

Post-capitalist imaginaries: The case of workers' collectives in Greece

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the case of two workers' collectives in Athens, Greece, and reflects on the transformative potential of entrepreneurial creation. I argue that these social and economic experiments are collective and essentially political. Thus breaking from the individualism that characterizes entrepreneurial discourse, this paper looks at the collective dimension of entrepreneurial activity and by reflecting on the collective capacities and transformative potential of these social initiatives, in terms of creating shared forms of sociality and bringing forward new ways of living and collective co-existence, it points to the inherently political character of entrepreneurship.

Keywords

autonomy, consensus, direct democracy, horizontality, post-capitalist imaginaries, prefiguration, public entrepreneurship, self-management, sociality, space, subjectivities, work

Introduction

This short paper is based on a series of semi-structured interviews and group discussions conducted between 2012 and 2014 in two workers' collectives located in Athens, Greece. My aim is to explore their organizing practices (particularly in relation to work) and social relations in a process of creating autonomous spaces. By focusing on autonomy and autonomous spaces, I intend to emphasize the idea that these social experiments are not simply responsive to power, but that they also drive and shape social transformation by creating alternative material articulations and ontological struggles. Therefore, autonomy refers to a collective project, shaping our ways both of living and connecting with others. Loosely drawing on Hjorth (2013) and Hjorth and Bjerke (2006), I look at these workers' collectives as manifestations of public entrepreneurship driven by the members' desire for social change through the creation of alternative forms of economic and social relations. My objective is to explore the transformative potential of these collective experiments in terms of creating new modes of socialities and subjectivities through a repertoire of inter-organizational practices that emphasize autonomy and the collective dimension of work. These practices, I argue, are essentially political, contributing to the creation of post-capitalist imaginaries by pointing to the workers' self-instituting capacities and by challenging the hierarchical and dominant logic of capitalist production (Hardt & Negri, 2004).

In light of this, this paper begins by presenting the two workers' collectives under investigation and then focuses on describing their repertoire of inter-organizational practices as manifestations of creative practices of resistance to the present in terms of

organizing. I argue that their practices constitute collective attempts of refusal and creation that foster shared forms of sociality and bring forward new ways of living and collective co-existence. I then conclude by pointing to the collective dimension and political character of entrepreneurial creation.

Brief outline of the workers' collectives

The workers' collectives described in this paper are located in Athens and operate in different sectors of the economy. The first case is that of Pagkaki, a coffee shop located in Koukaki¹. It was established by a group of eight people in 2010 and since then it has grown in size, now counting 11 members. Their activities extend beyond the standard coffee shop activities as they are involved in the organization of various social events and the release of political pamphlets. The second case is that of Syn.all.ois, a Cooperative for an Alternative and Solidarity Trade, located in relatively close proximity to Pagkaki in an area called Thiseio². It was established in 2011 by a group of five people previously involved in a non-profit cooperative called Sporos. It is a not-for-profit initiative involved in both wholesale and retail activities including the distribution of Zapatista coffee and other local and international products of small producers in Greece.

Both workers' collectives have adopted the status of a cooperative as their legal property form because there is no legal recognition of workers' collectives in the Greek constitution. They share some basic principles and have similar inter-organizational practices³. Each collective has a set of core, non-negotiable principles and they both have a strong political dimension. This political dimension is

manifested in their organizational structure and practices, which are guided by horizontality, a consensus decision-making model, and egalitarianism. Furthermore, as grassroots initiatives with clear economic and political objectives, they are part of the wider anti-neoliberal movement in Greece, yet they have no affiliation with any political party. Finally, they are reluctant to receive any economic support from financial institutions, governmental bodies or the EU, as, according to the participants, that could potentially undermine the political dimension of their experiments and pose a threat to their autonomy.

The political and collective dimension of entrepreneurial actions: An account of autonomous grassroots initiatives

Echoing recent demands for "escaping from the economy" (Fournier, 2008) and for "taking back the economy" (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, & Healy, 2013), this section focuses on the everyday practices of resistance to the present in terms of organizing, i.e., all the autonomous and collective practices of refusal and creation that foster distinctive forms of economic and social interactions, nurturing new livable worlds through a multitude of social, political, and economic relations. I reflect on the inter-organizational practices (particularly on the issue of autonomy and the ways in which work is understood and experienced) in the aforementioned two workers' collectives as they represent a distinct language of protest with wider social, and perhaps institutional, transformative potentialities. In the words of the Pagkaki members:

"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; it strives to create, here and now, the terms for a different organization of production" (Pagkaki, 2011: n.p.).

Their desire for an alternative way of addressing economic and social relations is exemplified in their inter-organizational practices that "operate as immanent critiques of existing forms of work organization [stipulating], in practice, that there exist other possibilities for how workplaces might operate" (Shukaitis, 2010, p. 63). A notable difference from conventional organizations relates to the way in which work is organized, perceived and experienced. In both cases, there is a strong emphasis on horizontality, equality and cooperation. At Pagkaki work is organized on a rotation basis, whereas in Syn.all.ois, alongside job rotation schemes, there is some division of labor in place in relation to technical aspects of the job, with members assigned different roles based on their experience, skills and knowledge. However, in both cases there is an emphasis on the collective nature of work and the idea that knowledge is a collectively determined potential. For example, in Syn.all.ois, despite the existing division of labor, there is in place a strong culture of multi-skilling and knowledge sharing, with members being encouraged to take personal initiatives and be involved in different tasks. As Lily, a member of Syn.all.ois, pointed out:

"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 programs. We try to share knowledge and help each other. There is mutual support for learning and knowledge sharing; we try to educate each other."

Working hours also vary from one place to another. At Syn.all.ois work is organized on a six-hour/five-day shift per week, whereas at Pagkaki there are eight-hour shifts and all members work from three to five days per week. In both cases there is a strong perception that work should be organized in ways that will allow members to have free time for other social activities. According to the participants, non-work time is vital for creating opportunities for "heightened politicization" (Weeks, 2011, p. 168), which is further illustrated in their political actions, such as the organization of social events, their participation in labor strikes, the release of political pamphlets, and other acts of solidarity. Their demand for fewer working hours therefore challenges the dominant work ethic and creates the opportunities that enable them to reinvent relations of sociality through their active participation in other political projects.

The main difference from other conventional organizations, however, is in the way in which work is perceived and experienced, as a process of cultivating reciprocal relationships that gives greater emphasis to the value of *caring* for each other and the common good. For example, their established egalitarian remuneration schemes are indicative of their perception of work as a collective effort, fostering a collective spirit necessary for practicing horizontality. This idea of caring for the other is evident in their strong cooperative ethos that guides both their inter-organizational practices and how they connect with people beyond their local boundaries (be it other workers' collectives, their customers, suppliers, or the wider community). Their collectives aim to build a wider network of solidarity economy that would forge strong ties between

these collectives and the wider community, creating possibilities for an alternative mode of economic life.

Another crucial difference from conventional organizations lies in their experimentation with inclusive models of participation and perception of autonomy. In both cases, decisions are made consensually in a general assembly in which everyone is expected to - and so far does - actively participate. As the participants explained, they establish a list of priorities and decide on a variety of issues, from technical to political aspects, such as their work schedules, their relationships with their customers and suppliers, as well as proposals for participating in various political actions. Consensus is considered vital to create a more inclusive model of participation, and in this process of deliberation, the role of the general assembly is vital to minimize exclusion and allow members to maintain their autonomy. Their practices share some similarities with Mouffe's (2000) notion of "agonism" in the sense that consensus is not just a state of agreement but a means of creating spaces that nurture deliberation under conditions of plurality. Reflecting on their established models of decision making, the participants highlighted that their established processes are based on a set of principles that place an emphasis on the collective dimension of autonomy and the realization of their self-instituting capacities. The participants from Pagkaki highlighted the transformative nature of these processes, as people learn to work together, listen to others and be receptive to new ideas:

"You have to be receptive to new ideas, and be able to make compromises. You can have passion and persistence at times of disagreement, 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)⁴.

In similar fashion, Ilias from Syn.all.ois argues that their experimentation with more inclusive forms of participation and autonomy has shaped new modes of subjectivity, emphasizing the self-instituting capacities of the subjects, and allowing them to determine both the *ends* and the *means* collectively. Through this process, Ilias avers:

"you change as a person... the most important thing is the everyday experience of being part of a collective, how you experience equality and all this, and how you see people changing through these processes; people who used to be shy and did not take much responsibility become more energetic and involved, others who used to be more dominant become more receptive to others, cooperate more. It is hard, don't get me wrong, it is difficult, but it is a school, a very big school."

In short, echoing Castoriadis (1987), autonomy is perceived by those involved in these projects as a social relation, as "one cannot want autonomy without wanting it for everyone and [...] its realization cannot be conceived of in its full scope except as a collective enterprise" (p. 107). It is a collective project that shapes the ways in which members live and connect with others. In this sense, it is a way of doing politics, a simultaneous act of refusing the hierarchical and dominant logic of capitalist relations in a process of creating their own anti-capitalist values and everyday practices within the market economy.

Moreover, members' inter-organizational practices create the conditions for new modes of socialities and subjectivities to emerge, fostering a strong collective identity in which individuals increasingly recognize themselves as part of a collective and of a wider network of people who desire a different way of living. Reflecting on the support they have received so far from the local community, Ilias reported:

"these workers' collectives are supported by people not just because they offer high quality products and services at affordable prices, but mainly due to their perception that they are not just "customers" but to some extent active members of a wider collective."

Although locally based, the practices have a translocal orientation. From the choice of the location for their collectives to the events they organize or participate in, they function in ways that could be described as forms of a "propaganda of the deed" (Shukaitis, 2009, p. 125) with a strong desire to disseminate their experience and ideas about self-management and an alternative way of organizing economic and social life to the wider public. The participants from Pagkaki, for instance, made explicit reference to their intention of creating a space for prefigurative politics, a field in which their continuous experimentation with alternative forms of organizing will foster a "space for encounters" (Pagkaki, 2011, n.p.), inspiring others to take part in similar forms of political action. As one of the members remarked:

"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..."
(Pagkaki 3).

Furthermore, their experience of self-management creates the conditions for extending these activities across space rather than remaining localized by disseminating their experience through the dissemination of political pamphlets, the organization of various political events and seminars in the physical space of the collectives, as well as co-organization and participation in various translocal events. Therefore, these "autonomous geographies" (Pickerill & Chatterton, 2006), these local spaces of anti-capitalist critique and post-capitalist imaginaries, have both material and symbolic importance in terms of fostering affective relations and mobilizing the collective action that is crucial for the emergence of new forms of organization and for bringing forward new ways of living and connecting with others.

Concluding remarks

Breaking from the individualism that characterizes entrepreneurial discourse⁵, the cases described in this paper place greater emphasis on the collective character of entrepreneurship; entrepreneurial activity is thus understood as something that always involves the Other, as a collective project and social relation. Here "entrepreneurship" is envisaged as a politically informed collective action that requires "a shift from enterprising individuals to the relationships between entrepreneurial citizens" (Hjorth, 2013, p. 38). In this sense, entrepreneurial creations refer to collaborative practices that cultivate a "distinct form of being, both at an individual level and at a collective level" (Kokkinidis, 2014, p. 3). I argue that the ways in which work is organized and

experienced in these projects, particularly the emphasis on the collective dimension of work further exemplified in their egalitarian remuneration schemes and horizontal practices, foster new modes of sociality that are to be understood as a collective engagement and an affective relation (Hjorth, 2013).

By reflecting on the transformative qualities of these economic and social initiatives, I have pointed to the collective and inherently political character of entrepreneurship. I have suggested that their practices are inherently political driven by the members' desire to create *here* and *now* alternative forms of economic and social relations. Thus, by looking at these workers' collectives as manifestations of public entrepreneurship (Hjorth, 2013), driven by the members' desire for social change, I have also pointed to the collective capacities and transformative potential of these social initiatives in terms of creating shared forms of sociality and bringing forward new ways of living and collective co-existence.

Notes

1. Koukaki is a quiet residential area and a small business neighborhood in the southeast of Athens near the historic district of Plaka.
2. Thiseio is a neighborhood northwest of the Acropolis.
3. For a more detailed account of the inter-organizational practices of these two and other workers' collectives see: Kokkinidis (2014) and Varkarolis (2012).
4. Please note that I use the actual name of the collectives rather than the real names of the participants as per their request to highlight the collective nature of their experiment.
5. For a fine critique on entrepreneurship see Jones and Spicer's (2009) work on "Unmasking the Entrepreneur".

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