Cooperative media and the politics of class: Exploring post-capitalist logics in the cooperative media of Ef.Syn and AlterThess

1. Introduction

The history of radical politics is dominated by extensive and fearless disputes upon strategies seeking to put an end to capitalism and bring about a better society. In this chapter we are grappling with the old but unresolved debate within working class politics between workers cooperativism and other working-class politics. By focusing on two workers-owned media projects in Greece, we seek to explore the strategic import of modern forms of political cooperativism towards a post-capitalist society. Worker cooperatives are collectively owned and self-managed by workers. This means that workers have total control of the production through collective and democratic processes of organization and governance. However, we cannot ignore that such ventures operate within the capitalist economy and produce for the market.

This contradiction has laid the groundwork for the development of various critiques of workers cooperativism within political trade unionism and the revolutionary socialist movements from the early 19th century until today. The main critiques involve: the status of cooperatives as enterprises within capitalism and that of cooperativists as "worker-owners" not really distinguishable from capitalist entrepreneurs; that the organization of cooperative labor within unfavorable economic conditions can undermine labor rights and freedoms (e.g. lower salaries, self-exploitation); and that cooperativists are prone to a narrow "sectarian" interest around the sustainability of their cooperatives that makes them lose touch with broader political demands and struggles of the left (Gibson-Graham 2003). As a result, questions of ownership and economic control, organization of work, and political identity and demands will be at the epicenter of our analysis. Framing this discussion, the concept of class will play an important role in thinking cooperativism as part of working-class politics. Alongside the two most widely used definitions of class in the Marxist tradition, (a) as an objective economic category in terms of property criteria and (b) as a more subjective formation of persons who are conscious of common interests and demands, class is also defined by Marx (c) as a social process involving the production,

appropriation and distribution of surplus labor (Williams 2014, 26-34; Resnick and Wolf 1989, 109-163). It is this third definition that we will use in this chapter to think about the three main critiques, as identified above, between cooperativism and other working-class politics.

In what follows we problematize such critiques by reflecting on new forms of workers cooperativism in Greece. Although there are many insightful inquiries addressing the role of class and media (Pleios 2011; Smyrnaios 2010), our chapter aims to contribute to such debates by examining how modern cooperativism practices can problematize and inform the construction of a post-capitalist imaginary. In doing so, we explore a sector of cooperative activity that has received less attention in the recent literature that deals with the wave of new cooperativism in Greece. Our research follows a case-study research design (Yin 2009), and is based on desk and document research, as well as qualitative interviews with members of two worker-owned media cooperatives, namely Efimerida ton Syntakton (the Editors' Newspaper; hereafter Ef.Syn) and AlterThess. We start with our problematization of working-class politics and the trade-unionist critique of cooperativism. We then set out our theoretical framework that is informed by a post-structuralist understanding of class and adopt a Political Discourse Theory approach, before we develop our analysis of the cooperativist practices of Ef.Syn and AlterThess.

2. Problematizing the Cooperativism-Class politics Nexus

The story of modern cooperativism is often attributed to the birth of Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society in 1844, a cooperative formed by 28 artisans who aimed at providing cheaper products for their community and decent payments for their members (Anheier and Toepler 2010). In confronting narratives about the natural evolution of capitalism, scholars interested in cooperative forms of social and economic organization often trace the emergence of cooperative practices to pre-modern societies. From the significance of gift in the pre-industrial societies (Mauss 2002) to the current platform cooperatives (Scholz 2016), and from Robert Owen's and Saint Simon's cooperative projects to Kropotkin's (2021) mutual aid and Proudhon's economic theory on mutualism (Proudhon 2003), researchers underline how values and practices that characterize cooperative formations are in sharp antithesis with the idea that human beings are selfish and competitive subjects that act to fulfill their private needs and interests. The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) defines a cooperative as an "autonomous association of persons united

voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise''(I.C.A).

Despite differences that researchers identify in cooperative forms, social enterprises and social and solidarity economy projects around the globe (Adam 2012; Defourny and Nyssens 2008), as well as the different legal formats that might exist in the various national contexts (Scholz et al 2021), there seems to be a broad agreement on the main principles that inform past and present cooperative endeavors. Accordingly, the 31st convention of ICA in 1995 defined seven principles that characterize cooperatives worldwide: (1) voluntary and open membership; (2) members' democratic control, (3) members' economic participation, (4) autonomy and independence by state and market actors; (5) a mission in providing educating, training and informing their members; (6) cooperation with other cooperatives; (7) increased concern for their respective communities. Cooperatives are organized in a variety of economic sectors and often advocate for a fair social and environmental transition. Nonetheless, the broad ethico-political ground that the above principles cover has allowed for various engagements with forms of cooperativist structures and practices, ranging from a convenient framework of starting a business within the constraints of the dominant socioeconomic system, to anti-capitalist accounts seeking to construct counter-hegemonic alternatives.

Tensions between trade unionist and cooperativist tactics within the labor movement

In this chapter we are focusing on the second form addressed above (i.e. anti-capitalist accounts) attempting to evaluate and characterize worker cooperative projects and practices that see cooperativism as a viable path, among others, towards a post-capitalist strategy. However, this narrative does not flow unproblematically. A conspicuous conundrum of the left economic imaginary and strategy for social transformation has been the denunciation of worker cooperativism by a big part of the traditional labor movement that continues even today. Whilst it is not our task in this chapter to provide a detailed historical account of this debate, it will be useful for our analysis in the following sections to reflect briefly on the strategic tensions around tactics and visions, which occurred as early as the beginning of the 19th century and the emergence of the British labor movement. As Sidney and Beatrice Webb (2011) describe, in the formative years of

trade unionism demands for the right of working men to vote, raising of wages, working conditions and standard of living on the one hand, coexisted with aspirations for the right of workers to cooperative ownership and the control of industry. However, as the movement was consolidating, the antagonism between the "ordinary" or "purely" union aims and the "impractical" or "utopian" aspirations of Robert Ownes and his likes was also growing (ibid., 210-224). By the mid 19th century, militant trade unionists had almost completely abandoned ideas linked to the cooperative ownership of industry, which were passing into the "*commercial-minded Cooperators*" [emphasis added] of the "new Cooperative Movement, inaugurated in 1844 by the Rochdale Pioneers" (ibid., 233).

Since then, labor movements and trade unionism have been in the forefront of workers' organizing against the systemic capitalist dominance in the economy and the state, with main aim to protect and fight for the expansion of workers' rights and living standards through collective bargaining, workplace regulation, provision of services and legal support to workers, organization of workers' societies and social clubs, and of course campaigning and striking. Left labor politics, since the emergence of the British labor movement in the early 19th century and until today, have been closely connected to the above tactics with trade unions being the first weapon of the working class against capitalism. At the same time, cooperativist tactics have been labeled reformist, unable to change the capitalist system or to even achieve fair and democratic management of labor. Also, more recently, the promotion of cooperativism (as part of the broader Social and Solidarity Economy agenda) by liberal institutions, like the EU, has been linked to welfare state downsizing and restructuring that involves the outsourcing of services and provisions to market actors (Adam and Papatheodorou, 2010, 11-14). As such, for many trade unionists and other actors in labor movements, Marx's original critique of cooperativism remains relevant:

Restricted, however, to the dwarfish forms into which individual wages slaves can elaborate it by their private efforts, the co-operative system will never transform capitalist society. To convert social production into one large and harmonious system of free and co-operative labor, general social changes are wanted, changes of the general conditions of society, never to be realized save by the transfer of the organized forces of society, viz., the state power, from capitalists and landlords to the producers themselves (Marx, 2019, 774).

New cooperativism in crisis-ridden Greece and the cases of Ef.Syn and AlterThess

The rise of a wave of new cooperatives during the 2010-2015 economic crisis in Greece signals for us the need to rethink this old debate. In the aftermath of a vibrant anti-austerity protest cycle (Serdedakis and Tompazos 2018), Greece experienced the emergence of numerous grassroots solidarity structures, such as social and solidarity clinics, collective kitchens, bartering projects and timebanks, tutoring programs, etc. that offered informal welfare services to large segments of the country's population (Malamidis 2020; Howarth and Roussos 2022; Papadaki and Kalogeraki 2017). Along these grassroots formations, the increased rates of unemployment and the quest for alternatives in organizing socioeconomic life beyond neoliberal capitalism coincided with the rise of a number of self-managed cooperatives in various professional sectors. These new cooperative ventures have been formed by or in close alignment with groups of activists. They were inspired by horizontal approaches of workplace democracy, and also maintained critical distance with the country's traditional cooperative sector, which due to state intervention and clientelistic relationships was synonymous to corruption scandals.

Among other grassroots media that are aligned with Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) values, such as the online portals of The Press Project, 3pointmagazine.gr and Imerodromos, the online radios of Radiobubble, metadeftero.gr and Radiofragmata, and the online OmniaTV platform (Papadopoulou 2023), the cases of Ef.Syn and AlterThess are cases of new forms of cooperativism in the Greek media sector.

Ef.Syn is a daily newspaper published by the newspaper's workers cooperative through a company established under the title "Independent Mass Media SA". The cooperative is the company's main shareholder and was founded in 2012 by former employees (journalists, technicians, administrative employees) of the Eleftherotypia newspaper that permanently suspended its operation in 2014, leaving hundreds of workers unpaid and unemployed. Starting its cooperative operation, Ef.Syn became an emblematic example of self-management in the press world. It was also embraced by activists and organizations of the broader left, due to its alternative working example, but also because it offered coverage of key sociopolitical issues often ignored by the mainstream press. This, as our interviewees emphasized, created an organic relationship with social movements and various struggles.

The cooperative venture of AlterThess was born in 2010, two years earlier than Ef.Syn. AlterThess is an alternative digital media platform created by early career journalists in Thessaloniki, who experienced precarious employment and unemployment because of the deterioration of working conditions during the crisis in the media sector. Attempting to create ties of proximity between society and the movement scene of Thessaloniki and Northern Greece, the primary aim of this venture is to highlight through systematic research social, political, and economic issues that are excluded by Greek mainstream media.

We understand Ef.Syn and AlterThess as part of what is often called a new wave of cooperativism, which is not only a Greek phenomenon. This wave includes new forms of worker cooperatives and social enterprises that have emerged around the globe in the aftermath of the various and interlinked crises of the past 20 years. Importantly, such ventures are linked by researchers and cooperativists themselves to progressive agendas for social change (Vieta 2010), aspiring to create a viable alternative to the dominant market economy. Nevertheless, their experimenting and commoning practices, as well as their attention to horizontal and self-managed processes (Roussos and Malamidis 2020), do not seem capable of escaping critique. As we have already summarized them, there are three main critical points: (1) cooperativists as "worker-owners" are not really distinguishable from capitalist entrepreneurs; (2) the organization of work in cooperatives within the competitive capitalist market can lead to the deterioration of labor rights and freedoms in securing the sustainability of the project; (3) cooperativists are focusing on the sustainability of their projects and are not interested to broader left demands and struggles.

In Greece, advocated by various anarchist, communist and extra-parliamentary leftist actors, criticism mostly highlights the inability of cooperatives and SSE more broadly to challenge the reproduction of capital, but also ostensibly its impact on the workers' class consciousness as "owners"" that their attention is shifting to the efficient management of capital (Gkagkelis 2021). The conceptual scheme of these critiques cultivates a political environment that resists linking cooperativist strategies with other working class and anti-capitalist politics. This in turn limits the relationship of worker-owned cooperatives with both grassroots and trade unions, and widens the distance between claim-making protest repertoires and prefigurative politics.

Practices and discourses of self-management, direct-democracy and horizontalism have emerged within and through the social movements of the previous decade. However, as our problematization in this section attempted to show, their realization in the workplace is not deemed relevant or it is even considered to undermine workers' struggles for large parts of the broader anti-capitalist scene in Greece . In this regard, we suggest that the analysis of the two media cooperative projects of Ef.Syn and AlterThess can inform a more expansive understanding of the cooperativism-class nexus and offer an understanding of how worker-owned media practices can contribute towards a post-capitalist strategy.

3. Theoretical framework

The significance of Class

Class is a term that comes with various connotations and meanings. Within the Marxist tradition it has been mainly analyzed: (a) as a social or economic category that defines objective groups in terms of property; (b) as a formation on the ground of economic relationships and through the realization of social, political and cultural organization (Williams 2014, 32-34). Even in Marx's own writings the two definitions often intermingle, providing ample ground for debates around the analytical and political significance of the term; is class constituted as an objective position in relation to property, or should it be regarded as the outcome of class consciousness around common interests? Is the existence of relations of exploitation and subordination between the workers and capitalists merely enough to speak about class, or is it that class is constituted through the struggle against capitalist oppression? Are all conditions necessary or one is reducible to any of the others?

In risking to make things more complex, and following Resnick and Wolff's (1987) reading of the *Capital*, we can see Marx offering a third understanding of class: (c) as a process that involves the production, appropriation and distribution of surplus value. This needs some further explanation. Marx (1990, 300-301) defined surplus value as the result of the overflow of labor from the worker to the capitalist. This surplus labor is what workers produce beyond what is necessary to keep them alive. In a waged relationship within capitalism the laborers are paid for the value of their work, which amounts to what they need for their subsistence at a certain living standard. However, workers produce more than the value of their wage. The surplus between what the workers get and the value that their work makes is appropriated and distributed by the

capitalist, this "exploitative process in which surplus labor is produced and appropriated is for Marx a class process" (Gibson-Graham, Resnick, and Wolff 2001, 7).

Considering the three conceptualizations together, we can see class being constituted in a threefold way, that is on the basis of the ownership or non-ownership of the means of production, by the degree of power over the labor process, and through involvement in appropriating or producing surplus value. Accordingly, we are faced with a considerable amount of complexity when considering the transformative potential of cooperativism. If workers have control over the labor process and ownership of the means of production, are they capitalists or members of the working class? Equally, what if they distribute their own surplus labor to support other workers, raise awareness around other social struggles, or secure the sustainability of their project? Should they be included in some politically distinctive class?

Whilst a synthetic reading of the three conceptualizations allows for a fuller understanding of the different dimensions of class analysis (i.e. objective location in the economic structure, subjective identification and class formation, social process), in our account we will mainly refer to class as the social process of producing, appropriating and distributing surplus labor. This choice enables us to render visible those sets of social practices that constitute the organization of work and life in the discourse of new cooperativism and evaluate their transformative potential towards a post-capitalist strategy as part of a broader counter-hegemonic bloc. This is also consistent with the anti-essentialist understanding of politics and social transformation that we adopt here. Drawing from post-marxist and post-structuralist accounts (e.g. Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Gibson-Graham, Resnick, and Wolff 2001), our analysis does not presuppose a particular social group (the proletariat) as the privileged agent to bring about social change. In this sense, we understand class struggle as one form of collective agency against the various forms of domination imposed by modern capitalism and other oppressive regimes (tied to or intersecting with capitalist social structures and relations) such as racism, colonialism, sexism, patriarchy, heteronormativity and ableism, among others. Accordingly, our problematization of cooperative practices and discourses in the empirical section draws upon the resources of Political Discourse Theory (PDT) (Glynos et.al 2021; Howarth 2018). We now turn to discuss the categories of discourse and its implications for politics.

Discourse and Political Discourse Theory

In PDT the concept of discourse is not simply about patterns of meaning or language and text. Rather, discourses are best viewed as *articulatory practices* that connect and signify the meaning associated with objects, relations, identities, and norms (Glynos and Howarth 2007). The articulations of such elements produce relational albeit incomplete systems of practice and meaning. Such systems are yielded together by way of dissociation, always bounded by a constitutive outside that is established through power and exclusion. In this sense, what matters in PDT is not to say that something has meaning, but to discern the conditions and conventions governing the production of meaning. However, since such conditions and conventions of meaning production are not inherently fixed, discourses are always marked by contingency and the possibility of contestation. Different social "realities" are thus constructed and emerge within different discursive systems and, since the complete fixity of meaning is an impossibility, alternative discourses and practices can challenge and subvert dominant accounts of "objectivity". In other words, things can be signified differently.

Social Logics, antagonism and equivalence

As mentioned above, discourse is not just text or talk but concrete social practices that crystallize certain logics. The analyst can discern the logics of a discourse by detecting the rules and objects that govern it and by unearthing the ontological conditions that make such rules possible (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 132-164). *Social logics* in particular aim to capture the norms and forms of conduct that make up a practice by detecting what can be said or done in a particular context. To put it more fully, the logic of a practice enables the analyst to recover the *rules* that structure it, as well as the *objects* and *conditions* that make the operation of such rules possible and vulnerable to change. The focus of the approach is to account for the emergence, reproduction and transformation of practices. In this sense, our empirical analysis aims to discern the rules that constitute the social logics that organize the discourse of cooperativism in our particular case studies.

Moreover, our approach also focuses on contestation and the creation of political frontiers through antagonism to demonstrate that different social realities are possible on the basis of distinct *political* choices (Laclau 1990, 34-35). The moment of (political) antagonism thus signals the division of social space into (at least) two opposing camps, a division constructed through relations

of equivalence established between disparate demands and struggles around various issues. Counter-hegemonic alliances are thus brought into being through what Laclau and Mouffe (1985) call *logics of equivalence*. Consider for example the discourse of the Aganaktismenoi mobilizations in the spring and summer of 2011 that was constructed against the austerity regime in crisis-ridden Greece (Roussos 2019). The movement of the squares linked together a range of identities, struggles and demands — e.g. anticapitalist, antiracist, environmentalist, anarchist, left-wing and even right-wing groupings and individuals, demands against mass layoffs in the public sector, personal debt and utility bills, evictions, education, privatization of public services and infrastructures, etc. — into an equivalencial chain for *real democracy* and against the implementation of the EU and IMF Structural Reform Support Programs. At that moment, Aganaktismenoi politicized the crisis by dividing the social space into two opposing camps, on the one hand the pro-austerity block and the anti-austerity movement on the other.

To summarize, our main priority is the evaluation and characterization of the social practices and politics of alternative cooperative media in Greece. Accordingly, in assessing and evaluating Ef.Syn and AlterThess as exemplars of new forms of cooperativism in the media sector within the Greek context, our method of analysis concentrates in naming and explaining implicit and explicit norms and values embodied in their practices. In doing so, we attempt to rethink and expand our understandings and conceptions of a *politics of class* able to incorporate the experience of political cooperativism.

4. Findings

The historical and modern debates of the labor movement with the cooperative sector concentrate around the aspects of ownership, organization of work, and the respective demands and struggles. As a result, this section addresses each of the three main critiques to cooperativism in an effort to provide a more nuanced understanding of the characteristics of cooperative media in Greece and evaluate their role towards a post-capitalist strategy.

Logics and Practices of collective ownerships and co-production

The question around the ownership of the means of production probably concentrates the greatest interest and criticism of the traditional labor movement against cooperatives. Put it roughly, ownership of the means of production within a cooperative inhibits the danger of turning cooperativists into capitalist owners. This process involves a change of status, where the shift of the worker to owner also translates to a shift of the original class position. The new class status hinders the individual's reflection on labor issues and private property regimes, and also makes it incapable of promoting class struggle. In the new cooperative context, the individual owes to be effective and productive and therefore, is deprived of the opportunities to engage in political and social struggles. This process leads to further demobilization and isolation from class conflicts.

If we follow the traditional marxist dichotomy of capital and labor, cooperatives by default incorporate a paradox: the workers' labor is subject to the cooperative control, with the latter being formed by the workers themselves. Cooperatives neither represent individual shareholders who join an entrepreneurial formation, nor do they assume the aggregation of many private property regimes; rather, they adopt a common ownership regime. Common property denies private property, in the sense that it implies the ownership of the means of production by all the cooperative members which enable them to respond to their needs. This is evident in both Ef.Syn and AlterThess cooperatives, whose operation does not fall under the management of an individual owner or shareholders in a capitalist firm. Especially in the case of Ef.Syn, where the decision to form a cooperative evolved during the workers' strike in Eleftherotypia newspaper, collective ownership assumes a vivid political direction (Ralli 2022). As an interviewee notes, "When the workers were still on strike and were printing the strike papers of the newspaper, it was a worker, a Trotskyist, who proposed the idea of cooperation and self-management. He argued that we will not reach a classless society from scratch, but we need to look at historical examples that emphasize cooperation" (Int.2). This cooperative character, where the workers take control over the means of production is emphasized by another interviewee who states that, "The phenomenon of the Ef.Syn is unique in the press's field in the history of Greece. [...] The newspaper belongs to the editors and that is why we chose the name Editors' Newspaper. We, the workers, are the real major shareholder of the newspaper" (Int.1).

The political direction of the cooperative formation, where the workers decide upon their labor, transcends all the professional sectors and grants them autonomy. Following the cooperative principles of independence, the cooperative formation implies economic autonomy from state and market actors. “Our characteristic, which we could write in one word and in capital letters on the wall, is INDEPENDENCE. We are unbound, we are independent. This is a great thing, we only have our own consciousness as a compass” (Int.2.) states an interviewee from Ef.Syn, while another one adds that “We experience direct democracy in practice; this also implies that we have no funding from any employer. We are not financed by any shipowner or any party, we have no bank loans. Our motto is that “the only employers are our readers”; and it is true, we have no strings attached” (Int.1).

Crucially, the aspect of autonomy becomes more important when it comes to the media sector, since it can greatly impact the quality of the cooperatives’ product, that is news and information. In 2023, Greece was found at the 107th position among 180 countries according to the World Press Freedom Index, being the lowest-ranked European country in terms of freedom of press (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). This status reflects the tip of the iceberg in a country where phenomena of entanglement between the media and the economic and political elite is not something new. As an interviewee from AlterThess notes, “[As journalists] what bothered us [in other jobs] apart from labor relations was that the journalist has to serve a private interest. We, therefore, believe that the media should be free from vested interests” (FG). In this respect, the independence of cooperative media has broader implications for the service of media in modern democracies. “Our model also means complete freedom. Complete freedom for the journalist of the newspaper. There is no censorship. Of course, all this is within a framework of journalistic ethics. Therefore, complete freedom for what we write” (Int.1) claims an interviewee from Ef.Syn. Similarly, another one adds that “If we write something wrong, it’s our fault. It’s not a mistake that our boss instructed us to write. We can write whatever we want in the newspaper” (Int.2).

In discussing cooperative ownership and production in Ef.Syn and AltherThess we have highlighted the development of economic practices that are designed to collectively (re)appropriate or create a resource important for the livelihood of the workers. Such practices involve associated labor, power to determine wages and redistribution of surplus, and power over the performance of labor. Within a hostile context, impacted by the recent economic crisis, digital transformation and

the decline of public trust towards traditional media that have increased the competition in the communication sector (Papadopoulou 2023), the self-interpretations of our interviewees allow us to discern norms of cooperation and values of dignity of work and equality, Thus, their social activity and form of cooperative economic practice represent a sharp alternative to the capitalist economic practices broadly and particularly in big media conglomerates, which is dominated by an ethos of competitiveness and is based on profit expropriation, private property rights and often vested interests. Journalists and other workers in the cooperative media that we investigate are empowered to realize their creative capacity, assuming full responsibility for their work that is primarily grounded on the collective interest of their cooperative project. What we describe here is an action centered social logic of sovereignty of labor.

Organization of work and decision-making practices

The common property regime creates a different set of practices within the workplace that transcends the traditional hierarchy and power differentials between workers, managers and owners in the capitalist firm. While in capitalist media enterprises power relations are further multiplied across the different scales of hierarchy (chief editors, journalists, assistants, etc.), cooperative media respond to this by counterposing a cooperative relationship; although, this can be translated into a variety of different operating systems. As it is highlighted by respective studies on cooperatives, operational and decision-making systems may vary according to the size of the enterprise, the professional sector in which it operates, the different needs in terms of professional expertise, as well as the respective cooperative and political traditions that a cooperative may follow (Williams, 2007). Based on our research findings, AlterThess and Ef.Syn cooperatives present different operational systems. The interviewees from AlterThess underline a rather horizontal management structure. As they highlight, “We chose to become a Social Cooperative Enterprise because we are interested in the concept of cooperation and the broader discussion about different work relations between the employees and the community we address. This is why we didn’t want to have a hierarchical structure with editors-in-chief, etc., but to base our operation on cooperation” (FG).

Ef.Syn follows a different pattern. According to its statute, the organization of work is democratically regulated. Nonetheless, due to its size and the demands of national distribution, it follows more traditional processes in the division of labor among its 120 workers. As an

interviewee from Ef.Syn explains, “the organizational model is not very different from other newspapers, with its organizational structure being divided in a hierarchical manner, with a director and senior editors in each department” (Int.2). However, the presence of hierarchies do not reflect strict power structures as it is the case in typical media enterprises. As the same interviewee underlines, “in our case, we don’t have the senior executive in a big office, and if he slams his fist down, he’ll do his thing” (Int.2). On the contrary, leading positions seem to reflect coordination roles in order to reach collaborative decisions. According to the interviewee, “the people who are in these positions that we have chosen, have some basic characteristics that they have in their personalities. The key feature is the synthesis of different opinions” (Int.2).

As mentioned already, such practices can be found in capitalist enterprises, where the managers adopt more progressive and inclusive strategies. Yet, what distinguishes the case of Ef.Syn is that representation in these leading positions is not determined by ownership shares or shareholders’ direct appointments. Rather, it is subject to the vote of the cooperative’s members, and therefore, such decisions are revocable through the cooperative’s general assembly. As an interviewee states, “we may have a chief publishing manager in every department, but they all come through direct votes” (Int.1). Extensive democratic processes like those described here have a direct impact on the internal work environment, which does not allow for the cultivation of competitive relations often found among co-workers in capitalist media enterprises. As an interviewee puts it, “what I want to say is that there is diversity. We can have our say and say no, that’s how I see it. And this is a very empowering practice” (Int.1), while another one adds that “the cooperative has as its decision-making body the general assembly where everyone is equal and decisions are made based on the majority rule. Basically, everything is controlled by the general assembly of the cooperative and there is no decision that can be made without its approval” (Int.2).

In this respect, and despite the difference among organizational models, democratic self-management in Ef.Syn and AtherThess cooperatives supersedes the dominant narrative of capitalist work organization in the media sector and beyond. The cooperatives’ general assembly symbolizes the main social practice of governance. Both projects are formally governed by their members on a one-person-one-vote basis, involving consultation and negotiation around all the issues and decisions that affect the life of the cooperative and the workers. Being at the heart of

the cooperatives, democratic participation of all members also means mutual awareness of collective goals and free flow of information, exemplified in the recognition and operation of the general assembly as the ultimate decision-making instrument. In all instances, collective practices of self-management address social and structural aspects of the organization of work through the production of a democratic environment at work against market logics that seek to individuate workplaces and workers. It is here that a social logic of self-governance emerges through collective processes that embrace openness and participation in decision making and in the broader life of the collective project.

Journalistic practices for the mutuality of struggles

The cooperatives' practices of common ownership and democratic self-management not only differ from the mainstream media workplace environment in Greece, but as we have seen they bear the potential to inform a more expansive politics of class. However, whilst both sets of practices are crucial in the concrete realization of potentially counter-hegemonic economic processes and social relations in the workplace, the third aspect of our analysis focuses on how cooperative demands and practices are associated and interact with other social struggles. This is particularly relevant for cooperative media as they can play a key role in popularizing and linking different demands and discourses stemming from movements and other actors of the left.

Early on from its establishment, Ef.Syn was itself the product of a workers' struggle in the midst of the Greek economic crisis (Ralli 2022). During the strike at Eleftherotypia in 2011 (Siapera, Papadopoulou, and Archontakis 2015), the workers started to print the so-called "strike-papers" to publicize their struggle and to also connect with other workers and grassroots movements that were facing the multifaceted effects of austerity (Int. 1 and 2). However, the connection of Ef.Syn with social movements did not stop there. During the anti-austerity wave of mobilizations, Ef.Syn was one of the leading voices in the national non-partisan daily press to cover protest events by giving space to claims raised by activists, unions and actors of the left. Although Ef.Syn has been criticized as a Syriza-leaning media outlet both by the right and the radical left, noone questions its role in providing national level coverage on anti-racist, pro-migrant, LGBTQ+, environmental and other social justice issues that are widely marginalized or even erased from the mainstream media. As one of our interviewees contends, "we want to be the

voice of the voiceless, we want to stage the voice of those that are not represented in the mainstream media" (Int.1).

This latter aspect is also central for AlterThess. Most recently, the cooperative received a strategic lawsuit against public participation (SLAPP) due to the coverage of the environmental damage of the gold mines in the region of Halkidiki in Northern Greece and the promotion of the local struggle against them (CFWIJ 2022). In a similar vein, the members of the cooperative have been targeted by the police when covering student and other demonstrations. As the members of the cooperative state "We are not talking about neutral information, we serve a piece of class information; but we also deal with issues that really interest us" (FG). This is further substantiated in the cooperatives "about us" statement on their web platform, where they clearly identify their journalistic mission at the side of movements and people that experience oppression on the basis of gender, race, class, religion, etc. (Alterthess 2018).

The aforementioned aspects underscore that Ef.Syn and AlterThess emphasize a journalistic practice that attempts to bridge the interests, needs and demands of various movements but also of all those who have been marginalized or deprived of the possibility of equal participation in the social and private sphere due to multifaceted forms of exclusion and injustice. As a result, their journalistic discourse moves beyond issues of class strictly defined. Rather, it embraces an intersectional perspective that rests upon ideas and norms of reciprocity, inclusion and mutuality of demands and struggles against any form of oppression, which in turn positions solidarity at the core. Solidarity then emerges as a key social logic, which informs their cooperative journalistic work in bridging "the small and bigger resistances of those from the below" (Alterthess 2018), in opposition to capitalist logics of individualization, self-reliance and exclusion. Such practices highlight the key role that media worker-cooperatives can perform in the equivalential linking of disparate demands and struggles contributing to the formation of a broader counter-hegemonic block.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Media ownership is a crucial factor which serves the development of specific political narratives. This is also a key component in the post-democratic scenario (Crouch 2004), where the accumulation of mainstream national media under a corporate umbrella provides a fertile ground

for the development of neoliberal capitalist politics. Already since the late 1980s and the introduction of private media in Greece, the media ownership landscape is characterized by a restricted market controlled by few business oligarchs, with direct links with conservative and neoliberal political and economic elites (Papadopoulou 2023, 84-85; Ralli 2022, 25-30). As it was reflected by the recent economic crisis, media conglomerates played a key role on the side of mainstream political parties and economic elites by supporting their hegemonic political narrative and their TINA capitalist dogma (Mylonas 2014; Papadopoulou, Kavoulakos and Avramidis 2021). In this respect, cooperative media seem to provide a vital alternative.

Research on cooperatives has addressed their role in fostering democratic practices that can overall contribute to the creation of a post-capitalist imaginary. Cooperatives' collective ownership and their democratic management are often linked to grassroots strategies for social change. This was also the case for Greece, where cooperative models were preferred by activists and unemployed people as business models that secured jobs in the precarious crisis setting, while also embracing direct democratic values. Although criticism from neoliberal and conservative actors is expected, progressive actors are also skeptical towards cooperatives. The main critiques often raised against cooperativism involve the transformation of workers to owners, the possibility of deteriorating labor rights and conditions, and the disorientation of workers from the *real* class struggle. This provides a dichotomy, where more traditional working class politics and prefigurative alternatives take different paths at the expense of forming an antagonistic post-capitalist discourse.

Our analysis suggests that cooperative media can have a rather crucial role in articulating a counter-hegemonic discourse and therefore connecting different demands and struggles under a post-capitalist framework. Ef.Syn and AlterThess are two paradigmatic examples of media cooperative ventures in Greece, through which class demands constitute part of a broader intersectional politics of class. Cooperative media offer an alternative form in the organization of media labor based on collective decision making and principles of horizontality, equality and collective responsibility. Moreover, they can play an instrumental role in covering issues in a variety of social sites that would not normally find a place in mainstream platforms, thus drawing equivalences among marginalized and excluded identities, demands and struggles.

During the last decade, a number of independent grassroots media endeavors have emerged across Greece offering alternatives to the capitalist media oligopoly. Following the role of the Web2.0 in the square uprisings across the world (Halpin and Henshaw-Plath 2022), The PressProject, Omnia TV, Infolibre and others offer valuable news coverage and analysis using social media platforms and adding new artillery to the traditional leftwing and anarchist media outlets. Nevertheless, our research shows that Ef.Syn and AlterThess provide an exceptional example in the organization of work in a sector that cooperativism has limited influence. Media cooperatives cannot escape the small role that SSE's market share has in Greece (British Council 2017, 56). Given that cooperatives are labor- and not capital-intensive ventures with increased degrees of group-dependency, media cooperatives might be incapable of bypassing their limited role both in terms of outreach and economic sustainability unless a broader sectoral increase of SSE materializes. Nevertheless, it is unfair to judge the role of cooperatives, and cooperative media in particular, by simply juxtaposing and comparing them with their mainstream counterparts. The social and political value that cooperatives add both to the sectors they operate as well as to their local communities requires a closer, contextualized examination of different sectoral case studies through a network-analysis perspective in order to unfold different links that assist the construction of a counter-hegemonic discourse; we suggest that this may serve as a direction for future contributions aiming to further develop the class-cooperativism nexus in formulating a more expansive politics of class.

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