

*SHOULD THE DEMOCRATIC MODEL BE APPLIED TO NON-
GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND FIRMS ?*

by

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Democracy is the taboo word of our time¹. It tends to be the single criterion by which humane institutions and organizations are evaluated. Its importance is such that it has obtained an ethical dimension : being democratic is good, being non-democratic is bad. There is even a shift in the meaning of the word since for instance democratizing education just means extending education to a wide category of people and not only organizing education according to democratic processes. However, let us keep the concept with its strict meaning, namely a system in which a collective decision is adopted through voting, for instance with a majority rule.

Given the importance given to the democratic character of institutions in the modern world, it is not surprising that many people consider as desirable to apply democratic rules to as many possible organizations as possible, beyond the public sphere for the working of which they have been initially designed. Thus, it is claimed that firms, associations and even, perhaps, the family ought to be managed according to democratic principles. At first glance this seems to be very attractive : Why, for instance, wage-earners, which are concerned by what will happen in their firm, would not be associated to decisions which can affect them ? Why, in non-profit organizations – such as an University – those who are concerned by the correct working of their institution would not participate into decisions ? Such general ideas are at the source of many legislations which oblige firms to accept representatives of wage-earners in their Boards or which organize

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Universities so that professors, students and members of the administration democratically elect representatives in the various committees and Boards of their Universities and/or appoint their presidents.

However, in spite of this positive prejudice, the extension of the democratic principle to all these humane organizations outside the public sphere completely change their very nature in a way which can be incoherent – and, therefore, be a threat on their functioning - or which can even be dangerous, as we want to demonstrate in the present paper. But, let us first give some thought to the problem of the role played by the democratic principle in the working of public organizations (which, to make short, we will call "the state"). We will then proceed to an analysis of the proper role of democracy in firms and will finally briefly consider the case of other non-governmental organizations.