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High Performance and Workplace Democracy. Can They Be Combined? A Life-cycle Analysis on Specialization.

Orestis Varkarolis, PhD student, Nottingham Trent University, UK

11, Gyzi Square, 11475, Athens (Greece), orestis.varkarolis2015@my.ntu.ac.uk

Daniel King, Professor, Nottingham Trent University, UK

50, Shakespeare Street, NG1 4FQ, Nottingham (UK), daniel.king@ntu.ac.uk

Alistair Mutch, Professor, Nottingham Trent University, UK

50, Shakespeare Street, NG1 4FQ, Nottingham (UK), alistair.mutch@ntu.ac.uk

Track 2: Critical Management Studies

High performance pressures have been claimed to be a key factor for workplace democracy deterioration within worker cooperatives. While there is empirical material refuting the claim that democratic management of the firm is associated with reduced efficiency, overall, economic performance and democratic functioning have been approached as antagonistic and not dialectic.

In turn, this longitudinal study on a small work collective, argues that though high performance is a necessity to survive in a hostile environment, abandoning workplace democracy is not. By highlighting the dialectic attempts of this collective to harmonize organizational efficiency and democracy over time by tapping on improved levels of cooperative governance, worker-owner engagement and empowering staff management practices, the radical mantra that favours skill-sharing and rotation as adequate solutions for institutionalizing workplace democracy is challenged while also some recommendations and a tool for operationalizing high-performance collective management are presented drawing from a socialist critique on bureaucracy.

Introduction

The prospects of high-performance workplace democracy have been deemed unrealistic on different premises by a variety of established authors that confluence on that, in the long-run, all worker cooperatives either fail or are bound to lose their democratic nature, as the *degeneration thesis* suggests (Stryjan, 1994).

The main argument is that workplace democracy is claimed to be futile as rival bureaucratic organizations are technically superior and as a result of isomorphic pressures (DiMaggio and Powell, 2009), cooperatives would either engulf specialization and thus resort to oligarchy or fail (Michels, 1915; Meister, 1984).

Still, despite the law-like nature of the theories of degeneration, there is no substantial empirical research to support it (Leach, 2016; Langmead, 2017) and, a series of researchers like Craig *et al.* (1995), Bousalham and Vidaillet (2018) have rebuffed 'the traditional view that democratic management of the firm is associated with reduced efficiency' (Doucouliagos, 1990, pp. 67–69) and associated workplace democracy with increased productivity/engagement (Bayo-Moriones et al., 2003; Craig et al., 1995; Mill, 1973).

However, apart from highlighting that degeneration is conditional and not inevitable (Cornforth, Thomas, Spear, *et al.*, 1988; Stryjan, 1994), little has been done –especially from a contemporary Critical Management Studies (CMS) perspective (Cheney *et al.*, 2014; Leca, Gond and Barin Cruz, 2014; Parker *et al.*, 2014; Reedy, 2014; Kokkinidis, 2015; Audebrand, 2017; Daskalaki and Kokkinidis, 2017; Esper *et al.*, 2017; Audebrand and Barros, 2018; Pansera and Rizzi, 2018)– to showcase that specialization need not straightforwardly lead to oligarchy (Gamson and Levin, 1984; Hunt, 1992; Cornforth, 1995) and to promote adequate organizational solutions that 'not only harmonize [efficiency and democracy] but make them complementary' (Horvat, 1972, p. 386). In this sense, CMS has largely failed to deal –apart from minor exceptions (Storey, Basterretxea and Salaman, 2014; Diefenbach, 2018)– with the most central challenge for horizontal cooperatives which is how to simultaneously favour greater democratization and firm efficiency.

In response to this challenge, the default position that radical co-operators have primarily adopted since the early 70's has been an emphasis on decentralization and strict direct democracy through promoting a skill-sharing/rotation strategy

(Mansbridge, 1973; Case and Taylor, 1979; Landry *et al.*, 1985). Along these lines, division of labour, though a key prerequisite for workplace efficiency (Hunt, 1992), was largely perceived as an evil undermining it (Gorz, 1976; Landry *et al.*, 1985).

On the one hand, such an approach represents a discontinuity from the debates taking place endogenously within the largely consumer-cooperative-driven cooperative movement where the problem was primarily posed as a lack of appropriate governance structures to police those mandated for managing the cooperatives (Davis, 1999; Cornforth, 2004). On the other hand, there is a remarkable confluence with the anti-statist critique of bureaucracy (and the professionalization of politics) –as expressed by anarchists (Benello and Boyte, 1993), Maoists (Whyte, 1973), the New Left (Breines, 1980) and self-management socialists (Horvat, 1972, 1975; Vanek, 1975)– that gained momentum during that times, as a reaction to 'the bureaucracy [that] betrayed the [Russian] revolution' (Trotsky, 1969, p.181).

Therefore, apart from classical literature on cooperativism, political writings of the above-mentioned streams should also be taken into consideration. Moreover, given that the track record of the first-wave responses to bureaucratization by radical co-operators have not proved that effective (Landry *et al.*, 1985) and that past experience, can potentially further inform the resilience of the next waves (Holleb and Abrams, 1975; Ingle, 1980), this research aimed from the outset to be useful and relevant to practitioners themselves. Besides, Varkarolis, has been a member of the work collective under investigation for the last ten years.

In this sense, by scrutinizing the challenges (the lack of) specialization/division of labour poses for direct (workplace) democracy within a cooperative, the aim of this research is to flesh out the concrete experience of radical co-operators' attempts to avoid oligarchy and provide some recommendations for crafting adequate high-performance organizational solutions that align efficiency/specialization with democracy instead of plainly rejecting specialization and resorting to dilettantism (Weber, 1921).

In this sense, as part of a trial-and-error process to develop adequate forms of organisation (Freeman, 1972), in this case for radical worker cooperatives, this article is a response to relevant calls for research that takes seriously the paradigm of high performance within CMS and with an emphasis in operationalizing the cooperative

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principles into distinct and *catalytic* –for workplace democracy– [managerial] *mechanisms* (Collins, 1999), as suggested by Novkovic (2004).

To this end, Varkarolis' experience as a member of a radical worker cooperative for more than a decade has proved catalytic, especially since given his mainstream business education and political background, he has purposefully attempted from the beginning to avoid becoming a manager chief. Along these lines, while the imbalance of relative skills has been a source of conflicts, the argument is that this excess of skills (in a particular area) should not be perceived as a burden but as an opportunity to promote more adequate organizational solutions that reinforce workplace democracy on the long run. To document the experience of collective management over such a long period, a series of vignettes and reflections are used along different stages of the organization's *life-cycle* (Lichtenstein, 1986).

Theoretically, thus, this paper aims to bring insights from a socialist critique of bureaucracy into cooperative management and, simultaneously, to study cooperative management through a critical organizational lens.

This paper starts with a discussion of the relationship between specialization and the life-cycle of a worker cooperative, as well as, some different perspectives of socialist responses to the issue of the division of labour. Next, as part of an ethnographic study, the challenges that a worker cooperative embracing direct management faces are presented, as well as, the limitations of a mere skill-sharing/rotation strategy. After reflecting on this rare longitudinal study on the experience of collective self-management, the discussion turns to the implications for the life-cycle projections of workplace democracy and the role of specialization within high-performance radical cooperativism.

The life-cycle of worker cooperatives, specialization threats and socialist responses

There is an age-old mantra regarding the direct management of worker cooperatives that has culminated into what is called the *degeneration thesis* coined after Webbs' pivotal research (1891). Worker cooperatives would either resort to oligarchy or fail (Webb and Webb, 1914; Michels, 1915; Meister, 1984).

Along these lines, Meister (1974, 1984) and Michels (1915), even argue that, eventually, through an explicit sequence of steps, 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), summarized in table 1.

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.	1. Organisation is based on division of labour, and division of labour leads to specialisation (pp. 58, 64–65).
2. Transition: the co-operative begins to adopt more conventional organisational practices. Conflict arises between management and the democratic nature of the co-operative.	2. Specialisation makes specialists indispensable and, thus, leadership must be provided by specialists ('expert leadership') (pp. 25, 58, 64–65).
3. Establishment: the co-operative has now accepted market values and traditional management hierarchy. Begins to hire more non-members and representative democracy emerges.	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).
4. Decline: management hierarchy assumes control of the co-operative.	4. Professional specialists become professional leaders who decide without consultation and are uncontrolled (pp. 27, 28).
	5. Discipline and strict observance of hierarchical rules become necessities for subordinates (pp. 27, 96, 100–101, 127).
	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).

Adapted from: McDonnell, Macknight and Donnelly, 2012, p. 145; Diefenbach, 2018, p. 5.

Table 1: Steps of democracy deterioration due to specialization

However, empirical research conducted by Cornforth (1995) and Cornforth *et. al.* (1988) highlights that apart from constraints to workplace democracy, there are also choices available for cooperatives to regenerate. Hence, no pattern plays out 'in all cooperatives as in Mester's four-stage life-cycle' (Cornforth, Thomas, Lewis, *et al.*, 1988, p. 205) and certainly not all cooperatives react in the same way (Gherardi and Masiero, 1987). Similar cases, where degeneration and regeneration take place without following a prescribed model, have, also, been put forward by Hunt (1995) while exploring the (side)-effects of the division of labour in Canadian cooperatives and Batstone (Elliott, 1987) while assessing degeneration thesis in light of a sample of sixty French producer cooperatives. Gamson and Levin (1984) even pointed out that a lack

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of in-house skills or a reluctance to attract skilled people has been a key obstacle for the survival of worker cooperatives in the USA.

Still, the centrality of organizational choices influencing 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 both efficiency and democracy– has been better showcased by Holleb and Abrams (1975, pp. 142–150). Their three-staged model, 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 (Ingle, 1980). 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 (Bernstein, 1976; Meister, 1984) but as an ongoing challenge, especially for radical cooperatives carrying a greater commitment to horizontality (Rothschild and Whitt, 1989; Jaumier, 2017).

To this end, most cooperatives rooted in or inspired by social movements (that are documented in literature), apart from socializing ownership, they have also been routinely advancing consensus decision making, skill sharing, (job) rotation and enrichment (Freeman, 1972; Landry *et al.*, 1985; Maeckelbergh, 2009; Wilson, 2014). Yet, such mechanisms (Collins, 1999), have too often proved not enough in themselves as counter-measures to balance uneven skills and influence on decisions and, thus, cultivate more democratic organizations (Mansbridge, 1973, 1979).

Therefore, given that participatory democracy is 'the most essential characteristic of cooperatives' (Rothschild and Whitt, 1989, p. 2) and challenges in this domain have wide demoralising effects on cooperativism (Laidlaw, 1980), one would expect more interest/attempts showcased within literature to address the challenges associated with specialization/division of labour (Rus, 1975) beyond governance policing a business as

usual management (Parnell, 1995; Takamura, 1995; Pendleton, 2002) or benevolent, values-based leadership (Davis, 1999).

For this, turning to socialist critiques of bureaucracy/managerialism for inspiration is required. For example, one of the rare, yet most striking elaboration, has been the different role prescribed for administrative experts to both enhance member participation and bring in specialist competencies in the equation. For example, Horvat's (1972) basic institutional analysis emphasized that a distinction –often difficult– between taking political decisions on a democratic manner and executing decisions based on special knowledge and expertise had to be made. Only *after* that, emphasis on avoiding the emergence of oligarchy should be given in 'institutionalizing control over enterprise management' (Horvat, 1972, p. 388). This in a sense, translates into the level of the individual expert, a task that Castoriadis (1988, p. 122) had earlier ascribed to a specialised enterprise supporting a society-wide workers' management of production, the plan factory, summed up as to 'work out and present to society as a whole the implications and consequences of the plan (or plans) suggested' so that the people themselves can decide 'in full knowledge of the relevant facts'. A notion that is somewhat reflected in the guidelines adopted by the International Co-operative Alliance (cited in Davis 2018, p. 19).

> 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.

Hence, the intention of this paper is to focus on collective management that is not only of high-performance but that it is also empowering for the whole community of practice. Along these lines, a series of reflections upon the experience of a decade-long membership on a work collective in Greece and the implications this case has for the limited in-depth empirical literature will be discussed by addressing the following research questions: *What key challenges specialization poses to the self-management of horizontal cooperatives? To what extent skill-sharing and rotation resolve those challenges and what are the implications for operationalising high-performance cooperative management?*

Methodology

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While empirical research on the above issues is scare, primarily due to a lack of access and resources to follow such projects for long periods of time (Cornforth, 1995; Langmead, 2017), this paper draws from the yearlong experience of Varkarolis as a complete-member-researcher (Adler and Adler, 1987) equipped with prior understanding and increased access to the field (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007; Merton, 1972).

But before getting into more details about the methodology, some background information on the case is required. Pagkaki is a horizontal worker cooperative that operates since 2010 a modern version of the traditional Greek kafenio, a place that serves coffee, food and alcohol at affordable prices in Koukaki, Athens. In terms of specialization, Pagkaki was also purposefully designed from scratch to have minimum requirements for division of labour to prevent the eruption of asymmetric relations within the collective to avoid the threat of oligarchization.

Moreover, Pagkaki was for most of its founding members an extension of their experience in a voluntarily non-profit cooperative called Sporos, primarily importing 'fair-trade' coffee from the movement of Zapatistas in Mexico. An experience that proved catalytic for Pagkaki to adopt relatively from the outset a more structured and less 'open' assembly than that of Sporos (Panagoulis, 2013; Varkarolis, 2013), to 'avoid repeating the mistakes of the past' (Varkarolis, 2012, p. 89).

Overall, this case was singled out from a broader ethnography of the Worker Cooperatives' Network of Athens (WCNA) (Daskalaki and Kokkinidis, 2017) – adopting a Responsive Action Research approach (Varkarolis and King, 2017)– when the correlation between speciaization and high-performance workplace democracy was identified as interesting and worthy of a discussion (Davis, 1971). In this sense, a sort of grounded theory approach of theory formulation was adopted involving, an 'iterative process of collecting and analyzing data' (Elharidy, Nicholson and Scapens, 2008, p. 144). While the amount of data available is enormous given the ten-year duration of the project, the primary sources here presented have been tape-recorded assemblies of Pagkaki and WCNA, mailing list and internal forum, two interviews and self-reflection (Alvesson, 2003).

In terms of an audit rail, the large amount of data were first organized based on an intra-organizational life-cycle/timeline focusing on the dialectic of democratic management (Holleb and Abrams, 1975; Ingle, 1980; Lichtenstein, 1986; Westenholz, 1986; Hunt, 1992; Cornforth, 1995). Yet, after that, while being informed by frameworks which highlight that workplace democracy evolves by following certain stages, in this paper, we did not adopt straightforwardly one of them to structure the findings and discussion section. Instead, the key stages are the result of axial coding. Still, while the analysis is crafted upon this rather exceptional case in terms of pre-history, the discussion follows a more traditional narrative based on Holleb and Abrams (1975) that is best suited for informing forming cooperatives. Finally, while drafting the paper with the intention to give back (Varkarolis and King, 2017), the idea of subverting the Business Model Canvas gradually emerged (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2010).

Findings

We now turn to documenting the challenges specialization and skill-sharing/rotation strategy brought to the performance of workplace democracy in Pagkaki over certain periods of time to then reflect upon recommendations for operationalising high-performance cooperative management.

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

There is an example that Pagkaki members often recall while explaining their pre-emptive attempt to resist oligarchization. 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 at place at Pagkaki 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 don't demand that everyone can fix everything but there is a down limit that we

wouldn't like to fail, like making a lousy coffee (Pagkaki member at a public event May 2012).

To this day, Pagkaki is characterized by a D.I.Y. ethos and calling-in help from outsider experts was largely not pursued. 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 an one-eyed man in the land of the blind, I am the only one in Pagkaki that can screw a screw. I really don't 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 oligarchization at Pagkaki, as the above quote illustrates, people naturally take up more responsibilities in areas that attract them or 'require' them. Hence, in a number of technical aspects, power could be formally or even informally delegated to particular persons based on their skill-set. Still, considerable time was also devoted on practical issues within the weekly assembly. For example, the amount of sugar required for a coffee to be regarded sweet was a memorable heated debate, for the first-generation of Pagkaki members (reflection diary).

The norm would be that all decisions that in a conventional enterprise fall under the management rights would have to be collectively decided. Therefore, what, at first sight, might seem as a technical issue, like 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.

Therefore, while arriving at the core political elements of Pagkaki –like following consensus decision-making, adopting equal pay, socializing profits and ownership– was a relative 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 a 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's email list 28 Nov., 2009) would, then, be attempted to be resolved by facilitating technically a basis for argumentation upon alternative scenarios (drawing from what a *plan factory* (Castoriadis, 1988) is

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supposed to provide in a societal level to self-management). Indeed, only, after calculating the projections together, the two persons that vetoed each other, it was possible to come to the conclusion that the different viewpoints were not merely reflecting 'idiosyncratic differences' (Pagkaki's email 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.

Similarly, this was the way the prices were initially 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 an 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, Varkarolis, was perceived to be an advantage for a group that ultimately took wise business decisions collectively.

> We were lucky that Orestis is a member, and therefore, there was a concrete budget plan well before setting up the venue that proved quite right … it is so many years that I've been working in similar venues and I now have a broader understanding (interview 2015).

To sum up, in the early days of Pagkaki formation, an awareness of the limited prescriptive literature on democratic structuring and self-management proved to be quite influential and functional. 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.

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

While Varkarolis 'didn't decide by himself on the grounds of his expertise, but his role was to perform tasks so that the group can take decisions' (Pagkaki assembly 19 May, 2015), when an internal crisis erupted in the group after a proposal was made for ousting one member, among other claims it was brought up that an informal hierarchy had developed on the basis of that expertise 'that constituted a privilege' (Pagkaki assembly 20 Jan, 14).

Despite a series of discussions on the issue as part of wider debates for the nature of the group, common ground was not found and the group split. Since this issue was one of

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the points of critiques of those that left the collective, those that stayed responded to it in public.

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

However, given this conflict and acknowledging that a way to curve the emergence of informal hierarchies (or the suspicion of it (Fairbairn, 2004)) 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 a respect on someone's inclination, I hate finances, maths and pc's, I don't 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, Lewis, *et al.*, 1988, p. 136). 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 (Apr. 15, 2018).

This, in turn, sparked a negative spiral of side-effects for the group dynamics. Varkarolis began to withdraw/disengage from the relative group's operations out of frustration and in an attempt to 'equalize' involvement, leading to under-utilization of competencies and low-level productivity, as the coming crisis –described below– illustrates (Mansbridge, 1983). Meanwhile, this happened while blaming the rest in the group for not keeping up; as expert knowledge was perceived to 'be used more as an excuse than being a key factor for the lack of commitment' (Pagkaki assembly 19 May, 2015). In reaction to this perceived 'inequality of commitment', conflictual and

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demoralizing dead-end discussions developed, 'fostering an unfriendly group atmosphere' (Gastil, 1993, p. 107), as the rest felt rejected and bossed (Adizes, 1971). It was within this context that, 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. As the heavily involved 'expert' retreated partly to give space to the group to develop without his influence/interference (Mansbridge, 1973), a number of initiatives were taken up by the rest 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.

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

Still, as Varkarolis realized –*after* coming across similar failures of the past (Landry *et al.*, 1985)– that, ultimately, the problem was not a lack of commitment but of relative skills, 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 he didn't feel as 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, 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 a 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, where 'none has 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

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inequality developed in both the 'expert's' and the 'bossed' minds 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 high-performance and 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, this failure was a result of a staggering lack of familiarity with literature on the most common and elementary problems that the everyday operation of such experiments entails.

Still, the fruitlessness of the skill-sharing/rotation strategy does not signal the impossibility of workplace democracy but the necessity of formulating of an appropriate scheme procuring the decision-making process with adequate information while also empowering the individual members and addressing their concerns for equality. To this end, this article is devoted and the next period of Pagkaki's life-cycle largely revolves.

Early maturity part 2: (Exceptionally) institutionalizing the bureau-technician (18-8-17 - today)

In the previous section, it became evident that the initial obsession of Pagkaki members with rotation and skill-sharing to prevent oligarchization proved to be a self-defeating rat-race. 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 could have been a reasonable move. And, indeed, the contemporary aim aspires '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 passes the evaluation tests Mill (2001) and Dahl (1986) expressed for democratic forms of governance. In other words, it is an option that apart from 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).

Moreover, the organization admits that there are some imbalances in certain competences and this time attempts to better handle them with a more pragmatist approach. That is by setting up a more professional yet empowering for all individuals process of (open) bookkeeping supported by dedicated popular education, team-building and induction processes that facilitate a high-performance collective approach (Vanderslice and Moss, 2006).

Still, such an approach to specialization is yet an exception to the rule. 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, emphasis in literature has primarily been given unilaterally in safeguarding democracy (Pansera and Rizzi, 2018). This paper has 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. To the implications of these findings, I now turn, but first a critical note, the context of high-performance in worker cooperatives is not just 'their fiscal health, but also ... the extent to which they are able to enhance their social mission' (Audebrand, 2017, p. 381).

Discussion: In search of high-performance consensual democracy

So, what do we learn from the Pagkaki case and how can this support the creation of high-performance radical bureaucratic configurations? I will structure my following reflections based on the life-cycle stages introduced by Holleb and Abrams (1975). In this way, a roadmap of the key challenges and choices for developing high-performance consensual democracy is provided as a reference for newcomers with radical cooperatives. Hence, as the discussion on the Pagkaki case below will illustrate, this life-cycle theorization differs and disembarks from extremely deterministic projections

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of the future (Michels, 1915; Meister, 1984) and is more open to a dialectic mastering of collective decision-making and to the possibilities of both creating organizational short-cuts through getting theoretically informed from culminated experience (Ingle, 1980; Westenholz, 1986; Hunt, 1992; Jaumier, 2017) and operationalizing organizational tools for this purpose.

Formation

Literature on the relation between adopting division of labour and workplace democracy within radical cooperatives, largely, revolves around the threat of oligarchization (Diefenbach, 2018). 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 competences 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– neither operated as a primitive democracy (Holleb and Abrams, 1975) nor management became a separated activity for co-operators (Batstone, 1983). However, while this process did advance the potentials of the collective taking wiser decisions, over time, it was over time side-tracked as the (primarily ideological-emotional) pressures for adopting a skill-sharing and rotation strategy increasingly failed to stir a functional group in both performance and team spirit.

From the perspective of designing high performance configurations of collective management then, the case of Pagkaki illustrates that it is possible to develop adequate solutions for utilizing critical competences without jeopardizing the practice of direct

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democracy and that this process requires continuous improvement. Moreover, this case confirms Ingle (1980) in that reflecting upon previous experiences of similar endeavours can be really 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 oligarchization 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, 1971; Diamantopoulos, 2012).

Early maturity

A central notion of adopting skill-sharing and rotation is to empower individuals and prevent the eruption of asymmetrical relations by attempting to equalize power and influence (Mansbridge, 1973; Jaumier, 2017). The results of such an approach, however, are often far from substantial and often have detriment side-effects for the effectiveness of decision-making, at least in worker cooperatives (Landry *et al.*, 1985). Therefore, a failure of such a plan is widely considered to be a starting point to realise that irreconciled inequalities in competences and commitments create problems both among colleagues and in terms of business effectiveness-survival (Gamson and Levin, 1984). In turn, mounting pressures for high-performance emerge and debates on the way the collective is structured eventually gain prominence resulting in either more conventional decision-making process and work configurations emerging or a formal structure favouring high-performance workplace democratization developing across three elementary areas: (1) work, decision-making and coordination; (2) maintenance; (3) organizational learning (Holleb and Abrams, 1975).

The findings of this research revealed that the skill-sharing/rotation plan as put forward in Pagkaki undermined the benefits of introducing an adequate organizational solution for supporting collective decision-making. Such a failure came as a result of not complementing this organizational procedure with adequate and 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

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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 such approaches 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 and inclusive resolutions can be developed while also avoiding the under-utilization of competence (Heller *et al.*, 1998) or even a brain-drain (Abramitzky, 2012).

For instance, specialists becoming bureau-technicians, *catalysts* (Brafman and Beckstrom, 2006) enabling the community to take appropriate decisions by bringing in, primarily, 'the implications and consequences … of the plan (or plans) suggested' (Castoriadis, 1988, p. 122) is only a starting point for developing high-performance collectives. It nevertheless requires a complementary step so that the collective can rip the benefits of bureau-technicians and that is if they (are inclined to) offer 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 conception of the task (or decision) at hand. Therefore, in due course, emphasis should be given in both advancing the competences of the collective and of the individuals by developing an appropriate education plan (Rothschild and Whitt, 1989; Vanderslice and Moss, 2006). This is something that lacks from notions of cooperative management that confine the responsibilities of the dedicated/specialist in merely providing and explaining the alternative options to the relevant decision-making body (Davis, 2018). Hence, a crucial contribution in the literature (Hunt, 1992; Pansera and Rizzi, 2018) is also to emphasize the criticality of expanding the scope for assessing and supporting workplace democratization (Bernstein, 1976). This might take place in a variety of ways ranging from education in business literacy, overall skill development, institutionalized induction and training opportunities to open-book management and creating collective intelligence by taking into pragmatist consideration the individuals/competences/maturity levels/quality of dialog involved (Rothschild and Whitt, 1989; Fairbairn, 2003; Vanderslice and Moss, 2006; Visch and Laske, 2018).

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Meanwhile, this period is more likely to be characterized by a renewed openness to experimentation as the former held assumptions are challenged. Still, radical changes require a lot of turning the 'flywheel' and stress is all around until the dependence on charismatic personalities eases (Collins, 2005). Yet, for some cooperatives this ends up in a Sisyphean effort that fails to deliver (Shukaitis, 2010).

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 improves 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 has famously put it for utopia.
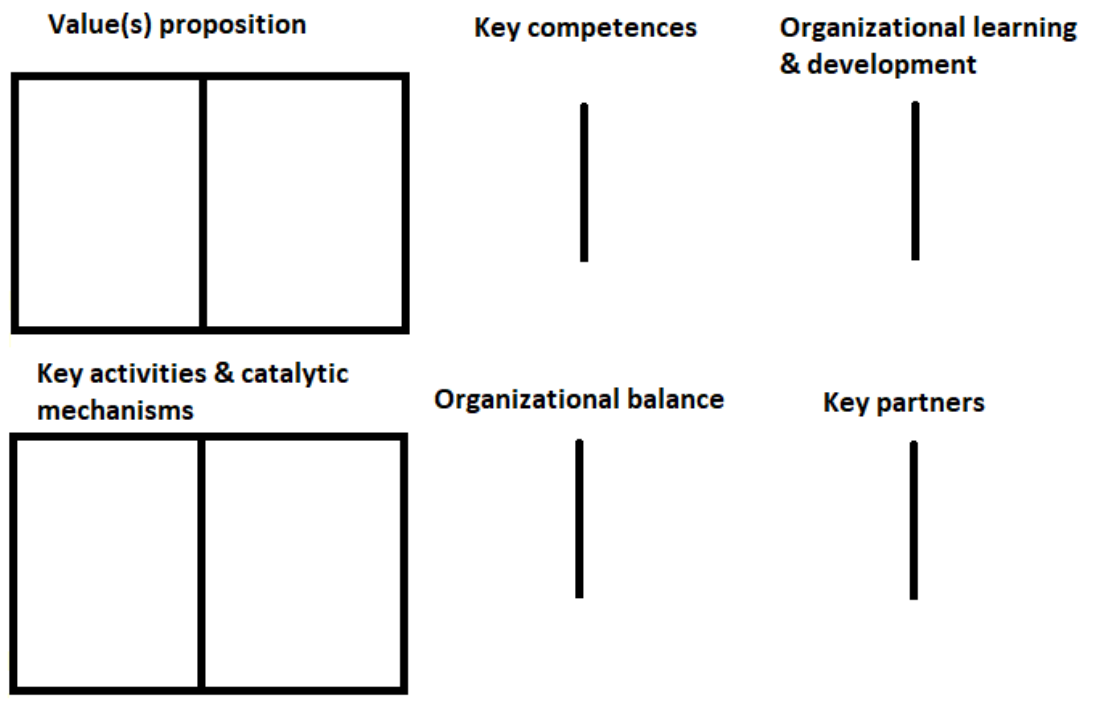

(A guide to) late maturity

In most part 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, 1993). Hence, the potentials of business failure or cooperative degeneration are treated as quite possible but not inevitable (Cornforth, 1995; Diefenbach, 2018) and certainly are not the focus of attention (Stryjan, 1989).

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, 1992, p. 297) was designed. It is named *consensual democracy development canvas* (see figure 1) and is supposed to be used as a tool to identify and address imbalances between (business and political) objectives and current situation as well as between members.

Before presenting the key elements of this canvas, I will focus on the rationale behind it. 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 rest 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 competences* 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.

Value(s) proposition

Key competences

Organizational learning & development

Key activities & catalytic mechanisms

Organizational balance

Key partners

Actions:

Figure 1: Consensual democracy development canvas

Similarly, in the area of *organizational balance* (of in-house competences 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 were there are no such imbalances on the left.

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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.

Finally, 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.

Conclusion

This paper argues that cultivating high-performance within cooperatives is a crucial yet overlooked factor for promoting and reinforcing workplace democratization. Along these lines, specialization and competence are critical inputs. However, crafting appropriate organizational solutions that mutually reinforce business efficiency and workplace democracy is not an easy task as it takes a lot of time, experimentation and conflict to mature. In this sense, by utilizing Varkarolis's long-standing experience as a practitioner of workplace democracy, a more evolutionary and dialectic understanding of workplace democracy as an open-ended process is adopted and theorized.

Moreover, the life-cycle model here discussed challenges the predominately deterministic approaches that pointed towards degeneration as the final and inescapable end of workplace democracy. Instead, it extends the model introduced by Holleb and Abrams (1975) that acknowledges oligarchization threats (Diefenbach, 2018) but emphasis is given on supporting success by introducing a relevant tool instead of providing (in)definite projections.

Along these lines, there was no conclusive evidence suggesting that the democratic dimension of the collective was jeopardized for more than a decade now but that there is still a lot to be done to reach a high-performance maturity in a variety of (unforeseen) areas. To this end, this paper was also written as a contribution that will help existing and forming cooperatives prioritize high-performance and stress the importance of devising and applying mutually reinforcing catalytic mechanisms even beyond the sphere of formal (political) decision-making as traditional cooperative management approaches do to avoid similar missteps.

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