Caring for the planet, caring for oneself? Bureaucratic ambivalence in the development of a social movement organization

Rahmouni Elidrissi, Yousra

emlyon business school

rahmounielidrissi@em-lyon.com

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INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary landscape of civic participation, social movement activism takes different forms ranging from membership-based social movement organizations (SMOs) or professional SMOs (McCarthy and Zald, 1977) that organizationally operate as modern bureaucracies, to more radical 'DIY' social movements (Cleveland, 2003; Crossley, 2003; McKay, 1998) that favor organizational networks and participatory democracy. The first have been described as 'protest businesses' (Hensby et al., 2012), and criticized for their bureaucratic constraints (e.g. centralization of campaigns and agendas) and self-sustaining approach towards membership. On the other side, and despite their agenda flexibility, organizational spontaneity and repertoire innovativeness (McKay, 1998), scholars have emphasized the limits of the second, particularly in terms of activities' effectiveness and the emergence of 'accidental leaders' (Purkis, 2001). Between these two forms of movement organizing stand mass-mobilization SMOs that rely on the active and direct involvement of beneficiaries. They are characterized by the simultaneous presence of bureaucratic and participative structure and processes, in an effort to organize on a large-scale level.

To analyze such recent forms of social movement organizations, De Bakker et al. (2017: 203) suggest to focus on "organizing as a process, instead of organization as an entity". In other words, they invite us to understand how movement participants develop and enact social structures. Drawing on research on 'alternative organization' (Parker et al., 2014) and 'partial organizing' (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011), the authors highlight the value of looking at organizing as an ongoing process involving "a continuous interplay between different elements of organization" (:224). As Mörth (2004) suggests, standard liberal conceptions of democracy are closely tied to organization. Hence, many social movement organizations can be described as a "partial organization" with a democratic ambition. As such, they make

deliberate choices to introduce a few organizational elements such as membership, rules, hierarchy or sanctions while attempting to maintain a structure allowing for a democratic distribution of power.

Den Hond et al. (2015) see social movements as blends of emergent and decided orders, introduced to handle higher levels of complexity. In recent studies, scholars have shown that, when concerned with global issues (e.g. environmentalism, anti-capitalism or the alter-globalization), small scale, local initiatives are unlikely to present a serious challenge to large scale institutions that are hierarchically organized and globally distributed (Albo, 2007; Harvey, 2012; Sharzer, 2012). Scaling (thus recruiting) and organizing (in the sense of structuring) then become crucial goals for social movements mobilizing in the face of global challenges. However, the pursuit of these two goals at the same time can result in various tensions crystalized around the simultaneous presence of bureaucratic and democratic logics.

Indeed, the formalization of social movement organizations may take different forms, from bureaucratic to hybrid (Achcraft, 2011), and there are merits and disadvantages to each organizational arrangement. Many studies argue that bureaucratization aids organizational maintenance (Gamson, 1990; Staggenborg, 1988), while 'too much structure can discourage participation and inhibit eagerness" (Feeman, 1977: 44). Also, bureaucratic organizations do not necessarily become less democratic ones (Staggenborg, 2013). A bureaucratic structure can help prevent leaders from goals' displacement without going through organizational procedures (Rudwick and Meier, 1970). On the other side, Maeckelberg (2009) shows how, in the decentralized organizing spaces of the global network democracy, contestation of decision emerged from the co-presence of hierarchically-structured "verticals" and autonomous "horizontals" members. In the case of high-profile mass-membership SMOs, Hensby et al. (2011) highlight an organizational tension between members' autonomy and reflexivity on one side and the organizational structure's rigidity on the other. In fact, as social movements scale, participation in decision-making by all members becomes constrained (de Bakker et al., 2017). In other words, the image taken by Bendix a long time ago (1947) remains true: bureaucracy entails two forms, one democratic, based on mutual respect and camaraderie; the other is characterized by obedience and loyalty by compliance to rules and procedures.

However, beyond the well-documented dualism of bureaucracy (Adler and Borys 1996; Adler 2012), few research has investigated the tensions existing at the *individual* level, when members committed for political/democratic and value-based reasons, feel alienated by the

new pressures and constraints that the process of bureaucratization brings to the fore. In this paper, we study the growing disconnection between grassroots members and the team in charge of the development and maintenance of the movement. We argue that this disconnection is due to the bureaucratization process (Gouldner 1954) that tends to diminish the areas of discretion of local units, as well as to increase the central ruling apparatus of the movement, through new procedures of decision making and participation. We also show that this disconnection pertains to a cultural misunderstanding about the proper level of commitment of members, to be considered as "true" activists. Theoretically, this disconnection is related to the ambivalence of the bureaucratic regime (Weber 1968): it enables us to go beyond Weberian pessimistic ambivalence about bureaucracy. According to Weber, bureaucracy is an iron cage that generates efficiency at the price of alienation and a high degree of dispassionate discipline (Adler 2012). If we follow this perspective, the movement we study in this paper should see devastating effects on the meaningfulness of activist work and most members exiting the organization in transformation. This is only partly the case and we look for what mechanisms permit the movement to develop despite the alienating effects of a logic of sacrifice that is alien to what many activists see as their reasons for engaging in the movement. We suggest that the major mechanism helping to mitigate the contradictions between bureaucracy and idealistic views of activism is the creation of a culture of self-sacrifice, thereby forcing individuals to leave the organization when they are unable to keep up with the pace of work and thereby loose the connection between caring for the planet and caring for themselves. We show that even though the ambivalence of bureaucracy is indeed a structural contradiction (Adler 2012), it can be mitigated by individual decisions to stay or exit the organization.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The question of bureaucratic ambivalence is certainly one of the most salient issues for social movement organizations, because they are confronted to the need of meaningful challenges and purposes for guaranteeing members' commitment, as well as of clear rules of participation and decision-making for the movement's efficiency and perpetuation. Several solutions to this ambivalence have been advanced in the literature. In particular, the Gouldnerian critique (1954) has offered a way to see bureaucracy as experienced by workers as the constitution of diverse forms of functioning and of different forms of social relations.

Bureaucracy can act as a ceremonial mask (according to the "mock" form), as a coercive weapon (according to the "punishment" form) as well as an enabling tool in the "representative" form (Adler and Borys 1996); seeing bureaucracy as entailing different forms and processes for actions permits indeed to go beyond the pessimistic Weberian view of ambivalence (imposing alienation as the price of efficiency). Adler and Borys (1996) have explained in this vein, how the lean production model can be seen by workers as both an enabling and a coercive bureaucratic mode of production. Indeed, workers collaborate in the procedure because they appreciate the trust invested in them by management, and because they experience the procedure as pursuing productive ends, rather than disciplining ones. At the same time, they also live the procedure as a way to intensify work, and so respond ambivalently to it. The same policy seems therefore to have simultaneously contrary effects, which are likely to generate tensions on the assembly line (Adler 2012). In short, the ambivalence of bureaucratic regimes cannot be summed up by a sterilizing opposition between workers' alienation and organizational efficiency.

This issue is important in this paper because the experience of simultaneously living bureaucratization as enabling and coercive seems to be at the core of the tensions reported by activists in our study. We investigate an emerging social movement organization in which members witness the growing power of a group of "chosen" activists, the production of strict regulations for decision making and participation, and a culture of over commitment: at the same time they continue to see assemblies gathering, new members joining the movement, democratic instances of decision making to be installed, and the meaningfulness of their engagement remains strong. This ambivalence generates tensions at the local and organizational level that have to be mitigated if the movement is to be perpetuated. Similar ambivalent experiences have already been documented in previous research (Ezzamel et al. 2001; Boiral 2003; Adler 2006). In this paper, we follow Adler (2012) to suggest that this ambivalence inheres in the social structure itself, that is to say, in the existence of "incompatible normative expectations of attitudes, beliefs and behaviors assigned to a position in an internally contradictory social structure" (Adler 2012: 245). This is important, because is suggests that the problems generated by ambivalence during a process of bureaucratization are not only due to the content of procedures, or to the centralized form of decision-making: we contend that it is also due to the disconnection between the normative expectations of members acting at the center of the movement and grassroots members. This

is all the more relevant in an organization whose social structure itself is shaped around the idealistic defense of strong values. In other words, the social movement organization is *essentially* ambivalent, as it has to defend an ethos of work dedicated to the strengthening of a collective cause, and an ethos of efficiency to make this cause practically advocated through concrete actions, skill development programs, and effective communication. In this paper, we study the effects on individual members of the movement of the deep structural contradiction between the forces of efficiency (that can lead to alienation) and the forces of ideals (that foster emancipation and autonomy). We show how grassroots develop forms of disengagement by experiencing the disconnection between the collective purpose of the movement (taking care of the planet) and the growing meaninglessness of their everyday work (taking care of oneself) because of the rapid dominance of what they call a cult of exhaustion among activists.

METHODS

Context – Research Setting

Alter/ANV (AlterNV) is a national mass-mobilization movement that had its beginning with the organizing of civil society in preparation of the international climate conference in Paris, known as COP21. It all started in Bayonne in October 2013 with Alter, an informal network of environmental militants organizing a weekend of mobilization around conferences, workshops, agoras and cultural activities promoting existing solutions to the climate crisis. The first so called "village of Alternatives" was then diffused to over a hundred local groups that were born, only a year later, all around France, with the objective of raising awareness on the climate crisis.

In September 2015, ANV was born with a focus on more confrontational tactics. Organizing direct actions, and emphasizing their non-violent character, ANV also engaged in training novice militants to convert them to civil disobedience.

AlterNV can thus be considered as a social movement organization that use *outsider methods of institutional challenge,* blending protest models of contestation and more conventional one aimed at awareness raising. As such, it is seen as a good 'school of activism', as Cécile explains:

> "*Alter is a great door where you enter through the door of solutions, alternatives, etc, which is much more comfortable personally, and which allow us to reach a larger*

base (…) (you start) you just go pick up your vegetables at the AMAP (associations supporting small farming), or you participate in a neighbours' gathering, and so you enter the movement, and little by little we bring you to civil disobedience… but you realize slowly. For me, it was the case, cause you see, at the beginning, I haven't imagined myself doing non-violent actions."

To give a sense of size, the movement accounts for 97 Alter and 30 ANV groups today. Its power derives from its capacity of mobilization at the national level, with specific skills in organizing distributed action at the local level. Among the movement's main activities, we find mobilizing around climate related issues and training members.

For different reasons, AlterNV is a good case on which to investigate the growing disconnection between grassroots members and the national facilitation team. First, the movement relies on the local level to maintain its mobilizing capacity on the national level. Second, although it's quite young in history, the movement went through a year and a half-long process of merger (between Alter and ANV) that has forced multiple collective discussions to formalize the organization's scope, objectives and methods, and established it as a recognized actor in the militant scene. These discussions have given rise to increasing internal criticisms regarding the organizational dynamics taking place within the movement, impacting the subjective experiences of militants and eventually leading to their (temporary or permanent) exit.

Data sources

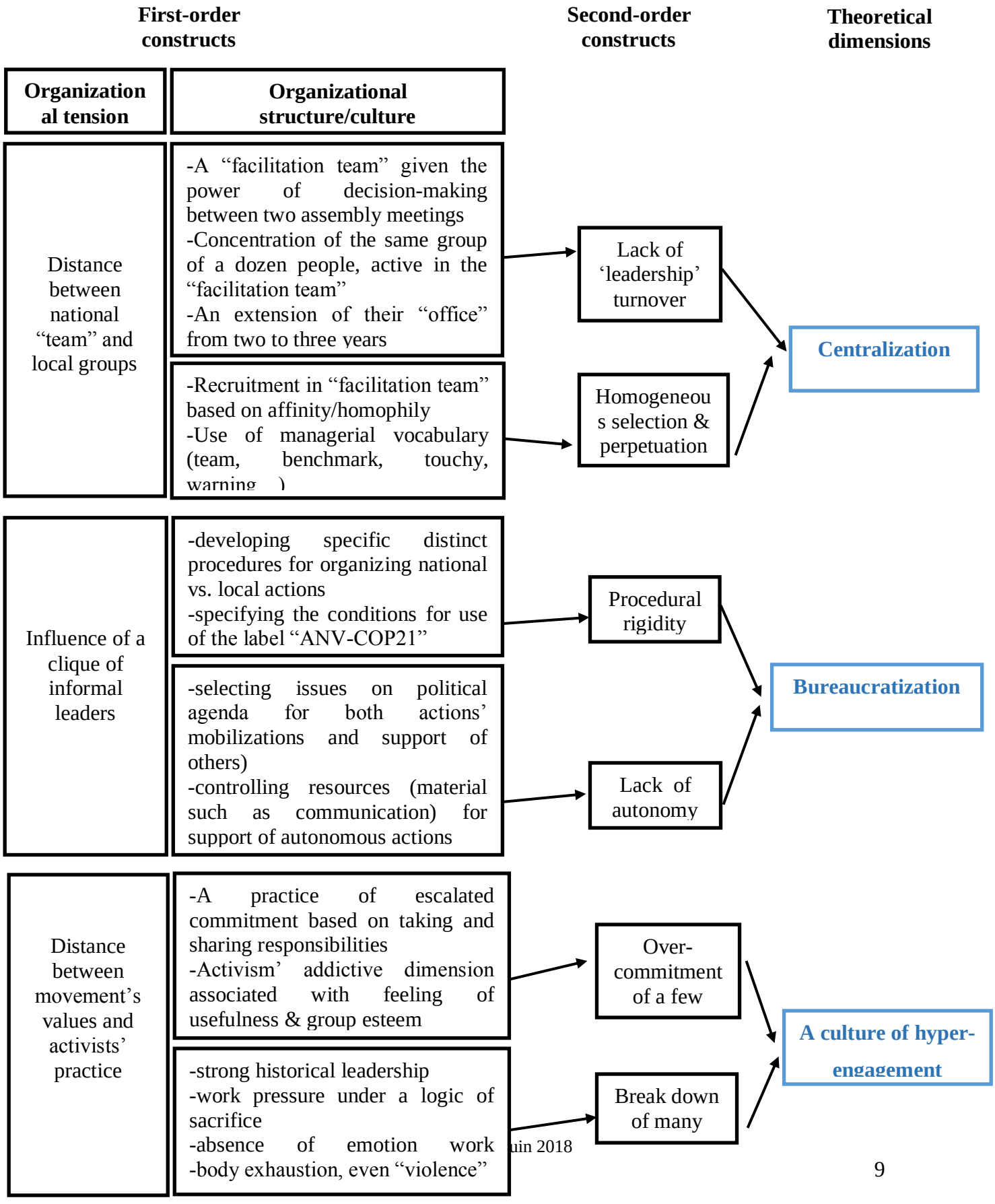
The study used both interviews and participant observation and the methodological approach was informed by an ethnographic perspective concerned with reaching an emic understanding of organizational processes. Data was collected from periods of participant observation at meetings and internal documents developed throughout the structuration of movement. Additionally, 23 interviews were conducted and lasted between 45 and 120 minutes. Crucial to the formation of this paper, the interviews followed a flexible guide -rather than a structured, standardized one- as the topics of centralization, bureaucratization and exhaustion emerged *during* the interview process. While they were at first centered on their bodily engagement in non-violent actions, the interviews provided an occasion for the expression of particular tensions activists were experiencing and struggling with.

Data analysis

We followed an inductive approach for the analysis. The first step consisted in identifying activists' anecdotes and episodes revealing tensions and/or contradictions relevant to the internal organizing process they were participating in and its intended and unintended consequences on their life. We then developed interpretive memos related to each of these tensions, to see whether they relate to an organizational or individual level, and whether they're linked to the social structure put in place, the culture developed or the everyday practice of the movement's members. Memos helped to generate categories and themes that would form an intermediate basis for data analysis. We combined our memos with constructs from the literature on social movements' organizing to get a clear understanding of what is happening (Lawrence & Dover, 2015). Next, we collected all the major themes that emerged as consistently important across all our interviews and observations to map the essential characteristics of the organizing process developed within this movement and continued to the subsequent analysis that focuses on the consequences of this organizing process on the subjective experiences of activists.

In the second stage, we engaged in open coding and identified common empirical themes associated the tensions around the shifting structure of the movement as well as the shifting meanings and practices of militancy among highly-committed activists. We first established a set of first-order constructs taken directly from the data. We iterated among empirical themes and between these themes and the literature on the organization of social movements and the literature on bureaucracy, in order to move from first-order open codes to second-order constructs including lack of leadership turnover, procedural rigidity and over-commitment of a few members. We then theoretically aggregated dimensions, to the concepts of political centralization, administrative formalization and the cult of exhaustion. The figure below summarizes the coding process.

Figure 1 summarizing the coding process



FINDINGS

We examined the recent history of a grassroots' movement born in the context of civil society's mobilization for COP21, exploring the dynamics of development it followed throughout 2016 and 2017 to ensure its survival post-COP21.

The imperatives of scaling and structuring emerged as necessary conditions for pursuing mobilization with the objective of building a mass movement for climate justice in France. The core political challenge was to pursue both goals (scaling and structuring) at the same time. That was made possible by engaging in two major projects as soon as February 2016: 1/a mass action of civil disobedience involving more than 300 activists, for a three-day blockade in April so as to avoid a loss of mobilization and 2/a process of formalization of the two original networks through a progressive merger giving birth to a mass movement structured around a confrontational and a propositional strategic axe: what we might call respectively « direct action resistance » and « prefigurative alternatives ». Despite these efforts to maintain a meaningful engagement in the political project, the movement was soon faced with internal tensions revealing possible contradictions between two views of a movement's efficiency. The first view is epitomized by the emergence of bureaucratic elements in the development of the "new" movement organization, such as creation of numerous procedures to govern members' commitment and internal systems of decision making; the second view is characterized by the need for many members to maintain an autonomous type of work and engagement in the movement. The tensions emerged when some "pre-bureaucratic" structures (such as a central team of highly committed members) conflict with grassroots' willingness to work according to their subjective appreciation of what is a meaningful movement.

In the remaining of this section we highlight three dynamics that account for the growing tensions highlighted above, as well as of an emerging organizing form that could prove to be a possible solution to these tensions.

1. ALTERNV, A COLLECTIVIST ORGANIZATION? A PROCESS OF POLITICAL CENTRALIZATION

AlterNV has no formal hierarchical authority structure since it functions as a network of local groups across France, coordinated by a national facilitation group called "facilitation team"

and referred to as « the team ». The « team » main task is to implement decisions taken at assemblies, by ensuring 1/coordination and 2/communication among local groups. All members have equal rights to participate directly in decision-making, meeting face-to-face every three to four months as an assembly to discuss and debate their activities. According to the movement's statutes, the "team" legitimacy can be questioned anytime and its members dismissed by the assembly. The assembly representing all grassroots' groups hence insures a form of *upward control* (Diefenbach, 2018) lying in the capacity to act as a counter-power to the "team".

This three-level structure (assembly, national facilitation team and local groups) implies a separation of power -recognized in the literature as an efficient instrument that can reduce the possibility of its abuse (Epstein, 1987/1998 pp.44-47; Ostrom, 1971/1987, p.87; Sauser, 2009, p.157). Local groups have the power of initiative that they exercise by making propositions to the assembly, the assembly the power of decision and finally, the task of implementation and coordination lies in the hands of the "team".

The first « facilitation team » composed of 58 members (26 women and 36 men, belonging to 24 different local groups) had a two-year mandate and was organized along commissions (communication; logistics; action; finance…) and/or working groups (climate camp; TAFTA…). Also, it included an "everyday management team" to take care of administrative work. However, while the team's mandate was extended from two to three years at the assembly meeting of June 2017, two specificities of the "team" dating from its origins, point to a potential breach of equilibrium between the different bodies of power:

1.1. Ambiguity/Ambivalence in role and decision power:

At its creation, the "facilitation team" was given an additional prerogative of "*taking strategic and political decisions between two assemblies in accordance with previous assembly decisions*" (CR coordination 10, Bordeaux, February 2016), which made it a unit that could potentially gain monopoly on power and influence decision-making (Diefenbach, 2018). The ambiguity surrounding its effective role and power is closely linked to the ambiguity around efficiency, as this quote of an activist who was part of the "team" for a few months reveals: *« our mission is not to be the head of the movement and to take decision in lieu of the whole movement… The mission of the « team » is to be efficient. And so, for certain decisions, we can indeed… make decisions and for others, we go to the assembly and make propositions. So*

yes, it's really… about actually facilitating (animer) the movement, concretely » **Raphael**

This quote exemplifies the ambiguity around the notion of 'efficiency' as well as the ambivalence of status of the facilitating team: its members are unclear about whether they are supposed to adopt a managerial posture (taking and implementing decisions) or a democratic posture (making propositions to be debated).

In February 2017, a year after its creation, the "facilitation team" became more openly criticized among many members, as ambiguity has given way to internal contestation. As a member of the team, Emma discusses the growing perception of this group as a centralizing body that has lost its original or rather intended role as an interface of coordination, hybridization and exchange:

> « *Today, we have a big issue at the level of local groups because many of them are still alive but… there is a huge break (rupture) between the team and the local collectives, while the team is supposed to be a tool at the service of local groups, to allow for hybridization and exchange… an interface of coordination in fact. At the end of the day, it becomes something that seems completely disconnected. The link (between national and local levels) is hard to make and even hurts local sensitivities because of the impression of a superior instance… »* *« We don't have any project because the villages (of alternatives) and the COP are over. So what do we do together? We have to organize. And organizing is important. But I think organizing doesn't necessarily mean centralizing (…) and now, we're thinking about a big challenge. To create something (around which to mobilize) like the villages. But since it's the team –although it's composed of people from all grassroots collectives… so around fifty people- who said: 'we suggest to put in place a project around a big challenge to re-galvanize the movement, to give some inspiration to grassroots' groups who sometimes, don't know what to do'. Well, it doesn't work at all, this proposition. Because people have the impression that it's coming from the team and not from the collectives that push for a project, but rather we're adding something more (…) there is a total rejection from the grassroots. So it's really hard because we're supposed to be the facilitation body that prepares those coordination assembly meetings but when a text is proposed by the team to anticipate the assembly discussions and approve the decisions, local groups don't engage with the text*

because they have the impression that it's an external thing that is added to their work » **Emma**

1.2. Recruitment method or Selection at entry: from parity to homophily

While gender parity and geographical representation constituted the main selection criteria of the first "team" members, they were progressively abandoned since recruitment was institutionalized through an affinity-based method: activists willing to join the "team" should either already know someone in it or be suggested by a member of their local group for the "team" to decide by consent to integrate them:

« Homophily-based functioning:

○ the team could be reinforced progressively, integrating new potentially emerging 'facilitators' who would want to be engaged.

○ Local groups and working groups are encouraged to suggest names to the facilitation team so it can integrate them

○ The facilitation team as a whole will approve the integration of a new member by consent »

Synthèse processus Alternatiba, CR coordination Bordeaux, February 2016

The same "affinity/homophily" method of recruitment was used for inclusion in the "Action" commission, a central unit in the life of the movement, as we will see later. This method based on homophily reinforced the professionalization of some at the expense of the involvement of new activists, constraining the principle of inclusiveness to include within decision-making circles only those activists who potentially share the same views.

"*The (facilitation) team (is) being co-opted. Co-opted, it's a group that internally chooses new members. Meaning that you and me, we form a group, we co-opt Hervé because we like him, because we find him efficient if you will. But in reality, we find him efficient because we like him too (…) no but it's crazy this level of homophily (…) it's control (…) it's all affinity-based. Yes, of course, I too prefer to work with you. But why do we all look alike? Because we work on the basis of affinity*!" **Guillaume**

This questions another ambivalence of the emerging mode of governance of AlterNV: while the organizing form growingly requires a clarification of roles and of levels of commitment that are translated into affinity rules, grassroots actors continue to see the foundation of their work as linked to a collective purpose that should permit to avoid any arbitrary modality of

role distribution.

2. ADMINISTRATIVE FORMALIZATION

The formalization of a number of rules and procedures introduced organizational elements that further revealed the imbalance of power to the benefice of the "team". More specifically, four procedures crystalize a tension around control by the central team and autonomy of the local groups.

Monitoring participation in agenda setting: A first hint/symptom of this growing imbalance is reflected in the development of a procedure in March 2017 to improve the participation of local groups in assembly's agenda setting. While the "team" is in charge of organizing assemblies, it is supposed to rely on local groups to specify the issues and debates they are willing to discuss. Nonetheless, after only two assemblies in 2016, a group of members raised their voice on the necessity to "*clarify the possibility for everyone to participate in assemblies' agenda setting and the improvement of debates*" (CR coordination Toulouse, November 2016). The procedure approved at the next assembly (March 2017) thus recalls that each militant can submit a proposition to the assembly, and distinguishes between propositions aimed at decision making and those aimed only at debate. The process to follow for each type of proposition thus specifies the timing, the content and details of the written document to be submitted. For instance, in the case of a proposition aimed at taking decision in assembly: "*the willingness to send a text should be signaled to the team at least seven weeks before the assembly meeting –so that it can take it into account when preparing for the agenda- describing, at least briefly, its content and objectives" and the actual proposition should be sent five weeks before the meeting, detailing the procedure to follow for amending the document*" (CR coordination Limoges, March 2017**)**

If this procedure implicitly reveals a lack of participation from local groups less than a year after COP21, its introduction also facilitates the future monitoring of local groups by the "team". Three other procedures followed in June 2017 that would further constrain local groups' possibilities for action and increase the national team's "powers" of intervention.

Constraining the use of ANV-COP21 label in organizing local actions: As part of the "team", the "Action" commission created a specific procedure for local groups willing to

autonomously organize non-violent actions. In the so called "ANV charter for local actions", several conditions are specified for using the label "ANV": respecting the criteria of non-violence originally developed by ANV; being in line with the movement positions on climate issues as stated in ANV' first public call "Let's stand up and save the climate!" and "Alternatiba Charter"; wearing the jacket or t-shirt of the movement and putting the logo on banners and leaflets. Finally, the procedure strongly suggests, when conditions of confidentiality allow it, to inform the facilitation team to benefit from national support on the movement's national communication channels (website, twitter…).

Centralizing discussion and decision on organizing national actions: The two other procedures dating from June 2017 exemplify the enactment of the "power" of the "facilitation team" and its "Action" commission to allocate roles and define proper levels of action. They concern the process of validating the organization of national actions labelled ANV. The first one called "Role of the 'Action' commission", constrains the types of actions that can be organized: massive, decentralized or reactive to a news topic. It also defines the role of the commission as follows: 1/suggesting or being solicited for non-violent actions; 2/organizing these; 3/training on non-violent action and strategy; 4/facilitating exchange within the network of ANV coordinators; 5/making the link with the "legal" commission. Finally, and more importantly, if solicited on a "*strategic opportunity*" for organizing a non-violent action, whether coming from an allied organization, a commission of the team (such as the "Strategy" commission) or a local group, the commission has the power to choose the locus of discussion and decision for that action, as shown in table 1 below.

Table 1: Process for national actions to be submitted for decision at the relevant space

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Propositions for organizing national actions:</th><th>Are transmitted to:</th><th>Then approved by:</th></tr>
<tr><td>When suggested by:</td><td>“Action” commission</td><td>The « everyday management team »</td><td rowspan="4">The « everyday management team » and the « Action » commission decide together on the most relevant space of discussion and validation of the proposition, which can be either:
- within the « team » ;
- within the group of local coordinators to which the « action » commission belongs;
- within a smaller group of people from the « everyday management team » or the « action » commission, mandated in case of high confidentiality</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">When proposed by:</td><td>A commission of the « team »</td><td rowspan="3">The « everyday management team » and the « Action » commission</td></tr>
<tr><td>A local group</td></tr>
<tr><td>An allied organization</td></tr>
</table>

While this first procedure also specifies the criteria for choosing the ‘relevant’ space of discussion and decision[1], as shown in the table above, the second “Procedure for validation of ANV national actions” details the process through which a written proposition has to go to within the relevant space before a decision is made: “*Propositions have to be written with a description of imagine actions and an explanation of their strategic interest. Ideas could then be proposed online, to be commented, amended and discussed. Then, depending on the strategic interest of the proposition, the most adequate level of investment of the network will be granted: either a maximal mobilization of the national network, or a simple communication support, or a local action supported by the national team (through training for example) or any other type of investment, to be defined on a case-by-case basis*”.

The introduction of these procedures clearly reveals a process of administrative bureaucratization taking place around the centralizing unit represented by the “team” and its “action” commission, which concentrate the power of decision-making on national protest activities. The procedures serve as tools to strengthen the influence of the team over the movement’ future actions and ways of acting. What remains to be seen is whether and how

[1] **Extract from procedure ‘Action commission’s role’:** « *l’importance politique et stratégique de la décision ; l’aspect potentiellement formateur de la discussion stratégique pour l’un ou l’autre des lieux de discussion ; le temps disponible des différents gps/à aux propo et projets en cours, etc.* »

this process of bureaucratization transforms the relationship between members and the organization as a whole.

3. THE CULT OF EXHAUSTION – FROM ENTHUSIASM TO A SENSE OF SACRIFICE

The third dynamic of development characterizing the movement concerns its normative dimension. Indeed, along the political and administrative processes taking place within AlterNV, a specific culture of activist work was developed and promoted.

Originally a loosely structured network of local militants in 2014, the movement grew to become an « *incubator of new militants* » (extract from a collective text produced post-COP21 and called "*Raison d'être d'Alternatiba*") based first on the diffusion of a culture of joyful and concrete activism. The founding fathers and early members emphasized strict organization as key for such an action-oriented emergent movement, coining their philosophy of militant action as based on a « *radicalo-pragmatic software* »: combining thinking/strategizing and direct action, the movement highlights the value of experimenting with concrete alternatives in practice, fostering a process of learning by doing ("*on apprend à marcher en marchant*", extract document "raison d'être d'Alternatiba"). Meetings in particular exemplify this organizational culture. Characterized by high levels of discipline, rigor and alertness regarding parity in particular, meetings follow a very detailed agenda, specifying members' interventions and the time duration related to each section of the agenda. They are organized around key roles assigned for certain members, who are given some form of authority during the meeting: a facilitator (*animateur*); a minute taker (*secrétaire*), a time gatekeeper (*gardien du temps*) and a rapporteur (*distributeur de parole & synthèse*). Finally, meetings usually involve sharing meals or drinks to introduce an atmosphere of conviviality and friendliness and facilitate the development of affective bonds among members. As one member describes her early involvement as a novice activist:

> "*I could see that it was very open, very familial… that there was a very good atmosphere among people (…) and that we could gather easily without having any a priori about what to do to enter the (militant) domain. And so, I actually stayed*."
>
> **Mailys**

Moreover, this organizational culture was associated with a militant practice characterized by inclusiveness and guided by intensification of work and personal commitment. Activists thus

emphasize responsibility and skills' upgrading as two mechanisms through which the group integrate new members and grow as a collective:

> "*The movement as it is growing, is based on taking responsibility. As such, we're going to encourage you to do that. Meaning that you will start by giving a hand to make a banner, then we'll see that you like it. So, the next time, we'll ask you: 'listen, can't you do this?' And hence, you'll go and do it (…) and taking responsibility means that you commit vis-à-vis others, but also you get boosted; in the sense that if you fulfil your responsibility, you feel valued (valorisé) by the collective, and so, there is something on the level of personal enhancement (quelque chose de l'ordre du mélioratif à titre personnel)".* **Pierrot**

At the same time, many highly involved activists reported on the other side of this culture of commitment. While asked about her experience of police violence during non-violent actions she participated in, Emma took the opportunity to raise an issue at the heart of her current concerns: a self-inflicted violence associated with the pressure weighing on work. She summarizes the issues in these words: "*the urgency, all the time, too much, too much, too fast… it never stops*". This pressure seems to dangerously alter the quality of life and health of many activists, thereby deteriorating their relationship with the movement and their willingness to sacrifice themselves for its efficiency and development:

> "*Over the last year and a half, my day would start at 8am and finish at midnight at best. I had no social life anymore… I've never physically mistreated myself so badly since I didn't take care of myself anymore, I stopped sleeping, I eat badly (…) and you go to any Alternatiba or ANV event and people would have dark rings under their eyes, they are under extreme tension… this violence really bothers me today, because I think it goes against what we promote (…) a society of good living and slowing down*".

In this quote, Emma also pointed to a personal contradiction she felt between the values promoted by the movement she worked within and her everyday working practices. What she called "*violence*" had been described to me by other activists as "*emotional fatigue*", "*exhaustion*" or a sort of "*helplessness/powerlessness*" they experienced at some point of their involvement within the organizing teams, especially following phases of high mobilization at COP21 and during national campaigns and large-scale actions launched post-COP21. This could be considered a natural phenomenon linked to the mobilization cycles of a movement

but it is described as so extreme in its length and impact on one's life that it led to the temporary or permanent disengagement of some.

This form of "violence" seems to take its roots in a logic of sacrifice and a *cult* of exhaustion, illustrated by the intense investment over long periods of time of the founding and early members. This is what another militant, Geoffroy, raised as a possible explanation for the subsequent violence that some highly committed activists experience on the ground:

> *"What really puts the pressure are the people who created this movement and the people that are part of it; many of them are engaged in a self-destructive manner: (in the sense that) I give everything I have to this. And working with these people, if you don't have the same kind of investment, sometimes it can be awkward. It's more this that pressures me than knowing there are 200 people who are joining us to play the activists… This (latter situation) makes me happy (…) I have the tendency to give everything I have as well but it's true that… here, there is something of a cult of exhaustion*"

He thus criticizes this pressure toward unlimited investment to the point of self-destruction that he sees as characteristic of the work culture of the movement: "'*if I'm not exhausted, that means I haven't worked enough'; this logic… it bothers me a bit*". He also recalled an episode that took place during the climate camp when he was asked to join the general coordination committee and decided to leave the next day when he discovered the working method of the group:

> "*They wanted everyday meetings to organize a big summer camp, it's a bit stupid! The « reunionite » (meetings for the sake of having meetings), I started escaping from it, I've cured myself from it. So, he (another member of the movement, also a trainer in non-violent communication) came to alert us on this cult of exhaustion, the fact that the two main camp coordinators were completely exhausted ('explosés') while… it's ok… the climate camp, it wasn't like… we weren't preparing for the revolution!*".

The "*addictive*" aspect of militancy makes it even harder for activists to take distance because, the more engaged they become, the more responsibilities they take and the more recognition they get from the collective. However, if this addiction first leads to an empowering feeling of being "*indispensable*" to the movement, ultimately many highly engaged activists experience a sort of 'overdose' when they have to leave after their body breaks down ("*when you don't listen to your body, at some point, it finds a way of telling you*

things" Emma). Reflecting on the relatively small over-committed core group belonging to the facilitation team (I estimate between 10 and 20 members) on the one side, and the relatively large number of members who left and cut all links with the movement (I estimate around 30 people) on the other, Jessica critically sheds light on the relation between the over-commitment of some members, those better resisting to pressures, and the centralizing process in place within the movement:

> "*in fact, when we are a small group of people doing too much work, in a way we make ourselves indispensable and finally break the inclusive dimension (of the movement). Moreover, we don't respect ourselves, don't take care of ourselves and so, at some point, we break down (crack). Psychologically and physically (…) Today, if we have such a hard time remobilizing local groups, it's exactly because… there is a facilitation team that seems inaccessible to people at the local level and who seems to give instructions, while it's neither the movement's logic nor that of the process we try to put in place (…) If we centralize a lot, we become a mastermind that says what has to be done, and thus loses its inclusive character"* **Jessica**

The nature of their commitment thus became the object of a dilemma among activists, only a year after the beginning of their activist adventure. A dilemma summarized in the words of Guillaume: "*How can we take care of the planet if we don't take care of ourselves?".* Many organizers I interviewed were seriously questioning the sustainability of their engagement, and advancing the necessity of putting limits if they wanted to keep up with their activist work. Forced to take a break from activism when she was diagnosed with a lung infection following her participation in the organization of a mass action of civil disobedience in April 2016, Laura decided to extend that break until September, which made her critically reflect on her further involvement in the movement:

> "*This summer, I asked myself: "but to what extend you want to come back, while you've never experienced such violent things than since you belong to a movement that claims to be benevolent and alternative? My life has never been as violent as it is since I'm in this thing. If you thing of its rhythm, and its pressure…*"

The contradiction between the movement's values and its member's experience of everyday activist work eventually led to the exit of many highly committed ones that couldn't bear the pressure associated with such a way of life. The problem of work intensity is a result of the misunderstanding between the core team, leading a process of bureaucratization aiming to

further the efficiency of the movement, and the grassroots teams, for whom the meaningfulness of the activist work rests upon a culture of joyful and convivial commitment that is deteriorated by the bureaucratization process. Indeed, to be part of the decision making circles, members need to prove their engagement through a norm of self-sacrifice that is disconnected from their initial reasons to join the movement.

DISCUSSION ET CONCLUSION

As predicted in the literature, bureaucratization has helped organizational maintenance in this case, however, at the expense of a loss of a number of highly-committed activists. By focusing on individual members' practice of everyday organizing, this paper permits to see the problems of bureaucratic ambivalence through their grassroots' experiences of work intensification. Our results show that a main consequence of the bureaucratization process is to intensify work and develop simultaneously a constraining culture of sacrifice within the movement, which is contradicting the culture of joyful engagement that most members share. This emerging culture, described by members as a cult for exhaustion, has an important effect in terms of mitigating the tension between bureaucracy and idealism. If many members see their commitment in the movement primarily in idealistic terms, they see simultaneously the movement becoming less idealistic and more oriented toward practical objectives. Indeed, the tension is not only normative but also practical: it can hinder local groups' creativity as members would spend too much time debating and complaining about the effects on people of the intensification of work, and therefore constitutes a salient problem for the movement: while people complain and express doubts about their engagement, the work is not done. Maintaining commitment through a culture of sacrifice supposes that members themselves decide whether they stay or leave the place: their exit in itself can thus be a solution, because it creates a kind of "up or out" principle of career within the organization that clarifies the rules of the game.

Members see the bureaucratization of the movement as both good and bad news: they have a paradoxical view of the movement and of the efforts they need to make to stay a productive member which entails to keep up with the desired pace of work. On one hand, they see the movement becoming a centralized coercive system of procedures that growingly discipline practices of participation access to the inner circles of the organization and control over the activities of the movement; they also see the soft display of a figure of the most desirable

activist, someone sacrificing her private life for the movement. On the other hand, they continue to live their commitment as participative and collaborative because they are *de facto* encouraged, even though through more supervised processes, to speak up and make proposals for actions at assemblies. They are therefore very motivated by the normative and political dimensions of their activities, but they live at the same time the rapid deterioration of the concrete everyday conditions of their activist work. The intensity has reached for some of them an unacceptable limit, leading to quasi-existential questioning about the actual meaningfulness of their engagement. At the same time, they also continue to want to feel that their activities are productive and efficient from the movement's perspective. Therefore, they do not express a straight and resolute rejection of the movement: they denounce a normative deviance toward work intensity as the central criterion to decide who is in and who is out of the movement, as well as who is allowed to access to the groups of influence.

Put differently, activists are growingly disconnected from the movement organization because they see it as a means of alienation more than as a means of emancipation, serving broader idealistic goals: this contradicts the very foundations of the movement. Activists are ambivalent toward the emerging organization because it blocks autonomy and distorts the meaning they invest in their work: the problem posed by the existence of an influential minority of activists (the team) is not mostly we argue, about growing control over decisions. It is also about the mutilation of activists' potential to contribute to the collective purpose, and the stifling of local creative efforts because centralization is antithetical to local autonomy.

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