



Alternative organizations in a global context: Tensions, challenges and potentialities

George Kokkinidis

review of

Atzeni, M. (2012) *Alternative work organizations*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. (HB, pp. 224, £71.00, ISBN 9780230241404)

While cooperation exists since times immemorial, in its modern form it constitutes a 'product' of specific socio-economic and political conditions. Within this context, cooperatives and other alternative experiments have offered an opportunity to challenge existing capital-labour relations and inter-work relationships and rethink the way we relate everyday practices to political organization in general. This in turn implies an effort to reconceptualise the links between the economic and social field of action. Despite their political, social and economic significance, such projects have received insufficient attention from critical management and organization studies scholars. In the light of this, this edited book offers the readers a colourful account of contemporary and historical examples in the labour movement (from the factory occupations and workers' cooperative in the UK during the 1970s to the current worker-recuperated enterprises in Argentina) while inviting us to appreciate the dynamics and factors influencing the nature and potentialities of workers' control and other self-managed projects. The book is divided in 8 chapters each drawing on a specific case from different historical periods and geographical contexts. Although context-dependent, the cases presented in this book offer a useful template of workable alternatives within capitalism. In so doing, this edition challenges the widespread assumption that workers cannot run

production themselves, as well as the almost naturalised character of capitalist work relations by offering a well-balanced analysis of the potentialities, tensions and challenges faced by alternative organizations within a market system.

The book begins with an introductory chapter by Maurizio Atzeni in an attempt to put into a more general theoretical framework some important and topical issues related to the transformative character of workers' control and self-managed experiments. More specifically, it reflects on the impact of such projects in shaping how people perceived work and how they relate with each other in their workplace but also in their communities, which is illustrative of the potential of these projects in constituting a vehicle of social transformation. Another important issue covered is the interplay between market forces and other structural factors in influencing the character and organizational practices of these projects as well as the ambivalence of state and other local institutions in supporting or repressing the potentialities of these projects. Therefore, any attempt to envision an alternative form of organization and organizing should begin with a critical reflection on the existing forms of work organization. In assessing and evaluating these alternatives, however, we need to pay attention to the structural conditions and mundane tensions they face while operating within a market system which (re)shapes their character and future possibilities. These issues, as Atzeni argues, should be carefully considered in any serious attempt to analyse and evaluate the current state and future potential of alternative experiments. After addressing the theoretical relevance of these projects, the chapter concludes with a solid summary of each chapter contained in this book.

Chapter 2, by Alan Tuckman, focuses on the UK context in the period marked by the end of the post-war settlement between capital and labour that resulted in the loosening of the employment relations and the decline of trade-unionism. The chapter offers a historical overview of workers' attempts to control production in the UK during the 1970s through factory occupations and workers' cooperatives. These occupations, although from a different geographical and chronological context, share much similarities with the Argentinean experiences discussed in Chapter 6. In both cases, the authors remind us that these occupations did not start out as a working-class revolt or a predetermined political ambition but rather as a defensive reaction to the fear of unemployment. Factory occupations, Tuckman (32) repeatedly says, 'tended to be acts of relative desperation of job loss, with no real plan for the future beyond some hope that another owner might be found'. Yet, these defensive and spontaneous actions, although short-lived, put alternative forms of organizing work at the heart of the political debate and strategy. Tuckman nicely reconstructs the history of the factory occupations in Britain during the 1970s and discusses the conditions that led to the wave of occupations in that period. By examining specific cases such as the 'Benn

Cooperatives' he offers some useful insights regarding workers' mobilisation and resistance to the prerogatives of capital, inviting us to look more closely at the strategies adopted by capital and labour. Those strategies adopted by the labour movement were rooted in social imperatives and were trying to 'move towards the establishment of an alternative to capitalism rooted in social needs' (44) while those of capital were driven by the imperative to extend commodification.

One such strategy is discussed in Chapter 3 by Russell Smith, Len Arthur, Molly Scott Cato and Tom Keenoy. Staying in the UK context but in a different chronological period (1990s and 2000s), the chapter is based on a longitudinal qualitative study of the 13 years experience of workers' control at the Tower Colliery in South Wales (for those interested in this experiment, it is also worth looking at Cato, 2004). The authors attempt to reconstruct the history of the deep-coal mine, focusing on the period between the buy-out in 1995 to its closure 13 years later. Drawing on site observations, individual and group interviews, and secondary data (including the cooperative archives and local newspaper reportage) the authors build a discussion around the nature, significance and limits of this experiment offering a well balanced reflection around the tensions and practical challenges that organizations face when multiple objectives clash. At the same time, it raises some important questions about issues related to work organization, employees' participation and decision-making. For Smith et al., Tower Colliery is a 'deviant mainstreaming' organization which shares similarities with conventional capitalist enterprises as these are manifested in the leading role of technocrats and the priority 'to the financial and technical strategic arguments' (59). Yet it challenges top-down organization and offers an alternative way of organizing work by giving emphasis on bottom-up ownership and control while it serves as an inspirational example for others to follow. Therefore, rather than dismissing the political and social significance of the project, they invite us to appreciate the practical challenges that alternative organizations face while operating within a "market-system".

The practical challenges faced by alternative organizations operating within a market-system are further discussed in the chapters to follow. Chapter 4, by Joseba Azkarraga Etxagibel, George Cheney and Ainara Udaondo takes us south to the periphery of capitalism and the Basque region of Spain where we find the most well documented examples of a cooperative experiment, the Mondragon Cooperatives. The discussion begins with a brief historical overview of the Mondragon Cooperative Experience (MCE) and its current status as the largest worker-owned organization in the world. The authors soon acknowledge and summarise the various criticisms and debates around Mondragon's work organization, members' participation and decision making processes. The discussion around these issues offers a balanced view of the MCE as an

experiment that tries to combine economic viability while maintaining strong political and social values and objectives. Focusing primarily on the outcome and implications of the 10th Cooperative Congress, the authors outline the "process of self-reflection and debate entitled 'Reflection on the Meaning and Future Directions of the Cooperative Experience' (82), an institutionalised process that nevertheless aimed to create a space for reflection on the evident bureaucratic tendencies in the Mondragon group and the privileging of economic over other more social and collective objectives. The themes covered in this broad-based process extended from problems related to members' as well as non-members' participation in the decision making process and control of the cooperative, to the issue of cooperative education and social transformation.

While the authors argue that the implications of the decisions made at the Congress are yet to be seen and future research will be indeed required, I feel that the discussion has much value for researchers and practitioners of alternative forms of organization as they open up a discussion on various important issues of everyday practices and challenges for organizations that operate within a market system. Acknowledgement of the tensions between democratic impulses and bureaucratic tendencies that are constantly present in every alternative experiment, and perhaps more intense in large-scale organizations such as Mondragon, invites us to further explore and reflect on various issues such as horizontality, participation and control or the relationship between size and workplace democracy. It therefore opens up further discussion: In what ways can cooperatives that operate in a complex global market resist the degenerative effects of market competition and maintain, perhaps even strengthen, their social values? How are we to make sense of employees' autonomy and control when multiple objectives (e.g. economic efficiency and more inclusive forms of participation) clash? And what are the potentials as well as the practical challenges for more inclusive forms of participation and control in a large-scale context? Some of these questions are addressed in the following chapters.

In chapter 5, by Camila Piñeiro Harnecker, the focus shifts from Europe to Latin America and more specifically to the newly formed producers' cooperatives in Venezuela in order to investigate the workers' experience with self-management, reflecting on the issues of workplace democracy and workers' solidarity. Unlike similar projects elsewhere (see the Argentinean workers' recovered enterprises discussed in chapter 6), the Venezuelan cooperatives are favoured by the state as a vehicle for social transformation which has resulted in the exponential rise of cooperatives under Chavez's administration. Based on a fieldwork conducted in the summer of 2006 on 12 cooperatives and 3 civil associations, this chapter investigates the potential relationship between levels of workplace democracy and

the development of workers' solidarity and to reflect on 'the main dynamics that could explain such a relationship' (107). In so doing, the author discusses the internal as well as external conditions contributing to the development of democratic workplaces and social consciousness, reflecting on the dynamics that are crucial for cultivating workers' solidarity not only within the cooperatives but also with the community at large. The chapter offers a thorough description of the democratic process in these cooperatives while encouraging the reader to look beyond formal forms of participation. In fact, and rightly so, the author places much emphasis on more substantive forms of participation, reflecting on workers' experience of the deliberative character of the democratic practices within their cooperatives.

The analysis of these cases, although context specific, opens up the discussion around the limits and contradictions of representation as an element of democracy and the importance of more inclusive forms of representation in blocking hierarchical tendencies in democratic organizations. Placing emphasis on equality and consent, coupled with structure and practices aiming to minimize exclusion, contributes to the members' realisation of their self-creating and self-instituting capacities. At the same time, the active participation and involvement of the members in the processes of deliberation and the dynamic interactions developed within these processes, cultivate among them a culture of openness and receptiveness to others' ideas. As Harnecker writes, 'a democratic practice that privileges deliberation, rather than time-saving voting procedures, is more effective in shaping individuals' preferences, so the likely initial contradiction between their individual and collective interests is diminished' (112). Moreover, the author reflects on the relationship between workplace democracy and equality and analyses how specific organizational arrangements contributed to the development of a sense of equality among the members.

As one of the most promising features of workplace democracy is its openness to change, the organizational arrangements and democratic practices in these cooperatives are not free from shortcomings and potential improvement. One such shortcoming identified by the author turns around the issue of collective monitoring and its impact on members' participation in the decision-making processes which can also be a source of conflict among the members. The discussion of this issue, although brief, reveals the importance of understanding equality beyond equal rights, placing emphasis on the mechanisms and conditions stipulating exercise of these rights. In the last ten pages of the chapter, the attention shifts from the internal factors that affect the functioning of workplace democracy to those external conditions contributing to the development of workers' solidarity and democratic attitude in spaces beyond the actual workplaces. Harnecker reflects on how the members' exposure to a

solidaristic ideology affects their everyday life and relationship with local communities as well as the extent that cooperatives' avoidance of market logic affects their social solidarity. Drawing on her findings, Harnecker argues that social consciousness is not guaranteed by simply exposing workers to solidaristic ethics. She further illustrates that exposure to market logic poses a constant threat to the democratic character of these and other experiments, and further diminishes social solidarity. Her conclusions highlight the importance of substantive forms of participation that need to be more broadly exercised beyond the work spaces to other spheres of social life.

Moving from Venezuela to Argentina, Chapter 6, by Marcelo Vieta, is based on a qualitative case study research on worker-recuperated enterprises (ERTs) that developed in the country as a result of the economic liberalization in the 1990s which eventually led thousands of small and medium-sized companies to bankruptcy (for those interested in the Argentinean experiments, it is also worth looking at the works of Atzeni and Ghigliani, 2007; Vieta, 2008 and 2010 and Vieta and Ruggeri, 2009). This crisis led to protests and the creation of grassroots democratic organizations such as the ERTs discussed in this chapter. It is important to note that unlike the Venezuelan cooperatives discussed in the previous chapter, the Argentinean ERTs not only lacked support from the state but they also faced hostility and, very often, violent repression. Also, as Vieta repeatedly argues the occupations and running of factories and other enterprises by workers did not start out as a working-class revolt or a predetermined political ambition but rather as a defensive reaction to the fear of unemployment. Yet this initially defensive reaction to unemployment fostered a sense of collective purpose and democratic ethos through a process of experimentation with alternative forms of organizing work. Although the ERT phenomenon in Argentina remains relatively small there is a symbolic dimension in these experiments, as they challenge widespread assumptions that workers' cannot run production. The chapter outlines the constraints and challenges these self-managed projects constantly face as they operate within a market system and provide an account of how they address these challenges in creative ways through a repertoire of organizational innovations and the development of soft infrastructures of interpersonal communications that nurture deliberation. In this process of innovation and experimentation with new forms of organizing work, the members of the Argentinean ERTs appear to reinvent themselves but also their relationships with their fellow workers and their local communities, which offer a useful lesson of the transformative impact of these self-managed projects.

Chapter 7, by Anita Hammer, is based on a comparative study on two cooperatives in India. The first is a workers' cooperative in the state of Kerala and

the second producers' marketing cooperative in the state of Gujarat. The study follows a comparative institutional analysis, in order to show 'that it is the dialectics of institutional development and class mobilisation that influence and determine the differing nature and trajectory of cooperatives in the two states' (158). The chapter begins with an overview of the two cooperatives and shows their main differences in the management and internal organization as well as their differences in terms of practices and values. The attention then shifts to assessing the transformative potential of collective mobilisation and how institutional context is shaping the nature of movements which in turn influence the internal and external practices of the two cooperatives. Drawing on the interlinkages between class organization, political mobilisation and institutional development the study argues that institutions and collective mobilisation can in some cases (as in the cooperative at Gujarat) reinforce existing power relations while in other cases (as in the cooperative at Kerala) offer a radical potential. Reflecting on the dynamic between institutions and collective mobilisation and how institutions not only reproduce dominant social relations but also constitute a space of political contestation, the chapter offers some useful lessons to researchers on cooperatives and other alternative projects, inviting us to look more closely the ways that such dynamics shape the values and practices of alternative organizations.

The last chapter, by Martino Ghielmi, is not only a deviation from the tenor of the rest of the book, but as Atzeni (21) correctly puts it, 'traditional studies on workers' control and self-management' historically focusing on the formal sector. This chapter is instead focusing on the development of alternative forms of associations in the informal economy in Kenya and more specifically in the capital city of Nairobi. Drawing on multiple research techniques (participant observation, interviews, surveys) the chapter attempts to critically evaluate the extent that self-help groups (SHGs) can be seen to constitute an alternative form of work organization and their transformative potentialities. In terms of structure, the chapter provides a conceptual framework for informal economy in order to set the grounds for analysing the Kenyan context. A brief political history of self-help in Kenya helps the reader to appreciate the complex political, economic and cultural context that self-help groups operate in. Focusing on specific cases, the chapter proceeds to examine the members' motivation to participate in such associations as well as the aims and practices of these groups. The author argues that participation in these groups is primarily a defensive strategy to exploitation and poverty in an attempt to cover their basic needs. Particularly important is the discussion around the role of economic, political and cultural factors in limiting the potentialities of SHGs as well as the interconnectedness of the informal economy with the formal sector.

To conclude, the book addresses some important and timely topics such as that of workers' control and self-management that have not yet received adequate attention in Organization Studies. The detailed ethnographic accounts of contemporary and historical examples of the labour movement provide a useful insight into the political, social and economic significance of these experiments and challenge many assumptions about work organization, workplace democracy, and employees' autonomy. Without romanticising in any way the social and political significance of such projects the book also challenges the almost banal arguments that alternative organizations are destined to operate at the margins and are thus insignificant, or that they will be inevitably forced to reproduce at least some aspects of capitalist work relations. It invites us to look more closely at the differences in the ways of organizing, even within the market system. The chapters contained in this edited book provide informative and well balanced arguments on the possibilities and challenges that alternative organizations face while operating within a market system. The empirical evidence of past and ongoing experiences of workers' self-management offers contextualised information about each of these projects and invites us to look more closely at the dynamic interlinkage of institutional forces and social movements in shaping the nature and practices of these social experiments. Therefore, I believe this book is a great resource for anybody interested in alternative forms of organization and particularly in cooperatives. It is not only informative but also theoretically intriguing both for experts in the field of alternative economies, cooperative and organization studies as well as readers with a general interest in the area.

references

- 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.
- Cato, M.S. (2004) *The pit and the pendulum: A cooperative future for work in the welsh valleys*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
- Vieta, M. (2008) 'Autogestión and the worker-recuperated enterprises in Argentina: The potential for reconstituting work and recomposing life', paper presented at the Anarchist Studies Network Conference, Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK, September 4-6.
- Vieta, M. (2010) 'The social innovations of autogestion in Argentina's worker-recuperated enterprises: Cooperatively reorganizing productive life in hard times', *Labor Studies Journal*, 35(3): 295-321.
- Vieta, M. and A. Ruggeri (2009) 'Worker-recovered enterprises as workers' cooperatives: The conjunctures, challenges and innovations of self-management in Argentina', in D. Reed and J. J. McMurtry (eds.) *Co-operatives in a global economy: The challenges of co-operation across borders*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

the author

George Kokkinidis is a Lecturer in Management at Leicester Business School, De Montfort University. His research areas turn around the wider field of organization studies and critical management studies. His current research interests and projects mainly focus on alternative forms of organization and organizing, social movements and networks, the organization of space and commoning. Further to his main research interests, some of his previous and recent projects also cover the organization of resistance, employees' attitude to work and identity work.

Email: gkokkinidis@dmu.ac.uk