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How the Social Partners View Direct Participation: A Comparative Study of 15 European Countries

ABSTRACT ■ In international discussion of new developments in industrial relations at the workplace there is general agreement on the importance of direct employee participation in the organization of work. This article reports some of the results of a wide-ranging study conducted as part of a project initiated by the European Foundation in Dublin. It analyses the position of the organized industrial relations actors in the 15 countries of the European Union. Its focus is on how they understand the concept of direct participation and how they assess the impact of new participative programmes on company performance, work organization and working conditions, and the established system of workplace industrial relations.

This article presents and discusses the main findings of a broad investigation of the position of the social partners in Europe on the new participative approaches which came to prominence throughout the industrialized world in the 1980s and early 1990s, under such labels as 'Total Quality Management', 'lean production', 'flexible organization', and the like (Geary and Sisson, 1994). The research was conducted as part of the EPOC (employee participation in organizational change) project, a major investigation into the nature and extent of direct participation and its role in organizational change, initiated by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions in 1992.¹

Since the late 1980s, the importance of, and need for, some kind of direct employee participation, or of employee involvement in the organization of work have largely become – it has been said – a kind of 'new conventional wisdom' (Osterman, 1994). At least within academic and enlightened managerial debate, scarcely any one would currently contest the general validity of the assumption of the positive value per se of increased worker participation in the operation of modern, more flexible enterprises.

How far this view is shared by the organizations of capital and labour

remains however substantially unexplored; yet this issue appears of particular interest with regard to the social partners in Europe. What came to be called the 'European model of industrial relations' (Streeck, 1991a; Ferner and Hyman, 1992) was long characterized by a pluralist labour-inclusive framework. Its pillars were the acceptance and mutual recognition of strong social partners – employers' organizations and trade unions – and the fundamental role played by centralized or coordinated collective bargaining as a means of regulating wages and terms of employment, in most cases supplemented by the crucial role played by the 'third actor', that is, the state. Despite the numerous variations on the 'model', it goes substantially uncontested that the organizations of labour, as well as those of capital, enjoyed significant influence in Europe in both industrial and political arenas – far more than in the USA and Japan, for example.

It is not unreasonable to assume also that in the subsequent period of decentralization of industrial relations of the 1980s and early 1990s the position of such influential actors was, at least to some extent, an important element influencing the character of industrial readjustment in the face of market turbulence, and, more particularly, the success or failure of the new participative ideas and programmes. We thus reject simple economic and/or technological determinism; implicit in our approach is the idea that social and political institutions – in this case the organized actors of industrial relations – play a fundamental role in shaping and moulding the ways in which such structural factors as the increasingly competitive pressures from international markets induce change.

The article is organized as follows. The next section explains the definition of 'direct participation' (DP) adopted in this study and illustrates some of the specific research problems. Subsequent sections discuss selected results regarding the understanding of the topic by the social partners and their assessment of the diffusion and impact of existing experiments. A few conclusions are finally presented.

Our data come from an ad hoc empirical study, covering the 15 countries of the European Union (EU), undertaken – within the EPOC project – as one of the preliminary steps for the preparation of a major investigation into the practice of direct participation in workplaces. This is currently under way in 10 European countries. For the purpose of this study, 'the position of the social partners' was operationalized as the opinions and approaches enunciated by leading representatives of the main organizations of capital and labour, and/or illustrated by documents produced by them. Such opinions and approaches were collected between 1993 and 1994 by a network of industrial relations specialists coordinated by the writer,² according to a common methodology based on documentary analysis and in-depth interviews following the same outline, and covering three main topics – (1) the social partners' definition and understanding of DP, (2) their assessment of the diffusion and impact of existing experience, and (3) their expectations

for the future. The representative organizations selected in each country as the significant 'social partners' were the peak federations (or confederations) of both sides of industry, as well as the national employers' organizations and trade unions in two industries, namely metalworking and banking. Thus, the information relates both to the general – and encompassing – level of the industrial relations representative system and to two specific sectors, exemplifying manufacturing and services respectively. On the basis of this information, detailed reports were then prepared for all countries, submitted to interviewees for comment, and finally delivered for the comparative analysis (for methodological details, see Regalia, 1995).³

Direct Participation and the Social Partners: An Ambivalent Terrain

As argued in the publication introducing and setting out the conceptualization of the EPOC project (Geary and Sisson, 1994), the idea of DP is certainly not entirely new. In Europe there is a long history of trade union demands for a greater employee voice and participation in the organization of their work, as well as of worker commitment to and interest in productive goals. Occasionally in the past, management also took an interest in experimenting with ways of actively involving workers and allowing them to assume responsibility in the daily organization of work.⁴ What is, however, new in the current emphasis on DP is the extent of managerial interest in promoting and/or supporting organizational strategies requiring to a greater extent and in a more systematic way than ever before forms of direct employee participation or involvement in the organization of work, in order to enhance business performance.

These more recent developments have shaped the conceptualization elaborated within the EPOC project, and utilized also for our specific study. We define DP as 'opportunities which management provide, or initiatives to which they lend their support, at workplace level for consultation with and/or delegation of responsibilities and authority for decision-making to their subordinates either as individuals or as groups of employees relating to their immediate work task, work organization and/or working conditions' (Geary and Sisson, 1994: 2).

Accordingly, DP does not constitute a one-dimensional, compact, homogeneous phenomenon. Nor does it encompass any and every form of new management technique, such as performance-related pay or mere direct communication programmes (see, for instance, Kelly and Kelly, 1991; Gold, 1994).⁵ Rather, DP is conceived of as providing and supporting a set of various 'opportunities' and/or 'initiatives' in the daily organization of work and in the social relationships between employees and management. These are not simply of a top-down kind, but imply a minimum of reciprocity,

which may be distinguished analytically as being of either a 'consultative' or a 'delegative' nature. *Consultative participation* means that 'employees are encouraged, and enabled, either as individuals or members of a group, to make their views known', within a context where 'the management, however, retain the right to accept or reject employees' opinions as well as reserving the right to take action' (Geary and Sisson, 1994: 3). Examples of such participation are quality circles, the French *groupes d'expression*, and suggestion campaigns. *Delegative participation* means 'that responsibility for what has traditionally been an area of management decision-making is placed largely in employees' hands: participation is designed into people's jobs'. Here 'the distinctive feature' is that 'employees are entrusted to plan, conceive and execute the daily organization of work' (Geary and Sisson, 1994: 3). Examples include semi-autonomous work groups, team-working, as well as individual task enlargement programmes.

Beyond all these distinctions, there is no doubt that DP appears to be socially ambivalent, as typical of all attempts to achieve cooperation within a pluralist environment. On the one hand, DP can well be perceived as an opportunity for both sides of industry, i.e. as a positive-sum game, from which each player should gain valuable benefits (Kochan and Osterman, 1994). Indeed, through DP programmes, management can benefit by *increased* continuous bottom-up *information*, which is of great value when managing complex systems and highly vulnerable processes; and/or by a *decentralization of responsibilities*, which is a fundamental resource for promoting those adaptive abilities increasingly needed from workers where productive strategies are dependent on continuous diversification and modification of routines according to circumstances (Kern and Schumann, 1984; Piore and Sabel, 1984; Boyer, 1987; Streeck, 1991b). To this, of course, the supplementary advantage of reducing costs of supervision can be added.

For their part, workers can benefit from involvement in participative programmes. In the case of consultative forms of DP they see that they are *systematically consulted* and that their *opinions are taken into consideration*, which means that they will to some extent influence their working conditions; while in the case of delegative forms of DP, they can enjoy *spaces for autonomy and self-management* in the organization of their daily work, offering them the possibility of exerting some control over it. In both cases, they also probably achieve as a result a better work environment and social climate, as well as new skills and responsibilities. As for the trade unions, they could be expected to welcome the introduction of programmes which can be largely seen as *positive responses to their traditional demands* for greater employee voice and participation in the organization of work, and which are expected to have positive effects on working conditions.

The shift to DP practices will, however, also appear highly risky for each of the industrial relations actors. For management, consultative participation might prove too expensive and time-consuming, with the additional

disadvantage of challenging consolidated managerial routines; whereas delegative participation, requiring changes in the frontiers of control – and therefore in the deployment of power within organizations (Ferner and Edwards, 1995) – might appear a threat to managerial prerogatives. For their part, workers would very likely regard consultative practices with suspicion, as a strategy to persuade them to disclose their practical, ‘hidden’ knowledge (Bonazzi, 1994), without any certainty as to its use by management. They might therefore resist the attempt to give them partial or insufficiently defined responsibilities, particularly if they fear that these will simply increase their stress without offering clear advantages. Finally the trade unions might suspect that the introduction of DP programmes is aimed at weakening and/or bypassing their more general, and solidaristically based, representative role.

The paradox is therefore that in order to be really effective, DP programmes require a highly transparent decision-making process and a positive orientation to sharing responsibilities on the part of management, and an active, trustful and to some extent confident involvement and commitment to the goals of production on the part of the employees and of their organizations; yet the parties might well be induced to negate these preconditions. On the one hand, management may be led to introduce DP only half-heartedly; on the other, workers and unions may react to the initiatives with animosity or distrustful indifference. In conclusion, because of its challenging cooperative nature, which requires a foundation of reciprocity and mutual trust to demonstrate its positive potential, DP is likely to appear a most controversial topic, subject to differing assessments and reactions by the industrial relations actors.

On these questions it is generally assumed that the employers’ organizations will normally share a more positive and less problematic attitude than their counterparts, focusing mainly on economic objectives, and showing a more confident expectation of the virtues of an organizational and managerial approach which would bear positive fruits for all parties involved, and does not, therefore, require formal discussion or extensive regulation. Whereas the trade unions are in general supposed to have a much more problematic and confrontational orientation, being particularly concerned with the negative effects of DP; and fearing that their role will be marginalized by its success, unless they can benefit by institutionalized supports for their recognition. They would therefore be expected to require that clearer positions be elaborated by the social partner organizations and the whole matter be subject to adequate regulation with the involvement of employee organizations. But one might wonder also to what extent such general hypotheses do not require revision in the light of real experience, and as a result of a learning process; and whether it would not be more realistic to hypothesize some sort of gap between positions of principle and behaviour based on facts.

Understanding Direct Participation

On the basis of our data, we can indeed anticipate our conclusions by saying that most of the commonly accepted assumptions are confirmed only to a limited extent. Let us focus first on the broad topic of the meaning of DP. This is approached from three perspectives: (1) the ways in which the term was understood by the social partners and the ideas they developed about it; (2) the reactions aroused by a first working definition of DP elaborated within the EPOC project; and (3) the aims attributed to DP.

First, when asked to illustrate freely, in their own words, what their organizations meant by DP, not all respondents appeared to have a clear understanding of the topic. Furthermore, somewhat surprisingly, since modern DP practices are usually seen as dependent on the initiative of management (Geary and Sisson, 1994), and DP-related issues are rather widely debated in managerial literature, the employers' organizations disclosed a rather uncertain and even contradictory view of DP and of its implications (see Table 1, p. 218). There were certainly organizations which had a clear idea of direct as distinct from 'indirect' participation, and as related to the organization of work – the best example being perhaps the French, where the term DP has been used by the employers' organizations since the early 1970s, becoming typical of the industrial relations culture in the 1980s. Quite often however the representatives of employers' organizations either reacted by saying that they had no elaborated opinions on DP, since it was not a concern of the central organizations, but a matter for the individual employers; or tended to misunderstand the topic in one way or another.

The first, somewhat reticent, reaction, found for instance in Belgium, Luxembourg, France (only in the banking sector) and Spain, appeared to reflect the classic dilemma in the logic of representing employers' interests: how to meet the challenge of coping with their diversity and autonomy, while providing ways for organizing them collectively (Streeck, 1989; Sisson, 1991). Even more interesting were the cases, including such different situations as all the organizations in Greece and in Finland, the peak organization (*Confindustria*) in Italy and the Confederation of Employers of the Finance Sector in Denmark, in which the employers' representatives tended spontaneously to equate direct with indirect or representative participation. In other words, they understood 'participation' mainly as participation through representation. Finally, there were others, such as the employers' organizations in Austria and the Association in the financial sector in Italy, that in the first place understood DP as 'financial participation'.⁶ Thus the term 'DP' does not seem to be highly familiar in the industrial relations culture of employers' organizations in many European countries.

Somewhat surprisingly, by contrast, the trade unions appeared on the whole a little better informed and to have more elaborated opinions on

the issue than their counterparts – they were less reticent, and in most cases able to support their opinions with examples. It is most likely that this difference reflects the more extensive scope of the trade unions' role by comparison to that of the employers' organizations. In the latter case, as already observed, the representatives' responsibility covers the 'collective' interests of members, while DP and related issues were seen as these members' individual affairs. Therefore, it was no coincidence that the overwhelming majority of employers' organizations – the only exception in a total of the 48 considered being the French CNPF, the Federation of Austrian Industrialists and (in the past) the Dutch organization in metal-working – did not identify any official position on DP, although most of them have publications, policy statements and 'informal' positions on the subject. In contrast, in the case of the unions, which have traditionally offered more extensive support to their individually weaker members, DP and related topics were seen as part of these members' 'collective' interests (although new and eccentric in nature) and not simply set aside as their mere personal affairs. Accordingly, formal, official positions have been recorded at least in the cases of all Belgian and French organizations, the British TGWU, the Greek confederation (although with reference to representative rather than direct participation) and one of the Dutch confederations. In many other cases the issue appeared to have been strongly debated and was the subject of recommendations, initiatives and investigations.

It has to be added however that in quite a large number of cases the spontaneous understanding of DP from the labour organizations was extraordinarily similar to that of their employers' organization counterparts (see Table 2, p. 219). Thus both sides of industry in Austria identified DP in the first instance as financial participation, while referring to DP as defined in the EPOC project as 'participative management' or 'co-determination'. In Denmark, both parties called DP 'direct cooperation'. In Greece, both sides misunderstood DP, equating it with representative participation. In Finland, both proposed 'ways of influencing one's own work' as a better definition. In Ireland, they shared the same positive view. In Italy, they interpreted 'participation' mainly as meaning representative participation, therefore calling DP 'worker direct involvement'. In Sweden, both sides were critical of a term that they thought sounded old-fashioned, and should therefore be replaced by another which would emphasize a bottom-up (rather than top-down) process. Both parties in Germany shared similar, though not identical, visions of DP as the involvement of workers in the processes of work organization.⁷

More generally typical of the spontaneous approach of the unions was a greater tendency to conceive DP as an *active 'process'* (rather than as a more *passive 'involvement'*), which *had to be linked to the channels of collective representation*. The first element in this perspective (DP as an active process) received particular emphasis by trade unions in the countries where the

TABLE 1. Definitions and Interpretations of DP: Employers' Organizations

Country	First Understanding of the Term 'DP'	Reaction to Proposed Definition
Austria	DP is primarily <i>financial participation</i> DP = participative management, co-determination	Agreement; but more emphasis needed on representative participation
Belgium	<i>Not a concern</i> of central organizations Clear and positive understanding (NCMV)	(No opinion given)
Denmark	Banking: Participation is primarily <i>representative participation</i> DP = direct cooperation, worker initiative	More emphasis on representative participation
Finland	Participation is primarily <i>representative participation</i> DP = ways of influencing one's own work, co-determination	Agreement (in banking) In general: approach too managerialist More emphasis on representative participation
France	Clear understanding of DP = means for associating workers in the organ. of work Banking: <i>not a concern</i> of central organizations	Agreement CJD (SMEs): More emphasis on representative participation
Germany	DP = involvement of workers in the processes of work organization	Approach too managerialist (metalworking)
Greece	Participation is primarily <i>representative participation</i>	(More emphasis on representative participation)
Ireland	DP = employee involvement	Agreement
Italy	Participation is primarily <i>representative participation</i> DP = worker direct involvement Banking: DP is primarily <i>financial participation</i>	More emphasis on representative participation
Luxembourg	<i>Not a concern</i> of central organizations	(No opinion given)
Netherlands	DP = employee involvement	Agreement
Portugal	DP = employee involvement	Employer prerogatives need to be safeguarded
Spain	<i>Not a concern</i> of central organizations	Agreement; but employer prerogatives need to be safeguarded
Sweden	Clear understanding of DP, seen, however, as old-fashioned: to be replaced by a bottom-up approach	Agreement on given definition (in metalworking) In general: approach too managerialist
United Kingdom	DP: better 'employee involvement'	Approach too managerialist

TABLE 2. Definitions and Interpretations of DP: Trade Unions

Country	First Understanding of the Term 'DP'	Reaction to Proposed Definition
Austria	DP is primarily <i>financial participation</i> DP = participative management, co-determination	More emphasis on employee autonomy
Belgium	DP = <i>werkoverleg</i> , employee involvement (ACV/CSC) DP = a replacement of representative democracy (ABVV/FGTB)	More emphasis on representative participation
Denmark	DP = direct cooperation	More emphasis on representative participation
Finland	DP = ways of influencing one's own work	More emphasis on employee autonomy
France	Means to democratize enterprises (CFDT, CFTC, CGC) Possibility for workers to participate in issues of interest, but open to risk of class collaboration (CGT) False social utopia (CGT-FO)	More emphasis on representative participation
Germany	DP = involvement of workers in the processes of work organization	Agreement (banking) More emphasis on representative participation (metal)
Greece	Participation is primarily <i>representative participation</i>	More emphasis on representative participation (metal)
Ireland	DP = employee involvement	Agreement (banking and metal)
Italy	Participation is primarily <i>representative participation</i> DP = worker direct involvement	More emphasis on representative participation
Luxembourg	In principle, uncertain orientation	Agreement (banking)
Netherlands	Possibility for workers to improve quality of work	Agreement (FNV, and IVB-CNV) More emphasis on representative participation (CNV)
Portugal	Participation is <i>representative participation</i>	More emphasis on representative participation (metal)
Spain	DP mostly perceived as <i>representative participation</i>	More emphasis on representative participation
Sweden	Clear understanding of DP, but seen as old-fashioned. To be replaced by a bottom-up approach	Agreement (academic engineers) More emphasis on representative participation (banking) More emphasis on employee autonomy
United Kingdom	DP = HRM practices currently promoted by management	More emphasis on employee autonomy and delegation of responsibilities

labour movement enjoyed longer traditions and recognition; while the second (the link with collective representation) attracted more attention from the weaker and less consolidated organizations of Greece, Portugal and (to a lesser extent) Spain. In any case, whether the understanding of DP appeared more positive or critical depended on the extent to which both these requirements (participation as an active voice in decision-making, and DP as positively linked to representative participation) were seen as fulfilled.

Comments on the EPOC Definition

Further qualifications to the somewhat confused scenario so far depicted came from the comments on the working definition of DP developed by the research group. In our interviews we presented DP as 'those management-initiated mechanisms and practices in workplaces through which employees are granted more control over their immediate work situation and/or are invited to participate in decisions which relate to the organization of work at the point of production', that is, as 'a process of delegating responsibility to and/or of consulting employees by the management, in which the workers are directly involved (i.e. not through representatives), either individually or gathered in groups'. The definition emphasized the role of management in introducing DP in a rather straightforward fashion. Not surprisingly, therefore, it was the representatives of the employers' organizations who were more likely to agree with the proposed statement (see Tables 1 and 2, right-hand columns).⁸

However, these same data reveal that not only the majority of the union representatives but also a large proportion of those of employers agreed only partially; and a few clearly disagreed. Even more interestingly, the agreements and disagreements were not necessarily based on the reasons that one might have expected. One would indeed have anticipated that employers' representatives would on the whole be quite favourably oriented to the proposed definition, and that concern might eventually arise about the ideas of 'granting the employees more *control* over their immediate work situation' and of '*delegating* responsibilities'. While with regard to trade union representatives one would have anticipated resistance because their role was not explicitly taken into consideration in this definition.

Most respondents on the trade union side effectively pointed out that the definition did not stress the importance of representative participation (see Table 2). In Denmark, for instance, the union representatives emphasized that 'the Danish style of management implied that management more often than not would contact the shop stewards before taking up any initiative regarding DP' (Lund, 1994:10). Many interviewees from the French confederations, even if with a different emphasis, reacted by saying that a combination of direct and indirect participation was necessary since the

delegation of responsibility to employees, although potentially positive, might be conducive to self-exploitation without the intervention of a representative body (Tchobanian, 1994). Many other similar remarks emphasized existing practices of, or future strategies for, explicit combinations of direct and indirect (representative) participation. But even more importantly, there were trade unions, especially in Austria and the Scandinavian countries, whose criticism was directed to the fact that the definition *did not give sufficient weight to the influence, initiative and interests of the employees themselves*: which is rather unusual given the traditional trade union priority assigned to collectivism rather than individualism. The Swedish unions, for example, tended to interpret the proposed definition as too conditioned by a Tayloristic background, where the issues of 'control' and 'decision-making' were crucial, while the topics of 'autonomy' and 'bottom-up' influence on work organization, typical of a post-Tayloristic environment, should be given greater emphasis.

Unexpected differences emerged also on the side of the employers' organizations. Only in a few cases (in Spain and in Portugal) did the respondents object to the definition on the grounds of the need to safeguard employer prerogatives more explicitly, by setting limits to the devolution of responsibility to employees. In others, there were on the contrary criticisms of what was seen as too 'managerialist' an approach, which did not allow adequate scope for employee initiative. This was the argument of the CBI and of the engineering employers' organization (EEF) in the UK, of the SAF in Sweden, of the employers' organizations in Finland and, to a lesser degree, of the German metalworking organization *Gesamtmetall*. In the clear words of the British EEF respondent,

. . . the problem with defining DP as purely management-led is that it only tells half of the story. Certainly it is management which creates the space for DP, but the follow-up is important. . . . Defining DP as the ceding of control by management to workers implies a benign 'big brother', when in fact changes are often bottom-up, or at least at some point in the process the emphasis changes from employees being invited or allowed to participate to employees taking the initiative themselves. (Geary et al., 1995: 11)

Moreover, criticism by the representatives of employers' organizations did not concern only the interpretation of the respective roles of management and employees. DP, it was sometimes argued, had to be integrated with an increased emphasis given to representative participation, as was stressed by the Danish confederation DA and the French CJD (an employers' organization which represents small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and which has been promoting DP since the 1970s). This was also indirectly indicated by those organizations, cited earlier, where DP was de facto seen as complementary to representative participation.

In conclusion, the reactions of the representatives of the social partners

with respect both to the term 'DP' itself and to the working definition developed within the EPOC project show that the topic was largely perceived as part of a quite uncertain terrain, whose boundaries are not neatly delineated. The picture can be completed by focusing on the aims and objectives of DP in the views of our respondents, and therefore on their attitudes towards it.

Aims and Objectives of Direct Participation

It is a common view that, in introducing or accepting DP practices, employers will mainly stress economic goals, such as 'the need to respond to increased competition, cost rationalization, a demand for greater flexibility, a requirement to adapt to the introduction of new technology, customization of production and the reform of managerial behaviour'; whereas unions will primarily emphasize social objectives and will therefore want 'to enlarge jobs, reduce work fatigue and boredom, secure more responsibility and discretion for employees and increased training' (Geary and Sisson, 1994: 11).

Again, however, our overview confirmed these assumptions only partially. This is not to deny that the representatives of employers' organizations, reflecting their members' interests, were primarily interested in the economic performance of firms, and that their trade union counterparts were in the first place interested in the well-being of workers. However, our data disclosed a more complex and intriguing scenario.

Only very few employers' organizations cited strictly economic motives alone. In nearly all cases, other 'softer' objectives, such as increasing employees' commitment and motivation, promoting social cohesion, improving and humanizing working conditions, were seen as a necessary complement to their expectations of economic improvement. Despite all cultural variations, what from our perspective is indeed most striking is that both objectives (the amelioration of economic performance *and* of the social environment) were largely perceived *as being pursued together* by making use of DP programmes. 'To humanize work while increasing profitability', as it was put by a representative of *Gesamtmetall*, could well synthesize a more widespread understanding. The relevance of these findings is reinforced by the observation that this is not the only possible option; that other paths are available, and other aims had been in fact pursued, as indicated by those representatives (e.g. from Austria and Italy) who emphasized that in the 1970s and early 1980s a major objective had been the need to reduce the power of the unions and to react to an exclusively 'collectivist approach to industrial democracy' (Carrieri, 1994; Flecker, 1994: 17–18). In the views of our respondents, these appeared, however, as stories of the past.

Symmetrically, in many cases the trade union representatives did not limit their positive expectations of DP to the amelioration of working conditions, but explicitly cited the achievement of economic objectives as well. Certainly, the goal of ameliorating employee working conditions was the unions' primary concern in the introduction of DP: all union respondents focused on this objective, conceptualizing it either as an increase in worker influence and self-regulation in the organization of work, or as an improvement in the quality of working life, or both; even though not all of them (especially within the financial sector) believed that such an objective could really be achieved. However, union representatives from a number of peak organizations (in Belgium, Spain, Ireland, Greece, Italy and Sweden), and more generally from those in metalworking, explicitly stressed economic objectives as a positive complement to the social ones.

The final balance of the social partners' general orientations towards DP is thus that our findings, as expected, confirmed a positive, although largely informal and unofficial, attitude towards participative programmes on the part of the employers' organizations. Somewhat surprisingly, on the part of the trade unions we found in the majority of cases a more positive orientation towards these programmes than one might have expected. Reasons given for the fairly favourable union attitudes were that such practices 'correspond to workers' needs' (Austria); they are a way 'to promote self-regulation and self-determination in the organization of work' or 'to have a real influence in the organization of work and in the development of human beings' (Germany, Denmark); they allow the parties 'to meet the challenge of flexibility while being beneficial to workers' (Italy) as well as 'to overcome the lack of citizenship within enterprises' (France); or, as it was put by a British respondent, because in the end 'DP is about people, rather than about money'.

As expected, there were also cases in which the attitudes of the trade unions were much less positive, if not wholly negative: such orientations were especially shared by the Belgian ABVV/FGTB, the French CGT and even more CGT-FO, which emphasized the dangers of a 'participationist ideology'. In this perspective, DP cannot be anything but pure illusion, as it tends to conceal the structurally unequal balance of power between the parties and the impossibility therefore for workers to have a significant influence on decisions. Even these most clear-cut positions, however, with time appeared to have left room to more pragmatic accommodation, where the issues of the regulation of DP and of the definition of the preconditions for its successful implementation had become the crucial ones.

Regulation of Direct Participation

From the evidence of our discussion so far, it is not the idea of DP itself that appears to be a controversial issue in Europe in the mid-1990s – in

FIG. 1. Patterns of Regulation of Workplace Participation, According to the Normative Basis

		LEGISLATION	
		Yes	No
MIXED REGULATION	Yes	Belgium, Finland, Italy, Portugal, Sweden	Denmark, Ireland
	No		
CENTRAL AGREEMENTS	Yes		
	No	Austria, France, Germany, Netherlands, Luxembourg, Greece, Spain	United Kingdom
STATUTORY REGULATION	Yes		
	No		
VOLUNTARISM	Yes		
	No		

contrast to the prevailing mood in the 1980s. The main subject of debate is rather the way of regulating the implementation of participative programmes and keeping their impact under control.

To understand the issue better, we must refer to the normative framework relevant to the topic. From this perspective, four patterns of the regulation of participation at the workplace can be distinguished: *statutory regulation*, where a normative framework to encourage participation is substantially provided by legislation; *central joint regulation*, where existing frameworks are mainly based on agreements between the social partners at central level; *mixed regulation*, characterized by specific combinations of legislation and central agreements; and *voluntarism*, where any arrangement regarding participation at the workplace is left to the initiatives of the parties locally, avoiding interferences from above or outside.

As shown in Figure 1, with the notable exception of the UK, all the countries in the EU are characterized by the existence of some kind of general normative framework for the encouragement or regulation of cooperative relationships between the two sides of industry at the workplace (for details see Regalia, 1995). In all cases such a framework, whatever its basis, relies almost exclusively on the operation of representative channels (be they works councils or shop stewards). Thus in most European countries, unlike the USA, and despite the many national variations, existing normative frameworks indicate a picture where participation is substantially envisaged as participation through representation (Rogers and Streeck, 1995). However, with few exceptions (such as the French *groupes d'expression*) such a normative framework does not strictly apply to the more recently developed DP programmes, whose practices generally fall outside the field of

competence of the already recognized representative systems. This explains why the issue of the regulation of DP was perceived as the most controversial topic between the social partners.

The position of the trade unions was quite homogeneous. In all cases they stressed the need for a systematic decentralized negotiation and co-determination of the conditions of implementation of participative practices. As long as this condition was met, as in the case of Denmark, the unions saw no objection to openly supporting the new managerial programmes.

On the other hand, the position of employers' organizations was more heterogeneous. Generally speaking, they appeared especially concerned that their affiliates should possess substantial autonomy in the introduction of the programmes, since – it was said – DP is a matter for individual employers. Thus employers tended to resist strongly any extension of existing regulation in the countries where the normative framework was mainly dependent on legislation. However, in countries where the most important existing regulations had been introduced through a centralized agreement, employer representatives placed little if any emphasis on the need to delimit the scope of a general normative framework. There were, however, exceptions. Under specific circumstances (as in Austria, Finland and Portugal) the employer organizations would accept, or were even favourable to legislation supporting the 'individual co-determination rights' of employees. More generally, they often did not oppose, and sometimes even supported, the introduction of DP by negotiation.

Thus by saying that DP is the responsibility of the individual employer they were not necessarily opposing the operation of a normative framework. Rather, they might be seen as suggesting that a centralized, rigid, uniform system of regulation would not fit in with the kind of practices and programmes which are useful and effective only as long as they are sufficiently flexible and capable of being adapted to individual company circumstances. In other words, our findings revealed that the debate is not so much whether regulation of DP should be established or not; it is rather what kind of regulation can be conveniently adopted in order that DP may be sufficiently efficient from an economic perspective and sufficiently acceptable from a social point of view.

Economic and Social Effects of Direct Participation

These observations lead us finally to the perceived consequences of DP. This crucial question will be approached first from the perspective of the economic and social impact of participative programmes. In the next section the effects on workplace industrial relations are discussed.

Before we move to the core argument, it is worth observing that our respondents did not have a clear perception of the quantitative diffusion of

DP within their domain. Most probably, this limited knowledge is a result of the characteristics of the new programmes themselves: their introduction takes place in a rather piecemeal fashion, without much coordination from the national organizations, even when it is the result of negotiations involving trade unions or works councils (see later). In any event, the lack of precise information favoured the development of quite contrasting appraisals of the current relevance of participative practices in the countries considered.

Given the almost generalized perception that modern practices of DP have been initiated by management primarily to improve the economic performance of their companies, it might have been expected that opinions on their economic impact would on the whole have been straightforwardly positive. Yet on this topic there appeared to be a widely held view that, although the introduction of DP practices may have positive effects on the economic performance of enterprises, they were *not productive as such*. Rather, they enhanced the productivity and efficiency of enterprises *in an indirect way*; moreover, such positive influence was dependent on the existence of specific conditions.

On the side of the employers, the preconditions spontaneously identified included the need for adequate training (Denmark), for continuous management support for the programmes (Finland) and high job satisfaction on the part of employees (Austria). In general, representatives of the employers stressed that it was not easy to *measure directly* the effects of DP in terms of efficiency and economic performance. Such economic advantages 'cannot be counted in pounds and pence', it was observed by an employer representative in Austria (Flecker, 1994: 31). Others even observed that the relationship was by no means certain, and that because of this uncertainty it was not necessarily the case that DP, which in the short run is costly, would be introduced.

Arguments put forward on the side of the unions were that DP would have positive economic effects only when employers took a systematic approach in introducing it (Belgium); that it would lead to long-term improvements in productivity (and not simply to short-term advantages through reduction of costs) only if used as a way of democratizing the organization of work (Germany); and that DP will bring more than short-term economic benefits only if employers overcome their too narrow view of the potential of employee participation (France). In Denmark, union representatives agreed with those of the employers that the positive impact of DP on productivity and quality will depend on the provision of adequate training by companies. In general, however, the trade union representatives tended to adopt a more positive attitude to this issue than did their counterparts in the employers' organizations.

The reverse was true as regards assessments of the impact of DP on working conditions and quality of working life: trade union representatives were much more critical than those of employers' organizations. While the

latter often emphasized the beneficial effects of increased autonomy, communication and job satisfaction,⁹ the former displayed a much more sceptical and ambivalent view. On the one hand, in many cases they also stressed the positive potential of DP in leading to increased autonomy, to more interesting, enriched and challenging work, paid more satisfactorily, facilitating social contacts, within a better, safer, less hierarchical environment and improved ergonomic conditions. On the other, a long list of negative effects was quoted by an even larger majority of respondents; these included social consequences as well as those affecting working conditions. Among the former, special emphasis was placed on the segmentation of the workforce between those who are positively affected by DP programmes and those who are marginalized because of their inability to participate in them; or on the deterioration of fundamental social values resulting from the increasing individualism and decreasing solidarity encouraged by DP practices. Among the latter, there was criticism of the deterioration of working conditions resulting from increased stress, work intensification and social pressure; of the greater risks of accidents, as well as of insufficient change in the traditional forms of supervision; of the loss of free time (especially in respect of quality circles) and of the dangers of self-exploitation. Most trade union respondents therefore insisted on the need for a revision of the terms of employment to reflect the changed circumstances, as well as for a new definition of the role of works councils and of the unions themselves. This leads to our last issue.

Effects on Representative Participation and Industrial Relations

In the light of our discussion of the social partners' assessments of the economic and social effects of DP, it is rather surprising that the crucial and controversial question of the impact of *direct* participation on *indirect* or *representative* participation appeared finally to be viewed by our respondents in a somewhat relaxed, and sometimes cooperative manner. This is not to deny the existence of deep differences and contrasting views. For instance ABVV/FGTB, one of the trade union confederations in Belgium, was very clear in considering DP 'an anti-union strategy, the new version of the old idea that workers do not need a union'. Similar positions were shared by other unions: the French CGT-FO, which represented one of the most outstanding examples in this group, considered DP 'a weapon against unionism'; in Spain, especially within *Comisiones Obreras*, there was a widespread view that DP was to be seen as a strong challenge to representative participation, whose functions were likely to be weakened; in Portugal, it was emphasized that DP would seriously interfere with both collective bargaining and trade union activities and rights.

In most cases, however, it seemed that the view of DP as a threat to trade unionism, which was widespread in the 1980s, had been replaced by a more pragmatic approach based on the expectation of their relatively peaceful coexistence, or even regulated combination. For instance, among employee organizations in Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the UK there was a widespread view that DP should be seen more as complementing than as displacing representative participation in companies where unions were recognized. In fact, according to the opinions of both social partners, the trade union role was rarely endangered by DP when the workforce was reasonably well organized. Only in a rather limited number of cases (in the UK, in Belgium, very marginally in Germany within the banking sector, and in Italy in the early 1980s) was it reported that management had taken advantage of change to withdraw recognition from trade unions or from other employee representatives.

In many cases, by contrast, the partners were quite ready to explain how direct and indirect participation had distinct, and non-conflicting roles. In Austria, for instance, employer representatives stressed that the two channels were assigned different sets of competences: DP applied to anything which could be individually organized (e.g. the immediate workplace), whereas indirect participation (co-determination) was involved either where interests of others were affected or where the collective interests of the whole workforce were involved. Similarly, there were those on the union side who emphasized that works councils exercised a supportive function by dealing with problems arising between employees and supervisors in the introduction of DP schemes (Flecker, 1994: 34).

In numerous cases, moreover, the introduction of DP appeared to have taken place with the approval (either informally given or formally negotiated) of works councils or trade unions. In the words of a Belgian employer representative in metalworking, 'a good understanding with trade unions is crucial to the success of any participation scheme. A company cannot introduce DP without the support of its unions' (Albertijn, 1994: 14). At least in these cases, the diffusion of DP was seen even by trade union representatives as offering opportunities, on the one hand, for distinguishing the competences and prerogatives of the new participative practices from those of established representative channels, possibly through negotiation or co-determination; and, on the other, to develop a new and more efficient strategy involving closer relationships with employees in a period of great change.

In conclusion, a rather unexpected positive interaction between indirect and direct participation practices was sometimes observed. Representative participation was indeed seen by many respondents – and not only on the union side – to exercise supportive functions in the implementation of DP: by helping reduce resistance to change, by dealing with problems arising

between employees and supervisors, by guaranteeing that all groups of employees would be safeguarded and that information would be more easily passed to all the workforce (Finland). In other words, it was in some cases discovered that the works councils and the trade unions might play a fundamental role in creating the social requisites (smooth communication, trust, equity) ever more essential for the successful establishment of DP. Significantly, there were employer representatives who spoke of a *learning process* on the topic.

Conversely, it was found – and not solely on the employer side – that DP might have a positive influence on industrial relations, collective bargaining, and the role of works councils and trade unions: by helping to redefine and extend the issues which needed to be dealt with collectively; by favouring an intensification and decentralization of collective bargaining which the unions had not been able to achieve themselves (France); by improving the quality of information available to works councils, thus resulting in ‘an opportunity for better quality co-determination’ (Austria; see Flecker, 1994: 39). In other words, it was sometimes discovered that DP might turn from being a fundamental threat into an opportunity for the renewal of industrial relations.

To conclude our discussion it has to be stressed, however, that as expected all this did not result in the end in a widespread, easy acceptance of the value per se of increased worker participation in the operation of modern enterprises. On the contrary, in addition to all the uncertain and ambivalent opinions and points of view which have been mentioned, in many cases our findings disclosed contrasting, and even contradictory, patterns of mixed feelings with regard to future perspectives of DP, where rather optimistic, or relieved, interpretations of past and current developments combined with quite cautious and wary anticipation of future trends.

Conclusions

A number of general conclusions can be drawn from our investigation. First, the positions of the social partners in the 15 European countries taken into account appeared to be far less clear-cut and mutually exclusive than is assumed in much current industrial relations and managerial literature. Second, such positions were on the contrary often inspired by principles of mutual acceptance and recognition, although mostly of a pragmatic kind; at any rate, moves towards less conflictual approaches and learning processes with respect to the past were in all cases mentioned. Third, employee DP was substantially conceived by both sides as complementing rather than displacing representative participation. Fourth, at least since the early 1990s, even the highly critical issue of the regulation of DP was not being approached in a rigid, confrontational way, but tended to be handled within a

more conciliatory approach. Trade union representatives did not insist on formalized, rigid prescriptions, while the employers did not simply emphasize the fundamental principles of managerial prerogatives and discretionary rights to manage. Finally, a considerable amount of uncertainty appeared all the same to characterize the importance the social partners attributed to DP and their future expectations.

On each of these dimensions our analysis has however also shown a great deal of heterogeneity and differentiation.¹⁰ These reflected both structural differences, as in the case of those between the metalworking and banking sectors, and between large companies and SMEs as well; or else were grounded in cultural and ideological (identity-linked) cleavages.

It would certainly be appealing to draw a few final conclusions by directly linking the observed differences to the main characteristics of the industrial relations systems of the countries examined. Yet this exercise would bear meagre fruit, since the social partner representatives from organizations operating within similar institutional arrangements did not display systematically similar patterns in their interpretations of and expectations from the introduction of new participative practices. Even employer and trade union representatives from the same country, and thus from the same general industrial relations framework, often revealed different understandings and assessments of current tendencies.

Our findings cannot be easily matched to a few external 'determinants', nor constrained into a schematic table on the basis of a handful of clear categories. This uneven character of the results, which makes them difficult to manage, may at least partially reflect the complex and heterogeneous nature of national industrial relations 'systems' themselves – which are hardly systematic in character, being the outcome of numerous and contrasting processes over time.¹¹ Moreover, it may also reflect the fact that the investigation dealt with the opinions of people who were not directly involved in the introduction and implementation of the programmes they were asked to discuss. Uncertainty and lack of first-hand information, and therefore a predominance of imagination over facts, might indeed account for discrepancies and hesitations which were difficult to deal with.

Even more, however, the unevenness of the results is likely to be a consequence, as expected, of the challenging cooperative nature of DP practices and approaches themselves, which require a form of reciprocity and mutual trust to demonstrate effectively their positive potential. Within this perspective, the uncertainties and even incongruities of the social partners' positions implicitly reveal the difficulties in shifting from the traditional pluralist and conflictual industrial relations paradigm to a new one capable of fostering the development of those high-trust relationships between the parties required for participative programmes to be effective (Ouchi, 1977).

NOTES

- 1 The activities of the first phase included work on the concept of direct participation (Geary and Sisson, 1994); an overview of the position of the social partners throughout Europe (Regalia, 1995), on which this article is based; and an appraisal of available research in the USA and Japan as well as EU member countries in order to establish the current state of knowledge of the topic (Fröhlich and Pekruhl, 1996). The second phase includes a major establishment survey, which is currently under way in ten EU countries, and a programme of detailed case studies. The project's research group comprises the following: Alain Chouraqui (LEST-CNRS, France) and Keith Sisson (IRRU, University of Warwick, UK), the former and current coordinators, Dieter Fröhlich (ISO-Institut, Köln), John Geary (University College, Dublin), Ulrich Pekruhl (Institut Arbeit und Technik, Gelsenkirchen), Georges Spyropoulos (ILO, Geneva), Hubert Krieger and Kevin O'Kelly (European Foundation) and the writer. The present article is a follow-up of a preliminary paper prepared for the Xth IIRA World Congress, Washington, DC by Alain Chouraqui, Keith Sisson and the writer (Chouraqui et al., 1994) on the first results of the EPOC project. An earlier version (also circulated as a Working Paper of the European Foundation, No. WP/95/73/EN) benefited from comments by many colleagues, from both within and outside the EPOC research group.
- 2 Participants in the Social Partner network were: J. Flecker (Austria), M. Albertijn (Belgium), R. Lund (Denmark), A. Hassel and O. Jacobi (Germany), T. Alasoini and T. Mikola-Lahnalampi (Finland), R. Tchobanian (France), J. Geary, C. Rees and K. Sisson (UK), T. Vervelacis (Greece), K. O'Kelly (Ireland), M. Carrieri (Italy), G. Als (Luxembourg), P. van der Meché, B. van Beers, M. van der Veen and W.L. Buitelaar (the Netherlands), M.L. Cristóvam (Portugal), F. Miguélez and C. Llorens Serrano (Spain) and R. Tollhagen (Sweden).
- 3 All the country reports have been published as Working Papers by the European Foundation, both separately (see references) and collected into two volumes (Regalia and Gill, 1995, 1996).
- 4 Examples are the experiments inspired by socio-technical systems theory in Norway and Sweden, debates and experiments for improvement in the quality of working life, and the *Humanisierung der Arbeit* initiative in Germany. For an extensive discussion of these and other attempts and programmes, see the literature review by Fröhlich and Pekruhl (1996) within the EPOC project. See also Latniak (1995).
- 5 One-directional top-down communication mechanisms do not allow for real employee participation. Performance-related pay may be designed to encourage workforce involvement in the daily organization of their work, but is a procedure unilaterally imposed by management (Gold, 1994: 12).
- 6 As explained in the country report on Austria, for instance, 'direct participation, or direct involvement of employees, is not a familiar term in Austria. . . . The word "participation" is used in connection with financial interests in business enterprises; so employee involvement is understood to mean the acquiring, by employees, of part ownership of their companies, possibly in the form of employee shares' (Flecker, 1994).

- 7 The reasons for this striking coincidence of views between the social partners in the same country were however different. In some cases it appeared to be the result of a consolidated tradition of cooperative industrial relations (as in the Scandinavian countries, in Austria and in Germany), or of an increasingly more cooperative climate which had been developing since the mid-1980s (as in Italy). In others, it was rather the outcome of a still limited real experience of DP, which could facilitate the elaboration of similar expectations for the future (as was probably true in Greece and Ireland).
- 8 In fact, the peak employer organizations fully agreed with this definition in five countries out of the 15; as did the national organizations in banking in four and in metalworking in six. In the case of the trade unions only one confederation (the Dutch FNV), and the organizations in banking in three countries and three in metalworking said they completely agreed with the definition given. Since the data are highly qualitative in character, however, it is not correct to draw straightforward quantitative conclusions from these and other figures.
- 9 There were, however, also some who emphasized that the new systems were more demanding than the old, requiring 'a commitment to change and an ability to live with some confusion' (O'Kelly, 1995: 30), as well as an ability to assume responsibilities, which were not to be considered as a matter of course. In some cases this was seen as a problem 'only for those who do not really want to work or are not able to accept responsibility' (Jacobi and Hassel, 1993: 62).
- 10 There has been space for only a few hints of such a differentiated picture in this discussion. For more details see Regalia (1995).
- 11 For an interpretation of industrial relations systems in Europe in terms of growing complexity and increasing heterogeneity, see the comparative Introduction by Ferner and Hyman (1992: i-xlix) to their volume on industrial relations in seventeen European countries, bearing the significant subtitle 'Industrial Relations in the New Europe: Seventeen Types of Ambiguity'.

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