Construire la démocratie organisationnelle: Le cas de la Louve

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Résumé :

Cet article s'appuie sur une recherche ethnographique de deux ans au sein de la Louve, un supermarché marché coopératif et participatif analysé comme exemple d'organisation alternative et démocratique (Cheney et al., 2014). Ces concepts, bien que parfois flous, servent dans ce cas à comprendre la place possible dans notre monde pour des manières alternatives d'organiser l'activité économique (Gibson-Graham 2008). Pour comprendre la singularité des organisations alimentaires dans ce contexte d'économies diverses, nous nous appuyons sur une théorie politique des relations de marché (Reinecke, 2010) dans laquelle les produits alimentaires sont perçues comme sources de débats politiques. Dans ce cadre, nous pensons que l'émergence de nouvelles démocraties organisationnelles peut être mieux comprise en observant comment leur objet social est politiquement chargé. Nos données nous permettent de comprendre la Louve comme une organisation alternative et un projet politique avec ses détracteurs en dehors mais également au sein même de l'organisation. Pour rendre compte de l'organisation, nous la racontons du point de vue de ses frontières. Plus particulièrement, nous analysons la difficulté à définir une direction commune dans une démocratie organisationnelle à travers le flou de ses frontières. Nous regardons ensuite comment la démocratie est réintégrée dans l'environnement de travail par des micro-pratiques des membres et les discours portés par l'organisation. Enfin, nous montrons que la politisation de la gouvernance de l'organisation ne peut être penser séparément de la politisation des conditions de production et de consommation des produits vendus. En tant que telle, cette alternative ouvre la voie pour mieux comprendre la structuration de la démocratie dans les organisations représentant l'économie diverse.

Mots-clés : Démocratie organisationnelle, organisations alternatives, Coopératives, Performativité critique

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INTRODUCTION

The recent years saw, in France, the rise of a new type of food retailers: participant cooperatives. The most famous one is *La Louve* in Paris, but we can cite *Scopelie* in Nantes, *SuperQuinQuin* in Lille, *SuperCoop* in Bordeaux, *La cagette* in Montpellier, *La Chouette* Coop in Toulouse or *Otsokop* in Bayonne[1]. Historically, the model of cooperative supermarkets was that a national chain in which every store's manager was a cooperator of the national group. Workers were, thus, excluded from the status of cooperator (Pluvinage, 2015). The governance is strictly different in the new wave of participant food cooperatives. Their concept is uncommon but simple: only cooperators can do their groceries inside the supermarket and all cooperators have to work three hours every four weeks at the supermarket. It will lower the cost structure and prices are expected to be 20% to 40% lower than in conventional mass supermarkets. Following the 2008 crisis and inspired by the Park Slope Food Coop in New-York, citizens started these projects to bypass conventional mass retailers and empower themselves as consumers. Parallel to a rising awareness of the alienating effects of brand marketing strategies (Klein, 1999), these groups of consumers are trying to imagine alternative spaces to challenge their entanglement in market relationships. Supported by public investors and cooperative banks, the first ones, launched in 2010, are opening and come from utopia to reality.

In France, These participant cooperatives have been spotted and largely reported by the media. They were rapidly identified as drawing their inspiration from the US based Park Slope Food Coop. The specificity of this organization, however, is that it relies heavily on volunteer work and a local community of individuals. Consequently, even when it reaches a critical size in the local community it has no incentive to export its model and conquer new market shares. Once cooperators have their organization functioning correctly, their only focus is to maintain it operational. This goes against the principles of capitalism economies in which expansion and the conquest of new markets is necessary to increase profits and returns

1 http://alternatives.blog.lemonde.fr/2016/11/02/le-formidable-essor-des-supermarches-cooperatifs/

on investments. Currently, each French project is independent, carried by individuals advancing their own agenda without any financial support from the Park Slope Food Coop, for instance. They do not have formal links between each other except informal ones, in that they try to implement the same organizational structure. The amazement of the media for such organizational innovation can, thus, potentially be qualified as they might concern only a few thousand people overall. It echoes the critic that those cooperatives are organizations restricted to hippies and rich leftists and do not hold the potential to effectively reshape our economies.

The situation might be more complex. To understand more deeply this rising phenomenon we draw on researches on organizational democracies and alternative organizations (Cheney et al., 2014, Cornforth, 1995, Michels, 1949). Even though concepts such as democracy and alternative are blurry and encompass very different types of organizations, they present key aspects from which we can better understand what is at stakes in those cooperative supermarkets. Through this literature we explore the common weaknesses of organizational democracies (Michels, 1949) and possible ways out (e.g. Cornforth, 1995). This helps us understand what spaces there are for alternative organizations in our economies. Inspired by geographical economics and the works of Gibson-Graham (2008, 2015) we advocate for a larger understanding of alternative organizations not just as marginal organizations but as representatives of a diverse economy already at work and which need to be performatively put at the front of the stage, particularly in management research. To understand the singularity of food organizations in this context of diverse economies, we turn to a political theory of market relations (Levy, 2016, Reinecke, 2010). Through this frame, we can analyze food commodities as political objects which values are negotiated by different actors. Overall, we hope to advance the understanding of the multiplicity of democracy in organizations. contend that the rise of new organizational democracies can be better understood by highlighting how their company purposes are politically loaded.

This research paper rests on an ethnographic work in *La Louve*, the first French participant cooperative. After two years of following the project's development, the supermarket finally opened allowing for further data analysis. We will present our first results although the fieldwork is still ongoing. Through interventions in the cooperative, this research advances a critically performative agenda (Spicer et. al., 2009). This agenda's goals are twofold. First it seeks to understand how these organizations are performatively reshaping our

cognitive understanding of what organizations are relevant and possible. Secondly, it aims at intervening as researcher to contribute to this critical performativity by putting on the front scene a functioning alternative organization advancing a critical agenda.

At this stage, the results are preliminary. The supermarket opened just a couple of months ago to what is officially a 'test phase'. The data coding is consequently still ongoing as the coming months will give us precious insights about the development of the organization and the problems it will face. We organized our results around four main ideas. We first draw on our data to show how the cooperative is thought of as an alternative organization and a political project, and as any political project, how it faces critics from within and outside the cooperative. To make a more precise account of the organization we, then, study it through its boundaries. Specifically, we analyze how the blurriness of its boundaries highlights the difficulty to settle a clear purpose in a politically oriented organization and explains how this closed organization can still diffuse its democratic ideal in its environment. We then analyze the process through which democracy is reintegrated in our society through micro-practices of members and large discourses on organizational democracy. Finally, we look at how the politicization of the food and commodities sold at the cooperative is gradually transforming and politicizing the whole project and transforming members in political actors.

Even though the overall impact of the cooperative might seems limited, it changes what we consider possible and, consequently, participates to performatively shape the organizational landscape. As such, this alternative opens a gate to further advance organizational democracy in our diverse economies. The paper is structured as follow, we will first introduce the conceptual framework then briefly present the methodology used to do the fieldwork, then we sketch out the first elements of results and we conclude by offering some elements of discussion.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Alternative organizations are becoming a trending topic in organization studies (Parker et al. 2014; Parker, Fournier, and Reedy 2007; Fournier 2006). They are organizations that challenges mainstream capitalism by promoting different ways of organizing but also different goals to pursue, following, for instance, a degrowth agenda (Fournier, 2008). The concept is very vast and if it useful to highlight the diverse economy at work, it is less

relevant to study specifically democracy since alternative organizations can be non-democratic. We advocate, however, that a focus on democratic organizations is necessary. In the light of recent threats to western democracies, it seems more and more urgent to bridge the gap between the official democracy of our public institutions and the strict hierarchy largely diffused in the workplace as it represents a serious threat to Democracy (Hertz, 2001). Democracy encompasses different modes of governance and defining precisely organizational democracy can be risky, as it was already argued years ago: "The vast literature on work democratization in industry uses the term "democratization" to refer to virtually everything from non-authoritarian leadership styles, to mild forms of worker participation in determining working conditions, to rather extensive forms of worker self-managed enterprises" (Smith, 1976:276). Consequently, organization democracy is mostly viewed as the dissemination of democratic ideals to workplaces' governance and is defined by explaining what it is not, such as "hierarchical workplace governance, where sovereign managers routinely dictate to employee subjects." (Johnson, 2006:246). As research's topics, they offer promises of performative interventions to weaken the capitalist hegemony and to contest *capitolenctrism* (Gibson-Graham, 1996). Two competing views drive management studies on organizational democracies. The first is often labeled the 'business case for democracy' (e.g. Kerr, 2004) and explore the potential of democracy to increase organization's efficiency. The second stream, on which we draw, view democracy as a value in itself and, thus, because of its moral benefit has to be promoted for itself (e.g. Stiglitz, 2009).

Indeed, if we observe that our capitalist economies largely rely on non-democratic forms of organization, we do not, however, start from scratch when trying to promote organizational democracy. The capitalist system is not entirely hegemonic (Gibson-Graham, 1995); we are already entangled in diverse economies in which organizational democracies can be found despite hegemonic discourses on capitalism. Their existence demonstrates the presence of multiple economic spaces at work within our contemporary capitalistic society which need to be performatively acknowledged as a resistance to the forces towards homogenization of economic practices. When gathered all those alternatives impact our lives much more than capitalist corporations, thus we need to make them, more often than not, the focus of our research, in a performative effort to de-marginalized them (Gibson-Graham, 2008, Spicer et al., 2009).

These alternative and democratic organizations do not randomly appear in the organizational landscapes. They are more commonly found in some specific sectors of the economy. Among these, the alternative food networks are particularly promising to understand this diverse economies and how they affect organizations (Gritzas and Kavoulakos, 2015). Many proponents argue that our embodiment in an organizational world makes our society non-democratic because the vast majority of those organizations still rely on hierarchical power's distribution (Hertz, 2001). To follow Foucault's vision, we are incarcerated in an environment of disciplinary institutions (Foucault, 1977). But as the example of the Mondragon cooperative illustrates, alternative organizations can also create a consistent network of less hierarchical structures (Cheney, 1999). The case of Mondragon offers insights in that the cooperative successful development is often explained by the vast network of supporting organizations (cooperative banks, insurances, schools) that were created almost simultaneously to spread the cooperative and democratic values throughout the Basque community. To understand the rise of alternative organization we thus need to understand networks of alternative, links and synergies between those organizations that are working to challenge the mainstream system.

In France, big retailing companies (such as Carrefour) are, dominating the market with more than half of all food sales in the country. However, alternative economic spaces have always existed (Parker et al., 2014). Alternatives can take the form of hybrid organizations, balancing between economic and social objectives (Battilana & Dorado, 2010) such as Food Assembly[2]. This for-profit organization uses a web platform to connect local farmers with consumers in order to reduce intermediaries, prices and the environmental footprints of our purchasing behaviors, while promoting organic food. Representative of the sharing economy and example of platform capitalism, Food Assembly has known a rapid growth in the recent years, illustrating the potential for success of such hybrid organizations. In the meantime, more radical forms of alternative emerge such a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). If the first CSA were created in Japan in the late 1950s (Groh & McFadden, 1990), in France, the first one was created only in 2001 even though has been rising since (Lanciano and Saleilles, 2015). Historically, the alternative in France took the form of organic cooperative supermarkets which are spreading since the 1970s. They represent an alternative in that they bypass conventional agriculture and that they promote cooperativism even though they were

2 In French : 'La Ruche Qui Dit Oui'.

mostly cooperatives in which workers were not all cooperators (Pluvinage, 2015). In the recent years, a new type of cooperative supermarket is rising. Influenced by the USA, many cooperative and participative supermarkets have emerged and been spotted by the press as a new sign of a democratic takeover of organizations by citizens. Contrary to what existed before in France, they are cooperatives of consumers. Everybody in the supermarket is a cooperator and has to work a few hours a month, the distinction between workers and clients is therefore suppressed. All of this supports the idea that the food retailing industry is already a diverse economy and that it is still diversifying even more.

Cooperative supermarkets are not new in the organizational landscapes. It emerges in the nineteenth century and it knew a rebound in the 1960s. Many studies have explored the inherent difficulty of democratic organizations particularly around the idea of "the degeneration thesis" (Michels, 1949). Following Michels study of political parties, any democratic organization is bound to be governed by an elite oligarchy reproducing its power in the long run, thus diluting the democratic values. Lately, the risk of recuperation of critical ideals by mainstream capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005) made a strong case to explain the decline of alternatives and their marginal role in our societies. However, it seems that the worker cooperatives are not doomed to degeneration (Cornforth, 1995). The recent boom of alternative food networks has opened a new gate to organizational democracy, an observation that contradicts pessimistic accounts of organizational democracy.

The main issue with *la* Louve is, thus, its democratic feature as taken-for-granted. Beyond the discourse, how can we assess its organization as democratic? What are the foundations of organizational democracies? And furthermore, can we take for granted that invoking the concept of democracy will enforce better relations among members?

The focus on a food cooperative is not insignificant, particularly regarding its tendency to generate political debate inside the organization. Consuming, and thus buying food, is a basic human need. Today the situation has changed to become more complex. Food cannot be perceived as a politically neutral object anymore (Levy et al., 2016). It is politically charged by many debates about the values carried by the food we produce and eat. We hear scandals about how food is made, about how it is served to us (Schlosser, 2001), how it is distributed, how we eat it (Petrini, 2013) and how we throw it away (Stuart, 2009). Going to the supermarket has become a political act.To some extent, the production and consumption of food products has become the symbol of a neoliberal system and its excesses. The

Spanghero scandal, for example, illustrated how supply chains powered by shadow intermediaries and financial investors could endangered consumers' rights and health. It is also an object that crystallise many tensions linked to the environmental crisis we are facing, whether because of the carbon footprint of products travelling several times across the world or because of the consequences beard by some countries due to others' practices (e.g. the deforestation in Indonesia to allow for the world oil palm consumption). These issues are more and more adopted by citizens who are changing their purchasing behaviors or try to influence big corporations in order to reduce the negative externalities of the products they consume.

The price setting process is itself a political issue. Contrary to neo-liberal mainstream theories, a price does not reflect a negotiation between free agents (Levy, 2016, Reinecke, 2010). Price setting can reflect power relationships and issues of domination. Yet, this issue is not under democratic deliberation today. It has been left out and naturalized, until recently (Klein, 2000, Reinecke, 2010). Mass retailers, through the performation of neo-liberal discourse promoting homo-oeconomicus, render utility calculus based on solely on price comparison an important feature of nowadays purchasing behaviors. The present mainstream model is one of mass retailers controlling the price setting process and, consequently, of consumers not having any control over those power relationships between western purchasing offices and small food producers. The value regimes defended in each price setting are thus hard and long to challenge for customers who have only indirect effects on CSR policies of mass retailers (Levy et al. 2016). Consequently, to integrate debate about price setting in the framework of a democratic cooperative supermarket might allow citizens to get back the control of a crucial political issue. These new organizations radically change citizens' relation to democracy as an everyday activity by allowing them to more directly negotiate and challenge these competing value regimes.

We now turn to the methodology used to develop this political vision of market relations and how can alternative organizations enforce them with the case study of a French participant cooperative.

METHODOLOGY

This study relies on a single case study which is extracted from an ongoing ethnographic study. The case is about 'la Louve' (the female wolf in French) which is a new

food cooperative supermarket in the North of Paris. It is a participant cooperative, which means that only members can get access to the products (at prices estimated to be 20 to 40% lower) in exchange of 3 hours of work every four weeks. In a nutshell, it suppresses the distinction between members and consumers. Today, the cooperative gathers almost 3 500 members and 6 full time employees. The latter are also cooperators but are working full time to do some specific tasks which necessitate a continuous presence or a legal representation. Regarding major decisions, it follows the cooperative principle of one member equals one voice. The project started in 2010 with the initiative of two New-Yorkers living in Paris and dissatisfied with present food retail systems. They wished to import the business model of the Brooklyn 'Park Slope Food Coop'. Although the two cooperatives do not have any formal link, the latter is helping its French copycat to start its activity. It particularly gives advices on how to implement democratic principles based on its own experience.

A single case study allows us to gain insights on an emerging object (Yin 2003). Participant cooperatives have been scarcely studied; the single case study was thus relevant to explore more deeply one possible example of an alternative to organize work more humanely in a retail industry well-known for its alienating practices. My first contact with the cooperative started two years ago. At the time, it was not even a cooperative yet, just an association of supporters. I met one of them who insisted that I join a meeting because of my previous work experience in the retailing industry. Since then, I have been actively engaged with the cooperative, first by giving them knowledge based on my previous experience or, when relevant, on my academic knowledge. This is, nevertheless, not (yet) an action-research design or a consultancy based research. My participation is still more that of an activist than that of an academic. Doing this ethnography, I try to understand the phenomena from within, by not separating myself too much from other cooperators. This first part of my research is thus based on a insider's ethnography.

Since the opening in November 2016, I am also coordinating a group of cooperators for three hours every four weeks. Just as few other hundreds cooperators, I have voluntarily accepted to take more responsibilities by coordinating the work of members registered during the same shift. We are three coordinators per shift to cover the large space of the store. It consist mostly of communicating with previous and future coordinators and with full-time workers to ensure that we are doing the relevant tasks during our three hours shift.

This is, of course, not without consequences on my research because I am actively shaping, however at the margin, the object I am studying. In the meantime, it is also a great opportunity to share get and share more information with other members, to switch from one task to another or one place to another in the supermarket. Finally, it gives me a broader view of the work being done at a given moment in my shift. Overall, this enriches my observations and my research and give me access to data that would be otherwise not available (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2012).

I have also been engaged in many social events with the cooperative such as general assembly, parties, workshop, and debates and so on. It allows me to get access to various types of data: field journal, formal and informal interviews, pictures and videos of the life at the cooperative, e-mails, Facebook group messages, and forum discussion retracing the internal debates and discussion of the cooperative. As any other cooperator, all these activities are based on volunteering.

The analysis of the data follows mostly an abduction process. It was gathered in an Nvivo project and coded without explicit preconceived categories. It followed a back and forth process which is still ongoing to make sense of the data. The categories were refined little by little by confrontation with new data or new literatures. Overall, it allowed us to explore the democratic potential of this alternative organization of work but also, to enter into more details in what is still challenging in those practices. The coding process and data analysis is still underway and consequently, the results are considered preliminary.

FINDINGS

The findings have to be completed by further analysis given that the coming months will be crucial for the development of the cooperative. Indeed, economic survival is still a critical issue for the cooperative. It is currently highly in debt from cooperative banks and public investors. The opening was delayed several times, the financial projections were, therefore, revised and the cash flow management was not as smooth as predicted, rent has to be paid monthly without any revenue for several months. Now that the cooperative is partially opened, cooperators are expecting to rapidly get a positive cash flow so that interests can be paid. In this way, one of the founders expressed his fear in an informal conversation: “we have 3500 cooperators but some of them joined because they like our ideals not to do their everyday groceries. We don’t know how many cooperators it represents but in the short term

we need people to come on a regular basis to generate cash" (Tristan[3], one of the founder). The reality test is thus still ongoing for this cooperative. Contrary to its US counterpart, it is not financially independent yet, even though its ties are with institutions participating also to the diverse economies and thus comprehensive to its current situation. Overall, the present state of affairs of the cooperative allowed us to identified four main issues: the inception of an alternative organization and a democracy, the blurry boundaries of the cooperative, the enforcement of democratic ideals and the politicization of the company purpose.

The food cooperative is firstly an alternative organization and can be defined as an organizational democracy. Cooperatives have long been analyzed as alternative in that they challenge mainstream governance practices, benefits sharing practices and that they aim for the emancipation of their workers (Leca et. al., 2014). Our data highlights two features to support this idea: the food coop is promoting itself as an alternative to mainstream mass retailers, symbols of immoral capitalism and as a political alternative it faces critics. Firstly, the cooperative is promoting itself as an alternative which can be perceived as "suggestive of organizational practices that are novel, creative, untried or untested, and perhaps radically different" (Cheney, 2014). In the meantime, this alternative organization is advancing a political agenda: *"our major principles : taste, environmental sustainability, the respect of Fairtrade and working conditions of our suppliers, low prices and the duty to satisfy the cooking habits, very heterogeneous, of our members…"* (*La Louve*, website). As such, the cooperative conveys many different political objectives, positioning itself as an organization advancing a vast and global agenda rather than a specific strategy and purpose.

The food coop is also presenting itself as a democracy but this discourse has to be challenged, more particularly because democracy is a "contested concept" and that different actors place different meaning on this concept. During the first years of the organization, before the supermarket was even open, the democracy was not fully operational. Following fears that communication is difficult and decision longer to take in a democratic setting (Michels, 1949), the founders decided to organize a coordination committee in charge of most day-to-day decisions. This committee met formally every two weeks and was composed of all managers of specialized committees (recruitment, IT, construction, procurement etc.) but was open, on demand, to any member. Because the supermarket was a cooperative, general assembly took place right from the start and approximately every two months, however, it

3 All names have been changed

was, at first, mostly a moment in which the organizing committee could inform members about the progress of the project and eventually recruit new members in committees depending on the available skills.

As a political project, it has its critics. We identified two major critics against the establishment of the cooperative. It is largely described as an organization made for hippies by hippies. It was, for instance presented during a radio show as such: "there is a waiting list (…) to have the right to queue at the cashier"[4] implying that only "bobos"[5] are willing to undergo such pointless sacrifice. The critics are also fierce inside the cooperative where some individuals accuse the organization of fostering only organic, and thus expensive, products with little regards to the more modest cooperators. The Facebook private group is a particularly active place for debates among members and this issue was regularly brought to the attention of members: "I am out of this group, too many dogmas, too much dogmatism. Good Bye" (20th January 00h46a.m) or "Hello, every time a member complains about not finding basic products but mostly gourmet food, it is the same answer: Patience. But I would like the rational explanation for this products' choice." (Natasha, 4th January 22h57).

It is also criticized for its global effect on regular paid jobs. Indeed, a demand that was satisfied by regular mass retailers through tenth of job is now substituted to a demand addressed to the cooperative which relies mainly on volunteer work. A service that was provided by paid jobs in capitalist organizations is now provided by an alternative organization which goal is precisely to reduce as much as possible the necessity of paid jobs. Consequently, instead of creating a new solidarity in the neighborhood it would increase poverty and unemployment. In other word, the political project of suppressing bad employment habits of mass retailers is radically achieved by entirely suppressing jobs in the cooperative supermarket. Consequently, it is view as reinforcing the trend of hidden labor.

Still, the food cooperative remains a collaborative project to enforce democracy in a highly undemocratic industry. It largely calls for democratic inspirations and claims itself as a self-managed organization. But it also connects to a network of democratic organizations

4 « RTL : on vous en parle déjà » Radioshow aired on 03/10/2016. Retrieved from http://www.rtl.fr/actu/conso/la-louve-premier-supermarche-alternatif-francais-participatif-7785089329

5 French word to designate rich individuals with left-wing political opinions.

operating in various sectors (the '*sisters cooperatives'* and '*the neighbor organizations"*[6]. Doing so, it helps actualize a reality in which capitalism is less hegemonic in its members' life (Gibson-Graham, 1996). The democratic nature of the organization can be seen in the politicization of its governance. It consists of denaturalizing hierarchical organizations by showing that large-scale democratic organizations (labelled *self-management* by the cooperative) exist and do survive in the economic landscape. It also goes through educating members, in a more top-down process, to democracy and democratic processes. This education process was particularly visible during general assemblies. We observed several interventions of Marvin, the lawyer coordinator and Cathy, the organization coordinator as they were explaining to an assembly of several hundred cooperators, the specificities of the organizational structure, the role of the assembly and the effects of one's vote on the overall organization. It was not difficult concepts but it helped normalizing one's participation to a democratic organization even though they were not experts on the subject. It went through PowerPoint Presentations and thorough explanations and finally Q&A sessions in order to denaturalize our hierarchical habits and ensure that cooperators become political subjects and democratic citizens. An ad hoc group of cooperators was also created to explore the diverse possibilities of enforcing democracy and using the general assembly in the most democratic way.

The second issue concerns the difficulty to establish the cooperative's boundaries: they are patently blurry. The company purpose is not clear and it is still obscure who takes part in the cooperative. The company purpose is presented, for instance, as such on its official website: "La Louve commits to make the cooperative affordable to everyone, by answering the needs and dietary choices of its members. *It also aims at* sensitizing its participants to present food issues and wishes to become a place for dialogue and sharing" (emphasis added). It highlights how vast the cooperative's purpose is supposed to be. By answering the dietary choices of its members, the cooperative claims its openness and whishes to be a general supermarket. Contrary to general department store, however, it claims an education mission to highlight these different dietary choices. Participation to general assembly allowed us to see how the company purpose is still debated by members. Apart from the supermarket and its retailing mission, members of the cooperative organize diverse events. They include political

6 http://www.lalouve.net/autour-de-nous

debates around food related documentaries and books, cooking seminar to rediscover rare food, uncommon visits of Paris, joint events with other worker cooperatives etc. However, this hybridity of the cooperative's mission is never specified and it has become a space to hold (m)any social activities depending on cooperators preferences and desires. The most salient debate highlighting the blurriness of the organization's boundaries was however the debate surrounding the "affiliates"[7]. The "affiliates" are individuals connected to a cooperator (most of the time they are family or roommate living in the same household) but who are not cooperator themselves. There is a severe controversy around the idea that they might do their groceries at the cooperative without working there. I have participated to seven general assemblies and the issue was raised every single time and never settled. This issue is all the more critical as it echoes the risk of reproducing capitalistic domination within cooperatives (Borritz, 2015, Flecha & Ngay, 2014). Indeed, cooperators are, by definition, the one owning the capital of the cooperative and, by excluding affiliates from the cooperative; they are indeed reproducing the domination of those who do not own capital by those who do, analyzed by Marx. However, if this was a real issue of domination in the famous case of Fagor acquiring Brandt, here, the issue also encompasses a business model issue before any domination consideration.

The third issue concerns the multiplicity of democracy and how to enforce democracy. Consistent with depiction of our representative democracy (Dahl, 1985, Hertz, 2001) worried that our hierarchical organizational lives might undermine democracy, our ethnography shows that direct democracy can not be taken-for-granted. Participation to general assembly was not persistent and an interviewee even recognized that she was not aware of her right to attend the general assembly as a 'simple member of the project'. However, democracy cannot be reduced to moments of formal votes. The democracy lies also in the moments of debates, contradictions and oppositions, the constant opposition between respectful, however different views (Mouffe, 2000). On this regards, *la Louve* develops many tools to create these spaces apart the general assembly. First, many very active members of the cooperative are engaged in specialized commissions which created agencements for debates, through meeting discussions in cafés to digital discussions through e-mails, private facebook groups with no or very few moderation. But more interestingly, the official forum of the cooperative remained relatively

7 In French : « Rattachés ».

silent regarding political issues and is used dominantly to manage shift exchanges for people with schedule imperatives. The private Facebook group regrouping more than thousand of coop members, is on the contrary a regular source of debates with many new conversations per day. Some of them generating fierce debate among members, for instance regarding the possibility to consume products made with palm oil or the efforts necessary to open the coop to more deprived individuals. These debates were not always easily solved and some led to individuals leaving the Facebook group. Again, peaceful discussions and conditions of debates consistent with democracy are difficult to sustain but prove that a democratic process is ongoing at la Louve.

Finally, it appeared that the reflexion on democracy and governance initiated by members cannot be easily disconnected from a broader reflection on the political implication of our food production and consumption. Food related issues were clearly perceived as political issues: "Then, that's when you realize that food is after all a very sensitive topic, which is, after all, reassuring" (Patrick, Cooperator). Because food products are politically charged, by a halo effect, individuals were more prone to rethink organizations and discuss issues related to democracy in the workplace. In turn, those organizations can also raise awareness on the political issues surrounding food production and consumption, as the cooperative declared goals express. Besides, it is important to note that members are present only a few hours by month in this organization, which is sufficient to engage them in a critical thinking on organizational and democratic issues in their everyday practices. Consequently, alternative food networks seem to be a key starting point to bring organizational democracy to the front scene of our societies and thus to partially reshape the organizational landscape in which people live.

Despite the efforts towards democracy, the food cooperative still rely on, sometimes invisible, power relations and disciplinary powers. It is sometimes inspired directly by practices from mass retailers. This observation can sometimes create a sense of cynicism or despair (King & Learmonth, 2014) when, for instance, to do our three hours shift we can only rely on our knowledge of mass retailers practices to do in autonomous way our jobs as cooperators (from participant observation).

DISCUSSION

Overall this study aims at enriching our understanding of organizational democracy and its multiplicity. First by highlighting democracy as a process made from different agencements and not only from formal votes, secondly by linking a democratic governance to a political understanding of the organization purpose by the members and finally by a co-construction of the organization boundaries by members and stakeholders.

This view of food products as political vehicles and how they shape organizational democracy will have to be confronted to the micro-events and the everyday life of the organization we experience in the field. We want to address four limitations to our study: There is an optimistic bias, the cooperative is still in its early age, it hardly helps us understanding how to politicize individuals and finally, it might affect more our imaginations than our everyday lives.

The first limitation is linked to our optimistic assumption that the political content of the cooperative products will help to implement an alternative organization. Other dominant forces are still at work and may counteract what the cooperative is trying to promote. For instance, the cooperative aims at fostering organic and local food meanwhile the European parliament is negotiating to reduce the constraints of the organic label, by extending the percentage of non-organic ingredients allowed to call a product organic or to reduce the number of control visits to give the European organic label. Of course, the other force, mass retailers, that cooperative is trying to substitute is largely dominating the market, which gives few reasons to be over enthusiastic. We did not look, however, at the possible threats the political dimension creates. During our fieldwork we, indeed, witness some cooperators leaving either the cooperative or just the Facebook group where many debates occur.

A second difficulty with this research program is that the cooperative is still early in its life cycle. Contrary to its model in Brooklyn which has been opened for forty years, the French copycat's operations started only a few months ago. Consequently, we might not have the hindsight necessary to develop more accurate accounts the political actions of the cooperative. Samely, we won't be able to rest on its capacity to endure. Its ability to take root in the organizational landscape is still pending. Its US counterpart has, for instance, a very unequal growth rate in terms of cooperators. Whereas it was slowly growing throughout the years since its opening, the numbers of cooperators skyrocketed after 2008 and the economic crisis which badly hurt consumers in the expensive Brooklyn's neighborhood. The early

years' militant community, which banned all products from the Coca Cola Company to protest against its unethical behavior, is now facing cohorts of new individuals with a different vision of the cooperative's purpose. This type of long-term process analysis of the cooperative is not possible for the moment with the French cooperative and they will have to be undertaken in the future to generate additional knowledge from a different perspective.

Our research agenda explored the connection of the alternative organization to a set of politicized individuals. It shows how political debates impact the organization and its ability to (fail to) bring together individuals. The issue of bringing in less politicized individuals towards alternative organization is still undiscussed. This question has to be asked anyhow, for it is a critical issue, particularly in a critical performative agenda (King & Learmonth, 2014). Advancing critical performativity means influencing the micro-practices of individuals to concretely challenge mainstream organizational practices (Cabantous et. al. 2016). The performative effect of critical discourses promoting alternative organizations is meant to challenge preconceptions and taken-for-granted perceptions of organizations and management practices (Spicer et. al., 2009). Accordingly, such a research agenda could explore how non-members of the cooperative were performatively impacted by new discourses and practices linked to the emergence of a participant cooperative in their environment. Instead, we chose to focus on how members, through direct contact with an alternative organization, performed new discourses which politicized previously unchallenged practices. However, a broader look at non-members could prove very interesting to explore the potentialities for a more practical critical research in management.

Overall, the effect of the cooperative on the economic sphere is still marginal. The store is mostly empty; the generated cash is low and nearby department stores are not really threatened yet. We advocate, anyhow, that it has a potential for performative effects in that it gives to all stakeholders an idea of what an alternative organization and an alternative economy could look like (Parker, 2002). Those stakeholders are the investors, volunteer workers and cooperators but also the affiliates, the press or even residents of this crowded neighborhood. It acts as a fiction story widening our scope of what we judge doable. Participant cooperatives in which consumers and workers are not separated are scarce and sometime criticized for they require only small investments (in time, money and emotions) from participants (Borrits, 2015). Despite these critics, the actualization of such cooperative, gathering 3500 members in an advanced democratic organization opens up new possibilities

to reconfigure the organizational landscape. Such project, even though it is still marginal as the effect of transferring its organizational configuration from utopia to the world of actual possibilities.

CONCLUSION

A political analysis of the cooperative's purpose highlights the origins of tensions between members through the critics any political claim is bound to generate. Even though, we can observe a decoupling from the political claim and the actual practices of the cooperative, the former is what will crystallize members' resentment towards specific features of the cooperative. Consequently, by refusing a stance of being politically neutral and by acknowledging the political nature of its purpose and structure, the cooperative is simultaneously addressing undealt issues of mainstream corporations and creating new challenging political debates for its own members. It is, thus, generating new perils. Democratic debates can address these perils but, despite the democratic principles of our societies, actual democratic behaviors are not spontaneous and need training and learning. The organizational democracy is therefore replacing the State in teaching basic democratic principle to citizens acting as cooperators owners of the cooperative. This way, the governance issue goes from a private level to the public sphere. Even though the vision of a diverse economy specifies that hierarchical and capitalistic organizations are far from unanimously defining our *capitalocentric* societies, democratic practices are still at the margin and need to be performed and actualized more often. Alternative organizations prove to be a fertile ground to foster democratic practices in our modern societies. Today, "*La Louve"* is finally open, allowing for further inquiry. It already seems that the organization is more democratizing than a democracy.

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