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## Preventing chiefs from being chiefs:
## An ethnography of a co-operative sheet-metal factory

**Abstract**

What remains of power and resistance when the fundamental antagonism between capital and labour – traditionally considered their main determinant within organisation studies – is absent? In order to investigate this question, the present study draws on a piece of ethnographic work, namely one year of participant observation as a factory worker, which I conducted within a French co-operative sheet-metal factory. Pondering the presence within the co-operative of seemingly powerless chiefs, I draw on the works of French anthropologist Pierre Clastres (1934–1977) on stateless societies in order to study co-operators in their 'continual effort to prevent chiefs from being chiefs' (Clastres, 1987: 218). Three forms of daily struggle around power relations appear to be central for members of the co-operative in circumventing the coalescence of power in the hands of their chiefs: a relentlessly voiced refusal of the divide between chiefs and lay members; a permanent requirement for accountability, and endless overt critique towards chiefs; and the use of schoolboy humour. Reflecting on such mechanisms leads to my questioning traditional conceptions of power and resistance within organisation studies, ultimately endorsing the view that power relationships are the contingent outcome of contextual configurations of practices. In these, power and resistance are no longer readily discernible (rather than resistance being considered a detached reaction to power), and the related role assignations are constantly shifting (rather than power being the fixed attribute of managers, and resistance that of subordinate workers.) Additionally, it suggests that such configurations of practices may well rely on little equipped and little formalised mechanisms – rather than sophisticated technologies, which are usually the privilege of management only.

**Keywords**

Pierre Clastres; power; resistance; organisational democracy; worker co-operatives; ethnography

Within organisation studies, resistance has traditionally been associated with the efforts of labour to oppose or circumvent the forms of control devised by management (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Edwards, 1979). And although resistance studies are now examining forms of labour that extend beyond factory work (Bain and Taylor, 2000), our understanding of resistance is still heavily rooted in the fundamental antagonism between capital and labour, as embedded in capitalist modes of production (Braverman, 1998[1974]; Burawoy, 1979). The question may thus be raised: what in fact is left of power and resistance when this antagonism is absent, whether in co-operatives (Cheney et al., 2014; Webb and Cheney, 2014), non-profits (Joannidès, 2012) or social movements (Sutherland et al., 2014)? In order to investigate this question, the present study draws on a piece of ethnographic work, namely one year of participant observation as a factory worker, which I conducted within a co-operative.

**Factory work in the co-operative sheet-metal factory**

Scopix[1] is a sheet-metal factory that is located in France and was incorporated as a worker co-operative some 30 years ago. At that time, the owner and boss of the company that then existed decided to close down the factory. The workers picketed it for several weeks until they were eventually offered the opportunity to run the business as a co-operative. After a couple of difficult years, during which employees frequently worked for no pay at the weekend in order to avoid bankruptcy, Scopix found itself in a position to support the rapid development of one of its customers, thus securing the activity and profitability of the co-operative. Scopix now comprises 25 worker-associates and has a yearly turnover of circa €2.5m, with this customer still being its main one and accounting for nearly half its sales.

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[1] This name is an alias, as are the names of the co-operators.

Typical products include electrical boxes or cabinets, control panels and various mechanical parts, with sheets of aluminium, steel and stainless steel being processed, based on customers' technical blueprints.

The shop floor is divided into three main sections (in order of process flow): cutting (stamping and laser cutting), bending, and soldering plus assembly. Sheet-metal work is a physically demanding job, with most tasks requiring workers to stand up all day, and frequently to handle heavy and cumbersome parts. Consequently, many workers, even the youngest, suffer from chronic back problems. In addition, the shop floor is very noisy, and some of the tasks are either dirty (due to the metal dust from grinding and deburring) or dangerous (for example, binding, where one worker cut off the tip of one finger during my time at the factory), not to mention repetitive. Masculinity (Collinson, 1992) is another dominant feature of Scopix, with the shop-floor workers being exclusively men. This tends to be reinforced by the ancestry of workers, most of whom originate from Southern European and North African countries (Italy, Portugal, Spain, Algeria, Tunisia etc.), where this cultural trait is even more prevalent than in France.

All current workers are associates, except for a few trainees and temporary workers, the rule in force being that workers usually become associates after they have completed their first year of employment. The company is 100% owned by its employees, with no support from external associates ever having been needed. Scopix functions with a supervisory board (composed of three members elected by the associates for a three-year term) and an executive board (three voluntary members designated by the supervisory board for a four-year term). All three members of the supervisory board are currently shop-floor workers. While the previous executive board was composed of two functional managers (accounting and sales) and one shop-floor worker, the new board (designated in 2013) is now predominantly composed of shop-floor workers, with just one of its members splitting his time between

office activities (programming for cutting machines) and shop-floor work (cutting). This feature – i.e. the existence of an executive board that is composed of members whose term is quite short and tends not to be renewed, and that includes lay workers – is in itself a strong marker of Scopix's distinctiveness among French worker co-operatives. These organisations are almost all directed by a general manager who happens to be a professional manager and whose term of office often extends over a long timeframe. This testifies for Scopix's pronounced interest in egalitarianism, an interest that is also reflected in the limited wage-differential scale (approximately 1:2) and in the fact that profit-sharing bonuses are not defined in proportion to salaries but are distributed equally (again in contrast to almost all other French worker co-operatives).

My engagement with the factory was as an unpaid trainee over a one-year period, from September 2013 to September 2014, filling in for various vacancies on jobs that are less demanding in terms of skills. I started with the job that is considered the most basic on the shop floor, that is grinding and deburring, and then progressively took on others, such as tapping, milling, and plugging of metal inserts and studs. I was also able to work on the stamping and bending equipment, provided the machine had already been set up by a skilled worker. In fact, bending on a press brake soon became one of my most frequent assignments, since I apparently displayed less clumsiness in this, as well as genuine affinity for the task. My specific status also allowed me to attend as many meetings as I wished. In particular, I systematically attended the weekly meeting of the executive committee (*réunion de directoire*), which takes place every Tuesday after the end of the working day; during this, committee members review the main issues, make decisions, and see co-operators who wish to make complaints. I also attended all the individual interviews organised by the new executive committee at the beginning of its term so as to get feedback from the associates about their priorities. Other opportunities to engage further with my co-workers came in the

form of lunch breaks (usually in the shared kitchen or at barbecues organised in front of the factory during spring and summer), and going out with single men of all ages at the weekend.

If conditions of access to the field are revealing of the group under study (Favret-Saada, 1977; Geertz, 1973), I must confess that my access to Scopix was surprisingly easy. It was granted, despite my presenting a rather vague objective at the time, after a single interview with one member of the former executive board, whose decision was immediately validated by her co-members on the board. And while I was afraid that the new executive board – which was designated after I had gained this agreement but before I had actually started my fieldwork – might question a decision made by their predecessors, they reiterated their agreement after a brief meeting. During my stay, I was never refused the opportunity to participate in any meeting, even including those on sensitive matters (for instance, giving a warning to an associate), and most of the time was even kindly informed when an unexpected meeting was organised on the spot. Whenever I expressed surprise about my presence being so easily accepted, for instance in the previously mentioned individual interviews, which included personal information (all workers agreeing to my attending, and all except one to having the interview recorded), the recurring motto was: 'We've nothing to hide here.'[2]

What rapidly emerged as one of the most striking features of Scopix is that there is little evidence of hierarchical power. This view is shared by members of the co-operative, whether they have spent their entire career at Scopix or have had the opportunity to experience other work environments. Within the co-operative, the organisation is, admittedly, formalised – and the existence of a certain amount of hierarchy is recognised. It is even possible to consult an organisation chart, which provides official and material evidence of this. However, this does

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[2] Further methodological details are provided in the Appendix.

not translate into the exertion of much power and authority by chiefs[3] towards their subordinates. Membership of the supervisory board is considered – and in fact works as – a purely honorific position, mostly a measure of one's popularity among colleagues. Although very active, members of the executive committee have great difficulty in imprinting their own orientations on actual operations. Similarly, the foreman and other managers have little chance to implement changes that are not already in line with members' wishes.

While elements of Scopix's governance design are likely to provide some of the necessary structural conditions for such a phenomenon – that is, the presence of (largely) powerless chiefs – they do not explain the actual mechanisms by which chiefs are effectively rendered powerless. It is precisely these mechanisms that I strived to uncover, as well as their implications for our understanding of power and resistance. The works of Pierre Clastres on primitive societies were the first to conceive of a chieftainship that was in essence separated from power and authority. Therefore I interpreted my own empirical observations as an invitation to carry us away from the French co-operative sheet-metal factory to the South-American Indian tribes with which Clastres was so familiar, and thus to travel back in time from the present to the 1960s.[4]

**Pierre Clastres and the primitive societies: 'a chieftainship without authority'**

A French anthropologist, Clastres (1934–1977) studied (in his fieldwork) Indian tribes in Paraguay and Brazil, including the Guayaki, the Guarani and the Chulupi (Clastres, 2011). In

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[3] I chose the term 'chiefs', despite its being somewhat vague in English, to refer to the people whom members of the co-operative designate (similarly vaguely) 'les responsables' (literally, those who have responsibilities). In the minds of co-operative members, this usually includes the three members of the executive board, the foreman and the four functional managers (accounting, sales, technical and engineering managers), but may contextually designate one of these categories only.

[4] The societies studied by Clastres were small in size (Clastres, 2012: 33), thus justifying the transposition to an organisation such as Scopix. For instance, the two Guyaki communities which he could directly observe were respectively including 30 and 70 members (Clastres, 2000).

one of his major works, *Society against the state* (1987) – originally *La Société contre l'Etat* (1974)[5] – Clastres shows that while primitive[6] societies are indeed stateless, this absence must certainly not be interpreted as a lack, as too often suggested by an ethnocentric view that considers the state as the desirable aim for any society. Rather, this absence marks the victory of societies that in essence seek independence and thus refuse to submit to state power (Clastres, 1987, 1994; see also Scott, 2009 for a Clastrian perspective on another geographic and historic context).

Besides this objective of external policy, i.e. to preserve their independence, primitive societies have a second political objective, one of internal policy, which is to preserve their social homogeneity:

> The same rigorous logic determines both the internal policy and external policy of primitive society […] the community wants to persevere in its undivided being and prevent a unifying authority – the figure of the commanding chief – from separating itself from the social body and introducing social division between Master and Subjects. (Clastres, 1994: 165)

Thus, what Clastres studies are the means by which primitive societies have prevented the emergence of a central authority, allowing only the 'bizarre persistence of a "power" that is practically powerless, of a chieftainship without authority, of a function operating in a void' (Clastres, 1987: 29). So why have a chief then? Because, in a move that is reminiscent of Freeman's (2013[1970]) warning against the 'tyranny of structurelessness', Indian societies

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[5] The book is actually a collection of articles previously published through various outlets, such as *Critique*, *L'Homme*, *Les Temps Modernes* and *L'Ephémère*.

[6] In casually referring to 'primitive societies' and later on to 'Savages', I choose to be faithful to Clastres' own words, upon which he was of course conferring a highly ironic tone, since the key aim of his work was to show just how elaborate the functioning of these societies (especially their political system) actually was.

have decided that power is better kept at bay by being named and embodied in the figure of a chief, rather than simply by being ignored:

> For, on discovering the great affinity of power and nature, as the twofold limitation of the domain of culture, Indian societies were able to create a means for neutralizing the virulence of political authority. They chose themselves to be the founders of that authority, but in such a manner as to let power appear only as a negativity that is immediately subdued: they established it in keeping with its essence (the negation of culture), but precisely in order to strip it of any real might. Thus, the advent of power, such as it is, presents itself to these societies as the very means for nullifying that power. (Clastres, 1987: 44–45)

The sole exclusive privilege that is usually recognised to the Indian chief is that of polygamy (Clastres, 1987: 32). In return, the chief must provide the group with goods and words, being generous with possessions (seldom being able to reject the relentless requests emanating from the group) and with speaking (thus being expected to be a good orator). Notwithstanding the fact that the words of the chief may be meaningless and often not even listened to, they are nonetheless demanded (Clastres, 2000). As Clastres puts it, 'if in societies with a State speech is power's *right*, in societies without a State speech is power's *duty*' (Clastres, 1987: 153). Within primitive societies, these elements of the cycle of exchange are of utmost importance for annihilating the power of chiefs. For instance, the 'obligation to give, to which the chief is bound, is experienced by the Indians as a kind of right to subject him to a continuous looting' (Clastres, 1987: 30). In a similar vein, 'the chief's obligation to speak, that steady flow of empty speech that he *owes* the tribe, is his infinite debt, the guarantee that prevents the man of speech from becoming a man of power' (Clastres, 1987: 154–155).

What Clastres makes eventually visible through his study of South-American Indian tribes is the Savages' 'continual effort to prevent chiefs from being chiefs' (Clastres, 1987: 218), understood as a means of maintaining the homogeneity of the group. He points out that the political goals of primitive societies, namely their independence and the homogeneity of their social body, can be met only because relentless work goes on in the group to put power at bay. Turning back to Scopix, the French co-operative sheet-metal factory, I thus similarly tried to appreciate the kind of activities that were performed by its members so as to prevent the locus of chieftainship being confounded with that of power.

**Preventing chiefs from being chiefs within Scopix**

Three types of daily activities appear as central for members of the co-operative to avoid the coalescence of power in the hands of its chiefs. First, co-operators relentlessly voice their refusal of a divide between chiefs and lay members. This contributes to reaffirming a group culture in which there is limited room for hierarchical power. Second, co-operators express permanent criticism and requests for accountability towards chiefs. This puts them in infinite debt towards members, a situation that conspicuously contradicts their exerting power. Third, co-operators use schoolboy humour to undermine chiefs' credibility and to limit their claims to authority.

*Refusal of the divide*

The first type of activities performed by co-operators to prevent chiefs from being chiefs is relentlessly to voice their refusal of a divide between chiefs and lay members. In this sense, it can be said that co-operators share a political objective that is similar to that of primitive societies, namely preserving the homogeneity of the group. One of the most visible activities aimed at doing just that lies in the daily interactions between shop-floor workers and chiefs. It is quite common to hear the former reminding the latter that they are ultimately all associates,

and thus need to be considered on an equal footing. The following exchange, which took place during the individual interview with Raymond, an operator from the cutting section, is illustrative of such practice:

> Olivier, member of the executive board: When Bernard [the workshop foreman] gives you an order, you …
>
> Raymond, interrupting him: I am not given orders, I'm an associate here!
>
> Olivier: Uh … well, I mean … uh … when you are provided with some work instruction by Bernard, you …

The shop-floor worker actually made the member of the executive board reframe his sentence, thus producing a periphrasis that now partly conceals the hierarchical relation that is supposed to link him with the workshop foreman. While I had thought, at the very beginning of my fieldwork, that this kind of behaviour was the privilege of senior workers – although Raymond is quite young, he has been working at Scopix for more than ten years and is clearly identified as one of Scopix's 'loudmouths' – I rapidly came to realise that less senior workers could engage in similar practices. Once, while I was milling alongside Marc, a rather discreet worker, he replied to the foreman's multiple requests as follows:

> Marc, with a slight smile and speaking in a pleasant tone: Don't start playing the boss, Bernard …
>
> Bernard, also pleasantly but with a slight touch of exasperation: I am not playing the boss, I AM your boss!

The conversation ended up with Marc confirming that he would proceed as per Bernard's requests ('I'll take care of it'), but enunciating this in a tone that conspicuously meant that he

would be doing it only because he himself was willing to do it, as if he were doing Bernard a favour.

The affirmation of the refusal of the divide between chiefs and lay members may also take a playful form. At times, I could hear shop-floor workers shouting out to each other:

Worker A, shouting with a carefully studied varying pitch: WHO is the BOSS?

Worker B, in the same manner: It's ME! I'M the BOSS!

As a consequence of its frequent occurrence, I eventually asked who had initiated this game, which I took to be a private joke based on some past work event. I was in fact referred to a well-known TV commercial (I don't watch much television, which explained my ignorance) by a car rental company, where superior service is supposed to put the customer in the boss's shoes[7]. When playing this game, members of Scopix are merely reminding each other of a basic co-operative principle, i.e. everyone is a boss in such an organisation, since everyone has ownership. However, this takes a particular flavour in the case of Scopix, insofar as it leads lay members frequently to oppose the claims for authority put forth by chiefs. One day, I heard a nearby worker playing the game by himself, saying out loud, 'WHO is the BOSS? It's ME! I'M the BOSS!' while on the job, which made me smile. However, I could not help thinking that this was perhaps not simply the meaningless by-product of the performance of a very repetitive task, but rather a way to make sure, by ritually repeating it to oneself, that something essential should not be forgotten, i.e. the refusal to accept that the group be divided into those who command and those who obey.

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[7] To see the commercial with English subtitles: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sulaJIjwgGI

Another telling episode, which is very significant in terms of how the refusal of the divide between lay members and chiefs may be expressed, relates to the management of functional managers' extra hours. During 2013, all office workers started to clock in as a result of the pressures emanating from the shop floor in favour of such move. While it had, until then, be considered technically too difficult to implement clocking-in for office workers because of their non-standardised schedules, this was contested by a few shop-floor workers, who issued a petition arguing that they could not see why they themselves should clock in if some associates did not have to do so. This forced the executive board of the time to organise a consultation, in which a majority of associates supported clocking-in for all. Unsurprisingly, when a first assessment of the new system was made at the end of 2013, all functional managers happened to be credited with a huge number of extra hours. I was thus offered the opportunity to attend a rather tense meeting, during which the new executive board, unwilling to authorise these extra hours to be paid, proposed that the functional managers should 'wipe the slate clean' for the past year and make sure from then on that they could stick to their 35-hour week contract. Functional managers violently opposed having their hours written off:

> Pierrick, engineering manager, very annoyed: What?! Are you taking the piss out of us? For more than seven years now, I have performed hundreds of extra hours without claiming any extra pay. We are not the ones who asked to clock in. They [the shop-floor workers] asked for it, so now they have to suck it up!

If one considers this episode from an economic perspective, it is simply incomprehensible. What is the point of asking managers to work shorter hours when they have, until now – for more than ten years, in the case of the most senior – systematically accepted working overtime without claiming any extra pay? From the erroneous perspective of utilitarian calculation, I myself at first read the whole exchange as an expression of the co-operators' taste for creating problems where there initially were none. However, once one seriously

accepts that Scopix follows not only economic objectives but also political ones – of which the primacy is regularly recognised – the story no longer appears as an anomaly. Once one accepts that the co-operative is in essence defined by its will to avoid having the chiefs separating from the social body and thus introducing division into the group, the discourse of the executive board becomes transparent:

> Michel, member of the executive board: I see no reason why you would need to work more than 35 hours a week. No one is indispensable. Your working contract is for 35 hours! So we understand that you may need to do some extra hours to deal with some unevenness in your workload from time to time, but these hours should eventually be recovered. If you are shown to be doing extra hours in the long run, this means that we are badly organised and that something has to be changed.

As can been seen through these examples, the relentless efforts aimed at preserving the homogeneity of the group are mostly accomplished by shop-floor workers and directed towards chiefs. They can also, as in the case of the clocking-in, be found among the executive board, directed at functional managers, or vice versa. These practices contribute to constantly reaffirming a group culture where there is, in the end, limited room for power to be exerted by the hierarchy. Indeed, chiefs know that any action or wording that would too conspicuously testify to their authority runs the risk of immediately being contested. And consequently, they know that they have a better chance of meeting their objectives when these already match the objectives of the shop-floor workers, and that the task of convincing the latter cannot be overlooked where this is not yet the case.

To be clear, while such practices tend to subdue the threat of a divide between chiefs and shop-floor workers, they do not fully shield the group from being affected by some division. The shop floor itself is not devoid of an occupational hierarchy that, for instance, situates

deburring and grinding at the very bottom. Objectively, the job is no more repetitive and imposes no more physical strain than many others, but it is probably its dirtiness that lets it down: after my first two weeks, during which I had done it full time, every time I was asked by the foreman to perform it again, he practically apologised, and I could be sure to hear mocking comments from my co-workers, such as: 'That's it, you've fallen back to the very bottom!' Similarly, within their sections, bending and soldering workers are ranked from P1 to P3, according to their skills and the extent to which they are able to deal with difficult parts. This process of differentiation is accepted by all as a necessary consequence of the allocation of work, but is nonetheless not devoid of some safeguards. For instance, all workers (i.e. not only the most skilled) are supposed to get involved in the prototyping process, and the perception of repeated exceptions to this implicit rule led in the past to the work of one perceivedly favoured worker being sabotaged.

### *Overt critique and requests for accountability*

A second dimension in the work performed by members of Scopix to prevent chiefs from being chiefs consists of submitting them to permanent criticism and requests for accountability. These activities are especially visible when it comes to the executive board. As soon as its members get to the shop floor after leaving a meeting, workers tend to ask them about the outcomes, demanding that they justify the decisions taken, which are criticised whenever they do not match workers' own views. When topics deemed very sensitive are at stake, such activities multiply. For instance, one day, the realisation that a regular bonus had been awarded by the previous board to one of their co-workers triggered some frenetic criticism from workers who considered it undeserved, the worker concerned being said not to fulfil the tasks that initially served to justify the bonus award. Although board members were in this case simply inheriting a problem that they had not themselves contributed to creating, they were subjected to a relentless flow of questions and criticism, demanding that they justify

either why they had not yet suppressed such an unfair bonus or, conversely, why they intended to suppress someone's acquired benefit. I could see that operations were seriously disturbed during that day, at the end of which Kevin, the youngest member of the board, uttered with a sigh: 'I feel like I spent my entire day answering their questions.'

Interestingly, I regularly observed that being sure of the facts was not a prerequisite for members' criticism of chiefs. For instance, in the example of the worker's bonus mentioned above, I could hear some workers criticising the board for having suppressed the bonus, although I knew the decision was still pending. Consequently, in a lot of cases, when the board was coming under attack, its job was mostly about re-establishing the truth. Since I had noticed that the board was quite transparent, providing members with the available information when requested, I first wondered why workers did not simply question board members more systematically when they wanted to know something. I came to realise that, from the co-operators' perspective, this was not necessarily desirable, because what mattered to them was first and foremost the act of criticising, independently of its content. Limiting oneself to solid information would tend only to limit the range of criticism available to them. I received some level of confirmation of this interpretation when asking members of the executive board why they did not organise some brief ad-hoc information meetings on the shop floor in order to avoid the diffusion of gossip. They smiled at each other, so underlining the naivety of my question, before one of them replied:

> That would not change anything. Even at the Annual General Meeting, you can see that no more than five minutes after the end, there is already some gossip going on.

Indeed, I noticed, for instance, that the minutes of the weekly executive-board meetings, which are posted close to the coffee machine, were seldom read. While one could conclude from this that criticising is, for Scopix members, an end in itself, such a conclusion would in

fact be inaccurate: rather, it is one of various means that co-operators use to limit chiefs' power. Indeed, the continuous flow of criticism and of requests for accountability that targets the board members keeps them alert not to go beyond their mandate. For instance, at the end of his individual interview (with the new executive committee, to get feedback from associates), Roger (who works in delivery) continued his discussion with the board for some time. As one of the most senior workers, Roger was keen to insist that 'executive-board members [had] always been spared within Scopix' and that they were always given some scope to act in accordance with their own personal interests. Although I cannot testify to the situation when previous boards were in place, I found his statement astonishing with respect to my own observations of the current board and its relations with other members. In stark contrast to Roger's view, what I found very striking was the cautiousness displayed by board members in avoiding any decision that may arouse the least suspicion of seeking to favour themselves – including a case where extending the responsibilities of one of the board members, although seemingly the most logical solution to the problem at hand, was dismissed. I interpret this cautiousness as a direct result of the pressurising activities exerted by co-operators, as previously described. In this sense, Roger's comments are probably best understood as if he were describing not what was happening but rather what should not happen – and, by so doing, contributing to having the threat of which he warned more surely averted.

Besides the executive board, other chiefs can be similarly targeted by this continuous work of criticising and demanding accountability. Raymond, one of the workers from the cutting section, who had repeatedly had arguments with the foreman in the preceding weeks, eventually decided to join the executive board's weekly meeting in order to reiterate his grievances. He started by mentioning that he would raise only things that he had already directly complained about to the foreman ('I've told him already'), thus making it clear that

what he was looking for was, above all, some sort of arbitration in his favour. He then complained that the foreman was always 'on his back' and constantly making 'digs' at him in order to detract from the perceived value of his work. He asked for a daily schedule to be provided to him so that he could work in an autonomous way, instead of being repeatedly bothered by the foreman's changing priorities. Finally, he criticised the board for taking sides too often with the foreman and stated that he was speaking not only for himself but for his entire section. Having talked for some 30 minutes, almost without being interrupted, he looked at his watch and suddenly stood up: 'F***, it's already 5.40 pm! My wife will kill me!' He hurried out of the room, only to poke his head back round the door to proclaim his conclusion: 'In short, he'd better stop pissing me off!'

If members of Scopix appear to be more afraid of their wives than of their chiefs, this is probably because their experience suggests that it is in fact easier to have the upper hand with the latter. On the day after Raymond's intervention at the executive-board meeting, I worked all day within his section and could hear him trying at length to convince his co-workers of the foreman's mistreatment of him and others, as well as conveying his mistrust of the executive board. At that stage, I realised that Raymond's lobbying echoed his mates' concerns only partially, and that he had been getting a little ahead of himself when claiming, the day before, that he was expressing the general opinion. However, when such lobbying does more closely reflect the feelings of the shop-floor workers, it has genuine consequences. Bernard, the current foreman, had in fact already occupied the position for some time, in the past. Having been found too authoritative by his former co-workers (he was previously a solderer), he was dismissed by the board from his foremanship after a petition was raised against him by shop-floor workers, and he returned for a time to his soldering job. He owes his recent comeback, one of the founding decisions of the new executive board, to his recognised technical skills and strength of character, but the negotiations required him to promise that he

would adjust his leadership style to be more consensual. While Raymond has probably developed too much enmity on the shop floor to be able to leverage existing discontent against Bernard, other pockets of resistance still exist in the factory and may succeed in doing so in the future.

This symbolic murder of the chief is reminiscent of the actual murders that were sometimes perpetrated against primitive chiefs who tried to exceed their roles (Clastres, 1994: 91, 170; but also Leach, 2004[1964] in another part of the world). Clastres reports the tragic end of one of them:

> They killed him in the middle of the square around which the village is built, the shelters. They killed him, all of them. I was told he was run through by perhaps thirty arrows! That is what they do with chiefs who want to play chiefs. In some cases, they turn their back on them, that is enough. If not, they wipe them out, once and for all.' (Clastres, 2012: 47, own translation)

Like the foreman, the executive board knows that its term – theoretically of four years – may come to an end more rapidly than planned if it dissatisfies Scopix members too much. This has not happened so far, all executive boards having been allowed to complete their term. Still, while Scopix's co-operators are offered the opportunity to demonstrate their support for the board each year through a show of hands at the Annual General Meeting, they have not done so: the vote has been consistently negative in recent years. Although a negative vote is not expected to lead automatically to the resignation of the executive board, it contributes to reminding its members that they are permanently at the mercy of their co-workers.

In addition to potentially leading to some concrete changes in the organisation chart, the relentless overt critique and demands for accountability expressed by co-operators have a more immediate effect. They place chiefs under constant pressure, in a position reminiscent of

that of Clastrian chiefs, i.e. their owing an infinite debt to the group, a debt that is never supposed to be fulfilled. The constant flow of overt critique that members of Scopix direct at their chiefs is comparable with the constant looting by Indians of their chiefs' possessions. The endless requests for accountability that subject Scopix chiefs to futile justification is similar to Indians' requirements for primitive chiefs to talk, in both cases reversing the dominant belief that speech would be 'power's *right*' instead of 'power's *duty*' (Clastres, 1987: 153). And in both cases, form is actually more important than content: in primitive societies, chiefs' speech can at times be empty and fail to convey any meaningful content; at Scopix, criticism again does not always take issue with real facts. What matters most is simply that the flow of speech or critique be sustained, thus indefinitely reaffirming the infinite nature of chiefs' debt.

Within Scopix, this state of affairs may be tough to experience. While the current foreman is mentally resilient and has the advantage of knowing the tricks that he himself long performed as a shop-floor worker, his two immediate predecessors left the company, the first due to burn-out and the second to being systematically played and cheated by workers. Consequently, when chiefs meet other chiefs, their talks may sometimes be more evocative of group therapy than of an exchange between self-confident managers:

> André, technical manager: I feel totally isolated within the company.

> Olivier, member of the executive board: And what about us? Don't you think we feel isolated as an executive board?

One Tuesday evening, around 8pm, the executive board was continuing its weekly meeting through talking on the pavement in front of the factory, despite the darkness and bitter cold. Its members had had a particularly hard day, and I could sense a lot of weariness and

despondency in their exchanges. To conclude, Olivier expressed in a striking manner a feeling that is widespread among Scopix chiefs:

> One is used to speaking about harassment in relation to an employee. But shouldn't it be possible to speak about harassment in relation to an executive board too?

*Schoolboy humour*

The third important dimension that is revealed when studying co-operators in their constant effort to prevent chiefs from being chiefs is their use of humour. In order to convey the meaning attached to such practices, I will draw on two examples.

The first of these two stories was initiated when André, the technical manager, proposed that a small office be installed behind one of the press brakes, so that Gaël, the operator running it, did not have to keep going up to the second floor to access the software needed to modify a blueprint manually. The change necessitated installing a desk and two dividing walls, and moving the desktop computer from the second to the shop floor. Gaël was himself very supportive of the idea, but the executive board eventually chose not to follow it up, deciding that there were more urgent priorities on which to spend the several hundred euros, and maybe also fearing that the computer could be used by workers for purposes other than work.

To make a joke of the situation, Paul, one of Gaël's bending mates, decided to install a fake office in the intended place. He put a wooden plank on two stands, which he covered with a calendar, to look like a desk blotter. He then found a rejected steel part that was a similar shape to a computer screen, and brought in one of the plastic chairs used for the summer barbecues, with its blue cushion. Finally, to put the finishing touches to his work, he added a fan, a small name card with 'ANDRÉ' written in red, and a sheet of cardboard to form the front of the desk. On the wall behind the desk, he hung a large cardboard sign, saying

'TECHNICAL DESK – MR GAËL' (see Picture 1). The installation triggered a lot of amusement on the shop floor, the quality of the craftsmanship and the attention to detail being particularly praised. Gaël, despite being the butt of the joke, acknowledged that it was an excellent one. I did not witness André's reaction, but (from what I was told) the joke brought about a hollow laugh.



**Figure 1: Fake technical desk crafted by Paul**

The installation remained there for approximately two months, with none of the chiefs asking for it to be removed. When I realised one day that it had disappeared, I asked Gaël what had happened and he told me:

> It was Paul and me who decided to remove it, like a couple of weeks ago. We just thought it did not really look great for customers.

Humour was used to mock not only the impeded fate of André's idea, but also the executive board's refusal. During one lunchtime in the shared kitchen, in the presence of Olivier (a

member of the executive board), the following conversation occurred. It had been a week of high absenteeism (through both holidays and sick leave), in the run-up to some departures:

> Régis: If this goes on, we will end up having more office workers than shop-floor ones!

> Gaël, very proud of his joke: That certainly won't happen. I recently asked for an office and it was refused by the board.

Olivier simply gave a forced laugh. This interaction shows how two dimensions of lay members' activities aimed at preventing chiefs from being chiefs tend to combine, humour often being intertwined with criticism (for related observations, see also Collinson, 1992; Korczynski, 2011; Rodrigues and Collinson, 1995). This appears to be a very powerful weapon, the use of humour preventing chiefs from responding properly to the critique unless they themselves think up a better joke with which to gain the upper hand.

During my fifth month at Scopix, I was myself involved in the second story that illustrates best how co-operators use humour to ridicule managers at times. That morning, I was working on the stamping machine, one of the jobs that I personally considered the most tedious, since the machine (in addition to being the noisiest on the floor) makes the ground vibrate unpleasantly. Besides loading up the metal sheets and unloading the parts and the sheet skeleton, there is not much to do while the machine runs, but the presence of a worker is required in front of the machine to intervene in case of a problem. André, the technical manager, came to greet me and noticed something was wrong:

> André: On these parts, you are supposed to remove the burrs in masked time as you go along. Didn't they tell you?

> Me: Uh … no, I didn't know …

The two workers posted nearby, Loïc and Edmond, came over to us right then, perhaps because they were curious about what was going on. (For accuracy, I mention that they both happen to be members of the supervisory board, but am certain this had no influence on what happened.) The following conversation ensued:

André, addressing them: Didn't you tell him that he is supposed to work in masked time on these parts and start removing the burrs as he goes along?

Loïc, with an incredulous smile: What?! Come on, André! It only takes a minute to remove all the burrs at the same time at the end. With a grinder, it will take no more than a minute; it makes no sense to do it as you go along. I don't think we're that tight for time at Scopix. If we were, we'd know by now!

During the exchange, Edmond, the second worker, had remained silent but expressed his agreement with Loïc through facial expression and gestures. A little vexed, André did not insist and left. A few minutes later, Edmond came back to me, immediately followed by Loïc, and offered me a mask he had cut from a sheet of cardboard (see Picture 2):

Edmond: Look, this way you will be able to work in masked time!

Loïc, appreciative of Edmond's sense of humour: Eh, have you seen our President?! [Edmond is sometimes called *Président* by some of his co-workers, because he is the only remaining worker who was there at the inception of the co-operative, and he has also been a member of the supervisory board for a long time.]
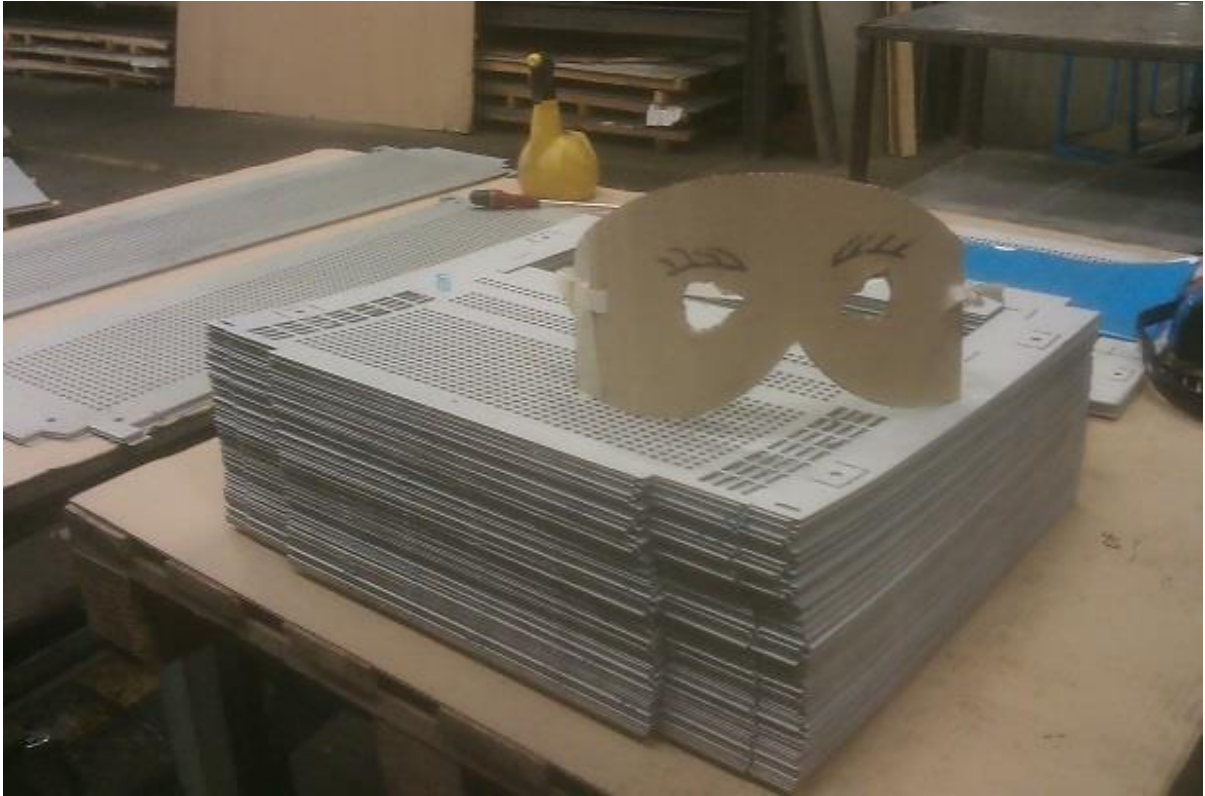
**Picture 1: Mask crafted by Edmond, lying on top of a pile of parts**

I tried to put the mask on my face, but broke the lashing, which was a bit too small. While I was thinking that this would put an end to the game, Edmond in fact returned in the afternoon with the repaired mask, the length of the lashing being now right for my head. I wore it for 15 to 20 minutes (I had to remove it, because it was dangerously narrowing my focus when loading and unloading) and must admit I did not feel any reluctance in doing so; it seemed the natural thing to do in response to the invitation. In particular, the fact that Edmond had taken the trouble to repair it provided a clear indication that any attempt to escape the game would lead to some disappointment. My intuition was right, and the sight of the mask provoked some frank laughter from workers passing by during the time I wore it. It so happened that André was not among them, but it was nonetheless clear that he was also an (or even the main) intended witness of the scene.

An outsider's eye may easily downplay such ritualistic games, but the reactions that followed left little room for doubt that these are important markers of Scopix's culture. Several workers, including the foreman and a member of the executive board, said to me with a broad smile: 'Now, you're ready to become a permanent here.' While it lasted, joining in with the joke made me a native. On the following days, another worker, Aziz, started to laugh every time we went past each other on the shop floor ('Ah, ah, the masked time! Very good!'), and called me either 'the masked time' or 'the masked avenger' on and off for several months. This does not mean that this cultural feature is not contested within Scopix, its childish characteristics being rejected by some. One worker with whom I had a good relationship told me:

> My poor [author's first name]! I like you very much, you know. It's not too late yet; you don't need to become like them.

Although he used a tone that was only half serious, I could detect traces of genuine concern in what he said. But still, the fact that he felt the need to contest this cultural frame is yet another testimony to its importance. In the mask joke, it was not only the manager who was mocked but also the managerial discourse, which – through the pun on 'masked time' – was deconstructed. The real status of managerial words is suddenly revealed: that is, empty exhortations with no impact on the reality of the shop floor. Through schoolboy humour, co-operators thus succeed – in one fell swoop – in undermining the credibility both of chiefs and of their favourite means of exerting power.

**Reframing traditional understandings of power and resistance**

The case of Scopix, as described through a Clastrian lens – that is, by looking at the efforts made by co-operators to avoid the coalescence of power in the hands of the co-operative's chiefs – raises several questions about the way organisation studies have generally conceived

of power and resistance. Historically, resistance has been understood by scholars raised in the Marxist tradition as the opposition by the working class to domination by those who either exert the global function of capital – that is the extraction, realisation and allocation of surplus value (Armstrong, 1985) – or ultimately benefit from it (Braverman, 1998[1974]; Edwards, 1979). Power and resistance – whether channelled by worker unions or directly undertaken by self-organised workers – thus appeared as contrasting attributes in the struggle between entrenched and clearly delimited interest groups.

Three interrelated trends have occurred that lead us to progressively reconsider this view. First, neo-Marxist studies of power and resistance were progressively forced to acknowledge that class struggle was more and more concealed, with the implementation of control systems such as piece-rating tending to align workers' objectives with the interests of the dominant class (Burawoy, 1979). As a consequence, the study of power and resistance became increasingly interested in conflicts that were only marginally imprinted by ideology, and where workers and their representatives – rather than claiming the grand ambition of working-class emancipation – aimed, more modestly,  at local arrangements that could improve working conditions (Burawoy, 1979; Delbridge, 1998; Edwards, 1979). Second, questions of identity and subjectivity gradually emerged as additional explanations for resistance, workers being seen as contextually engaged in the construction of selves or in the defence of collective identities that are not necessarily congruent with those that management tries to impose upon them (Collinson, 1992; Ezzamel et al., 2001; Jermier et al., 1994; Kondo, 1990; Thomas and Davies, 2005). Third, in the combined face of control systems that were deemed to be increasingly sophisticated and pervasive (Casey, 1999; Covaleski et al., 1998; Kunda, 1992; Sewell, 1998; Townley, 1996; Willmott, 1993) and of a socio-economic context that has rendered the balance of power less and less favourable to workers (Du Gay and Morgan, 2013; Parker et al., 2014), it was argued that, rather than having disappeared, manifestations

of resistance had progressively taken renewed forms (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Hodson, 1995; Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995). Such manifestations are often now more mundane than heroic (Certeau, 1984; Korczynski, 2007), and more covert than overt (Fleming and Spicer, 2002; Scott, 1990), and need therefore to be sought in the 'subterranean realms of organisational life' (Fleming and Sewell, 2002: 863). Cynicism, as a way for workers to distance themselves from dominant corporate discourses and injunctions, constitutes a paradigmatic example of such behaviours (Fleming, 2005; Fleming and Sewell, 2002; Karfakis and Kokkinidis, 2011), no matter how contested its effectiveness in genuinely influencing power relations in the workplace (Contu, 2008; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Willmott, 1993).

There is little doubt that these three concurrent trends, by significantly extending not only the possible meanings to be attributed to resistance but also the list of (mis)behaviours that are now to be included in its scope (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Fleming and Spicer, 2007), have significantly altered dominant scholarly conceptions of power and resistance. What has remained constant, however, is the periodically repeated expression of the belief in the existence of objectively divergent interests between capital and labour, no matter how concealed this may sometimes be. This still constitutes the fundamental reason for justifying resistance in the workplace (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Collinson, 1992; Spicer and Böhm, 2007), and, as a consequence, the almost-systematic assignation of fixed roles to workplace actors, power being invariably seen as an exclusive attribute of managers – and resistance, symmetrically, as an exclusive attribute of subordinate workers.

The Scopix case, in casting co-operators who benefit equally from the extraction of surplus value, can be considered an extreme case (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). It not only neutralises the presence of objectively divergent interests between chiefs and lay workers, but also (as Scopix's chiefs cannot claim closer proximity with shareholders and so a better understanding

of their intentions) leaves them short of a reason to impose their own will and decisions upon their co-workers. (See also Joannidès, 2012 for a similarly extreme case, which shows that, in the context of the Salvation Army, the hierarchy is again contested, as the chiefs cannot impose their decisions upon lay Salvationists in the name of an alleged higher proximity to God.) These features of Scopix are particularly conducive to casting light on often-overlooked aspects of power and resistance, and thus encourage reconsideration of traditionally granted conceptions of these.

*Power, resistance: whose power and whose resistance?*

The first element from the Scopix case that challenges traditional conceptions of power and resistance relates to the question of who in reality exerts power, and who resists. For Clastres, the answer to these questions was straightforward when it came to South-American communities: the observation that Indian chiefs were powerless testified to the fact that power was found on the side of society (Clastres, 1987, 1994). If the Indian chiefs were not offered the opportunity to extract themselves from the social body, thus preventing groups from being divided between those who command and those who obey, this meant that power remained in the hands of the tribes. Resistance by chiefs was seldom noticed, and when it occurred, the most likely outcome was its rapid crackdown through the chief's dismissal or murder (Clastres, 2012: 47). In sum, confronted with the questions of who in fact exerted power and who resisted, Clastres (in the case of South-American Indian societies) offered an answer that is symmetrically opposed to the one that is usually taken for granted within organisation studies. Power was an attribute of the tribe, and resistance was an attribute of the chief, but with the latter rendered very unlikely by the ultra-efficient mechanisms of control devised by Indians, which ultimately let the occurrence of an unexplained and disruptive event – what Clastres, drawing on La Boétie, refers to as the *malencontre* (Cardoso, 2011; Clastres, 1994;

La Boétie, Étienne de, 2002[1574]) – be the sole possibility for the reversal of power relationships.

The case of Scopix speaks in favour of an assignation of power and resistance duties that is more nuanced both than that traditionally envisioned within organisation studies and, at the same time (despite also featuring chiefs who are to a large extent powerless), than that envisioned by Clastres. Indeed, I described both instances in which the traditional vision of corporate settings seemed to apply, with chiefs' tentative displays of power being resisted by workers, and instances in which, conversely and in line with the Clastrian take, chiefs seemed to be the ones resisting co-operators' injunctions. We could apply to the former instances the contestations by workers of the selective implementation of the clocking-in system and of the unfairly awarded bonus. In those situations, workers can be seen as classically opposing some chiefs' decisions, as could be similarly observed, albeit often with less success, in most corporate settings. And we could apply to the latter instances the incessant requests for chiefs' accountability formulated by co-operators, to which chiefs try to respond by engaging in either justificatory work or truth reinstatement. In those situations, chiefs can in turn be seen as the ones resisting workers' displays of power, thus turning upside-down prevalent understandings of power and resistance.

There is no better illustration of the always-possible shift in power and resistance relationships at Scopix than the reference to harassment, such as that issued by Olivier: in the executive-board member's words, traditionally assigned roles of harassers and harassed suddenly merit being inverted, leaving the possibility open for power and resistance to be accounted for along reinvented lines. Similar shifts are made visible in the daily activities of the executive board, which may sometimes take sides with shop-floor workers against functional managers and may sometimes do just the opposite, rendering networks of power and resistance situational, and thus perpetually provisional. As a matter of fact, the singular

position of the three members of the executive board is made all the more conducive to confusing traditional lines by their all happening to be the boss (qua members of the board) of their own boss (qua shop-floor workers), thus multiplying the opportunities for shifting roles and, in so doing, the loci of power and resistance. In sum, in view of the Scopix case, traditional conceptions of power and resistance, which envisage them as a priori and narrowly assigned to fixed groups, no longer hold. They now need to be dismissed in favour of a vision that considers the exercising of power and resistance as no more than temporarily assigned to individuals or collectives and as always likely to be redistributed along new lines of interpretation (Thomas and Hardy, 2011).

*Power, resistance: what first?*

The second element from the Scopix case that raises questions about traditional understandings of power and resistance relates to the usually admitted anteriority of power to resistance. In line with interpretations of a mechanistic sort, usually borrowed from physics, resistance is seen as naturally produced by power, as a mere counter-force that gets automatically released, albeit in varying degrees, in response to the application of some initial and triggering force. As a consequence, power and resistance become conceptually imprisoned within a 'Newtonian' (Thomas et al., 2011) 'action–reaction type of relationship' (Pina e Cunha, Miguel et al., 2013).

The case of Scopix undermines this mechanistic view of power and resistance, for it displays many instances in which members of the co-operative engage in activities with aims that seem not to respond to chiefs' endeavours, but rather to anticipate them – and, in so doing, more surely to avert them. The case of the Clastrian tribe is similarly replete with examples illustrating the same phenomenon. Particularly illustrative of such activities are the repeated assertions of equality, whether playfully or in a more serious tone, by Scopix members to

chiefs; these have the effect of deterring the latter from excessively overt authoritarian claims and conduct. Roger's comments, mentioned earlier, are of the same nature. His portrayal (to the new board) of previous executive-board members as privileged and selfish provides a compelling example of preventive activities that lead chiefs to much cautiousness, in particular to avoid engaging in actions that may arouse any suspicion of willingness to overstep their mandates or to favour self-serving decisions.

These examples tend to confirm that traditional views of power and resistance, which mechanistically consider resistance to be the natural reaction to power, miss part of the phenomenon that they purpose to account for. Indeed, if these various activities were to be interpreted in terms of resistance expressed by subordinates to their chiefs, they could be coined as representing 'pre-emptive' or 'anticipatory' resistance. However, doing this would conspicuously contradict the assumed understanding of resistance as being subsequent to power. In order to solve this paradox, one possibility would again be to relax the assumption of a fixed assignation of power and resistance roles (Thomas and Hardy, 2011) – as we did when reckoning that managers and their subordinates were in fact constantly shifting roles. Pre-emptive moves, such as those frequently made by Scopix members, could then be reinterpreted as expressions of power rather than resistance. But another possibility, which may – I suggest – be even more fruitful, would be to take one step further and also to relax the assumption of duality between power and resistance (Knights and Vurdubakis, 1994; Mumby, 2005), thus considering that resistance is not external to but instead operates from within power (Knights and Vurdubakis, 1994). In place of two separate and dichotomous concepts, there would remain only contextual networks of power relationships or struggles, within which power and resistance would be seen as co-constitutive and indiscernibly intertwined (Fleming and Spicer, 2007; Knights and Vurdubakis, 1994). Several recent studies of organisational change seem to have engaged in such directions by demonstrating the fragility

of the usual distinctions drawn between active change agents and passive recipient agents, presenting change instead as the outcome of a co-construction between managers and subordinates, in which power and resistance are no longer readily discernible (Courpasson et al., 2012; Ford et al., 2008; Thomas et al., 2011). In showing that change processes are not accurately reported when presented as imposed from above by powerful managers on resisting subordinates – rather, they reflect the engagement of both parties in subjective struggles around meaning – these studies have rightly made important steps in blurring the boundaries between the very concepts of power and resistance. However, the notions of thoughtful (Ford et al., 2008), facilitative (Thomas et al., 2011) and productive (Courpasson et al., 2012) resistance, which these studies promote, must equally be discarded, for they still contribute to reasserting the assignation of a priori and fixed roles when presenting resistance as the monopoly of employees against managers.

*Power, resistance: what is left?*

The last element from the Scopix case, which questions traditional understandings of power and resistance, directly stems from the two previously raised concerns; it relates to the essence of power. If power and resistance are not possessed once and for all by given individuals or collectives, but are instead contextually found in constantly shifting networks of power relations – and if, correlatively, resistance and power cannot be properly discerned, but instead are both indistinct parts of the same phenomenon – how is power eventually to be defined?

This is probably the aspect on which the Clastrian perspective is the most insightful. What Clastres has expressed so eloquently is that power is not embedded in certain titles, functions or positions, but is instead the outcome of the control mechanisms devised by the tribe. With polygamy, the Indian chief is conferred a privilege that is made all the more huge by the fact

that South-American primitive societies sometimes comprise more men than women, meaning that polyandry is consequently the norm (Clastres, 1987: 116 #590). Such an immense privilege creates an imbalance that can never be offset and constitutes, for this very reason, the founding principle of power relations within the tribe (Clastres, 1987). Indeed, it is because it is impossible to settle the debt owed to the tribe that the Indian chief can, in return, be submitted to infinite extortion of goods and words, and simultaneously be deprived of any form of power and authority. In the Scopix case, no similar privilege needs to be conferred upon executive-board members to give rise to similar mechanisms: the monthly bonus of 150 euros with which they are rewarded does not cover their extra hours, and what in fact makes them volunteer for these posts is the sheer naive belief, albeit rapidly abandoned once in office, that they may make a difference to the way the co-operative is run. Their hubris seems to be reason enough for their mates to submit them to the various containment mechanisms that I previously described, and thus largely to limit the extent of their prerogatives. Again, this shows that power is not embedded in hierarchies, but is best described as emerging from configurations of practices – or, to put it another way, that power should always be considered the *explenandum* rather than the *explenans*. Being a chief may well be tantamount to being powerful, but only if chieftainship rests on underlying mechanisms that allow it to be so; this is definitely not the case either in the Indian tribe or in Scopix, where the prevalent mechanisms are – conversely – those that prevent chiefs from being chiefs.

Because he conceived power as the intended outcome of subtle mechanisms of (unbalanced) exchange, Clastres can be said to have been one of the first to have correctly defined power as a technology (Foucault, 2007). In emphasising the impossibility of equating power with something that would, a priori, be possessed by certain people or be embedded in certain positions, the understanding of power as a technology invites organisational scholars to dig into the detailed organisational processes and practices by which power relationships are in

fact constituted, a direction that is also echoed in theorisations of power as 'power to' rather than 'power over' (Chan, 2000; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009). While such an emphasis on technologies of power is hardly new within organisation studies, it tends to have been narrowly restricted to studies of control and surveillance – through, for instance, the description and analysis of processes related to the implementation of systems such as Human Resource Management (Weiskopf and Munro, 2012), Total Quality Management (Delbridge, 1995) and management accounting (Alvehus and Spicer, 2012). In focusing on such highly formalised systems of control, whose initiative can thus be that of management only, it has neglected the possibility of a whole range of technologies that would draw on much less (or even no) technical equipment, and be little formalised. The Scopix case, through featuring the effects of implicit debt-based mechanisms on power relationships, provides an instantiation of technologies of this kind, and thus invites organisation studies to attend to them more systematically.

In sum, the Scopix case, through featuring co-operators in their continual effort to 'prevent chiefs from being chiefs', endorses the view that power relationships are the contingent outcome of contextual configurations of practices. In these, power and resistance are no longer readily discernible (rather than resistance being considered a detached reaction to power), and the related role assignations are constantly shifting (rather than power being the fixed attribute of managers, and resistance that of subordinate workers.) Additionally, it suggests that such configurations of practices may well rely on little equipped and little formalised mechanisms – rather than sophisticated technologies, which are usually the privilege of management only.

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**Appendix: Methodological insights**

My data consist mostly of fieldnotes, which I spent between two and three hours after each working day to gather in an electronic diary. These fieldnotes were themselves based on headnotes, i.e. my mental recollection of events and talks of the day, as well as on some notes jotted on a small notebook wherever possible, some jobs like the stamping one allowing some free time while the machine runs (Emerson et al., 1995). During the regular meetings or those planned sufficiently in advance, I used to bring my laptop and directly type my notes in the diary.

While I had already identified power, resistance and organisational democracy as potential topics of inquiry, in a broad sense, before starting my fieldwork, I had not specifically spotted the theme covered in the present paper, that is the forms of daily resistance aimed by co-operators at avoiding the coalescence of power in the hands of the chiefs, at that time. It rather emerged, quite rapidly, from my engagement in the field, appearing to me as one of its most striking features, a view that is in fact shared by members of the co-operative themselves.

In order to keep some spontaneity to my account, I decided not to perform any systematic coding of the material I had collected. Rather, I chose to draw on the methods of ethnographic writing advocated by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995) in order to produce a 'thematic narrative' that is fieldnote-centered and where the story is analytically thematised, but in rather loose ways (Emerson et al., 1995: 170). In that spirit, I used as my starting point the observations that I considered the most revealing and edited the corresponding fieldnote excerpts. I then started to provide some interpretations for their meanings and progressively connected them to related observations, thus generating in the end a sequence of 'thematically organised units of excerpts and analytic commentary' (Emerson et al., 1995: 170).

My aim was first and foremost to produce a convincing account, i.e. one that meets the objectives of authenticity, plausibility and criticality (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993). I tried to achieve authenticity, that is 'convey[ing] the vitality of everyday life encountered by the researcher in the field setting' (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993: 599), by exposing in the paper my status during the fieldwork and clearly delimiting in the findings my involvement in the narrated events. I dealt with the criterion of plausibility, that is connecting with organisational scholars' common concerns (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993: 600), by relating my empirics to the literature on power and resistance. Finally, I endeavoured to reach criticality, that is 'the ability of the text to actively probe readers to reconsider their taken-for-granted ideas and beliefs' (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993: 600), by showing how the thought of Pierre Clastres was conducive to the possibility of new interpretations in and around this literature.