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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Governing without Governed and Governors: an Attempt to Establish a Non-Hierarchical Organizational Repertoire<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** This study focuses on attempts to establish non-hierarchical structures and decision-making processes within a squatters' movement, where these modes of self-organizing are usual. Beneath the declaration of a non-hierarchical structure, many variations and perspectives on how to achieve such a goal may be concealed. Besides formal meetings of the collective where common decisions are made, a horizontal logic of sharing space as a commons has to be maintained in everyday life. A reflexive attitude toward the distribution of power is a key aspect of managing the tension that arises between the idealized vision of horizontality and the efforts that are made to realize it. I analyse how the experiment with non-hierarchical organization is carried out in a squatted garden in a city in southern France, where people live in huts and trailers and share a legally rented common house on a connected parcel of land. By using ethnography, in which semi-structured interviews and participant observation form a crucial part, I interpret the inner dynamics of a concrete collective and its strategies to maintain a non-hierarchical logic. I focus on the tools, methods and practices that are used by the participants to keep the distribution of power horizontal and on their reflection on this process. Studying a case such as this will shed light on the variations in how a sustainable project on squatted land can be formed. Analysing one possibility that appears to be successful, and its interpretation within the context of new left movements, help us to better understand prefigurative attempts at creating alternative forms of coexistence.

**KEYWORDS:** commons, horizontality, prefiguration, social movements, squatting

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## 1. Introduction

This study focuses on governing projects that claim attaining horizontality as one of their fundamental goals. In the case of political squatting, it is hard to imagine anything other than a non-hierarchical structure. Prime examples of such projects are autonomous social centres, which function not as isolated spaces, but provide a variety of services for the public and are open to new people. Within them, various forms of dealing with horizontality can be found (Piazza 2013; Yates 2014). Methods of non-hierarchical decision making and prefigurative politics are common within new left movements (Maekelbergh 2009; Graeber 2004) and many collectives strive toward a horizontal distribution of power. There is a plenty of space for experimenting and searching for tools that enable collectives to fulfil their resolution for trying to establish and maintain equality. To seek ways to be non-hierarchical is a crucial part of the identity of many collectives that are involved in the squatters' movement and that are trying to contest a normality represented by an unequal distribution of power.

Interpreting methods of governance as organizational repertoires is useful for understanding their shared dimension across organizations without direct leadership. They are available as tools, shared and created within and in between particular projects. The consensus model may seem to be just one mode of self-organization, but it is actually understood and realized differently by diverse groups of activists, and the strategies of dealing with the organizational dimension can accordingly vary dramatically. Individuals learn and experiment within different projects and they influence and inspire each other. I study the praxis of horizontal prefiguration in one particular case, with the aim to understanding the uneasy task to create this specific form of coexistence and to analyse the character of the knowledge gained by members of this collective. To experiment with horizontality is always a complicated task, whose outcome is unsure and fragile. It is an ongoing process that is simple to imagine but tricky to attain.

I decided to study the phenomena of non-hierarchical governance in a project that is not really well known even in its region. Situated in southern France, it is mostly hidden, quite small and located outside the city centre. The project is semi-legalized, containing a legally rented house with a large garden that had been recently occupied. The inhabitants decided to live in the squatted garden in caravans and self-build huts and to use the house commonly. Programmes for the public are occasionally organized in the form of concerts, workshops and gardening activities. For the purposes of this research I will call the place Cedar, after the kind of trees that grow in the garden; the names of participants are also anonymized. The collective of this project by inventing and experimenting with non-hierarchical organizational repertoire is trying to find solutions to how to live together without any hierarchy.

## 2. Governing the Occupied Commons

To create a non-hierarchical project is a complicated task to fulfil. To be without direct leadership, which is the common form of governance within most institutions and projects, is not achieved just by removing the leaders: there is a need to replace this normal structure with a more sophisticated form of governance that can provide egalitarian modes of power relations. The logic of prefiguration leads social centre collectives to the creation of spaces radically different from those of the normality around them: 'Prefiguration is a practice through which movement actors create a conflation of their ends with their means. It is an enactment of the ultimate values of an ideal society within the very means of the struggle for that society' (Mackelbergh 2009, 67). On the basis of prefiguration, the idea that people should not be governed hierarchically is widespread

within the new left movement. It is hard to imagine that squats would have official leaders in charge of the space. On the contrary, methods of governance without direct leadership are systematically created.

Interpreting these non-hierarchical methods of governance as repertoire enables us to study them as shared and exchanged tools across the squatters' movement. Tools and know-how are shared by specific collectives; methods are exchanged and they are tested and reinvented within particular spaces, as Owens declared in the case of spreading the know-how to squat across Europe (Owens 2013). They circulate by various channels, but physical experience seems to be crucial as activists gather within larger events and projects such as ZADs (Zones to Defend), squats or demonstrations, as well as just visiting each other's projects. In any event, there is usually just a limited range of possibilities: 'A population's repertoire of collective action generally includes only a handful of alternatives. It generally changes slowly, seems obvious and natural to the people involved' (Tilly 1978: 156). In the European radical left movement, forming horizontal systems as a way to self-organize is a common strategy for the task of sharing common space. Horizontality is used as an argument for legitimizing projects and is performed within social centres. The repertoire may be the same, but it is usually understood and realized differently by diverse groups of activists (Piazza 2013). As for example Polletta shows within the context of the USA, non-hierarchical forms of organization have been used since the 1920s, and such an organizational repertoire is widespread within left movements (Polletta 2002).

To deal with the actual task of making a decision, though, can vary within projects even when they declare a non-hierarchical structure. Piazza, on the basis of his research of social centres in Catania, had to reject his hypothesis that the consensus model is always used within this field, because he found that voting was used in one of the projects when a consensus was not to be reached: 'Although activists from both social centres adopted the consensual method to solve internal divergences and to make unanimous decisions, transforming their preferences during the debates, they considered diverged when unanimity was not achieved (...)' (Piazza 2013, 106). On this basis he draws a scale to describe these processes by creating a typology of how horizontal their decision-making processes actually are. The problem of voting and the reason why it is not usually used by activists is explained by Graeber: 'What is seen as an elaborate and difficult process of finding consensus is, in fact, a long process of making sure no one walks away feeling that their views have been totally ignored' (Graeber 2004, 89). To vote means that there is somebody that is not part of the actual course of the collective. A deeper analysis of the consensus model alone reveals that there are distinctive differences in understanding of the same organizational repertoire.

Particular squats within the context of social movements are usually governed by collectives that have power to decide over the space. This type of relation toward a property can be understood as a commons, in contrast to property regimes of state, individual and open access (Bromley, 1992). According to Ostrom, a clear definition of the group that uses the space, and thus the distinction between the commons and the space outside it, are a basic precondition for dealing with a commons (Ostrom 1990, 91). A commons is governed collectively and gives certain benefits to all of the participants. It is based on the creation of specific sorts of relations and praxis: 'Common space can be considered as a relation between a social group and its effort to define a world that is shared between its members' (Stavrvides 2016, 54). This can be understood as a creation of an autonomous area governed by one's own rules (Stavrvides 2014). Such a creation provides members of the collective with a space for experimenting with their own identity. The balance of power relations in the process of the creation of a commons is crucial: 'In order for common space to remain common there must be developed forms of contestation and agreement about its use and character which explicitly prevent any accumulation of power. Especially, any accumulation of situated, space-bound power' (Stavrvides 2016, 106). The tools that help to keep the power horizontal within an experiment with a particular space are the core

interests of my study. To have a physical space where the processes of commoning can be explored is crucial for any collective trying to experiment with horizontality.

Urban commons are often mentioned in the context of resistance to the enclosure of properties that have been used by communities and are endangered by gentrification (Blomley 2008; Huron 2015; Noterman 2016). Squatting used by activists tends on the contrary to be a method of creating a new commons by taking it out of the logic of the market and to use it without the consent of the owners, who are excluded from the process of governance. It is a strategy that is used to gain the exact opposite to enclosure, to liberate space from the neoliberal city and to see its use by the community for reasons not based in ownership. Moreover, the position of the collective outside the legal system gives them the opportunity not to deal with the usual legal structures of community organization: ‘Squatting offers opportunities for setting up almost any kind of establishment without the need for larger resources or the risk of becoming mired in bureaucracy’ (Pruit 2013, 32). The question of the purchase of the property arises for collectives that try to establish a legally based urban commons, as for example in case of the limited-equity cooperatives in Washington, DC: ‘A major point of pressure lies in the fact that urban commons must be wrenched from the capitalist landscape of cities’ (Huron 2015, 969). To accept a mortgage to be able to gain control over a property leads communities to compromises shaping the forms of self-organization. For example, Noterman introduces the concept of uneven commoning to describe a situation where most members of a cooperative are not willing to participate in daily maintenance of the commons, as sharing a mortgage is understood as doing enough (Noterman 2016).

A close study of ‘actually existing commons’ (Eizenberg 2012a) reveals a great variability of organization beneath the concept of a commons, in which many forms of governance can be found. As a commons is defined by a community and its relations towards the resource, the inner organization of an ‘actually existing commons’ is not fixed: ‘Each commons has distinctive dynamics based on its participants, history, cultural values, the nature of the resource, and so forth’ (Bollier 2007, 28). Often the systems are based on a democratic logic of power distribution (Noterman 2016). Each particular case has its own specific internal problems, which can lead in extreme examples to a power shift to a ‘totalitarian commons’, as in the case of some of the collective gardens in New York (Eizenberg 2012b), where the commons falls apart from within. As the non-conventional commons of a squatters’ movement tend to use different systems of governance, many of the tensions that are characteristic of conventional ones do not arise. The most distinctive division within can be identified by different approaches toward the processes of legalisation, which create an internal conflict between the ‘autonomous and institutional wings’ of a squatters’ movement (Aguilera 2018). Creating a division between two types of squats according to their willingness or unwillingness to negotiate and fit within the legal framework of particular legislative is a strategy of repression that seeks to divide the squatters’ movement into two categories, and is common in the European context as a way of gaining control over the politics of contentions (Dadusc 2019). This process is based on legalizing moderate projects while systematically repressing radical ones.

### **3. Commons and New Left Movement**

The prefigurative politics used by the new left movements can be understood as a method of resistance that enables the classical binary opposition between revolt and revolution to be bridged. Barša observed this idea in his study of the approach of post-humanist philosophy of the subject toward emancipation: ‘These movements reveal the ‘nowhere’ of Fanon’s and Sartre’s thought, which is situated between the lonely individual and the sovereign state, and so between existentialist revolt and political revolution’ (Barša 2015,

171). This way offers an alternative whose core is based in creative political protest that connects two traditional forms of resistance. It is an opportunity where it is possible to reach emancipation without direct confrontation with the political power of the state: '(...) it is necessary for civic disobedience not to be understood as a plain instrument for seizing or rebuilding the state, which would provide emancipation in the future, but as an interaction where emancipation is happening here and now' (Barša 2015, 174)<sup>2</sup>. Emancipation is in this sense a process which is a practice outside confrontational logic. As individual revolt is ineffective, revolution deprives the individual of authenticity. Prefigurative logic represent a post-humanist approach toward this dilemma, and anchors the sense of emancipation away from fixed identities in the present moment at a particular place.

To distinguish this shift in logic of resistance within the movements that appeared in the 1990s, Day introduces the notion of 'newest social movements' characterised by a different attitude toward the state and its hegemony, a '(...) shift from a counter-hegemonic politics of demand to a non-hegemonic politics of the act' (Day 2004, 719). This was made more visible by the Occupy movement, where long-term occupation of squares and other public spaces was hard to analyse within classical approaches of social movement studies, where politics are understood as something inherently connected to the state (Brissette 2016). The prefigurative turn is represented by different goals: 'These movements reject not only the idea of vanguard but also the idea that hierarchical social stratification is necessary for effective political organization in favour of prefiguring new forms of social organization that reject leaders and fixed political representation' (Maekkelbergh 2016, 123). The tools that enable this type of organizing can vary dramatically as they are used in diverse contexts, but some of them are commonly shared as particular practices across the movement. As these autonomous zones can last for weeks, there is a need to set up camps on squares that are based on a non-hierarchical logic. The know-how needed both to set up a formal non-hierarchical decision making process and to treat each other on the basis of horizontality in everyday interactions are fundamental to the structure of the movement itself.

Yates argues that the importance of spaces where the ideas of social movements persist are neglected by scholars and the main focus is on decision-making processes within adversarial social movement mobilization: 'This over-emphasis rationality, downplays habit and identity, and continues to treat activities outside of political protest and its planning as somewhat irrelevant' (Yates 2014, 6). His emphasis on practices that he qualitatively studies among three social centres in Barcelona highlight that even in a latent period when social movements are not easily visible there actually are people that carry on the know-how by maintaining their projects from day to day. A social movement in a period without suitable circumstances for mass mobilization still continues to produce specific practices in everyday life, and experiments with its organizational repertoire. Radical social movement organizations contest ways of sharing and creating, in that members can take on various positions and thus try to manage a range of operations (Fitzgerald, Rodgers 2001). This enables individuals to be involved in experimenting with their identity and to move within the structure. The study of organizational repertoires, social movement organizations and especially their radical variants, represents an ideal field for research into social movements.

The situation when social movements seem to be inactive is carefully described by Taylor in her approach toward the women's movement, where she develops the concept of abeyance in her study of the second half of the gap in between the mass mobilization of suffrage movement in the 1920s and new left feminist movements in the 1960s: 'The term "abeyance" depicts a holding process by which movements sustain themselves in non-receptive political environments and provide continuity from one stage of mobilization to another' (Taylor 1989, 761). The social movement organizations may seem hidden, but they are providing a

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2 Translated by the author.



basis for carrying on the tools needed to construct alternative spaces: ‘The abeyance process functions through organizations capable of sustaining collective challenges under circumstances unfavourable to mass mobilization’ (Taylor 1989, 765). As the ability to create non-hierarchical spaces seems to be crucial for the new left movements and this organizational repertoire is widespread among particular cases, a better understanding of this process is crucial to an analysis of the inner logic of the movement itself.

The study of practices enables a closer look at how politics are actually present within social movement organizations even if they are not directly involved in the politics of contention. The ideals formed within a social movement are manifested in daily interactions and are shaped by organizational repertoires that are widely shared. Many social movement organizations work with a non-hierarchical logic and provide infrastructure for the movement to grow. As Yates argues, the study of practices is crucial for revealing a political dimension to such organizations: ‘It was maintained that such everyday political practices established a closer relation between political values and lifestyles for individuals and collectives, tackling inequality, individualism and relationships of exchange on a small scale’ (Yates 2014, 18). While he focuses on three different kinds of particular practices, namely food skipping, distributing resources, and communality and dividing labour, I instead argue more generally that the logic of horizontal power distribution itself is created by sets of practices that are used as tools that can be carefully studied. And these sets of practices, where horizontal logic is manifested, reveals the nature of non-hierarchical organizational repertoire.

#### **4. Methodology**

This study is methodologically based in ethnography within the tradition of social anthropology (Hammersley, Atkinson 1996; Okely 2012), characterized by participant observation, which includes living in the field and sharing day-to-day tasks in maintaining the project. Qualitative analysis, which enables us to examine one case in detail and one possible solution of a non-hierarchical organizational repertoire, leads to a deeper understanding of the potential approaches to horizontality that a collective can take. This field research consists in carefully describing the formal methods used when there is a need to make a decision and the dimensions that concern everyday life within the non-hierarchical community. The questions of rules, power, non-formal hierarchies or gender equalities are carefully discussed with the participants, who in such a collective tend to have a reflexive attitude toward their creation. Making qualitative research within a field where participants are on the edge of legality is quite sensitive to mutual trust. Usually the only way to become part of the collective is by spending time in the field: ‘Only by establishing long-term relationships based on trust can one begin to ask provocative personal questions, and expect thoughtful, serious answers’ (Bourgois 1996, 12). To live in such a project as a researcher and share experiences that are so normal for its members, but so new for an outsider, is a tool that helps us to understand the inner logic of the terrain of horizontality.

I spent three weeks as a guest in Cedar, camping in the garden and using the common house, I fed the chickens every morning and watered the garden based on permaculture techniques. When studying non-hierarchical organizational repertoire by a qualitative approach, the question inevitably arises of where the study is going to take place. If the locality can be easily decided in advance, to choose the particular place for ethnographic field research usually depends on an array of uncontrolled factors: ‘The role of chance in finding, then seizing a rewarding field site echoes the often crucial serendipity in comprehending and analysing the research material’ (Okely 2012, 46). This research took place in southern France; this locality was chosen because there are plenty of projects that have the characteristics suitable for this research.

Squatting in this region is a common strategy for setting up various projects that are governed by non-hierarchical logic. I contacted a few projects by e-mail in which I asked if it would be possible to conduct research and interviews with members of the collective. The collective of Cedar was open to participating and found the topic of my research interesting. From an ethical point of view, informing all the people involved in the participating project that they were part of this research was a matter of course; all the places and people in this study are anonymized so that it is not possible to recognize any particular project or person.

I made eleven interviews during my visit, which had the same general structure and were open to be modified during discussions. I was interested in the tools that are applied during a variety of occasions. The main topics under discussion were as follows: the meaning of non-hierarchical organization, plenary meetings and their structure, everyday life, non-formal hierarchies, and conflicts. At the end of an interview I asked if there was something that should be added, and I led an open discussion about topics that members of the collective found to be important. Apart from two people who did not find the time or mood to talk with me, I recorded conversations with all the members of the Cedar collective reachable in that time period. I analysed the data in the program RQDA, which enables the researcher to create codes and so to assemble data according to particular themes. The relationships that emerge between the interviews on the basis of the coding help to better understand the information gathered during the research project. The core of this analysis is the reconstruction of participants' interpretations of their own experience that reveals an emic perspective toward particular topics.

## 5. The Garden, the House and the Collective

The collective of Cedar is composed of people that have known each other for years. There are around fifteen people living mostly in couples, including three children. The members are mostly in their thirties and from France with the exception of one family with origins in Spain and Italy. They work in various fields, but work where there is no direct leadership is preferred, for example as carpenters in a non-hierarchically organized cooperative, making serigraphs and selling artwork at festivals, or preparing and performing at circus events. The combination of low-cost living – the cost for one person a month is fifty euros – and the supportive French system of social help, gives them the opportunity not to be driven by income. Situated on an area of two thousand square metres, the garden became a place where the collective was formed: '(...) people started to make *cabans*<sup>3</sup> so it's like saying something strong to put a house in the garden and say OK, it's habitant garden, living garden. Family garden with a big family, tribe' (Paul). The collective has not been accepting new members in recent years as there is no space for new constructions. The group that governs the commons is clearly defined (Ostrom 1990). An exception was made for two migrant minors who had been living in caravans, and the collective helped them to pass the formal processes to legalize their stay in France.

The garden, the house and all the space but the huts and private areas near them are used collectively as a commons. The centre of Cedar is a common house, the only legally rented space and located right next to a larger area where the occupied garden is situated. The garden was squatted in 2012, the fence between the garden and the house was removed and the collective started to actively use the garden by building their first construction: 'At the beginning it was like normal shared house, and it went more and more to an occupied garden with home made construction and all and so on. And all this steps that we had met together that have

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3 huts

brought us to where we are today' (Pierre). The decision to connect the squatted garden and the house changed the character of the project: 'We were not any more *collocation* living in the house<sup>4</sup> but we started to be collectively living place' (Paul). The process of squatting and creating a project open to the public formed the collective that is taking care of it. Not all the current members were present from the very beginning, some of them being attracted later once the living garden had already been established.

The house is the only source of drinking water and electricity, and is used by everybody. There are bathrooms, toilets, washing machines, kitchen, and the living room serves as a co-working area and meeting space. Use of the building depends on the season; during the winter it is used more often. Only one room was inhabited during the time of my research and all other members of collective lived in the squatted garden in self-build huts. The huts differ in the style of their construction, but most of them use a variation of connecting a caravan with a wooden construction, which serves as a living room furnished with large windows. In one case a yurt is part of such a connection. Some prefer a more simple style with just a caravan and a small private area. The living zones create a circle around a central construction in the middle of the garden. This is an area where public events are organized, with a bar and quite a large space for concerts. All wooden constructions are technically very well made due to the presence of carpenters in the collective. There is also a fire place, pizza oven and dry toilets. All the space in between is used as a permaculture garden, providing people with fruits and vegetables. Tomatoes, figs, cucumbers, pumpkins, and all other sorts of vegetation fill the gaps. The vegetation also serves to divide particular places and structures the space of the garden.

Nothing in Cedar is locked; all doors are open, so no keys are needed. The entrance gates to the area, the house and all huts stay open even when the residents are not present. This mutual trust is shared and highlights a notable contrast with the gentrified character of the neighbourhood. The house used to be in a rural area on the edge of the city, surrounded by farms with fields. That changed with the construction of a subway to the area accompanied by massive investment, materialized through the construction of dozens of new buildings. This is also the case of Cedar, as the house and garden are owned by such a company and so is waiting to be demolished: 'It is promoteur, it is an enterprise that makes constructions, buy fields and buy house and make construction and sell it' (Paul). The topic of gentrification is explicitly reflected by the Cedar collective and it is a point that connects the project with local residents that are forced to live in a new environment or to leave. The members of Cedar have been systematically mapping the process of gentrification in their surroundings and they organize public events to share this topic with locals.

## 6. Non-Hierarchical Organizational Repertoire

There are two basic dimensions in which the non-hierarchical organizational repertoire can be analysed. Collectives inevitably face decisions that have to be made by all its members, so there is a tendency to create a formal platform and tools that enable them to conduct organized meetings. The aim is to reach a solution of a proposed dilemma in accordance with everybody. Especially in the case of such a collective as Cedar, which is quite small in the number of its members, there can be a long period of time between plenary discussions, during which smaller tasks and problems have to be solved on the basis of day-to-day interactions. Most of the time, the aim to keep a horizontal power distribution takes place during plain communication when people meet in the garden or in the house. Within this dimension it is also possible to

4 housemates



identify tools and methods that enable participants to keep their prefigurative vision alive. I will start this analytical part with plenary discussions, and later I will focus on less formal communication.

The construction of organizational repertoire is influenced by the history of non-hierarchical projects and is explicitly reflected within Cedar: ‘From the sixties you have some ways to construct collectives and tools that already exist and we took some stuff from this, and this inspired us also. So this is also part of our inspirations. And those are tools that help us let about dealing with all the house and stuff we had to do’ (Pierre). Especially within the locality where there are many non-hierarchical projects, there is obvious potential for sharing experience locally and to influence each other by sharing this experience. ‘And with Paul we already met for ten years in squat where he had his association. I had mine also’ (Pierre). Personal experience with other projects is crucial for passing on know-how (Owens 2013). Other members of the collective referred to their experience with horizontality within cooperatives.

## 6.1 Formal Meetings

To reach a consensus is made by methods that guarantee that there is no one in the collective that would not have space to express an opinion and so be excluded from the solution. As voting usually offers just categories among which the participants have to choose, (Graeber 2004) the consensus model has a much wider palette of possible solutions, but on the other hand it can be uneasy to find an agreement. As Maeckelbergh notes during her research of alter-globalization movements, conflict is an inevitable part of consensual decision-making processes, but can be fruitful when carefully managed:

‘Conflict is welcomed because it represents diversity. Out of diversity comes creativity and creation. This transformation of conflict from adversarial to constructive takes place through horizontality. Horizontality acts as a guiding ethos and practices to actively limit hierarchies to allow diversity to remain constructive’ (Maeckelbergh 2009, 100).

The aim of assembly is not to force members to unanimity, but on the contrary to try to create a safe space where guided conflicts can enable participants to understand each other’s visions and to constructively search for a solution that is placed within the respect of diversity.

The formal tool most mentioned in interviews with members of the Cedar collective is used at the beginning of each assembly and is called a *meteo*: ‘We begin with the meteo and so everybody has a word which does not require a response of others, it’s simply just that I express how I feel and maybe if I have doubts concerning this reunion and so on’ (Lucie). The meteo is a method when everybody has two minutes to express his or her feelings. This is guaranteed by measuring the time and so keeping the same space for all: ‘At the beginning we start with a talk pass, like everybody have two minutes with chronometer’ (Paul). It is a simple procedure that enables all participants to have space to express their feelings and to be sure that this space is equal. Measuring time then provides the same time for everybody, so those who have the tendency to speak for a long time and to take over the time due to others are forced to have the same space. *Meteo* is used at the very beginning to talk about emotions: ‘The first tool is about how we feel, personally, not about subject of everything or something. It is like we talk about meteo, the weather of everybody’ (Paul). The logic of *meteo* is used regularly in form of a *circle* during the meeting when dealing with concrete topics.

A few reasons were mentioned as an interpretation of why the *meteo* and *circle* are so useful for the beginning or closing of a particular topic. For example, Paul claims that when someone has already spoken,

it is easier for him to be part of the following discussion: ‘(...) everybody had already talked, and they have no shame to start, done that before’ (Paul). To hear a variety of opinions at the beginning seems to be useful to understand the diversity that can be explored before any possible confrontation, so members of collective firstly know how diverse the opinions are that they have to deal with. On the contrary, free discussion can tend to fall apart and lose the constructive dimension and be driven by a few members arguing among themselves: ‘It’s reacting to what the other one has said, and it’s not interesting. You know, you won’t get forward with reacting to the position of someone’ (Pierre). The *meteo* and *circle* are methods to provide an overview of particular opinions and so to help to begin or to close the discussion with openly showing each other’s position toward a particular problem that have to be solved by the collective.

The structure of the meeting itself is the topic that is first discussed during the formal meetings to provide members of collective with an idea of what the assembly will contain: ‘We have *ordre de jour*. We say there are the topics, that we should discuss, and we do it one by one, everybody express himself and if needed, we do the circle one more time’ (Lucie). Even before the meeting, e-mails are used to set the agenda that can be created in advance so the reason to call an assembly is clear: ‘It is sent by mail to everybody, everybody can add a topic or if he wants he can modify some topics’ (Marianne). During the meeting, discussed topics are noted so there is written material concerning the decision process: ‘And always we keep the notes, that we can return to it, when some decision was made it can happen that it would be forgotten’ (Jean). The written form makes the decision more solid and it is clear in detail what was decided even for members that could not attend the meeting.

To reach a consensus is perceived by the Cedar collective as something natural: ‘We never had to vote one against others. We always decided by consensus. So it generally always works well’ (Jean). Consensus appeared as a normal way of making decisions, as a self-evident part of a common decision-making process, so the project is clearly characterized by the consensual model (Piazza 2013). This process can be sometimes emotionally heavy for some of the members, and not every time is it conducted in an ideal mood, as for example is apparent in the story Paul told me about how he left a meeting when he could not handle the way the process was managed when deciding about the yurt that was a part of his hut:

‘Me, I left meeting about problems with neighbours about our *cabanes*<sup>5</sup>. And people decided that we should move the yurt. And I didn’t, nobody ask me what I felt before, and they told me that, and I left meeting because I was very angry. But sometimes we don’t, we are not about to manage the emotion of everybody every time. And it is not possible so it is always crises, but with a lot of carefulness’ (Paul).

Tensions and conflicts in the collective will be analysed later, as they were not connected to the structure or functioning of the formal meetings. It seems that the collective of Cedar is in concordance that using plenary meetings to reach a consensus is the right way to manage the commons even though there could be some misconducts of the actual topic.

Other tools that are formally used were not often mentioned in the interviews and are not considered so important for the assembly and its structure. One tool used is that the participants write down ideas under three categories: ‘Sometimes we use this, at the beginning we use this rule, as exercise, to talk about need, and make a list all together, each one who put the board in collective room. And need and wish, maybe three - need, wish and fear. Something like that’ (Paul). Or the method when members of collective physically move in the space to express their stance toward particular question: ‘(...) physically you make a cross. So this part is for something, this part is against something. This part is, you will involve yourself, you won’t

even involve yourself. And using this, it's really easy' (Pierre). It can help in particular the discussion to move on from talking to a different activity, so that verbalized arguments are demonstrated in different way and thereby approach a potential conflict from a different perspective.

The formal meetings can be interpreted as a uniting process where conflicts can be solved, or even as a way to strengthen social cohesion between members of the collective: 'When we gather and make a collective decisions, that's there where I feel horizontality the most, I feel a lot of love. To me it is giving this, the feeling of team, it gives me the joy' (Marianne). As this collective does not have so many plenary meetings and the frequency of them change over time depending on the needs of the project, more attention is put on everyday life as a way to live together in horizontality. But the importance of gaining knowledge of how to formally gather and make decisions or handle conflicts seems to be crucial for a collective that shares a vision of non-hierarchy. There are many problems that can be solved by day-to-day communication, but to have a platform where more complicated or controversial problems can be open and managed is an inevitable part of experimenting with horizontal power distribution. An assembly is a place where tensions can be handled by the cooperation of all the members of the collective.

## 6.2 Daily Negotiations in the Common Spaces

In order to analyse the dimension of everyday interactions I looked for those practices that help participants to fulfil their visions of horizontality. To take care of the commons requires sharing a set of rules that people will tend to respect so there is a consensus on how the space should be actually maintained. There are no decisions taken for granted in Cedar – all of them can be reopened and discussed again if there is a need to do so: 'Decisions are made, until the opposite is proven' (Marianne). The rules are perceived in such a way that it would not be possible to write them down and to create a solid system of laws. All explicit rules are to be negotiated and they are never regarded as something fixed: '(...) in fact you can do everything till it's a problem for someone. I think it's the best way to live together and to have acceptable relations without an obligation and so on. Because in fact we want to feel free' (Pierre). Instead of the logic of creating a set of rules to be followed, the rules are created continuously: 'You will only learn stuff by doing it. It's not by thinking it and inscribing it that it will work after' (Pierre). The system of negotiating and reinventing of the rules on a daily basis seems to work well for the Cedar collective, as they comment that this system is very open and gives them space to experiment. The possibility to negotiate all the rules within non-hierarchical logic forms a basis for inventing a new form of cohabitation. It is a method for creating an autonomous area (Stavrides 2014).

The logic is to start with no rules at all and slowly create a system based on mutual respect that enables members of the collective to search for a way of sharing their project. The reason why this method is so important is explained by some members of the collective: '(...) when we take the things only point by point and we create the rules for every element, we will get to things that become completely illogical, that are egalitarian in the very meaning of the term, but which actually don't work in everyday life' (Lucie). Pierre argues that when the rules are not fixed there is a possibility to act freely: 'Because while you are following the rule, you are never in a reflexive position, because you are following something, you know. You are reproducing something' (Pierre). To not have a system of explicit rules, and so not to lose the possibility of negotiating a particular behaviour if needed, is one of the key points that the Cedar collective is trying to reach. The experimental dimension enables participants to be creative and to explore the ways of living next to each other: 'We have tacit rules, non-official rules set, well understood because of the common living. For

example, you know this person doesn't like this, or the other one doesn't wake up well or I don't know stuff like this. So you can live together' (Pierre).

To live together brings with it the necessity of creating a common space and this process forces the members of the collective to cooperate in everyday life and to search for mutual respect within the boundaries of the garden. During the process of creation of material dimension of a project, they have to deal with their diverse visions of in which place they want to live and in which way they want to construct it. There are many cases when changes of space are made without a formal decision and so there is no consensus reached about them. Olivier argues that this possibility to do things when someone believes making the place better is crucial: 'So for me it is like you don't have to ask me if you feel like you want to change everything in this place because you cannot see any more this yellow (*pointing at the yellow wall in the living room*) and want to do it better. If you want to do something better, you do it' (Olivier). Tensions can arise when a small part of the collective decides to do something without discussing with others, just among themselves. This is described by Marianne when she explains the difficulty that she has in accepting such kind of action within the common space: 'At the beginning I had perceived it as a form of dominance (...) we call it *bim-bam-boom* and it is very fast' (Marianne). The difference between spontaneity and freedom to create and on the other hand formally made decisions and the right to decide and be part of discussion is perceived as crucial. In the case of Cedar and its perception of horizontality, the emphasis on the possibility to create is widely preferred.

One of the characteristic of taking care of common space is division of labour, which can be the source of various kinds of misunderstandings. There are usually different perceptions of how to deal with domestic labour and with the maintenance of the space. The strategies that are shared by members of Cedar collective are based on voluntariness: 'I washed the kitchen because I wanted to wash the kitchen (...) Do it by yourself, because you want to do it. If you ask something behind it, I prefer then that you don't do it. For me the collective is that' (Olivier). The question of participation is not focused just on cleaning, but more generally on the different spending of time and energy that are put into the common project. The strategy of not forcing anybody to do anything seems to be popular among Cedar's members: 'There is no equality in investment in the collective point, but there is equality in the liberty to do or not' (Paul). The logic behind the possibility of letting people themselves freely decide how they want to participate is based on the idea that there is no clear common vision of what have to be done: 'Nobody can say to other you have to do that because it is our aim, our collective aim is this one' (Paul). If there is no common agreement to create particular things, there is no pressure to reach this vision.

### **6.3 Governing the Conflicts in Daily Interactions**

One of the methods of avoiding tension is based on openness of expression of feelings and a willingness to discuss things immediately: 'Sometimes I was hurt, touched by the decision that was made, and so I went to talk directly to the people that did it, and I was relieved' (Marianne). To talk about tensions directly with the people involved in a controversy as a way of preventing conflicts is a certain skill that has been reflexively learned among members of the Cedar collective: 'I think now we are dealing much better with this than before. For example today I think we talk a lot of things directly with the person, with whom we have problems' (Pierre). A situation of tension that had not been solved and so created a long term cleavage between the members is described by Ingrid: 'There were some underground [conflicts] without explosion but just the feeling ah, it's very hard, because nothing is told, but it's everywhere' (Ingrid). The preference of

open discussion and direct dealing with personal problems is presented as crucial for the collective to be in accordance with its own vision of horizontality.

The methods used to avoid conflicts are interpreted as long processes that finally enable members of the collective to reach a common understanding: 'We spend a lot of time talking about affective problems in the daily life, everybody takes care' (Paul). The topic of conflict is an example where formally lead discussion can help to change perspective in daily interaction: 'We had some troubles for long time and we made assemblies about this to come through. And we had to take a lot of energy to analyse the problem and how we can be objective with sensitive stuff' (Pierre). The topic of conflict is an important dimension in collective life, and when carefully managed, can lead to a creative end (Maeckelbergh 2009). Most of the members refer to it as something in the past, that was successfully overcome and it is not actual any more: 'It was very conflictive, until we learned to know our traumas, our mechanisms of protection. The attitudes of ones and others surprise us less. We somehow accepted them' (Marianne). To live together, to have formalised ways of discussion and a will to understand each other seems to be a good strategy to accept the diversity among particular individuals.

Even if conflicts occur less frequently and there are methods of solving them, deep-rooted antipathy or frustration are not easily abandoned. As for example Nina explains her problematic relationship with another member of the collective: 'We already have a base, which is conflictive (...) It is not easy for us to communicate. I think that I can be aggressive, because I sometimes feel that his way of doing attacks me. The same for him, he would tell you the same, he feels attacked' (Nina). The process of acceptance mentioned by Marianne doesn't necessarily mean that there would not be any tension and it can be hard to carry on. She describes that sometimes she feels tired of respecting the behaviour of others that she is not in accord with: 'So now it is less conflictive, because we accepted it, but it doesn't mean that I would feel like to continue to accept' (Marianne). Explicit discussions concerning such tensions can help with understanding the other and with the ability to reach mutual respect, but not with feelings and emotions: 'We discussed it, and actually it was not well solved, because I think (...) it's little bit more deeper' (Nina).

Another example of a process of avoiding conflicts is connected with gender stereotypes and is highly reflected in the collective. There are no specific activities divided in male-female binarity. Despite this fact, tensions can appear over the question of space, particularly in the case of discussions: 'It's mainly men who are talking much more than women, so we try to take care about this' (Paul). The question of dominance and hierarchy based on this mechanism is perceived as something that can be reflected on and that the responsibility is on both sides of the relationship: 'There cannot be just someone who is taking too much space, if he is taking the space, it is because you are not well set in yours. So there is a double responsibility and I think it's really up to everybody to work on this' (Lucie). The idea of double responsibility means that the one who is creating the dominant position should be able to reflect upon this situation when carefully confronted: 'The person who is part of a hierarchical relation is able to turn it over if somebody tells it to the person, to stop the process of dominance (...) Not always someone realises that he is actually part of a dominant relation' (Marianne). The process of resolving an unbalanced situation is well practised within the collective, and it is a mechanism that makes members open to be confronted.

To be in a horizontal community and to decide by consensus does not lead the collective of Cedar to unanimity but rather to a process of creative invention of the tools that help them to set up a platform where various approaches can work next to each other: 'Everything has to be created continuously, I don't believe that it would be possible to reach something stable, perfect, that would not move any more. I think it is everlasting movement' (Jean). These tools are possible to identify within formal and non-formal dimensions and the members of Cedar collective are in reflexive attitude toward them. As the creation of non-hierarchical organizational repertoire is the common goal of this collective, the tools are closely focused on



this dimension. It is a process of experimenting with one's own identity: 'Emancipation, meaning of what we are, what is social life. I think it's very rich to learn a lot of things about ourselves, and create. It is giving us a lot of material to create, to imagine, to have' (Paul). In practising prefiguration, members of a collective emancipate themselves from normal ways of living together (Barša 2015). There are conflicts and tensions, but on the other hand there are tools for dealing with them and for balancing a never fully attainable horizontality.

## 7. Conclusion

This study focuses on the everyday practices of horizontal prefiguration within a squatted garden in southern France. The non-hierarchical organizational repertoire is closely analysed as a set of particular tools that enables the collective to reach its vision of horizontality. For formal meetings, the Cedar collective uses various tools that serve the purpose of keeping assemblies horizontal, and which, while not many, are explicit and reflected by all members of the collective. Decision processes are constructed on the basis of using these methods that are shared and well known to everybody concerned. For example, *meteo*, the tool used to give a voice to each participant involved in the meeting, consists of a set of particular practices: keeping time, passing the turn to speak round a circle, not interrupting others while speaking, and not reacting to what others say. These rules have quite a technical character so the tools once devised are kept as agreed for their intended purposes. The application of such a formalized procedure is fundamental for the collective in order to maintain an equitable structure at these meetings. Prefigurative politics are constructed through systematic work with such methods, which are discussed and reinvented if needed, so the process of managing assemblies is in concordance with the goal of creating a non-hierarchical structure.

In a similar vein to the case of formal meetings, explicitly agreed methods are used within daily interactions. When for example a particular type of dominant behaviour is felt to be taking place, there are concrete tools available to deal with the situation. They are reflectively used by the collective, so it is easy to apply them. When someone feels that such a situation has come about, there is a known technique that enables participants to analyse the situation and thereby restore equality. The one who is believed to be exhibiting dominant behaviour is confronted with this interpretation of the situation in discussion with present members of collective. To have a formalised way of contesting domination in everyday interactions is useful for keeping a non-hierarchical power distribution outside that provided by the assemblies with their more formal structures. These tools, defined as sets of particular practices, are used by members of the collective to try to give the project a non-hierarchical structure. This research shows that the attempt to reach a horizontal power distribution is a complicated process that requires from a collective a sophisticated approach towards this problematic.

The notion of an ideal that is impossible to reach is crucial for understanding the struggle that collectives which have decided to experiment with horizontality are facing. Questions about conflicts demonstrate that it takes much effort to keep equality and overcome problems. Theoretically, the consensual model should be able to solve such a situation. During my stay I was told about the deeper tensions that were hard to overcome, conflicts that are not easy to express and thus too hard to deal with. Despite this fact, the inhabitants agreed on the non-hierarchical organizational repertoire being the best model of self-organization. While an ideal may not exist in reality, the reflexive attitude shown towards the ideal of horizontality enables them to create a possible solution. The tools that help members of collective to aim at the goal of horizontality are highly reflected and are used systematically.

To study a small project such as Cedar, where the main focus is on living together, may shed light on the complicated process of horizontal prefiguration. Squatting as a practice of seizing unused property is a way of creating autonomous spaces without the need for hierarchies based on private ownership. They are often maintained as commons. The practice of squatting is often connected to social movements and is often shaped by its repertoires. It is possible to trace political squatting back to the 1970s when it spread widely across Europe, and to analyse its history and interconnection with urban movements that have appeared in various forms since this time (Martínez López 2018). The case considered in this study of an urban commons in southern France and given in this paper as one of the possibilities for creating a non-hierarchical space within the new left movements is an example how the practices of prefiguration shape and are shaped by a social movement organization and its inner structure.

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