

The odyssey of alternative firms “Redux”: new organizational perspectives from a case-study

Mathias Béjean (CGS - Mines Paristech)

Sébastien Gand (CGS - Mines Paristech)

Candidats au prix Roland Calori

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Soutenance de Sébastien Gand : 22 septembre 2008

Mathias Béjean

MINES ParisTech - Centre de Gestion Scientifique

60, Bd Saint-Michel

75 272 Paris Cedex 06

Mél : mathias.bejean@mines-paristech.fr

☎ : 01 40 51 90 99

RESUME

Ces dernières années, le modèle de la firme dite « conventionnelle » a été sévèrement critiqué par de nombreux observateurs. Ces derniers ont, d'une part, souligné la place trop prépondérante accordée aux actionnaires dans la répartition de la valeur produite par les entreprises et, d'autre part, dénoncé un ensemble d'externalités négatives pour la société civile. Dans le contexte de crise actuelle, les modèles d'entreprises dites « alternatives », ont alors souvent été présentés comme des solutions existantes et prometteuses pour réviser en profondeur le modèle de l'entreprise conventionnelle. Pourtant, l'histoire mouvementée de ces projets alternatifs montre aussi que l'enthousiasme de départ peut très vite tourner en désillusion profonde au cours du temps. Qui plus est, la lecture de ce type de trajectoires, déviantes par rapport au modèle dominant, demeure encore trop souvent très influencée par la controverse idéologique, limitant ainsi la compréhension plus fine de leur dynamique idiosyncratique.

Prenant acte de ces problèmes persistants, cet article vise à analyser la dynamique des projets alternatifs d'entreprise au cours du temps et à en proposer une lecture enrichie. Ainsi, après avoir remis en perspective l'histoire des projets alternatifs d'entreprise, nous commençons par souligner les limites des approches dominantes qui ont souvent soutenu une thèse de la « dégénérescence » de ces organisations. En essayant de sortir de perspectives trop déterministes, nous tentons d'élaborer une nouvelle grille d'analyse qui dépasse le dilemme traditionnel entre « efficacité économique » et « fonctionnement démocratique » dans la

littérature classique. En fournissant trois « traceurs » principaux de transformation, cette grille vise à rendre visible une variété enrichie de trajectoires dites « alternatives », ainsi qu'un potentiel renouvelé laissant ouverte l'exploration de nouvelles variantes. L'usage de cette grille interprétative, inspirée des travaux de Chester Barnard sur la coopération, est alors illustré à l'aide d'une étude de cas longitudinale portant sur une petite SCOP opérant dans la création de jardins artistiques. Après avoir décrit les interactions entre les différentes variables de notre modèle à l'aide de notre cas, l'intérêt et la portée de cette grille interprétative pour la compréhension plus générale des dynamiques de coopération organisée sont finalement discutés.

Mot-clés: entreprises alternatives, changement organisationnel, thèse de la dégénérescence, étude de cas

INTRODUCTION

Lately, “conventional” firms have been roughly criticized for both the legitimacy of shareholder value and the production of negative externalities that affect society. The roles of firms in Western societies as well as of management in the professional development of people are consequently questioned. Although critiques on regulation of and management in “conventional firms” are as long as the history of modern businesses¹, this provides a refashioned need for management practices that would pay more attention to social and environmental issues. To such a broad issue, two main approaches have developed. The first one, labeled today “Corporate Social Responsibility” (CSR), has focused on external regulation of and managers' behaviors² in large firms (Capron 2007). The second one has developed under the label of “alternative firms” or “democratic firms” which stems from

¹ The modern issue of “corporate social responsibility” and of regulation between “Business and Society” dates back to the creation of large trusts and firms in the USA during the last decade of the 19th century.

² The stream of research in CSR is far from being unified but the overall issues are about the specific role of managers as a pivotal position in trying to cope with antagonistic incentives and the fact that responsible organizational behaviors should be better reached through tight regulation or through corporate initiatives.

various historical oppositions to the so-called “conventional firm”, i.e. the dominant form of firm characterized by hierarchical organization and institutional non-ownership of workers³.

We here only consider the second approach. “Alternative firms”, such as cooperatives or self-managed firms, have recently been riding a new wave of interest and popularity⁴. Still, although researchers have formerly argued that democracy at work may be a relevant organizational approach for knowledge workers (Rousseau and Rivero 2003; Harrison and Freeman 2004; Kerr 2004), there is a pending risk for arousing enthusiasm that could end up in disenchantment as it has already been the case over history (see especially the second half of the 19th century or the 1960s and 1970s; (Webb and Webb 1897; Desroche 1976; Sainsaulieu, Tixier et al. 1983; Pendleton 2001)). Such opinion does therefore not reprove the contemporary importance of Business and Society issues, but rather suggest that organizational perspectives on “alternative firms” still merit further development, especially in a period when rethinking the firm in general is on the research agenda both in management and organization studies.

In this paper, we thus seek to contribute to a better understanding of the functioning and transformation of “alternative firms” on both an empirical and a conceptual basis. Building on results from an in-depth case study, we deal with the following research questions: how to understand and theorize the dynamics of “alternative firms” at work? What specific issues are they facing with? Which theoretical grounds may sustain an organizational approach that would pay equivalent attention to “alternative” and business issues?

The paper is organized as follows: in a first section, we review the notion of “alternative firms” from an historical point of view in order, first, to analyze on which purpose the concept emerged and, second, to provide the usual arguments on the generation and degeneration of such firms. Then, identifying several limitations to existing approaches, we put forward an analytical framework to further understand the functioning and dynamics of transformation in alternative firms. In a second section, we use our framework longitudinally to investigate the crises and evolutions of an alternative firm over seven years. In the last section, we discussed

³ This definition is further explained in the first section.

⁴ In France, articles and special issues in newspapers have been flourishing from the economic and financial crisis spread in 2008.

our findings and suggest new research perspectives intended to rethink both alternative and conventional firms.

1. ALTERNATIVE FIRMS: FOR A NON-PRESCRIPTIVE AND NON-DETERMINISTIC APPROACH

1.1. “ALTERNATIVE FIRMS”: CONDEMNED TO FAIL?

The category “alternative firms” needs to be defined to better understand the logics of such firms and of dedicated research to these organizations. In this subsection, we first focus attention on the nature of “alternative firms” through an historical perspective and then provide a synthesis on main debates and conclusions about “alternative firms”. We eventually identify several limitations that justify and frame the need for another perspective.

1.1.1 Industrial revolutions and the opposition to "conventional firms"

“Alternative firms” are tightly linked to the modern business history with upheavals in the organization of work and the emergence of new forms of corporations. The category “conventional firm” relates to the progressive emergence of such transformations from the beginning of the 19th century. Schematically, two dimensions are distinctive and can be respectively labeled “governance” and “work organization” (Gand and Béjean 2007; Gand 2008). The former relates to the separation between capital and labor that expands from the 19th century. It is nowadays exemplified by the terms of “shareholders” and “wage-earner.” The other dimension that defines the “conventional firm” is the hierarchical work organization which developed from the late 19th century (Lefebvre 2003). At first look, “alternative firms” can be defined as attempts to depart from the mainstream organization which has been quickly expanding but has also been fiercely criticized over history.

“Alternative firms” may also be differentiated from “reformative” perspectives and experiences that rather aim at rebalancing power distribution inside the firms. For example, at the “governance” level, it comprehends initiatives such as the introduction of employees on boards (Kaufman 2000), whereas autonomous teams or empowerment experiences are examples of attempts to reform the organization of work (Mintzberg 1990; Müller-Jentsch 1995). We argue that alternative firms’ projects contest the tenets of “conventional firms” more fundamentally both at the governance and at the operational level.

As a matter of fact, “democracy” is usually at the heart of the “alternative” approach which was already promoting equality of rights between firms’ members at a time where political democracy expanded over Western societies. Still, the notion has often been either restricted to purely institutional democratic aspects such as “elections” and “general assembly”, or extended to “general participation.” Other approaches have rather characterized such democratic organizations accordingly with their initial project which always aspires to combine business and democratic functioning (Laville and Mahiou 1984; Simons and Ingram 1997; Pendleton 2001).

1.1.2 The degeneration thesis and its limitations

The twofold purpose of alternative firms requires that these organizations prove to maintain economic sustainability and democratic functioning over time. This possibility has precisely been contested by several major authors in the studies of organizational democracy (Webb and Webb 1897; Michels 1949 [1911]; Meister 1984).

The so-called “degeneration thesis” can be summarized in the following citation: “*All such democracies of producers - either fail or cease to be democracies of producers*” (Webb & Webb, 1920, cited by Rosner 1985). The degeneration thesis thus states that any alternative firm will either fail due to economic or democratic degeneration:

- **Economic degeneration:** because of restrictive conceptions of democratic functioning or of rejections of any management function, the firm is unable to remain competitive on its markets (Viggiani 1999; Pendleton 2001). The nature of and contingencies on each kind of business constrain the type of democratic organizational form.
- **Democratic degeneration:** Remaining competitive can lead to an abandonment of democracy, in a form of oligarchy, of formal democracy or even a return to a “conventional” form of organization (Michels 1949 [1911]; Meister 1984; Hernandez 2006).

According to this rationale, the debate is dichotomized between business needs and democratic aspirations, the two being supposed to be antagonistic with each other. The conception of democracy seems to be restricted to the most visible institutional features (vote, election). Although this approach has been dominant over the most part of the 20th century, several limitations can be pointed out. In the following, criticizing this perspective we derive

propositions that would simultaneously be “requirements” for a renewed analytical perspective.

First, the “alternative firms” category, when restricted to democratic aspects, is problematic since it masks the whole representation of the organization, including business and operational elements. Still, following past research, we argue that business/work and democratic dimensions are inseparable (Stryjan 1994; Warhurst 1998) because:

“The organization and control of any labor process is [...] both an operational issue and a political action, ensuring the material and ideological reproduction of the mode of production” (Warhurst 1998).

It is thus our opinion that constructing the “alternative” category *against* the dominant form of organization has led past research to pay too much attention to the “democratic” dimension and to disregard issues related to other interactions, especially when managing the day-to-day activity. Consequently, “alternative firms” have mainly been analyzed with imported organizational concepts from “conventional firms” (Stryjan 1989).

Proposition 1: *understanding and analyzing the dynamics of “alternative firms” requires not to separate between the business aspects and the embodiment of progressive ideas, for organizational possibilities are contingent to the business/work dimension*

Proposition Ibis: *there is a need for broader analytical frameworks that pay attention to distinctive dimensions of “alternative firms”, such as democracy, while not concealing other constitutive dimensions of such organizations.*

Second, another main limitation of the degeneration thesis has been to consider and analyze “alternative firms” without taking into account the historical inscription and the business variety of these organizations (see the works of the Webb spouses for instance)⁵. Historical analyses have however demonstrated that cooperatives and democratic firms have especially

⁵ On this point, see the critique of Max Weber to the work of Michels (1911): according to Weber, Michels had an "idealist" and "romantic" vision of democracy and therefore did not consider democracy as "a historically conditioned system" Scaff, L. A. (1981). "Max Weber and Robert Michels." American Journal of Sociology 86(6): 1269-1286.

spread in qualified trades and professions, a context in which they have been particularly sustainable because of limited needs for management and almost direct parity between members (Sainsaulieu, Tixier et al. 1983; Bate and Carter 1986; Gand and Segrestin 2010).

***Proposition 2:** there is a lack of analytical approaches which may account for a variety of “alternative firms” without assuming deterministic forms and ways of transformation over time.*

Third, as the degeneration thesis apprehends “economic sustainability” and “democratic functioning” separately, it results in providing a unique variable for assessing the evolution of alternative firms which may be roughly summarized through “more or less” democracy. In our view, this however does not provide a relevant evaluation of the transformation of such alternative firms. Democracy cannot be the sole indicator of success: assuming that corporate democracy is “good” for itself (Collins 1997) remains contestable as long as control variables are not introduced, such as the type of participation, the economic success and the different contributions/retributions expected by members and the organization (Reynaud 1997; Hatchuel 2004). These numerous variables can change over time and space. They are not ready-made solutions, but rather distinctive and core elements to be collectively design in ways as various as members’ ideals.

***Proposition 3:** democracy should not be considered as the sole variable of evaluation of the degeneration or success of an “alternative firm.” The members’ satisfaction, the business performance and the perspective of evolution and development are also of primary importance.*

1.2. A RENEWED APPROACH TO ALTERNATIVE FIRMS: CONCEPTUALIZING ORGANIZED COOPERATION

Drawing on the precedent propositions, we propose an analytical framework, based on previous works of Chester Barnard, who developed a general theory of cooperation in formal organizations (Barnard 1968 (1938)), and of Yohanan Stryjan (Stryjan 1989; Stryjan 1994), who pointed out most of our previous critiques and proposed a dynamic theory of “reproduction” in self-managed firms.

The purpose of our framework is to provide articulated dimensions which conceptualize both the design and the evaluation of cooperative action. This framework will then be used to investigate a case-study. Our rationale is to build on Barnardian “theory of formal organizations” (Barnard 1968 (1938), chap.7) which precisely conceptualizes “cooperative action.” In fact, working on “conventional” firms, Barnard’s aim was to demonstrate and justify the need for “executives” and to discuss moral implications of executive functions. In Barnard's words (see chapter 7 of *The functions of the executive*), three elements represent an organization:

- **Members:** the individuals who wish to cooperate together and commit to an organization.
- **Common purpose:** the commitment is driven by a common purpose, i.e. the “objective of cooperation” (p86).
- **Means of communication:** to concretely cooperate, members need to communicate, under an oral form or other means.

Regarding the design of organized cooperation, according to Barnard, the three constitutive elements mentioned above are dynamic and evolve in interaction with the environment, possibly independently the one from the other. They are at the same time interdependent and form a system of cooperation. Consequently the role of the executive is to maintain a dynamic equilibrium between the three basic elements, i.e. coherence between the evolutions of the common purpose, the members and the communication means (see Figure 1 below). The latter may be considered as synonymous to coordination means in “modern” management terms.

Regarding the evaluation of organized cooperation, the latter, according to Barnard, cannot continue over time unless there is “effectiveness” of collective action, i.e. attainment of the common purpose, and “efficiency” for members, i.e. satisfaction according to their contributions and their expectations.

Building on this perspective, we here extend Barnard’s theory to a more general level, i.e. without considering “executive functions” as natural and necessary *per se* in a firm, or as existing only under the form of an “executive.” So doing, we seek to propose generic dimensions of firms’ organizations, independently from their “conventional” or “alternative” aspect. Our approach considers "organizational means" as central for the embodiment of membership and common purpose. Conversely, the nature of common purpose and of

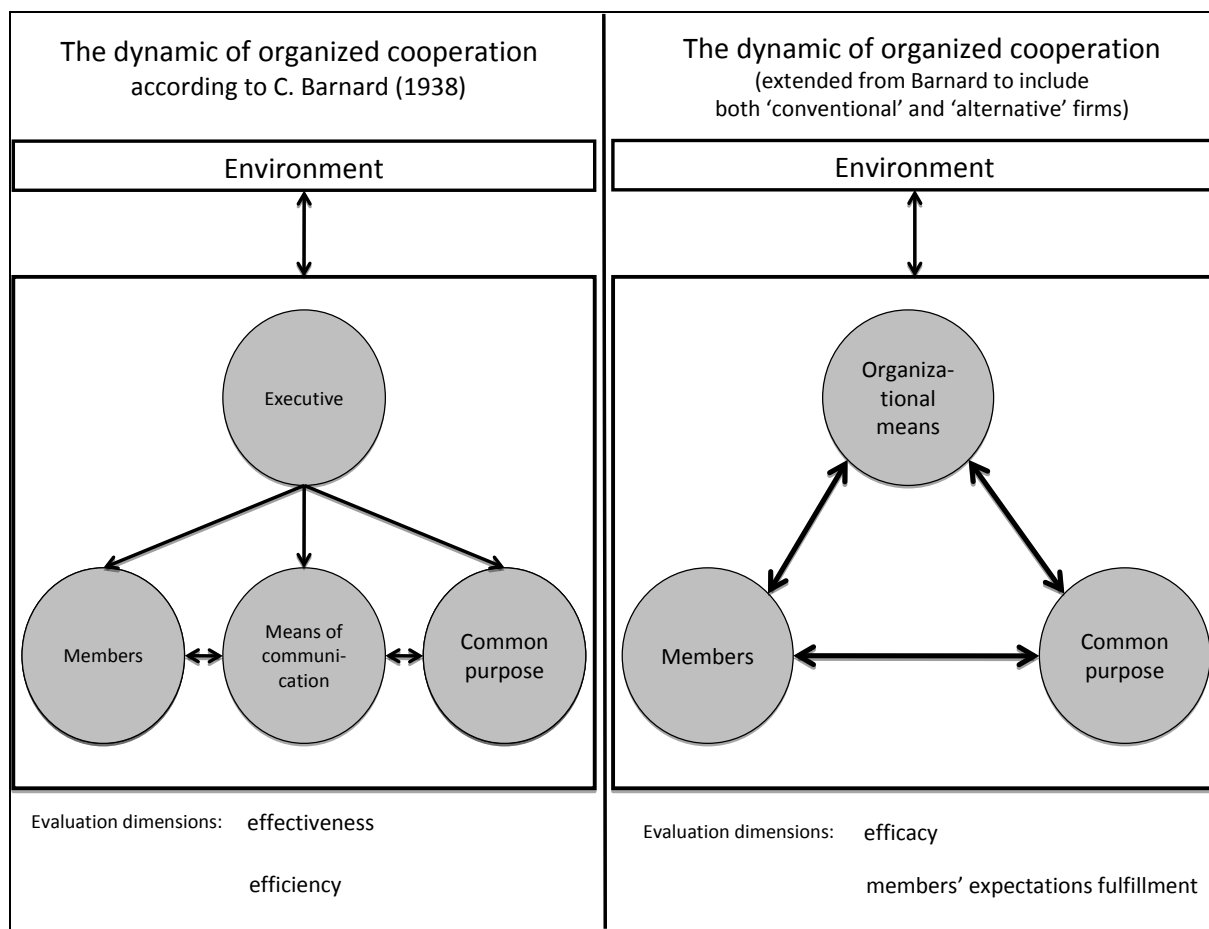
expected membership, as well as the nature of the business and work, all play either as constraints or enablers of firm's organization (see Figure 1 below).

Likewise, departing from traditional evaluation's variables of alternative firms that separate business performance from democratic functioning (see our critique and proposition 3 above), we follow Barnard's rationale regarding the evaluation of sustainable organized cooperation.

This suggests two interrelated variables of evaluation:

- **Efficacy:** this first dimension is an evaluation of collective action on the whole, not separating democratic aspects from business ones. It considers the overall efficacy reached thanks to members' contributions and relative to the common purpose. This may include “democratic functioning” but not independently from work-content dimensions or other values such as solidarity for instance. This dimensions of efficacy are both self-determined by the firm and by the environment (in the case of competitive markets for example)
- **Member's satisfaction fulfillment:** this second dimension examines the “members' expectations fulfillment”, defined as the satisfaction that members consider from the organization's activity and the achievement, or not, of the common purpose. It expresses a relation from the organization to members' expectations and retributions. This evaluation's dimension does not consider members as a unified collective and allows for distinction between different categories of people.

Figure 1- Modeling Barnard's organizational dynamics and our extension



Our framework is thus composed of three design dimensions to consider organizational dynamics: members, organizational means and common purpose. Our framework also integrates two performance dimensions: efficacy at the organizational level and members' expectations fulfillment at the individual level.

The rationale was to depart from approaches that tend to only consider a dimension of the common purpose, i.e. “democratic functioning” in the case of alternative firms. Here the democratic dimension is considered as a dimension of organizational design among others (especially the nature of the business, the work constraints or issues of skills and competencies), and is not considered as intrinsically superior to any other mode of organizing. The proposed framework is designed for investigating patterns of alternative firms over time without pre-defining final results or considering judgments of value.

In the following, we thus propose to investigate a classical research issue on alternative firms with renewed lenses: how to understand the dynamics of “alternative firms”? To which specific management issues are they confronted to? To what extent the common purpose, the

organizational answers and the members' commitment may be original? To what extent has the traditional opposition hidden original organizational phenomena?

The use of such a framework and the potential for discovery is also linked to the choice of a methodology and a research field that are described in the next section.

2. METHODOLOGY

We here describe our general methodology. After having set the research context, we detail data collection and analysis. We would like to insist on the fact that our study was above all following an exploratory approach which means that the research approach was discovery- and not validation-oriented (David and Hatchuel 2007). In such situations, case selection criteria have to integrate other dimensions than sole "representativeness" and may include: important changes in the organization, originality of the context and opportunities for experimentation. In the following, we try to demonstrate that our single case study matches such heuristic criteria and thus provides a rare opportunity to get new insights on alternative firms' management.

2.1. RESEARCH SETTINGS

Our research is based on the longitudinal study (Pettigrew 1990) of Garden Concept a small firm which designs, realizes and maintains private gardens with a special focus on artistic and ecological dimensions. During the research period, from 2004 to 2008, Garden Concept experienced a commercial growth and hired new employees. The firm is currently employing ten people, has been awarded two regional prizes for the innovativeness of the project and has tripled its sales over the studied period.

While it was officially founded in 2003 by five partners, the origins of the whole project trace back to the middle of the nineties. At that time, Eliane was finishing her studies in landscape and garden design. Solicited by some private clients, she started to create gardens with the help of her husband, Pierre, and subsequently determined to set up a sole proprietorship to professionalize her emerging activity. Between 1996 and 2002, the family business grew up. Several garden projects were realized and regularly necessitated to hire seasonal gardeners. At the end of this period, two of them were durably recruited.

The economical and internal evolutions of the organization changed the way in which the two founders were conceiving their project. Facing new commercial and organizational issues and

having no background in these areas, they decided to associate with someone who will be in charge of the administrative work. Still, finding an “administrative partner”, as they said, would not be an easy task. A first attempt failed because of radically different conceptions on the way to manage the firm. An experimented entrepreneur in the software industry was the first potential new partner. As he was emphasizing the necessity to grow rapidly, the two founders, who had a more “artistic” background, were frightened by the business plan and feared that such way of development will put in danger their original project. They thus decided not to fully delegate the administrative function, but to ask for an external help to structure it. Moreover, on the basis of their first and unsuccessful experience with what they felt to be the “conventional” management doctrine, they started to look for an alternative way in which to incarnate their citizen and artistic aspirations.

The previous decisions led one author of this paper to be involved in the setting up of Garden Concept, since he was precisely asked to help Eliane and Pierre to find the “right structure” for their alternative project. Although the founding partners eventually managed to set up the firm and to progressively gather new people who apparently believed in an alternative and democratic way of running a firm, between 2003 and 2008, the organization endured three important crises. These three collective crises induced the founding partners to address issues related to their alternative project and to revise their beliefs about core and distinctive elements of their democratic functioning.

Garden Concept’s history thus gave us a remarkable opportunity to observe an entire process of creation, crises and transformation of an alternative firm. As a result, this made it possible to explore the value of our analytical framework as a means to further understand the difficulties to combine *efficacy* and *members’ expectation fulfillment* in the day-to-day activity of alternative firms, as well as the role that *management functions* can play to overcome them.

2.2. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

While being mostly based on results from a four-year collaborative research (David and Hatchuel 2007), our study also combines different qualitative methodologies such as semi-structured interviews and archival or documentary search (Marshall and Rossman 1995; Yin 2003; Thiétart 2007). In addition to our empirical observations, we thus possess an exhaustive corpus of official documents that have been produced internally or externally by the firm as

well as many notes taken during formal and informal discussions between the founders since the genesis of the project.

Our study started as two separate research projects that converged into a common exploration. Both authors shared an interest in understanding how traditional management theory and doctrines might be enriched through the case of alternative firms. In 2002, the first author started to collaborate with Garden Concept on an informal basis. This gave him access quite soon to crucial data about the genesis phase and induced him to start an official research with the firm. The researcher was then deeply involved in the day-to-day activity of the firm, an “immersion” which is considered as a key element for a successful research in the field, because observing formal aspects only has already proven to be of limited interest in the case of alternative firms (Stryjan 1994).

Meanwhile, the second author was carrying research on professional service firms with a particular focus on democratic and self-managed firms. He was introduced to the case of Garden Concept in the early stage of the research. To balance the position of the first researcher, he did not have a formal role or responsibility in the transformation of the firm but several research meetings as well as data exchange were organized over the period of investigation.

3. FINDINGS

In this section, we explore the value of our analytical framework to better understand the dynamics of organized cooperation in alternative firms. We start with describing the transformation process of Garden Concept through the lens of three critical “events” (Langley 1999) which occurred over the studied period.

3.1. EMPHASIZING MEMBERS’ EXPECTATIONS FULFILLMENT THROUGH A “HIGHLY MEANINGFUL” COMMON PURPOSE

During the first six months of Garden Concept’s existence, the number of members rapidly increased and came to seven persons. Five of them were officially associated to the cooperative functioning, including Eliane and Peter who owned 95% of the shares at that time. The three other associated co-operators included the two former gardeners of the family business as well as the researcher who had been symbolically given some shares to account for his help in the setting up of the firm.

Regarding the common purpose, the “genesis phase” of the collective project started in 2002 and ended in early 2003 with the official setting up of Garden Concept. Looking for what Eliane and Pierre named “*an alternative way of working with people, which enables each member to find its place within the organization,*” the two founders determined to choose the French co-operative legal status named *Société Cooperative de Production (SCOP)*. It was firstly suggested by the researcher and was not previously known by either Eliane or Pierre, but appeared to match their beliefs and values so much that it was almost immediately selected. Moreover, Eliane insisted on the necessity to formulate fundamental values and work principles, including ecological principles and artistic excellence, in a corporate charter which would be communicated to any potential new member of the cooperative. Her aim was to make clear and shared a “highly meaningful” common purpose and to ensure a harmonious functioning in the future.

Regarding the membership, the choice for a “democratic” structure as well as the nature of the common purpose inspired the cooperative members and stimulated strong commitment. They accepted to start working with low wages and were regularly contributing to the collective project beyond what is commonly expected in a conventional firm. Of course this devotion was not equally distributed between members and some of them feel more involved than others, but every worker had the impression to be “all in the same boat.” As far as Eliane was concerned, the idea of sharing her personal artistic project with other people was exalting her and she strongly believed in “the powerful transformation from ‘I’ to ‘We’”, as she often declared.

Regarding the organizational means, the founders were convinced that their democratic functioning would be sufficient to self-manage the firm. “Democracy” was seen as a universal organizational principle that could make it possible to coordinate collective work rightly. In that sense, any word referring to hierarchical or supervising position was proscribed by the founders who only accepted to define themselves as “pillars” of the firm. While implicitly emphasizing their technical expertise in botanic and garden design, this role was however not formally described and, actually, it rather referred to a position of “leaders” or “guardians of the common cause.” This also explains why there were only unsophisticated management tools which basically consisted in counting working time or giving instructional worksheets of the day. Since this excluded any flowchart or more formalized job description, patterns of work distribution were underdeveloped and mechanisms of coordination only relied on professional principles which were supposed to be found in individual gardening skills.

Building a “highly meaningful” common purpose to ensure strong commitment and vitalize membership was thus the priority of the first phase of Garden Concept’s life. Still, this first configuration (see Table 1) disregarded the development of organizational means. As a result, the firm endured an important crisis at the end of the period. On the operational side, many projects were delayed because of bad coordination and quality of service was declining whereas it was supposed to be a core and distinctive element of Garden Concept’s creative offer. On the administrative side, occupied by operational issues, Eliane was unable to manage the firm alone. As she did not realize that prices were too low to support rising fix costs of the new structure as well as new investments in the meantime, the firm started to face important cashflow problems. In this context, she felt the necessity to find support and determined with Pierre to hire a new employee who would be in charge of the managerial work. They solicited a person named Sylvia who had just left her previous job in a large international company and had an important background in management. Seduced by the “collective venture”, as she said, she accepted a part-time job in the small firm.

3.2. EMPHASIZING EFFICACY THROUGH THE STRUCTURING OF A TRADITIONAL MANAGEMENT FUNCTION

During the second phase here studied, Sylvia started to play an ever more important role in the executive management of the firm. Seen as the one who could save the project from financial and organizational troubles, the former “pillars” devolved many decisions upon this new member.

Regarding the organizational means, the change was significant and had an important impact on the efficacy of the firm. On the operational side, accustomed to operations management in her former job, Sylvia set up new management tools to organize and supervise the day-to-day activity. The results of this re-structuring were almost immediate and led to better coordination and efficacy. On the administrative side, Sylvia instituted new reporting tools and provided Eliane with provisional budgets to help her plan operational work as well as resources allocation. Moreover, while recognizing the value of dialogue and participation, Sylvia reproved the former self-managed functioning which was, according to her, more paralyzing the whole organization than vitalizing it. Convinced that the firm needed a clear “decision-maker”, she often claimed that the cooperative had to “emerge from immaturity.”

Regarding the membership, although the co-operative model was not abandoned, debates on what “being a member” may signify arose over this period. On the one hand, having in mind

the search for better efficacy, Sylvia and other members of the cooperative were convinced that the firm should hire new members on a strict professional basis. This meant that “being a member” would above all signify to bring one’s workforce to the firm and to get a wage in return. Such a view, on the other hand, unsatisfied Eliane and Pierre, who still believed in a stronger commitment to the “cause.” Bringing the initial corporate charter out in meetings again, they insisted on the distinctive nature of members’ contribution that was required to carry out their original project. According to them, it was not enough to behave as a “wage earner”, be it on the most professional basis, to become a “member” of Garden Concept.

Regarding the common purpose, changes in organizational means and membership generated debates on the fundamental “reasons for cooperating.” In fact, the managerial tools implemented by Sylvia implicitly referred to a specific way of “making gardens” that appeared to be inconsistent with Eliane’s one. For instance, although she was convinced by Eliane’s skills and constantly complimenting her artistic talent, Sylvia, as well as other gardeners, considered that Eliane was unable to organize her design work and that she was wasting much time with details that were unimportant, particularly during the plantation phase. Likewise, she disapproved the way the artist was incomprehensibly stocking plants that were intended neither to an identified garden project nor to retail selling. According to her, managing the plant inventory in such a way was inefficient, risky and expensive.

Reaching better collective efficacy through the structuring of an effective managerial function was thus the leitmotiv of the second phase identified in Garden Concept’s existence. Even though this second configuration primarily seemed to enable the cooperative to go through its financial troubles, the organizational change led by Sylvia then raised more fundamental issues all related to the “reasons for cooperating.” Although Eliane was unable to formulate it clearly, she was particularly suffering from this restructuring. With Pierre, she felt that the initial common purpose had been lost on the way and was even thinking to put an end to the overall project. Still, new financial troubles and persistent disagreements on the management of the firm led Sylvia to resign first. The official collaborative research started in this new context of collective crisis.

Phase		Genesis and federation (1)	Structuring and degeneration (2)	Collaborative research and regeneration (3)
Configurations		<p>Evaluation dimensions: efficacy members' expectations fulfillment</p>	<p>Evaluation dimensions: efficacy members' expectations fulfillment</p>	<p>Evaluation dimensions: efficacy members' expectations fulfillment</p>
Content on	<i>Common purpose</i>	Highly meaningful common purpose and search for “an alternative way in which to run a firm”	Disagreement on the “reason for cooperating”	Restoring an artistic tradition of garden design considered as “fine place - making”
	<i>Membership</i>	High commitment and choice for a cooperative legal status	Disagreements on what “being a member” may mean	Re-assessing the nature of members’ contribution and required skills
	<i>Organizational means</i>	Almost inexistent	Structuring of an administrative function	Designing original managerial functions with a special focus on design activities
Outputs/ crisis		Coordination crisis and financial troubles	Collective crisis and departure of the administrative manager	New symbolic space for organized cooperation and departure of some former members

Table 1 – Synthesis of main findings

3.3. MANAGING A COLLECTIVE ODYSSEY: DESIGNING ORIGINAL MANAGERIAL FUNCTIONS AND DIFFERENTIATED ROLES TOWARDS A COMMON PURPOSE

The third phase of Garden Concept's life that we analyzed in this paper started in a difficult context. The departure of Sylvia was not without any impact on the other members and some of them continued to defend her point of view.

Regarding the membership, the first reaction of the founders, including the researcher, was to gather all the cooperative's members in order to abate conflicts through dialogue and free debate. They organized meetings to deal with members' expectations fulfillment and regenerate the participative functioning. However, it only resulted in legitimizing members' dissatisfaction and intensified oppositions. Members' commitment was significantly undermined and some of them were even considering bringing a prosecution against the founders because they thought that the collective functioning was no more complying with co-operative legal requirements. As far as they were concerned, Eliane and Pierre were, once again, thinking about stopping the project for they did not want to play the prescriptive role of "executive managers", a position which would have been contradictory with their original ideals.

Regarding the organizational means, the researcher started to organize a collaborative work with Eliane on garden design processes and languages. The aim was to further understand what "the object to manage" was and to revise Sylvia's understanding of the garden activity. This collaborative research work led to a new and shared language of value which made it possible to further discuss the links between the business and the creative processes. For example, as far as the inventory space was concerned, the research phase revealed that the plants were not only commodities to be stored but also artistic materials required to complete the design work. Thus, Eliane needed to possess not only what Sylvia named the "managerially reasonable inventory level", but also a huge variety of plants with which to compose. Moreover, the research identified the potential role of such collection in the selling process. It revealed that the inventory space should not only be managed as a costly space to reduce, but rather as an "exhibition and learning" space in which the clients would be educated to the minimum garden "sol-fa."

Regarding the common purpose, a collaborative work on design languages combined with documentary research on garden art history made it possible to restore an artistic tradition in which garden design was better understandable as fine "place-making" (Hunt 2000). On a

conceptual side, it led to revisit Sylvia's assumptions on Eliane's design work. Referring to traditional distinction between design and execution, the former administrator was for instance giving priority to "creativity" during the planning phase and promoting "better operational efficacy" during the planting phase. Nevertheless, the collaborative research brought to light new design dimensions (e.g.: textures, colors, sounds, odors...) which were underestimated by this formal representation, whereas they were essential to Eliane in making her gardens. This led to re-assess the role of plantation in the overall design process and to give full consideration to the manipulation of multiple design dimensions at work, as well as to the required skills to obtain evocative and valuable scenographic effects. On a symbolic and social side, the new representation of garden design modified in return both Eliane's status within the group and the type of collective needed to support this idiosyncratic common purpose.

The research phase thus coincided with (and supported) a third phase of Garden Concept's history. Departing from former debates on democratic functioning, the collaborative work re-focused the analysis on the management of design activities. Revealing several misunderstandings about the profound nature of the common purpose, it also sustained new managerial actions. This transformation allowed cooperative members to envision an extended space of collective action in which most of the former oppositions on "democracy" and "participation" failed away. While giving sense again to the "reason for cooperating" and reenergizing most of the - present and future - members, it also induced, at that time, others to quit the cooperative.

4. DISCUSSION

The interpretation of the case-study through an analytical framework which does not reduce the logics of evolution of alternative firms to a single mix of democracy and economic performance seems to open renewed perspectives in the analysis and in the management of such corporate projects. We here consider three contributions: a new fashion of approaching 'alternative' firms and their possible evolutions; a discussion of classical leadership approaches and suggestions for renewed perspectives; last extensions of our work to knowledge-intensive and art-based firms are considered.

4.1. BEYOND THE DEMOCRACY/PERFORMANCE ALTERNATIVE: TOWARDS A LESS-DETERMINISTIC APPROACH OF ALTERNATIVE FIRMS

As a matter of fact the “democratic appeal” has been at the heart of traditional perspectives on alternative firms since their first premises (e.g. see part 1 and Garden Concept’s case). Even though we believe that it is difficult to reprove such attempt to improve “organizational life”, we argue that the academic debate has been impoverished by a too strict dichotomization between “economic performance” and “democratic functioning” (e.g. see authors of the degeneration thesis). This current opposition is of little value for both theoretical and managerial efforts, because it limits the range of collective actions which can be carried out to “reproduce” alternative firms (Stryjan 1989). Historically, corporate democracy has mainly dwelt on qualified trades and professional firms due to work autonomy and little needs for coordination. This did not prevent from embodying solidarity in numerous cases, as historical examples in the social economy and in the cooperatives proved it (Desroche 1976; Demoustier 1984; Gueslin 1998). Nevertheless, democracy, when uniquely understood as a *modus operandi* for decision-making, can be antagonistic to “solidarity” and can produce “dissatisfaction” (Reynaud 1997). Rather than a managerial technique intended to promote formal “equality” between members, the concept of “democracy” may thus be better apprehended from a more open and “metaphorical” perspective (Matten and Crane 2005).

Following the “degeneration thesis”, there is no doubt that Garden Concept is a case of degeneration. Extended democratic functioning has been abandoned, management roles, while original, have been structured and are today not subject to rotation as it is the case in kibbutz for example (Billis 1977). Such a theoretical lens would have led to degeneration in any case, since there is little chance that Garden Concept would still exist without any transformation. This is why our proposed framework, while being very large, offers no organizational restriction in designing potential cooperation devices. As it has been previously argued, cooperation develops over time thanks to two elements: coordination, i.e. the capacity for working efficaciously collectively, and cohesion, i.e. what founds the collective and bind people together (Segrestin 2005; Segrestin 2006). The proposed dimensions of evaluation consider the relation between the organization, understood as a collective action towards a common purpose, and the members. We argue that this relation is at the heart of “alternative firms” projects, with a common purpose and a nature of membership that may be enriched compared to “conventional” firms. In this perspective, organizational means play a role of constraint and enabler to embody values of the firm.

The case study exemplifies such perspectives on organized cooperative action. For instance, during the second phase, when there were attempts to set up “classical” management functions, it was not simply a question of democracy or of economic performance that was at stake. The relation of some members, especially of the main artist, Eliane, to both the organizational means and the evolution of the purpose were in fact “degenerating.” During this phase, the case shows a high-risk of a “de-meaning” of the project that could also have led to the loss of another dimension of the project, distinct from “democracy” or “economic viability”: it is the *work content*, i.e. the peculiar relation to objects and clients that the artist tries to sustain despite the incomprehension of her workmates unconvinced by its value.

Such link between specific collective practices and organizational means, common purpose and membership may be a future direction for research on “alternative” firms that would depart from classical debates on “degeneration.” This may also be of particular interest when studying the growing sector of Social businesses, i.e. “cause-driven businesses” (en.wikipedia.org). Because there is a tendency, as it can for instance be noted in the communication of the French cooperative movement⁶, to “solve” the democratic issue by arguing that after the members properly elect the board or the general manager, a “conventional” hierarchical line of management should follow. Still, while recognizing that democratic devices may not always be the “best” management devices, due for example to issues of competence, “cause-driven businesses” (i.e.: “highly meaningful” common purposes which require high commitment to members) might also encompass different management models to be sustainable over time. For instance, Garden Concept, through its repeated evolutions, shows how a progressive management emerges. This original model is apparently neither purely participative-driven nor purely financially-driven, but rather driven by professional and artistic logics which restore a new language of management. The latter does not prevent from integrating values such as solidarity or training and professional development at the core of the project, but rather aims at making possible the embodiment and future of such facts. Although this example could also be restrictively interpreted in “degeneration” terms (e.g.: autocratic domination and “closure” of the organization), our analytical framework suggest, to a larger extent, that Garden Concept is in a situation in

⁶ See official communications by the Scop confederation (www.scop.coop)

which the collective is building another “equilibrium” (i.e. a sustainable configuration of members/common purpose/organizational means).

Our proposed rationale to “alternative” firms therefore tries to restore organizational dimensions that a single “democratic” approach has tended to underestimate in the past, then missing specific issues such as competence variation and differentiation, differentiated members’ commitment to work and to common purpose. It is also a way to emphasize another dimension which has tended to be overshadowed by the democratic “appeal”, namely the specific nature of the common purpose. We labeled it “highly-meaningful” in the case of Garden Concept and explained how it generated specific commitments and expectations from members. There is a need for further research on this issue, including the pivotal role of organizational means, especially in Social businesses and Non-profit organizations for example.

4.2. THE “TWO SIDES” OF COMMON PURPOSE: FOR A DUAL PERSPECTIVE ON LEADERSHIP

Revealing dynamic links between organizational means, membership and common purpose, our study provides complementary insights that might enrich traditional views of leadership. Since there is a huge body of literature on this area (see for example: Cartwright 1965; Mintzberg 1973; Kotter 1982; Moss Kanter 1989; Kotter 1990; Mintzberg 1998; Basso 2006; Tengblad 2006), we here only discuss three main points relative to:

- **The nature of leadership:** it has often been argued that, while being complementary to, “leadership” differs from “management” to a large extent. Especially when it comes to “top managers”, authors regularly claim that “executives” should not be regarded as “managers” but as “leaders” in the sense that they pursue different goals.
- **The goal of leadership:** whereas management deals with tasks and coordination patterns, leadership consists in creating collective cohesion by dealing with members’ motivation and setting up a “vision” or “direction” that may impulse and enable change in the organization.
- **The source of leadership:** although there has been many debates on the way to “acquire” leadership competences (see for example the historical opposition between north American and European approaches to leadership education in (Byrkjeflot 2001)), it is commonly accepted that leadership lies in individual traits that differ from

traditional “rational skills” and that are more linked to “values”, “emotions” or even “aesthetic” dimensions (e.g.: Hansen, Ropo et al. 2007)

At first glance, our findings seem to completely sustain such a view of leadership. Regarding the nature of leadership, the role played by Garden Concept’s so-called “pillars” is distinct from the role played by the associated administrator and could clearly be interpreted in terms of leadership: the “pillars” are those who vitalize membership by setting up a “highly meaningful” common purpose. Likewise, they are the ones who impulse change in the organization and who eventually regenerate the space of collective action. Such “cathectic function” (Scott 1995) obviously matches with the major characteristics of leadership that we have delineated above.

Nevertheless, our findings may also suggest a complementary approach to leadership. In line with Scott (1995), who was also building on Barnard’s understanding of organized cooperation, we would say that the model of “leadership” which emerges from the case study consists in building collective cohesion through the strategic “manipulation of symbols” (Scott 1995). It is particularly obvious during the first phase of Garden Concept’s life, that is to say when the “pillars” keep on referring to many symbols of the cooperatives’ history in order to federate members. Furthermore, as noted by Scott (1995), what is crucial in such a view of leadership is that it does not separate between the *conceptualization* and the *legitimization* of the “common purpose:” “[Barnard’s] *dualistic view of leadership stressed both the cognitive (guiding) and the cathectic (motivating) functions of the leadership role.*” (Scott 1995, p.42) Such a dual perspective seems to match better with our findings, particularly regarding the third phase of Garden Concept’s existence, when the “pillars” start a collaborative work on design languages with the researcher. As shown by the case, the transformation which resulted from this work was mostly based on a *conceptual effort*. The latter was thus essential to restore a purposeful organization and had, in return, many effects on the legitimacy of the pillars as well as on the commitment of the members.

Further research in these areas may thus be interesting to complete traditional views of leadership which have often neglected the conceptual side of “leadership.” In addition, even if we cannot develop this point further here, our study also suggests that the way to combine these two aspects of leadership seems precisely to exceed traditional definitions of either

“management” or “leadership.” Characterizing this original system of action further might also be of a more general interest.

4.3. CAN ALTERNATIVE FIRMS CONTRIBUTE TO RETHINKING (CONVENTIONAL) FIRMS?

Are “alternative firms” condemned to evolve in a “social economy” or in other supposed specific sectors? We argue that their problems, understood in the renewed fashion that we have tried to set up, might share similarities with, at least, organizations of professionals and creative workers. We here try to open research perspectives from our work on “alternative firms.”

In a knowledge economy, where competition is driven by innovation, there has been a growing interest for the study of knowledge and creative workers (e.g. Drucker 1999; Scarbrough 1999; Alvesson 2000; Rousseau and Rivero 2003; Rousseau and Shperling 2003). While traditional approaches have tended to expose a view of such organizations with very few management and coordinated organizations (Gouldner 1957-58; Scott 1965; Hinings, Brown et al. 1991), current challenges due to environment and business evolutions demands new cooperative patterns and changes in ways of organizing.

Regarding professional workers, which have been studied over the last two decades under the label “Professional Service Firms” (PSFs), the supposed loss of professional values, the supposed introduction of “commercialism” or the supposed rise of bureaucracy are current issues (e.g. Cooper, Hinings et al. 1996; Greenwood and Lachman 1996; Powell, Brock et al. 1999). In consulting firms, it has also been argued that the control of professionals was achieved mainly through identification and symbolic values (Alvesson 1993; Alvesson and Robertson 2006; Alvesson and Empson 2008). We argue that understanding such issues might be enriched by a specific investigation on the links between organizational evolutions and their links to a common purpose or to the definition of possible membership in the firm.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to renew perspectives on and approaches of “alternative” firms. After having historically situated the projects of “alternative” firms, we proposed a theoretical framework to overcome limitations of the current dominant theory, known as the

“degeneration” thesis: rather than posing the debate in a democracy vs performance matter, we proposed a more general organizational framework, which relates members, common purpose and organizational means. The framework was then used to analyze the case of Garden Concept over seven years and to interpret three major moments of change. It showed how the three dimensions of the model are intertwined and the specific role of organizational means in relating the individuals to the common purpose.

Our approach was to explore new perspectives to overcome the limits of current oppositions in the way to consider alternative firms. We particularly focused on how links between individuals and collective perspective are respectively played out and through organizations. The case made it also possible to consider a complementary perspective on leadership and to shed light on the two sides of “common purposes”, that is, both *conceptually* designed and *socially* diffused.

This exploratory research of course requires more developments to pursue a redefinition of “alternative” firms’ issues and dynamics. Among other perspectives, the content of common purpose should be explored further through other cases, for example by using different professional activities. Analyzing larger organizations is also necessary in order to assess the role of this significant contingency variable. More generally, further research in these areas could contribute to understanding how a common purpose encompasses both a business perspective and a representation of membership into a “joint-commitment”, to borrow the word of the American philosopher Margaret Gilbert. In a nutshell, without being ready-made solutions, alternative firms are some kind of “extreme cases” which might contribute to rethinking conventional firms in a more general way.

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