The liberated firm, a radical innovation or a mere avatar of participatory management?

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Is the “liberated firm” a new fad in relation to previous managerial models? Is it a genuine innovation or an avatar of participatory management? Is the liberated firm freed from the difficulties encountered when implementing this form of participatory management? To answer these questions, three emblematic cases are brought into focus: Favi, a metalworking firm; Poult, which makes cookies; and CHRONO Flex, a company that repairs hoses. Liberated firms turn out to be in both continuity and rupture with the participatory model. Although they manage to overcome some problems, the difficulties of implementing the liberated firm model should not be overlooked.

Is the “liberated firm” a radical managerial innovation or an avatar of participatory management?[1] The latter, which it represented a credible alternative to Taylorism and bureaucracy (TIXIER 1986), had the favor of corporate directors during the 1980s. Despite its inability to take deep roots in the everyday activities of organizations, it continued serving as a reference mark even though the concept of participation remained unclear (BORZEIX & LINHART 1988) and managerial policies promoting it were losing force (BOUFFARTIGUE 1990). Meanwhile, the term “participation” had spread into several fields of labor relations and bred protean practices (ROJOT 1992). During the 1990s and 2000s, there was a return to formalizing and rationalizing managerial processes (re-engineering, standardization, etc.).

In the past few years however, owing to the example of firms that have adopted this sort of approach and declared themselves “liberated”, enthusiasm has been revived about practices emphasize the human and cultural aspects of management (PETERS 1992, CARNEY & GETZ 2009). Proselytism is rife in the literature on liberated firms, apart from a few remarkable exceptions (in particular, PICARD 2015); but not much research has been devoted to these practices.

Can we define a model of “liberated firms”?[2] If so, how does it differ from the “participatory model”? Have liberated firms moved beyond the difficulties encountered by participatory management? Have new difficulties cropped up?

[1] This article, including quotations from French sources, has been translated from French by Noal Mellott (Omaha Beach, France).

[2] In this article, “model” is not used in the normative sense of an example to be followed. Borrowed from the sociologist Max Weber, it more humbly suggests a potential reference for actions in an organized situation.

A review of the participatory model

Origin and trends

Participatory management has not been invented recently. Already in the mid-1950s, organization theorists, such as Chris Argyris (1955, p. 1), drew attention to its relevance: "*'Participative management' and 'democratic leadership' are phrases that are currently in the limelight in most management circles. These phrases are taken to mean that the subordinate should be given an opportunity to participate in the various decisions that are made in their organization which affect them directly or indirectly."*

At the start of the 1960s, manufacturers and labor unions in Norway rued the gap between the organization of firms as a hierarchy and the status of citizenship. Out of this arose a vast program of participatory industrial democracy that, from Sweden, spread to several other lands (ORTSMAN 1978). For the sake of "good' management (and no longer with a political justification, as in Norway), the principles set by this program for the organization of work were diffused, in particular: room for choosing standards of quantity and quality for the production process, and the emphasis on information channels.

Drawing inspiration from these achievements, participatory structures in production (semi-autonomous groups, production cells, elementary units of responsibility, etc.) were experimentally introduced in France during the 1970s. Wage-earners in these structures freely organized their work to reach a standard of production set by management. Underlying these structures were ideas about job enrichment and polyvalence. In addition, wage-earners themselves analyzed malfunctions and enjoyed a degree of control. During the 1980s, participatory approaches to work underwent a revival in France. Borne by the example of Japan and by a "modernist" left-wing current of thought, this fad was promoted through an abundant, enticing body of writings on management (PETERS & WATERMAN 1982, ARCHIER & SÉRIEYX 1984).

Given the many experiments under way, theorists drew up a "participatory model". The tools used for promoting worker participation in production were incorporated in this model: in the first place, the quality circles seen as the key to the Japanese success story (CHEVALIER 1989). As a lever for transforming work on the production line, quality circles (progress groups, consultation groups, etc.) brought together small (often *ad hoc*) groups of wage-earners (appointees or volunteers) in a workshop or service for the purpose of identifying, analyzing, choosing and settling the problems related to their activities. In 1984, according to AFCERQ (Association Française des Cercles de Qualité), more than ten thousand such groups involved more than two hundred thousand wage-earners in two thousand establishments in France.

Meanwhile, the Auroux acts of 4 August 1982 introduced the right for wage-earners to express their opinions directly and collectively "*about the content and organization of their work, and about defining and implementing actions for improving working conditions in the firm*" (Art. L. 461-1 of the Labor Code). These "*direct expression groups*" did not encounter objections from employers. The major employer organization (CNPF) even presented quality circles as evidence that firms had already organized this "*right of expression*" — despite differences between the finalities of these arrangements. The means for stimulating participation thus came to back up the tools for promoting worker implication in production. Some of these means, such as "management by values", were overarching, whereas others, such as "participatory innovation" or awards, were more targeted.

Value-based management, a later trend in participatory management emphasized "excellence" and formulated orientations (or "values") that were defined in terms both broad enough to cover all functions and sectors in the firms but, too, narrow enough so that wage-earners could draw on these values to accomplish their assigned tasks. Its principal tools were corporate charters, company mission statements and "company projects", described as "*pacts of participation*" (BOYER & EQUILBEY 1986, p.17). Seeking to reinforce the production unit as a "community", such projects defined the major lines in the firm's vision of its future and the long-term approach it intended to pursue.

In functional — less normative — terms, the arrangements for "participatory innovation" (BARBIER 1989, TEGLBORG 2010), were, during the 1980s, limited to collecting suggestions and ideas from employees. The objective was to stimulate individual and collective "direct expression" and to tap the personnel's innovative capacities in order to improve working conditions, the productivity of work units and the quality of services. A final example: a concrete arrangement of this sort was to bestow awards (trophies for innovations or quality, etc.) as a public recognition of the behaviors (individual or collective) that management deemed exemplary. Such awards might, or might not, entail the payment of a bonus (depending on the economies made thanks to the suggestion or meritorious action).

The problems of participatory management

During the 1980s, the critique of the participatory model focused on two sorts of problems. Labor sociologists in particular emphasized the problems of designing a model described as "rotten from the core", whereas other studies pointed a finger at the problems and conditions related to applying the model, since management, even "participatory", is an art of execution. Without developing these points, we shall briefly discuss the basic controversies related to problems of each sort.

Problems of the first sort converged toward a full-scale accusation of the participatory model as being "rotten from the core": this model, given its underpinnings, was considered to be makeshift, inefficient and deleterious to work groups. In particular:

- Participatory management was the opposite of a "critical participation" that arises out of the grass roots. It redefined the boundary between formal and informal activities in a way that did not favor wage-earners, since

the rationales of "prescription" and of "protest" were incompatible (BORZEIX & LINHART 1988, LINHART 1991, BORZEIX *et al*. 2015).

- Despite appearances, wage-earners were isolated, and the firm's requirement of unity disrupted work groups (TIXIER 1986 & 1988, BARBIER 1989).
- Participatory management was a puttered set of arrangements, not at all a model (ALTER 1990 & 1993).
- The participatory model did not at all prove to be beneficial and efficient, as its advocates had postulated (LAVILLE 1988, BARBIER 1989).

Other criticisms, more temperate, focused on participatory management as an art of execution. They did not target the foundations underlying the participatory model, but did point to serious impediments to applying it, especially when the overall organization of a firm rejects it. In particular:

- The "individualization" adopted in human resource policies short-circuited participatory strategies (MARTIN 1995).
- The pressure toward conformity trumped the acceptance of behaviors that lay outside the norms (MARTIN 1995).
- Participatory arrangements were superposed on an organization of work that was unadapted since it did not put an end to the separation between the functions of design/conception and execution (IAZYKOFF 1991, LAVILLE 1988 & 1992).
- The managerial team's comportment, corporate policies and the mentality of upper management did not square with the particpatory model (McLEOD & BENNETT 1972, GROUX & LÉVY 1985, HERMEL 1988).

Studying "liberated firms"

A new managerial model?

At first sight, "liberated firms" are presented not as a formal model but as a movement of ideas. Isaac Getz (2009, p.34), the advocate of these practices in France, has defined the liberated firm as: "*an organizational form in which employees have complete freedom and the responsibility to undertake actions that they, not their bosses, have decided are best.*" The leader/liberator takes the assignment of abolishing the attributes of the conventional hierarchical organization and creating a workplace environment that, propitious to the freedom to act, stimulates self-motivation and is grounded on the inherent equality between individuals (GETZ 2009 & 2012). This freedom of action is placed at the service of the company's vision, and the latter is a form of regulation of the individual's freedom. Most liberated firms do not have: a chain of command, reserved places in the parking lot, special offices for top white-collars, time clocks for checking in/out, managers, titles or ranks (GETZ 2009 & 2012). They allow wage-earners to choose their leader and schedules, and even to invent their jobs under condition that this contributes to the company's success (CARNEY & GETZ 2009).

Although liberated firms are arousing ever more enthusiasm (to the point of apparently being a fad), this movement's sources reach back in time. At Favi, a pioneer in this respect, the sources of inspiration are: Douglas McGregor (1906-1964), a psychologist of the human relations school; Jean-Christian Fauvet, the consultant who created sociodynamics, and Shoji Shiba, a specialist in total quality. Tom Peters, coauthor of the best-seller *In Search of Excellence* (PETERS & WATERMAN 1982) also deserves a place among these sources. In *Liberation Management*, Peters (1992) declared that he wanted to free firms from the overpowering weight of the hierarchy, from the hypertrophy of centralized services, and from formal procedures. He asked firms to undertake an in-depth restructuring so as to draw closer to their customers.

Despite the astonishing contrast between the sources of thought on liberating firms and the claims of avant-gardism, when all is said and done, is there anything new? Have the problems raised by participatory management been addressed? Our astonishment suggests two questions:

- How to better describe the model of liberated firms? And how does it differ from the participatory model?
- Have liberated firms moved beyond the difficulties that limited the implementation of the participatory model? Might other difficulties, specific to these firms, have cropped up?

Three case studies and an analytical grid

To gain an overall view of this liberation movement, we drew from our participation in various circles of thought devoted to managerial innovations (Innovacteurs, Entreprise & Personnel, Institut de l'Entreprise, École de Paris, etc.) and collected documents for analyzing this movement (articles in academic journals and professional magazines, blogs, videos, etc.). This immersion led us to back to this movement's source. Our comprehensive approach tried to take into account this history and the associated ideological trends, whence a look back on the participatory model.

We then launched three case studies. These cases were selected owing to the media coverage of each case. In all, thirty-six interviews were conducted with individuals, along with three group interviews. Besides the five CEOs (three of them also chaired the board of directors), we interviewed samples of wage-earners that were formed so as to reflect roles and statuses in the workforce (personnel representatives, technicians, operatives…).

THE FIRST CASE: Favi (430 wage-earners), a die-casting firm specialized in copper alloys that has become the European leader of selector forks for gearboxes. Located in Hallencourt (Picardy, France), this company has strong local moorings and a strong determination to maintain jobs there. Its stated ambition is "*to always do more, better, at a lower cost, with love for our customers, in Hallencourt and out of respect for our children's land*". It has organized work, since 1987, as a series of production cells (or minifactories), each of which has: a sales representative in relation with a

specific customer, approximately thirty operatives and experts (maintenance, quality). The cell leader is an operative coopted by his peers. This work team is to continually improve quality, innovate in both processes and products, and make investment decisions. As happened for the development of a rotor for an electric motor, mixed teams (R&D, sales, experts and operatives) are formed for a project and for following up on the marketing of new products.

The second case; Poult's cookie factory at Montauban (southwestern France) (300 wage-earners), the leader in distribution to big and medium-sized supermarkets. Drawing from Favi's example, Poult, at a time when its operating results were in the red, launched a project bearing a strong ideal in 2006: "*Build together a citizen enterprise, where freedom and confidence in people guarantee performance and durability.*" Wage-earners are asked to innovate; and an "intrapreneurial" attitude is fostered. Wage-earners can start new businesses via Poult's business incubator. Emphasis is placed on autonomy and responsibility, as reflected in the reduction of rungs in the hierarchy from four to two and in the making of major decisions by work groups. The factory has been reorganized as four autonomous units with from 65 to 120 wage-earners, each unit making different varieties of cookies. In addition to operatives, an autonomous unit has experts (maintenance, quality and process innovation), technicians (progress, maintenance), skilled operatives (OPAC: *opérateurs à compétence*) and a leader (*animateur*). The "skilled operatives" now have the assignments that used to be the job of line-managers: the management of quality, the maintenance and planning of the ovens, and "animation" of the workforce.

Le third case: CHRONO Flex (250 wage-earners), a specialist in on-site hydraulic hose repairs. Following a period of remarkable growth since 1995, the company sank into a recession in 2008. Drawing on Favi's example, CHRONO Flex launched its movement of liberation in 2009: the firm's founder announced to work teams that he would no longer make operational decisions and that, henceforth, his assignment would be to make the workplace environment "*as nourishing as possible*". This project seeks to cultivate "*love for customers*" and to transfer initiatives to the grass roots by "*regenerating the firm in the form of an armada of smaller, faster and more agile 'speed boats'*" (CEO). The company thus divided France into thirteen regions now called "speed boats", each of them with a captain, coopted by peers, as pilot. A "speed boat" is made up of fleets of trucks equipped for emergency repairs. It is headed by a sales representative who is a technician, has an entrepreneurial mentality and is interested in increasing sales.

We have tried to detect the underlying managerial model since the first managerial practices adopted by Favi till the model's transposition at Poult and later at CHRONO Flex. Thanks to a review of the literature from the 1980s and 1990s (in particular the descriptions of participatory practices by: TIXIER 1986, BARBIER 1989, LAVILLE 1988, BUÉ 1996, & MARTIN 1994), we drew up a grid of the items that best characterized the participatory model and compared them in each of the three firms under study.[3] Through a content analysis of the interviews conducted, we then tried to detect the items that these three cases had in common and to discover the original aspects of liberated firms.

Continuity… ?

Our overview of the literature came up with twelve "dimensions" for characterizing the participatory model, nine of them related to the organization of work (the first nine in Table 1). These twelve were part of the grid for analyzing the three cases under study.

Despite shifts in the vocabulary, the model of liberated firms can be seen as a belated outcome of participatory management, thus as being in continuity with it.

In these three firms, the number of rungs in the hierarchy has been reduced. The hierarchy of authority has been restrained, or even abolished. The proximity between rungs is both spatial and symbolic; and the use of the familiar *tu* (instead of the formal *vous*) is the rule. At Favi, supervisors who used to be under the general manager have become production cell leaders. At Poult, the leaders of the autonomous units took the place of two middle rungs in the hierarchy. At CHRONO Flex, the regional directors were replaced with "*speed boat captains*" (coopted for three years), and the general manager has been installed in an open space in the midst of colleagues. Everywhere, the titles and status symbols over which status-seekers fond have been abolished.

Production is organized in small teams, and most operational decisions are made at that level. These teams, and individuals too, are held responsible for their results. Self-control by peers and by customers replaces control by the hierarchy. The staff's role is reduced to providing backup for these operational units (Mintzberg's logistics function). The preparation, planning and control of worktime are done by operatives with the help of their team leader at Favi, or the skilled operative at Poult.

[3] The formulation of these items has been borrowed, to a large degree, from Tixier (1986), who tried to place participatory practices in a model.

Table 1:
The twelve dimensions of the participatory model in the three firms under study

Dimensions of the participatory model (1-9: the organization of work)	*Favi*	*Poult (factory at Montbauban)*	*CHRONO Flex*
***1**. A lean hierarchy.*	Reduction from five to two rungs.	Reduction from four to two rungs.	Reduction from three to two rungs (elimination of regional directors).
***2**. Work teams (small groups of wage-earners) recuperate tasks that used to be dispersed among operatives.*	Backup services are gradually integrated in the "production cells": control, quality, and maintenance, as well as human resource functions related to the organization of worktime.	"Skilled operatives" propose backup services.	A functional role is assigned to the "speed boat captains" instead of specialized services (probably because of the size and geographical dispersion).
***3**. Sharp reduction in hierarchical control as a hierarchy of skills replaces the hierarchy of authority.*	Production cell leaders have the role of stimulating productivity, quality and innovation by stimulating participation.	The leaders of "autonomous production units" have the role of boosting the autonomy and responsibility of work teams, and only intervene when problems crop up.	The "captains" have the role of boosting the quality of services and stimulating sales in the geographical zone.
***4**. At the ground level, room is created for negotiations about: production goals, quality, working conditions and the organization of work.*	Operational decisions are made at the lowest level. For example, the cell leader decides with colleagues whether his production cell has to work as one, two or three work teams; and adjustments are made during peak periods of activity.	Adjustments at the individual level: according to a company document, "*collaboration among individuals becomes the basis for the firm's operation*".	"*The work team's job is to make operational decisions*" (CEO-chairman); "*The goal is for technicians to be their own boss*" (CEO).
***5**.A mixed decision-making process: top management sets orientations while letting the ground level wide room for negotiations.*	Production cells make operational decisions.	"*Decisions that, in the end, do not necessarily suit everyone, but that's the group principle*" (CEO).	"*My job is to work on the environment, and the team's job is to make operational decisions*" (CEO).
***6**. Wage-earners' activities are related to the company's goals via the concern for quality and customer services.*	The Favi system: everything has to be done so that workers make real-time decisions in order to deliver, in due course, the best quality to customers.	The management of quality is taken into account by skilled operatives.	Everyone is to ask themselves: which decision will best serve the company's vision of its future?
***7**. Human resource management: Recruitments and job changes are based on applicants' technical aptitudes and their degree of participation.*	Newcomers have to accept the Favi system's principles.	The recruitment team receives applicants and evaluates them using its own criteria. This is the occasion for it to make sure that the recruit shares certain values.	Newcomers are coopted by work teams and have to make a solemn commitment that they will adopt CHRONO Flex's values.
***8**. System of mutual evaluation between the top and bottom of the hierarchy.*	Cell leaders are coopted by operatives.	Joint evaluations are conducted, in particular for matters related to pay (including for white-collars).	The firm, along with ground-level operatives, sets the rules. For instance, a "speed boat" coopts its "captain" for a 3-year period.
***9**. A strong "company culture", formalized and diffused, for integrating wage-earners.*	A culture based on the values and symbols of the Favi system as formalized and promoted by the firm.	A culture based on the values that, voiced by the CEO, figure in communications but are not very formalized.	A culture based on a formal set of values and symbols: CHRONO Flex's four values.
***10**. Periodical meetings (workshops, quality circles, and groups for "direct expression", problem-solving, etc.).*	*Ad hoc* meetings in the course of ordinary operations.		Meetings organized by the "captains" or top management every three weeks.
***11**. Innovation, suggestion boxes, etc.*	Innovation is part of everyday operations. Operatives are urged to make product innovations.		For the time being, innovation still seems to be the prerogative of top management.
***12**. Procedures for collective mobilization: company projects, charters, etc.*	The Favi system is expressed in principles inspired by its "*Judeo-Christian and Picardy roots*" (ZOBRIST 2018, chapter 21).	No formalization, but "*In the house of Poult, there are values that have to be shared… the right to make a mistake, to be criticized, to experiment*" (CEO).	According to an in-house document, the company project relies on four values: — performance through happiness; — cultivate love of the customer; — a respectful and responsible team; and — an open mind.

The intent is to make individuals feel involved in their work in a way that Ouchi (1982), whose Z theory is in line with McGregor's Y theory (1960), would describe as clannish. At Favi, operatives said that a new recruit, if he did not play the team game, risked being rejected by the group and ultimately expelled from the firm.

…or renewal?

In all three case, we notice elements of the participatory model as described in the literature. However the experiences mentioned during interviews suggest a renewal of the forms of participation. In addition to the twelve items related to the participatory model (Table 1), new elements appeared (Table 2). Let us discuss each of these seven signs of renewal.

Participation as the default

No longer peripheral and occasional, participation is now a full part of the operation of these firms. It is no longer a matter of "participatory" meetings (quality circles, progress groups, expression groups, etc.), which opened a parenthesis in everyday worklife and where participation was supposed to lead to learning and career development.

In these liberated firms, participation takes place through everyday activities at the workplace and is reflected, in particular, through group decision-making processes. Decisions are no longer the privilege of an individual supervisor assigned to this role; they are now made by the work group. Recruitment to the work group and the choice of a team leader are made through cooptation.

Likewise, the sensitive question of pay rates has a collective dimension, variable depending on the firm. At Favi, where individual bonuses have been abolished, a system of incentives exists whereby wage-earners can obtain up to the equivalent of fifteen months of wages. At CHRONO Flex, a group of wage-earners announced to the CEO, who was preparing for a year-long world tour, its intention to redesign the pay system. Following a period of thought and tests, a scenario was adopted: each vehicle used for repairs is operated like a minifirm

Table 2

Dimensions specific to the liberated firm in the three firms under study

New dimensions specific to the liberated firm model	***Favi***	***Poult***	***CHRONO Flex***
1*. Participation as the default mode of operation.*	Participation is a full-fledged part of the operation of the "production cells" (Favi), "autonomous production units" (Poult) and "speed boats" (CHRONO Flex). A democratic decision-making process: new recruits and team leaders are chosen by cooptation; work groups make decisions on investments.		
2*. Democratizing innovation.*	The determination to "democratize" innovation: all persons, from operatives to the CEO, are encouraged, at least theoretically, to innovate in all fields.		Top management is planning to develop this dimension.
3*. Boosting an entrepreneurial culture.*	Mixed teams (R&D, experienced operatives, sales) for developing new businesses.	All wage-earners are asked to develop new businesses (for example, biscuits for sports). Creation of an incubator.	A strong entrepreneurial culture at the company's business core with participation by the 200 truck drivers who undertake emergency interventions.
4*.A societal ambition.*	"*Sustain the lives of two hundred families in Hallencourt*" (CEO).	"*Re-enchant the world of the firm*" (CEO).	"*Refounding society via firms*" (CEO).
5*. The CEO's new role.*	The CEOs of the three firms refuse to make operational decisions and have reoriented their actions toward creating a work environment as favorable as possible to employees.		
6*. Conducting change: The "leader/liberator" allied with the grass roots.*	The charismatic leader at the origin of the liberation process allies himself with operatives who are seen as key players in this liberation.		
7*. Shifting from the technostructure to operatives.*	The specialists who used to coordinate, plan and control activities now have the assignment of following up on the development of operatives' skills and qualifications and of facilitating the process whereby work groups autonomously settle production problems.		

with its own income account. On the basis of this full transparency, 15% of the margin is to be redistributed monthly to the technician who drives the vehicle, to which is added 15% of the margins of all technicians working in the same "speed boat". Furthermore, 15% of the margin is to be redistributed to all colleagues on a quarterly basis. This variable pay system takes account of individuals, work teams and the firm as a whole. At Poult, where the pay of white-collars is still individualized, a group of blue- and white-collars has been formed to make decisions about wage hikes.

"Democratizing" innovation

In the participatory experiments conducted during the 1980s and 1990s, wage-earners were mainly asked for their suggestions about how to improve everyday life at the workplace. In liberated firms, innovation is being democratized. In two of the three cases under study, all employees, from operatives to the CEO, are asked to help improve the organization and its products.

Boosting an entrepreneurial culture

These three firms differ with regard to how they detect and tap new business opportunities (SHANE & VENKATARAM 2000). As a newcomer among liberated firms, CHRONO Flex has pushed very far the implication of its 200 itinerant sales representatives. Initially centered on their role as maintenance technicians specialized in round-the-clock emergency repairs of flexible hoses, these representatives are now presented as a group of individual entrepreneurs who develop the firm's core business and detect new business opportunities. At Poult, every employee is a potential "intrapreneur" who may develop a new business in the company's incubator. At Favi, mixed teams (R&D, experienced operatives, sales) can be formed to turn an opportunity into a new business, as happened when developing a new rotor for electric motors.

Pursuit of a "societal" ambition

These new forms of work are not restricted to the pursuit of goals set for the firm's economic performance. According to the CEO in each of these three firms, participation has a societal dimension: at Favi, "*sustain the lives of two hundred families in Hallencourt*"; at Poult, "*re-enchant the world of the firm*", and at CHRONO Flex, "*contribute to refounding society via firms*".

The CEO's new role

The CEOs in these three firms declared that they refuse to make operational decisions and have reoriented their actions toward creating a work environment as favorable as possible for employees. In the words of Alexandre Gérard, CEO at CHRONO Flex: "*If I plant a seed in dry soil without light, it's not going to grow. If I plant it in good soil with light, it'll grow. The problem is not the seed but the soil. So, my job is to work on the environment; and the job of work teams is to make operational decisions.*"

Conducting change: The "leader/liberator" allied with the grass roots

In the experiments carried out in the 1980s and 1990s, the adoption of the participatory model was a choice made by upper management with the goal of palliating the drawbacks of the conventional organization, where middle-level supervisors are considered to be the leading players. In the three cases under study, the leader/liberator has an alliance with the grass-roots operatives, thus making the latter the key actors in this liberation. Zobrist (2018) has justified this: "*A revolution comes out of the base, the people*".

A shift from the technostructure to operatives

We observed not just that the "technostructure" (LAVILLE 1992) has a new role but also that it takes a back seat. Participation is based on direct access to expertise. Everyone is entitled to a say, and the expert is a resource at the service of work teams (not an actor in a structure with the assignment of supervising, making plans and exercising oversight). At Poult, the expert is to follow up on the development of operatives' skills and facilitate the "autonomous" settlement of production problems. At Favi, the technostructure is externalized, delegated or granted to customers, to principals and to the organizations that set standards (ISO, etc.).

These differences with the participatory model can be largely set down to changes in the external context (the state of the economy, competition, mentalities, etc.) where the model of liberated firms is applied. These changes do more than just adapting participatory management: they have renewed the participatory model.

Liberated firms: Moving beyond the original difficulties of participatory management?

Beyond the prescription/protest dichotomy

The liberated firm model can be described as open participatory arrangements that boost covert participation. In work teams, operatives have room for reappropriating their actions. In this sense, these firms propose moving beyond the dichotomy lurking in covert participation between prescription and protest where "*any attempt to bring the unspoken arrangements, which they [operatives] have concluded with each other, out of the shadows protecting them amounts to a loss*" (BORZEIX & LINHART 1988, p. 51). In contrast, these liberated firms preserve zones of uncertainty and let operatives decide what should be brought into the light or kept in the shadows. The argument that participatory management was a "war machine" against labor unions came under criticism at the time. The idea that the participatory model is *a priori* a source of negative, unilateral effects on wage-earners (BARBIER 1989) has never been verified. Labor unions are not very active in the three firms in our study, and

do not even exist at Favi. But is this a cause or a consequence of the model? In any case, the personnel representatives whom we met at Poult did not mention anything suggesting disgust with this liberation. Quite to the contrary, they took part as watchful observers and emphasized that this liberation has improved the system of management.

In our three case studies, the criticism of "individualization" as an impediment to participation did not seem relevant insofar as these firms are centered on small groups more than on individuals, and they foster solidarity within these groups. The pressure toward conformity is still present, but the nature of conformity has changed: it is now focused on the adoption of a shared set of values (definitely at CHRONO Flex and Favi), which reinforce the model. The liberated firm model is presented as the means for coping with an economic crisis that has not yet dissipated.

These liberated firms are definitely pushing away from Taylorism. They foster polyvalence; and job enrichment is a reality. This enables the production group members to have a lasting influence on the company's activities.

Trial and error as a virtue and a condition for efficiency

In these three liberated firms, deviating from rules is postulated to be a potential source of learning that, if need be, can be brought under question. Trial and error occurs but as part of a malleable, not highly formalized model. CHRONO Flex is at the start of this process; and Poult is still experimenting. However we predict, with little fear of making a mistake, that implementing this form of management takes time (25 years at Favi) and, therefore, requires a relatively stable leadership and plan.

Business performance on par

With regard to economic performance, the liberated firms in this study are doing well, but we find it hard to conclude whether this success stems from a relationship of causality. A company's performance does not depend on managerial decisions alone. Recall the disaster awaiting the companies among those cited by Peters & Waterman (1982). Dwelling on the irrationality of the 1980s, one top manager, G.Y. Kervern (1986), has pointed out that 42 out of a selection of 62 firms experienced major difficulties shortly afterwards or had simply gone under.

In our three liberated firms however, positive trends in profitability have coincided with the introduction of changes in management, thus suggesting a positive correlation between the two — but validating this correlation would require further investigation.

But other sorts of problems crop up…

While some of the impediments to applying the participatory model seem to have been overcome, others difficulties have cropped up.

One difficulty has to do with the nature of organizational changes. In liberated firms, the formal hierarch is waning, as reflected in the suppression of; rungs, formal controls and status signals. These changes, described as innovations through a process of "withdrawal" (GOULET & VINCK 2012), often leave in place unthought-out aspects of the organization that make wage-earners lose their bearings. In a manager's words: "*We have the impression of a vacuum in some places. The old way's been abolished but without proposing something new. It'll be necessary to imagine other ways of operating.*"

According to Getz (2009), the firm's vision is the means for regulating employees' freedom of action. Nonetheless, the question of regulation in everyday work has not been settled. Management hopes for self-regulation by peers. This sometimes happens, but it can be lacking. As an operative at Poult said, "*It's hard to go see a colleague and tell him, 'You work poorly, you're taking undue advantage…'. He's going to say, 'Who are you to say that? And you, you do this, you do that'.*"

If an employee has difficulty regulating his peers' comportment, what about managers? The assignment of managers to command and control functions has been abolished in liberated firms. Leaders coopted by their peers have replaced the middle-level hierarchy of supervisors. It is hard to work out a new position, especially in cases of conflict or infringements. An employee who faced this sort of situation said, "*Managers have unloaded their traditional role; they say their role is to follow up on raising the level of skills and qualifications among employees. But in cases of conflict, no one's around. They say, 'We are not to command.' So, they don't do anything, and we feel abandoned.*"

In the three case studies, decision-making is no longer the privilege of individual managers; it has been turned over to the work group. But making a collective decision does not always just happen. In the following situation, it implied an intervention by management: "*When a leadership is taking shape, some don't agree: 'By what right should it be you?', etc. So, decisions aren't well made, and there are a few more conflicts… that's when we feel we have to monitor the teams*" (CEO, Poult).

Another difficulty has to do with the fact that liberation resounds differently from one person to the next, and leads to contrasting commitments. In an operative's opinion, "*There are those whom the new system has allowed to reveal themselves and who are pulling the organization forwards, and then there are those who come just to put in their time.*" The most committed wage-earners might experience lassitude, even more so when the system of reward and recognition has not yet been redesigned. In the words of an employee heavily involved in this new way of organizing work: "*The proposal is always to do more, but at some point, we reach the limits. Those who commit themselves, who always volunteer, they can't put up with it any longer. Besides, they don't get anything more, there's no possibility for advancing.*"

The very concept of liberation is open to different interpretations, which are not clearly formulated. This leaves room for all possible interpretations, even for the one whereby a free individual does what he actually wants to do (GEUSS 2005). When freedom is not understood in collective terms, deviations occur. As a union member pointed out, "*The person in planning is fed up. There're several operatives who refuse to do manual receipts, claiming that they don't want to. They tell her, 'No, we're free, we don't want to!' There's no rule held in common, and no one says anything.*"

A final point: the liberated firm model is incarnated in the figure of a leader. Paradoxically, the boss's presence, even though he has withdrawn from operational management to devote his actions to improving the work environment or drafting a strategic vision, is very strong in these firms. Transforming the firm depends very much on this leadership. The CEOs of all three firms, whom we have met, can be described as visionary: "*Since a firm is a form of monarchy, the only way to break free is to make a revolution*" (Jean-François Zobrist, Favi); it is necessary to "*re-enchant the world of the firm*" (Carlos Verkaeren, Poult); and "*the project of liberated firms is to change the firm and, thereby, society*" (Alexandre Gérard, CHRONO Flex).

Behind the force of these ideas, we glimpse the risk that the model will flounder when the CEO leaves. At Favi, the succession of Zobrist took place after a presence that lasted 25 years. Will the Favi system survive? When Qualium Investissement, a subsidiary of the Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations, acquired Poult in 2014, it imposed a new leadership; and the CEO was forced out in 2016. What will become of the model of the liberated firm there?

Conclusion

To describe the emerging model of the liberated firm (considered to be a new model by its promoters and many a commentator), we have compared it to the participatory model with which it seems related. As shown, the liberated management observed in the three firms under study both marks a continuity with the earlier model of participatory management and makes a break with it. In between continuity and renewal, it is neither a remake nor a radical innovation. The liberated firm tries to adapt the participatory model's vision of the relation between management and business performance to the new socioeconomic situation. While some impediments to applying the participatory model have apparently been surmounted, other difficulties, specific to liberated firms, have cropped up. The information gleaned from our study might prove useful at a time when many managers want to draw inspiration from the liberated firm model.

It would be worthwhile to conduct further studies with a larger sample of firms and with more targeted questions. In a followup to our previous study (GILBERT *et al*. 2014), it would be worthwhile examining the forms of regulation and control exercised in liberated firms.

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