

Countering co-optation

Keeping the 'alternative' in alternative organising

Organisational alternatives hold the potential to change society. However, their principles and practices may be appropriated by the very systems they were once posed against. With the collaborative research project of AlterEcos, Sara Dahlman, Erik Mygind du Plessis, Emil Husted, and Sine Nørholm Just investigate the tactics by which organisations can push for alternative forms, even while they encounter their own co-optation into the dominant order.

From co-operatives to cryptocurrency, many alternative approaches to organising economic activity have arguably been co-opted by the very system they were meant to counterbalance or overcome. How can such movements break free from the hegemonic order they inhabit, while retaining the integrity of their vision? Professor Sine Nørholm Just, Sara Dahlman, Erik Mygind du Plessis from Roskilde University, Copenhagen Business School, and the University of Southern Denmark, Denmark, seek to answer these questions through their wide-ranging AlterEcos project. AlterEcos explores what it means for economic forms to be 'dominant' and 'alternative' in contemporary society, what happens to 'alternative' economic thought when it becomes widely accepted, and how, in this context, economic change is possible.

The project is rooted in an 'ecological' understanding of the economy (with both terms etymologically linked through the Greek 'oikos', meaning 'household'). This highlights that within the word 'economy' itself there is the seed of anti-capitalist potential: economics was founded on the governing principle of sustainability rather than the constant striving for accumulation and growth.

By introducing the notion of the 'performativity of economics', the project works against the received wisdom that the economy is self-regulating and therefore immutable. Instead, it can be rethought and performed in radical and imaginative new iterations, but how do such alternatives emerge?

AN ALTERNATIVE TO WHAT, AND HOW?

To label something 'alternative' begs the thorny question: 'alternative to what,

and how?' There is a particularly complex tension between a desire to see one's own principles gain traction and appeal, while resisting the possibility of these principles being co-opted (and perhaps diluted) by the dominant order.

Proponents of alternative organising consider capitalism to be the currently dominant social order against which alternatives should be posed. Alternative organisations may run counter to the dictates of capitalism in their principles and/or practices. For example, *promoting individual autonomy* is a principle that opposes the constraints that capitalism imposes on human freedom via workplace hierarchies and wealth inequality. Similarly, *encouraging solidarity* resists the atomisation of workers by competition and consumerism, while the principle of *taking responsibility* for our future challenges the unceasing capitalist drive for profit and growth. These three principles offer a framework for identifying alternative organisations, but such an approach focuses only on explicit opposition to capitalist values. After all, organisations may defy capitalist imperatives without being overtly antagonistic to them – and we should focus on the practices of such organisations as well as the principles to which alternatives adhere.

When focusing on practices, contemporary research highlights existing alternatives. For example, capitalism's reliance upon strong managerial control and superficial democratic input may be countered by the practices of horizontal decision-making, open meetings, and artistic self-expression. Such practices can form the basis of 'prefigurative politics', whereby an organisation's structure is designed not merely to pressure the system to change but to ultimately shape the world in its own organisational image. Prefigurative politics seeks to proactively



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enact the change it wants to see in the world at large, instigating a microcosm of alternative organisation.

While a practice-based approach to organisations helpfully recognises practical alternatives that may lack consistent principles, it implies that the practices which counter capitalism at this particular moment are inherently valuable. As a result, this approach remains ambivalent about how to respond when formerly alternative practices are co-opted by the dominant order (we see this over and over again with the co-opting of sustainable practices by organisations keen to 'green wash' their own environmental inactivity, for example).

THE FACTOR OF FREEDOM

A third, less developed approach to alternative organisations focuses on their relation with freedom. In this context, freedom involves countering dominant norms and institutions rather than promoting a specific set of principles or practices. In other words, freedom is the

therefore constantly reinvent themselves to remain alternative and resist their (own) domination.

In studying disparate forms of alternative organising, the AlterEcos project has developed the notion of *alternativity* as freedom. Cases are drawn from alternatives concerning the individual subject (mindfulness and meditation), the economy (a sustainable pensions investment company), and politics (an independent political party). While all these cases demonstrate the endeavour to remain 'alternative' in the face of potential appropriation, they also face some degree of absorption into the dominant system.

FROM REJECTION TO APPROPRIATION

All three cases follow a similar trajectory in which an initial impulse towards 'not being governed like that' and, hence, rejecting the powers that be, is soon followed by a risk of appropriation, of being incorporated within existing structures – or, indeed, becoming the new order. The latter occurred in the case of the independent political party, Independents for Frome (IfF), which gained absolute majority in the council of Frome in the UK. While the party also learned that the power of town councils is limited, a main insight from this case is that once an alternative becomes dominant, it must think about how to reinvent itself. The former happened to *SusPens* (a pseudonym), a financial tech start-up company that sought to delink pension investments from current market logics but ended up contributing to profit maximisation through sustainable investment portfolios. Here, a main question becomes whether and how one can change capitalism when accepting its



'Alternative' organisations run the risk of becoming incorporated within existing structures.



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terms of operation. Finally, the ostensibly gentle practices of ‘mindfulness’ might be corrupted when, for instance, adopted by the military and police, with a view to ultimately creating calmer and more calculating killers. Here, the question becomes one of ensuring that a potentially emancipatory practice is not harnessed for purposes of subjugation.

TACTICS OF EMERGENCE

When the three cases encountered the double bind of either rejecting dominant orders but remaining uninfluential or gaining influence but risking appropriation, they sought to carve out spaces of freedom in between the two extremes, using various tactics. These tactics of emergence – of maintaining the potential for new forms to emerge – include endurance, germination, and reiteration. In the case of SusPens, *endurance* meant accepting the corrupted version of its organisation, while pushing the financial

sector in a more sustainable direction from within. Choosing to continue to work within the financial section enables SusPens to explore possibilities for more sustainable investment, while potentially opening previously unforeseen cracks and crevices for more radical alternative organising. It is an organisation that only makes very small changes, one step at the time, but that persists in its endeavour and offers enduring – if marginal – alternatives to current investment practices.

Mindfulness offers an example of the tactic of *germination*. Despite managerial intentions in private corporations and public institutions alike to use mindfulness to make their workforces more productive and resilient, meditation practices may still function as a ‘Trojan horse’, transforming organisations from within, while dressed in the trappings of capitalist ideology. Germination thus turns appropriation into an asset, seeing co-opted practices

as holding the potential to spawn alternatives despite their co-optation.

The lff party exemplifies the tactic of *reiteration*. Upon gaining an absolute majority in the town council, the founding lff councillors decided not to run for a third term. Most expressed concern that the party structures that were ultimately developed were less fun and more demanding than expected, while (un)official male leaders subordinated and even excluded female councillors. The newly elected third administration sought to reinvent lff by focusing on the need to tackle feelings of marginalisation, thereby raising the importance of collaboration and dialogue. As such, what used to be alternative for lff – being bold and radical – was later rejected, and what previously seemed tedious and ineffective – inclusivity and transparency – became the new alternative. Reiteration is thus a continuous reinvention of principles and practices through trial and error, allowing infinite iterations of the original project and upholding the potentiality of alternavity as freedom.

ALTERNATIVITY AS FREEDOM

Through the diverse nature of its studies, the AlterEcos project offers a nuanced and holistic reconsideration of the potential for alternative organising. The researchers highlight that the appropriation of organisational forms by capitalism does not necessarily end alternative endeavours. If organisations can endure the corruption of some of their elements, they can still make changes from within the dominant order. Furthermore, principles and practices may be absorbed into this order, germinate, and provoke change from within through their potential for disruption.

Moreover, the development of further iterations of an organisational form allows for constant reinvention and retains the potential for freedom. Indeed, these tactics of emergence uphold alternavity as freedom, wherein alternative organisations can remain in some way free from hegemonic structures and position themselves as alternatives, while encountering their own co-optation by the capitalist system. It is through these tactics, therefore, that human freedom becomes possible – as an endless process rather than an attainable goal.

Behind the Research



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Research Objectives

The AlterEcos project studies alternative forms of organising.

Detail

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Bio

Beginning from the study of existing

alternative organisations, the AlterEcos project explores prospects for change that emerge within economic and societal orders – not as its radical ‘Other’, but as its ‘second selves’, its AlterEcos. The project simply asks: How do alternatives to currently dominant forms of economic organising become possible?

Funding

The Velux Foundations

Collaborators

The AlterEcos team are: [Sara Dahlman](#), [Emil Husted](#), [Erik Mygind du Plessis](#) and [Sine N Just](#)

References

Dahlman, S, du Plessis, EM, Husted, E, Just, S, (2022) Alternativity as freedom: Exploring tactics of emergence in alternative forms of organizing. *Human Relations*. doi.org/10.1177/00187267221080124

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Personal Response

In recent years, worker cooperatives have seen renewed interest as alternative economic organisations. Does the concept of alternavity as freedom offer us unique insights into this form of organisation?

“ Worker cooperatives are important examples of alternative forms of organising that both reject existing organisational norms (notably, offering workers ownership of the means of production) and immediately risk being co-opted by these very norms (for instance, worker cooperatives can be harnessed for profit maximisation). Thus, the concept of alternavity as freedom alerts us to the need to constantly rethink what worker cooperatives are and can be, just as such cooperatives should actively negotiate the tension between rejection and co-optation – whether using the tactics of emergence we have identified or developing their own. ”



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