

# Spaces of possibilities: Workers' self-management in Greece

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the process of workers' self-management brought about by a wave of experimentation with alternative organizational forms taking place in Greece since the beginning of the current financial crisis. The discussion is supported by empirical evidence from qualitative fieldwork conducted in three workers' collectives. Drawing on the findings of my research, I argue that the members' values and everyday practices give shape and meaning to their aspirations of creating a space that not only critiques the existing forms of work but also puts into practice other possibilities that give emphasis to reciprocal relationships and prioritise collective working, egalitarianism and autonomy. I also argue that their established consensus-based decision-making models, far from representing a state of agreement, allows - within collectively determined boundaries - the creation of a space where diverse opinions flourish rather than being suppressed. This encourages the development of more inclusive models of participation and the construction of rule-creating rather than rule-following individuals.

## Keywords

alternative organizations, autonomy, consensus, decision-making process, democracy, egalitarianism, Greece, horizontality, self-management, workers' collectives

The beginning of the financial crisis which struck Europe in 2008 saw a wave of experimentation with alternative organizational forms in Greece. In particular, non-capitalist social experiments and innovations such as workers' collectives and cooperatives, Self-Help Groups, Local Exchange Trade Systems (LETS), Freecycle networks and Timebanks (Donadio, 2011; Smith, 2013; Vogiatzis, 2012), and, in 2013, the first worker-occupied factory (Vio.Me., 2013), constitute attempts to remedy some of the shortcomings of the era by offering an alternative way of organizing based on principles such as that of user-ownership, user-control and user-benefit.

In this paper I focus on workers' collectives guided by horizontality, prefiguration and direct democracy. These cases are interesting because they constitute what Pickerill and Chatterton (2006) coined as "autonomous geographies"; local spaces that are "simultaneously anti-, despite- and post- capitalist" (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010: 475). My interest therefore is to look at the organizational practices in these collectives and how they challenge conventional management practices while they operate within capitalism and at the same time offer alternative ways to organize our work and life as well as our relationships with each other. Through a series of interviews and group discussions with members of these collectives in Greece between July and August 2012, I intend to show how the members' values and everyday practices give shape to their aspirations of creating alternative workplaces and cultivate relationships that prioritise collective working and organizational practices guided by equality and cooperation. By giving emphasis to the decision-making process, the overall organization of the groups, their work ethics and egalitarian remuneration schemes, my intention is to show that these self-managed projects, offer a useful template for anti-capitalist critiques and post-capitalist imaginaries.

Therefore looking at the way that work is organized and experienced in these collectives provide a conceptual frame to challenge conventional management practices and employment relations and to question contemporary work values and the current organization of work by confronting its depoliticization and moralization. More specifically, the members' desire for autonomy does not simply refer to demands for organizing their work autonomously, for better working conditions or unalienated work but rather to demands for less work too. This is evident, for instance, in their established 6-hours shifts in an attempt to create "new ways of living and new modes of subjectivity" (Weeks, 2011:170-71) that are in sharp contrast to the current discourses on autonomy and employees' participation which serve as a disciplinary mechanism that is "fashioning productive forms of subjectivity, workers who are simultaneously self-directed and manageable" (Weeks, 2011: 56). So, looking at the organizing practices in these self-management projects and the process of creating autonomous spaces, emphasis is placed on the collective dimension of autonomy and the realisation of their self-creating, self-altering and self-instituting capacities which in turn fashioning "rule-creating" rather than "rule-following" subjectivities.

In this sense, autonomy is not a mere organizational tool but a way of doing politics, of bringing the future into the present, which is simultaneously a collective act of refusal and creation: refusing a set of values and practices embedded in capitalist relations while experimenting with anti-capitalist practices. For example, their established egalitarian remuneration schemes as well as the refusal of the wage-labour relationship have both theoretical and practical implications. First, they exemplify new forms of organizing work that challenge the neoclassical theory of the firm as a profit-maximising entity and of individuals as being driven primarily by motives of self-interest. Secondly, by rejecting the privileged model of waged labour and by perceiving work as a collectively creative potential they offer a platform to question existing capital-labour relations and inter-work relationships. Their emphasis on horizontality and consensus provide a platform to critique the existing hierarchical relations of work as well as fashionable discourses in management studies around autonomy, new forms of leadership and non-hierarchical structures by pointing to their ideological and political dimension that serves as mechanism to legitimise existing forms of power relations and authority. Thus, examining the way that work is organized and experienced in these three projects could help us unveil problems associated with contemporary practices, meanings and values of work and envision workable alternatives.

In the light of this, this paper begins by presenting the theoretical and methodological framework of the research. I then describe how work is organized within these collectives. I argue that their practices challenge widespread assumptions such as that individuals are being driven by motives of self-interest and that self-management projects are doomed to fail due to the pressures they face from operating within a capitalist market. I also argue that these self-managed projects offer some useful insights as to how we can organize work differently by emphasising horizontality, prefiguration and direct democracy. Next I describe the decision-making process in these collectives, arguing that their established consensus-based decision-making models encourage the development of more inclusive models of participation and the construction of rule-creating rather than rule-following individuals. I then conclude by discussing the significance of these experiments, not only as spaces for anti-capitalist practices but also as laboratories for a post-capitalist future.

## **Autonomy and horizontality: Beyond the post-bureaucratic rhetoric**

The desire for autonomy has been a key principle for many contemporary social movements (Chatterton, 2005; Katsiaficas, 2006; Maeckelbergh, 2009; Sitrin, 2006), urban social centres (Chatterton, 2010; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006), community gardens (Nettle, 2010) and workers' cooperatives (Vieta, 2008). As a concept, "autonomy" is infested with many meanings due to the variety of practices described as autonomous, but with reference to the present work it involves the realisation of our self-creating, self-altering and self-instituting capacities, through reciprocal and mutually agreed relations with others. Therefore, far from understanding autonomy in a liberal-individual sense, it has to be understood as a collective project and as a social relation that shapes our ways of both living and connecting with others that requires a distinct form of being, both at an individual level and at a collective level.

In this process of creating autonomous spaces, the aforementioned works provide colourful accounts of the protagonists' political identities and strategies, as well as their social relationships and organizing practices that emphasise horizontal methods and direct democracy. Horizontality is a goal as well as a tool. It is a process of creating equality through the active construction of non-hierarchical relations, a process that lies in the conflation of participatory democracy with consensus-based decision-making (as will be discussed in the next section and in the analysis). While their organizing practices and objectives might vary, one thing they have in common is their shared view that non-hierarchical relations do not imply a lack of organization, as it is often believed, but rather a distinct way of organizing: one that rejects both the creation of hierarchical forms of governance and the exclusion of diversity. To this end, emphasis is placed on a repertoire of organizational innovations (e.g. social forums, affinity groups and consensus decision-making techniques) and the development of soft infrastructures of interpersonal communications that nurture deliberation under conditions of plurality.

Having said that, Pickerill and Chatterton (2006) and, more explicitly, Böhm et al. (2010: 18) remind us of the tensions that inhabit autonomy arguing that any demand for autonomy is "embedded in specific social, economic, political and cultural contexts, giving rise to possibilities as well as impossibilities of autonomous practices". This argument finds support in Atzeni's (2012) edited book on alternative work organizations which provides a range of examples, from the well known Mondragon cooperative to the Tower Colliery in the UK, of experimentation with alternative forms of organizing and the dynamic interplay between market forces, political contexts and workers' collective attempts to create autonomous spaces through organizational practices that favour more inclusive models of participation and less hierarchical structures.

Furthermore, looking at the conditions and forms of work in our post-industrial workplaces, we can witness how the demands for autonomy by social movements in the late 1960s have been adopted by the regimes of capitalist accumulation (Böhm et al., 2010; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007; Weeks, 2011). Looking at Organization and Management literature we immediately notice that the rise of neo-liberalism in the 1980s coincided with a relentless attack on hierarchism and bureaucracy, resulting in the flattening of organizations and the flexibilisation of labour that relies on autonomous work arrangements. More specifically, the grounds invoked to justify

these anti-hierarchical charges are mainly economic in character, pointing to the need for more fluid organizational forms in response to the increasing challenges of the business environment. In short, it has been argued that the bureaucratic organization suffers from inefficiency, slowness, lack of creativity, burdensome rules and impersonality and therefore, to address the challenges of today's hypercompetitive market, the modern organization has to be liberated from such restrictions (Peters, 1992). This kind of rhetoric has resulted in a whole range of anti-bureaucratic management techniques, from lean management to business process re-engineering, all aiming to infuse creativity, innovation, knowledge sharing and entrepreneurship.

Therefore, as the current demands for organizational openness require alternative organizational practices, some researchers of managerial orientation call for the "end" of management (Cloke and Goldsmith, 2002) or envisage a re-evaluation of its role (Raelin, 2005 and 2011). In the post-bureaucratic firm, the traditional role of management that is based on hierarchical command and procedures becomes obsolete, for new organizational forms emerge that "take the maximum distance from hierarchical principles, promising formal equality and respect for individual liberties" (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007: 71). In this context, leadership becomes a collective process where the leaders willingly share power and employees gradually gain new roles, which traditionally managers held, in team-like relationships that are guided by a shared vision for the good of the organization as a whole. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2007: 76) put it, "neo-management is filled with exceptional beings, proficient at numerous tasks, constantly educating themselves, adaptable, with a capacity for self-organization and working with very different people". The post-industrial work ethic give emphasis on work as a practice of self-realization aiming to fashion employee subjectivities that would "dedicate themselves to work as the center of their lives" (Weeks, 2011: p.69). Employees who know what they have to do without having to be told and organizations that do not have to resort to orders to get the job done, as employees are able to self-organize themselves, take personal initiatives and responsibilities. What is distinctive about the post-bureaucratic rhetoric is the attempt to reconcile employees' autonomy with control through particular forms of conduct under which the meaning of autonomy is constrained by the logic of competition and profit in a "monolithic value-framework" (Fleming, 2013: 479).

In short, behind the post-bureaucratic rhetoric of freedom, autonomy and self-management lurk new forms of control, domination and surveillance perhaps more comprehensive than ever before (Brown et al., 2010; Clegg et al., 2006; Courpasson, 2000; Courpasson and Clegg, 2006; de Cock and Böhm, 2007; Fleming, 2013; Knights and Willmott, 2000; Parker, 2009). Such new forms of control, albeit "soft", are very evident in post-bureaucratic organizations such as the *Morning Star* (Hamel, 2011), as the absence of supervisors and managers has actually led to even more sophisticated disciplinary mechanisms through self- and team-surveillance. Cases like the *Morning Star* illustrate how a post-bureaucratic organization addresses the problem of "control", by having "people to *control themselves*, which involves transferring constraints from external organizational mechanisms to people's internal dispositions" (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007: 80 - emphasis original). After all, as Michael Burawoy (cited in Weeks, 2011: 10) famously argued, "exploitable subjects are not just found; they are [...] made at the point of production".

In conclusion, the question is not whether employees can or should have more autonomy and control over their work but *what kind* of autonomy and control, and *for what*? How are we to make sense of these notions if we break from this narrow value-framework? The recent experiments of workers' collectives in Greece constitute

attempts to organize work differently, by privileging autonomy and horizontality while simultaneously refusing to enter the logic of competition and profit. One of the main purposes of this paper, therefore, is to address the aforementioned questions by paying more attention to the members' desire to create an autonomous space, their experience of self-organizing in these collectives and explore how they function, as well as how they resist hierarchical tendencies.

### **Organizational democracy: from representation to more inclusive models of decision-making**

The anti-hierarchical rhetoric in Management and Organization Studies literature places strong emphasis on the democratisation of organizations, through the strengthening of employees' participation and involvement, which is viewed as a fundamental break from the old authoritative and strict hierarchical structures characterised by labour-control strategies. However, the importance of some sort of hierarchical structures, albeit soft, in the way that we organize work and relate to each other, has been so embedded in the way that we imagine alternatives that any attempt to create a democratic and non-hierarchical organization is at best treated with much scepticism. Particularly in mainstream management studies literature, the demands for workplace democracy point to the impractical character of participatory democracy and the more "practical" and "realistic" alternative of representative forms of governance. (Cloke and Goldsmith, 2002). Such a view however, is problematic for at least two reasons. First, representative democracy assumes unity and homogeneity which in turn excludes any dissenting opinion and blocks the openness to challenge embedded in democracy (Derrida, 2005; Fritsch, 2002; Graeber, 2002). Secondly, it legitimizes the distancing between the rulers and the ruled by allowing the elected representatives to appear as the "voice" of all the members, which in turn reinforces a system of work organization that reproduces existing power relations and hierarchical structures (Kokkinidis, 2012). Democracy therefore is not about the strengthening of representation; rather it is about the opportunities that people have to continuously (re)invent forms of popular participation and to meaningfully participate in the decision-making process, if and when they wish to (Maeckelbergh, 2009).

Reflecting on the process of creating autonomous spaces in non-hierarchical social movements and other social experiments, it is important to look at their organizational practices and the emphasis they place on experimentation for autonomy and more inclusive models of decision-making. In this process, a model then of deliberative democracy can perhaps be seen as a leading alternative to an aggregative model of decision-making. Yet deliberative democracy has often been criticised for neglecting the inevitability of conflict in political life, while the notion of rational consensus is both empirically and conceptually difficult to realise (Mouffe, 2000). Mouffe instead proposes a model of democracy in terms of "agonistic pluralism"; one that would be based on a more adversarial mode of interaction. However, although Mouffe rejects the idea of ever reaching consensus due to the inherent antagonism in human relations, her version of democracy presupposes some minimum shared (consensus on) standards between the adversaries: respecting others' views and their right to defend their ideas. As she herself acknowledges, "consensus is indeed necessary but it must be accompanied by dissent" (2000: 113). Therefore, it might be sensible to say that Mouffe's "agonistic" alternative is not only compatible but in fact presupposes a

deliberative framework. This is nicely analysed by Knops (2007: 125 - emphasis original), who concluded that "the two processes of deliberative and agonistic democracy - one grounded in critical theory and the other in postmodernism, are in fact *mutually dependent* aspects of a solution to the same problem".

The case of the alterglobalisation movement demonstrates how these two processes can successfully intertwine. Maeckelbergh's (2009) work provides a detailed account of the decision-making process in the alterglobalisation movement. Initiatives such as the social forums and the affinity groups (see also della Porta, 2005 and 2009; Klein, 2002; Murray, 2010) allowed for the direct participation of everyone in an open process of deliberation coupled with a consensus-based decision-making process. The creation of "conflictive spaces" further encourages and embraces diversity and conflict in constructive ways. This is possible through the emphasis on the reciprocal relationships between the members and the strict rules of engagement that accompany consensus decision-making. The idea is that consensus does not necessarily imply unanimity and compromise. On the contrary, consensus is viewed as conflictive and functions in ways that encourage connectivity by giving to all the actors the opportunity to express their views and negotiate alternative solutions that would be mutually acceptable. Reflecting on the constructive potential of conflict and how the members of the movement resolve conflicts, Maeckelbergh (2009) reminds us that the question is not simply to try to resolve all conflicts, but rather to find creative ways to embrace these diverse and often conflicting positions. In times of unresolved conflicts and disagreements, the decentralized network structures of the movement create the conditions for minimizing exclusivity by allowing the various groups to maintain their autonomy and act as they wish. As Maeckelbergh (2009: 101) explains, "one of the main principles of consensus is that no one should win and no one should lose an argument. Instead the aim is to brainstorm until a solution can be found that suits everyone". So, by embracing conflict and perpetual contestation, the consensus practices in the affinity groups clearly share some similarities with Mouffe's (2000) idea of "agonistic pluralism". In this sense, a consensus-based decision-making model, far from presupposing a state of agreement, is the institutionalisation of conflict in constructive ways that opens up the space of practising democracy within and across the groups of the network, aiming to achieve the minimum exclusion of the members from the decision-making process.

Various researchers however, have questioned the effectiveness of non-hierarchical movements to produce results as it is illustrated in Ehrenberg's (2000: 398) argument that "as important as popular activity is, it must be directed, organized, coordinated and focused. This is why movements create goals, leaders and organizations". Another, perhaps more substantial, line of critique points to the limited capacity of non-hierarchical movements to block hierarchical tendencies. For example, Freeman (1972, 1975) argues that the formation of informal or covert structures is almost inevitable and thus the emphasis on structurelessness and non-hierarchical forms of governance serves as a way of masking power. As Freeman (1972: 4 - emphasis original) argues, "[w]hen informal elites are combined with the myth of 'structurelessness', there can be no attempt to put limits on the use of power. It becomes capricious".

Having said that, the case of the workers-recovered enterprises (ERTs) in Argentina provide a good example to contest the aforementioned criticisms by looking at their organizational practices as they place emphasis on horizontality and direct democracy. These experiments did not start out as a working-class revolt or a predetermined political ambition. It was a defensive reaction to the fear of

unemployment that nevertheless fostered a sense of collective purpose and democratic ethos through a process of experimentation with alternative work practices. We should of course not undermine the tensions that inhabit autonomous practices and the constraints that market mediations imposed on self-management and workplace democracy (see for example, Atzeni and Ghigliani, 2007). Yet what I would like to point to is the ways in which they address these challenges and lessen the adoption of capitalist work relations through a repertoire of organizational innovations. In brief, there is a strong emphasis on employees' involvement and active participation in the decision-making process through workers' councils and the central role of the general assembly. Coupled with other innovations such as the introduction of pay equity, job rotation schemes and JIT practices as well as the creation of networks of solidarity further contribute in practicing horizontality and successfully resist hierarchical tendencies (Vieta, 2008 and 2010). Also it is worth pointing to the transformative and inspirational impact of these projects not only for those involved and their local communities but also for the labour movement worldwide, as they point to the workers' self-instituting capacities and provide a workable alternative to capitalist work relations.

To conclude, any discussion on workplace democracy begs questions about inclusion and exclusion, about who should have the right and be willing to participate in the decision-making process. If representative democracy assumes and enforces homogeneity and unity, which inevitably leads to the exclusion of any dissenting voices, shall we then try to consider alternative and more inclusive forms of participation? Is a deliberative model an appealing alternative and what are the practical challenges for organizations when multiple objectives (economic viability and inclusive forms of participation, for example) clash? Drawing on the case of three workers' collectives in Greece, this paper will also address these questions and explore the members' experience of the consensus decision-making process.

## **Methodology**

This article's fieldwork was conducted in three workers' collectives in Athens in Greece during the months of July and August 2012. Each of these three collectives is operating in a different sector, of which I will provide more details below. For the purpose of this work, semi-structured interviews and group discussions with the members of the collectives were considered the preferred research methods and proved to be an effective way to generate rich data.

All interviews and group discussions lasted between 1.5 to 2.5 hours and were tape-recorded with the consent of the interviewees. At the outset of each interview the participants were given an assurance of confidentiality, although their real names are disclosed as per their request. The only exception is the Pagkaki coffee shop. While the real name of the collective is Pagkaki, any direct reference to my participants' views will be under the name of the collective as per their request to highlight the collective character of their experiment.

The choice of the city of Athens for my fieldwork was based on two reasons: the time constraint and the large number of social experiments in the city. This choice does not in any way reflect the absence of such experiments in other cities. While the majority of these experiments are concentrated in Athens and Thessaloniki (the two largest cities in Greece), equally notable experiments can be found elsewhere (see Vogiatzis, 2012).

During the fieldwork I was presented with various challenges that emerged before, during and after the collection of data; challenges that required careful consideration and multiple approaches to overcome them. The first challenge was negotiating access to the members of these collectives, and during that process the role of my initial contacts was decisive. The first step was to contact some of the members either by phone or email and provide them with information about myself (my status and my previous work) and the purpose of this project. I then tried to arrange informal meetings with some members in these projects, which helped us to get to know each other and clarify my intentions (what I was trying to do and why) before we proceeded with the "formal" interviews and group discussions.

In two cases, the members of the collectives were sceptical and eventually unwilling to participate in my project. In my view, the fact that I am an academic working in a UK University, although it was never explicitly brought up, might have been one of the factors for their lack of enthusiasm and cooperation in my project. Although the members from one of the collectives I approached politely refused by suggesting that their project was relatively new and therefore there was not much to say about their experience, they also stressed that if there was something to be said about their experience, they would do so themselves. That indicates, in my view, the suspicion towards my academic role and the relatively strong anti-intellectualism that activists often share. This is further confirmed by Chatterton et al. (2010), whose work nicely illustrates the suspicion that activists and people involved in various alternative experiments often have towards academics. More than that, however, I felt that this suspicion was also self-directed. I too often felt uneasy about my motives and intentions, which was evident in the way I was approaching the participants in this project. I often felt somehow apologetic about my position in a Business School, emphasising my critical stance towards management as if I was trying to distance myself from the Business School while simultaneously being within.

During the process, my aim was first to minimise the expert-subject division that academic research often suffers from, and at the same time to address another challenge that I anticipated would emerge after getting off the field, which was how to allow my participants to communicate their ideas rather than me speaking for them. I agree with Chatterton et al. (2010: 264) that it is important to "seek ways to not speak for others, but still seek to communicate the ideas of others. Sometimes this will be just listening and shadowing, at other times it will be engaging, stimulating, or acting". With this in mind, I tried to intervene during the interviews and group discussions as little as possible and let my participants do all the talking. Therefore, although I did have some specific themes that I wished to cover during the process, I also tried to be flexible and let my participants raise and discuss issues that they considered important. Also, in the analysis that follows, my intention is not so much to analyse my participants' views but rather to describe their experience and hopefully offer a clear picture of how they feel, their aspirations and experience, rather than my interpretation of their activities.

Furthermore, while use of semi-structured interviews and group discussions have been effective in generating rich data about my participants' experiences, my findings ultimately rest on self-reporting by the interviewees which consequently raises some methodological concerns. The interviewees' accounts around the dynamics by which decisions are made are limited by their subjective interpretations of the organizing processes and their intention to reveal or conceal information as well as to reflect on any potential gaps between their desire to create an autonomous and democratic space and their actual practices. Therefore, and in terms of progressing this research, I feel



that combining interviews with participant observation would be useful in further exploring how they develop routines and advance or lose alternatives in these groups, how work is organized and their inter-work relationships as well as the tensions that inhabit autonomous practices and the constraints that market mediations imposed on self-management and workplace democracy. Attending their meetings would have been useful in terms of getting more concrete details of the issues discussed and how decision are made, better capturing the dynamic process of decision making by focusing not only on the formal processes but also at the informal; those subtle and often invisible ways that (re)shape their organizing practices and inter-work relationships. As a related issue, I have also tried in my work to discuss how the organizational practices in these collectives fashion rule-creating subjectivities. I believe that this is an argument that has more analytical potential and has not been fully explored in the present paper. Therefore, as further research on this matter is needed, I feel that combining the research methods used for this paper with participant observation will generate data that would extend beyond the self-reporting accounts of my participants.

To conclude, considering the aims of this project, the themes covered during the interviews and group discussions focused around the following two clusters. First, I focused on the organization of the groups and work within them, giving special attention to how tasks are distributed among the members of the collectives and the distribution of income. Then, my attention turned to the decision-making process in these collectives, with the aim of looking at the issues of democracy and participation in assemblies and members' experience of the process of consensus decision-making. Other issues, such as members' motives, aims and the problems that they faced were also discussed. Overall, my aim was to look at the ways in which their everyday practices give shape and meaning to their aspirations of creating a space that not only critiques the existing forms of work but also puts into practice other possibilities that emphasise reciprocal relationships and prioritise collective working, egalitarianism and autonomy.

## **Analysis**

### **A brief overview of the workers' collectives**

This research is based on members' experiences of self-management in three workers' collectives located in Athens: Unfollow (a monthly political magazine), Pagkaki (Coffee shop) and Syn.all.ois (Cooperative for an Alternative and Solidarity Trade). The magazine Unfollow was started three year ago by a group of journalists with long experience in mainstream media. It has a core team of four members responsible for all the administrative and daily activities, and what we can call a "peripheral" team consisting of those responsible for journalistic activities. The magazine is solely financed by all its members and their main source of income comes from the magazine's aggregated revenue.

Syn.all.ois also started three years ago and has five members. It is a not-for-profit Cooperative for Solidarity Economy that sprang out of the idea of organizing and supporting the growing network of distribution of fair trade products and solidarity trade in Greece. Syn.all.ois distributes Zapatista coffee and other local and international products of small producers from Greece and elsewhere, and undertakes both retail and wholesale activities. It has also established very close ties with local

producers and the price of the products in their store is negotiated with the local farmers who are always informed of the retail price of their product. Syn.all.ois's customer base consists solely of individuals and small businesses and it refuses to cooperate with any large supermarkets or other types of large corporations.

Finally, the coffee shop Pagkaki was set up by a group of eight people four years ago. Due to its very promising start it has grown in size, now counting eleven members, with one original member having departed, and four new members having joined. Besides the standard coffee-shop activities, Pagkaki's activities extend to the organization of various social events and releasing of political pamphlets, in which all members are expected to participate.

There are several commonalities between the three collectives. All have adopted the status of a cooperative as their legal property form as there is no legal recognition for workers' collectives. Each collective has its own set of core, non-negotiable principles that guide its aims and objectives as well as the rights and responsibilities of the members. There is also a very strong political dimension in these experiments. Their structure and practices are strongly influenced by the members' political beliefs in creating a workplace that is guided by horizontality, consensus decision-making model and egalitarianism. The general assembly is the only organ that formally takes decisions through a consensus-based decision-making model. The internal cohesion and solidarity among the members is evident in the established egalitarian or almost egalitarian remuneration schemes, and is perhaps further propagated by the relatively small size of these experiments.

It is also important to mention that these collectives have no support from the state. Despite the fact that capital shortage constitutes one of their main challenges (with the exception of Pagkaki), there is so far a general unwillingness towards the idea of receiving any financial support from external sponsors or governmental bodies, even though they could receive funds because of their status as cooperatives. This is due to the members' belief that any external financial assistance would undermine the political dimension of their experiments and pose a potential threat to their autonomy.

Moreover, it is important to stress that these projects, although being economic organizations, place more emphasis on their political objectives to create a space for prefigurative politics and the dissemination and circulation of political ideas. This is very crucial for understanding how these collectives organize work, and create spaces that are simultaneously anti-, despite- and post- capitalist. Although their practices are context-dependent and perhaps locally bounded and not easily transferable, they offer some useful insights in terms of organizing work differently. Therefore, and with no intention of offering any mechanical blueprints for anti- and post- capitalist practices, my hope is to simply describe the everyday practices in these collectives and bring forth the members' experiences from participating in self-management projects that give shape and meaning *here* and *now* to their aspirations of creating spaces that are autonomous, open and experimental.

### **Organizing work: Division of labour, horizontality and egalitarianism**

A recurrent theme during the interviews and the group discussions was the members' desire to create a workplace free from hierarchical structures, a space to realise their personal aspirations through autonomy and cooperation. While the organization of work in these collectives varies from one to another, in all cases strong emphasis is placed on horizontality and direct democracy. In order to analyse how work is organized in these collectives, it is important to note that members perceive work as a

process of cultivating reciprocal, rather than antagonistic, relationships with each other. Hence, the difference between the way that work is organized in these collectives and other conventional organizations does not so much lie in the way that the tasks are allocated, but rather in the way that work is understood and experienced: as a process of cultivating relationships that prioritise collective working and organizational practices guided by equality and cooperation. Therefore, they add an ethical dimension to work that gives more emphasis to the value of *caring* for each other and for the common good. This is also evident in their established egalitarian remuneration schemes which further cultivate the collective spirit necessary for practising horizontality.

Work in each of these collectives is organized differently; yet in all cases the basic principle is that work is a result of a collective effort, and all tasks and activities, from those that require minimum skills to those based on expert knowledge, are equally important for the functioning and viability of the collectives. In the cases of Unfollow and Syn.all.ois, there is a technical division of labour, while at Pagkaki, every aspect of work is organized on a rotation basis. In all cases, however, the organizing process requires the active participation and the consensus of all the members, while strict egalitarian remuneration schemes are in place to strengthen cooperation and reciprocity.

In the case of Unfollow, the members have established a clear division of labour from the very beginning of the project, which comes as a result of the nature and structure of the collective, as my participants explained. There are clearly defined roles and responsibilities for each member, necessary for the daily functioning of the magazine.

Firstly, the collective consists of a core team of four people responsible for journalistic activities as well as for all the administrative duties including the editing of the magazine. Then the "peripheral" team consists of about fourteen people whose roles and responsibilities are merely journalistic. The process of running the magazine consists of a variety of autonomous tasks some of which require journalists to invest a lot of time in doing research while other tasks often rely on the individuals' expertise and knowledge; hence the defined roles, as my participants explained. Augoustinos, for example, is the editor of the magazine, but his role is more of a consultative and coordinative nature, and although he ensures consistency in the topics covered in each issue of the magazine, how the journalists approach each topic is entirely up to them.

Reflecting on their previous work experience and the current conditions in Unfollow, both Augoustinos and Mariniki (members of the core team) stressed the high levels of autonomy and control that they currently enjoy. So despite the evident division of labour, the absence of hierarchical tendencies so far can be attributed to the cooperative nature (guided by the principles of user-control and user-benefit) of their project, the small size of the magazine and its horizontal structures as well as their perception of work as a collective effort irrespective of skills and knowledge. This perception of work as a collective effort has influenced their established remuneration schemes too. As my participants reported, they are all responsible for financing the operational costs of the magazine themselves, and their compensation comes solely from the sales of the magazine.

Therefore, although the structure of the collective differs significantly from other mainstream magazines, working hours are flexible and all members devote much energy and effort in order to see their project succeed. Unlike the other two collectives discussed below, where working hours per day are fixed (six hours at Syn.all.ois and eight hours at Pagkaki), the nature of journalistic activities requires

more flexible work arrangements which make it difficult to establish fixed working hours and measure working time. This flexibility of work is also reflected in their established pay schemes. While the general principle is that all the members will receive an equal compensation for their labour based on the sales of the magazine every month, they have also agreed that the members of the core team should receive slightly more money due to their extra work for the administrative-related activities. It is, however, important to note here that this "extra" wage is not a result of their special knowledge or expertise, but rather is due to the unanimous agreement among all the members that it is fair to get a compensation equivalent to the fixed working hours they dedicate for these types of activities. As my participants stressed, even though they receive a wage that is perhaps less than what they could have enjoyed if they were working elsewhere, they do so with great enthusiasm because they are participating in a self-directed project.

Whilst in the case of Unfollow there has been a clear division of labour from the very beginning and all the members agreed their roles and responsibilities, in the case of Syn.all.ois the initial aim was to resist the emergence of such division so that all members would have responsibility for all the activities on a rotation basis. Yet, in the process of running the collective, a division of labour has gradually emerged in technical aspects of the job and each member has certain roles based on their experience, skills and knowledge. However, neither the knowledge nor the outcome of their individually performed tasks is viewed as an individual possession. On the contrary, strong emphasis is placed on multi-skilling through knowledge and information sharing, as well as job rotation schemes alongside the existing division of labour within the collective. As Lily explained,

"We all have an area of work that we have developed an "expertise" in, but not in an absolute sense. I mean that I will not be the first to sit in front of the computer but I do know how to use all the computer programmes. We try to share knowledge and help each other. There is mutual support for learning and knowledge sharing; we try to educate each other. My specialist area is in agricultural products and so I try to share information and pass my knowledge to the other members. Anna (another member of the group) is very good at packaging and distribution, Stavroula (another member) speaks Italian and is responsible for the communication with the respective team of solidarity trade in Italy, the Libero Mondo."

Therefore, despite the evident division of labour in technical aspects of the job, there is a strong culture of knowledge sharing and all the members are encouraged to take personal initiatives and be involved in different tasks, while all decisions about the governing of the collective are made in the general assembly, which will be discussed in the next section. These practices further strengthen their work processes and enable them to continuously learn new skills and take over new roles necessary for the daily functioning of the collective. Their emphasis on self-management, direct democracy and flat organizational structures allows them to exchange information and co-ordinate action successfully without the need to establish formal networks of communication or supervisory structures. A crucial factor for the development of this knowledge and information sharing culture is the strong sense of ownership and solidarity among the members, as well as their view that knowledge is not an individual possession but a collectively determined potential. This is also reflected in their established egalitarian remuneration schemes, as they have from the start

established a complete pay equity irrespective of the member's position, skills or knowledge expertise.

Work allocation is divided between three shifts (morning, afternoon and evening) on weekdays and one shift on Saturdays. All the members work for a maximum of six hours a day for five days a week. Shifts are allocated on a rotation basis and every few months the general assembly is responsible for revising the time schedules. Yet, as Lily reported, they often stay and work for longer hours due to the strong sense of community and the cooperative ethos shared among the members, as well as their desire to see their project succeed. The members' willingness to support each other and put extra effort and commitment towards what they do should also be attributed to their active participation and equal power in the governance of the collective, which cultivates a very strong sense of ownership and a feeling of belonging which further cement their ties of solidarity. As Lily explained,

"We do stay for longer sometimes, but this is because we forget that we have to go, and I think that is because we feel really well in this place. I have to work for fixed hours and it is the same for everybody. Nobody has had so far to work more hours, but even if there is a need for this to happen at some point, we will do it with solidarity. If, for example, someone has to leave his post for a couple of hours, someone will step up and cover his post, but we will not do this expecting to return the favour. I mean, we will not say I covered you for two hours and so you have to do the same, nothing like this has happened so far."

The members' willingness to work for longer hours can be attributed to structural issues such as the established horizontal structures and the consensus-based decision-making processes, as well as to the members' perception that they are involved in a project that is worthwhile. As Shukaitis (2010: 66) suggests, in self-directed projects it is easier to "integrate much more of one's creative capacities and abilities than normally one would if it were being directed by someone else". This is true not only in the case discussed here but also in many other workers' self-management projects such as in the case of the ERTs in Argentina (Sitrin, 2006).

Furthermore, their established horizontal structures and the role of the general assembly is also crucial in how work is organized as it encourages the participation of all the members in work-related activities. Reflecting on their experience so far, the members' emphasis on self-management has contributed to the successful coordination of individual tasks and allowed them to respond better to customers' needs and the planning process.

Similarly to the other two collectives, Syn.all.ois is primarily a political project aiming to spread the ethics of cooperation and the solidarity economy. This is evident in the relationship it has established with other collectives in Athens, local producers and consumers, as well as the activities within the collective, which extend beyond the retailing of fair trade products. In terms of their relationship with other collectives there is an attempt, although in its infancy, to build networks of solidarity that would help them address some of the challenges they face (e.g. capital shortage) but also to spread the ethics of cooperation and mutual aid, inspiring others to participate in similar projects. For example, when I went to Syn.all.ois for the first time, I noticed next to the front door a bookstand of a Book Collective, located in Exarcheia. As Lily later explained, these projects are not only economic entities but also (primarily) political projects aiming to spread the ethos of cooperation and mutual aid. In this

process, providing a space to this newly established collective is a small act of solidarity with dual (material as much as symbolic) purpose. It aims to help them address some of the challenges every start-up organization faces (e.g. market accessibility and distribution issues). But at the same time building these networks of cooperation and mutual aid creates the conditions to spread the ethos of cooperation and reciprocity, and at the same time encourage others to be involved and start their own projects. The strong cooperative ethos among workers' collectives is also evident in Lily's stories about the support they have received from other collectives in times of need. For instance, Lily recalled a time they needed cash to be able to place an order for coffee and other supplies, and how the necessary capital was generated through internal loans from members of the collective who had some savings and a loan from another workers' collective; in both cases these loans were of course interest-free. Furthermore, the strong cooperative ethos extends to their relationship with local producers, as Lily's story indicate,

"Greek farmers are informed about the retail price of their products and in fact they are often involved in determining the final price for the consumers. We do the same, of course, when we distribute our products to other small shops. The price is determined after a mutual agreement and there is a fixed percentage of profit that we can make. For example, the maximum price that another shop can sell our products for should not exceed the price that we charge in our store by more than 15% and we also offer them another 8% of our profit so that we can both have a maximum of 20% profit from the price we pay to the producer, but this is the maximum."

In addition to this, the members organize seminars and various events with other groups in order to circulate ideas such as fair trade, sustainable farming and environmental issues, anti-consumerism and the importance of cooperativism. In short, the members' motives are driven primarily by their desire to spread the ideas of cooperation and the solidarity economy, which they try to combine with their own economic self-preservation. Therefore, their willingness and motivation to work beyond their fixed 6-hour shifts is due to their political aspiration and determination to create a project that will allow them to cover their basic needs and at the same time do something that they will enjoy and find politically satisfying.

Moving on to the case of Pagkaki, all my participants there frequently noted the political character and objectives of their project and it is clear that they function in ways that could be described as forms of a "propaganda of the deed" (Shukaitis, 2009: 125). For example, the members' choice to open the coffee shop in an area called *Koukaki*<sup>1</sup>, instead of *Exarcheia*<sup>2</sup>, explains to a large extent their intentions to create a space that is accessible to many more than just the current members of the collective and other like-minded people. As they repeatedly said, their aim is to inspire more people to participate in political actions that they would not otherwise. As one of the members said,

"Our aim was to interact with people, [...] to bring forth the idea of self-management and autonomy in the workplace, and we wanted to try to make these alternative ways of organizing accessible to those people outside the project and not only between ourselves or our comrades, who more or less share the same ideas. We then began to think whether we should open a coffee shop at Exarcheia that would have been our natural space and where

we would have been much more comfortable from the beginning, since we would have been surrounded by friends and like-minded people; or to go to another area and try to make it accessible to the people that..." (Pagkaki 3)

[another member intervened and added]

"Exarcheia is full of places that organize various events and release pamphlets, but here you create a space where someone will see a poster or a brochure that wouldn't normally be seen in the area and so they become exposed to different ideas, an alternative logic." (Pagkaki 1)

The strong political character of their project is also evident in the way they organize work. Unlike the two previous cases, Pagkaki's members reported that the initial division of labour had gradually been eliminated due to the strong knowledge and information sharing culture that has allowed both the old and new members to take up new roles and feel comfortable executing different tasks. According to my participants, during the first few months following the opening of the coffee shop, there was some division of labour in place, as those with considerable work experience in the food and beverage industry stepped up and took more responsibilities; yet this was a result of individual initiatives. After three years, the initial division of labour has been completely eradicated while the established work practices are based upon job rotation and learning across tasks, teamwork, decentralization of responsibility and members' participation in the decision-making process. Reflecting on their experiences so far, one of the participants said,

"Some had work experience in this industry...others did not even know how to make a coffee, so whoever was good in one area used to step up and take more responsibilities. If someone had experience in how to organize the economic part of the business, he used to come forward; in general, all the necessary information for the smooth running of the coffee shop was acquired internally. Then, it was also everyday experience/practice that helped us develop our skills." (Pagkaki 2)

Working hours are kept strictly to eight hours per day, as it is very important that members participate in other social activities. Work allocation is therefore designed in accordance with the basic principle that each member should work for at least three days per week and no more than five days, subject to exceptional cases. By exceptional cases, they mean members requesting more or less time due to other commitments or personal circumstances. The rationale behind the three min.-five max. working days is based on the members' perception that within this time-frame they will be able to cover their living expenses and enjoy enough free time for other social activities. For example, in several occasions my participants pointed to the importance of non-work time for creating possibilities of "heightened politicization" (Weeks, 2011: 168). The relationship between non-work time and opportunities to establish new forms of political participation and collective projects is evident in their political actions such as the organization of social events, their participation in labour strikes, the publication of political pamphlets and other acts of solidarity. Therefore, the members' demand for less work is not only challenging the dominant work ethics but also point to the opportunities that enables them to reinvent relations of sociality through the active participation in other political projects. It is also worth mentioning

that their political views about work, as well as their inclination towards a more simple life and anti-consumerism, have contributed to how they have organized work. For example, to my question about how they determine what someone's needs are and what if one member wishes to work longer hours, one of my participants said that "usually the opposite happens (laugh), most of the time people need to take a day off for various reasons" (Pagkaki 2), while another member added: "we have the tendency to work as little as possible, I mean as long as we can cover our needs we do not want to work for more (laugh)" (Pagkaki 3).

During the weekdays, they have five shifts and on weekends the shifts increase to six. The allocation of the shifts is discussed in the general assembly and is based on the number of shifts each member requests. As one participant explained,

"The shifts are allocated subject to the needs of each member. For example, I need three shifts per week - this is what I need financially and so I ask for three shifts, or someone else wishes to work four shifts and another five. Therefore the weekly schedule is designed in accordance with the members' needs." (Pagkaki 1)

While there is much flexibility around work, the allocation of shifts is for a fixed-term period, subject to revision by the general assembly. The general principle is that all members work for a maximum of eight hours a day and for no more than five days a week, for which they receive a fixed amount of 8 Euros per hour. So, unlike the previous two cases, at Pagkaki the remuneration is based on hourly wages and not the aggregate revenue of the collective. Therefore, any surplus made after covering their operational costs and any other expenses is used either as reserve funds (such as maternity and paternity leave, sick leave) or for the purpose of supporting similar projects elsewhere. In any case, the members are not entitled to receive any extra income apart from that based on their hourly wages, irrespective of the surpluses produced. In other words, the members' income is fixed and does not increase in proportion to the rise in the collective's aggregate revenue.

It should also be noted that Pagkaki is perhaps the most financially successful alternative project in Greece at the moment and that success is also reflected in their expansion from eight to eleven members. Yet despite the success they have enjoyed so far, there are no conflicts among the members and no questioning of their initially established principle of receiving an income that will be based on an hourly wage rather than the collective's aggregate revenues. In my view, this shared principle among the members of the collective is important because it directly challenges both the methodological individualism that underpins the neoclassical theories of the firm according to which individuals are opportunistic and always seeking to maximise their self-interest (Fontrodona and Sison, 2006) and the idea that alternative organizations are doomed to evolve into capitalist enterprises due to the pressures they face from operating within a capitalist market.

The well-known degenerative thesis, for example, is based on the idea that alternative non-capitalist organizations are too weak to confront capitalism and so they will either adapt to its logic or fold. While there are indeed many examples of organizations that started out as self-managed projects and gradually transformed into more typical capitalist organizations, often due to the pressures they face operating under capitalism, there are also many cases that suggest the opposite, such as the projects discussed in this paper. A fair argument might be that these projects are relatively new and that similar projects start to exhibit capitalist tendencies after a



longer period of time. While this might indeed be true, I feel that some of their innovations in terms of distributing profits as well as their established procedures for joining or exiting the collective provide solid safety valves against capitalist tendencies.

More specifically, the members of Pagkaki are not shareholders and therefore do not have any individual ownership rights on the coffee shop's assets that they could potentially profit from. Rather, "the kafeneio belongs to all those who are working in it at that time, participating in the collective" (Pagkaki, 2011: para 5, line 1). So, any member who decides to leave is not entitled to any compensation. This is important as it cultivates a completely different approach to ownership rights where control is not based on property rights but rather on labour control.

Despite the fact that Pagkaki is so far a very profitable project, the original members resisted the idea of hiring employees who could potentially increase their profits. Instead, they have recruited four new members (one of the original members left) and there are now eleven people, all with the same rights and responsibilities. As they explained, they refuse the capital-labour relationship and therefore in order to cover the demand for extra work at the collective they needed to recruit new members who would enjoy the same rights and responsibilities.

Although there are no clearly defined criteria in the recruitment process, the general principle is that the new recruits should be recommended by an existing member and they should commit for at least two years in order to build a sense of ownership about the project and cultivate a reciprocal relationship with the existing members. The crucial issue here is that, irrespectively of seniority, financial contribution or knowledge and expertise, all members are equal. As we can read in their webpage too:

"All workers are equal members of the group, regardless of whether they contributed to the original capital that created the kafeneio. Besides, the kafeneio belongs to the cooperative and not to its current members, and this condition is formally enshrined in our constitution too" (Pagkaki, 2011: para 16, lines 2-5).

According to my participants, the closed procedures in recruiting new members, the emphasis on equality, the egalitarian remuneration schemes and the lack of individual ownership have further contributed to the absence of hierarchical structures and to the blocking of capitalist tendencies. As they put it,

"The desire to work without a boss is not enough. The functioning of a work collective is not simply an alternative form of livelihood, but on the contrary, it is a form of struggle which demands great political commitment and collective responsibility; which strives to create, here and now, the terms for a different organization of production" (Pagkaki, 2011: para 14, lines 1-4).

In other words, Pagkaki is primarily a space for prefigurative politics, where the members' daily practices create, as they put it, "a space for encounters" (Pagkaki, 2011: para 1, lines 2-3) or, as Shukaitis (2010: 62) echoes, "a platform, for the dissemination and circulation of political ideas" in order to inspire others to take part in forms of political action that they would not otherwise. For example, the members' commitment and determination to see their project succeed explains to a large extent their willingness to dedicate much greater energy and time to activities such as

organizing social events and releasing of political pamphlets, since they strongly believe that they are participating in something that is meaningful and politically satisfactory.

To sum up, each of the three collectives organizes work differently, yet in all cases emphasis is placed on cooperation, horizontality and autonomy. Division of labour is evident in two of the three collectives, yet in all cases any tendency towards hierarchical structures has so far been resisted. This can be partly attributed to the members' political aspiration to create a space free from hierarchical structures and a laboratory for social change, and partly to the established egalitarian remuneration schemes, as well as the existing forms of representation and decision-making process that I will discuss in the following section. Job rotation also varies from one collective to another, yet all members give particular emphasis to the collective character of the work and to the idea that knowledge is not an individual possession but a collectively determined potential. Their practices also challenge both the assumption that individuals are driven by self-interested motives and the idea that self-management projects are doomed to fail due to the pressures they face from operating within a capitalist market. Therefore, these autonomous projects are important because they challenge various widespread assumptions about how we can organize work and our social affairs; they constitute spaces for prefigurative politics and therefore "operate as immanent critiques of existing forms of work organization as they stipulate, in practice, that there exist other possibilities for how workplaces might operate" (Shukaitis, 2010: 63).

### **The decision-making process**

Turning to the decision-making practices used in these workers' collectives, there are some similarities with other experiments that can be found in the available literature (see for example: Maeckelbergh, 2009; Vieta, 2008). Strong emphasis is placed on direct democracy and a consensus model of decision-making through general assemblies and the active participation of all the members. All members are expected to participate in setting a list of priorities and decide on a variety of issues, from technical issues such as how to organize the work schedule and what products to use, to the relationships with their customers as well as the political elements of their work (such as acts of solidarity with other workers by participating in strikes or providing financial support to other similar projects). While the labour process varies from one collective to another, all are built on horizontal decision-making methods with particular emphasis on consensus in order to create a more inclusive model of decision-making. The idea, as all my participants stressed, is that when all members participate in the deliberation, they understand the reasoning behind the chosen solution, which in turn strengthens a sense of ownership of the decisions made and they support its implementation.

While important decisions are made exclusively in the general assemblies, there is much flexibility and members are encouraged to take initiatives on daily matters as long as these do not conflict with the basic principles and objectives of the collectives. In the case of Syn.all.ois, for example, members are encouraged to make decisions in order to respond quickly to daily issues without necessarily seeking the consensus of the general assembly. As Lily explained,

"Individuals are encouraged to take initiatives for daily matters and of course we discuss them later at the general assembly. If somebody has crossed the

lines, we will tell him: "stop, you are crossing the line". But these are all issues to be discussed at the general assembly and not at a personal level. If we had, however, to take all decisions through the general assembly that would create an extremely inflexible system... there is much flexibility on some issues."

Consensus-based decision-making models have been criticised for being too rigid and inflexible in responding to daily matters, which in turn can slow down the organization's responses to market opportunities and affect the long term viability of the organization. In response to a relevant question, the members of Pagkaki stressed that, although this is a fair criticism of consensus decision-making models, for them what matters is not so much how quickly to respond to market demands but instead how to ensure the widest possible consensus over any work-related matter, from minor issues such as coffee making to more substantial issues such as suppliers' selection or members' recruitment. As in the case of Syn.all.ois, my participants explained that there is much flexibility for daily matters and people are able to take initiatives on mundane issues. For instance one of my participants said,

"As we said earlier, there are not all practical issues equally significant and obviously we do not discuss in the meetings whether we will have black or blue garbage bags" (Pagkaki 1)

While another added nevertheless that during the first months in the agenda of the assembly were covered issues that now sound rather trivial but at the time were crucial for the smooth functioning of the coffee shop such as coffee making,

Pagkaki 2: "Nevertheless, the first few months we had discussions about how to make a coffee, yes, yes, yes, how to all make coffee in the same way, yes, yes, yes, at first we had nothing, I mean for many months and many hours we were discussing about any possible minor issue until we managed to standardised some things"

Pagkaki 1: "It is not like other coffee shops where you have the boss deciding how to make coffee for example, here we all have our own views and we have to collectively make a decision"

Pagkaki 3: "We had discussions about how much sugar in order to make a sweet coffee and how much for a medium sweet. I mean details that when I now think back I am getting frightened (laugh)... but it is something that we had to decide collectively and there is no better space to do so but the general assembly"

Without doubt, deliberative democracy is a time consuming process and requires the active participation of all those involved in these projects but that is, according to my participants, what creates real participation. They also recalled times when they had to postpone a decision and eventually lost opportunities to participate in various social events. However, in their view, this seeming inflexibility and inability to make quick decisions is in fact a key contributor to their success so far, as consensus is not just about reaching an agreement but in fact creating a space where people can express themselves truly as equals, where everyone is willing and open to listen to different opinions and collectively agree to a proposal that they can give their consent even if they do not fully subscribe to it. As my participants explained,

Pagkaki 3: "For us it is important to follow our own rhythms of work. There are times that reaching a decision about an issue takes more than five sessions; we need the time to make sure that we support its implementation; that this is a decision that we have all agreed upon; all members have to give their consent for important decisions."

Pagkaki 2: "We all have to be actively involved in the meetings and share our views...In the assembly we have the opportunity to discuss all sort of things and encourage each other to share ideas so that we can come up with a proposal that we are all satisfied... Even if someone has more experience or technical knowledge about something (she used an example with accounting), it does not mean that this view will have more value. We do not value someone's idea more than others, we are all equals."

Pagkaki 1: "We come up with proposals that we discuss during the meetings but these meetings are dynamic and that means that proposals are altered and new emerge during the process. At the end, I might give my consent even if I am not fully convinced with someone else's idea, but through discussion I was able to see the merit in that proposal."

Therefore, focusing on how quickly you can come to a decision seems to miss the most important aspect of deliberation that is the process to arrive to a decision,

"The first year since we opened the coffee shop was a tough year. I mean in terms of organizing all these, to reach the point that we are today where things function in a more orderly fashion and without much effort from our part. Of course for this to happen a lot of experimentation was required and we dedicated a lot of time and effort; we did many mistakes and we often had many delays until we were able to come to a decision; and that was really tiring at times. But on the other hand every decision has to come through the general assembly, I mean all the issues (whether practical or political) are discussed in the meetings... We can't just 2 people decide about important issues, we do need to seek the advice of all the others." (Pagkaki 1)

There is a general feeling that when more people participate in the decision making process it is less likely to make mistakes which also points to the self-transformative character of the process as people learn to work together, to listen to others and be receptive to new ideas. So, reflecting back to their established models of decision-making, these are based on a set of principles that give emphasis to equality and consent, the construction of rule-creating rather than rule-following individuals and the constructive potentials of conflicts and disagreements. In short, for those involved in these projects, consensus decision-making is a necessary tool for the creation of autonomous spaces as it places emphasis on the collective dimension of autonomy and the realisation of their self-instituting capacities.

There is also much scepticism about other forms of democratic governance that give more emphasis to strengthening the representation of the members rather than their direct participation in the decision-making process. This is because, in their view, representative democracy leads to the exclusion of some people or ideas as it assumes homogeneity and unity. This view also finds support in the literature, as it has been often argued that representative democracy "creates, rather than alleviates, oligarchic tendencies, thus excluding the majority of members from the decision-

making process. This is because, 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" (Kokkinidis, 2012: 237). A system of representative democracy and its subsequent exclusion of diverse opinions and perspectives is evident not only in capitalist organizations but also in many avowedly democratic cooperatives where ownership and control is supposedly in the hands of the members. This is because representative democracy assumes and enforces homogenization and unity, which in turn leads to the exclusion of some viewpoints or people within those organizations.

In the case of the workers' collectives in Greece, the emphasis on consensus tries to address just that. According to my participants, the established forms of direct democracy and the consensus decision-making model create a barrier against the development of hierarchical tendencies within the collectives. In their view, the central role of the general assembly creates the conditions for minimizing exclusion by allowing each member to maintain his/her autonomy. That is because, instead of assuming unity and homogeneity, they embrace disagreement. This is reinforced by the practices of horizontality where each member has equal power as well as rights and responsibilities. The emphasis on equal power is very important, as equality can be a very misleading concept if it is understood in a superficial way. For example, in many seemingly democratic organizations equality and organizational democracy are understood as the members' right to "freely" discuss matters that concern them in the general meetings, and periodically exercise their right to elect their representatives, rather than a right to direct participation in the decision-making of the cooperatives.

Therefore, this scepticism towards representational forms of governance has further contributed to the development of a consensus decision-making model within these collectives. The members of Pagkaki argued that the success of a consensus-based decision model is determined by two factors: structure and closed procedures. According to my participants, the established horizontal structure and the central role of the general assembly has so far resisted the development of hierarchical tendencies. As one participant explained,

"It is important to keep in mind that there is always a danger of hierarchical tendencies emerging within the group, no matter how democratic you try to be. I mean don't feel as if you are in a kind of utopia, a perfect "thing" where everything goes great just because we are good people. Of course this is not the case, so you should always be alert that there is a danger...Also we have closed procedures, we are not an open group; there are very specific procedures and the structure of the assembly does not allow you to exceed your personal limits and impose your will over the group." (Pagkaki 1)

The reference to closed procedures, referring to their loosely established recruitment criteria, is crucial for understanding this member's perception of democracy and the emphasis on the consensus-based decision-making model. According to the participants, workplace democracy is possible only among equals and that requires people to have enough time to build strong relationships and concern for each other and the common good. One of their principles therefore is that, in order to join the collective, all new members have to commit for at least two years. Reflecting on the recruitment process, one of my participants explained that,

"Work here is not opportunistic, I mean that... let's say that there is demand for extra work for two months; we won't enter the logic of hiring someone for 2-3 months because we believe that it is not possible to build strong relationships and for everybody to have equal power and control. This person will not be able to develop a relationship with the rest of the team and have equal rights and responsibilities, and it is at moments like that that you develop hierarchies. It happens many times that we need extra hands, but if someone comes for only two months, inevitably the older members will have more authority and control..." (Pagkaki 1)

There seems to be a kind of fraternal logic in their understanding of democracy which is loosely influenced by the Aristotelian conception of friendship, according to which "friendship takes time and [...] one must learn to trust someone who might be a friend" (Jones, 2003: 232). Here friendship does not refer to personal friendship but rather what Schwarzenbach (2005) refers to as civic friendship, which she considered as a central value in democracy, concluding that "[d]emocracy is also the political extension of friendship between equals, and if democracy violates this essential value it fundamentally compromises its nature" (Schwarzenbach, 2005: 250).

Therefore, the established horizontal structure and the *entry-exit* procedures create the grounds for building close relationships, and balance the individual and group interests, which in turn constrain the emergence of hierarchical tendencies within the group. This is further confirmed by the available literature on the ERTs in Argentina. They have successfully resisted going back to hierarchical forms of governance by giving emphasis to horizontality and direct democracy, despite the apparent tensions between democratic impulses and bureaucratic tendencies (Atzeni and Ghigliani, 2007; Vieta, 2008; Vieta and Ruggeri, 2007).

In addition to the importance of structure, my participants thought that their prior experiences in other self-managed projects as well as the importance of respecting others' beliefs were equally important. As one participant added, a consensus-based decision-making model in action requires the cultivation of a consciousness of self-reliance, receptiveness and openness to the Other. These are qualities that are constructed through the members' active participation and involvement in the processes of consensual decision-making and the dynamic interactions that are developed within these processes:

"You have to be receptive to new ideas, and be able to make compromises. You can have passion and persistency at times of disagreements, but the general assembly gives us the opportunity to use these disagreements in a productive way. It is not about my opinion or your opinion, it is about the whole group. I think that the assembly creates the grounds to somehow control our excessive Ego and I believe that we have all changed through these collective processes." (Pagkaki 2)

Reflecting on the process of reaching an agreement, my participants highlighted that the strength of a consensus-based decision-making model is that at times of disagreements, the goal of the group is to discover what produces the objection and negotiate potential solutions until they are able to find a way to meet that need in a revised agreement, rather than to suppress the objection. The ultimate aim, they explained, is to come up with a proposal that everybody has agreed upon, rather than allowing a group of people to make the decision as in a representational system. For

example, in the case of Syn.all.ois, emphasis is placed on respecting divergent opinions and reaching a consensual agreement. However, at times of unresolved conflicts and disagreements, the group has used the majority rule. In such rare cases, however, the decision is recalled and renegotiated within the first two months of its implementation.

In short, the consensus practices in these collectives share some similarities with Mouffe's (2000) notion of "agonism". On these lines, consensus is not just a state of agreement; it is a means of creating a space where diverse opinions flourish rather than being suppressed, reinforced by practices of horizontality. The underlying assumption is that, for a truly democratic workplace, disagreement should be respected and embraced. That, of course, does not mean that diversity is without limits. On the contrary, diversity is viewed as a work in progress which is limited by a set of concrete principles and guidelines, as indicated by my participants' responses on this matter:

Pagkaki 1: "We have a number of core principles that are not negotiable. For example, a new member cannot come and say that we should not sell Zapatistas coffee and instead sell Nestle or that we should not bother participating in the general strikes; these are core principles and are non-negotiable."

Pagkaki 2: "Or to say that I want to change the remuneration schemes. It is a core principle."

Pagkaki 3: "Or to have majority rule. We cannot accept this. Our core principles are non-negotiable."

Within these minimum shared standards however, disagreement is viewed as an opportunity to express and accept different viewpoints that hold constructive potential for the strengthening of democracy. Disagreement, therefore, is not perceived as something that has to be suppressed or eliminated, but rather as something that has to be embraced in creative ways so as to minimise the exclusion of the members from the governance of the collectives.

To sum up, each of the three collectives develops its own management practices, yet they all share a desire to create autonomous spaces guided by horizontality and direct democracy. In doing so, emphasis is placed on both the structure of these self-managed projects and their processes, aiming to create spaces that nurture deliberation under conditions of plurality. Yet this "plurality" is set within certain limits; within some basic, non-negotiable, collectively agreed and shared standards (e.g., refusal of wage labour, egalitarian remuneration schemes, reaching consensus) that, coupled with the central role of the general assembly and the active participation of all the members in the decision-making process, contribute to the development of more inclusive models of participation and the construction of rule-creating rather than rule-following individuals.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, self-managed projects such as those described in this paper have so far received inadequate attention by critical management and organization studies scholars, although they offer an opportunity to rethink the way we relate everyday practices to political organization in general, inviting us to reconceptualise the links between the economic and social field of action. While these social experiments are

perhaps small and context-dependent, they are indicative of an alternative theory and practice embedding envisioned future modes of social organization into the present of organizing.

After all, to escape from the economy, Fournier (2008: 534) argues, "is at least as much a question of decolonising the imagination as one of enacting new practices", and this is manifested in the members' prefigurative strategies, which represent a distinct language of protest. In this sense, the act of escaping does not refer to quietism and passivity or a retreat from the economic sphere, but to exploring workable alternatives within capitalism. The members of these self-managed projects are well aware of the limitations of being separated from the economy and the wider society, and how such separation can not only marginalise them but also leave capitalism unchallenged. As such, the seminars and social events organized by the members of Syn.all.ois in conjunction with other groups, or the choice of the Pagkaki's members to open the coffee shop in an area other than *Exarcheia* (which would be their "natural habitat") are illustrative of their intentions to reach out to the wider public and engage them with the relevance and usefulness of anti-capitalist ideas and practices, hoping to inspire more people to participate in similar political actions.

With this in mind, these self-managed projects are primarily driven by the members' political aspiration to create a space that is open and experimental; a space that would not only challenge the existing forms of work but also put into practice other possibilities that place emphasis on reciprocal relationships and prioritise collective working, egalitarianism and autonomy. While I have no intention of offering any mechanical blueprints for anti- and/or post- capitalist practices, my aim was to describe how the members' aspirations to create alternative workplaces take shape through their everyday practices. In doing so, I have also made a number of key arguments related to the significance of these experiments in terms of providing a platform for the dissemination of practices antagonistic to capitalism; creating forms of social relations that challenge both the methodological individualism that underpins neoliberal theories and the widespread assumption that alternative non-capitalist organizations are too weak to confront capitalism and so they will either adapt to its logic or fold.

Therefore, these projects are important because of their multiple objectives (social, political and economic). Operating within capitalism presents them with constant tensions between the desire to remain non-capitalist and a shift to a more capitalist model of organizing; yet these tensions are addressed in creative ways by the protagonists of these self-managed projects, who seem to ground themselves in a different set of values from those offered by competition and the capitalist market, fostered within their practices of autonomy, egalitarianism, horizontality and direct democracy.

These practices offer some useful insights for an alternative mode of productive life that prioritises the social and political objectives of the groups over their economic self-preservation. In the case of Pagkaki, for instance, the egalitarian remuneration schemes and the refusal of the wage-labour relationship have both theoretical and practical implications for our vision of an alternative form of organization, exemplifying new forms of organizing work that challenge the neoclassical theory of the firm as a profit-maximising entity and of individuals as being driven primarily by motives of self-interest. At the same time, they extend our understanding of workplace democracy beyond representation, of egalitarianism



beyond equal opportunities and of autonomy beyond "a monolithic value-framework" (Fleming, 2013: 479).

Reflecting back to the three projects described in this paper, one of the main features of autonomy is the recognition that individuals are capable of creating their own rules and of governing their affairs as they see fit, which in turn requires a different definition of democracy. One that supports more inclusive models of participation and encourages the construction of rule-creating rather than rule-following individuals, allowing them to determine both the *ends* and the *means*, collectively. Therefore, far from understanding autonomy in a liberal-individual sense, it has to be understood as a collective project that shapes our ways of both living and connecting with others. In this sense, autonomy is not a mere organizational tool but a way of doing politics, of bringing the future into the present, which is simultaneously an act of refusal and creation: refusing a set of values and practices embedded in capitalist relations while creating their own anti-capitalist values and everyday practices within the market economy.

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### **Notes**

1. *Koukaki* is a quiet residential area and small business neighbourhood in the southeast of Athens near the historic district of Plaka.
2. *Exarcheia* is an old district at the heart of Athens and since the students' revolt against the military Junta (1974) has been a place for underground political activism; a stage for activist groups of various social, cultural and political backgrounds (autonomists, feminists, anarchists, extra-parliamentary leftists, ethnic minorities, etcetera) and a laboratory for experimentation. For a more precise picture of political activism at Exarcheia, see the works of Tsagarousianou (1993), Vatikiotis (2011) and Chatzidakis (2013).

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