Alternatives to Mainstream Businesses: A Framework and Systematic Literature Review

Abstract

In an era of overlapping crises, alternative organizations seek to prefigure new ways of organizing beyond mainstream business practices. However, the diversity of phenomena labeled "alternative" has fragmented the scholarly field. This article asks: What distinctive features define alternative organizations, and what unites them against mainstream businesses? We argue that alternative organizations are dynamic resistances to bureaucratic entities prioritizing shareholder value. Based on an iterative review of leading journal articles, we propose a two-axis framework—pursued goals (worker empowerment vs. socio-economic impact) and modes of action (emerging vs. established structures)—leading to four ideal-types: freelancers' collectives, flat organizations, social entrepreneuring initiatives, and social organizations. A semi-systematic literature review (PRISMA method, n = 144 articles) reveals that alternative organizations consistently face heightened contradictory tensions. We conceptualize alternativity as the active management of these tensions and outline a research agenda focused on the resources needed to sustain alternative organizing.

Key words : alternative organizations ; semi-systematic literature review ; worker empowerment ; socio-economic impact ; hybridization

1. Introduction

In our current era marked by perpetual crises—health, geopolitical, social, environmental, and technological—alternative organizations are increasingly capturing scholarly and public attention. Far from merely dreaming of a better world, alternative organizations attempt to render such ideals tangible through concrete organizational practices and structures. They challenge established norms and explore different ways of organizing work, economic exchanges, and social relations. As Gumusay and Reinecke (2022) emphasize, alternative organizations oscillate between two statuses: they are both *real utopias*, showcasing the feasibility of seemingly unattainable ideals, and *acts of imagination* that invite profound rethinking of the foundations of social and economic organization. As real utopias grounded in the present's possibilities, alternative organizations manifest on a small scale—such as self-managed collectives or

cooperatives—acting as prefigurative models for broader systemic transformation. Opposing mainstream business models, they often include emerging categories of workers like freelancers, digital nomads, or social entrepreneurs. Civic and political engagement emerges as a central feature of these new modes of organizing, underlining the broader societal impacts of economic activities.

Yet, the diversity of practices associated with alternative organizations presents a major challenge: the field remains fragmented, with different streams of literature interpreting and appropriating the concept according to their own logics. What is identified as "alternative" varies widely, making comprehensive understanding difficult. Addressing this challenge requires tackling fundamental questions: *What distinctive features define alternative organizations, and what unites them in contrast to mainstream businesses?*

In this article, we focus on organizations engaged in economic production—whether for profit or not—thus deliberately excluding political organizations or social movements whose primary goal is political mobilization rather than market-based value creation. Although such movements may share participatory or horizontal logics with alternative organizations, their fundamental orientation differs, justifying their exclusion from our scope to enhance comparability.

Within existing literature, alternative organizations are often defined by moral principles such as autonomy, solidarity, and responsibility (Parker et al., 2014). However, these principle-based definitions have been criticized for being tautological and insufficiently operational. Responding to these critiques, Dahlman et al. (2022) suggested a shift towards defining alternativity as a dynamic pursuit of freedom rather than static adherence to specific principles. Building on this dynamic view, we further propose that alternative organizations should be understood in relation to the dominant model they resist—mainstream businesses—which we define as bureaucratic organizations (Grey & Garsten, 2001) primarily dedicated to maximizing shareholder value in line with Friedman's doctrine.

Against this backdrop, our article makes three major contributions:
First, we propose an organizing framework that maps the main empirical phenomena posing themselves as alternatives to mainstream businesses. Structured along two axes—(1) the pursued goals (internal worker empowerment vs. external socio-economic impact) and (2) the modes of

action (emerging vs. established structures)—this framework delineates four ideal-types of alternative organizations: freelancers self-organizing collectives, flat organizations, social entrepreneuring initiatives, and social organizations. This comprehensive map aims to unify a fragmented literature across research streams, including new work practices, alternative forms of work organization, social entrepreneurship, and social business.

Second, building on this framework, we conducted a semi-systematic literature review using the PRISMA method, analyzing 144 articles to delve deeper into how alternative organizations manifest empirically and to identify commonalities across diverse cases. Our key finding is that, despite varied goals and action modes, alternative organizations consistently face heightened contradictory tensions. Unlike mainstream businesses, whose bureaucratic logic ensures systemic coherence between goals (economic performance, growth) and practices (control, hierarchy, incentives), alternative organizations must constantly navigate competing logics—an inherently unstable and fragile position.

Third, recognizing this inherent fragility, we contribute to building a research agenda centered on the resources that enable alternative organizations to not merely survive but thrive through the management of these tensions. In other words, the capacity to draw strength from contradictions is what sustains alternativity over time.

2. Problematization of the Research Question

Defining alternative organizations is challenging due to the inherent instability and fluidity of the term, as highlighted by Cheney and Munshi (2017). Practices once seen as divergent often become normalized, blurring the boundaries of "alternativity". Thus, a clearer conceptualization is needed to enhance the coherence of the field.

2.1 Defining Alternative Organizations by their Goals

In scholarly discourse, alternative organizations are often conceptualized around their guiding principles—moral frameworks influencing their practices and goals—particularly following Parker et al.'s (2014) definition. The trio of autonomy, solidarity, and responsibility is identified as foundational, promoting well-being at individual, collective, and environmental levels.

However, divergences persist: some scholars highlight human dignity (Pal, 2016) or equity (Cheney & Munshi, 2017), while others debate whether these principles should be equally prioritized (Just et al., 2021). Autonomy is central in research on counteracting the alienating effects of work (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2020), solidarity is emphasized in studies of democratic participation (Pansera & Rizzi, 2020), and responsibility is foregrounded in critiques of corporate capitalism's role in the climate crisis (Elzenbaumer & Fabio, 2018).

Principle-based definitions, however, face criticism for their tautological nature and for marginalizing initiatives with different value rationalities, potentially leading to "binary" perspectives that exclusively recognize alternatives positioned against capitalism (Gibson-Graham, 2008). Responding to these critiques, Dahlman et al. (2022) propose reframing alternativity not as strict adherence to specific principles, but as a dynamic pursuit of freedom—an ongoing strategy to distance from dominant orders. They emphasize alternativity as a process, acknowledging that alternative efforts are often reabsorbed by the systems they seek to challenge.

While Dahlman et al. (*ibid*, p. 1968) assert that the distinctiveness of alternative organizing lies in its "*critique of existing principles and practices while refusing to assume the alternativity of other principles or practices*", we argue that understanding the organizational world requires more than an abstract pursuit of otherness. Alternative organizations, we argue, are united by a shared objection to a prevailing practice deemed intolerable and a collective aspiration to enact change. Thus, it is critical to identify both what they resist and what ideals they pursue.

We propose distinguishing two core orientations: internal transformation (worker empowerment) and external transformation (socio-economic impact). Internally, alternative organizations challenge the bureaucratic models inspired by Taylor's mechanistic approach, marked by hierarchical power, specialization, and formalization (Grey & Garsten, 2001). Externally, they aim to revolutionize stakeholder relations, promoting an expanded view of corporate responsibility (Freeman et al., 2004) as opposed to Friedman's (1962) shareholder primacy. Alternative organizations may advocate for inclusive capitalism or seek a more radical break with the capitalist system itself.

2.2 Identifying Organizational Modes of Action for Alternativity

The pursuit of goals in alternative organizations unfolds along two distinct dimensions: specific ways of organizing production ("*organization of production*") and specific ways of producing organization ("*production of organization*"), drawing inspiration from Bohm and Land's (2012) differentiation between organization and organizing. The external quest for socio-economic impact or the internal quest for workers' empowerment materializes in organizational forms that may emphasize either the strength of the overall structure (the whole versus the parts) or the freedom of individual processes to forge work collectives (the parts versus the whole). Rather than clear-cut differences, we believe that those views reveal different but complementary aspects on the phenomenon at stake. Thus, we categorize the means of pursuing alternativity— the organizational modes of action employed to achieve goals—following the organizations (*established structures*) and organizing (*emerging structure*) duality.

When examining alternative organizations as established structures, the focus is on the entity '*organization*', strategically instituted to orchestrate production in alignment with its objectives. Building upon Mintzberg's (1993) insights, established structures refer to the systematic organization of activities, involving the allocation and deployment of resources and responsibility. This orchestration occurs through a network of hierarchical relationships and communication channels, strategically designed to effectively navigate the inherent tension between the division of labor and the integration (or coordination) of work. Examining alternative organizations as established structures delves into the organizational "whole", spotlighting how structural strength empowers members and influences the socio-economic environment.

While Mintzberg's organizational diagrams depict relatively homogeneous functioning, the processual perspective, introduced by the same authors (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985), acknowledges the emergent nature of strategy as a continuous process. This perspective extends to alternative organizations, where the term "*alternative organizing*" (Reedy et al., 2016; Alakavukiar, 2023) underscores the processual nature, emphasizing how these modes of organization dynamically reconfigure their structures for greater diversity in coordination modes. Structures in this view are instantiations of processes. In studying alternative organizing, the

focus shifts to organizing activities individuals undertake to reconfigure organizational structures and enhance workers' autonomy or organizing toward socio-economic impact objectives. As such construction of alternative organizations can occur informally, outside formal structures criticized for alienation, or formally through entrepreneurial endeavours that diverge from mainstream businesses.

2.3 A Framework for Alternative Organizations

Based on this critical reading of recent research published in leading journals (*Organization Science, Organization Studies, Academy of Management Annals, Human Relations, Organization,* etc.), we propose a new framework to synthesize the fragmented empirical landscape of "alternative organizations". Through an inductive approach and iterative analysis of the literature, the authors reached a consensus on the construction of the framework (see Figure 1).

Organizations are categorized along two dimensions: their pursued goals—either an internal focus on worker empowerment or an external focus on socio-economic impact—and their modes of action, distinguishing between emerging and established production structures. This double-entry table identifies four configurations: freelancers' self-organizing, social entrepreneuring, flat organizations, and social organizations. We introduce these new labels to integrate diverse research streams, highlight commonalities across cases, and offer a more coherent articulation of perspectives.

Figure 1: Mapping of Alternative Organizations by Orientations and Structures

	Internal orientation	External orientation
Emerging structure	1. **Freelancer self-organizing**	3. **Social entrepreneuring**

Established structure	**2. Flat organizations**	**4. Social organizations**

Freelancers' self-organizing: refers to emerging practices, explored in the *new ways of working* literature (Aroles et al., 2019), where independent workers (e.g., digital nomads, platform workers), having distanced themselves from mainstream bureaucratic organizations perceived as meaningless, coordinate informally to enhance their autonomy and overcome professional obstacles.

Flat Organizations: studied in the *alternative work organizations literature*, they reject bureaucratic hierarchies by implementing flatter structures with fewer or no managers, sometimes supported by technology (e.g., digital platforms). Typically initiated top-down by leaders, the establishment of flat structures aims to foster members' autonomy through the very design of the organization.

Social Entrepreneuring: explored in the social entrepreneurship literature, this focuses on entrepreneurial initiatives that create alternative business models to address environmental and social issues. Unlike established social organizations, social entrepreneuring (Mair et al., 2012), emphasizes ongoing entrepreneurial action rather than finalized organizational outcomes.

Social organizations: studied in the literature on the social and solidarity economy, social business, and post-growth organizations, adopt alternative yet institutionalized models like cooperatives to prioritize social goals over profit (Battilana and Lee, 2014). As established structures, they typically follow a not-for-profit or limited-profit orientation, reinvesting most of their earnings to strengthen their activities and further their social mission.

While boundaries are fluid—e.g., some self-managed organizations blend impact and internal change—this framework clarifies how alternative organizations differentiate themselves from mainstream models and lays the foundation for our systematic literature review.

3. Review Methodology

In response to the exponential growth of scientific publications, particularly in organization studies (Bornmann & Mutz, 2015), navigating this vast body of knowledge has become increasingly challenging. Recognizing the fragmented state of existing research, literature reviews have gained crucial importance (Snyder, 2019). However, the volume of publications exceeds human capacity for exhaustive analysis, prompting us to conduct a semi-systematic review (Snyder, ibid), guided by the PRISMA method (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) to ensure both completeness and replicability.

Outlined in Figure 2, our review process comprised five key steps. First, we identified 61 relevant keywords for studying alternative organizations through collective brainstorming among the authors. In step 2, we refined our query through iterative tests on the Scopus database, resulting in 1,736 articles meeting our inclusion criteria within the Business, Management, and Accounting disciplines.

In step 3, we retained the top 15% of articles based on citations per year to prioritize influential contributions, yielding a pool of 261 articles for manual screening. Step 4 involved abstract-based screening and double coding, excluding articles focused solely on alternative management methods without an organizational dimension, or on social protest movements. We limited the selection to articles published between 2013 and 2023, given the less mature state of alternative organization research in the early 2000s. To maintain reliability, three authors participated in the article selection process. Divergent coding was resolved through team discussions to reach consensus.

In step 5, the final 144 shortlisted articles were categorized according to the four main ideal types of alternative organization. This categorization prompted a deeper exploration of social entrepreneurship, leading to internal discussions among the authors to refine definitions for quadrants 3 (social entrepreneuring) and 4 (social organizations). Drawing on their diverse areas of expertise, the authors divided the task of thoroughly reading and analyzing the 144 selected articles, focusing on topics ranging from new forms of flat organization to social entrepreneurship. For each quadrant, specific writing leads were appointed. To coordinate the

collaborative writing process, the full team held three workshops, in October 2024, January 2025 and April 2025, to ensure alignment and consistency across all sections.

Figure 2 : Article review process
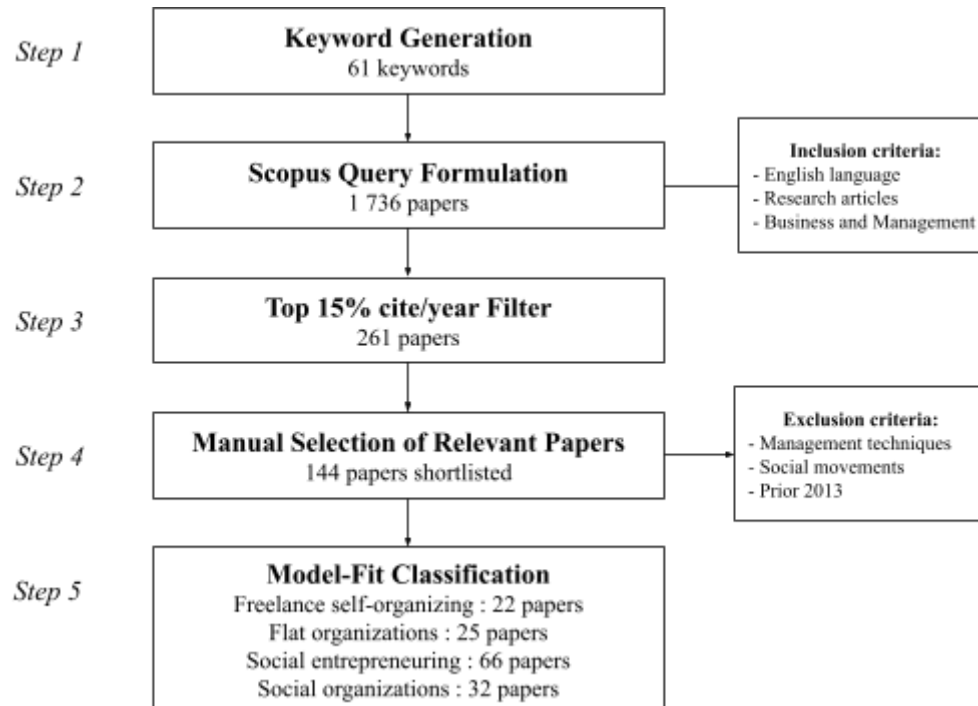
5. Review Insights

5.1. Freelance Self-Organizing

5.1.1 Promises of self-organizing: Flexibility as an aspiration, solidarity as a resource

Self-organizing practices are emerging structures centered on internal dynamics, positioned as pathways to autonomy and flexibility (Gandini, 2015). Rooted in the literature on new ways of working (Aroles et al., 2020; Messenger & Gschwind, 2016) and the future of work (Johnston, 2020), they respond to both economic disruptions and cultural shifts valuing mobility and independence.

The rise of freelance work is linked to crises such as the 2008 financial collapse, which pushed many workers into precarious or forced self-employment (Kokkinidis, 2014). Yet it is also fueled by digital innovations enabling platform work (Wood et al., 2018; Gandini, 2019; Glavin et al., 2021) and new lifestyles like digital nomadism (Cook, 2020; Hannonen, 2020; Mancinelli, 2020) and Work From Anywhere models (Choudhury et al., 2021). These developments reflect a broader cultural shift toward valuing autonomy, mobility, and flexibility. Digital nomads, for example, seek to escape rigid corporate structures, choosing their own schedules and blending work with leisure (Cook, 2020). Thus, independent work oscillates between necessity and aspiration, where temporal and geographic flexibility is central (Messenger & Gschwind, 2016; Reichenberger, 2017).

While these new ways of working offer autonomy, they also demand continuous networking and reputation-building, particularly in fluid sectors like the arts, where job stability remains fragile (Woronkowicz & Noonan, 2019). Moreover, the reality of independent work, especially in the gig economy, remains constrained by financial insecurity and social isolation. Platform workers often experience alienation, manifesting as powerlessness and isolation (Glavin, Bierman, & Schieman, 2021), while Schwartz (2018) identifies three major challenges: limited communication with platforms, unpredictable earnings, and the absence of clear career trajectories. Thus, many freelancers regroup into collectives to access networking opportunities (Bouncken et al., 2020; Bouncken & Aslam, 2019), seek mutual support (Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2021), and build protection against precarity.

According to Kokkinidis (2013), self-managed collectives offer an alternative to capitalist work structures by promoting autonomy, equality, and solidarity. In a similar vein, Alacovska and Bissonnette (2019) highlight that these collectives can be structured by practices of care, involving emotional and moral commitments to others beyond market logics. Within these self-organizing dynamics, coworking spaces, conceived as "third places" (Bouncken & Aslam, 2019; Orel, 2019), play a crucial role by offering sociability, creativity, and innovation opportunities (Bouncken et al., 2022; Rese et al., 2020). They help to counter isolation while

promoting mutual support, professional growth, and knowledge exchange (Clifton et al., 2022). More precisely, Orel (2019) emphasizes that coworking spaces provide independent workers with a sense of community, collaboration, and flexibility, fostering a more socially engaging and productive work environment compared to isolated freelance settings.

5.1.2 Limits and paradoxes: fragile self-organized collectives and the elusive promise of solidarity

While self-organized initiatives hold the promise of worker empowerment and mutual support, they often fail to deliver fully. This paradox stems from two dynamics: the structural fragility of collectives due to socio-economic constraints, and the erosion of solidarity when self-management practices are compromised.

Independent workers face deep structural constraints that limit autonomy. Freelancers, for instance, are heavily dependent on client demands, a phenomenon described as "client colonization" (Gold & Mustafa, 2013), where flexibility becomes constrained by external expectations. Similarly, digital nomads' autonomy is curtailed by visa policies, connectivity needs, and income instability (Hannonen, 2020; Mancinelli, 2020), leading to what Cook (2020) terms the "freedom trap," where the pursuit of independence results in self-discipline, constant availability, and blurred boundaries between work and life.

Economic pressures also fuel competition among freelancers (Gandini, 2016; Schwartz, 2018; Wood et al., 2018), weakening collective solidarity. Highly skilled freelancers, while relying on collaboration for reputation-building (Gandini, 2016), face latent competition, further exacerbated by the material conditions of coworking spaces (Bouncken et al., 2021; Orel, 2019). Poor design and lack of privacy can intensify stress rather than foster collaboration. Platform workers, meanwhile, are structurally atomized, evaluated individually by algorithms, and often

see themselves as entrepreneurs rather than employees, complicating collective identity formation and limiting solidarity (Johnston, 2020; Wood et al., 2018).

Self-management remains key to nurturing solidarity but is increasingly undermined by economic pressures. Financial instability challenges the sustainability of self-managed collectives, as shown by Kokkinidis (2013, 2014), leading to the erosion of care practices central to their functioning (Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2021). Additionally, the corporatization of coworking spaces by actors like WeWork (Aroles et al., 2020) has transformed originally informal environments into managed spaces aligned with market logic, undermining the initial ideals of autonomy and peer governance. While these spaces encourage spontaneous interaction (Bouncken et al., 2021; Rese et al., 2020), they also risk reproducing bureaucratic controls.

Finally, the absence of management is not necessarily ideal. Poorly managed coworking environments can foster stress, distraction, and interpersonal tensions (Bouncken et al., 2021), raising an important question: what form of management can support collective practices without undermining the autonomy and solidarity that self-organizing initiatives seek to cultivate?

5.1.3 Literature debates: How to make collective practices effective and sustainable over time?

This section examines the conditions under which solidarity among independent workers can be sustained. Two key levers emerge: digital infrastructures supporting dispersed coordination and public support preserving the informal, care-based ethos of self-organized collectives.

To address the geographical dispersion of independent workers, digital communities have become crucial organizing tools. For platform workers, often subjected to algorithmic management and precariousness, informal collectives and emerging unions offer spaces for mutual support and resistance (Glavin et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2018). Digital tools such as forums, messaging apps, and social media groups enable emotional support, information sharing,

and collective strategies like price coordination (Johnston, 2020; Wood et al., 2018). These infrastructures facilitate care practices central to self-employed workers (Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2021) and illustrate alternative organizational dynamics rooted in informality and experimentation (Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2019; Schwartz, 2018).

Knowledge-sharing in coworking spaces (Clifton et al., 2022; Bouncken et al., 2021; Rese et al., 2020; Bouncken & Aslam, 2019) complements these digital practices, reinforcing collective resilience against precariousness. Yet, solidarity remains fragile. Digital spaces can replicate the dynamics of self-promotion and competition (Gandini, 2016), raising a critical question: how can digital infrastructures be governed to foster genuine collective identities rather than intensify individualism?

Self-organization alone is insufficient for long-term sustainability; public support is essential. Platform collectives often lack legal recognition and bargaining power, requiring regulatory frameworks to institutionalize social dialogue (Johnston, 2020). Furthermore, public funding can preserve non-commercial third spaces—such as cooperative coworking spaces, makerspaces, and fablabs—where care-based solidarity practices thrive (Bouncken et al., 2021).

Self-organizing is not only functional but political. Kokkinidis (2013) highlights how self-managed collectives challenge capitalist norms by promoting cooperation and solidarity. However, without public protection, there is a risk that self-organization becomes co-opted by capitalist logics of self-exploitation (Aroles et al., 2020). Governments thus have a crucial role in safeguarding the autonomy of grassroots spaces through financial support, legal recognition, and access to shared resources.

Ultimately, self-organization oscillates between emancipation and reproduction of the very dynamics it seeks to resist. Future research should explore how these practices can better address work fragmentation while preserving their original aspirations. These informal initiatives reflect workers' enduring desire to rebuild communities, share resources, and create solidarity spaces amid the individualization of work.

5.2.1 Promises of flat organizations : Unlocking autonomy and agency

In today's volatile economic environment, organizations face growing pressure to be agile and resilient. Many are moving beyond traditional bureaucratic models (Khanagha et al., 2022) and embracing flatter structures that expand autonomy and redistribute decision-making power. Flat organizations broadly take two forms: (i) self-managed organizations promoting distributed leadership and collective governance, and (ii) technology-enabled organizations such as digital labor platforms, coordinating activity through decentralized networks.

Self-managed organizations empower employees to govern themselves, make decisions autonomously, and operate without traditional managerial hierarchies. They promise to return control over work to workers, enhancing autonomy, creativity, and responsiveness to market demands (Lee et al., 2021). Described as "de-alienating" (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2020), they offer a renewed sense of purpose by allowing individuals to shape their tasks and collective norms.

Several self-management models exist (Lee & Edmondson, 2017): post-bureaucratic organizations remove formal hierarchies entirely; humanistic management promotes participative decision-making within flatter hierarchies; and organizational democracy institutionalizes participation through mechanisms like shared ownership and voting rights (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2020). Across these models, distributed leadership reimagines authority as a dynamic, trust-based process (Lumby, 2017). Some formalize this through systems like holacracy, reinforcing accountability and autonomy, while others, like Morning Star, build bespoke governance structures (Lee & Edmondson, 2017). Shared values—solidarity, care, conviviality—become key to coordinating action (Reedy et al., 2016), often echoing ideals that extend beyond organizational boundaries.

Digital labor platforms represent another model of flat organization, connecting independent workers with clients via technology (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017). Operating without formal employment relationships or managerial hierarchies, they coordinate labor through algorithms and interfaces, flourishing in deregulated markets by shifting risks onto workers while promising autonomy (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2016).

Platforms support a wide range of tasks, from microtasks (e.g., Amazon Mechanical Turk) to ride-hailing (e.g., Uber) and freelance work (e.g., Upwork). Despite their diversity, they share a narrative of emancipation from bureaucratic constraints, attracting workers seeking alternatives to traditional employment (Waldkirch et al., 2021). This appeal is strong among occasional workers valuing flexibility and career exploration (Scully-Russ & Torraco, 2020). Platform workers experience autonomy at three levels: legal status, task scheduling, and working conditions (Pichault & McKeown, 2019). However, this autonomy often comes with trade-offs, including economic insecurity, weak labor protections, and vulnerability to market fluctuations.

5.2.2 Limits and paradoxes : Reconfigurations of control

While flat organizations promise to unlock autonomy and redistribute power, the literature reveals persistent tensions between emancipation and control (De Vaujany et al., 2021). These tensions highlight a paradox at the heart of flat structures: efforts to escape hierarchy often generate new, subtler forms of discipline that may undermine the very autonomy they aim to foster.

In self-managed organizations, distributed leadership is frequently presented as a vehicle for empowerment. Yet, as Lumby (2017) argues, this model can fail to meaningfully redistribute power. Authority may remain concentrated—albeit in new hands—and leadership, instead of being truly shared, is sometimes perceived as a zero-sum game where one person's loss of power results in another's gain. Moreover, distributed leadership can obscure power dynamics that, in bureaucratic systems, were structured and governed by standardized, rational processes, which can be more equitable and transparent (Lumby, 2017).

Even in post-bureaucratic settings where formal hierarchies have been largely dismantled, informal controls emerge to fill the void. Peer pressure, social norms, and shared expectations become powerful tools of regulation (Khanagha et al., 2019). While these mechanisms enable coordination without managerial oversight, they also generate heightened expectations for self-discipline, emotional investment, and continuous accountability. Paradoxically, the promise of freedom can translate into stress, performance anxiety, and reduced space for

dissent—ultimately constraining the creativity and innovation these models were designed to unleash (Kingma, 2019).

Similar contradictions arise within digital labor platforms. While they offer workers freedom over schedules and task selection, this flexibility is tightly framed by algorithmic management systems (Healy et al., 2020; Galière, 2020 ; Bucher et al., 2021; Waldkirch et al., 2021). These systems were initially invisible, enabling platforms to evade traditional labor regulations. The literature has now thoroughly described how algorithms guide and control workers through the automation of tasks formerly handled by human managers, such as recommending actions, monitoring performance in real time and applying automatic sanctions or rewards, rendering control both more immediate and more opaque (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017). Workers may enjoy formal independence, but in practice, they are constantly evaluated and ranked, often reduced to data points and performance scores (Scully-Russ, 2020).

Yet, the control exerted by algorithms is not always experienced as coercive. In some contexts, algorithmic management is interpreted as more impartial and meritocratic than traditional supervision, particularly when performance evaluations are seen as standardized and free from the biases of human managers (Galière, 2020). This perception can be especially pronounced in the Global South, where informal labor and arbitrary managerial practices are widespread; here, algorithmic systems may appear to offer greater consistency, predictability, and protection from discretionary decisions (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2016). Workers also develop tactics to navigate these systems, building "*platform literacy*"—the skills needed to understand, anticipate, and strategically respond to algorithmic rules (Sutherland et al., 2020). Through "*pacifying the algorithm*" (Bucher et al., 2021), they manage visibility and avoid sanctions without overt resistance. However, such strategies often lead to anticipatory compliance, as workers internalize algorithmic norms and adjust their behavior accordingly, ultimately reinforcing the very systems of control they aim to resist (Karanovic et al., 2020).

5.2.3 Literature debates : What organizational resources are needed to empower workers in flat organizations?

Autonomy alone is insufficient to sustain worker well-being and organizational performance. Although it enhances intrinsic motivation (Renard et al., 2021), it does not consistently lead to higher engagement (Gerards et al., 2018) or intrapreneurial behaviors (Gerards et al., 2021). Horizontal decision-making models, grounded in consensus and shared values, may also generate frustration, conflict, and overload (Reedy et al., 2016; Lee & Edmondson, 2017; Kociatkiewicz et al., 2020), while the absence of clear coordination structures can strain individuals and collectives (Renard et al., 2021). To address these tensions, three key debates emerge regarding the organizational resources needed to transform autonomy into empowerment: transformational leadership, the reconfiguration of the HR function, and the design and regulation of technology.

The first debate concerns leadership forms that reconcile autonomy and coordination in flat organizations. While these structures challenge traditional hierarchies, they require new mechanisms to sustain cohesion and creativity without undermining individual freedom (Lee, 2021). Transformational leadership, which fosters initiative, responsibility, and collective ownership, is often cited as a promising approach (Gerards et al., 2018; Coun et al., 2021). Yet its empowering effect depends on worker perceptions (Coun et al., 2021), and its legitimacy in post-bureaucratic contexts remains fragile (Bourgoin et al., 2020). Scholars call for further research into how leadership is co-constructed in everyday practices and emphasize exploring bottom-up managerial transformations (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2020).

The second debate addresses the evolving HR function in organizations where it is either dismantled or automated. Ensuring worker development without traditional HR support raises critical questions. Distributed HR models, where leaders, peers, and clients contribute to development (Scully-Russ & Torraco, 2020), and informal support systems on platforms (Waldkirch et al., 2020) offer partial solutions but lack institutional anchoring. Digital learning systems provide upskilling opportunities but often reflect managerial logics. Reimagining HR as an architectural function, actively shaping enabling environments, could reconnect HR to stakeholder-oriented models.

The third debate concerns the ambivalent role of technology. While often linked to surveillance capitalism (De Vaujany et al., 2021), technology can also enable decentralized and empowering

structures. Digital tools may support autonomy (Jabagi et al., 2019), but algorithmic management often induces anticipatory compliance through performance tracking. Protecting worker autonomy requires regulatory frameworks (Healy et al., 2020) and longitudinal research to assess whether emerging decentralized models genuinely empower workers or simply mask new forms of control.

5.3 Social entrepreneuring

5.3.1. Promise of social entrepreneuring: managing value creation and social impact

The concept of social entrepreneuring arises from the entrepreneurial archetype, where individuals dissatisfied with existing models create ventures to generate societal impact through alternative business models. Scholarly discourse highlights its processual, iterative nature, underpinned by four key principles: entrepreneurial autonomy, mission-oriented value creation, stakeholder inclusivity, and an adaptive organizational approach.

Entrepreneurial autonomy emphasizes decision-making freedom, enabling social entrepreneurs to remain flexible and responsive to changing socio-environmental contexts (Lumpkin, 2013; Chandra, 2017). This autonomy fosters resilience, innovation, and risk-taking rooted in community engagement (Ebrasi, 2013; Günzel-Jensen, 2020). It allows dynamic strategy adjustment to evolving challenges, characterizing autonomy as a foundational feature of social entrepreneuring.

Mission-oriented value creation prioritizes social impact over profit, aligning ventures with broader goals like the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Schaltegger et al., 2018). Social value creation varies across entrepreneurial stages (Brieger et al., 2020) and is shaped by personal characteristics such as gender and sustainability orientation (Dickel & Eckardt, 2020). Social entrepreneurship plays a key role in fostering sustainable development, particularly in emerging economies like East Africa and India (Thorgen & Omorede, 2018; Hota et al., 2019; Maseno & Wanyoike, 2020; Haldar, 2019; Lubberink et al., 2019).

Stakeholder inclusivity stresses the direct involvement of individuals and communities in shaping entrepreneurial initiatives (Calic & Mosakowski, 2016; Alkire et al., 2020). Social

entrepreneurs prioritize participatory approaches that integrate stakeholder needs (Goyal et al., 2016; Agrawal & Hockerts, 2021), fostering legitimacy and collective purpose. This participatory ethos strengthens adaptability, as illustrated by initiatives like the COVID-19 idea blitz (Bacq et al., 2020) and the role of women entrepreneurs in emerging markets (Trejesen et al., 2016; Agarwal et al., 2020).

Adaptive organizational approaches differentiate social entrepreneuring from rigid, profit-driven models (Kimmitt & Muñoz, 2018; Davies & Chambers, 2018). Ventures exhibit agility to address local and systemic challenges (Chandra & Paras, 2020; Holzmann & Gregori, 2023). The tension between standardization and local adaptation is central, with scholars debating whether models should be generalized or tailored (Dasakalaki et al., 2016; Lumpkin et al., 2018; Littlewood & Holt, 2018; Shahverdi et al., 2018; Servantie & Rispal, 2020; Bozhikin et al., 2019). Studies show sociocultural and economic factors deeply shape social entrepreneurship practices (Méndez-Picazo et al., 2020; Hossain et al., 2017; Zahra et al., 2014).

Thus, social entrepreneuring is a dynamic, process-oriented approach that prioritizes social and environmental value over profit, leveraging autonomy and stakeholder engagement to address complex societal challenges through emergent organizational forms.

5.3.2 Limits and paradoxes: between utopian idealism and pragmatic alignment

Social entrepreneuring prioritizes mission-oriented impact over profit-centric objectives. However, the literature reveals significant tensions between pragmatic alignment with classical economic principles, such as Friedman's shareholder primacy, and utopian ideals that celebrate non-conformity (Ruebottom, 2013; Hota, 2023).

A central tension in social entrepreneuring involves the financial sustainability of ventures (André & Pache, 2016; Roundy and al., 2017; Liu & Huang, 2020; Van Lunenburg and al., 2020). Some scholars argue that financial self-sufficiency is vital for scalability and long-term viability (Islam, 2020), advocating for revenue-generating mechanisms as core elements of social entrepreneuring models. Values also play a crucial role in navigating tensions within social entrepreneuring. Chatterjee, Cornelissen, and Wincent (2021) highlight that social entrepreneurs

engage in values work—a set of practices through which they shape and negotiate values within their ventures.

Another prominent tension concerns the methodologies for measuring social impact (El Ebrashi, 2013; Tate & Bals, 2018; Gali and al., 2020). Some scholars emphasize the need for standardized, quantitative metrics to ensure rigorous assessment and comparability across social ventures, while others highlight the limitations of such rigid frameworks, arguing that the complex, context-dependent nature of social value creation often requires qualitative, flexible assessments (Belz & Binder, 2017). This debate reflects philosophical questions about the nature of "value" in social entrepreneuring and how it can be consistently measured across diverse contexts. For instance, studies have shown that younger and older entrepreneurs, driven by different motivations, are more likely to focus on social value creation than middle-aged entrepreneurs (Ip et al., 2020).

Finally, the nature of innovation within social entrepreneuring sparks considerable debate (Tracey & Stott, 2017). Some scholars advocate for disruptive innovation that challenges and redefines existing social structures, while others support adaptive innovation, suggesting that social entrepreneuring can enhance its relevance by building on existing practices rather than seeking radical changes. This tension highlights the spectrum of approaches, from innovation as systemic transformation to innovation as incremental refinement (Szekely & Strebel, 2013). Regarding the degree of radicality in innovation, social entrepreneurs are more likely to establish a social enterprise when pursuing radical or disruptive innovation, whereas those favoring adaptive or incremental innovation may be inclined to create a social business, as we will define in quadrant 4.

5.3.3 Literature debates: Toward a research agenda for sustainable models, impact, and innovation

The ongoing debate between utopian ideals and pragmatic alignment in social entrepreneuring highlights unresolved tensions within the field (Rey-Marti, 2016; Macke and al., 2018). This debate provides fertile ground for further inquiry, as addressing these tensions is crucial to advancing both theoretical understanding and practical application in social entrepreneuring. To contribute to this discourse, future research should prioritize three interconnected debates: (1)

exploring sustainable hybrid models, (2) developing multidimensional impact frameworks, and (3) refining the conceptualization of innovation in social contexts.

The exploration of sustainable hybrid models should focus on identifying organizational structures that balance revenue generation with mission fidelity. This research would address the challenge of preserving social values while ensuring financial viability, providing insights into how social enterprises can scale their impact without compromising their mission. Comparative studies across institutional environments, funding mechanisms, and geographic contexts could illuminate best practices for achieving this balance, refining theoretical models of hybridity and offering actionable frameworks for practitioners (Brandsetter & Lehner, 2016).

The second research priority involves developing multidimensional frameworks for impact assessment. Current approaches often focus on either quantitative metrics or qualitative evaluations, yet both perspectives have limitations. Halberstadt and al. (2020) emphasize the need to consider the stage of development when analyzing the potential for sustainable impact. Future research should bridge this divide by proposing integrative frameworks that combine quantitative rigor with qualitative depth. A "third space of assessment" could emerge, allowing the measurement of tangible outcomes alongside more context-specific effects. Such frameworks would enable comparability while preserving the relevance of assessments to local social realities, advancing the credibility of impact evaluation (Dey & Steyaert, 2016).

Lastly, the continuum of innovation within social entrepreneuring requires deeper investigation. Social entrepreneurs navigate a spectrum from disruptive innovation—challenging existing systems—to adaptive innovation, which modifies current practices to enhance social relevance (Kruse and al., 2020). Future research should examine how social entrepreneurs navigate this continuum, identifying contextual factors influencing their strategic choices (Roundy, 2020). Resource constraints, stakeholder demands, and regulatory environments likely shape whether innovation is disruptive or adaptive. Comparative studies across diverse contexts will enhance theoretical models by capturing the dynamic nature of innovation in social entrepreneuring.

By addressing these three debates, future research can deepen the understanding of social entrepreneuring, helping resolve foundational tensions in the field and providing valuable insights for both scholars and practitioners.

5.4.1 Social organizations' promise of socio political transformation

Social organizations refer to established legal forms such as cooperatives and Non-Profit Organizations (NPOs), or for-profit companies committed to democratic governance and accountable value distribution (Young & Lecy, 2014). They promise socio-political impact, ranging from moralizing capitalism to radically transforming socio-economic systems. Some authors see social impact as a philanthropic "band-aid for capitalism," such as sanitation projects in Indian villages (Ramani et al., 2017), while others emphasize transformative projects like local renewable energy cooperatives (Picciotti, 2017).

Social organizations combine social purpose and economic activity, encompassing a diversity of initiatives. Extending the "social enterprise zoo" metaphor (Young & Lecy, 2014), we view them as different "species" combining social and market goals in distinct environments. Within this broad definition, two main types emerge: social enterprises and social businesses, each embodying different conceptions of socio-political transformation.

Social enterprises combine economic activity, social mission, and democratic governance, where decision-making is independent of capital ownership (Defourny & Nyssens, 2017). Rooted in 19th-century cooperativism, they aim to invent collective production and consumption models as alternatives to the market economy. Democratic governance and profit-sharing are key pillars, often enshrined in specific legal statutes. Some scholars, like Fournier (2013), use Ostrom's commons framework to emphasize radical rethinking of capitalism through principles like "reciprocity in perpetuity." Cooperatives, though a subcategory (Mitzinneck & Besharov, 2019), are treated as distinct phenomena. They grapple with resilience, leadership complexity, and maintaining democratic governance as they scale (Cheney et al., 2014). Italian social cooperatives exemplify collective socio-political transformation, where members democratically decide on the social use of assets confiscated from the Mafia (Picciotti, 2017).

Social businesses, by contrast, arise from individual entrepreneurial initiatives and pursue social purposes without focusing on legal status, governance, or profit distribution like social

enterprises do. Often summarized by the "triple bottom line" (people, planet, profit), they lack a specific legal heritage and instead rely on certifications or labels. They typically address Bottom of the Pyramid (BOP) markets, aiming to meet the social needs of the poorest populations (Glavas & Mich, 2015; Desa & Koch, 2014; Ghauri et al., 2014; Vernay & Sebi, 2020; Ramani et al., 2017). However, social businesses primarily seek to moralize capitalism rather than radically transform it, addressing urgent social and environmental issues without fundamentally challenging the existing order (Cheah et al., 2019).

5.4.2 Paradoxes linked to market isomorphism and mission drifts in social organizations

The socio-political ambition of social organizations is attenuated by market isomorphism logics; and threatened by the risk of "mission drift" as the organization grows.
Conversely, other researchers caution against overemphasizing profitability, warning of the risk of "mission drift"—the shift from social objectives to economic goals, which could dilute the intended social impact. This tension emphasizes the challenge of balancing a strong commitment to social missions with financial independence, raising the question of whether social and financial objectives are truly complementary or if pursuing both creates an inherent paradox.

A series of articles, particularly those dealing with cooperatives, highlight the fact that some social enterprises are drifting away from their original transformative political project. The long-term anchorage of these organizations in the market economy, their professionalization and growth seem to dilute the radical nature of their alternative dimension. This process, which we describe a posteriori as market isomorphism, results in a shift to the left of these organizations within quadrant 4.

At least two papers (Heras-Saizarbitoria,2014 ; Flecha & Ngai, 2014) adopt a critical approach in order to analyze the extent to which basic cooperative principles are applied in daily practice from the perspective of worker–member–owners. Building on the case study of the famous basque cooperative Mondragon, they reveal a decoupling of cooperative principles from the workers' daily activity and precarious employment conditions.

5.4.3 Overcoming market pressures and avoiding mission drift risks

Researchers have explored how social business models (BMs) could innovate to offer alternatives to market-based management tools and avoid isomorphism by prioritizing social impact over economic logic. Social enterprises, cooperatives, and social businesses all share concerns about designing sustainable, flexible, and innovative BMs adaptable to diverse applications.

Two major concepts structure this research: hybrid business models (Alberti et al., 2017) and the Social Enterprise Model Canvas (SEMC) (Sparviero, 2019; Olofsson et al., 2018). Hybrid business models integrate social and economic objectives, adapting the traditional Business Model Canvas by adding components that address social and environmental concerns. However, they largely remain rooted in conventional economic models with social additions, rather than radically mission-driven reconfigurations.

In contrast, the SEMC focuses explicitly on social enterprise needs, considering non-targeted stakeholders, governance principles, customer and beneficiary involvement, mission values, and impact measures. By embedding mission values and short-term objectives, it helps social enterprises resist the drift toward purely economic goals. SEMC addresses challenges such as the "measurement paradox," although its complexity and generalist design limit its professional adoption. Researchers highlight the need for new strategic tools better suited to alternative organizations, moving beyond frameworks inherently shaped by capitalist ideology.

A second pathway to address tensions involves navigating market logics through hybridity (Jäger & Schröer, 2014). Pursuing social impact often creates tensions with economic imperatives, which hybrid organizational frameworks help to explain (Cornelissen et al., 2021; Mitzinneck & Besharov, 2019). Scholars show how hybrid organizations build interorganizational and intersectoral collaborative networks, opening new opportunities for sustainable development. Hybridity involves forming an integrated identity that coherently aligns social missions with market demands, creating "functional solidarity" that sustains both impact and economic viability. This dual positioning offers plural legitimacy but demands constant tension management internally and externally.

Finally, future research could enrich this field by examining how public policies and institutional frameworks recognize and support hybrid organizations. Understanding how legal frameworks and public funding could foster hybrid models' growth is crucial for their integration into broader economic systems. Recognition at the policy level could help hybrid organizations scale their impact without compromising their social missions.

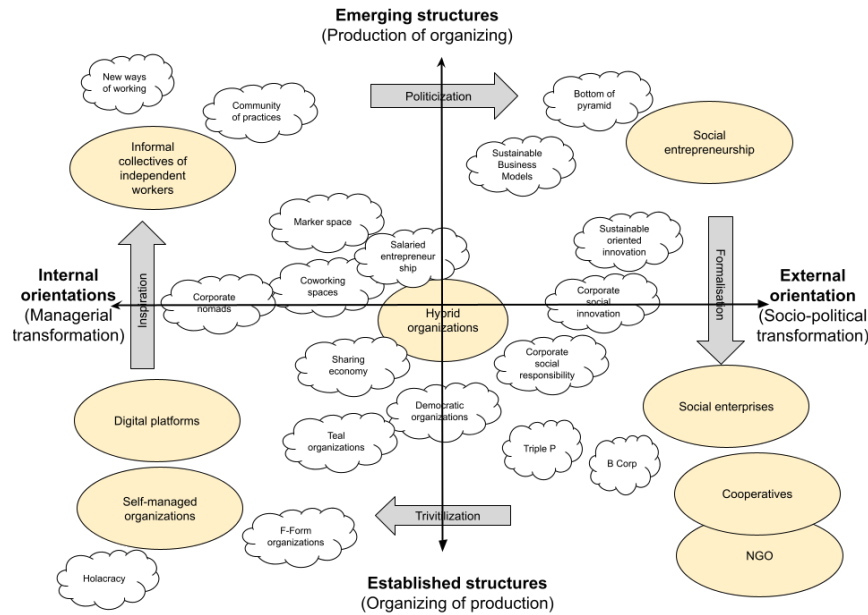# 6. General Discussion : Hybridization, tensions and future research directions

In this article, we proposed a renewed conceptualization of alternative organizations as economic entities challenging mainstream business logics—dominated by bureaucratic structures and shareholder-value imperatives—through the pursuit of transformative goals such as worker empowerment or socio-political value creation. Their modes of action may take the form of emerging, processual organizing or more established structures.

Based on a semi-systematic literature review, we showed that alternative organizations are not only plural but also fundamentally paradoxical. Our organizing framework delineates four ideal-types—freelancer self-organizing collectives, flat organizations, social entrepreneuring initiatives, and social organizations—each situated at the intersection of different goals and modes of action. However, empirical realities reveal considerable overlap, hybridization, and evolution across categories.

6.1 Hybridization logics : How alternatives evolve

Building on Figure 3 below, we identify two central paradoxes structuring the hybridization dynamics of alternative organizations: the tension between formalization and inspiration, and the tension between politicization and trivialization. These tensions are not merely challenges but fundamental features shaping how alternatives develop, transform, and sometimes dissolve.

Figure 3 : Hybridization logics of alternative organizations

Emerging structures
(Production of organizing)

Politicization

New ways of working

Community of practices

Bottom of pyramid

Informal collectives of independent workers

Sustainable Business Models

Social entrepreneurship

Marker space

Salaried entrepreneurship

Sustainable oriented innovation

Internal orientations
(Managerial transformation)

Inspiration

Coworking spaces

Corporate nomads

Corporate social innovation

Formalisation

External orientation
(Socio-political transformation)

Hybrid organizations

Sharing economy

Corporate social responsibility

Digital platforms

Democratic organizations

Social enterprises

Teal organizations

Triple P

B Corp

Self-managed organizations

F-Form organizations

Cooperatives

Trivitlization

NGO

Holacracy

Established structures
(Organizing of production)

Formalization vs. Inspiration

Mainstream organizations increasingly draw inspiration from alternative work practices developed in informal and experimental contexts, particularly among collectives of independent workers, attracted by their perceived agility and innovation potential. For instance, spatio-temporal flexibility, initially embraced by digital nomads as a pathway to autonomy and meaningful work, has been institutionalized within large corporations through models such as "*corporate nomadism*" (Choudhury et al., 2021). Yet, this absorption often alters the original meaning of these practices: autonomy becomes entangled with new forms of digital surveillance, while solidarity gives way to individualized performance expectations. Although individuals may formally choose when and where to work, they remain subject to implicit productivity norms and performative pressures that blur the boundary between freedom and control. Similarly, coworking spaces, originally conceived as community-driven and non-hierarchical environments, have undergone significant commercialization, increasingly aligning with the capitalist models they were intended to challenge (Orel, 2019; Bouncken et al., 2021).

Politicization vs. Trivialization

Alternative organizations articulate political aspirations—whether focused on socio-environmental change or worker emancipation. Yet maintaining political agency over time

proves difficult. In flat organizations and freelance collectives, the pursuit of individual autonomy can drift into normative conformity or self-exploitation, particularly in digital platforms that promise freedom ("be your own boss") while reinforcing algorithmic control. The evolution of the "sharing economy" illustrates this risk: initially framed as a movement for access and community, it has been largely appropriated by monopolistic actors prioritizing shareholder value. Similarly, social organizations and social businesses risk losing their transformative edge as they scale. Entrepreneurial heroization often replaces collective missions, leading to the absorption of alternative logics by dominant market rationales.

6.2 Research agenda : Resources for navigating paradoxes

Throughout this article, we have demonstrated that, despite their diversity, alternative organizations are fundamentally paradoxical. Navigating heightened tensions is not a sign of organizational weakness, but rather a defining feature of their identity and resilience. Far from being imperfect variants of dominant models, alternative organizations act as laboratories of organizational experimentation, precisely because they sustain, rather than resolve, contradictory demands. Their distinctive strength lies in their ability to maintain productive paradoxes—between autonomy and coordination, social impact and economic viability, democratic participation and organizational efficiency, or transformative missions and isomorphic pressures.

Building on these insights, we propose three avenues for future research. First, future studies should explore the mechanisms of hybridization within alternative organizations, particularly how processes of formalization affect their emancipatory potential. While practices like coworking and mobile work risk being diluted through institutionalization, it remains unclear how flat organizations and other alternatives adopt, adapt, or resist these dynamics. Do they preserve emancipatory practices, or do they contribute to their normalization? What organizational mechanisms enable the translation of new ways of working into sustainable alternatives?

Second, there is a need for deeper research into the trajectories of politicization and depoliticization. Future research could investigate the organizational, environmental, and

strategic factors that determine these trajectories. Under what conditions do alternative organizations succeed in resisting trivialization? How do they adapt their political missions in the face of growth, institutionalization, or external pressures without losing their distinctiveness?

Third, scholars should investigate the resources and capabilities that allow alternative organizations to navigate contradictions productively. Rather than seeking coherence, successful alternatives cultivate the ability to live with and leverage tensions. Research should examine what material, relational, and symbolic resources, as well as what forms of leadership or collective governance, support this dynamic balancing act and sustain alternativity over time without mainstream assimilation.

7. Conclusion

This article has sought to clarify and unify the fragmented field of research on alternative organizations by proposing a renewed conceptualization and an organizing framework based on empirical phenomena. We argue that alternative organizations should not be seen as finalized solutions, but as evolving experiments in organizing beyond dominant economic logics. Their distinctive strength lies in their ability to embrace paradoxes, navigate hybridization, and sustain transformative ambitions in adverse environments. Our analysis shows that managing alternativity is less about resolving contradictions than about creatively harnessing them.

While our semi-systematic literature review captured major debates across a wide range of journals, it has limitations. By focusing on the most cited articles per year, we aimed to include alternative voices beyond top-ranked mainstream journals. However, our review was restricted to English-language articles indexed in Scopus, potentially overlooking national specificities and marginalized research spaces. Future studies could address these gaps by integrating non-English literature and examining alternative organizing beyond the economic domain.

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