

# **Workplace Democracy: Collective wisdom as a catalyst for corporate climate action**

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## **Abstract**

The field of business ethics has shown an increasing interest in the responsibilities of firms in taking climate action. In the current debates on political CSR it is put forth that firms have a responsibility to address global injustices (such as climate change) due to their systemic connection to these problems. Within this context especially multistakeholder initiatives are heralded as inclusive platforms in which public and private actors together can provide democratically legitimate solutions for taking effective (global) climate action. Although this seems promising, the effectiveness of these (political) efforts of firms to tackle climate change are called into question, and on a normative level political CSR is criticized for lacking pluralism, having a libertarian bias, and being exclusive of marginalised stakeholders. This paper aims to contribute to the diversification of political CSR by exploring the merits of workplace democracy for corporate responsibility in the context of climate change. Both in academic and societal debate, democratisation of work has gained significant momentum. Drawing on arguments about the epistemic benefits of democratic decision making and insights from feminist standpoint epistemology, we show that democratically governed firms will make better decisions regarding corporate climate policies and the involvement of other stakeholders, and as such the democratisation of firms can play a crucial role in combating climate change.

*Keywords: climate change, workplace democracy, epistemic democracy, political corporate social responsibility, corporate climate action*

## **I. Introduction**

Our climate is changing at an increasing speed, as a result of the actions and inactions of our species. We actively destroyed the atmosphere of our planet and now fail to restore it. Although most humans now believe that some form of action is needed to combat the changing climate, we are divided over both what kind of actions are due, as well as over who should take action. In the middle of the incredibly complex conglomerate of crises that we are currently facing, it is tempting to suggest immediate, strong action by a select group of people who “know what they are doing”. In the general debate, we come across this technocratic response regularly: we need experts, policy makers, technicians and scientists to come up with solutions. In our combat against the urgent climate crisis, these experts should be given a leading role, and any (for example, democratic) interference with their important and skilful work endangers or limits our chances of getting out of this catastrophe. This line of reasoning can be found on both sides of the political spectrum. Ruling, neoliberal forces will stress the potential of a technological fix, where market forces and innovative specialist companies - driven by green profits - will gradually invent a way out of this mess (Jones, 2017; MacMartin et al., 2018) . On the opposite side, activist scholars such as Andreas Malm propose something of an ecologically minded vanguard of militant activists that will circumvent or temporarily disable slow and bothersome democratic processes by forcing climate action (Malm, 2020).

Notwithstanding the intuitive temptation of immediate action, these responses are problematic from a practical and democratic perspective. From a practical perspective, the problem is that so far, the technocratic road has not been very successful - and we have no reasons to believe that this will change in the near future. The second, more important problem, is that the technocratic or vanguard argument is inherently undemocratic (not to say anti-democratic). The technocratic response is presented as a-political, whereas the autocratic response is definitely political but a-democratic (cf. Rummens, 2024). Whereas we can find

these problematic elements in the general debate on combating the climate catastrophe, they are magnified when we zoom in on the role of companies in this crisis.

Tackling the destructive ills of climate change have for a long time been considered a collective action problem befalling governments, citizens and NGOs rather than corporate actors. Yet, it are companies, especially multinational enterprises, that have been, and still are, main contributors to climate change. According to Heede, 63% of global carbon dioxide and methane emissions between 1751 and 2010 can be allotted to 90 major carbon entities. Many of these entities are corporate actors: firms from the oil and gas industry such as Chevron, ExxonMobile, BP, and Shell are in the top-10 (Heede, 2014). Despite their clear contribution to climate change, businesses left out of the equation for a long time when it comes to tackling climate change. Firms were considered to have mainly - if not only - a responsibility towards the economic bottom-line of the firm and subsequently, to its shareholders (cf. Friedman, 2009)

Over the past decades this conception of corporate responsibility has gradually changed and increasing emphasis is put on corporate social responsibilities (CSR) for that firms have for remedying the social ills that result from economic activities (Freeman, 2002; Garriga & Melé, 2004; Matten & Crane, 2005), and even on the political responsibilities of firms. Political CSR stresses the political (hence not mere technical or ethical) nature of corporate powers and (in)action and asserts that corporate actors have a responsibility in addressing the grand challenges of our times given their systemic social connectedness to global harms and injustices, such as labour exploitation, institutional racism and climate change (Arnold, 2016; Bziuk, 2022; Hormio, 2017; Scherer et al., 2016; Tempels et al., 2017). Taking up these societal challenges can take various shapes and forms, from the provision of public goods and the protection of human rights, to engaging in multistakeholder initiatives (MSI) with for-profit, non-profit and public actors to govern the negative social and environmental impacts of global corporate activity. Especially the multistakeholder initiatives are heralded as an inclusive

deliberative platforms in which public and private actors together can provide democratically legitimate solutions to (global) sustainability issues (such as the Forest Stewardship Council) (Fougère & Solitander, 2020; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011).

However, while over the past years increasing efforts are made by governments and NGOs to spur firms to take their responsibility for climate change, many of these corporate climate actions have not yet proven to be as ambitious, genuine, or as effective as is necessary to steer us away from climate catastrophe (Coen et al., 2022; Dietz et al., 2018, 2021). Illustrative of this rather grim picture is that Coen et al. (2022) find that a limited number of firms actually walk their talk when it comes to reducing greenhouse emissions. While some firms make genuine CSR commitments, many are simply green washing – engaging in symbolic action rather than making substantive efforts to combat climate change. As such it comes as no surprise that that global GHG emissions from the energy and industry sectors are going up rather than down (Cadiz et al., 2019)

Apart from these empirical findings casting somewhat of a shadow over the optimism regarding MSIs preparing us for a greener future, there are various underlying concerns that further problematise the multistakeholder initiatives. The lack of inclusion of marginalised stakeholders (workers at various levels in the supply chain, indigenous populations), limited effectiveness of (public-)private regulation, and a neoliberal bias at these sites of deliberation that ultimately favours the shareholder interests and the economic stakes of the firms involved in these initiatives, are just some of the concerns (cf. Fougère & Solitander, 2020; Hussain & Moriarty, 2018; Moog et al., 2015; Pek et al., 2023).

Given these issues with political CSR, an alternative approach to countering the climate catastrophe seems warranted. If corporations are major actors in this crisis, and if our response is to be a political and democratic one, then just focussing on deliberation of firms with other actors is not sufficient, and we need to consider some forms of democratisation *within* the firm.

We recognise that this might be considered a bold move. In our liberal, capitalist era, corporate entities are conceptually separated from what is considered the proper political realm. Whereas democratic politics takes place in city halls or parliaments, the economic realm is governed by other, not necessarily democratic principles. However, scholars have recently reinvigorated the debate about workplace democracy. Both in academic literature and in the societal debate, the conversation on the democratisation of work has gained significant momentum (Ciepley, 2020; Frega & Herzog, 2020; Krüger, 2023; Malleson, 2023; Quijoux, 2020; Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021; Stehr, 2023). We believe that there are various convincing arguments for workplace democracy (and some against it, as well - all of which we will go into later). In this paper we add another relevant argument to this debate. Based on arguments about the epistemic benefits of democratic decision making, while also borrowing insights from feminist standpoint epistemology, we put forth that the democratisation of firms can play a crucial role in combating climate change. Democratically run companies, we hold, are more likely to take their responsibilities in tackling this global problem.

In order to construct this argument, we will start by explaining why firms have a responsibility for climate action, and point out the lacunas in current theorizing on political corporate social responsibility and its limited attention for the role of the workers. In the next section we will turn to the arguments for and against workplace democracy, and show that an epistemic argument for democratisation can be developed along these lines. In the fourth section we will then further outline an epistemic argument for workplace democracy, and link it to the current debate on climate action. The final section will serve as the rug that ties the room together.

## **II. On corporate responsibility and climate action**

While there is an increased amount of research being done on potential corporate efforts to combat climate change, there is an important moral question preceding these efforts, namely the question whether and to what extent firms have a responsibility to tackle climate change in the first place. Within the realm of business ethics this is still a topic of contention. As such in this section we first shed a light on this debate in order to show that there are several moral arguments to be made that would endow firms (big and small) with a responsibility to take climate action.

### ***The moral minimum: corporate responsibility and ordinary morality***

In the contemporary discussion on corporate responsibility it is generally assumed that firms have a wider responsibility than just a responsibility to its shareholders (cf. Assländer & Curbach, 2014; Bowie, 1999; Freeman, 2002; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011; Solomon, 1992). Even scholars who embrace the notion of ‘shareholder primacy’ tend to acknowledge that firms at the very least have to adhere some basic moral principles (cf. Brennan et al., 2021; Hasnas, 2009). Hsieh (2017) refers to this basic moral minimum as *ordinary morality* which is to provide a framework for the responsibilities of firms in relation to different kind of actors they engage with in their operations (ranging from consumers and workers to NGOs, states and the environment). He highlights how firms have minimal negative duties such as the responsibility to refrain from harming others and to respect the autonomy of other actors. These basic moral rules are to be adhered to in dealing with both market as well as non-market actors. A violation of ordinary morality could for instance be when a firm engages in behaviour where it willingly and knowingly inflicts harm – for instance when subsidiaries of chemical giant DuPont contaminated land and drinking water with PFAS. From Florida and Michigan to The Netherlands, all across the globe DuPont polluted the environment, despite being well aware of

the fact that this PFAS-pollution would have serious consequences for the health of the people living nearby (Gillam & Kelleher, 2023; Reuters, 2023). Moral negligence can also be seen as a violation of ordinary morality – such as when a producer of a certain product is expected to inform a consumer about key properties and risks associated with a product or service and fails to do so (Hasnas, 2009)

These kind of approaches are helpful in structuring our thinking about corporate responsibility in concrete daily activities of firms, in their dealings with consumers and employees. And while living up to these moral obligations is essential, it is at the same time a rather limited and hands-off approach to corporate responsibility. It provides little guidance on how to deal with the more mediated harms and injustices our global society is facing, and in which firms play an important part. One can think of problems such as labour exploitation in the global supply chain, the global obesity pandemic, and most notably for our case at hand – the problem of climate change. We now turn to the work of Iris Marion Young on political responsibility for structural injustices as her ideas provide the conceptual tools to answer the question *why* firms would have a (political) responsibility for climate change.

### ***Political corporate responsibility for climate change***

In recent years various authors such as Sardo (2023) and Bziuk (2022) have – building on the work of Young – shown that climate change and its effects should be conceptualised as a structural injustice, for which a plurality of actors, including firms, share responsibility. In her seminal work *Responsibility for Justice* (2011) Young makes clear that structural injustices should be understood as social processes that:

put large groups of persons under systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities, at the same time that these processes

enable others to dominate or have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising capacities available to them

(Young, 2011, p. 52)

Hence these harms and injustices are the result of structural processes in which myriad of actors participate. The climate crisis, Sardo makes clear, can be understood as such a structural injustice as “the most vulnerable to climate hazards are also both dominated by and excluded from meaningful participation in global political and economic structures built on fossil-fuel intensive practices of extraction, production, and distribution that intensify climate change” (Sardo, 2023, p. 27). Given the multitude of actors that are (often) unintentionally involved in creating and sustaining this injustice, Young argues that responsibility for these kinds of injustices cannot be grasped with a traditional liability model of responsibility, as this tries to highlight specific actors – either collective or individual – of which it can be shown that they are “causally connected to circumstances for which responsibility is sought” (Young, 2011, p. 97) and these harmful actions are engaged in knowingly and willingly. Now, Young maintains that assigning responsibility for structural injustices is not possible with a liability model as this model seeks to pinpoint a specific set of actors as liable, while for structural injustices there is a complex network of interconnected actors engaging in processes of cooperation and competition that bring about these injustices.

In order grasp and tackle these structural injustices, Young proposes a different approach to responsibility, which she calls the social connection model of responsibility. In this model a wide variety of actors such as governments, civil society organizations, individuals, and businesses, all participate in processes that create systemic threats of domination and deprivation, and by the virtue of their social-connection to these processes these actors share responsibility for these injustices (Young, 2006, 2011). Within the context of the climate crisis



this means that corporate actors do not have a responsibility to address climate change on the basis of their individual causal contributions, but rather because of the fact that they participate in and benefit from carbon-intensive political and economic structures that create and sustain climate hazards and unjust relations of power (Bziuk, 2022; Sardo, 2023).

In contrast to the liability model, the social connection model is forward-looking, so rather than looking back and focussing on assigning blame, it is explicitly focussed on finding solutions to help set current injustices right. In addition, Young understands responsibility for structural injustice as an essentially shared responsibility that can only be effectively taken through collective action with other actors. Given that for Young political action should be understood as “public communicative engagement with others for the sake of organizing our relationships and coordinating our actions more justly” (Young, 2011, p. 112) social-connection responsibility should be seen as a *political* responsibility.

It is important to note that for Young political responsibility is essentially shared, but that this does not imply an equal responsibility (responsibility is not a zero-sum game, so to speak). To structure our reasoning about the degree of responsibility Young introduced four parameters: power, privilege, interest, and collective ability. Power reflects an actor's capacity to change situations of injustice, while privilege entails moral obligations for those benefiting the most. Interest implies responsibility for those suffering from injustice, and collective ability involves groups of actors addressing injustices together. These parameters of reasoning can be used to rethink the responsibilities of public as well private actors (Ferguson, 2024; Sardo, 2023; Tempels et al., 2017; Young, 2011).

This brief overview of the normative debate on corporate responsibility for climate change has given an answer as to *why* firms have such a responsibility. Yet the *how*-question remains: for how should firms take this responsibility and decide upon what to do? Scholars working on political CSR have formulated various answers to that question.

### ***Political responsibility and the problem (un)democratic corporate decision-making***

As we have seen in the previous section, taking political responsibility to address structural injustices means engaging in *collective communicative action with other actors* to determine how to remedy these injustices. It is this element of Young's theory that forms one of the normative backbones of political CSR theorizing. As Scherer and Palazzo note that it is Young's social connection model that "not only imposes a new modus of legitimacy on corporations, it embeds them in the emerging global governance movement and transforms them into political actors" (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011, p. 917). As such political CSR is one of the key examples of how firms can take their political responsibility for the climate crisis: by engaging for instance in multistakeholder initiatives (MSIs) with for-profit, non-profit and public actors to address the environmental impacts of both individual firms and corporate sectors as a whole.

At first glance deliberative multistakeholder platforms and communicative engagement by individual firms with various stakeholders seems like a fine way for firms to determine how to engage in climate action in a way that is also democratically legitimate. Yet, as we discussed in the introduction, there is – as of yet – very limited empirical evidence that corporate climate action in for instance the energy and industry have proven *effective* (Cadez et al., 2019; Coen et al., 2022; Dietz et al., 2018; Moog et al., 2015).

In addition, there is the issue of *inclusivity*: it is unclear which actors should be included in the deliberation and subsequent decision-making procedures on corporate policies. One of the key tenets of deliberative democracy is the idea that in order for political actions of firms to be legitimate all affected actors should be included in the deliberation (Frynas & Stephens, 2015; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007). However, several studies on political CSR show that frequently not all relevant actors are included, and if they can come to the table dissenting

voices are silenced (Banerjee, 2022; Fougère & Solitander, 2020; Moog et al., 2015). Banerjee (2018) for instance shows how in the extraction industry MSIs and political CSR activities by multinational firms fail accommodate the voice and the needs of vulnerable stakeholders such as indigenous communities. As such what he calls ‘the perspectives from below’ are neither heard nor do they effectively impact corporate policy.

And these voices from below are not just vulnerable stakeholders outside of the firm, it are also the workers that are frequently left out of the equation when it comes to decision making on (political) CSR. Much of the political CSR theorizing focusses on the firm as unitary actor and its engagement with external stakeholders, while not addressing the various stakeholders within the firm. While there is ample research on the determinants of CSR policy on firm level, these tend to focus on the impact of stakeholders such as investors, specific NGOs and consumers rather than the workers on various levels in the organisation, work councils or trade unions (Harvey et al., 2017; Scholz & Vitols, 2019, p. 237). Reinecke and Donaghey’s recent work on industrial democracy and political CSR emphasizes the importance of the inclusion of (local) worker voice in developing their political CSR strategies. They state that:

excluding worker voice from view casts pCSR as an overly benign, consensus-oriented process that conceals the inherently conflicting interests between capital and labour: MNCs outsource production to places with governance gaps to exploit cheap labour costs while workers have little power to challenge MNC practices (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021, p. 458).

By including local workers in the deliberations political CSR can move from abstract idealized and consensus-minded moral reasoning to concrete problem-solving conversations that leave room for competing interests and agonistic confrontations (ibid.).

Hence there is reason to believe that these perspectives from below, from both outside the firm as from within, should have a stronger part to play in corporate governance. However, then the subsequent question becomes to what extent should these actors have a say in corporate policy? For when stakeholders are included in the deliberation or the debate and are being heard, that does not necessarily mean that they also have an active vote in the final decision-making process. Edward Freeman (2010), one of the founding fathers of stakeholder theory, famously stated that we should ask ourselves: ‘For whose benefit and at whose expense should the firm be managed?’, yet that does not answer the question who ultimately should *decide*. So we should also ask: by whom should the firm be governed? Who should hold primacy in determining how firms shape and take their political responsibilities?

Currently many firms are still run and organised in a classic (neo)liberal fashion, in which management and shareholders play an authoritative part in the governance of the firm (cf. Ferreras, 2023). As such even if firms engage in deliberative forums for sustainability, frequently corporate financial interests trump the interests and concerns of societal stakeholders (Anderson, 2017; Bakker et al., 2019; Hussain & Moriarty, 2018; Moog et al., 2015). These findings provide little reason for optimism in regard to possibility of corporate actors taking their political responsibility for climate action. Yet, if we take Youngs idea of political responsibility seriously and truly embrace the idea of the all-affected principle, this would mean that the whole range of affected stakeholders should be included in the deliberation and that they together decide on corporate policies. Scherer, Bauman-Pauly and Schneider already hint at how this would in fact imply a radical turn-around in the corporate governance structure of many multinationals, for making the decision-making procedure more inclusive, legitimate and fair would effectively mean breaking the autocratic dominance of shareholders and managers (cf. Scherer et al., 2013).

Building on this suggestion to (radically) rethink corporate democratic governance and the more recent calls by Banerjee and Reinecke & Donaghey to include the perspectives from below, we hypothesize that the institutionalisation of workplace democracy can be a way to create more inclusive, effective and ultimately better decisions for firms to shape and take their political responsibility for climate action (Banerjee, 2022; Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021). Worker's voices are obviously not the only 'perspectives from below' that ought to be included in a just and inclusive deliberation on green policies of companies. Other important agents would be local indigenous populations, NGOs, environmental organisations, academics and other groups that have experiences or expertise that could improve policies. It is clear that from a perspective of justice and political responsibility, these actors should have a say. Our argument in this paper is that the decisions regarding the question of who should be involved in these kind of deliberations should be taken by a large and diverse group, instead of a small homogeneous group. Therefore, a democratically organised corporation will be able to better arrange such stakeholder involvement than a narrow and biased boardroom. In the next section we set out the argument for workplace democracy, and explain why among the myriad of affected groups and actors it is important to start with giving the workers a decisive voice in corporate governance. Upon establishing this, we connect it to the debate on political corporate responsibility for climate change.

### **III. Democracy at work**

The idea to give workers a voice in the management of companies is not new. Traditional liberal thinkers like John Stuart Mill proposed democratically run businesses, and in the recent century, workplace democracy resurfaced in political and academic literature in various waves. All over the globe, workers have experimented with self-government and worker cooperatives (Ness and Azzellini, 2011). For the sake of this paper, our main interest is in the philosophical

underpinnings of worker self-rule at work. In a recent overview of this current literature about workplace democracy, Roberto Frega, Liza Herzog and Christian Neuhäuser (Frega et al., 2019) have identified at least four arguments in favour of workplace democracy.

The first type of argument is the state-firm analogy argument, that is most prominent in the work of Robert Dahl, who claims that “*if* democracy is justified in governing the state, *then* it must also be justified in governing economic enterprises” (Frega et al., 2019, p. 3). A second line of argumentation is related to meaningful work, which focuses on wellbeing and dignity of workers. To achieve those values, democracy in the workplace is necessary. Thirdly, republican theorists have argued that workplace democracy is necessary to avoid domination, which is crucial in achieving liberty (conceptualised as being free from arbitrary intervention by others). A fourth line of argumentation is that democracy at work can spill over and improve democracy in society at large. If our jobs were organised democratically, so the argument goes, we would be training our civic virtues and create a democratic culture of collective self-management that benefits a stable democratic society in general (Frega et al., 2019).

The first three arguments are all concerned (in different ways) with the effects of democratisation of firms on the workers involved. The fourth argument engages with the societal effects of a democratic spillover, but accounts only for indirect effects via training of citizens in their workplace. What this literature fails to engage with, we argue, is how democratic decision making in firms influences the kind of decisions these firms make, and how this in turn impacts society. In other words: current arguments do not take the societal outcomes of these democratically organised workplaces into account. In order to arrive at an argument that a democratic workplace is more likely to avoid the biases of boardrooms and to include various perspectives in their decision making, which leads to more inclusive and environmentally friendly corporate decisions, we will take two steps. First, we will engage with the argument that democracy at work has epistemic benefits. Secondly, we will argue that

democratically run companies not only take decisions that are better for that company, but that this has an external force as well: democracy at work might lead to more just and inclusive notions of political CSR.

### *The epistemic benefits of workplace democracy*

Let us begin with explaining what workplace democracy could look like. We will not lay down a blueprint for democratic governance structures that should fit any company, but we can lay down a minimal programme, some basic principles that should be met to be able to speak of workplace democracy. Based on the work of Gerlsbeck and Herzog, we propose that “the *equal* participation of *all* employees [...] in binding decision-making processes” would serve as such a minimal programme (Gerlsbeck & Herzog, 2020, p. 313). Note that this principle can (theoretically, at least) be met via a range of different institutionalisations, from the co-determination boards that are currently in place in many German firms, to horizontalist workers’ cooperatives such as Mondragon in the Basque country.

The epistemic benefits of democracy at work along these principles are mostly related to forms of deliberation by large and diverse groups. This is why the inclusion of *all* instead of *some* workers is important. Knowledge and intellect are distributed throughout the firm, and if decision-making wants to tap in to that distributed knowledge, procedures should include all employees (Landemore, 2017, p. 21). Small, like-minded groups (like company boards or management teams that are controlled by shareholders) are likely to maintain or even reinforce flaws in reasoning, biases, and mistakes. Broad, deliberative democratic processes where many different perspectives meet can detect and avoid those biases (Gerlsbeck & Herzog, 2020; Page, 2007). So large, heterogeneous groups can outperform groups of experts in solving complex problems (Hong & Page, 2004). Given the complexity of the problem at hand, “the property we should want to maximize is cognitive diversity of the group rather than individual ability”

(Landemore, 2017, p. 90). The underlying argument for such cognitive diversity is the “Diversity Trumps Ability Theorem” (DTA-theorem) that is defended by Lu Hong and Scott Page. The theorem states that “a randomly selected collection of problem solvers outperforms a collection of the best individual problem solvers” under the conditions that the problem is complex and the group involved is smart, diverse and large (Page, 2007, pp. 162-164).

When it comes to the first condition, the complexity of the problem, it is important to clarify that here complexity refers to problems that cannot be solved by one heuristic set of problem solving practices, or only one perspective. Complex problems are problems that need multiple problem solving strategies or perspectives to find an optimal solution. This means that for instance a difficult math problem does not qualify as a complex problem in this sense, since probably one mathematical strategy of problem solving is enough to find a solution and a plethora of perspectives does not add anything to that problem-solving-power. The question of a company’s climate policies is sufficiently complex and cannot be solved by approaching it from only one disciplinary lens. One needs to weigh in financial, environmental, social and political considerations to come to a solution, hence it can qualify as a complex problem.

One might argue that this then calls for group of experts from these different disciplines to tackle such complex issues, yet this is not what deliberative democrats such as Landemore call for. Rather, the condition of ‘smartness’ is not as strict as one might think. The level of sophistication that is needed in the DTA-theorem to qualify is rather low: the agent should be able to provide some answer (*any* answer) to the problem at hand (Kuehn, 2017, p. 83) - and this makes sense as that the whole point of the theorem is that ability as expertise is not crucial in the decision-making process. In our case of corporate climate policies, it is fair to expect that any worker of a company has enough experience, knowledge and capacities to say something (*anything*) about possible ways that their company can contribute to solving that problem. Hence, it seems reasonable that the four conditions of the Diversity Trumps Ability Theorem



apply to case of corporations and their green policies, and therefore it is to be expected that (a large and diverse enough representative sample of) the workforce of a given company will outperform the small homogeneous and (hypothetically) able people in the traditional boardroom.

### *Critique of the Hong-Page theorem*

The theorem of Page and Hong has led to an significant discussion among scholars from a broad range of academic disciplines. This is not the place to reflect on all those discussions, but it is important to highlight some of the issues that seem relevant for the use of this theorem in democratic theory. The main critique on the work of Page and Hong has been the mathematical critique of Abigail Thompson with the catchy subtitle 'an Example of the Misuse of Mathematics in the Social Sciences' (Thompson, 2014). This critique has in turn been used by Jason Brennan (2016) to support his case against democracy and in favour of epistocracy. Responding to these criticisms, Daniel Kuehn has recently concluded that these are either 'incorrect, misleading, or irrelevant to the validity of the theorem' (Kuehn, 2017, p. 72). Let us briefly touch upon some of these issues.

Most of the criticisms are of a mathematical nature, or deal with the 'translation problems' when mathematical insights are transposed to social sciences. For us, interested in the relevance of these mathematical outcomes to democratic theory, Thompson's fifth objection is the most important. For this objection, Thompson has repeated Hong and Page's computational experiment, but this time with both a *maximally diverse* group of problem solvers and a *random* sample of problem solvers. This final group, which was diverse, but not *as* diverse as the first group, performed better in solving problems. So, according to Thompson, we should conclude that it was randomness, and not diversity that drove the success of the groups that Hong and Page studied. According to Daniel Kuehn, this is not the right conclusion to draw from this outcome. The fact that the randomly diverse group outperformed the maximally

diverse group does not harm the theorem, exactly because it does not state that a group should be *maximally* diverse. Remember that the theorem states that a diverse group will outperform a non-diverse, high-ability group. So if social scientists, like us, argue for enhancing (although not necessarily maximizing) diversity through democratisation, this is still perfectly within line of thesis of Hong and Page and can be expected to improve the problem solving capacity over the more homogeneous high-ability groups that traditionally make up most citizen assemblies, parliaments, and boardrooms (Kuehn, 2017, pp. 80-83).

Remember that our argument will, in the end, hold an instrumentalist perspective of democracy at work. While there are many good reasons to argue for the intrinsic value of democratizing the workplace for employees, in this paper we do not (primarily) highlight those. Here, we are mostly interested in the additional positive *epistemic* effects of democracy on decisions regarding CSR strategies and corporate climate action. As Gerlsbeck & Herzog state: “The redistribution of power from managers (backed up by owners) to workers, while also valuable in itself, is likely to have positive epistemic effects” (Gerlsbeck & Herzog, 2020, p. 322). In other words: even if we were to grant any democratic merits to the boardrooms and shareholders of current businesses, expanding the corporate demos seems crucial to reach the higher level and diversity that can lead to better company decisions. It is very well possible that a democratically organised workplace will also increase the legitimacy of the companies’ green policies, but for the sake of the instrumental argument that we hope to flesh out here, we will leave the ‘increased legitimacy’ argument aside for now. Moreover, Elizabeth Anderson has been right to point at the problematic lack of a non-instrumental argument for universal inclusion based on the Diversity Trumps Ability Theorem (Anderson, 2006, p. 13). Although this is certainly correct, for the sake of this paper we will not try to solve the issue. As stated above, other arguments for workplace democracy *do* take the intrinsic value of universal inclusion into account.

### *Feminist standpoint epistemology*

The argument that broader, more diverse involvement of people in decision-making leads to better decisions is not only supported by insights from management studies (Hong & Page, 2004; Page, 2007), but also by feminist philosophies of knowledge (Harding, 2015). The feminist concept of standpoint epistemology helps us understand how knowledge is always socially situated. The way that we think, the questions we ask, and the possible answers to those questions are all shaped by the contexts in which we are socialised. In unequal societies, the prevailing perspectives and knowledges will generally reflect or represent the interests, values, standards or standpoints of dominant groups. These dominant groups, for a long time, were made up of bourgeois (in Marxist analysis) white (in critical race theorist analysis) men (in feminist analysis). The biased, one-sided knowledge produced by these limited groups of people in turn lead to policies and decisions that reinstate the vested interests of these groups. To avoid bad decisions based on inherently limited and biased standpoints, feminist scholars have argued for a ‘strong objectivity’ program. At its core, this program states that prevailing assumptions and values can be detected and challenged by beginning our considerations from “the perspectives of economically, politically, and socially oppressed groups that can bring valuably novel insights” to the table (Harding, 2015, p. 35).

In the context of companies, these contrasting views that can challenge dominant perspectives and biases in the board rooms are most likely to be found when *all* employees have a voice in policy deliberations. There are at least two issues that make these workers insightful agents in the process of decision-making: firstly, they have (generally) not been involved in the policy decisions so far, and are thus genuine outsiders; secondly, they have been subject to (the consequences of) those decisions and are thus experts by experience regarding the effects of policies on the ground floor. This makes employees a crucial, even primary, group to be involved to reach better corporate decisions. With the minimal programme of workplace

democracy in mind, this involvement should not be limited to ‘listening to the concerns of employees’ but involves the actual power to (co-)determine company policy.

This final issue relates directly to a fundamental democratic question: Who is the demos – who should be included in decision-making procedures? This question highlights obvious tensions in any society that wants to constitute itself democratically. According to the argument outlined above, as well as a recent study of epistemic democracy at work, the primary demos (or: stakeholder) in the democratic workplace should be the employees (cf. Gerlsbeck & Herzog, 2020, p. 324). But the corporate demos must not remain limited to only employees. This primary demos of workers (or their representatives) can decide to involve other crucial stakeholders that will or might be affected by the decisions as well. Recently, Philipp Stehr (2023) has made an elaborate argument in favour of a democratically legitimised all-affected principle in corporate decision-making procedures, that underpins this position. In line with theories of political CSR, all kinds of societal stakeholders must be involved in the democratic decision-making of a company. The difference between traditional theories of political CSR and our proposal is that the power to determine which stakeholders should be involved rests with the primary demos of employees (instead of, for example, the traditional boardroom). We think they are best equipped to do so for two reasons. Firstly, the broad, diverse body of employees (at least in comparison to the traditional boardroom) will be stronger embedded in (local) societies and therefore be better able to represent diverse societal interests. Their rootedness in daily lived social experiences makes workers more sensitive to the importance of including particular societal stakeholders that a CEO or management team might not think of. Secondly, based on the insights from standpoint methodology, reliable knowledge production and good decision making (including decisions about which stakeholders to involve) should begin from the perspective of marginalised groups. Within corporations, workers are that oppressed group. Therefore, in line with feminist concerns for inclusive deliberation, the

primary corporate demos of employees should have a dominant position in selecting external stakeholders in corporate decision making.

***What could workplace democracy look like: ideal vs non-ideal***

On the basis of the above discussion it becomes possible to sketch a set of provisional institutional arrangements within the firm that can do justice to the epistemic potential of workplace democracy. We will first briefly set out an ideal-theoretical arrangement, and then work towards a non-ideal adaptation that takes constraints of time and scale into account.

The ideal model of epistemic democracy at work would be based in an assembly in which *all workers* of that company participate and decide. The deliberations of this assembly democracy, where everyone has an equal right to speak and decide, can tap into the distributed knowledge and experience that is available in the work force (Landemore, 2017). Moreover, this large group is likely to maximise the possibility of including a diverse set of problem-solving-techniques, strategies and standpoints that will lead to the highest chances of finding good and just solutions for the companies' climate policies. However, in the real (and non-ideal) world it is likely unfeasible to set up such assemblies in a structural way, in both small business as well as large multinational firms. Apart from the really practical constraints such as space (is there a room that can host this large group and facilitate deliberation?), we deem *time* and *scale* to be two core challenges.

Scale is one of the issues that is frequently put forward as a key problem. While assembly-based workplace democracy might be (very) viable for micro-sized firms of 10 people, small enterprises of fewer than 50 people, or even medium-sized firms (<250 people), this will be harder to realise in firms with more people or in multinational firms that operate across continents. It hard to envision full scale assembly democracy in firms with over more than 500 people. And even if this could be realised in practice, we run into the second issue,

namely that assembly democracy is time-consuming. Although we can expect that the implementation of collectively conceived policies might be smoother than top-down policies that are not supported by the workforce, the time needed to collectively deliberate complex issues like climate mitigation policies with all workers will be considerable. This in turn means that less time can be devoted to the core processes of the firm (production of goods and provision of services) which can affect the efficiency of the firm, hamper productivity, and in the end reduce profitability and harm shareholder value (cf. Singer, 2018; Walters, 2021).

This argument is better known as the ‘efficiency-objection’, and one might wonder whether this is not a knock-down argument against workplace democracy. For if democratic deliberations severely hamper the efficiency of the firm, threatening its survival in the marketplace, then a more authoritarian mode of governance would be preferable. Yet, that would set aside the epistemic benefits of workplace democracy we outlined in the previous sections, and this would neglect the moral arguments for workplace democracy. Hence, we follow Walters (2021) and hold that the institutionalisation of some form of workplace democracy should trump pragmatic efficiency considerations. This is not to say that economic considerations of efficiency do not hold sway, it simply entails that we should opt for a structure of corporate governance that in the first place ensures workers’ voice and decision-making power, and within these democratic constraints we should opt for a model that provides the most efficient way of governing the firm.

These problems of time and scale in democratic decision-making procedures are of course not new. In public governance of the municipalities, provinces and states we face similar issues, and democratic theorists have come up with good solutions, such as (a combination of) elections, representation, delegation, and lottery. Let us see how these solutions might be feasible for our non-ideal institutionalisation of workplace democracy.

In order to ensure that sufficient epistemic gains are made in the corporate decision-making process is imperative that there are various deliberative sites within the company (depending on the size of company) where a wide and diverse groups of workers can share their ideas, thoughts and perspectives on the direction the company should take. Given that it is practically impossible to let all workers deliberate and decide, we follow Landemore (2017) and hold that random selection of workers to these deliberative sites would be the best option. Given that these sites for deliberation are only open to this randomly selected group of workers deliberation and decision-making will be considerably less time consuming than large assemblies, and has the benefit that it is likely to include a (sufficiently) diverse collection of standpoints, knowledges and experiences. After careful, equal and inclusive deliberation on the various approaches to the problem, the sample can either try to establish consensus or - when this is impossible - take vote on the proposed policy solutions.

In response to the constraints of scale that might arise in large companies, one can consider the mechanism of delegation to mitigate this. In particular in multinational corporations, where we can expect knowledge, experiences and heuristic strategies to be diversly distributed over the various locations of the corporation, local (randomly selected) deliberative bodies could send delegates to higher (national) assemblies to discuss the decisions and arguments of the local assemblies. These delegates could have limited (or fixed/imperative) mandates, and be subject to mechanisms such as instant recall and replacement, which facilitates the anchorage of autonomy and authority in the most basic level of the company. A national assembly of delegates could then in turn send their delegates to the multinational assembly where the perspectives of the various national and local assemblies come together. Anderson has pointed at the important role of dissent in epistemic democracy: “disagreement during group deliberation draws decision makers’ attention to asymmetrically distributed information and diverse problem-solving strategies that may be relevant to the solution of

public problems” (Anderson, 2006, pp. 15-16). In order to remain attentive to the solutions that were eventually not chosen, and to create a mechanism of feedback, dissent should also be possible *after* the phase of decision-making. The mechanisms of delegation and instant recall could be good ways to institutionalize this dissent.

Our approach is compatible with various new modes of corporate governance that have been proposed by business ethicists and political theorists in recent years. For whether it is by co-determination, economic bicameralism (where shareholders and workers have equal decision making power), or labour-owned and labour-governed democratic governance, our approach provide room for the creation of more deliberative sites within these corporate governance structures (cf. Ferreras, 2023; Malleson, 2023). In all these models, there is more room for exchange of perceptions, positions and knowledges, deliberation, and collective decision making. As such it is plausible that the models outlined above provide more room for epistemic gains, than the currently dominant models of corporate decision making by boardrooms and shareholders. Whether one model should be preferred over the other for moral and/or pragmatic reasons is something that should be taken up in future research. Our aim here is not to construct one single blueprint for ‘the’ democratically run multinational, but merely to show that there are many available democratic experiences and theories that could solve problems of time and scale in workplace democracy whilst maintaining the benefits of epistemic democracy.

#### **IV. Good for workers, good for the planet?**

The last section explained how workplace democracy can extend or improve political CSR by involving all employees in the decision-making about corporate policy, including decisions about what other (external) stakeholders to involve. In this section, we will elaborate about how



the democratization of work leads not only to better internal corporate policy, but also to improved consideration of environmental concerns and actual social and ecological responsibilities for companies. We will begin with the (little) empirical evidence available for our claim, and then move to the theoretical arguments that support our assumption that more workplace democracy means better measures to combat climate change.

As Frega, Herzog and Neuhäuser (2019) noted in their paper on workplace democracy, we still lack a large amount of empirical data to support many of the (well-theorized) assumptions about the benefits of workplace democracy. In research on the corporate climate transition and workplace democracy we face a similar problem, as much of the research that focusses on worker voice, does not look at workplace democracy, but rather zooms in on trade unions, and the impact they can have on corporate climate policies (cf. Askenazy & Didry, 2023; Greco, 2023; Normann & Tellmann, 2021; Ringqvist, 2022). The little evidence that we have, is supportive of that idea that varieties of workplace democracy can indeed have a positive impact on corporate climate responsibility. In Germany and Austria, where employees have since long held a voice in the codetermination (*Mitbestimmung*) of their companies, researchers find a positive relation between worker involvement in decision-making, and substantive measures to improve the corporation's responsibilities regarding the environment (Pichler et al., 2021; Scholz & Vitols, 2019). The term substantive here is of interest, since the authors find that the workers are not prone to take symbolic or ceremonial measures that contribute to the prestige or image of the company but do not involve any company resources to be spent. An example of such symbolic measures is a companies' membership of 'green networks'. Rather, Scholz and Vitols for instance find that "codetermination strength is strongly and positively related" to substantive CSR measures (Scholz & Vitols, 2019, p. 244). Workers steer towards substantive measures that will, for example, limit the emission of pollutants that are harmful to the environment and the workers, instead of ceremonial, public commitment of top managers

to green ideals. Moreover, the size of the firm has a strong positive relation to CSR as well. The larger the company, the more prone it is to take symbolic and substantive policy measures regarding CSR (ibid.: p., 242).

Combining these insights that (1) larger companies are more likely to take substantive policy measures on CSR, and (2) workplace democracy leads to more substantive CSR policies, we can shed new light on our general argument that workplace democracy will increase firms' commitment to combat climate change. Democratizing large firms will incorporate a wide variety of workers in the demos, making that demos bigger, more inclusive and heterogeneous. These are all elements that contribute to better decision making, as we put forth in the third section. Moreover, research shows that the lower classes are more affected by climate change than the middle and upper classes, while their share in the emission of CO<sub>2</sub> is considerably smaller. There is also a strong element of gender at play here, with working class women being more affected than men (Gore, 2015). What this implies is that democratising decision making at work will lead to more and different voices to be taken into account, that can relate more to the experiences of the effects of global warming, which will in turn lead to more just climate policy of such companies.

We can extrapolate what this means for the largest firms that we know: multinational corporations. When we think about large firms operating in areas where the costs of labour and production are low, we can hypothesize that workplace democracy could have a strong influence on increasing these multinationals' substantive CSR measures, for example regarding climate justice. First of all, the demos of such large companies is very extensive, and includes those in the most marginalised positions. Not only are workers in countries like Bangladesh, India, the Philippines, or Brazil the most economically exploited parts of the workforce of multinational corporations, but they are also more likely than many in the Global North to be directly affected by the effect of climate change. Workers in low-wage countries are often also

the most vulnerable to floodings, heat waves, desertification or the destruction of forests (Georgieva et al., 2022; Gore, 2015; Hallegatte et al., 2018). Yet, we also know from research on climate adaptation that the inclusion of these most vulnerable groups can be vital to creating sustainable and responsive climate policies, as Indigenous peoples bring in practices, experiences and knowledges of the local environment that play an important part in making local climate policies a success (Byskov & Hyams, 2022; Raygorodetsky, 2017; Satyal et al., 2021).

Combining these findings with our earlier insights from standpoint theory with the empirical findings on corporate governance in several German and Austrian firms, it seems plausible that inclusive democratic decision-making within companies has the potential to substantively increase their commitment to climate justice.

## **V. Conclusions**

This paper is a response to the urgent and complex societal problem of climate change, as well as to the academic (and societal) problem concerning the moral responsibilities of companies in the mitigation of this global problem. Because of the large role of companies play in the deterioration of our climate, we explored whether and how workplace democracy might help companies to take responsibility for their societal role. In order to determine how the democratization of companies can help us gain a better understanding of the social responsibilities of companies regarding climate change, this paper took three steps. First, we explored the limitations and problems of contemporary theories of (political) CSR. We identified issues regarding the scope of the responsibilities of companies, as well as regarding the inclusiveness of stakeholder involvement. Moreover, traditional CSR does not fundamentally challenge the ultimately authoritarian decision making within firms, and is thus

unable to create accountability *within* those firms. Second, we analysed how arguments in favour of workplace democracy fail to engage with the societal effects of the democratisation of work. In response to this lack, we used and developed arguments about the epistemic benefits of democratic decision making and arguments from feminist standpoint epistemology to show that democratically governed companies will make better decisions. Third, we then showed that based on these epistemic arguments and illustrated with available empirical evidence, the democratisation of firms indeed increases the chances of better decisions regarding the responsibilities of those companies concerning climate change mitigation.

These findings have an impact on two academic debates that have not far have not really been brought together: the debate on political CSR and the debate on workplace democracy. This paper, we think, has shown the merit of connecting these two fields in a more structural way. Our theoretical contribution here is threefold. In the first place we add to the philosophical debates on climate justice and responsibility for structural injustices by focussing on the political responsibilities of firms (instead of states, IGOs, NGOs, or individuals) for averting the looming climate catastrophe. Secondly, we contribute to the debate on political CSR by looking at what political corporate responsibility could entail in the context of climate change, and more specifically, by exploring how Iris Marion Young's notion of political responsibility as 'collective communicative action' can be institutionalised on a corporate level. Based on insights from theories of workplace democracy and epistemic democracy, we put forth that taking corporate political responsibility for climate justice seriously, implies the institutionalisation of inclusive democratic governance on the level of the firm. This should in the first place should aim at the inclusion of workers in the decision-making processes of the corporation. Thirdly and finally, we contribute to the current debate on workplace democracy by adding a specific (and rather instrumental) focus on the epistemic benefits of a democratized

firm. This argument complements and enriches other, more intrinsic arguments for worker voice or legitimate corporate decision making.

At the same time several questions still remain, and as such this paper should be seen as a call for more theoretical and empirical research on workplace democracy and corporate climate action. One of the questions that needs to be further explored is what kind of democratic system one would need to institutionalize at the level of the firm. In this paper we defend the introduction of a system of democratic deliberation and decision making, but do not take a stance as to whether this model should be aimed at consensus or whether it should also leave room for (substantial) conflict. In many theories of deliberative politics and political CSR, this link between deliberation and consensus is drawn. Because of this it has been criticized by theorists like Chantal Mouffe for the tendency to minimize or hide conflict (Mouffe, 2011) . According to these critics, conflict is central to the political, and covering up this conflict by seeking for consensus is harmful to political life, and dangerous because the conflict might linger on underground, leading to extra-political outbursts of violence (cf. Brand et al., 2020; Dawkins, 2021, 2022) The workplace is among the places where fundamental conflicts of interest (such as between labour and capital) will surface, and hence there is a need to incorporate or facilitate these conflicting interests in the democratic procedure. There might be no need to find a consensus, or the ‘one true solution’. Agonistic deliberations can involve or even sustain contestation, and decisions can (and often will) be taken by majority rule. The point is to bring a broad variety of perspectives, arguments and interests to the table, in order to increase the chances of finding just policy outcomes. Yet, what mode of deliberation works best, under what conditions, in which situations, and with what type of stakeholders, needs to be addressed in future research.

In a similar vein it is important to explore what kind of models of workplace democracy work best. It is even possible that within a firm, various modes of worker voice co-exist, ranging

from co-determination models like in our German and Austrian examples, to bicameral systems, steward-ownership models, or worker cooperatives. Empirical research and experiments will have to find out which particular democratic institutions are the most realistic, effective or efficient when it comes to corporate climate responsibilities (Fleurbaey, 2023; Malleson, 2023)

Notwithstanding these large theoretical and empirical tasks still ahead in our understanding of the relationship between workplace democracy and the responsibilities of firms in our struggle against climate change, we hope to show the necessity and potential of this more democratic path to climate justice. For if a just climate transition entails building a more equal and democratic economy, that includes the ‘voices from below’ we should start by making sure that “no worker is left behind” (Klein, 2023). In order to do that, the democratisation of firms is a necessary first step.

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