

**Developing theories and tools for resisting degeneration with
the Worker Cooperatives' Network of Athens**

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Abstract

Avoiding degeneration is a classic –empirically under-researched– challenge that cooperatives face in their pursuit of remaining democratic and economically viable. This thesis –driven by pragmatism and abduction– aimed to explore in-depth and support actively the attempts of radical worker cooperatives to (better) resist degeneration.

To this end, a processual analysis of resisting degeneration with the Worker Cooperatives’ Network of Athens (WCNA) served as a starting point for better making sense of the interrelated challenges involved. The analysis was also supplemented by a closer examination of the internal workings of two of its members. Based upon such a rare, dynamic account of cooperative movement generation and maintenance, I arrived at a more holistic conceptualization of degeneration and highlighted the self-fulfilling nature of overly pessimistic laws of degeneration.

Meanwhile, a series of interventions by the researcher took place to promote consensual forms of democracy the reception of which resulted in a better understanding of the complex nature of degeneration and the need for more systemic actions/solutions. Moreover, a key finding was that for organizational systems of (coalitions of) radical cooperatives to be more viable, the humanist aspirations of co-operators should be taken far more into consideration.

Finally, building upon the yearlong presence of the author in the field, the action research technique and similar cases of resisting degeneration in literature, guidelines/tools/recommendations for (collective) management and cooperative development were crafted and theory was developed that better explains empirical material.

Chapter 1.

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This thesis gives an account of a Responsive Action Research (Varkarolis and King, 2017) conducted to support (a coalition of egalitarian) work collectives in developing a cooperative movement with great potentialities by better responding to a classic problem of cooperativism, degeneration. In this chapter, I briefly introduce the real-life situation that triggered the current investigation in this direction and my point of departure from the established literature based on a research strategy rarely taken up before on degeneration.

1.2 New cooperativism (in Greece) and old challenges requiring new solutions

In the early twenty-first century, a new wave of cooperativism –termed by Vieta (2010, pp. 2–3) as *new cooperativism*– emerged which was distinguishable from older cooperative movements for having the following characteristics:

(1) It emerges as direct responses by working people or grassroots groups to the crisis of the neoliberal model. (2) Its protagonists do not necessarily have tight links to older cooperative movements, beginning their collective projects from out of immediate social, cultural, or economic needs rather than from pre-existing cooperativist sentiments. (3) Its politics tend to emerge at the level of the everyday and tend to take on, when compared to capitalocentric frameworks, more equitable ways of redistributing social wealth and more ethical ways of engaging with the other and the earth. (4) It tends to involve strong practices of horizontalized labour processes and decision-making structures, often including collective ownership of social, cultural, or economic production; culturally- and gender-sensitive divisions of labour; and more egalitarian schemes of surplus allocation, when compared to capitalist production, and even when compared to older or more traditional cooperative experiences. And (5) it has stronger connections with surrounding communities than capitalocentric economic models; many of them embrace clear social objectives and local initiatives of community development.

Within this context, a first wave of radical cooperatives also merged in crisis laden Greece stemming from within ‘a broader resistance movement [marked by] an enhanced emphasis on autonomous self-organization, social solidarity, networking and opposition to state policies and neoliberal capitalism’ (Kioupkiolis and Karyotis, 2015, p. 296). By 2012, some of them had formed a coalition under the banner of Worker Cooperatives’ Network of Athens (WCNA). Their intention was to facilitate the development of an inspirational cooperative movement.

To this end, WCNA (members) adopted tacitly a series of safeguards to avoid arriving at a degenerated movement. For instance, favouring a more horizontal division of labour, promoting direct democracy instead of formal representation, adopting collective ownership, establishing a solidarity fund, committing themselves to become rooted within social movements and independent from the state (Rothschild and Whitt, 1989; Kokkinidis, 2015; Daskalaki and Kokkinidis, 2017). Hence, WCNA took proactive measures which have been identified as crucial to resist the persistent threat of degeneration (Diefenbach, 2019) from a social movement/Marxist perspective (Rothschild and Whitt, 1989; Egan, 1990; Jones, 2010b).

By 2016, however, the momentum of the *subject* of the research (Thomas, 2011) – WCNA – not only seemed to confirm Malleson thesis (2014) that egalitarian driven work collectives are doomed to be marginal but almost reached the point of failing to even *reproduce* itself (Stryjan, 1994). A variety of issues troubling its constituents were seemingly the primary reason for this. The following quotation derived from the minutes of a WCNA assembly (26 Jan. 2016) describes quite vividly the existential threat that WCNA faced at that moment.

We, then, focused on the existential issues of the WCNA. The four of us that attended the meeting commonly agreed that the Network is non-existent. This is not due to indifference but rather is a result of internal problems challenging the resilience of the work collectives... We discussed a bit and decided to propose to the collectives to debate within their assemblies regarding whether they want (and how) to participate. Otherwise, resuming like this makes no sense.

Yet, the abovementioned real-life problematic situation was not turned into a case for (dis)proving the most influential theories of degeneration or solely how resisting degeneration takes place in relation with one classic special theory, as mostly has been the case in the literature. Instead, my research engagement with WCNA and two of its members –which despite being economically successful were fracturing as collectives– was primarily driven by the intention to support WCNA (members) in overcoming some of their real-life problems. In this respect, prior experience, literature and pragmatism were highly influential and catalytic for exploring/articulating degeneration as a complex problem –influenced by ‘a complex set of relationships between indiscrete variables’ (Swepson, 1995 cited in Liu, 2011, p. 94)– requiring systemic solutions.

1.4 Experience and pragmatism leading to a point of departure from established theories

Initially, my approach on –theoretically sampled because of an espoused emancipatory discourse and commitment in putting it into radical cooperative action (Barros, 2010)– WCNA was initially rather inductive. Overall, however, I did not follow step-by-step any of the *general plans* available in theory (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009, p. 90). Instead, I adopted under the banner of pragmatism (Johnson and Duberley, 2000a; Creswell, 2002, pp. 13–14; Saunders *et al.*, 2012, pp. 142–144; Collis and Hussey, 2013, pp. 54–55) a mix of elements drawn from multiple research strategies including case study, action research, ethnography and grounded theory.

Such a distinct and rarely taken up before bricolage was largely the result of my bad prior experience of being researched as a co-operator. Indeed, I was problematized about the potential relevance of academic writing from the inception of this research project. More specifically, I considered that arriving at the field at a very advanced stage of problem-finding (Merton, 1959) was a major hindrance for being relevant (Varkarolis and King, 2017). In turn, this heavily influenced me towards gathering/interpreting data and acting on evidence before identifying a theoretical problem or adopting a theoretical framework (Swepson, 1995; Ferrance, 2000). Nevertheless, such a methodological attitude was not merely an outcome of me being embedded in the field long before even thinking of becoming a researcher but was to a large extent intentional and driven by active reflexivity (Mason, 2002, pp. 4–8).

Indeed, informed by a series of methodological, political, epistemological and ethical debates about the relation with the researched and for cultivating mutually benefiting/engaging research with world-making potentials (Burawoy, 1998; Pettigrew, 2001; Edward Wray-Bliss, 2002; Roth, Sandberg and Svensson, 2004; Freire, 2005; Van de Ven, 2007; Brewis and Wray-Bliss, 2008; Potsdam, 2015; Varkarolis and King, 2017) while (re)constructing the past (Barros, Carneiro and Wanderley, 2019), my take on (resisting) degeneration was not at all detached. On the contrary, I favoured reflexive intervention intended to support emancipation and radical social change (Tripp, 1990; Chatterton, Fuller and Routledge, 2007) by developing ‘constructive knowledge that is appreciated for being useful in action’ (Goldkuhl, 2012b, p. 135).

In line with the above, even though WCNA members were not actively engaged as co-researchers within a formally Participatory Action Research (Whyte, 1991), the research design was members’ driven as emphasis was given in responsiveness to real-life

problems undermining the prospects of co-operators meeting their stated objectives (Varkarolis and King, 2017) and in continual testing the abductively emerging theoretical insights (Potsdam, 2015) for increased internal validity/relevance (Swepson, 1995).

Along these lines, my focus on the *object* of the study (Thomas, 2011), degeneration, was more driven by the curiosity to better explain empirical patterns and generative mechanisms in the field (Burawoy *et al.*, 1991; Van de Ven, 1992; Burawoy, 1998, 2009; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019) than by literature, even though it was heavily informed by it. In other words, it was abduction (Potsdam, 2015) that led me to refine the variety of threats and theories that despite their different underpinnings –introduced in the coming literature review–, mutually reinforce the pessimistic for the prospects of workplace democracy *degeneration thesis*. A thesis which was coined after the Webbs' (1891) pioneer work on (worker) cooperatives since late nineteenth century.

All such associations of producers that start as alternatives to the capitalist system either fail or cease to be democracies of producers (Webb and Webb, 1920, p. 29).

To the end of theory refinement (Emigh, 1997; Potsdam, 2015) reflecting upon action/intervention, combining theory and empirical material (Dubois and Gadde, 2002; Wadsworth, 1998 cited in Davis, 2007, p. 189; Potsdam, 2015) have proven to be key elements of the current research project. Along these lines, a cornerstone of the heavily influenced by a combination of pragmatism and interpretivism qualitative research (Goldkuhl, 2012b) was to combine increased understanding with improvements in a problematic situation (Potsdam, 2015). That is by shifting the attention from *what* happens (or not) to projects of workplace democracy to devising coping strategies and designing more viable structures (Rosner, 1984a; Banathy, 1996; Walker, 1998) fit for a cooperative movement with great transformation potentialities (Malleon, 2014).

In this sense, the current research –guided by an epistemology that prioritizes ‘problem solving and informed future practice as contribution’ (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2015, p. 137)– departed from the well-established, pessimistic and deterministic law-like variants of the *degeneration thesis* (Cornforth, Thomas, Spear, Lewis, *et al.*, 1988; Stryjan, 1989b; Cheney *et al.*, 2014). Yet, the same goes in relation to those theories that do not follow the inevitability of such grandiose claims. That is regardless of whether they draw upon cases of tentative successes (Cornforth, 1995; Leach, 2005; Langmead, 2017) or outright failures (Boggs, 1977; Landry *et al.*, 1985; Castoriadis, 1988) as developing relevant, workable and actionable knowledge (Argyris, 1996; Chatterton,

Fuller and Routledge, 2007), tools and recommendations were not part of their agenda. Indeed, researchers, unlike political intellectuals (of the past), have unfortunately rather been limited in *parroting* (Meek, 2014) what practitioners (and their allies) had themselves achieved (Egan, 1990; Storey, Basterretxea and Salaman, 2014; Kokkinidis, 2015; Esper *et al.*, 2017; Pansera and Rizzi, 2018; Diefenbach, 2019).

Hence, following my review of the literature on (resisting) degeneration (within Critical Management Studies), it became evident to me that research operationalized as an emancipatory action research project aiming to deliver actionable knowledge was rather missing (Chatterton, Fuller and Routledge, 2007). To this end, pragmatism with its emphasis on practical solutions and outcomes (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019, p. 145) was considered regardless of my preferences (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019, p. 159) ‘the most appropriate paradigm given the nature of the problem under investigation’ (McKerchar, 2008).

To conclude, by researching the fortunes of an extreme case of (new) cooperativism, WCNA as an insider action researcher over the period 2014 to late 2019 and documenting the attempts of WCNA members to evade degeneration threats, the current research went beyond showcasing that degeneration is conditional (Cornforth, Thomas, Spear, Lewis, *et al.*, 1988; Stryjan, 1989a). That is by developing new conceptual models that were turned into tools for the ‘identification of appropriate ameliorative strategies’ (Ingle, 1980, p. 6) that co-operators could themselves use to change the course of degeneration (Marx, 1976).

Hence, overall, not only light has been shed on the under-researched empirical side of (resisting) degeneration (Leach, 2005; Cheney *et al.*, 2014; Langmead, 2017; Diefenbach, 2019) but also recommendations and organizational tools were formulated to support similar endeavours in realizing potential.

After providing a brief outline of the structure of the thesis, I return to question and critique aspects of the literature in more detail and arrive at a concrete set of research questions in chapter 2.

1.5 Thesis structure

While the thesis has been written up in a rather conventional structure to help the reader make a better sense of the overall story, it is important to stress that the processes involved to arrive at this outcome have been the result of prolonged iterative processes moving

‘back and forth between induction and deduction’ (Morgan, 2007, p. 71) while also treating both literature and findings as data.

In the chapter of the literature review, I provide a short introduction to the timeless problem of degeneration, outline the various segregated theories of degeneration, the rarely validated empirically recommendations and tools available to resist degeneration threats, the unfinished business of Critical Performativity as well as the main approaches on researching cooperatives (degenerating), to arrive at my emergent (from praxis) theoretical framework.

In chapter 3, the issue of methodology is discussed and the context of the empirical research is presented. The focus on both WCNA and individual members throughout this yearlong research project (officially dating from 2016 to 2019) was justified, along with the choice of my research methods which were aligned with my innovative research strategy. The influence of my presuppositions in the research project and the attempts for the research output to be researched-led and researched-checked are also presented. Finally, an audit trail was provided to make more explicit the research steps of this qualitative study.

In chapter 4, I first presented the history of WCNA dealing with degeneration. Then, I explored the cases of Pagkaki and Synallois, two economically successful members of WCNA that have avoided becoming oligarchic but are struggling with disorganization and the fracturing of their collectives. Finally, I shared a series of reflections based on the empirical material and the reception of my interventions.

In chapter 5, the empirical findings were discussed in light of the relevant literature. More specifically, in the first section, the empirical findings of the process study on WCNA (resisting) degeneration were integrated in a way that aggregated the so far special theories of degeneration. A tool for co-operators to strategize against degeneration was also crafted. In section 5.2.2, after examining the distinct challenges of collective workplace democratization in practice, I argued that a deeper understanding of workplace democracy is required to deal with the threat of oligarchization. One more organizational tool was developed, this time for shifting the priority from dealing with power asymmetries supposedly erupting from specialization in executing tasks to cultivating a balanced high-performance workplace democracy. Afterwards, in section 5.2.3, I provided some recommendations for cooperators to better manage fragmentation without

managers. Moreover, some limitations of the research project were acknowledged and new avenues for future research were identified.

Finally, in chapter 6, I summarized the answers given to the research questions, their significance and implications in practice.

Chapter 2.

Literature review

2.1 Introduction

As already mentioned in the introduction, the degeneration of workplace democracy has long been identified as a key threat for worker cooperatives. Over time, a variety of theories have proclaimed a variant of the degeneration thesis introduced by Beatrice Webb (1891) proclaiming more or less that ‘over time a democratic, worker-owned firm will tend to fall into decay, chiefly because of declining economic efficiency but also because of a loss of social dynamism’ (Cheney, 2002, p. 17).

In the literature review that follows, the rationale behind the widespread blending of disciplines and cases of (radical) cooperatives facing degeneration was the mapping of a large, complex, heterogeneous and ‘previously unconnected’ literature so as to familiarize with culminated theory and to set up the ground for ‘the production of emergent and novel’ theory (Cornelissen and Durand, 2012, pp. 152–153). In other words, to set the stage for advancing well-thought and relevant theories that take into consideration the most prominent characteristics of radical worker collectives: worker-owners are a distinct type of workers that attempt to challenge the employer-employee relationship (Rothschild-Whitt and Whitt, 1986) and the social division between order givers and order followers (Bettelheim and Pearce, 1975; Kokkinidis, 2015).

To this end, the literature review proceeded in the following order. Firstly, the focus was on taking into consideration the specifics of organising horizontal cooperatives within the context of a (sceptical) revival of interest on (radical) worker cooperatives (Schantz, 2006; Wright, 2009; Cahill, 2013; Malleson, 2013; M. Wilson, 2014). Secondly, emphasis was given to the variety of degeneration threats and the available recommendations/tools for avoiding them across a variety of disciplines and streams. Thirdly, I reviewed literature within Critical Management Studies inspired by the intention to ‘actively and pragmatically intervene in specific debates about management and encourage progressive forms of management’ under the banner of Critical Performativity (Spicer *et al.*, 2009, p. 537).

2.2 A historic view on cooperatives and the classic problem of degeneration

It is more reasonable and better for society and progress that men should own capital than that capital should own men (Holyoake, 1908, p. 312).

This is how the famous Owenite historian of cooperativism George Jacob Holyoake describes the rationale the early co-operators had in mind. In his treatise ‘History of

cooperation', he has offered us indeed a rare and rich inside account of the early years of cooperativism at the eve of the industrial revolution and the expansion of capitalism in Great Britain. While he considered the Rochdale Pioneers as possessing a 'special talent for co-operation' (p. 59) –that managed to balance idealism with reality while still world making–, at the same time, he ascribed their success as a result of a thriving community correcting mistakes of the past experiments.

Indeed, a variety of cooperatives had operated before the establishment of the consumer cooperative Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers in 1844. For example, the first 'cooperative society for production, as a means of social transformation' was founded in 1831 by the Christian socialist Buschez (Palgrave, 1912, p. 157). Still, the Rochdale Pioneers by engulfing managerial tweaks introduced by other co-operators are widely regarded as the first successful practitioners of an associationist ideal looking for embracing society as a whole (Yeo, 2018), the cooperative commonwealth.

The Co-operative ideal may be expressed thus: By means of mutual association to eliminate the present competitive industrial system, and to substitute mutual Co-operation for the common good as the basis of all human society . . . by the principle of service for service, the instinct of self-interest is made to promote the common good (Webb, 1921, p. 2)

Cooperatives were, hence, introduced as a reaction to the competitive and profit-oriented capitalistic enterprise (Cahill, 2013; Vieta, 2014). However, the distinctiveness of the cooperative form¹, embracing the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity (International Co-operative Alliance, 2015), goes beyond the profit motive. It lies predominantly in its dual nature (Fauquet, 1951; Draheim, 1952), being a business enterprise and a social group of members that are 'worker-owned, worker-controlled and worker-benefiting' (Audebrand, 2017, p. 11). Therefore, for a cooperative to thrive, it has to succeed both externally and internally, commercially and pedagogically (Lichtenstein, 1986, p. 55). Yet, sometimes as Zamagni and Zamagni (2010) put it, the one pole dominates the other, atrophying the distinct identity of cooperatives.

¹ A key distinction has to be made early enough between cooperatives as a legal form affiliated with certain principles (ICA, 1995) and a cooperative mode of organization (Stryjan, 1989). Still, these two categories are not mutually exclusive and in fact difficult to be delimited. Only notable exceptions are the extremes of fake cooperatives, conventionally run companies registered as cooperatives simply for taking advantage of favouring policies and illegal, recuperated enterprises run by workers themselves, even without specialist roles like managers and directors (Ruggeri, 2014).

According to theories of *movement degeneration* (Develtere, 1992; Staber, 1992; Diamantopoulos, 2012), when cooperatives mimic conventional for-profit enterprises in becoming solely commercially successful, the ‘movement perspective, networks, and organizing skills and knowledge [of cooperativism] can all be lost; succeeded by bureaucratic-corporate perspective and managerial networks, ideology and skills’ (Diamantopoulos, 2012, p. 207). Along these lines, even if they do not falter commercially, the result is a movement in (ideological) crisis (Diamantopoulos, 2013). The following quote from a well-received and often-cited paper prepared for the 1980 Congress of the International Co-operative Alliance (1995) illustrates that the mainstream cooperative movement has been long aware of such a tendency.

If co-operatives do nothing more than succeed in being as efficient as other business in a commercial sense, is that good enough? And if they use the same business techniques and methods as other business, is that in itself sufficient justification for the support and loyalty of members? (Laidlaw, 1980).

However, if co-operators attempt to go beyond the mainstream inspired by anarchist ideals regarding democracy (Rothschild and Whitt, 1989; Schantz, 2006; Wright, 2009; Cahill, 2013; Malleson, 2013; M. Wilson, 2014), they are largely expected to fold commercially. As the *organizational degeneration* thesis broadly poses it (Cornforth, Thomas, Spear, Lewis, *et al.*, 1988; Stryjan, 1989b) that is the inevitable result of business pressures or inadequate collective organization (Webb and Webb, 1914; Michels, 1915; Luxemburg, 1966; Mandel, 1975).

The most enthusiastic believer in this form of democracy would be hard put to it to find, in all the range of industry and commerce, a single lasting success. In the relatively few cases in which such enterprises have not eventually succumbed as business concerns, they have ceased to be democracies of producers, themselves managing their own work (Webb and Webb, 1921, pp. 463–4).

Hence, neither juxtaposing the principle ‘one member, one vote’ to ‘the one share, one vote’ nor distancing from a business as usual approach management perspective have proven to be adequate safeguards for cooperatives (Landry *et al.*, 1985; Heras-Saizarbitoria and Basterretxea, 2016) to remain ‘democratic organisations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions’ as the statement on the cooperative identity adopted by the International Cooperative Alliance (2015, p. 15) puts it.

In turn, the current research intends to promote the adoption of more realistic means

towards radical objectives so that (coalitions of) radical worker cooperatives better hold against degeneration and with increased potentials for contributing towards large-scale transformation by attempting to integrate specialization within workplace democracy and embracing anarchist cybernetics (Swann, 2018). Such a pursuit is quite timely given the rising new cooperativism (Vieta, 2014) and the historical tendency of radical cooperatives to remain marginal (Malleon, 2014).

2.3 The new emerging wave of egalitarian collectives and their distinct, timeless problems

In the early twenty-first century, a new wave of worker cooperatives that represent only a small subset of today's worker cooperatives –termed by Malleon as *egalitarian collectives*– were distancing themselves from more traditional cooperatives by the fact that ...

... the locus of authority rests with the whole group on an egalitarian basis and is not delegated. Decisions are made through a collective participatory process, usually by consensus. There tends to be no distinction in status between any members. Jobs are shared or rotated, and wages are usually equal for all (Malleon, 2014a).

Such egalitarian collectives have also been increasingly coordinated under the banner of the Workers' Economy (Esper *et al.*, 2017) –following the Argentinean experience (Vieta and Ruggeri, 2009)– and up to a point bear the potential for replenishing the lack of 'traditional movement know-how, networks and inclination to drive development *from below*' that characterize the mainstream cooperative movement (Diamantopoulos, 2013, p. 14, emphasis in original).

Based on the above, it is clear that egalitarian collectives have adopted a far more radical approach to democracy and movement building. This was probably the result of being largely influenced by grassroots social movements –increasingly turning to cooperatives as a response to a worldwide recession– and by people that simply 'prefer working in a democratic situation' (Curl, 2007, p. 3) or that have no other alternative (Vieta and Ruggeri, 2009).

Within such a context, these co-operators –like other generations before them– have been attempting to become sovereign over capital and to connect with solidaristic relations with equal co-workers (Mansbridge, 1979; Landry *et al.*, 1985) by getting away from the yoke of the self-interested employer-shareholder. Yet, historically, management becoming the responsibility of each member has proven quite a complicated challenge –inhibiting a

variety of extra costs— and the attempts to collectively negate the employer-employee relationship are full of challenges (Marshall, 1920; Horvat, 1975; Mansbridge, 1979; Landry *et al.*, 1985; Stryjan, 1989b). Among them, those that seem most difficult to resolve and bit ironic given the expectations that alienation would subside, job satisfaction would increase (Whitehorn, 1974; Rothschild-Whitt and Whitt, 1986; Jossa, 2013) increased levels of stress, increased level of (unproductive) conflicts due to freedom of expression, ponderous decision-making processes, operational fragmentation/disorganization and difficulties in obtaining accountability from members (Adizes, 1971; Mansbridge, 1973; Gamson and Levin, 1984; Mellor, Hannah and Stirling, 1988; Walker, 1998; Wuisman and Mannan, 2016). On top of that, under the pressures of market competition, it is quite common that some people experience being self-exploited (Shukaitis, 2010) and not equal with the rest in various aspects including among others pay, prestige, influence and commitment (Mansbridge, 1973; Gastil, 1993a).

Likewise, pressures for brain-drain have also been reported due to a lack of experience/training on democratic self-management and a reluctance to attract relatively skilled people (Gamson and Levin, 1984; Landry *et al.*, 1985; Mellor, Hannah and Stirling, 1988; Abramitzky, 2012). Still, there is scarce empirical material providing us with *long-term* insights (Cornforth 1995 p. 495) on how cooperatives reproduce themselves over time as members' organizations (Stryjan, 1994, p. 66).

Hence, overall, in light of the pessimism surrounding the prospects of workplace democracy, if egalitarian collectives are to advance 'as a much-needed international beacon of an alternative vision for labour' (Ozarow and Croucher, 2014, p. 989), a variety of distinct problems require to be addressed in appropriate ways (Stryjan, 1994, p. 62). But to streamline this process, a deeper understanding of the most established degeneration threats was first required. To this end, in the next section, a more thorough examination of the most well-established degeneration theories took place coupled by some less influential ones that, nevertheless, have been recognized as critical in the area of concern.

2.4 Degeneration theories

Among the various theories describing degeneration threats, there has been little convergence on why and how exactly degeneration holds sway or even if there is a room of manoeuvre under certain conditions. To better showcase this claim and set the ground for developing a less segregated conceptualization of degeneration as a starting point for adequate ameliorative actions, in this section I focused on the divergent –thematically–

diagnoses and not on the shared projection that put together those diverse theories. Along these lines, five different perspectives were identified claiming more or less that:

A worker cooperative is a) an individualistic form of association (cooperative individualism), b) destined to be superseded by a superior mode of organizing (oligarchy emerges due to technical inferiority), c) as it tends to be prone to fragmentation (disorganization), c) while competing with over-resourced capitalists and their cultural hegemony e) in an (a)political manner (apolitical cooperative movement and goal degeneration) (See Figure 1).

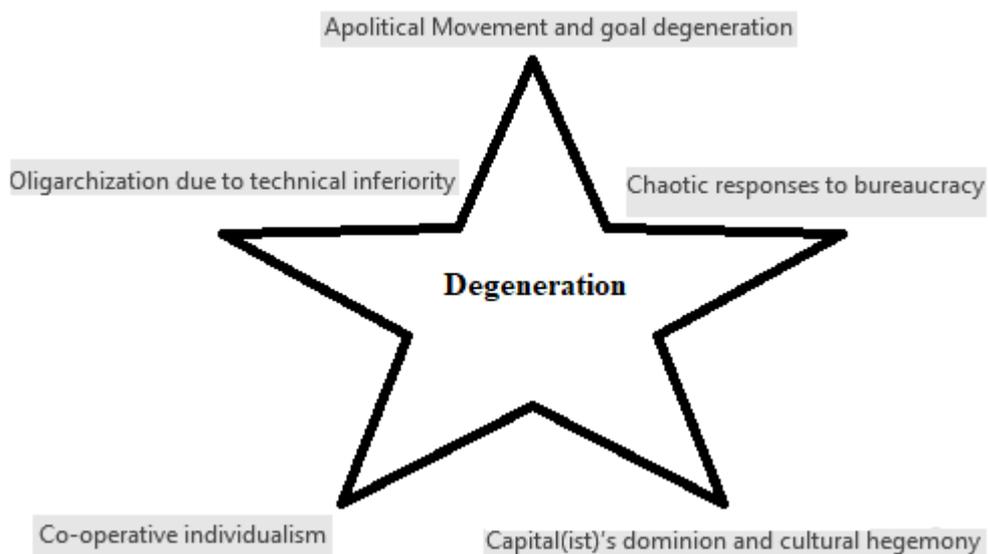


Figure 1: Different streams of degeneration theories

2.4.1 Organizational degeneration

2.4.1.1 Co-operative individualism

In the pioneering research on cooperativism *The Cooperative Movement in Great Britain*, Beatrice Webb –building primarily upon secondary sources from other researchers (Jones, 1975; Cornforth, 1995)– dismissed worker cooperatives as a form of *co-operative individualism*. Instead, she applauded the accomplishments of consumer cooperatives. Hence, Webbs considered that there is ‘something [wrong] in [worker co-operatives] themselves’ (Webb and Webb, 1914, p. 21) –characterized by an individualistic attitude, short-sightedness and lack of discipline– leading to ‘an inevitable conflict of interest ... between the workers in a cooperative and the community they serve’ (Gibson-Graham, 2003, p. 138) or, in other words, to a commercial failure as a result of being controlled democratically by workers (Cornforth, 1995).

We cannot ascribe the failure of the Association of Producers to the fact that they have to depend on voluntary recruiting or that they were exposed to capitalist competition, or that they were made up of manual workers and were entirely dependent for ability on what the manual workers could supply. For all these considerations apply, as we shall see, to the great and growing Co-operative Movement of Associations of Consumers (Webb and Webb, 1914, p. 20).

Likewise, Biehl and Bookchin expected that despite intentions, co-operators –if commercially viable– will over time adopt a bourgeois mentality due to the variety of compromises required to compete on the market and the (perceived) absence of room for manoeuvre in the social realm/arena.

Any privately owned economic unit, then, whether it is managed cooperatively or by executives, whether it is owned by workers or by shareholders, is not only susceptible to assimilation by the capitalist system but will definitely be assimilated eventually, whether its members like it or not. As long as capitalism exists, competition will always require the enterprises within it to look for lower costs (including the cost of labour), greater markets, and advantages over their rivals, in order to maximize their profits. They will tend ever more to value human beings by their levels of productivity and consumption rather than by any other criteria (Biehl, 1998, p. 116).

Along these lines, co-operators have most often been criticized for their profit-seeking mentality. First, when raising prices above normal (Webb and Webb, 1914; Jones, 2010b). Second, when hiring (lower remunerated) non-members (Oppenheimer, 1896; Webb and Webb, 1921; Abell, 1983; Ben-ner, 1984; Cheney, 1999; Rosner, 2008), leading sooner or later to a situation where there are more paid employees than members (Pendleton, 2002).

2.4.1.2. Oligarchy emerges due to technical inferiority

Contrary to the above notion of cooperative individualism, the next major degeneration *threat* for workplace democracy has largely been conceived by research that was not conducted primarily on worker cooperatives (Diefenbach, 2019) but was taken up by researchers on cooperation, like Kirkham (1973 cited in Cornforth 1995). Indeed, the *iron law of oligarchy* introduced by sociologist Robert Michels [1911] (1915) based on his research on the Germany's Social Democratic Party has been considered relevant as he claimed –without offering ‘a formal definition’ (Leach, 2005, p. 315)– that rule by the few was supposed to affect *any* kind of organization: ‘Whoever says organization, says oligarchy’ (Michels, 1962 cited in Leach, 2005, p. 312). Expanding, thus, in a sense Weber (1946), on that workplace democracy is futile as rival bureaucratic organizations

–vesting authority to specialists– are technically superior and only some small-scale organizations can somewhat avoid oligarchization. Other than that, humanity seems trapped within an Iron Cage of instrumental reason and oligarchic rule (Weber, 1921).

The decisive reason for the advance of bureaucratic organization has always been its purely technical superiority over any other form of organizations ... Bureaucratization offers above all the optimum possibility for carrying through the principle of specializing administrative functions according to purely objective considerations (Weber, 1946, pp. 214, 215).

Likewise, Meister (1974, 1984) also argued that deterioration of democracy takes place in an explicit sequence of steps and affects different kinds of organizations based on his research on a variety of democratic associations (see Table 1, for the views of Michels and Meister on degeneration derived from Diefenbach (2019, p. 549) and McDonnell, Macknight and Donnelly (2012, p. 145) respectively).

<p>1. Formation: Direct democracy is central to the operations of the business. There is a lack of capital and the economic functions of the organisation are poorly developed.</p>	<p>1. Organisation is based on division of labour, and division of labour leads to specialisation (pp. 58, 64–65).</p>
<p>2. Transition: the co-operative begins to adopt more conventional organisational practices. Conflict arises between management and the democratic nature of the co-operative.</p>	<p>2. Specialisation makes specialists indispensable and, thus, leadership must be provided by specialists (‘expert leadership’) (pp. 25, 58, 64–65).</p>
<p>3. Establishment: The co-operative has now accepted market values and traditional management hierarchy. Begins to hire more non-members and representative democracy emerges.</p>	<p>3. Specialisation (differentiation of functions) leads to hierarchisation/stratification: to a minority of superiors (‘the leaders’) and a majority of subordinates (‘the masses’) (p. 26).</p>
	<p>4. Professional specialists become professional leaders who decide without consultation and are uncontrolled (pp. 27, 28).</p>
<p>4. Decline: management hierarchy assumes control of the co-operative</p>	<p>5. Discipline and strict observance of hierarchical rules become necessities for subordinates (pp. 27, 96, 100–101, 127).</p>
	<p>6. Leaders isolate themselves, leadership turns into a cartel or ‘closed caste’, and leaders make their dominance and ruling permanent (pp. 67, 92, 98–102).</p>

Table 1: Michels and Meister on degeneration

Along these lines, it is true that cooperatives –due to their democratic nature–, face additional challenges triggering isomorphic pressures (Ames, 1995; DiMaggio and Powell, 2009) to engulf established bureaucratic configurations as a counter-weight, like a) expanding, socializing new members and sustaining committed, homogenous membership (Marshall, 1920; Mansbridge, 1979; Gamson and Levin, 1984; Stryjan, 1989b; Schoening, 2010), b) recruiting and democratically utilizing critical (organisational) skills (Gamson and Levin, 1984) while also balancing between different level of skills, training, involvement and influence (Brandow and McDonnell, 1981; Putterman, 1982; Develtere, 1992; Stryjan, 1994), c) achieving productive use of

meetings and conflict (Mansbridge, 1973), as well as, d) obtaining accountability and discipline in the absence of hierarchy (Webb and Webb, 1914; Meade, 1972). Yet, more scrutiny is required to arrive at the conclusion that such pressures do lead within the context of (coalitions of) work collectives in...

... a concentration of entrenched illegitimate authority and/or influence in the hands of a minority, such that de facto what that minority wants is generally what comes to pass, even when it goes against the wishes (whether actively or passively expressed) of the majority (Leach, 2005, p. 329).

Meanwhile, it is also true that there are also benefits from workplace democratization (Cornforth, Thomas, Spear, Lewis, *et al.*, 1988). Yet, such benefits could better be exploited if co-operators did not get themselves constrained in the logic of oligarchization by aiming solely to converse its course by introducing governance structures to police those mandated for managing the cooperatives (Davis, 2001) or retreating towards the opposite, a 'chaotic unstructured state' of disorganization/fragmentation (Herbst, 1976, p. 29).

2.4.1.3 Disorganization

Following Michels, bureaucracy has most often been perceived along party lines as 'a specialized layer of leadership, which ... uses the mass organization for its own ends' (Van Der Walt and Schmidt, 2009a, p. 188). Likewise, centralism has also been conceived in various occasions –especially trade unions– as an...

... artificial organization from above downward which turns over the affairs of everybody in a lump to a small minority, is always attended by barren official routine; and this crushes individual conviction, kills all personal initiative by lifeless discipline and bureaucratic ossification, and permits no independent action (Rocker and Chomsky, 1998, p. 90).

Therefore, in their attempts to distance themselves from such incarnations of centralism and bureaucracy, co-operators have often arrived at quite problematic situations characterized by a lack of structure or coordination either within horizontal cooperatives or their federations (Freeman, 1972; Landry *et al.*, 1985; Walker, 1998). In this sense, it has proved quite challenging for co-operators to adequately integrate competing demands...

...between the principle of democratic decentralization of management, according to which workers in all parts of the enterprise should decide on all matters directly, and the idea of the enterprise as a working and

business unity aiming at the greatest economic efficiency possible (Kamusić, 2016, p. 221).

In other words, the ‘absence of any real and identifiable centre, controlled from below’ (Castoriadis, 1988, p. 100) has often resulted in spineless organizations (Freeman, 1972; Landry *et al.*, 1985; Walker, 1998). Posed in this way, decentralized unity of command as a key component of workplace democracy is not simply a matter of decentralizing authority through institutionalizing a general assembly as the ultimate responsible decision-making body (Daskalaki and Kokkinidis, 2017). Instead, coordination among different (bodies of) workers is required to prevent handing over –out of desperation– power to the experts to ‘put an end to chaos’ (Lenin, 1974, p. 431).

2.4.1.4 Capital(ist)’s dominion and cultural hegemony

Turning to broadly Marxist theories of degeneration that emphasize the detrimental ‘external forces [of] capitalism’ (Cornforth, Thomas, Spear, Lewis, *et al.*, 1988), worker cooperatives are expected to fold under confrontation from (over-resourced) capitalists’ competition (Luxemburg, 1966; Michael Bakunin, 1971) due to their undercapitalization (Thornley, 1982; Dow, 2003), and, either the social vision will fade out (Webb, 1891; Biehl, 1998) or they will have to be accommodated with a marginal presence in only a few sectors (Ellerman, 1982; Marx, 1985; Malleon, 2014a) ‘that cannot sustain capitalist firms’ (Ben-ner, 1984, p. 253).

Besides, radical cooperatives –as a deviant form of organizing– face a variety of constraints by the environment they find themselves in and which influences both their survival and their internal operations (Simons and Ingram, 2003). For instance, worker cooperatives will likely face media reporting biases (Mangan and Byrne, 2018), lack of access to finance (Gintis, 1989; Comeau and Levesque, 1993), appropriate (liberatory) technology (Bookchin, 1982; Castoriadis, 1988), and, most crucially –as this results in society at large to be unfamiliar and disinterested in setting up worker cooperatives (Fanning and McCarthy, 1986; Cornforth, Thomas, Spear and Lewis, 1988; Doucouliagos, 1990; Moyer *et al.*, 2001; Schwartz, 2011; Ricketts, 2012; Malleon, 2014a)– lack of an appropriately supportive education-socio-cultural background (Levin, 1982; Cornforth and Thomas, 1990; Lambrou and Petrescu, 2014). Indeed, according to Pérotin (2006, p. 296)...

... problems with firm creation, rather than dissolution, may explain the limited incidence of labour-managed firms even in countries where issues of structural viability have been resolved.

2.4.2 *Apolitical cooperative movement and goal degeneration*

Political neutrality or depoliticization is often considered quite attractive within cooperativism to curb the pressures for internal infighting (Cahill, 2013; Ratner, 2013). However, even if participants themselves do not limit cooperatives as a means for merely improving their individual conditions (Ratner, 2009), without proper leverage, social control, internationalization (Bretos and Errasti, 2017; Flecha and Ngai 2014) and a strategy favouring wider social changes (Masquelier, 2017) that unfolds as part of a disciplined and unifying political current supporting self-management on a societal level, even the most radical cooperative movement is ‘bound to disintegrate on its own’ (Boggs, 1977, p. 107) or become domesticated (Robinson, 2007).

To this end, the state –even if a leftist government is in place– can have a devastating influence to the cooperative movement ranging from cases of straightforward state/government opposition (Széll, Blyton and Cornforth, 1989; Lindenfeld and Wynn, 1997; Rouaud, 2007) to paternalistic and counterproductive support that atrophies the cooperative spirit (Adizes, 1971; Fairbairn, 1991; Develtere, 1992; Simons and Ingram, 2003; Warhurst and Darr, 2006).

Finally, apart from influencing negatively the democracy/resilience of individual cooperatives, degenerative pressures can also (indirectly) affect the broader networks and movements within which cooperatives are nested (Develtere, 1992; Staber, 1992). If such environmental pressures prevail, whole cooperative sectors become frozen as movement involvement degrades and a retreat from objectives of social performance to market instrumentalism takes place (Diamantopulos, 2012). In turn, a hybrid form of *worker capitalism* develops (Bradley and Gelb, 1983)– where even individual property rights are not eliminated (Ellerman, 1984).

2.4.3. *Summary*

The theories of degeneration are diverse, stand-alone and mostly overly pessimistic generalizations/projections based on historical descriptions of failures in advancing workplace democratization in a micro, meso or even a macro level. While different lines of argumentation behind the different degeneration theses have been identified and grouped before –like in the often-cited research of Cornforth and colleagues (1988)–, there has been a lack of theory construction aimed at better integrating these diverse theories into a more coherent whole ‘from the perspective of those experiencing the phenomenon’ (Woodgate, 2000, p. 194). In turn, my real-life experience and the

conceptualization of degeneration as a wicked problem (Diamantopoulos, 2013, pp. 17–18) has triggered me towards such an undertaking.

However, my theoretical interest on integrating rather than rejecting degeneration theories is tightly connected with the intention to better craft adequate coping strategies and ‘to make [new cooperativism] work’ (Baldacchino, 1990, p. 476). In this sense, I have intended to also contribute to the small body of literature that provides recommendations and tools for resisting degeneration. With that in mind, I turn to relevant publications for inspiration and review.

2.5 Recommendations and tools for resisting degeneration

In this section, my focus has not been on challenging the degeneration theories head-on as others have done before on both theoretical (Abrahamsson, 1977; Baldacchino, 1990; Egan, 1990; Diefenbach, 2019) and practical grounds. However, I did use degeneration theories (in the sequence presented in the previous section) to structure my review on the most well-known recommendations and tools available for co-operators to resist degeneration.

2.5.1 Safeguards for bridling individualism

As the aggregated experience of co-operators enlarges (Ingle, 1980), a variety of more mundane and easily-implemented safeguards develop to address issues like hiring non-members (Rosner, 2008) more effectively than in the past. Indeed, as the following passage illustrates, new generations of co-operators in the United Kingdom have learned from the mistakes of their forerunners and appropriate solutions are in place.

The incorporation of constitutional safeguards into the rules of worker cooperatives has, so far at least, helped to prevent formal take-over either by external shareholders or by a minority of workers. This is not to say that formal degeneration cannot occur, but it appears to be rare in Britain today (Cornforth, Thomas, Spear and Lewis, 1988, p. 120).

Likewise, opening up to their communities (Ranis, 2010; Meyer and Hudon, 2017), socializing ownership and supporting non-profit activities are some ways through which co-operators have often attempted to distance themselves from a profit-oriented economy (Case and Taylor, 1979; Rothschild and Whitt, 1989) and avoid cases of failure stemming from market success (Baldacchino, 1990, pp. 464–5).

Finally, Janet Biehl has proposed from a Social Ecology perspective that cooperatives would better be embedded within ‘a larger community that has the power to bridle’ an individualist attitude from the part of co-operators, (Biehl, 1998, p. 117) and promote ‘the

benefit of all' (Biehl, 1998, p. 119). Hence, if the economy was municipalized (along libertarian lines), ...

... those who worked in a factory would participate in formulating policies not only for that factory but for all other factories—and for farms as well. They would participate in this decision-making not as workers, farmers, technicians, engineers, or professionals, but as citizens. The decisions they made would be guided by the needs of their community as a whole, not by those of a specific enterprise or occupation or trade; they would serve the best interests of the community (Biehl, 1998, p. 119).

2.5.2. Choosing supporting practices of consensual democracy

According to theories of oligarchization, it is inevitable that power will be delegated voluntarily by mandators to specialists for their organizations to become more effective only to later find out that 'the administrative apparatus is no longer an obedient instrument' (Abrahamsson, 1977, p. 24). However, there is also a small body of empirical research available on worker cooperatives engulfing specialization which showcased that this course is not inevitable (Hunt 1995, Cornforth et al 1988).

In fact, while there are difficulties that inhibit workplace democracy, there are also (critical) choices available for cooperatives to regenerate (Tomlinson, 1980; Batstone, 1983; Cornforth, Thomas, Spear and Lewis, 1988; Cornforth, 1995). Hence, no pattern plays out 'in all cooperatives as in Mester's four-stage life-cycle [see Table 1]' (Cornforth, Thomas, Spear, Lewis, *et al.*, 1988) and certainly not all cooperatives react in the same way (Gherardi and Masiero, 1987).

Along these lines, as Holleb and Abrams (1975a, pp. 142–150) have illustrated in their model, whether the end outcome of the bureaucratization process will be a conventional bureaucracy (degeneration) or *consensual democracy* –a balanced incorporation on an organizational level of both democracy and bureaucracy that favours effective democracy– is primarily influenced by organizational choices. In other words, apart from adopting political democracy by 'distributing final authority equally among all the members of an organization', in consensual democracy, a key preoccupation is to adopt organizational schemes that prove effective (Ingle, 1980, pp. 1–2).

The three-staged model introduced by Holleb and Abrams (1975a), which is not linear but involves iterations between the different stages, is based on findings drawn from alternative self-help organizations of the late 1960's. However, it can well be adapted to worker cooperatives, as well, and some stages might be skipped if co-operators are relatively informed about the specifics of cooperativism (Ingle, 1980; Rosner, 1984b).

During the first stage of consensual anarchy, the decision-making process is rather informal and there is minimal division of labour. In the second stage, more conventional decision-making process and work configurations emerge. In the third stage, either the organization will fully resort to conventional organizational lines or an adequately radical organizational solution will be developed that is quite effective.

Hence, in this sense, bureaucracy (and specialization as a core element) is not treated per se as a key signal for a move towards (organizational) degeneration/oligarchy (Bernstein, 1976b; Meister, 1984) but as an ongoing challenge, especially for radical cooperatives carrying a greater commitment to horizontality (Rothschild and Whitt, 1989; Jaumier, 2017).

Along these lines, a variety of ways for fostering inclusive and effective models of participation have been devised by co-operators to adapt to external pressures without handing over power to the experts (Bernstein, 1976a; Kokkinidis, 2015; Jaumier, 2017; Pansera and Rizzi, 2018). For instance, most cooperatives rooted in or inspired by social movements (that are documented in literature), apart from socializing ownership, have also been routinely adopting consensus decision-making (Radical Routes, 2008; Gradin, 2015), developing procedures of group-members alignment (Kanter, 1972; Langmead, 2017), promoting skill sharing, (job) rotation and enrichment (Freeman, 1972; Landry *et al.*, 1985; Maeckelbergh, 2009; M. Wilson, 2014) or even sortition (Pek, 2019) and ridiculing to avoid the eruption of both formal and informal oligarchies from erupting (Jaumier, 2017).

Still, such mechanisms (Collins, 1999), have certainly limitations, for example, in balancing uneven skills and (legitimate) influence on decisions and, thus, cultivate (even) more democratic organizations (Mansbridge, 1973, 1979). Moreover, serious concerns have been raised about the viability of educating co-operators in-house (Gamson and Levin, 1984; Cornforth, Thomas, Spear, Lewis, *et al.*, 1988; Rothschild and Whitt, 1989) and whether an all-out aversion towards specialization by co-operators (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979; Rothschild and Whitt, 1989; Malleson, 2014b) could (in)directly result in draining radical cooperativism from critically necessary skills (Gamson and Levin, 1984; Landry *et al.*, 1985).

Besides, from a broadly Marxist perspective (Rattansi, 1982; Braverman, 1998), task specialization and division of labour, as partly championed by Adam Smith (1776) and

Bray (1968, p. 63), is not a mere capitalist, hierarchical phenomenon especially if reciprocity of benefits or collective ownership is achieved (Marx, Engels 1998).

... there must always be division of labour — there will always be some whose mental superiority will qualify them to be the directors of their fellows — there will always be some who are pre-eminent in letters, and the arts and sciences — but all such are only parts of the great whole, and are as dependent on their fellows, as their fellows are upon them. As the dependence, therefore, is equal, the labour should be equal; and, whether the labour be equal or unequal, the remuneration should ever be in proportion to the labour, whatever may be the character or the results, or the end of that labour. Division of labour must never be lost sight of, for it is the lightener of man's toils, and the first step to civilization and refinement (Bray, 1968, p. 63).

With collective ownership the so-called people's will vanishes, to make way for the real will of the cooperative ... If Mr Bakunin only knew something about the position of a manager in a workers' cooperative factory, all his dreams of domination would go to the devil. He should have asked himself what form the administrative function can take on the basis of this workers' state, if he wants to call it that (Marx, 1986, p. 297).

Indeed, at times, Marx(ists) seemed quite comfortable to accommodate with both a technical and even a social division of labour. For instance, this was the case within a particular revolutionary setting like the Bolshevik Revolution where 'realism' (Daniels, 1993) was exhibited while choosing to step back from workplace democracy towards one-man management (Boggs, 1977).

As Castoriadis (1998) has argued such a turn was consistent with the notion of scientific socialism but not with his vision of self-management as communicated through *Socialism ou Barbarie* (Castoriadis, 1988). Indeed, while he endorsed a technical division of labour while introducing the plan factory, a specialised enterprise supporting a society-wide workers' management of production that 'work[ed] out and present[ed] to society as a whole the implications and consequences of the plan (or plans) suggested', he did not engulf a social division of labour (Castoriadis, 1988, p. 122).

Instead, he followed a consensual democracy approach –also shared by Horvat and Bookchin– founded upon the principle of distinguishing between taking political decisions on a democratic manner and executing decisions based on special knowledge, as much as possible coupled by the introduction of appropriate safeguards for misbehaviour.

Suppose an assembly was debating whether to build a road. After weighing the pros and cons of building the road, the citizens might vote

that the road was necessary. Their decision to build it is an example of policymaking. The road could be built over any of several routes. The engineers in the community would devise plans for the various possibilities, solving any technical problems that might arise with each, then bring those plans to the assembly. There the engineers would lay the alternatives before the citizens, explaining each one clearly. Few of the citizens in the community would likely know how to build a road, but then, such expertise would not be necessary for them to have. It would merely be necessary that they understand clear explanations and the differences among the plans. Most important, the engineers would not be the ones to decide which road to build (except in their capacity as citizens). They would simply function as a panel of experts. After debating the strengths and weaknesses of each plan, it is the citizens (including the experts in their capacity as citizens) who would choose their preference (Bookchin, 1998, p. 106).

The organizational/political goal of a socialist enterprise is to maximize both democracy in decision-making and efficiency of implementation ... Since political and technical decisions cannot be neatly separated and neither can work units be made perfectly homogeneous nor the entire work community sufficiently small, there is always a possibility for individuals and groups to abuse power. Therefore, special safeguards ought to be built into the system. This implies an institutionalization of control and conflict-resolution as well as an institutionalized defence of individual interests against the inconsiderateness of the group and a defence of collective interests against misbehaviour by individuals (Horvat, 1983, p. 279).

In this way, people have both the formal authority and decide ‘in full knowledge of the relevant facts’ (1988, p. 122). A notion that is also somewhat reflected in the guidelines adopted by the International Co-operative Alliance (2015) for the management of cooperatives.

Key strategic policy decisions need to be explained to members clearly, concisely and in a way that the whole membership can understand, with alternative options given where appropriate.

2.5.3. Operating systems for coordination

To use a metaphor, it is common sense, at least among basketball fans, that if a team has no centre in the field that it will face difficulties in taking rebounds. However, it is, so far, not that common-sense among radical co-operators that if you do not have a manager or director –apart from evading a potential source of (in)formal authoritarianism within the workplace– fragmentation/polycentrism might well undermine workplace democracy. In fact, according to Landry *et al.* (1985), this is the natural outcome of a certain ideology influencing praxis (Develtere, 1992).

Capitalism and the so-called socialist states have produced one notion (or dogma) of a good organization: efficient, hierarchical organization, with a

strict division of labour, which is assumed to be good for all situations. Since libertarians wish to model themselves neither on capitalism nor the so-called socialist states, the industrial form of organization with which they are associated is rejected for all situations. In reaction fully democratic, informal, non-hierarchical organization becomes the model for all cases and contexts ... The assumption is that as long as we fight in the right way we are bound to win. from here it is only a short step to thinking that it does not matter if we win, as long as we've played the game in the right spirit (Landry et al., 1985, p. 13, emphasis in original).

Therefore, unless the assumptions of such an ideology are challenged (Stryjan, 1994), it would be naïve to expect a betterment in avoiding operational fragmentation. To this end, the contribution of the Viable Systems Model developed by cybernetician Stafford Beer (Beer, 1995; Swann, 2018) and adapted by Walker (1998, pp. 1, 7) for structuring (federation of) cooperatives 'to function [as whole systems characterized by] increased efficiency without compromising democratic principles' is highly topical.

Inspired by the human form and how we, humans, react in a changing environment by coordinating our brain and muscles through our nerve system (Beer, 1995), VSM was designed as a '*diagnostic tool*' (Beer, 1995) to serve 'as a guide for identifying important roles, functions and lines of communication' that radicals could use for avoiding fragmentation, ineffective decentralisation and despotism (Swann, 2018, p. 449).

In Figure 2, I adapted Permin's (2016, p. 420) visualization of the VSM concept. Even though, at first sight, the five subsystems of VSM might seem quite difficult to grasp. Swann (2018, pp. 436–437), however, offers a rather accessible summary:

System One [muscles and organs]: The System One units of the model represent the operational parts of an organisation. The System One units operate on specific tasks within the external environment and have the autonomy to respond to changes in their environmental niches as they see fit.

System Two [spinal cord]: The second level is a framework within which System One units communicate with one another and coordinate their activities.

System Three [brain stem]: System Three is the first level of that second or higher part of the VSM: it regulates the operations of System One units not in line with each other but in line with the goals of the system or organisation of which they are part.

System Four [interbrain]: The fourth level is where the immediate strategy of the system or organisation is developed. It involves those activities that take in information from System Three about how the lower, autonomous System One units are operating as well as information from the environment about changes and fluctuations and how the system or

organisation responds to and affects these. In addition, it is involved in transmitting information between System Three and the planning and longer-range strategic thinking and decision-making at System Five.

System Five [cortex]: System Five is the part that deals with the long-term planning for the system or organisation.

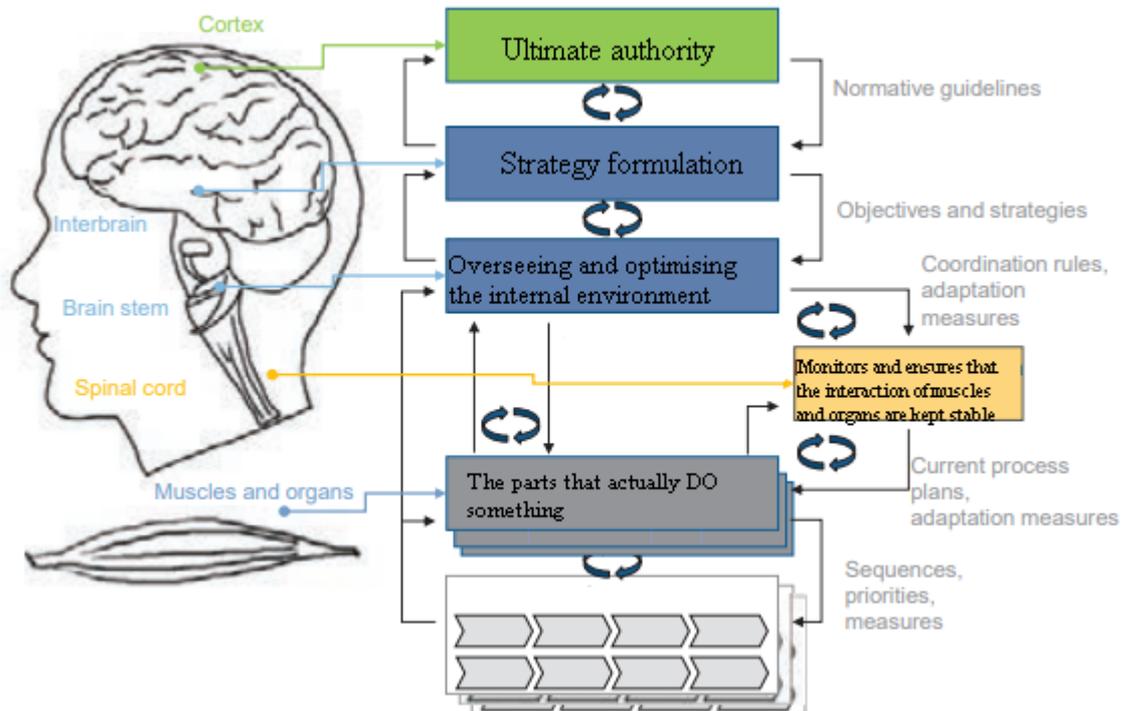


Figure 2: An adapted version of Permin’s (2016, p. 420) visualization of the VSM concept

A second approach that has recently been gaining traction from co-operators as a potential remedy for developing a better flow of communication and coordination among members are organizational operating systems of dynamic self-governance like Holacracy and Sociocracy (Laloux, 2014; Robertson, 2015; Mcnamara, 2017; Eckstein and Buck, 2018). Still, apart from practitioners’ anecdotes, there are very limited research outputs examining their implementation. For instance, see the research of Heijne and Buck on Steiner-Waldorf schools and intentional communities which also summarizes key considerations for dynamic self-governance (2013, pp. 41–42):

1. Clear and Compelling Purpose [a) Written Vision, Mission, Aim, b) Aims that anchor domains of decision-making].
2. Defined Roles and Accountability (Leadership) [a) Written role descriptions, b) Consent-based election process for all key roles, c) At minimum, these elected leadership roles: a. Facilitator b. Secretary, d) Other elected roles as needed, such as Representative(s) to other linked circle(s), e) Operational leader, f) Assign operational role].

3. Effective Processes [a) Solution-focused processes to achieve the circle's aim: Lead-Do-Measure and 3-step design of work, 3-step or 9-step proposal process, b) Facilitator and Secretary prepare and send agendas in advance, c) Rounds where people are repeatedly given the floor and asked for their participation, d) Meeting minutes that emphasize tasks and decisions, e) Ongoing development; development = learning, teaching, exploring/researching in interaction with doing].
4. Fair and Efficient Decision-making [a) Consent decision-making, b) Defined operational decision-making, c) Double-linking].
5. Good Communications, Among Group Members and Outside the Group [Role descriptions, elected leadership, and circle representatives].
6. Record Keeping of the Organization's Shared Information [a) A document system on-line that everyone can access equally, with printed records for those without computer access, overseen by Secretary, b) A handbook kept by Secretary for reference in meetings].

Still, despite the potentials for such solutions to alleviate enduring dysfunctional elements of governing alternative organizations like (worker) cooperatives (Wuisman and Mannan, 2016), it is important not to be negligent about the fact that such organizational solutions were initially developed for conventional for-profit enterprises (Eckstein and Buck, 2018; Swann, 2018) or representative democracy and certainly not collective management. Therefore, especially given the limited empirical material for developing structural solutions for advancing collective governance, more emphasis should be given on how to cautiously tweak them to avoid the reinstatement of the logics of the old system (Guevara, 2005) and not merely demystify them (Ferschli, 2017).

2.5.4. Nurturing a supportive cooperative environment

By integrating business and social goals (Fairbairn, 2002; Novkovic, 2008), and positioning themselves in market niches providing for caring communities (Ferguson, 1991; Müller, 1991), co-operators have often managed to exploit the cooperative advantage (Ferguson, 1991; Müller, 1991; Birchall, 2003; Storey, Basterretxea and Salaman, 2014) to sustainably reproduce themselves over time (Stryjan, 1989) and secure guaranteed employment (Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2014).

Besides, as a result of the well-acknowledged desire for union and cooperation among cooperatives (Watkins, 1970; MacPherson, 1995; Birchall, 1997), a nurturing environment that supports cooperative development in the *meso* level has often materialized (Cornforth, Thomas, Spear and Lewis, 1988; Whyte *et al.*, 1991; Ammirato, 1996, 2018; Spear and Thomas, 1997; Savard, 2007; Audebrand and Barros, 2018).

For instance, as a way to avoid intra-competition, shelter organizations, networks and common funds (Dana, 1896; Horvat, 1982; Gunn, 1984; Comeau and Levesque, 1993; Jones, 2010a; Bretos and Errasti, 2017) have been channelled towards establishing systems of interdependent firms (Jordan, 1986; Safri, 2015; Bousalham and Vidaillet, 2018) and developing mutually supportive cooperative supply-chains to expand even in an international level (Flecha and Ngai, 2014; Safri, 2015; Bretos and Errasti, 2017; Dafermos, 2017; Esper *et al.*, 2017).

Besides, drawing from a broader community ecology perspective (Jordan, 1986; Egan, 1990; Staber, 1992; Menzani and Zamagni, 2010), co-operators forming clusters of mutually supportive organizations, actively promoting cooperative development (Jordan, 1986; Egan, 1990; Staber, 1992; Menzani and Zamagni, 2010) and becoming well-rooted within social movements are key prerequisites to increase the material development, confidence and the self-activity of the masses (Brinton, 2004; M. Wilson, 2014; Yeo, 2018) by habituating them (Michail Bakunin, 1971) not to reproduce capital and wage-labour (Perlman, 1969) while defying the hegemonic capitalocentric common sense norms (Marx, 1864; Gibson-Graham, 2003).

2.5.5. Advancing bottom-up the movement for the cooperative commonwealth

Apart from experimenting in forming mutually supportive relations and coalitions between individual cooperatives (Esper *et al.*, 2017) or cooperatives and their communities (Ranis, 2010; Meyer and Hudon, 2017), fighting along with other forces in the macro level for the socialization of power and means of production under a coherent strategy (Laidlaw, 1980; Fairbairn, 2004a, 2004b; Cahill, 2013; Ratner, 2013; Riddell, 2015; Masquelier, 2017; Quarter, Mook and Armstrong, 2017) –through supporting strikes or other ongoing struggles– has been both recommended (Michail Bakunin, 1971; Marx, 1985; Jones, 2010b; Riddell and Communistische Internationale, 2011; Riddell, 2015) and proven (Egan, 1990; Fairbairn, 2001) to be legitimate safeguards for degeneration.

However, to arrive at a self-directed cooperative movement (Pollet and Develtere, 2004; Adeler, 2014; Esper *et al.*, 2017) –rooted within broader social movements (Greenberg, 1981; Egan, 1990)– and not a recuperated cooperative sector (Marx, 1985; Biehl, 1998; Robinson, 2007; Jones, 2010b) should come as a result of co-operators themselves promoting their agenda (Vézina, 2001; Pollet and Develtere, 2004; Diamantopulos, 2012; Adeler, 2014) with ‘specific proposals for economic democracy’ (Mygind and Rock, 1993), and not established top-down through state action (Marx, 1933) since

‘organizational and institutional structures *alone* ... are not sufficient (Scurrah, 1984, p. 337).

For this task, a broad international, democratic organization based on bottom-up delegation –probably mixing unitary and adversary democracy (Mansbridge, 1983)– instead of top-down government is required ‘to unite and concentrate’ forces (International Workingmen’s Association, 1964, p. 329) with a clear strategy (Baldacchino, 1990) and a vision for a unified common practice (i.e. the cooperative commonwealth). Hence, there is a necessity for radical co-operators to promote decentralized unity not only within their organizations but also in further developing the cooperative movement.

To this end, if paid organizers of any sort are deemed necessary while scaling-up, specific care should be exhibited to avoid the formation of an apparatus influencing policy (Schmidt and Van Der Walt, 2009, pp. 188–189). In other words, safety-valves for bureaucratic conservatism (Socialist Workers Party, 1940) are required so that paid functionaries respect the movement goals and do not prioritize their own benefit (Michels, 1915; Leach, 2005; Schmidt and Van Der Walt, 2009).

2.5.6. Summary

After obtaining an overview on the various recommendations raised and tools proposed in the literature for co-operators to better resist degeneration vis-à-vis the degeneration theories, it became clear –following Diefenbach’s rationale (2019)– that for each threat there is at least one potential solution. But given the diachronic significance of the various degeneration threats, there is also much room for contributions in this area as also indicated by the calls for further research ‘on the resources, structures, and practices that contribute to the resilience of worker cooperatives’ (Cheney et al. 2014, p. 595). Likewise, there is also plenty of room for validating/testing available recommendations and relevant tools in action.

In turn, the current thesis focuses on both issues from the standpoint of promoting within Critical Management Studies constructive management knowledge (Spicer *et al.*, 2009; Barros, 2010) fit for circumventing ‘socially oppressive, asymmetrical relations of power’ within egalitarian collectives (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996, p. 18).

2.6 The unfinished business of Critical Management Studies: Promoting emancipatory forms of management

As mentioned above, this research project was broadly rooted within critical organization studies interested in a problematization of ‘existing social and organisational relationships as natural or unavoidable’ (Fournier and Grey, 2000, p. 19). More specifically, by focusing on the degeneration pressures cooperatives face (Sauser, 2008; Cathcart, 2013; Flecha and Ngai, 2014; Lambro and Petrescu, 2014; Leca, Gond and Barin Cruz, 2014; Storey, Basterretxea and Salaman, 2014; Pansera and Rizzi, 2018) and reflecting about generating responses in an organizational level in line with cooperative values, the thesis offers a supportive research attitude which seems particularly timely as contemporary critical scholars encompassing a variety of heterodox approaches on business administration are increasingly questioning their impact on practice (Contu, 2018) and are looking to move beyond saying what is wrong with management to offering positive, affirmative engagement with practice (Spicer *et al.*, 2009; Fleming and Banerjee, 2015; King and Learmonth, 2015; Learmonth *et al.*, 2016; Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman, 2016) that does not fall prey to managerialism (Parker and Parker, 2017).

Along these lines, even though only a few researchers have overall focused on actively supporting alternative organizations from an organizational perspective (Parker and Parker, 2017), alternative forms of production have proportionally featured strongly in the small body of literature linked to the notion of Critical Performativity (CP).

For instance, Paranque and Willmott, drawing from secondary empirical material, claim John Lewis Partnership (JLP) represents a ‘practical demonstration, albeit flawed, of how an alternative form of organization is sufficiently “efficient” and durable to be able to “compete” against joint-stock companies’ (2014, p. 606). CP, in the sense, has been used as a lens to assess how JLP fares in providing us with progressive forms of management and not the other way around.

Likewise, the ‘in situ historical, case of critical performativity’ that Esper *et al.* (2017, p. 690) provide while highlighting the multifaceted ways that academics have supported the reproduction of alternative forms of production in Argentina –ranging from documentation to ‘participation in trials as witnesses and experts’ (Esper *et al.*, 2017, p. 677)–, fails short of (even documenting) active intervention in the content of cooperative management.

Finally, Leca, Gond and Cruz claim to explore ‘how scholars and academic institutions can “walk the talk” of critical performativity and not merely subvert managerial discourse by supporting the development of alternative organizational forms and delivering the methods and knowledge that are related to the construction of these organizational forms’ (2014, p. 685). Yet, once again, there is no evidence provided regarding the creation of new methods and knowledge for co-operators to use in their everyday life.

Hence, despite the potentials for scholars’ engagement, support and, at times, celebration of worker-cooperatives within CMS (Esper *et al.*, 2017; Jaumier, 2017; Pansera and Rizzi, 2018), CP has been mostly used as a lens to conduct research on (supporting) alternative forms of production but not on developing organizational knowledge/tools in line with cooperative values (Novkovic, 2004). Reproducing, thus, the main deficiency of research conducted on cooperatives (resisting degeneration) as already highlighted before.

Therefore, this small body of literature rather feeds the scepticism regarding how CP might (better) work in practice (Cabantous *et al.*, 2015; Fleming and Banerjee, 2015; Parker and Parker, 2017; King and Land, 2018) so that, for the purpose of this thesis, worker-owned-and-governed cooperatives to actually be considered an inspirational alternative (Shukaitis, 2010; Cheney *et al.*, 2014).

One way in this direction is –drawing from the critical pedagogy tradition (Freire, 2005) –, not to fail to engage with practitioners, potentially interested in and benefiting from an ‘active and subversive intervention into managerial discourses and practices’ (Spicer *et al.*, 2009, p. 538) either altogether (E Wray-Bliss, 2002; Wray-Bliss, 2003) or early enough (Varkarolis and King, 2017).

Therefore, before ruling out the possibilities of academics (Varkarolis and King, 2017) or business schools supporting alternative organizations –which is in itself a contentious issue (Rowlinson and Hassard, 2011; Parker, 2018)–, more emphasis should be given in developing a better match between sympathetic critical scholars and, in this case, radical co-operators’ so as ‘to produce knowledge that is worthy of transfer to both science and practice’ (Andrew Pettigrew 2001 p. S61&67 cited in Van de Ven, 2007, p. 6). Besides, crafting organizational solutions requires, ‘taking into account the men-in-a-situation to whom’ this research ‘was ostensibly directed’ (Freire, 2005, p. 94).

Along these lines, this thesis largely supports Barros’ (2010, p. 181) critique on that CMS literature has largely failed ‘to affect and influence practice’ and his choice of preferred

methodology to reverse this trend, Participatory Action Research. Yet, instead of drawing from Habermas' theory of communicative action, I mostly drew inspiration from Castoriadis' (1988, 1989, 1998) and considered my research as part of a self-reflexive process of a coalition of egalitarian collectives questioning their activities, norms and assumptions as part of a 'continuous process of democratic self-institution' (Castoriadis, 1989, p. 12).

To this end, I did not simply wait 'for problems to be brought to' me within the formal debates but I rather sought them, to bring them in the table (Sarason, 1972, p. 250) for promoting healthier organizations (Gastil, 1992b; Lindenfeld and Wynn, 1997), 'not solely in terms of fiscal health' (Audebrand, 2017, p. 381) but also in terms of potentialities for supporting the mission (and outreach) of self-governance (Horvat, 1972; Audebrand, 2017).

Hence, my theoretical focus on degeneration came as a result of being identified as first and foremost a real-life problem in the field requiring both the researcher and co-operators 'working together in search of solutions to practical problems' (Roth, Sandberg and Svensson, 2004, p. 117). In this sense, degeneration was not approached in a positivist, detached-way to uncover or refute a (sociological) law governing society and history because literature pointed me in this direction but instead it was first experienced as an organizational-political problem requiring a better theory to match the empirical case (Dubois and Gadde, 2002; Potsdam, 2015).

But having drawn theoretically from a wide variety of disciplines and theoretical approaches within the literature review, which theories and concepts exactly shaped my research and why? That is something that the following section on the process for arriving at my theoretical framework covers in quite a detail.

2.7 A validated in practice theoretical framework as a starting point for integrating anarchist cybernetics with cooperative humanism

According to Nilsson (1986), when it comes to researching cooperatives, there are two extreme models of theory building that most authors follow. On the one hand, some theories are developed deductively based on an ideal type of cooperative that is rooted in social and political philosophy. On the other hand, there are real-life theories that proceed inductively from 'organizational practices, as they are applied in such organizations to theory' (Stryjan, 1989a, p. 1).

Likewise, degeneration has been most often approached inductively and deductively. In particular, the well-established theories of degeneration are mostly inductively constructed generalizations derived from within certain contexts. For instance, Webbs (1920) focused on the co-operative movement in late nineteenth-century Great Britain, Michels (1915) on the Social Democratic Party in Germany, Boggs (2015) on the disintegration of the council movement within revolutionary Russia, Landry *et al.* (1985) on the failures of radical cooperatives in the UK during the 1970's, and so on.

When such failures were translated into inescapable projections, the viewpoints of their advocates were rightfully targeted by scholars deductively testing their theorems and offering disconfirming evidence. Hence, a way has been paved for theorizing degeneration as something that, instead of inevitable, is conditional (Hunt, 1992; Cornforth, 1995).

However, what seems to be missing from the literature are theories that incorporate not only hard laws and exceptions but also aggregate the various stand-alone degeneration theories. Yet, for such a task neither (naïve/extreme) deductive nor inductive approaches are adequate. That is because there is almost no pointers in the established literature for holistically exploring the various degeneration theories (with the minor exception of Diamantopoulos (2013), who briefly touches upon degeneration as a wicked problem) and there is also no reason to unite the various strands of degeneration theories if conducting a quite strictly inductive, white paper research (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Instead, being embedded within the area of concern (Brydon-Miller and Greenwood, 2003) as a member of a worker cooperative for ten years, a founding member of a network of worker cooperatives for six years and having conducted overt research as a heavily committed complete-member-researcher for three years (Adler and Adler, 1987), being equipped with prior knowledge and having adopted an abductive approach to address real-world problems (Potsdam, 2015) has proven catalytic for concluding that there is a mismatch between established law-like theories of degeneration and my own experience as a reflexive practitioner.

Along these lines, an interpretation of degeneration as a messy problem requiring a holistic diagnosis of 'total system performance' was primarily the result of my relatively vain attempts over the years to solve each and every component of the problem independently (Ackoff, 1971, p. 661). Hence, reflecting upon my own 'action which is researched, changed and re-researched' over time (Wadsworth, 1998 cited in Davis, 2007,

p. 189), I realized that I was caught in a dynamic swam of degeneration requiring a systems approach of action research (Reason, Bradbury and Ison, 2008), and, thus, an understanding of degeneration *as-if* (Reason, Bradbury and Ison, 2008) it was the culmination of interrelated unrepressed degeneration threats.

Therefore, given that my diagnosis of the interrelated challenges leading WCNA in an existential crisis largely validated VSM as a prognostic tool (Morgan, 2007), it largely shaped my research aims and structure of the discussion (Dubois and Gadde, 2002; Potsdam, 2015). Likewise, it was the real-life situation (Pettigrew, 1990) that WCNA has found itself in which was also in line with the failures of the past (Case and Taylor, 1979; Landry *et al.*, 1985) that proved Malleson (2014) right in that the fate of radical cooperativism is at best to be marginal that triggered me in elaborating towards reconciling radical objectives with realistic means in the pursuit of consensual democracy.

Still, as my voice was not heard while my projections were quite met, I realized that further ‘use of action research learning cycles’ (Coghlan and Gaya, 2014, p. 282) was required to better clarify the initially fuzzy research/real-life problem and improve the internal/implementable validity of my analysis and recommendations (Argyris, 2003).

Along these lines, prior publications adopting VSM as a diagnostic tool for designing viable structures of alternative organizations (Swann, 2018), including (federations of) worker cooperatives (Walker, 2018) and evolutionary approaches that identify earlier choices on the journey towards consensual democracy (Ingle, 1980), have proven highly influential as they have largely shaped the scaffolding of the research. Yet, overall, my research project has been quite distinct in that my contributions were directed at arriving at some rules of prudence and supportive business tools/processes/guidelines in line with cooperative values that further distance cybernetics from ‘the [early] ambition to dispense with the human’ by integrating elements of VSM with the humanistic aspirations of radical cooperativism (Pickering, 2010b, p. 244).

Still, while acknowledging that moving forward with voicing such ‘prescriptions’ would undoubtedly evoke some resistance among participants especially towards adopting consensual democracy and anarchist cybernetics out of ‘habit, instinct, opinion [or even] mere whim’ (Tripp, 1990) as a rejection of any performative intent (Fournier and Grey, 2000, pp. 180–181) linked to its association with the ideology of capitalism (Castoriadis, 1999), I also considered that a deeper reflexive dialogue within WCNA assemblies based

on the research findings could ease the tensions *rationalizing* disorganization (Landry *et al.*, 1985).

Now if there are plenty of warning signals, and if no organization really wants to go to seed, why does it ever happen? The answer is obvious: eyes that see not, ears that hear not, minds that deny the evidence before them. When organizations are not meeting the challenge of change, it is as a rule not because they can't solve their problems but because they won't see their problems; not because they don't know their faults, but because they rationalize them as virtues or necessities (Gardner, 1965 cited in Ingle, 1980, p. 68).

Besides, my intention has not been to defend my position and recommendations as THE solution but primarily to partake and facilitate a critical debate that could, at least, lead to a conscious rejection of my proposals and, at best, lead to a configuration of systems that suits the environment and the dynamics of the people involved.

In this sense, a key part of (self-)evaluating (politically) the success of the current *idealist/pragmatist* research project (Selener, 1997, p. 30) revolves around whether my practical intervention and theoretical contribution avoids reinforcing the passivity, apathy and cynicism of co-operators without, however, exaggerating about 'what is realistically possible'. Therefore, following Chatterton, Fuller and Routledge (2007, p. 219) my intention has been:

- to share relevant and accessible knowledges with groups in ways that don't increase dependency or hierarchy;
- to offer both radical critiques and inspiring alternatives which are translatable and seem doable; and
- to appropriately intervene and criticise, or accept and support.

Hence, an awareness has been exhibited on the critiques raised against judging co-operators for overreaching goals like transforming capitalist society (Shukaitis, 2010; Paranque and Willmott, 2014) as they might contribute to 'apathy and passivity, rather than to a search for better strategies' (Rosner, 1984a, p. 392). Therefore, my priorities were –as inspired by Solidarity (2004)– to increase co-operators' 'confidence, autonomy, initiative, participation, solidarity, egalitarian tendencies and self-activity' in advancing –following Galeano (1993, p. 230)– towards forming viable networks (Walker, 1998) of healthy (Lindenfeld and Wynn, 1997) consensual democracy-driven worker cooperatives (Ingle, 1980) promoting politically the cooperative commonwealth.

Along these lines, a fitting frame for evaluating degeneration is not whether utopia is reached (and degeneration has been completely tackled) but the extent to which a series of threats have been confined across different overlapping areas. Besides, when approaching degeneration as a rather complex problem, it is also important to be mindful of the fact that even a successful implementation of a recommendation or a tool to address a certain threat might well not be enough for avoiding degeneration.

To conclude, my first and most important methodological choice which retrospectively seems to be a key one for arriving at actionable knowledge (Argyris, 1996; Chatterton, Fuller and Routledge, 2007) has been to descend into the real-life swamp (Schön, 1987) of degeneration with a 'genuine openness to the situation' (Reason, Bradbury and Ison, 2008, p. 151). Hence, without being constrained by preconceived theoretical frameworks acting as constraining cages (Charmaz, 2006, p. 17) but equipped with an increased awareness of the literature.

The reasons guiding me in this critical decision together with various other methodological choices I made throughout this research journey are presented in detail in the methodology section that follows the coming recapitulation.

2.8 Summary

After having obtained a very broad overview of the literature on (resisting) degeneration, it is important to crystalize the main points of how this literature review has shaped the overall research project and the theoretical framework that underpins it.

Firstly, I summarize the research gaps that were identified in this literature review: a) a relative lack of empirical material on (resisting) degeneration (Leach, 2013, p. 3; Cheney *et al.*, 2014; Jaumier, 2017, p. 217; Langmead, 2017) b) a relative lack of an inquiry that explores simultaneously the various degeneration theories to provide a more holistic theory, c) a relative lack of research outputs supporting co-operators to better confine degeneration.

Secondly, I state my research aims in response to the above-mentioned research gaps:

- explore the empirical side of egalitarian collectives acting as an alternative to conventional top-down, for-profit enterprises and as a movement dedicated to macro self-management,

- provide an insider account of the interrelations between degeneration challenges involved and the limitations of countermeasures at place,
- generate reflections for advancing more systematic, viable and healthy cooperative movements in real-life.

Thirdly, I declare that such a response was not solely driven by literature. Indeed, my focus on supporting, the reproduction of viable networks of healthy consensual democracy-driven worker cooperatives promoting politically the cooperative commonwealth was also the result of adopting an abductive/action research approach while being embedded in the area of concern.

Fourthly, based on the above, degeneration was not solely approached as a dynamic (Cornforth, Thomas, Spear, Lewis, *et al.*, 1988), not inevitable process (Diefenbach, 2019) but also as a complex problem (Diamantopoulos, 2013) requiring a more holistic understanding for better confinement.

Fifthly, instead of attempting to refute the degeneration thesis altogether or highlight critical factors responsible for degeneration and consistently with a hacktivist approach, the primary focus of the research was to document the pressures for degeneration encountered by the theoretically sampled –yet also too familiar– key case for consolidating clusters of special theories (Merton and Merton, 1968, p. 51) and ‘identify[ing] new ... relationships within a tentative [body of] theory ... which explain the phenomenon more precisely’ (Ridder, 2017, p. 299).

Sixthly, beyond developing an integrated model of degeneration threats than that encountered in theory, my preoccupation shaped by my pragmatist epistemology was also to deliver concrete tools and actionable theory explaining and foreseeing degeneration (threats).

Seventhly, even though the participation of the researched was heavily required, not merely on moral, political grounds but also out of a pragmatic necessity ‘for a successful inquiry’ (Greenwood, 2007, p. 131), no formal research procedure was set up for this. Instead, the full-member researcher encapsulated as far as possible the research processes within the formal decision-making processes of the researched and responded to what he considered more surprising/interesting in terms of literature so that the whole project would be realistic given the timeframe (of the PhD) available.

Eighthly, the overarching research question –which was broken down to three clusters of sub-questions– adopted to guide the research was:

Main Research Question: What degeneration challenges have WCNA (members) historically faced? What safeguards, structures and tools for resisting degeneration were at place and how could egalitarian collectives become more viable and driven by consensual democracy?

- Sub-questions cluster 1: What are the various challenges and their interrelations that WCNA has faced while promoting a radical cooperative movement? What are the countermeasure adopted? What could be done to arrive at a cooperative movement with great transformation potentialities?
- Sub-questions cluster 2: What are the (side-)effects of adopting specialization within egalitarian collectives? How can co-operators keep the benefits and better manage the bad side-effects of adopting specialization?
- Sub-questions cluster 3: What are the main roadblocks in promoting a decentralized unity of command within and among radical cooperatives? How to design decentralized coordination of co-operators within a cooperative and within a cooperative movement?

Ninthly, to better operationalize the research questions, a series of objectives were also adopted:

Objective 1.1: Conduct a process analysis of the efforts of WCNA members to promote a radical workers' cooperative movement (including the countermeasures adopted).

Objective 1.2: Identify the interrelations between the key challenges WCNA has faced while attempting to support its members and promote the development of a cooperative movement driven by egalitarian collectives.

Objective 1.3: Formulate a model for cooperative movement degeneration.

Objective 1.4: Formulate organizational tools for supporting co-operators in resisting movement degeneration.

Objective 2.1: Identify the side-effects of specialization within two worker cooperatives embracing collective management.

Objective 2.2: Propose ways for better integrating specialization within workplace democracy.

Objective 3.1: Identify the constraints in promoting a decentralized unity of command within and among radical cooperatives.

Objective 3.2: Propose ways that advance the creation of high-performance radical bureaucratic configurations.

To explain how I sought to answer these research questions, I now turn to the methodology section.

Chapter 3.

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In the literature review, I examined the various degeneration theories and the recommendations/tools available for co-operators to address specific to cooperativism problems. Moreover, I there argued that adopting a rarely followed approach on degeneration based on abduction and action research might well serve the dual aim of better understanding degeneration as a conglomeration of degeneration threats and better confining them.

In this section, my focus was on justifying my emerging design (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and methodological choices towards addressing a simultaneously practical and theoretical research problem from inception till writing up. On the one hand, the intention was to satisfy the *recoverability criterion* (Brydon-Miller and Greenwood, 2003, pp. 18–19) by enabling ‘other interested parties ... to evaluate the information and interpretations offered and examine the consequences of the sequence of actions taken’ (Greenwood and Levin, 2007, p. 56). On the other hand, to stimulate my reflexivity ‘to enhance the credibility of findings’ (J. Wilson, 2014, p. 123).

3.2 Ground assumptions - epistemic reflexivity

The current investigation and action research more broadly are *valued laden, morally committed, relational* (Mcniff, 2011, p. 27) and influenced by pragmatism/existentialism (Susman and Evered, 1978). This means that knowledge production is aiming at building theories about the world as it currently stands only to ‘develop knowledge for action and change’ in line with values and appropriate ends (Goldkuhl, 2012a, p. 92). In other words, the main aim of the current investigation was creating *constructive* [descriptive, explanatory, prospective and prescriptive] *knowledge* (Goldkuhl, 2012b, p. 144).

Such a focus in improving existence and action (Dewey, 1931) is most evident in my disinterest in debating what is really ‘degeneration’ (Cherryholmes, 1992; Creswell, 2002) or identifying/refuting relative social ‘laws’ and my preoccupation on how to support WCNA becoming a catalyst for the development of cooperative movement with great potentialities (Rorty, 1990; Dewey, 2007). Indeed, as I indicated in the Introduction, my commitment was to support WCNA (members) and co-operators more broadly in a manner that is both consistent with democracy in the workplace (Dahl, 1986; Mill, 2001) and supports the development of a movement with great potentialities.

Based on my yearlong experience in an open, *exceedingly complex system* (Beer, 1959, p. 18) unfit for applying procedures/criteria that make sense in natural sciences, I initially perceived abstract models like VSM and consensual democracy as very useful to foresee the problematic situations of WCNA (members). Therefore, I considered that they both posed a legitimate explanation of the Malleson thesis (2014). However, when they were used to guide my intervention, the results of my ‘experiment’ were not that rewarding. Still, the feedback obtained from reality enabled me to explain deeper causal mechanisms and revise the initial frameworks accordingly so as to arrive at ‘revisable guides to future performance’ (Pickering, 2010a, p. 25).

Hence, targeting *desirable* (Heron, 1996, p. 161) or *worthwhile* (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p. 1) purposes/outcomes through an ‘involvement with practitioners over things which actually matter to them provide[d] a richness of insight which could not be gained in other ways’ (Eden and Huxham, 1996, p. 526).

To this end, taking into consideration both ‘structural relations, and the ways in which they affect and are affected by, the subjective meanings of human beings’ was catalytic (Keat and Urry, 1982, p. 174). In this sense, I opted for a third way beyond the objectivism-relativism polarity (Bryman, 2008; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019, p. 143) by adopting an objectivist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology (Johnson and Duberley, 2000a, pp. 185–190) associated with critical realism-pragmatism (See

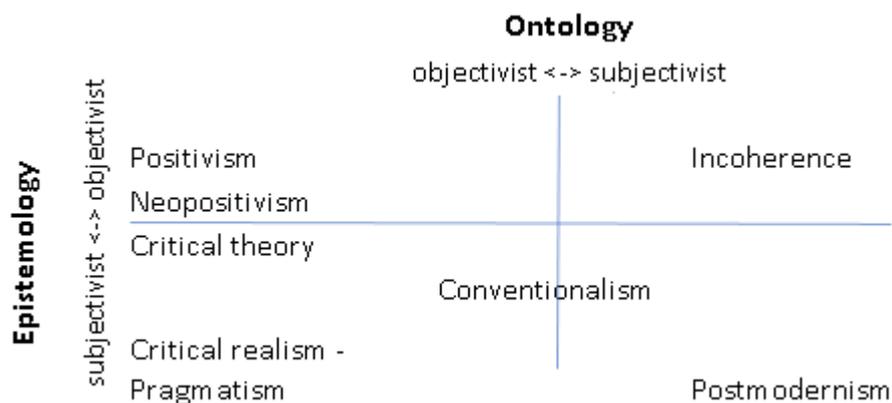


Figure 3).

Our everyday practical actions as human agents tacitly presume that external causal regularities exist which we may act upon... even though our conceptualization and explanation of such regularities must always be open to question ..., our ability to undertake practical actions that are successful and our ability to reflect upon and correct actions that seem unsuccessful, imply that we have feedback from an independent ‘reality’

which constrains and enables practices that would otherwise be inconceivable (Johnson and Duberley, 2000a, p. 187).

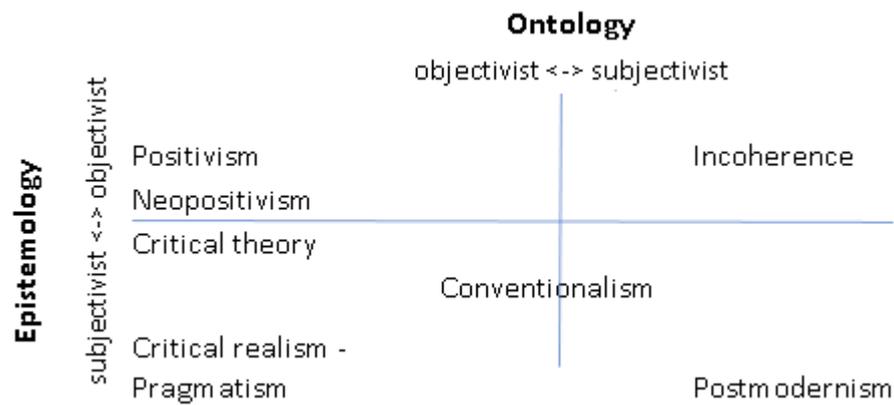


Figure 3: An ontology-epistemology matrix derived from Johnson and Duberley (2000, p. 180)

Given that in terms of workplace democracy, there are various forms of organizing among which different people would choose from (Goldman, 1911; Guillaume, 1971), I do recognize that I am a strong advocate of consensual democracy. This is evident from choosing it as an ‘evaluative frame of reference’ (Pentland, 1999, p. 712) which underpinned my interventions.

Nevertheless, I do reject imposing values of ‘better’ organization on others (Mcniff, 2011, p. 28) as part of a ‘tradition of pluralism in anarchism’ (Shannon, Nocella and Asimakopoulou, 2012, p. 26). As Malatesta (1965, p. 37) put it...

... one may, therefore, prefer communism, or individualism, or collectivism, or any other system, and work by example and propaganda for the achievement of one’s personal preferences, but one must beware, at the risk of certain disaster, of supposing that one’s system is the only, and infallible, one, good for all men [sic], everywhere and for all times, and that its success must be assured at all costs, by means other than those which depend on persuasion, which spring from the evidence of facts.

In this sense, I strongly value non-dogmatic experimentation, reflection and deliberation (upon outcomes). Still, there are constraints in processes of public deliberation stemming from the fact that the world is only available subjectively by humans that are not even purely rational (Castoriadis, 1989; Barros, 2010) and cannot directly observe causal powers (Johnson and Duberley, 2000a). Hence, multiple realities are necessary at play (Oates and Alevizou, 2017) undermining the prospects of creating a certain common ground by negotiating interpretations of a subjectively experienced world (Greenwood and Levin, 2007, p. 56). From an interventionist’s perspective, this posed a challenge in reaching a consensus among research participants to stir action in a certain direction which respondent validation could not resolve (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Hence, from a certain (participatory) action research perspective (Chein, Cook and Harding, 1948), my interventions during fieldwork could be classified as failed. That is because my recommendations have not been adopted to be tested in real life. However, from a perspective that considers the role of the theorist to be that of a facilitator of the reflexive process taking place among, *with* and *for* activists by enabling ‘a more structured and *high definition* discussion’, my research project has proven quite useful (Gordon, 2007, p. 276, emphasis in original). Indeed, a presentation of the thesis was accepted as part of a series of seminars/workshops that would underpin the formative debates on building a developmental cooperative movement in a panhellenic level in early 2020 (which were cancelled due to the outbreak of COVID-19). Hence, while the real-life problem has not been solved, the terms for more productive debates have improved. After all, then, the current research project has proven ‘to work’ for the research participants.

Finally, as the external world ‘is in a constant state of becoming’ (Goldkuhl, 2012b, p. 139), I also approached (resisting) degeneration as a process in a state of becoming (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002) and ‘not something that *happens to*’ WCNA (members) (Langley *et al.*, 2013, p. 5).

3.3 Case selection: A balanced choice between WCNA and its members

Selecting the system of reference or, in other words, selecting the case(s) has been one of the defining choices for the shape of the research project that requires some elaboration. As already mentioned, I was embedded in the field of radical cooperativism long before conducting a literature review. Indeed, I have been a heavily involved (founding) member of Pagkaki, a worker cooperative that participates in WCNA from its inception years before even thinking of conducting a PhD thesis. Moreover, as a practitioner, I had already attained a relatively good awareness of the political literature on the degeneration of worker cooperatives while publishing an ethnographic take on Pagkaki in 2012 (a few months before WCNA was established). Therefore, I have certainly neither been a neutral or dispassionate observer of WCNA (members) nor a researcher entering the field *tabula rasa*.

Drawing from the above, the choice to enter the field before conducting a literature review was not based on methodological debates (Glaser, 1998; Charmaz, Thornberg and Keane, 2018). Still, my focus on WCNA (members) was not just a matter of convenience or in-depth local knowledge (Fenno, 1986). Nevertheless, the latter was indeed crucial to

identify over time Pagkaki and WCNA as interesting cases in terms of literature (Davis, 1971; Burawoy, 1991).

Initially, I was also really problematized whether I should focus on Pagkaki in more depth or to focus on WCNA for breadth. Gaining a broader perspective –especially as the case of Pagkaki has been rather unique in relation to the rest work collectives of Greece– was ambitious. Fortunately, I followed this path. However, such enlargement in scope was limited within WCNA to focus on publicly/politically organized worker cooperatives (not facing apolitical degeneration), as it was more likely –due to their self-reflective nature (Castoriadis, 1989)– to provide me with fresh insights and practices for organizing both as separate entities and as a network (Daskalaki and Kokkinidis, 2017).

In my case, as an insider, it was quite easy to obtain access to the field. However, my prior experience of the time demanding nature of responding to researchers led me to avoid conducting interviews or questionnaires from the start of my research journey. Instead, a lot of time was spent in the field to identify abductively interesting and relevant research problems (Potsdam, 2015).

3.4 Developing a Responsive Action Research approach as a dissatisfied researched

Retrospectively, being a member of a cooperative advocating social change has been a primary reason for adopting a *radical change* perspective (Burrell and Morgan, 2019) and opting to adopt elements of action research which was considered to be quite fitting for promoting radical social change (Chatterton, Fuller and Routledge, 2007; Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2007). Still, overall, the most catalytic reason for adopting a research design inspired by action research in the first place was my prior experience as a dissatisfied researched and as a reflexive practitioner recognizing the constraints for dedicating time to collective research (Varkarolis and King, 2017).

More specifically, as a researched member of Pagkaki with direct and –through my colleagues– indirect experience of participating in dozens of research projects (Schmalzbauer, 2013; Skuludaki, 2013; Makris, 2014; Kokkinidis, 2015; Aivalioti and Merkuri, 2016; Marioli, 2016; Sdrali *et al.*, 2016; Daskalaki and Kokkinidis, 2017), it was staggering that none of the numerous sympathetic to our cause researchers that have been granted access has attempted to follow a PAR approach and only once we have come across in an interview conducted following an inductive approach (Prassoulis, 2018). Instead, most often we received requests, like the following:

As part of my assignment, I need to take an interview from a member of the cooperative. I attach the questions I will ask... Please, let me know when it is possible for me to come because it must be done by 17/1/2013 (email; received by Pagkaki; a week before the deadline 10/1/2013).

In other words, most aspects of research had already been planned with no prior contact with the research participants and no opportunity was given to us to partake in the research design. Hence, as research design has been perceived as the domain of the researcher (or even worse of their supervisors), we, thus, have faced research projects that were no way customized for us and driven by irrelevant for our case pre-set research objectives (Davies, 2017). Irrelevancy in our case has largely been a knowledge production problem (Van De Ven and Johnson, 2006) resulting from arriving at Pagkaki at a very advanced stage of problem-finding (Merton, 1959) with actually no room for manoeuvre, as the example given above illustrates.

On top of that, the times they have provided to respond were extremely tight. ‘Parachute’ researching (Dawson and Sinwell, 2012) has unfortunately proved to be the norm even though time was required for cultivating appropriate understanding and research relations for developing helpful/relevant research. Hence, while Pagkaki initially attempted to be relatively accommodating for well-meaning researchers, the collective increasingly started to feel that we were rather asked to fit into the researchers’ agendas than advancing our own. Along these lines, there have been cases that we indeed stalled or rejected requests. Besides, ...

...devoting our free time to quote our public self-presentation documents for researchers and participating in a research where the bottom line/targets are irrelevant with our situation, objectives and priorities is problematic and in the long run unsustainable (Varkarolis and King, 2017, p. 321).

For instance, when the aim of the research was solely related to exploring austerity and crisis, we mostly rejected these requests since they were irrelevant to our situation and objectives.

We are sorry we did not find the time to answer your message sooner. Things have been quite hectic for us lately with work and everything else. We would not have been able to meet your request for an interview though since we were certain from the beginning of our effort that our choice had nothing to do with crisis and austerity... There is a lot more information on our views on our site, which I presume you already know. We wish you and your colleague all the best on your research (Pagkaki responding to an interview request; 3/6/2015).

Such an obvious lack of awareness of the collective or even of a basic reading of our website, like a video-interview in the welcome page of the English version of the website, would significantly signal to the research participants that partaking in a research project would, ultimately, arrive at a waste of time (reflexive diary).

[Pagkaki's creation] has nothing to do with the crisis... The initial idea preceded crisis for two years, it was a coincidence that by the time we were ready to open, the crisis was here. We would have done it regardless of the crisis (video-interview by AlterNation (2013)).

Based on the above, it is no surprise to recall as unique, the first instance that a researcher contributed to our practice, not through the research process itself, but by translating our English texts in the German language. That came as a result of providing him beforehand with our texts translated in English to first familiarize with us before proceeding with an interview. Along similar lines, a researcher within WCNA apart from conducting fieldwork, she also took up writing minutes of assemblies and was actively involved in the facilitation of assemblies in a WCNA member, Synallois (audiotaped assemblies; WCNA internal affairs' working group; 17 May 2019, 8 Nov. 2019, interview; Alpha, interview; Beta).

So, my own experience of being the researched confirmed Barker and Cox (2002) in their claim that activists' knowledge, interests and skills are often not taken into consideration and leading to irrelevant for them research impact targets. If activists were merely asked to provide some guidelines early enough it would certainly result in way better levels of relevancy and insight. Or, even without a formal deliberation taking place, if emphasis was given on the political objectives and public reflections of the activists the situation would be far better. For example, a researcher could take as a vantage point the following remark by a Viome worker in a public workshop entitled *In dialogue with Viome* that was organized during the Second Euromediterranean Meeting of the Workers Economy.

I think that research on the support of workers in recuperated enterprises from their families might prove extremely valuable... I'm convinced that this backstage issue deserves in-depth research (event; Mu).

Along these lines, the so far failed connection between the researchers and the researched has rather reinforced a widely shared preconception most of us had regarding the prospects of academics becoming useful allies. Indeed, for most Pagkaki members, it was highly unlikely that academics with no groundedness in the field would ever be able to give back.

I personally and others felt a repulsion for academics because they were talking about something without being involved. I think Orestis is a theoretician, a type of theoretician that is more endearing than others, it is not because we are friends, but for reasons that similarly made me endear Ruggeri, as well. They are both theoreticians that get their hands dirty (audiotaped assembly; Pagkaki; 21 Sep. 2015).

But if then, the specialists of knowledge production were not relevant for us, where did this leave us as practitioners? Schematically, there were two options. Either self-reflect without depending on others' support. This is the default option for grassroots movements since reflecting their praxis is (supposedly) an internal requirement for advancing their causes and a great team-building exercise. Or, do it together with others, after developing appropriate methodological procedures and research capabilities endogenously. Pagkaki and me personally have adopted both. First, because we acknowledged that according to our standards the collective approach was quite slow and that we could never encompass a great variety of issues. It, thus, makes sense why a book based on a single member's perspective has been published by Pagkaki, why we have been operating a bookshop and a reading space around diverse topics that we wanted to promote and finally why there were some attempts to facilitate better grounded debates and outputs on real-life experience/problems of radical cooperativism, activism and so on.

Here, is where, as an experienced member of a work collective, I reach my limits and the academic/intellectual steps in. Being able to listen, document all similar experiences and arrive at a conclusion that I cannot make ... So, here it makes sense after 8 years to help the intellectual (audiotaped assembly; Pagkaki; 21 Sep. 2015).

So, there is a need for a type of connection between those that do it and those that are reflecting and dealing with it in a theoretical level. That is, in general, complicated and problematic but maybe appropriate (audiotaped assembly; Pagkaki; 21 Sep. 2015).

Yet, for such connections to materialize with academics, there is a mentality and a formulaic approach to research that requires revisiting.

There is an issue here with academics if, for example, you get in a process of telling them 'listen, we have this problem, what should we do?'. Academics, come, locate the problem, report and from then on, they are not in a position to suggest things for moving that way. Most often, there is a problem, so for another one to be born out of it, more revisions and more issues that are going to be researched again by other academics within the academic community. So, it's difficult [to expect] for the academic community to enter the organizations 'from below' to listen to your problems (audiotaped assembly; Pagkaki; 21 Sep. 2015).

Indeed, there are some academic conventions that (are often perceived to) inhibit a self-referential attitude to research when targeting high ranking academic journals (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013; Li and Parker, 2013), as the following testimony of a researcher signifies.

As a researcher you are more or less confined by academic conventions: a) you are addressing an academic audience, b) you are obliged to write more theoretically than prescriptive, c) there is an established research process pattern 'literature review-> research questions-> methodology-> analysis' (interview; Gamma).

Summing up so far, participants in radical cooperativism apart from their indispensable procedures for conducting self-reflection often attract and receive support from sympathetic researchers (Greenwood and Santos, 1992; Esper *et al.*, 2017) that given the institutional - cultural support that goes with it (Russell, 2015) can prove useful allies or even accomplices (Mark and Beth, 2016). But for such a connection to fruitfully materialize, activists must retain a protagonistic role and guide the research process to address relevant problems. In turn, this requires both researchers and researched dealing creatively with academic conventions.

That is pretty much what I did while researching Pagkaki, Synallos and WCNA. I calmly waited for opportunities that require an action-oriented approach on formulating theory and took as a vantage point the stated objectives combined with the relatively broad variety of problems shared by WCNA members in a series of assemblies. Likewise, a creative attitude towards writing up the thesis was evident in my attempt to meet the expectations of a PhD while delivering an output that resembles 'a manual' (WCNA, 2014, p. 4).

In this sense, Responsive Action Research was developed as a variance of PAR but with a specific focus to arrive –in time– in deliverables and be in sync with the contemporary debates within WCNA. In other words, I intended to 'keep most of the benefits and minimise the discouraging aspects of time pressure and coordination that in general PAR involves' (Varkarolis and King, 2017, p. 326).

Hence, RAR was carried out without requiring all-the-way participation in the research project by the researched (Hall, 2001, p. 173). Therefore, RAR provided a more pragmatic/adaptive framework (Rodje, 2009) in contrast to the cumbersome process of formal deliberation and shared governance that PAR entails without of course reducing the researched to objects to be manipulated (Johnson and Duberley, 2000b).

Indeed, it took me more than two years to simply identify some of the most important real-life problems that challenged WCNA members and explore the problematic relation between the empirical material and the established theoretical frameworks. If the whole process was to be carried out collectively, it is quite certain that the timeframe of the PhD would not suffice or the links between the case and theory would have to be scrapped. The fate of an ongoing participatory action research project launched by a WCNA working group in March 2018 –that I heavily drew empirical material from ranging from tape-recordings to questionnaires– so far, seems (unfortunately) to prove my point, especially as I had to step down my involvement in the working group to allow them (Mansbridge, 1973) to ‘make known mistakes and reinvent the wheel’ (Tripp, 1990, p. 164).

With that in mind, introducing the real-life problem that this research project largely responded to and that put degeneration in the spotlight of my attention, follows. In the final section of the chapter, a broader introduction to the context of the cases has been provided.

3.5 Complex real-world situation calling for a dialectic process theory

The final form of the current research project was highly influenced by the interrelated challenges that WCNA members and WCNA faced. As WCNA members were in troubles, WCNA faced a prolonged paralysis characterized by limited momentum, outreach and commitment by its members (Diamantopoulos, 2012). The following quote from a fellow member of Pagkaki at a WCNA assembly greatly illustrates the link between the troubles of WCNA-in-crisis and the problems of its members.

We believe that we have reached a standstill. The collectives do not discuss the issues of the network and WCNA is essentially not working. If we do not manage to find a way out of this in a productive manner, dissolution is in its way. We haven’t managed to advance in any of the objectives that we have set apart from the objective of mutual aid. We believe that a general assembly must be called to debate the problems of the network, the political objectives and the problems of WCNA members. In this process, each collective is advised to propose ways for the political sustainability of WCNA and highlight a central political aim for the coming period (audiotaped WCNA assembly; 22 Jan. 2017).

Hence, a variety of degeneration pressures had added up for WCNA to face dissolution with market instrumentalism not being one of them, as theoretically expected (Diamantopoulos, 2012). Given that my research questions pointed me towards ‘uncovering the detailed dynamics’ of degeneration (Cornforth, 1995) and stimulating

‘changes in desired ways’ (Goldkuhl, 2012b, p. 139), it was deemed appropriate to adopt pragmatism and follow a *processual* approach.

In other words, I focused on degeneration as a ‘temporally evolving phenomen[on]’ and did not adopt a *variance* approach (Langley and Tsoukas, 2011, p. 2) focused on identifying some critical factor(s) for (resisting) degeneration (Rothschild-Whitt, 1976; Cornforth, 1983). Breaking away, thus, from an approach that has dominated literature in the past (Hunt, 1992, p. 37). In turn, a *dialectic process theory* was considered a better fit to describe and explain the complexity of the real-life situation at hand (Van de Ven, 1992, p. 78) and to ‘move closer towards a dynamic understanding of how to improve’ the problematic situation (Langley and Tsoukas, 2011, p. 10).

Dialectics begins with the assumption that the developing entity exists in a pluralistic world of colliding events, forces, or contradictory values which compete with each other for domination and control (Van de Ven, 1992, p. 78).

Besides, the guiding rationale for focusing on ‘explanations in terms of patterns in events, activities, and choices over time’ (Langley and Tsoukas, 2011, p. 6) was to develop theories and tools with ‘practical benefits [at least] for those involved’ (Reason, Bradbury and Ison, 2008, p. 152).

Finally, such an approach necessitated (resuming) the collection of processual data (Langley *et al.*, 2013) and adopting systems thinking (Reason, Bradbury and Ison, 2008). It is clear, therefore, that even though RAR offers a balanced way forward for identifying interesting theoretical/practical problems that are of interest to both researchers and researched based on abduction, it is more a research design focusing on problem finding/responding than a stand-alone research strategy. Therefore, a certain creative combination of (elements from other) research strategies was required depending upon ‘the nature of problems to be solved, the conditions in which they exist, and the action researcher's preferences and criteria’ (Kapoor and Jordan, 2009).

To better present my whole research journey and explain my criteria for choosing a combination of different elements from different strategies, an outline of my (evolving) bricolage of various strategies that shaped my methodology which I termed Ethnographically Grounded Responsive Action Research and Theory (EGRART) has been provided.

3.6 Ethnographically Grounded Responsive Action Research and Theory

In a nutshell, EGRART was first and foremost grounded on intense fieldwork conducted with an emphasis on action –the targets of which have not been co-determined through a formal participatory process or a literature review– without, also, reinventing theoretically the wheel. In other words, I coined EGRART as a reflexive process of identifying key theoretical and practical problems on the spot while ethnographically exploring interesting (theoretically) cases and aiming at providing constructive knowledge on the fly ‘derived from both the evidence and from the literature’ (Davis, 2007, p. 194). Hence, EGRART utilized advantages from different strategies (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019, p. 160) and went beyond a mere descriptive ethnography conducted in a detached way with no interest in action and little emphasis on theory (Beilin and Boxelaar, 2001; Dick, 2007; Reedy and King, 2019).

Along these lines, while my vantage point was adopting (Responsive) Action Research as a way to be relevant, I have also heavily drawn from ethnography (methods of data collection), grounded theory (techniques for data analysis like axial and theoretical coding) and case study (the methodology to refine and expand theory based on new empirical data) in a way to utilize their best elements and minimize their disadvantages.

Still, EGRART is no way a strategy free from troubles (see Table 2). The main problem from the researcher part is that it is a high-risk strategy as ‘you have to live with the fear that no useful data patterns and theory will emerge (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019, p. 157). Moreover, on top of requiring a high level of commitment by the researcher, there are also constraints in terms of securing access, familiarity and necessary resources for a prolonged investigation/intervention (Chein, Cook and Harding, 1948; Van de Ven, 1992; Cornforth, 1995; Beuving and Vries, 2015). Finally, critiques, which have been raised for qualitative researchers more broadly, highlight the lack of repeatability-rigour (Bryman and Bell, 2011) and the threat of ‘subjectivity’ (Kock, 2004, p. 269).

Methodology	Advantages	Disadvantages
Ethnography	Intense fieldwork, participant observation.	Mainly descriptive, high time requirements for the researcher.
(Responsive) Action research	Emphasis on action/relevance	Little emphasis on theory, few descriptions in the action research literature which reveal exactly how a theory is developed. Potentially wrong interpretations due to biases.
Grounded theory	Clear theoretical production (axial coding->theoretical coding), literature as data, emerging research questions.	Not interested in action.
Case study	Clear-cut connection between empirical findings and theory.	Difficult to generalize.
EGRART	All of the above	High-risk research requiring high levels of commitment, time-consuming, access constraints, lack of repeatability, threat of subjectivity.

Table 2: (Dis)advantages of EGRART

After the above short introduction of EGRART, I elaborate on the schematically three phases characterizing the progression of an EGRART research project to get more concrete (the goals and procedures of which are synopsized in Table 3)Table 1. Throughout the research journey, creating theory and intervening/proposing recommendations were two sides of the same coin developing incrementally (Eden and Huxham, 1996).

	Phase 1: Ethnographically groundedness to locate practical/theoretical problems	Phase 2: Intervene in real-life problems by matching/synthesizing empirical material with theory	Phase 3: Write-up reflexive theory with clear audit-rails
goals	find patterns/problems in data	stir a process that provides theoretically-informed solutions or more options to certain real-life problems	theory refinement/victorious intervention
Sub-goals	responsive, practice-based approach to problem finding	analyse problem of/with practitioners, stir solution/action, in case of resistance to change; theorize it to better capture reality and in case of implementation; evaluate it to improve solutions and theory of interventions	a new, authentic and credible understanding of reality for the community, possible options for action/change
Procedures / Techniques involved	ethnographic data collection, ongoing grounded theory analysis treating literature as data	encapsulate action theory cycles within the formal procedures of the researched (RAR)	provide a final reflection on the attempts and approaches to handle real-life problems and showcase how the empirical case and theory intersect

Table 3. Phases of Ethnographically Grounded Responsive Action Research and Theory

Meanwhile, EGRART involved multiple iterations (Kock, 2004, pp. 271–272) of collecting ethnographically data, interpreting data reflexively and theorizing abductively. The following audit trail illustrates that in a simplified manner (see Table 4). The reason for this simplification was to provide a comprehensible way for outsiders to appraise the research process (Brydon-Miller and Greenwood, 2003, pp. 18–19).

empirical	review-reflexivity	theory
longitudinal embeddedness in the field		
	choosing the subjects of research and the research design	
vague awareness of real-life problem: WCNA losing momentum		identify object of the study
	diagnosis 1: Factors responsible for movement degeneration fall primarily in the collectives' area of responsibility	
validate prior inductions: radical failures stemming from skillful disorganization, VSM, consensual democracy, Malleon thesis		
act on evidence: recommendations for restructuring (WCNA-Pagkaki)		
	evaluate results	
	diagnosis 2: recommendations were not adequately debated (WCNA -after intuitive restriction-turned spineless and deteriorated as projected. Restructuring Pagkaki to prove functional required additional safeguards)	
act on evidence: collecting supportive evidence will be enough to support my case		
	evaluate results	
		review literature / theorize abductively
		alert: organizational learning may be skillfully sabotaged
gather data ethnographically	interpret data reflexively	
identify barriers for consensual democracy		
	diagnosis 2: Unchecked idealism sabotages personal/collective growth.	identify degeneration as a complex problem
act on evidence: provide win-win safeguards for extending socialistic liberty		formulate theoretical framework
	evaluate results	
	diagnosis 3: Cybernetics should serve the humanistic aspirations of cooperativism. Self-institution is a constant challenge requiring deeper focus on culture	
	Conclusion-next steps	Practical theories for (resisting) degeneration
act on evidence: publish the PhD in events hosted by WCNA and allow the demos to decide in full knowledge of the implications		

Ethnographically grounded
problem - finding

Responsive Action Research
and theory development

Writing-up reflexively

Table 4: Action research progression

3.6.1 Phase 1: Ethnographically grounded problem-finding and theory development

The first phase revolved around problem finding and ended up with the formulation of the research questions. To this end, given the adoption of a responsive approach to problem-finding (Varkarolis and King, 2017), ‘prolonged immersion in the field’ was required –like in conventional ethnography (Bryman, 2012, p. 465)– to identify a worthy/interesting topic (Davis, 1971; Lincoln and Guba, 1985) with potentials to simultaneously advance ‘theoretical knowledge, practical relevance, and scientific rigour’ (Radaelli *et al.*, 2014, p. 2). During this early period, collecting data with ethnographic techniques and analysing them without any preconceived framework deduced from literature for data gathering using grounded theory techniques like constant comparison took place to guide theory development (Glaser, 1965; Locke, 2012, pp. 45–58).

In this sense, I initially clearly adopted a *grounded theory strategy* (Langley, 1999, pp. 699–700) to make sense of the rich, longitudinal, varied data being collected (Langley *et al.*, 2013, pp. 6–7) by looking for important categories and relations between categories in various levels of abstraction (Locke, 2012, p. 54). In terms of data collection, whilst I have worked in the field as an activist-researcher since 2015, I had also first-hand access to these worker cooperatives from Pagkaki’s inception in 2008. Building on prior understanding (also enabling me not to take all responses at face value) and access to the field (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007) that has been difficult to be pinned down (see Figure 5**Error! Reference source not found.**). The longitudinal fieldwork performed was primarily conducted through means of overt participant observation over three years (Bell, 1969).

Throughout this prolonged period, as shown in **Error! Reference source not found.**, I worked with other members of the cooperatives, visited them as a customer and attended their assemblies/public events. To keep notes and track my insights over time, I also used a reflection diary. Other critical sources of data were social media accounts, documentaries, public events, informal conversations, tape-recorded personal and media interviews, research outputs from other researchers, minutes and tape recordings of Pagkaki and WCNA assemblies, all translated from Greek. Unstructured interviews were also performed to better make sense of my data (In Appendix IV: Summary of cited sources (interviews and events), a list containing some background information on the interviews performed and the cited events has been compiled).

My priority in the early days of open coding was to code on the go the fresh data collected and to enable the identification of patterns (Charmaz, 2014) through the use of

axial/selective coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Rowley, 2014). The computer-aided qualitative data analysis software, NVivo, was used to better manage large volumes of data.

Meanwhile, from a Responsive Action Research perspective, the main emphasis in this first phase was the researcher to identify ‘a focus for change’ (Townsend, 2013, pp. 61–71) in line with the stated objectives (Gergen, 2015, p. 306) of WCNA (2014) ‘to communicate the idea of collectivism and facilitate-help the creation of new projects’ and ‘to share know-how in terms of business and human relations’.

In the second phase of data analysis, data reduction based on the objectives of WCNA was conducted to avoid ‘death by data asphyxiation’ (Pettigrew, 1990, p. 281) which over time paved the way for me to identify the challenge of degeneration as a *core/central category* (Charmaz, 2014) for WCNA (members). The main pillars of the emerging through *data complication* reconceptualization of the data on the specific setting involved (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, pp. 29–30): cooperative community development, business sustainability and political performance (see Figure 4. Categories emerging from axial coding). However, further fieldwork and analysis were required to better grasp relations between concepts throughout time.

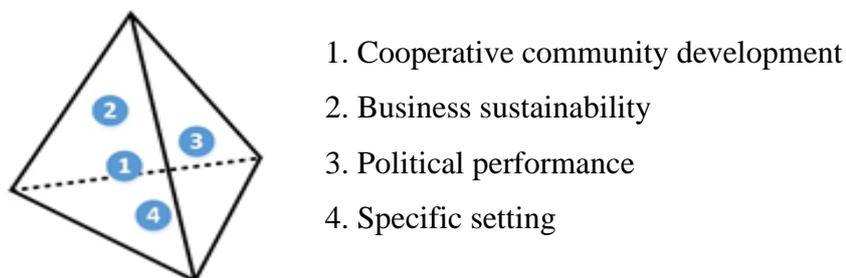


Figure 4. Categories emerging from axial coding

In the third analytical phase, to ‘detect patterns’ of (resisting) degeneration, a *temporal bracketing* strategy (Langley, 1999, pp. 703–4) was used to arrive at a ‘linear sequence

of *phases* that occur over time to produce a given result' (Langley, 1999, p. 692), like WCNA deteriorating or Pagkaki and Synallois² fracturing as collectives.

Such a move enabled me to provide a *thick description* of cooperative movement degeneration based on an ideographic organizational study (Beuving and Vries, 2015, pp. 174–7). In other words, to 're-describe [the] object of explanation in a theory-important way, postulating the existence of multiple generative mechanisms that are potentially responsible for the occurrence of the events under study' (Tsoukas, 1989, p. 559).

To avoid the pitfalls of being too descriptive or too abstract in my narrative, I focused on the 'underlying conceptual model that linked [the story's] phases' (Cornelissen, 2017, p. 6) by identifying 'specific theoretical mechanisms recurring over time' (Langley *et al.*, 2013, p. 7). In turn, a model was inferred purposefully from the particular to the general and from the real to the abstract in a manner that fits not only the data of this ideographic *extreme case* (Eisenhardt, Graebner and Sonenshein, 2016, pp. 1118–1119) of egalitarian collectives but also instances of degeneration within the mainstream cooperative movement as portrayed by Diamantopoulos (2013).

Influenced by Gioia's (2013) data structure, in my attempt to seek qualitative rigour – without falling victim of rigour mortis (Eisenhardt, Graebner and Sonenshein, 2016)– I codified my creative leap from data to theory (Langley, 1999) based on Saldaña's (2013, p. 13) codes-to-theory approach in Figure 5. I simply added some illustrative quotes to 'simplify a complex story' (Bate1 and Bate, 1997).

² More information on the two cooperatives will be provided in the introduction of the dedicated to this research question findings section. A self-presentation document of each collective can be found on the appendices.

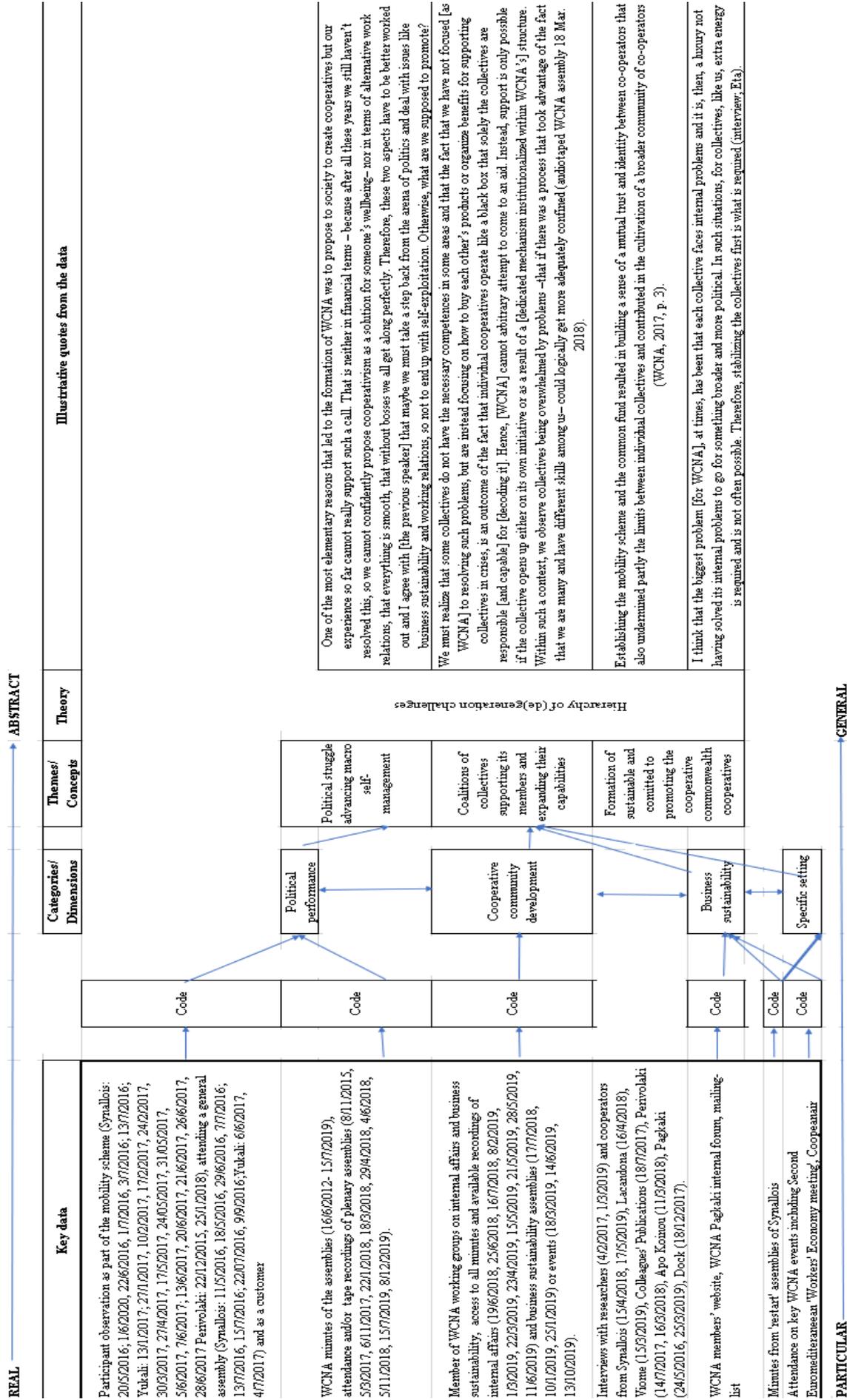


Figure 5: Codes-to-theory based on Saldana (2013, p. 13) and supplemented by illustrative quotes from the data

Summing up, my prolonged engagement and persistent observation collecting systematically ethnographic data on WCNA (members) (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Wallendorf and Belk, 1989; Carlsson and Manning, 2010) provided me with a rare opportunity to provide a credible account of the WCNA (members). Meanwhile, I was also able to identify interrelations between various degeneration threats kickstarting a process for better explaining such a complex problem based on both process data and narrative (Pentland, 1999).

In narrative theory, the story is an abstract conceptual model; it identifies the plot or generative mechanism at work. At a minimum, this story must describe a progression or sequence of events. In narrative theory, however, the "story" includes a great deal more than just an event sequence. (Langley *et al.*, 2013, p. 9).

From the perspective of theory development, then, the first phase of this ideographic study focused on ‘abstraction and theoretical conceptualization of the issues at hand’ (Tsoukas, 1989, p. 558). In turn, my preoccupation in the next phase of EGRART was to provide some recommendations for fostering cooperative development in, eventually, a panhellenic level by counterbalancing the different causal powers which have contributed in the deterioration of WCNA and the fracturing of its two most economically successful members.

3.6.2 Phase 2: Responsive Action Research and theory refinement

Given that the researcher was from the outset organically embedded within the host organizations, responding to problems erupting in the field was encapsulated within their standard formal procedures and did not add up to their workload (Varkarolis and King, 2017). That means that the dialogue between the researcher and the researched largely took place within the assemblies of WCNA (members) as part of their own agenda which also explains the rather small number of interviews required. Hence, it was within the assemblies that preliminary findings were shared-analysed-validated-enhanced and collective creative brainstorming took place (Gabriel, 2015).

In this sense, recommendations did not stem ‘from above, but from within’ (Gordon, 2007, p. 280) and should not be considered as dreadful prescriptions posed in a take-it-or-leave-it manner. Instead, the intention has been to serve as a starting point for further collaborative elaboration and revision in an attempt to counterbalance the negative effects

of the anti-blueprint rhetoric evident in both CMS (King, 2015a) and social movements, as Wilson (2014, para. 51 of chapter 1) has greatly illustrated.

Over-all, anti-blueprint rhetoric has had a negative impact ... Firstly, this resistance to blueprints has itself, with a certain irony, often resulted in closing off the possibilities of imagining a better world. Secondly, the refusal to discuss in more concrete ways the possible workings of an anarchist society has meant that potential problems are not easily anticipated and are often overlooked entirely. And, finally, the lack of alternative visions, to inform and inspire, has helped maintain the popular view of anarchism as hopelessly unrealistic and naïve.

Operationally, to arrive at these recommendations, I largely draw from the VSM tradition (Swann, 2018) for designing viable and compatible with consensual democracy (Ingle, 1980) structures of cooperatives and their federations (Walker, 1998, 2018) after validating their predictions in practice. Along these lines, after *hanging around* immersed in reality (Wolcott, 1990 cited in Alvesson, 2003, p. 172), the thick ‘version of historical analysis’ was provided as a reference point to an idealized state to arrive at a set of recommendations ‘to improve organizations’ (Starbuck, 2003, p. 449) by narrowing the gap between reality and idealized state. The intention, hence, became to challenge the Malleson (2014) thesis in real life.

Given however that most recommendations were either rejected or unreflexively abandoned, a value-added theoretical contribution of this research was identifying the contradiction between the humanist (often idealist) aspirations of co-operators and the idealized state of consensual democracy. Besides, this was not just another variable influencing the deterioration of WCNA (Whetten, 1989). Instead, it became a *working hypothesis* (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and a *plausible theory* (Van Maanen, Sørensen and Mitchell, 2007, p. 1149) explaining the Malleson (2014) thesis.

In turn, such an explanation forced a rethinking of my evaluative frame of reference. To accommodate with the findings of this research, my focus turned towards advancing an ‘improved understanding’ among practitioners of the consequences of their organizational choices and crafting some rules of prudence on how to combine high-performance with ‘the release of [co-operators’] human potential’ (Susman and Evered, 1978, p. 585). To this end, I drew both from the findings of this research but also the established literature (Emigh, 1997).

The outcome of such a process was ‘a guide for what should be considered in the diagnosis of an organization as well as for generating possible courses of action to deal

with the problems of degeneration (Susman and Evered, 1978, p. 590). To structure the rules of prudence, the model of consensual democracy introduced by Holleb and Abrams (1975) and the Viable Systems Model (Beer, 1989; Walker, 2018) were twisted.

Finally, two organizational tools for co-operators were also crafted to facilitate competent/balanced collectives and collective strategizing. A task that positivist science was, indeed, unfit to pull through and which, after all, justified the choice of action research (Susman and Evered, 1978; Eden and Huxham, 1996).

3.6.3 Phase 3: Writing-up reflexively a process theory emerging from action research

A fitting writing approach of an EGRART project is the *theory-laden narrative* (Beuving and Vries, 2015, p. 177) encountered in naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Writing therein is seen as flowing from analysis, as the final stage of the arc of naturalistic inquiry, and as a capstone put on the entire research process. It encompasses coming to terms with the complex relations between description, interpretation, and explanation in a coherent master narrative (Beuving and Vries, 2015, p. 173).

Besides, a narrative strategy is quite consistent with writing up process theory (Pentland, 1999) and to ‘express the sequence of practice and reflection that is entailed in the action research’ (Bryman and Bell, 2011, p. 415). Hence, overall, while writing up, the emphasis is on the tip of the iceberg of the process data which better supports the emerging theoretical framework infused with both the self-understanding of people [respondent validation] and the reflexivity of the researcher (Beuving and Vries, 2015, p. 169).

To this end, from the standpoint of collecting and making sense of data, my embeddedness in the field has been a great asset. Indeed, due to my specific membership status, I enjoyed advanced access to both data, tacit-knowledge and people (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007) enabling me to *reflexively* ‘read through or beyond the data’ (Mason, 2002, p. 149) without adopting a *literal interpretation* of some minutes the quality of which has been a constant source for my complaints towards WCNA and Pagkaki.

Regarding the ongoing remarks on the quality of minutes, I would like to raise my concern as well. From the meetings I have attended, I realize that the attempt to ‘document’ the debates is very difficult and is often ineffective’ to satisfy the objective posed as to inform all members and create an archive of the WCNA... We have to keep in mind that within a discussion, ideas are expressed, concerns are raised that are not that clear, thoughts, fears, feelings, interpretations. There is a creative ambiguity and finally a volume of information beneficial in my opinion that cannot be properly recorded. Therefore, minutes will always be ‘incomplete’,

‘outrageous’ and will reflect a level of interpretation or writing style of the person who assumes the ‘joyless’ and demanding role of writing them up. Perhaps the transcript would solve the problem and personally would make it easier for me to have a more overall picture of the network. Since I would not dedicate three or four hours to listen to a sound recording, [such a transcript] would allow me to understand and reflect upon the issues raised (email; response to my complaints in the mailing list of WCNA 27 Nov. 2018).

Yet, even within qualitative studies, it has been argued that closeness apart from a resource might as well be a liability if staying native (Alvesson, 2003, p. 167). On this regard, I follow Burawoy (1998) on that all approaches have their strengths and weaknesses and that it would be wise for me to write up the thesis in a way that is as deliberate and reflexive as possible and backed up appropriate safety valves. For instance, it was pretty clear from the standpoint of being the researched that the observer’s worldviews and the scope s/he adopts influences the focus and nature of the research outputs (Schön, 1987; Burawoy, 1998) as I witnessed numerous times researchers arriving in the field with overtly preconceived to the detail research projects where the (theoretical) problems were located in the literature that most often provided irrelevant from the standpoint of practitioner research outputs.

In the remaining section, therefore, I attempt to question my presuppositions and be as reflexive as possible. First, I focus on the issue of closeness and the ethical issues arising thereof and, second, my focus is on problematizing my footprint in the research.

3.6.3.1 Closeness and ethical considerations

Retrospectively, I never experienced any conflict between my dual roles and commitments as an insider researcher (Adler and Adler, 1987). On the contrary, it felt – unlike, what expected (Alvesson, 2003)– quite effective (being paid by both sides) and, on top of that, it was nice to be an academic rooted in practice and a practitioner enjoying institutional/supervisory support (reflection diary). This was especially the case since bridging the simplistic polarity between insiders and outsiders through providing lots of fundamental material (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009) has been a key objective of both the researcher and the researched.

Hence, critical for achieving such a victorious balance between the activist and the academic role has been my attempt to align political with research objectives to ‘work not on, not for, but with’ (Khasnabish and Haiven, 2015, p. 24) and ‘from within’ WCNA (Gergen, 2015, p. 306) to arrive at a research output that it could publish. Therefore, as a

result of the *organic* relation (Gramsci, 1971) between the fieldwork researcher and the participants prior to conducting this research, special care has been exhibited to undermine the historically constructed alienating division between the researcher and the researched (Coriat, 1976; Braverman, 1998; Wray-Bliss, 2003; Smith, 2005) and instead further nurture such a relationship while adhering to calls for more reflexive Critical Management Studies (Brewis and Wray-Bliss, 2008).

Along these lines, it would be quite honest to confess that complete anonymity was not discarded as an obstacle for generating a well-situated account (Taylor and Land, 2014, p. 98) suffering from ‘an unacceptably large measure of distortion into the data’ (British Sociological Association, 2017, p. 7) or to enable other researchers to better evaluate/triangulate my research but was rather driven by the desire to reaffirm the invaluable contribution of the researched in the process (Varkarolis and King, 2017) which was nurtured by the relations of trust already established.

Despite such relations, I formally explained my objectives through the consent forms drafted following the British Sociological Association (2017) Statement of Ethical Practice and promised to make sensitive incidents or information impossible to be tracked to a specific work collective or a particular person by a strategy aiming not at camouflage but obfuscation.

I am conducting a PhD research project focusing on worker cooperatives of Greece with the dual aim to challenge the prevailing conventional understanding of management and promote the diffusion of more equitable, solidaristic, horizontal, open management tools, procedures, understandings by giving voice to those under study and providing practical assistance to the real problems they face (Statement of Ethical Practice provided to the researched).

After all, as in previous research on members of the network where participants from two collectives of the network requested the disclosure of their organization's name (Kokkinidis, 2015, p. 853), there was also no problem for me in securing access, a very high securing level of protection from harm/discomfort and vivid documentation without resorting to anonymity, as no objections were raised.

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 rationale behind such an approach from the side of Pagkaki was –following Freeman’s (1972) critique of the *star* system– to partake in research as a collective and to circumvent the possible development of ‘stars’ among us. Meanwhile, it is interesting to note that once, we had been rejected access to the transcript of the interview that we provided for ethical reasons.

Unfortunately, this is not possible. To carry out this research, we have committed to the ethics committee of the University [Anonymous] to protect the personal data of the participants (their organizations and their representatives). The rules of confidentiality (as presented in the consent form signed by [a Pagkaki member] define a common approach to all recordings and transcripts so that after their analysis no association with the participants and their organizations can take place. All the interview material is by now part of this archive, following our protocols for protecting personal data (email; received by Pagkaki; 18 Dec. 2016).

Moreover, a technique that was used quite effectively to open-up sensitive conversations was to call interviewees to provide me with some fake accounts of problems erupting within their collectives in a way to reassure them that I would neither understand nor report the personal issues involved but I would have an overall clarity of the problems at hand.

Finally, the research conducted by Kokkinidis (2015) is one of the very rare instances that a focus group was conducted. It was, therefore, really illuminating to realize that it can generate far more dense insights. That is because validation happens on the go and it was more comfortable ‘for people that do not feel confident/enjoy speaking in public’ to partake in a conversation (informal chat with a member of Pagkaki that participated in the focus group). Hence, a focus group allowed a thicker representation to be brought to the surface and it was much easier for the researcher to obtain a clearer distinction between what is an individual’s and what is the collective’s opinion. On the other hand, it is far more difficult to attract participants and get organized than one-to-one interviews. Along these lines, I only conducted ‘focus groups’ to validate my research in the assemblies of Pagkaki, WCNA and Synallois once.

On the one hand, my intention is to validate my findings ... and, on the other hand, you to decide whether you prefer to pseudonymize Synallois or not, which would require a great distortion of the data to be possible, like not mentioning the Zapatista coffee. Schematically, then, there are two options. First, if you consider that there is something that could harm you in this thesis then it might be wise to anonymize this case study so for instance to protect your public image. Second, if you are proud of your contribution to the next generations of co-operators, you might well prefer

to be acknowledged as contributors by name (validation assembly; Synallos; 22 May 2019).

3.6.3.2 Personal footprint on research

Being a male, white, middle-aged, raised in Greece, (Post)Anarchist/Open-Marxist PhD-student driven by normative commitments to the project of autonomy (Castoriadis, 1989) who has undergone mainstream business education has, indeed, both influenced the formation of my aims and categories. Drawing analogies based on mainstream business ‘tools at hand’ (Klag and Langley, 2013, p. 161) is just one example of how my background as a researcher has influenced the research output.

Still, throughout the research process, my interaction with the researched has proven highly useful and inspiring in developing concepts that have ‘value to others’ (Klag and Langley, 2013, p. 160). Nonetheless, by not exploring among the researched alternative-to-mine driving commitments (axiology) shaping, for instance, the adopted theoretical framework –due to considering that process too cumbersome and less workable (Pettigrew, 1990)–, I indeed somewhat silenced different directions of theory development. In this sense, I acknowledge the role my values have influenced the conduct of this research and the conclusions drawn from the investigation while adopting a quite typical stance for a pragmatist (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998).

For pragmatists, values and visions of human action and interaction precede a search for descriptions, theories, explanations, and narratives. Pragmatic research is driven by anticipated consequences. Pragmatic choices about what to research and how to go about it are conditioned by where we want to go in the broadest of senses. Values, aesthetics, politics, and social and normative preferences are integral to pragmatic research, its interpretation and utilization (Cherryholmes, 1992, p. 13).

Indeed, I chose not to nullify myself as an activist-researcher ‘in the name of democracy’ (Freire, 2008, p. 210) and voice myself within self-reflexive democratic institutions that I love to see progressing (Freire, 2008) and which, after all, bear the full responsibility for advancing self-management and any (in)action resulting from an encounter with this thesis.

Still, overall, the research project was largely member-driven and member-checked. For instance, apart from adopting a RAR approach to problem finding, respondent validation was also performed. The aim was to balance my interpretation with that of the participants (Charmaz, 2014) given that my voice together with that of the participants was integral in the analysis (Charmaz, 2008).

To this end, a Greek version of Chapter 4.2 was provided to the researched as part of an initiative of a co-worker taken to facilitate the debate of a dedicated self-education assembly at Pagkaki (20 Sept. 2018) which received very good feedback and only some minor adjustments were deemed necessary. For the analysis of the chapter 4.3.3 and 4.3.4, the English version was shared through email and a presentation in Greek was given in parts or a dedicated assembly.

Moreover, to counterbalance the main drawback of being native (Alvesson, 2003; Brannick and Coghlan, 2007; Skrutkowski, 2014) and improve the overall validation of the research (Carcary, 2009), triangulation was conducted in parts of the research output with other researchers that had conducted fieldwork on WCNA. Indeed, over the years, I conducted fieldwork and took into consideration the perspectives of eventually ex-members of WCNA (interview; Delta, interview; Epsilon) or co-operators that are not aligned with the political principles/objectives of WCNA (interview; Zeta) as negative cases that would enable me 'to capture the full complexity of the data' upon which my emerging theory was eventually based' (Willig, 2013, p. 71).

By moving among different WCNA (members) through the workers' mobility scheme (Daskalaki and Kokkinidis, 2017), an interplay of closeness and distance led me into conducting comparisons between the different work collectives which in turn allowed me to even better make sense of Pagkaki.

Likewise, the communication with my UK-based supervisors, my attendance in the Cooperatives-UK-organized Cooperative Congress 2019 and my presentations at international research conferences, also enabled me to better grasp the distinctiveness of the case (reflection diary).

Finally, from the opposite perspective, to set the scene for the narrative to come (Pentland, 1999) and to provide the reader with a contextual background to judge the transferability of the process theory (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), the next section has been devoted to a brief introduction on the emergence of new cooperativism in Greece.

But first, a compact non-linear, graphical summary of the research methodology is provided based on the Honeycomb of Research Methodology in Figure 6 (J. Wilson, 2014, p. 281).

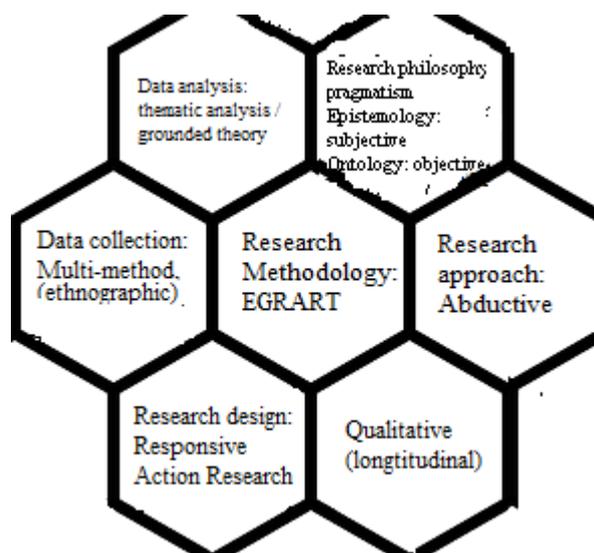


Figure 6: Overview of the Honeycomb of Research Methodology based on J. Wilson (2014)

3.7 Contextual background: The emergence of new cooperativism in Greece

By the end of the twentieth century, cooperatives in Greece –predominantly agricultural– had a bad reputation. As a result of individualistic and party-political interests (Kioupiolis and Karyotis, 2015), cooperatives that involved a *low level of cooperation* (Ratner, 2009) were prone to business failure, misappropriation and widespread corruption. Meanwhile, historically, cooperatives were not taken up as vehicles for overcoming the capitalist relations of production and, thus, no indigenous tacit knowledge or translated experience was available for prospective new generations of radical co-operators. Mostly, this has been because politics were for too long constrained within the ideological and party-political level (Kosmopoulos, 1991).

Therefore, in a sense, worker cooperatives shaped by practices that characterize the newest social movements (Day, 2005; Maeckelbergh, 2009) have been ‘imported’ and re-situated for the first time in Greece in the twenty-first century.

Coming across cases of worker cooperatives abroad, inspired some of us to start Pagkaki (Sporos, 2011, para. 5).

In Greece, there were no worker cooperatives and, largely, cooperatives were associated with agriculture. This all came from abroad. I remember searching on the internet about worker cooperatives in San Francisco³, Latin America... We wanted to do something along these lines, but it was not clear ... We certainly knew, however, that some values that we have adopted in similar political projects, would be highly influential. Equality, direct-democracy, consensus decision-making and equal pay –as a logical

³See https://sporos.espiv.net/worker_coops.html

extension of equality– would be the fundamentals. On top of that, there was a drive for a political dimension, promoting an alternative on how work could be organized, distancing ourselves from established models of co-partnership and family co-ownership [that have been widespread in Greece]. In this sense, we draw more from the tradition of the anti-global movement than cooperativism (interview; Eta).

This all coincided with social movements being on the rise, at the time, and increasingly influenced by *prefigurative* elements of politics (Boggs, 1977). Hence, as more and more people were turning their back on more traditional forms of hierarchical politics, like party politics and institutionalised labour unions, a space for radical cooperativism opened. Along these lines, sentiments of disassociation with both the native tradition of cooperativism and of the classic ways of conducting politics have largely shaped Pagkaki, the first –and highly influential– worker collective established in 2010 Greece.

There was a disappointment from more traditional ways of struggle that increasingly lead more activists in experimenting with prefigurative politics ... There was also a need to expand from discussing abstract generalities to taking up more concrete action (interview; Theta).

By adopting a more creative/experimental attitude to direct action (Landauer, 2010), Pagkaki (2013, p. 4) attempted to bridge making a living and struggling for social emancipation by ‘challenging the maximalist approaches that operate as excuses for postponing any creative resistance for the moment of the revolution’.

Soon, this initiative to expand the repertoire and audience of the grassroots social movements was well-received and advanced by similar worker cooperatives that were since then set up (AlterNation, 2013; Stin Priza, 2014; Colleagues’ Publications, 2015). Over time, then, horizontal cooperatives expanded, and as some of them were actively aiding others to set up their projects –gaining their acknowledgement (Beaver, 2013; Youkali, 2013)–, some interrelations began to form between them (ranging from provisioning cooperative services/products to political affinity). In turn, prior social ties and the power of example have been acknowledged as highly influential for the formation of most cooperatives in an event that largely announced for the first time the formative debates of WCNA in early-2013 Athens.

Through such events and the self-presentation texts of such radical cooperatives, a new area for political debate emerged within the social movements. Two of the most important debates that took place in this early period have been an open discussion at Pagkaki in its first birthday (4 Nov. 2011) and the first inclusion of such a topic within a political festival attracting a couple hundred of radicals, like Communismos 2.0 (event; Gamma).

In these two instances, some reflections about the role and limits such cooperative experiments can play for the movement against capitalism and the prospects of them networking were first shared and exchanged in public (fieldnotes). It, also, became evident that there were worker cooperatives that conceived their projects as forms of decent personal choices and not dissenting-to-the-status-quo-attempts of social prefiguration (M. Wilson, 2014). Therefore, such self-managed projects had no public presence as collectives and no intention to align themselves with the new-born cooperative movement primarily because of a lack of faith in the potentials of radical cooperativism and not primarily out of an individualistic or life-style-in-Bookchin's-terms (1995) attitude (Varkarolis, 2012).

Yet, counterproductively (Merton, 1948), such an attitude –largely endorsed within radical circles as being quite humble, as the following quote puts it–, rather reinforced, not challenged, the nature of cooperative that has primarily asserted itself in history as a firm where workers just claim a bigger slice of value for the fruits of their labour (Marx, 2008).

Other cooperatives are humbler, and I respect the people that make such a personal choice ... but making politics from a cooperative is another issue (event; Beta).

The outcome of such debates was also to a great extent the result of an active presence of (some) participants in these non-political cooperatives in other forms of struggle and their own dispassionate/indifferent attitude towards cooperativism.

We must be cautious not to retreat to Proudhonism. We did not find THE solution or THE method (event; Gamma).

There is no salvation within capitalism, so it would be inconsistent to promote such an initiative in public (event; Gamma).

This particular livelihood choice has clear political characteristics, but we do not consider it a radical political project, nor can we present ourselves as a 'revolutionary subject' (event; Alpha).

The issue of degeneration was also brought up repeatedly and in varying manifestations as a central reason for outsiders not aligning with radical cooperativism, as the following quotes –taken from public debates within (antiauthoritarian) activists' circles– indicate.

We've seen how cooperative degenerate, for instance, Mondragon. What different choices can one make? (event; Alpha).

Have you not learned something from the co-optation of movements during the '70s? You either fail commercially or some become bosses, once again (event; Beta).

Hence, overall, it is important to realize that the development of new cooperativism in Greece was –unlike in Argentina (Ruggeri, Martínez and Trincherro, 2005; Esper *et al.*, 2017)– the result of co-operators turning into practices of social movements but a fraction of people from social movements entering the field of cooperativism by setting up from scratch new cooperatives and inspiring others to do so, as well.

We can observe that there is a growing tendency by people that have been involved in social-class struggles before to set up –based on prior relations forged in this field– cooperatives with characteristics of direct democracy, egalitarianism etc. While this is interesting it also evokes some questions because of the antinomies such experiments face and the limitations such avenues face as antagonistic [to capitalism] structures (opening statement by the organizers of event; Alpha).

That is especially the case since 2009 and the extreme austerity measures that were taken as a response to the Greek government-debt crisis (erupted in the aftermath of the 2008 global economic crisis) (Cappuccini, 2017). Therefore, new cooperativism also emerged in Greece as a response of ‘working people or grassroots groups to the crisis of the neoliberal model’ (Vieta, 2010, p. 799) which while mimicking the structure of the Greek economy by primarily being located in services (CICOPA, 2013) nonetheless disembarked from it by forming an activist-driven social economy (Kioupkiolis and Karyotis, 2015, p. 15).

If the crisis had not erupted, there would not have been so many worker cooperatives in Greece. Necessity has played, undoubtedly, a key role. However, it is important not to undermine that this took place while social movements were on the rise and there was an optimism cultivated within them that when a system is dismantling there is a necessity for proposing alternatives. There was also an overall attitude that defied risks. Such a momentum was lost around 2015 (interview; Eta).

Along such lines, Colleagues’ Publications –a longstanding WCNA member– which started in 2009 as a voluntary project within the grassroots union of book workers was after a few years transformed into a worker cooperative supporting some of its unemployed members (interview; Iota).

Likewise, Perivolaki, a kafenio at Petralona, was initiated by laid-off workers from the media sector with low prospects of finding a new job in the collapsing sector (interview; Kappa).

We did not choose to be working in a kafenio but we were rather forced to. In March 2011, we were among those that were fired in the media sector for [trade] union activity. Apart from the fact that unemployment swept this sector, given the context and coverage of this incident, it was obvious that there would be none employer willing to hire us. In this sense, we realized that for at least a long period, we would not be able to work again in this sector (email; received by WCNA; 2015).

A similar scenario resulted in the first recuperated company in Greece, Viome, located in the outskirts of Thessaloniki. After the factory was abandoned by its owners, the workers occupied it and after a long struggle that put them into the international spotlight, Viome diversified production from building materials to detergents and started producing once again on February 12, 2013. For a detailed background on Viome, see Karakasis (2005), Kiouпкиolis, and Karyotis (2016).

Most people that started the recuperation of Viome had no relation with the ideas of self-management, direct democracy ... some of them had no relations even with the left in general. Therefore, there was no vision that they chose to enact upon but a reverse process. Given that the contemporary mode of production failed them to provide with the necessities for their subsistence -along with the failure of the political parties and labour unions to support them in finding a solution to their problem- they were left facing two solutions: jumping to the unknown that could potentially offer them something or plunge into despair. [They chose the latter.] Therefore, the vision was built, it was built in practice, through practices (Event; Delta).

Yet, unlike the above cases, the dozens of worker cooperatives that were created during this period did not take part in networking initiatives that erupted in Thessaloniki, Athens, Rethymnon and even in a Panhellenic level. That is either because of internal problems of the cooperatives (or an inability to spare scarce resources) or a rejection of the rationale that lead to the formation of WCNA in 2012 by other social movement actors.

While accepting the contradictions and the present limits of [such] projects, we believe [that] cooperation and coordination between them can create stronger dynamics that can challenge the dominant organization of work and, more generally, the dictatorship of the capitalist economy (WCNA 2014).

In this sense, the current thesis attempts to partake in an effort to better align the map of the WCNA membership (Figure 7) –as recorded in October 2019 in its revised self-presentation document (WCNA, 2019)– with their vision, as expressed in a nutshell by Viome, and not the vice versa.

In a few months, there will be a Euromediterranean meeting for the Workers' Economy hosted in Viome. This is our vision, in a nutshell.

Multiplying, coordinating and networking the multiple forms of this Other Economy, of this Other Society and of this Other Life. In the end, this is where we want to contribute. But first, or together with this, we have to survive with dignity and freedom (event; Delta).

On top of that, this research project is also a contribution to a dialogue within social movements of Greece, in an attempt to reopen a debate that had temporarily not ended in favour of radical cooperativism and, ultimately, is undermining its momentum, outreach and possibilities at a time that WCNA members exhibit a lower rate of mortality compared to even the ‘large scale businesses [that] are generally [considered] more viable’ (Centre of Planning and Economic Research, 2019, p. 51); a key (methodological) comparative aspect that, for instance, the Webbs’ had overlooked (Jones, 1975; Cornforth, 1995).

Hence, embarking from negative cases regarding the degeneration of cooperativism a la Webbs, it was considered a worthy endeavour to more open-mindedly explore the various reasons responsible for the stagnant development of radical cooperativism (Emigh, 1997). With that in mind, the thesis turns to the findings chapter.

Name	Business
Viome [Athens]	Detergents manufacturing
Apo Koinou	Mental health
Synallois	Fair-trade
Perivolaki	Kafenio
Pagkaki	Kafenio
Colleagues' Publications	Publications

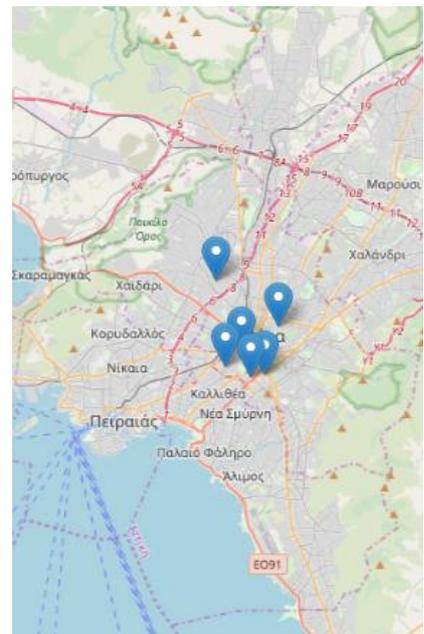


Figure 7. WCNA members in October 2019

Chapter 4.

Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of my processual study and reflection upon my active intervention on (resisting) degeneration with WCNA (members) in three parts. The first part provides a historical account of how degeneration unfolded in the case of the Worker Cooperatives' Network of Athens, starting from the first discussions that led to its formation in June 2012 till January 2020. Documenting the effectiveness of the countermeasures deployed against degeneration and the various challenges met by WCNA was then used, on the one hand, as a starting point for brainstorming based on the literature some recommendations for supporting the regeneration attempts of WCNA. On the other hand, to develop theory that fits the processual data collected without omitting important concepts/factors and on top of that explaining their inter-relations (Vollstedt and Rezat, 2019).

In the second part of the current chapter, my focus turned on two longstanding and economically successful WCNA members (2014, p.1) that aspire to develop 'egalitarian relations of production and decision-making', Pagkaki and Synallois. By exploring how these two collectives that 'are successful in keeping their character as democratic organisations' work (Diefenbach, 2019, p. 559), I realized that they really face difficulties in keeping the benefits and managing the bad side-effects of adopting specialization. In turn, the dynamic documentation of the (side-)effects erupting from adopting specialization became the basis for designing a tool for promoting ameliorative actions in line with consensual democracy (which will be presented in the discussion). However, co-operators often felt reluctant to follow the route of consensual democracy and, in this way, undermined the transformation potentialities of the cooperative movement.

In the last part of this chapter, I elaborated on a series of reflections generated by (the culminated reception of) my interventions on WCNA (members). More specifically, I identified a key limitation of the frameworks that were used for arriving at my initial recommendations. Degeneration requires not just systemic solutions but solutions that integrate realist means with radical objectives in ways that take into deeper consideration the humanist aspirations of cooperativism.

4.2 A holistic analysis of degeneration (threats) on WCNA movement building

Formation of WCNA (1/6/2012-8/11/2013)

We call all cooperatives/work collectives in a meeting to get to know each other, exchange experiences and thoughts on such self-managed experiments and discuss suitable forms for a more stable contact and networking (email; received by Pagkaki; Jun. 2012).

This call would kickstart the process of forming a coalition of newly formed alternative worker cooperatives in 2012. After only three assemblies, the criteria for participation (what constitutes an alternative cooperative) and the internal way of organizing were agreed and the objectives of WCNA were brainstormed. Within these debates, there was clear evidence in terms of discourse and (proactive) measures being taken to avoid degeneration.

First, as a way for radical co-operators to distance themselves from the mainstream *cooperative sector* of Greece (Develtere, 1992) and to form the political identity of the coalition to come, an ideal-type of a radical cooperative was constructed largely by distilling already shared features among cooperatives participating in this process of formation (WCNA, 2017). Hence, to be considered as a WCNA member the following minimum criteria would have to be met: adopt egalitarian relations in the workplace, avoid hiring non-members for core operations of the collective, favour common ownership instead of individual shares, socialize excessive profits or reduce prices if workers are well-paid, reject racist, sexist and fascist viewpoints and behaviours (WCNA, 2014, fieldnotes).

The coalition spontaneously (Bookchin, 1975) adapted the decision-making process of its constituents, that of direct democracy, within the context of a secondary, non-hierarchical network structure and committed itself to ‘a high degree of autonomy from state, party, business or other institutional dependencies’ to advance a self-directed cooperative movement (WCNA, 2014, pp. 2–3).

Moreover, to confront the expected pressures to adapt to the ‘logic of the market and the motivations of capital’ (Mellor, Hannah and Stirling, 1988, p. 67), WCNA adopted the objective of ‘mutual support between members’ in the form of countermeasures like: ‘creating an internal solidarity market’, ‘promoting each other to the public’ and ‘exploring ways of economical, organizational and technical mutual assistance’ (WCNA, 2014, p. 4).

Worker cooperatives are *doomed* to operate within a capitalist system. It is extremely difficult for an isolated cooperative experiment –no matter how radical the perceptions of its members are– not to be confined in a sterile survival game within the *jungle* of the market, resulting too often on the degeneration of its foundational objectives and losing any potential for contributing in social transformation (WCNA, 2017, p. 3, emphasis in original).

Hence, in a way, WCNA was not put together to give flesh to a pre-existing plan of action but was built after individual collectives reflected upon ‘what it [was] *possible* for them to do’ and what was ‘*right* to do’ (Blee, 2012, pp. 85, 90, emphasis in original). In turn, the adoption of solidarity measures between WCNA members against degeneration contributed in the cultivation of a sense of a common identity and reinforced the sentiments of hope, self-confidence and excitement that marked this era with high expectations about the possibilities of counterposing industrial democracy to despotism and collectivity to individualism (Ziogas, 2013a).

Just like capitalism is not solely an economic system but also a correlation of certain principles, identities and meanings, our networks, as well, can – maybe– advance something broader than working without a boss, a broader conceptualization of work as part of a collectively organized life and creation (WCNA, 2017, p. 3).

The practice, thus, of avoiding reproducing wage labour and wage workers (Perlman, 1969) was also part of a broader, more holistic, pedagogical countermeasure to identities and attitudes fostered by capitalism.

Capitalism not only produces products but also social relations. Each product produced within the capitalist mode of production reproduces the worker and the capitalist, a class social relation. It also reinforces the profit motive and the principle of antagonism etc. Our experiments of self-management accordingly not only produce products, the products of Viome, for example, are not simple detergents but are outcomes of a different mode of cooperative production that aim not on profit but in fulfilling certain needs ... Radical cooperatives have, thus, a huge educational role to play. Self-educative for its members and more broadly to society... It is the road for society to self-educate itself in something radically different and given that society becomes increasingly involved into the cooperative mode of production, the result would be developing cooperativism further and practising it better (Event; Delta).

Along these lines, it is clear that WCNA had from the start higher expectations than building *socialism in one factory* (Mandel, 1975) and that its constituents had the intention to avoid a corporatist attitude where workers within a single workplace would solely look for their own well-being (Boggs, 1977; Greenberg, 1981). Hosting political events, shutting down during general strikes and marching together with other workers,

creating a solidarity fund as well as promoting cooperative diversification and compiling a guide on ‘how to form a worker cooperative’ were all brainstormed quite early (Minutes; WCNA assemblies; 14 Jan., 11 Feb. and 10 Jun. 2013, reflexive diary).

This was largely the result of taking into consideration some criticisms that were raised against an individualist attitude on the workers’ part not solely in the early days of cooperativism (Jones, 2010a) but also within the self-management experiment in Yugoslavia or revolutionary Spain (Seidman, 2002; Ziogas, 2013b; Leval, 2018) (reflexive diary). Indeed such criticisms, on the one hand, led to ‘socializing profits’ and keeping prices down to be affordable by the many (Karakasis, 2005; Pagkaki, 2011; The Colleagues’ Publications, 2015; Papantoniou, 2017). In this sense, the projection that operating on the *arena of the market* (Wijkström, 2011) directly leads to creating antagonism between producers and consumers (Biehl, 1998) was not validated in the field.

We aspire to balance providing the lowest possible prices without compromising the quality of our primary products or their process of production whilst simultaneously ensuring our decent pay and working conditions (Pagkaki, 2011, p. 4).

On the other hand, selfishness was also not exhibited in a political level (Michael Bakunin, 1971; Greenberg, 1981; Boggs, 2015) as the willingness ‘to participate in the struggles for broader social transformation’ in the *macro* level by directly seeking complementarity with ‘the autonomous trade unions and the movement for solidarity economy’ indicates (WCNA, 2014, p. 4).

Indeed, during this first period, the internal discussion was highly politicised, overly optimistic and well-tuned with the radical imagination following the peak of the anti-austerity movement in Greece

The issues that were raised and discussed during the first two years were more political and not so focused on how these cooperatives could be sustainable, how they can cooperate between them and request support from others to solve their operational problems. We could discuss for hours more ideological issues. Moreover, our political debates were very premature. We were ten work collectives and we were discussing how this would sweep Greece, how can there be 100s of collectives and so on (interview; Eta).

Still, WCNA was not (intended to be) a vanguard organization or a *sect of ultra-left* homogenous radical cooperatives (Rees, 2007). In part, this was a lesson derived from the experience of one of its founding members, Pagkaki, as an observer of a failed earlier

attempt to coordinate radical worker cooperatives in the second largest city of Greece, Thessaloniki (reflection diary).

Indeed, a relatively inclusive, big-tent approach exhibited by WCNA was evidenced by the call for a first Panhellenic meeting for worker co-operators at the squatted social centre Embros in 8/11/2013 signed by 11 members. There, co-operators from 28 projects showed up without necessarily having to represent their affiliation.

Our call is particularly inclusive as our intention is to meet each other, exchange thoughts, listen to one another, share experiences, as well as political opinions and theses, not only as collectives but also as individuals that share similar working settings (WCNA, 2013, p. 3).

But the agenda set for this two-day Panhellenic meeting by WCNA did revolve around a set of strategic questions to better understand each other and identify common grounds for concerted action. More specifically, the questions that were raised to guide the discussion were:

How can worker cooperatives contribute to a broader social transformation? How do we delimit worker cooperatives from the state (institutions)? What could be the connection with other worker struggles? (WCNA, 2013, p. 4)

Yet, the responses of the collectives that opened up the stage and the open discussion that developed with the participation of their members while illuminative for a better understanding of the field, brought to the fore that the prospects for generating an active current of politically motivated worker cooperatives movement seemed rather farfetched (Minutes of the Panhellenic assemblies at Embros 9-10, Nov. 2013, reflexive diary).

In fact, there were no grounds for neither ideological homogeneity nor a political synthesis (Dielo Truda, 2001; Voline, 2005). Schematically, the most elementary distinction was between those that 'were more interested in discussing the issues of everyday life within a worker cooperative, and those that were more interested in political issues' (interview; Eta, reflexive diary). The former, constituted the majority and their interest was primarily a result of mixed feelings about the contradictory experience of cooperativism. The latter, apart from worrying about the prospects of cooperativism, were also fearing the danger of *liquidation* (Rees, 2007). Both schematic tendencies failed to provide a roadmap and inspire the rest to commit in a united front (Minutes of the Panhellenic assemblies at Embros 9-10, Nov. 2013).



Figure 8: Snapshots from the first Panhellenic meeting on radical cooperativism (occupied social centre Embros)

WCNA in limbo (11/11/2013-17/3/2018)

The outcome of the identifying and formative debates organized by WCNA was not that fruitful and marked the end of an era as it became evident that there were slim chances for generating a strong cooperative movement. Besides, it was in this difficult period that two long-standing WCNA members pulled out from the coalition for diametrically opposing reasons. The one had consistently championed focusing more on the problems of everyday cooperation following a queer perspective on the politics of everyday life (as expressed in the first quote that follows) while the other expected WCNA to focus more on (political) agitation towards the masses (as expressed in the second quote). Meanwhile, both did not really commit in advancing neither direction (Fieldnotes, informal discussion).

We would like WCNA to focus on the problems of everyday life within its constituents, discussing possible solutions, ideas, proposals, mutual dealings, right here and right now and maybe, on the long run, to get in touch and communicate with other projects of a coming network of self-determination and self-management, like social clinics, solidarity initiatives in neighbourhoods etc. We could not follow some of the debates that took place within WCNA about the international development of cooperativism since we cannot afford to spare time from overcoming issues that we face in our operations, and that are never-ending as we realize all the time (email; sent to WCNA by ex-member 2015).

We perceive WCNA has been trapped in introspection, as a result of ongoing analysis and theoretical reflection. Though these elements are necessary, they have monopolised the procedures. We fear that attempting to reach an absolute consensus on issues (or because of this process, few members will be left agreeing in the end) takes us away from our objectives (email; sent to WCNA by ex-member 2014).

Still, WCNA entering a limbo mode was predominately neither a result of a lacking (commitment to a) shared political roadmap nor a lacking receptivity of cooperativism as an integral part of the social movements (as introduced in section 3.7 *Contextual background: The emergence of new cooperativism in Greece*). Instead, this was an outcome of the critical problems challenging the individual collectives. In other words, the main reason why co-operators became inwardly focused with limited time to spare for collaboration was rather internal issues –including a lack of homogeneity towards (actively) participating in WCNA– and the practicalities of each cooperative which were of higher priority than political reflection/action.

It is not that likely that within each collective all members agree with WCNA unless this is a key criterion for selecting members. Without having any agreement on this issue, some members might well not attend the assemblies. Some persons join a worker cooperative simply for making a living without any further interest in cooperativism. In the past, there were members in our collective that were not interested at all about WCNA. [Now], all members want and currently have time to support WCNA. However, we cannot propose and “stir” things alone (audiotaped WCNA assembly; member of Perivolaki; 8 May 2017).

The rest are not interested (informal chat).

We should not forget that most of us are relatively new-born collectives that have not yet stood on their feet and that are full of everyday anxieties, so having a monthly WCNA assembly is too much (we cannot make it). We also should realize that not all members of the collectives are interested in the same way about WCNA which is also understandable (Synallosis, 2016).

Most of the rest members do not disagree but they also do not get their hands dirty (interview; Iota).

In part, WCNA became an insular project because people within worker cooperatives retained within a different context an *employee rationale* (not taking the responsibility of the project and its active support, practically and politically) (Pagkaki 2015) or a *co-owner attitude* that simply minds his/her business share (participant observation).

WCNA was not fed from its constituting members, as they did not discuss the agenda of WCNA and naturally failed to be productive, leading it to degeneration (audiotaped WCNA assembly Jan. 22, 2018).

Cooperative movement degeneration was, thus, not a result of an ideological crisis erupting from adopting a technocratically promoted market pragmatism as commonly presented in the literature on mainstream cooperativism (Laidlaw, 1980; Diamantopoulos, 2012). Instead, it was a result of a reality check –triggered as time was passing by since

the formation of the collectives (Minutes of WCNA assembly 12 May 2014, fieldnotes)– that securing a satisfactory level of operations, wages and maintaining a well-tuned collective are key preconditions for radical collectives to be able to actively promote cooperativism.

Along these lines, WCNA, for most of its members, had largely been perceived as an extra burden requiring sparing scarce resources, at a moment, that most groups had not resolved their internal issues.

WCNA is a secondary priority. Nevertheless, we have benefited in a practical, psychological and political way by meeting so many people, reading the documents of other collectives and participating in debates with them (interview; Kappa).

It was recognized by all that no group had discussed not just about the document but for WCNA, so there was nothing to discuss (minutes; WCNA assembly 24 Jun. 2014).

It is no wonder, then, that over time some WCNA members would experience disappointment, introspection and, ultimately, disengagement from WCNA.

I think that the biggest problem [for WCNA], at times, has been that each collective faces internal problems and it is, then, a luxury not having solved its internal problems to go for something broader and more political. In such situations, for collectives, like us, extra energy is required and is not often possible. Therefore, stabilizing the collectives first is what is required (interview; Eta).

This was pretty evident, for instance, by the increasing interest shown for discussing the contradictory experience of cooperativism; as co-operators steadily realised that ‘associated work is not a piece of cake’ (Pagkaki, 2011, p. 2). In fact, the complexity of associated work was so underestimated that after a few years some of them –like me (audiotaped WCNA assembly 18 Mar. 2018)– would retrospectively confess that they had been ‘arrogant, under-skilled and naive on this matter’ or that a lot of members that got involved in the process simply had no idea about what to expect. As two members of Synallois and Perivolaki, respectively, put it, ...

... the foundation of most collectives was mostly based on prior relations of friendship, [family] or comradeship without the members [seriously] reflecting upon whether their viewpoints on collective work converged. On top of that, at least the currently longstanding members [of WCNA] for which I pretty much have a clear idea, have all made the same mistake. We thought that we were very well prepared for working together and that collective work would be something that we could easily handle simply

because some of us were involved in other [type of] collectives in the past (audiotaped WCNA assembly; Synallois member; March 18, 2018).

Most people that entered the collectives were unemployed that had no idea about the situation they got involved in... The mentality, largely exhibited, revolved around their previous experiences of either taking up personal responsibility for something that they owned or just getting paid for working. A collective has nothing to do with that mentality, it is about common interests and obligations. If some people can not follow such a rationale, it is obvious that they are not made for worker cooperatives (interview; Kappa).

A lack of a radical cooperative tradition in Greece and even of literature translated in Greek on standard problems of cooperation played an extra role in naïvely adopting such high expectations on the co-operators part and inadequate (if any) safety valves for smooth intra-cooperation. As Ziogas (2013), a member of Synallois, claimed quite early in an event on social and solidarity economy, there was no appropriate...

... knowledge production supporting such cooperative networks with experience, knowledge and a direction –not to regulate them– but help them resolve their problems. This is really important right now (event, Epsilon).

WCNA members, for example, largely did not foresee that as key antagonisms have been drawn out of the (workplace) occasion –or because of it (Horvat, 1983; Mellor, Hannah and Stirling, 1988)–, very often conflicts would emerge and escalate in critical levels so that the only viable solution was splitting up a group or firing a member.

As wage labourers, we took for granted that some specialists organized the environment where we worked and were supposed to resolve cases of internal infighting. When we were suddenly part of a group where each worker had the duty and responsibility to contribute to the definition of the working conditions and to set the boundaries of the duties of all colleagues, there was no experience of how this is done in practice. As a result, the solution came [primarily] through conflict (email; sent to WCNA from a cooperative in conflict/trouble; 9 Feb. 2015).

Seemingly a paradox (Stohl and Cheney, 2001), conflict escalation also included instances of avoiding –thus not productively dealing with– conflict (Ramon, 1980; Whittle, 2009) that will be discussed in more detail in the next section focusing on the cases of Pagkaki and Synallois.

It is very often that there is often a reluctance to discuss certain issues ... out of fear of conflict. We, thus, often postpone such a discussion or reach a rather shallow agreement. Still, avoiding conflict at any cost is not that helpful (response to WCNA questionnaire).

If someone was so often late at work, why was this issue not resolved in time and it is only now mentioned that the conflict has escalated to such a degree? (mailing list of WCNA).

Yukali, Pagkaki and Perivolaki barely survived through such processes of internal infighting erupting from cases ranging from an overwhelming individualistic attitude to outright sexist violence within the workplace (Participant observation, fieldnotes, interviews Kappa, Lambda and Mu, Pagkaki 2015). Colleagues Publications', as well, faced recurrent issues in this area (interview; Iota).

An incident of sexist violence and its non-uniform condemnation by all members according to the internal rules of the collective [which entail stripping membership for violence] has put the collective in a really bad situation (draft WCNA statement, not published).

Our debates were not political or were guised as political, we were consumed with rivalries and very bad relations (audiotaped WCNA assembly 8 Nov. 2015).

Along these lines, the most mundane sources of conflicts have been issues arising from members attaining different paces in terms of overall engagement (Pagkaki, 2015; interview; Kappa, questionnaires), failing considerably in work or in participating in the political process (Pagkaki, 2015; interview; Iota).

For instance, all cooperatives that had newcomers joining faced serious problems in sustaining an environment of comradeship between the members. Some of them were exacerbated by the lack of relevant recruiting-socializing processes and explicit statutes and others were triggered by a lack of a '*desire to co-exist here and now in respectful and sharing relationships, with the ample participation of all*', an element explicitly stressed as key by a large association of cooperatives in Venezuela (CECOSESOLA, 2010, p. 23, emphasis added).

Informed bylaws in both theory and practice seemed to be a step in the right direction since at least they provided a framework for consciously debating and cultivating a shared common ground, even if 'it is impossible to foresee all threats' (Pagkaki, 2015, p. 13) and 'properly revisited statutes, in general, could only reduce the number of problems emerging' (assembly; internal affairs working group of WCNA 28 May 2019).

All opinions converged on that there were significant gaps in the statute of the collective which coupled with postponing general assemblies led the co-operative to a dead-end (Minutes of WCNA assembly 11 Mar. 2014).

For instance, having a documented agreement from the beginning on the ownership of cooperatives would have pre-emptively deescalated the tensions that arose when two founding members of a collective claimed a share on the generated capital when they decided to leave their cooperative for personal reasons (informal consultation of a WCNA member in crisis 26 Mar. 2018). Such a demand was unheard of for the rest and though a negotiation was reached, it severely undermined the pre-existing social ties between the former colleagues/friends (informal consultation of a WCNA member in crisis 26 Mar. 2018). Moreover, a lack of prior agreement on the scheme of co-ownership showcases that overall little clarity existed for their ‘company’, altogether.

Similarly, adopting a constitution written by another cooperative without undergoing a series of formative debates has also proved an empty shell. Still, drafting by themselves a constitution was an uphill/demanding task for most cooperatives (fieldnotes).

Drafting the constitution took us about one year (audiotaped validation assembly; WCNA 19 Dec. 2019).

Meanwhile, as a response to the problems erupting at the level of individual cooperative members, some collective processes were set up at this stage to at least deal with the consequences. First, the establishment of the workers’ mobility scheme involved members of one collective filling in gaps in another so that the latter would not retreat to wage labour (Daskalaki and Kokkinidis, 2017). Second, the creation of a common fund involved covering the operational costs of WCNA, supporting through loans WCNA members in crisis and, in perspective, the facilitation of new projects (minutes of WCNA assembly 23 Mar. 2015).

In turn, such measures, significantly, played a key role for consolidating in practice a sense of collective identity between WCNA members. A task that the internal debates so far had failed to generate.

Such practices resulted in building a sense of mutual trust and identity between co-operators that also undermined partly the limits between individual collectives and contributed in the cultivation of a broader community of co-operators (WCNA, 2017, p. 3).

Yet, as I later realized, such collective measures were not radical enough since they were not dealing with the root causes that troubled both the individual collectives and the individuals within the collectives. Still, as I posed it in a WCNA general assembly, targeting root causes was impossible since the collectives were operating like a black box that WCNA had almost no knowledge and jurisdiction about its internal workings.

We must realize that some collectives do not have the necessary competences in some areas and that the fact that we have not focused [as WCNA] to resolve such problems, but are instead focusing on how to buy each other's products or organize benefits for supporting collectives in crises, is an outcome of the fact that individual cooperatives operate like a black box that solely the collectives are responsible [and capable] for [decoding it]. Hence, [WCNA] cannot arbitrarily attempt to come to aid. Instead, support is only possible if the collective opens up either on its initiative or as a result of a [dedicated mechanism institutionalized within WCNA's] structure. Within such a context, we observe collectives being overwhelmed by problems –that if there was a process that took advantage of the fact that we are many and have different skills among us– could logically get more adequately confined (audiotaped WCNA assembly 18 Mar. 2018).

On top of that, market failures had also their toll on WCNA including a member, Aftarkeia, and two observers, Collective Courier and Mpeyiri (2015). Nevertheless, whether such marginal cases of complete market failures were directly related with the (worker) cooperative form (Webb and Webb, 1914; Michels, 1915), being under-resourced (Luxemburg, 1966; Thornley, 1982; Dow, 2003), a lack of critical skills (Gamson and Levin, 1984), unviable business plans or a mix of the above requires further research. The facts are that Aftarkeia operated within a tiny market like that of DIY solar ovens, the grocery store, Mpeyiri (2015, p. 2), claimed it failed due to its members 'inexperience and the somewhat spontaneous rejection of the sector' and Collective Courier operated in a very competitive market dominated by multinational corporations (and their franchise affiliates) where the key customers are enterprises and not individuals.

Yet, regardless of the exact root causes of such failures, a seed of doubt about the viability of such experiments was planted among most WCNA members. Retrospectively, however, it is clear that, overall, WCNA members exhibited compared to the 'large scale businesses [that] are generally [considered] more viable' (Centre of Planning and Economic Research, 2019, p. 51), an even lower rate of mortality.

Meanwhile, beyond the above-mentioned factors that have undermined the creation of a movement momentum, there was also the problem that WCNA members were neither formed nor coordinated based on ideological affinity or even a serious political commitment (WCNA assembly April 29, 2014; reflexive diary). In this way, WCNA somewhat confirmed the expectations of advocates of platformism (Dielo Truda, 2001) that a big-tent approach of organizing was bound to have 'a fairly weak impact even if numerically strong, or suffer serious splits' (Van Der Walt and Schmidt, 2009b, p. 246).

Indeed, WCNA de facto minimized its objectives into diffusing experience gained (Figure 9) and supporting each other quite early. It, thus, got primarily limited in facilitating some decentralized events where one member would introduce another member or its products to its audience.



Figure 9: Presenting ways of organizing collective work during a Festival [17 Oct. 2015] (left); Perivolaki hosting Synallois to present the history of the coffee served (right).

Exceptions to this minimalistic rule (See Figure 10) were marching during general strikes under the banner of WCNA (27/11/2014, 1/5/2015, 12/11/2015), conducting a fundraising concert (8/9/2016) to support the organization of the Second Euromediterranean ‘Workers’ Economy’ Meeting (28-30/10/2016) where a reflection of WCNA experience was also presented and, finally, expressing solidarity with the recuperated factories of Viome and Robin Wood⁴ (an initiative of workplace occupation –supported by WCNA (events; Zeta and Eta)– that dissolved before entering production mode).

We demand from the government that declares in all tones its willingness to support workers and the *social and solidarity economy* to prove this in practice, not to remain in words (WCNA, 2016).



Figure 10: WCNA during the general strike of 27 Nov. 2014 (left); Second Euromediterranean ‘Workers’ Economy’ Meeting hosted at Viome (centre); Solidarity demonstration for Viome (right)

Meanwhile, adopting under the banner of WCNA events/workshops that single members would organize in any case –solely to get the message out about the existence of the not well-known WCNA– resulted in a double disappointment. Those that actually did

⁴ <https://robenworkers.wordpress.com>

organize the events were critical for the lack of collective enthusiasm in organizing the events (reflexive diary) and for those that eventually did not bite the relevance of these events, their disengagement accelerated under the pretext that their participation is requested in areas that are not that stimulating.

Our interests are focused more on other issues... We highlight this as important. We were neither able to co-organize nor attend the event with Hugo Blanco (Email; received by WCNA; 2015).

We are wondering why we have organized as WCNA events for Kobane and Gaza, why our first big event was with Hugo Blanco (and how we managed not to co-organize as WCNA the event with Ruggeri! [event; Theta]) ... ultra-politicization has contributed in cooperatives not joining or leaving WCNA' (Synallois, 2016).

In turn, the first reaction to reduced political output and the distance between WCNA and its members was to tackle the deficiency of the decision-making structure.

The structure of WCNA is really tiring and not that agile. Moving from the monthly assembly of representatives from each cooperative to all general assemblies of WCNA members is time consuming and dragging (Synallois, 2016).

Therefore, following a proposal put forward by Synallois, WCNA (2017) changed its structure without dealing further with the problems erupting at the micro level of each cooperative and, as before, without attempting to co-construct an inclusive political roadmap. Hence, the only corrective measure taken, after all, was simply to reduce the transmission costs of decision making between WCNA and its members (Leach, 2016) in the hope of revealing repressed creativity and zeal (event; Iota). This was attempted via constituting a once in a three-month general assembly and introducing relatively autonomous –yet subject to the general assembly– working groups (Minutes of WCNA assembly 15 May 2016). Still, such a structural change coincided with the involvement of WCNA in the support of the Second Euromediterranean 'Workers' Economy' Meeting and, initially, proved quite productive.

The new structure delivers! (informal chat with a member of Colleagues' Publications 2017).

Yet, my reaction has been quite sceptical from the beginning of such a plan for solely a structure change, as only shared with Pagkaki members.

This proposal bypasses the existing problems that most WCNA members face more or less (no ideological homogeneity, lack of a political roadmap and commitment) ... If the mentality within cooperatives remains the

same, then [solely] changing the structure will prove vain (Pagkaki forum post 17 Jul. 2014).

Later, based on my own experience in a WCNA working group, another critical problem was identified. WCNA lacked the authorization-delegation required to be of help to the individual cooperatives either proactively or by directly intervening.

In the case of the last existential threats that two WCNA members faced, we were caught as WCNA unprepared and without any available procedure to be of help. It is high time that we act more proactively (and even reactively). Either by demanding WCNA members to share with us their elementary rules on decision-making and their membership, or even by creating an independent secondary level judiciary process where individuals from WCNA members can appeal to and sustainable resolutions of conflict can be promoted without undermining the relations of trust between WCNA members (email; sent to WCNA by the researcher March 2018).

On top of that, given my closed interaction with a variety of participants in most WCNA collectives, I also detected that since WCNA members faltered to rotate their delegates or devote plenty of time within their own assemblies to discuss what was going on in WCNA, that there was a problem for newcomers to better contextualise themselves. On top of that, participation in WCNA assemblies was not considered a prerequisite for membership resulting in cases like the following.

What is WCNA? (newcomer in WCNA member assembly 4 Jul. 2016).

What are the objectives of WCNA (newcomer during an informal chat while working together Jun. 2016).

Regarding WCNA, I really do not know what to say about it, I cannot understand what's going on (newcomer in WCNA member assembly 17 Jan. 2017).

This is a common rationale: When working you are getting paid, attending WCNA does not. Why then go?... 'What is your mandate for telling me I should go to the WCNA assembly?' (interview; Kappa).

Such a realization was communicated to WCNA by me at the end of 2017.

A sense of estrangement has developed towards WCNA from members that do not participate in its assemblies and, ultimately, discussion/decisions taken at a WCNA level are not representative of the attitudes of the great majority of co-operators (audiotaped WCNA assembly 6 Dec. 2017).

Hence, my diagnosis was that the main problem for the network laid primarily at its separate members' area of responsibility (being unable to engage fully with WCNA) and

was somewhat reinforced by a lack of an overall vision for moving radical cooperativism forward (which I –at that time– considered to be quite easily possible to be built bottom-up).

If WCNA members cannot operate properly as cells for conducting political praxis, it is impossible for WCNA to operate smoothly as an organism. Hence, the primary task would be to stimulate first an operative cell [even if this is WCNA]. For such a cell to be functional, a shared, inclusive target should be identified in a plenary of WCNA so as to motivate most of us in its undertaking (audiotaped WCNA assembly 22 Jan. 2018).

The lack of adequate minutes or inconsistency in sharing voice recording of the assemblies seemed to further enable such a vicious circle as it made it difficult even for me being that committed and engaged to get in tune with the evolution of the debates between different assemblies (reflexive diary). As a previously heavily committed to WCNA member of Synallois put it...

... this is an issue all coalitions face. Their maintenance requires lots of work and this should be done by specific people. People that build up an archive and facilitate the debates. At times, some people had this initiative but that was a spontaneous, discontinued process as nobody dedicated himself for enough time so that some proper structures are set. Two or three did this for some time and then some others brought in some elements, but this was not at all organized [as required] (interview; Eta).

Indeed, after the international meeting on the workers' economy, WCNA was once again left free-floating with no proper maintenance taking place despite the efforts of Pagkaki and Viome to provide a new political goal for WCNA, the creation of a common distribution channel between recuperated enterprises and worker cooperatives. However, while a considerable amount of energy was devoted to fleshing out and stirring this project by Pagkaki and Viome (more details available in the Pagkaki case and the section), it was later realized that the two supposed operational locomotives for this project Synallois and Lacandona were facing considerable internal challenges and the project stalled as it ran out of steam.

As a reaction to a messy situation developing and the erupting feeling of separateness that was no longer coupled by any tangible benefits, WCNA retreated with discomfort to the previous dysfunctional model (WCNA Minutes on 8 May 2017). Yet, sustaining WCNA after this experience seemed a quite difficult challenge since the problem was bigger than an inefficient procedure. As I shared it with WCNA, a sense of repulsion and deep alienation between [the assembly of] WCNA and the basis of its membership

predominated; constituting the latter equipped with a shallow understanding of the situation and thus with limited abilities to overcome WCNA's standstill' (audiotaped assembly; WCNA March 17, 2018).

Therefore, after a prolonged period of inactivity and low expectations leading to a somewhat paralyzed movement (Briscoe, 1991), a meeting would be called to decide whether WCNA dissolves or not that marked the beginning of a new era. Apo Koinou, Sintrimmi and Viome joining WCNA was partly responsible for the latter.

To sum up, the second phase of WCNA was characterized by the eruption of major crises in the domain of individual cooperatives that had, in turn, ripple effects on the other levels, as well. Meanwhile, structural elements of the collectives and a big-tent approach adopted by WCNA resulted in a rather weak movement which failed to get nested within social movements, lacked a direction and suffered from members' disengagement. While a mere structural change could not by-pass the factors that inhibited the generation of an active cooperative movement, the infusion of three new members and the optimism that they brought in somewhat stabilized WCNA and reversed 'the inertial drag of maturing' WCNA members (Diamantopoulos, 2012, p. 48). Cooperative movement degeneration was, thus, a quite complex process influenced by a constellation of often interwoven case-specific factors including non-movement actors

A regeneration attempt leading slowly to deterioration and an emerging opportunity for radical coordination (18/3/2018-19/12/2019)

In the first assembly of a new era for WCNA (18/3/2018), the first decision to be made was whether WCNA would dissolve. Following a relatively unprecedented attendance by most collectives (only compared to –at the time– with the Panhellenic meeting that took place in Athens, 8/11/2013), it was easily decided that this is not the case.

This is impressive because everybody believes that it is our failure; if it does not exist. We are then all isolated, feel lonely and powerless. And, at times, it has been helpful. It is a space for sharing problems or knowledge which evokes a sense of belonging to something larger. We are not just a bunch of worker cooperatives but part of something larger (interview; Eta).

Nevertheless, no one was sure exactly on how to proceed with WCNA and a rather free-floating reflection took place. Still, a relatively common thread was that the nature of WCNA should be revisited to more actively become preoccupied with the problems of the collectives. That was simply because, as a longstanding WCNA member put it in a passionate farewell speech which did strike a chord among the participants...

... one of the most elementary reasons that led to the formation of WCNA was to propose to society to create cooperatives but our experience so far cannot really support such a call. That is neither in financial terms – because after all these years we still have not resolved this, so we cannot confidently propose cooperativism as a solution for someone’s well-being– nor in terms of alternative work relations, that everything is smooth, that without bosses we all get along perfectly. Therefore, these two aspects have to be better worked out and I agree with [the previous speaker] that maybe we must take a step back from the arena of politics and deal with issues like business sustainability and working relations, so not to end up with self-exploitation. Otherwise, what are we supposed to promote? (audiotaped WCNA assembly March 18, 2018)

Indeed, such crucial problems were mostly kept out of sight and out of the agenda even though setting the latter was open for all. Therefore, such an outcome was attributable both to a lack of openness from the part of the individual collectives and a failure from WCNA part to create a dedicated safe environment for such problems to first get communicated and second be treated as collective problems.

We are not informed about the problems of WCNA in time. This information must be shared before the situation gets critical... For problems to be resolved, it is required that each collective opens up to WCNA (audiotaped WCNA assembly March 18, 2018).

The collective [in trouble] considered the rest collectives showed no interest in their case and that some WCNA members were reluctant to take a side on the conflict that they had gone through... The rest, that attended this meeting, perceived that it was the collective in trouble that did not communicate enough an emergency signal. Therefore, WCNA could not realize the extent of the problem and was not indifferent towards the collective (minutes; ad hoc meeting between WCNA and a collective in trouble 19 Mar. 2019).

In turn, WCNA decided shortly after:

- a) to create three independent working groups –internal affairs, politics and business/finance– to carry out a mapping of the problems that the collectives faced in part to avoid demanding/dragging general assemblies and,
- b) to deal with the most pressing issues challenging the survival of its members in an ad hoc manner.

The working-group-driven WCNA

In terms of the three thematic working groups, the initial mission as defined by the general assembly was to simply scope the issues emerging in the respected areas and brainstorm on the potential role WCNA could play. Only after clarifying their role in the next general assembly, individuals would then join them (WCNA assemblies 14 Jun. 2018).

Along these lines, the preparatory assembly regarding finance issues that took place in 17 July 2018 reported that after considering the problems that WCNA members have faced, the following tasks were identified as fitting for a future working group (which were not validated in the next general assembly (audiotaped WCNA assembly 5 Nov. 2018):

- presenting to newcomers and in crises some common problems that WCNA members have faced [and ways that have attempted to address them],

- enhancing mutual understanding and help between WCNA members by following a process that first focuses on communicating the current financial position and the future plans of each cooperative. On the one hand, such a proposal might serve as a chance for the collectives to prioritize reflecting upon their financial problems and, on the other hand, it could serve as space for outsiders bringing in new insights that the collectives at trouble might have missed. A first thought is that such a process could take place in a dedicated solely to that purpose plenary or [in parts] as a subsection of [more] plenaries. The rationale is that we do not consider meaningful such a discussion to take place within the confines of a small working group,

- the developmental perspective of WCNA: a) facilitate-support the creation of new collectives in areas that enhance the autonomy of WCNA (members) as identified during the previous phase like setting up a brewery or a coffee roasting facility, b) given a good track record of provided support, WCNA might become more attractive for attracting new members (minutes; preparatory assembly for business 17 Jul. 2018).

Yet, as a result of (a long lacking and productive) enthusiasm, in the rest assemblies, two working groups were formed and took the initiative to go beyond their mandate. Since, then, the structure of WCNA de facto changed from a plenary-driven assembly to a working-group-driven WCNA (mimicking the previous relative scheme involving about three general assemblies a year).

[In the working group of internal affairs,] we did not start from defining the agenda of this thematic group but instead, a debate opened up and through this process we were able to identify what mattered most to the participants. We were primarily driven by impulse and a desire to participate and not to map the areas of concern [as decided by the general assembly]. That was the general attitude... Since I've participated in all three working groups, my understanding is that the areas the working groups decided to focus depended on the attitudes of the people involved (audiotaped WCNA assembly 5 Nov. 2018).

This was evident for the rare amount of people that had followed all three working groups. My reflection was that...

... the three working groups, depending on their membership, operate quite idiosyncratically and this is reflected in their vision and plans. For example, the working group of internal affairs has adopted a consciousness-raising approach prioritizing a better understanding of recurring issues as a way forward, the politics working group considers that ideas motivate people and, therefore, is devoted in taking part in debates within the public sphere, for the business sustainability working group, finally, it is important that problems are resolved and this requires developing an appropriate form of intervention to solve a problem of an individual member [without jeopardizing its autonomy] (audiotaped WCNA assembly 5 Nov. 2018).

When the time was ripe for a general assembly, most attendants stressed that it was or that it should be the general assembly that provides the direction to the working groups and that for this relation to operate harmoniously, a dialectic relation between working groups and the general assembly was required, as the following WCNA decision ambitiously declared:

The general assembly proposes to the working groups general guidelines and each group reflects upon how this could materialize. If this is deemed not feasible by the group, it has to report this back to the general assembly (audiotaped WCNA assembly 5 Nov. 2018).

Yet, such a decision failed to accept and adapt to the fact that a large number of participants to the working groups would be demoralized by such a perceived intervention into the workings of what spontaneously ended up being ‘open thematic assemblies’ with no priory agreed mission (WCNA, 2019, p. 5), a key element for effective governance (Heijne and Buck, 2013).

I think that the attitude now is that we take the initiative and start working with joy. That is the essence of this phase of WCNA. I do not feel that we should task the general assembly with coordinating or checking the working groups. Are we not all the general assembly? (audiotaped WCNA assembly 5 Nov. 2018).

In turn, demoralizing those more involved would be disastrous for a voluntarily run organization. Therefore, brainstorming ways that would enable the general assembly to somewhat ‘stir the organization as a whole’ (Bider, Bellinger and Perjons, 2011, p. 249) increasingly became my preoccupation so that democracy prevails. My reflection on this matter, as I shared within a WCNA general assembly, was that, at least, some preparatory work and different options should be provided to the general assembly so that the latter is not confined in rubber-stamping projects taken up by those who ‘have few other demands on their time, or have special managerial expertise, or have special access to information’ (Hansmann, 1996b, p. 41).

I think that we should build upon the existing impulse as a starting point and complement on this. We have to keep in mind that we are a voluntarily run organization that cannot hold the people accountable for not doing their job so it is wise that people that do the job are motivated for this. It will then be more probable that they will deliver ... Moreover, by acknowledging that, for the moment, the general assembly cannot actually direct the working groups given the available information, maybe it should be the task of the working group to provide some different courses of action to the assembly (audiotaped WCNA assembly 5 Nov. 2018).

Yet, my voice was not heard and the working groups operated merely as thematic assemblies without taking up an extra preparatory work apart from –at best– providing a more focused space for debate/deconfliction and a report prior to the general assembly of WCNA. Along these lines, decisions like ‘to circulate progress reports of the working groups as a way to keep informed those that do not attend them’ (WCNA assembly 5 Nov. 2018) could well be perceived as an extra burden (to that of attending) or get rejected out of mere whim or even be undermined by a lack of equipped or willing members to perform such essential tasks for the maintenance and well-functioning of the network voluntarily.

The following discussion which took place during an attempt to (re)define the scope of the finance working group is quite illustrative of concealing from the general assembly the self-fuelled rationale [no critical competencies exist within WCNA] which seemingly led to the renewed mission of the assembly: prioritize (internal) self-education instead of partaking in a process of solving the problems of its members. Inhibiting, in a sense, ‘genuine corrective actions’ to be taken for stabilizing WCNA members in crisis (Argyris, 2003, p. 1182) and reinforcing a ‘self-fuelling error process’ (Argyris, 1996, p. 400) as those with the relative competences were, once again, not listened to and stepped aside instead of being ‘dragged down’ in a pointless pursuit (Visch and Laske, 2018) (reflexive diary).

I am fed up with being proven right about foreseeing failures, please give me a chance for getting confirmed for a success!!! If we do not take advantage of the skills of individuals that do not participate within a working group the prospects for the ongoing regeneration attempt are slim (email; sent to WCNA 25 Feb. 2019).

Indeed, in the ‘compact’ minutes shared –following the widespread consent of the attendants that such a nature of minutes would be more useful–, no such evidence were provided (minutes/audiotaped assembly; business working group assembly 10 Jan. 2019).

-In cases like this [of WCNA members in financial/marketing troubles], does this working group intends to support them or should they request aid from a consultancy company? Can we be of help?

-We do not want [to be the] experts.

-On this issue, we must take into consideration our experience, knowledge etc. I think that what we need is first to self-educate ourselves. If the issue was simply how to track your business financially, we could assist newcomers but in terms of how you improve your products, how to better communicate yourself, marketing in other words, I do not think that a member of WCNA has much to offer. We, for instance, do not have a marketing plan.

-It is also a matter of individuals, I understand that Orestis has some knowledge. Then, some individuals could come together...

-The issue is [first of all] whether we consider that there is a need in this direction.

-Business sustainability is the first and most important aspect for the rest to follow and we all want to attract more people for political reasons as well. The issue is whether/how we can deal with this necessity which for the moment is not taking place.

-It goes without saying that it is useful that tools are provided for collectives to conduct better business plans, to improve their marketing plan etc, as mentioned in the last WCNA assembly ... However, I did not exactly understand what was Orestis' proposal [referring to the proposal raised by the preparatory assembly of 17 July 2018 summarized at the beginning of this section]. So, I sat down to reflect how this working group could work, along these lines. I understand that brainstorming requires more than four people but, on the other hand, these are our capacities. Therefore, I consider that if there is a request by a WCNA member, we should, firstly, check whether there is something simple that we can be of help, maybe request more info so that brainstorming solutions is possible. Secondly, call an extended assembly dedicated to this issue open for more members of WCNA to attend.

-OK, this has also elements of self-education.

-I think that the role of the working group would be to support a member after the collective has tried to solve the problem and not each collective simply calls us in. Since there is no knowledge or time available to conduct someone's marketing plan. Our role should be distinctively supportive.

- It is important to focus on our self-education, as the members of the working group. To take into consideration what are our competences, where we can be of help and maybe through mutual learning, we could have better chances of being of help in the future.

-I like the previously articulated proposal regarding the process since we lack competences in this matter. Thinking that WCNA can set up a

working group that consults its members is not attainable for the moment. There are no members that can pull this through. There are simply a bunch of people that are interested in certain issues and there is some tacit knowledge available that requires to be advanced. The goal of the working group would be to facilitate this process. We cannot do a business plan at the moment, at least, I do not.

-Nobody knows or maybe some of us know some parts in terms of pricing, in terms of laws etc. What would be the point of having a working group then instead of simply contacting the members that have more knowledge on the issues? I consider that the main objective would be to build a working group that supports the sharing of that knowledge.

-So, this is our objective [at least for the moment], right? To share knowledge among us?

-Yes.

-Yes.

Under such circumstances, the option of introducing paid work for the diffusion of information may well-be required so that all members stand better chances to ‘understand and dominate’ the debates taking place within WCNA, as Castoriadis (1988, p. 97) would have put it. However, introducing paid work in some areas bears the potential to undermine the level of commitment already exhibited (Frey, Frey and Bruno, 1997; Titmuss, 2018), so it is quite possible that a dismissive of paid work structural inertia will be exhibited for/while scaling up (Hannan and Freeman, 1984; Mansbridge, 1992; Varkarolis, 2012, pp. 86–88). Therefore, a seriously reflected balanced mix and gradual experimentation seemed to be the best way forward (Schmidt and Van Der Walt, 2009, pp. 188–189).

Summing up, WCNA has stimulated more members than before in its day-to-day processes during the ongoing attempt for regeneration. However, a powered by individuals and their work WCNA prioritizing the formers’ goals over the necessities of WCNA (members) where plenaries were conceived only as a secondary body destined only for providing feedback and ratification seemed not capable of reversing the deterioration of WCNA, as the remaining chapter argues. Along these lines, the fact that these individuals were neither supported by WCNA so that the latter better benefits from the invaluable enthusiasm of the former and the problematic situation where the large proportion of the membership has not de facto been in a position to stir the organization as a whole, were considered two critical factors that required more scrutiny in the future for a true regeneration to take place.

The ad-hoc driven WCNA

Reflecting upon the emergency cases of supporting WCNA members in an ad hoc basis during this period, there was a success story and a series of failures. Starting from the success, WCNA reacted quickly when informed about a critical situation developing that threatened the existence of one of its members.

In the assembly of the WCNA that took place in 18/3/2018, we were notified from a member of WCNA that non-workers are claiming to have a say in the operations of the worker collective, hence, cancelling, in essence, its co-operative nature. She, thus, announced that they cannot be any longer perceived as members of WCNA. We believe that such an act that undermines the existence of a WCNA member is of concern for all of us. We are willing and asking to be provided with more viewpoints in the situation in a meeting –possibly at the worker cooperative– to have a better understanding of the situation. We also declare our commitment for finding a solution that defends the cooperative nature of the worker collective (email; sent by WCNA to the cooperative facing institutional degeneration 19 Mar. 2018).

Such an existential crisis emerged as the collective in trouble failed to find –for a prolonged period– an alternative way to cover the necessary shifts of one of its members that had surgery without requesting from another member with health issues to step up a bit her shifts (showcasing the limitations of the mobility scheme in place).

In turn, pressure from the WCNA part seemed to ease the degeneration pressures quite early (WCNA assembly 4 Apr. 2018). On the long run, some tips provided to address the conflict by the researcher during an interview (Mu), which took into consideration the increased bargaining power of the coalition of collectives, proved successful when implemented by the collective somewhat later. The case was closed for good. However, it could, as well, have been avoided if for instance some Pagkaki members –like me– that had faced a similar situation before were consulted so that they could simply say, as I did when finally informed, ‘why did you not simply shut down Perivolaki for a shift or something?’. Indeed, such a simple idea that just did not pass through Perivolaki members’ mind could have avoided triggering a major crisis that after an unexpected turn of events, almost turned to a peculiar institutional degeneration of the cooperative (Cornforth, Thomas, Spear and Lewis, 1988) (interview; Mu, audiotaped WCNA assembly 18 Mar. 2018).

However, open-mindedly reaching out for support has not proven that easy so far. Indeed, even when WCNA was acting following an invitation to support its members facing financial troubles or intra-group conflicts the encounters were not that (likely to be)

productive. Hence, no real breakthrough has been overall recorded in targeting the main financial/internal problems that primarily troubled its members (WCNA, 2019). Largely, my interpretation of my attempts to intervene as shared with WCNA was that this was an outcome resulting from the collectives not proving to be ready and adequately supported by WCNA to challenge the groupthink responsible for such troubles:

WCNA members do not open up to WCNA and this triggers a vicious cycle (audiotaped WCNA assembly; 15 Jul. 2019).

To be more specific, there was a case where the collective in trouble, ultimately, failed to open up to WCNA by remaining trapped in the group dynamics that lead to the problem, in the first place (minutes of an ad hoc meeting of WCNA with the collective 19 Mar. 2019, minutes of economics working group after a meeting with the collective 5 Apr. 2019, minutes of internal affairs working group with no date). Therefore, even though some critical support was offered on the WCNA part that took advantage of the skills lacking within the collective to conduct a business plan or draft a paper to dispel the myths that had cast a shadow on the collective or to activate the workers-mobility scheme (minutes of an ad hoc meeting of WCNA with the collective 19 Mar. 2019), a different set of solutions was put forward. This included hiring temporarily non-members for some months –which would later be offered to become members– during which the outcome of some juries –which would either result in big fines or no fines at all– and the generated turnover would showcase whether the cooperative will remain or falter. During this period, membership on WCNA would be halted.

From a different perspective, WCNA members were also reluctant to provide negative feedback, active support or even think of creating an independent, collective judiciary (participant observation). Indeed, the working groups considered or proved to be not equipped for such purposes and some individuals sharply said that challenging groupthink was not of our business.

On the long run, our aim is that a future internal affair or conflict resolution working group has more tools and better-equipped members to be of help. Till then, we advise each collective that faces a problem to share it with WCNA and an ad hoc group is created for the situation at hand (minutes; WCNA internal affairs working group assembly 8 Feb. 2019).

WCNA is a network of worker cooperatives, not a federation. Hence, it is an attempt to communicate between individual cooperatives, express solidarity among us and jointly addressing the public ... The individual cooperatives should come first and then the Network. Cooperatives being autonomous is everything! (audiotaped WCNA assembly 18 Mar. 2018).

We are not meant to have a say on how each collective is dealing with its business issues or to judge their products. Only if this is requested, it could be part of the agenda. We are judging modes of production; Not products (audiotaped WCNA assembly 8 Dec. 2019).

Meanwhile, in another emergency case stemming from a seemingly existential intragroup conflict when WCNA was called in, there was, once again, really slim prospects to be of critical help. WCNA still lacked any vested authority to do so for the mutual benefit of both poles of the equation and the collective also had not developed any pre-agreed –at the good times– rules of engagement in the event of internal conflicts (participant observation).

A starting point for developing systemic solutions to persistent organizational problems in the future

In terms of problem-solving, then, the contemporary regeneration attempt of WCNA has not proven that successful in ‘avoiding the repetition of the same mistakes and open up to new solutions’ (audiotaped WCNA assembly 18 Mar. 2018) like dealing with a more systemic solution as proposed just before the first general assembly of this era. Indeed, my following recommendations for upgrading WCNA based on the rationale that ‘no group of five members is in any way autonomous, only together in large numbers we can have some limited autonomy’ (audiotaped WCNA assembly March 18, 2018) were largely not taken into consideration:

a) upgrading WCNA by transferring political time and energy from the individual cooperatives to the network (radical coordination) coupled by an upgraded internal affairs’ working group, collective brainstorming on financial problems of the collectives and overall well-structured processes of information sharing, decision making and implementation. For instance, WCNA members are required to share and update key information regarding its membership, the way their decision-making treats disagreement and the reasons that may lead to expelling a member so that these cannot be unfoundedly be challenged and jeopardize the relationships of trust between members. Likewise, a safe channel for individual members expressing discomfort or collectively brainstorming out of the box solutions for collectives in trouble could also be set up to de-escalate tensions erupting within collectives. Provision of time devoted in both decision making and their implementation would be taken into consideration,

b) transforming it into a network of co-operators so that people [which are mostly interested] and not groups make decisions in a general assembly which was deemed as the most probable route that WCNA would follow (deterioration),

- c) hibernating for a while with the hope that over time some new members will join and motivate the rest (deterioration) or
- d) dissolving immediately (dissolution).

Yet, given that the projections regarding the fate of WCNA if my recommendations were not adopted have proven quite valid, deterioration (See the extended version in Figure 11), maybe they should better be put once again, more thoroughly on the table. Besides adopting (or not) some form of radical coordination in early 2020 would prove catalytic for the prospects of seizing the erupting –once again since late 2012– opportunities for partaking in a (cooperative) movement with great transformation potentialities.

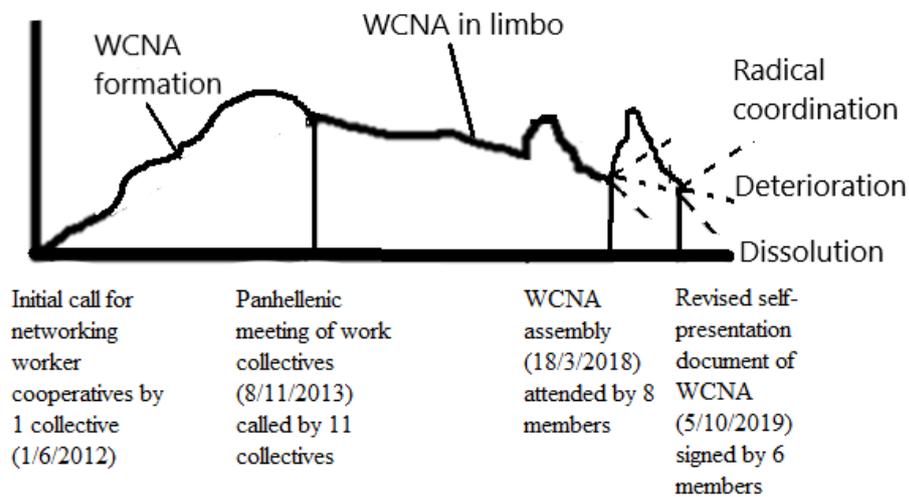


Figure 11: Phases and organizational choices

Indeed, despite the slow deterioration that WCNA has been facing in the late 2010s, the defeatist attitude that had overwhelmed WCNA’s general assemblies was contained in part because of the initiatives and momentum of the deviant politics working group which facilitated a series of initiatives that rebalanced the dual objectives of radical cooperativism by marching with grassroots labour unions (1/11/2018), revisiting/enhancing the outdated presentation document of WCNA and organizing a public event to support the recuperated factory of Viome from the danger posed by the auctioning of its –squatted– premises.

On top of that, an increased optimism stemmed from the momentum for coordinating across Greece radical cooperatives ‘that truly operate according to direct democracy and

consider themselves as preforms of a different kind of society’ that was sparked by the – for the time being– annual Coopenair Festival⁵, established in 2018.



Figure 12: A banner informing about the organizers of the first Coopenair Festival

Indeed, apart from Viome, Pagkaki and Apo Koinou that were formally co-organizing this Panhellenic festival, some WCNA members also attended it and, overall, proved to be quite motivational. However, co-organizing the first or even the second Coopenair Festival as WCNA was not discussed in a general assembly due to time limitations and divergent strategic priorities among WCNA members which have not been collectively debated/integrated for a prolonged time (for instance, see Pagkaki and Viome involvement with the common distribution channel (event; Kappa) **Error! Reference source not found.**, Synallois participating in WFTO [instead of CICOPA], Colleagues Publications’ focus on coordination among radical publications [Vivliostasio⁶]).

These two factors have also been crucial for the slow pace/engagement with the formative debates for coordinating in a Panhellenic level, as foreseen and articulated in the first general assembly taking place in a Coopenair Festival by the researcher (See Figure 13).

I understand that we all desire and recognize the necessity of joint action but based on what I heard earlier there are roughly three different approaches - as promoted by people in Rethymno, the Integral cooperative and WCNA- for cooperative development carrying within them different political significations ... Since most of us are involved in various things, I guess that the day after [the festival] each side will stick to what it has already committed itself to and to the plans that are already lagging... There are people here, obviously, that have not yet spoken because simply they realize they do not have time for this (audiotaped assembly; first Coopenair festival 14 Oct. 2018).

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/coopenairFest>

⁶ <http://vivliostasiosympraxi.blogspot.com/p/blog-page.html>



Figure 13: Discussing the prospects of a Panhellenic cooperative network at CoOpenAir festival, 14 Oct. 2018 (left); WCNA general assembly, 5 Nov. 2018 (right).

The following responses of WCNA members on their availability to co-organize the second Panhellenic Coopenair festival as individual collectives also support my above claim.

Unfortunately, we are unable to partake in the working groups that organize the festival due to time restraints but will attend as many general assemblies as possible... In a practical level, two members of the collective will come to Thessaloniki and help wherever necessary (email; sent to Coopenair Festival by a WCNA member 2 Jul. 2019).

We too face problems in attending working groups, assemblies etc because there is a shortage of availabilities (email; sent to Coopenair Festival by a WCNA member 3 Jul. 2019).

Similar reasoning for not being involved in organizing Coopenair festival was also echoed by other, non-aligned with WCNA radical cooperatives.

Unfortunately, we are unable to partake in organizing the festival as a collective due to time restraints and internal debates [that are a priority] ... Though we are one of the oldest and larger work collectives in Greece, we have not succeeded in being politically extrovert and communicate our existence, experiences, successes and failures within the broader movement that to a great extent is unaware of our existence. We hope that this will change shortly (email; sent to Coopenair Festival 18 Jun. 2019).

We decided that we cannot partake in co-organizing the festival due to time restraints that do not allow us to participate and commit to this endeavour in a manner that we consider necessary ... However, we would like to get informed and if to attend as many assemblies we can (email; sent to Coopenair Festival 12 Jun. 2019).

Therefore, bottlenecks in terms of dedicating time for political action have been very crucial for the development of a radical cooperative movement. A factor which even proved catalytic for a WCNA member to –hopefully temporarily– step down from the assemblies of WCNA because ‘it was not possible for [them] to follow the debates and the working groups of WCNA in a way that the burden/initiative/understanding of this

process was not shared quite equally among its members' (audiotaped WCNA assembly 8 Dec. 2019).

Even though the collective did not put any blame on the procedures of WCNA –quite the contrary–(audiotaped WCNA assembly 8 Dec. 2019), it seemed, at least for me, an imperative that the general assembly of WCNA takes full responsibility for not 'developing certain kinds of supporting mechanisms' tasked with countering the centripetal forces that do not allow cooperativism to expand, including the defeatist attitude that this is how it works, cooperativism is slow and requires a lot more effort.

Indeed, radical cooperatives did seem to purposefully (Ison, 2017) adopt certain models of organizing that were overwhelmingly time-consuming and that made it difficult to for someone to keep up with the debates (audiotaped validation assembly; WCNA 19 Dec. 2019, participant observation at Pagkaki). That was particularly the case of the early days of organizing the Coopenair Festival.

Regarding co-organizing the second Coopenair Festival, someone would expect that a small portion of energy would be required. Instead, so far this does not seem to be the case. eversing this trend requires radical measures to tackle the roots of this problem ranging from who cooks the souvlakia to taking previous decisions as a starting point [for reflection] and not having to re-invent everything from scratch. Otherwise, the result would be only a few coming together and most others slowly abandoning the project (audiotaped assembly; Pagkaki 19 Jun. 2019).

Being (ultra)democratic and not that experienced in operating in a secondary level of organization or adopting an advice model of decision-making were the main reasons behind the cumbersome processes. One such example of unproductive, ultrademocratic decision making has been the process decided by the general assembly of the second Coopenair Festival to decide how and when a reflection of co-organizing the festival would take place. The decision was that this would take place in the typical assembly conducted via teleconference where different collectives present the viewpoints of their assemblies. In this way, organizers were not only burdened in terms of providing content but also to streamline a process regarding the form. Posed in this way, it was quite foreseeable that some cooperatives would miss the deadline for elaboration –if undergoing it at all for such a matter–, some delegates would have to simply attend the meeting without given any mandate and those that have undergone the process to share something could well be burned out by the attitude of the rest (reflection diary, Coopenair Festival mailing list). Instead, simply calling an ad hoc, open to all brainstorming assembly following an advice model instead of searching the ideal through consensus

(Laloux, 2014), would be much more swift, easy-going and still quite democratic process (Pagkaki forum post 29 Oct. 2019). Besides, attempting to be ultrademocratic largely backfired and a major criticism was that, at least on a practical level, there was too much ‘unaccountable delegation of power into the hands of few individuals’ (audiotaped assembly; second Coopenair Festival 13 Oct. 2019).

In this sense, together with the radical attitude which proved to be quite inspirational and motivational (in contrast with similar cooperative gatherings organized by the state or the international cooperative movement), there was also an imminent threat that unchecked anarchic exaggerations (Bookchin, 2013) that could lead despite the intent towards an insular project. In turn, there was also the threat that ‘in the name of efficiency, oligarchy could hold sway’ (audiotaped validation assembly; WCNA 19 Dec. 2019).

While some positive steps have been taken after dedicating four self-reflexive assemblies on the way to organizing the third Coopenair Festival in terms of documenting experience in terms of organizing, there are no proposals yet in the table for adopting modes of organizing that are both agile and member-driven. Along these lines, a three-day meeting of co-operators hosted by WCNA in early 2020 Athens without distractions from obligations connected with organizing a large-scale cultural event and dedicated to seminars, workshops and assemblies could well serve as a turning point for adopting more adequate means fit for radical purposes (Minutes of the assembly at the second Coopenair Festival 2019; audiotaped WCNA assembly 8 Dec. 2019).



Figure 14: Concert at second Coopenair Festival

To this end, WCNA –given its long experimentation in various organizational models and its updated identity statement– could well prove a platform to reflect upon for building in a Panhellenic level some dedicated mechanisms that advance a more realistic and thus inclusive approach in terms of committing (and better exploiting) scarce resources in the decision-making process. Likewise, the Integral Cooperative (of Heraklion etc) could

well bring in a model for coordinated dissemination of radical cooperativism and the experience of Rethymno could well provide a guideline for integrating cooperativism with the social movements in a concerted attempt to expand the spiral of radical cooperativism.

In this way, the three main tendencies of radical cooperativism in Greece would avoid becoming victims of ‘dogmatism, inflexibility and attachment to one’s ideas; limit[ing] social imagination; and discourag[ing] the open experimental spirit that is necessary for creative social change’ (Clark, 1998, p. 162) and have better chances of developing an adequate cooperative culture of (degeneration) resistance supporting co-operators and libertarians to mutually reinforce the outreach and the repertoire (interview with Pagkaki, interview with Colleagues’ Publications) of ‘their interrelated movements’. Besides, as an increasing number of authors (Cahill, 2013; M. Wilson, 2014) have stressed unless libertarians engulf a prefigurative, dual economy alternative for *hollowing out* (not beating) capitalism, their plans ‘will have a hollow ring’ (Clark, 1998, p. 182), as well.

To conclude, while cooperative movement degeneration seemed looming for WCNA, in part out of major problems erupting at its constituents, enough co-operators showed up to defend WCNA and committed themselves on supporting the individual collectives to stand on their own feet as an attempt to regenerate WCNA. Yet despite the initial enthusiasm and the initiatives taken by other radical co-operators in Greece, WCNA failed to adopt a proper systemic response and found itself deteriorating.

Therefore, up till the end of this phase, the overall findings suggest that despite its proclamations and symbolic-socialist practices, WCNA has so far relatively little achievements for inspiring the creation of a cooperative movement with great transformational potentialities. From an outsider perspective, this could be enough evidence to support the thesis that egalitarian collectives are deemed to be marginal (Malleon, 2014). However, my understanding as an insider activist-researcher was that under certain conditions WCNA could well play a catalytic role for a highly influential and developmental Panhellenic movement of radical cooperatives supporting and supported by the democratic project.

Along these lines, organizational (double loop) learning (Argyris, 2003) –challenging values responsible for the status quo that confirms the Malleon’s thesis (2014)– driven from the culminated experience of WCNA, the structural experimentation of Pagkaki and the overall discussion that follows in the next chapter could well serve as a starting point

for further undermining the prevailing defeatist/justifying attitude towards cumbersome processes within radical cooperativism (Landry *et al.*, 1985) and open up a discussion about the organizational model that could be adopted for a united front of radical cooperativism in a Panhellenic level.

With that in mind, after a brief introduction of Pagkaki and Synallos, my focus turns on (supporting) the attempts of these two collectives to better work as healthy democratic collectives work. This includes focusing on how to counter the crucial threats of oligarchization and disorganization in ways that could be of use for improving WCNA as well.

4.3. The challenge of cooperative management: Balancing internal stability with adaptation to external necessities

4.3.1 Introduction

So far, there is a dearth of empirical and theoretical insights in how (self)management could be practised so that the gap created by getting rid of managers in terms of coordination could better be filled with only minor –VSM-inspired– exceptions (Walker, 2018). My argument, here, is that while, at first sight, this seems like a quite structural, technical problem, it is not. A deeper holistic approach is, thus, required. This includes taking into a deeper consideration the (ideological motivations of the) people involved (Develtere, 1992) and the requirements of the environment. In other words, not to become constrained on the element of structure (and governance), as co-operators (and researchers) have largely done in the past. Indeed, as Fletcher (1976, p. 181) brilliantly points out:

Since the time of Owen, co-operators have been obsessed with formal structures, assuming naively that if the structure is right cooperation will necessarily flourish.

In the current investigation, a great deal of my exploration on egalitarian collectives redesigning themselves revolves inevitably around the issue of structure. Yet, in a more systemic than systematic manner (Reason, Bradbury and Ison, 2008) which is often attributed to engineering and planning (Banathy, 1996). For instance, the vision of those that created them has also been taken into scrutiny while diagnosing troubles arising from the (implementation of the) operational/decision-making systems in place so that the latter could be redesigned for better meeting both the aspirations of the members but also the expectations of their environment. Therefore, getting some more background of the

two WCNA members was required before getting into more detail on the troubles that they faced and reflecting upon ways they could better operate.

4.3.2 Shared background, different collectives

My long-standing experience and research on Pagkaki and Synallois, in an informal way, dates back in 2004. At that time, like most founding members of these two collectives, I joined the horizontal and voluntary cooperative, ‘o sporos’ [in English: the seed] that pioneered in promoting solidarity economy from 2004 till 2012 in Greece by primarily distributing coffee produced by the Zapatistas movement in Chiapas, Mexico.

Overall, Sporos proved quite influential for a variety of similar experiments to grow (Varkarolis, 2012) and managed as a self-organised collective with a social movement attitude to surpass in outreach and sales non-political, fair-trade Non-governmental organizations. Indeed, Sporos reached the point of ordering and shipping coffee directly from the Zapatistas movement in Chiapas, Mexico which numerous of its members had visited.

But what made Zapatista coffee an inspiration to create a well-received voluntary-run, non-profit consumer cooperative in Athens in the first place? In short, it was the fact that its producers were not solely organized within cooperatives but were also comrades within a broader movement that promotes autonomous self-government and establishes ‘autonomous economic structures based on equality and common benefit’ (Synallois, 2013, p. 1).

Along these lines, both Pagkaki and Synallois highly espoused the principles of direct democracy and autonomy building as practised by the Zapatista movement and were heavily influenced by the prior experience of running Sporos collectively. In this sense, the operation of Pagkaki in 2010 came as a result of extending the promotion of the Zapatista coffee/movement and expanding radical cooperativism in the most ‘crucial aspect of individual and social life, the issue of work’ (Pagkaki, 2011, p. 1). Likewise, Synallois (See Appendix III: Synallois), was established in 2011 as a spin-off of Sporos by five members of Sporos, that intended to take up more professionally the distribution of Zapatista coffee (Sporos, 2011; Synallois, 2014).

After a multi-month internal debate, we concluded to form a separate work collective, staffed by Sporos members, that will take care of the logistics required to support the growing distribution channels of solidarity trade in Greece ... the non-profit cooperative Synallois (Sporos, 2011, para.7).

However, Pagkaki adopted quite early a much more structured and less ‘open’ assembly than that of Sporos and Synallois (Varkarolis, 2012; Panagoulis, 2013). The idea was to ‘avoid repeating the mistakes of the past’ (Varkarolis, 2012, p. 89) responsible for the deteriorating loyalty and exodus by members (Stryjan, 1994) that predated shutting down Sporos when an insulting email sent by mistake in its mailing list was not followed by any remorse or unanimous condemnation (Varkarolis, 2012)

At an elementary level, this meant that Pagkaki adopted a far more structured and purposeful approach while bringing into life an alternative to the model of wage-labour and the alienation it entails (Marx, 1977), including an agreement on foundational decisions shaping the (extended and revised over the years) *organizational platform* of Pagkaki (Dielo Truda, 2001), like no hiring, no individual ownership, socializing profits, commitment to promoting workers’ self-management, anti-fascist/racist/homophobic collective, consensus decision-making, equal remuneration (Varkarolis, 2012, p. 107, reflection diary). However, the fact that it almost took two years for the forming collective to find an appropriate and affordable place to host this collective endeavour made it possible for the collective to be –at least in the beginning– proactively dealing at the good times of the collective (Panagoulis, 2013) on issues that could trigger the eruption of conflicts in the future. Yet, over time, challenges mounted up for Pagkaki, as well.

Overall, then, both collectives have remained democratic and economically viable. Yet, both have been struggling to preserve their internal coherence. That is despite pursuing two opposing strategies. Pagkaki attempted structurally not to depend that much on its members while Synallois attempted to fit the organization to the personalities of its members.

In the next section of this chapter, I demonstrate how Pagkaki and Synallois have over time gone through a process of (re)designing themselves (Develtere, 1992; Stryjan, 1994). While documenting how co-operators were ‘correcting and managing the consequences of old decisions’ (Stryjan, 1994, p. 66), I also partook in a dialogue for ways out of the mess either through direct intervention (Pagkaki) or reflections sharing (Synallois).

Finally, the findings of my fieldwork –including the reactions probed by my interventions– stimulated a series of reflections that I expanded upon in the concluding section of this chapter.

4.3.2. *Pagkaki*

4.3.2.1 *The challenge of preserving coherence when individuals change*

~~System 5—Ultimate authority/fundamental rules~~

For most of Pagkaki history, the ultimate authority of the collective was exercised through a weekly assembly of more or less ten persons. Such a structural setup of decision-making was spontaneously adopted (Bookchin, 1975) as perceived to be most fully compatible with direct democracy/anarchism/self-management (Castoriadis, 1988) and quite feasible to be coupled by a consensus decision-making process, at least, within such small groups (Seeds for Change, 2013). Therefore, all policies and ground rules adopted by the collective have been the product of collective elaboration and all members have voluntarily consented on them. Along these lines, new members were asked to join a structured collective (close assembly) following the tradition of platformism instead of a collective being the sum of its members in pursuit of synthesis (open assembly) (Dielo Truda, 2001; Voline, 2005).

We have some 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 (Interview of a member of Pagkaki cited in Kokkinidis, 2015, p. 867).

In other words, if comparing the organizational model of Pagkaki and Synalloyis, as a member of Synalloyis did in (audiotaped validation assembly; Synalloyis 22 May 2019) ...

... in the case of Pagkaki, the focus was on the organization while in the case of Synalloyis it was the [particular] members. In Synalloyis, we have been too personalistic; taking as a vantage point our membership, whereas, in Pagkaki, the attempt was not to lose their culture as membership changed and not to be dependent upon persons.

The most fundamental rules of Pagkaki were decided upon no more than two assemblies within a two-year formation period. Retrospectively, these two formation years and the early years of operation were the times that the collective felt more connected than ever having undergone a series of formative debates on who they were, what were they doing, why they have chosen such a stance and how did they respond to critiques raised on (radical) cooperativism. Hence, as Pagkaki members had established a sense of a shared belonging (Audebrand, 2017), they were, also, 'able to defend in pretty much the same way the collective in public' (audiotaped Pagkaki assembly 18 Apr. 2019). The fact that

the collective was in tune, was also evidenced in its first public reflection of its experience.

The relations of trust, solidarity and mutual support during the difficult times we have lived throughout the year constitute the most valuable heritage of our experience...Without the absence of frictions, disagreements and mistakes due to high demands, our different temperaments, and our inexperience, the result of this collective quest for a joint pace is the feeling of collective strength, something so hard to come by in the social situation that prevails today. Being a relatively closed group with concrete procedures for admitting and expelling members from the collective was a catalytic factor in attaining these relations (Pagkaki, 2011, p. 148).

To this end, focusing as a group primarily on issues related to promoting self-management –while also aiming to be ‘part of broader struggles for a transformation of society’ (Pagkaki, 2014, p. 4)– was for me as a founding member crucial as...

.. it was unrealistic to expect that we all would agree on every aspect and given the lack of a tradition of radical cooperativism, extra effort was required if interested in seriously promoting self-management (audiotaped Pagkaki assembly 18 Apr. 2019).

System 4—Forward Planning

Yet, while arriving in a political level at a shared frame of reference was a relatively swift process, the planning of the business in terms of renting a venue that was deemed appropriate was far more dramatic. A veto got vetoed, to be later mutually revoked. Ultimately, it was a good choice and within the first two years of operation, the whole investment was back in the hands of the founding members which also received a satisfactory level of compensation from almost day one (especially concerning the common wages being paid for similar jobs).

Still, despite the financial success and the relatively smooth intra-cooperation, as membership changed beyond the immediate circle of close comrades, it was time for the collective to realize that the general assembly and Pagkaki’s constitution were not ‘*miraculous* institution[s] ... bestowed by some libertarian God’ (Castoriadis, 1988, p. 96, emphasis in original). Indeed, the most existential degeneration threat that Pagkaki has ever faced was related to an internal crisis of the collective which largely split in 2014.

For more background information, on the unfolding of this crisis, Pagkaki (2015) published a piece of self-reflection based on this traumatic experience which to maintain the overall flow of the analysis, I briefly touch upon in Box 1. In a nutshell, however, the

fracturing of the collective erupted out of totally unforeseen challenges –that are nonetheless quite typical within worker cooperatives– like adequately balancing emotions of inequality and belonging (Mansbridge, 1973; Audebrand, 2017).

The triggering event for the 2013-2014 existential crisis at Pagkaki was the proposal raised by half group to expel a member that was at odds with the collective in both terms of politics and everyday work (since otherwise either the horizontal nature of the collective or its outward political nature would have to be abandoned).

The proposal for expulsion had been preceded by lengthy personal conversations and a lot of discussion in the assembly to avoid such a solution. In general terms, it appeared that we perceived the existence or absence of collegiality, camaraderie, promptitude, collective pace and political prioritisation in divergent ways (Pagkaki, 2015, pp. 7–8).

Besides, while such a process was largely agreed in Pagkaki political platform but not broken down in a concrete sense, it became evident that in a situation that would lead to firing a member, half of the group practically reacted for ideological reasons that directly undermined the constitution in place and (in)directly offended the rest for supposedly adopting a boss-like attitude (Pagkaki, 2015, reflection diary).

I agree that someone must leave the collective in less extreme cases than hitting someone else; yet, as part of the working class, I cannot fire people (minutes of Pagkaki assembly 2 Jul. 2014).

Perhaps, had the trust between us not been irrevocably damaged, the group could have avoided the depth of conflict despite our differences and disagreements. The basis upon which these disagreements were founded and the aggression with which they were expressed, created two distinct groups within the collective, prohibiting meaningful dialogue. The possibilities for communication were irreversibly lost and any communication henceforth demanded enormous effort, was purely practical and emotionally draining for all (Pagkaki, 2015, pp. 14-15)

On top of that, it increasingly became evident that for the wave of newcomers that had no prior social ties with the members of the collective, the nature of the collective that they had agreed to become members of, made them feel uncomfortable within the group.

During the last month, I am feeling like I am passing a political test and I feel like this because this is the case (minutes of Pagkaki assembly 29, Apr. 2014).

Some people feel safe and confident to propose the expulsion of a person from the group. Meanwhile, others never failed the safety that

they belong to the group. Allowing such behaviours of power is a source of imbalance (minutes of Pagkaki assembly 2, Jul. 2014).

Hence, the causes and consequences of the conflict were quite deep and difficult to heal, especially since, as revealed in this situation, communication within collectives does not necessarily take place under ideal conditions and reaching consensus can also be the result of not only rational arguments being put forth by humans which are neither solely members nor solely guided by pure reason (Castoriadis, 1989; Barros, 2010).

It is impossible to foresee all bad scenarios [for instance, that Pagkaki members formerly active in radical trade unions would experience such an existential crisis and prefer to leave the collective than firing a person that does not fit the collective] and even if there is an appropriate tool, it is not necessary that it will be put in action at any time and place, since there are countless factors that shape human relations that can block such an occurring (like, emotions) (Pagkaki, 2015, p. 13).

Overall, then, the conflict was not solely related to an individual member not fitting to the organisation or firing a person within a work collective, as initially discussed within the group ‘but that we held completely different logics with regards the struggle of the working class ... and what each of us could support based on our political understanding’ (Pagkaki, 2015, p. 12). Hence, a first major challenge for the collective that almost proved fatal was how to preserve communality when individuals change without undermining the pact that put together the collective organization in the first place.

The collective must have some stable values but its objectives should reflect its membership changes; so that their desires are also taken into consideration (minutes of Pagkaki assembly 2, Jul. 2014).

As a way, to promote a way out of this conflict and better manage the belonging paradox (Audebrand, 2017) by infusing appropriately individuality within communality, a more structured way for *individual-collective alignment* (Langmead 2017) was brainstormed and put in practice as part of a self-reflexive assembly taking place every six months.

A dialogue regarding each member’s political desires begun to find the specific area which motivated us the most in contributing to the co-creation of aims and means that would move us away from introversion and apraxia (Pagkaki, 2015, p. 8).

Hence, the constitution of Pagkaki was not set in stone and structural inertia was not exhibited after all (Hannan and Freeman, 1984). Moreover, as a safeguard against the

potential of an erupting founders' elitism (Freeman 1972), a common ground of obligations and commitments to the group was proposed in a way that would allow members to feel safe if fulfilled.

The expressed intention was to set a minimum set of preliminary obligations that each member would have to fulfil as a contribution to the group's operation. If a member failed, this would open the doors of expulsion. Otherwise, it would be safe (Pagkaki, 2015, p. 9).

Yet, even this positive and creative idea did not pass the assembly as two out of ten members disagreed in fear that this would only be a pretext for expelling one of them. Hence, under conditions of mutual distrust and as two groups of members ultimately shared a different understanding of reality, we all sooner or later realized that it was too late for this conflict to be resolved without resorting to changes in membership.

As a result, we jointly realized that some member(s) would have to leave the collective, the collective had to dissolve itself or, following a consensus decision-making troubleshooting procedure –I had consulted before (Seeds for Change, 2013, pp. 108–125)–, the group should be split into two collectives with those that remain in Pagkaki supporting the rest in setting up a new worker cooperative (Pagkaki, 2015, p. 11).

After a short series of assemblies dedicated to this conflict resolution process, the crisis ended 'in July 2014 when a group of four members announced that they intend to leave Pagkaki' (Pagkaki, 2015, p. 11) by indirectly acknowledging that despite the disagreements and/or the –perceived– despicable acts of the other half of the collective, the framework they had agreed upon was not supportive of their late reactions.

Box 1: Collective breakdown at Pagkaki

~~System 3—The challenge of optimizing Pagkaki post-crisis~~

After the serious existential crisis passed, Pagkaki members focused on how to optimize the system for not ending up in the same situation by adopting some more proactive measures. Therefore, ideas that were largely brainstormed within the crisis were put in effect (Pagkaki, 2015, pp. 15–17). Namely, Pagkaki institutionalized the regular revision of the political priorities of the collective to become more explicitly inclusive and accommodating (see Box 2), introduced the minimum commitments mechanism for all members to be held accountable based on commonly-agreed criteria, attempted to more actively support the integration of new members by naming a Pagkaki member as a dedicated contact line for newcomers responsible for clarifying things or giving tips and,

finally, made explicit the percentages required for both expelling and welcoming onboard members.

Yet, as the long period of a collective document not coming out from Pagkaki since then, illustrates that the results of these processes were not that satisfactory in arriving once again at a robust and stable collective with a clear plan.

In terms of setting political objectives that motivate us, I think that we have reached a dead-end and bewilderment on various fronts. In turn, this has led to tensions and was hard for all members, especially the newest ones (Pagkaki forum post 23 May 2017).

We are not a coherent collective that is fully aware of where it stands and what it does ... there are two fresh members and two more are joining the group so half of the collective consists of newcomers (audiotaped Pagkaki assembly 22 Nov. 2018).

This was largely connected with the minimum gains from the flagship of the corrective measures adopted, the mechanism to revisit the political operations of the collective. At best, such a mechanism brought into the surface the incoherence of the collective and the limitations of a small-sized collective to develop a broader strategic agency especially under the conditions of WCNA in crisis and retreating social movements (audiotaped Pagkaki assembly 7 Dec. 2017). At worst, it seems that in the attempt to accommodate newcomers and being (ultra)democratic has made it more difficult for them to make sense of the collective; as a starting point for (re)shaping it and overall to get better integrated with the rest.

Nevertheless, despite the tensions erupting from failing to abide en masse with the minimum requirements and from the disorganization erupting from not following the established work norms/procedures (as discussed in the next section), there were moments like when participating in major cooperative events like the 2nd Euromediterranean Workers' Economy meeting or the Panhellenic Coopenair Festivals that the collective felt quite connected and energized.

In Thessaloniki, where we all went as a collective [for the 2nd Euromediterranean Workers' Economy meeting] was one of the best times for sensing as a team [with an agency]. We just took part in some discussions and carried out some practical stuff. Nevertheless, that was the best experience we had for a long time as a collective (own reflection during interview Eta).



Figure 15: Teambuilding at the 2nd Euromediterranean Workers' Economy meeting

Since Pagkaki institutionalized a process for revisiting the political operations of the collective so that all members have the chance to influence the process, there have been two cases of series of assemblies arriving at two different roadmaps.

The first time, a series of debates led to promoting the development of a cooperative distribution network at an international level, after a proposal was made by Viome for the second euromediterranean Workers' Economy Meeting. As expressed by Pagkaki in a panel on the traits of a militant and antagonistic Workers' Economy during this international meeting...

... we believe that we should start from practical things that are a necessity for those attending this meeting. This could in turn further trigger this cooperation into more political objectives. We consider this proposal of Viome for setting up a common distribution network very important (Pagkaki 2016).

The rationale was that the creation of such a common distribution network ...

... would enable cooperatives to be economically viable without making compromises due to market pressures and to avoid circumstances where consumer cooperatives are solely interested in the price of the product or worker cooperatives primarily preoccupied with the revenue of their members. Hence, being in charge of the whole route of production from the producer to the consumer is a crucial way forward (Pagkaki at event Kappa).

Along these lines, setting up a common distribution network was deemed pivotal in resisting degeneration due to market pressures by promoting a mutually supportive ecosystem of co-operators and also serve as an opportunity for some of them to get together to form a cooperative network that embodies the traits of the Workers'

Economy. As Pagkaki members put it in two dedicated assemblies on establishing a common distribution cooperative network among worker-run businesses:

[The network] can serve as a pivotal starting point for communicating and distributing products, good practices, participants and know-how. As time goes by, this symbolic-identifying character will potentially develop a momentum that will enable, later, the cultivation of a more political/social dimension between those collectives that are interested in this aspect (Pagkaki at event Kappa).

Something that is already happening is a good starting point to practically start this network before spending too much time debating/discussing it and get lost in translation (assembly; 2nd Euromediterranean Workers' Economy Meeting 30 Oct. 2016).

Some initiatives were taken to promote the creation of such a common cooperative distribution channel either in public or by ordering samples of tea from a recuperated factory to be distributed by WCNA members. The intention was from the start that the promotion of such an endeavour would be 'promoted bottom-up without any central node responsible but separate actors being coordinated through a common email list and establishing expanding bilateral relations' (assembly of 2nd Euromediterranean Workers' Economy Meeting 30 Oct. 2016).

However, despite the initial enthusiasm and apart from external constraints, the creation of such a distribution network was not that well supported operationally by neither Pagkaki, WCNA or the rest collectives that –supposedly– signed up for this without really reflecting upon the practicalities that it entailed. The email list was never set up and, after a year, Pagkaki abandoned this project. Still, voices for renewed attempts are raised by other co-operators that were not that actively involved in the failed attempt and –at the time of writing this document– remained a standard theme for discussion in Panhellenic, Euromediterranean and global gatherings (minutes; Coopenair Festival 2018 and 2019, fieldnotes). However, my conclusion as one of the pioneers for arriving at this idea has been that maybe it would be wiser to let it go for the time being as strategy, capabilities and culture were not likely to be aligned soon (Rick, 2014).

There is no problem in the idea [itself] but we lacked competences and [a necessary] culture was 'eating' our strategy (Pagkaki forum post 25 Dec. 2019)

The second time that Pagkaki attempted to reformulate its strategy, a more broad and multi-issue agenda was adopted in an attempt to incorporate elements from a variety of

fields that some Pagkaki members prioritized and that one way or another had relevance with the objectives of the collective ranging from solidarity with Zapatistas and Rojava to regenerating WCNA and forming a Panhellenic network. The result of such a fragmented strategy was for me –as shared in an assembly (18 Apr. 2019)– that

... a series of actions characterized by an activist mentality and not a broader strategy were put forth. Hence, there was not a concise message communicated by the collective, members getting confused, demobilized and even disengagement. Meanwhile, those people outside the collective cannot grasp concretely what we intend to achieve as a collective and as a network. Still, when discussing strategy within a cooperative, there are not that many options. We often forget that our starting point is that we are part of cooperativism

Box 2. Revisiting the political strategy of Pagkaki

System 2—Destabilized Pagkaki

Overall, the structural solutions Pagkaki introduced in 2015, largely faltered while its members exhibited post-crisis a common non-productive feature often encountered within worker cooperatives (Whittle, 2009), conflict avoidance. Indeed, since the first year of introducing the mechanism of Minimum requirements, at least a few Pagkaki members and both newcomers would have to be expelled by the collective for failing to deliver on projects –not that connected with the business part of the collective which was also only rarely monitored– and timelines they had set like producing a documentary about Pagkaki. As this tendency climaxed instead of getting restrained, this mechanism was de facto abandoned.

The collective has created a tool, the minimum requirements. There is a problem however since this tool has not been enforced during my presence in the collective. That is especially the case since this issue has been brought up plenty of times (Pagkaki assembly 7 Dec. 2017).

Likewise, the integration of a new member was not at all easy-going for both sides with several established norms of the group being openly or de facto challenged. Nevertheless, this time, a more inclusive, open to change (or accommodation) approach was de facto and not formally adopted as most members opted for accommodation or suppression of conflict. Hence, the ‘collective leaned towards’ that person by somewhat bending the rules (Pagkaki forum post 23 May 2017).

I admit that I prefer to do extra work than have a conflict with a colleague for not doing his part (Pagkaki assembly 7 Dec. 2017).

It is always possible to see the glass as half empty or half full. We can always be dismissive for things that we have not achieved or nag about even the smallest achievement. After all these years, I do not consider anything self-evident and I am much more lenient (Pagkaki assembly 7 Dec. 2017).

I have now accepted the fact that each member has multiple desires and needs to address simultaneously which I respect and that is why we are that slow sometimes. If we were more committed and focused ... there would be much more time for struggle but this is not certain since we might end up with depression. So, there is no point examining what-if scenarios. This is the reality and we must accept it (Pagkaki forum post 26 Jun. 2017).

Meanwhile, in conjunction with the rather failed attempts to once again integrate organically new members into the collective, it was the old members' turn to gradually abandon the ship, as their plans had once again not worked out quite well and organizational commitment declined.

Along these lines, the integration of the next batches of newcomers was also further undermined as democratically-agreed guiding references of the collective in both practical and political level were somewhat rendered obsolete and Pagkaki operated increasingly on an ad hoc basis.

Therefore, given that the whole process progressed de facto and unreflexively, it was extremely difficult to keep the constitution up to date, making it extra hard for newcomers to make sense of the situation, as Pagkaki had changed a lot since 2015.

A lot of things are taken for granted ... Too often, [a newcomer] to avoid impeding the process or because it is ashamed for not knowing something, [s]he will not ask ... and even if a member asks to check whether all members know what we are talking about, [s]he will not say, no. Therefore, it is better to not let the new member fight for a way in but to be granted access in let's say a political manual that he would have to read over a month (Pagkaki assembly 12 Nov. 2018).

If Pagkaki was now created from scratch by the existing members, it would probably have been a very different collective (Pagkaki assembly 19 Jul. 2018).

It is important for the collective and the proper integration of the new members, to not have too many exceptions to the rules and divergent levels of commitment. If there is a problem, it must be discussed and maybe a timeframe or something else is developed to delimit the situation (Pagkaki assembly 2018).

In fact, the biannual self-reflexive assemblies were the only opportunities for understanding up to a point the situation and maintain a fragile shared frame of reference and, ultimately, to decide who is in and who is out from Pagkaki.

... when you encounter a rule that others created, you might say it is ok with you. However, if you have not realized why this was adopted, you might not pay that much attention. So, for a newcomer, it is important to realize why the collective has ended up with them. Otherwise, a distance between the newcomer and those that set the rule develops. In my case – which might have been an exception to the rule– the process set up by the collective to review the member-organization relationship after six and twelve months was quite effective in allowing me to make sense of what is going on and keep track on how this relationship unfolds (audiotaped assembly; Pagkaki 12 Nov. 2018).

Finally, the reluctance to even name instances of bad performance –not to mention holding accountable those responsible–, also influenced negatively the outputs of the group and the relations between its members

I do see a lot of things not being said and problems enlarge ... for instance, [as a new member] I find it difficult to understand what is going on (Pagkaki assembly 7 Dec. 2017).

Problems should be named without fear nor passion. Those that name the problems are not doing it because they are bad persons but because some procedures are required to operate smoothly (audiotaped assembly; Pagkaki 7 Dec. 2017).

Over time, a ‘dismissive attitude by the individuals towards the collective either through voice or silence’ increasingly emerged (audiotaped assembly; Pagkaki 19 Jul. 2018) and so did a growing common realization that organizational commitment deteriorates when sense is not common or when too often there are certain things that the collective decides but that they do not materialize.

There are different perspectives about how committed we are on our duties; some are more relaxed and some more serious. We have to get better on this to avoid undermining the group spirit and since it is necessary for its maturity (Pagkaki assembly 7 Dec. 2017).

I am motivated to do my part when others do their part. Otherwise, when people are not committed, I am not that committed, as well (audiotaped assembly; Pagkaki no date).

Feeling part of a well-functioning collective is motivational. Otherwise, there is no inspiration for political praxis. Hence, we have to function well and be sustainable (audiotaped assembly; Pagkaki 22 Nov. 2018).

Still, overall, it is important not to neglect that despite the shortcomings of Pagkaki in terms of high aspirations of most of its members, it is still way ahead of similar experiments in terms of democratic organizing. As a probationary member put it in his evaluation of the first six months on the collective:

Despite all the shortcomings, problems and conflicts encountered within the collective, I have never been part of such a functional group ... We have to remind ourselves how things are in other assemblies. This does not mean of course that there is no necessity for things to improve ... But I sense that we all deliberately attempt to improve our relations in the level of political, personal and work relations (Pagkaki forum post 25 May 2019).

~~System 1—Who's in?~~

Since 2017, developing a homogenous and functional collective has become a difficult challenge (and a top priority) for Pagkaki which like any other members' organizations 'of today, [is] shaped by yesterday's members, populated by today's members, and [is preoccupied with] the shaping of tomorrow's organization and the recruitment of its would-be members' (Stryjan, 1994, p. 66). That is, for instance, the main reason why the one-year period that newcomers in Pagkaki were required to commit themselves after the one-year probation period was extended to two years (Kokkinidis, 2015).

Meanwhile, even though the formal mechanism of minimum requirements has never been enforced—drawing from the rationales raised for at least two probation members not to join the collective and the reasons shared by three full members for leaving the collective—there are some informal, de facto minimums that are more or less in place since May 2017.

- a) Active participation in the assembly!
- b) Comradship-companionship in everyday work and carrying out our responsibilities.
- c) Pagkaki must be one of the key priorities of each member...
- d) ... in a way that reflects an appetite, good mood and 'gratitude' for being a Pagkaki member.
- e) Each member should feel a part of the whole (Pagkaki forum post 23 May 2017).

Yet, summing up, if all Pagkaki members fulfil the above criteria in terms of organizational commitment and are in principle supportive of radical cooperativism in both an expressive/prefigurative and instrumental/strategic sense, why was Pagkaki

struggling with avoiding the fracturing of the collective and dealing with disorganization and what could be done about it?

To address such a question, from an action research perspective, entailed that first of all some sort of intervention takes place to change this problematic situation. In this case, my focus for change revolved in a quite fundamental area, to decongest the overwhelmed general assembly at Pagkaki. In the next section, I offer a quite *critical* reading of Pagkaki's decision-making setup as a starting point for my intervention aiming at an improvement in dealing (in)directly with disorganization (Goldkuhl, 2012a, p. 89).

4.3.2.2 An intervention to a real-life problematic situation: Dealing with disorganization/an overwhelmed general assembly at Pagkaki

Problem identification and intervention

While reflecting upon the multifaceted reasons that influenced the fragmentation of Pagkaki, my provisional conclusion as shared with the collective was that the typically political/organizational measures adopted for coherence –like convergence on shared agreements and criteria of membership– required, at the very least, the introduction of further dedicated mechanisms to improve the bottleneck capacity of the general assembly (Pagkaki forum post 4 Jun. 2019).

Indeed, due to the pressing practicalities of running a business collectively with highly radical aspirations (Landry *et al.*, 1985), the agenda of Pagkaki assemblies was historically overwhelmed by pressing issues popping up all the time (reflection diary). Hence, decision-making was quite often cumbersome with a series of serious political (and operational) debates always lagging or summarily discussed.

I am deeply concerned with how practicalities make the political intentions redundant. What are the tools for such experiments to operate without wasting so much time (audiotaped assembly; Pagkaki 27 Sep. 2016).

On top of that, the emphasis was primarily given on the point of collective decision-making but too often decisions were not enforced and commonly agreed tasks were not performed by members that were neither ready nor supported to perform them (Visch and Laske, 2018). One iconic example, along these lines, was the failed attempt to shoot a documentary about Pagkaki (2015), as part of the mechanism of minimum requirements (reflexive diary).

Therefore, my starting point for proposing ways to better confine the looming disorganization in Pagkaki was to decongest the general assembly from practical issues

and to dedicate one weekly assembly of the collective in deciding about practical matters and executing tasks, so that no task would take more than a month to be fulfilled. Along these lines, the following not-that-well-processed proposal was raised in early 2018 and was adopted for experimentation.

This is a proposal for changing our decision-making, at least regarding the execution of some tasks. For this to work, it is important to realize that we all want things to get done and that we have to avoid being obstacles to this. So, for instance, once in two months, instead of having our weekly general assembly, parallel working groups will take place i.e. for Pagkaki finances where tasks should be done on the spot. Each working group has a dedicated facilitator, that cannot jump into the rest working groups unless it is required for two working groups to cooperate. The rest have the opportunity to switch tables [working groups] according to their interests on the subjects discussed as an agenda of each working group and the open issue for discussion will be provided on the spot. If a decision is reached, it cannot be challenged (unless someone was absent for health reasons) (Pagkaki forum 27 Jan. 2018).

In principle, the idea was to form four main working groups for the standard operations of the collective: kitchen, finance, politics and administration. A set of two working groups would take place simultaneously in a world cafe manner (Brown, Isaacs and World Café Community, 2005). Hence, dedicated to each working group facilitators are kept stable dedicated to each working group and the rest members can choose upon issues that interest them more. The agenda and the issue currently discussed were marked in a sheet of paper to facilitate this process (See Figure 16).

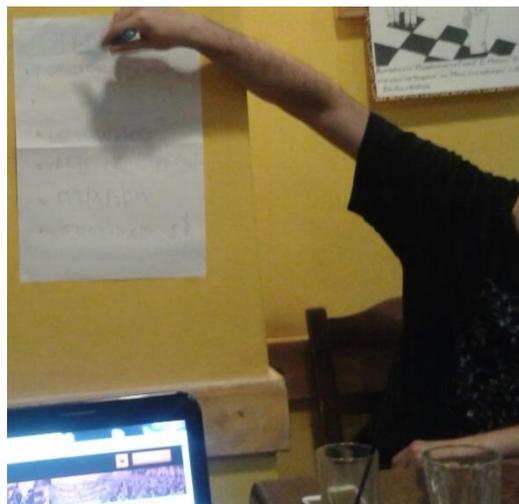


Figure 16: The agenda of the finances working group

Afterwards, a recap assembly took place to provide an early overview of the discussion to all members and generate some feedback without retreating to a more complicated structure requiring appointing people as *double-links* (Rau and Koch-Gonzalez, 2018) for

transmitting information between the groups and the general assembly. In this sense, everyone gets informed on the go about all working groups and given that there is no serious objection (requiring more thorough elaboration/discussion) after minor adjustments decisions are validated in common.

Emphasis was, thus, given in becoming more agile by increasing the bottleneck capacity of the collective to make decisions about practical issues that no one objects instead of co-developing ideal decisions for just a few issues. Or, in the words of Laloux (2014), to move from a frictional version of consensus decision making towards an *advice model* of decision making that was equally democratic.

Moreover, this structure was purposefully designed so that people can collectively share knowledge or instantly obtain necessary information from colleagues. For instance, if drafting financial report requires access to the bank account and the one responsible for this report has no access to it, the person dedicated to this is in reach and can provide the relevant input. This has proved very important as synchronizing individuals outside of their schedule has proved to be a daunting task (reflection diary).

Overall, then, a middle-ground level between the individuals tasked to execute decisions and the general assembly as the ultimate authority was curved to better monitor the progress of execution and in this way, three levels of authority could be distinguished that should be neatly aligned for avoiding fragmentation.

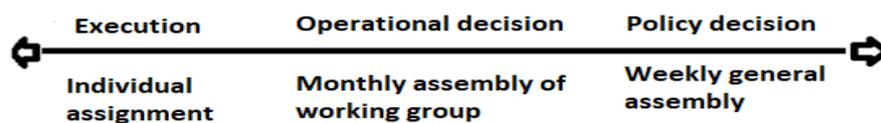


Figure 17: Decision-making and execution continuum at Pagkaki

At the most basic level, then, there was task execution. In the next level, decision-making (practical) business-related issues takes place. Finally, the general assembly is responsible for getting the whole thing work without being overwhelmed by having to execute/discuss a lot of (trivial) things. As I put it using the metaphor of railway organizing, ...

... there are three levels of authority roles required for better and concerted results: one person is responsible for providing coal to the firebox of the steam engine and fixing the engine en route, a working group assembly is driving the train and checks the overall performance as assigned from the general assembly and, finally, the general assembly that is in charge of coordinating the various trains and changing the tracks in ways that are effective (Pagkaki forum post 27 Mar. 2019).

~~System 4—Different strategies at play~~

However, as part of the typical for this period divergence of understandings on why and how this system was supposed to work, there was not a critical mass of people sharing a commitment in practically advancing such a system towards a certain direction (reflexive diary). Along these lines, Pagkaki neither assigned the dedicated facilitators with a crucial leading role for better coordinating the whole process nor supported them in doing so economically beyond the spot of the assemblies (for instance to collect the various issues or proposals that fall into their agenda as raised in Pagkaki's mailing list, forum or assembly).

Some working groups lack a dedicated and inspired [leader in sociocratic terms (Rau and Koch-Gonzalez, 2018)] to support them and are, thus, rather free-floating (Pagkaki assembly 12 Nov. 2018).

In fact, facilitators had only increased responsibilities, divergent attitudes about their strategic role and quite a marginal contribution to the betterment of the flow of the whole process. Meanwhile, most working groups had neither a (collectively agreed) mission statement nor the necessary resources to carry out the tasks falling into their jurisdiction on time (Walker, 1998, p. 15; Heijne and Buck, 2013). Hence, there was room for optimization but this required some more planning in the general assembly.

Maybe we should discuss how to best conduct these working groups and how to optimize them so that the general assembly does become decongested from practical issues. It seems that for the moment we have different expectations and that leads to bad performance [and tensions] (Pagkaki forum post 2019).

~~System 2 & 1 Fail-safe mechanisms for stability~~

Initially, my understanding was that the working group powered model of decision making collapsed due to the lacking culture of self-regulation or collective control characterizing Pagkaki and like-minded collectives more generally (Mansbridge, 1973; Landry *et al.*, 1985). Yet, when I was informed by the VSM perspective, I reframed my diagnosis as a failure to 'design a system which ensures that the problems are dealt with autonomously' (Walker, 1998, p. 52).

In turn, a proposal was made to adopt a fail-safe mechanism to better ensure that things get done without the collective having to act in a bossy manner towards its members

(Pagkaki assembly 25 Apr. 2019). Along these lines, (the facilitator of⁷) each working group would have to document in their minutes all assigned tasks accompanied by a deadline for execution. If the deadline was reached –without any further notice, conflicts or uncomfortable discussions– the task automatically gets reassigned to the so-called *ultra-executionist* which is solely responsible for getting things done (even by outsourcing) and has been allocated dedicated paid time within his/her permanent schedule for that (audiotaped assembly; Pagkaki 16 May 2019). In this sense, ‘the worst-case scenario [is] considered in advance’ and dealt with ‘pre-agreed intervention rules’ which means that autonomy is forfeit under certain conditions’ for the benefit of the whole organization (Walker, 1998, p. 15).

When this idea was introduced in an assembly, the only major concern raised was whether such a safety measure would undermine the collective spirit by reinforcing an employee rationale or a president-seeking mentality. Still, after all, it was considered safe to try for a certain period (audiotaped assembly; Pagkaki 16 May 2019).

~~System 3—Pending optimization~~

Despite the seeming agreement of experimenting with the introduction of the ultra-executionist, the safety valve was never introduced in practice initially because there was a necessary discussion pending for configuring the whole system which was side-tracked by other issues being considered more pressing for the collective. Hence, the overall system was de facto stalled.

Evaluation of intervention and next steps for theory development

In terms of improving the problematic situation, my intervention was not successful. Moreover, as time passed, my impression increasingly became that the related discussion seemed to be somewhat skilfully avoided as part of a concealed resistance to the idea (Argyris, 2003) stemming from an idealistic faith on uncontrolled, spontaneous organizing.

In part, such an attitude could be considered in line with the radical aspirations of the collective as, for instance, explored in the next section regarding bureau-phobia. Yet, from a workplace democracy perspective, there were no valid objections apart from the

⁷ A couple of persons, that will be assigned some set of hours within his/hers monthly program, solely dedicated to executing tasks that those initially responsible were not able to do so (including introducing the tasks into the system if working groups are unable to do so)

individual preferences of the majority of members. Therefore, it became clear that the primary reason for the failure of my intervention was that it revealed that consensual democracy was not appealing for the majority of Pagkaki in early 2020.

Indeed, despite my provocative remarks to reopen the discussion, no dedicated debate was conducted (Pagkaki forum post 6 Mar. 2020).

I am observing that the debates about the ultra-executionist and the improvement of the facilitation/minutes writing are unconsciously and repeatedly not discussed [even though they are documented as part of the agenda], we should have a look at this (Pagkaki forum post 4 Sep. 2019).

Consequently, tackling what I had identified as disorganization did not require mere technical fixes but ideological shifts or membership changes. To this end, facilitating debates on cooperative experience in a manner that favours the promotion of consensual democracy within and beyond Pagkaki was considered the most feasible and meaningful way forward. The utility of the experience of Pagkaki would then be turned into *teleological* recommendations for promoting consensual democracy (Van de Ven, 1992) after taking into consideration the established literature in the discussion (Locke, 2012) so that other collectives can avoid reinventing the wheel.

Yet, to better understand why such recommendations were put in the table in the first place, a closer look on how Pagkaki has approached and experimented on adopting a horizontal division of labour as a third way between the Scylla of oligarchy and the Charybdis of failure is also required. Therefore, in the next section, the focus is on Pagkaki attempts to better resist the threat of oligarchy throughout time.

4.3.2.3 From bureau-phobia to the bureau-technician

Formation period: Fear of oligarchy and natural inclination for the skilled (2008-9/2014)

There is an example that founding Pagkaki members often recall while explaining their pre-emptive attempt to resist oligarchy. It is their choice of the food menu. It was purposefully designed so that all members could undertake it without being dependent upon a chef. Therefore, Pagkaki members, apart from chefs, were, also, supposed to be, at least, competent waiters, baristas, DJ's and cleaners.

Still, a relative, horizontal division of labour has been in place at Pagkaki since inception but this took place in the background of the everyday operations influencing crucially both the self-image of its members and the group dynamics.

Well, I might not be able to conduct a business plan, but that is not necessarily hierarchy ... the vast majority of the collective's activities can be performed by each one of us ... when it comes to more specialized areas, those that are more competent attempt to make the others learn i.e. how to make a nice coffee. We do not demand that everyone can fix everything but there is a down limit that we would not like to fail, like making a lousy coffee (event; Kappa).

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 (Interview of a Pagkaki member cited in Kokkinidis, 2015, p. 860).

To this day, Pagkaki is characterized by a D.I.Y. ethos and calling-in help from outsider experts was largely not pursued.

I prefer that a member of Pagkaki designs our menu with the rationale that it is better to conduct whatever we can by ourselves before reaching others outside of the collective (Pagkaki assembly of working groups 9 May 2019).

This makes people with a relative inclination towards an area or relevant education to become nominated as 'experts' by the group and, thus, having to carry a burden that they might well not be equipped to undertake or that stresses them.

Once again, today, I felt like a one-eyed man in the land of the blind, I am the only one in Pagkaki that can screw a screw. I do not like this specialisation and, especially, having a lot of things relying on me (Pagkaki mailing list; 5 Oct. 2010).

Therefore, despite the inherent fear of oligarchy at Pagkaki (Leach, 2005), as the above quote illustrates, people naturally take up more responsibilities in areas that attract them or 'require' them. Hence, in many technical aspects, power could be formally or even informally delegated to particular persons based on their skillset.

However, the unchallenged throughout the years' norm would be that all decisions that in a conventional enterprise fall under the management rights would have to be collectively decided.

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 cannot just have two people decide about important issues, we do need to seek the advice of all the others (Interview of a Pagkaki member cited in Kokkinidis, 2015, p. 864).

Therefore, what, at first sight, might seem as a technical issue, like how much sugar is required for a coffee to be regarded sweet (Kokkinidis, 2015, p. 863) or updating selling prices based on increased purchase prices, could well be classified as more ‘political’, and, thus, debatable, requiring more thorough collective deliberation by all members.

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 (Kokkinidis, 2015, p. 863).

I am wondering why, if there was a problem with the espresso machine, we would call a specialist to solve the problem but to get a decision for raising the price of beers [after the new tax on alcohol] has to take so much time (Pagkaki forum post 29 Jun. 2016).

Hence, while arriving at the core political elements of Pagkaki –like following consensus decision-making, adopting equal pay, socializing profits and ownership– was a relatively smooth process that required only two general assemblies, the decision to rent an appropriate place was much more complicated (Varkarolis, 2012). This was illustrative of a pretty much-shared understanding on political issues during the formative period of Pagkaki and divergence on business-related issues that lead quite early in an uncomfortable situation where a veto of a member got vetoed by another.

The problem of ‘intuitive decision-making’ (Pagkaki mailing list; 28 Nov. 2009) would, then, be attempted to be resolved by me facilitating technically a basis for argumentation upon alternative scenarios (drawing from what a *plan factory* (Castoriadis, 1988) is supposed to provide in a societal level to self-management).

Indeed, only, after calculating the projections together with the person that I vetoed her veto, it was possible to conclude that the different viewpoints were not merely reflecting ‘idiosyncratic differences’ (Pagkaki mailing list; 28 Nov., 2009), as initially perceived to be by some in the group. It was, then, that the two vetoes were mutually revoked (and the veto was abandoned by the collective) and the decision was taken for Pagkaki to rent its current venue.

Likewise, this was the process through which the prices were as well set by the collective. Data and mathematical types were put together within a spreadsheet so that the implications of choices would be made concrete and experimentation on different alternative scenarios could instantly take place within the assembly.

Moreover, as the projections were quite met, having on board a person with relative education was perceived to be an advantage for a group that ultimately took wise business decisions collectively.

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 (Interview of a Pagkaki member cited in Kokkinidis, 2015, p. 864).

To sum up, in the early days of Pagkaki formation, a partly-awareness of the limited prescriptive literature on democratic structuring and self-management proved to be quite influential and functional to both avoid oligarchy and exploit specialization. That is by mainstream managerial knowledge being virtuously 'rethought and resituated in a new context' (Thompson and McHugh, 2009, p. 395), that of workplace democracy, without undermining the DIY ethos of the collective.

Early maturity part 1: From fame to blame and the limits of skill-sharing/rotation strategy
(9/2014-8/2017)

During the existential crisis that erupted in the group after a proposal was made for ousting one member (as introduced earlier in box 1), among other claims, it was brought up that an 'informal' hierarchy (Freeman, 1972) had developed on the basis of my expertise [in managerial accounting] 'that constituted a privilege' (Pagkaki assembly 20 Jan, 14). Hence, as a sense of power inequality (Mansbridge, 1973) was one of the points of critiques of those that left the collective, those that stayed responded in public that...

... the fact that someone is trained and more competent in something, does not lead per se to oligarchy. On the contrary, if the consensus decision-making process is working, the competencies of an individual –if shared– can benefit the collective (Pagkaki, 2015, p. 9).

The same kind of response was also given to newcomers to make sense of my role at the time.

Orestis did not decide on his own on the grounds of expertise, but [his] role was to perform tasks so that the group can take decisions' (Pagkaki assembly; 19 May, 2015).

However, to avoid similar conflicts erupting once again in the future, by acknowledging that a way to curb the emergence of informal hierarchies (or the suspicion of it (Fairbairn, 2004a)) is to bridge the gap between the ‘expert’ and the average user by activating the average users, more emphasis was given on promoting skill-sharing and rotation in the spirit of Zapatismo (Varkarolis, 2014).

To this end, a considerable roadblock was a repulsion to the expertise at hand.

On the other hand, there must be respect on someone’s inclination, I hate finances, maths and PC's, I do not want to mess with them ... in such a case, the responsibility is mine ... I cannot call on the one that does the finance or the one that downloads music ... It is not a matter of everyone having to perform every task, the point is that there is an equilibrium (Pagkaki assembly 19 May; 2015).

Therefore, while the primary rationale for promoting rotation was more grandiose ‘for the group to be/feel able to stand if a [key] member leaves’ (Pagkaki assembly; 19 May 2015) the aim was similarly de facto set for a small rotation on ‘routine administration’ (Cornforth, Thomas, Spear, Lewis, *et al.*, 1988). Still, a series of attempts to hand over some processes like setting the prices failed for this moderate target, as well.

The type for pricing, I have shown it to 10 people. OK, it’s not working (Pagkaki assembly; Apr. 15, 2018).

This, in turn, made me to largely withdraw from updating and overseeing the financial records of the collective as I considered that expert knowledge was ‘used more as an excuse than being a key factor for the lack of commitment’ in the rotating process (Pagkaki assembly; 19 May, 2015). In turn, as the rest felt rejected and bossed (Adizes, 1971), demoralizing dead-end discussions developed, ‘fostering an unfriendly group atmosphere’ (Gastil, 1993b, p. 107).

Meanwhile, within this context, after a few months, the group had to cut wages, in an unforeseen scenario that showcased that the configuration of the system overseeing the business was left spineless. In turn, some initiatives were taken up by the rest of the members to develop a better monitoring system enabling the group to track the financial status of the business. Yet, no serious progress was achieved. On the contrary, this experience reinforced the growing doubts about the feasibility of the rotation strategy that begun to increasingly surface among the group.

This period was a reality check that we cannot all do everything in here, it is not possible (Pagkaki reflexive assembly 8 Mar. 2018).

Still, as I realized –*after* coming across similar failures of the past (Landry *et al.*, 1985, pp. 46–48)– that, ultimately, the problem was not a lack of commitment, but of relative competencies which we hesitated to admit, a renewed attempt was put into place. This time the plan was to ‘lead’ the team, but in a way that the collective is empowered and that I did not feel like a sucker (reflexive diary).

To this end, a system of collective effort and distributed leadership was designed by allocating tasks across different domains/people that influenced the overall financial performance of the collective and maintaining primarily a supervisory role of the project. Hence, in a way evening the energy required for the support of the system which was even more inclusive/holistic than before while also procuring the necessary skills for its supervision.

However, a lack of a culture of horizontal accountability would side-track the prospects for proper supervision to be conductible and despite the enthusiasm of taking up more responsibilities by other group members, once again the outcome was a dysfunctional system undermined by fragmentation. As a result, ‘none had an overall idea about the financial status and performance of the collective’ (Pagkaki forum; 1 Sep., 2018).

Summing up, the rotation period of Pagkaki has been a challenging and eye-opening experience for the co-operators involved. First of all, rotation proved to be not that easy especially since not everybody was willing (given the various constraints involved) or capable of putting the required effort into this as featured in the cooperative literature (Gamson and Levin, 1984; Landry *et al.*, 1985). Even though there was no formal hierarchy, no pay differentials or divergent working conditions and interests, a sense of inequality developed in both the minds of the ‘expert’ and the ‘bossed’ for opposing reasons, lack of commitment from the one side and unequal influence on decisions from the other side. Hence, neither consensus decision-making nor formal measures that prevent people from gaining excess gains for their contributions proved enough safeguards for sustaining neither high-performance workplace democracy nor team spirit as the rather well-functioning system of the previous phase got dismantled.

In part and in contrast with the awareness exhibited in the previous phase of the prescriptive literature on socialist self-management, the ‘radical failure’ of this stage (Landry *et al.*, 1985) was a result of a staggering lack of familiarity with the literature on the most common and elementary problems that the everyday operation of such

experiments entails, especially in terms of cultivating consensual democracy (Horvat, 1983).

Still, the initial fruitlessness of the skill-sharing/rotation strategy does not signal the impossibility of workplace democracy. Instead, it highlights the necessity of formulating an appropriate scheme that is effective and empowering for the individual members while also advancing unity in executing in common and securing the procurement of adequate expertise knowledge by becoming more realistic about means while remaining committed to radical aims (Malleon, 2014).

To this end, the current case study is devoted and the next period of Pagkaki's history largely revolves.

Early maturity part 2: (Exceptionally) institutionalizing the bureau-technician (8/2017 - today)

In the previous section, it became evident that the initial clinging of Pagkaki members to rotation and skill-sharing as *the* way to prevent oligarchization proved to be an exercise of chasing its tail. Instead of paying so much attention to developing rotation, maybe, showcasing a greater commitment to enable more informed decisions with greater chances for equal influence based on effective supporting processes could have been a more reasonable move.

Indeed, along these lines, the aim as set by the collective became how to support 'everybody realizing where we stand economically based on key indicators so that as a collective, we can decide upon alternative scenarios developed for this purpose' (Pagkaki forum 2 Sep. 2018).

To this end, the 'expert' will temporarily oversee all financial operations and after designing and testing a new open-book management procedure, opportunities for the rest to engage will once again be offered to run the system afterwards. While such a move might evoke a leap towards one-man management (Lenin, 1974), it still supports political equality, effective participation, enlightened understanding and control of the agenda by the people themselves (Dahl, 1986), it, also, promotes 'the virtue and intelligence of the people themselves' (Mill, 2001, p. 35). Hence, it passes the evaluation criteria that Mill (2001) and Dahl (1986) expressed for democratic forms of governance.

Moreover, the organization admits that there are some imbalances in certain competencies and this time attempts to better handle them with a more pragmatic approach. That is by setting up a more professional yet empowering for all individuals process of (open)

bookkeeping supported by dedicated popular education (Bryer, 2019), team-building and induction processes that facilitate a high-performance collective approach (Vanderslice and Moss, 2006).

Indeed, as of May 2019, the collective was almost ready for attempting to rotate once again and decided that the training required for the new person to take over bookkeeping would be open for all and videotaped. The educator and the educatees would also cooperate in writing up a guide so that the training process becomes streamlined (Pagkaki assembly of working groups 9 May 2019).

Still, such an approach to specialization/rotation is still an exception to the rule; it has only been partially implemented in some days requiring somewhat more demanding food preparation shifts (of the once attainable to support food menu). Similar, ideas for transferring such an approach to facilitate assemblies or record their minutes have to date been rejected despite repeated claims and evidence on the constraints the rotation strategy poses for the quality of the decision-making process.

[The rotation strategy] undermines the quality of the assembly and its efficiency! (Pagkaki assembly 20 Dec. 2018).

To recap, balancing democracy and high-performance has been a difficult challenge for cooperatives in general and Pagkaki in particular. Yet, drawing from the frame of degeneration thesis, emphasis in literature has primarily been given in safeguarding democracy (Pansera and Rizzi, 2018). In turn, this thesis opened up the frame of the debate by reiterating the centrality of mobilizing competences to stir an improved utilization of human resources (Széll, 1989) by exploring the role of specialization within a horizontal cooperative and challenging the reception of a skill-sharing/rotation strategy as a silver bullet for oligarchy. Along these lines, rotation is not treated as an end in itself but primarily as an indispensable process for sustaining a balanced, members' driven democratic cooperative which offers developmental opportunities for their members to circumscribe the belonging paradox.

4.3.3 Synallois

4.3.3.1 A (seemingly) success story of workplace democracy facing fragmentation

Synallois has been a small worker cooperative running a fair-trade grocery shop in Thissio, Athens, since 2011. It is quite successful in terms of both working conditions and hourly wage but reaching this point took some years (Synallois, 2016; interview; Eta).

All founding members of Synallois were members of the earlier introduced voluntary cooperative Sporos and Synallois was initially created simply as...

...a separate work collective, staffed by Sporos members, that will take care of the logistics required to support the growing distribution channels of solidarity trade in Greece [including Sporos] (Sporos, 2011).



Figure 18: Founding members of Synallois

Therefore, Synallois largely inherited most of its structural and even cultural elements from Sporos. Hence, the only notable difference from Sporos was that it aimed at advancing alternative and solidarity trade more professionally, largely meaning dedicating more hours and more fully to the project as individuals.

After years of operating Sporos, it became evident that the voluntary model had limitations since the project required heavy commitment and high standards of organizing to be sustainable, not to mention to more widely spread the principles of alternative and solidarity trade. For this reason, after a long process of debates, the decision was made to create a new collective that would handle the bulk of the work required and that is how Synallois was born (Synallois, 2014, p. 1).

The structure which was chosen for Synallois (or better continued from Sporos) ... was only slightly calibrated. We kept, for example, the weekly general assembly and even the atypical for a conventional shop way of communicating to customers highlighting the alternative nature of the endeavour. Yet, we offered a greater sale margin to shops and were pretty active in stepping up the volumes of distributed products. In a sense, we tried to become a bit more 'professional' to become financially sustainable (interview; Eta).

Yet, while founding members of Synallois had cooperated before, this experience had taken place at a quite different context with far less (professional) expectations that nonetheless provided them with an advanced starting point in terms of practical know-how. As shared in a WCNA assembly (March 18, 2018) by one of their members, ...

... we largely inherited our roles from Sporos. At first, this was nice since it was evident that we all possessed know-how, up to a certain level.

In the long run, however, such a view has been claimed by some of its members to be a bit *arrogant* (Synallois member in WCNA assembly March 18, 2018).

Being practitioners within a voluntary collective, we aspired to become more professionals. But professionalism was missing. We had learned something and tried to build upon that. However, more professional knowledge was required and we had not realized that, at the beginning (WCNA assembly March 18 2018).

In the same assembly, it was also stressed that the main reason for these particular persons to come together was that they were fulfilling critical roles within Sporos and certainly not some convergence of opinions on how to work collectively (WCNA assembly March 18, 2018). Besides, that seems to be the reason why Synallois in 2018 was still struggling to forge an alternative work environment ‘where all pretty much understand in the same way the things that [they] do, to save energy from conflicts, misunderstandings etc’ (interview; Beta) despite not having undergone membership changes⁸ and after working together for so many years.

Moving to the operational structure of Synallois –apart from operating the store as a salesperson–, each of the five members had also a specialized role according to his/her preference and skills and this was highly mirrored in their self-image (interviews).

I really like this part of the job, delivering parcels to different logistic companies, it’s like I am not working (informal discussion with a Synallois member while working).

Yet, while a functional division of labour has been in place for key operations of the collective, all (major) decisions were taken in the weekly assembly through consensus decision-making and all members were entitled equal pay. Hence, it has adopted a horizontal division of labour (Cornforth, 1995) and remained an egalitarian collective (Malleon, 2014).

We are a small organization of five persons, dividing the workload in equal shares, depending on the preferences and the capabilities of each one of us, and receiving the same (very modest) pay for our work. We discuss

⁸ In late 2019, one founding member retired and two new members joined the collective (<https://www.facebook.com/plugins/post.php?href=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2Fsynallois%2Fposts%2F2472200619695641>).

all the issues regarding the project collectively in our weekly assembly, trying to reach decisions by consensus (Synallosis, 2011).

This, however, does not preclude that sometimes the recommendations made by those that actually (would) run the projects seemed to be weighted more. Still, there was no evidence that the outcome of the decision was determined by them, informally side-tracking democracy (fieldnotes; WCNA working group of internal affairs).

Therefore, contrary to the pessimistic and deterministic views considering oligarchy as inevitable, Synallosis has proven to be an exemplar of collectivist democracy (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979; Rothschild and Whitt, 1989). As such, it rightfully deserves credit for that.

Despite the evident division of labour in technical aspects of the job, [in Synallosis] there is a strong culture of knowledge sharing and ... all decisions about the governing of the collective are made in the general assembly (Kokkinidis, 2015, p. 857).

Indeed, after almost a decade of operating with a horizontal division of labour, the threat of oligarchy erupting from engulfing specialization has not materialized (Kokkinidis, 2015; Diefenbach, 2019) as the assembly was always meant to have ‘the final say in decisions’, not the individuals (Dahl, 1998, p. 71) or ad hoc task forces (like for instance the group responsible for the coffee) (interview; Beta).

Whether such a democratic decision-making has influenced negatively the overall performance of its members is unknown and it is practically impossible to scrutinize such a hypothesis (Mellor, Hannah and Stirling, 1988). Yet, Synallosis neither has been outcompeted nor its members complain about their remuneration being low as projected by some (Shukaitis, 2010). In fact, they are quite satisfied with their remuneration and it is pretty certain that if they had not adopted a division of labour, in the first place, failure would be unavoidable.

That we are all competent to perform any task is an ideological slogan. It is not possible for me to learn Italian so that I can do what Stavroula is doing. Who will do the maths? The one that is more competent in this. There is no problem with that. If there is a division of labour, maybe it is also a good thing. What would be the consequences of doing this all the way round? (audiotaped assembly; WCNA working group of internal affairs 28 May 2019).

Retrospectively, however, after the initial ‘honeymoon ride’ of the early days of Synallosis (Brandow and McDonnell, 1981, p. 43), when –despite, their remuneration being quite low– a caring community of trust and solidarity had emerged (Kokkinidis, 2015; Synallosis, 2014), sensing as a collective that has secured intra-cooperation has proved to

be quite a challenge (Synallosis, 2018) as a variety of rather unforeseen problems emerged like...

...feelings of entrapment in certain work roles, powerlessness to perform the tasks of other colleagues and insecurity if someone has to be off for some time, lack of coordination, anxiety and confusion to respond to the load and complexity of work required e.t.c. (Synallosis, 2014, p. 2).

This was, to a great extent, an outcome of a not-that-well-thought or debated highly-personalistic division of labour adopted ‘over the years that fit the five particular [members] participating [but not the objectives of the collective]’ (audiotaped validation assembly; Synallosis 22 May 2019) as each of them were somewhat ‘running its own business’ (audiotaped validation assembly; Synallosis 22 May 2019). On the one hand, this seemed convenient but, on the other hand, had a variety of bad side-effects.

For instance, specialization at Synallosis –facing the absence of a coach and lacking a deep bench to turn to– was rather synonymous to *professional loneliness* (Selwyn, 2014), anxiety and, after all, tensions; no way a privilege.

My role within the collective is fixed, like anybody else’s. That is convenient from one point of view as tasks are carried out more easily, automatically and efficiently. The problem is, however, that each one of us is closed in its cage and his loneliness... I took up some critical stuff that I could not deal with. Everything that had to do with financial management, for example. That was not comfortable, at all and, at times, I really felt stressed! But I do recognize, that there is also a problem with skills that cannot be dealt with. In terms of maths, for example, despite the good intentions there is no-one to help me, not even a person that you can talk about such stuff. So, the only solution seems to me to call for external help (interview; Eta).

Along these lines, the adoption of a skill-sharing and rotation strategy as advocated in relevant theory has proven neither an easy task nor an adequate ameliorative strategy (Rothschild and Whitt, 1989). More specifically, even the relatively moderate target of having at least two persons able to perform a task has not been met (fieldnotes on WCNA assembly). Hence, only ‘minor steps’ have been documented over the years in this direction (Synallosis, 2014, p. 2) either because of a lack of time to spare, a shortage of skills available, a falling over time spirit for intra-cooperation or even a repulsion of certain tasks and change (fieldnotes, validation with researcher).

I assume rotation is one option but skills should also be taken into consideration. For example, I am willing to sit with Ilias, but it is difficult for me to follow, even in terms of plain maths. So, there is a clear limit for me on this. It is easier to do what Lili does and the opposite. I could also

do Tasos job, but I do not like being in the streets (audiotaped assembly; WCNA working group of internal affairs 28 May 2019).

Promoting rotation requires energy and time that is not in abundance. Moreover, some of us are more than others reluctant to change ... there are therefore also psychological barriers from our personalities (response to WCNA questionnaire).

Hence, from an organizational perspective, Synallois has suffered to a certain extent from inadequacies related to the limited consideration exhibited for integrating the separate tasks into a coherent praxis. In other words, it seemed that the coach of the team or 'the conductor of the orchestra' (Marx, 1981, p. 507) was missing.

We are teams without a coach. Therefore, we all have to be coaches, as well, and that's the hard part. Otherwise, everybody acts according to whatever comes to mind. The role of the assembly is to coach us ... In here, everyone operates like running his own business. We all do different things and we often do not know what the others are doing. The assembly has not proven enough to pass through such information (interview; Eta).

Having a horizontal division of labour without a superior to coordinate us is a challenging issue. Even though steps have been made in this direction, we have not reached a satisfactory level of coordination. We feel that there is a knowledge gap on how to coordinate labour in a horizontal manner (Synallois, 2014, p. 3).

At times, it is difficult for even two to three of us to get together to solve a problem in both everyday operations and for facilitating more ambitious projects. Everybody has its worldview and some preconceptions of the other inhibit this process. Moreover, everyone has its personal problems, and it is very easy to get back to a routine that more or less is quite working (interview; Eta).

Nevertheless, retreating to formal democracy and appointing a cooperative manager (Davis, 1995) was never an option in tune with the radical underpinnings of the collective. So, calling in help from a fellow co-operator seemed more familiar and that is how I initially received their invitation for supporting them in 2016 in conjunction with conducting ethnographic fieldwork as part of my PhD.

We want you to help us in reviewing/auditing, as an 'expert' that has worked with cooperatives for a lot of years/that is at the same time an outsider and a person we can trust, our efforts to a) reorganize our internal communication procedure in regards to transmitting information more efficiently for a smoother 'business' operation, b) design each posts job description which has been a huge source for tensions, c) check/comment/intervene in our online presence, d) facilitate/comment our political function (assembly, events, WCNA...). (Synallois assembly 11 May 2016).

4.3.3.2 A report from the 'auditor'

Early data gathering and (re-)interpretation of the problem

During this period, I was present at a process that defined the job tasks of the rotated role of the salesperson at Synallois. Despite the evident tensions, confusion and divergence on work attitudes that hindered that prospect (fieldnotes), a common ground was seemingly found without requiring any external assistance (reflexive diary). Hence, my understanding was that...

... a procedure was in place so that [Synallois would] solve a series of problems (like the duties of the salesperson shift) which went quite well and there was no reason for an outsider like me to intervene (email sent to Synallois to kick-start respondent validation 20 Oct. 2018).

Therefore, after leaving the field to conduct participant observation elsewhere I thought that the primary area for improvement that had not received any attention was to create a new collective challenge to feel inspired and connected, as the initial enthusiasm of setting up Synallois naturally resided.

We did it, we set up Synallois! But after all these years, we need renewed motivation. Otherwise, we end up in the boring discussion of yet another year discussing introducing a certain product or not (informal discussion with a Synallois member while working).

Are there any objectives that you have [recently] jointly met? Maybe you have to invent a new vision/goal to attain to feel more connected as a collective (interviewer).

However, after a few months, I was puzzled to hear that no significant progress has been recorded in dealing with disorganization and in fact, the fracturing of the collective had accelerated. Was it primarily personality differences or different aspirations that undermined the intra-cooperation within Synallois (2018)? Or maybe it was defective conflict resolution strategies that ultimately hampered the co-operation between members and undermined the group relations (Reinharz, 1983)?

To arrive at a more topical diagnosis of the situation, some more data collection was required. Indeed, a couple more interviews were conducted, I reviewed some minutes of assemblies and a focus group dedicated to validation took place. Based on that additional info and drawing from the VSM frame, my final response to the request received by Synallois was ready to be shared as part of an ad hoc 'mutual aid scheme [among WCNA members] where some outsiders propose things with a more clear mindset ... than those experiencing the problems directly' (Synallois member in WCNA assembly, March 18,

2018). Indeed, some critical notes were put forward that were not aligned with the intra-group consensus reality (Mindell, 2005).

Diagnosing and acting on evidence: initial recommendations

Synallois, despite engulfing specialization, has neither resorted to oligarchy nor has failed economically as degeneration thesis claims. Yet, in the absence of relevant theory or a native cooperative tradition to turn to (Ingle, 1980), Synallois has been struggling with more mundane issues of disorganization which challenged the ‘spirit of cooperation between members’ (interview; Beta) and which triggered the fracturing of the collective.

Our division of labour is convenient for all. Yet, in other aspects, like promoting an awareness of the difficulties each role faces or of the amount of energy or care required to carry out the necessary work, it is quite problematic (response to WCNA questionnaire).

Along these lines, obtaining a better overview of the operational parts was indeed considered quite a sensible starter not only for avoiding demoralising misunderstandings and undervaluation of the amount of work required for each post but also for better designing and experiencing integration/autonomy (Walker, 1998)

I am responsible for the orders of local products. The rest thought that this entailed that I pick up a phone, order five kilos of that, ten of the other and that’s all. Well, it is not! Lots of orders require more than 30 minutes because something is out of stock, something else pops up etc. My colleague thinks that I just take a phone and nothing else. It’s my fault that I did not explain to anyone that this is not an easy task, you have to check the inventory, estimate the sales and take into consideration the expiry dates. [Sharing such information] is something to start with. If I have a problem and I am not available, the rest will know that this is not something that can be solved within 10 minutes (audiotaped assembly; WCNA working group of internal affairs 28 May 2019).

Nobody is interested in the work I, here, provide (informal chat).

This was the reason why I advocated quite early that a damage-control strategy towards operational fragmentation was required.

You could, on an elementary level, more energetically inform each other about the requirements of each post, advance shadowing across different posts or even create working groups dedicated to assuring the smooth cooperation between different posts (early draft emailed to Synallois 2018).

But what was inhibiting the collective from integrating each working post in the first place?

As I spent more time in the field, my initial diagnosis was that –just like in the case of Pagkaki– a great deal of facing unresolved problems in Synallois could be attributed to a small ‘society’ adopting the non-productive communication and conflict resolution strategy of conflict avoidance between members (and, as an extension, work posts); so typical within small democratic organizations and small states (Parsons, 1939; Mansbridge, 1973, 1992; Landry *et al.*, 1985; Lowenthal, 1987; Bray, 1991). Traces of such deficiencies were abundant.

We often did not give a fuck about issues that triggered dysfunction just to avoid conflicts (audiotaped validation assembly; Synallois 22 May 2019).

We all do that, it’s part of maintaining our relationships stable (audiotaped validation assembly; Synallois 22 May 2019).

The following responses in an interview with a member of Synallois are indicative.

Maybe, a problem [of egalitarian collectives] is that due to their small size, there seems to, also, be an issue of creating family relations, in a bad sense ... along creating strong bonds of solidarity and trust ... Meanwhile, interpersonal clashes are far more intense within a group of five than in a collective of twenty-five [like Sporos]. When your subsistence depends on a project, it is more likely that conflicts will emerge but quite difficult for such conflicts to escalate for the same reason (interview; Eta).

It is difficult for us to say that someone is not doing his job right [and] when you are attempting to discuss something that is in the area of someone’s responsibility and pride, it’s like you are entering a landmine. I do it, others do it, we all respond as if we are critiqued and attempt to defend ourselves (interview; Eta).

He also provided me with a case to support this argument from an assembly that I also attended, where another member seemingly defended herself by putting the blame on the whole collective. However, my sense was that this was not a mere defence but simply a different reading of the problem.

This is not a problem of warehouse organizing! The problem is that we are not all involved in [supporting] it (fieldnotes).

Moreover, due to inadequate information-sharing procedures in place at Synallois, critical information often got lost and intra-cooperation was undermined by a false-dilemma between mine and not-mine business (fieldnotes).

So, when something pops up, we have to find the one responsible to address it (Synallois, 2014, p. 2)

We are not an agile team. We find difficulty in reacting and adjusting to change (Synallois, 2018).

Hence, even if criticism-concern was raised in an assembly, it was often not that well-processed by both sides as the group overall lacked skills, commitment and a supporting ideology to arrive at properly facilitated and easy-going assemblies that generate adequately inclusive solutions, despite the progress that has already achieved over time by setting an agenda and appointing a (rotated) facilitator (fieldnotes).

While there is a need for a better assembly, we find it difficult to improve it (Synallois, 2018).

Indeed, as a Synallois member confessed in questionnaires conducted as part of the WCNA Participatory Action Research...

... different viewpoints are often treated as contradictory and synthesis is not always attempted (response to WCNA questionnaire).

Yet, despite a conflict avoidance attitude and difficulties in communication, it was not that Synallois members 'accepted whatever' (interview; Eta).

Control and evaluation are carried out collectively which is quite difficult and creates tensions but often is also taken into consideration [and a corrective course is adopted] (interview; Eta).

When I shared my first draft of my analysis on Synallois for validation, there was a disagreement in some points by the person I had interviewed but, overall, it was deemed 'very interesting' (email; received 21 Nov. 2018). That was probably because the part of my proposal regarding the necessity for conducting a series of formative debates about the foundations and common ground of the collective was in line with Synallois beginning in October 2018 'a round of debates for re-founding the collective, that [they] named Restart; a round of discussions that [they] did not have time to undertake during the formation of the collective' (email; received 21 Nov. 2018).

I was also glad to later hear that there was support in the process of optimizing Synallois from another PhD researcher (who happened to be conducting fieldwork in Synallois at the time) by facilitating the process which went quite well. As Stavroula put it in our audiotaped interview, the presence of Helena as a facilitator...

... allowed us to discuss difficult topics, about our expectations from the others and ourselves, about feelings of being burdened by others and issues that create grumble and tiredness, in a way that is coordinated well-thought in advance. We, alone, could not have managed to [create such an environment] because we would end up in a rather free-floating discussion

of I told you so and you told me that ... We were, thus, able to speak about up to a satisfactory point about the problems that we face in an elementary way without getting exhausted.

At these re-start meetings (Synallois minutes of the assembly on business sustainability, 13 Feb. 2019, Synallois minutes of the assembly on political objectives, date unknown), Synallois was positioned within a broader dynamic movement advancing the social and solidarity economy that includes fair trade, networks of cooperatives and so on. It was, for instance, during these meetings that becoming a member of the World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO) was decided and membership at WCNA was reaffirmed with – suspiciously– low cost in terms of time (Hansmann, 1996a).

Other than that, even though I was not involved in fieldwork throughout this phase and only got some minutes of the related assemblies, my perception of the overall plan for the Restart was quite positive, in principle. My first reaction when Stravroula summarized the process as, first, decompose Synallois into bits and, then, synthesize them together bottom-up was that this was quite compatible with exploring my initial hunch about the nature of the problems of Synallois but also with an established sequence of steps proposed by one of the rare organizational approaches for balancing the ‘demands from different parts of the organization’ (Bider, Bellinger and Perjons, 2011, p. 249), the VSM.

Where in a conventional enterprise there is a supervisor or a director, there must be an organ, in our context, the assembly that operates as a supervisor and a director (interview; Beta).

Along these lines, while the process was in the right direction, it almost seemed ‘too good to be true’, a reflection I shared with them during the validation assembly. It was on the side of that same assembly that my diagnosis crystalized in its final form. A sole remark which I had heard before (17 Mar. 2016) but not given it that consideration, made it clear for me that there were deeper, political/ideological underpinnings of what an alternative to mainstream business organization and professionalism is that heavily triggered the interpersonal problems between members of Synallois that unfortunately were not discussed as such during the restart phase.

Hence, there was indeed a faltering system 2 not passing info to the general assembly to develop corrective measures for optimizing the organization. However, the main source of disorganization was coming from a system 5 dysfunction exacerbated by the lack of ‘ground rules which set the tone for the whole organisation’ (Walker, 1998, p. 14). In

turn, it was their (bad) relations which side-tracked the possibilities for a functional system 4.

If there are problems in relations between members it is difficult to have broader objectives. We are not inspired. That is the reality. Given this situation, we face difficulty in setting collective targets (validation assembly).

I think that the mission of the collective was lost as we lost our mood towards the rest (validation assembly).

While during Restart Synalloy supposedly re-affirmed that there was no mission drift and that they were not solely interested in trading but that they made politics through trading (interview; Beta, follow-up validation), at least one member had some reservations out of a sense that there was a tendency to move in the direction of becoming 'traders' (Briscoe, 1991)⁹. Moreover, there was also an instinctive fear by some members that by introducing printed price labels, barcode scanners at the checkout or cooperating with a bigger company with more sophisticated/automated machinery for roasting/packaging able to deliver coffee capsules, Synalloy would orbit towards a faceless working place following the standard mainstream process of supermarket chains or even reproduce the same alienating working relations –leading to soulless, routine, replicable, top-down bureaucratic processes (validation assembly, fieldnotes)– it has been trying to overcome. As one member put it...

... our personalistic way of organizing was partly our choice. I consider that such cooperative experiments face the dual objective of being economically sustainable and of being built upon the personalities of each member. Instead of operating as a factory where everyone is supposed to work in the same way regardless of who s/he is, our cooperative experiments should strive for something different (validation assembly).

Act on evidence, evaluation of 'restart' and next steps for theory development

When I heard the above phrase, I immediately intervened to suggest that there need not be, in principle, an incompatibility between collective organizing and personalities of members. It was in the discussion that followed that I realized that balancing the members' personalities/skills with the necessities of the collective project was the primary task and challenge of cooperative management. The implications of such a

⁹The sole member that perceived Synalloy was 'distancing itself from the initial radical starting point'(validation assembly) would retire after a few months and this might have been a contributing factor –probably not the most important– why the issue was not brought in the formal procedures of the assembly. Anyway, out of coincidence, the pressure for undergoing more existential debates to arrive at either a more tangible common ground or to a dead-end situation requiring cutting a Gordian knot was relieved.

realization has been catalytic in conceptualizing degeneration as a very complex problem and rethinking my initial intervention strategy (see section 4.4.3).

In this sense, disorganization was partly a choice of the members of Synallois just like in Pagkaki. Yet, this time, it was a result stemming from their preference in bringing their personalities wholly within the collective. However, the intuitive way that this has taken place has caused them a variety of (not solely) organizational troubles.

For Synallois, after conducting a series of long omitted foundational debates within a properly facilitated environment, a new era seems to emerge. Yet, my concluding recommendation to Synallois was that the feeling of improved communication/relations that they have so far generated (informal chat) requires an additional emphasis being given in aligning members' skills/personalities with the needs of the collective.

After sensing like a (well-functioning) collective, pursuing political goals in common – ideally co-generated and aligned with that of WCNA– will naturally follow and enable individuals to engage more fully and wholeheartedly with the collective. Along these lines, a mission well-suited for Synallois (2016) and its membership at that time would be to more actively and collectively support WCNA to become a catalyst in the development of a radical but not marginal cooperative movement.

Such a recommendation was based on the understanding that it offers Synallois both access to critical know-how –for instance by becoming a member of CECOP/CICOPA or other international networks of (new) cooperativism– and the fact that the majority of its members are already active within WCNA to meet their personal needs for growth/collective belonging.

4.3.4 Summary

While in the literature on resisting degeneration emphasis has primarily been given in safeguarding democracy (Pansera and Rizzi, 2018), these two cases opened up the frame of the debate by reiterating the centrality of mobilizing competences to stir an improved utilization of human resources (Széll, 1989) by exploring the role of specialization within a horizontal cooperative and challenging the reception of a skill-sharing/rotation strategy as a silver bullet for oligarchization.

On top of that, dealing with fragmentation, promoting a better organizational balance while dealing with professional loneliness, different levels of skills and commitment, managing the belonging paradox and, overall, developing en route organizational

responses to organizational problems are common challenges that both Synallos and Pagkaki faced, even though being that culturally different.

Along these lines, while acknowledging that structure is important, it became evident that membership is even more pivotal. Therefore, it makes sense that these two elements should be properly managed to be in tune to yield the best of both.

To expand on the above and review the experience of a yearlong Responsive Action Research, a series of reflections follow that form a starting point for a discussion with the literature in a way that supports the creation of high-performance radical bureaucratic configurations.

4.4 Reflection from a yearlong Responsive Action Research and intervention

4.4.1 Introduction

In this section, I reflect upon the outcomes of my methodological strategy, Ethnographically Grounded Responsive Action Research and Theory in two parts. Firstly, I present a holistic conceptualization of degeneration from a practitioners' point of view as initiated by my prolonged immersion in the field and introduce an organizational tool that co-operators could use for formulating strategy. Secondly, I highlight how my RAR design has enabled me to conceptualize degeneration as a complex problem and the implications this has for shaping the discussion of the current findings with the literature in the following chapter.

4.4.2 A holistic conceptualization of degeneration

One conclusion drawn from the preceding analysis is that the most *existential* degeneration threats for WCNA came from problems erupting in the micro level of its constituents undermining their commitment to partake in building up a cooperative movement. Hence, it is quite common-sense that any attempt for association among cooperatives will stand a chance over time, only if there is a satisfactory level of performance in that fundamental area by individual cooperatives.

In turn, the challenge of *association* is not at all an easy task and in this case, it has also been exacerbated by the rhetoric of degeneration that disrupted the rootedness of the cooperatives within social movements and a reluctance to open up. Yet, mutual aid between co-operators can and has proved crucial in the case of WCNA for the resilience of some of its members.

Moreover, while acknowledging that *transcending* the dwarfish forms of cooperation requires both association and political struggles, taking action at the *macro* level requires relative competency in the lower level(s) as well. Hence, blows on the latter have more detrimental effects for individual cooperatives and, in turn, undermine the association and movement building capacities of the related cooperative movement.

As the overall interrelations described above between the different levels of degeneration challenges greatly resemble Maslow's (1943) *hierarchy of needs* and its famous –yet often misinterpreted– visualization (Bridgman, Cummings and Ballard, 2019), I decided to name this framework *hierarchy of degeneration challenges* but adopt a visualization based on a ladder (Figure 19) to emphasize that hierarchy between different levels does not mean that fundamentally all problems and threats should be perfectly addressed before going for higher levels (Bridgman, Cummings and Ballard, 2019).

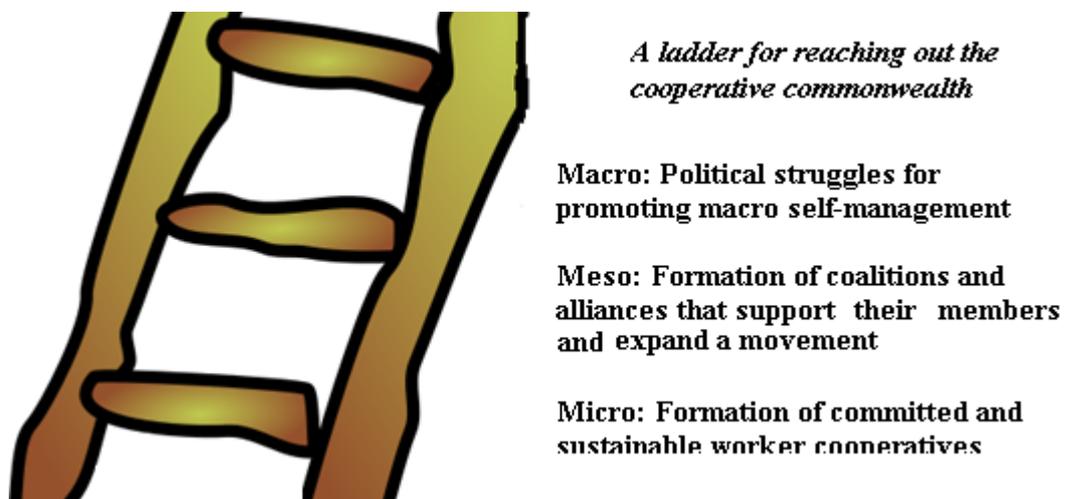


Figure 19: Hierarchy of degeneration challenges

Based on such an understanding, it makes sense that even the most idealist co-operator should seriously reflect pragmatically on forming a competent worker cooperative while also even the most pragmatic contribution of an apolitical cooperative can be of great use values for radical co-operators. Nevertheless, such a ladder –conceptualized based on the findings of the current research but having in mind the established literature– is specifically crafted for taking ‘over the world’s economic and social system and to reorganise it on co-operative lines (i.e. to achieve the “co-operative commonwealth”)’ (Fairbairn, 1994, p. 30). Hence, disembarking from the tradition of the mainstream cooperative movement to adopt a seemingly politically neutral strategy (Ratner, 2009) focusing quite strictly on expanding the cooperative sector (Mayo, 2015) with minor exceptions (CICOPA, 2019; United States Federation of Worker Cooperatives, 2019).

However, while the model Hierarchy of degeneration challenges is insightful, it is quite static and primarily compatible with an outsider’s perspective. In an attempt, to better capture an insider’s point of view –inspired by a description of promoting the cooperative movement as a spiral by a Pagkaki member– I arrived at the following conceptualization/visualization of the task to advance the radical cooperative movement (See Figure 20: Radical cooperative movement spiral of development).



Figure 20: Radical cooperative movement spiral of development

Finally, the hierarchy of degeneration challenges could well be incorporated with the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) framework to support the operationalization of this broad strategy by arriving at the Cooperative movement de/generation SWOT analysis (see Figure 21: Cooperative movement de/generation SWOT analysis). In this sense, an analytical devise that has predominately been associated with identifying competitive advantages/core competencies (Peters and Waterman, 1982; Porter, 1987; Prahalad and Hamel, 1990) for developing *hardball* (Stalk and Lachenauer, 2004, p. 63) strategies to ‘trounc[e] the competition’ is here twisted so that the driving mission becomes developing synergies and cooperative strategies for reaching out the cooperative commonwealth.

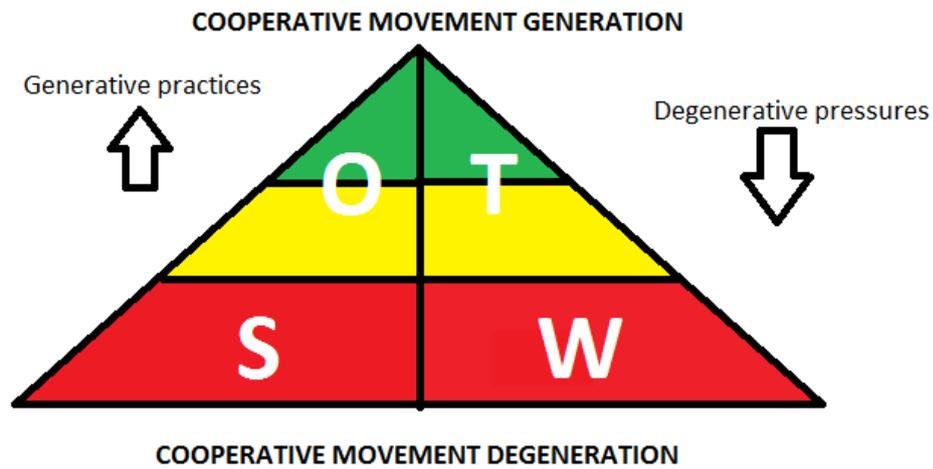


Figure 21: Cooperative movement de/generation SWOT analysis

Along these lines, it is also important to stress, following Stacey (2011, p. 94), that such a tool is not the result of a realist assumption based upon a series of success stories that promises ‘organisational success if one follows the prescribed procedures’ but instead it is a reflexive social construction for brainstorming based on negative feedback from cases of failures of reproduction and tentative lessons from past successes where...

...the outcome of a previous action is compared with some desired outcome and the difference between the two is fed back as information that guides the next action in such a way that the difference is reduced (Stacey, 2011, p. 66).

Hence, while traditionally SWOT has been used by top management within corporations to establish a top-down strategy for the organization, Cooperative movement de/generation SWOT analysis is by design a mere brainstorming tool for ‘tactical soldiers [co-operators] themselves’ to strategize without requiring for this ‘some external guidance or vanguard’ (Sporos, 2012, p. 152) either in the form of a vanguard party or a consulting agency. Still, like in classic SWOT analysis, S and W refer to the internal of an organization while O and T to the environment and the point is to better align the organization to better fit within the environment.

	SWOT	Cooperative movement de/generation SWOT analysis
Mission	Trounce the competition.	Reaching out the cooperative commonwealth
Goal	Maximize profitability	Build up a radical cooperative movement for self-management

Agency	Cascade (Top-down)	Bottom-up self-organization
Output	Correct strategy revealed by experts	Brainstorm based on conversation

Table 5: SWOT vs Cooperative movement de/generation SWOT analysis

4.4.3 Degeneration as a complex problem: rethinking the intervention strategy

Initially, crafting the first organizational tools that literature on Critical Performativity has ever delivered sensed like a great achievement. Yet, I deeply knew that this was not a great breakthrough as it was extremely unlikely to be used by WCNA (members). Time would never suffice for debating strategy within WCNA assemblies, as things were going.

Therefore, I started naming and bringing up in the WCNA assemblies one by one the issues that I considered to be responsible for a degenerating WCNA. Meanwhile, after considering the literature, I did not hesitate to make recommendations for improvements even in some cases I knew there was no way that they would be adopted but I considered important to not be confined by what was possible but to act according to what was necessary.

In this sense, it was not surprising that often my proposals were not adopted. Sometimes I thought that it was simply a matter of other members not having access to the empirical material I had collected. Therefore, I often collected or communicated more and more evidence to support my arguments but still no serious organizational learning seemed to take place. Yet, when I had provided plenty of evidence but consensus was not reached, my understanding became that idealism despite being a key inspiring factor driving the cooperative movement was also a key liability.

In turn, I attempted to provide pragmatically driven but still compatible with idealism solutions to real-life problems like taking advantage of technical skills available within WCNA, developing checks/fail-safe mechanisms in Pagkaki or attempting to harmonize cooperative management with the personalities of members in Synallois. Yet, even when it seemed that I had bet on a horse destined to win (the decision to experiment with the bureau-technician), culture ate my strategy. I, then, finally realized that beneath idealism there was something deeper which my technical fixes –in line with most prescriptive literature available– were not taking that much into consideration, the human longing for influence/affection and difficulty in self-constitution.

Hence, apart from realizing that degeneration is a far too complex problem if it comes to generating viable solutions based on anarchist cybernetics, consensual democracy and the like, it is important to keep in mind and provide opportunities for real-life people to grow first of all as persons and together with others. In other words, after my yearlong investigation, my argument became that the notion of an expansionist socialist liberty (Bakunin, 1950, pp. 23–24) has not been taken that into consideration within the literature on consensual democracy.

I mean the only liberty which is truly worthy of the name, the liberty which consists in the full development of all the material, intellectual and moral powers which are to be found as faculties latent in everybody... I mean that liberty of each individual which, far from halting as at a boundary before the liberty of others, finds there its confirmation and its extension to infinity; the illimitable liberty of each through the liberty of all, liberty by solidarity, liberty in equality; liberty triumphing over brute force and the principle of authority which was never anything but the idealised expression of that force, liberty which, after having overthrown all heavenly and earthly idols, will found and organise a new world, that of human solidarity, on the ruins of all Churches and all States.

In turn, my argument goes that articulating such a goal and introducing related dedicated mechanisms should be hardwired within a cooperative system dedicated to the development of a cooperative movement with great transformation potentialities. Meanwhile, to avoid cooperativism becoming marginal, an interest in performance (consensual democracy) is also a key precondition.

Considering the above, in the discussion that follows I arrived at some recommendations that attempt to both contain (counterproductive) idealism and unleash the developmental prospects of both cooperativism and co-operators. Still, following a cybernetic ontology and tradition (Pickering, 2010b), without claiming that there is a recipe for success within *exceedingly complex* systems apart from continuous adaption (Beer, 1981).

4.4.4 Conclusion

After open-mindedly/holistically documenting the WCNA attempts to resist degeneration and intervening based on an emergent theoretical framework, it became clear that some adjustments are required to the few available prescriptive guidelines and tools available for structuring (coalitions of) radical work collectives. To this end, the following chapter revolves.

Chapter 5.

Discussion: Contributions and next steps

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I position the findings of my research within the established literature to highlight contributions and discuss their implications before proposing some next steps for further research ‘raised by the data’ (Ferrance, 2000, p. 13).

5.2 Contributions and implications for theory

5.2.1 Moving from special theories of degeneration to a holistic conception as a basis for (better) supporting developmental movements of egalitarian collectives

After conducting an extensive review on theories and cases of (resisting) both organizational and movement degeneration among (coalitions of) worker cooperatives, it became clear that the well-established theories of degeneration were quite competing and not that fitting for *all* cases (Diefenbach, 2019). Meanwhile, cases and theories of resisting degeneration while crucial for undermining such overtly pessimistic grand theories have not been that influential in supporting co-operators avoid degeneration and reproduce both individual worker cooperatives and their coalitions. In the remaining section, a discussion of the findings and the implications they have for literature on networks of cooperatives (Audebrand and Barros, 2018) (resisting) degeneration (within Critical Management Studies) (Storey, Basterretxea and Salaman, 2014; Barros and Michaud, 2019) takes place.

The common thread of the various theories of degeneration termed as degeneration thesis represents a strict and straightforward axiom according to which worker cooperatives end up in a lose-lose situation over a non-specified period (Cornforth, Thomas, Spear and Lewis, 1988; Stryjan, 1989b; Diefenbach, 2019). In other words, any worker cooperative would sooner or later face a dilemma with two bad options: either succumb economically to competition or short-cut democracy. Consequently, the prospects for generating an active cooperative movement with large-scale transformative potential –especially if driven by egalitarian collectives– is rather unthinkable (Malleon, 2014). Yet, this has been actually the case of the emerging new cooperativism (Vieta, 2010).

Along these lines, while critical factors influencing the fate of a worker cooperative (movement) have been identified at different domains (Mygind and Rock, 1993), they are not covered by the classic axiom of degeneration and no actual interest has been

showcased to inform such a limited thesis on what this research highlighted to be a rather complex problem (Diamantopoulos, 2013). In turn, literature on regeneration has also often adopted the same limited and, thus, misleading frame to evaluate the attempts put forth by co-operators as simply remaining sustainable and democratic (Pansera and Rizzi, 2018).

My experience as a member of a cooperative that has been involved in the creation of a radical coalition of worker cooperatives since 2012, as well as my abductive theoretical approach based on a longitudinal study of a workers' cooperative movement, has enabled me to provide a different take on degeneration. Hence, by describing and explaining the challenges of the constituents of WCNA to ensure organizational survival, growth and community building while adhering to vision and values, this thesis added to the literature on (resisting) degeneration both a rare, holistic account of cooperative movement de/generation and an insiders perspective of cooperative movement degeneration.

Along these lines, the findings suggest that WCNA came into being so that its members better survive in a hostile environment and up to a point this is the case, confirming Audebrand and Barros (2018). However, their aspirations go beyond mere reproduction by targeting to contribute in a broader social transformation (Egan, 1990). To this end, they must face a variety of interrelated –yet most often unanticipated– degeneration threats to their existence, association and transcendence.

The interrelations between these threats were identified and theorized thanks to the longitudinal, multi-sited fieldwork performed. Hence, while different levels of degeneration were earlier identified among different cases, an exceptional contribution of this research project is also revealing the interrelations between those different levels that led to the formulation of the hierarchy of degeneration challenges. This is a key contribution that the contemporary literature focused on evaluating the deviance of isolated worker cooperatives to conventional/bureaucratic organizations or the dynamics of the strict degeneration thesis was indeed unfit to provide.

Moreover, as part of progress achieved on identifying crucial factors and their interrelations for cooperative movement degeneration, a new interpretation/synthesis of the culminated theory on (resisting) degeneration was made possible. Therefore, theory was developed that better explains empirical phenomena –not limited to that of the cases here explored (Emigh, 1997, p. 657)– and provides relevant (indirect) positive research impact on radical and horizontal cooperativism (Contu, 2018; Rhodes, Wright and Pullen,

2018). That is by improving the ability to foresee degeneration (threats) and to identify ameliorative countermeasures at all levels, the *Panoramic view on de/generation* (see Figure 22). That is quite crucial since findings made visible that co-operators are often ill-informed and ill-equipped about the tensions and problems they are about to face as their struggle develops and given that the early recognition of the threats is to an extent a critical factor to (better) survive.



Figure 22: The Panoramic view on de/generation

Factors triggering the degeneration of a cooperative movement

- Lack of needed professional staff and volunteers leads to a loss of broad community respectability and support while depending on external agencies undermines the autonomy of the cooperative movement. State/government opposition (Lindenfeld and Wynn, 1997; Rouaud, 2007), discriminatory lack of supporting mechanisms, including but not limited to providing access to finance (Comeau and Lévesque, 1993; Gintis, 1989), appropriate education (Levin, 1982), paternalistic and counterproductive support that atrophies the cooperative spirit (Adizes, 1971; Develtere, 1992; Fairbairn, 1991 (Simons and Ingram, 2003; Warhurst and Darr, 2006)) and leads to defamatory failures (Mill, 1973; Cahill, 2013)
- Even if the early cooperativism was anti-systemic, it lacked a clear vision, a future oriented theory, linking the small-scale initiatives into federated units that might gradually (or suddenly) blossom into anti-systemic revolution (Cahill 2013, p. 238). Unless the cooperative movement finds a practical/realistic way to retain the vision of the idealists who began it, the new co-operatives will be absorbed into the dominant economy as a weak third sector of contemporary capitalist structures (Cahill, 2013, p. 235)
- Cooperativism risks losing any transformational dimension as a result of ideological crisis and depoliticization (Laidlaw, 1980; MacPherson, 2011; Cahill, 2013; Ratner, 2013; Riddell, 2015).
- Because of limited resources to spare on a complicated-meso level the size of coalitions would be too small for the task at hand (Mansbridge, 1992; Hansmann and Hansmann, 2009; Van Dyke and Amos, 2017).
- Leadership class/elit might emerge and side-track the democratic nature of the coalition (Freeman, 1972; Michels, 1915). Goal-displacement resulting from paid organizers hijacking policy decisions for their own benefit (Michels, 1915; Leach, 2005; Schmidt and Van Der Walt, 2009).
- Mainstream cooperative movement facing goal displacement while alternative currents remain marginal (Laidlaw, 1980; MacPherson, 2011). Lack of shared goals and identity undermines the formation of coalitions (Van Dyke and Amos, 2017; MacPherson, 2011).
- Un-familiarity effect and the habit of powerlessness deters the formation of worker cooperatives (Pérotin, 2006; Schwarz 2012) while isomorphic pressures to adopt proven conventional means/ends re-inforce a hybrid of worker-capitalism (Ames, 1995; DiMaggio and Powell, 2009). Non-democratic habits and values undermine workplace democracy (Rothschild and Whitt, 1989) with each cycle of cooperation repeating largely the failures of the past.
- Relying primarily in own capital and facing difficulties to access finance results in under-capitalization (Thornley, 1982) which limits the cooperative presence in few sectors. Hence, cooperative mode of production is marginalized (Malleon). Emphasis on small scale can lead to ignoring other necessary scales
- Due to pressures from competition the social vision will fade out (see Wilson, 2014). Social movements rejecting cooperativism leads to goal displacement/introspection (Gibson-Graham, 2003)
- Reduced efficiency due to difficulties in utilizing different levels of skill and influence / difficulty in obtaining accountability, discipline and achieving productive use of meetings and conflict (Mansbridge, 1973; Brandow and McDonnell, 1981; Putterman, 1982)
- Cooperative individualism resulting from (a) political neutrality.
- Extra costs for building and sustaining a work collective (Gamson and Levin, 1984; Horvat, 1975; Landry, 1985; Mansbridge, 1979; Marshall, 1920; Stryjan, 1989), greater freedom of expression and participation in decision making leading to increased conflicts (Mellor et al., 1988; Rothschild and Whitt, 1989)

On top of that, such an innovative conceptualization of degeneration enabled me to craft an organizational tool for co-operators to strategize their movement and offer some recommendations for integrating radical cooperativism in a Panhellenic level based on the Cooperative Movement De/Generation SWOT analysis (See Figure 23). Signalling, thus, a move away from forecasting degeneration or refuting degeneration towards attempting to introduce *coping strategies* (Rosner, 1984a).

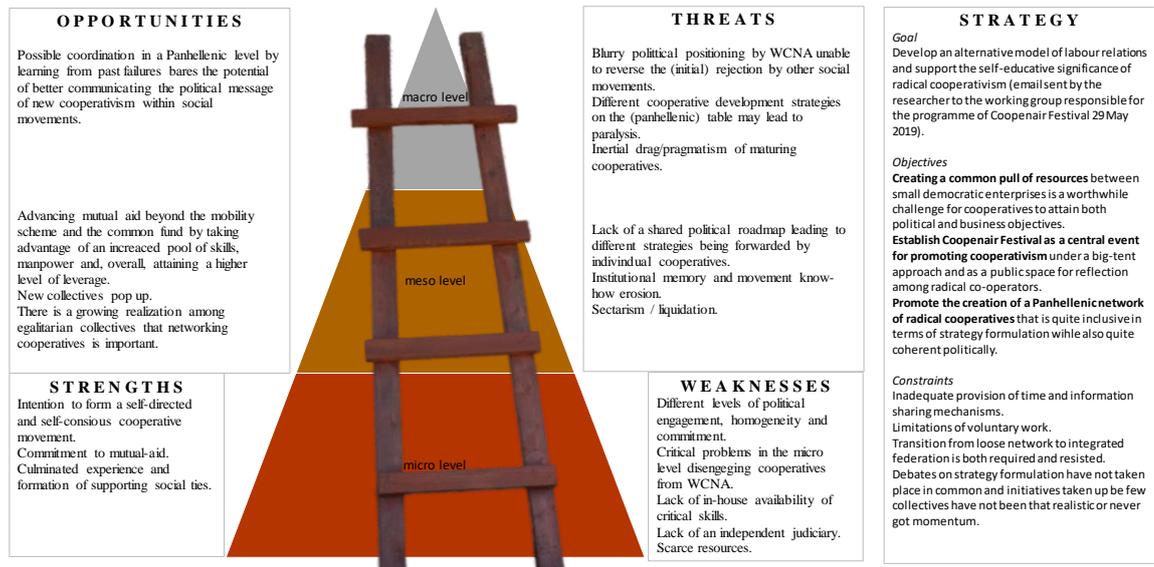


Figure 23: Cooperative movement de/generation SWOT analysis on WCNA

To conclude, analysing the WCNA attempts to resist degeneration, a set of theories were generated that make it easier for co-operators to foresee degeneration challenges and evade threats. Cooperative Movement De/generation SWOT analysis has also been to my knowledge the first concrete strictly organizational tool, literature on critical performativity has ever delivered (Spicer *et al.*, 2009; King, 2015; Reedy and King, 2019).

5.2.2 Moving towards a healthy high-performance consensual democracy: implications for the (horizontal) division of labour within egalitarian collectives

Whereas in literature engulfing specialization has been considered as undermining the prospects of workplace democracy and as a step for the resurrection of bureaucracy (Rothschild and Whitt 1986), the case studies here, confirmed the conclusions of rather rare empirical research on worker cooperatives which stressed that technical/horizontal division of labour was not leading per se to bureaucratization (Hunt 1995, Cornforth et al 1988). Instead, competent specialists were indeed necessary (Széll, 1989) and the danger of fragmentation was far more likely due to a one-sided critique of management to undermine the horizontal organization than oligarchization (Hunt, 1992; Landry, 1985).

In order to provide, a roadmap of the key challenges and choices for developing high-performance consensual democracy based on combining the empirical data of the investigation with literature, I will structure my following reflections based on the three-staged model of consensual democracy as introduced by Holleb and Abrams (1975).

Formation

Literature on the relation between adopting division of labour and workplace democracy within radical cooperatives, largely, revolves around the threat of oligarchy (Diefenbach, 2019). Specialization in this sense is seen more as a problem and a challenge for workplace democracy because of the supposed power asymmetries it entails (Rothschild-Whitt, 1976; Meister, 1984). In the end, the initial enthusiasm and the great expectations of co-operators will be challenged in real-life and the cooperatives will have to choose between adopting more conventional organizational practices at the detriment of democracy or accommodate with low performance challenging their survival (Ingle, 1980; Landry *et al.*, 1985). Most often this choice is perceived to be an unforeseen scenario triggering a reality-check maturity process (Lichtenstein, 1986).

In Pagkaki, this has not been exactly the case. While specialization was perceived as a potential threat, key competencies available within the collective were creatively utilized by a collective process set up following the guidelines of Castoriadis (1988). Along these lines, the ‘specialist’ used his competences to translate the options and choices available for the collective and decision were taken collectively in the assembly (from renting a venue to adjusting selling prices). In this sense, Pagkaki –primarily because of its founding members’ prior experience obtained at a prior collective endeavour and an awareness of some of the prescriptive literature available– neither operated as a primitive democracy (Holleb and Abrams, 1975a) nor management became a separated activity for co-operators (Batstone, 1983).

Meanwhile, in the case of Synallois, differentiation of roles emerged quite early in key operations of the collective without however retreating to top-down bureaucracy. Nevertheless, in the absence of clear rules, converging work attitudes and proper coordination, a sense of ‘chaos and ambiguity’ emerged as the initial enthusiasm resided and the intimate relations that sensed like a family were ultimately undermined (Holleb and Abrams, 1975a, p. 144). In due course, this led to increased pressures to clarify where members’ stand, in which direction they want to head to and how, which were framed as missed formative debates signalling a new stage of development, re-start.

On the one hand, from the perspective of designing high-performance configurations of collective management then, the case of Pagkaki illustrated that it is possible to develop adequate solutions for utilizing critical competencies without jeopardizing the practice of direct democracy and that this process requires continuous optimization. Moreover, this case confirmed Ingle (1980) in that reflecting upon previous experiences of similar endeavours can be beneficial to create organizational short-cuts for developing high-performance collective management. On top of that, it also became evident that for sustaining high collective performance and team spirit, an adequate skill-sharing format is required not just as a safeguard for oligarchy but also to better manage the emotions of inequality and securing trust especially as the renewal of members takes place (Mansbridge, 1973; Fairbairn, 2003). This could as well include a recruiting and induction approach that checks and manages baseless great expectations (Mellor, Hannah and Stirling, 1988) to avoid as much possible fruitless conflicts without however resorting to a conformist cynicism of a ‘frozen’ co-operative movement (Briscoe, 1991; Diamantopoulos, 2012).

On the other hand, the case of Synallois showcased that while specialization is not leading per se to oligarchy, pressures for achieving high performance in the absence of a dedicated manager and thus a functional self-managed collective requires at an elementary level institutional clarity, members alignment and coordination.

Early maturity

Empowering individuals and preventing the eruption of asymmetrical relations by attempting to equalize power and influence have been central goals for egalitarian collectives (Mansbridge, 1973; Jaumier, 2017). Along these lines, skill-sharing and rotation have been considered of utmost priority to secure workplace democracy from the threat of degeneration (Rothschild and Whitt, 1989).

However, the empirical cases of two WCNA members with ‘deeply held political values’ which has been considered a critical factor for avoiding organizational degeneration (Holleb and Abrams, 1975b, p. 153) outlined that arriving at a fractured/disorganized collective might well be posing for egalitarian collectives a much more serious, underestimated threat.

In turn, the *fracture/disorganization* of the collective has domino effects both in terms of bad internal relations but also in terms of delivering political outputs as elementary motivational factors of cooperativism like feeling ‘at home’ in the workplace, enjoying

comradery relationships and the sense of having get rid of dominating elites are not secured. Indeed, Pagkaki has not delivered a new collective document for a prolonged period and Synallois was overwhelmed by its internal problems losing sight of supporting as a collective a broader mission.

Therefore, more emphasis seems to be required in preventing radical cooperatives from failing to reproduce themselves as healthy, well-functioning and inspiring collectives (Cornforth, Thomas, Spear and Lewis, 1988; Stryjan, 1989a). Along these lines, adopting one-size-fits-all mechanical solutions that do not take that much into consideration the persons involved like Pagkaki attempted or the more personalistic/family approach of Synallois do not seem to be recipes for success.

The case of the re-start phase of Synallois has been indicative in this matter. Despite the achieved sustainability of the cooperative in business terms, the family relations that had formed in the early days of Synallois were, on the long run, rather holding Synallois down, not together. Hence, changes and a renewed bonding pact/motivation were urgently required for establishing a more well-functioning and healthy collective. Meanwhile, without consolidating collective overview, control and evaluation, the result was that one felt marginalized, one undervalued, one overwhelmed, one not motivated and one confined on a pressuring job role.

Likewise, mechanic approaches to overcome the division of labour and constitute a formal pact as a frame of reference as Pagkaki attempted also proved problematic for the effectiveness of decision-making but also for arriving at a well-tuned collective. For instance, the skill-sharing/rotation plan that was initially successful was undermined by the lack of dedicated processes for fostering the maintenance/cohesion of the collective and organizational learning. Responsible for this lack of foresight, was the lack of association with relevant literature and the difficulty of acknowledging and dealing with inequalities within radical circles (Mansbridge, 1973; Landry *et al.*, 1985).

In this sense, this case, unexpectedly, brought to the fore the somewhat hidden –and rarely acknowledged– internal (emotional) conflicts arising from power-authority/maturity imbalances and the severe challenges such group dynamics pose for the effective management of the collectives (Mansbridge, 1973; Gamson and Levin, 1984; Visch and Laske, 2018). While approaches calling for aboliting any division of labour have been mocked in the past as being naive, illusionary and deceptive (Horvat, 1972, p. 388) or even representing a lack of revolutionary consciousness (Guevara, 2005), my argument

is that when taken into consideration, more sustainable, inclusive and ultimately democratic resolutions can be developed for avoiding the under-utilization of competence (Heller *et al.*, 1998) or even a brain-drain (Abramitzky, 2012).

Therefore, specialists becoming bureau-technicians, *catalysts* (Brafman and Beckstrom, 2006) enabling the community to take appropriate decisions based on consensual democracy (Bookchin, 1982; Horvat, 1983; Castoriadis, 1988) is only a starting point for developing both high-performance and balanced, members' driven collectives which requires complementary steps so that the collective can rip the benefits of bureau-technicians and become more inclusive like, for instance, open-book management (Bryer, 2019).

In turn, bureau-technicians offering developmental opportunities for demystifying knowledge as an aside of their primary task being to foster the convergence between the 'experts' and the rest primarily in the conception of the task (or decision) at hand is just one way that members can get empowered. Yet, there are more inspirational ways for empowerment than attempting to equalize competencies which in the case of Pagkaki backfired. That is by individuals being overwhelmed by tasks that they were not ready or properly supported to undertake (Kegan *et al.*, 2016; Visch and Laske, 2018) resulting in both problematic relations among colleagues and reduced business effectiveness (Gamson and Levin, 1984).

For instance, it seems a far more realistic and meaningful endeavour to take into deeper consideration the persons (capabilities, aspirations and readiness) –entitled membership– involved and not aiming to change them (too much) but to socialize/integrate them more wholly with the collective (Laloux, 2014) by taking into consideration what the members are passionate about and how such a passion could better serve the collective mission (Collins, 2005). In this sense, influenced by Gestalt paradoxical theory of change arriving at an inclusive/affective collective (Brandow and McDonnell, 1981) is more likely to occur....

... when one becomes what [s]he is, not when [s]he tries to become what [s]he is not (Beisser, 1970 cited in Mann, 2010, p. 62).

Along these lines, depending upon the size of the collective, it is expected that some key competencies will not be available in-house and that some persons might not find their sweat spot role in the organization. By joining a coalition, such bottleneck capacities are expected to increase. Nonetheless, collective scrutiny is required to avoid an atrophying

overdependence (Jordan, 1986) by stimulating personal/collective growth for arriving at a confident collective, aware of its role and contribution to the larger whole (Collins, 2005).

Hence, a crucial contribution in the literature (Hunt, 1992; Pansera and Rizzi, 2018) was also to emphasize the criticality of expanding the scope for assessing and supporting workplace democratization to take into considerations opportunities given for individuals to be themselves and grow (Bernstein, 1976b).

Finally, early maturity is far more likely to be characterized by both conflicts –given that priory fundamental principles are openly challenged– but also from a renewed openness to experimentation. In turn, a key determinant for arriving at an even more mature collective is the nature of organizational learning that the collective has secured –despite memberships changes– after spending a lot of effort in turning the *flywheel* (Collins, 2005). For some cooperatives, this will, undoubtedly, end up to be a Sisyphean effort. But in those cases that the adoption of certain organizational practices improves both the quality of decision-making process and the experience of workplace democracy, this will improve both the confidence and the motivation of the participants to further experiment and master collective management (Westenholz, 1986; Széll, 1989; Gand and Béjean, 2013). In turn, a more fully-fledged maturity, transformation process becomes a more and more tangible –yet elusive– objective that gets workplace democracy moving, as Galeano (1993, p. 230) has famously put it for utopia.

(A guide to) late maturity

For most of the literature on the life-cycle of worker cooperatives, the period of late maturity is primarily associated with the final step of workplace democracy deterioration (Meister, 1984). Instead, late maturity has been here approached from a practitioner perspective moving successfully towards a high-performance consensual democracy (Ingle, 1980) conceived as an open-ended, utopian goal worth striving for and not a tangible reality (Gastil, 1993b). Hence, the potentials of business failure or cooperative degeneration were considered as quite possible but not inevitable (Cornforth, 1995; Diefenbach, 2019) and were certainly not the focus of attention (Stryjan, 1989a).

To facilitate such a journey based on this case study, a navigating compass for co-operators striving for becoming ‘a powerful and inclusive group –with membership that is committed to the democratic process– that maintains healthy, democratic relationships and practices democratic form deliberation, including equal and adequate speaking

opportunities and both comprehension and consideration’ (Gastil, 1992a, p. 297) was designed. It is named *consensual democracy development canvas* (see Figure 24) and is supposed to be used as a preliminary tool to identify and address imbalances between (business and political) objectives and current situation as well as between members.

In the remaining section, a presentation of the key elements of this canvas is provided. In the upper part, the current situation on some key areas of concern are to be filled first and then, in the lower part, a series of recommended *actions* are brainstormed to address weaknesses and further galvanize strengths.

Within the box of *value(s) proposition*, the typical for a business canvas value proposition is described (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2010, pp. 22–25) while in the right side the cooperative-political values adopted by the collective. In box *key activities & catalytic mechanisms*, a breakdown of the value proposition into core activities takes place and the way values are operationalized in supportive catalytic mechanisms is showcased.

Regarding the remaining categories (divided by a line), in the left part, the positive elements of the area under investigation are presented while in the right side the negative elements. For example, if there are critical *key competencies* that are identified as necessary to support the key activities but are not available in-house, they are marked on the right side while if available, on the left.

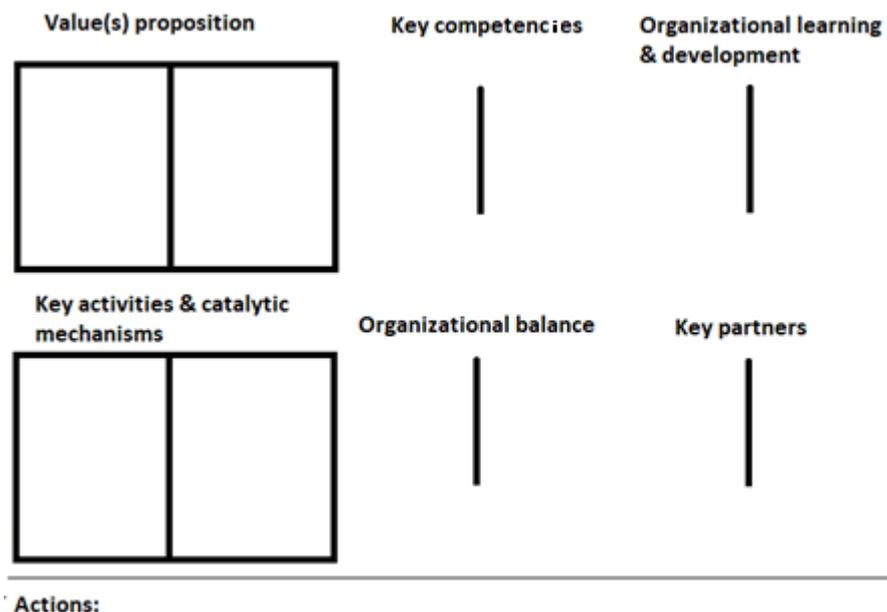


Figure 24: Consensual democracy development canvas

Similarly, in the area of *organizational balance* (of in-house competencies available by co-operators), imbalances that can become problematic in terms of business performance or team spirit are marked on the right side while areas where there are no such imbalances on the left.

In *organizational learning and development*, initiatives and catalytic mechanisms that have been put in place and are deemed beneficial for the organization are listed on the left while those that seem to be missing or being ineffective on the right.

In the right column under *key partners*, difficult to replace external partners are listed while on the left those that can easily be replaced or that carry similar values with the cooperative.

5.2.3 Managing fragmentation without managers: advancing coordinated egalitarian collectives

Accelerating the collective decision-making process without resorting to oligarchy (Viggiani, 1997) or arriving at forms of radical coordination that enable the ultimate authority being exercised by the people, ‘el pueblo’ (Beer, 1995), have so far proved quite challenging for co-operators. To enable co-operators better navigate around these challenges, the experience of the empirical cases of WCNA, Synallois and Pagkaki (introduced in chapter 4) will be discussed in light of relevant theory so that certain guidelines are drafted for stimulating other self-directed cooperative movements to devise appropriately their cooperative models. More specifically, some rules of prudence for advancing coordinated egalitarian collectives –as partly inspired by Vanderslice (1988), Wuisman and Mannan (2016)– are provided structured along the five sub-systems of Viable Systems Model.

Subsystem 1: Muscles and organs (The parts that actually DO something)

Too often, co-operators have been heavily preoccupied with designing bullet-proof structures to avoid degeneration pressures for abandoning their alternative, democratic spirit and avoided seriously reflecting upon the membership of the organizations (Stryjan, 1989a). For phoenix cooperatives or recuperated cooperatives (Mellor, Hannah and Stirling, 1988), like Viome that are rooted within a pre-existing operation of the workplace under hetero-management, this makes sense as there is largely no option for deliberately selecting certain members over others and, therefore, membership is to a large extent pre-given and re-defined by push-and-pull debates (Karakasis, 2005). But for cases of newly formed cooperatives, like Pagkaki and Synallois, ‘deciding who is on the

coop' is of crucial importance and so does setting up a framework that defines their obligations and a process for expulsion early on (Footprint Workers' Co-operative Ltd and Seeds for Change Lancaster Co-operative Ltd, 2015, p. 24).

Along these lines, the empirical cases of Pagkaki and Synallois confirmed that forming a coherent membership is an elementary starting point for avoiding conflicts and ponderous decision-making in the long run. To this end, ongoing active maintenance through processes of member-collective alignment and provisional institutionalization are necessary and, ultimately, inescapable if the structure is to get better tuned with the (evolving) membership to yield the best elements of both. A culture –that overcomes the barriers for (Landry *et al.*, 1985)– taking into consideration and utilizing the capabilities of each member as well as its drives for growth is a key precondition for collectively providing proper support.

Under such conditions, the inevitable pressures for specialization and even a division of participation within decision making that naturally develop at some point of the cooperative's life-cycle (Holleb and Abrams, 1975a; Hunt, 1992) –as this has been (in)formally the case at Pagkaki, Synallois and WCNA– need not be considered that worrisome. Besides, it is simply ineffective that everyone is involved in every single decision and task of a cooperative (Wuisman and Mannan, 2016) and organizational effectiveness is a key downplayed, aspect for members' satisfaction (Gand and Béjean, 2013). Therefore, the issue at hand could be better posed as how to perform, evolve and communicate so that threats like fragmentation and oligarchization or the belonging paradox are better managed and maximum opportunities are provided for arriving at a balanced collective while also promoting members' growth.

To this end, the first step to kick-start a process of configuring bottom-up cooperative management is delimiting its operations after taking into serious consideration 'the types of decisions in which different categories of workers could, and should, be involved' (Jones, 1940, p. 173). A second step, requires coopearors to 'give up some of their autonomy in the interests of coming together as a coherent larger whole' (Walker, 1998, p. 76) marked by a shared purpose (Jordan, 1986, pp. 110–111). Then, the challenge transfers in establishing coping mechanisms and layers of dedicated VSM subsystems to ease the emergence of conflicts and further advance radical cooperativism operationally, educationally and, ultimately, politically.

Along these lines, a proper boundary-management between the separate assemblies (and members) of WCNA is required so that a common pool of scarce resources is created and an effective interdependent system emerges by leaving behind the focus on the supposedly autonomous individual cooperative (Jordan, 1986).

Subsystem 2: Nervous system (monitors and ensures that the interaction of muscles and organs are kept stable)

Previous research on WCNA (members) highlighted the emphasis given on horizontality through investigating the organizational schemes of radical direct democracy like the general assembly and consensus decision-making (Varkarolis, 2012; Kioupkiolis and Karyotis, 2015; Kokkinidis, 2015; Daskalaki and Kokkinidis, 2017). In this way, it has mirrored the optimism co-operators shared in the early formative period of this new wave of cooperativism in Greece. In turn, this longitudinal research brought to the fore that institutionalizing a general assembly and adopting consensus decision-making is not enough in the long run to maintain a balanced collective.

As the Synallois case illustrated organizational silos can even form within a small collective of five leading over time to a sense of organizational dysfunction, overburn and estrangement despite being successful as a business. By adopting bad communication strategies like ‘camouflag[ing] their negative feelings’ (Reinharz, 1983, p. 207), Synallois members faced mounting interpersonal difficulties both resulting from and further contributing to unstructured procedures that undermined cross-functional cooperation.

In contrast, when different roles got coordinated within a collective, like quite often is the case at the everyday work at Pagkaki, the result is functional smooth cooperation that could further be harnessed by dedicated to stability fail-safe mechanisms (minimum commitments of members, probation period, ultra-executionist). Still, size, culture and in-house membership (skills and preferences) potentially contribute to bottlenecks for this to happen all the way and among all fields. For instance, a lack of willing/competent circle-leaders for the operational working groups of the collective (Rau and Koch-Gonzalez, 2018) and persistence in rotating the role of the facilitator, largely disrupted the collective intelligence of the group and severed the continuity of Pagkaki’s nervous system.

Finally, the case of WCNA working groups showcases that an interface responsible for maintaining the dialectic relation between working groups and the general assembly stable is required so that ‘the capabilities of the regulators ... balance the complexity of

the situation they are charged with regulating' (Walker, 1998, p. 194). Having competent paid facilitators or minute takers as a reserve within a voluntarily driven organization, in turn, might well evoke the fear of an emerging *leadership class* (Michels, 1915) but still, it would be baseless if such a task was delegated for the diffusion of information and allocated in terms of ability, interest, and responsibility (Freeman, 1972).

It is important, therefore, to stress as key preconditions for functional intra-cooperation that:

- members do not avoid conflict at any cost (Whittle, 2009) but are committed to productive use of conflict (Gamson and Levin, 1984, pp. 235–6) and adequate conflict resolution process are explicitly defined in advance (Panagoulis, 2013),
- proper fail-safe and de-escalation measures are put in place to handle different levels of skills, commitment, experience and confidence (Horvat, 1983) and
- the appropriate apparatus system or processes that unify the distinct organs are appropriately staffed for that task at hand to ensure that members, divisions or working groups can adequately support the organism and vice versa.

Subsystem 3: Base Brain (overseeing and optimising the internal environment)

As already expressed, task differentiation is up to an extent inescapable for co-operators and this has been posed as an irreversible challenge undermining the prospects of democratic organizing by paving the way for oligarchy (Michels, 1915). In response, radicals have often attempted to overcome all forms of division of labour and specialization in a variety of ways ranging from skill-sharing to staying small (Kanter, 1972; Rothschild-Whitt, 1976). Yet, such efforts have been deemed quite challenging (Rothschild and Whitt, 1989) and even problematic (Landry *et al.*, 1985; Mansbridge, 1992).

In this thesis, my argument is that, per se, neither division of labour nor decentralization lead neither to oligarchy (Diefenbach, 2019) nor fragmentation/polycentrism (Castoriadis, 1988) if new institutions are developed that will enable reassembling the fragments (Castoriadis, 1988, p. 100). Instead, this is the result *if* such a process of segmentation is not properly managed for self-managed integration (Gorz, 1976).

Along these lines, if a benevolent and dedicated cooperative manager is out of the question (Davis, 1995), it is a priority task of the collective to become able to oversee and optimize for itself (even if some extra hands with related skills that are not available in-

house are required in an ad hoc manner). Obtaining, thus, an overview of the fragments is a necessary starting point –so heavily overlooked within Critical Management Studies with only minor exceptions (Swann, 2018)– to secure and optimize the functionality of direct democracy. To this end, decentralizing decision-making, scarce resources and centralizing information sharing is an integral and indispensable part (Castoriadis, 1988; Pickering, 2010b).

For instance, in an operational level, a recoup session was established to take place after the meetings of the working groups of Pagkaki so that all members oversee the operations of the organization as a whole and provide feedback to the working groups –if necessary– at an early stage. On a more political level, a dedicated to self-reflection and optimization assembly takes place at about every six months in concurrence with the assemblies dedicated to evaluating the probation period of newcomers. In the absence of such integrating or fail-safe mechanisms like the ultra-executionist, there is a danger that oligarchic tendencies or organizational fragmentation will go out of spiral. Likewise, while Synallois did not suffer from oligarchy that much, it has been struggling to reverse the fracture of the collective.

Similarly, in the case of WCNA, the working groups have to a certain extent developed a momentum that somewhat ‘defies’ or predetermines the mandate provided by ordinary WCNA members in the general assembly. Therefore, to put it gently, there is much potential for improving the promotion of unity (alignment with strategy, information sharing between working groups and general assembly), optimization (tacking efficient advantage of scarce resources, providing in advance sets of proposals and summaries of the activities of working groups to all members, amending proposals following general assembly orders, maintaining an accessible archive) and synergy across its working groups and between the collectives.

Subsystem 4: Midbrain (strategy formulation)

In a conventionally run enterprise –and that seems partly to be replicated even in the value-based cooperative model of cooperative management (Davis, 1995, 2016)–, the power, vision and plan is or seems to flow from the above circumventing bottom-up participation (Stacey, 2011). To avoid replicating such a model prone to demutualization and degeneration (Diamantopoulos, 2012, 2013), a variety of cooperatives have attempted to develop a movement of leaderless alternatives (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979).

Yet, collectively strategizing has often deemed quite challenging and costly to arrive at due to the variety of preferences involved and, thus, ‘control over the political process can fall into the hands of an unrepresentative minority’ (Hansmann, 1996b, p. 41). Meanwhile, a failure to envision a way forward for a concerted coalition of cooperatives due to different preferences or interests has even led cooperative federations to collapse (Walker, 2018).

To avoid such a misfortune, developing dedicated catalytic mechanisms (Collins, 1999; Novkovic, 2004) assuring ‘that leader-associated functions crucial to organizational survival [are] fulfilled’ while distributing power (Vanderslice, 1988, p. 684) and supporting members of leaderless organizations in taking the lead and the associated responsibility instead of delegating power to committee members that may well ‘impose their own idiosyncratic preferences on the group as a whole’ (Hansmann, 1996b, p. 42) seems to be quite crucial.

Indeed, an emphasis for cultivating a collective and inclusive approach on strategy formulation at Pagkaki has proved to be a quite demanding and costly process also exacerbated by the increased turn-over of members and the operational capabilities of a small collective that are realistically speaking, quite minimal (Castoriadis, 1998). Yet, despite the relative ineffectiveness of Pagkaki’s strategic plans, a key positive side-effect of revisiting the political priorities of the collective has been to secure a mediocre-for-the-great-expectations-of-its-members yet crucial-for-the-well-being-of-the-collective sense of ineffective still *shared* agency.

In turn, for Synallois, competing (cooperative) work attitudes and difficulties in productively dealing with conflict have so far hampered the potential of arriving at a smoothly balanced collective and foreclosed the possibilities of a common vision acting as a catalyst for undermining the organizational silos that have emerged.

Turning to the case of WCNA regeneration, it is important to realize that by breaking up the general assembly in parts meaningful opportunities for participation and useful/productive conflict from below upwards emerge at the various levels so that the power/vision/commitment also flourished bottom up. This was crucial as otherwise untapped potential, precious time and critical information would not be available to make properly inclusive decisions. Yet, for unifying the fragmented working groups through the general assembly and arriving at a coherent cooperative (network) also requires provisioning time and energy specifically for strategy formation-reformulation. To

streamline such a process, it might be wise that a body of members are required to act as ‘base brain’ and provide to the general assembly not only the opportunity to make sense of the internal environment based on the ongoing interactions of the members (Stacey, 2011) but also to enable the identification of emerging environmental opportunities and threats that WCNA and its constituents should focus on in common (using, for instance, the de/generation SWOT analysis).

Moreover, it seems that a key precondition for arriving at an inclusive strategy that successfully takes off –apart from environmental opportunities and a certain degree of (cultural/political) homogeneity between those involved within individual cooperatives and their coalitions– is to secure a pool of necessary capabilities. Otherwise either the costs associated with constructing a shared frame of reference would be enormous or the fruits of a concerted cooperative (movement) would be minimal (Stryjan, 1989b; Hansmann, 1996c; Malleon, 2014b; Walker, 2018).

Overall, then, it becomes clear that scaling up the cooperative movement from below involves far more aspects than simply adopting consensus decision-making in a flat second level structure (Mansbridge, 1992). Along these lines, dedicated mechanisms that allow the overwhelming majority of co-operators to take charge and nurture their initiative to not get thwarted by ill-prepared/overburdened assemblies or informal elites (Freeman, 1972; Maeckelbergh, 2012) are undoubtedly indispensable. The Consensual democracy development canvas is a key contribution along these lines.

Subsystem 5: Higher brain (strategy formulation)

Debates on sustaining cooperative democracy have largely been focused on the level of who has the ultimate authority within a cooperative (Cornforth, 2004). In simple terms, the ultimate authority is the governing body where proposals get ratified, redirected or rejected and a brainstorm takes place for general issues affecting the direction of the organism. In most small-scale cooperatives this is a weekly or monthly assembly (Malleon, 2014). In larger coalitions of cooperatives, the main options are schematically to delegate bottom-up pyramidically or directly elect representation (Mansbridge, 1992).

The findings of this research confirm that the model of an almost weekly general assembly is adopted by WCNA members. On top of that, Pagkaki and to a lesser extent Synallois have also introduced working groups to better support the decision-making process (yet exclusively regarding operational aspects of the collectives that required better support).

In the case of WCNA, however, recallable delegation has proved difficult to maintain proper mandate and feedback between cooperatives and WCNA. Electing representation was also never proposed in an attempt to stick to a movement perspective and avoid the detriment effects representation has had so far for the momentum of a cooperative movement (Laidlaw, 1980; International Co-operative Alliance, 1995; Diamantopoulos, 2013).

So, WCNA has contemporarily been experimenting towards creating a third option, a mix of a first-level network of radical co-operators that participate in the constituents of WCNA coupled with an endorsement of decisions by the collectives. Still, unless there is a better beforehand preparation and some room for elements of adversary politics/advice decision-making to be included, despite the intent WCNA will likely continue to be marginal and not take upon a leading role for promoting cooperativism beyond the confines of a bunch of like-minded collectives with limited outreach (Mansbridge, 1992; Laloux, 2014; Malleson, 2014a).

Overall, then, from the perspective of promoting an influential cooperative movement (Diamantopoulos, 2012), it seems to be an imperative to realize that sticking to (formal) democracy is not enough. Instead, more complex decision-making structures seem to be required rooted in circular-functional hierarchy (Swann, 2018), stimulating the growth of members, productive use of conflict and time. Yet, when it comes to organizing and ‘self-constitution inquiry is never-ending’ (Reason, Bradbury and Ison, 2008, p. 147) and continuous self-reflection on the lived experience of members is required to avoid sticking to dogmas of good or bad organization (Landry *et al.*, 1985, pp. 12–13). Along these lines, some avenues for next steps for research instigated by the current investigation have been provided for further supporting the development of the spiral of radical cooperativism in the following section.

5.3 Next steps for research

Given my pragmatist epistemological perspective that the point of the research project was not to provide ‘answers to enigmas in which we can rest’ (James, 1963, p. 26) but in instruments that we could use to the extent that they work in practice, I consider that there are various ways through which the current research could be extended/calibrated.

For instance, despite the huge amount of fieldwork performed and data collected, the theories developed here are the result of limited cases that –despite taking into consideration an extensive literature– were rooted under certain environmental

conditions. Hence, scrutinizing such theories in both similar cases and across different environmental conditions would be a task well worth it and co-operators should be mindful not to over-rely on literature.

Likewise, extending the panorama of degeneration threats through a comprehensive meta-analysis seems like an interesting endeavour with great implications in practice. Moreover, I would like to point the criticality of developing a research focus on the development of collective intelligence/teamwork within horizontal cooperatives and an exploration of whether the small size of the worker cooperative is, unlike what is expected, a bottleneck that all small business share in terms of accessing a wide variety of required competencies (Jordan, 1986).

Moreover, while I was conducting my ethnographic fieldwork on Greek cooperativism, in 2015, a SYRIZA-led government formed in Greece with an agenda of becoming a partner state for cooperativism (Bauwens, 2012). Yet, in several interviews conducted as part of a triangulation-validation strategy, it was stressed by various co-operators that the policies developed to promote solidarity economy through cooperatives, while theoretically informed by cooperative success stories in other contexts (CICOPA, 2013), they were neither evidence-based, nor grounded on local data and, therefore, topical. On the contrary, they sometimes prolonged historical deficiencies of the Greek cooperative movement, like its relationship with the state (Adam, Kornilakis and Kavoulakos, 2018). This issue fits well with the calls for more cautious and multiscalar approaches on crafting and evaluating enabling policies for SSE cooperatives to realize their transformative potentials (UNRISD, 2016) and avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, dumping taxpayers' money and cooperative ideals (Develtere, 1992; Pollet and Develtere, 2004). An issue that was shared with representatives of CICOPA visiting Athens.

Finally, as the cooperative ideals, in this case, have proven quite strong and resilient, it would be interesting to follow up and evaluate the adoption by WCNA or similar endeavours of any of the recommendations made and the tools crafted, to expand such a rarely rich account of (resisting) degeneration in new directions and offer validation of the tools, here, introduced.

5.4 Conclusion

In short, the current research has contributed innovatively in both making a better sense of degeneration but also for opening inspiring new pathways for research with wider implications for actors beyond those immediately involved.

Chapter 6.

Conclusions

The spectre of degeneration has been haunting cooperation almost since its inception in nineteenth-century Great Britain (Webb, 1891; Stryjan, 1989b). While a variety of law-like claims of the inevitability of degeneration have been falsified since then, in the early twenty-first-century degeneration is considered more or less a ‘highly likely, scenario’ (Diefenbach, 2019, p. 559). Meanwhile, there is still a staggering lack of empirical material supporting/refuting such claims and documenting (resisting) degeneration (Leach, 2013, p. 3; Cheney *et al.*, 2014; Jaumier, 2017, p. 217; Langmead, 2017).

In turn, the current thesis followed the steps of Holyoake in documenting an emerging first-wave cooperative movement with ‘world-making’ aspirations in contemporary Greece. More specifically, the findings of my research were founded upon a dynamic, decade-long ‘thick description’ of the WCNA attempts to spread radical cooperativism and the real-life problems encountered in this process. Along these lines, this research has offered abundant empirical material as part of a pioneer in-depth, dynamic examination on a variety of degeneration threats that WCNA (members) have faced over almost a decade.

Yet, the current research output departs from being a strict ethnographic take confined on reality as-is. In turn, by taking action together with others to tackle degeneration, researching this action and bringing in new action plans all over again has proven incremental for identifying degeneration as a complex problem leading to a messy situation and bringing into life actionable knowledge for collectively confining degeneration. To this end, viably reconciling radical objectives with realistic means – while advancing the hybrids of consensual democracy and anarchist cybernetics– needs to be coupled by the fabrication of institutions that stimulate self-constitution, organizational learning and personal development.

Moreover, given my distinct and rarely taken up before perspective (within Critical Management Studies and beyond) of an insider following an abductive approach and adopting a holistic framework for analysing cooperative movement degeneration allowed the identification of interrelations between various degeneration threats and the enrichment of existing (Potsdam, 2015) dynamic approaches on degeneration. In this way, a fitting –at least for the cases explored– ‘theoretical framework which no longer accepts degeneration as inevitable’ (Cornforth, 1995) was formulated with the potentials of offering a far better theory for explaining empirical phenomena (Lakatos, 1970).

In the remaining section, I elaborate on my answers to the research questions (which I state once again as a reminder).

What are the various challenges and their interrelations that WCNA has faced while promoting a radical cooperative movement? What are the countermeasures adopted? What could be done to arrive at a cooperative movement with great transformation potentialities?

Literature on degeneration has been dominated by –predominately pessimistic– special theories directed towards diagnosing degeneration and identifying critical factors undermining the potentials of workplace democracy. Still, a series of research contributions have been put forward that challenge the law-like nature of the threats of degeneration and identified key critical factors/countermeasures for avoiding degeneration threats.

The empirical investigation of WCNA in a holistic way throughout the years revealed that its members have proven quite resilient and that the benefits associated with collective work predominately have exceeded the drawbacks. In this sense, it has proved to be a negative case for law-like theories advocating that such collective endeavours are prone to fail.

Still, the potentials of an expanding cooperative movement were severely undermined – despite the various rather proactive countermeasures deployed for foreseen degeneration threats– by a variety of unanticipated and interwoven factors that could be classified as existential, associational and transcendental.

In terms of existential threats, the fundamental ones were securing a satisfactory level of compensation so that the cooperative does not dissolve and successfully reproduces its membership without collapsing. Yet, apart from these extreme scenarios which were not that common, financial problems and problems of interpersonal relations did, at times, certainly challenge the majority of WCNA members. Along these lines, ponderous decision-making developed that made it difficult for members of WCNA to actively follow and engage in its processes.

Hence, given that for most individual collectives sparing scarce resources in that collective endeavour seemed quite a luxury, forming a coherent and influential network of worker cooperatives has proved quite difficult. On top of that, the rhetoric of degeneration made it even more difficult for co-operators to get rooted (and recruit from)

within social movements. Therefore, WCNA was rather constrained in retreating to sporadic activism without having secured a sense of shared belonging/agency.

It is quite clear from the above then that some clusters of factors/challenges were more critical than others and somewhat preconditions for resolving the rest in a manner quite similar to that presented in Maslow's hierarchy of needs (like achieving a satisfactory level of business sustainability and solidarian relations between members)¹⁰. A lack of in-house skills, a reluctance to open up to new solutions and the lack of some sort of institutional support from WCNA had been detrimental for the prospects of developing an influential movement.

Yet, beyond identifying the (interrelations between the) various factors undermining the development of a thriving radical cooperative movement, a key theoretical contribution of the research is that a more holistic and expandable conceptualization of degeneration emerged aggregating the various special theories of degeneration and offering a reinterpretation of the most established degeneration theories. Hence, significant progress has been made to develop theory that better fits the empirical material of this case without being disconfirmed from numerous other cases found in literature, the panorama of degeneration.

Finally, generating an account of cooperative movement-building from the perspective of an insider action researcher also enabled the cultivation of a business tool that co-operators could use by themselves to strategize ways to become more viable in front of – rather unnoticed so far – real-life degeneration threats. To showcase how this tool could be used, a series of reflections were generated revolving around upgrading WCNA and directing it towards grasping the opportunity – opening from co-hosting and attending Coopenair Festival – to arrive at a cooperative movement with great transformation potentialities in Greece.

To sum up, the dual role of the researcher as a full member of a constituent of WCNA and his abductive/action-research approach have been catalytic to arrive at a relevant and interesting research output that was not limited in (dis)confirming the classic problem of degeneration. Instead, it offered a sophisticated diagnosis and practical theories/tools for improved (holistic) prognosis and threat evasion.

¹⁰ This is the sole reason why the generated theory was named *hierarchy of degeneration threats*. Other than that, there is no link with motivational theory, psychology or Maslow.

Does specialization inevitably lead to oligarchy? How does specialization affect the relations between members and the operational balance of the cooperative? How can co-operators better manage the side-effects of specialization? Is skill-sharing/rotation strategy a silver bullet against oligarchy?

Literature on the relationship between the division of labour and workplace democracy within egalitarian collectives, largely, revolves around the threat of oligarchy (Diefenbach, 2019). Specialization in this sense is seen more as a problem and a challenge for workplace democracy because of the supposed power asymmetries it entails (Rothschild-Whitt, 1976; Meister, 1984). Overcoming the challenge is then seen as a race to equalize power primarily through skill-sharing and rotation (Mansbridge, 1973). The results of such an approach, however, are far from substantial and often have detrimental side-effects for the effectiveness of decision-making (Landry *et al.*, 1985).

The current thesis, drawing from an empirical and longitudinal study on two small work collectives adopting differing levels of horizontal division of labour, largely confirmed Leach (2005) that an emerging oligarchy is somewhat nonsensical in small collectives adopting a consensus decision-making approach. Instead, utilizing competent specialists is indeed necessary for organizational effectiveness (Széll, 1989) that can well be aligned with supporting workplace democracy.

Yet, for integrating distinct competences within workplace democracy smoothly, a deeper understanding and management of the side-effects erupting from adopting a horizontal division of labour is required. To this end, the significance of the research has been threefold.

First, it identified crucial (side)-effects in terms of intra-group relations –a sense of expert loneliness/estrangement and a feeling of being bossed– and business performance, organizational silos/fragmentation, dilettantism/under-utilization of competence.

	Configuration of division of labour	Effects		Side-effects		Alternatives		Researcher insights / proposals	
		Execution of (non) specialist tasks	Coordination	Oligarchization	Group relations	Rotation	Skill-sharing	Collective mobilization	Steps for coordinated cooperation
Synallois	In the fore of everyday work and workers' self-image.	Decent execution of specialist tasks according to individual competences but debased value on non specialist tasks.	Dysfunctional and cumbersome cooperation between different work roles due to ignorance and apathy.	Lacking evidence of oligarchization but prevalent signs of frustration by the 'experts' and assignment by the rest ("it's none of my business").	Lack of team spirit, exacerbated by a lack of formative debates, misunderstandings and undervaluation of different work roles. A sense of entrapment, anxiety, confusion, powerlessness and insecurity leads to bad personal relations.	Small prospects for rotation to take place, primarily on secondary/maintenance tasks.	High barriers due to repulsion or advanced skill requirements.	While shadowing between posts is a good starting point, team (re)building and motivation is what is urgently required.	The assembly has to finally coach the individual 'players' and help them accept their roles for forming a well-functioning team. Supporting 'experts' develop for the benefit of the group might be needed.
Pagkaki	Division of labour was adopted in the background of everyday work to support the cooperative. When the task at hand was conceived quite technical-practical there was (in)formal delegation but if deemed political, like managerial accounting did, a more collective-proactive approach to avoid oligarchization was considered.	A sense of connectedness when working together smoothly across different work roles but when attempting to overcome the horizontal division of labour in the background operations, by breaking-down and partly rotating some specialist tasks, efficacy and teamwork were challenged.	Coordination was largely achieved in everyday work but beyond that the organization was a black box despite shared access to information.	The separation of political from technical authority was promoted since day one as a way to curb imbalance in influence. The 'expert' also pressured the rest for more participation but ultimately rotation was not that possible.	Different levels of skills and influence were seen as threats for the collective. Yet, the strategy adopted to address this resulted in the 'expert' being disengaged and the others' feeling rejected and bossed.	For rotation to be possible in managerial accounting, it had to be broken down, so that some maintenance could be undertaken by more members. This led to a fragmentation that undermined the 'expert' from having an overall idea of what is going on without actually narrowing the gap between the average user and the 'expert'.	High barriers due to repulsion or advanced skill requirements. Primarily achievable in maintenance operations.	A new strategy/vision is required breaking with the currently self-defeating race of skill-sharing/rotation and emphasizing both the empowerment of cooperators and taking better advantage of the skills available.	Design a system of open-book management, focusing on key indicators, that will enable all cooperators take full ownership of the business and fully aware decide based on data, not trust.

Table 6: The side-effects of adopting specialization

Second, it introduced an organizational tool, the Consensual Democracy Development Canvas, to facilitate brainstorming actions to react to the abovementioned side-effects so that specialization is more smoothly integrated with and supportive of workplace democracy.

Third, it advocated for functional intra-cooperation by promoting more viable forms of radical cooperativism in response to disorganization/fragmentation erupting from a one-sided critique of management (Hunt, 1992; Landry, 1985), as discussed in the next section.

Along these lines, the radical mantra that favours skill-sharing and rotation as an adequate set of solutions for institutionalizing workplace democracy is both challenged as a silver bullet and defended as a crucial practice –if thoughtfully set in motion– to stimulate organizational balance.

What are the (side-)effects of adopting specialization within egalitarian collectives? How can co-operators keep the benefits and better manage the bad side-effects of adopting specialization?

In previous research on WNCA (members), there has been much praise on the embracement of direct democracy and consensus decision-making as ways to avert the threat of degeneration. This was largely in line with the initial optimism that co-operators widely shared in the early days.

However, the analysis of the findings showed that institutionalizing a general assembly as the ultimate authority while a key precondition the formation of a coherent, effective and meaningful collective requires additional member-collective alignment and business optimization mechanisms in line with cooperative values.

At a bare minimum, a constitution is required (and the process for revisiting some parts of it) that highlights the core principles/objectives of the collective and represents a key frame of reference for policy decisions like the obligations of members. However, as the complexity of the situation to be collectively managed increases for a variety of issues (from membership changes to forming second level assemblies among cooperatives), so does the necessity of adopting more layers of mechanisms.

Unfortunately, at least for first wave radical collectives like those here researched, the above conclusion was not at all evident and has often led to problems like structurelessness and fragmentation (Freeman, 1972; Landry *et al.*, 1985). An idealist naivety in organizational matters focusing solely on being ultrademocratic coupled by a lack of relevant literature/education and an overreliance on spontaneity as a safeguard for self-centred autonomy are largely to blame for this.

Hence, the main significance of the current research was to warn co-operators about such threats of disorganizing and to partake in a ‘trial-and-error process’ (Freeman, 1972) for formulating some rules of prudence for not reinventing the wheel. To this end, an anarchist interpretation of the VSM (Swann, 2018) was turned into a tool of prognosis and a guideline for democratically structuring decentralized coordination among co-operators (after proving legitimate as a diagnostic lens in the cases of Pagkaki, Synallois and WCNA).

The following recommendations are, along these lines, inspired by VSM and the small body of literature promoting consensual democracy (Freeman, 1972; Ingle, 1980; Horvat, 1983; Castoriadis, 1988) and the validation they got from the empirical investigation on WCNA (members): Adopt a constitution, break up the assembly into smaller bits to provide opportunities for engagement and personal growth aligned with commonly agreed missions (and targets), create adequate communication channels to integrate/overview them, develop a mentality of frank communication to not sabotage them, opt for consent –or in trivial matters/proposal generating processes, an *advice process* instead of consensus (Laloux, 2014)–, establish dedicated mechanisms –adequately staffed– to support decision-making before (agenda setting, proposal

generation), during (assembly facilitation) and after the general assemblies (archiving, updating policies, follow-up on the execution of assigned tasks) with autonomous fail-safe and ad hoc de-escalation measures to streamline the processes so that the ultimate authority and the responsibility of optimizing the system to be truly in the hands of the general assembly.

Implications for practice

By building upon the rich empirical material collected in the current case and coupled by (other cases discussed in) the theories of degeneration, theory was developed that not only better explains reality but also significantly advances the abilities of co-operators for foresight (i.e. by arriving at the expandable framework of the panorama of de/generation) and manoeuvring away of cooperative-specific challenges by introducing subverted organizational tools, like the Cooperative Movement De/Generation SWOT Analysis and the Consensual Democracy Development Canvas.

In this way, the current longitudinal and multi-sited research performed, contributed in better understanding and approaching both the dynamics that radical cooperatives undergo within their life-cycle and the main challenges that require to be managed by co-operators themselves so that they develop initiatives for arriving at well-balanced collectives in terms of internal power relations but also in terms of incorporating both effectiveness and democracy.

Along these lines, a series of recommendations were also shared so that WCNA adopts a plan aiming to both improve the resilience of individual cooperatives and their coordination (which so far have proved quite challenging and demoralising).

Implications for methodology

Finally, the current thesis apart from documenting WCNA attempts to resist degeneration also documented in quite a detail the ways through which the activist-researcher engaged with the researched to attempt ‘to make [radical cooperativism] work’ (Baldacchino, 1990, p. 476). Hence, inspired by Freire (2005, 2008), this was not just another case of studying (self-)management (Thompson, 2005, p. 66, emphasis in original) targeting solely intra-academic debates (Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman, 2016; Parker and Parker, 2017).

Even though the diagnosis and recommendations made by the critical RAR researcher during the intervention were unable to stimulate ‘motivated efforts to make changes’

(Chein, Cook and Harding, 1948, p. 46), the prolonged interaction with the researched and the continual testing in practice of the emergent theory proved catalytic for the latter to stand a chance of being relevant and useful for the ongoing formative debates taking place in a Panhellenic level. Moreover, by researching the evoked by the interventions reactions, I also better captured the organization as-is (Argyris, 2003).

Along these lines, action research could well be considered as a fitting technique for similar research endeavours within self-managed collectives and their self-reflexive processes. By documenting the process in quite a detail, advocates of critical performativity could well experiment in this direction with better guidelines and tools than those that literature on Critical Performativity has so far delivered.

Finally, I consider that my research has echoed some of the few voices within social movements that express the devastating effects of the anti-blueprint rhetoric (M. Wilson, 2014) and I particularly invite co-operators to experiment along similar lines.

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Appendices

Appendix I:

A Letter to the Advocates of the Co-operative Principle, and to the members of co-operative societies (Jones, 2010a).

The co-operative principles!

The errors of the present movement.

The true basis of co-operation.

IT is too much the custom to cry down the individual whose vision is not identical with our own—he who will not advocate a principle in the same way in which it is advocated by ourselves, is too often denounced as an enemy instead of being recognised as a friend, who thinks that better means may be adopted for the furtherance of the very principle itself.

The liberty of opinion is the most sacred of all liberties, for it is the basis of all, and claiming a right to the free expression of my views on a subject that I hold of vital importance to the interests of the people, I take this opportunity for offering a few remarks on the character and results of the co-operative movement.

In accordance with the prejudice above alluded to, some may say, indeed some have said, that I am opposed to co-operation: on the contrary, I am its sincere tho' humble advocate, and, from that very reason feel bound to warn the people against what I conceive to be the suicidal tendency of our associative efforts as conducted now.

At the same time I feel bound to express my full conviction that the present leaders of the co-operative movement are honest, sincere, and well-meaning men, who in their zeal for the furtherance of a good cause, have overlooked the fatal tendency of some of the details in their plan of action.

I contend that co-operation as now developed, must result in failure to the majority of those concerned, and that it is merely perpetuating the evils which it professes to remove.

I will divide the remarks I have to offer, under three heads: 1st, what are the means the present co-operative movement possesses, of defeating the system of monopoly and wages-slavery; 2nd, what would be its effects upon society if successful; 3rd, what is the only salutary basis for co-operative industry?

Before proceeding, however, to the consideration of these several points let us ask, what are the avowed objects of co-operation?

To put an end to profitmongering—to emancipate the working-classes from wages-slavery, by enabling them to become their own masters; to destroy monopoly and to counteract the centralisation of wealth, by its equable and general diffusion. We now proceed to consider—

-I.-

The means applied to effect these results. For the above purposes the working classes are exhorted to subscribe their pence, under the conviction that, by so doing they will soon be enabled to beat the monopolist out of the field, and become workers and shopkeepers for themselves.

They are told that the pence of the workingman are, collectively, more powerful than the sovereigns of the rich—that they can outbuy the moneylords in their own markets—that they can outbuy the landlords on their own acres. The fallacy of this is proved by the fact, that out of the annual income of the empire, a by far greater portion is absorbed by the rich than by the working classes, (a fact too well known to need statistics),—a fact most forcibly conveyed to us by the recollection, that during the last fifty years, while the savings of the classes, (a great portion of the same however, belonging to the middle classes), have been £43,000,000, the rich classes have increased their capital by £2,414,827,545. It is, therefore, an error to say, that capital against capital—pence against pounds—the co-operation of the working classes can beat down the combination of the rich, if their power of so doing is argued on the ground, that they possess more money collectively.

But, it may be objected, "the facts you adduce prove the extent to which profitmongering has progressed, and still more forcibly point to the necessity for co-operation."—AGREED.—"Again," say they, "admitting that our capital is smaller than that of our masters, we do not merely intend to balance capital against capital as it stands, and there to stop, but so to employ whatever capital we possess, as to make it reproduce itself, while

the effect of our success is to impoverish the great employer, and thus daily lessen the discrepancy in our relative resources."

It must, however, be recollected, that while the working classes are trying to do this with their little capital, the monied classes will be trying to do the same thing with their enormous riches; that the monied classes, further, have the advantage of being already far ahead in the race—that they wield all the national power—that they are, to a great extent, independent of home trade—that their cannonballs open new markets, of which they will take good care to maintain exclusive possession—that they control the entire monied and commercial system, and can, therefore, expand or contract the currency, raise or depreciate the various interests, glut or restrict the market, and create panic upon panic whenever their interest is enlisted in the measure. It may be said, that they would injure themselves by resorting to some of these means for crippling working class co-operation: granted. But, remember! they can afford to lose—you cannot! That which would but pinch their little finger would amputate your entire arm. Thus they would counteract the expansion of your capital by reproductive means. Again—never lose sight of this: they wield all the political power as well! If they should fail in other ways, they can destroy you by new laws—they can throw legal obstacles in the way of co-operation that would prove insurmountable: in this the middle class would support them, every shopkeeper, little or large, every profitmonger, down to the smallest, would be against you—for you profess to put an end to profitmongering—you profess to supersede the shopocratic class.

It is amusing to remark, that many of those who advise a union with the middle classes are strenuous supporters of the present co-operative system; they seek the support of the middle class, and tell us to expect it—with the same breath shouting to the world, that their "co-operation" will destroy the shopkeepers! That destruction, however, proceeds but very slowly, co-operation on their plan has now been long tried—is widely developed, and they tell us it is locally successful—yet, never in the same period, has the monopolist reaped such profits, or extended his operations with such giant strides. Do we find Moses, or Hyam, waning before the tailors—Grissel or Peto, shrinking before the builders—Clowes, or Odell, falling before the printers? Everywhere they are more successful than before!—Why! because the same briskness of trade that enables the co-operators to live, enables the monopolists with their far greater powers, to luxuriate.

Thus much for the inequality of the contest—an inequality that might almost deter from the attempt. But that attempt may triumph, if those forces which we really do possess are but directed aright.

This brings me to the consideration of the co-operative plan by which you endeavour to effect the regeneration of society.

The co-operative power you have evoked can be applied to only three objects:—

1. To the purchase of land;
2. To the purchase of machinery, for the purpose of manufacture ;
3. To the establishment of stores, for the purposes of distribution.

1. The Land. Consider, firstly, the enormous amount you must subscribe for the purchase of land in sufficient quantity to relieve the labour market of its competitive surplus. Secondly, remember that the more an article is in demand, the more it rises in price. The more land you want, the dearer it will become, and the more unattainable it will be by your means. Thirdly, recollect that your wages have been falling for years, and that they will continue to fall consequently, while the land is rising in price on the one hand, your means of purchase are diminishing on the other. Fourthly, two parties are required in every bargain—the purchaser and seller. If the rich class find that the poor are buying up the land, they won't sell it to them—we have had sufficient instances of this already. They have sagacity enough not to let it pass out of their hands, even by these means. Fifthly, never lose sight of this fact: only a restricted portion of the land ever does come into the market—the laws of primogeniture, settlement, and entail lock up the remainder; a political law intervenes, that political power alone can abrogate.

It may, however, be urged, in answer to the first objection, that the capital invested in the purchase of land would reproduce itself. I answer, reflect on how our forefathers lost the land —by unequal legislation. It was not taken from them by force of arms, but by force of laws—not by direct legal confiscation, but they were TAXED out of it. The same causes will produce the same effects. If you re-purchase a portion of the land, you would re-commence precisely the same struggle fought by your ancestors of yore—you would wrestle for a time with adversity, growing poorer every year, till holding after holding was sold, and you reverted to your old condition. This can be obviated only by a readjustment of taxation—a measure that can be enforced by political power alone.

2. Machinery and manufacture. The second object to which co-operation is directed, consists in the purchase of machinery for purposes of manufacture. It is argued, "we shall shut up the factories, and competing with the employer, deprive him of his workmen, who will flock to us to be partakers of the fruits of their own industry." It is impossible for

you to shut up the factories, because the great manufacturer is not dependent on home-trade—he can live on foreign markets; and in all markets, both home and foreign, he can undersell you. His capital and resources, his command of machinery, enables him to do so. Is it not an undeniable fact, that the working-men's associations—the co-operative tailors, printers, &c., are dearer than their monopolising rivals? And must they not remain so, if their labour is to have a fair remuneration? It is impossible to deprive the employer of workmen to such an extent as to ruin him—the labour surplus is too great; and were it even smaller, the constantly developed power of machinery, which he can always command the readiest, would more than balance the deficiency you caused.

If, then, we do not shut up the factories, we only increase the evil by still more over-glutting the market. It is a market for that which is manufactured, far more than a deficiency of manufacture under which we labour. If we add to manufacture we cheapen prices; if we cheapen prices we cheapen wages (these generally sink disproportionately)—and thus add to the misery and poverty of the toiling population. "But," you may argue, "we shall make a market—create home-trade, by rendering the working classes prosperous." You fail a leverage: the prosperity of the working classes is necessary to enable your co-operation to succeed; and, according to your own argument, the success of your co-operation is necessary to make the working classes prosperous! Do you not see you are reasoning in a circle? You are beating the air. You want some third power to ensure success. In fine, you want political power to reconstruct the bases of society. Under the present system on your present plan, all your efforts must prove vain—have proved vain—towards the production of a national result.

3. Co-operative Stores.—By these you undertake to make the working-man his own shopkeeper, and to enable him to keep in his own pocket the profits which the shopkeeper formerly extracted from his custom.

These stores must be directed towards the distribution of manufactures or of food. If the former, you must either manufacture your goods yourselves, or else buy them of the rich manufacturer. If you manufacture them yourselves, the evil consequences alluded to in the previous paragraph, meet you at the outset. If you buy them, the manufacturer can undersell you, because the first-hand can afford to sell cheaper than the second—and recollect the wholesale dealer is every year absorbing more and more the retailing channels of trade.

We then suppose your stores to be for the retailing of provisions. Under this aspect, their power, as a national remedy, is very limited. Food is wealth—money is but its representative; to increase the real prosperity of a country, you must increase its wealth, whereas these storers do not create additional food, but merely distribute that which is created already.

But the question is here raised: "if the working-man has to pay a less exorbitant price for the articles he wants, he will have so much more of his wages left to purchase land, and otherwise emancipate himself from wages' slavery. Therefore the co-operative stores are the very means for obviating one of the objections urged: they are the very means for counteracting the threatened fall of wages, and consequent diminution of subscriptions."

This observation brings me to the second division of the subject, as in that the answer is contained; and here again I admit that co-operation on a sound basis is salutary, and may be a powerful adjunct towards both social and political emancipation. The solution of this question, however, depends not only on the means at command, but also on the way in which those means are used—and I contend:

-II.-

That the co-operative-system, as at present practised, carries within it the germs of dissolution, would inflict a renewed evil on the masses of the people, and is essentially destructive of the real principles of co-operation. Instead of abrogating profitmongering, it re-creates it. Instead of counteracting competition, it re-establishes it. Instead of preventing centralisation, it renews it—merely transferring the rôle from one set of actors to another.

1. It is to destroy profitmongering: Here I refer you to the confessions at the recent meeting of Co-operative Delegates; it was the boast contained in every reported speech, that the society to which the speaker belonged had accumulated a large capital—some as high as £2,000 and £3,000 in a very short space of time;—some having started with a capital as small as £35, others having borrowed large sums (in one instance as much as £9,000) from rich capitalists, a measure not much calculated to emancipate co-operation from the thralldom of the rich.

But to revert to the accumulated capital; how was this sum accumulated? By buying and selling. By selling at cost price! Oh no! By buying for little, and selling for more—it was accumulated by profits, and profits to such an extent, that in one case, 250 members

accumulated a capital of £3000 in a very short space of time! "Down with profitmongering!"

What is this but the very same thing as that practised by the denounced shopocracy? only that it has not yet reached so frightful a stage. They are stepping in the footprints of the profitmongers, only they are beginning to do now what the others began some centuries ago.

2. It is to put an end to competition, but unfortunately it recreates it. Each store or club stands as an isolated body, with individual interests. Firstly, they have to compete with the shopkeeper—but, secondly, they are beginning to compete with each other. Two or more stores or co-operative associations are now frequently established in the same town, with no identity of interests. If they fail, there is an end of it, but if they succeed, they will spread till they touch, till rivalry turns to competition—then they will undermine each other—and be either mutually ruined, or the one will rise upon the ashes of its neighbour. I ask every candid reader—is not this already the case in several of our northern towns?

3. It is to counteract the centralisation of wealth, but it renews it. We proceed one step further—the fratricidal battle has been fought in the one town, the one association has triumphed over the others, it absorbs the custom of its neighbours—the co-operative power falls out of many hands into few wealth centralises. In the next town the same has been taking place—at last the two victor associations dispute the prize with each other—they undersell each other—they cheapen labour—the same results attend on the same causes, and the working classes have been rearing up a strong, new juggernaut, to replace the worn out idol under which they bowed before.

Let us reflect, what are the great canal companies, joint stock companies, banking companies, railway companies, trading companies—what are they but co-operative associations in the hands of the rich? What have been their effects on the people? To centralise wealth, and to pauperise labour. Where is the essential difference between those and the present co-operative schemes? A few men club their means together. So did they. Whether the means are large, or little, makes no difference in the working of the plan, otherwise than in the rapidity or slowness of its development. But many of our richest companies began with the smallest means. A few men start in trade, and accumulate profits. So did they. Profits grow on profits, capital accumulates on capital—always flowing into the pockets of those few men. The same with their rich prototypes. What kind of co-operation do you call this? It is the co-operation of Moses and Co., only

a little less iniquitous—but, based on the same principle, who guarantees that it will not run to the same lengths? What benefit are the people to derive from this? What is it to us if you beggar the Moseses and the Rothschilds tomorrow, and create another Rothschild and Moses in their place? My idea of reform is not to ruin one man to enrich another—that is merely robbing Peter to pay Paul. As long as there are to be monied and landed monopolists in the world, it matters little to us, whether they bear the name of Lascelles or of Smith. Such is the present system of co-operation,—a system unstable in itself, and, if successful, injurious to the community. A system that makes a few new shopkeepers and capitalists to replace the old, and increases the great curse of the working classes, the aristocracy of labour.

-III.-

Then what is the only salutary basis for co-operative industry? A NATIONAL one. All co-operation should be founded, not on isolated efforts, absorbing, if successful, vast riches to themselves, but on a national union which should distribute the national wealth. To make these associations secure and beneficial, you must make it their interest to assist each other, instead of competing with each other—you must give them UNITY OF ACTION, AND IDENTITY OF INTEREST.

To effect this, every local association should be the branch of a national one, and all profits, beyond a certain amount, should be paid into a national fund, for the purpose of opening fresh branches, and enabling the poorest to obtain land, establish stores, and otherwise apply their labour power, not only to their own advantage, but to that of the general body.

This is the vital point: are the profits to accumulate in the hands of isolated clubs, or are they to be devoted to the elevation of the entire people? Is the wealth to gather around local centres, or is it to be diffused by a distributive agency?

This alternative embraces the fortune of the future. From the one flows profitmongering, competition, monopoly, and ruin; from the other may emanate the regeneration of society.

Again—the land that is purchased, should be purchased in trust for the entire union—those located thereon being tenants, and not exclusive proprietors, of the farms they cultivate. Free hold land-societies, companies, etc., but perpetuate the present system—they strengthen the power of landlordism. We have now 30,000 landlords—should we be better off if we had 300,000? We should be worse off—there are too many already!

The land can be more easily and more rapidly nationalised, if held by merely 30,000 than if possessed by ten times that amount. And, again, the rent would increase the national fund—while the contributions of the freeholders would be but a chimerical treasure.

Such a union, based on such a plan of action, might hope for success. The present co-operative movement, I repeat, must perish as its kindred have done before it—and, if not, its success would be a new curse to the community. Why do the rich smile on it? Because they know it will prove in the long run harmless as regards them—because they know it has always failed, hitherto, to subvert their power. True the attempts often succeed in the beginning—and why? Because the new idea attracts many sympathisers—while it is too weak to draw down the opposition of the money lord. Thence the co-operators are enabled to pick up some of the crumbs that fall from the table of the rich. But what is the £3,000 of Rochdale amid the proud treasures of its factory lords? Let the shock come among the mighty colossi of trade, and the pigmies will be crushed between them.

A national union, on the plan suggested, does not run these dangers. A national fund thus established, would, in all probability, be a large one—and place a great power in the hands of the association. Persecution would be far more difficult. Now each society stands isolated, and is attacked in detail by the combined forces of monopoly—then to touch one would be to touch all. The national centralisation of popular power and popular wealth (not its local centralization), is the secret of success. Then restrictive political laws would be far more difficult, for they would encounter a gigantic union, instead of a disorganised body. Then the combination of the rich would be far less formidable—for, though superior in wealth, they would be far inferior in numbers. So they are now—but the numbers at present are without a connecting bond; nay, in but too many cases, essentially antagonistic.

I entreat the reader calmly and dispassionately to weigh the preceding arguments. They are written in a hostile spirit to no one at present concerned in co-operative movements—but from a sincere and earnest conviction that the opinions here expressed are founded upon truth. I have given the difficulties in the way of the co-operative movement—not with a view to discouragement—but that by seeing the dangers, we may learn how to avoid them. As it is we are failing from Scylla into Charibdis.

If, then, you would recreate society, if you would destroy profitmongering, if you would supplant competition by the genial influence of fraternity, and counteract the centralization of wealth and all its concomitant evils,

NATIONALISE CO-OPERATION.

Appendix II: Pagkaki

It's been just over a year since the work collective of 'Pagkaki' started operating. We emerge from this experience laden with successes, mistakes, tentative inferences, evaluations, but most of all, the certainty that pathways for collective answers exist for that crucial element of individual and social life: work.

Acknowledging the limitations and compromises that such an initiative entails in today's environment we tried during the year to bridge our vision for a just society to our collective practise, to bridge the struggle for survival to the struggle for social emancipation.

And so, we have created a collective and a space, which although far from the fantasy of some ideological purity, contain within them the relations we seek for a different society, which we do not want to remain utopian: an autonomous society of solidarity and comradeship, without experts-aristocrats, bosses, wage slavery, without profits for the few and exploitation for the many. For these large issues regarding human emancipation and social justice, we try to give our small answers.

Our journey this year has not been easy; the choice of collective work is no simple matter. The desire to work without a boss is by itself 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 organisation of production.

The relations of trust, solidarity and mutual support during the difficult times we have lived throughout the year constitute the most valuable heritage of our experience. Without the absence of frictions, disagreements and mistakes due to high demands, our different temperaments, and our inexperience, the result of this collective quest for a joint pace is the feeling of collective strength, something so hard to come by in the social situation that prevails today.

Being a relatively closed group with precise procedures for admitting and expelling members from the collective was a catalytic factor in attaining these relations. Work at Pagkaki is not opportunistic – individuals are not hired to cover immediate needs. Instead, all workers are equal members of the group, regardless of whether they contributed to the original capital that created the kafenio. Besides, the kafenio belongs to the cooperative and not to its current members, and this condition is formally enshrined in our constitution too.

When we sought to broaden our collective, choosing new members constituted one of our toughest decisions. We did not seek someone solely suitable for the job, but a comrade for our common path. Today the collective has eleven members, with one original member having departed, and four new members having joined.

All the decisions which involve the Pagkaki, whether they are practical or political in nature, are taken in our fortnightly meeting by all of us with the highest degree of consensus after extensive discussion.

All work is rewarded on the basis of a predetermined hourly wage, depending on the hours each of us works, and not by dividing up the profits at the end of the month, since our group's basic constitutional and political principle is that the surplus, if one exists will be used to support collective projects based on similar principles.

Concerning the matters of work as such, we have no delusions about its transformation into a playful process, especially in a demanding sector such as food and beverage. However, continuously trying to create the conditions and take the decisions that make work at Pagkaki as friendly as possible for all of us, is a permanent objective of the group.

Our work at Pagkaki, like in any other place of work, has its procedural side. Beyond this though, we are interested in its social dimension, meaning, in the creation of an especially accessible-affordable place for meeting and entertainment.

Furthermore, we aspire towards a balance that guarantees the lowest possible prices without compromising the quality of our primary products or their process of production whilst simultaneously ensuring our decent pay and working conditions.

The financial standing after our first year in operation is at first sight encouraging. From the very first months we began receiving our hourly pay, covering running costs and simultaneously managing to repay a large part of the original capital we put into creating the kafenio. Furthermore, from the original three shifts a day during the first few months, we have now increased this to five shifts a day.

Obviously the Pagkaki does not constitute the sole solution to the issue of work. It is however functional and, as its first year has proven, it is a viable model, which we would like to promote. We desire it to constitute a useful example and to partake in the network of mutually supportive projects.

We do not believe we are, nor do we aspire to be an island of freedom amongst widespread barbarity. We want to withstand this barbarity through our political choice of a work

collective and we know our resistance will be meaningful if – and because – there are currently solidarity networks and a plurality of creations being developed to try and negate and overturn the conditions of paralysis, submission and exploitation that the current system imposes on all aspects of our everyday life.

An important aspect of these diverse social movements that are developing is grassroots labour unionism which is organising in horizontal and direct democratic ways combative struggles against exploitation. In this framework, and although our work conditions differ, we support the actions of the self-organized union in our sector and we participate in the general strikes.

A year is a short time, but based on the experience we got through this cooperative we want to share with you our conviction that these sorts of projects are not only possible, but that we have ability – if we have the patience, the perseverance and we do not run out in indictments – to create our own collective answers. And that collective action and creation are able to reinstate the confidence and joy that we so desperately need. The only thing we need is to dare to experiment collectively, learning from the historical experience of other such endeavours.

One year on and more than ever, in affection and anticipation, we would like to share the Pagkaki with you.

October 2011. Worker's collective Pagkaki

Appendix III: Synallois

Syn Allois is a solidarity economy cooperative founded in Athens, Greece, in 2011. The name in Greek means “together with the others” and that's how we decided to act, at a time when our country was entering a deep economic and social crisis, as a result of the failure of the global neoliberal economic model. In other words, we experiment with alternative economic practices, based on cooperation, solidarity and equality.

Our main activity is solidarity trade, mostly of foodstuff. In our vision of solidarity trade, the circulation of products is not the buying and selling of anonymous objects for profit, but a whole chain of human relations, involving producers, distributors and consumers, and the impact they have on the environment. We believe that these chains can be organized through building stable and long-lasting relationships of mutuality and trust, that take into account the wellbeing of all the participants while ensuring environmental sustainability. A dignified price for the producers, including the costs of agroecological cultivation, the distribution of high-quality and affordable products to the consumers and the maximum level of communication and flow of information, are all essential parts of this process.

The main partner with whom we try to implement this philosophy are the coffee cooperatives of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico. We import their organic, shade-grown coffee directly to Greece once a year, offering a significantly higher price than the local middlemen and a pre-payment of up to 60% of the import value during the harvest period, as a means of avoiding speculative financing. The terms of this trade are continuously debated and rearranged, according to each season's specific conditions, between the coffee cooperatives and the solidarity buyers in Europe that form the RedProZapa network, of which we are a member. Due to our limited resources, we import products from other producers' cooperatives of the Global South indirectly, through our cooperation with the social cooperative Libero Mondo in Italy and the El Puente organization in Germany, whose practice and philosophy are very close to what we aspire to.

For the distribution of these products, we rely on an alternative distribution network throughout Greece, that comprises mainly of solidarity economy initiatives (solidarity trade shops, consumer coops, social centres, cooperative coffee shops), committed individuals and also some small private shops and coffee shops that are sympathetic to our cause. We also sell directly to the public, through our shop in Athens. There, we also offer products from Greek cooperatives and producers with whom we maintain direct and

stable relationships, trying to implement the values of solidarity trade at the local level as well.

Our internal structure is that of a workers' cooperative, aiming for the maximum equality between us. We are a small organization of 5 persons, dividing the workload in equal shares, depending on the preferences and the capabilities of each one of us, and receiving the same (very modest) pay for our work. We discuss all the issues regarding the project collectively in our weekly assembly, trying to reach decisions by consensus and to surpass our disagreements through building respect and mutual understanding. We do not feel as associated “owners” of an alternative business, but rather as a team working for a common cause. Our aim is to reach a dignified pay for all, and if we continue to expand, to socialize the benefit, through including more people in the cooperative, lowering selling prices or helping other solidarity economy projects.

Besides everyday work, we try to influence our social surrounding through many parallel activities. Organizing or participating in public events and workshops on various issues (solidarity trade and economy, agroecology, seed biodiversity and freedom etc.), being regular members of two networks regarding workers' cooperatives and alternative food distribution schemes and attending various forums and festivals keep us constantly busy. What keeps us going is the feeling that we are a part, even a tiny one, of a growing global movement of myriad of collectives, organizations and networks that work daily to make this world a more just and sustainable place.

Appendix IV: Summary of cited sources (interviews and events)

Summary of cited sources

Events

	Event & host organization	Date	Source
Alpha	Communismos 2.0 / Fabrica Yfanet (https://yfanet.espivblogs.net ταυτοτητα)	25 May 2012	Audiotaped; available online at https://yfanet.espivblogs.net/2012/09/06/φεστιβάλ-συνέδριο-communismos-2-0-ηχογραφήσεις [last visited 1/1/2020]
Beta	Creative resistances and anti-power: Book presentation (Varkarolis, 2012) /Akoixi (https://akoixi.espivblogs.net/αυτοδιαχειριζόμενος-κοινωνικός-χώρο)	3 Apr, 2013	Audiotaped; available online at http://media.radio-i.org/images/audio/prooimio/130403_Pagaki.mp3 [last visited 1/1/2020]
Gamma	One year Pagkaki: Reflections on collective work / Pagkaki (https://pagkaki.org/en)	4 Nov. 2011	Participant observation -fieldnotes
Delta	Prospects and vision for social and solidarity economy / 5th Alternative Festival of Solidarity and Collaborative Economy	4 Jun. 2016	Videotaped; available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zcyIAcZPvcE , https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLOGjoSkCHI , https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bNb8VIP6jxg , https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LP3Aw-s4MRY&pbjreload=10 , https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nvkMgfrlQE8 [last visited 1/1/2020]
Epsilon	Beyond statism and individualism: the experience and the prospects of social and solidarity economy in crisis-laden Greece / (https://www.facebook.com/events/314421565350246/)	27 Mar. 2013	Videotaped; available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRHS8GrPDxc [last visited 1/1/2020]
Zeta	Robin Wood are not alone! / WCNA (Yukali)	23 Apr. 2016	https://kolektives.org/node/120

Eta	Fundraising day for Robin Hood / WCNA (Lacandona)	21 Jul 2016	https://kolektives.org/node/136
Theta	Event - discussion with Andres Ruggeri, author of the book 'The recuperated enterprises of Argentina' / Pagkaki	18 Mar. 2016	Videotaped; available online at https://youtu.be/LS_Er8z00kI [last visited 1/1/2020]
Iota	Local and international networking of self-managed endeavours and its challenges / Second Euromediterranean 'Workers' Economy' Meeting (https://www.facebook.com/events/1575576326085066/?active_tab=discussion)	29 Oct./ 2016	Videotaped; available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P0t71I_IpUU&feature=emb_title [last visited 1/1/2020]
Kappa	Commons Fest	17 Oct. 2017	Audiotaped.
Lambda	2nd Euromediterranean Workers' Economy Meeting [General assembly]	30 Oct. 2016	Videotaped; available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DXrkjDZQHII [last visited 1/1/2020]
Mu	2nd Euromediterranean Workers' Economy Meeting [In dialogue with Viome]	30 Oct. 2016	Videotaped; available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1v-gXhjwV-8 [last visited 1/1/2020]

Interviews

Interviewee	Organisation
Alpha	PhD researcher
Beta	Synallois
Gamma	Researcher
Delta	Former WCNA member
Epsilon	Former WCNA member
Zeta	Member of other cooperative network
Eta	Synallois
Theta	Pagkaki

Iota	Colleagues' Publications
Kappa	Perivolaki
Lambda	Yukali
Mu	Perivolaki