatible with democratic values’ (Mouffe, 2009: 22) and that there can be an “empirical basis for identifying real interests’, which is ‘not up to A, but to B exercising choice under conditions of relative autonomy and, in particular, independently of A’s power – e.g. through democratic participation’ (Lukes, 2005:146). The construction within the *Inquiry Group Interim Report* from the Group was detailed in its co-dependent development of a culture of ownership amongst staff *in addition to* the formal structure of control, without both of these it would appear unlikely that a meaningful shift in power could happen:

Gradually, having a *culture of ownership* became central to our discussion. This then extended the concept of owner director, to have an owners’ job description and the encouragement of all to understand the business and be able to play a full role within it.

Inquiry Group Interim Report

Thinking back to Hardt and Negri’s position in *Assembly* (2017a) whereby the democratic shift suggested was such that leaders were only to be trusted with ‘tactics’ not ‘strategy’, Mouffe (and indeed inherent the Group’s prior rejection of a search for consensus)

questions this concept of a 'multiplicity that is free from negativity and antagonism' but also on the value of such a perspective without a 'recognition of the necessarily hegemonic nature of the social order' (Mouffe, 2018:55).

The democratic institutions of the employee ownership should consequently, if not constructed upon consensus, be ones which allow an agonistic expression and where people 'genuinely have the possibility of choosing between real alternatives' (Mouffe, 2018:93). Mouffe points to hollowing out of western democracy where:

Popular participation in the taking of decisions [was] ... discouraged since it could only have dysfunctional consequences for the working of the system. Stability and order were more likely to result from compromise among interests than from mobilizing people towards an illusory consensus on the common good. As a consequence, democratic politics was separated from its normative dimension and began to be envisaged from a purely instrumentalist standpoint (2009:82).

Reconstructing Tannenbaum's research in order to better understand control in the organisation, it is with a view to recapturing the fundamental assertion that 'Democracy cannot be defined without the concept of control' (1986a:330), that the organisation is *knowable* and not a system so complex as to just create 'unpredictability' (Cardinal et al., 2017:582) and, in addition, that the legitimisation of the organisation through the sharing of power is a desirable objective in that it is 'concerned with questions of the common will and the common weal' (Tannenbaum, 1968:3).

The conditionality of workplace democracy and degeneration

In the review of the literature of participation the framing of the democratic co-operative, or worker owned firm within Michels's concept of the inevitable oligarchisation was examined. It would be hard, if not impossible, to draw any conclusions from a study of a transitioning company on its potential degeneration. It would also be deterministic in the extreme to suggest that it was effectively 'doomed' to not have a democratic nature were it to not follow certain 'rules'. Rothschild (2016) has updated her thesis on the potentiality for democracy within the cooperative workplace, she sees potentiality in the decline of hierarchy in the modern firm (and beyond):

this collectivist or co-operative-democratic logic that is spreading but that continues to battle a bureaucratic/hierarchical logic that still dominates our modern era, although the latter finally may be on the decline (2016:8).

The alternative that she finds in a range of organisations, although principally in small community and non-profit organisations, here she identifies the 'logic of co-operative or collectivist democracy' (Rothschild, 2016:8). In updating the definition of participatory

democracy in the typology of firm she identifies (in her nomenclature Democracy 2.0 as opposed to the representative, and necessarily hierarchical, Democracy 1.0) these are consensus driven, non-hierarchical and do not have a formal division of labour.

Rothschild writes that decisions are considered legitimate 'only if every member (or participant or citizen) who would be affected by that decision has been invited to take part in making it' (2016:9) secondly 'all hierarchies of authority are resisted' third, and this with specific reference to Michels's (1962) 'iron law', that 'against exclusivity in the holding of an expertise or relationship needed to do the organization's tasks' and finally that 'relationships within a co-operative logic can be only personal, egalitarian, and of value in themselves' (Rothschild, 2016:9).

The diversity of Rothschild's non-hierarchical references ranges from Amazon-owned Zappos, which implemented the self-organising teams system called 'Holacracy' (2016:13) to the delegated power to the many volunteers who organise the Burning Man festival each year (referencing Chen, 2016). In these organisations it could be argued that the form takes precedence over the function; 'members' rights to be heard and to learn from others are primary and thus trump the efficiency or hierarchal claims that prevail in Democracy 1.0' (Rothschild, 2016:9). This tension was partially voiced by an owner-director of Company B when answering the questions from the Inquiry Group, elaborating on why they had taken the decision to move from being a coop to being employee owned:

Sometimes the label of being a co-op had its own baggage where people might say, for example, 'I think this is how it is done in the cooperative movement' and became a tension between a political project and commercial success.

The elevation of, or retention of, the idea of *individuals* granting consensus within the collectivist democracy which Rothschild writes is one which 'reduces inequalities of influence while encouraging individuals' voices' (2016:11), ultimately there could be seen as an elevation of the individual over the collective (despite the name). As Summers and Chillias (2019) write on the development of economic and democratic skills in EO companies 'becoming an employee-owner was a transformative event where 'the concept of ourselves has changed' from individual workers, to being 'a shared realm'' (2019:12).

BookCo's soon-to-be owners were to find themselves in the position not because they had chosen to join a mission-based coop, but rather by dint of working there when the family bequeathed it to the staff. The very process of the Workers' Inquiry was one where they

recognised that actively engaging was an opportunity to not just continue as it was before, they were clear that this needed a level of consciousness and that staff:

Need to be clear on 'why becoming an EO' rather than just that it's being 'gifted' to staff.

Group Inquiry Session Three

Both company B and the Inquiry Group were very supportive of the idea of participation in significant decisions but equally sceptical on consensus:

We operate now on consent, rather than consensus. This has had the effect of speeding up some decision making. Consent is constituted with three positions; 'yes I agree' / 'not a vote for but no problem with it' / 'no' this has been helpful in moving projects forward and also identifying those who may wish to lead particular projects too.

Before having the three positions ... we were continuously concerned with how long things can take.

Owner-Director Company B

This 'three position' orientation on decisions was wholeheartedly taken up by the Inquiry Group and made its way into the *Inquiry Group Interim Report* for the business as a way forward for BookCo too. There was seen to be potential tension between technical roles – any specialist within the business and overall strategic decision making, for a relatively small company the Inquiry Group at BookCo recognised the impossibility of rotating staff or training staff in the technical detail needed to become a software developer, manage the distribution centre, or file tax returns. This 'tension' however was not seen as a fundamental inhibitor of participation in decisions, more something which needed to be managed, in *Session Two* the Group defined how there should be an 'Ability for an EO company to deliver problem solving across and through the business as a whole, sharing of good practice.'

It has already been discussed how the Inquiry Group considered access to expert support both within Council and HR, this proactive managing of owner representative access to information in order to make appropriate decisions for the business. Jaumier (2017) highlights the lack of research of co-operators' 'everyday experience' (2017:218) resulting in a rather limited knowledge of organisational democracy, they also write that 'ordaining a ban on anything that resembles an organisational hierarchy do not work as miracle cures in getting rid of issues of power' (2017:232) reflecting the dimensional aspects of power and their diverse impacts in the organisation. Diefenbach (2019) draws out the potential for

democratic participation *even if* there are ‘formal layers and specialised functions with different responsibilities’ (2019:553) for them the shared *technical* knowledge is one of management and control:

it is possible to achieve a ‘demystification’ of specialised knowledge and trait leadership theory, and to reach a different understanding of leadership – as an interactive, collective process or a shared activity – in alternative types of organisation. Such an approach is much more consistent with modern conditions of business and work and with modern, educated people (‘knowledge workers’ ‘professionals’) than the antiquated and outdated notions, if not to say ideology, of ‘leaders’ and ‘followers’ (2019:551-2).

A culture of ownership and reverse dominance hierarchy

Rather than an overriding focus on structures of control, possibly as they had been pre-defined as part of the bequeathing of the business, the Inquiry Group often gravitated to ideas of ownership culture to address challenges around access to knowledge and playing an effective role in relation to management. In response to the Group questions the owner-director of Company B responded with a challenge of their own; ‘A key question for the transition and going forward would be: who owns organisational culture?’ their call to the Inquiry Group was to:

Cultivate an organizational culture of frankness and transparency, at all levels of work. If an individual employee struggles with either, they will struggle with EO and this will affect the organisation.

Believe in the BookCo brand, its mission and its vision. Cultivate a culture that understands that the BookCo brand is an asset.

Be vigilant around the contradictions/incompatibilities between the responsibilities of owners and directors, and the rights of employees.

This statement was taken by the Group and shared with all of BookCo in the weekly company *Bulletin* which goes to all staff, so clearly they felt it expressed their own opinion. Some of the more practical architectures of creating that culture of ownership, implicitly a culture *owned* by the employees were outlined in the *Inquiry Group Interim Report* including the more formalised road to becoming an owner despite the default ‘technical’ ownership through the employee shareholding trust, a leveraging of the businesses’ history to support the culture where a:

As the John Lewis Partnership says ‘we should be inspired by our history, not constrained by it.’

Inquiry Group Inquiry Group Interim Report

The 'Owner's Job Description' that the Inquiry Group wrote as part of this process is shown below.

Owner's Job Description

Rights and Responsibilities

As an owner you have a right to share in the financial success of the Partnership, you also have a responsibility to contribute to that financial success through your actions.

You have a right to question business practices and decisions which you believe are not in the Partnership's interests, you also have a responsibility to help find solutions and not just highlight problems.

You have a right to access information about how your actions and decisions influence Partnership performance and a responsibility to evaluate your actions and decisions from an ownership perspective.

Skills

You are required to develop and demonstrate the skills and experience required to be an owner, including being able to scrutinise and understand Partnership reports and financials. In order to support you with this there will be training and support available to you.

To cooperate and value others in the business.

To help enable fast, and good, decision making.

Participation

Participation should be transparent and in partnership with employee owners not tokenistic or superficial.

Understanding that collective ownership of the business means not defending particular interests or groups but rather working with management to further the best interests of the Partnership as a whole.

This includes the willingness to take difficult decisions to protect the Partnership for past, current and future booksellers along with readers.

To participate in the day-to-day running of the Partnership and to take responsibility for the future of the Partnership as a whole, but also expect in return that others will reciprocate this responsibility to you with transparency, respect, to listen and give clear explanations of the reasons for decisions or actions.

Being a BookCo Owner

Believe in the BookCo brand, its mission, and its vision. Cultivate a culture that understands that the BookCo brand is an asset. Take a part in developing this brand for the future.

Where differences appear insurmountable then look to the Founder's words *on Courage, Faith, Joy in work, Craftsmanship, Love of Literature, Idealism and Shrewdness*, to help guide the way forward.

In the ownership of culture, if it is accepted that both the concept of Lukes's (2005) third dimension of power, beyond behaviourism, that of the organisational collective is *in addition* to the external factors which are leading to the decomposition of hierarchy at BookCo (technical specialism, delaying etc.) then may open up a space where traditional centralisation and formal control can begin to change to a set of new norms. Even if a hierarchical culture, possibly due to family ownership, is currently dominant *without* a significant hierarchy present.

BookCo as an independent bookseller has a natural predisposition to a *primus inter pares* ethos (Boehm, 1993:233) which, if I were to generalise slightly (there is plenty of evidence to support this Miller 2006, Laties 2011, Caine 2021), and as discussed, is also common to many booksellers (and is also recently demonstrated again in the very public debate with Waterstones' booksellers challenging their pay versus the bonus that their hedge fund owners received (Chandler, 2021)) these egalitarian instincts are also normative within the trade more generally.

It is possible, although the literature on this is sparse, to see the ownership of culture in this context as an emergent *reverse dominance hierarchy* (Jaumier, 2017) whereby:

... power collectively remains in the hands of lay members rather than coalescing in those of their appointed head(s). In both cases, this is to be understood as the outcome of the day-to-day sanctioning activities in which co-operators routinely engage with the ultimate purpose of ensuring the actualisation of egalitarian principles. Within the co-operative context, this model of reverse dominance hierarchy may present some advantages over that of social-movement-like participatory democracy. Indeed, displaying all the features of a classic organisation may allow the co-operative to conform, at least in appearance, with expectations of its dominantly capitalist environment (2017:234).

We are presented with several dialectical contradictions within this model, including an uneven access to economic power between staff and management, existing structural, hierarchical, control mechanisms (again demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic). In addition, it is important to consider to how realistic it is for booksellers to 'refuse to do' or to have behaviours *individually* which would challenge management.

However, as a collective culture of valuing management 'insofar as they work for the common good' (Boehm citing Godelier, 1993:237) combined with emergent formal democratic structures then this concept could be the proto-representation of the egalitarian 'instincts' of the company as a whole. It also avoids the pitfalls of requiring the collective to have some sort of natural agreement on strategy, for example, where these

questions can be tested within agonistic structures of representation but measured against conscious, or unconscious, cultural objectives defined by booksellers across BookCo. This concept also works to help explain Tannenbaum's dilemma (1961:35) where he found employees to believe an organisation democratic when it was not, looking for very formal structures of democracy and control alone, ignoring the additional dimensions of power which the individuals in the organisation recognised, and threw up this apparent contradiction.

Reverse dominance hierarchy is primarily an anthropological concept applied to small indigenous societies, see for example Clastres (2013) and there is little evidence of its use in management studies outside of Jaumier (2017). Clastres discusses how some indigenous societies have chiefs where they are 'not a commander; the people of the tribe are under no obligation to obey' (2017:206) in these societies the role of chiefs is without (political) power, they are institutions which are unable to put society in their own service rather have to demonstrate collective interest:

what qualifies such a man to be chief? In the end, it is his "technical" competence alone: his oratorical talent...his ability to coordinate...And in no circumstances does the tribe allow the chief to go beyond that technical limit; it never allows a technical superiority to change into a political authority. The chief is there to serve society; it is society as such – the real locus of power- that exercises its authority over the chief (Clastres, 2013:207).

The technical pressures on the business, as discussed, have placed a significant imperative on the company to adapt to a changing retail environment. In this sense the *technical competence* of senior management could be seen as reflecting these demands; there are five directors including the CEO of which, digital is one – delivering technical transformation, finance; again, limited to a relatively narrow technical deliverable. The final two directors are 'HR & Operations' and 'Sales & Marketing', both heavily weighted towards co-ordination of resources for shops who manage their own day-to-day operations independently.

The role of the CEO in this context, it could be argued, does indeed reflect much of that of an indigenous chief who 'has to rely on nothing more than the prestige accorded him by the society to restore order and harmony' (Clastres, 2013:206). This metaphorical interpretation of power held within management, or lack of, if it is to reflect the likely transitioned experience within BookCo could require two additional perspectives on context to be examined; firstly that there is empirical evidence of technicalisation of

management and secondly that the idea of the 'collective cultural interest' can be effectively constituted within the organisation.

The severe constraints that the management operate under due to lack of funds, the precarious nature of the business within the context it is operating within can be seen as offering only limited choices for the people in those positions, and they need also to be ones which are understood by the employees. They may find them distasteful, for example the closure of a bookshop, however none of these closures have prompted a letter to *The Bulletin*, the internal newsletter, questioning the rationale, nor did any of the Group sessions raise this as an area of contention with management either.

This 'logic' of reaching profitability reflects a trend which Nichols and Beynon saw emergent in the 1970s where 'both managers and workers can increasingly be seen as *labour*, whose future is structured by the needs of *capital*' (1977:xv). They recorded a conversation with a Trade Union official who said:

If they want participation we say "all right let's have equal participation – open the books". But it's a tricky game because they can come back at you and say "look... the cupboard's bare". And we've lost the right to say "That's your problem" (1977:164).

In this sense it has become the shared problem of everyone in the business, all sales figures and costs are open to everyone in the business. As already recorded even pay rises for staff delegated down to local shops, who can award them if they can demonstrate they make enough profit to do so.

Burawoy (1982b) wrote about an 'indulgency pattern' whereby '...management becomes concerned with ensuring cooperation and consent from workers rather than with the production of profit' (1982b:849), and subsequently have to 'to reassert both profit and control' however this indulgency (in Burawoy's example) is exhibited within a traditional rather than worker-owned firm and assumes a fundamental divergence of interests between workers and management (who are also owners in this context). Basterretxea et al. (2020) saw evidence of this type of behaviour resulting from what they considered to be weak management, however this perspective owes much to the degeneration thesis and pre-dated the trends towards hierarchical decomposition.

What could be defined as concerns about indulgency vs. a reverse dominance hierarchy culture, can also be seen as assuming a more fundamental divergence of interests where there may be none of any significance in BookCo. The *fundamental* shared interest being as

basic as survival. In this it would seem not unreasonable to talk of a hegemony of capital within the organisation, but one subject to the restraint of some booksellers attempt to reconcile profit with the social role of the bookshop. It is also the case that booksellers within the Inquiry Group may have underestimated the potential conflict arising from other employee-owners. Ferguson (1991) discusses the challenges within 'Wholly Grains' an ethical bakery cooperative where challenges of product dilution in order to deliver more profit (by using white flour) created an existential crisis:

...more profit translates potentially into higher wages, better benefits, a cushion for emergencies, or relocation to a more comfortable setting. Yet when the white flour crisis came to a head, the resolution seemed to fly in the face of profitability and expansion and uphold the principles of the bakery (Ferguson, 1991:119).

It is conceivable that equivalent challenges will arise within BookCo, say for example taking money to promote a book which booksellers do not believe in, and these would test the organisation's resolve in addition to the democratic structures and processes put in place. These are by no means inconceivable as individual booksellers have refused to promote certain titles (the erotic novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* for example) in the shop window at BookCo before.

Certainly, it would be expected that the new owners would also have to actively define their relationship with management as much as a traditional company would, if not more so, Basterretxea et al. (2020) write that:

challenges can arise when board members feel they are on the board to represent and defend the interests of particular groups of workers or members rather than work with management to further the best interests of the cooperative as a whole (2020:6-7).

There are challenges here which the Group looked to both culture and impermanent structures to help resolve, the Owner's Job Description although applicable to all who worked in BookCo '...becomes a bit strange/less clear at managerial level and higher' (Owner-Director Company B) due to the overlapping roles. The *Inquiry Group Interim Report* also showed a consciousness in this regard:

It was also recognised that there could be a danger of new structures creating tensions, where none had previously existed. So early reflection on employee rights and responsibilities should be incorporated into transition, for example employee board members to be described as owner directors rather than worker representatives.

Where Burawoy saw a conflict between interests and profit in the indulgency pattern there now exists less of a divergence of perspective, the logic of the current era is more

commonly that 'there is no alternative' as a member of the Inquiry group recounted in one of the early sessions:

Profitability (or lack of) influences everything and has become the overriding governing factor of these [strategic] decisions.

They then reflected:

Once profitable will this just shift to be a focus on 'maintaining profitability'?

Marx recognised in the *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* that:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. (1971 [1859]: 20-21).

The social existence of those working in the environment discussed can be seen as determining their consciousness in this context. Were there to be a deterministic approach, then it could lead to a conclusion which discounted organisational democratisation as likely to have any material impact on the social relations of production arising from this context.

As Ferguson asserts:

...the collective's internal structure and the external environment should not be treated as separate entities but should be seen as inextricably interrelated in a dynamic process. There are no inherent paradoxes or tendencies within this alternative form that leads it inexorably down the path towards normalization, nor do systemic pressures always shape outcomes (1991:111).

The experience of the Inquiry Group was one where agency started to emerge and choices about structure and power were seen as areas where people could influence or have a say, irrespective of the context of profitability or 'maintaining profitability', these were still seen as worthwhile and important areas of engagement.

Returning to Rothschild and Whitt's (1986) stipulations on avoiding degeneration and the 'iron law' they defined how cooperatives should stay small (Rothschild and Whitt, 1986:11), have a shared purpose (Rothschild and Whitt, 1986:95) and 'shared knowledge and skills'; avoiding specialisation and uneven distribution (Rothschild and Whitt, 1986:104). The *conscious* understanding that democracy is not a given within the employee owned

organisation, indeed the Group was at pains to point out in the *Inquiry Group Interim Report* that:

Our Partnership will also be an experiment with democratic organisational structure. The change inherent in any experiment should be embraced and we should not be afraid to try things, adapt them, accept feedback and try new ways to work accordingly.

The Inquiry Group did not reach the same conclusions as Rothschild and Whitt (1986) that *all forms* of hierarchy or specialisation, partially due to the size of BookCo, were an antithesis to democratisation, even the smaller Company B, although without hierarchy, had rejected complete consensus in favour of a more nuanced position.

In celebrating the positive decline of the hierarchical organisation Rothschild (2016:8) has not seen the potential opportunity for democratising what remains. The inevitable challenges of specialisation and division of labour being able to be overcome by a sharing of skills, in what Diefenbach (2019) referred to as the *technical* knowledge of management and control. There were also interesting themes emerging around the changing nature of a culture of ownership and control where, irrespective of formal hierarchy, then employees have a consciousness of their own power and in terms of the change in ownership their own potential power to impact on the strategic direction of the business as a whole. As Gouldner wrote in 1955:

...if organizations must adjust to ... a need for consent, is there not built into the very marrow of organization a large element of what we mean by democracy? (1955a:506).

The reverse dominance hierarchy organisation which might emerge would be an exciting area for future research.

Summary

This analysis has utilised the Extended Case Method to revisit selected theories exposed within the Literature Review and has used the research data to examine their failure, and then undertake a '*reconstruction of existing theory*' (Burawoy, 1991:6). This has been the culmination of a process which has been an intervention within the researched organisation with a conscious participatory process of CPAR and Workers' Inquiry then looking for the social forces at play on these social processes hand-in-hand with the reconstruction of theory based upon this conscious analysis.

There was an examination of how Ramsay's (1977) cycle of control has entered a new cycle mediated by technology, where efficiency and hierarchical decomposition, combined with

the collapse of the labour movement has resulted in a new context, one where, paradoxically, there also exists a potentiality for greater, meaningful worker control. As with any dialectical forces the opportunity in change can open up both positive and negative.

Gouldner (1955) and Burawoy (1972) did not examine a succession to an employee owned firm however they did expose the pressures for the reproduction of social relations within their own studies. Using their work to expose how, under the current structural pressures of capitalism, a succession to new worker-owners could easily, by default even, result in a continuation of social relations in the organisation. The understanding of this, and the extension of their own succession theories can create an opportunity for change, one which recognises the danger of this continuation, but not its inevitability.

Tannenbaum's (1961; 1968; 1986) theory of control may have seemed an eccentric choice in the context of this study, as it reflects much of the scientism of the 1960s and 70s in its examination, and graphing, of power and control in the firm. Using it as a starting point to discuss power more generally in the organisation, and Lukes (2005) radical view of the dimensions of power, exposed its overreliance on behaviouralism but also an inherent structuralism which recognised that there *had to be* an appreciation of power within the organisation if any meaningful democratisation were to happen. Burawoy questions whether Tannenbaum is 'in fact measuring control at all?' (Burawoy, 1982a:9) however in the face of growing post-structuralism within studies of the organisation where power and control are ever fluid, then extending the conversation that democratisation *can* be understood is essential. Lukes's clarity in expressing *power over* as opposed to *power to* is key to this.

Rothschild (2016) and Rothschild and Whitt (1986) look to small, non-hierarchical, consensus-based organisations without significant divisions of labour, to deliver democratic firms. Without these elements they see inevitable degeneration and succumbing to the *Iron Law* of oligarchy. Although there are very legitimate questions over whether assumptions of consensus actually do extend decision making time (certainly within small organisations) these rules, presented as almost iron laws in themselves, offer little in the way of agency for people to create new and democratic organisations with a different shape. Where new forms of post-hierarchical organisation start to emerge then looking at new forms of cultures of control within the workplace should also go hand-in-hand, although only emergent at this point, concepts of reverse domination hierarchies of

control, especially for firms with large numbers of technical specialists should be explored. What should be retained from Rothschild and Whitt is their enthusiasm for the opportunities to organise work democratically. The research has found that there is a potential within the changing organisation of contemporary work to extend greater job level responsibility beyond its technical confines towards democratisation.

CHAPTER 7 – CONCLUSIONS & CONTRIBUTION

Introduction

Having access to be able to undertake a research study at BookCo offered a unique opportunity to explore employee ownership with employees prior to the shift in ownership of the organisation. As a retailer, BookCo exemplified the interplay between industry change, principally driven by the impact of technology in the macro environment, and its internal effects. With BookCo transitioning from being a family-owned firm, one which was regarded as having been paternalistic and supported over many years of making a financial loss, to becoming an employee owned business, it exposed a dynamic set of social relations and an opportunity to carry out participative research which might effect positive change.

Given the context - the changing retail landscape - combined with the high commitment, but low pay of the booksellers involved, BookCo would also seem well suited to employee ownership, enabling a future where greater financial rewards could be shared along with more strategic control. BookCo had already seen significant re-structuring and delayering to cut costs in its need to adapt to the change in channel mix between the high street and online. As a result of this, many booksellers within the business had seen wage differentials squeezed and they had few illusions about the opportunities for promotion; however, at the same time, they did have fewer managers and more power to shape their own daily work. This decomposition of hierarchy, which had seen head office and regional structures deconstructed over the last ten years, created more work intensification for those who remained. However, as emerged during the research, there was also no desire to see this hierarchy return, whether populated by managers or by a bureaucracy to support the new employee owners. Booksellers valued the new flexibility that the flatter organisation currently offers.

In addition to the changes in hierarchy, BookCo also saw a shift in its employee profile, towards those supporting greater online sales. With online sales representing a greater proportion of the company's income, this resulted an increase of workers represented in two quite different jobs - with software engineers working on the website, who are highly technically proficient and well rewarded financially, and Distribution Centre (DC) staff packing books for online sales, who receive a similar level of pay to booksellers in the stores. The latter are primarily temporary agency staff doing repetitive tasks whose work is sales volume dependent and therefore precarious.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020 all shops were forced to be closed, some of which have become permanent. Booksellers were furloughed unless they were picking books for online sales in 'dark stores', whereas work levels for software developers and for those in the Distribution Centre increased exponentially. This experience exposed, or at least reversed temporarily, the previously delegated power structure, as control became more centralised once again, situated with the five executive directors. At the time of writing, shops are still closed due to the third national lockdown, so it is difficult to say whether this shift in control is merely conditional or whether there are likely to be longer term effects. What seems likely is that there will be an accelerated channel shift and the business will be even more reliant on its digital sales in the future, as opposed to face to face retail sales.

The Participatory Action Research Group had almost completed its work on the *Inquiry Group Interim Report* when most of its members were furloughed. It is anticipated that when the business returns to full capacity, that this Group will continue to assist with the rollout of the employee ownership. Although there was no real collective agency around the move to worker ownership prior to the instigation of the Inquiry Group, by the end of this research process it began to feel like there was a real momentum around the transition.

By the end of this research the Inquiry Group had made thirty-one recommendations in its *Interim Report*, including a number of short- and medium-term objectives for the business across a range of both structural and cultural changes. Company B assisted in this with their helpful comments and answers to the Group's questions, having helped the Group galvanise more around 'a culture of ownership' through reflecting how to effectively collectivise the booksellers within the business. As well as answering the Inquiry Group's questions, Company B, asked the Inquiry Group to consider that there:

... is no one-size fits all model or language for the responsibility aspect of ownership. Every employee will inevitably interpret "ownership" in their own way. Measures, KPIs, etc. will only work so far in providing clarity/points of reference. This is of course true of any group of owners, be they a partnership, a corporation, shareholders, etc. but in a situation where you introduce many employees (and their interpretations) to what would traditionally be closed, board level decision making, one is faced with political 'complications' that would otherwise simply not exist. Key considerations in an EO situation then become:

How are these political complications/aspects managed, resourced and accounted for?

What is the right level of transparency when it comes to managing these aspects? (Where 'right' corresponds to the effect on organisational culture that that transparency will have.)

Who will be responsible for making those calls and ultimately to whom are they accountable?

Who will champion them when necessary? (And what might 'when necessary' look like?)

Owner-Director Company B

The Group itself was certain that whatever form it took that there needed to be positive action from staff to engage if they wanted to have any 'influence or control' at all, as was commented in one of the sessions 'we need to be clear on 'why becoming an EO' rather than just that it's being 'gifted' to staff'. In this it was felt that 'organisational structures of participative democracy' (Inquiry Group Interim Report) have the *potential* to deliver employee control, but only that.

There was conscious engagement with imagining something different and helping to bring the vision into view. The empirical investigation, as a collaborative project both internally at BookCo, and with the tremendous support from the non-hierarchical and already employee owned Company B, has raised many questions for existing theory related to Rothschild and Whitt's (1986) conception of conditions to avoid degeneration, in addition to the challenge of balancing hierarchy (or lack of) with control (Clastres, 2013, Jaumier: 2017).

This Chapter will consider the methodological decisions made within the research, summarise the research findings and the important contribution they make to the theoretical and practical understanding of democracy in employee owned organisations. It will conclude by considering the contemporary position of workplace democracy and the contribution this study makes. Furthermore, there will be a short examination of researcher reflexivity, participants own comments on the analysis and supplementary areas for possible future research.

Reflections on methodology

This research has synthesised an Extended Case Method and CPAR into a new Workers' Inquiry. This situated the Extended Case Method in a more participatory context, as opposed to its often more frequent ethnographic use. Critical Participatory Action Research was explicitly extended beyond the immediate action into also developing theory, this was important in order to develop generalisable outcomes which others could engage with, in

addition to situating the specific workplace within a wider societal context. Both of these methodologies are sympathetic to embedded participation and to the sharing of liberation-based theory, so this combination within one study did not seem an unnatural extension under the descriptor of the Workers' Inquiry, an inherently praxis-based research. This approach is also highly distinctive from other recent Workers' Inquiries due to its focus on collective change, democracy and theory, as opposed to class composition and 'self-activity'. This had the effect of situating the research within a dialectical understanding of the structural context workers found themselves in, as well as engendering change.

The Extended Case Method was used to address a challenge in how to ensure theory and a dialectical perspective could be sympathetically applied to Critical Participatory Action Research. Burawoy's Extended Case Method shares in its appreciation that 'we don't enter the field as "natural" individuals, but with perspectives, defined by common knowledge as well as accumulated bodies of disciplinary knowledge' (Burawoy, 2019:50), in alignment with dialectics. Its focus on extending theory as a principal objective in research, forced a break from more undeveloped dialectical approaches which appear merely to look for contradictions and worker/management conflict. A dialectical focus on the 'totality', on the interrelation of the broader context with the specific social relations at BookCo, enabled new perspectives on both the research site and the theory chosen.

The approach to the research was also one which was able to be flexible enough for new understanding to emerge, which did not necessarily just 'fit' with extending the specific theory chosen or be based entirely in the setting of the research. One example of this was the contradiction which became apparent between the participants objective for more power in the organisation *without* introducing more structure. This perspective came to represent the intersection between change, external pressures both in the industry and technology and new organisational forms.

Other researchers utilising the Extended Case Method have found themselves in something of a contradictory position. Burawoy in the earliest application of the method in his own research in the Zambian copper mines (1972) found that he was 'replicating the color bar within the research team' (1998:22). He points to the paradox that as participants 'we are trapped in networks of power' and as observers 'we are on "our own side"' (1998:22-23). He continues; 'there is no escaping the elementary divergence between intellectuals, no matter how organic, and the interests of their declared constituency' (1998:23). The participatory approach taken to the research was able to surface these potential conflicts

and ensure that all participants could be involved in the research from beginning to end. The research adhered to Wadham and Warren (2014) view that; 'only where participants are involved in all stages of the research process can the extended case method genuinely depict their organizational world' (2014:11).

The use of an Extended Case Method necessitated structuration 'locating social processes in the context of their external determination' (Burawoy, 1998:23), which could lead to normalisation in the fitting of research to a theory, and conversely the theory to the research. Burawoy reflects on a potential solution to this, in 'working more closely with those whose interests the study purported to serve' (1998:24). Similarly, in a more recent application of the Extended Case Method by Ferguson (1991), she considers that:

I am left reflecting on the division of labor in which I find myself. Paradoxically, I was drawn to do research in a collective in order to examine their attempt to erase the distinction between mental and manual work and find myself firmly on one side of that divide: a mental worker interpreting the manual work of others (1991:132).

The use of CPAR, actively supported by the Inquiry Group, gave a structure that they found helpful in balancing reflectivity and action, and one that will continue to be used beyond the formal timeline of this research study. It was pleasing to see how the method became their own and will be used to continue the transition process. Fals-Borda and Rahman write that within participatory action research this; 'dialectical tension in commitment and praxis leads to a rejection of the asymmetry implicit in the subject/object relationship that characterizes traditional academic research and most tasks of daily life' (2008:4-5). This breakdown in the researcher/researched dichotomy was apposite for booksellers, and sympathetic to the democratic transition the Group wanted to engender.

Fals-Borda and Rahman also point to success being demonstrated by the redundancy of the researcher in the transformation process (2008:5). I certainly feel I could now step away from the Inquiry Group and they would continue with no detriment. In addition, Fals-Borda and Rahman assert that there 'is an obligation to return this knowledge systematically to the communities and workers' organizations because they continue to be its owners' (2008:9) and in that sense there is an additional obligation of dissemination, the idea of sharing the knowledge produced within the Group to other potential employee owned firms was also discussed. If possible, sharing experiences would also go some way to repaying the generosity of Company B in sharing their own experiences of employee ownership.

The Inquiry Group, and the very question they were answering, existed *because* of the transition, as the concept of ownership, employee or otherwise added a logic and legitimisation to a conversation within the business. However, having shares held in trust which no employee could ever sell, or control was actually academic because the more tangible change would be the family stepping away from the board and what their influence would be post transition. Such is the abstract nature of shares moving from one place to another, that the Group saw no conflict with requesting changes prior to this legal status:

The more we explored the topic of participation in the company the more we became convinced that this used to raise questions about how to change decision making now and generate a sense of ownership prior to transition. The Inquiry Group believed that many of the proposals in this report could be put in place prior to shares being moved to a trust.

Inquiry Group Interim Report

Given the direction of travel for many corporations in delaying and worker involvement, it would seem not unrealistic to expect that some companies will move in this direction anyway. Several governments have suggested they would mandate employees on boards (Cabinet Office, 2012, The Conservative Party, 2017:18), yet it has not come to fruition. It would make for an interesting study to explore why not; however, it was outside the scope of this research study.

Ramsay and Haworth (1984) have argued against those who recognise cooperatives and worker owned firms as in some way prefigurative of a different, post-capitalist, society which leaves the fundamental relations within the firm as unchanged in that ‘authority relations’ (1984:299-300), ‘division of labour’ (1984:314) remain firmly intact and do nothing to change society. This analysis takes a less dramatic position and makes no claims around employee ownership changing capitalist relations as a whole.

Recognising that Ramsay and Haworth were writing in the 1980s, prior to many of the post-Fordist change in the economy and to firms, they make an important observation that:

...the bureaucratic confines of most ‘economic democracy’ proposals do not augur well for capital-sharing as the likely instigator of worker involvement, or of widespread awareness of the limits of capitalism and the existence of experimental alternatives to it. On balance it does not seem to us likely to challenge fundamentally capitalist relations and more probably it will promote the status quo through that juridical deception, the collective ‘worker capitalist’ (1984:317-318)

This touches on the question implicit within the title of this thesis ‘Better Capitalists?’.

Inherent in the descriptor is an apparent contradiction, and, for many, might represent a

form of negation; for a worker to be a capitalist they are to renounce what was an inherent challenge to capitalism from the worker. Taking up the challenge posed by Wellbrook that what workers lack 'is not necessarily an understanding of their own situation but a confidence and the support to challenge their circumstances' (2014:370), this research has demonstrated potential opportunities for agency and democratisation within employee owned organisations.

Research findings

The research has produced a number of significant findings through both its extension of theory, and its contribution in methodological approach. This Chapter will summarise and review this theory development, utilising the themes of a new cycle of control, succession and culture, understanding the organisation, and the decomposition of hierarchy and the iron law.

Revisiting the questions posed at the outset of this research, it is evident that the findings have made a significant contribution to extending knowledge in these specific areas:

How do organisational structures of participative democracy within employee owned companies enable workers to control, or have impact upon strategy?

In what ways does the diminishing of collective worker organisation and the changing nature of work create an opportunity for new organisational forms?

To what extent do people have more agency within employee owned firms?

A new cycle of control

The research has extended Ramsay's concept of Cycles of Control (1977; 1985; 1993) which examined the role of participation in the organisation through the understanding that it should be seen as *negotiated, partial and historically specific*. Utilising this lens, the research introduced a new fifth cycle of control which demonstrated that new power relations, principally driven by technology, have disrupted the thesis of participation as waves of control between labour power with an equivalent response of concessionary participation (Ramsay, 1977:496).

With the retreat of collectivist labour power (Office for National Statistics, 2015), this new cycle is rather built upon the shift within capitalism towards flexible production (Streeck, 2012:31), decentralisation and efficiency (Lasi et al., 2014:240). Supported by technological changes, this flexibility has placed greater job control with workers and removed old

bureaucratic structures, it has not however given people more confidence that they can change things for the better (Masquelier 2017:61).

The previously established industrial relations stance of taking of workers' collective objectives as being democracy and control and managers' the 'goal of efficiency' (Ramsay, 1977:498) has now transitioned to individualised industrial relations focusing on individual aspirations (Kelly, 1998:4, Cederström and Fleming, 2012:40). In this context, more participation is not a threat to efficiency nor inherently a threat to internal authority, because, as this thesis has discussed, workers have been seen as operating more in the interests of the firm than management by some (Galbraith, 2004).

The thesis does not refute the concept of cycles, rather in its focus on the 'empirical reality' (Ramsay, 1993:79) that workers find themselves in today, it reveals new challenges for those looking to democratise the firm and achieve meaningful participation. If the changes in organisations driven by technology are 'permanent', then they offer a new and potentially exciting context for a discussion on participation. With job level control being higher, for many, than ever before – this raises questions of how it relates to strategic level control and whether this is a meaningful separation at all (Ramsay, 1985:61-2).

As the research demonstrates, with the workplace experience of workers, the social relations of production, are changing in parallel to broader changes in production. These changes, despite the continuing structural limits, also offer contradictions and, inherently; 'management's inability to predetermine outcomes' (Ramsay, 1985:63). In this respect, the Fifth Cycle of Participation offers a potential for change which could be seen as transcending the previous antagonistic social relations, but only if the technical process of work is seen as offering an opportunity for broader engagement within the organisation.

Succession and culture

The research developed the concept of succession by extending the theory into succession to employee ownership. Building substantially on Burawoy (1972; 1996) and Gouldner's (1955) research into the changes in the social relations of production inherent in successions, it utilises this context to shed light on power and structure in the contemporary workplace.

The context of a transitioning employee owned firm is uncommon and this has enabled this new perspective from which to explore the theory of succession. The prior theory focused on how power would transition, exemplified by the question posted by Burawoy 'what

access does the successor have to organizational controls to cope with resistance and conflicting demands?’ (1972:50). With the succession to employee ownership there were two eventualities explored within this study, those of *pseudo succession* and *democratic succession*. With *pseudo succession* the family business paternalistic culture is maintained by management, *democratic succession* in the current environment – with the lack of formal decision-making structure, for example, is shown to be a significant challenge. Three areas of tension were identified as needing to be addressed if the strategic level engagement by employees was to be realised:

- (i) Cultural transition – for the workers to reform sophisticated paternalistic control measures to collectivised control.
- (ii) Rewriting myths – for the employee ownership to utilise a mythical past in order to create both mediating mechanisms for agonistic disagreements, but also to legitimise the new ownership.
- (iii) Control structures – effective use of imposed organisational structures of control, such as the Employee Council and board membership, to create a new relationship with management.

The thesis offered an important ‘successional lens’ in order to look at the challenges of transition to employee ownership, one which more clearly elaborated on the need for the conscious examination of the change of internal relations.

Understanding power within the organisation

Although clarity on where power in the organisation sits was problematic for both the Inquiry Group and the researcher, it was understood to be key in delivering democratisation. Utilising both Tannenbaum to underline the importance of measuring whether employees are ‘exercising *real*, and not merely perceived or imagined, influence’ (1986:288) and Lukes (2005) multi-dimensional understanding of power – it was possible to address the more poststructuralist assertion that the modern organisation is unpredictable and constantly shifting (Cardinal et al., 2017:582).

Rather than abandon control as unknowable, the Inquiry Group looked to create a culture of ownership, which could be seen as sitting outside of traditional structural and behavioural control structures. As they wrote:

Gradually, having a *culture of ownership* became central to our discussion. This then extended the concept of owner director, to have an owners’ job description

and the encouragement of all to understand the business and be able to play a full role within it.

Inquiry Group Interim Report

They understood that their challenge was 'not how to eliminate power, but how to constitute forms of power which are compatible with democratic values' (Mouffe, 2009:22) and that there could be an "empirical basis for identifying real interests'... e.g., through democratic participation' (Lukes, 2005:146). Within the *Inquiry Group Interim Report*, they detailed the development of a culture of ownership amongst staff *in addition to* the formal structure of control. This conscious addressing of 'organisational effect' by the Inquiry Group, that Lukes described as the third dimension of power, where action and policy is 'not attributable to a particular individuals' decisions or behaviour' (2005:26), contributed a significant research finding for how workers may look to engage within new organisational structures.

Developing the idea of employee cultural power, the thesis began to explore the concept of a reverse dominance hierarchy (Clastres, 2013, Jaumier: 2017) which was used to represent a more purposeful culture of ownership within the business, as opposed to the concept of the 'indulgency pattern' (Burawoy, 1982b:849) that can be seen as managers just seeking cooperation within antagonistic staff relations. Reverse dominance hierarchy has been identified within the thesis as a potential for additional future research within employee owned organisations. Combined with the changes to organisational structures and devolved decision making, organic democratic culture could be a rich area for participatory inquiry.

Decomposition of hierarchy and the 'Iron Law'

Whereas Rothschild and Whitt (1986) and Rothschild (2016) set out the conditionalities for avoiding degeneration and Michels's (1962) *Iron law of oligarchy* within co-operative and employee owned organisations, the research findings challenged the underlying assumptions of the degeneration thesis. The Inquiry Group rejected the inevitability of degeneration based upon division of labour, staying small and reaching consensus, in favour of 'an experiment with democratic organisational structure' (*Inquiry Group Interim Report*). The Group emphasised a sharing of skills and knowledge, with common strategic objectives and one where ownership was a collective role rather than technical function.

Predictions of degeneration based upon the existence of hierarchy in Rothschild and Whitt (1986) are largely based on research prior to the decomposition of bureaucracy evident in

many organisations today. This research has examined the contingencies designed to avoid degeneration and raised new perspectives based upon the work of the Inquiry Group which add a valuable new perspective on the challenges of democratic organisation.

Conclusions

Workplace democracy has been the central theme throughout this thesis. Democratising the firm is a fundamental challenge to the way work is structured today. Ellen Meiksins Wood highlights the essential opposition to capitalism that exists within true democracy:

There are absolute limits to capitalist democracy, which – even as an ideal not only as a deeply flawed reality – ends where appropriation begins. The immense concentrations of power in capitalist property, and indeed the impersonal dictates of market disciplines and the imperatives of profit maximisation, are sealed off from any kind of democratic accountability. The democratic writ does not run, for example, in the workplace, nor in the distribution of labour and resources. This leaves huge expanses of human life – in fact, most of our daily experience – outside the ambit of democracy, even in principle, let alone in practice (1991:176).

When Marx wrote of worker-controlled firms in the third volume of *Capital* (this section written around 1865) he saw the ‘antithetical character of supervisory work disappears, since the manager is paid by the workers instead of representing capital in opposition to them’ (1991:512). However, Marx also recognised that this is more than overcoming antithetical relations within production, by ‘producers, govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their collective control instead of being dominated by it as a blind power’ (Marx, 1991:959) to overcome indifference, alienation and the ‘depression of his conditions’ (Marx, 1991:179). What appears to be fundamental here, is not the overcoming of alienation and the specific conditions of production but rather the ‘blind power’ of capital, of the logic of the drive to create *capital* above all things.

Democratisation of production within employee owned organisations is not a given with the mere juridical change of ownership in many employee owned firms. With its growing attractiveness to individual capitalists, there is also a tendency to keep the relations of production unchanged. The antithetical relations with management persist as before, as this thesis discusses, within the typology of such firms. This has always been a danger where employees are not engaged in the actual succession to employee ownership democratic engagement can be less than where workers have had agency in creating their own organisation (Carter, 2006:416).

The attractiveness of employee owned businesses within capitalism, with their increased efficiency, higher productivity and stability, cannot be denied. These benefits, in addition to the broader requirement for ownership of task, and of taking responsibility and ‘ownership’ at a job level, reflects the drive for efficiency and the changes required by the more technological pressures on the firm and its need to become agile, adaptive and deliver flexible production. Even where employee ownership is not present, these themes are common across western capitalism. The new agile and technically competent worker is self-monitoring or supervised by managers who look to check on wellbeing and operate in a context of ‘individualised industrial relations’ (Kelly, 1998).

Indeed many ‘bequeathed’ firms, the most common form of employee-ownership in the UK (Employee Ownership Association 2018), are not bequeathed at all. Instead, they are sold to their workforce and shares are held in an EO trust. In large, part the driver for this is The Finance Act 2014, which launched the Employee Ownership Trust (EOT) model. Under this model, owners who sell their shares in a firm to an Employee Ownership Trust as part of a move to employee ownership are exempt from paying capital gains tax. As a result, employee owned firms have been growing in the UK with a 28% increase in 2019 with combined sales of £20.1bn with greater average productivity than traditionally owned UK businesses (EOA 2021). As the Employee Ownership Association writes:

Employee ownership delivers 4% of UK GDP annually. Employee owned businesses achieve higher productivity and greater levels of innovation and are more resilient to economic turbulence. They also have more engaged, more fulfilled and less stressed workforces (EOA 2021a).

Despite the increase in EO firms and their higher average productivity, access to finance is often inconsistent and difficult to find, as described by a representative from employee owned consultancy Traverse, who says ‘we would explain what the structure was and the phone would go down’ (cited EOA 2018:22). With the driver for transition to employee ownership often coming from ‘traditional’ and family owners, the Employee Ownership Association has also questioned the ability for many organisations to make the transition from ‘top-down management’ (2018:23) and found that experience in this type of change was lacking in management and there was a need for experts in transition to ‘transfer their experience and expertise to business owners’ (2018:23).

With the primary drivers for succession to EOTs being productivity, motivation and tax incentives, with the transition of these businesses there may well be an emergent gap in skills for economic democracy – if indeed there is a call for them at all. In many of these

businesses, the change to employee ownership is principally a legal one, an opportunity even being seen by the big accounting firms like KPMG (KPMG, 2019) who appreciate the logic of supporting companies in this space. The prospects for democratisation as part of this process are less clear. Indeed, as described in this thesis, there were originally two other EO companies in addition to Company B who were taking part in the research, however both withdrew when the management found out that the main focus was to be the level of democracy in their firms.

The 2012 UK government's Nuttall Review of Employee Ownership stated that for employee ownership to be meaningful the 'employees' stake must underpin organisational structures that promote employee engagement in the company' (Nuttall, 2012:20). The report recognises the challenges here in broad terms only:

The benefits of employee ownership are most likely to be realised when ownership co-exists with wider drives for employee participation in decision-making. Studies speculate that this can prove to be a different challenge for large companies or those expanding with growing workforces that will need to adapt their managerial structures in order to ensure continued employee involvement. Smaller companies on the other hand, may find employee engagement is easier to implement and maintain (Nuttall, 2012:24).

As well as an emergent challenge of democratisation within EO firms there is also the interplay with the individual-collective, the Employee Ownership Association's Report placed some of the intrinsic benefits of employee ownership in the *individual* experience as work; 'is where we look to feel valued, to receive recognition and to derive respect, and it is linked to our individual identity' (Employee Ownership Association, 2018:6). For Summers and Chillas, this also created potential conflict; 'collaborative practices, rather than appearing to encourage homogenisation, on the contrary encouraged the voicing of different interests, which could be combative' (2019:10).

This emergence of agonism, as discussed previously, in respect to the exchange of ideas requires conscious organisational design, in addition to a rediscovery of democratic processes and culture in order to be able to fruitfully address the interplay between the individual and collective. Summers and Chillas write that economic skills can be trained, whereas 'economic *democracy* skills emerge as a result of working in an EOC' (2018:12) reflective of Pateman's (1978, 2012) observation that people 'learn to participate by participating' (2012:10).

Central to the importance of this research is the role of democratic structure *and* culture within the organisation and this could be seen as especially challenging given its

diminishment within the broader socio-economic context. Hägglund sees within Marx's vision for democratised production as essential to more meaningful change in work:

Such democratic ownership is decisive for the actual possibility of a society what would privilege meaningful work in free association with others. As long as the means of production are privately owned, the growth of capital – rather than the creation of meaningful forms of labor – will be the aim of the system as a whole, regardless of what our individual intentions may be (2019:280).

Of course, the potential for democracy within employee owned firms is ultimately constrained by capitalism. Under capitalism profit is most valuable, and although firms may have the opportunity to choose a democratic route to control and make decisions as a result that do not *purely* place profit as the single motive above all else, they do have to make a profit, and they will be constrained by access to capital when they cannot dilute the employee ownership with bank and finance capital. However, the Inquiry Group was willing to face up to these challenges and try anyway:

Our Partnership will also be an experiment with democratic organisational structure. The change inherent in any experiment should be embraced and we should not be afraid to try things, adapt them, accept feedback and try new ways to work accordingly.

Inquiry Group Interim Report

Pateman (1978) found opportunities for workplace democracy to 'spill over' into society as a whole in the 1970s, due to the broader socio-political context, something necessarily significantly different today. It would be contradictory to believe that the drivers for democratisation are a strong force in society, yet capitalism has, through a combination of its own challenges, opened up an opportunity which, as with all contradictions, could offer a positive context for democracy within the organisation. A rediscovery of democracy is also an opportunity for people to be able to play a part in change, as Marx wrote:

Democracy is the solved *riddle* of all constitutions. Here, not merely *implicitly* and in the essence but *existing* in reality, the constitution is constantly brought back to its actual basis, the *actual human being*, the *actual people*, and established as the people's own work (1975:29).

What these successions to employee ownership demonstrate is that without an explicit discussion or intervention, then the new structure is likely to reproduce the old. The new cultures of those firms with a high density of 'knowledge workers' with a hierarchy which may be organic, or dynamic or just diminished has a need for legitimacy baked in. That legitimacy and reliance on employees, even more so if they are owners, contains a potential for democratising the firm.

Contribution

This research has made several important contributions to knowledge, both theoretical and methodological. Combining participatory based action research in a transitioning employee owned company, with the support of one already in employee ownership, and then extending this research through theory offers a unique perspective. It has extended Ramsay's concept of Cycles of Control (1977; 1985; 1993) into the Twenty First Century and has demonstrated how new power relations and technology have disrupted the thesis of labour power and concessionary participation. With the retreat of collectivist labour power this new cycle is built on a crisis of legitimacy within capitalism itself and the need for efficiency driven by technological changes and a shift to service industries in the west. It retains the essential historical and economic perspective which Ramsay developed and extends rather than refutes the concept of cycles.

The research also develops the concept of succession within this context, building substantially on Burawoy (1972; 1996) and Gouldner's (1955) own research into the changes in the social relations of production inherent in such transitions. The context of research within a transitioning employee owned firm is uncommon and this has enabled a new perspective. Succession to employee ownership for BookCo can be seen as a concretisation of new control mechanisms, those of disbursed control and self-management, as a result of the prevailing economic and technological environment. This change offers a new relationship in ownership and control which provides a potentiality for greater employee power which of course may or may not be realised. This is important as Burawoy writes:

We hear little of work as an activity undertaken by competent, creative individuals, seeking to exercise control, albeit minimal, over their environment (1982b:847-8).

This research has utilised participatory and worker-led methods in order to expose the way in which they reflexively respond to this change in the organisation, enabling them to simultaneously experience a democratised method whilst thinking about workplace democracy.

This research has also challenged many of the contemporary theories of control and power in the organisation, those which claim that the complexity of new organisational forms results in research only being possible into a narrower form of mechanisms of control - as opposed to a wholistic consideration of power in the organisation. By utilising Tannenbaum (1961; 1968; 1986) and Lukes (2005) this research has demonstrated that these

architectures of control *can* be examined in their totality; with the experience of the pandemic exposing many power relations as conditional in addition to examining the complex interplay between structural and cultural power within new forms of organisation.

It has also made a significant contribution in exposing the new social relationship of production within the context of the decomposition of hierarchy, and its subsequent impact upon the potential for democratisation within the employee owned firm. The research has shown how, within BookCo, there was a reluctance to replace removed hierarchies of management with new employee control structures and consequently that there was a greater emphasis on *culture of ownership* in addition to formal structures. This recognised the changing shape of the organisation whilst recognising the new reality of decision making and power across the business, not just as behavioural indicators of power. In this, the research findings explicitly challenge the rules set down by Rothschild and Whitt (1986) for the survival of worker owned firms in addition to Michels's (1962) *Iron law of oligarchy* as the role of hierarchy and bureaucracy.

In its methodological contribution, this research has returned to Marx to develop the concept of the Workers' Inquiry as praxis. This approach was taken to extend Critical Participatory Action Research within a broader economic, historical and social context recognising the shared democratic and liberatory objectives between these two methods. It also utilised the centring of theory present in the Extended Case Method, with the combined use of Workers' Inquiry and Critical Participatory Action Research, which moved away from the use of ethnography where it is more commonly applied. In the application of this blended approach there is a unique contribution which may assist other researchers in considering options for methodological application within the workplace.

By combining these methods, the research was able to create a specifically dialectical approach grounded in the praxis of workers in the company being studied, in addition to enabling both a democratic objective and a democratic research method for the workers participating. Additionally, with the additional access to an already fully employee owned firm, with which the participants could engage, this created a novel methodological approach which enabled further reflexivity within the participatory Inquiry Group.

These contributions were also made within a research project which detailed the contemporary retail and bookselling context both before and during the pandemic. These additional pressures and the recording of their impact also forms a unique record of this period of time.

Researcher personal reflections

To reflect on the journey that this research has taken, and how I have evolved in my thinking, I feel it is worth reviewing how this research study and the methodological decisions, philosophical approach and research questions have developed and become intertwined. I will draw on the positive experience of working with colleagues as participants, and the reflexivity it engendered and ultimately the importance of praxis in delivering the real potential of theory in the real world but also on developing research skills.

Prior to starting a PhD, I was working within a business which was planning to transition from being a family owned bookseller to becoming Employee Owned. As a senior manager involved in this process, I felt it was important for our actions to be based on established knowledge and theory so that we could take a considered and rigorous approach in order that the company could have a better chance of success for its new worker owners. Additionally, I wanted staff engagement in the process and not have a transition process that was purely management led, which would have seemed somewhat contradictory to the potentially democratising effect of the change of ownership.

The PhD offered an opportunity to use research to begin a process of engagement with staff about the move to Employee Ownership. It also worked somewhat de-politicised these discussions, where there, potentially, could have been resistance from management to incorporating the opinions of staff in planning for transition.

My subsequent interactions with peers, academics and participants have contributed to the most significant developments related to my practice as a researcher. I have benefitted from often quite passionate discussions with doctoral peers, within the doctoral roundtables, principally over the nature of CPAR vs. Action Science. My own work had attempted to combine these two rather disparate streams of Action Research, which are, as I found out, generally seen as incompatible (Cooke, 2001:103). Action Science has a heavy focus on replicability, measurement, and the researcher's own, more ethnographic, observation of participants, as opposed to placing them at the centre of the research and driving it forward as the participants themselves.

Initially, I had conceived my research to likely be ethnographic in nature – echoing some of the more historical (Engels, 2009 [1845], Amair et al., 2018), and some recent (Woodcock, 2014, 2017) Marxist research and engagement with the workplace. However, in the

discussions with other researchers, in reading other theses (Cathcart, 2009) and in discussions with my supervisors, it became clearer that if the methodology was to support the democratic stream within the research, then Critical Participatory Action Research would better enable a truly democratic process, as it largely removed the distinction between researcher and researched. This approach could also inform both the research and the future democratisation of the business as the knowledge would be retained and could continue to be used by the participants. Reason quotes Rorty on Participatory Action Research when he claims 'you might as well be describing democratic politics, it doesn't bear particularly on social science, it is just what people in democratic societies hope to be doing' (Reason, 2003:109). For Rorty the 'just' reflects an (over) emphasis on *action* over theory, however had I continued down an ethnographic route, I believe the research would have been narrower, less effective, and not as true to its democratic aims.

My journey as a researcher therefore grappled with some of these ethical, and political questions in order to find a sympathetic methodology. This was greatly influenced by the thesis written by Cathcart (2009) where a regret around *not* using Participatory Action Research (PAR) was expressed. PAR has a democratic and liberatory approach to research with people at its heart:

to create participative communities of inquiry... [through] ... a practice of participation, engaging those who might otherwise be subjects of research or recipients of interventions to a greater or lesser extent as co-researchers' (Reason and Bradbury, 2008:1).

There are a few ethnographic engaged pieces of scholarship which have emerged over the last few years, including Cant (2020) *Riding for Deliveroo*, Woodcock (2017) *Working the Phones* and Geissler (2018) *Seasonal Associate*, all of which expose precarious working conditions. However, as Brook and Darlington write on PAR, given the 'orientation on participation, active agents and social change, it is surprising that action research has had modest take-up in industrial relations and sociology of work' (2013:238).

As discussed in the introduction the challenge was to rediscover some of the engaged industrial research of writers such as Gouldner (1955), Lupton (1963), Nichols and Beynon (1977) and Burawoy (1982a) and for this research to be reflective of that tradition. This was also a conscious decision in order to avoid what Lowery identifies as the 'new Ptolemaism' in the academy which they see as 'a push for scholarship to be insistentlly insular and to be much less interested in the study of the world than in the study of the study of the world'

(2021). Rather Critical Participatory Action Research situates the engagement of the researcher as; 'scholar-practitioners, not philosophers ...'living life as inquiry'' (Reason, 2003:120).

Focusing on the participatory and democratic nature of CPAR also enabled a fruitful crossover with the rather academically undeveloped Marxist concept of a Workers' Inquiry, which I was able to extend by combining with CPAR in the workplace. The addition of an Extended Case Method (Burawoy, 1998) forced an active dialogue on methods to find a suitable balance between action and the use of theory. Mattick has written that Marxism has become 'a preoccupation of intellectuals and [has taken] on an academic character...no longer predominantly approached as a movement of workers but as a scientific problem to be argued about' (1983:286). I wanted to ensure that the research had broader appeal and that it would not abstract the work of the participants to a point that it was either so removed as to be unrelatable to their own experience, their own view on the analysis follows this reflection. When sharing of my own analysis with the participants it was positive that they were able to find additional value in perspectives such as placing BookCo within the broader economic context, and the role of succession from the family owners.

For a researcher utilising participatory research methods there is an inherent paradox, as it is possible, if critically engaged, be pulled in two different directions, as Said wrote 'to be an expert you have to be certified by the proper authorities; they instruct you in speaking the right language, citing the right authorities, holding down the right territory' (Said, 1994:77). These interactions required specialisation, and affiliation(s) to the University, to my employer, to my participants and potentially inhibit criticality, even if only through access to time and resources, rather than looking to avoid active disagreement or conflict.

Recalling Debray, Said writes that 'when worry about pleasing an audience or an employer replaces dependence on other intellectuals for debate and judgement- something in the intellectual's vocation is, if not abrogated, then certainly inhibited' (Said, 1994:67-68). As a researcher there was a line to be carefully navigated here; this was especially the case with worker participants and interactions with management who on occasions raised questions about where the research was headed and were possibly concerned with the nature of the confidential discussions underway in the Inquiry Group.

I recognise that I was able to only allay these concerns to a degree, and able to continue with the research partially due to my position of being both in the Inquiry Group and a senior manager. I also appreciate that my critiques of other Workers' Inquiry - that they

lack participation and focus on democratic methods, in addition to limitations of structural understanding - are partially restricted by the access challenges and this may also influence their perspective. However, challenging the nature of research and engagement is also fundamental to the CPAR, as Reason has asserted 'the action research movement is engaged in redescribing inquiry: we are attempting to speak differently in the face of an entrenched vocabulary' (2003:119).

The impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic was thankfully limited due to the amount of research which had been carried out prior to lockdown. It would have been exceedingly difficult to continue with the level of participation that the Inquiry Group had been engaging in, as a group and also across the rest of the business, had much of this not been completed already. The impact of COVID-19 is therefore not explicitly discussed within this thesis, as it had minimal effect on the research study. However, what the Pandemic did expose was the conditionality of some of the owner-manager relations and the perceived culture of paternalism present within the business. Had the active part of the study continued into the period of the Pandemic, it may have engendered an additional level of reflection and emphasis from some participants, which is suggested and expanded on in their response to the analysis, which is discussed below.

To me, working and engaging with others and transcending my own personal experience to one of collaboration, has been essential in challenge my own ideas and developing reflexivity. In addition to the requirement to clearly explain my thinking in non-academic language. The challenge of embedding theory and for it to be seen as relevant and useful has been fundamental to the research work with participants and in the construction of the analysis.

Participant feedback on the analysis

As detailed in Chapter Five, the research process was an iterative one, with each cycle's data confirmed by the Inquiry Group as an accurate representation of their deliberations/actions. Throughout the research, participation was held to a high standard whereby:

Researchers need to engage with reflexive evaluation of collective and negotiated design, data collection and data analysis to consider the interpersonal and collective dynamics during the research process (Nicholls, 2009:118).

This *collective* and *negotiated* 'sense-making' (Nicholls, 2009:124) in combination with the location of the research site as the researcher's place of work did much to ensure that there was not a case of the 'researchers' hands [being] hidden' (Chiu, 2006:188). Therefore, it was always planned that the analysis undertaken as part of the research post the end of the production of the *Interim Report* by the Inquiry Group be shared with the participants for their reflections and input.

The analysis Chapters of the thesis were shared with participants in April 2021 with the comment that *all* feedback was welcome, irrespective of whether good/bad/indifferent and that I wanted to see if they felt it was a logical extension of the research process they had worked on.

Some of the comments reflected the experience of the Pandemic in 2020/2021 with the period of time elapsed where comments on the process made it 'difficult to remember it all with all that's gone on since!'. I was slightly concerned about the representation made about the nature of booksellers within the thesis, as this was necessarily broad brush, however the positionality I had described was pretty much accepted, with one commenting that they were 'really enjoying the idea of 'independent booksellers' as 'reluctant capitalists''.

As a Group there had also not been a specific discussion on the succession from the culture of being a family business. This was a theme which emerged more within the analysis, as one participant commented upon reading that, that 'questions of succession from family owned are undoubtedly of great interest for ethos now and in the future'.

What I had not anticipated was how they would also find the greater detail on industry data, both for retail and bookselling as either news or useful. However, one participant responded that 'the general numbers on turnover and pay were particularly illuminating'. The structural changes underway in the trade was not something discussed in any detail within the Inquiry Group, nor had been requested by them during the process. The opportunity to write the analysis and 'step back' to look at the broader totality of relations was, in reflection, something that could have also benefitted from discussion within the Group.

The research of the Group was more practitioner based, their focus on specific democratic mechanisms rather than a more macro analysis, and that met the objectives of the Group. To 'force' any broader context into the research could have reversed the ceding of control

to the participants. With the sharing of the additional analysis this additional layer also became available to them rather than their work be 'extracted' (Nind, 2011:359). In this, their inclusion in every stage of the process was underlined.

Although, as outlined in Chapter Four, there was not a deliberate intention for the participants of the Inquiry Group to be representative of the whole workforce, the call for volunteers did generate a mix of staff from across the business. The participant feedback on this was also that they felt this mix had added legitimacy to the process; 'I do think it was vital that the group itself was representative of the company as a whole, with participants from all the pillars of our business'. Furthermore, they added that 'I also think it was interesting that when the group met in two different sessions, with different participants, the outcomes of the discussion were largely the same'. The interaction which the participants were able to undertake with their colleagues across the organisation during the research also contributed significantly to the efficacy of their outcomes and the report produced.

The impact of the Pandemic and the closure of shops during lockdown did impede on the sharing of the report with the business as a whole, which would have led to further discussion. The Group was still keen to see this through and they are keen to find opportunities to continue to engage with the proposals they had made; for instance, with one participant describing how they 'Would be very interested to see what the wider engagement in the interim report is like, and particularly a virtual event of some sort'.

Interestingly there was also a feeling from some that the impact of the Pandemic may accelerate some of the current trends in the workplace. The effect may also be to make people consider their work experience more. As one participant wrote in their feedback:

...once we are hopefully out of the thickest part of the Coronavirus woods, it should be taken into account how long the absence from shops and the pandemic in general will have an effect on some people's interest in things beyond the bare necessities of their jobs – though perhaps I'm only speaking for myself there!

None of the participants found anything in my analysis as a surprise, nor did they feel that my descriptions were out of kilter to their experience of the research. In addition to their role in reviewing summaries and findings at each stage of the research this, is likely to also be a result of them knowing me as a colleague as well as a researcher. The access to the external business also enabled the process as a whole to be more directed by the

participants. It worked to give them a resource which sat outside of the BookCo management structure, and reliance on me as a researcher, and gave the entire process an additional level of validity.

As the bookshops begin to re-open and people return to work it will be the task of the Inquiry Group to extend the *Interim Report* out to the rest of the business for their input too and begin to implement some of the recommendations. Returning to an earlier comment made by a participant, the Inquiry Group see the research process as 'being the start of a conversation, not the end'.

Supplementary areas of research

The participants in this research will be continuing to engage as the Inquiry Group throughout the transition of the company to employee ownership, which will offer additional research opportunities to examine how the recommendations and objectives set by the Group in this current research round are enacted.

As retail continues to be an industry under considerable pressure – as further shops close and people's roles are made redundant - then there are likely to be further transitions to employee ownership, both through being bequeathed and through workers taking control themselves. These new transitions to employee ownership, along with recently transitioned firms offer other areas for further research. There is an opportunity for a more longitudinal study to explore whether these new architectures of control are temporary or a more permanent feature of this mode of production.

Democratisation of the workplace, with the changes to hierarchical structures would be a fruitful area for further research with more distributed forms of control understanding power in these contexts across companies could enhance concepts such as the reverse dominance hierarchy. It will also be necessary to understand how, and if, the pandemic also accelerates calls for a more democratised economies or 'fairer' ways of working.

The longer-term impact of the COVID pandemic on ways of working, on retail and bookselling are currently only emergent, as is, potentially a better version of capitalism. At the time of writing, (March 2021) shops are still closed due to lockdown. As society returns to a more normal existence it will become more apparent whether the changes to shopping habits are permanent or not.

This research was carried out with the future owners of BookCo and consequently did not include those who sat outside the demos, for example temporary distribution centre

workers. The interplay between employee ownership owners and non-owners in the same organisation and the experience more generally of employee ownership/democratisation for those in more precarious or temporary roles could also offer additional areas for further research.

Bibliography

- Abílio, L. C. (2017) The Uberisation of work: the real subsumption of 'getting by'. *Historical Materialism Journal*, 13 April. Available at: <http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/blog/uberisation-work-real-subsumption-getting>. [Accessed 25 April 2017].
- Ackers, P., Marchington, M., Wilkinson, A. and Goodman, J. (1992) The use of cycles? Explaining employee involvement in the 1990s. *Industrial Relations Journal*, 23, (4), 268–83.
- Aglietta, M. (2015) *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation, The US Experience*. London: Verso.
- Alvesson, M., and Deetz, S. (2000) *Doing Critical Management Research*. London: SAGE.
- Alvesson, M., Bridgman, T. and Willmott, H. (2009) *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Management Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Amair, J., Bell, H., Castoriadis, C., Chatel, S., Lefort, C., Lyotard, J-F., Mothé, D., Pannonicus, Romano, P., Véga, A. & Weinberg, J. (2018) *Socialisme ou Barbarie Anthology*. Trans by D.A. Curtis. London: Eris.
- Argyris, C. (1998) Empowerment: The Emperor's New Clothes. *Harvard Business Review*, May-June, 98-105.
- Arnstein, S. (1969) 'A ladder of citizen participation'. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35 (4), 216–224.
- Azzellini, D. (2018) *Communes and Workers' Control in Venezuela: Building 21st Century Socialism from Below*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Baccaro, L. and Howell, C. (2017) *Trajectories of Neoliberal Transformation: European Industrial Relations Since the 1970s*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bampfylde, S. (2016) Partnership, Purpose and Productivity. *Royal Society of Arts Event*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LKGI4CyAcNw> [Accessed 20 May 2017], 23 November.
- Bansal, P., Smith, W. and Vaara, E. (2018) From the Editors – New Ways of Seeing Through Qualitative Research. *Academy of Management Journal*, 61, (4), 1189-1195.
- Basterretxea, I., Cornforth, C. and Heras-Saizarbitoria, I. (2020) Corporate governance as a key aspect in the failure of worker cooperatives. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 1-26
- BBC News (2017) MPs call for end to 'bogus' self-employment. *BBC News*. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-39765768>. [Accessed 29 May 2017].
- Benson, J.K. (1977) Organisations: A Dialectical View. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, March, 22, 1-22.
- Berman, M. (1999) *Adventures in Marxism*. London: Verso.
- Bernstein, E., Bunch, J., Canner, N. and Lee, M. (2016) Beyond the Holocracy Hype. *Harvard Business Review*, 94, (7/8), 38-49.
- Bernstein, P. (1983) *Workplace Democratization, Its Internal Dynamics*. New Jersey: Transaction Books.

- Bezos, J. (2021) *2020 Letter to Shareholders*. Available online at: [2020 Letter to Shareholders \(aboutamazon.com\)](https://www.aboutamazon.com/news/letter-to-shareholders) [Accessed 15 April 2021].
- Blaug, R. (2009) Why is there hierarchy? Democracy and the question of organisational form. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 12, (1), 85-99.
- Blodgett, A., Schinke, R., Smith, B., Peltier, D. and Pheasant, C. (2011) In Indigenous Words: Exploring Vignettes as a Narrative Strategy for Presenting the Research Voices of Aboriginal Community Members. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 17, (6), 522-533.
- Blunden, A. (2017) *The Origins of Collective Decision Making*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Boehm, C. (1993) Egalitarian Behaviour and Reverse Dominance Hierarchy. *Current Anthropology*, 34, (3), 227-240.
- Böhm, S. G., Jones, C. and Land, C. (2001) Castles Made of Sand. *ephemera, critical dialogues on organisation*, Volume 1, (1), 1-10.
- Booksellers Association (2016) *Bookselling for Britain, A Manifesto from the Booksellers Association*. London: Booksellers Association.
- Braverman, H. (1974) *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism: The Degradation of work in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- BRC (2016) *Retail 2020, Fewer but Better Jobs*. Available at: <https://brc.org.uk/media/57612/retail-2020-report-1.pdf> [Accessed 3 August 2020].
- BRC (2016a) *Retail 2020, Report 3: Solutions – The Journey to Better Jobs*. Available at: <https://brc.org.uk/media/73512/brc-retail-2020-report-3-solutions-final.pdf>. [Accessed 3 August 2020].
- BRC (2018) *Pay In Retail*. Available at: <https://brc.org.uk/media/371753/10428-pay-in-retail-2018.pdf> [Accessed 1 August 2020].
- Brennan, M. & Noffke, S. (1997) Uses of Data in Action Research. In Carson, T.R. & Sumara, D.J. (eds.) *Action Research as a Living Practice*. New York: Peter Lang, 23-43.
- Brook, P. and Darlington, R. (2013) Partisan. Scholarly and active: arguments for an organic public sociology of work. *Work, employment and society*, 27, (2), 232-243.
- Burawoy, M. (1972) *The Colour of Class on the Copper Mines, from African Advancement to Zambianization*. Lusaka: University of Zambia.
- Burawoy, M. (1982a) *Manufacturing Consent, Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Burawoy, M. (1982b) The Written and the Repressed in Gouldner's Industrial Sociology. *Theory and Society*, 11, (6), 831-851.
- Burawoy, M. (1985) *The Politics of Production, Factory Regimes Under Capitalism and Socialism*. London: Verso.
- Burawoy, M. (1991) Introduction. In: Burawoy, M., Burton, A., Ferguson, A., Fox, K., Gamson, J., Gartrell, N., Hurst, L., Kurzman, C., Salzinger, L., Schiffman, J. & Ui, S. *Ethnography Unbound, Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1-7.
- Burawoy, M. (1991a) Reconstructing Social Theories. In: Burawoy, M., Burton, A., Ferguson, A., Fox, K., Gamson, J., Gartrell, N., Hurst, L., Kurzman, C., Salzinger, L., Schiffman, J. & Ui, S.

- Ethnography Unbound, Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 8-27.
- Burawoy, M. (1998) The Extended Case Method. *Sociological Theory*, 16, (1), 4-33.
- Burawoy, M. (2007) For Public Sociology. In Clawson, D., Zussman, R., Misra, J., Gerstel, N., Stokes, R., Anderton, D.L. & Burawoy, M. (eds.) *Public Sociology, Fifteen Eminent Sociologists Debate Politics and the Profession in the Twenty-first Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 23-64.
- Burawoy, M. (2012) The Roots of Domination: Beyond Bourdieu and Gramsci. *Sociology*, 46, (2), 187-206.
- Burawoy, M. & Olin Wright, E. (2002) Sociological Marxism. In Turner, J.H. (ed.) *Handbook of Sociological Theory*. New York: Springer. 459-486.
- Burawoy, M. (2019) Empiricism and its fallacies. *Contexts*, 18, (1), 47-53.
- Burnham, J. (1945) *The Managerial Revolution*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Butler, J. (2002) What is critique? An essay on Foucault's virtue. In: Ingram, D. (ed.) *The Political: Blackwell readings in continental philosophy*. Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 212-226.
- Butler, S. (2018) Wallace & Gromit producers hand stake in business to staff. *The Guardian*. Saturday 10 November. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/nov/10/wallace-gromit-producers-hand-stake-in-business-to-staff> [accessed 23 June 2019].
- Butler, S. (2020) UK retail industry suffered worst year on record in 2019. *The Guardian*. Thursday 9 January. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/jan/09/uk-retailers-suffer-worst-year-record-job-cuts-store-closures>. [Accessed 23 August 2020].
- Cabinet Office (2012) *Responding to Nuttall – next steps to a John Lewis economy*. Available at: [Responding to Nuttall – next steps to a John Lewis economy - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/144441/Responding_to_Nuttall_-_next_steps_to_a_John_Lewis_economy_-_GOV.UK.pdf). [Accessed 17 April 2021].
- Caine, D. (2021) *How to Resist Amazon and Why*. Portland Ore: Microcosm Publishing.
- Campbell, L. (2018) Waterstones sold to Elliott. *The Bookseller* 26 April. Available at: <https://www.thebookseller.com/news/waterstones-sold-elliott-advisors-773231>. [Accessed 26 April 2018].
- Cancian, F.M. (1993) Conflicts Between Activist Research and Academic Success: Participatory Research and Alternative Strategies. *The American Sociologist*, 24, 92–106.
- Cant, C. (2020) *Riding for Deliveroo, Resistance in the New Economy*. London: Polity Press.
- Cardinal, L. B., Kreutzer, M. and Miller, C. C. (2017) An Aspirational View of Organizational Control Research: Re-Invigorating Empirical Work to Better Meet the Challenges of 21st Century Organizations. *Academy of Management Annals*, 11, (2), 559-592.
- Carter, N. (2006) Political Participation and Workplace: The Spillover Thesis Revisited. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 8, 410-426.
- Cathcart, A. (2009) *Directing Democracy: The Case of the John Lewis Partnership*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leicester.
- Cathcart, A. (2013) Directing Democracy: Competing interests and contested terrain in the John Lewis Partnership. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 55, (4), 601-620.

- Cebr (2017) *Bookselling Britain: The economic contributions to – and impacts on – the economy of the UK’s bookselling sector*. London: Cebr.
- Cederström, C. and Fleming, P. (2012) *Dead Man Working*. Winchester: Zero Books.
- Cernea, M. (ed.) (1985) *Putting People First, Sociological Variables in Rural Development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: For the World Bank.
- Chambers, R. (1997) *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the first last*. London: Intermediate Technology Publications.
- Chambers, R. (2002) *Participatory Workshops, a sourcebook of 21 sets of ideas and activities*. Abingdon: Earthscan.
- Chandler, M. (2019) Elliott deal for Barnes & Noble goes through, Daunt heads to New York. *The Bookseller*, 7 August. Available at: <https://www.thebookseller.com/news/elliott-bid-barnes-noble-goes-through-after-shareholder-vote-1055691>. [Accessed 7 August 2019].
- Chandler, M. (2021) Waterstones staff launch petition after Elliott's £93m payout. *The Bookseller*, 3 February. Available at: <https://www.thebookseller.com/news/waterstones-staff-launch-petition-after-elliotts-93m-payout-1235722#:~:text=%2C%20Elliott...-A%20petition%20has%20been%20launched%20calling%20for%20Waterstones%20to%20top,total%20of%20%C2%A393.3m> [Accessed 5 February 2021].
- Chen, K. (2016) “Plan Your Burn, Burn Your Plan”: How Decentralization, Storytelling, and Communication Can Support Participatory Practices. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 57, 71-97.
- Chiu, L. F. (2006) Critical Reflection, More than nuts and bolts. *Action Research*, 4, (2), 183-203.
- Clastres, P. (2013) *Society Against the State, Essays in Political Anthropology*. New York: Zone Books.
- Cleaver, H. (1992) The Inversion of Class Perspective in Marxian Theory: From Valorisation to Self-Valorisation. In: Bonefeld, W. Gunn, R. and Kosmas, P. (eds.) *Open Marxism, Volume II Theory and Practice*. London: Pluto Press, 106-144.
- Cocaign, E. (2012) The left’s bibliophilia in interwar Britain: assessing booksellers’ role in the battle of ideas. *Twentieth Century Communism, A Journal of International History*, 4, 218-230
- Cohen, G.A. (1996) The three sources and component parts of Marxism. In: Wolton, S. (ed.) *Marxism, Mysticism and Modern Theory*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press in association with St Antony’s College Oxford, 1-6.
- Cohen, S. (1987) A Labour Process to Nowhere? *New Left Review* 1, (165), 34-50.
- Comerford, R. (2020) Wordery sold to Elliott Advisors. *The Bookseller*, 1 May. Available at: <https://www.thebookseller.com/news/wordery-sold-elliott-advisors-1201881>. [Accessed 1 May 2020].
- Co-operatives UK (2021) *#1MillionOwners*, 12 February. Available online at: [#1MillionOwners | Co-operatives UK](#) [accessed 24 April 2021].
- Cordeiro, L., Soares, C.B., and Rittenmeyer, L. (2017) Unscrambling method and methodology in action research traditions: theoretical conceptualization of praxis and emancipation. *Qualitative Research*, 17, (4), 395-407.

- Cooke, B. (2001) The Social Psychological Limits of Participation? In: Cooke, B. Kothari, U. (eds.) *Participation, The New Tyranny?*. London: Zed Books, 102-121.
- Cornforth, C. (1995) Patterns of Cooperative Management: Beyond the Degeneration Thesis. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 19, 487-523.
- Coutinho, J. (2016) *Workplace Democracy, Well-Being and Political Participation*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Manchester.
- Cressey, P. and MacInnes, J. (1980) Voting for Ford: Industrial Democracy and the Control of Labour. *Capital & Class*, 4, (2), 5-34.
- Creswell, J. David and Creswell, John W. (2018) *Research Design, Qualitative, Quantitative & Mixed Methods Approaches*. 5th Edn. Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Crouch, C. (2004) *Post-Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Cunningham, J. (2017) Methodological implications of Marxian praxis in action research. *Action Research*, 15, (3), 294-309.
- De Smet, A., Lackey, G. and Weiss, L. (2017) Untangling your organization's decision making. *McKinsey Quarterly* June. Available at: [Untangling your organization's decision making | McKinsey](#) [accessed June 2019].
- Deleuze, G. (1992) Postscript on the Societies of Control. *October*, 59, (Winter), 3-7.
- Dellot, B. (2016) Occupational Hazards, the plight of the modern worker could be reversed if we make the right choices now. *RSA Journal*, 4, 24-29.
- Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (2020) *Trade union membership 2019: statistical bulletin*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/trade-union-statistics-2019> [accessed 20 January 2021].
- Diefenbach, T (2019). Why Michels' 'iron law of oligarchy' is not an iron law – and how democratic organisations can stay 'oligarchy-free'. *Organization Studies*, 40, (4), 545–562.
- Douglas, A.J. (2008) Democratising Dialectics with C. L. R. James. *The Review of Politics*, 70, (3), 420-441.
- Duberley, J. and Johnson, P. (2009) Critical Management Methodology. In: Alvesson, M., Bridgman, T. & Willmott, H. (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Management Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 345-368.
- Duménil, G. and Lévy, D (2018) *Managerial Capitalism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Eatwell, R. and Goodwin, M. (2018) *National Populism, The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy*. London: Pelican.
- Economic and Social Research Council (undated) *What is Impact?* Available at: <https://esrc.ukri.org/research/impact-toolkit/what-is-impact/> [accessed 20 June 2018].
- Eley, J. and Hall, A. (2019) John Lewis slashes costs like a PLC as retail challenges mount. *Financial Times* 4 October. Available at: [John Lewis slashes costs like a PLC as retail challenges mount | Financial Times \(ft.com\)](#) [accessed 17 April 2021].
- Engels, F. (1987 [1894]) Anti-Dühring. In: Marx, K, Engels, F. *Karl Marx Frederick Engels, Collected Works*. Volume 25. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 5-298.

- Engels, F. (1990 [1886]) Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy. In: Marx, K. and Engels, F. *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works*. Volume 26. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 357-398.
- Engels, F. (1995 [1892]) *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. London: Junius.
- Engels, F. (2009 [1845]) *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Employee Ownership Association (2018). *The Ownership Dividend*. London: EOA.
- EOA (2017) *Lush announces 10% move to employee ownership at EOA Conference*. 27 November. Available online at: <https://employeeownership.co.uk/news/8082/> [accessed 23 June 2019].
- EOA (2021) *What the evidence tells us*. Available online at: <https://employeeownership.co.uk/resources/what-the-evidence-tells-us/> [accessed 5 April 2021].
- EOA (2021a) *What is Employee Ownership?* Available online at: <https://employeeownership.co.uk/what-is-employee-ownership/> [accessed 5 April 2021].
- Fals-Borda, O. and Rahman, M.A. (2008) *Action and Knowledge, Breaking the Monopoly with Participatory Action-Research*. New York: The Apex Press.
- Ferguson, A. A. (1991) Managing Without Managers: Crisis and Resolution in a Collective Bakery. In: Burawoy, M., Burton, A., Ferguson, A., Fox, K., Gamson, J., Gartrell, N., Hurst, L., Kurzman, C., Salinger, L., Schiffman, J. & Ui, S. *Ethnography Unbound, Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 108-132.
- Fisher, M. (2009) *Capitalist Realism, Is There No Alternative?* Winchester: Zero Books.
- Flood, A. (2020) 'People are so happy we exist': indie bookshops grow despite retail slump. *The Guardian*, 10 January. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jan/10/indie-bookshops-grow-high-street-declines> [Accessed 23 August 2020].
- Flood, A. (2021) Book sales defy pandemic to hit eight-year high. *The Guardian*, 25 January. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jan/25/bookshops-defy-pandemic-to-record-highest-sales-for-eight-years> [Accessed 2 April 2021].
- Fraser, D. (2018) Whose economy is it anyway. *BBC News*, 7 March. Available online at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-business-43317433> [accessed 3 March 2019].
- Freeman, J. (1984 [1970]) The Tyranny of Structurelessness. In: Freeman, J and Levine, C. *Untying the Knot*. London: Dark Star Press and Rebel Press, 5-16.
- Freire, P. (1996 [1970]) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin Books.
- Fukuyama, F. (1992) *The End of History and the Last Man*. London: Penguin Books.
- Furedi, F. (1990) Introduction. In: Jakubowski, F. *Ideology and Superstructure in Historical Materialism* London: Pluto Press, vii-xxxiii.
- Furedi, F. (2018) *Populism and the European Culture Wars*. Oxford: Routledge.

- Galbraith, J. K. (2004) *The Economics of Innocent Fraud, Truth for Our Time*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Gardiner, L. (2017) Election 2017: What jobs do UK workers actually do? *BBC News*, 23 May. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-2017-39966615>. [Accessed 23 May 2017].
- Gardiner, L. and Tomlinson, D. (2019) *Sorry, we're closed, understanding the impact of retail's decline on people and places*. Resolution Foundation Report. Available at: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/sorry-were-closed-understanding-the-impact-of-retails-decline-on-people-and-places/>. [Accessed 3 August 2020].
- Garsten, C. and Nyqvist, A. (2013) *Organisational Anthropology: Doing Ethnography in and among Complex Organisations*. London: Pluto Press.
- Gaventa, J. and Cornwall, A. (2013) Power and Knowledge. In: Reason, P. & Bradbury, H. (eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research*. London: SAGE, 172-189.
- Geissler, H. (2018). *Seasonal Associate*. South Pasadena: Semiotext(e).
- Gorli, M., Nicolini, D. and Scaratti, G. (2015) Reflexivity in practice: Tools and conditions for developing organizational authorship. *Human Relations*, 68, (8), 1347-1375.
- Gorz, A. (1970) Workers' Control. *Socialist Revolution*, 1, (6), 17-31.
- Gorz, A. (2005) *Reclaiming Work, Beyond the Wage Based Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gouldner, A. W. (1955) *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd
- Gouldner, A. W. (1955a) Metaphysical Pathos and the Theory of Bureaucracy. *The American Political Science Review*, 49, (2), 496-507.
- Goodrich, C.L. (1975 [1920]) *The Frontier of Control, a study in British Workshop Politics*. London: Pluto Press.
- Graeber, D. (2018) *Bullshit Jobs, A Theory*. London: Allan Lane.
- Green, T. (2019) Publication is not enough, to generate impact you need to campaign. *LSE Blogs*. Available at: blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2019/09/27/publication-is-not-enough-to-generate-impact-youneed-to-campaign/ [accessed 1 May 2020].
- Greenberg, E.S. (1983) Context and Cooperation: Systemic Variation in the Political Effects of Workplace Democracy. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 4, 191-223.
- Grint, K. (2010) The Sacred in Leadership: Separation, Sacrifice and Silence. *Organization Studies*. Vol 31, Issue 01, pp. 89-107.
- Hägglund, M. (2019) *This Life, why mortality makes us free*. London: Profile Books.
- Haider and Mohandesi (2013) Workers' Inquiry: A Genealogy. *Viewpoint Magazine*, September, Issue 3. Available online at: viewpointmag.com/2013/09/27/workers-inquiry-a-genealogy/ [accessed 6 May 2019].
- Hamel, G. (2011) First, Let's Fire All the Managers. *Harvard Business Review*, 89, (12), 48-60.

- Harris, R., Reid, R. and McAdam, R. (2004) Employee involvement in family and non-family-owned businesses in Great Britain. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour & Research*, 10, (1/2), 49-58.
- Hartman, R. K. (2014) Subversive Functionalism: For a less canonical critique in critical management studies. *Human Relations*, 67, (5), 611-632.
- Hardt, M. and Negri, A., (2017) Book launch: assembly by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *University of Westminster, Westminster Institute for Advanced Studies*. Westminster: 12 October.
- Hardt, M. and Negri, A., (2017a) *assembly*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Harvey, D. (1996) *The Condition of Postmodernity, an enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Harvey, D. (2010) *The Crises of Capitalism*. Event: at the *Royal Society of Arts* 26 April. Available online at: [RSA ANIMATE: Crises of Capitalism - YouTube](#). [Accessed 25 March 2021].
- Hastings-King, S. (2015). *Looking for the Proletariat, Socialisme ou Barbarie and the problem of Worker Writing*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Hayday, S., Perryman, S. & Robinson, D. (2004) *The Drivers of Employee Engagement*. Brighton: The Institute for Employment Studies
- Heartfield, J. (2018) How the Working Class Was Shut Out. *Spiked Review* February. Available online at: <http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/how-the-working-class-was-shut-out/20945#.WomGGUx2uhd>. [Accessed 18 February 2018].
- Hegel, G.W.F. (1988 [1840]) *Introduction to The Philosophy of History*. Trans by L. Rauch. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Heras-Saizarbitoria, I. (2014) The ties that bind? Exploring the basic principles of worker-owned organisation in practice. *Organization*, 21, (5), 645-665.
- Heron, J. (1996) *Co-Operative Inquiry, Research into the Human Condition*. London: SAGE.
- Heron, J. (2010) *The Complete Facilitator's Handbook*. London: Kogan Page.
- Hill, A. (2018) Waitrose slips up and takes the shine off the mutual model. *Financial Times*. Available online at: <https://www.ft.com/content/c82acc3a-495f-11e8-8ae9-4b5ddcca99b3> [Accessed on 12 May 2018].
- Holland, J. (2020) Amazon Inquiry. In: *Notes from Below, From the Workplace, a collection of worker writing*. London: Notes from Below, 7-22.
- Holmes, C. and Mayhew, K. (2012) *The Changing Shape of the UK Job Market and its Implications for the Bottom Half of Earners* London: The Resolution Foundation. Available at: <http://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2014/08/The-Changing-Shape-of-the-UK-Job-Market.pdf>. [Accessed 22 May 2017].
- Hopwood, A. G. (2009) On Striving to Give a Critical Edge to Critical Management Studies. In: Alvesson, M., Bridgman, T. & Willmott, H. *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Management Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 515-524.
- Hudson, A., Hayes, D., Andrew, T. (1996) *Working Lives in the 1990s The Provisional Findings of the Attitudes to Work Survey*. London: Global Futures.

Hyman, R. (1974) Workers' Control and Revolutionary Theory. In: Miliband, R. and Saville, J. (eds.). *Socialist Register*. London: Merlin, 241-278.

Ilyenkov, E.V. (1977) *Dialectical Logic, essays on its history and theory*. Trans by H.C. Creighton. Moscow: Progress Publishers.

Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) (2017) *Economic growth no longer leading to rising earnings, finds IPPR Commission on Economic Justice*, 6 September. Available online at: [Economic growth no longer leading to rising earnings, finds IPPR Commission on Economic Justice | IPPR](#) [Accessed 2 April 2021].

Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) (2018) *Prosperity and Justice, A Plan for the New Economy – The Final Report of the IPPR Commission on Economic Justice*. Cambridge: Polity.

Institute for Workers' Control. (1977) Document: A Workers' Enquiry Into the Motor Industry. *Capital & Class*, 1, (2), 102-118.

James, C.L.R. (1977) *The Future in the Present, Selected Writings*. London: Allison & Busby.

Jaumier, S. (2017) Preventing chiefs from being chiefs: An ethnography of a co-operative sheet-metal factory. *Organization*, 24, (2), 218-239

Jervis, R. M. (2016) *Worker Ownership, Democratic Management and Developmental Freedom in British Worker Co-operatives*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of York.

Jossa, B. (2017) *Labour Managed Firms and Post-Capitalism*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Karambakhsh, P. (2020) The Powers of Australian Retail Workers as a Section of the Global Working Class. *Global Labour Journal*, 11, (2), 118-133.

Kasim, S. (2017) Cooperative Democracy or Cooperative Competitiveness: Rethinking Mondragon. In: Panitch, L. and Albo, G. (eds.) *Socialist Register*. London: Merlin, 202-223.

Kay, J. (2017) How our politicians fell out of love with the market. *Financial Times*, Friday 12 May, 20-21.

Kelly, J. (1998) *Rethinking Industrial Relations, Mobilization, Collectivism and Long Waves* London: Routledge.

Kemmis, S. (2013) Critical Theory and Participatory Action Research. In: Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research, Participative Inquiry and Practice*. London: SAGE, 121-138.

Kemmis, S., McTaggart, R. & Nixon, R. (2014) *The Action Research Planner, Doing Critical Participatory Action Research*. Singapore: Springer.

Kemmis, S., McTaggart R. and Nixon, R. (2015) Critical Theory and Critical Participatory Action Research. In: Bradbury H. (ed.) *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research*. 3rd edn. London: SAGE, 453-464.

Klocker, N. (2012) Doing Participatory Action Research and Doing a PhD: Words of Encouragement for Prospective Students. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 36, (1), 149-163.

Knyght, P., Kouzmin, A., Kakabadse, N. and Kakabadse, N. (2010) Auditing employee ownership in a neo-liberal world. *Management Decision*, 48, 1304-1323.

Kokkinidis, G. (2012) In search of workplace democracy. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 32, (3/4), 233-256.

- KPMG (2019) *Employee Ownership Trusts*. Available at: [Employee Ownership Trusts \(assets.kpmg\)](https://assets.kpmg.com/content/dam/kpmg/pdf/2019/04/Employee-Ownership-Trusts.pdf). [Accessed 23 April 2020].
- Labour Party (2017) *For The Many Not The Few: The Labour Party Manifesto 2017*. Available at: <http://www.labour.org.uk/index.php/manifesto2017>. [Accessed 18 May 2017].
- Labour Party, (2018) *Alternative Models of Ownership, a report to the shadow chancellor of the exchequer and the shadow secretary of state for business, energy and industrial strategy*. London: Labour Party. Available at: <http://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Alternative-Models-of-Ownership.pdf> [accessed 10 February 2018].
- Lake, D. and Wendland, J. (2018) Practical, Epistemological, and Ethical Challenges of Participatory Action Research: A Cross-Disciplinary Review of the Literature. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 22, (3), 11-42.
- Lasi, H., Kemper, H-G., Fette, P., Feld, T. and Hoffmann, M. (2014) Industry 4.0. *Business & Information Systems Engineering*, 4, 239-242.
- Latties, A. (2011) *Rebel Bookseller, why indie businesses represent everything you want to fight for – from free speech to buying local to build communities*. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Leach, D. (2016) When Freedom Is Not An Endless Meeting: A New Look at Efficiency in Consensus-Based Decision Making. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 57, 36-70.
- Levitas, R. (1997) Educated Hope: Ernst Bloch on Abstract and Concrete Utopia. In: Daniel, J.O. and Moylan, T. (eds). *Not Yet, Reconsidering Ernst Bloch*. London: Verso, 65-79.
- Lewin, K. (1997 [1944]) *Resolving Social Conflicts & Field Theory in Social Science*. Washington: American Psychological Association.
- Lewis, J. S. (1954) *Fairer Shares, a possible advance in civilization and perhaps the only alternative to Communism*. London: Staples Press.
- Long, R. J. (1982) Worker Ownership and Job Attitudes: A Field Study. *Industrial Relations*, 21, (2) 196-215.
- Lowrey, K. (2021) Trans Ideology and the New Ptolemaism in the Academy. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 50, 757-760. Available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-021-01950-9> [accessed 16 April 2021].
- Lukes, S. (2005) *Power, A Radical View*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lupton, T. (1963) *On the Shop Floor, Two Studies of Workshop Organization and Output*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Luttrell, W. (2000) "Good Enough" Methods for Ethnographic Research. *Harvard Educational Review*, 70, (4), 499-523.
- Maeckelbergh, M. (2011) The Road to Democracy: The Political Legacy of "1968" *International Review of Social History*, 56, 301-332.
- Marcuse, H. (2012 [1964]) *One Dimensional Man, Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society*. London: Routledge.

- Martineau, P. and Stafano, M. (2021) Amazon Expands Effort to 'Gamify' Warehouse Work. *The Information* March 15. Available online at: [Amazon Expands Effort to 'Gamify' Warehouse Work — The Information](#) [Accessed 16 March 2021].
- Marwick, A. (2013) Silicon Valley isn't a Meritocracy. And it's Dangerous to Hero-Worship Entrepreneurs. *Wired*. 25 November. Available at: <https://www.wired.com/2013/11/silicon-valley-isnt-a-meritocracy-and-the-cult-of-the-entrepreneur-holds-people-back/> [accessed 28 February 2018].
- Marx, K. (1880) *A Workers' Inquiry*. Available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/04/20.htm> [accessed 14 July 2019].
- Marx, K. (1971 [1859]) *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Trans. S.W. Ryazanskaya. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Marx, K. (1975 [1843]) Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. In: Marx, K. and Engels, F. *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works*. Volume 3. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 5-129.
- Marx, K. (1976 [1845]) Theses on Feuerbach. In: Marx, K. and Engels, F. *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works*. Volume 5. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 6-9.
- Marx, K. (1990 [1867]) *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy* Volume One. Trans by B. Fowkes. London: Penguin.
- Marx, K. (1991 [1894]) *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy* Volume Three. Trans by D. Fernbach. London: Penguin.
- Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1968 [1845-6]) *The German Ideology*. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1976) *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Collected Works*. Volume 6. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Marx, K. and Engels, F. (2002 [1848]) *The Communist Manifesto*. London: Penguin.
- Mason, P. (2016) *Postcapitalism, A Guide to Our Future*. London: Penguin.
- Masquelier, C. (2017) Beyond Co-optation: Revisiting the Transformative Function of "Worker's Self-Directed Enterprises". *Socialism and Democracy*, 31, (2), 53-72.
- Mattick, P. (1978) *Anti-Bolshevik Communism*. London: Merlin.
- Mattick, P. (1983) *Marxism, Last Refuge of the Bourgeoisie?* London: Merlin.
- McNiff, J. (2014) *Writing and Doing Action Research*. London: SAGE.
- McNiff, J. (2017) *Action Research, All You Need to Know*. London: SAGE.
- Michels, R. (1962 [1911]) *Political Parties, A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*. New York: Collier Books.
- Microsoft (2021) *Work Trends Index*. Available at: [2021 Microsoft WTI Report March.pdf \(azureedge.net\)](#) [Accessed 15 May 2021].
- Miller, D. (1981) Market Neutrality and the Failure of Co-operatives. *British Journal of Political Science*, II, 309-329.
- Miller, L. J. (2006) *Reluctant Capitalists, Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Mintzberg, H. (1983) Why America Needs, But Cannot Have, Corporate Democracy. *Organisational Dynamics*, 11, (4), 5-20.
- Mintzberg, H. (2004) *Managers not MBAs*. Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd.
- Monaco, L. (2015) Nuova Panda schiavi in mano, Workers' Inquiry as a Tool to Unveil FIAT's Strategy of Labour Control. *Historical Materialism*, 23, (1), 221-242.
- Moore, J. (2004) Living in the Basement of the Ivory Tower: a graduate student's perspective of participatory action research within academic institutions. *Educational Action Research*, 12, (1), 145-162.
- Mouffe, C. (2009) *The Democratic Paradox*. London: Verso.
- Mouffe, C. (2018) *For a Left Populism*. London: Verso.
- Mullan, P. (2017) *Creative Destruction, How to Start an economic renaissance*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Müller, J-W. (2017). *What is Populism?* London: Penguin.
- Nichols, T. & Beynon, H. (1977) *Living with Capitalism, Class Relations and the Modern Factory*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Nicholls, R. (2009) Research and Indigenous participation: critical reflexive methods. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 12, (2), 117-126.
- Nind, M. (2011) Participatory data analysis: a step too far? *Qualitative Research*. 11, (4), 349-363.
- Notes from Below (2020) Introduction. In: Notes from Below, *From the Workplace, a collection of worker writing*. London: Notes from Below, 1-6.
- Nuttall, G. (2012) *Sharing Success: The Nuttall Review of Employee Ownership*. London: Department for Business, Innovation & Skills. Available at: [Nuttall review of employee ownership - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/214222/nuttall-review-employee-ownership-2012.pdf) [Accessed 1 May 2018].
- Oakeshott, R. (2000). *Jobs and Fairness, the logic and experience of employee ownership*. Norwich: Michael Russell.
- Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2015) *Labour disputes: annual article 2014*. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/workplacedisputesandworkingconditions/articles/labourdisputes/2015-07-16#review-of-1995-to-2014>. [Accessed 20 May 2017].
- Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2016) *Trends in self-employment in the UK: 2001 to 2015*. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/trendsinselfemploymentintheuk/2001to2015>. [Accessed 22 May 2017].
- Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2017a) *Unemployment rate (aged 16 and over, seasonally adjusted)*. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/timeseries/mgsx/lms>. [Accessed 20 May 2017].
- Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2017b) *Wages and salaries annual growth rate %*. Available at:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossdomesticproductgdp/timeseries/kgg2/qna>.
[Accessed 20 May 2017].

Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2021) *Homeworking hours, rewards and opportunities in the UK: 2011 to 2020*. Available at: [Homeworking hours, rewards and opportunities in the UK: 2011 to 2020 - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#) [Accessed 15 May 2021]

Ollman, B. (2003) *Dance of the Dialectic, Steps in Marx's Method*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.

Ovetz, R. (2021) Introduction. In: Ovetz, R. (ed) (2021) *Workers' Inquiry and Global Class Struggle: Strategies, Tactics, Objectives*. London: Pluto Press, 1-39.

Page, B. and Jones, P. (2018) Waterstones buys Foyles. *The Bookseller*, 7 September. Available at: <https://www.thebookseller.com/news/waterstones-buys-foyles-858311>. [Accessed 7 September 2018].

Palmer, G. and Clegg, S. R. (1996) *The Politics of Management Knowledge*. London: Sage.

Parker, M. (2018) *Shut Down the Business School, what's wrong with management education*. London: Pluto Press.

Pascale, R. (1990) *Managing on the Edge*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Pateman, C. (1978) *Participation and Democratic Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pateman, C. (2012) Participatory Democracy Revisited. *Perspectives on Politics*, 10, (1), 7-18.

Peers, M. (2021) The Briefing: Jeff Bezos Calculates Value Creation Wrong. *The Information* April 15. Available online at: [The Briefing: Jeff Bezos Calculates Value Creation Wrong — The Information](#) [accessed 16 April 2021].

Peters, K. and Thomas, H. (2020). The Triumph of Nonsense in Management Studies: A Commentary. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*. In Press 20 May. Available online at: <https://journals.aom.org/doi/abs/10.5465/amle.2020.0124?ai=vfxw&ui=57gk&af=H> [accessed 24 May 2020].

Piketty, T. (2017) *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Piore, M. and Sabel, C. (1984) *The Second Industrial Divide, Prospects for Prosperity*. USA: Basic Books, HarperCollins.

Pollert, A. (1981) *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives*. Basingstoke: The MacMillan Press

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

Postone, M. (2003) *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Price, M. (2017) *Fairness for All – unlocking the power of employee engagement*. Oxford: Stour Publishing.

- Quinn, R.E. and Thakor, A. (2018). Creating a Purpose-Driven Organization. *Harvard Business Review*, July-August, 78-85.
- Ramsay, H. (1977) Cycles of Control: Worker Participation in Sociological and Historical Perspective. *Sociology*, 11, (3), 481-506.
- Ramsay, H. (1980) Phantom participation: patterns of power and conflict. *Industrial Relations Journal*. Volume 11, Issue 3, September pp. 46–59.
- Ramsay, H. (1983) Evolution or cycle? Worker participation in the 1970s and 1980s. In: Crouch, C. and Heller, F.A. (eds.) *International Yearbook of Organisational Democracy Volume I: Organisational Democracy and Political Processes*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 203-225.
- Ramsay, H. (1985) What is participation for? A critical evaluation of 'labour process' analyses of job reform. In: Knights, D., Willmott, H. & Collinson, D. (eds.) *Job Redesign, Critical Perspectives on the Labour Process*. Aldershot: Gower.
- Ramsay, H. (1993) Recycled waste? Debating the analysis of worker participation: a response to Ackers et al. *Industrial Relations Journal*, 24, (1), 76-80.
- Ramsay, H. and Haworth, N. (1984) Worker Capitalists? Profit-Sharing, Capital-Sharing and Juridical Forms of Socialism. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 5, 295-324.
- Reason, P. (2003) Pragmatist philosophy and action research. *Action Research*. Volume 1(1) pp.103-123
- Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (eds) (2008) Introduction. In: *Sage Handbook of Action Research*. London: Sage, 1–11.
- Rees, J. (1998) *The Algebra of Revolution, The Dialectic and the Classical Marxist Tradition*. London: Routledge.
- Reeves Knyght, P., Kouzmin, A., Kakabadse, N. and Kakabadse, A., (2010) Auditing Employee Ownership in a Neo-Liberal World. *Management Decision*, 48, (8), 1304-1323.
- Robertson, J. (2019) The firms turning their workers into owners. *BBC News*, 17 May. Available online at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-48297641> [accessed 23 June 2019].
- Romano, P. and Stone R. (1947) *The American Worker*. Available online at: <https://libcom.org/history/american-worker-paul-romano-ria-stone> [accessed 6 May 2019].
- Rothschild-Whitt, J. (1979) The Collectivist Organization: An Alternative to Rational-Bureaucratic Models. *American Sociological Review*, 44, (4), 509-527.
- Rothschild-Whitt, J. (1983) Worker ownership in relation to control: a typology of work reform in Crouch, C. and Heller, F.A. (eds.) *International Yearbook of Organisational Democracy Volume I: Organisational Democracy and Political Processes*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 389-405.
- Rothschild, J. & Whitt J.A. (1986) *The cooperative workplace, Potentials and dilemmas of organizational democracy and participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rothschild, J. (2016). The Logic of a Co-operative Economy and Democracy 2.0: Recovering the Possibilities for Autonomy, Creativity, Solidarity, and Common Purpose. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 57, (1), 7-35.

- Rowlinson, M., Jacques, R.S. & Booth, C. (2009) Critical Management and Organizational History. In: Alvesson, M., Bridgman, T. & Willmott, H. (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Management Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 286-303.
- Said, E. W. (1994). *Representations of the Intellectual*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Savage, M. (2015) *Social Class in the 21st Century*. London: Pelican.
- Sayer, D. (1989) *The Violence of Abstraction, The Analytic Foundations of Historical Materialism*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Scholz, T. and Schneider, N. (2017) *Ours to Hack and to Own: the rise of platform cooperativism, a new vision for the future of work and a fairer internet*. New York: O/R Books.
- Schweickart, D. (2002) *After Capitalism*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc.
- Scott, P. (2006) Participation or Democracy at Work. *Ephemera, theory and politics in organization*, 6, (1), 89-93.
- Simpson, E. (2021) Reinvention for the digital age. *BBC News* 11 March. Available online at [John Lewis warns of 'painful' store closures - BBC News](#) [accessed 24 March 2021].
- Sitkin, S. B., Long, C.P. and Cardinal, L. B. (2020) Assessing the Control Literature: Looking Back and Looking Forward. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behaviour*, 7, 339-68.
- Smith, K. (2005) Marxism: Finding the Maestro in Management. *Philosophy of Management*, 5, (2), 3-16.
- Smith, M. (2018) Worker-owned businesses: 'We get paid the same regardless of role'. *The Guardian*, 23 February. Available at: [Worker-owned businesses: 'We get paid the same regardless of role' | Business to business | The Guardian](#) [Accessed 6 October 2019].
- Söderberg, J. and Netzén, A. (2010) When all that is theory melts into (hot) air: Contrasts and parallels between actor network theory, autonomist Marxism, and open Marxism. *Ephemera*, 10, (2), 95-11
- Srnicek, N. and Williams, A. (2015) *Inventing the Future*. London: Verso.
- Stern, S. (2021) Zoomed out: the surreal nonsense of the online meeting cannot end soon enough. *Prospect*, 8 April. Available at: [Zoomed out: the surreal nonsense of the online meeting cannot end soon enough - Prospect Magazine](#) [Accessed 15 May 2021].
- Stevenson, I. (2021) Distribution and bookselling. In: Nash, A., Squires, C. & Willison, I. (eds.) *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain, Volume VII The Twentieth Century and Beyond* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 191-230.
- Stoecker, R. and Bonacich, E. (1992) Why Participatory Research? Guest Editors' Introduction. *The American Sociologist*, 23, (4), 5-14.
- Storey, J. (1983) *Managerial Prerogative and the Question of Control*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Storey, J., Basterretxea, I. and Salaman, G. (2014) Managing and resisting 'degeneration' in employee- owned businesses: A comparative study of two large retailers in Spain and the United Kingdom. *Organization*, 21, (5), 626 –644.

- Storey, J. and Salaman, G. (2016) *A Better Way of Doing Business? Lessons from the John Lewis Partnership*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Streeck, W. (2012) Citizens as Customers, Considerations on the New Politics of Consumption. *New Left Review*, 2, (76), 27-47.
- Street, A. (2017) Reciprocate: Ethical business Q&A with Andy Street. Event: *Saïd Business School*. Oxford, 14 February.
- Summers, J. and Chillas, S. (2019) Working in employee owned companies: The role of economic democracy skills. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 1-23. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0143831X19835319> [Accessed 1 January 2021].
- Suvin, D. (2018). *Splendour, Misery, and Possibilities. An X-Ray of Socialist Yugoslavia*. Chicago: Haymarket.
- Tait, C. (2017) *At the crossroads, the future of British retail*. Fabian Society. Available at: https://fabians.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/FABJ4765_Retail_report_260117_WEB_-2.pdf. [Accessed 23 August 2020].
- Tannenbaum, A. S. (1961) Control and Effectiveness in a Voluntary Organisation, *American Journal of Sociology*, 67, (1), 33-46.
- Tannenbaum, A.S. (1968) *Control in Organizations*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.
- Tannenbaum, A.S. (1986) Controversies about control and democracy in organisations. In: Stern, R. N. and McCarthy, S. (eds.) *International Yearbook of Organisational Democracy Volume III: The Organisational Practice of Democracy*, Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 279-331.
- Tannenbaum, A. S., Kavčič, B., Rosner, M., Vianello, M. & Weiser, G. (1974) *Hierarchy in Organizations, An International Comparison*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.
- The Conservative and Unionist Party (2017) *Forward, Together: Our Plan for a Stronger Britain and a Prosperous Future*. Available at: <https://www.conservatives.com/manifesto>. [Accessed 18 May 2017].
- The Economist (2014) Thomas Piketty's "Capital", summarised in four paragraphs. *The Economist*. Available at: <http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2014/05/economist-explains>. [Accessed 22 May 2017].
- The Editors (2018) New Ways of Seeing Through Qualitative Research. *Academy of Management Journal*, 61, (4), 1189-1195.
- The Taylor Review (2017) *Good Work. The Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices*. Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy. Available online at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/627671/good-work-taylor-review-modern-working-practices-rg.pdf [accessed 23 June 2019].
- Thompson, E.P. (1995) *The Poverty of Theory, or an orrery of errors*. London: Merlin.
- Timming, A. and Summers, J. (2018) Is workplace democracy associated with a wider pro-democracy affect? A structural equation model. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 41, (3), 1-18.

- Tourish, D. (2019) *Management Studies in Crisis – Fraud, Deception and Meaningless Research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tronti, M. (2012) Our Operaismo. *New Left Review*, 2, (73), 119-139.
- Tronti, M. (2019) *Workers and Capital*. London: Verso.
- Ussher, K. (2016) *Improving pay, progression and productivity in the retail sector*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/improving-pay-progression-and-productivity-retail-sector>. [Accessed 3 August 2020].
- Wadham, H. and Warren, R. (2014) Telling Organizational Tales: The Extended Case Method in Practice. *Organisational Research Methods*, 17, (1), 5-22.
- Wallace-Stephens, F. and Lockey, A. (2019) *Retail Therapy, towards a future of good work in retail*. London: RSA.
- Wang, Y., Watkins, D., Harris, N. & Spicer, K. (2004) The relationship between succession issues and business performance, evidence from UK family SMEs. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour & Research*, 10, (1/2), 59-84.
- Waterstones Staff (2019) *Working at Waterstones*. Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a3af3e22aeba594ad56d8cb/t/5ca75e49e79c70b16ce900f9/1554472522589/148+Waterstones+book+%282%29.pdf>. [Accessed 8 April 2019].
- Wellbrook, C. (2014) A workers' inquiry or an inquiry of workers? *Ephemera, theory & politics in organization*, 14, (3), 357-374.
- Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K. (2010) *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*. London: Penguin.
- Williams, G. (2020) Editor's Essay. *Wired UK Magazine* September/October, 14.
- Willmott, H. and Paranque, B. (2014). Cooperatives – saviours or gravediggers of capitalism? Critical performativity and the John Lewis Partnership. *Organisation*, 21, (5), 604-625.
- Wolff, R. (2012) *Democracy at Work: A Cure for Capitalism*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Wood, E. M. (1991) *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism, A Historical Essay on Old Regimes and Modern States*. London: Verso.
- Woodcock, J. (2014) The workers' inquiry from Trotskyism to *Operaismo*: A political methodology for investigating the workplace. In: Figiel, J., Shukaitis, S. & Walker, A. (eds.) *ephemera*, 14, (3), 489-509.
- Woodcock, J. (2017) *Working the Phones: Control and Resistance in Call Centres*. London: Pluto Press.
- Wren, D. (2016) *Cultures of Performance and Reward in UK Employee owned businesses*, unpublished PhD thesis, Sheffield Hallam University.
- Wright, S. (2017) *Storming Heaven, Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Zelený, J. (1980) *The Logic of Marx*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Zipes, J (1997) Traces of Hope: The Non-synchronicity of Ernst Bloch. In: Daniel, J.O. and Moylan, T. (eds). *Not Yet, Reconsidering Ernst Bloch*. London: Verso, 1-14.

Žižek, S. (2012) *Less Than Zero, Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*. London: Verso.

Žižek, S. and Thompson, P. (2013). *The Privatization of Hope, Ernst Bloch and the Future of Utopia*. London: Duke University Press.