More Than Prefigurative Politics? Redefining institutional frames to reduce precarity under neoliberal capitalism

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Abstract

This paper responds to the emergent calls for recovering the role of contentious politics in prefigurative communities to more effectively transform capitalist institutions. Theoretically drawing on the work of Judith Butler, our paper points to the importance of the institutional frames, demarcating who will be (mis)recognized in the public space, at the core of politics. Our analysis of the Coop case shows how prefigurative and contentious politics can be articulated, rather than being incompatible, to reduce precarity if they actively engage with and redefine the institutional frames. It is by doing so that an assembly is constituted wherein a redefined subjectivity emerges whose dis-identification from the precarizing frames enables both forms of politics in a virtuous circle. At the same time, our analysis suggests that Coop's political practices cannot completely redefine the individualized, calculative neoliberal subject. Project workers embraced the assembly only to the extent that interdependence and solidarity reduced their self-responsibility and helped advance their professional and life projects. Overall, these insights advance the literature on grassroots organizations by showing the importance of articulating prefigurative and contentious politics to redefine the institutional frames, as opposed to privileging the former over the latter and operating in complete autonomy from institutions. Yet simultaneously they confirm the difficulty to redefine the precarious neoliberal subject through collective emancipatory projects.

Keywords:

Introduction

Worldwide, grassroots initiatives ranging from cooperatives, citizens' protests, commoning projects, local alternative currencies and alike, are mobilizing people. Though heterogeneous in nature, they share a commitment to fight against the precarization of our lives at the hand of neoliberal capitalist institutions and norms such as private property, markets and individual responsibility (Graham & Papadopoulos, 2021; Parker, Cheney, Fournier, & Land, 2014; Parker, Fournier, & Reedy, 2007). They do so by creating communal spaces organized around other values, where different social practices and more relational and solidary subjectivities can emerge (e.g., Buchter, 2022; Haug, 2013; Reinecke, 2018).

An emergent body of organizational scholarship has argued that these grassroots initiatives hold great political potential because they turn away from traditional forms of contentious politics, such as strikes and demonstrations, and enact a more prefigurative form of politics. Instead of seeking change by advancing political demands towards existing institutions, as traditionally done in contentious politics (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015; Tilly, 2008), prefigurative politics seeks change by enacting new practices in autonomy from institutions (Gautney, 2009; Maeckelbergh, 2011). Prefigurative politics thus refers to a politics of immanence that experiments with alternatives to capitalist institutions in the here and now, anticipating what the future could look like (Daskalaki, Fotaki, & Sotiropoulou, 2018; Daskalaki & Kokkinidis, 2017; Farias, 2016; Maeckelbergh, 2011; Reedy, King, & Coupland, 2016) as opposed to seeking confrontation with institutions pushing them towards change in the future. It is by attempting to organize horizontally, sustainably and in solidarity, that new subjectivities can emerge and that we get glimpses of a less precarious future (e.g., Daskalaki & Kokkinidis, 2017; Daskalaki et al., 2018; de Souza & Parker, 2020). These grassroots' prefigurative politics are seen as key to expand organization studies' social imaginary beyond capitalism, allowing us to move from critique of what already exists into more 'performative'

2

organizational knowledge that can help build alternatives (Zanoni, Contu, Healy, & Mir, 2017; Fournier, 2006; Reedy & Learmonth, 2009; Zanoni, 2020).

Recently, however, some have warned that assuming that the prefigurative practices of grassroots organizations will automatically lead to overcoming neoliberal capitalism is misplaced (Bailey, 2019; Dean, 2015; Zanoni, 2020). History shows that non-capitalist organizations have often coexisted with capitalist institutions, or stronger, they are necessary to their reproduction (Böhm, 2014; Federici, 2012). Moreover, while different practices in grassroots organizations might foster the emergence of novel subjectivities, this possibility should not be taken for granted. As Butler's work (2015) reminds us, subjects can never emerge in complete autonomy from existing institutions, as these latter dictate the terms of subjects' appearance in the public space. Institutional frames demarcate the subject in specific ways, determining who can or cannot appear and receive protection. Her conceptualization, precarization precisely refers to how such institutional frames render the lives of those who cannot appear less 'livable' (Butler, 2004a; Lorey, 2018). This ontological dependence of the subject on institutional frames points to the illusory nature of the autonomy from existing institutions that underpins prefigurative politics. Indeed, many grassroots organizations struggle to stay true to their own values and practices and hence to remain in existence, due to the multiple pressures they undergo to align with the institutions constituting society around them (e.g. Errasti, 2015; Soetens & Huybrechts, 2022; Reedy et al., 2016; Reinecke, 2018). These critiques alert us that, without contentious politics challenging existing institutional frames, prefigurative politics alone are likely to fail in their intent to move society towards a post-capitalist future (Miller, 2015; Zanoni, 2020). Yet, when contentious politics are adopted by grassroots organizations, they tend to replace their prefigurative practices, leading to the demise of the organization (e.g. Maier & Simsa, 2020; Reinecke, 2018), suggesting that contentious and prefigurative politics are incompatible.

This paper investigates the politics of Coop, a Belgian cooperative that, since 1998 has combined community building through prefigurative politics with a strong engagement in contentious politics through advocacy to reduce project workers' precarity. Different from most grassroots organizations (Maier & Simsa, 2020; Reinecke, 2018), it has grown into a large solidary community, which is at once prominently advocating the reform of existing institutions to reduce precarity. Theoretically drawing on Butler's work (Butler, 2004a, 2004b, 2015; Butler, Gambetti, & Sabsay, 2016; Butler, Laclau, & Laddaga, 1997), which points to the key role of institutional frames in politics, we ask the following questions: How are prefigurative and contentious politics articulated to redefine the institutional frames that precarize the subject? What subject emerges from these redefined institutional frames within Coop?

Our study contributes to the organizational literature on grassroots organizations by showing how prefigurative and contentious politics can be articulated to redefine the institutional frames of neoliberal capitalism and, so doing, reduce precarity (Bailey, 2019; Miller, 2015; Zanoni, 2020). Our analysis thus points to the importance of the redefinition of the institutional frames at the core of politics (see also Butler et al., 2016; Swyngedouw, 2020). It is by redefining these frames that a subjectivity emerges whose dis-identification from the institutional frames lead to their support in the contentious practices as well as their engagement with the prefigurative community. At the same time, our analysis suggests that, while the redefinition of institutional frames through prefigurative and contentious politics might effectively reduce precarity, it does not necessarily foster a radically novel subjectivity beyond neoliberalism. Paradoxically, the redefined institutional frames of Coop seem to sustain an individualized, calculative subject that embraces the assembly to the extent that interdependence and solidarity reduce its self-responsibility and help advance its own professional and life project (see Fleming, 2014; Moisander, Groß, & Eräranta, 2018; Mumby, Thomas, Martí, & Seidl, 2017). This finding indicates that, to succeed, institutional frames need

to be redefined in ways that are compatible with the individualized neoliberal subject, yet that precisely this compatibility might at once constitute their fundamental limitation in overcoming capitalist institutions (e.g. Brown, 2005; Dean, 2015, 2016).

The promise and the limits of prefigurative politics in grassroots organizations

Organizational scholars have recently started exploring alternative grassroots organizations in which members seek to organize themselves in autonomy from neoliberal capitalist institutions (e.g. Daskalaki et al., 2018; Maier & Simsa, 2020; Reedy et al., 2016). Key and returning in these studies is the notion of prefiguration, a politics of creating post-capitalist alternatives 'in the here and now', through doing things differently (Maeckelbergh, 2011, p. 3; see also Gibson-Graham, 2006). This modality of politics is radically different from contentious political practices, which advance claims towards existing institutions, projecting desired institutional change and recognition into the future. On the contrary, practices of horizontal democracy enable one to speak, discuss, agree and disagree and to materialize shared values in the present, outside existing institutions (Haug, 2013; Maeckelbergh, 2012; Reedy, et al., 2016). They do not posit a well-defined goal beforehand, but rather create communal spaces in which members engage in collaborative decision-making (Parker, 2012), raising awareness about the necessity of change, activating participants to do things differently and to inspire others (Farias, 2016, Maier & Simsa, 2020; Peter & Meyer, 2022). Relations of affect, trust and solidarity within the community play a key role in nurturing new political subjectivities that distance themselves from existing institutions (Reinecke, 2018, p. 1312; see also Haug, 2013) and oppose the impersonal, individualized and competitive subjectivity produced by neoliberal capitalist institutions (e.g. Farias, 2016; Reedy et al., 2016; Reinecke, 2018).

Some studies however point to the limitations of prefigurative practices to transcend the normative conditions regulating the subject in sociality. For instance, Reedy, King and

Coupland's (2016) study of the Midtown Alternative Consensus, a loose confederation of initiatives in the UK, revealed the "difficulties and contradictions associated with trying to live so much against the grain of dominant social norms" (p. 1568). These contradictions reflect the impossibility for subjects to emerge within the community in ways that are autonomous from institutions. Along the same lines, Reinecke's (2018) study of Occupy Wall Street has shown how "over time deeply entrenched institutional inequalities frustrated participants' attempts to maintain an exceptional and communal space" (p. 1299). These analyses point to grassroots organizations' difficulty of maintaining a space of 'exception', outside the institutions that govern them (Martí & Fernández, 2013). An organizational focus on their own internal practices ends up threatening their own existence and their ability to transform capitalist institutions and render lives less precarious on the long term.

However, when grassroots organizations do attempt to overcome these limitations by engaging more with institutions through contentious political practices, these latter tend to displace prefigurative ones. For instance, as Maier and Simsa's (2020) study of the 15May movement shows, the constitution of a political party to advance demands, tends to erode the practices of horizontal democracy and conviviality that were originally at the core of the community, leading to demonstrators' disappointment and eventually the demise of the movement. Similarly, Reinecke (2018) documented how the necessity to engage in 'strategic' politics in relation to the institutions of the media and the police re-introduced institutionalized inequalities into Occupy Wall Street. This evolution exacerbated difficulties and tensions, ultimately leading to the end of this landmark of political experience.

Taken together, these analyses suggest how on the one hand, grassroots organizations' prefigurative politics alone is unlikely to change neoliberal capitalist institutions, yet, on the other hand, their incompatibility with more transformative contentious practices.

Challenging the institutional frames that precarize through the assembly

To address the conundrum of the limitations of solely relying on prefigurative politics and its incompatibility with contentious politics, we rely on Butler's work on political mobilization against precarity (Butler, 2004a, 2015; Butler et al., 2016). Unlike theorizations of prefigurative political practice which seeks to reduce precarity by acting outside and beyond the existing institutions (Gautney, 2009; Maeckelbergh, 2011), Butler's work repositions institutions front and centre of any strife against precarity. In sociality, she holds, subjects' emergence is always regulated by institutional frames, which she calls 'terms of appearance', that make the subject 'legible' in the eyes of others in specific ways (Butler, 2004b; Butler et al., 2016). Under neoliberal capitalism, subject-citizens are governed through institutional frames that constitute a precarious subject that needs to self-regulate (Foucault, 2008; McNay, 2009), to be self-sufficient (Rose, 1999) and self-responsible (e.g. Fleming 2014, 2017). Subjects are individualized, made to compete and rendered fully responsible for their own failure to win the competition (Butler, 2015; Lorey, 2018). Those who are, for any reason, unable to live up to this moral demand of self-sufficiency in their relation with others will be misrecognized and left to their fate. By dictating the specific conditions on which subjects can legitimately exist, or be recognized in the public space, these institutional frames unequally distribute precarity, making some particularly vulnerable and condemning them to living 'unlivable lives' (Butler, 2015; Butler et al., 2016). The law plays a particularly important role in enforcing these terms, as it formally grants or denies legal status and the protection that comes with it (Alberti, Bessa, Hardy, Trappmann, & Umney, 2018; Lorey, 2018). For instance, legislation that restricts social protection to full-time employees with a permanent contract, denies recognition to individuals who are not employed, work intermittently, part-time, and/or are self-employed, making their lives less livable.

Butler emphasizes how assemblies such as Black Lives Matter, Gezi Park and Taksim Square originate in subjects' shared dis-identification from the institutional frames that make them precarious (Butler, 2015; Butler et al., 2016; see also Swyngedouw, 2020). By being together in these assemblies, subjects become aware of how institutional frames turn them into individualized and precarized neoliberal selves (Butler, 2015, p. 21). Similar to many contemporary grassroots organizations that organize around prefigurative politics, the assembly interrupts the reproduction of an individualist and self-responsible subjectivity through an ethos of solidarity that is grounded in openness and mutual interdependence (Butler, 2015). At the same time, the assemblies discussed by Butler are not only spaces of prefiguration. They also constitute acts of contentious politics against existing institutions because they directly reclaim subjects' recognition within the existing institutional frames, to obtain the food, shelter, and security without which one is – sometimes literally – left to die (Arendt, 1998).

We argue that Butler's (2015) emphasis on 'the right to appear' and to be protected as an essential aspect in the strife against precarity is helpful to advance our understanding of grassroots organizations' politics. By advancing the institutional frames constituting subjects as more or less deserving protection as the main object of politics (see Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), this perspective opens up the way to reconcile prefigurative politics enacting alternative subjects in the assembly and the assembly's contentious politics reclaiming recognition from existing institutions in the public space. For Butler, "any hegemonic position is always exposed to the risk of being subverted" (Butler et al., 1997, p. 3). Politics can therefore not forego the on-going, open-ended strife for recognition in the *public* space, the right to have rights, to be protected and to be granted a livable life.

Coop

Coop was founded as an association in Belgium in 1998 by an artist manager and an engineer active in the cultural sector and turned formally into a cooperative in 2016. The founders wanted to support artists deal with the complex tax and social security administration due to their atypical legal status as 'project workers', independent contracted individuals hired on a project basis (cf. Cappelli & Keller, 2013). Like in many other countries, also in Belgium, a great number of cultural workers live in highly precarious conditions due to insecure and discontinuous nature of their work, the high competition and low revenues (Murgia, 2013). Since its origins, Coop has gradually evolved into a large organization that creates a solidary community through which it attempts to reduce this precarity inherent to cultural work. At the time of the study, Coop opened branches in cities in nine European countries besides Belgium, including France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Hungary, the Netherlands, Austria and Sweden. In 2003, Coop started to legally act as an employer of project workers by making use of article 1bis of the national social security law (hereafter article 1bis). This article allows artists to formally work and get the social protection as an employee despite the absence of an employment contract, provided that the work concerns an artistic activity paid for by a natural or legal person and that working hours can be proven (socialezekerheid.be, 2020). In this arrangement, project workers work for their clients as employees of Coop and register their activities and work hours on the platform. Coop invoices the received goods and services to the clients and pays the artists. By becoming employees, they receive the same social protection if they meet a legally established minimum registered income. In 2017, about 40% of the value of the activities that passed through Coop was through an employee of the Cooperative (General Assembly, 2018).

In 2016, the association was turned into a cooperative under Belgian law. This statute has allowed Coop to formalize members' participation and to increase the transparency of governance processes. The structure was flattened and re-organized around four management

9

teams: operations, administration, strategy and development, and IT. Formally, like for all cooperatives, the democratic governance of Coop is ensured through the yearly General Assembly. In the General Assembly, the activity and financial reports of the previous year are presented to the cooperative members, who also elect 10 project worker members and 7 members from Coop's staff on the board of directors. Since 2017, participation is furthermore guaranteed through thematic working groups, in which members reflect and deliberate on a specific topic – for instance on the cooperative's ethics, financial transparency or social impact – to formulate policy recommendations (Year Report, 2019).

At the time of study, Coop counted about 180 staff spread over different regions and 14,500 members (General Assembly, 2018), the majority of whom work in arts or crafts (55%). Other profiles include 'technical artists' (e.g. sound engineer for theatre productions) artistic-related professions (e.g. arts teachers) (34%) and in non-artistic work (11%). Members tend to be young, as reflected in the average age of 35.6 years, and a small majority (54%) are men (Year Report, 2018). Coop offers project workers an online administrative tool, a collectively acquired professional insurance scheme, the payment of invoiced amounts for a fee and the mandate to collect the invoice with the client, legal advice for project workers, production materials for rent, ateliers and co-working spaces and offices where members can meet informally, work, and where formal meetings, festivities, workshops and seminars are organized.

Methodology

Qualitative data collection

Most data for this study were collected in 2018 through semi-structured interviews with members and staff of Coop in Belgium, non-participant observations of its activities, and extensive available internal and external documents. When we obtained permission to study

Coop, we were given access to its numerous publications, which allowed us to familiarize ourselves with the history and the vision of the organization. The first author conducted 25 in-depth interviews with persons managing the Coop (10) – henceforth "staff members" – and project workers who work through the cooperative (15) – henceforth "project workers" or "project worker members," when required for clarity. Both authors additionally jointly interviewed a trade union representative who had been following the evolution of Coop over the years and written on it in the national press. Table 1 offers an overview of respondents. Their socio-demographic and professional profile broadly reflects the composition of Coop's project worker members at the time of the study.

Insert Table 1 about here

Our contact person reached out to staff members asking them to participate in the research, while the first author solicited project worker members during observations of events organized by Coop in its Brussels premises and through snowball-sampling. This recruiting strategy has likely led to a sample of respondents from the larger group of the more active members of Coop, as opposed to members that solely use it as an administrative tool.

The interviews with staff members included topics such as Coop's values, mission, history, current practices and activities, its membership and broader constituency, and its goals in relation to workers' precarity in the labour market and the future of work more broadly. Respondents were also asked to reflect on the relation between Coop and the Belgian labour market and welfare institutions. In the interviews with project workers, discussions revolved around their work, questions about precarity and their relation to Coop and other members. During the interviews, project workers also drew their network and the position of Coop in it. All interviews lasted between one and two hours. They were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and respondents were given pseudonyms. In line with common ethical guidelines, respondents

were informed about the research, provided consent, and were guaranteed that anonymity would be respected at all times (Flick, 2007).

Interviews are a particularly relevant data source, since they allow the subject to be performed through discursive practice in relation with others (e.g. Butler, 1988, 2005). In the interview situation, the interviewee and the interviewer seek to make themselves 'intelligible' along a normative framework in order to be recognized by the other as viable human beings. At the same time, we are aware that the discursive practice we could capture does not provide the 'truth' about the subject, as it reflects the relation in the interview situation and the normative framework imposed on the subject (Butler, 2005).

The first author observed study days, research seminars, information sessions and formations organized by Coop. The second author was also present on a few occasions. Extensive notes were taken during these observations and recordings were made whenever possible and allowed. Finally, we collected extensive documentation on Coop from its origins to date, such as internal documents published by Coop (e.g. books, articles, statistics, personnel surveys, year reports and online information) and external documents published by trade unions, newspapers and other scholars, as well as publicly available videos of meetings (Coop's General Assembly of 2019 and 2020), and seminars and debates featuring Coop's representatives. The combination of internal and external documentation allowed us to gain a comprehensive understanding of the organization's political practices.

Data analysis

The data was analysed in several phases. In the first phase, we read the interviews and the documentation to get a shared overall sense of the organization. Through the multiple data sources, we became aware of the richness of activities and were particularly struck by the explicitly political discourse about precarity that permeated Coop, something that is rather

uncommon in Belgian civil society organizations. All Coop's practices were informed by members' understanding that project workers' precarity originated in the institutional frames which misrecognize and thus deny protection, yet which also make project workers individually responsible for their success or failure.

In a second phase, we addressed the first research question (how are prefigurative and contentious politics articulated to redefine the institutional frames that precarize the subject?). First, we went through all the collected data and identified all practices through which the cooperative seeks to reduce precarity. This resulted in an extensive list of practices which were, through multiple discussion rounds and iterations, categorized into four main practices: 1) practices of conviviality and horizontal democratic governance, 2) the mutualization of financial risks and resources among members 3) the employment of project worker members relying on article 1bis, and 4) practices of advocacy for the recognition of project work by Belgian institutions. In line with the literature (e.g. Gautney, 2009; Maeckelbergh, 2011), we coded the first two practices as 'prefigurative politics', as they foster change in the 'here and now' through a solidary community, rather than by seeking immediate confrontation with institutions. The latter two practices question the Belgian labour law that only recognizes waged labour in the welfare state. As these practices advance demands from the institutions, they were coded as 'contentious politics' (see Tilly & Tarrow, 2015; Tilly, 2008). Finally, we sought to understand how these two modalities of politics jointly attempted to redefine the institutional frames that make project workers precarious. Here, focusing on the articulation, we paid particular attention to the way prefigurative and contentious practices as well as the subjectivities they produce related to one another.

In a third phase, we addressed the second research question (what subject emerges from these redefined frames within Coop?) Here we turned exclusively to the interviews with project workers to analyse which kind of subject emerged in their narratives along the frames as

redefined through Coop's prefigurative and contentious practices. This last analytical phase revealed how project workers performed themselves in an ambiguous way, as an interdependent, solidary subject with reduced self-responsibility, who is less precarious, yet still individualized and calculative.

Coop's prefigurative practices of conviviality, democratic governance and mutualism

The headquarters of Coop are hidden behind an anonymous façade in a small street in the centre of Brussel, were it not for the "COOP" banner announcing something interesting is happening here. Behind the wooden portal, the main building hosts a reception desk exhibiting Coop fliers and promotional brochures of various other initiatives, a small library, an ample, welcoming sitting area with a coffee corner, and various training and seminar rooms for members. Behind a glass wall looking into a green courtyard with benches, picnic tables and mural art, the staff's offices are located. This place is the living heart of Coop, where project workers come together as an assembly on a day-to-day basis and are able to share their experiences, interests and struggles. The importance of this assembly as a communal place where project workers can meet, is for instance reflected by Lucas, a developer of web applications and digital programs, who told us that "it is super interesting, it is so great to hear the stories of others". Likewise, Lucie, a consultant, described how Coop offers a space for "solidarity, because we are not alone, I get help, but I also help others, so it's mutual."

This sense of togetherness and solidarity is actively produced by Coop through this space, the assembly's shared activities, and a narrative of conviviality and democratic governance. All materials, ranging from fliers to research reports, studies and books refer to the organization's founding values of equality, solidarity, autonomy, freedom, and horizontal democracy, opposing them to competition and profit (Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

These values inform the internal practices of democratic governance of the organization, which become highly visible during the legally mandated yearly General Assembly. During this two-day event at the Brussels headquarters, the board of directors presents the activities to the membership and the ballot for the board renewal is cast, followed by debates in which the future of the cooperative is discussed. The General Assembly is highly attended and is also live streamed to allow wide participation and later made available on a YouTube channel (YouTube video Yearly General Assembly, 2018). Participation in the governance of the cooperative is furthermore fostered through the working groups in which project workers can collectively prepare guidelines on policy related topics (such as financial transparency, representation, IT and ethics) shaping Coop's policies on these themes throughout the year. Nick, a member of the strategy and development team, explains:

> "Besides the General Assembly, you have these different working groups in which particular themes are discussed (…). Those who want to take part in these working groups can introduce themselves. It has been a way to, beyond the classical and legally mandated General Assembly and Board of Directors, to make sure that members are actively involved in this form of … [collective decision-making]."

These governance practices reconstitute new institutional frames for project workers to perform themselves as part of a democratic and solidary community, rather than individualized subjects competing with each other to obtain the next project to make a living.

Every-day interactions also constitute Coop as a community in which members are strengthened by their relations with others, whereby they "have the feeling of being surrounded by people who are all confronted with the same concerns" (Ruth, craft worker). Coop's reports affirm the overcoming of the individualized, self-responsible neoliberal subject through statements like the following:

> "The collective enterprise has become a place where group feeling transcends individual interests, [where] social relations are strengthened and where, together, we achieve a better quality of life." (Coop, 2019, p. 11)

This type of narrative redefines the neoliberal institutional frames in the public space. In the assembly, project workers are de-individualized, recognize their mutual interdependence, and build common projects to reduce their precarity. Observing a training session for project worker members on assertiveness and conflict management, [name of the first author] was struck by how project workers helped each other:

> *"Marc struggles with handling the numerous emails he receives overnight and during weekends. Afraid of losing jobs, he responds to all, with detrimental consequences for his private life, not to mention the stress he clearly feels when telling his experience [Marc sighs, he looks desperate]. Others recognize his situation, most of them experience the same pressure. Some share how they deal with it, by making agreements with clients beforehand or creating an automated email during weekends, saying 'thank you for your message, I will contact you on Monday'. Marc, like other attendees probably facing the same issues, listens carefully while taking notes."* (name of first author's field notes, 8 May, 2018)

The project workers however did not simply share practical tips to cope with the pressure of life as a project worker. They also expressed solidarity to him in a way that reconstituted Marc's individual struggle as a shared one.

A solidary and interdependent and thus less precarious subject also emerges through the mutualization of resources among project workers. Meghan, a staff member in the department of administration, finances and logistics explained how "[t]he greatest solidarity in Coop is the mutualisation, [...] accepting that there will be a levy on income, [...] the same for everyone, 6,5% for all members, irrespective of their income." The funds collected on every activity registered via the platform are used by Coop to purchase spaces (co-working space, offices, ateliers), material (professional equipment and vehicles) and insurances, which are then made available to all members at reduced cost (Year Report, 2017; prospects, 2018). These funds also enable the organization to collectivize the risk of late or non-payment by clients. Harry told us:

> "Invoices are always paid too late, most of the time 30 to 60 days after the invoice date. Before [joining Coop], I wasn't able to [enforce payment], but now you can put your payment date on your invoice and of course with Coop clients know that if they don't pay quickly Coop will put a whole team of lawyers at work. If you are self-employed

you have to rely on a collection agency." (Harry, project worker, animation/illustration/character & motion design)

The practice of mutualization reduces project workers' precarity by turning them into members of a collective, sharing their responsibility. Mutualization redefines the institutional frames in the public space that make them individually responsible for bearing the financial risks related to their project work. The key role of mutualization in enabling the emergence of solidary subjectivities within Coop's assembly featured prominently in the internal documentation, but also regularly surfaced throughout the interviews with both staff and project worker members. Liam, a staff member in the strategy and development department told us:

> "We negotiate insurances for work accidents and civil responsibility on behalf of all Coop members (…) and so the day a member has an accident, he or she benefits from the insurances arranged by Coop. These insurances are cheap because Coop negotiated them on behalf of the entire community."

The mutualization of risks makes an important difference in project workers' individual lives, as Coop's resources through the collective fund opened up professional opportunities that would otherwise not be available to them. For instance, Georges, a consultant, stressed how "it is because of Coop that I am able to do this", and William, an upcycling artist, likewise said: "[i]f it were not for Coop, I could have never launched my project. The [the financial] threshold would have been too high." In the collective, project workers felt relieved and enabled to do what they considered impossible without this solidarity system.

Together, these practices of democratic governance, conviviality and mutualization of risks reconstitute Coop as an assembly, a communal space in which a less precarious subjectivity can emerge. While the institutional frames in the public space precarize project workers by constituting them as individualized and self-responsible, the redefined frames of Coop allow for the emergence of a subject that is solidary in the relation with other members, reducing precarity. This performance is a powerful modality of micro-politics that disrupts the

reproduction of the highly individualized, competitive and self-responsible neoliberal subject, prefiguring a different, less precarious future.

Building on prefigurative practices: Coop's contentious practices of employment and advocacy to better protect project workers

Coop is not only an assembly prefiguring alternative relations, economic practices and subjectivities, it also one that engages in contentious politics in name of the solidary community that is constituted through prefiguration. Through other members' stories and Coop's trainings, brochures and other channels, project members became more aware of how their precarity is the consequence of the institutional frames of work that misrecognize them, rather than their own individual responsibility. For them, Coop plays a key role in challenging such frames, representing and defending the rights of the community in the public debate to combat precarization:

> "Yes. It's really important that Coop represents the workers. Workers who were initially artists. (…) It's really good that a big entity can defend this type of work and give it recognition." (Lucas, project worker, developer of web applications & digital programs)

> "[Considering] the changed employment conditions [refers to the decline of permanent jobs], with flexi-jobs and all the regulations surrounding them that are changing. I think that it is a nice social role they [Coop] play, absolutely." (Mike, project worker, photographer)

> "Something needs to change. Our system is no longer efficient, it was written for workers on the assembly line that's it. (…) I really hope that Coop can go into a bat for this [for more adequate social protection]." (Daniel, project worker, designer).

Coop is thus able to enact contentious politics by virtue of a community of project members that have become de-individualized in Coop's assembly and reject to take individual responsibility for the structurally induced nature of their precarity. In this sense, Coop's prefigurative practices function as an essential condition for its contentious politics.

The latter takes place in the back building, where Coop staff and the working groups strategize about how to ensure that precarious project workers receive better protection in an institutional system that fundamentally misrecognizes them. A key practice to ensure this protection is their formal employment by the cooperative, so that they can enjoy the social protection that comes with this legal status. Sketching triangles to visualize the relation between project worker members, the cooperative, and clients, Joey, a member of the operations team, explained:

> "We have consciously chosen to hire people through an employee system as in this way we can offer a safe environment. We decrease the risks as a starting project worker because that status offers limited protection."

Another staff member of the strategy and development department, Liam, explained the ethical and economic reasons behind this practice as follows:

> "In Belgium, the best social protection possible is that of the employee and therefore it seems to us quite normal that someone who generates wealth thanks to his [sic] know-how receives the best social protection possible. That's what we defend, Coop transforms self-employed people into employees." (Liam, staff member strategy & development)

Through this political practice, Coop re-appropriates the institutional frames of the legal category of employee. Doing so, it contests the exclusion of project workers from social protection, leading to their precarization. Coop's documentation legitimizes this re-appropriation by emphasizing the inadequacy and injustice of institutions which reflect full-time, long-term employment which was common in the past:

> "Protection should no longer be reduced to those in wage employment. We need to expand the scope of those rights and make sure that they apply to every work situation. That is what we fight for every day, to fill in for every situation in which regulations, the market logic or the laws fall short." (Coop, 2019, p. 7)

Project workers can accordingly perform themselves as misrecognized by institutions and deserving the protection. Sarah, a creative cultural worker, for instance explained:

"With Coop you can take a break if needed, you can 'fall out' (…) You pay a percentage [on your income], you pay a social contribution, while as a self-employed this is … [not the case]."

The use of this loophole to the law has however stimulated an intense debate between Coop and the trade unions, which in the Belgian system are institutionally heavily invested in establishing and administering social protection mechanisms. The unions have accused Coop of creating 'bogus' employees and allowing them to fraud as they can register activities on the platform that never took place. Charlie, a trade union member, has written different articles sharply condemning this practice:

"Coop [is] a fake employer who acts as an intermediary via an accounting website. It operates as a kind of interim office without a real employment contract because that inhibits flexibility and creativity with regard to tax evasion. (…) They have exploited this practice – that was initially a good solution for the complex artist status – to the maximum. (…) Another problem is that Coop grafts itself as a parasite onto our legislation, makes a lot of money through it and has thousands of people involved who are free to make their own accounting constructions." (excerpts from an opinion article written by Charlie, trade union member)

Coop is also accused of using article 1bis for individuals who are not artists, for whom the protection was devised. Project workers are aware of the contested nature of this practice, yet defend it as the only possibility to obtain recognition and protection:

"There's no legal frame [for project workers]. What the cooperative does is in a grey zone. When I look at my employment contract... I'm employed under PC304 [the Joint Committee for artists], but that's not really what I do. But that is the one PC that allows for this kind of flexibility." (Daniel, project worker, designer)

At the same time, Coop also contests the existing legal categories of work in more overt ways, to advocate for better protection of project workers. Rose, a staff member strategy and development, explained to us:

"Social security now depends on whether you are an employee, self-employed, or a civil servant. If you are none of these, you fall out of the system. Actually, you should have a sort of personal card which follows you and the things you're doing. More linked to the person, not to the type of contract as such. (…) [A form of] secured flexibility (…) We are already active on this (…) We get asked, mainly on a European level, to play a role."

Staff members frequently advocate for the redefinition of the legal categories of work at events on the future of work with trade unions, employers, state bodies at the national and European level. Coop also organizes public seminars and conferences on this topic:

> *"We attend the 24h 'du travail' [the 24 hours of work']. During these two days, Coop's headquarters are turned into a conference room. They are packed with project workers, staff members, representatives of trade unions, colleagues from other cooperatives, civil society activists, researchers and interested individuals. They discuss how institutions should be changed to better protect workers. The growing number of precarious workers, including project workers, is presented as pointing to the future of work, the beginning of a fundamental transformation that will render more and more people increasingly precarious. Early in the programme, a trade union representative takes the word and sharply attacks Coop for undermining the social security system. Coop's director is really upset and can hardly keep calm." (name of second author's field notes, 12 December, 2017)*

Reflecting the importance of this practice, the General Assembly of 2020 introduced a thematic working group around Coop's political project of reducing project workers' precarization through the law.

Together, the employment of project workers through the re-appropriation of existing legislation and the advocacy activities illustrate how Coop engages in contentious politics in the name of the solidary assembly constituted through prefigurative political practices. Put differently, carried and supported by the de-individualized and politically aware subjectivities constituted in an assembly, Coop is then able to play a key role in challenging the institutional frames of work by which project workers are precarized in the public space. Through these contentious practices, Coop's project members can perform themselves as legible in the welfare state and deserving social protection, reducing their own precarity.

And back again: Contentious politics sustaining prefigurative politics and the ambiguity of the solidary yet calculative subject

Not only do prefigurative politics constitute the condition for contentious politics to occur, but also, at the same time, the protection offered to project workers through contentious politics conversely attracts project members into the community, strengthening the assembly and its

prefigurative politics. Some project workers were adamant with us that becoming a member of the cooperative – and more precisely the protection through the status of employee – was a way to kickstart their careers:

> "For me, personally, when I decided to join Coop, my goal was really to launch my activities [as a project worker] to experiment with it and to grow." (Georges, project worker, consultant – work broker)

> "[Joining Coop] allowed me to get started, to experiment a bit […]. You can start as an entrepreneur or do little things, without having the status of entrepreneur which is very heavy. Because financially, you must immediately pay several hundreds of euros every three months [social security contribution as a self-employed]. So, you have this financial aspect and also your administration. […] So, I use Coop clearly as a solution because it allows me not to become an entrepreneur immediately, even though the purpose is still to become independent at some point." (Alison, project worker, consultant – gender equality)

Importantly, the contentious politics enacted by Coop did not require project members to take the barricades themselves. Coop operates in a much more structural way with a clear division of political labour. Although membership in Coop had raised project workers' political awareness, in most cases, they did not engage themselves in contentious politics, which they saw as a task of the organization:

> "Coop takes a risk on the edge, *they* do not pass the line of the law, but *they* are very close [to passing it] (…) it is precisely that, that what can enhance progress (…) to work the frames to change the shape of the frame a bit." (Sophie, project worker, jewellery artist, stress added)

While supportive in the broader political project of Coop, the self performed in these accounts is one that will reap the benefits from the broader strife without however personally engaging in it. For instance, when asked about his engagement in Coop's political strife, Harry, an animator/illustrator performs a self-regulating subject who does not have the time to take part in 'these things': "I'm not involved in these kinds of things, first and foremost... I know it sounds like a stupid excuse, but I really work a lot".

Here, the ambiguity of the subject emerging in Coop's assembly becomes apparent. While the articulation of prefiguration and contentious politics redefined the neoliberal frames in an ongoing virtuous circle, project members did not perform themselves consistently and completely outside and against the neoliberal frames. On the contrary, strikingly, project members frequently narrated themselves along the redefined frames offered in Coop to sustain an individualized calculative subject, who was however not individually responsible for its own career.

This ambiguity emerged most clearly when interviewees were asked about the extent to which they were part of the Coop community. Interviewees often clearly distanced themselves from it and reaffirmed themselves as individuals. For instance, Mike vigorously stated: "No! No! No! (…) I wouldn't even know what the collective looks like or what the collective is". In a similar vein, they often did not include Coop in the drawings of their networks, explaining that: "Coop is not really in my network… Coop is more like a tool" (Sarah) and that "Coop is no network, it is not a condition, it's a way to *arrange* things" (Lisa). Oliver explained:

> "I think three out of four of the members of Coop use it like that [as a tool]. It's something more *practical*. And yes, it's true, we receive all this [political and practical] information and we read a bit. It's often interesting. But most of the time you have so many things on the side, so I don't put too much time or effort in it. (…) For me, it helps me more than it annoys me. It's a tool, you see." (Oliver, project worker, socio-cultural activities, stress in original)

These statements recast Coop as individual project workers' instrument rather than a community one is part of, aligning the performed self to the norms of a calculative neoliberal subjectivity that weighs the cost against the benefits of every action (Brown, 2005; Foucault, 2008; McNay, 2009).

Narrating about Coop as a convivial community, Daniel argued how:

> "[doing things] all by yourself, it is extremely difficult. For your morale, psychologically. So, you need to surround yourself, to engage in professional

networking. It is so important to surround you with people who have the same interests. It helps *to advance.*" (stress added)

Interdependence and solidarity with other members of the cooperative are a way to advance one's own career, not to reconstitute it as a shared project. This instrumentality was also central in narratives on the importance of the practices of mutualization and employment with the cooperative:

"I started to think about it [about the (dis)advantages of being self-employed], okay, you don't pay taxes on your wage. But that also means that you don't build pension rights, that you are not really insured. And I mean, these were things... When I was standing four to five meters above ground to install a projector or something like that... these were things I started thinking about." (William, project worker, upcycling artist)

"The problem is that a lot of project workers work illegally and that when they declare their work, they lose what they have and that's not a good thing. With Coop, I believe, they can fill in this need, to work in a legal way but without losing the advantages we have (…) Of course there are constraints to it, but these are normal, legal, and allow you to live your passion." (Lucie, project worker, life coach)

Overall, the individualized selves emerging through these accounts show the limits of Coop's political practices to overcome the existing institutional neoliberal frames. Project workers' participation in the cooperative allowed them to *sustain* an individualized and calculative neoliberal subject, rather than to radically transform it. In this sense, the articulation of prefigurative and contentious politics through Coop's practices only partially interrupts the reproduction of the neoliberal precarious subject. On the one hand, such articulation enabled the redefinition of a subjectivity that rejected individual responsibility for its structural exclusion. On the other hand, it could not completely redefine the institutional frames, resulting in an ambiguous subject that reclaims recognition and protection, without however abandoning individualism and self-regulation.

Discussion and conclusion

Taking stock of the emergent calls for recovering the role of contentious politics in prefigurative communities to more effectively transform capitalist institutions (Bailey, 2019; Böhm, 2014;

Dean, 2015; Featherstone, 2011; Miller, 2015; Zanoni, 2020), we examined Coop's political practices aimed at reducing project workers' precarity. Drawing on Butler's notion of the assembly, our study repositioned the institutional frames at the core of the strife against precarity – instead of theorizing such strife as one for autonomy from the frames through which the subject is constituted and precarized (Butler, 2004a, Lorey, 2018). More precisely, we focused on how Coop articulates prefigurative and contentious politics to redefine the institutional frames through which project workers become precarized under neoliberal capitalism.

Our analysis reveals how in the cooperative, prefigurative and contentious practices constituted a virtuous circle, whereby the redefinition of the frames through one type of practices both supported and leveraged the redefinition of the frames through the other type of practice and vice-versa (see Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 about here

The practices of conviviality, horizontal governance and mutualization of risks prefigure Coop as a solidary community and redefine the institutional frames of the public space that constitute the subject as individualized and self-responsible. The subject emerging through this redefinition is one that is de-individualized and solidary with the community, thereby reducing its precarity in the assembly. Through these practices of engagement with others, members become more aware of the induced, structural nature of their precarity as opposed to an individual condition (cf. Butler, 2015; Butler et al., 2016; Swyngedouw, 2020). This collective dis-identification from the institutional frames in turn supports Coop's contentious practices of re-appropriation of the law to employ project workers and pushing the public debate on the future of work. Through these practices, Coop questions and re-appropriates the legal categories of work that misrecognize project work in the welfare state. Doing so, they redefine the institutional frames that define the legal categories of work in the welfare state on behalf of the

whole community. Project members were in turn able to perform themselves as legible in the welfare state and deserving social protection on the long term, reducing their precarity within the assembly. That Coop's contentious practices immediately offer social protection, without project members necessarily being engaged in its contentious strife, in turn attracts project workers into the assembly, allowing the enactment of prefigurative practices. Yet, it is also through this latter iteration that the ambiguity of the subject appearing through Coop's redefined frames becomes apparent. Surprisingly, Coop's virtuous circle of prefigurative and contentious practices does not constitute a radical novel subjectivity, one that is fully outside or opposing the neoliberal frames that precarize project workers. Rather, it allows the emergence of a subject that is solidary with the community and thus becomes less precarious, yet at once remains calculative and wedded to its own individual career.

These insights advance the existing literature on grassroots organizations' prefigurative politics by showing how they are not incompatible (e.g. Maier & Simsa, 2020; Reinecke, 2018). Prefigurative and contentious politics (Bailey, 2019; Miller, 2015; Zanoni, 2020) can be combined as a coherent political project that structurally challenges the institutional frames that precarize the subject, instead of operating solely outside them. The analysis shows how this articulation is made possible by constituting an assembly in the Butlerian sense of the term, in which the institutional frames form the core object of politics. Actively engaging with and redefining the precarizing frames of the public space, Coop's prefigurative and contentious practices jointly create a communal space as an assembly in which project members dis-identify from these frames, reject to take individual responsibility for their precarity and remain supportive of Coop's politics over time. However, importantly, Coop operates in a much more structured way than Butler's assembly and most grassroots organizations. Coop employs staff that curate the space in which all prefigurative practices of solidarity and mutualism take place. The same staff also engages in contentious politics by debating with institutions on behalf of

the community. This organization allows Coop to have a 'political edge' that most grassroots organizations lack (Featherstone, 2011), without requiring the members of the community to engage themselves in contentious practices that could undermine prefigurative ones. In this sense, Coop resembles what Jody Dean calls a 'Party', or "a body that can carry the egalitarian discharge after crowds disperse, channelling its divisive promise of justice into organized political struggle" (Dean, 2016, p. 10). She observes that the anger of the mass in the margins of society opens up an opportunity to mobilize and instigate social change. Nonetheless, over time, the desire for change needs a 'form of representation' for its effectuation, a political leadership able to speak for the many and push the institutionalized field towards social change (Dean, 2016). At the same time, Coop is not just any 'Party'. It is one in which prefigurative practices of internal democracy and conviviality ensure that leadership and staff involved in contentious politics are not co-opted into existing institutions and remain true to the assembly's mission.

Overall, our analysis supports pleads against rejecting contentious politics upfront – on the ground that engagement with existing institutions make one accomplice in the power structures that create injustice in the first place (Mouffe, 2013; Reinecke, 2018) – to favour politics through local, 'insurgent' experiences of self-management in relative autonomy from broader society (Daskalaki & Kokkinidis, 2017; Farias, 2016; Tyler, 2019; Vachhani & Pullen, 2018). As our study shows, these two forms of politics are not essentially incompatible. They can even mutually reinforce each other as two ways to redefine institutional frames that make the subject precarious.

Yet, at the same time, contrary to what Butler and much of the organizational literature on grassroots organizations envisage (e.g. Daskalaki et al., 2018; Farias, 2016; Fernández, Martí & Farchi, 2016; Haug, 2013; Vachhani & Pullen, 2018), Coop's struggle for the redefinition of the institutional frames that precarize these subjects does not entail the emergence of a radically

novel relational and solidary subject. The subject that emerges through Coop's political practices is one that performs relationality and solidarity because that allows it to *reproduce* itself as a calculative individual building on its own career. Paradoxically, those same practices that reduce precarity by redefining the neoliberal frames at once hamper the emergence of a subject outside neoliberal capitalism. They allow project workers to reject personal responsibility for their precarious lives (Brown, 2005; Fleming, 2017; McNay, 2009), while at once engaging in the community only in as far as it serves their individual need to build a more livable life through their career. In this sense, they do not undermine, but rather reaffirm a neoliberal – individualized and calculative – subjectivity.

The analysis of the subject performed by our interviewees thus reveals the limitations of the political practices of Coop to fundamentally disrupt the neoliberal frames that constitute the subject (cf. Brown, 2005; Foucault, 2008; McNay, 2009). The Coop case shows how a collective strife can be organized through political practices that enjoin the individualized and calculative neoliberal subject rather than requiring it to completely redefine itself. Yet, these modalities of mobilization leave the subject ontologically individualized and calculative (cf. Fleming, 2014; Moisander et al., 2018; Mumby et al., 2017). These insights thus seem to reaffirm the difficulty to redefine the neoliberal subject that is fundamentally incapacitated to constitute itself as part of a collective emancipatory project (e.g. Brown, 2005; Dean, 2015, 2016; Contu, 2008; Thompson, 2016; see also Sanson & Courpasson, 2022).

The confrontation between Coop and Belgian trade unions should be understood in the light of this fundamental ambiguity. While Coop's struggle to make project workers' lives less precarious gathers wide support, the modalities through which it achieves their protection can count on less sympathy. This because they allow individual project workers to shift the cost of their protection not onto capital but onto (an underfunded and retrenching) welfare state

(Vanderbeeken, 2017; see also Lorey, 2018). Although there are some recent signs of reconciliation between these positions, the trade unions have in the past consistently reproached Coop precisely for increasing precarization by making the status of project worker more attractive for both project workers and their clients through the additional protection provided to the former. They have also critiqued the cooperative for reproducing a neoliberal subjectivity rather than fostering a collective one that reaches beyond the members of Coop, a critique that finds confirmation in project workers' understanding of Coop and its political work, and their own role in and relation to it.

This controversy reminds us of the impossibility of emancipatory political projects, or an aspired 'space of appearance', that are entirely inclusive. As Butler argues, there is no such thing as 'the people', a notion which always "im/explicitly establishes lines of demarcation" (2015, p. 3). In advancing a specific political project, parties and alike necessarily bring to the fore the interests of a particular group (Stjerno, 2004) and impose a new, redefined frame, constituted by some onto a broader group (Dean, 2016). As no framework includes 'all', there will always be "constitutive exclusion" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; see also Kramer, 2017; Swyngedouw, 2020) – the exclusion of those who are not able to appear within this newly defined space that demarcates the political subject and constitutes 'us'. Inevitably, also the frame demanded by Coop thus always entails the recognition of some while misrecognizing and dispossessing others, constituting them in turn as more vulnerable. This is the case for any organization, any form of political activism or contestation that seeks to subvert the existing framework of power.

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