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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Re-articulating Autonomy and Solidarity. The Case of Smart: The Largest European Network of Freelance Co-operatives[1]

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ABSTRACT: This article explores how workers' autonomy is supported by Smart, the largest network of freelance cooperatives in Europe. Based primarily on ethnographic data, we argue that this case shows that workers' autonomy is not necessarily linked to being self-employed but can actually increase in the transition from the status of self-employed to that of salaried employee. In particular, we define Smart as an alternative organisation and show how over the years it has shaped spaces of autonomy for freelancers by also being able to combine autonomy with innovative forms of solidarity. In doing so, we argue that supporting autonomy has an 'alternative' potential only if we adopt a relational conception of autonomy. In the case study analysed, we show that Smart members manage to benefit from enhanced autonomy and forms of solidarity through the construction of a series of relationships, in particular with: (i) welfare institutions through the co-operative; (ii) the co-operative's staff; and (iii) other freelance members of the cooperative. This leads us – in studying a case of alternative organisation – to call for Critical Performativity projects conducted through activist ethnography, a methodological framework based on a constructive approach towards the research objects, and on interpersonal research practices, where the internal knowledge of a specific organisation is combined with the knowledge of organisational scholars in a fully collaborative research effort.
KEYWORDS: Autonomy, Cooperative, Cross-national ethnography, Freelancers, Solidarity
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1. Introduction

In organisation studies, the will to counteract the ubiquity of capitalist logics has given rise to contrasting epistemological positions (Fleming and Banerjee, 2016; Parker and Parker, 2017; Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman, 2016). While some researchers from critical management studies focus on disclosing the pervasiveness of power relations in the social world, other scholars rather propose shedding light on alternatives by adopting a constructive approach to studying organisations that differ from mainstream business corporations regarding both their ends and their means (Cheney et al., 2014; Christensen, 2020; Esper et al., 2017). This article contributes to this second research line by adopting a Critical Performativity approach to analyse the ongoing attempts to build alternatives to capitalism while accepting the invitation to adopt a positive and affirmative engagement with the organisations studied (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Just, De Cock and Schaefer, 2021).

In the current debate within organisation studies, alternative organisations are defined according to their commitment to three principles: (i) they should defend individual autonomy, (ii) foster solidarity, and (iii) be responsible for the future they are contributing to shaping (Vidaillet and Bousalham, 2018; Husted, 2021; Parker et al., 2014a). The first two principles – the support for individual autonomy and the promotion of solidarity – can however give rise to tensions or even contradictions (Parker et al., 2014b). In line with the Critical Performativity approach, in this study we explore organisations conveying an alternative project for freelancers, which is precisely based on the attempt to simultaneously support their individual autonomy and the construction of forms of solidarity. This is particularly interesting in the case of self-employed workers since they classically epitomise the celebration of autonomy resulting in the self-responsibilisation of individuals (Fleming, 2017; Moisander, Groß and Eräranta, 2018). More specifically, we take the case of Smart, a European network of freelance cooperatives (Charles and Ferreras, 2020; Murgia and de Heusch, 2020), and discuss the main results of an 'activist ethnography' (Reedy and King, 2019) conducted in France, Germany, and Italy.

The contributions of this study are threefold. First, by adopting an epistemological approach posited in the debate about Critical Performativity, it theoretically contributes to the literature on 'alternative organisations' by inviting us to overcome a conception of autonomy focused on the individual and rather emphasise its collective and relational dimension. From an empirical point of view, we provide a contribution to the 'library of alternative case studies' (Parker and Parker, 2017) called for by many organisational scholars. Finally, this article also represents a methodological reflection on activist ethnography as a suitable methodological framework for critical organisation studies.

The article is structured as follows. First, we present the theoretical framework, discussing alternative organisations and the ambivalences of autonomy embodied by self-employed workers. We then expose our epistemological positioning before describing the research contexts and the adopted methods. In the empirical section, we show how the groups of workers studied were able to benefit from enhanced autonomy and solidarity forms through a series of relationships built in and through the cooperative. In the final sections we therefore discuss how the combination of autonomy and solidarity we observed allows us to reframe our understanding of autonomy. We indeed argue that supporting autonomy can have an 'alternative' potential only if we adopt a relational conception of autonomy.

2. Alternative organisations supporting freelancers' autonomy

2.1 Autonomy and solidarity: Two principles at the core of alternative organisations

In an attempt to avoid fuelling the pervasiveness of market capitalism with their research, many organisational scholars have recently engaged in the flourishing debate on alternative organisations (Dahlman et al., 2022; Parker and Parker, 2017; Parker et al., 2014). Alternative organisations have often been defined by difference, in contrast 'to the orthodox, hierarchical, for-profit organisation' (Diefenbach, 2019: 552) or 'to the familiar, traditional, mainstream, predominant, or hegemonic institutional arrangements' (Cheney et al., 2014: 1). Parker and colleagues (2014a) instead propose a positive definition of alternative organisations, which relies on the defence of three principles: individual autonomy, solidarity, and responsibility. This last principle refers to the awareness among alternative organisations of the long-term consequences of their actions. Empirical studies thus show how alternative organisations such as cooperatives or grassroots groups worry about the future they are contributing to shaping, expressing their sense of responsibility through the defence of sustainability (Daskalaki, Fotaki, and Sotiropoulou, 2019: Meyer and Hudon, 2017).

The first two principles – individual autonomy and solidarity – raise more concerns, as their combination can result in tensions or even contradictions within organisations, given that, according to Parker and colleagues (2014b: 629), 'the second principle reverses the assumptions of the first'. The defence of solidarity relies indeed on the recognition that human beings are united by mutual interdependence relationships and implies valorising the collective, working towards equality and fostering cooperative logics (Atzeni, 2012; Cheney et al., 2014; Jaumier, 2017). Research on worker-owned cooperatives underlines how the construction of effective solidarity among workers is a continuous and iterative process that is crucial for the longevity of such alternative organisations (Bretos and Errasti, 2017; Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2014; Paranque and Willmott, 2014).

The support for individual autonomy instead implies acknowledging and increasing the freedom of choice for individuals, avoiding authoritarian practices, and fostering individual self-determination (Parker et al., 2014b). Several empirical studies thus underline the centrality of autonomy in alternative organisations (Husted, 2021; Jensen, 2021; Kokkinidis, 2015; Reedy, King, and Coupland, 2016), but at the same time also the ability of contemporary capitalist societies to support workers' autonomy to make it work for their own purposes (Böhm, Dinerstein, and Spicer, 2010). In this frame, to promote both individual autonomy and solidarity may seem challenging. Parker and colleagues (2014a: 37) thus ask: 'How can we value freedom, but then give it up to the group?'

2.2 An 'autonomy myth' epitomised by self-employed workers

Autonomy is often associated with a neoliberal conception of a self-sufficient individual, whose freedom would be hindered by any collective regulation, which is considered de facto responsible for the dependence of individuals on the state and its agencies (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999; Fleming, 2022; Lastrico, 2016). In particular, feminist scholars have discussed in depth the 'autonomy myth' typical of contemporary capitalism (Fineman, 2008; Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds, 2014). Fineman (2000: 14) critically examines 'our foundational myths of individual independence, autonomy, and self-sufficiency'. According to her work, this conception of the individual as being independent from others pervades capitalist societies and denies the experience of vulnerability inherent in the human condition, undermining solidarity-based welfare (Fineman, 2000). In the words of Fineman (2008: 10): 'society is conceived as constituted by self-interested individuals with the capacity to manipulate and manage their independently acquired and overlapping resources'.

This autonomy myth is reflected in the labour market, where individuals are urged to look for fulfilling jobs, taking charge of their own destiny, and becoming 'entrepreneurs of themselves' (Foucault, 2008; Gorz, 2001; Rose, 1990). The growing diversification of employment arrangements contributes to spreading this injunction to autonomy, transferring to individuals the responsibility for their own career (Conen and Schippers, 2019; Moisander et al., 2018). Self-employed workers can be considered as an emblematic case of these ambivalent individualisation processes (D'Amours and Legault 2013; Murgia et al., 2020). They indeed crave the autonomy promise entailed in self-employment, hoping to be able to independently develop a meaningful business and to be free to decide with whom, when and how to work (Norbäck, 2021; Storey, Salaman and Platman, 2005). The wish to escape dependent employment to enjoy more autonomy thus represents a recurrent argument formulated by workers deciding to become self-employed, even if they do not always reach the level of freedom they were expecting (Mondon-Navazo, 2017; Muehlberger, 2007).

At the same time, this search for autonomy contributes to the isolation of self-employed workers and deprives them of the collective rights and protections usually granted to employees (Conen and Schippers, 2019; Schulze Buschoff and Schmidt, 2009). Their social vulnerability has been highlighted in several studies (Dekker, 2010; Lane, 2011) and was especially visible in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, when self-employed workers in most countries faced a sharp fall in their income on their own (Bajos et al., 2020; Eichhorst, Marx, and Rinne, 2020). Having to cope with the many risks they are exposed to without relying on collective resources, self-employed workers thus exemplify the 'radical responsibilisation' of the workforce analysed by Fleming (2017). Beyond the loss of social protection, the price to pay for the expected autonomy gains also consists of a dissolution of working collectives, which contributes to their isolation (D'amours and Crespo, 2004; Murgia and Pulignano, 2019). The access to some spaces of freedom thus goes hand-in-hand with a weakening of social relationships with peers, exposing most of the self-employed to a feeling of 'aloneness' (Ashford, Caza and Reid, 2018; Vallas and Cummins, 2015).

2.3 Re-embedding autonomy in the collective?

To tackle the social vulnerability of self-employed workers, organisations have emerged in several countries to allow them to formally become employees, thus improving their access to social rights in the transition from the status of self-employed to that of salaried employee (Bajard, 2020; Bureau and Corsani, 2015; Mondon-Navazo et al., 2021; Murgia and de Heusch, 2020). Against the grain of the neoliberal conception of the individual, such organisations refuse to give up autonomy as a political orientation and rather claim to enhance the autonomy of workers while fostering new forms of solidarity. In doing so, organisations supporting self-employed workers come close to the characterisation of alternative organisations proposed by Parker and colleagues (2014a).

Trying to foster spaces of autonomy at a distance from an individualist idea of self-sufficiency, these organisations can be related to the analysis of researchers who propose to redefine autonomy by emphasising its collective dimension. From a sociohistorical perspective, Castel and Haroche (2001) underline how the construction of individual autonomy relies on the mobilisation of collective supports such as social rights. Feminist scholars go a step further, drawing on relational theories to redefine autonomy as socially constructed through supportive relations with others and institutions (Friedman, 2003; Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000). The responses to the vulnerability inherent in the human condition could therefore be driven by concern for preserving and fostering the autonomy of individuals, and the collective has a crucial role to play in this process of enhancing autonomy (Anderson, 2014; Goodin, 1985; Mackenzie et al., 2014). Beyond this theoretical statement, it is thus worth documenting attempts to promote a collectively built autonomy through empirical investigations.

Such a research programme should rely on specific epistemological premises, to analyse current experimentations without interpreting them through the same lens used to critically study practices typical of contemporary capitalism.

3. Epistemological approach

To analyse the practices of an organisation claiming to offer workers an alternative to self-employment by simultaneously supporting autonomy and solidarity forms, we place our work within the debate about the Critical Performativity approach, an epistemological positioning of critical researchers interested in 'alternative organisations' (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Just et al., 2021). The Critical Performativity approach was first proposed in the field of economic geography to offer an alternative to the 'hypercritical attitude' of scholars focused on disclosing the pervasiveness of capitalism and the ineluctability of power relations (Gibson-Graham, 2006, 2008). Emphasising the performative dimension of knowledge, defenders of Critical Performativity claim that the aim to 'understand the world in order to change it' should be discarded, as 'to change our understanding is to change the world' (Gibson-Graham, 2008: 615). Scholars are thus encouraged to adopt a constructive approach to addressing the 'plethora of hidden and alternative economic activities that contribute to social well-being and environmental regeneration' (Gibson-Graham, 2008: 618).

In the field of organisation studies, Critical Performativity gave rise to intense discussions: inviting their peers to 'encourage progressive forms of management', Spicer, Alvesson, and Kärreman (2009: 537) also mobilised Critical Performativity in mainstream contexts, with the risk of contributing to 'corporate hegemony' (Fleming and Banerjee, 2016: 272), and to 'accommodate with managerialism' (Parker and Parker, 2017: 1366; see also Cabantous et al., 2016). To avoid the dilution of the critical dimension of Critical Performativity, Parker and Parker instead invited academics to focus their research on organisations 'already involved in struggle against a hegemonic present' (2017: 1366). Given that the organisations supporting freelancers claim to propose an alternative to the self-responsibilisation of workers typical of late capitalism, we analyse their practices by exercising 'theoretical care' (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 102), seeking to avoid approaches based on prior scepticism about organisational objectives, 'seeing difference and possibility rather than dominance and predictability' (Gibson-Graham, 2008: 626) and 'replacing suspicion with wonder' (Christensen, 2020: 5).

To be consistent with this epistemological positioning, a crucial element is represented by a strong and constant dialogue between academics and organisation members (Cinque and Nyberg, 2020; Esper et al., 2017). In this study too, from the very beginning, we decided to engage in what has been termed 'activist ethnography' (Reedy and King, 2019) by building a team composed of two organisational scholars and one person who – at the time of the fieldwork – had a key role within Smart.

4. Research context: A single cooperative model, three different countries

Smart was founded in 1998 in Belgium as a non-profit organisation supporting artists, later becoming a cooperative open to workers from all economic sectors. The objective of Smart is to provide shared means for its members to develop their economic activity autonomously, as would a self-employed person, while providing them with the same access to social security as classical employees. Instead of creating their own enterprise, Smart members can therefore mutualise many services, such as administrative and fiscal declarations, debt collection or accountancy tools, while also having access to employee status and associated social rights. This is why the cooperative defines its members as freelancers, as they work under the status of salaried worker while benefiting from autonomy in their relations to clients, in their time management and their working methods and remuneration. As for the economic model, Smart finances itself by collecting commissions on the

turnover earned by members before its conversion into wages: the commission rate can vary from 8.5 to 14 per cent depending on the country.

Over the years, the members' profile has diversified. They work in different sectors, with a vast majority in the service economy, especially the knowledge economy. Smart members also have very diverse working patterns, from entrepreneurs who wish to grow or test their projects, intermittent workers such as artists and creative professionals, and those who have a stable job and develop an activity they enjoy within the cooperative, to people who only occasionally sell goods. Most workers involved with Smart are multiple job holders with profiles usually considered non-standard and they need business support as well as social protection.

Since the 2000s, Smart began to spread to other European countries, giving rise to formally independent structures, which adapted the Smart model to their legal and cultural framework. The link to the "mothership" is maintained through values, business model, and financial strings as well as the participation of a representative from Smart Belgium in each board. This research is based on a study of the first Smart cooperative founded outside Belgium – Smart France – and of two of the last cooperatives created abroad: Smart Germany and Smart Italy.

4.1 Smart France

The linguistic geographical and cultural vicinity of France and the French-speaking community in Belgium explains why, in 2009, France was the first country in which Smart outreached its activities.

French members access wage-employment mainly through fixed-term contracts as employees, which can last between one day and one month. At the time of the fieldwork, around 50% worked in the performance and audio-visual sector, and the remaining 50% was distributed mainly among training and consultancy, graphics and design, and communication. In economic terms, the members were divided almost equally into the following four income ranges: 0 - 720 euros per year; 720 - 2083; 2083 - 6820; 6820 – 272.669. When members generated enough income, they could sign an open-ended contract with the cooperative. In 2021, Smart France counted around 3,000 members who invoiced about 26.5 million euros, supported by 90 staff members, distributed across 14 offices.

4.2 Smart Italy

In Italy, Smart became active in 2013. In 2021 it counted about 1,300 active members who invoiced 4.3 million euros. The staff was composed of seven employees, with offices in two cities (Rome and Milan).

At the time of the research, around 60% of the members worked in the arts and entertainment sector and over 20% in the audio-visual sector, followed by other occupations in education, communication, and IT. About two-thirds of Smart Italy members signed an on-demand contract with the cooperative, which is a temporary subordinate employment contract. This work arrangement – limited to the arts and entertainment sectors – lies dormant when the worker has no client and is immediately activated in the case of a new job. For workers from other industries, because of legal issues related to the Italian context, Smart could not propose a salaried job, and had no other choice than to hire workers as 'para-subordinated', which is a hybrid status between employment and self-employment, closer to the latter. At the time of the fieldwork, around 30% of members were thus hired with a contract of collaboration (co.co.co).

4.3 Smart Germany

Smart was created in Germany in 2015, with a permanent office based in Berlin. Differently from France and Italy, artists in Germany had no interest in becoming employees of the cooperative for their artistic work, as they could benefit from specific health insurance via the Künstlersozialkasse (KSK), with lower social contributions as self-employed workers. Therefore, Smart Germany mainly employed artists for their parallel activities in other sectors (not eligible for the KSK). In particular, almost 30% worked as consultants, around 20% in education, 15% worked in the field of writing and translating and around 10% in visual arts, followed by a range of jobs, from cleaning workers to tour guides. In terms of work arrangements, at the time of the study, a vast majority of workers had a fixed-term contract as employees with the cooperative, which usually lasted for several months. A few members instead used Smart as a side employment contract, for so-called "mini-jobs". In 2021 Smart Germany counted nearly 250 active members, who invoiced more than 3.6 million euros, and a staff of 15 people.

5. Methodology

This study is based on a multi-sited and cross-national ethnography (Marcus, 1995; Hannerz, 2003) aimed at exploring how Smart may foster the autonomy of freelancers while developing forms of solidarity in different national contexts. The fieldwork was conducted in Germany from February to July 2019, and in France and Italy from February to May 2020. The first author carried out the research in both France and Germany and the second conducted the fieldwork in Italy. The third author is the Institutional Affairs Officer of the Belgian cooperative, and a reference person for research collaborations.

In line with the Critical Performativity approach (Gibson-Graham, 2006), we conducted an activist ethnography, a framework that combines three ethnographic traditions (see Reedy and King, 2019), such as: organisational ethnography, which is mainly used to analyse organisational cultural contexts, often with a focus on invisible or marginalised communities (Ybema et al., 2009); militant ethnography, in which researchers participate directly in the organisation's actions, including through the facilitation of workshops and meetings (Juris, 2007); and participatory action research, which aims at the co-construction of knowledge with research participants and involves working with organisations whose values and goals are shared by the researchers (Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2007). The objective of the research was primarily to give a voice to the growing category of self-employed workers who express a need for more rights and social protection and to identify alternatives to self-employment. In conducting the research, it was crucial to discuss the research questions with the members of Smart, in order to find a common ground at the crossroads of research interests and organisational priorities. In the course of the study, in addition to constant discussion during data collection and analysis, the two researchers participated in Smart's events, taking part in panel discussions, moderating events and publicly exposing themselves when the organisation was under attack, such as in 2020, when the French government threatened to take away unemployment benefits from Smart members. Similarly, the researchers invited the third author – an officer of Smart – to hold seminars at their university, as well as to co-author a series of papers presented at conferences on alternative organisational models, while also facilitating contacts between Smart and similar organisations in Europe.

The third author also endeavoured to ensure easy access to the fieldwork for the two researchers, in the three countries in the scope of this article. Participation was thus allowed at public events and meetings, and researchers could spend time in the coworking spaces (when present) and conduct semi-structured interviews with both freelance members of Smart and with workers among the cooperative staff. In particular, we engaged in around 100 hours of participant observation to which were added 30 in-depth interviews with members of

Smart. Observations and interviews were conducted in French, Italian and German, and all texts were later translated into English and then analysed using a critical interpretivist approach (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2013). The analysis of the collected data relied on a constant dialogue between the three authors. The third author also discussed step by step the emerging analytical tracks with research participants of the three cooperatives and asked for their comments during the writing process. These exchanges allowed the three authors to check that the interpretations were consistent with the sensemaking within the organisational context, the interpersonal process contributing to increasing the trustworthiness of the research, and to building a closer connection between researchers and the organisation.

6. Choosing solidarity and becoming salaried to be autonomous. The case of Smart: a network of freelance cooperatives in Europe

As underlined above, Smart claims to support the emergence of solidarity forms among freelancers without encroaching on their autonomy. To understand whether and how Smart cooperatives in different national contexts can actually overcome the tension between solidarity and autonomy discussed in the organisational literature, we collected data in three countries where the cooperative is based: France, Germany, and Italy. In the following we present our findings by illustrating how members could actually escape social isolation and exposure to social risks, benefiting from enhanced autonomy and forms of solidarity through the construction of a series of relationships that members could build through the cooperative.

6.1 Relations with welfare institutions through the cooperative

First, being a member of Smart allowed freelancers to become employees, and then to be included in the welfare system, contributing to, and benefiting from the social rights and collective resources acknowledged to dependent workers and largely refused to self-employed workers by welfare institutions. Smart cooperative was indeed born with the explicit aim to strengthen the business of freelancers but also to improve their social protection, allowing members to employ themselves through the cooperative and thus to enjoy the same protections as employees do in cases of unemployment, work incapacity, and sick and parenthood leaves.

> The object of Smart is to protect any freelancer facing precariousness, discontinuity of work and income uncertainty. The intermittent contract is a tool to protect them while at the same time allowing them to remain autonomous. (Smart Italy adviser)

> Entering Smart, I got access to the employee status, with unemployment benefit and with sick leave too. I feel safer and it is great to know that there is Smart, we both contribute and receive. It changes the relationship with the invoice, I find it great. (Smart Germany member)

Accessing social rights was therefore one of the main reasons why freelancers entered Smart in the three countries studied. In the Italian context, becoming a Smart member was also a way to not only shift from self-employment to dependent employment but also to escape informal employment, which leads many freelancers to work without any institutional protection.

> Some Smart members enter the cooperative because they are aware that, without a cooperative behind them, it is very difficult to work formally. Being a Smart member, in a way… you can tell your client 'Okay, I work with you if you sign a contract'. To say it yourself is something, to have it said by a well-known cooperative at the European level is something else. This is like a defence, a shield. (Smart Italy adviser)

In each country, flexible procedures allowed freelancers to handle their relations with welfare institutions and to modulate their access to social rights through autonomous management of their income. In fact, in many cases there was a disconnect between the perceived remuneration and the work performed – the time dedicated to prospecting, making estimates or keeping updated was rarely financially rewarded. As members of Smart, freelancers could spread their remuneration, covering this otherwise non-remunerated work to ensure continuous access to social rights. As long as they respected the minimum wage rules and declared actual working days, members could indeed store money within the cooperative and be paid, even during non-contracted periods. This was especially useful in the three countries considered in this study, where the welfare systems were based on wage employment and access to social benefits such as maternity leave or where unemployment benefit required reaching a minimum number of worked days.

The opportunity to spread income was especially important for Smart Germany members, who were supposed to pay a minimal monthly contribution of 180 euros for health insurance, even when they were not earning anything. Smoothing their remuneration, freelancers ensured stable access to health insurance and avoided the uncertainty connected with irregular income.

> In Germany there is an obligation of health insurance: even if you're not working, you are obliged to pay for health insurance. This is the reason why we try to keep people continuously in employment to cover them with health insurance. (Smart Germany adviser)

> Now I am insured through SMART. I push all the income streams to Smart and I say, 'pay me €1,000 a month', then I can say, 'okay this is the income stream which I have every month and I pay my contribution to the health insurance'. It eases the stress of it. (Smart Germany member)

On the other hand, in these three countries, if members needed to make investments for their professional activity, acting as micro-enterprises, they could decide to use part of their income to cover professional expenses or travel costs. This was especially useful in the French and Italian contexts, where the simplified regimes for self-employed workers did not allow the deduction of work-related expenses: by entering Smart, members of both countries benefited from a financial autonomy they would have been deprived of as self-employed workers.

> I have to manage a turnover, and in it I have to include my expenses (train, phone, equipment) and I have to employ myself; I have to do both. With Smart I can manage both in a way that I could not have done as a 'micro-enterprise'. (Smart France member)

> During our interview, the member opens his computer to show me the balance of his personal account within Smart. He comments: 'Look, if you purchase some goods, you can get the 19% difference and get a credit on your account. So, this is the money I spent – €427 – and then I get credit of the VAT €66.22. When I purchase things online now, I use my Smart account as a business address and then I forward the invoice to Smart, and they return this money to me.' (Smart Germany fieldnotes)

While such a deduction facility could be useful, advisers from the different countries made sure that members did not abuse it, checking that they were paying their social contributions and declaring worked days. The cooperative thus mediated the relationship of freelancers with welfare institutions and ensured that members were making decisions consistent with the valorisation of social protection at the core of the Smart project.

> When I get someone asking me, 'How can I get the maximum amount of money?', I can understand it, but if you want to pay as little contributions as possible… The aim of coming to us is precisely to pay contributions, so if you don't want to pay any, become a micro-enterprise. Don't come to our cooperative if you don't want to pay contributions, it doesn't make sense! (Smart France adviser)

> I was a bit tired of micro-enterprise because we don't contribute to anything. […] Today I pay for the pensions of the current retirees, and I hope that the following generation will pay for my pension. It is something important, like social security. These are things I care about. (Smart France member)

> I think it's perfectly normal to share sickness, unemployment, ageing, it seems absolutely natural to me, these are social benefits that must be kept. I'm an employee at heart and I have absolutely no culture of entrepreneurship or accountancy from my parents who are civil servants, I don't care about money. For me it's natural to be a salaried employee. (Smart Germany member)

In many cases, the interviewed members thus emphasised the importance of paying their contributions not only for their own personal security, but also for contributing to the more general social protection system. While some legal specificities gave rise to differences regarding the profile of members across countries, as described in the section on the research context, the combination of social protection with flexible administrative and accountancy procedures enhancing the autonomy of members was a common feature of the studied organisations.

6.2 Relations with the staff of the cooperative

Beyond the inclusion in dependent employment, Smart membership also gave access to a supportive team working for the cooperative and its members. The social and fiscal declarations of freelancers were thus taken charge of by permanent workers of the cooperative. This administrative support was much appreciated by freelancers who are traditionally required to take charge of their own destiny, feeling solely responsible for all aspects of their business.

> Smart saved my business as a trainer because I was not able to do and pay what I was supposed to. 7% of my turnover is a cheap price to do all this for me. (Smart Germany member)

> When I was 100% self-employed, this was what was bothering me, the insecurity part. The insecurity of saying, 'I'm on my own', which means that I'm my own salesperson, technician, comms manager, all that. If I screw things up it's my fault, and it's all on me. (Smart France member)

In particular, the debt collection department of the cooperative relieved freelancers from the obligation of making sure clients paid their invoices. In the three countries, a mutualised guarantee fund even allowed members to achieve remuneration when their clients did not pay, with the shortfalls being absorbed collectively. These services provided by the cooperative contributed to reducing the financial vulnerability of members and relieving them of a certain 'mental burden', allowing them to focus on their activity.

> By joining Smart, you share risks that, being a freelancer alone, you can't share with anyone. From the fact that they don't pay you to the fact that they pay you late. (Smart Italy member)

> It's an important service, to know that once a customer has signed the invoice, no matter what happens, we'll get the money that is on the invoice. It is an invisible service, but it takes some of the mental burden off from having to deal with 'will the bill get paid?' It happened to me at the very beginning, I was paid, so I didn't even realise that the client had never paid the invoice! (Smart France member)

The use of these support services was not billed to members according to the frequency or intensity of their needs. In line with the mutualisation principle, such facilities were instead funded thanks to a levy deducted from the turnover invoiced by members to their clients. The fixed rate applied in each country ensured that members with higher incomes would contribute more – in absolute terms – to the costs of the shared services than freelancers with a low turnover. A Smart Italy adviser underlined that this funding mechanism embodied the solidarity values at the core of the cooperative:

> For us, the 8.5% that we ask on member's turnover is not a 'price', but the value of mutualism. There are members who invoice 200,000 euros, instead there are members who invoice 2,000 euros per year, but both pay 8.5%. (Smart Italy adviser)

In parallel to practical help, the relationship emerging between freelancers and advisers in charge of the administrative follow-up then also provided members with a kind of psychological or emotional support. The adviser became for members a reference person to contact to ask a question or remove a doubt, breaking with the loneliness of classical freelancers.

> To check the current situation of my personal account within the cooperative, I can access an updated pdf online. Every time I call them, so that they explain to me the meaning of each line. (Smart Germany member)

> My advisor is really there to… it's more than a service. I could have the platform, with the interface where I enter my contracts and I sign them. But she checks, she tells me, 'you made a mistake, I corrected it…' There is an element of *maternage* which is interesting, I know that I have support. As a self-employed, what support would I have? (Smart France member)

The relationship between the staff and the members of the cooperative was actually based on mutual trust in the three countries: advisers were ready to use the money of the cooperative to anticipate the wage of freelancers, even when clients had not yet formally signed quotes. In this case, advisers decided to help members to overcome a difficult situation, even if this flexibility implied a small financial risk for the cooperative.

> It happens very often. For example, I am a freelance web designer and I have to develop a website for a company. Smart makes a €2,000 contract, which the client will pay once the product is received. The member can decide to divide the €2,000 so that Smart is in the red until the end of the contract [it is anticipating this salary], but we are confident in doing so because we know they will pay us. There is trust, most of all because there is trust between the member and the adviser. (Smart Italy adviser)

> As an adviser, I decide to reimburse expenses to someone who doesn't have enough money, that's my decision, if the management has the right to say that it's a mistake, I have the means to assume it and explain why I did it. It's up to us to make the decision to say, 'Yes, I'll click, because I know that this person is in financial trouble and that if I don't pay his expenses, he won't finish the month, and that next month there are bills that will come in and that it will be fine'… But in the end, it is a personal bet! (Smart France adviser)

The exchanges with advisers could also trigger a self-confidence-building process among members. After discussing it with their adviser, indeed, some freelancers realised that they were undervaluing their work and finally felt entitled to ask for higher remuneration from their clients.

> Our job also consists of giving advice, helping members to better manage their activities, looking at them in perspective, for example by making intelligent use of the virtual portfolio, discouraging job opportunities that are not decent. If as a singer you sing for free in a huge TV show, it may make sense. But if you are going to sing for free for the sausage festival, there is something wrong. (Smart Italy adviser)

> My adviser and I did the calculation, and she told me to ask for travel expenses. They refused, but I've already started the negotiation for next year. (Smart France member)

However, the research participants underlined two limitations to this empowering process. The first is external to the cooperative: for freelancers clients remained an important source of heteronomy, and advisers were not able to counteract market forces leading to a downgrading of members' work.

> We see people evolving and managing to define why their price is worth it and why their client must accept to pay that price for them to provide the service. But it is a complicated process, it is not very easy for them. And for us it is easy to say, 'invoice more', but then you have to find clients who are willing to pay more. (Smart France adviser)

The second limitation was connected to the time pressure faced by advisers to take care of a high number of members. Their heavy administrative workload could actually impede them in dedicating time to business support, and advisers expressed a feeling of frustration.

> The relationship with members is very nice, but there is a big share of operations that are a bit mechanical, so we don't have as much time as we would like to provide quality support to people's projects. (Smart Italy adviser)

> Right now, we have four people working as advisers. And we are looking for new advisers, and we are looking for additional spaces, because it's too much… Even without any marketing, without any advertising, we have every week people coming to the info session and joining the cooperative. (Smart Germany adviser)

At the time of the fieldwork, the situation was especially critical in Smart Germany, because the cooperative was going through a phase of exponential growth, and advisers were overwhelmed with the administrative tasks connected to the inclusion of new members.

In terms of relations with the cooperative's staff, the advisers reported a growing request from members to represent them. As an example, the following question was raised during a workshop:

> Shouldn't Smart use more of its international cooperative status to represent us? […] That's the point of being in a cooperative, it's to be able to represent and bring together all members and allow them to speak with one voice and defend the interests as freelancers. (Smart France member)

Over time, in response to these requests, although Smart was never involved in collective bargaining, it intensified its advocacy activities in all three national contexts. Its action was indeed more oriented towards lobbying through bringing the voice of its members to the government level.

> We were invited by the German Ministry of Labour for several talks about the social coverage for the freelancers, then we are also invited by political foundations like Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Hans Bockler Stiftung… (Smart Germany adviser)

> The Smart management negotiates and works with the government. It's interesting, because Smart brings together people who are isolated, like me, and allows us to have a recognised organisation which exists, which has legitimacy, which has clout. Because it's not easy for an individual to be heard. This is a great advantage. (Smart France member)

The cooperative's staff thus provided members not only with a wide range of services which, thanks to a strong mutual trust relationship, contributed to reducing the loneliness and the self-responsibilisation of freelancers in the three countries, but it also engaged in advocacy activities, which some members would like to replace with actual representation.

6.3 Relations among freelancers within the cooperative

Being part of Smart did not just allow frequent contact with the staff of the cooperative, but also let members become part of a wide group of freelancers, breaking with the isolation typical of self-employment. Some freelancers, especially in France, where the cooperative had an established role on the national scene, justified

their Smart membership with the political desire to build a collective project and counteract the processes of individualisation characterising contemporary capitalism.

> I don't want to be a one-person business, I don't want to be a self-employed person because I think that politically it's a huge trap, I want to be socially protected and at the same time I want to see people, above all, I don't want to live in isolation anymore. (Smart France member)

> I'm really into Smart on a militant basis, because it's a cooperative. For me, cooperatives try to set up an alternative to the current financial and liberal capitalism in a concrete way. (Smart France member)

More specifically, several freelancers expressed the desire to build collaborations with other members, to avoid an individual confrontation with the market and to share responsibilities with peers.

> It would be important to create a collective and to try to work on projects together in a cooperative like Smart, to give each other security… So that in a project I'm in charge of the communication or I'm in charge of the commercial part. Everyone should do what he is able to do, according to his skills, his desires… (Smart France member)

> I would really like to do bigger projects, with more people. The question is how to do it. (Smart Italy member)

We observed a range of attempts in the three countries, which showed different levels of ability to meet freelancers' expectation and support relationships among them. A common practice in all three case studies was the effort made to ensure that jobs advertised by members could be distributed among the members of the cooperative.

> Sometimes we actively support cooperation. So, for example if we get a message from one Smart member saying: 'I cannot do this specific job which is already confirmed', we can look for another member working in the same field who could do it. In that way the job stays within the community and the client is happy because he doesn't have to look for another person to do the job. (Smart Germany adviser)

> For example, a member needs two or three other professionals working in Milan: he calls me, asks if anyone is there and we try to make a call as wide as possible. (Smart Italy adviser)

However, besides handing over jobs from one member to another, the cooperatives were aware that freelancers' requests to enhance relationships between members remained, at the time of the fieldwork, at least partially unmet.

> Right now, we are like small islands consuming the service offer of Smart without getting in touch with each other. I think we need to change the way we work on a different level. (Smart Germany member)

> We don't know the other members much. We're not in contact with the others. I would hardly be able to find someone who does the same thing as me, there is no database. (Smart Italy member)

> We want to cooperate economically with people we like. You can't start to say that you're going to do a project together if you don't know each other and if you don't have the same values, the same vision, the same objectives. The problem in Smart is that we are many. It doesn't facilitate the emergence of a collective life. (Smart France member)

We thus observed a consensus between members and advisers around the fact that a greater effort was required to build a cooperative life within Smart and foster cooperation among its members. Being aware of the challenge to be faced in the three countries, advisers seemed ready to assume an impulse role in this field.

> To build a proper cooperative life, this is something we want to do more in the future but in the current time frame, we just don't have the capacities to do it. So, we are discussing about how to do more. (Smart Germany adviser)

> The community-building animation is something we need to do but no one has the time or energy to do it now, so we are sowing the seeds. At the next assembly, together with the members, but especially with a group of selected members, we will discuss the possibility of animating local groups in cities where we have more members. (Smart Italy adviser)

In France, where Smart was first created, concrete initiatives were already being taken to develop the cooperative life, whereas in Italy and Germany such activities were still mainly in the planning stages at the time of the fieldwork. Coworking spaces and third places were thus opening in many French cities and a programme of participatory workshops inspired by the Belgian model – Smart in Progress – was being implemented to foster internal democracy and to allow members to meet each other on a regular basis. Several Smart France members underlined that they had met peers for the very first time thanks to these initiatives. During the interviews, they emphasised how fruitful the exchanges they had with their peers were, allowing them to become more self-confident, to enjoy greater freedom, and to better manage their own business.

> We realised during this social event that it was great to be able to talk about it among members, to have spaces where we could talk about it, tell each other how we organise ourselves, our little tips and tricks. (Smart France member)

> I learned to talk about my project, to build self-confidence. And I think that being in a cooperative helps because we present our projects to each other, we talk about our figures, we want to exchange ideas, we ask each other: 'How do you do it?' (Smart France member)

Beyond the work of advisers, the emergence of a cooperative life within Smart also relied on its members, who occasionally organised events autonomously, with the only logistical support of the Smart team. These quotations from Smart Germany and France members illustrate how the desire to bring the cooperative to life, and build a community, lead members to invest time and energy in bottom-up initiatives:

> We decided to create a local collective committee with people who want to organise conferences and workshops on a voluntary basis, to get to know each other, to help each other… After the last meeting we created a Discord, which allows us to talk to each other, to put things in place. We didn't ask for authorisation from Smart, but we try things out, in a rather messy and disorganised way. (Smart France member)

> I explicitly proposed to help them with community building. Because I think it's a pity that so few people come to the general assembly, there should be at least 50 people… I proposed a social networking system for Smart members, and I am willing to develop it. (Smart Germany member)

Being members of Smart, freelancers could therefore build supportive relationships with institutions, with the cooperative's staff, and with other Smart members. All these relationships contributed to enhancing their autonomy in the three countries, even if important differences could be observed regarding access to social rights (shaped by national legal specificities), availability of advisers (limited in Germany by the exponential growth of the cooperative), or support for horizontal solidarity (at the time of the fieldwork, this was more developed in the French context).

7. Discussion

This empirical exploration of Smart's organisational practices and its members' representations in three different national contexts sheds light on the possible articulations between autonomy and solidarity, contributing to the debate on alternative organisations developed within organisation studies.

We first empirically showed that freelancers' autonomy is not necessarily connected to self-employment but can rather increase in the transition from the status of self-employed to that of salaried employee thanks to the supportive relationships built through and within the cooperative. The three kinds of relationships we identified actually fostered the autonomy of members in running their activities while at the same time promoting – to a greater or lesser extent according to the national context – innovative forms of solidarity.

By mediating the relationship between freelancers and welfare institutions and turning them into employees, Smart allowed members to be covered against social risks and to dedicate themselves to the development of their business without worrying about potential sickness, unemployment, or work incapacity. In the three countries, the flexibility of administrative procedures also granted freelancers important margins of autonomy in the management of their income and consequently in their access to social rights, according to their priorities and professional needs. At the same time, becoming employees enabled members to both contribute and benefit from a welfare system based on the mutualisation of risks. Inclusion in the welfare system was actually one of the most important objectives of the cooperative and was particularly crucial for the members of Smart Italy, who wanted to avoid working in the informal economy, and for those of Smart Germany, who could thus enjoy a monthly health insurance contribution. The research also revealed the political attachment to this aspect expressed by some members, who – albeit with varying degrees of engagement with the cooperative – were keen both to enhance their autonomy by preventing risks and to take care not only of their individual security but also of the collective social protection system, actively contributing to its maintenance and reinforcement.

The relationship of members with the staff of the cooperative also illustrated a combination of autonomy and solidarity. The availability of supportive services such as administrative and fiscal declarations, debt collection or accountancy tools resulted from the process of mutualisation. In the three countries, all Smart members were actually funding these services by paying the same percentage fee on their turnover, regardless of their actual use of these shared resources. These common tools allowed members to be absolved from the heavy tasks they should have carried on as self-employed workers and to focus on the autonomous development of their core business, without being concerned about fiscal obligations or delayed payments. The personal relationship emerging between freelancers and advisers also contributed, in some cases, to empowering them to better value their work and negotiate higher remuneration. A need for representation was also expressed by research participants, which Smart's staff was in no position to address, but which it responded to by intensifying its advocacy activities with local and national governments. In terms of relations with the staff of the cooperative, the main concern was found in the overstretched workload of advisers, which could limit the effectiveness of this mutualised business support and – at the time of the fieldwork – the situation was especially critical in the German context.

The third relationship we analysed concerned the interactions among members, who also claimed to be part of the cooperative to escape isolation. At the same time, if most research participants were hoping for the construction of mutual knowledge and fruitful collaborations among Smart freelancers, it was still a goal that was yet to be achieved in the three countries. In comparison with the Italian and German contexts, the French cooperative was a little ahead, following in the footsteps of the Belgian model: socialising events and participative workshops were organised to allow freelancers to meet, but the examples of effective cooperation were still quite scarce at the time of the fieldwork. However, the intertwining of autonomy and interpersonal solidarity was confirmed by several Smart members, who, after having had the opportunity to exchange with their peers, were feeling more self-confident, and also in some cases took collective initiatives to foster the development of cooperative life in an autonomous way, without waiting for the advisers' input.

8. Conclusion

This research on Smart cooperatives in three European countries contributes to the current discussions in organisation studies at the empirical, epistemological, and theoretical levels.

From an empirical point of view, the analysis we conducted within the largest European network of freelance cooperatives allowed us to add a hitherto understudied case to the collection of alternative organisations called for by several organisational scholars (see Parker and Parker, 2017). In particular, our research showed how practices aimed to build alternative forms of organisations (Wiksell and Henriksson, 2023) could foster the autonomy of members (Böhm, Dinerstein and Spicer, 2010) thus enacting an original combination of autonomy and solidarity. In epistemological terms, this article highlights the fruitfulness of combining a Critical Performativity approach with the study of alternative organisations (Just et al., 2021). The 'readiness to explore rather than judge' that characterises Critical Performativity (Gibson-Graham, 2008: 620) and the involvement of a Smart insider in the whole research process allowed us to explore the three cooperatives in-depth, underlining their achievements and potentialities without neglecting the eventual gaps between intentions and practices. The risk of accommodating with capitalism reported by some organisational scholars (Fleming and Banerjee, 2016) was then prevented, as this research addressed the case of a network of cooperatives which convey an alternative project and may therefore represent an ally in the common quest for progressive social change (see Parker and Parker, 2017). By articulating the epistemological premises of the Critical Performativity approach with a research design focused on alternative organisations, and conducted through an 'activist ethnography' (Reedy and King, 2019), the two researchers and the Smart insider could indeed contribute to the programme by 'bring[ing] marginalized, hidden and alternative economic activities to light, in order to make them more real and more credible as objects of policy and activism' (Gibson-Graham, 2008: 613). In theoretical terms, our findings allowed us to show that alternatives can be found to the self-responsibilisation and atomisation of the workforce, currently epitomised by freelancers. Indeed, our research showed that the two principles at the core of alternative organisations – autonomy and solidarity – are not necessarily contradictory and can rather be mutually supportive (see also Husted, 2021). The empirical evidence that relationships based on solidarity can enhance the autonomy of human beings counteracts the neoliberal myth of autonomy, which considers social bonds as potential brakes for the freedom of self-sufficient individuals (Fineman, 2008). Such results invite us, as organisational scholars, to reframe our understanding of autonomy, emphasising its collective dimension, as feminist researchers have recently pointed out (Friedman, 2003; Mackenzie, 2014). Conceiving autonomy as relational thus represents a promising perspective to explore alternative organisations overcoming the apparent tensions between autonomy and solidarity.

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