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4. PARTICIPATION

FROM CONFRONTATION TO COOPERATION

The Cooperative Experience arose as an answer to a situation of the alienation of workers, with a participative and, therefore, different formula from the prevailing capitalist model. A formula that looked for the promotion of **business democracy**, and it consequently pursued the non-polarization of the typically capitalist power. The basic pillar of this new formula is participation, i.e. democracy. This is how we start to overcome one of the contradictions in which human beings are submerged: the unworthy intervention in their work, their character as a defenceless and programmed instrument. In the light of this model there is an opposite model of a person that is not an object but a subject of decision, participating in what affects its life and community, from responsibility and maturity.

After the Second World War programmes were started for worker participation in the administration and management in typically capitalist companies. This way, it was aimed to evolve from a model based on the confrontation between workers and managers, towards a model where the implication of people has a positive effect on their productivity and in which the workers are linked to the objectives of the companies. The participative model implies the existence of a common shared objective which they want to reach through shared management. This participative model is nowadays a priority in the business world, not just cooperative business but also in capital companies.

THE NEO-LIBERAL MODEL OF PARTICIPATION

However, it seems appropriate to meditate on our concept of participation and to compare it with other focuses that are moving around the world of companies nowadays; to meditate on our own *why* and *for what reason* of participation. From many focuses that nowadays defend participation, it is considered as an instrument, as necessary tactics. From this **instrumental conception of participation**, the approach par excellence that justifies a more democratic way of operating is efficiency. This way, the idea of resulting participation is detached from the problems of the distribution of power, since the idea that encourages it values this phenomenon as a merely tactical element, at the exclusive service of

objectives that really matter (growth, economic profit, etc.). This conceptualisation of participation has been strongly reinforced, both in the political environment and the economic environment, by fervent followers of the neo-liberal ideology.

At the present time, one of the concerns and the most important proposals of neo-liberal speech are centred on the citizen's re-conceptualisation as an **actively responsible individual**. At first sight, this conceptualisation seems to coincide with the ideal of the cooperative person: a responsible, active person, owner of his own destiny, with initiative. However, in the roots of the cooperativist ideal we find the idea of solidarity, which is absent in the neo-liberal model. The neo-liberal model conceives a free, autonomous, responsible, participative individual, among other characteristics, but from and for the satisfaction of needs and individual projects; for the satisfaction of the nervous element of their world view: individual interest, personal benefit, the selfish tendency of the human being. The cooperative model is, in many ways, its antithesis. It conceives a responsible and participative individual, from and for the satisfaction of its own personal development together with the service to its community; i.e. from and for solidarity.

It is interesting to stress this aspect, because important misunderstandings can be given. We could be up against a tendency towards the fading of differences, mainly through the assimilation of dominant speeches and practices of certain participative tendencies, without the deep principles of individualistic humanism really being assumed. Participative tendencies at the exclusive service of maintaining the lucrative logic and the logic of the journey of growth. It is true that all steps toward greater participation are positive, and we can learn from all of them and in all directions. However, in this Cooperative Experience we have **our own, profound direction**, which has enormous potentiality. We should not stop going deeper into the rich and rigorous coherence of Arizmendiarieta's thought, easily substituting it for the theorists of capital companies, their *best sellers* and the concepts that come into fashion cyclically in the business environment.

The motivation and ultimate consequence of the reinforcement of the idea of the actively responsible individual, in the neo-liberal model, points towards the **individualization of the social conflict**. This way, the conflict moves from the public-political environment to the internal jurisdiction of the individualized person. The conflict lies, therefore, in the territory of personal blame, through the destruction of the different structures of solidarity and community ties. The citizen, docile and "asocial", gradually loses the deep noble meaning of politics in its broadest sense, i.e. as participation in those matters relating to the community and the construction of higher forms of social organization.

THE COOPERATIVE MODEL OF PARTICIPATION

In the light of this model, which is not based on solidarity, our Experience presents a way of understanding and practicing the participation

that comes from deep ethical convictions. From the individualist and cooperative worldview, participation is an asset in itself, an objective as such, which can and should go hand in hand with efficiency but should not be exclusively subordinated to it. Its *raison d'être* goes beyond the narrow argument based on economic profit, and the force of its argument lies in the objective of promoting true democracy, insofar as is possible beyond representative democracy, promoting the creation of an active, responsible, pro-solidarity individual, not only in the work environment, but in all orders of life. It is a different vital position, in which the participative attitude and the organizational structures that make it possible, are viewed as essential in the dignifying process of the human person, in their human and community development.

To establish this dividing line, which is often vague, between neo-liberal models and the cooperative model of participation, requires taking steps in the construction of our own personality and advancing in our differential project. Therefore, it can be useful to maintain a critical spirit with our surroundings, and also a self-critical spirit with our own actions. This way, by being aware of the dangers and with a watchful attitude, we will be in the position to learn from others, and be open to the contributions of other ways of understanding the business project, and at the same time, we will be able to revive and renew the spirit that is characteristic of the Arizmendiarrieta experience. As Arizmendiarrieta said, from this position, after *denouncing* capitalism, we will be able to *learn* from it, *overcome it*, fundamentally with regard to the void of an ethical and moral project that characterizes it. Therefore, it is advisable not to lose sight of our concept of participation in its full extent, and its distance with regard to a purely instrumental conceptualisation.

PARTICIPATION IN WORK

We can distinguish two dimensions of participation in cooperatives. The first one, the participation in the actual work process, is a common dimension in all types of companies. The second, organic institutional participation, societal participation, is characteristic of the cooperative company. In the first dimension, in the aspect of the **organization of work**, we have experiences that promote participative work methods, in which the implication and responsibility of the actual workers acquires a greater relevance. An non-hierarchical organization of work that can adopt different techniques or names such as "process re-engineering", promotes participation and humanizes the work. To go deeper into the idea and work methods based on the creativity and emotive bonus of the task perceived as our own, involves joining participation, humanization and efficiency. In this environment it is necessary to encourage debates and make new backing around the experiences that are already being given in some of our cooperatives.

It is worth highlighting a particular idea here. The attempt to introduce new more participative forms of organization of work is important in all kinds of companies. Cooperatives, due to their essence, have an **excellent opportunity** to adopt and go deeper into this environment, since their

institutional structure can give enormous coherence and consistency to this kind of participative idea. In this field, cooperatives have a special potentiality, and to advance along these lines, beating resistances to change, can be one of the most important keys for the social and economic future of cooperative companies.

We are working on the knowledge that the Cooperation is a current and future paradigm in the face of models of total competition or purely tactical-instrumental participation. The cooperative company could find its role in social transformation, making the person the centre, and at the same time making the following possible: education, employment for the human and professional development of people, and the creation and distribution of wealth and social welfare with equality criteria.

SOCIETAL PARTICIPATION: RISKS

Societal participation is the genuinely cooperative dimension of participation, where our model's democratic character lies. It is known, however, that the key to democracy is in the real vitalization of its institutions and standards, which on their own do not guarantee real participation and implication.

In that sense, cooperative democracy, has two main risks: the risk of polarizing the power and the risk of passivity. The risk of polarizing the power has to do with the contemporary tendency towards the concentration of the power of decision, in the interests of efficiently responding to the situations of the market. It appears evident that the growing competitiveness and the need to make important decisions with increasing speed, make it more difficult or add complexity to the starting up of participative processes that in many cases could be an obstacle to the dynamism and flexibility that the market currently demands. We could agree, therefore, that it is unavoidable that a qualified authority must direct certain rules of the cooperative community, all the more so that the complexity and the "mysteries" of economic life seem to require increasingly more dedication and education. On the inside of any human organization the knowledge is organized in a hierarchical structure and the work and functions are divided. Even more so, if possible, in such developed and complex societies as those of today.

However, or precisely due to this fact, a community that aspires to the active participation of its members and democratic social organization should also aspire to counteract the centralizing tendencies of the knowledge and information as far as possible, by activating creativity and imagination. It should ask to what extent it believes in the participative model, and maybe even to what cost. The general context imposes rhythms and methods of operation that come into conflict with the cooperative formula on many occasions. However, the readings based on the absolute power of an external reality that is inevitably imposed, paralyse and disable the constructive energy directed at the change. The participation requires the devising of means and methods that make it viable, as far as possible with the knowledge that total participation is an ideal, without giving way to

reasoning that emphasizes its impossibility. Whoever is convinced of the goodness of an ideal, in this case the participation, will have an attitude which shows possibilities of improvement and not the difficulties that the environment imposes.

The second risk, the **risk of passivity**, comes from the actual cooperative social body, and it can also deteriorate the cooperative project. The passive attitude could be in connection with the external capitalist context and with the phenomenon of polarizing the power in the heart of the actual cooperative company.

Passivity is strongly contrary to the entire commitment inherent to the condition of being a cooperative member. The double personality, of a worker and businessperson, involves an extra responsibility in the member's persona that forces him to accept the risks inherent to all managers on his scale. The serious danger of cooperativism lies in creating a "sine die" financial mentality, with the side effect of long-term immobility, and sense of union in what has been achieved, until it is made rigid and inflexible to adapt to the changing historical circumstances. Even more so, if possible, when over the last few years we have experienced an excess expansion and we have all played to win.

OTHER ASPECTS FOR REFLECTION

Participation in work is at this time a field which could perhaps advance, and where we possess great potentiality, precisely due to the societal dimension that gives it a special coherence. The participation in the management of work can also be an important lever to revitalize the same societal participation. The societal participation, however, also has its own problem, which we must go deeper into in order to advance towards a fuller cooperative democracy. We can mention some points for debate, besides the most general reflections made until now:

. The reflection on the dimension

The subject of industrial concentration has traditionally constituted one of the objections against the transforming possibilities of cooperativism. The great dimension of a company or an institution implies a danger (not always insuperable) of distancing from the centres of decision, of the materialization of the implication in the purely representative aspect of democracy, and the tendency towards a technocracy that is somewhat far from a truly common project. The dimension, also nowadays, is one of the big challenges for the future of participation and cooperative democracy. It is a difficult balance between organizational growth imposed by the economic reality, the profitable economic unit demands modules of human and industrial concentration, and the cooperative assumptions.

We live in a complex, external reality, with a business dimension that tends towards concentration, a complicated network of interests, and the need to make important decisions fast. Dynamism and flexibility are required in the decisions, as an indispensable condition for the

competitiveness and future of the cooperative project. The growing dimensionality appears, at least, not to help a democratic, participative decision-making process.

In times of a global market and processes for the internationalisation of the economy, the distancing of the decision-making centres could endanger the cooperative ideal of participation, and in the light of this, the need to sharpen the genius and creativity stands out in the search for organizational formulas that harmonize efficiency with democracy.

. The reflection on the communication

The key, indispensable requirement, of genuine cooperative democracy is the fluency of information, or, formulated with more property, an authentic internal communication. Communication is the "blood of the community". Communication, in our case, is not only understood as a mere administration tool, but also as an instrument for personal development. To make a constant evaluation of our methods, achievements and communicative gaps is primordial for the subject we are dealing with in this chapter.

. The reflection on "societal qualification"

Preparation or education is another of the challenges linked to participation. There is a marked tendency to establish education programmes in the technical field that aim to educate workers in the accounting and financial and productive handling of the company, under the supposition that this is the most little-known field and the greatest need of the workers. Although technical education is essential, it is not less certain that participation demands a minimum amount of education as regards participative ways of administrating, democratic methods of resolving conflicts and mechanisms of solidarity to use the available resources. Therefore, education in participative administration could go beyond the inculcation of the general principles of the Cooperation. We could call this "societal education".

Societal education is fundamental in order to avoid the risk of polarizing the power and of passivity: renewed education in democratic methods, which cause the permanent assumption of responsibility and awareness of all the workers that are involved in the Experience. The level of awareness and the degree of responsibility cannot be considered as constant over time. This level of awareness and responsibility evolves and varies over time, which is why it should be refuelled in order to conserve a level of maturity and appropriate participation, at any stage or contingency that the cooperative community faces. Even more so, if possible, in a context in which the dimension reached and many other factors can water down the participation and hinder the visualization of the common efforts and ideals.

. The reflection on the convenience of currents of thought and opinion

It would also be a good idea to reflect on the convenience of institutionalising currents of thought and opinion in the heart of the cooperative world, with the objective of intensifying the debate, and therefore, aiding the processes for making more conscious and more mature decisions.

This is a point at which we deliberately placed a “perhaps” and it does not appear to be a matter that needs short-term elucidation. It is a delicate matter, since it would contribute a new element (with its dangers) to the Experience’s cooperative culture. In fact, in all democratic realities with a certain dimension and certain complexity intermediate institutions arise through which the potential voters channel their opinions, their proposals and their currents of thought. It is true that a “pluralist” democracy can have its inconveniences in the environment of business democracy, in which up to now the style of a “one-party democracy” has worked more. However, symptoms of “democratic cooling” also appear in assemblies, in which the member feels a lack of motivation and expectations for the effective management of their ideas. The creation of these intermediate structures as currents of opinion may lead to an exclusively individual treatment of large quantities of information, therefore, helping understanding and participation through a pluralistic group administration of the complexity of the matters to be dealt with. Perhaps it would not be a bad idea to make a first approach to this debate.

Questions for debate:

- What is the state of societal participation today?
- Is an appropriate societal participation possible without a more participative organization of work? What relationship exists between the two dimensions of the participation (societal participation and participation in work)?
- As regards the participation in the work, are the experiences we have on new forms of reorganizing the work able to be generalized?
- Is the flow of information that circulates in our cooperatives and our institutions sufficient for conscious and mature participation? What are the key problems in internal communication? What can we do to improve the communication channels?
- Does the current intra-cooperative organizational structure (within each cooperative) allow wide and appropriate institutional participation? Could it be improved in this sense?
- How can we harmonize the dimension of large companies with participative democracy? Is it a good idea to move towards smaller basic decision-making centres?
- Is the work carried out nowadays sufficient for what we have called the “societal education” of the members of our community? If it is not sufficient, what steps could be taken?
- Is the institutionalisation of currents of opinion necessary in the cooperative social body? Is it a good idea?