Dis/agreement, trust and spaces of dissent

"We might sum it up like this: "We understand that you are using the medium of communication to impose your language on us. We understand that you are lying when you posit the language of your commands as a common language. We understand, in short, that all universals in language and communication are merely a lure, that there are only idioms of power, and that we, too, must forge our own." The second possibility would argue the reverse, making community (of capacity) the ultimate reason for noncommunity (of the account): "We understand that you wish to signify to us that there are two languages and that we cannot understand you. We perceive that you are doing this in order to divide the world into those who command and those who obey. We say on the contrary that there is a single language common to us and that consequently we understand you even if you don't want us to. In a word, we understand that you are lying by denying there is a common language." (Rancière, 1999, p46)

"Throughout the 1960s and 1970s of my experience, it became more and more clear that whatever one might do to undermine hierarchy and autocracy in structural terms, in political protocol, or in social rubric, powerful influences tended to maintain the status quo ante" (Beer, 1994, p7)

"Equality: a word, from which everything else can be derived." (Lübbermann, Premium Collective forum, *Realignment Premium*))

7.1 Introduction

The previous chapter centred around the discussion of *low cybernetics* as a way of articulating the potentially inaccessible concepts, models and ways of thinking which make up cybernetics. This was done by, on the one hand, reducing their complexity through strategically selecting which are its most salient components, which I call 'easing', while on the other, connecting the models to organisational contexts to reduce their inaccessibility and abstractness. If this conception of low cybernetics can be effectively elaborated and further developed (while remaining at ease with the many failures and wrong turns it will take along the way) then the threat of cybernetics priesthoods developing (and the corollary fatigue) may be significantly ameliorated.

However, I take a different turn in my final findings chapter, moving beyond democratic *communication* of cybernetics and towards a democratic conception of *control*; not merely as it is conventionally understood in democratic cybernetics, as ways of structuring processes and agreements which lead participants into conformity with each other, but also as a means of breaking that conformity, undermining existing forms of control so that they might be mitigated or improved. This re-framing of democracy, as a force which resists the appearance of forms of oligarchic control, provides a radically different angle from which to view the relationship between cybernetics and democracy. In this vein this chapter follows Beer's mantra that *"it is better to dissolve a problem than to solve it"* by reassessing what is understood by democracy and control, and therefore articulating new grounds upon which technocracy and hierarchy can be undermined, disrupted and brought into visibility (Beer, 1993, p25).

To speak in more explicit terms, I will consider democracy not as a process of coming to agreements and consensus, but instead, following Rancière, as a means by which dissent can be expressed.[1] This understanding of democracy (and its potential facilitation through organisational design) provides the possibility of a *stage* emerging upon which undemocratic priesthoods might be undermined. It is through an understanding of democracy as dissent, I will claim, that a context can emerge in which the presumed prioritisation of some voices over others can be called into question by organisers. I will explore this heterodox conception of democracy by discussing PK's governance practices in detail and their inventive responses to the Covid pandemic, which emerged from their unique approach to democratic self-governance. They provide a powerful example of how dissent can be a positive and productive force within democratic organisations and can provide unique opportunities for responding effectively to unforeseeable circumstances.

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[1] The influence drawn from Rancière during this chapter came as a result of unexpected themes emerging, especially through my analysis of PK's board which resonated closely with my reading of Rancière's work. Many other writers I considered during the earlier stages of my academic research could have become incorporated into this analysis, but Rancière's idiosyncratic framing of democracy was the one which stood out as having the most to contribute to a democratic implementation of cybernetics.

7.2 PK, Covid and democratic adaptation

7.2.1 PK forum as a sight of agreement & disagreement

This chapter is centred around the forum maintained by PK and its exemplification of how dissensus can be used productively within democratic organisations to not only deepen the forms of democracy that it practises but can also have an important role in the organisation's ability to adapt to new conditions. As has been discussed already, PK's forum is the closest thing the organisation has to a regularly used shared workspace, since the organisation works almost entirely remotely. It is an online forum used to keep up to date with, discuss and learn, everything going on in the organisation. While day to day activity is often done through personal phone calls and emails, any discussions which implicate the organisation as a whole, or any decision important to the collective in any way, is discussed on the forum. Apart from PK's yearly face-to-face meetings, the consensus decision-making process is practised on the forum, making it the key space in which PK governs itself as a collective.

The forum has a backlog of discussions reaching back more than a decade of the collective's existence, and almost any question about the organisation or its two decades experience can be answered on the forum with some searching. With this incredible depth of recorded knowledge, and the time PK has had to gather this knowledge, comes a certain outdatedness to the forum. It is not specially designed for the purpose PK has put it to. It is a basic and generic board which allows for simple categorisation of posts, personal messages and little more. This has led to extensive debates on the forum (discussed below) concerning its drawbacks and limitations. As a consequence of the logistical and technological limitations of the space there is

some evidence that use of the board has declined in recent years, with the notable exception of the several months when the Covid pandemic was at its worst, in which the forum became much more active and many lively discussions took place as PK attempted to orient itself to the worst crisis it had ever contended with. [2] It is in this context that much of my discussion of the board, and what it represents for democratic cybernetics, is based. [3]

While most major decisions the collective makes are put to the collective via the forum, it is vital from the outset to recognise that the making of agreements and decisions covers only a small proportion of what happens there. Most important here is the way the board operates as a space in which *anyone* who is a member of the forum (the criteria of entry being very minimal (see Chapter 3, page **Error!**

Bookmark not defined.)) can initiate and participate in any discussion, and those discussions need not be directed towards the making of decisions specifically. Updates, concerns, blue-sky ideas and questions of political philosophy are discussed on the forum, and it is often these seemingly undirected posts and discussions that lead to new and unforeseen developments in PK's approach to organising. Moreover, despite the suggestion that participation on the forum is waning, the creative and inventive use of the forum appears to be the normal way it is used, and while I will centre the discussion around Covid, this wide-ranging use of the forum appears to be

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[2] Two researchers I spoke with, who had also been provided access to the forum by the collective to conduct research, suggested that they had seen much more participation on the forum during the height of the Covid pandemic than they had observed both before and after the most acute period of the crisis.

[3] Despite the varying levels of participation on the forum the open discussion remains the norm for decision-making which might impact the group. While day-to-day activity is dealt with outside of the forum, important decisions appear to always be discussed on the forum (or they are at least presented on the forum for discussion, even when no one raises issues, concerns or additional input).

the usual way it is utilised.[4] To explore how the forum is used and the unique political environment it creates, I will focus on the calamitous events of Covid and a thread which discussed a more specific issue, though still connected to the broader crisis created by the pandemic.

7.2.2 Example thread one: Realigning Premium & the Covid pandemic

The emergence of Covid produced a massive threat to PK's survival, especially considering their near total dependence on venues, bars and festivals which were closed during the pandemic. Uwe said during this time that PK had experienced a *"a 95% drop in sales since mid-March, now in June the sales have risen slightly to just a 90% loss"*, and the atmosphere on the forum suggested that long-standing members felt the threat of the collective collapsing altogether was significant (Lübbermann, Premium Collective forum, *Organisational Changes*). Uwe set out the situation they had to content with:

> *Festivals are all called off, events are partly moved online but many are also called off, and we presume that not all of our partners and customers, like cafes, clubs, bars and so on, will withstand this crisis. That means: we must on the one hand reduce expenditure (makes ourselves smaller, but let the affected people decide) and on the other hand expand some jobs that we need (rebuilding, perhaps new products) or create jobs that people need to have an income (make ourselves big) and through that not leave anyone hanging"* (Lübbermann, Premium Collective forum, *Organisational Changes*)

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[4] While it is the case that activity on the board peaked around the time of the Covid pandemic, it may be appropriate for intense discussion to centre around times of turbulence and uncertainty in which the intelligence of the group as a whole is required to creatively solve complex problems, unlike the more 'day-to-day' work which occupies participants during less tumultuous times (which can be done via phone and email). This is indicative of how 'system 5' is often conceived of in the VSM (as becoming activated at times of uncertainty in which established norms/policy is insufficient to solve the problem at stake); being concerned with the 'outside and then' as opposed to the 'inside and now' (associated with system 3) (Walker, 1991).

Several threads were initiated in response to the acute crisis PK found themselves in. These discussions revolved around generating ideas and approaches to surviving the crisis and deliberating over the implementation of those potential solutions. A wide variety of ideas emerged from the discussion and members were encouraged to make suggestions, provide evidence that they were achievable and contact relevant people to enable these ideas to come to fruition. The subject of coming to a consensus around one or more ideas was much less of a focus than logistically facilitating their implementation, or the expression of concerns regarding the viability of one idea or another, as well as the alignment of these ideas with the principles and policies the collective is committed to. Everyone jumped into action during this period to suggest possible means of keeping the collective alive: workers, suppliers and customers among them. Several specific issues were identified and discussed in detail by the members of the forum. These included:

- There was a commitment to, from the outset, avoiding any solution which would result in greater costs being put onto customers as a result of the financial problems PK found itself in (as was alluded to in Lübbermann's statement above). This would not only go against their core principles but would reduce the sense of trust and commitment from their customers.

- Developing new products: a range of new potential products and markets to move into were suggested by members of the forum. Part of the rationale was to diversify the goods produced by PK so they could become less dependent on a single type of product (and consequently on the health of a particular market), which had led to a vulnerability when soft-drink distributors were disrupted by the pandemic. These suggested new production avenues included a sugar-free version of their cola and a larger 0.5l version, selling

the raw materials that made up their cola products, and even selling gummy bears. It was agreed, however, that these new products could only be introduced once financial stability was re-established.[5]

- There were also significant problems with overspending and a lack of accountability in payment requests across the collective, which Uwe focused on as a key vulnerability in need of a response and is the subject of the next section (see Chapter 7, page 9).

- The crisis also brought into view the threat of power consolidation by the orga-team which would take decision-making power away from the collective and into the hands of a smaller sub-group of more specialised members, as was alluded to in the previous chapter during the discussion of the 'two-class collective' (see Chapter 6, page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**).

The pandemic became a site for radically reassessing the organisation and re-evaluating many of the ways they worked. On the other hand, the abandonment or re-evaluation of the principles, policies and commitments which the collective had were almost never brought into question, and their identity as a group was palpable.[6] These discussions were about a lot more than only moving towards a decision together. Of course, decisions were made during the discussion, and they played an essential role

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[5] Importantly, it emerged from the discussions that the production of cola itself was not what the members were part of the collective for, and instead the working culture, organisational approach and democratic character of the organisation took precedence. All who spoke up were happy for the organisation to expand beyond the production of a cola drink into a variety of other areas, and to make the most of the network of contacts, suppliers and knowledge the organisation had gathered to expand into new markets.

[6] One partial exception to this unwavering commitment was the suggestion by a few members of the orga-team that power consolidation by the group was inevitable, justified or more efficient. Several members of the organisation, notably including Uwe, strongly pushed back against these suggestions and restated the organisation's commitment to the equality of its members.

in PK's responsiveness to the crisis, but the most definitive feature of the discussions, I wager, was the *generation of ideas* by the collective rather than the mere deliberation over which possibility to pursue. Where possible, as many of those ideas as possible were sought after. Although the now extremely limited resources at PK's disposal acted as a constraint on the variety of possibilities which could be pursued, actions which could be taken without the significant use of resources (such as gathering and relaying information or communicating with others) was always encouraged and was generally done autonomously by members with particular ideas in mind. While PK's forum is used for coming to agreements, I found that the forum's emphasis was much more on the gathering of inputs from a wide network of participants than it was on the practice of a structured decision-making process. In fact, unlike the 'control, trust and transparency' discussion below, these discussions often didn't come to shared consensus at all, but rather many tentative agreements (subject to future revision) in order to try and test a viability of the suggested avenues of possibility.[7] Most of what happened on the forum was not guided towards making decisions as such, but was instead focused on yielding a high variety of possible responses by maintaining a space in which all participants could contribute to a creative problem-solving process. This creativity, I will argue, is an essential component of PK's remarkable durability and adaptability as a group.

7.2.3 Example thread two: Worker oversight and disagreement (control, trust and transparency)

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[7] Furthermore, as was attested to during the literature review, the tentative agreements which were reached often included many 'stand-asides' and members who chose not to participate in the discussion. Decision-making was fragmentary and based more around what could be acted upon with ease than with the establishment of an explicit 'consensus'.

One contributory factor to the huge financial instability felt during the pandemic, Uwe said in one thread, was that payments had been made to collectivists who appeared to have done little to no work. While details of the situation were omitted from his statement, in the interest of protecting personal information, the situation was presented as being in serious need of addressing. He asked for the collective to offer ways around this to ensure that it didn't reoccur. He mentioned that he had looked over the payment requests to ensure the work that was claimed for had been done and mentioned that any member could do this kind of oversight if they chose to. He highlighted the need for a solution to this problem and framed the issue at stake:

> *"do we want to **monitor** the hours that are worked for us, do we want to not do that and always **trust** the honesty of the people, or do we want to uphold **transparency** and generally want to be able to see hours and work?"* (Lübbermann, Premium Collective forum, *Control/trust/transparency* [emphasis added])[8]

He suggested a solution might be having pairs of members check each other's work and that this might offer an easy decentralised solution to the problem, pointing to the fact that a few workers had already started doing this independently. He ended his post by requesting responses, feedback and alternative suggestions to address the situation. A debate ensued in which several members took diametrically opposed positions on the issue. One member disagreed strongly with Uwe's oversight suggestion, saying it would create a sense of distrust in the organisation. Three notable perspectives were expressed during the discussion and all three appear to rest on mutually incompatible interpretations of the meaning of the words control (or monitoring), trust and transparency. I will reproduce each of their perspectives here, due to its impact on the arguments made during this chapter.

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[8] The word 'monitor' here could have been translated to 'control' but it was decided that the former conveyed with greater clarity the meaning being communicated in Uwe's statement.

First, Uwe expressed a proposed solution to the issue which had emerged:

> *"A suggestion was to set up so-called tandems, i.e., that 4 eyes are always looking at a task. These eyes could regularly change. Then we would have more control than up until now, but also more transferal of knowledge, more of a failsafe and perhaps a better atmosphere. We would, however, clearly have more working hours to pay, it would be in question whether we can or want to afford that. 4 eyes can also slow down and complicate work, I don't know if I would have the motivation for it. On the other hand, it has been fed back that supervision can be demotivating. I understand that too."*
> (Lübbermann, Premium Collective forum, *Control/trust/transparency*)

Following this he outlined his reasoning behind this proposition, based on his understanding of the roles that control and transparency should play in the organisation:

> "*My opinion would be: we should have as little supervision as possible, but completely without doesn't work either. And: if so, then everyone may monitor everyone at the drop of a hat. Transparency is a significant requirement to be able to make decisions together at all, and if one cannot see what others have worked on, then we cannot, through lack of information, have a consensus."*
> (Lübbermann, Premium Collective forum, *Control/trust/transparency*)

This led to Peter, a regular contributor to the forum's discussions, responding with an argument concerning what was at stake in the relationship between transparency and control, relating both concepts to the issue of 'information balance':

> *"Transparency does not enable control but makes control unnecessary. In my view control will then only be necessary because there exists an opportunity for abuse. Such a possibility is necessarily based on an imbalance of information. The question is now: can the imbalance of information be rectified through unchanged control, or can control be changed in a way that makes abuse impossible? Control is therefore never a solution, but just a possible consequence of rules being maintained which contain the possibility of abuse."* (Peter, Premium Collective forum, *Control/trust/transparency*)

Following this, Rachel intervened with her own interpretation of what was at stake in the discussion, and notably took issue with Uwe's proposed resolution to the issue:

> "On the theme of transparency: in modern businesses transparency is often spoken of, work times are tracked visibly for everyone and reports about the progress are regularly filed. Everything is very transparent – on the other hand there is also perfect social control. All colleagues monitor each other and have the 'performance' of others in their mind. Thus, surveillance is in my eyes the old-fashioned, uncool tool, which however makes it clear when one is being monitored, in contrast to transparency, which puts everyone in constant fear of control. Consequently, the transparency has a much bigger and more subversive influence on the workers through the ever-possible invisible controls than the expected visible controls do (Hello Foucault, hello Panopticon).
> So, when you "notice" mistakes with the calculations it's clear to everyone that the filed documents can at any time undergo an inspection to an unknown extent." (Rachel, Premium Collective forum, *Control/trust/transparency*)

Rachel also centred her interpretation of control around Uwe personally, saying:

> "Currently you [Uwe] *have the account at your disposal, you monitor all hours and transfers, you have a lot of information that others don't have. That means you currently control a lot - who controls you?"* (Rachel, Premium Collective forum, *Control/trust/transparency*)

These statements provoked Uwe to give a hearty defence of his actions, in which he rebutted her characterisation of the situation and his own role within in, particularly responding to the claim that he *"control*[s] *a lot",* saying*:*

> "Your [orga-]*team can access exactly as much information as I can, there is no information advantage, that is plainly false. Timesheets generally go to* [Margaret]*, I only see them when I ask. Everybody could do that [...] I have also, in this discussion, not blamed anyone, not even implicitly, but only spoken of mistakes [...] These were simply assumptions on which basis I was criticised. Or has someone said that that's how it is? If yes, that is simply not right. I will gladly be criticised for things that are genuinely real, but then ask*

first of all, what is the matter at all. Criticism on the basis of assumptions that aren't right, how shall I answer them?" (Lübbermann, Premium Collective forum, *Control/trust/transparency*)

Other members of the collective also jumped to Lübbermann's defence, including Ben who defended Uwe and what he perceived to be a *"lack of control"* in the collective, while seemingly referring to Rachel's behaviour as toxic:

> *"Negativity is also what I have experienced in recent weeks at Premium, among which belong the current example, that someone refuses to explain their hours, and nevertheless wants to have money. Why would you do that? What's behind it?"* (Ben, Premium Collective forum, *Control/trust/transparency*)

He referred to breaches of trust in the collective, ranging *"from toxic behaviour to that which damages the business, which in recent years damage has absolutely come about"*. Regarding control he said,

> *"I know no single collective or business that is as ridiculously unsupervised as Premium"* and *"the necessary trust is not a one-way street here, and for me it is going, mildly put, in the completely wrong direction."* (Ben, Premium Collective forum, *Control/trust/transparency*)

The discussion was far more heated than any other I came across during my research, and although disagreements, criticisms and dissent were very common, they did not usually take the form of divisive language or sides being taken.[9] In that sense, this discussion was an outlier from the norm in the collective, but it demonstrates starkly the readiness for difficult issues to be raised and worked through within the collective. This discussion began with a problem and proposed solution, but through the process of the conversation, punctuated by overlapping disagreement, it also became a

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[9] Perhaps some responsibility for the heat of this discussion can be put down to the pressure and unusual circumstances which the Covid lockdowns imposed on people. The oppressive self-policing which was expected from people during the lockdown resonates with the increased self-regulation suggested by Uwe to decrease unnecessary spending. This could have contributed to members like Rachel expressing discomfort in more accusatory language than usual in response to the suggestion.

discussion concerning the varying understandings of control, transparency and trust, and created a stage upon which varying organisational, ethical and social disagreements could be raised.

While the subtly opposing perspectives and interpretations of these ideas had little hope of being satisfactorily resolved during the discussion, perhaps this would be neither possible nor desirable. The varying understandings of transparency and control show that even within an organisation where there is close alignment and agreements on the principles upon which the organisation should be made, the ways these principles relate to each other remains irresolvably divergent. While on one level the discussion centred around a particular problem in need of a resolution, the open and unguided space on the forum allowed for the decision-making process to also function as a context for consent and, more characteristically, dissent to emerge. The lack of a tightly structured decision-making process (coupled with the evident need to find some agreement despite this) produced a space in which perspectives could be articulated, agreed and disagreed to organically, until one or more members sought to reach agreement through the proposition of a resolution. Eventually such an agreement was made after a proposal was made by Chris:

> *"Proposal for resolution: everyone and anyone that would like to be paid by Premium, has the duty to the collective, when asked, to **plausibly** outline how these hours are being used."* (Chris, Premium Collective forum, *Control/trust/transparency* [emphasis added])

Notably, the agreement took up almost none of the debate and was passed quickly due to no one raising objections to it, despite the widely varying interpretations of the situation members evidently had. Most of the thread was taken up with discussions about how the situation should or shouldn't be approached, what difficult to define terms implied and who, if anyone, had done wrong during the discussion and the

events that led to it. In other words, the discussion revolved around disagreements. Coming to an agreed solution in response to the problem articulated by Uwe took up little of the discussion, and the collective appeared to have no problem establishing one after the participant's disagreements had been expressed. In short, the exchange shows that open discussion spaces such as PK's forum offer something more than directing participants towards coming to agreements together, they offer opportunities for disagreements to be freely expressed, and with them new, unpredictable possibilities to be revealed. With discursive openness comes not only opportunities to express sentiments, concerns or problems in need of solutions, but also to generate inventive solutions and unexpected responses to the issues raised. I wager that the expression of disagreements constitute an essential component of the creative process of problem-solving collectively and forms a core component of PK's governance approach; both highly democratic, inclusive, and leading to greater adaptability to the unexpected.

7.3 Dissent & cybernetics

Thus far these findings have concerned organisational models which are primarily designed to assist organisations in proper decision-making, whether in the VSM's case a means of better diagnosing and responding to organisational vulnerabilities, or in sociocracy's case the provision of a governance model which affords a comprehensive governance structure to assist in facilitating more democratic ways of coming to agreements. More broadly, discussions about democratic organising often seem to revolve around decision-making mechanisms as though they are equivalent with governance itself. While decision-making is undoubtedly a vital dimension of collective organisational activity, I argue that it does not exhaust it, and consequently I suggest that cybernetics and its relationship with democratic politics has been limited insofar as it has concerned itself primarily or exclusively with decision-making processes, or with governance processes which might lead to the facilitation of better decision-making. In order to make visible what this exclusive concern for decision-making has left dormant, I will characterise processes of decision-making as *agreement* making strategies and contrast them to the generative possibilities of *disagreement* by drawing on Rancière's unorthodox conception of democracy.[10]

7.3.1 Rancière' relevance to the project

Before developing my reading of Rancière and its relationship with PK's forum, I should first discuss Rancière's politics itself. In order to understand his idiosyncratic

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[10] There are a variety of writers in the area of democratic theory who are critical of Rancière and who make alternative proposals of how to conceive of dissent, politics and similar concepts (Mouffe, Galloway and Tiqqun are a few writers who consider themes of subversion and dissent from differing angles). I will not, however, discuss these works in detail here, since this thesis is not concerned with Rancière's work as such but with what can be drawn out of his conception of disagreement to make better sense of cybernetics' possible impact on participatory democracy. Despite this, in the concluding chapter I will return to the academic work surrounding Rancière to discuss where my work fits into it (see Chapter 9, page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**).

conception of democracy I begin instead with his conception of *"the two opposed logics of politics and police"* the first being understood as *"the government of everyone and anyone"* and the latter being *"the natural government of social competences"* (Rancière, 2014, p55). This distinction is the basic split upon which his understanding of politics is based. To be more specific, policing, for Rancière, is understood as:

> *"an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise."* (Rancière, 1999, p29)

In this sense, policing for Rancière can be summarised as what is ordinarily called politics, if politics is understood as ways of distinguishing who has the right to do what and under what circumstances:

> *"Politics is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution. I propose to give this system of distribution and legitimization another name. I propose to call it the police."* (Rancière, 1999, p28)[11]

Practices, processes and operations which order social bodies, distinguish what goes where and under which circumstances, is designated as the *logic of policing* by Rancière. Consequently, at a basic level, all forms of social organisation are forms of policing, or are at least governed through forms of policing.[12] Politics is understood

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[11] Rancière's practice of re-framing conventional understandings and 'giving them another name' is quite reminiscent of PK's above discussed re-framing of the conventional economy as the 'abnormal economy' (see Chapter 6, page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**), as well as Swann's emphasis on renaming things as being key to clear articulations of cybernetics.

[12] The unanimity of policing should begin to indicate already that for Rancière 'policing' is not altogether pathologized (else all forms of social organising would be dismissed on the same grounds of

as that which radically opposes this predominating logic of policing with that which opposes all such logics of distinction. Politics, Rancière claims, is *"antagonistic to policing"* and is understood to be:

> *"Whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration - that of the part of those who have no part. This break is manifest in a series of actions that reconfigure the space where parties, parts, or lack of parts have been defined. Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise"* (Rancière, 1999, p29-30)

Policing, therefore, is understood as the processes by which 'parts' which make up a social body are *counted* and distinguished, whereas politics is the radically oppositional logic which calls this ordering of parts into question and shows how they might be counted otherwise. This leads to understanding politics as that which emerges when *"the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part"* (Rancière, 1999, p11) . The existence of a social order, which is to say police order, is predicated on a process of *"counting of the community's parts"* (Rancière, 1999, p9) and asserting what is considered a part of the social body, as well as determining what is excluded from it.

Politics is therefore understood as an interruption of any logic of policing, which is to say any logic of governance based on principles of who does and does not have the right to rule over anyone else. It is this undermining of the logics of distinction that leads to politics being based on a radical logic of equality, understood as,

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constituting policing), but it does remain antagonistic with politics and requires questioning, challenging and undermining constantly via the latter.

> *"simply the equality of anyone at all with anyone else: in other words, in the final analysis, the absence of arkhe, the sheer contingency of any social order."*
> (Rancière, 1999, p15)

With these terms briefly introduced, we can return to the question of democracy. Democracy for Rancière is a form of governance based on the radical equality of everyone with everyone, and therefore of no one over anyone else. This leads to politics, for Rancière, possessing a manifestly anarchic tone. This notion of democracy is not simply a form of governance, however, nor can it be identified with some set of social practices:

> *"The term democracy, then, does not strictly designate either a form of society or a form of government. "Democratic society" is never anything but an imaginary portrayal designed to support this or that principle of good government. Societies, today as yesterday, are organised by the play of oligarchies. There is, strictly speaking, no such thing as a democratic government. Government is always exercised by the minority over the majority."* (Rancière, 2014, p52)

Instead, he describes democracy as a 'scandal':

> *"The scandal of democracy, and the drawing of lots which is its essence, is to reveal that this title can be nothing but the absence of title, that the government of societies cannot but rest in the last resort on its own contingency. There are people who govern because they are the eldest, the highest-born, the richest, or the most learned. There are models of government and practices of authority based on this or that distribution of places and capabilities. Such is the logic that I've proposed to be thought under the name of "police"."* (Rancière, 2014, p47)

Consensus, which has to a large extent been implicitly identified with democracy in this research until this juncture, is seen as radically opposed to democracy for Rancière. It is *dissensus* which is aligned with democracy and the logic of equality here, whereas consensus is identified with the logic of police upon which divisions,

partitions and exclusions are justified. Tanke makes this reaffirmation of dissensus explicit:

> *"Politics opposes consensus by means of dissensus. Dissensus, whether the straightforward political variety or the type employed by art, is the means by which the sensible is deprived of its self-evidence, punctuated, and subjected to dispute. Dissensus is the process of politics itself in that it is the activity of countering the police distribution of the sensible with the egalitarian supplement."* (Tanke, 2011, p61)

Consent and consensus are here identified with conformity and compliance, negatively inflected, whereas dissent and dissensus are characterised by their radically egalitarian implications which stand in opposition with whatever status quo predominates.[13] Dissent is expressed through the articulation of a *disagreement*, in which a statement is made which cannot be accounted for by the existing, consented to, order. The incompatibility between the two opposing statements produces a misunderstanding in which the speakers fail to understand each other's statements as making sense or being 'sensible'. In its extreme form, Rancière says:

> *"X cannot see the common object Y is presenting because X cannot comprehend that the sounds uttered by Y form words and chains of words*

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[13] I should here draw attention to a certain ambiguity between consensus as Rancière characterises it, as epitomising policing and conformity, and the consensus decision-making process itself, which allows for and encourages the expression of dissent. Lorey argues:

"A distinction must be made between Rancière's concept of policing consensus and the consensus procedure that was used to reach decisions in many assemblies of the occupation movements. As it is specifically not based on sameness and unanimity, this kind of consensus procedure installs 'dissent at the heart without it crystallizing into blocs and identities'. In contrast to this, a policing consensus makes politics, through which democracy is practised in dissent, disappear. Democracy – in the sense it is discussed here – is not compatible with this policing consensus, because it arises in dispute and in the debates, in which this consensus is broken open and a possibility space is opened up." (Lorey, 2014, p14-15)

Pickard also draws attention to the various ways in which dissent is registered within consensus process:

"The Seattle IMC's meetings allow for several levels of consensus and ways to register dissent without derailing the process, including ''reservations'' (have concerns), ''non-support'' or a state of ''non-disagreement'' (the person sees no need for the decision), or ''stand aside'' (it may be a mistake but a person can live with it). Making a ''block'' indicates that the person feels the decision goes against fundamental IMC principles." (Pickard, 2006, p11-12)

similar to X's own…. The structures proper to disagreement are those in which discussion of an argument comes down to a dispute over the object of the discussion and over the capacity of those who are making an object of it." (Rancière, 1999, preface xii)

Dissent always results in disagreement because the expression of politics involves the articulation of a position which is excluded by the status quo police order and is therefore not understood to be intelligible by that order. With this unconventional and heterodox vocabulary in mind we can consider how it relates to the conception of democratic cybernetics so far elaborated in this research. I argue that Rancière's work has an essential role to play in the development of a democratic cybernetics, and that accounting for his idiosyncratic understanding of politics is vital for cybernetics to avoid tending towards a continuous return to technocracy.

7.3.2 Policing and cybernetics

I contend that there is a very strong relationship between cybernetics and policing, to the extent that it seems to border on synonymity. What prevents me from claiming the latter, in fact, mostly comes down to the discursive understanding of cybernetics I have utilised throughout this research, leading me to fall short of defining it too definitively in a single and uniform way. It should immediately be emphasised that I am using the term 'policing' in a specific theoretical sense in this context, and that the term for Rancière is *not* synonymous with *"the truncheon blows of the forces of law and order and the inquisitions of the secret police"* but specifically with the *"more general order that arranges that tangible reality in which bodies are distributed in community"* (Rancière, 1999, p28). For Rancière, the term is *"neutral, "non-pejorative"* and is neither identified with cops nor with *"the state apparatus"* (Rancière, 1999, p29) . It bears repeating again that any distribution of bodies, any way of 'ordering' a social body, such as a consensus process or sociocratic consent or

whatever else are all forms of 'policing' in this sense. In fact, my interest in cybernetics stems precisely from an interest in conceptualising and designing forms of organisation in which 'cops' as much as priesthoods and technocrats are excluded altogether and otherwise prevented from emerging. Despite this, the resonances between cybernetics and policing in this strictly Rancièrian sense are obvious.[14]

Cybernetics is commonly referred to as the science of control, and policing is that which determines what goes where and under what circumstances, which is nothing if not control, broadly understood. Cybernetics has to do with the drawing of distinctions in order to make sense of complexity and complex systems and is concerned with utilising these distinctions and forms of partition to understand how a system can be (self-)regulated, (self-)controlled and (self-)organised. To be more exact, cybernetics closeness with policing emerges specifically from its application to human organisations and the question of how they should best be designed, structured and, for Beer, effectively organised. When cybernetics is applied to any organisational domain made up of people, it asks how best to make *sense* of the organisation through a process of distinction, which leads to the production of a model of that system. This modelling of the sensible can be characterised as what Rancière calls *"the distribution of the sensible"* and it is this distribution which policing manifests in organisational terms. The reproduction of the distribution of distinctions is the concern of the police, leading me to argue that insofar as

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[14] This identification between policing and cybernetics will rightly afford democratic practitioners and theorists alike with a sense of suspicion and scepticism towards the latter. I will emphasise several times throughout this chapter the specific meaning that Rancière assigns to 'policing' and its distinction from the police, traditionally understood. While cybernetics provides a means of thinking about 'good policing' in a strictly Rancièrian sense, I also emphasise the riskiness and ethical ambivalence of cybernetics and policing alike. It is this ambivalence, in fact, which necessitates that cybernetics is thought of in a strictly democratic sense and prioritises the democratic purposes towards which it can be aimed, rather than the mere criteria of 'efficiency' of whatever goal towards which it is directed. Cybernetics, as I understand it, is a risky and dangerous practice and does not procure 'good governance' irrespective of the goals towards which it is set (as was discussed during the introduction).

(organisational) cybernetics is put into practice, it is expressed through policing. Whenever it is applied to questions of human organisations, cybernetics asks how it is that those organisations should best be policed.

While I contend that there is a strong relationship between organisational cybernetics and policing as it is understood by Rancière, I fall short of claiming that cybernetic models like the VSM and Sociocracy are simply sites of policing, since it is plausible that they open and facilitate opportunities for dissent to emerge. However, I do claim that these models are concerned more with the facilitation of decision-making, and therefore agreement, than with dissent. Despite the strong relationship these cybernetic models have with modes of policing, they nevertheless retain the possibility of politics re-emerging within and through them. Systems which aim to *"steer political thought back in the proper realisation of the arcke of politics"* still become new sites for politics to re-emerge (Bosteels, 2014, p81) . Political philosophies which aim to re-establish consensus, Bosteels says of Rancière, always fail to eliminate politics as new forms of reappropriation of their categories are used as ways of enabling politicisation (Bosteels, 2014).

It should again be emphasised that despite the ineliminable status of oligarchy in governance from a Rancièrian perspective (perhaps even qualifying it as an *"invariant"* characteristic of human organisations) oligarchies should not be concerned as all being equally pathological or oppressive. This is a vital consideration in the above stated identification of cybernetics with policing. While oligarchy can be thought of as the default state of things from a Rancièrian perspective, there remain *'better and worse'* forms of policing which *"can give democracy more or less room"* (Chambers, 2014, p10). It is with this improvement

of the state of policing in mind that I propose a democratic cybernetics as an aide.[15] If, as Beer argued, cybernetics can be understood as *"the science of effective organisation"* and, as I claim, cybernetics is near synonymous with Rancière's conception of policing, then perhaps the former is best understood as the means by which forms of policing can be improved (Beer, 1993, p13).

7.3.3 Disagreement and PK

Cybernetics ultimately has to do with the making of distinctions and divisions in order to gain a form of control over a system (in democratic contexts this is understood to be shared self-control). In this way, cybernetics is almost synonymous with policing in a Rancièrian sense. I even suggest a definition of cybernetics as *the science of policing*. This leads me to ask: can cybernetics be used to produce 'good policing' ('good' here roughly meaning policing which facilitates the expression of productive dissensus)?[16] PK's preoccupation with encouraging and facilitating disagreement leads me to suggest that their approach to governance might be proposed as an instance of 'good policing' in the above stated sense. Specifically, it facilitates an organisational space in which dissent and disagreement regarding the existent ways in which the organisation is governed can be expressed and are positively encouraged.[17] This dissent, notably, has one significant exception (in both

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[15] Rancière says: *"The police can procure all sorts of good, and one kind of police may be infinitely preferable to another."* (Rancière, 1999, p31)

[16] As was just alluded to, 'good policing' here can precisely be understood as forms of ordering a social body which exclude and render obsolete 'traditional' forms of policing, as well as forms of technocratic rule, priesthoods and the like. Highly democratic forms of organisation, such as those exemplified by PK are examples of the kind of 'good policing' I am trying to get at with this meeting between cybernetics and Rancièrian policing.

[17] Although PK's board was the primary instance of dissent being facilitated within my cases study research, it was not the only case of it I found during my project. When I was considering various possible case study organisations early in my project, Chapel Arts Studio, a democratically run art studio who have facilitated projects around dissent, seemed to reflect some of the same attitudes exemplified by Lübbermann and PK's practices. David Dixon, the group's founder, said:

Rancière's theory and PK's practice): equality itself. PK finds itself aligned with this single principle which is understood as standing beyond debate (although its exact implications and interpretation are certainly subject to disagreement). In one post in which Uwe sums up the collective's commitment to equality he says it is "*a word, from which everything else can be derived*" and goes on to elaborate:

> "*The two most important basic assumptions from this are:*
> *1. The power to make decisions about resources and people should not lay primarily in the hands of those who have something (shares in a company or a position in it), but in the hands of the affected people. If we **start from equality**, it makes no sense that some people can decide over others just because they have something. Therefore, we invite all those affected to participate equally in business decisions*
> *2. The extraction of jointly acquired resources or profits should also not lay primarily in the hands of those who have something (share in a company or a position in it) but in the hands of the affected people. If we **start from equality**, it makes no sense, that some people may withdraw profits practically unrestricted from the shared work of many people, while others simply don't have enough resources to live. Thus, we have our standard wage model, that obviously (see 1.) is decided together.*" (Lübbermann, Premium Collective forum, *Realignment Premium* [emphasis added])

Uwe also emphasises equality's value both as an ethical principle and as practically advantageous, stating that the collective aims to:

"*I aspired to having the opportunity of creating an arts network that I wanted to be a part of; the kind of thing I'd want to inhabit. Build your own, so to speak. But you can't do that from the top and lead it, you have to do that from the inside and be part of it and allow it to grow around you… and you'll all grow together. If you try to run it and manage it too much, then it becomes brittle and top-down and I'd like to think that's not really the way we work. Obviously, we have plans, and we have to lead those but as much as humanly possible we try to make it as an open-ended non-linear type of organisation.*" (CAS, 2019)

In relation to enabling dissent in the organisation:

"*It's just giving people permission to follow their nose really, and that way I think it makes the organisation stronger, more flexible, less rigid and more adaptable to change.*" (CAS, 2019)

> *"show and prove that with* [equality] *one can not only run a stable business but that it functions better, in the sense of the absence of problems, and also in the sense of resilience to crisis, so that actually almost all businesses can and should become more equal."* (Lübbermann, Premium Collective forum, *Realignment Premium*)

Anke Turner, who writes in Lübbermann's book concerning the collective, further elaborates PK's assumption of equality:

> "*Many companies only consider their stakeholders insofar as they are constantly weighing up their negotiating power. Who do they have to involve in their decisions because their influence is great, and who can they leave behind, because their influence is small. That's what makes Premium different. The Collective involves everyone, no matter how influential they are, because it assumes that all stakeholders are equally worthy. While other companies only involve their stakeholders where they can appear useful or they do so within the framework of legal regulations the operating system of Premium is designed in such a way that there is no possibility at all not to include the co-affected."* (quoted in Lübbermann, 2021, p109)

Equality is understood in PK as *the* fundamental assumption of the organisation. It is, on the one hand, unquestionable and immovable, but on the other, it is purposefully left underspecified; therefore, remaining the subject of continuous contestation and re-evaluation, harking back to the discussion of feedback in the last chapter (see Chapter 6, page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**).

This chapter will develop the relationship between dissensual governance and PK's practices by considering how the notions of agreement and disagreement relate to different ways of understanding self-governance, the former being identified with the dominant framing of governance as being to do with the development of *decision-making processes,* while the latter (which PK specialises in) is identified with the facilitation of *disagreement enabling spaces*. The facilitation of dissent leads, I argue,

to a conception of democratic organisational cybernetics which is likely to produce "*better*" forms of policing.[18] I further wager that the facilitation of dissent has been an essential component of PK's ability to not only survive the Covid pandemic but to emerge from it stronger, and ready to better respond to further disturbances in the future.

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[18] Which is to say, those which are less likely to devolve into priesthoods of experts who impose their organisational perspectives on those with an ultimately equal right to rule.

7.4 Dis/agreement: the facilitation of processes of agreement and spaces of disagreement

During the previous chapter I discussed CK and PK's approach to providing continuous communicative feedback within their organisation, with the former doing so using processes of reflection and retrospective, while the latter utilised the space afforded by its forum. Here, I further elaborate this emphasis on the use of *spaces* on the one hand and *processes* on the other and associate each one with disagreement and agreement-making respectively. These are important findings in relation to this research project because, first, I argue that cybernetics can be impactful in the design of both processes of agreement and spaces for the expression of disagreements, and second, because prior analyses of the relationship between democracy and cybernetics have, to my knowledge, entirely neglected the latter.

7.4.1 Agreement as facilitated by process

We understand *agreement* here to be established within organisations through forms of decision-making *process*. While there are many forms of decision-making process used by various forms of democratic organisation in differing contexts, the two key examples I have considered during this research are consensus and consent, the distinction between the two being somewhat ambiguous and subject to the interpretations of the groups who use them.[19] On the forum Uwe outlines PK's consensus process as such:

> *"The sequence of events is typically that various opinions and viewpoints about a particular topic are collected, in the duration of two weeks according*

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[19] PK refer to their decision-making process as consensus based, though my discussion with Michael led to him conceding that it might be equally characterised by consent. Sociocratic organisations similarly base their decisions on the lack of *"objections"* from the decision-making circle, though they are more vocal in drawing a clear line between consensus and consent and identify their process with the latter (Rau, 2018).

to experience, until someone proposes a resolution and writes about it, which one can then comment on, but doesn't have to. To not comment is therefore considered agreement. So that the possibility is there to express one's opinion, though, you must wait a couple of days. If there is no veto, the proposed resolution becomes a resolution, but can be put into question again at any time." (Lübbermann, Premium Collective forum, *Realignment Premium*)

Whatever process is developed or determined by a group, decision-making, understood as means by which groups come to agreements, is characterised by a *process* of coming to decisions. Decision-making processes such as these may be formally structured or remain *ad hoc* (sociocracy focuses strongly on rigorous process, whereas PK's processes are more fluid and subject to improvised adjustment). In either case decision-making is characterised as a process.[20] Such processes take democratic groups from a state of indecision to one of decision by working through a myriad of possibilities until an agreement can be made. Review processes and processes of critical self-reflection (discussed during Chapter 6, page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**) also guide organisers towards agreements. Many of the components which make up sociocracy are best understood as processes by which agreements can be made within an organisation.

This emphasis on process and agreement making was most clearly encapsulated during my discussion with Jack about the dis/agreement distinction which I was considering during our later interviews together. After working through the implications of the distinction, and after I introduced the association between dissent and spaces which enable them (discussed next), Jack distilled the relationship between decision-making processes and agreement, and CK's tendency towards

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[20] Voting systems and heuristic processes such as a showing of hands are also understood here as examples of decision-making process.

emphasising decision-making over the unguided discussions which characterise PK's dissensual way of working together:

> "*I guess it* [dissent] *is all the other stuff that isn't decision-making actually. If you take decision-making as the event where consensus is found. It's the bits that make life different for everyone…*
>
> *It's probably somewhere where we've fallen down a little bit in CK…. we actually have very few fluid, non-directed communication points. We got rid of our Slack, our Signal is probably our only liminal space where random stuff happens and we just chat, or little moments in the meetings. We used to: on Friday mornings we started doing just long check-ins where we'd just chat about stuff. And that feels weird to us because it's not really our practice anymore, but we found it very liberating in a strange way… Where we've moved all our chat is to Notion, all our commentary is specifically about a thing, and trying to move towards a thing, solve a card, solve a ticket, talk about a project that's going on… and we try to tease out opinions but it's always towards something… I think the team retreat we just had was one of the biggest moments to not be actively decision-making all the time, and even then, we had morning and evening exercises. And I noticed that our instinct was definitely to try to make a decision.*" (Jack, interview 1)

Jack's comments show how a tendency to constantly be decision-making, finding agreements and solutions, may signify strong organisations progress and organisational coherence, but may also be indicative of a kind of restricted interpersonal interaction in which the free flow of ideas is sacrificed in favour of the clarity afforded by processes directed towards specified ends. This directed mode of collaboration may be particularly stifling when moving into new and uncharted territories in which creative, out of the box thinking is required to respond adaptively and avoid falling into conventional thinking, devoid of the specific contextual circumstances in which the group finds itself.

7.4.2 Disagreement as facilitated by spaces

With this characterisation of agreement-as-process in mind, how might disagreement be characterised in contrast? If processes characterise the means by which high variety problems are turned into agreements, how should the means by which expressions of disagreement are facilitated within democratic organisations be characterised?

First, the facilitation of disagreement cannot, unlike agreements, be characterised by a *process* of expressing disagreement. Such a process would undermine the dissent it is supposed to enable by constraining the means by which it can be expressed. Such a suggestion would be to misunderstand the disruptive potential of dissent and its purpose as a means of undermining or rearranging the consented to order of an organisation. A complaints process, to take one example, would function to take disagreements and process them in such a way as to determine their legitimacy and assess whether they should be 'counted' as legitimate complaints. The establishment of any process for enabling the expression of dissent can best be understood as a means of domesticating it and removing its defining character as a means by which consensuses can be *recounted* differently. Dissent would be better exemplified by the members of a group finding a way to undermine, disengage from or repurpose a consented to practice than to follow it as intended. How then should the process of dissent be understood in organisational terms? In *Disagreement* Rancière refers to the process of 'staging' equality to delineate how politics emerges by invoking the example of socialist and feminist Jeanne Deroin. The metaphor of staging appears frequently in Rancière's work within a political as well as theatrical and aesthetic context:

> "*Jeanne Deroin does this in exemplary fashion when, in 1849, she presents herself as a candidate for a legislative election in which she cannot run. In*

other words, she demonstrates the contradiction within a universal suffrage that excludes her sex from any such universality. She reveals herself and she reveals the subject "women" as necessarily included in the sovereign French people enjoying universal suffrage and the equality of all before the law yet being at the same time radically excluded. This demonstration is not a simple denunciation of an inconsistency or a lie regarding the universal. It is also the **staging** *of the very contradiction between police logic and political logic which is at the heart of the republican definition of community."* (Rancière, 1999, p41) [emphasis added]

This characterisation of dissent being *staged* draws attention to the fact that dissent always takes place within *a space*, within a context of policing which is arranged in one way and is capable of being arranged otherwise through the performative act of dissent. This leads me to consider politics not as the outcome of process, but as denoting a type of expression which takes place *within a space.* Presented in this way, I ask whether stages upon which dissent is performed can be organisationally facilitated and maintained by identifying conditions which are conducive with its emergence. Can a space in which politics is allowed to emerge be created, and what are the conditions of that stage facilitating the expression of dissent? Vitally, performance on such a stage would not be determined by one's status as a performer, a narrator or any other established theatrical role. The expression of dissent is proved through its lack of predefinition, its openness to anyone and everyone. This is what makes its embodiment in process impossible, and what makes the governance (perhaps better understood as facilitation) of such a stage difficult, if not impossible to discuss without tying oneself in knots (discussed further during Chapter 7, page 50). It is also what makes PK's radical inclusion of all 'stake-holders' in the organisation to participate such a powerful illustration of the facilitation of dissent.

This leads me to claim that this understanding of dissent as taking place in a space, or upon a stage, conforms closely with the way in which PK's forum functions, making it perhaps the most impressive expression of democratic organising I came across during this project. The openness of the forum provides an environment in which (1) any member can speak on any topic at any time, unconstrained by the time and scheduling constraints which face-to-face meetings inevitably run into. More singular than this is PK's (2) openness to almost anyone joining the forum who is in some minimal way connected to it (see Chapter 3, page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**)

including active workers, consumers, suppliers, distributors or even researchers like myself. These two characteristics mean that even I, with my only connection to the collective being of academic interest, was invited to participate in or initiate any thread of my choosing (as well as explore the wealth of interactions within the space). The PK board constitutes an exemplary stage for the facilitation of political dissensus which allows for the expression of disagreement, which has benefited PK as an organisation and its participants as members of the collective.

7.5 Trust and productive dissent

We have discussed the distinctions between consensus and dissensus as they operate in this thesis, as well as the identification of the latter with its facilitation within spaces. PK's forum exemplifies a context in which dissent is facilitated by the techniques of governance that the collective has developed, and importantly, sustained over several decades. This begs the question of how PK's (self-)governance operates and how the space in which they form their disagreements is governed and sustained. While an extensive analysis of PK's governance approach exceeds the confines of this research, I will here discuss what stands out as the most salient feature of PK's approach to sustaining their collective and forum. Simply put, this factor can be characterised as the creation of a culture of unconditional trust and mutual care, or, to put it in the terms used by Walker (discussed below), a shared feeling of *"identity with the whole"* (Walker, interview 7). One of the explicitly present features of PK's organisational approach is their constant reinforcement of social bonds through an active and responsive mentality of care and trust for the members of the collective. The culture and practices of trust are codified into PK's policies, or 'modules' as they call them, and are also expressed improvisationally when unusual needs become evident among their members. Sometimes these take the form of making exceptions to policies in order not to *"let anyone down"* and sometimes lead to new policies being formed to prevent the repetition of turbulence among their network of partners and collaborators (Lübbermann, Premium Collective forum, *Realignment Premium*). This commitment to reinforcing social bonds is evidenced constantly on the forum, both formally and informally. Here I draw attention to a few of the formal policies which demonstrate PK's mentality of reinforcing and demonstrating trust and mutual care.

7.5.1 Trust & mutual care in PK's organisational structure

- Module 32: perhaps the most obvious example of a policy practice which aims to reinforce and produce trust within the collective is the consensus decision-making module, which states:

  > *"Since the task of a business is seen as meeting the needs of customers in cooperation with, and not to burden, individual participants, it is only logical to get all participants on board when making decisions. Naturally the participation is voluntary. So, it is free for everyone, be they supplier, colleague, merchant or customer, to take part in every decision, and their knowledge as well as their needs, ideas and wishes be brought in.*
  > *This is possible because the decision-making occurs with the help of democratic consensus. It is then discussed with the participants for a time until no one brings forward any fundamental objections in the form of a veto. That means, that all objections and concerns must be fully considered and discussed, until everyone can live with a decision, without explicitly having to agree."* (Premium Collective, Operating System, Module 32)

  Additionally, as was mentioned earlier, agreements made by the group often include various stand-asides, whether explicitly in the form of articulated disagreements or implicitly from not posting to the discussion thread.

- Module 23 states that all agreements which are made between partners (all without the use of contracts), are flexible and renegotiation is considered normal:

  > *"This module is about an agreement always being able to be changed and adjusted according to the situation of the participants. People who want to cooperate with one another don't need any comprehensive contracts with notice periods."* (Premium Collective, Operating System, Module 23)

- PK commit to paying invoices without any delay (Module 10) in order to prevent putting pressure on partners. On the other hand, Module 12 states that if payments are not immediately made by partners no interest is added. The module states *"the levying of interest is fundamentally inappropriate, since the income generated in this way is not based on performance."* (Premium Collective, Operating System, Module 12)

- Module 16 concerns the use of "pull" instead of "push" advertising. PK try to retain trust with their customers by not imposing excessive advertising on them, preferring to 'pull' new customers in through their ethical practices, good service and culture of trust rather than 'push' them towards buying products via advertising and aggressive marketing. No one, Michael said when I spoke with him, wants advertising shoved in their faces, so PK make efforts to avoid it. Module 41 is the flip side of this commitment, which concerns communication about PK's practices with those who want to receive that information. This concerns *"information about ways of working, products and the business being actively spread. Without imposing the information on other people."* (Premium Collective, Operating System, Module 41). This active communication includes giving talks and lectures about PK's practices and inviting researchers like myself to engage in projects with the collective.

- Module 39 concerns production errors and their transparent communication:

  > *"There is no production in which everything goes right 100% of the time. Therefore, we should deal with mistakes openly. Only when mistakes are known can improvements be considered, in order to eliminate the causes of mistakes. Thus, it should be considered at what scale mistakes in production should be publicly made known, to also give people outside of the collective the possibility to bring in their*

> *knowledge and find solutions."* (Premium Collective, Operating System, Module 39)

- Finally, Module 34, which was added to the OS by Auguste Junkfood in their own implementation of the OS, includes a module regarding alcoholism and its prevention via the provision of 1 cent per bottle to go to alcohol prevention charities (more than 10% of revenue). They also do not communicate this provision on the bottles because:

> *we don't want to signal to addicts that it's ok to consume our beer as an addictive substance. Despite this, we speak about it to encourage other manufacturers of alcohol containing drinks to support help and prevention projects with part of their income."* (Premium Collective, Operating System, Module 34)

This came as a result of the organisation dealing with members of the organisation as well as consumers suffering from alcoholism.

These modules exemplify some of the ways that PK and other organisations implementing their OS use their policies to develop and retain trust with their partners.[21] Vitally, this extension of trust and mutual care, as has been shown in the above examples, extends beyond the participants in the collective themselves to the suppliers, customers, the environment, and any others who are in any way affected by PK's work. It is in this sense that PK's culture of equality, trust and care should be seen for its radicality in both its practice and its consequences. The generosity which characterises PK's work is recognised and reciprocated by those it is shared with, and it is this, its members claim, that has led to PK finding support and solidarity during their greatest times of need.

7.5.2 The Lübbermann-Move

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[21] Other examples were referred to earlier, such as the 'small quantity discounts' policy (see Chapter 4, page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**). There are many additional examples of such policies which have not been included here.

This organisational approach was to a large extent pioneered by Uwe himself, which is evidenced by his recently published book discussing his practices both within and prior to their manifestation in PK (Lübbermann, 2021) . There, Uwe discusses his approach to governance and coordination in depth, which relies to a large extent on providing the space for others to use their own intelligence and understanding:

> *"It is not at all necessary to find every solution to a dilemma yourself. The others are also clever. Often it is enough to free up the space for a good solution."* (Lübbermann, 2021, p61)

The other vital component of this collaborative form of governance, according to Uwe's philosophy, centres around trust:

> *"I tell you what I want and ask you what you want, and we coordinate our behaviour with each other. I often offer advanced payment; with this I build up trust. With this trust, transparency, and mutual agreement we can achieve almost anything. My brother calls that the Lübbermann-Move: establish trust, solve problems, celebrate success together.*
> *I would have to lie though if I had to claim that the necessary trust always came easily to me, as it is also bound with a risk, and as I mentioned, I am a very careful person."* (Lübbermann, 2021, p44-45)

Lübbermann's approach to leadership resonates closely with the non-coercive governance practices discussed by Clastres in *Society Against the State* in which he (discussing work by R. Lowie) identifies three attributes of the *"titular chief"*:

> *"(1) the chief is a "peacemaker"; he is the group's moderating agency (…)*

> *(2) He must be generous with his possessions, and cannot allow himself, without betraying his office, to reject the incessant demands of those under his "administration"*

> *(3) only a good orator can become chief."* (Clastres, 2020, p29)

The *"human centred"* approach to organising embodied in PK, while emerging quite directly from Lübbermann's philosophy and practice, has been fundamentally shaped

and developed by the collective. The group's self-governance has been vital to it, but the group's approach and philosophy is better understood as being *facilitated* by Uwe rather than crafted by him personally. This returns me to themes discussed during my initial findings chapter regarding Brown's work on facilitation and the easing of governance processes. Despite these informative overlaps, what is at stake here is the effects this approach to governance has had on the collective's culture of mutual trust and support, and the consequential atmosphere of safety and openness which has created a space in which participants can dissent openly and without fear of reprisals from their fellow collectivists, or from Uwe. Perhaps the best 'proof' of this culture of care and trust which PK embodies is the fact that, as Michael reminded me more than once, despite never using contracts during their over two decades of work they have never been drawn into any legal disputes and have always successfully resolved tensions and conflicts through discussion and compromise.[22]

7.5.3 Productive and unproductive disagreements

We have so far discussed disagreement as a productive force within organisations, which enables new organisational arrangements to be discussed and proposed by the group, and which provide an alternative understanding of the kinds of organisational contexts cybernetics might contribute to the facilitation and development of. However, consideration should be made for the limits of this productive interpretation of dissent by considering the circumstances in which it acts not as a way of discovering new possibilities but on the contrary, acts as a means of shutting

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[22] This organisational prioritisation of trust contributed to the need for (and high tensions involved in) the 'control, trust & transparency" discussion above, due to the extraordinary conditions the pandemic had in Germany and their impact on industries which depend on public venues for their viability. On the one hand this can be seen as a result of (1) there being no oversight from the collective regarding what money was claimed, while on the other (2) contributing to the tumultuousness of the discussion which followed it, since the idea of oversight was so foreign to the practices PK are accustomed to.

down the expression of alternative possibilities and creative solutions. When I discussed with Walker my intended consideration of the notion of dissent as an alternative interpretation of democratic politics, he was supportive and interested in the idea, but also expressed concerns about the ways in which dissent could be used as a way of slowing down and disrupting decision-making processes:

> "*One of the early meetings at Suma, when it was everybody discussing everything, there was a long agenda and after about an hour we got through to item 6. And item 6 came up and one of the members, who happened to be female, said "there's no point in discussing this let's move on to seven." And everybody said, "well, wait wait wait this is on the agenda, we should discuss it" and she said, "there's absolutely no point because I'm never ever going to agree to this, I don't care what anybody says, I'm not going to agree to this, and as we work on consensus, we can never agree, so we can just forget it move on to the next one."*
>
> *And there was this general sort of uncomfortableness... I mean, that is giving the tiny minority complete power to stop things happening. And it is one of the things about co-ops that I found: if you want things to change* [and have] *lots of new ideas and try things and innovate it's very easy for people to stop that happening. You can always say "well we haven't got the time", "we haven't got the money", "this is a crazy idea". There's a million ways of stopping things happening."* (Walker, interview 7)

This example, far from being indicative of the dangers of dissent, emphasises the ease with which both dissent and consent can be shut down and prevented from being expressed when people either misunderstand democratic practice or otherwise use it to shut discussion down. As we discussed the issue further, and the context in which I was utilising the term, Walker considered the contexts in which dissent could be a productive force within organisations, and a way of opening possibilities rather than shutting them down:

"It very much depends on the people. I mean, most people, particularly in a coop, there's this sense that holding it all together is really crucial. You know the sort of system cohesion stuff that Stafford talks about a lot. But then a lot of people get, you know, "bees in their bonnet" which they're going to pursue at all costs.

*There's this whole thing about, I think for me, it's about the **identity with the whole**. You need to feel that you're **a part of the group, a part of the larger organisation** and then if you find you disagree with something really strongly, and you say "look I think there's something we really need to discuss" people know that you're not just making trouble. I mean, I've worked with people who just love being in a complete minority, and everyone is saying "this is just totally stupid" and they just really thrive on that."* (Walker, interview 7 [emphasis added])

This emphasis on trust as *"identity with the whole"* seems central to understanding PK's successful development of a culture in which dissent can be freely and productively expressed. I contend that this dissensual culture contributed positively to the problem-solving skills of the group and were in fact imperative to PK's ability to adaptively respond to both internal tensions, like the above discussed disputes, as well as external threats, like the potentially catastrophic impact of Covid. The collective's ability to prioritise the needs and requirements of the whole led them to frame the collective not so much as a cola producing company but as a collective of people working together in radical ways (see Chapter 7, page 7), opening the opportunity to respond to the crisis by fundamentally changing the work that the group was doing. Furthermore, this change did not require unanimity of the group, in fact it was based around a diversity of approaches which encouraged the diversification of the collective's work into a wider variety of areas.

Walker's reference to *"feeling a part"* of the group is especially poignant here in relation to Rancière's work, particularly the latter's concept of *"the part of those who*

have no part" and its intimate connection to his understanding of politics as dissent (Rancière, 1999, p65) . Walker's comments highlight a fascinating paradox implied by the examination of dissensus discussed here. Namely, for members of an organisation to freely express the senses in which inequalities within the organisation remain - senses in which some remain *apart* from the organisation - they must be treated with the presumption that they are equal within that organisation, which is to say, as if they are *a part* of it.

7.6 Cybernetics, technology and dissent

Having discussed the vital importance of trust and feeling *"a part"* of organisations in the maintenance of *spaces of dissent*, I now return to the question of the role of cybernetics in the facilitation and governance of these spaces. In order to do this, I consider the technological infrastructure which enabled PK's communications (the forum), and a particular discussion they had regarding the need to improve this infrastructure. This discussion will reveal both the opportunities and limits of cybernetics in maintaining an effective environment for the expression of dissent, and I will argue that approaching the design of such a space from a cybernetic angle is, on the one hand, vital for thinking about how such spaces could become more effective and dynamically governed, and on the other, far from exhaustive of the salient factors to be accounted for as a result of the trust centred orientation of these spaces.

7.6.1 Technological facilitation and the impact of cybernetics on spaces of dissent

PK's digital forum, as was discussed at the outset of the chapter, is a generic board which the collective has maintained for almost two decades. This means the forum is home to an extremely rich and informative bed of information and knowledge which has been gathered over this time, but it is also limited in several respects. In response to the technical limitations of the forum, Tony began a thread to discuss the need to make changes to the space, while ensuring that the rich catalogue of knowledge that had been developed wasn't lost in the process. Chris, as a participant on the forum who took an interest in technology and software, suggested several potential options to the group. After several months of intermittent discussion regarding the topic and having discussed the alternative possibility of restructuring the existing board, it was decided NextCloud would be used to enable new communicative capacities for the

group while maintaining the current use of the forum for other discussions. This approach would also lessen PK's exclusive reliance on the forum, which they hoped would mean that it could be used for more focused discussions, rather than being used to try to solve, plan and discuss all the organisation's diverse and varied tasks. Tony emphasised the need to focus on the needs of the collective rather than the speculative possibilities afforded by novel technologies:

> *"But I am also absolutely of the opinion that "tools" cannot help us if we don't know what we actually want."* (Tony, Premium Collective forum, *Realignment Premium*)

A post made by Uwe contributed to this by identifying three problems that he hoped to be ameliorated through the introduction of new digital organisation tools. The first of these problems, concerning the confusing and disordered nature of the board and the lack of easy ways to work through the data, was discussed above (see Chapter 4, page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**). The other two issues identified by Uwe were as follows:

> *"2. Our networking at the collective has also gone to sleep: it has between the orga-team and the rest of the collective, as well as between the collective and the diverse partners who work together. New partners join only very occasionally, there haven't been new speakers in forever, new delivery structures have not been built by anyone in ages, and that means Premium is stuck. I'm sure that no one has pushed for this development with negative intentions, but there were also a couple of people in orga-team that see this state as the new norm and even wanted to declare the rest of the collective as no longer belonging, i.e., that only the orga-team are the collective. That would be, however, not only against our core philosophy of equality of all people, but it would also be very counter-productive, because the orga-team alone don't simply supervise everything and also cannot supervise everything […]*

3. Now in Corona-times we only have 45 percent of the sales but, according to the latest numbers, still 80 percent of the costs. We must therefore urgently develop our contacts and the sales.” (Lübbermann, Premium Collective forum, *Online Tools*)

Despite the clarity of the needs stated by Uwe, Tony, in his response, stated that he was doubtful that Uwe's concerns would be satisfactorily resolved through the NextCloud platform which was beginning to be implemented. To some extent the move to NextCloud provided a promising opportunity for the organisation to be greater able to communicate effectively and plan their work together in ways which they had been limited from previously, giving the collective new organisational capacities. On the other hand, these changes introduced challenges which need to be worked through and accounted for. First, the introduction of the new tools created a steep learning curve for discussants to adjust to, as was argued by Uwe:

"We of course had different opinions on subjects; while experienced IT people, for example, find our processes not digital enough or our tool-deck insufficient and think we need one that can do much more, it is still hard for some people to use.” (Lübbermann, Premium Collective forum, *Further Realignment Premium 2021*)

Second, as I discussed with two fellow researchers who had been provided access to the forum for their own work, there are questions regarding how the addition of these new tools will impact some of the other principles which PK have emphasised over the years, such as the easy and transparent accessibility to all participants in the collective. I discussed how PK's commitment to transparent accessibility of their work would be impacted by these changes, since the use of new software - along with the usernames and passwords, the possible greater use of confidential or personal data, and so on - raise questions regarding who does and doesn't get granted access to observe and participate in the discussions and decisions which are made in the new

NextCloud space. While the data gathering phase of my research drawing to a close resulted in me not requesting access to the NextCloud space, the question of how the introduction of new technologies might impact organisational commitments like these show the complex and unexpected knock-on effects that introducing such new tools can produce.

7.6.2 Limits to the impact of cybernetic design on dissensual spaces

These issues regarding the consequences of introducing new technological frameworks to spaces of dissent have direct relevance to the question of the importance of cybernetics in facilitating the self-governance of these spaces. This is not only a consequence of the iconic association of cybernetics with digital technology (an association this research has largely ignored) but more as a result of cybernetics' impact on the question of the effective design of organisations and tools for their governance, and more specifically for my concerns, spaces in which dis/agreement can thrive. Despite the clear relevance of cybernetics to thinking about how to effectively design spaces of dissent (discussed next), I first want to draw attention to the limits of approaching these questions with a perspective of good design and effective planning in mind. In many ways, PK's ways of working evidence the relative unimportance of focusing on the development of tools and advanced techniques for improving dissensual spaces. If anything, what PK demonstrate is that such spaces can remain viable even under conditions of relatively messy and *ad hoc* technologies and spaces.[23] In this regard, PK's practice is

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[23] Other examples could have been provided here regarding the simple and sometimes chaotic ways in which PK are organised. For example, while investigating the group's OS governance structure, which is essential to their long-term goals of spreading their organisational approach to others, I had some trouble getting a full up-to-date version of the OS documents and received several partial versions of the OS from different sources. I also considered a discussion on the forum in which Peter, who offered to codify the governance process, had had a *several yearlong* discussion on the board in which he requested feedback on his work and requested details about the process. This long and disordered process led to him expressing some frustration to me about the lack of organisational clarity at PK.

reminiscent of the handful of telex machines, board pens and blackboards used during the Cybersyn project (Medina, 2011). However, while that project showed how implementing cybernetics effectively could have unexpectedly impressive effects, even with very low-tech infrastructure, PK show that the same impressive results can emerge from a culture of generosity, trust and identity with the whole. In this investigation of spaces of dissent and the conditions required to enable their emergence, it is apparent that a focus on the "*human centred*" approach taken by PK is the primary requirement for the viable facilitation of such spaces, even in circumstances where the arrangement of them is messy, improvised and altogether lacking in rigorous organisational design. This leads me to tentatively suggest that in the context of creating spaces of dissent, a sense of shared "*identity with the whole*" can sustain such a space despite a quite disordered organisational structure, whereas I find no reason to suggest that the obverse is the case: namely, that a good organisational structure can sustain a culture of dissent in contexts which lack a shared sense of feeling 'a part' of the organisation in question.

7.6.3 The impact of cybernetic design on dissensual spaces

Despite contending that the heart of facilitating dissent relates to a trusting, emotional disposition which cannot directly be transposed into a design approach, I maintain that despite this limitation cybernetics remains of central importance to considering how to design and (self-)govern such spaces. Furthermore, I am unaware of any existing work investigating the means by which such spaces can be designed, meaning that the work of understanding how appropriate environments for the

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However, despite this, the OS has been introduced in several other organisations, and, somehow, PK seem to overcome their organisational issues through their generous attentiveness to their members' needs when it counts the most. This shows the ease organisations like PK have with messiness, but also the difficulties and pathologies which can sometimes emerge from such mess.

democratic expression of dissent can be facilitated still needs to be done. Although PK have demonstrated that such spaces can be effectively developed and maintained, they have done it in an *ad hoc* fashion and used generic tools which have notable technical limitations. While this is testament to the primacy of trust and shared identity in these spaces, it is also indicative of limitations which might be mitigated if alternative tools were intentionally designed with PK's dissensual form of governance in mind. This is evidenced by PK's own expression of the need for a better framework for their collective discussion space, as well as their testimony that appropriate tools for such work do not appear to exist. Furthermore, Uwe and others associate the recent decline in the use of the forum with its technical limitations (see Chapter 4, page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**) and sees this decline in use as both directly correlated with the messiness of the forum and as a direct threat to the democratic character of the collective.

The lack of work in this area of organisational design, and the fundamental role of dissent in PK's practice in general, indicates that the design of tools to better facilitate spaces of dissent could be a fruitful and important avenue of future research for cyberneticians and designers with an interest in the subject. The fact that such spaces can overcome organisational disorder does not imply that they thrive on it (in fact, resistance to the board's messiness is a constant subject of discussion in the collective), and purpose build spaces which facilitate the expression and sustainment of dissent could improve the practices of seasoned practitioners like PK. It could also, importantly, make the process of enabling dissent to emerge easier within organisations without the vision and guidance of practitioners like Uwe. Although, as was stated above, such tools are unlikely to be sufficient to enable dissent without a strong culture of trust to support them.

Jack's earlier comments about CK's use of software and their tendency towards decision-making processes, as opposed to open discussion spaces (see Chapter 7, page 30), are indicative of the way many software technologies are structured towards decision-making processes, rather than open dissensual spaces. It is also indicative of the impact of the implicit assumptions of their designers and the (sometimes unintentional) steering effect this can have on organisations who employ such software, harking back to the discussion in the last chapter regarding the conscious reassessment of one's language and practice (see Chapter 6, page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**). On the other hand, PK's unconventional and inventive use of a basic forum is equally indicative of the possibility of reappropriating tools and *mis*using them towards radically participatory ends. This is suggestive of the ambivalence of digital technologies in relation to their support of dissensual spaces. They may be supportive and impactful for the development of new organisational capacities, but this affordance is just as likely to be expressed through their reappropriation, inventive exploitation or 'hacking' as it is to be done through their intentional design with cybernetic principles in mind. This leads me to cautiously conclude, then, that on the one hand cybernetic design may help in the creation of better constructed spaces in which dissent can occur, while on the other, the creation of such spaces may equally be constructed with an attitude of improvisation, repurposing or misuse.[24]

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[24] The invocation of the idea of *misuse* here is drawn, first, from an observation of the unusual way in which PK make use of their forum: using it for general governance communications is a far-cry from the usual use such message boards are put to, and contrasts significantly with tools like Notion which are designed specifically to facilitate easier project management. Second, the term is associated with the concept of messiness which has informed this study. The kind of improvisational utilisation of tools for purposes unforeseen by their designers runs through several of the examples discussed during this research, such as the use of telex machines during the Cybersyn project; PK's use of the forum; or perhaps even Phillips' use of the VSM at Cloughjordan as a governance structure and not merely a diagnostic tool.

7.7 The facilitation of spaces of dissent

Having explored (1) the general orientation of PK's governance, which primarily concerns the cultivation and reproduction of trust, mutual identity and *"feeling a part"* of the organisation, and (2) having discussed the potential impact of cybernetics in terms of designing appropriate tools to facilitate spaces in which dissensus can thrive, I can briefly return to the difficult question of cybernetics as an approach to governance within dissensual spaces. As was mentioned above, a consideration of how cybernetics, often understood as 'the science of control', can support the expression of Rancièrian politics, which opposes and undermines systems of ordering and control, seems like an impossible knot to untie. How could that which brings order facilitate that which opposes and undermines established orders?

In answering this I suggest two considerations. Firstly, I have argued throughout that the forum used by PK constitutes a space in which dissent can emerge, though, like all politics this emergence is impure.[25] If this analysis has grounding, then forms of governance do not necessitate the elimination or exclusion of politics altogether, despite their antagonistic relationship. Indeed, Rancière states that no authority can be established without having to *"speak 'equal to equal'"* to a greater or lesser degree and argues that all unequal social relations imply some minimal assumption of equality to function (Rancière, 2014, p48) . Without such an implicit presence of equality it would be impossible *"for pupils to understand their schoolmasters or for the ignorant to obey the government of experts"* (Rancière, 2014, p48). Second, some scholars have accused Rancière's politics of being inevitably fragile, ephemeral and even *"unabashedly sporadic and intermittent"* (Hallward, 2006, p123). While this is

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[25] Chambers argues that for Rancière there can be no *"pure politics"* (Chambers, 2011)

surely true of politics as such ("pure" politics), the impurity of actuated politics runs in tension with this claim. Pure politics may be inevitably momentary, but impure politics, mixed with some forms of policing, may become capable of being sustained over time. The first of these claims leads me to argue that the notion of governance is not simply incompatible with the emergence of politics, since both are always already mixed and impure, while the latter implies that the sustainment of politics necessitates that it is somehow governed (or facilitated), even if such facilitation at the same time constrains politics and renders it impure. This perhaps makes better sense of my earlier allusions to Rancière's statement that better and worse forms of police exist (see Chapter 7, page 23) and my suggestion that cybernetics may offer means of developing better ways of policing.

We might now suggest two heuristic criteria for considering what a 'better' form of policing might look like, with the preceding investigation of PK's forum in mind. First, it would be (1) governance which (like PK's) *allows for and encourages the emergence of dissent*, and second, which (2) *enables that dissent to be sustained and to remain present over time*. The issue of sustaining the possibility of dissent's emergence within organisations returns me to the role of cybernetics in facilitating such spaces and is specifically relevant for the question of organisational *viability* which is central to organisational cybernetics.

The uneasy relationship between Rancièrian politics and cybernetics leads me to argue that although the governance of a space for the expression of dissent is a thorny, messy and inevitably contradiction-ridden subject of enquiry, I contend that for a space for the expression of dissent to remain viable over an extended period of time it must be 'governed' in at least some minimal way. While the governance of PK's forum doesn't take the form of explicit intervention in, or regulation of, discussions I

nonetheless argue that governance of the space is clearly present, though the term 'facilitation' seems more fitting. This form of governance has little to do with the monitoring or regulation of members' behaviour or forms of expression, but in *maintaining the space* in which these expressions take place in order to ensure that the space remains viable, often taking the form of re-enforcing and protecting the logic of equality which ensures that dissent remains possible.[26]

In more explicit terms, governance of the forum requires, (1) first, the protection of the space by guaranteeing that equality is practised on the forum, and (2) that equality's precise specification is subject to ongoing deliberation, revision and reinforcement. The precise definition of equality is left without exhaustive definition, which has the effect of allowing each of the members to consider their own understanding of equality and where the lines exist between maintaining and breaking it. The fact that the group's collective understanding of equality is the subject of debate and deliberation is indicative of the collective notion of governance I observed on the forum, so too is it reminiscent of the continuous feedback

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[26] Lübbermann's approach to governance, discussed above, and its resonance with Clastres' depiction of the titular chief, may be informative here. His readiness to be criticised, and his positive encouragement of it, is suggestive of a form of power which enables and expects to be undermined when appropriate. In one post Uwe displayed some insecurity regarding the forum's readiness to criticise him when appropriate, claiming:

"I am only a person with a limited level of knowledge, wealth of experience, daily form, intellect, all that. Barely anything could be more dangerous for Premium, I believe, than if no one would trust themselves to say something about not thought-through suggestions from me. I have heard of businesses in which it's like that, but with us hopefully not :-)
Who of you would say something if he or she is of the opinion that one of my suggestions is not a good idea?" (Lübbermann, Premium Collective forum, *Decision-making processes and resolutions: a question of trust*)

In response to this thread, Michael responded by saying he would criticise him readily, but also noted Uwe's *"stubbornness"* potentially getting in the way of completely open criticism; a response that betrays both an openness to criticism and the paradoxical difficulty involved in holding power while remaining open to being criticised.

It might also provoke me to consider the limits of the board and the centrality of Uwe's role on it. While participation from all members is strongly encouraged, it remains the case that participation on the board often centres around a small group of members who tend to frame and guide discussions to a significant degree. Lübbermann is the most involved in the broadest range of discussions, but a group of around 10 participate very frequently. Most of the 100s of members of the forum contribute very rarely, if at all, to the discussions that take place on the forum.

relationship between the language and practice of equality I referred to in the previous chapter (see Chapter 6, page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**). It is neither a single member (such as Lübbermann) nor a specific sub-group (like the orga-team) who is tasked with governance of the forum but is instead a group process in which the collective is responsible for, and responsive to, the governance of the space. I showed evidence of this during the above discussed debate (see Chapter 7, page 11) in the form of both criticisms levelled at Uwe and the subsequent disagreement from both Uwe and other members in response to those criticisms.

This form of governance, which cybernetics may be informative in the development of, can be understood as being oriented around the goal of enabling politics (or rather the encouragement of its emergence) to be sustained within an organisational space. This form of governance has more in common with the facilitation of the *"titular chief"* than it does with the conventional understanding of governance as that which ensures that processes are followed, and limits are not overstepped. In other words, the form of (self-)governance I have here described can be fairly characterised as being distinctly non-managerial. While agreement-processes require governance which ensures that the processes and their outcomes are maintained, spaces of dissent require a quite different form of governance to ensure that they remain viable. Governance of the latter is far less explicit and visible, and is better thought of as facilitation, but it is nonetheless equally necessary for the sustainment of a democratic community, and consequently for the development of a democratic cybernetics.

7.7.1 Cybernetics, process and facilitation

These two understandings of facilitation lead me to consider another angle from which 'governance' might be thought of in cybernetic terms which take account of, on the one hand both *consensus and dissensus*, and on the other, both *processes and spaces* through which organising takes place. Cybernetics as it pertains to democratic organisations not only requires elaboration in spatial terms, but also on the level of how spaces and processes interact. The facilitation of dissent is not merely a consequence of the space in which it occurs, but how that space and the processes within it interact and resonate with one another. PK is made up of processes, policies and protocols and these are inter-related with the space which facilitates them. Their policies and practices mix with the spatial context in which they operate. This interlinking of spaces and processes also draws attention to the deeply contextual way in which the organisational space should be understood. The space is not merely the board itself as a piece of (inventively utilised) software but is an emergent consequence of the interaction between PK's policies, practices and, vitally, their organisational culture, made up of human relationships and emotional bonds. This kind of holistic, multifaceted understanding of space and the processes within it is necessary for a proper analysis of how dissent might be effectively facilitated in democratic organisations with the use of dissent. This also brings to the fore the role of cybernetics in facilitating better spaces of dissent: these spaces are not only a consequence of the human relationships which make them up, but the relations broadly understood, including their processes and their inter-relation with the space in which they are practised.

We might illustrate the complexity, messiness and inter-relatedness of these different aspects of the forum by considering some of the limitations I observed on the forum, each of which cannot be simplistically blamed on failures within their processes, their

space or their inter-personal relationships. Consensus is the key decision-making process around which PK's practice orients, and like any well implemented consensus process, actively encourages the expression of dissent (the compatibility of dissent and consensus decision-making processes was made note of during Chapter 7, on page 20). Despite the openness of this process, it also has some clear limitations. First, (1) discussions are often moved forward by a relatively small group of particularly prominent members, raising the concern of an informal sub-group within the organisation having implicitly more decision-making power than other members of the organisation. It is also (2) hard to assess the extent to which dissent is acted upon, especially from those who do not post on the board frequently. Despite being a quite frequent contributor to the forum, I earlier showed Rachel's vocal expression of dissent from Uwe be responded to negatively by Uwe and the group, and although this situation was earlier read as demonstrative of an open culture of dissent, it can equally be interpreted as an instance of a dissenting voice being dismissed. We also saw Garry, a not so frequent contributor to the board, vocalise his disdain for the boards *"never-ending detail"* (see Chapter 4, page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**)

but on this occasion no further comment was made on the thread in question, and no resolution to that issue was reached (at least not on the thread in which the issue was raised on that occasion), despite the complaint being echoed and reiterated in other instances. Finally, I earlier referred to claims that (3) activity on the board has varied widely during different times (peaking during the height of the Covid pandemic) and noted that there were suggestions that activity on the forum had dropped off over time.

These three criticisms of the forum could be characterised as limitations of the organisational processes, the space, or with the human relationships which make up

PK, but I wager that none of these perspectives are sufficient to account for them altogether. In each case these limitations can be characterised in many ways, and I have shown examples above (in relation to the 'control, trust and transparency' discussion during Chapter 7, page 9) of how different members characterise such situations in very different ways depending on their perspective. One value of approaching these problems with a cybernetic orientation is an emphasis on the *"patterns which connect"* these various ways of seeing, finding commonalities between them and threading together their underlying resonances (Bateson, 1979, p12) . In this sense, one role of democratic cybernetics is to act as a means of establishing a shared language capable of bringing together the diverse perspectives into a space of commonality and agreement, while at the same time acting as a means of thinking about how to better facilitate dissent.[27]

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[27] The success of such a shared language if heavily dependent, as I showed in the previous chapters, on its articulation in contextually situated, commonly understood terms and an avoidance of its more obscure and inaccessible expressions (see previous chapter).

7.8 Two understandings of cybernetics in dis/agreement

As a way of wrapping up this chapter and beginning to consolidate what I have found throughout this wide-ranging research, I present two quite different conceptions of cybernetics which have run implicitly through these findings and more broadly through organisational cybernetics. Rendering these characterisations of cybernetics more clearly visible will go some way, I hope, to revealing where democratic applications of cybernetics have been restricted in their self-conception, leading to a failure to take advantage of important strands of the discourse which could be impactful to the future development of the subject.

The former cybernetic understanding, which has been identified more closely with the initial three finding chapters of this project, has accounted for many applications of cybernetics to democratic organisations (despite my suggestion that they be re-articulated into *low* theoretic forms), while the latter, which I associate more closely with this chapter, has been largely understated in the existing canon and deserves greater attention in future research. Vitally, I want to show how these two conceptions of cybernetics and, conversely, the relationship between agreement and disagreement which has been the focus of this chapter, are fundamentally interrelated and mutually dependent on one another. I will do this by considering an interesting idiosyncrasy which emerged from my findings in which Jack and Walker, my two most prominent research participants, both referred to the same heuristic metaphor in order to make sense of the, sometimes confusing, relationship between agreement and disagreement as it is understood in this research.

7.8.1 Cybernetics as conducive with stability and homeostasis

The original popular conception of cybernetics, as it was defined by Wiener in *Cybernetics: Or control and communication in the animal and machine*, is characterised by a focus on the means by which systems can maintain homeostasis despite changing circumstances (Wiener, 2019). It is this concern for the stability of an organisation which led to cybernetics lionising 'control' as a vital characteristic of the subject and as essential to the survival of any complex system. This primary focus on stability and balance are ineliminable characteristics of an organisation which wants to broadly retain its identity as an organisation and is the ultimate criteria upon which the VSM is based. A focus on the correction and dampening of 'errors' has led some to accuse Wienerian cybernetics of pathologising positive feedback, as well as potentially beneficial disturbances to internal order which might instigate adaptive development of the system (Plant, 2014) . This characterisation of cybernetics as being concerned with internal stability and homeostasis, I claim, is strongly resonant with the democratic tendencies towards agreement and consensus. Consensus here is not understood simply as a decision-making process but as a tendency towards coming to shared agreements as a group. This understanding of cybernetics, as concerning error-correction and maintaining homeostatic stability, has been the dominant view in application of cybernetics to democratic organisations.

7.8.2 Cybernetics as conducive with adaptability and responsiveness

While the value of retaining stability (which is to say, viability) in democratic organisations has been taken for granted in this project as a beneficial goal to which organisations should strive, I have also sought to emphasise the beneficial implications of facilitating opportunities for existing stabilities to be disturbed and undermined, leading to organisational adaptation to changing circumstances. Both the vulnerability produced by PK's dissensual space, and the trust required to enable

anyone and everyone to participate equally are indicative of the risky yet worthwhile conception of organising as having as much to do with generating ideas and novelty as it has to do with limiting instability and uncertainty.

We understand this appraisal of disagreement to be correlated with an alternative conception of cybernetics which play an essential role in the subject's diverse lexicon, but which has been implicitly de-emphasised in organisational cybernetics, broadly speaking. Conceptualising cybernetics as holding adaptation and responsiveness at its zenith, above even the retention of a stable identity, is indicative of an understanding of cybernetics in which survival and viability of a system may at times require a radical reassessment of the principles around which an organisation is oriented. From this perspective, the retention of stability in an organisation is of less importance than its adaptability to ever changing external and internal factors. PK's reassessment of their collective purpose was exemplified at the outset of this chapter when their discussions regarding how they might survive the crisis led to them revising their identity as a cola-producing collective altogether, opening the space for them to proceed into new avenues of production and collaboration. I have argued here that their openness to, and facilitation of, dissent created a context in which a seemingly insurmountable external disturbance could be adapted to by effectively leveraging everyone's knowledge and diversity of perspectives. The openness of their discussion space provided them with the widest range of inputs and factors to be considered, meaning the group could better account for the many possibilities contributing to the complex problem they found themselves in.

From this perspective both consensus and dissensus (& their corollaries agreement and disagreement) are understood as fundamentally ambivalent regarding the adaptability and survival of the organisation in question, which is to say that both

may be conducive to its thriving or detrimental to it depending on the characteristics of the consensus/dissensus in question. Consensus may take the form of shared identity and unity, or it may amount to a pathological conformity and bland conventionalism, leading to compliant dogmatism and organisational stasis. Equally, I have here argued that dissensus can lead to greater creativity, adaptability and unforeseeable insight for an organisation, but it can equally lead to organisational instability, chaos and the exacerbation of internal disputes. Neither one nor the other are beneficial in themselves. However, the prioritisation of the former over the latter is a tendency that a consideration of Rancière's radical re-framing of democracy brings sharply into focus.

7.8.3 Yin-yang and the interconnection between consensus and dissensus

The prioritisation of the governance of processes of agreement rather than the facilitation of spaces of disagreement have led to a one-sided focus in democratic applications of cybernetics, I have argued. This imbalance should be redressed by considering how spaces of dissent might be produced within democratic organisations, which I claim constitute a largely untapped source of creative adaptability within democratic organisations. PK's focus on consensus decision-making and processes of agreement making remind us, however, that neither consensus nor dissensus can be sustained in a vacuum. Both these ways of understanding democratic governance are dependent on one another and should be sustained by democratic collectives, which I argue PK have been successful in doing despite less-than-ideal circumstances. To illustrate the mutual dependence and compatibility of these concepts I will conclude by briefly considering a strange idiosyncrasy which emerged during my discussions with two interview participants regarding disagreement; in which they both independently introduced the

metaphorical image of yin-yang as a way of articulating their understanding of disagreement (as applied in my research) and its relationship with processes of agreement.

During my later discussions with Jack my findings were beginning to take form and my conception of disagreement was beginning to take shape (although it was early in development, and I had not connected the concept to its dependence on spaces). As I inarticulately tried to explain the conception of dissent to Jack, he referred to the meditative and martial arts practices he was spending his downtime exploring. This he saw as a way of making sense of disagreement and its relationship with decision-making:

> *"I feel like it's a bit like the Tai chi - the white and the black thing - I wonder if they emphasise both sides of the coin?"* (Jack, interview 10)

This comment led me to try to elaborate what made agreement and disagreement distinct, which in turn led to me (and, it seemed, both of us) gaining a far clearer understanding of the relationship between dissent and *spaces* which facilitate them. Although the link had come to my mind prior to this exchange, it was this moment which left me with a far greater sense of clarity regarding the relationship between it and the issues of governance and cybernetics I was trying to make sense of. This conversation led to greater clarity regarding the role dissent played in my project, but it was given a second layer of significance not long after when I discussed the same subject with Walker, and he introduced the same visual metaphor to explain how he had come to similar conclusions regarding Beer's views of the relationship between centralisation and decentralisation in organisational terms:

> *"For me I guess there were a number of things going on at the same time with people talking about contradictions within the VSM. So, you've got the*

contradiction between centralisation and decentralisation and autonomy and cohesion. And on the one hand you want as much decentralisation as you can, but on the other hand if you get too much decentralisation the whole thing doesn't hold together. So, then you have to centralise, but then you limit autonomy… all these contradictions.

And the western mind sees opposites as mutually exclusive. So, if it's centralised it can't be decentralised and vice versa. And what Stafford showed very clearly is that an organisation is both at the same time. And there was this little presentation he gave called "to be and not to be" and [when] *I was looking at the yin-yang thing I was trying to get my head around what it was all about. And suddenly I had this flash that this thing about centralisation and decentralisation is fundamentally a yin-yang. You don't want one or the other, you want both working for their mutual benefit… it's like saying shall we have day or night? And the answer is you've got to have both… so you need these things working together.*" (Walker, interview 8)

These considerations of the mutual dependence of intertwined concepts like these had led Walker to write a short essay entitled *"Yin and Yang and the VSM"*, in which he meditated on the need to balance seemingly opposing concepts in the effective practice of organisational cybernetics. There, Walker further elaborates the *"meta-pattern"* which emerges from seeing the mutual interdependence of what might at first appear to be concepts in tension with each other:

"*One story tells of a monk who was meditating in the mountains and watching the way shadows changed as the sun moved in the sky. He could see the pattern of bright light and shadow on the hills below him changing. His eureka moment came when he saw that there was always a **meta-pattern** of light (yin) and dark (yang) on the hills: part was always light, part was always in shade, but the pattern was always there…. His insight developed into the yin-yang understanding of opposites being complementary. Any one part of the hill could either be light **or** dark, but there was a higher understanding: a meta-understanding. The yin-yang pattern could always be recognised no*

matter where the sun happened to be. And they realised this applies to everything. In the Tao-te-Ching Lau Tzu writes

"Being and non-being produce each other

Difficult and easy complement each other" (Walker*, Yin and Yang and the VSM,* p2-3 [emphasis in original])

What emerges is the vital interrelation of both consensus and dissensus, or dis/agreement, and the need for them to both be facilitated as a means of creating functional democratic governance. PK show how both can be facilitated and sustained in the same organisational space, but the dominant language of decision-making, process and agreement have often obscured the latter from view.

7.9 Summary

This chapter has explored the vital importance of accounting for and accommodating dissent when considering the impact of cybernetics on democratic organising and organisations. I have argued that the relevance of this conception of democratic politics has been entirely ignored from existing explorations of cybernetics and democracy. This exclusion has contributed to the democratic application of cybernetics being overly concerned with decision-making processes at the expense of developing a space and culture of trust, leading to *"identity with the whole"*. This identity is essential for developing a context in which democratically grounded adaptation can emerge through dissent. Dissent (from existent practices and conventions within the organisation) can generate adaptive solutions to organisational problems which might otherwise be ignored by conventional thinking or strict adherence to existing processes.

I have explored the distinction between consensus and dissensus further by associating the former with decision-making and *process*, while the latter is characterised by *spaces* in which it is easy for it to emerge. This was evidenced by an exploration of PK's long-running digital forum, which has adaptively responded to changing circumstances over several decades (and the Covid pandemic in recent years) through a radically democratic approach to self-governance and organisational culture. I argued that PK are a paradigmatic example of the approach to democratic governance defended in this chapter and future research into the governance of spaces of dissent would do well to learn from PK's example. I also considered the relevance of cybernetics to this interpretation of democratic self-governance, and the uneasy relationship between cybernetics and dissensus. The 'control' of spaces of dissent is seemingly a contradiction in terms, though clearly the facilitation and

maintenance of such spaces is needed for them to remain viable over time, as the arguably *"good"* (or at least *"preferable"*) policing which characterises PK shows (Rancière, 1999, p31) . Equally, the care-based practices, generosity and *"human centred"* approach to governance on display at PK show that while cybernetics may be impactful in such a space it should remain secondary to the higher values of the democratic group, which are best understood in the final instance as expressions of the *assumption of equality*. Finally, I argued that both agreement and disagreement, and therefore consensus and dissensus, are of equal relevance to the balanced sustainment and adaptability of democratic organisations. Seeing one as coming prior to or higher than the other is likely to lead to, on the one hand a lack of internal coherence and on the other an over-emphasis on control and conformity. The latter has predominated in democratic organisations generally and cybernetic interpretations of democracy. It is this imbalance that this chapter seeks to redress, the consequences of which would be both the deepening of dissensual democracy in participatory organisations and the substantiation of cybernetic contributions to those organisations.

7.9.1 Key contribution from the chapter

This chapter has contributed a major way of thinking about democracy in cybernetic terms which has been left out by of existing works by cyberneticians and organisation theorists. While there have been studies considering the possibility of organising and sustaining dissent, this project has gone further by showing the link between dissent and organisational spaces (or 'stages') and has shown that the facilitation of dissent within organisations can contribute to their increased adaptability in situations of great uncertainty. Furthermore, I have proposed organisational cybernetics as an appropriate discursive framework through which to understand how dissent within

organisations might be sustained. I have shown that deep organisational democracy (such as that which PK practices) comes not from consensus or dissensus alone but from the mutual reinforcement and the resonances between them. This also implies their compatibility, which was empirically supported by my analysis of PK's forum.

Alongside the introduction of dissensual democracy within cybernetic organisational thinking, I located this within the spatial domain, indicating that by thinking spatially as well as in terms of process, cyberneticians can deepen democratic structures and provide greater opportunity for emergent intelligence and problem-solving to self-organise among participants. Spaces of dissent therefore provide a way of thinking about how autonomous problem-solving can be sustained while minimising the reliance on experts and internal hierarchies within organisations.

Finally, the investigation of PK revealed the centrality of what I called 'trust' in sustaining spaces of dissent. PK's sometimes chaotic organisational practices were in need of refining and updating, but despite the disorder of some of their processes they have proven themselves capable of surviving even the most unforeseeable and severe perturbations as a result of the social bonds and egalitarianism which they continuously reinforce with all their members, partners and customers on an ongoing basis. I found that organisational refinement is of central importance to improving organisational practices, but the reinforcement of social bonds and interpersonal trust remains the core of facilitating *spaces of dissent*.

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