

Working Together: How Workplace Bonds Strengthen a Diverse Democracy

Cynthia Estlund. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc. 2003.

reviewed by Grant Hayden

To Cynthia Estlund, the workplace is more than just a place to put in your time, chat over the office water cooler, and leave at the end of the day, carrying out your more important familial and civic responsibilities elsewhere. It is, instead, a vital site for the creation and maintenance of social capital, the networks of norms and trust that help people pursue shared objectives. And as such, the workplace plays a significant role in building social connections across typical divisions of race and gender, and thus provides some of the glue that holds civil society together.

The book begins with two propositions. First, the workplace is a hotbed of social interaction. Second, the workplace is more diverse in terms of race and sex than other places where people meaningfully interact with each other. Together, these two propositions mean that the workplace may be the best hope for developing the kind of social capital upon which civil society, and a diverse democracy, depend.

The wrinkle, and the challenge presented to lawmakers, is that the diversity in the workplace is in large part due to the fact that workplace associations are involuntary—the result of the legal coercion of employers through various civil rights statutes and the economic coercion of employees who face limited choices within, and without, their workplace. Thus, Estlund is in the position of arguing that one of our most undemocratic institutions, the workplace, contains the seeds to strengthen our democracy. And, drawing on a wide range of convincing empirical data and democratic theory, she makes a good case.

Living Apart But Working Together

Estlund begins the book with the familiar story of the recent decline in memberships in voluntary associations—places like the PTA, fraternal organizations, and even bowling leagues. As people started “bowling alone,” those networks of shared norms and trust have declined, depleting the store of social capital. And this social capital, according to many theorists, is a necessary prerequisite to having vital and efficient democratic political institutions.

The decline of social capital has been met with a great deal of debate and analysis about the state of civil society and the prescription for civic renewal. But the role of the workplace has been largely ignored. This is, in part, because most definitions of civil society exclude the state and the market. The workplace, as market institution, is governed by economic incentives, and, so the story goes, is not the home to meaningful public discourse. But, as Estlund notes, “[S]omething seems amiss in this account. For we may be bowling alone, but we are working together” (6).

Estlund spends the first part of the book examining the workplace as a center of sociability among diverse groups of people. Drawing on a range of empirical information, she contrasts the workplace with other potential points of contact for people of, say, different races or genders.

Blacks and whites, for example, do not live together, learn together, or worship together. Despite the fact that mixed-race families are more common than they once were, they are still the exception, not the rule. Most citizens, even those in more heterogeneous metropolitan areas, still live in neighborhoods predominantly occupied by people of their own race. And even those in mixed-race neighborhoods have little contact their different-race neighbors. The persistence of residential segregation has, even fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, kept schools largely segregated, and churches, like most other voluntary associations, are also racially homogeneous.

There are, of course, some institutions that are more racially integrated – the military and higher education are the most prominent examples – but Estlund believes the most promising arena for racial integration is the workplace. Survey data reveal that the workplace, while far from completely integrated, is more integrated than other institutions. About two-thirds of white respondents in a recent survey reported having at least one black coworker among the people they immediately work with, a number that rises as companies become larger. Other surveys reveal that, when asked to think about places where they associate the most with people of

different racial backgrounds, the workplace is mentioned more than any other place. And because more Americans spend a longer period of time at work than in the military or in higher education, it is the workplace that holds the most promise for increasing the types of interactions that build social capital across racial lines.

The story with gender integration is obviously a bit different. Gender is not like race in that men and women are not spatially segregated into different homes and neighborhoods, and thus not segregated to any significant degree in housing and education. Men and women usually live together for much of their lives. So what difference does it make whether they work together as well—what makes the workplace a unique place to strengthen bonds between men and women?

While the workplace does not present a unique point of contact with each other, it provides a different, more meaningful type of interaction for men and women. For while men and women are not spatially segregated, they are assigned gender-specific positions and tasks outside the workplace in ways that are largely beyond the reach of the law to deal with. In the workplace, however, such role segregation is against the law. Women's participation in the workplace has risen sharply over the past thirty years, and women are increasingly occupying positions of power and authority in the workplace. Estlund is no Pollyanna on this front—she acknowledges that occupational segregation remains a particularly stubborn problem, and that “full equality is still not in sight” (87). Nevertheless, the workplace, driven by the law of employment discrimination, has become a place where men and women are put into positions very different from those dictated the norms that persist at home and in other social institutions.

Of course, race and sex are one thing, but class is quite another matter. And Estlund admits that the hierarchy and structure of the workplace do little but reinforce class differences—both symbolically and financially. Indeed, even when some forward-thinking CEO decides to office in a cubicle along with the rest of the workers, he only shares their office space, not their compensation. So while the workplace may be a promising arena to overcome societal divisions based on race or gender, it won't be a place to mend a more fundamental societal rift—that of class. But any proposal that involves moving forward on race and sex is surely worth a look.

Connecting in the Workplace

Merely putting people of different races or genders together in the workplace, however, will not necessarily help reinvigorate civil society. Those workers need to interact in a meaningful way. This is the underlying thesis of the “contact hypothesis,” that sustained cooperative interaction produces more positive intergroup relations and attitudes. And mere proximity won't do the trick. Estlund, then, wants to determine whether the modern workplace is a place where such interaction occurs; otherwise, the diversity in the workplace may not build meaningful bonds across race and gender.

So the question becomes whether the modern workplace can provide the sort of interaction demanded by the contact hypothesis. Estlund argues that it can. Certainly people are spending more time at work. But more importantly, survey data reveals that people report having meaningful conversations with their coworkers. Conversations around the water cooler may not always involve weighty political issues, but even mere gossip can build interpersonal connections. More to the point, most workplaces are structured in a way that workers must work together and rely upon each other in order to get the job done. And, even where this is not the case, such as at low-wage workplaces, employees may develop solidarity through their shared economic adversity. In the end, the ties that develop in the workplace may spill over into a broader social connection between people who would otherwise remain separated.

Now, Estlund admits that this paints a somewhat rosy picture of the workplace; at a minimum, it does little to capture the full range of what it's like to work in America. She spends an entire chapter laying out the various versions of the modern workplace and their capacity to foster employee interaction. Some workplace trends obviously cut against her thesis. The rise of telecommuting and the virtual workplace makes for somewhat thinner connections between employees deprived of face-to-face contact. It's also harder to build connections when employee turnover is high—the increased use of contingent workers and, more generally, the opening up of internal labor markets makes employees more like free agents without as much of an incentive to build long-lasting connections with fellow workers. And, of course, there is the persistence of the low-wage workplace, where worker interactions are almost entirely suppressed.

Despite these somewhat dismal trends (for her project, and for workers generally), Estlund believes that the workplace is still the best hope to build relationships between diverse groups of people. There are also signs that some workplaces are becoming more conducive to the building relationships between workers. Some firms are moving to more team-based production systems, which would foster the interaction and trust necessary to build social capital. Other firms have tried to reduce turnover and tap the productive potential of their workforce by fostering cooperation rather than internal competition—they offer family-friendly practices like subsidized childcare and paid leave for childbirth, infant care, and the care of sick relatives. Such practices may foster greater connectivity between workers (if for no other reason by reducing worker turnover) as well as allowing workers to become otherwise involved in the larger community. These practices, couple with the well-known solidarity that may be developed in unionized

workplaces, show that the workplace remains one of the primary sources of meaningful interaction between people, especially between people of different races and genders.

How Workplace Bonds Enrich Democratic Life

Satisfied that the workplace is an important source of social capital, Estlund spends the second part of her book charting the relationship between the workplace and democracy. Here, she takes a distinctly theoretical turn from the empirical data that dominated the first part, delving into theories of democracy and civil society. In so doing, she is immediately struck by the way that the workplace has been largely left out of this theoretical picture.

Historically, the workplace has not been conceptualized as a place for public discourse, and thus has not been viewed as an important source of social capital. This disregard for the workplace is largely due to typical workplace conditions—the workplace, compared to most other institutions, is highly regulated, and marked by a lack of the freedom typically associated with public discourse. It has therefore been categorized as part of the market, not part of civil society, and thus not a source of democratic capital.

But, as we have seen, the more typical institutions of civil society—civic associations, schools, and churches—lack diversity. Those more traditional associations do little to create social capital and meaningful public discourse across race and gender lines. Thus the workplace plays a distinct role in civil society as a place where people are economically or legally compelled to get along.

Thus we reach Estlund's central, and most counterintuitive point, that the very constraints placed on the workplace allow it to make a unique contribution to civil society. As she explains, "The fact that there is less individual freedom within the workplace than, for example, in the public square may actually contribute to successful integration of workplaces, the experience of which can in turn spill outside the workplace and enhance democratic life" (133). In other words, we do not need to have a democratic workplace in order to have a workplace that helps democracy.

What the Law Can Do

Estlund concludes her book with some preliminary thoughts on how we can best regulate the workplace to enhance its contribution to democratic life. Most of the suggestions are not new—legal academics have proposed variations of many of them for some time. But Estlund's arguments give these suggestions additional weight by tying them not to the advancement of a particular group of workers, but of something broader and more compelling, including the future of democracy itself.

The law, from Estlund's point of view, needs to promote diversity and more constructive interactions in the workplace. Initially, this means crafting the law to enhance workplace integration. The law must also provide incentives to employers and workers to structure the workplace in a way that fosters genuine connection between different groups of workers.

She has several suggestions along this line, beginning with strengthening affirmative action programs. Affirmative action in the workplace—which involves the deliberate use of race or sex in employment decisions—was originally justified as a remedy to historical discrimination. As that justification has lost popular appeal, courts have pushed such programs on the grounds of increasing diversity. This would seem to match up with Estlund's concerns, but the diversity approach tends to emphasize differences between workers. Thus, she believes in affirmative action, but believes that its primary justification is its integrative capability. That is, different groups should be placed together in the workplace not because the resulting diversity will increase productivity (indeed, in most cases, it will not), but because it will force the type of connections that spill over into society. A little bit of friction in the workplace may not be a good thing for the bottom line, but it is a necessary aspect of building social connections across race and gender lines.

Ordinary employment discrimination laws can also be shored up. Most race and sex discrimination now occurs at hiring, but most employment litigation is over firing. This is, in part, because the hiring process is highly subjective, and applicants don't have as much insight as do established workers into an employer's motivations for its decisions. As a result, discriminatory barriers to entry ensure that workplaces remain more segregated than they otherwise would be. One way to change this, according to Estlund, is to shift the law away from employer motivation to employer results: analyzing the race and sex of actual workers is much easier to do than analyzing employer motivations. She also suggests shifting the EEOC's enforcement powers to focus on entry-point decisions rather than termination decisions.

Estlund's book, then, provides an additional—and powerful—justification for many of the legal changes sought by scholars of labor and employment law. We learn that such changes will not only help disadvantaged workers, but will also improve social connections between those of different races and sexes—connections upon which civil society, and democracy, depend. And it instructs us that a chat over the water cooler—or, more precisely, *who* is chatting over the water cooler—is more important than it seems.

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