Drawing Out Democracy: The Role of Sortition in Preventing and Overcoming Organizational Degeneration in Worker-Owned Firms

Simon Pek1

Abstract
Fostering sustainable worker ownership and control of their organizations has long been an aspiration for many. Yet, the growth of worker-owned firms (WOFs) is often accompanied by organizational degeneration: the tendency for a small oligarchy of unrepresentative workers to control democratic structures at the expense of the participation of everyday workers. Prior research suggests that organizational degeneration occurs naturally as WOFs become larger and more complex. Building on and departing from this work, I argue in this essay that an important cause is likely to be current practice around how worker representatives are selected—specifically, the near-universal reliance on elections. As an alternative, I argue that the application of sortition—the use of lotteries—to select worker representatives in major decision-making bodies such as boards of directors and councils could help prevent and overcome organizational degeneration, while also offering additional social and business benefits for workers and their organizations.

Keywords
worker ownership, worker cooperatives, organizational degeneration, democracy, random selection, sortition

Introduction
Fostering sustainable worker ownership and control of their workplaces has long been an aspiration for many scholars, social change agents, policy makers, and workers alike. Worker ownership can have extensive benefits for workers1 and their organizations, including increased collaboration, productivity, organizational resilience, attention to social and environmental issues, protection of workers’ rights and interests, and workers’ psychological and professional development (Cheney, Santa Cruz, Peredo, & Nazareno, 2014; Frohlich & Godard, 1998; Harnecker, 2009; Kokkinidis, 2015a; Luhman, 2006; Peredo, 2003). Interest in worker ownership has only been amplified in light of declining union membership (Cathcart, 2014), the 2008 financial crisis (Adler, 2014), and the transition toward the knowledge economy (Rousseau & Rivero, 2003). This has intensified the need for management scholars to attend to how worker-owned firms (WOFs) can succeed and thrive in the long run.

Majority ownership by workers and significant worker control rights through democratic decision-making structures are two important characteristics that differentiate WOFs from traditional capitalist firms (Ben-ner, 1988; Sauser, 2009).2 Much researcher and practitioner interest has been paid to these democratic structures, which vary widely across WOFs. For instance, the John Lewis Partnership, a worker-owned trust, has a complex governance structure centered on representation that includes a Partnership Council comprised mostly of representatives elected by workers and a Partnership Board comprised partially of representatives elected by the Partnership Council (Paranque & Willmott, 2014). WOFs tend to adopt different governance structures depending on their size and stage of development (Cornforth, Thomas, Lewis, & Spear, 1988; Rothschild & Whitt, 1986). Smaller WOFs tend have collectivist governance structures centered on direct democracy, whereby decision-making authority is entrusted to all workers who make decisions collectively. Size and complexity—“the classic albatrosses of democratic practice” (Malleson, 2013, p. 139)—make collectivist structures unsustainable in large WOFs, as they tend to experience challenges including increased transaction costs, difficulty diffusing information across the workforce, inefficiency, and ineffective decision-making, which I expand on in the next section. Thus, large WOFs—whether those that have grown from their collective

1University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

Corresponding Author:
Simon Pek, Peter B. Gustavson School of Business, University of Victoria, 3800 Finnerty Road, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada V8P 5C2.
Email: spek@uvic.ca
roots or those that originated from established non-WOFs—tend to be dual-structure organizations: characterized by a representative governance structure in which workers elect a board of directors or a similar type of organ to represent them in organizational decision making, while still being entrusted to make certain decisions collectively during general membership meetings. For instance, all workers in the plywood cooperatives in the Pacific Northwest of the United States have one vote in electing members of the board of directors and can attend general membership meetings in which they have a direct decision-making role (Bellas, 1972; Greenberg, 1986). In the case of the cooperatives comprising the Mondragón Corporation, each worker has an equal vote in decisions made in the general assembly, including electing members of the board of directors (Forcadell, 2005).

Despite their promise and benefits, WOFs often face a major problem as they grow in size—degeneration. This concern is perhaps best captured by Sydney Webb and Beatrice Webb (1968), who argue that

Democracies of producers . . . have hitherto failed, with almost complete uniformity, whenever they have themselves sought to own and organize the instruments of production. In the relatively few instances in which such enterprises have not succumbed as business concerns, they have ceased to be democracies of producers managing their own work, and have become, in effect, associations of capitalists. (p. 67)

A major form of degeneration is organizational degeneration, whereby an oligarchy comes to dominate democratically run organizations at the expense of the participation and influence of everyday workers, ultimately threatening and undermining the very democracy that characterized the organization in the first place (Cornforth, 1995; Cornforth et al., 1988). As I describe further below, evidence of organizational degeneration and its manifestations is widespread, and scholars have found that it can have important social and business consequences for WOFs.

These problems have not gone unnoticed, and over the years, scholars have emphasized the importance of developing and identifying ways of preventing and overcoming organizational degeneration and its manifestations in WOFs (e.g., Cheney et al., 2014; Langmead, 2016; Sauser, 2009). To date, scholars and practitioners have identified numerous potential solutions that show promise, several of which center on changing democratic structures. As I elaborate below, these can be classified into two broad categories: those centered on improving representative governance structures and those centered on shifting to more direct forms of democracy. This essay is an attempt to critically reflect on the nature of organizational degeneration in WOFs and how it might be prevented and overcome. I argue that, although the solutions proposed to date show promise in helping address aspects of organizational degeneration in WOFs, they have fundamental limitations that hinder their effectiveness. Our field would thus benefit from a fresh perspective on the causes of, and potential solutions to, organizational degeneration in WOFs.

As a departure from prior work, I focus my attention on a more specific potential cause of organizational degeneration which, although largely absent from research on WOFs, has received increasing attention in the field of political science—the reliance on elections as a tool for selecting representatives in structures of representative democracy (Guerrero, 2014; van Reybrouck, 2016). Scholars in this growing field argue that, despite the ubiquity of elections in modern democracies, their use has many deficiencies that underpin contemporary concerns about democracy. Furthermore, they argue for the use of sortition—that is, the use of lotteries (Stone, 2016)3—as a promising alternative to the use of elections (e.g., Carson & Martin, 1999; Hannig, 2017). Drawing on this body of work, I argue that reliance on elections as a tool for selecting representatives in WOFs is likely to be a major yet underanalyzed cause underpinning organizational degeneration in WOFs. I then make the case for how the use of sortition to select representatives in major decision-making bodies such as boards of directors and councils could help prevent and overcome organizational degeneration in WOFs while also offering three additional advantages that can help WOFs achieve their social and business objectives: improved decision making, increased identification and integration, and greater efficiency.

Accordingly, this essay makes two overarching contributions to ongoing work on democracy in WOFs. First, it provides a novel way of thinking about the causes of, and possible solutions to, organizational degeneration in WOFs. In addition to showing promise in helping prevent and overcome organizational degeneration and its effects on WOFs’ social and business objectives, it helps move research on democracy in WOFs beyond the traditional dichotomy between direct democracy and representative democracy. Second, my analysis of the advantages of sortition in the context of WOFs suggests a novel way in which the traditional duality between WOFs’ social and business objectives could be bridged. Ultimately, it is my hope that this essay serves as a provocative challenge and inspiration for scholars and practitioners interested in organizational degeneration in WOFs and worker ownership more broadly.

In the following section, I will briefly overview research documenting and analyzing organizational degeneration, followed by examining and analyzing some of the major solutions proposed to date by scholars. Drawing on research in the field of political science, I will argue how the use of elections to select representatives is likely to be an important cause of organizational degeneration in WOFs. Building off these arguments, I will then introduce the concept of sortition, discuss its history and resurgence, and outline how its use may help overcome and prevent organizational degeneration and its
associated impacts. I will conclude by discussing the implications of my arguments for future research and practice.

**Organizational Degeneration in WOFs**

*Experiences of Organizational Degeneration*

Organizational degeneration can be seen as a multistage process (Meister, 1984), during which extensive initial idealism and a strong emphasis on egalitarianism are gradually replaced with the prioritization of economic goals and the centralization of power. Central to this process are the gradual dismantling of structures and rules favoring direct democracy, the fragmentation of the membership, and growing specialization and differentiation. Meister’s (1984) analysis is closely linked to Michel’s (1999) seminal analysis of “the iron law of oligarchy,” whereby an oligarchic elite gradually gains and retains power due to a variety of psychological and organizational factors. This leaves WOFs with an apparent trade-off: either maintain their democratic character or grow and expand. In fact, some WOFs are reluctant to grow to avoid the consequences of organizational degeneration (Cornforth et al., 1988; Rothschild & Whitt, 1986). For instance, workers in the Community News cooperative preferred the creation of a spin-off cooperative instead of internal growth (Rothschild & Whitt, 1986), and the founder of the Scott Bader Commonwealth deliberately established a size limit of approximately 350 workers, after which a separate spin-off would be necessary (Schumacher, 1973).

Evidence of organizational degeneration and its central manifestations—the centralization of power within oligarchies comprised of workers not descriptively representative of the broader workforce, and worker apathy and reduced participation in democratic structures—in large WOFs is widespread, though it is important to note that its extent and specific manifestations are likely to vary considerably across organizations. Regarding the former, the centralization of power within oligarchies of workers is a common concern (Itkonen, 1996; Jaumier, 2017; Kokkinidis, 2012). Elections in worker cooperatives are infrequently contested, the reelection of board members is common, and there is a tendency for existing board members to preselect and propose new candidates (Lees & Volkers, 1996). Representative bodies are rarely descriptively representative of the workforce. Studies have found that representative bodies overrepresent men versus women (Lees & Volkers, 1996), administrative and commercial workers versus manual workers (Atzeni & Ghiglani, 2007), managers versus non-managers (Storey, Basterretxea, & Salaman, 2014), middle-class workers versus working class workers (Meyers, 2011), and workers with higher job index scores versus those with lower ones (Whyte & Whyte, 1991). In the case of a cooperative bakery, managers were significantly overrepresented on the board of directors “because they were the only ones visibly making and implementing decisions, were widely perceived as smarter and more capable—and the only ones with sufficient time and wage flexibility to run for these meagrely stipended positions” (Meyers, 2011, p. 126). As power becomes centralized, there is a risk that the interests of individual workers and members of minority groups will have their interests drowned out in organizational decision-making (Cornforth et al., 1988). Taylor (1994), for instance, describes how workers’ ability to effectively advocate for broadly held socially oriented objectives such as improving working conditions and fostering equality among workers was threatened by the growing centralization of power in an increasingly disconnected leadership that prioritized more narrowly held business objectives such as increased productivity and profitability.

Regarding the latter manifestation, several scholars have documented high levels of apathy and low levels of participation among workers in large WOFs. One important expectation is that they meaningfully participate in elections. Yet, workers’ participation in elections tends to be low (Lees & Volkers, 1996). Furthermore, even when workers do participate in elections, research suggests that their participation is not always logical or critical. Voting decisions may be driven by factors such as popularity assessments, workplace friendships, favoritism, and the desire to punish one’s colleagues (Bernstein, 1976; Hernández, 2006; Kasmir, 1996). Another expectation of workers is that they participate actively in general membership meetings. Yet, as with participation in elections, participation in general membership meetings can also fall short of the democratic ideal, with workers infrequently challenging their representatives with critical comments or questions (Itkonen, 1996; Lees & Volkers, 1996). Even more problematic is the reality that many workers do not actively participate at all. Some attend but opt out of participating. Hernández (2006), for example, describes disengaged participation among some workers at a worker cooperative she studied:

> Apathy is evident through different behavior patterns among the members. Some members arrive at the meeting with a hangover from the previous night’s party. Others are able to sneak through with alcoholic beverages and drink at the assembly, while others bring a newspaper and use it to cover their heads as they fall asleep. Some members note that these antics take place because uninterested or apathetic members attend the meeting just to not lose their food vouchers, or to fulfill basic responsibilities. (p. 125)

Similarly, Bellas (1972) describes his observations from one meeting he attended in one of the plywood cooperatives he studied:

> For example, this writer, present at the annual meeting of one mill, heard members complaining that they had to attend in order to get paid for that day. Besides the pay, they also received
breakfast and lunch, yet they voluntarily remained outside the meeting room during the entire proceedings. (p. 39)

These manifestations are closely related to the size of WOFs. Somerville (2007) notes that “in representative cooperatives . . . internal democracy can be very weak—generally, the larger the enterprise, and the smaller the investment made by its members, the weaker the democracy will tend to be. This can lead to degeneration” (p. 10). These problems are also deeply interconnected and can be self-reinforcing (Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004). For instance, low levels of participation can lead to concerns about the democratic legitimacy of representatives (Cornforth, 2004), and apathy and low participation can reinforce each other:

Worker–member–owners, who have direct democratic mechanisms at their disposal, would appear to have opted for a rhetoric of abandonment of the cooperative spirit and an abstainer stance within the formal democratic organization in which they work, as they would seem not to advocate for a more genuine integration of the principles on a day-to-day basis. (Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2014, p. 659; emphasis in original)

Organizational degeneration and its manifestations can also have important implications for WOFs given their dual nature: businesses on one hand and social purpose-oriented associations on the other (Flecha & Ngai, 2014; Novkovic, 2012). On the social side, organizational degeneration can pose a risk to WOFs’ central values and principles (Cheney, 1999). Its manifestations can, for instance, create distinctions between different classes of workers (Kasmir, 1996), reducing cohesion and identification. Keeping these values and principles vital necessitates continuous debate and engagement (Cornforth et al., 1988), which is likely to be reduced as WOFs degenerate. Workers dissatisfied with their lack of influence may also become more likely to discontinue the democratic aspects of their organizations:

If members feel they have little or no influence over the decisions that an enterprise makes, it seems likely that they will be less inclined to identify with it or feel any “ownership” of it. In such circumstances, they may be more receptive to proposals to demutualise. (Somerville, 2007, pp. 10-11)

On the business side, organizational degeneration can inhibit business performance through fostering limited attention to strategic issues, reduced leadership skill development, and reduced engagement with new innovations and market opportunities (Cornforth et al., 1988; Stryjan, 1994). Stryjan (1994) discusses how centralization in democratic structures can inhibit business development:

Growing centralization, undertaken in the name of ‘efficiency’ has, in practice, cut off the organization from member input in crucial fields, such as 1) innovation and product development, 2) the mediation of two-way contacts between the organization and the consumer market, and 3) capital formation. A democracy deficiency has, in this case, also led to a basically unsound business structure. (p. 75)

These findings are echoed by a growing body of research on shared capitalism suggesting that robust structures for employee participation provide workers with the means to improve their organizations’ performance and thus serve as a complement to the incentives created through shared ownership structures (e.g., Kruse, Blasi, & Park, 2008; Péroin & Robinson, 2002).

Major Solutions Proposed to Date

Despite concerns about organizational degeneration and its prevalence, scholars have emphasized and found that it need not be inevitable (e.g., Cornforth, 1995; Diefenbach, 2019; Jaumier, 2017; Sauser, 2009; Stryjan, 1994). Much work has been devoted to analyzing the causes of organizational degeneration in hopes of finding solutions to overcoming and preventing it, many of which center on adopting new democratic practices and ideas. Rooted in the notion that limitations of current representative structures are an important cause of these problems, scholars and practitioners in one vein have identified solutions focused on improving upon these structures. Hernandez (2006), for example, describes how workers in the Pascual worker cooperative used practices such as closely monitoring and, in some cases, recalling their leaders to counteract oligarchy. Cornforth (1995) describes how workers in the Suma worker cooperative developed a new hub structure in which departments discussed issues internally and then appointed representatives to meet together and make collective decisions. As well, Forcadell (2005) describes how the Mondragón Corporation centered its structure on the free association of smaller units, each of which was run democratically.

Critical of the notion of representation, several scholars and practitioners in another vein have argued for a shift toward greater direct democracy as a means of addressing organizational degeneration. Kokkinidis (2012) compellingly argues that representation may be at the root of many of the problems linked to organizational degeneration. Representation creates distinctions between representatives and those they represent, which leads to beliefs that representatives can and should make decisions on behalf of all workers:

No matter how unpopular their decisions might be, the system of representative democracy gives the elected representatives the legitimate right to appear as the “voice” of all the members. The paradox here is that, although representative democracy is portrayed as a method which ensures “majority rule”, as soon as the representatives are elected, the power is concentrated in the hands of the few, thus excluding the vast majority of the
This exclusion can silence minority voices under the guise of unity and homogenization, leading Kokkinidis (2012) to argue that the way democracy is practiced within many cooperatives with governance structures centered on representative democracy “is not just an unfinished project but a project heading in the wrong direction” (p. 250).

To date, numerous solutions have been identified and proposed that focus on fostering a return to more egalitarian and horizontal ways of practicing democracy. These include reverting back to direct democratic structures (Kokkinidis, 2015b) and continually searching for democratic consensus when making decisions throughout the organization (Atzeni & Ghiglioni, 2007). They also include novel practices to help overcome traditional criticisms of direct democracy, including improving the efficiency of consensus decision-making processes (Leach, 2016) and reducing inequalities among workers (Meyers & Vallas, 2016).

I argue that although solutions such as those noted above undoubtedly show promise, our understanding of organizational degeneration would benefit from a fresh analysis. A focus on transitioning back to more direct democratic structures may offer solutions suitable to certain contexts, particularly smaller organizations, but may not be as beneficial in larger ones. As discussed earlier, a large body of research has argued that as WOFs grow in size and complexity, they begin to face numerous issues necessitating transitions toward more representative structures. These include increased transaction costs associated with decision making and communicating information (Cornforth et al., 1988), a diminished ability for workers to digest and make sense of a growing body of information (Whyte & Whyte, 1991), and a diminished ability for workers to be able to understand and keep up to date with varied business practices (Österberg & Nilsson, 2009). Decision making can also become more time consuming and inefficient:

In some cooperatives, for example, the leaders and members have believed so strongly in participation and direct democracy that they have insisted that virtually all decisions be made by group consensus or near consensus. Even in a small organization, this policy tends to produce long, frustrating discussions that exact a high psychological toll from members and constitute a significant drag on organizational efficiency. Of course, if the cooperative gets larger, this policy becomes completely unworkable. (Whyte & Whyte, 1991, pp. 295-296)

Because of these costs, transitioning to dual structure governance structures may be necessary even as cooperatives grow beyond even just 15 to 20 workers (Cornforth, 1995). These critiques echo broader work in political science arguing that representation of some sort becomes necessary when groups exceed a certain size (e.g., Dahl, 1970, 1989).

At the same time, solutions centered on improving traditional representative structures may lead to important improvements such as helping increase the accountability of representatives through increased worker monitoring. However, in line with advocates of direct democracy, I argue that these sorts of solutions are unlikely to challenge the fundamental dynamics created by representative governance structures. In extending this work by adopting a new analysis of why these representative structures are unlikely to have their desired effects, I hope to expand the scope of ways of overcoming and preventing organizational degeneration in WOFs.

**Toward a New Solution: The Promise of Sortition**

**The Limitations of Electoral Representative Democracy in WOFs**

A growing body of research echoes the concerns raised by Kokkinidis (2012), yet goes further to critique not representative democracy per se, but representative democracy centered on the use of elections, which van Reybrouck (2016) refers to as electoral representative democracy. Over time, elections have become the dominant way of conceiving of and practicing representative democracy and, thus, perceived as the only acceptable alternative to direct democracy (Guerrero, 2014). Van Reybrouck (2016) notes that “the words ‘elections’ and ‘democracy’ are nowadays synonymous for almost everyone. We have become convinced that the only way to choose a representative is through the ballot box” (p. 38). Yet, despite their ubiquity, there is a growing dissatisfaction with elections. A more in-depth understanding of the problems caused by electoral representative democracy, then, can help shed light on the dynamics of organizational degeneration in WOFs that employ this method and point toward the needs for an alternative.

Scholars have identified numerous limitations of elections that can be mapped directly onto the central elements of organizational degeneration in WOFs. Regarding the centralization of power within oligarchies that are not descriptively representative of the broader workforce, elections foster the opportunity for interested individuals to self-select into political careers (Gastil & Wright, 2018), thus creating a distinct class of their own (Smith, 2009). Such individuals may do so because of ambitious and egotistical personalities (Gastil & Wright, 2018) or their susceptibility to the corruptions that come with power (Carson & Martin, 1999). Furthermore, the use of elections is an important cause of the poor descriptive representativeness in WOFs described above. Carson and Martin (1999) argue that “it is a typical feature of every representative government that elected representatives are not typical members of the community: inevitably, most of them have greater wealth, status, or perceived talents than most of those who vote for them” (p. 6). Many workers may be
turned off from running in elections by concerns including the fear of being rejected (Buchstein, 2010), a comparative lack of resources to succeed in electoral contests (Malleson, 2018) and a lack of interest in unsavory aspects of campaigning including discrediting other candidates and focusing on tactics over issues (Burnheim, 1985). This helps explain why certain groups of workers in WOFs referred to earlier—males, managers, those with administrative and commercial roles, those with higher class backgrounds, and those with higher job indexes—tend to be overrepresented in representative bodies.

Moreover, the dynamics of elections and campaigning are an important factor that helps explain why elected representatives in WOFs at times pursue interests that diverge from those of the broader workforce. Politicians may feel the urge to do so because of a desire to be reelected (Malkopoulou, 2015), because doing so can help compensate parties to whom they are beholden for their support during elections (Guerrero, 2014), or because of the inherent difficulty of not considering their personal interests when they make decisions pertaining to the broader community (Engelstad, 1989).

In terms of the concurrent high levels of apathy and low levels of participation among workers observed in large WOFs, scholars have found that elections create a dynamic in which citizens become largely unempowered outside of their role as voters. Opportunities for influencing elected representatives are unequally distributed and often ineffective (Malkopoulou, 2015). Everyday people thus tend to remain uneducated about politics (Goodwin, 1992), have an indirect effect on policy decisions at best (Emery, 1989), and become increasingly apathetic (Carson & Martin, 1999). Emery (1989) argues that whenever and wherever representative democracy has been introduced it has displayed the dynamics of this system. The voters have become alienated from the political process, as it has remained beyond their control. They have become apathetic in the sense that they cease to “follow politics” and fail to exercise their right to vote, or, if legally compelled to vote, they cast a so-called donkey vote. They have become cynical in believing that the political system is being used for purposes other than those publicly espoused by the politicians. (p. 5)

These dynamics are echoed in analysis from research on WOFs, which has found that a common reason offered for lackluster worker participation is their perception that their participation will not have a meaningful impact (Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2014; Kasmir, 1996). The use of elections is thus likely to be an important reason for the documented apathy and generally low levels of participation in democratic processes observed in large WOFs.

Collectively, these findings and arguments suggest that the focus on elections as a means of selecting representatives in WOFs with governance structures centered on representative democracy may be a major cause of organizational degeneration and its consequences. Yet, a growing body of research and practice suggests that there are other ways of selecting representatives that might help prevent and overcome this problem.

**Sortition: Its History and Resurgence**

Despite the ubiquity of elections today (Guerrero, 2014; van Reybrouck, 2016), the selection of representatives in representative governance structures can be, and indeed has been, practiced in many different ways. The extensive use of elections to select representatives is, in fact, a relatively new phenomenon in the long history of democratic thought and practice. Another method of selecting representatives is the use of sortition. Central to the use of sortition and its benefits is its arational nature: the fact that the selection of candidates from within a predefined pool cannot be affected by any manipulations by humans (Dowlen, 2009). The process of selecting individuals using sortition includes the creation of a pool of potential candidates who become undifferentiated in the lottery, the selection of a predetermined number of candidates through a process termed the “blind break” (p. 304) in which the potential for human control is eliminated, and the uncovering of the selected individuals (Dowlen, 2009).

Prior to the ascendance and dominance of representative governance structures centered on elections, sortition was used extensively and in varied ways in polities including Ancient Athens, 18th-century Switzerland, and Italian city states such as Florence and Venice (Buchstein & Hein, 2009; Engelstad, 1989; Manin, 1997; Mulgan, 1984). For instance, sortition was used in varied ways in Ancient Athens to select members of the popular courts, the council, members of legislative panels, and most public officials, with only a small number of positions filled using elections (Mulgan, 1984). Yet, despite extensive use of sortition in these and other early polities, it became almost completely eclipsed by the use of elections during the French and American revolutions (Buchstein & Hein, 2009; Manin, 1997). A major reason for this shift was the growth of the principle of consent, which superseded the principle of distributional justice as the main perceived source of political legitimacy (Manin, 1997). As Buchstein and Hein (2009) put it, “the contractual rationality of elections is based on the construction of a kind of relationship of wills between those who vote and those who are elected into office” (p. 32). This shift gave rise to a new understanding of the nature of citizenship, whereby “citizens were now viewed primarily as the source of political legitimacy, rather than as persons who might desire to hold office themselves” (Manin, 1997, p. 92). Other explanations include the lack of knowledge about the principle of representative sampling (Sintomer, 2010b), changes in power structures within polities (Engelstad, 1989), and the association of sortition with unattractive practices such as gambling (Goodwin, 1992) and military drafts (van Reybrouck, 2016).
Despite elections superseding sortition as a tool for selecting representatives, in recent decades, it has made a strong comeback. Perhaps the most common and well-known use of sortition is its use in juries. Buchstein and Hein (2009) argue that “the judicial sphere became the starting point for an expansion of lottery practices to other politically relevant spheres” (p. 32). Indeed, Vergne (2010) documents a growing exploratory and advocative interest in sortition in the latter half of the 20th century, which has only accelerated since (e.g., Hennig, 2017; van Reybrouck, 2016). For instance, sortition has been used in a variety of mini-publics (Grönlund, Bächiger, & Setälä, 2014), including citizens’ assemblies (Fournier, van der Kolk, Blais, & Rose, 2011) and citizens’ juries (Iredale & Longley, 2000). Ambitious proposals have also been made to incorporate sortition into larger standing government bodies, such as the European Union (Buchstein & Hein, 2009).

Sortition is slowly gaining the attention of management scholars, with scholars proposing the use of sortition in contexts including the boards of directors of private and public sector organizations (Carson & Lubensky, 2009; Zeitoun, Osterloh, & Frey, 2014) and labor unions (Pek, 2019). Yet, based on my review of research and practice, the application of sortition to select representatives in WOFs is very minimal. In particular, we lack a theoretical treatment of how its use could help prevent and overcome organizational degeneration and improve the broader practice of democracy in WOFs.

**Sortition as a Solution to Organizational Degeneration**

I now turn to analyzing how the use of sortition to select worker representatives in major decision-making bodies such as boards of directors and councils could help prevent and overcome organizational degeneration and its consequences in WOFs. I do so by drawing on a rich body of research on the advantages and disadvantages of using sortition to select representatives (see in particular Carson & Martin, 1999; Engelstad, 1989; Goodwin, 1992; Malkopoulou, 2015; Malleson, 2018; Mulgan, 1984). Before proceeding, it is important to note that because the advantages and disadvantages of sortition have mostly been analyzed in the context of societal governments, not all may apply to the full spectrum of WOFs. In addition, much research on sortition is theoretical, and empirical work tends to study mini-publics because there is very limited empirical work on the use of sortition to select representatives in traditional legislative bodies. In contrast with traditional legislative bodies, mini-publics are usually one-off, meet for a fixed period, and do not have final decision-making authority (Malleson, 2018; Pek, Kennedy, & Cronkright, 2018). They also tend to have extensive resources and time, particularly, in the case of citizens’ assemblies (Fournier et al., 2011). Thus, although evidence from mini-publics is highly suggestive, the applicability of some of it to representative bodies in WOFs such as boards of directors warrants further study.

Regarding the centralization of power within oligarchies of workers that do not descriptively represent the broader workforce, sortition reduces the risk of oligarchization given that selection is out of one’s hands and the odds of repeat selection are minimal (Goodwin, 1992; Manin, 1997). This would especially be the case if reselection for the same role were barred, as was typical in randomly selected committees in Ancient Athens (Carson & Martin, 1999). Thus, it would no longer be possible for some workers to become career politicians in representative bodies in WOFs and to dominate these bodies over extended periods of time. Moreover, sortition would improve the descriptive representativeness of WOF decision-making bodies because it fosters the equal opportunity of being selected for a specific role (Manin, 1997). Goodwin (1992) argues that “if properly conducted, a lottery is entirely impartial between individuals and is thus eminently fair according to the basic and widely accepted definition of fairness” (p. 55). It thus eliminates the risk of bias in the selection based on criteria such as gender and age (Carson & Lubensky, 2009). We could then expect that manual workers, nonmanagers, working-class workers, men, and those with lower job index scores—groups that have been found to be underrepresented in the decision-making structures of WOFs—will be more likely to be represented under structures based on sortition. Finally, sortition is likely to increase representatives’ attentiveness to the interests of the broader workforce. One way it is likely to do so is by reducing the incentive for outside parties to influence the selection of representatives, thus reducing the need for elected politicians to compensate their supporters with preferential policy decisions (Buchstein, 2010; Zeitoun et al., 2014). Another way is by fostering greater inclusion of underrepresented voices in decision-making bodies (Smith, 2009). In fact, in a recent speech, Kofi Annan, the former Secretary General of the United Nations, highlighted sortition as a potential means of fostering inclusion and “preventing the formation of self-serving and self-perpetuating political classes disconnected from their electorates” (Annan, 2017, p. 13). With a broader array of voices at the table, representative bodies could focus on topics that are more closely linked to the everyday experiences of the broader workforce (Malkopoulou, 2015; Zakaras, 2010), including equality and on-the-ground working conditions, which can get neglected in larger WOFs (Taylor, 1994).

Regarding the concurrent high levels of apathy and low levels of participation among workers in WOFs, the use of sortition can help increase overall participation in governance (Buchstein & Hein, 2009). It can widen direct participation in governance structures by reducing the barriers and risks associated with competing in elections that often inhibit participation (Malkopoulou, 2015; Pek et al., 2018), opening
up the possibility for traditionally apathetic workers to participate. Another way it can do this is through fostering more frequent turnover of representatives (McCormick, 2006), creating more opportunities for workers to attain decision-making roles. Regarding broader worker participation outside of formal roles, sortition shows promise in encouraging everyday workers to become more involved in general governance activities and discussions, while overcoming some of the overt apathy and disengagement described above. It can do so by bringing ordinary workers and their experiences to the table and depoliticizing political discourse, which can help increase workers’ awareness, participation, and engagement in governance (Zakaras, 2010). As more and more workers become able to access leadership positions and engage in the democratic process, apathy, and low participation may be directly challenged in what could become a positive feedback loop. The more workers who traditionally have not been able to participate in the governance of their organizations gain skills and positive experiences in leadership roles, the more likely they may be to participate in other capacities and to motivate other workers to participate.

In addition to its characteristics that address the two major manifestations of organizational degeneration, sortition has three advantages that are highly relevant for the practice of democracy in WOFs, particularly given their dual social and business functions. First, sortition can foster improved decision-making in WOFs, which can help them excel in both their business and social domains. Scholars have identified several benefits of sortition related to this point. By bringing in more diverse voices and perspectives, sortition is likely to generate greater collective intelligence to draw on when making decisions (Landemore, 2013). In this vein, Carson and Lubensky (2009) argue that “organizations that value diversity and creativity would benefit by random selection of its leadership, which would explicitly promote fresh ideas and new perspectives, with the flow-on potential of innovation” (p. 92). Randomly selected bodies are also likely to be able to engage in more rigorous deliberation. Because they have fewer allegiances to political programs and less of a need to engage in partisan activity, randomly selected representatives are likely to have more time, greater freedom of judgment, and greater intellectual modesty when deliberating and engaging with different perspectives (Gastil & Wright, 2018; Vandanamme & Verret-Hamelin, 2017). In addition, they are likely to adopt a focus on bigger-picture issues with longer term horizons because they will be freed from the incentives to focus on the short run and on issues for which credit can easily be claimed that are brought on by the nature of electoral campaigns (Guerrero, 2014; Vandanamme & Verret-Hamelin, 2017). Finally, workers would likely perceive collective decisions as more legitimate because they would have been made by people like them:

It can be assumed that the decisions made by people who take office or receive a seat in a political body based on a random selection procedure are more strongly binding because they are affected by the problems, life experiences, and value judgments of the participating citizens. (Buchstein, 2010, p. 447)

Thus, if a large WOF were debating the relative merits of social and business objectives within a particular issue domain such as the organizing of production, we could anticipate that randomly selected representatives would be able to identify a broader range of solutions that could draw synergies between the varied objectives, that they could deliberate more critically about the relative merits of the different solutions, and that whatever decision would be taken would be perceived as more legitimate by the broader workforce.

Second, the use of sortition shows promise in generating greater social identification and integration among workers, helping keep WOFs’ values and principles vital and reducing the risk of demutualization. One way it can do so is by increasing worker integration and identification, which are often overlooked advantages of sortition (Göhler, 2010). It can help generate greater respect and tolerance among workers in WOFs, particularly toward members of groups that have faced prejudice and racism (Burnheim, 1985), and break down the traditional power barrier between workers and their representatives (Dowlen, 2010). Thus, diverse groups of workers in WOFs such as those at different hierarchical levels or in different departments could become better attuned to each other’s perspectives and experiences. Another way it can do so is by helping prevent disintegration and disidentification. Sortition can help reduce the social costs that can accompany factionalism between different interest groups in WOFs such as shop-floor workers and managers (Zeitoun et al., 2014), as well as the polarization that often stems from electoral competitions between candidates (Engelstad, 1989). It also doesn’t provide those who aren’t selected with reasons to feel blame or rejection, or those who are selected with any reasons to feel superior (Carson & Martin, 1999; Goodwin, 1992; Mulgan, 1984).

Third, the use of sortition achieves the abovementioned benefits while also remaining efficient, which is critical to sustaining workplace democracy in organizations (Rousseau & Rivero, 2003). In terms of the process for selecting representatives, sortition does not require extensive and costly campaigning (Carson & Martin, 1999), nor does it require much time to perform (Engelstad, 1989). In terms of actual organizational decision-making, it intrinsically balances the inherent values underpinning direct and representative democracy:

Since the best democratic system is real self-government and because self-government is impossible in the large communities typical of modern democracy, the second-best solution is...
actually to let the counterfactual citizenry selected by lot decide. (Sintomer, 2010a, p. 49)

Indeed, in Ancient Athens, it was seen as “a natural compromise between the principle that the people should rule directly and the practical impossibility of having everybody involved in the day-to-day matters of government” (Elster, 1989, p. 104). It bridges the traditional divide between direct and representative democracy by expanding opportunities for more people to participate in their democracy in a more horizontal manner while ensuring that decision-making processes remain efficient (Delannoi, 2010; van Reybrouck, 2016). In this way, WOFs can make decisions in a manner that is broadly inclusive, nonoligarchical, and efficient, ultimately helping bridge the traditional dichotomy between direct and representative democracy in WOFs.

**Potential Limitations of Sortition**

Although I argue that sortition shows promise in improving the practice of democracy and reducing the risk of organizational degeneration in WOFs, several critiques have traditionally been levied against sortition that warrant serious consideration. First, there is the risk that randomly selected worker representatives may not be, or may not be perceived as, sufficiently competent to serve on major decision-making bodies in WOFs. Despite the egalitarian presumptions of sortition, Malkopoulou (2015) points out that “the recognition of equal competence of all for holding office may be too optimistic, neglecting real-life inequalities between citizens with regard to education, interest and commitment to public affairs” (p. 249). Although the competency of elected officials is often overstated and there are instances in which incompetent representatives are elected, elected officials tend to be reasonably competent and, more importantly, are able to develop their skills and knowledge over time through successive terms in office (Malleson, 2018). Because the use of sortition ignores merit (Goodwin, 1992), when competence is unequally distributed, there is the risk that those selected will not be the most competent, or worse, will be incompetent (Delannoi, 2010). This poses a direct threat to several of the purported benefits of sortition for WOFs—for instance, highly incompetent representatives might make poorly conceived or even arbitrary strategic decisions.

Although this is an important concern, it has been challenged by arguments, evidence, and suggested mitigating factors. There are several reasons why this argument has been found problematic: elections do not necessarily result in the selection of the most competent decision makers either (while at the same time adding a range of other problems and distortions noted earlier); most decisions involve a social value dimension that need not require extensive technical knowledge and is better considered by everyday people than by experts; and traditional arguments about a lack of competence have been used in the past to exclude women and other minorities from voting (Carson & Martin, 1999, 2002; Guerrero, 2014; van Reybrouck, 2016). Furthermore, contrary to this critique, experience suggests that randomly selected representatives produce high quality decisions. In his review of experience with mini-publics, Dryzek (2012) summarizes that

> The most obvious finding from mini-publics relevant to the larger public sphere is that, given the opportunity, ordinary citizens can make good deliberators. Moreover, issue complexity is no barrier to the development and exercise of that competence. These findings contradict skeptics who highlight citizen incompetence, and proceed to argue for either nondemocratic or (more frequently) minimally democratic political arrangements. (p. 158)

As one example, in summarizing their research on three citizens’ assemblies in British Columbia, Ontario, and the Netherlands charged with reviewing the electoral systems and, if they deemed it necessary, proposing alternative systems, Fournier and colleagues (2011) concluded that

> In sum, while citizens are generally weakly motivated to become engaged in and informed about political matters, things change drastically when they are presented with the chance to play a decisive role in public decision-making. In spite of the fact that the assemblies dealt with a difficult and technical topic, members were willing to invest the time and effort required to do a good job. Their commitment translated into diligent participation, impressive knowledge acquisition, judgments that evolved non-chaotically, preferences based on principles rather than whim, and reasonable decisions. Citizen political decision-making proved to be of a remarkably high quality. (p. 150)

Finally, several practical measures could be taken to mitigate the risk of randomly selected workers making poor decisions. These include training, limited or no decision-making power for a certain period of time, facilitation, clear rules and processes for deliberations, and access to relevant expertise in specific decision-making domains (Carson & Martin, 2002; Fournier et al., 2011; Malleson, 2018; Zeitoun et al., 2014). WOFs could also consider using minimum competency thresholds for workers—such as a certain number of years’ experience or a high-school education—to be permitted to participate in the draw. It will be important, however, to be cognizant of the fact that such restrictions could distort the descriptive representativeness of the bodies and the associated benefits of this representativeness (Carson & Martin, 1999).

A second concern is that randomly selected representatives in WOFs might not be as accountable to the broader workforce as those selected through elections. Aside from having any input in setting the parameters for the governance structure, the broader workforce has no input into the selection or retention of representatives under sortition (Gastil &
Wright, 2018). Because randomly selected representatives have no formal sanction or authorization (Zakaras, 2010), they may not perceive a duty to act in the interest of the broader workforce (Carson & Martin, 1999). Randomly selected representatives could thus face the risk of moral corruption (Engelstad, 1989) and a greater temptation to pursue their own interests than elected officials would (Malkopoulou, 2015). In the absence of some accountability mechanisms, randomly selected worker representatives might thus not take their roles seriously and/or leverage their position to pursue interests even more opposed to those of the broader workforce than elected officials would.

Yet, as with competence, practical experience suggests that randomly selected representatives behave in a civic-minded way. In their study of citizens' juries addressing health policy questions in the United Kingdom, Coote and Lenaghan (1997) found that the vast majority behaved in a civic-minded manner:

> It appeared to us that most jurors behaved as though they were acting on behalf of their community rather than simply in their own best interests. The experience of being selected to represent the local population and taking part in a “jury” with fellow citizens seemed to produce a peer-group pressure to be “good neighbours” and to consider the needs of others. Very few jurors were prepared to assert their personal interests over those of the community as a whole and we were struck by how seldom jurors used personalized anecdotes as a means of expressing a view or interpreting evidence. (pp. 89-90)

This finding was echoed in Carson and Martin’s (2002) analysis of a range of mini-publics involved in making decisions on technological matters. They concluded that participants took their roles very seriously, committed a high level of time and energy to them, deliberated effectively, and were not highly susceptible to external influences or personal biases. In addition, mechanisms for practical oversight could be developed to reduce the risk of randomly selected representatives making improper decisions (Gastil & Wright, 2018). Malleson (2018) identifies several such mechanisms including recall processes, oaths of office, training, disclosure requirements, and penalties for bribery, which could all be adopted in WOFs.

Third, in the absence of mechanisms to foster broader workforce involvement, there is the risk that participation of the broader workforce will decrease. Elections provide the workforce with a structured form of participation every few years (Malleson, 2018) and generate “momentum of discursive interaction” (Malkopoulou, 2015, p. 247). Thus, despite the argument that sortition can foster greater participation described above, it also risks reducing the, albeit limited, participation generated through elections in WOFs. It will be important for WOFs to develop a comprehensive set of structures to foster broader workforce engagement, such as suggestion schemes, town halls, and advisory councils. These closer interfaces would not only boost engagement and participation but also help increase the accountability of representative bodies (Gastil & Wright, 2018).

Finally, sortition is at times perceived as irrational, which may influence workers’ initial openness to the idea and perceptions of the legitimacy of randomly selected representatives and the decisions they make. Goodwin (1992) argues that “the use of lottery to take a decision circumvents the processes of rational thought and deliberation to which we, as human beings, are committed, and of which we are proud” (p. 56). In contrast, elections are often perceived as rational given that they are centered on citizens’ use of reason in expressing their will (Zeitoun et al., 2014). However, a growing body of research challenges these criticisms. Regarding the first, it is important to note that, although sortition may appear to be irrational, it is “a consciously neutral procedure” (van Reybrouck, 2016, p. 152) in which the system is constructed using reason with the aim of engendering many of the benefits described above (Carson & Martin, 1999). In fact, recent research on the replacement of elections with sortition in standing government bodies finds that stakeholders generally perceived sortition as legitimate and more desirable than elections (Pek et al., 2018). Thus, if implemented thoughtfully and carefully, the use of sortition in WOFs could be perceived as not only rational but also legitimate right off the bat.

**Implications and Conclusion**

Despite the promise of WOFs in overcoming the limitations of capitalist forms of organizing, organizational degeneration is a serious concern that can have wide-ranging negative effects on large WOFs and their workers alike. Scholars and practitioners have explored several solutions aimed at addressing organizational degeneration, including those focused on improving representative governance structures and those focused on shifting to more direct forms of democracy. In this essay, I argued that while the solutions proposed to date show promise in helping address aspects of organizational degeneration in WOFs, they have fundamental limitations that hinder their effectiveness. I sought to take a fresh perspective on organizational degeneration that makes two overarching contributions to research.

First, this essay provides a novel way of thinking about the causes of, and possible solutions to, organizational degeneration in WOFs. By drawing on a growing stream of political science research, I identify and elaborate on a potential cause of organizational degeneration in WOFs—reliance on the use of elections to select representatives—that to date has received limited attention. Prior research suggests that organizational degeneration tends to occur naturally as WOFs grow in size and complexity. In this essay, I argued that a related yet more specific cause of organizational degeneration in WOFs is likely to be their reliance on the use of elections to select representatives making improper decisions (Gastil & Wright, 2018). Malleson (2018) identifies several such mechanisms including recall processes, oaths of office, training, disclosure requirements, and penalties for bribery, which could all be adopted in WOFs.

This finding was echoed in Carson and Martin’s (2002) analysis of a range of mini-publics involved in making decisions on technological matters. They concluded that participants took their roles very seriously, committed a high level of time and energy to them, deliberated effectively, and were not highly susceptible to external influences or personal biases. In addition, mechanisms for practical oversight could be developed to reduce the risk of randomly selected representatives making improper decisions (Gastil & Wright, 2018). Malleson (2018) identifies several such mechanisms including recall processes, oaths of office, training, disclosure requirements, and penalties for bribery, which could all be adopted in WOFs.

Third, in the absence of mechanisms to foster broader workforce involvement, there is the risk that participation of the broader workforce will decrease. Elections provide the workforce with a structured form of participation every few years (Malleson, 2018) and generate “momentum of discursive interaction” (Malkopoulou, 2015, p. 247). Thus, despite the argument that sortition can foster greater participation described above, it also risks reducing the, albeit limited, participation generated through elections in WOFs. It will be important for WOFs to develop a comprehensive set of structures to foster broader workforce engagement, such as suggestion schemes, town halls, and advisory councils. These closer interfaces would not only boost engagement and participation but also help increase the accountability of representative bodies (Gastil & Wright, 2018).

Finally, sortition is at times perceived as irrational, which may influence workers’ initial openness to the idea and perceptions of the legitimacy of randomly selected representatives and the decisions they make. Goodwin (1992) argues that “the use of lottery to take a decision circumvents the processes of rational thought and deliberation to which we, as human beings, are committed, and of which we are proud” (p. 56). In contrast, elections are often perceived as rational given that they are centered on citizens’ use of reason in expressing their will (Zeitoun et al., 2014). However, a growing body of research challenges these criticisms. Regarding the first, it is important to note that, although sortition may appear to be irrational, it is “a consciously neutral procedure” (van Reybrouck, 2016, p. 152) in which the system is constructed using reason with the aim of engendering many of the benefits described above (Carson & Martin, 1999). In fact, recent research on the replacement of elections with sortition in standing government bodies finds that stakeholders generally perceived sortition as legitimate and more desirable than elections (Pek et al., 2018). Thus, if implemented thoughtfully and carefully, the use of sortition in WOFs could be perceived as not only rational but also legitimate right off the bat.

**Implications and Conclusion**

Despite the promise of WOFs in overcoming the limitations of capitalist forms of organizing, organizational degeneration is a serious concern that can have wide-ranging negative effects on large WOFs and their workers alike. Scholars and practitioners have explored several solutions aimed at addressing organizational degeneration, including those focused on improving representative governance structures and those focused on shifting to more direct forms of democracy. In this essay, I argued that while the solutions proposed to date show promise in helping address aspects of organizational degeneration in WOFs, they have fundamental limitations that hinder their effectiveness. I sought to take a fresh perspective on organizational degeneration that makes two overarching contributions to research.

First, this essay provides a novel way of thinking about the causes of, and possible solutions to, organizational degeneration in WOFs. By drawing on a growing stream of political science research, I identify and elaborate on a potential cause of organizational degeneration in WOFs—reliance on the use of elections to select representatives—that to date has received limited attention. Prior research suggests that organizational degeneration tends to occur naturally as WOFs grow in size and complexity. In this essay, I argued that a related yet more specific cause of organizational degeneration in WOFs is likely to be their reliance on the use of elections to select representatives making improper decisions (Gastil & Wright, 2018). Malleson (2018) identifies several such mechanisms including recall processes, oaths of office, training, disclosure requirements, and penalties for bribery, which could all be adopted in WOFs.

This finding was echoed in Carson and Martin’s (2002) analysis of a range of mini-publics involved in making decisions on technological matters. They concluded that participants took their roles very seriously, committed a high level of time and energy to them, deliberated effectively, and were not highly susceptible to external influences or personal biases. In addition, mechanisms for practical oversight could be developed to reduce the risk of randomly selected representatives making improper decisions (Gastil & Wright, 2018). Malleson (2018) identifies several such mechanisms including recall processes, oaths of office, training, disclosure requirements, and penalties for bribery, which could all be adopted in WOFs.

Third, in the absence of mechanisms to foster broader workforce involvement, there is the risk that participation of the broader workforce will decrease. Elections provide the workforce with a structured form of participation every few years (Malleson, 2018) and generate “momentum of discursive interaction” (Malkopoulou, 2015, p. 247). Thus, despite the argument that sortition can foster greater participation described above, it also risks reducing the, albeit limited, participation generated through elections in WOFs. It will be important for WOFs to develop a comprehensive set of structures to foster broader workforce engagement, such as suggestion schemes, town halls, and advisory councils. These closer interfaces would not only boost engagement and participation but also help increase the accountability of representative bodies (Gastil & Wright, 2018).

Finally, sortition is at times perceived as irrational, which may influence workers’ initial openness to the idea and perceptions of the legitimacy of randomly selected representatives and the decisions they make. Goodwin (1992) argues that “the use of lottery to take a decision circumvents the processes of rational thought and deliberation to which we, as human beings, are committed, and of which we are proud” (p. 56). In contrast, elections are often perceived as rational given that they are centered on citizens’ use of reason in expressing their will (Zeitoun et al., 2014). However, a growing body of research challenges these criticisms. Regarding the first, it is important to note that, although sortition may appear to be irrational, it is “a consciously neutral procedure” (van Reybrouck, 2016, p. 152) in which the system is constructed using reason with the aim of engendering many of the benefits described above (Carson & Martin, 1999). In fact, recent research on the replacement of elections with sortition in standing government bodies finds that stakeholders generally perceived sortition as legitimate and more desirable than elections (Pek et al., 2018). Thus, if implemented thoughtfully and carefully, the use of sortition in WOFs could be perceived as not only rational but also legitimate right off the bat.
representatives as they develop representative governance structures. Because this analysis is more specific and focused than broader critiques of representation per se as it relates to WOFs, it can help reorient analysis of the causes of organizational degeneration toward those that could be addressed through novel, potentially more fruitful interventions. In this vein, I argue that using sortition to select representatives offers a novel yet practical solution to help prevent and overcome the two central manifestations of organizational degeneration in WOFs: the centralization of power within oligarchies of workers that are not descriptively representative of the broader workforce, and worker apathy and reduced participation in democratic structures. In doing so, my arguments contribute to our field’s long-standing quest to better understand how to prevent and overcome organizational generation and its problematic manifestations (Itkonen, 1996; Langmead, 2016; Lees & Volkers, 1996; Sauser, 2009), ultimately helping avoid its harmful social and business consequences such as limited attention to strategic issues and reduced engagement with new innovations and market opportunities. These arguments also help move research on democracy in WOFs beyond the traditional dichotomy between direct democracy and representative democracy. As I argued above, sortition expands opportunities for participation in a horizontal manner while ensuring that decision-making processes remain efficient. My essay thus helps answer calls to identify novel ways of improving the responsiveness of workplace democracy while maintaining efficiency (Rousseau & Rivero, 2003).

Second, my analysis of the advantages of sortition in the context of WOFs suggests a novel way in which the traditional duality between WOFs’ social and business objectives could be bridged. These objectives do not always go hand in hand, creating tension in WOFs (Taylor, 1994). Scholars have thus long called for innovative ways of addressing this duality (Cheney, 1999; Cheney et al., 2014; Cornforth et al., 1988). Cheney (1999) pointedly notes that

To survive, organizations such as cooperatives that maintain a strong social commitment must define organizational success and deal with the practical matter of organizational maintenance. An organization that maintains democracy, equality, and unshakable bonds of solidarity yet does not prosper economically will appear as a footnote in a history of cooperatives and so-called Utopian enterprises. Yet of what value is continuance if the organization’s essential features become indistinguishable from those of a noncooperative? This is the fundamental dilemma facing many organizations that seek simultaneously to be distinct from and yet engage the larger market. (p. 9)

In my earlier elaboration on the advantages of sortition in WOFs, I argued that sortition has two important benefits that help bridge this duality. First, I argued that it could improve decision-making by bringing in more diverse voices and perspectives, fostering more rigorous deliberation, broadening the range of issues discussed, and increasing the perceived legitimacy of decisions made. Thus, the use of sortition instead of elections could improve worker representatives’ attentiveness to domains where social and business objectives may trade off, support their identification of a broader array of solutions to address those trade-offs, help them generate a more thorough analysis of and deliberation about the solutions, and increase broader worker acceptance of the chosen solution. Second, I argued that it could improve identification and integration by breaking down traditional power barriers, increasing respect and tolerance among diverse workers, reducing factionalism, and eliminating the feelings of rejection or of superiority that often accompany elections. These benefits can help WOFs bridge the duality between social and business objectives in several ways, including exposing workers to each other’s diverse experiences, fostering a climate of mutual support, and generating a desire to seek solutions that benefit the collective as a whole as opposed to individual groups or factions. Although long-standing tensions between social and business objectives in WOFs will by no means be completely addressed through the use of sortition, it demonstrates the potential to make meaningful inroads.

In conclusion, in this essay, I sought to take a fresh perspective on the phenomenon of organizational degeneration in WOFs. As my central focus was on developing the case for the principle and merits of using sortition as a solution, I left many questions open and practical matters unaddressed. Much empirical and theoretical work is needed to address questions including how sortition could be implemented in specific WOF governance structures, whether it is best combined with other selection tools such as elections, which representative bodies are most conducive to sortition, and how its limitations could be best overcome. My hope is that this essay begins to spur dialogue and research about a potentially powerful new conceptual tool that could be deployed by scholars and practitioners interested in revisiting and improving upon the practice of democracy in WOFs to ensure their long-term sustainability and success.

Acknowledgments
I would like to thank Editor Pablo Martin de Holan, Associate Editor David Jamieson, and the two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful engagement with this essay and their helpful suggestions. I would also like to thank Terrill Bouricius, Tom Malleson, Jeffrey Kennedy, Adam Cronkright, Sonja Novkovic, Camille Meyer, participants at the 46th Annual Administrative Sciences Association of Canada Conference, participants at the 2018 Sustainability, Ethics, and Entrepreneurship Conference, and members of the Gustavson Research Club for their insightful feedback and comments on earlier versions of this essay. All errors and omissions are my own.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.
1. For ease of presentation, I use the term “worker” to refer to those workers who have an ownership stake and access to decision-making structures in their organizations, and this category of worker is the focus of my theorizing. I do so while recognizing that several worker-owned firms (WOFs) also hire other workers who do not have access to these rights, including the Mondragon Corporation and the John Lewis Partnership (Storey, Basterretxea, & Salaman, 2014).

2. In this essay, I restrict my conceptualization of WOFs to firms that broadly fit these two criteria, omitting discussion of employee stock ownership programs (ESOPs), which tend to have limited scope for worker participation in decision making (Ben-ner, 1988; Cathcart, 2014; Ijuviene, Stitely, & Hoyt, 2010).

3. Other terms frequently used in the literature include sortition (Manin, 1997) and random selection (Carson & Martin, 1999).

4. Regarding past on-the-ground uses to select decision makers, I identified two uses of sortition briefly mentioned in the literature. Sortition was used in the Scott Bader Commonwealth to select a committee to assess the performance of the board of directors (Bernstein, 1976) and in a plywood cooperative to select members of an appeals committee (Berman, 1967). Regarding potential applications, Bouricius (2017) suggested that sortition could be used to select members of nominating committees tasked with identifying a slate of nominees for the board of directors.

5. The size of randomly selected groups is an important consideration (Crosby, Kelly, & Schaefer, 1986) to foster adequate representation and limited skewness, while at the same time fostering deliberation and practical feasibility (Zeitoun, Osterloh, & Frey, 2014). Although larger groups tend to be representative of the population, even smaller groups can result in a group being a reasonable cross-section of the population they would be selected from Sintomer (2010b). This suggests that WOFs with very small boards or councils may need to revisit their size or use tools such as stratified sampling to foster greater representativeness, as suggested by Zeitoun and colleagues (2014) for the case of corporate board of directors.

References


Novkovic, S. (2012). The balancing act: Reconciling the economic and social goals of co-operatives. In M.-J. Brassard & E. Molina (Eds.), The amazing power of cooperatives, Québec (pp. 289-299). Québec, Canada: Québec International.


