8th EMES International Research Conference on Social Enterprise

EMES events

Bringing principles and values
to renew action

University of Zaragoza / Teruel Campus, 4-8 October 2021

Organising the enterprise as a common: an alternative to participatory management in worker cooperatives

Kristel Maasen

Belgium

COST
EUROPEAN COOPERATION IN SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Funded by the Horizon 2020 Framework
Programme of the European Union

EMES Selected Conference Papers

2021

Organising the enterprise as a common:
an alternative to participatory management in worker cooperatives

Kristel Maasen

Faculty of Philosophy and Social sciences
Research centre METICES
Université libre de Bruxelles, Belgium
Contact: kristel.maasen@ulb.ac.be
Paper presented at the 8th EMES conference
5 October 2021, Teruel

Abstract
Managerial discourses, methods and tools are used in many worker cooperatives to increase the economic and societal impact of their activities. However, as critical management studies have highlighted, management methods are imbedded in particular representations about organising that reduce the participation of workers. This paper looks at a number of worker cooperatives in Belgium that don't apply a managerial rationale for organising. The paper argues that it is possible – and desirable in terms of agency – for workers to share organisational power instead of delegating it to management. First is described, on the basis of interviews, how worker-members coordinate and regulate their daily work. This is followed by a presentation of the guiding principles that worker-members use for organising and running their enterprise. Viewing their enterprise as a common, worker-members in the selected enterprises correspondingly organise their work in common. The following principles were deducted: 1) a vision of workers as legitimate and capable producers, organisers and governors, 2) a conception of the enterprise as an association between workers for the purpose of the realisation of a joint project, 3) a shared responsibility for the relational network that makes an effective collective performance possible, and 4) a principle that consists in the creation and maintenance of commitment through interest and communication. It is further argued that the rationale of the enterprise as a common allows workers to find answers to the challenges of organising and thus constitutes a viable alternative to the managerial rationale.

1   Introduction

Researchers interested in the question of agency and participation of workers pay particular attention to enterprises that are governed by the people who work in them. This type of enterprises may be referred to as democratic organisations, worker-controlled enterprises, labor-managed firms or worker cooperatives. In this paper, the term 'worker cooperative' will be used for any enterprise with an associational constitution where the members of the association participate in the daily activities as paid or unpaid workers. The fact that the workers are also the principals of the enterprise explains why worker cooperatives are often touted for their democratic and participatory practices.

However, there is an ongoing debate about the extent to which the everyday experience of worker-members in worker cooperatives is significantly different from the experience of workers in other enterprises (Arthur et al. 2004; Atzeni and Ghigliani 2007; Davis 2017; Langmead 2017; Quijoux 2018; Smith et al. 2011). Many studies remain inconclusive as they indicate positive elements such as more participatory work processes and more equal social relations, while simultaneously raising concerns about shortcomings in participation that may lead to organisational degeneration. At the source of some of the tensions and contradictions observed may be the introduction of managerial discourses, methods and tools (Heras-Saizarbitoria and Basterretxea 2016).

The introduction of a managerial rationale potentially has detrimental effects on democratic and participatory practices. Even participatory forms of management may bring along negative effects in the form of reduced worker participation and instrumentalisation of democracy by management (Pasquet and Liarte 2012; Pastier and Silva 2021). This is the case in spite of efforts by boards and workers to adapt existing and develop new management techniques and procedures that correspond to their values, as well as to find and nurture managers with participatory leadership styles.

Some researchers propose fixes such as an 'ethical agency contract' for managers (Davis 2017) or linking the functions of managers to spaces of participation (Gand and Béjean 2007). The research for this paper draws instead on critical management studies that highlight that management methods are imbedded in particular representations about organising (Le Texier 2016; Stacey 2011). In this light, the question of alternative conceptions of organising is highly relevant. A useful frame is provided by the growing literature on the organisational processes associated with the commons.

In a number of worker cooperatives in Belgium, interviews with worker-members show that participation is embedded in all dimensions of the enterprise. In these worker cooperatives, worker-members organise their work jointly rather than delegating organisational power to a management. It will be argued that their way of organising and thinking about organising reflects an organisational rationale that is different from the managerial rationale. Worker-members consider their enterprise as a common resource and endeavour and apply a corresponding organisational rationale that guides their actions.

First, a closer look is taken to participatory management in order to understand the source of some of the participation problems associated with a managerial rationale. In the second section, the methodology used for this study is explained. Following this, the paper briefly describes on the basis of interviews how worker-members coordinate and regulate their daily work. The fourth and last section presents the organisational rationale of the enterprise as a common and shows how this rationale proposes alternative answers to the challenges of organising than those provided by the managerial rationale.

2   The problem with participatory management

A widespread assumption in the cooperative development literature is that worker-members in worker cooperatives start with a spontaneous way of organising and need to adopt, as they mature and grow, a number of ideas borrowed from management sciences. In this view, the enthusiasm and egalitarianism of the start-up phase will inevitably fade away (Meister 1974; Michels 1915). As that happens, the survival of the worker cooperative comes to be in the hands of a small number of leaders. Worker-members will often install a board that can oversee daily operations for transparency and to prevent minority domination (Leach 2005). The board composed of worker-members then delegates the power to organise to a dedicated management that may consist of one or a few worker-members or a person recruited externally.

The significance of the delegation to management of decision-making and organising rights in the domain of operations may be overlooked in worker cooperatives since the worker-members themselves are the principals. Moreover, when management is introduced in worker cooperatives, it is usually in an adapted form that can broadly be referred to as participatory management. Managers invite workers to give input to decision-making and organising processes on the work floor. Managers may also delegate decision-making authority to workers on certain issues. Their leadership style focuses on responsibility rather than direct control. This type of management, together with governance by the worker-members, may well lead to a high level of implication on the work floor. Nevertheless, the introduction of a managerial rationale entails a fundamental change in the relation between the workers and their joint enterprise.

Le Texier (2016) argues that the organisational rationale of management is a governmental rationale just like the patriarchal rationale and the rule-bound organisational rationale. An organisational rationale is defined as "a particular mental scheme that integrates in a coherent whole a multiplicity of representations and principles of judgement and action" (Le Texier 2016: 113). In other words, an organisational rationale is what orients a person in his or her activity of organising and reflects a degree of coherence in his or her attitudes and behaviour. It is not a particular model, toolbox or ideology, but rather a way of seeing and thinking about the multiple factors external and internal to the enterprise that then influences the 'realistic' options for action in a given situation of action (Friedberg 2019). The managerial rationale is deemed a governmental rationale as it relies on the subjection of some to the exercise of power by others. Its particularity is principally exercised not by directly directing the behaviour of workers but by arranging their action situation in such a way as to condition their bodies and minds in adopting certain behaviours and attitudes considered useful by management (Le Texier 2016).

Essential to the organisational rationale of management is the subordination of workers to the organising activities of management. Management is tasked with achieving the purpose of the enterprise as determined by the principals. The principals govern and control the workers with the help of an intermediary: management. One may wonder how this distinction between principals, managers and workers operates in worker cooperatives where the workers and the principals are the same people. Interestingly, worker-members are supposed to switch between the "hat" of member and the "hat" of worker according to the domain concerned. In the role of member, workers have voting rights in governance matters including the election of a board (Ellerman 1984). Worker-members appoint and supervise the manager or management team, and also set out the strategic guidelines within which management has to operate to achieve the purpose of the enterprise. These rights are exercised in regular meetings. In the role of worker, however, worker-members are expected to follow "the rules of the game". On the work floor they are placed under the authority of management who is mandated to oversee implementation of the governance decisions

made by worker-members. Management does this by arranging resources and processes and by ensuring a match between the individual workers employed and the conceived arrangement. Worker-members are left without decision or organising rights in the domain of operations, since this right is delegated to management. Surely, management will delegate some organisational authority to workers. However, this authority is to be exercised within a framework clearly defined by management who holds overall responsibility for the result.

It is then no surprise that the everyday experience of worker-members in worker cooperatives may resemble the experience of workers in other enterprises having adopted a form of participatory management. The fact that the workers in worker cooperatives are also the principals, and can in principle call to account management, is in itself of limited significance on the work floor. Like in other enterprises with participatory management it is required of workers to submit to some larger whole or greater good in daily work situations (Stacey 2011: 385). A number of paradoxes and contradictions are exposed by Stohl and Cheney (2001) in regard to participatory management. These are among others associated with a tendency to streamline democratic processes for efficiency gains thereby losing their essential vitality and adaptability. Further, forms of teamwork that are installed may be resented and rebelled against by workers. Managers also tend to frame disagreement as resistance rather than as a sign of commitment which dissuades workers from speaking their mind (Stohl and Cheney 2001). Furthermore, the lateral communication between workers diminishes and degrades their capacity to integrate their viewpoints and work together without the mediation of a person in a hierarchical position. In short, "participation becomes participating in the leadership of the leaders" (Stacey 2011: 386).

The associational constitution between worker-members in worker cooperatives is thus a necessary but not a sufficient condition for genuine participation on the work floor.

3   Methodology

This section clarifies how an organisational rationale links to organising activities, and presents the empirical material and its treatment.

The concept of organisational rationale defined previously is inscribed in the sociological study of organisation from an actor-centred perspective. In this perspective, organisation is seen as the result of organising, a practice shaped both by habits and reflexion. Organising is defined here as the continuous and deliberate work aimed at orienting the activity of multiple individual workers for the purpose of achieving collective performance. Organisational work is motivated by the search for a certain efficiency, regularity, continuity and effectiveness. It should be pointed out that the portrayal of organising activities being the exclusive domain of a person or group with a specific expertise is widely acknowledged to be a construction, which contributes to the legitimation of power exercised by managers (Grey 1999; Reed 1989). In reality, organising is an activity in which multiple actors are involved in various ways and to a different degree depending on the enterprise (Reynaud 1988). The interaction between organising activities and context factors results in the organisation and hence the particular social structure of the enterprise.

Organising entails power and agency issues. Expressions such as 'organic', 'natural', 'spontaneous', or 'self-organisation' fail to acknowledge the complexity of organising. To explore an alternative organisational rationale at work in worker cooperatives, or to identify the factors that lead a group of worker-members to accept the authority of a manager on the work floor, it is necessary to understand the organisational choices made by worker-

members in the course of organising. Interviews are a suitable method to reveal the justifications for the organisational choices made by worker members. As it is expected that worker-members often express their choices in close relation to the particular history and context of their enterprise, interviews should be conducted with workers from multiple enterprises so that shared aspects of their respective reasoning can be seized.

The empirical research for this study was conducted in enterprises where workers engage in a joint enterprise to produce goods or services for exchange on the market against an income. To understand the organisational choices made by worker-members, it was important to only select enterprises where the organisation of work was at least actively accepted by the workers and preferably also conceptualised by them. A first criterion was that workers formally control the enterprise through a majority of votes in the general assembly and the board. Additionally, the organisation of work should not be controlled by a minority of workers. In other words, the majority of workers must have the possibility to modify the organisation of work directly or at least indirectly by the replacement of the competent body. Of course, this criterion needed to be verified during the interviews. The exclusion of non-profit associations was a third criterion that served to keep maximally open the possible tensions among social, psychological, societal, economic and financial goals, and to bolster the relevance of comparison with management theories. Additional criteria were used to exclude starting enterprises, enterprises with a very small number of worker-members and enterprises with minimal need for work organisation. Normative selection criteria such as social value of the enterprise or espoused organisational values were not applied.

Box 1 Enterprises: main activity, number of workers, number of worker-members, and number of years controlled by workers at the time of the interviews

Enterprise	No. of workers	No. of worker-members	No. of years controlled by workers
Printing press	7	7	44
Home nursing association	32	19	5
Communication bureau	8	6	13
Painters firm	20	10	30
Law firm	17	11	5
Metal workshop	(7)	(2)	39
Communication bureau	13	11	17
Construction company	4	4	6
Employment service	30	20	5
Cheese factory	16	10	36
IT service	30	27	19
Book shop	9	5	7
Wholesale grocery	10	8	11
Enterprise for the reuse of materials	10	7	4
Ecohouse construction company	12	10	11
Accountant office	14	10	23

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in French and Dutch in sixteen enterprises, all located in Belgium. At the time of the interviews, the enterprises existed for at least five years and counted between four and thirty-two workers. Larger enterprises corresponding to the above mentioned criteria were not found in Belgium. A total of thirty two worker-members were interviewed from one hour up till three hours. In three enterprises (the first three listed in box 1), five workers each were interviewed as small case studies to start the analysis from. The interviews with worker-members in the other enterprises helped to develop and strengthen theory-building by highlighting additional similarities and differences. Besides questions about the division of work and coordination, the main question was formulated as

follows: "What, in your way of working together, makes that your enterprise functions?". The purpose of the interviews was to obtain insight in worker-members' thinking process around organising, particularly what they take into account when organising and what they find necessary to do to make their joint enterprise successful.

Among the enterprises studied, differences were observed in the distribution of support activities (distributed among many workers or concentrated in the hands of a few persons) and in the constellations of areas of decision-making attributed to individuals, subgroups or the whole group of workers. Likewise, outcomes in terms of job design, frequency of team communication, work processes, performance rewards and other organisational characteristics were different from enterprise to enterprise. This was expected because worker-members solve organisational challenges while taking into account their respective priorities as well factors such as the technical requirements of production, the skills of workers and the legal and economic context.

In spite of the variety in organisational forms, similarities in the interviewees' way of thinking about what to take into account when organising were discovered. With the help of a thematic analysis of the interviews, categories were developed and reorganised until a coherent whole emerged. This process resulted in the unveiling of an organisational rationale that is clearly distinct from the managerial rationale. The organisational rationale that emerges from the interviews was compared to the organisational rationale of management for the construction of an ideal-typical organisational rationale. It is this comparison that best brings out its nature and meaning. It may be considered bold to refer to a single organisational rationale of management. Yet, this is what will be put forward, although there is a possibility that the characterisation may not do full justice to each and every strand distinguished in management sciences.

Although the organisational choices made and explained by the majority of persons primarily reflected a shared organisational rationale, it should be noted that in two enterprises other organisational rationales seemed more dominant. One case reflected mostly the patriarchal rationale and another case reflected the organisational rationale of (participatory) management within a broader frame of socially responsible governance. The presentation of the findings will be limited to the organisational activities and organisational rationale shared by the majority of interviewees in this study's sample.

4 The work of organising in common

This section aims to describe succinctly what the interviewed worker-members *do* when they organise. It is argued that worker-members strive to ensure mutual commitment to their joint enterprise by taking simultaneously into account each other's needs as members *and* as workers. This distinguishes their way of organising from the managerial rationale where taking care of the needs of the workers is delegated to a limited number of people whose mandate is to help the principals achieve the purpose of the enterprise. As will be explained later, it is from the mutual commitment to their joint enterprise that many answers to the organisational problems of effectiveness and sustainability can be found.

Before describing the main features of the organisational activities that were identified with the help of the interviews, it is useful to take a look at what the literature has to say about commons organising. The similarities that were observed have led to the adoption of the

term 'organising in common' (Fournier 2013) and the naming of the organisational rationale as the 'organisational rationale of the enterprise as a common'.

Although studies on the commons often focus on natural resources and especially on their quality as commonly used resources, distinguished from private resources and state-governed resources, Fournier (2013) proposes that commons are best understood not as a resource but as a social process of organisation and production. Ostrom (1990) demonstrated how ordinary people overcome the social dilemma of collective action and the theory of the tragedy of the commons by creating complex social arrangements that facilitate collective action. Ostrom's use of extensive empirical data and economic argumentation contributed to a broader scientific acceptance and growing interest in forms of organising that don't imply top-down regulation. This boosted studies on the social processes involved not only in the production and reproduction of natural resources but also of other goods and services. Fournier (2013: 450) further argues that "commoning is about relinking producers with the means to produce (collectively) for themselves. Commoning is about reconciling what the social division of labour within capitalism has separated."

A review of the available literature on commons organising results in the following main characteristics: (1) the enterprise is carried by a community, (2) membership is based on participation in a joint activity, in particular in joint use, production and distribution, (3) members define and modify the project of the enterprise which includes both aspects related to its purpose and its way of functioning, (4) organising is done jointly by members, and (5) results in a social organisation that reproduces community (Albareda and Sison 2020; Aufrère et al. 2019; Dardot and Laval 2015; De Angelis 2017; Desreumaux and Brechet 2013; Fournier 2013; Guttmann 2021; Nicolas-Le Strat 2016). Other characteristics were mentioned by only a few authors or were object of discussion such as whether or not adherence to anti-market or anti-capitalist political views should be considered as a characteristic. The espoused characteristics of commons organising differ substantially from the managerial rationale. Characteristic 4 defines most clearly the difference between commons organising and management, while characteristic 2 and 5 are under question in worker cooperatives with participatory management.

The cooperative experience has shown that joint governance (characteristics 1 and 3) is possible. But what does it mean to jointly organise (characteristic 4)? This raises numerous questions. Is it possible to run an enterprise and be economically viable without a separation between organisers and organised? How to divide tasks and coordinate? How to avoid free-riding and ensure individual effort? How to have access to the needed competences for the well-functioning of the enterprise? Nicolas-Le Strat, in his book on the work of commoning, insists on the nature of organising as an activity, a work to be done: "These processes [of commoning] have nothing to do with spontaneity; they need to be conceived and elaborated, imagined and put into action. They are constructed technically and socially. They incorporate a broad variety of actions: of thinking and language, technical and relational, material and immaterial. …[A]ctions that bring the common into existence" (Nicolas-Le Strat 2016, 17). A number of studies have centred particularly on the organisation of the workplace, but a more systematic understanding of the actual work involved in organising in common is yet to be developed (Albareda and Sison 2020; de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford 2010; Korczynski and Wittel 2020). It is this actual work involved in organising in common that will be presented here.

4.1 Worker-members share and distribute organisational power

Because of personal preferences, ideological reasons or on pragmatic grounds, worker-members share the work of organising. According to a printing press worker, truly working together implies:

> "in an open and horizontal way, keeping open all means and options for everyone that have to do with organising, consulting, discussing, figuring out, exploring technically..."

Worker-members do not delegate or relinquish overall organisational power to a limited number of persons. In the law firm, for example, as one person interviewed explains:

> "We decided together that we could not simply function as a consumer of the project by just being a lawyer without necessarily liberating time to actually take care of the project as a whole at the service of others."

This doesn't imply that everyone is involved in everything. Like productive activities, support activities such as planning, marketing, research and development, contracting, administration and representation are distributed among workers individually and in small groups, according to their competences and interests. In a few cases, worker-members took the step to invite a person with expertise in commercial development, financial management or collaborative work methods to become part of the team and take on a number of support tasks.

In the enterprises studied, a division of labour goes together with a vision of organising as a joint responsibility. A member of a construction company says:

> "This is the cooperative spirit for me, finding the articulation between effectiveness and participation. The big error would be to believe that we need to have co-decision on all matters. This is not true. If the persons don't have something to add at a given moment they shouldn't co-decide, right? And we don't all have the same competences and thus we acknowledge that. So that creates domains, different circles. And so we take it upon us to interact between us and globally."

There are differences between persons in terms of personal and structural power. Workers are aware that some support activities influence the overall work process and thus the daily work of all. They are also aware of the risk of becoming dependent on a few persons that develop specialised expertise and networks that are important for the enterprise. Rather than eliminating these inequalities of power, they keep them in check by mechanisms of consultation and accountability, and by a precise delimitation of this power to the activity concerned. The person in charge of representation and contracting in one of the construction companies in the study explains:

> "It's me who commits the enterprise so I need to be certain that we are ready when we sign. So if [my colleague] didn't give me the documents, I say 'give me the documents for this'. I mean, it's functional. (…) So, yes, there is a sort of delegation of responsibility, that's clear, regarding precise domains. Not all roles are the same, we assume that that's the case. But I don't have more voice or more right to speak during the team meeting. And if at a given moment there is a wish to modify things, that comes from whoever, well, that's good. (…) I did the planning and they didn't like that because I didn't meet their expectations, and [another colleague] proposed to take over. (…) In fact, what interests me is that the enterprise functions. I'm not interested in petty politics. And I think that we work a lot in this spirit. We're not much into defending our turfs. Rather what is useful for the enterprise, what will also make that I'm feeling good."

As the previous quotation indicates, the possibility for modification of organisational arrangements remains in the hands of the worker-members. An interviewee from the law firm underlines the importance for the well-functioning of the enterprise of "each time reacting and adjusting the system in function of the way in which the persons concerned function and perceive it".

Questions of power and agency are delicate and under constant negotiation, and undoubtedly deserve more detailed treatment than this space allows, but the interviews contain numerous details that show that worker-members conceive of zones of decision and not hierarchies. At the same time, it would be clearly a misconception to imagine that

workers are free to take any decision within their zone of decision. They operate within the framework of the common project that exists between them.

4.2 Worker-members pursue commitment to the project of the enterprise

As in all membership based enterprises, members associate on the basis of a joint project which they define and redefine together. What is remarkable is the interviewees' outspokenness about their commitment to the project of the enterprise. In their view the project reflects their main interests, if not in its present state then at least in its intent.

The content of the joint project is not limited to the legal statutes or the domain of governance. The components of the project of the enterprise depend on what worker-members find valuable individually and together. A few of the interests mentioned by the persons interviewed were: offering clients a qualitative or socially responsible product, not having a boss and not working alone, an above-average level of remuneration, being involved in both productive and support activities, co-deciding on the strategic and profit-oriented aspects of the enterprise, or having more control over work hours. In some but not all enterprises, worker-members may accept differences among each other in terms of their contributions and returns, as well as in terms of influence.

Worker-members from the same enterprise can differ in what they personally consider an essential component of the project, i.e. what they find so important as to question their involvement if this is no longer included. Still, they rally behind the project as a whole and each person has a legitimate voice in the matters that are part of the project.

Crucial in ensuring commitment to the common project are the time and attention given to agreeing on a project that includes the acceptation, discussion and evolution of the needs of each member until a consensus is reached. Interviewees from the printing process expressed the goal of achieving commitment explicitly:
> "Essentially, you pursue joint commitment which should be at the same level."
> "If for example five self-employed persons decide to work together, you still have those individual interests that play a role, while these are here actually smoothed out into a common interest."

New people become a full member after a trajectory that serves to determine whether there is a sufficient match. They become associates in a joint undertaking. In the understanding of the worker-members, the commitment of all is needed to achieve the project of the enterprise and thus their own interests. Reflection on the common project is therefore not limited to certain times and formal meetings and can potentially occur at any moment. In fact, modification of the project is part of the association agreement between worker-members. The project remains open as worker-members recognise the fact that members' needs and courses of action change, that the project inevitably evolves in function of the people arriving and leaving, and that an ever-changing business environment requires new strategies. Commitment to the joint enterprise, which implies abandoning some autonomy, is not restricted to the project as currently defined but extends to a future horizon with the other members, who commit themselves equally to making their joint enterprise a success.

One of the founders of the cheese factory talked about how the project evolves with changing circumstances and the implication of new people:
> "A company lives in a context of a changing world. (…) The discussions we have now are vital discussions in which everyone should be able to speak their mind. So that everyone also realises 'yes indeed we need to do that, we need to keep making that investment, we need to continue to work on this'. (…) Actually, we've had much organic growth in this respect. It's difficult to formalise. I also shudder at the thought of that. An enterprise is actually a little like a society in miniature. So you have all kinds of people and it's important that there is communication between everyone."

The needs and wishes of each worker-member in the light of a changing context become known through communication.

4.3 Worker-members communicate directly with each other

The process of concretisation and integration of the interests, needs and viewpoints of worker-members is completed in the course of their activity, where intentions become real (or not) i.e. produce effects. In the enterprises studied, it is not one or a few persons who are charged with taking into account the different interests and subsequently deciding upon a course of action. Integration is undertaken by the worker-members through direct communication around the activity concerned. In this respect, it is relevant to draw attention to the etymological meaning of communication as "making common". True communication implies a willingness to change in the course of the conversation. In the process of communication, identities are constituted and meaning around topics as well as around organising is constructed (Woodilla 1998). For this to be achieved, however, the interaction needs to fulfil the conditions for "making common" such as frequent face-to-face interaction, an equal exchange of viewpoints and the intention to reach consensus (Cheney 1995; Pastier and Silva 2020; Woodilla 1998). The distribution of governmental and organisational power mentioned previously contributes to "get all noses pointed in the same direction", says a worker of the printing press. Shortcuts are not possible, confirms a person from the law firm who formerly was a director in another type of enterprise:

> "When I was director in a formal way, I also didn't exercise my power in a stupid and evil way, I was into adherence. [However] at some moments you get tired of the… and so you end the discussion by taking a decision. But it's an escape. Here, we are obliged to go all the way."

This doesn't necessarily imply long drawn out processes of decision-making. Faced with economic pressures, worker-members are compelled to find a consensus sooner rather than later.

Worker-members meet and talk frequently with their colleagues about matters pertaining to their joint enterprise. They communicate not only with those nearby in the process of production, but also with colleagues that are involved in the same working groups. There are regular all-team meetings and attention is paid to facilitate formal and informal contacts between worker-members who would otherwise not cross. Many interviewees insisted on the importance that each colleague speaks their mind and engages in the conversation. The initial commitment to a project is not sufficient. Ongoing communication is crucial as a member of a construction company states when asked what is important for the well-functioning of the enterprise:

> "We knew that we were focussing on ecological construction. And in this way you also attract the people that are interested in ecological construction. (…) [You need to] continue to communicate sufficiently, I think. So that you know…, that you make everything explicit, that you know what the other person wants or doesn't want. Not presuming too much."

This is not evident for every person, especially not in group settings. Reactions to this challenge vary from enterprise to enterprise: from trying to read the body language of a person and talking one-to-one before or after a meeting, to imposing an expression of agreement or disagreement during a group meeting. In several enterprises communication techniques and trainings had been introduced. Several interviewees also spoke about gradual improvement of their individual and collective capacity to exchange differing viewpoints on sensible issues while maintaining communication.

Furthermore, worker-members hold colleagues directly accountable and provide feedback on their performance. Nearly all interviewees made reference to instances of social control and social encouragement. Joint evaluation of team performance is institutionalised and in several enterprises tools are used for the sharing and follow-up of key business data. As worker-members are co-responsible for the functioning of the enterprise as a whole and have excluded concentration of power, it is also expected of all to communicate difficult messages regarding unsatisfactory performance or unconstructive attitudes directly to the colleagues concerned, although this remains a challenge in several enterprises.

4.4 Worker-members take care of the relations between them

The efforts to engage in constructive communication and the willingness to find consensus on issues important to themselves testifies of relational reflexivity (Donati and Archer 2015). Worker-members reflect on whether the relations between them are helping or hindering the realisation of their joint project, how the characteristics of their relations impact positively or negatively the commitment of the participants, and in what way these relations are created by themselves and others. Compared to other forms of reflexivity such as looking at how to take most advantage of a given situation or simply adapting to the behaviour of others, relational reflexivity is a form of reflexivity that takes into account the meta consequences of one's actions. It's a complex but everyday evaluative activity of people who are aware that they need to invest in their relationships in order to continue to benefit from its positive effects. This form of reflexivity is familiar to most people in couple, family and friendship relations and is also often applied in broader informal networks. Relational reflexivity encourages a person to reorient from focussing on her immediate concerns towards taking into account the concerns of others and in this way caring for the relation.

Relational reflexivity is encouraged through the very way the collaboration is set up. Each person achieves his or her goals simultaneously with the others, without the interests of one person impinging on those of the others. Furthermore, in several of the enterprises, spaces were created for the explicit exercise of this form of reflexivity. An interviewee from the painting company tells about how they organise twice a year moments for reflecting about their one-in-one relations and the overall relation between them:

> " Wat also fascinates me (...) is to keep an eye on and do something with the field of tension between the collective and the individual interest. (…) Regularly we need to ask ourselves and our team 'are we still doing well', keep our finger on the pulse of others, 'are we still on the same page?'. "

As worker-members are deeply invested in the success of their joint enterprise and understand that the relation among them is the source of their joint performance, selfish or dominant behaviours are not considered a valuable course of action for others nor for oneself. An interviewee from a construction company says:

> "If you take as a starting point that we are all associates, that we are all equivalent, then you aren't going to direct someone on the basis of power or money or position."

Cooperative and generous behaviours seem more advantageous, as many persons explained.

Fundamental in the organising process is thus a reflection on how the way they organise can contribute to, or harm, the commitment of other worker-members to their joint enterprise. It is in this sense that organising in common produces and reproduces community around the joint enterprise. In its turn, the existence of a community helps to overcome moments of difficulty and doubt about whether to continue or exit from investing in the joint enterprise. The we-relation between worker-members, in other words, generates positive effects of its own that sustain commitment (Donati and Archer 2015, 189-90). A worker from the printing press explains:

> "You learn that it's not all so ideal, that there are flaws. But that's the case with everything. Also in a normal relation with your wife or someone you get to know. But equality is also there… it solves everything. It's a bedrock."

A virtuous circle is set in motion by organising in common and kept going through relational reflexivity. Inversely, relational reflexivity and hence organising in common will be under pressure in case of continued economic difficulties, insufficient integration of new persons, protracted discord between subgroups or feelings of injustice or inequality that are not addressed adequately.

5 An alternative to management

The previous section provided a synthetic overview of the multiple organising activities of worker-members. The motivations for their activities reflect an organisational rationale in its own right and not a value-enhanced form of the managerial rationale such as participatory management or socially responsible management. An attempt to present this organisational rationale in a concise way will be followed by an explanation of its capacity to provide alternative answers to the challenges of organising.

5.1 The organisational rationale of the enterprise as a common

The organisational rationale of the enterprise as a common, as it emerges from the interviews, is first and foremost characterised by its consideration of workers simultaneously as producers, organisers and governors of their enterprise. Workers are legitimate agents not only within a given action situation, but also co-create their action situation at the level of the project of the enterprise and the organisation of the enterprise. There is no division of people in classes such as workers, managers and principals. In particular, organising is not constructed as a specialised activity performed by persons with a higher political, social and economic status (Grey 1999). There is no division between persons that organise and persons that are subject to their organising activities. Instead, some activities are taken charge of by one person and other activities are organised by other persons.

Second, the enterprise is conceptualised as a joint project of concrete persons. Workers do not only supply their competences and time towards the realisation of their joint project that may include financial, material, social, ideological and psychological dimensions. Workers also link their destinies to each other by association. Their association is a conscious engagement to a project and a process that comes with responsibilities, rights and obligations. They agree to relinquish their autonomous agency in exchange for the benefits that come from the realisation of the project and on condition that it is their right to participate in any evolution of the content of their joint project as well as in the activities that concretise the project (Nicolas-Le Strat 2016: 61). The enterprise is not constituted as an "it"; as a whole with a purpose of its own to which workers need to submit. The project of the enterprise does not come to impose itself on the activity from outside. On the contrary, the project develops "in direct relation to the developed activities and in the same temporality " (Nicolas-Le Strat 2016: 33).

Third, the quality of the relational network or the social structure in other words is a shared concern. Workers are vigilant to maintain a we-relation which is a type of relation that is characterised by mutual recognition and mutual obligation (Donati and Archer 2015). A we-relation facilitates communication and ensures adherence, not by subordination but by commitment. It contributes to overcome temporal discrepancies between contribution and retribution and sustains the continuation of activity during difficult moments. The we-relation between workers is grounded in a common interest in the flourishing of their enterprise, but requires permanent attention and action. As the relational network is produced continuously by everyone's behaviours and actions, it's also fragile and may break down. If that happens, the enterprise no longer constitutes a shared resource for the realisation of workers' interests. The idea of the presence of an observer standing outside the relational network who can design, change or set objectives for it is absent (Stacey 2011: 59). Workers are aware that they share responsibility for the relational network that makes an effective collective performance possible.

Fourth, the guiding principle for organisational activities is the creation and maintenance of the commitment of all workers involved. This is achieved through the permanent integration of interests. The integration of interests among workers is not restricted to questions of governance or to what the tools of participatory management can achieve. The integration of interests continues on the work floor through communication in the sense of 'making common'. As cooperation is sought through commitment, sanctions are not used, unless it concerns an issue that would potentially lead to expelling a person from membership of the association. Neither are techniques such as standardisation, surveillance, rewards or persuasive coercion used to assure cooperation (Stacey 2012). Workers do use institutional techniques, such as the design of work processes, to create an action situation that encourages acting in a cooperative way. These may resemble the institutional techniques of participatory management, but are not forms of conditioning since workers retain their ability to reflect and act upon these institutional techniques that they set up and modify themselves.

In sum, the enterprise is held in common. The organisational rationale of the enterprise as a common appears to be characterised by 1) a vision of workers as legitimate and capable producers, organisers and governors, 2) a conception of the enterprise as an association between workers for the purpose of the realisation of a joint project, 3) a shared responsibility for the relational network that makes an effective collective performance possible, and 4) a guiding principle that consists in the creation and maintenance of commitment through interest and communication, also on the work floor. This tentative representation of the organisational rationale of the enterprise as a common needs to be further refined and verified. Interestingly, the conventional dichotomies of the enterprise such as decision-maker versus implementer, organiser versus organised, individual versus collective interest, economic versus social strategies and interest-based versus value-based engagement dissolve in the presence of the organisational rationale of the enterprise as a common. This of course doesn't mean that there are no tensions, only that workers engage in a permanent work of integration.

5.2 Alternative answers to the challenges of organising

The organisational rationale of the enterprise as a common would not be an organisational rationale if it wouldn't provide solutions for the challenges of organising. Orienting the activity of multiple individual workers for the purpose of achieving collective performance is not a simple task. In the managerial rationale this task is assumed by management on behalf of the principals. Management identifies the tasks to be done and assigns these tasks to the workers. Management also aligns the different tasks through coordination. Management furthermore conceives of multiple ways to stimulate individual workers to use their best efforts.

This section attempts to offer some elements of response to the two-fold question of whether the commons rationale addresses the functions mentioned above (i.e. is an organisational rationale) and in what way it contributes to or hinders the fulfilment of these functions. While an economic analysis is out of this study's scope, worker-members explained that they perceive many positive effects of organising the enterprise as a common. A worker from the printing press states:

> "It's more based on voluntariness than on coercion from a boss. That is very important. And I say, we are seven and if all seven of us voluntarily invest our time in this, then we are every bit as good. Everything will run more smoothly than when you put seven people that are distant from each other together in a room and tell them 'now you are going to produce this'. That's something very different."

The benefits of organising the enterprise as a common can be linked to both real and psychological ownership of the enterprise, and to the presence of permanent processes of integration. The we-relation between worker-members provides the space in which these

complicated processes of integration can be brought to a good and efficient end, without the need for coercion.

In regard to the division of work, optimising the work flow can serve as the guiding principle for the division of labour among workers. There is no need for conceiving a hierarchical and controlling chain, which also eliminates a number of social sensibilities from the elaboration of a performant work division. The involvement of workers allows for creativity in designing jobs that combine tasks that fit with the wishes and competences of individual workers with tasks that are perhaps less interesting but respond to the needs of a well-functioning enterprise. A level of flexibility in the allocation of tasks is maintained as a matter of course so that activities can be adapted when the needs change or when a colleague needs support.

The coordination of work is facilitated by a thorough knowledge and understanding by workers of the purposes and dimensions of their joint project. The actions of workers in their zones of decision build on the consensus reached previously or in the course of the activity. Workers are accountable towards all others, as co-governors and co-organisers. Further integration of activities happens mainly through the open communication channels that exist between individuals and groups.

Individual efforts are stimulated through the various material and non-material interests that workers have in the success of their joint enterprise. The fact that workers co-decide on the division of work also implies a responsibility for the proper implementation of these tasks. Any form of freeridership is discouraged and will be denounced directly by colleagues. Workers themselves are also aware of the detrimental effect their behaviour may have on the group and consequently on the functioning of the enterprise as a whole.

Without any conclusions about its efficiency, it can be said that the organisational rationale of the enterprise as a common addresses the main problems of organising. This does not mean that finding solutions is always easy or possible. Potential obstacles to worker-members' capacity to fully realise their goal of organising the enterprise as a common were also identified. These include the construction of a joint project that motivates everyone, the achievement of a balance between the contributions and retributions of each member and among members, the integration of multiple new persons simultaneously, the presence of personal difficulties to work and communicate in group, and the development of performant ways of alignment when the number of worker-members increases. These potential obstacles, if they occur, may impair the beneficial effects of organising in common and either threaten the sustainability of the enterprise or lead to the introduction of another organisational rationale such as the managerial rationale.

6 Conclusion

Grey (1999: 579) notes that the current application of management terminology to nearly all forms of social coordination "closes off alternative conceptions of coordination, most notably those of community". This paper intends to contribute to the efforts of numerous others to make visible that another way of organising is possible – a way of organising which maintains the participation and agency of workers on the work floor (Gibson-Graham 2008).

For this study, members of worker cooperatives in Belgium were interviewed to learn more about how they organise their work. While worker cooperatives are not necessarily *worker-organised* enterprises, this happened to be the case for the majority of the enterprises

selected for this study. Worker-members in these enterprises share organisational power and embed participation in all aspects of the organisation of work while keeping their joint enterprise viable over time. In doing so, they show by example that, contrary to widespread belief, it is possible to run an enterprise without resorting to a managerial rationale.

Instead, worker-members in these enterprises apply a different organisational rationale whereby they consider the enterprise as a common resource and endeavour, and organise accordingly in order to maintain commitment and control in the hands of those who are doing the work on a daily basis. This paper intended to show that the organisational rationale of the enterprise as a common is a way of thinking about organising that allows for a viable and sustainable enterprise. The study on which the paper is based reveals the following characteristics: 1) a vision of workers as legitimate and capable producers, organisers and governors, 2) a conception of the enterprise as an association between workers for the purpose of the realisation of a joint project, 3) a shared responsibility for the relational network that makes an effective collective performance possible, and 4) a guiding principle that consists in the creation and maintenance of commitment through interest and communication.

Research on organising in worker cooperatives active in other historical, regulatory and cultural contexts would contribute to refining and possibly modifying the above-mentioned characteristics as well as to understanding more about the conditions that foster the application of the organisational rationale of the enterprise as a common.

Bibliography

Albareda, Laura, and Alejo Jose G. Sison. 2020. 'Commons Organizing: Embedding Common Good and Institutions for Collective Action. Insights from Ethics and Economics'. *Journal of Business Ethics* 166 (4): 727–43.

Arthur, Len, Tom Keenoy, Russell Smith, Molly Scott Cato, and Peter Antony. 2004. 'Cooperative Production - a Contentious Social Space?'. 22nd Annual International Labour Process conference Amsterdam.

Atzeni, M., and P. Ghigliani. 2007. 'Labour Process and Decision-Making in Factories under Workers' Self-Management: Empirical Evidence from Argentina'. *Work, Employment & Society* 21 (4): 653–71.

Aufrère, Laura, Philippe Eynaud, Olivier Gauthier, and Corinne Vercher-Chaptal. 2019. 'Entreprendre En Commun(s): Une Étude Du Processus de Création d'un Supermarché Coopératif et Participatif'. *Revue Française de Gestion* 45 (279): 83–96.

Cheney, George. 1995. 'Democracy in the Workplace: Theory and Practice from the Perspective of Communication'. *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 23 (3): 167–200.

Dardot, Pierre, and Christian Laval. 2015. *Commun: essai sur la révolution au XXIe siècle*. Paris: La Découverte.

Davis, Peter. 2017. 'Ethical Agency Contracts as a Basis for Co-Operative Management and Leadership'. European Conference on Management, Leadership & Governance , 59–66.

De Angelis, Massimo. 2017. *Omnia Sunt Communia: On the Commons and the Transformation to Postcapitalism*. London: Zed Books.

Desreumaux, Alain, and Jean-Pierre Brechet. 2013. 'L'entreprise comme bien commun'. *RIMHE : Revue Interdisciplinaire Management, Homme(s) & Entreprise* 7 (3): 77.

Donati, Pierpaolo, and Margaret Scotford Archer. 2015. *The Relational Subject*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

Ellerman, David. 1984. 'Worker Cooperatives: The Question of Legal Structure'. In *Workers Cooperatives in America*, edited by Robert Jackall and Henry M. Levin, 275–301. Berkely: University of California Press.

Fournier, Valérie. 2013. 'Commoning: on the social organisation of the commons'. *M@n@gement* 16 (4): 433-453.

Friedberg, Erhard. 2019. 'Purposive Action Is a Genuinely Sociological Perspective'. *Advances in Sciences and Humanities* 5 (6): 171-179.

Gand, Sébastien, and Mathias Béjean. 2007. 'Les Difficultés Des Entreprises Démocratiques Face Au Management: Enjeux et Modalités de Conception de Fonctions Managériales Originales'. 16ème Conférence Internationale de Management Stratégique.

Gibson-Graham J.K.. 2008. 'Diverse economies: performative practices for `other worlds''. Progress in Human Geography 32 (5): 613-632.

Grey, Christopher. 1999. '"We Are All Managers Now"; "We Always Were": On the Development and Demise of Management'. *Journal of Management Studies* 36 (5): 561–85.

Guttmann, Alexandre. 2021. 'Commons and Cooperatives: A New Governance of Collective Action'. *Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics* 92 (1): 33–53.

Heras-Saizarbitoria, Iñaki, and Imanol Basterretxea. 2016. 'Do Co-Ops Speak the Managerial Lingua Franca? An Analysis of the Managerial Discourse of Mondragon Cooperatives'. *Journal of Co-Operative Organization and Management* 4 (1): 13–21.

Korczynski, Marek, and Andreas Wittel. 2020. 'The Workplace Commons: Towards Understanding Commoning within Work Relations'. *Sociology* 54 (4): 711–26.

Langmead, Kiri. 2017. 'Challenging the Degeneration Thesis: The Role of Democracy in Worker Cooperatives?' *Journal of Entrepreneurial and Organizational Diversity* 5 (1): 79–98.

Le Texier, Thibault. 2016. *Le maniement des hommes: essai sur la rationalité managériale*. Paris: La Découverte.

Leach, Darcy K. 2005. 'The Iron Law of What Again? Conceptualizing Oligarchy Across Organizational Forms'. *Sociological Theory* 23 (3): 312–37.

Meister, Albert. 1974. *La Participation Dans Les Associations*. Paris: Les éditions ouvrières.

Michels, Robert. 1915. *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*. Hearst's International Library Company.

Nicolas-Le Strat, Pascal. 2016. *Le Travail Du Commun*. Saint Germain sur Ille: Éditions du Commun.

Ostrom Elinor. 1990. *Governing the commons: the evolution of institutions for collective action*. Cambridge University Press.

Pasquet, Philippe, and Sébastien Liarte. 2012. 'La Société Coopérative et Participative : Outil de gestion pour l'entrepreneur social ou une nouvelle hypocrisie managériale ?' *RIMHE : Revue Interdisciplinaire Management, Homme(s) & Entreprise* 3 (3): 3–16.

Pastier, Kévin, and François Silva. 2021. '"Quand les RH s'en mêlent… ". Du sociétaire au salarié-entrepreneur : une redéfinition de la citoyenneté coopérative'. *Présenté au 31ème congrès de l'AGRH*, Tours, France.

Pastier, Kévin, and François Silva. 2020. 'Quel Impératif Délibératif En Entreprise ? De La Gestion Au Commun'. *Communication et Organisation*, no. 57: 137–50.

Peuter, Greig de, and Nick Dyer-Witheford. 2010. 'Commons and Cooperatives'. *Affinities : A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture, and Action* 4 (1): 30–56.

Quijoux, Maxime. 2018. 'Sauver Son Entreprise En Créant Une Société Coopérative. Engagement Syndical et Participation Ouvrière'. *Sociologie Du Travail* 60 (4): 1–22.

Reed, Michael I. 1989. *The Sociology of Management*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Reynaud, Jean-Daniel. 1988. 'Les Régulations Dans Les Organisations: Régulation de Contrôle et Régulation Autonome'. *Revue Française de Sociologie* 29 (1): 5–18.

Smith, Russell, Len Arthur, Molly Scott Cato, and Tom Keenoy. 2011. 'A Narrative of Power : Tower Colliery as an Example of Worker Control through Cooperative Work Organization'. *WorkingUSA* 14 (3): 285–303.

Stacey, Ralph D. 2011. *Strategic Management and Organisational Dynamics: The Challenge of Complexity to Ways of Thinking about Organisations*. 6th ed. Harlow, England ; New York: Financial Times Prentice Hall.

Stacey, Ralph D. 2012. *Tools and Techniques of Leadership and Management: Meeting the Challenge of Complexity*. London ; New York: Routledge.

Stohl, Cynthia, and George Cheney. 2001. 'Participatory Processes/Paradoxical Practices Communication and the Dilemmas of Organizational Democracy'. *Management Communication Quarterly* 14 (3): 349–407.

Willmott, Hugh. 1993. 'Strength Is Ignorance, Slavery Is Freedom: Managing Culture in Modern Organizations'. *Journal of Management Studies* 30 (4): 515–52.

Woodilla, Jill. 1998. 'Workplace Conversations: The Text of Organizing'. In Grant D., Keenoy T. and Oswick C. (ed.), *Discourse and Organization*, SAGE publications, 31–50.

EMES network
building knowledge together