

Labor Self-Management: Is It Consistent With Rawls?

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Is labor self-management (LSM) an element of a just society? The goal of this essay is to succinctly delineate John Rawls' scheme of justice and to demonstrate how LSM is consistent with Rawls' ethical system and criteria. In fact, LSM will be shown to be superior to conventional hierarchical firms--from both an efficiency perspective and as measured by Rawls' ethical criteria. Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (1971) was selected as the benchmark because it is arguably the most widely cited and discussed ethical explanation for democratic capitalism.¹

First, let us state precisely what we mean by "labor self-management." The term is usually reserved for firms which are run democratically with the principle of one person/one vote prevailing, examples include producer cooperatives and democratic Employee Stock Ownership Plans (ESOPs). In these firms, only those who work there can own it, run it, and receive its profits. Thus, management is accountable to the employees, and the employees control the firm and make its major decisions, either directly or indirectly. In some cases, all major decisions are subject to a referendum of all qualified employees. In other firms, the board of directors is democratically elected by the employees and the board makes the firm's strategic decisions, with management retaining its role in day-to-day decision-making.² In addition to strategic decision-making, employees in a LSM firm have much, if not total, control over job level decisions. Work is completed by self-managing or autonomous work groups. Ideally, a LSM firm would develop both direct (job level or shop floor) and indirect (representative) democracy as both tend to reinforce each other.³

I. Rawls

The moral principles that would be chosen by persons in the "original position" (POPs) from behind a "veil of ignorance" are the foundation of Rawls' theory of justice. Before stating the principles that Rawls believes would be selected by POPs, it will be helpful to explicate the circumstances of those in the original position. The original position should not be taken literally. It is not a place in history; rather, it is a state of rational deliberation in which one is denied knowledge of any of one's particular attributes such as IQ, race, religion, strength, or even one's aversion to risk. In this state, one has no idea as to how various possible principles of justice will impact one's life. From this position, the veil of ignorance ensures that individuals cannot behave strategically in selecting principles of justice. POPs possess only a knowledge that "their society is subject to the circumstances of justice and whatever this implies."⁴ Also, POPs "know the general facts about human society;" but, they have no information that they collectively or singularly

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could use to their advantage and/or the disadvantage of others.⁵

Rawls believes that POPs would select the following two principles:

First Principle: Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all.

Second Principle: Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both: (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, consistent with the just savings principle, and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity.⁶

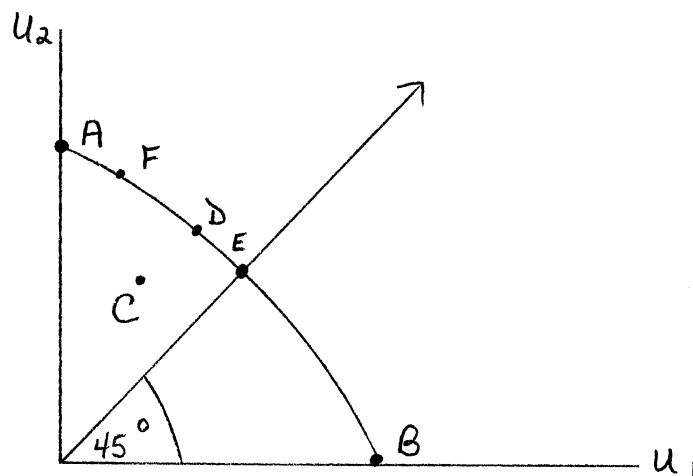
Rawls maintains that liberty can only be limited if such restrictions strengthens the total system of liberty for all. Furthermore, Rawls suggests that the two principles be ordered serially such that the first principle is given priority over the second. That is, one cannot sacrifice basic liberties for economic gain (i.e., one cannot--even voluntarily--sell oneself as a slave) or as Rawls phrases it: "The priority of justice over efficiency and welfare."⁷

The first principle applies to political liberties such as the right to vote and to hold office, but like our Bill of Rights, it includes negative as well as positive liberties. The second principle is concerned with the distribution of income, wealth, authority, and responsibility. "While the distribution of wealth and income need not be equal, it must be to everyone's advantage."⁸

Although justice is the main topic of his book, Rawls is quite concerned with efficiency. Rawls contends that society would desire an efficient allocation of resources, because inefficiency exploits society as a whole. For Rawls, the ideal world would be both just and efficient. In the real world, however, society strives for efficiency, but justice must take priority over efficiency. Rawls delineates several problems in terms of Pareto optimality. An allocation of resources is said to be Pareto efficient if, for any two individuals, there is no redistribution that makes either person better off without making the other worse off.⁹

Given a set of fixed endowments that can be allocated between two individuals there will be a plethora of Pareto efficient allocations. Among these, a principle of justice is necessary to decide which efficient allocation is best. In the graph below, the points along the curve AB represent different maximum levels of outputs that can be produced from a given set of endowments (i.e., the production possibilities frontier curve). The axes represent the level of utility for person one and person two of different allocations of resources. While all the points along the curve AB are Pareto efficient, only point E is ideal in Rawls' opinion. At point E resources are allocated both efficiently and equitably. At point F, resources are allocated efficiently, but very inequitably. Therefore, a just society would prefer to redistribute and move toward (if not to) point E. If this were not possible, a just society would be willing to tradeoff some efficiency for equity, preferring point C, for example, to point F. This society should, however, strive to eradicate the inefficiency in the system and move to point D if not to point E.¹⁰

Rawls contends that the just society will choose structures that will maximize the expectations or well-being of the least advantaged. Only improvements in the welfare of the least advantaged lead to a higher level of social welfare in the just society--provided, of course, that those changes are



consistent with the difference principle.¹¹ Rawls points out that very large differences between the rich and the poor make the poor even worse off.¹² He also suggests that it is consistent with his system of justice to lower the expectations of some of the better off:

The democratic conception is not consistent with the principle of efficiency if this principle is taken to mean that only changes which improve everyone's prospects are allowed. Justice is prior to efficiency and requires some changes that are not sufficient in this sense. Consistency obtains only in the sense that a perfectly just scheme is also efficient.¹³

Rawls prefers a system in which whatever the outcome is, it is just (i.e., perfect procedural justice).¹⁴ He sees markets, whether capitalistic or socialistic, as a way of achieving pure procedural justice, provided that: government acts to keep markets competitive, there is full employment of resources, and government uses appropriate forms of taxes and transfers to obtain a wide distribution of income and wealth as well as a reasonable social minimum. "Assume also that there is fair equality of opportunity underwritten by education for all; and that other equal liberties are secured."¹⁵ If all of the above conditions were met the resulting outcomes would satisfy Rawls' difference principle and would be a result of pure procedural justice.

Rawls introduces a Kantian distinction with his notion of a rational life plan. Rawls states:

The main idea is that a person's good is determined by what is for him the most rational long term plan of life given reasonably favorable circumstances. A man is happy when he is more or less successfully in the way of carrying out his life plan. To put it briefly, the good is satisfaction of rational desire.¹⁶

To achieve these rational life plans, Rawls proposes that individuals will want certain primary goods. Because of their instrumental capabilities of assisting in any rational life plan, Rawls hypothesizes that individuals will want more primary goods rather than less, regardless of one's life plan. The primary social goods, according to Rawls, are: Rights and liberties, opportunities and powers, income and wealth, and a sense of one's own worth.¹⁷ Rawls introduces maximization into the original position with his assumption that POPs will

prefer more, rather than less, primary goods.¹⁸

Two more concepts found in Rawls must be discussed before we move on to the relation of LSM and Rawls. First, let us review Rawls' views on moral development, then we can elucidate his ideal of a social union of social unions.

Rawls breaks down our moral development into three stages. The first stage is the family. A child realizes that his parents love him for what he is (i.e., unconditional love). In the family the child learns obedience to a moral authority.¹⁹ The next stage is that of associating outside the family. In these more impersonal settings, individuals learn a first hand knowledge of justice which is transmitted via society's institutions and members.²⁰

In the final stage of moral development, an individual obeys the principles of justice for their own sake. All subordinate ideals are integrated and understood in the context of "suitably general principles. The virtues of other moralities receive their explanation and justification within the larger scheme."²¹ It is only then that an individual is an autonomous, nominal, rational self. For Rawls, it is necessary that each individual go through this process to achieve moral autonomy. Only then can we treat each other as ends.

In a private society, individuals have their own private ends "which are either competing or independent, but not in any case complementary."²² Furthermore, institutions are viewed only as instrumental, not as good in themselves. "Thus each person assesses social arrangements solely as a means to his private aims. No one takes account of the good of others."²³ In such a society, the use of sanctions will be necessary because each member is not "moved to act justly."

In contrast to this private society, Rawls hypothesizes that human beings are social by nature and that they do have shared final ends and "they value their common institutions and activities as good in themselves."²⁴ Since no one can do everything that he could do, much less do everything, which might be done, he must pursue a rational life plan in such a way as to attempt to ascertain some of the myriad of potential excellences. Each can participate in more excellences than he can achieve alone by sharing in the excellences attained by others. In this way, we can all participate in a multitude of excellences and thereby satisfy our need for heterogeneity. This is only possible, however, when each feels secure as a member of the social system; that is, one is treated as an end, not simply as a means, and one has a sufficient sense of self worth.

Rawls characterizes his ideal society as a well-ordered society (as opposed to a private or civil society) which is itself a social union. It is Rawls' "social union of social unions." In this social union of social unions, "the successful carrying out of just institutions is the shared final end of all the members of society, and these institutional forms are prized in themselves."²⁵ In this scheme, each person's desire to express their nature as free and equal moral persons will come to fruition in the pursuit of their rational life plans consistent with behavior that is implied by the principles that POPs would concur to in the original position. These life plans are a part of a "superordinate plan being realized in the public institutions of society;"²⁶ however, they are not teleological in the sense that they are not subordinated to some goal such as national power. Rather, the intention is that the "constitutional order should realize the principles of justice."²⁷ That is, as rational, autonomous, free, and equal individuals choose rational life plans and subsequently implement them to the extent their capabilities permit, then the effulgence of the good emanates from this society.

II. Labor Self-Management in the Rawlsian System of Justice

Let's begin with a review of Rawls' primary goods. Rawls includes: "rights and liberties, opportunities and powers, income and wealth," and a sense of one's own worth.²⁸ Although Rawls does not explicitly include the right to meaningful participation, which means simply that those affected by a decision have a right to participate in that decision in a meaningful way, I think that a strong argument can be made for its inclusion on several grounds.²⁹ First, participation is a necessary component of powers, so one could argue that the right to meaningful participation is already in Rawls' primary goods, albeit implicitly. Second, the primary good of a sense of one's own worth is closely linked to the right to meaningful participation.

People will have a greater sense of self-worth when they have more say or more control over their lives, including their work-lives. This leads into the third reason for the right to meaningful participation; namely, a POP would select meaningful participation as a right. Stripped of the knowledge of one's position in society as well as one's position in a hierarchical firm, one would want to guarantee one's rights and liberties in the firm just as one guarantees one's rights and liberties in society. Finally, since meaningful participation can be viewed as something that one could autonomously and rationally will that all be allowed to follow the same precept, meaningful participation takes on the moral force of a Kantian categorical imperative.

This discussion brings up an apparent contradiction in Rawls. Specifically, why would POPs bifurcate society into one sphere in which each person is an equal and has an equal voice and an equal vote (i.e., the political sphere), and another sphere in which influence, power, and authority are a function of how much capital one owns (i.e., the sphere of capitalist production)?

Gintis (1983) argues that the issue of justice in production is "one of control, not ownership."³⁰ Gintis argues that both capitalism and state socialism (e.g., the USSR) are contradictory totalities in that they both "frame political participation in economic life in terms of property rights."³¹ He states that the only difference between capitalism and state socialism is that in state socialism the property rights are socialized rather than private. Gintis believes that a "consistent application of Rawls' principles" would lead to a system which was based on person rights in both the political and the economic spheres (i.e., one person/one vote).³² This dichotomy may again be an indicator of Rawls' unconscious bias to substantiate the status quo.

Rawls would respond that hierarchical firms are acceptable if, and only if, they satisfy the difference principle. That is, large differences in income and power (within a firm) are only acceptable if it can be demonstrated that these inequities are to the long-run benefit of the least advantaged. Also, for the difference principle to hold, there has to be fair equality of opportunity and education for all. Another consideration is that the difference in income and power cannot be "excessive" regardless of whom they benefit and still be considered just.³³

Whether existing differences in income and power are "excessive" involve empirical evidence and value judgments. For the moment, however, let's assume that all of the above conditions have been met and will continue to obtain. If LSM satisfies both conditions of democratic equality and the difference principle, then it would eliminate the potential contradictions between a participatory democracy and a market economy discussed above.

The superiority of a LSM firm to a conventional firm can be made on several planes. First, many case studies and data from four survey research projects of firms that are either LSM or have an Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) have shown that these firms, when compared to conventional firms are:

(1) more efficient; (2) more profitable; (3) are equally adaptive to technological change; (4) are more likely to survive a severe recession; (5) have a much higher rate of job creation; (6) have a much faster sales growth rate; (7) broaden the base of corporate stock ownership; (8) have lower rates of absenteeism; (9) produce less scrap and waste; and (10) are generally associated with higher levels of job satisfaction.³⁴ Additionally, the most methodologically rigorous study of ESOPs in the U.S., to date, found that worker participation is the key independent variable in explaining the superior corporate performance of ESOPs when compared to similar non-ESOP firms.³⁵ Thus, a move toward LSM would be a move toward Pareto optimality, hence one could argue that society should do so strictly on efficiency grounds.

Second, democratic control of the workplace would eliminate the artificial bifurcation between democracy in the political sphere and property rights in the economic sphere discussed above. Third, LSM is consistent with the historical political process of Western civilization which is based on a premise of equality of individuals and one person/one vote constitutions.

Fourth, even if LSM were less efficient than conventional top-down managed firms, LSM can generate a greater sense of self worth, community, and solidarity, thereby fostering a climate more amenable to treating each other as ends rather than simply as means. Fifth, if one accepts the premise that meaningful participation is an inalienable right, Rawls' serial ordering of the two principles would enjoin forsaking participation in order to achieve greater efficiency. Therefore, LSM, which by definition incorporates meaningful participation, should be preferred to conventional firms. Sixth, LSM is in accord with Rawls' belief that a just system should operate on the basis of pure procedural justice. Since those affected by the decision participate in the process in a LSM firm, whatever they decide is just.

Finally, a different line of argumentation in favor of LSM is that LSM would enhance an individual's moral development, particularly at the second stage, thereby strengthening the capability of an individual to treat others as ends and adhere to the principles of justice for their own sake. Since most persons who are employed outside the home spend the majority of their waking hours at the workplace, it is clearly important that this be a place of moral development.

In the morality of association, individuals learn moral standards from the positive and negative reactions their behavior evokes from the other members of the group and by emulating those individuals in the association who are admirable.³⁶ Rawls explains that a child's lack of experience in putting himself in another's position and making moral judgments is slowly overcome as he takes on "more demanding roles with their more complex schemes of rights and duties."³⁷

That LSM enhances one's capabilities for moral development should now be fairly clear. First, as one participates in workplace decisions one must put oneself in an other's positions in trying to determine how particular tactical and strategic business decisions will impact upon one's co-workers.³⁸ Second, participation generates many more opportunities for evoking reactions from one's peers regarding one's moral judgement than would conventional firms in which management (normally) unilaterally imposes its judgement regarding all key decisions on the production workers.

According to Rawls:

But if we consider the more demanding offices that are defined by the major institutions of society, the principles of justice will be recognized as regulating the basic structure and as belonging to the content of a number of

important ideals. Indeed, these principles apply to the role of citizen held by all, since everyone, and not only those in public life, is meant to have political views concerning the common good.³⁹

Here we see the importance of an educated and ethical citizenry. Many of the decision-making and leadership skills that would be learned in a LSM firm that would not be learned in a hierarchical firm can be transported to the public sphere. This has two positive effects. The citizens are better able to analyze issues both intellectually and morally. Also, important leadership training can occur in the firm which would perhaps encourage and certainly enable more people to run for positions of public office. This is consonant with the difference principle's requisite that offices be open to all.

The proposition that participation within the firm leads to participation in the political sphere has been empirically validated by Maxwell Eiden's (1981) statistical analysis of American workers in a participatory firm. He concludes:

The most significant finding is that ... having some power over one's work covaries with one's attitude toward taking up participatory opportunities. If there is no chance to have an impact, one does not attempt to participate.... These findings empirically support [the] contention that a democratic authority structure in a workplace is likely to enhance participation in and beyond it (emphasis in the original).⁴⁰

Similar results were reported by Karasek (1978) who interviewed 1638 Swedish workers, who were a representative sample of Sweden's total work force, in a longitudinal study from 1968-74. Karasek's summary of his findings present a strong case for the transferability of skills and attributes from the work sphere to the political sphere. He states:

"A test of the model with a longitudinal random sample of the Swedish work force ... shows that workers whose jobs become more 'passive' also become 'passive' in their political and leisure activity. Workers with more 'active' jobs become more 'active' outside of work. Cross-sectional analysis yields consistent results."⁴¹

Karasek's results changed little after controlling for demographic variables. This research is supported by similar findings reported by several independent studies in several countries.⁴²

Finally, I propose that LSM is a necessary condition to satisfy Rawls' requirement that each member of society view one another as equals, as friends, and associates.

Thus we may suppose that there is a morality of association in which the members of society view one another as equals, as friends, and associates, joined together in a system of cooperation known to be for the advantage of all and governed by a common conception of justice.⁴³

Hence we have seen that LSM is preferable to hierarchical firms in terms of an individual's moral development. Furthermore, it has been contended that LSM is

a necessary condition for members of society to view each other as equals.

III. Conclusion

Rawls' description of an idealized just society coincides with our current system of democratic capitalism--perhaps with a more significant safety net, greater resources allocated to education, and a more equitable distribution of income and wealth. Rawls delineates a social system based on one person/one vote in the political sphere. Yet his difference principle has been used as an argument against participation in traditional, hierarchical firms.

A growing research literature demonstrates that a move to LSM would be a Pareto superior move to greater efficiency. This paper has demonstrated how LSM could reasonably be an important element in a just society. LSM is certainly consistent with Rawls' criteria, but LSM extends Rawls' notion of power and a sense of one's worth as primary goods to the economic sphere. Thus, LSM reconciles a significant contradiction in Rawls. Namely, why would society freely select a social system that rests on an artificial dichotomy between economic and human rights? A society that rationally chooses to allow its population to vote on important political matters--or elect leaders on an egalitarian basis to decide such matters--could also rationally choose to allow its working population to vote on important firm matters--or to elect leaders on an egalitarian basis to decide such issues. LSM is not only consonant with Rawls' view of a just system, it improves upon it by making his system of democratic capitalism truly democratic.

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Endnotes

1. While Rawls is used as the ethical benchmark, the author does not accept Rawls unquestioning. For various critiques of Rawls see: Clark and Gintis, 1978; Eshete, 1974; Fisk, 1974; Gauthier, 1977; Gintis, 1983; Gourevitch, 1975; and Norton, 1974, 1983.
2. Employee Stock Ownership Plans (ESOPs) are usually set-up as democratically as conventional firms--one share/one vote, but not as democratically as labor self-managed firms--one person/one vote. Hence, employee ownership is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for LSM. ESOPs have received broad political support; there have been 15 laws passed in the last twelve years granting ESOPs various tax advantages. Thus, while not always as democratic as an ideally structured labor self-managed firm, ESOPs offer an opportunity for expanding employee ownership. See Rosen et. al. (1986), Rooney (1983-84), and Zwerdling (1980) for discussions of the differences between ESOPs and labor self-management.
3. Pateman, 1970, pp. 106-7; as cited in Elden, 1981, p. 45.
4. Rawls, p. 137.
5. ibid.
6. ibid., p. 302.
7. ibid., pp. 61, 302.

8. ibid., p. 61.
9. ibid., pp. 62-68.
10. ibid., pp. 67-70.
11. Rawls' second principle is often referred to as the difference principle.
12. ibid., pp. 76-80.
13. ibid., pp. 75-80.
14. ibid. p. 55.
15. ibid., p. 87.
16. ibid., pp. 92-3.
17. ibid., p. 92.
18. ibid., p. 93.
19. ibid., pp. 462-7.
20. ibid., pp. 467-72.
21. ibid., p. 478.
22. ibid., p. 521.
23. ibid., p. 521.
24. ibid., p. 522.
25. ibid., p. 527.
26. ibid., p. 528.
27. ibid., p. 528.
28. ibid., p. 92.
29. Operationalizing this concept of meaningful participation goes beyond the scope of this paper. While participation should be expanded as much as possible in as many spheres as possible, there are some obvious problems. For example, restrictions on the scope and structure of participation are necessary for such groups as children, students, the mentally handicapped, and criminals. Furthermore, the type of and scope of participation will vary depending on the context and the expertise needed viz a viz the expertise the potential participant can offer.
30. Gintis, 1983, p. 110.
31. ibid., p. 110.
32. ibid., pp. 110-11.

33. Rawls, p. 79.

34. See: Bellas, 1972; Conte and Tannenbaum, 1978; Zwerdling, 1980; Frieden, 1980; Gordon, 1980; Marsh and McAllister, 1981; Jones and Svejnar, 1982; Fusfeld, 1983; Rosen and Klein, 1983; Rooney, 1983-84; Tannenbaum et al, 1984; General Accounting Office, 1986; Quarrey, 1986; Rosen et al, 1986.

35. Quarrey, 1986, pp. 41-44.

36. Rawls, pp. 467, 471.

37. ibid., p. 469.

38. While labor self-management is still egocentric in that the effects of the firm's decisions on other firms and their employees are not beneficently considered, this type of planning would be inappropriate at the firm level-- even if it is deemed to be appropriate at any level.

39. ibid., p. 472.

40. Elden, 1981, pp. 49-51.

41. Karasek, 1978, p. i; as quoted in Elden, 1981, p. 52.

42. See Elden, 1981, pp. 52-55 for a brief literature review.

43. ibid., p. 472.