



# Organizing otherwise: Translating anarchism in a voluntary sector organization

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Although foundational texts in Critical Management Studies (CMS) pointed to the empirical significance of anarchism as an inspiration for alternative ways of organizing (Burrell, 1992), relatively little work of substance has been undertaken within CMS to explore how anarchists organize or how anarchist principles of organization might fare in other contexts. This paper addresses this gap by reporting on the experiences of a UK Voluntary Sector Organization (VSO) seeking to adopt non-hierarchical working practices inspired by anarchism. The paper analyses this process of organizational change by examining how ideas and practices are translated and transformed as they travel from one context (direct action anarchism) to another (the voluntary sector). Whilst the onset of austerity and funding cuts created the conditions of possibility for this change, it was the discursive translation of ‘anarchism’ into ‘non-hierarchical organizing’ that enabled these ideas to take hold. The concept of ‘non-hierarchical’ organization constituted an open space that was defined by negation and therefore capable of containing a multiplicity of meanings. Rather than having to explicitly embrace anarchism, members were able to find common ground on what they did not want (hierarchy) and create a discursive space for democratically determining what might replace it.

## Introduction

In the early 1990s, Gibson Burrell wrote that there were a ‘growing number of alternative organizational forms now appearing, whether inspired by anarchism, syndicalism, the ecological movement, the co-operative movement, libertarian communism, self-help groups or, perhaps most importantly, by feminism’ (1992: 82). These organizations offer an alternative to the dominant form of the capitalist business enterprise, which Burrell understood as repressing autonomous human development. Since 1992, however, most critical studies of management have focused attention power relations in mainstream capitalist

organizations (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Costas and Fleming, 2009; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Knights and McCabe, 1998; Poulter and Land, 2008). Resistance has mostly been understood in terms of opposition to capitalist, managerialist forms of control rather than on alternative, non-capitalist forms of organization (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Fleming, 2014; Fleming and Spicer, 2010; King and Learmonth, 2014; cf. Parker et al., 2014). Whilst such studies have been invaluable in deepening our understanding of power and domination in contemporary management, they can lead to a kind of critical melancholy (Gibson-Graham, 2006). By exposing new, more sophisticated forms of exploitation and domination within even apparently emancipatory management practices like teamwork (Barker, 1993), participation (Cooke and Kothari, 2001) or self-management (Bramming et al., 2011), CMS risks theorizing power as monolithic and resistance as futile. Instead of cultivating new organizational practices and subjectivities, this form of critique effectively forecloses potential for real change. Whilst an affirmative experimentation with organizational change requires compromise, CMS has tended towards a politics of purity that evaluates attempts to organize otherwise from a safe distance. In effect, critique has become a form of 'secular holiness' (du Gay, 1998) in which the critical subject occupies a relatively safe and risk free position abstracted from the messy realities of 'doing' organization (King, 2014). This has sidelined the development of alternative, perhaps more humane, ways of organizing. As Gibson-Graham (2006: 4) put it, 'Strong theory... affords the pleasures of recognition, of capture, of intellectually subduing that one last thing. It offers no relief or exit to a place beyond'.

In light of these melancholic, critical investments, relatively little has been done within CMS to develop Burrell's suggestion that 'alternative' organizational forms found in political social movements (Reedy and Learmonth, 2009) should be examined as possible sources of new ideas for organizing (cf. Parker, 2011; Parker et al., 2014; Parker et al., 2007; Williams, 2005). This paper contributes to the small but growing literature in CMS on anarchist organizing by examining a voluntary sector organization (VSO) that consciously adopted an anarchistic model of organizing. In line with calls for a 'critical performativity' (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Spicer et al., 2009), the research deployed a methodology grounded in 'engaged scholarship' (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006) and participatory action research (Kindon et al., 2007) to actively foster alternative, anarchist inspired, organization. Our concern as researchers was to support democratic organizational change through the research process. The case study is a small voluntary sector education service provider called World Education (WE)<sup>1</sup> who, following a period of managerialism in the early 2000s, decided to review their

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1 Throughout the paper we have used pseudonyms for the case organization.

organizational principles and practices to become less hierarchical and more democratic. Drawing inspiration from anarchist social movements, they experimented with non-hierarchical organizing and consensus decision-making, to align their practices with their political and ethical value system; a process that our research sought to support.

Following a short literature review of anarchist organization studies, the paper outlines the methodology used in the empirical study: a combination of non-expert consultancy, participatory action research, and semi-structured interviewing. Together these methods enabled a combination of sympathetic engagement, intervention and critical distance. Part three describes the case organization in more detail, giving an account of its historical development from a radical activist organization in the British Midlands in the 1980s to a professional education service provider, with 5 full time employees and a turnover in the region of £400k by the late 2000s. The change of UK government in 2010, coupled with internal conflict, a change of leadership and an increasingly austere funding regime, brought WE full circle and to considering a return to its more radical, anarchistic roots.

Part four of the paper analyses these changes, working through the issues arising from introducing anarchist, 'non-hierarchical' principles and practices into the organization. Drawing upon concepts from the sociology of translation (Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996) we suggest that translating organizational practices and principles from one sector (anarchist social movements) to another (the voluntary sector) is not a simple matter of transfer, but also of transformation, constituting a new assemblage of meanings and practices whilst drawing inspiration from the original. The main focus in the discussion is on the linguistic and conceptual translation from 'anarchism' to 'non-hierarchical'. This discursive shift had two main effects. First, it de-emphasized a contentious political position that some members felt would not allow a professional enough organizational performance to secure funding. Second, it replaced the fullness of a positive, albeit contested, approach to politics with a more open space, defined by negation, within which democratic debate over organizational practices could take place. 'Non-hierarchical' in the case did not so much signify a presence as an absence. Given widespread disillusionment with hierarchy within the organization, this empty signifier<sup>2</sup> or 'non-signifier' facilitated agreement between members about what they did not want the organization to be. This enabled them to engage in the kind of directly democratic, autonomous ideal of

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2 We are not using the concept of the empty signifier here in the sense that Laclau (1996) does, but in a more general sense to refer to a signifier that designates absence, rather than presence.

self-determination that lies at the heart of anarchism (Graeber, 2013), without explicitly labelling themselves as an ‘anarchist’ organization.

## Anarchism, critique and management studies

Although there are currents of anarcho-syndicalism running through some workers’ cooperatives, anarchist theory and practice has largely been neglected within Critical Management Studies. Of course, anarchism itself is a highly contested concept. In popular culture, anarchism is more often associated with violent political protest and bomb throwing than it is taken seriously as a political position (eg. Chesterton, 2010; Conrad, 2011; Pynchon, 2006). Theoretically it covers a range of positions from the libertarianism of Robert Nozick (1974), through Stirner’s (1995) egoistic individualism, Kropotkin’s (2006) mutualism and collectivism, Bakunin’s (1973) revolutionary activism and Proudhon’s (1979) federalism. More recently, anarchism has been associated with many of the ‘even newer social movements’ (Crossley, 2003; Day, 2005), for example the alter-globalization movement (Feigenbaum et al., 2014; Maeckelbergh, 2009), self-identifying anarchist groups (Sutherland, 2014), environmentalist organizations (Day, 2005; Sutherland et al., 2014) and Occupy (Graeber, 2013; Halvorsen, 2014).

At its most simple, anarchy can be defined as ‘the absence of a master, of a sovereign’ (Proudhon, 1970: 203). As Peter Marshall (2008: x) notes, this reflects the etymological roots of the word ‘anarchy’ which ‘comes from the ancient Greek *αναρχία* meaning the condition of being “without a leader” but usually translated and interpreted as “without a ruler”’. This sense of being without a leader is reflected in the recent work of Neil Sutherland on mechanisms and practices of leadership in anarchist organizations as a collective process of meaning-making operating in the absence of formally appointed leaders (Sutherland, 2014). This suggests that anarchists’ primary concern is with the creation of hierarchy and the separation of leaders as designated individuals or groups who occupy positions of power and exercise authority over others.

This is not to say that leadership and authority do not exist at all in anarchist organizations. Colin Ward identifies three sources of authority deriving from a formal position in a chain of command, from specialist knowledge and expertise, or from ‘special wisdom’ (Ward, 1982: 43). In an organization based on anarchist principles, leadership shifts according to expertise relevant to the task in hand rather than being allocated by a formal position in an organizational structure. ‘This fluid, changing leadership derives from authority, but this authority derives from each person’s self-chosen function in performing the task in hand’ (Ward,

1982: 43). This model of organization offers a more democratic form of organization, based on free association and mutual aid, and mitigates some of the dysfunctions of formal authority and hierarchy. For anyone working in a university it will hardly be a surprise that those who study marketing or work organization are the last people that would ever be consulted by vice-chancellors and senior management on matters of university branding or reorganizing the university's administrative structure. As many studies of informal organization have shown, not only does 'the knowledge and wisdom of the people at the bottom of the pyramid [find] no place in the decision-making leadership hierarchy of the institution. Frequently it is devoted to making the institution work in spite of the formal leadership structure, or alternatively to sabotaging the ostensible function of the institution, because it is none of their choosing' (Ward, 1982: 43; cf. Bensman and Gerver, 1963; Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939; Roy, 1959).

Regardless of performative efficacy, however, anarchists are first and foremost concerned with direct action and autonomy (Ward, 1982: 27). Autonomy is understood in terms of the free association of individuals in collective action that is determined through directly democratic processes. Direct action means taking responsibility for problems, rather than petitioning those in authority, such as political representatives, to deal with them. In both cases, the focus is on constituting organizational processes that support autonomy and direct action, rather than disempowering individuals and groups by placing responsibility and authority in the hands of a small, organizational elite.

Despite the difficult historical relationship between anarchism and Marxism, best illustrated by the tensions between Bakunin and Marx in determining the political structures of the First International in the 1870s (see Miller, 1984: chapter 6, for a discussion), they share a common opposition to capitalism as a social system that disempowers workers, and thus see work as a central terrain for political contestation. As Colin Ward (1982: 27) puts it: 'The autonomy of the worker at work is the most important field in which [the] expropriation of decision-making can apply'. The central concern for anarchism, therefore, is not the increased effectiveness that might be realized by decentralization of decision-making and authority,<sup>3</sup> but political empowerment. Rather than a rejection of order and organization per se, anarchy suggests an approach to organization that refuses hierarchical relations of domination, whether by 'leaders', 'bosses', 'rulers' or 'managers', and seeks the coordination of action in a radically

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3 See Hamel, 2011 for a recent managerialist version of this argument. Hamel, it should be noted, formulates this problem as one of efficiency and effectiveness rather than exploring the wider meaning and purpose of the organization.

democratic and participative frame. It therefore ties in well with the established literature on workplace democracy and workers' cooperatives (Atzeni and Vieta, 2014; Cheney, 1999; Kokkinidis, 2014; Ranis, 2006; Srinivas, 1993; Vanek, 1975; Webb and Cheney, 2014).

Rejecting the liberal democratic understanding of government, which situates the state as the defender of democratic liberty, and therefore seeing anarchism's anti-state position as anti-liberal-democratic, David Graeber (2013: 154) writes that:

Anarchism does not mean the negation of democracy... Rather, anarchism is a matter of taking... democratic principles to their logical conclusions.

Reflecting this demand for direct, rather than representative, democracy, anarchism can be defined in terms of core 'principles of horizontal, radical, participative democracy and the destruction of hierarchy' (Sutherland et al., 2014: 765). Whilst forms of vertical hierarchy may be unavoidable (Freeman, 1972; Lagalisse, 2010; Nunes, 2014), the ideal of a flat, non-hierarchical, radically democratic and autonomous form of organization is one that most anarchists would subscribe to.

Crucially, this ideal is both an organizational 'end' and a 'means'. Anarchist organizations embed autonomy and democracy in their organizational practices by developing forms of participatory democracy and reflexivity that aim to 'model and enact a different vision of how the world might be organized, thereby inspiring hope that another world is possible' (Smith 2008: 203). In these organizations the principles of organizing are self-consciously reflected on, challenged and alternatives experimented with (Maeckelbergh, 2014) so that political ends become organizational means.

Of course, there are as many versions of anarchism as there are anarchists and the sheer diversity of *anarchisms* means that even an introductory text on anarchist theory runs to some 800 pages (Marshall, 2008). There are, however, some significant currents in contemporary anarchism that we would like to draw attention to as they provide important influences on the case organization discussed in the following sections, as well as underpinning movements like Occupy, that have brought a critique of capitalism, and constitutive practices of counter-capitalist organization, into popular discourse in recent years. One of the central principles in the anarchist tendencies discussed above is horizontalism: an approach that intends to create non-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian ways of organizing and acting (cf. Nunes, 2014). To do this they use organizing mechanisms such as consensus-based decision-making, spokescouncils and tools for reflection to overcome forms of exclusion and 'limit power inequalities that

inevitably arise' (Maeckelbergh, 2011: 164). Whilst these practices tend to focus on explicit decision-making processes within meetings and pay less attention to the wider processes of exclusion that shape who can be present in these fora (Blee, 2012), they do present possibilities for a prefigurative participative democracy (Graeber, 2013). This approach to participatory democracy is more than simply a set of systems or techniques. It is an ethos in which processes of organization become reflexively self-present (Maeckelbergh, 2011). In contrast to a potentially infinite deferral of the 'good organization' into a utopian future, these organizations enact their political values in their everyday organizational practices here and now, 'learning how to organise the world differently' through experimentation and direct action (Maeckelbergh, 2011: 96).

Despite the insights that studies of the alter-globalization movement or Occupy offer those interested in alternatives to conventional management, there are few accounts that have directly applied them to managing and organizing in other contexts. Studies of workplace democracy rarely draw upon anarchist political philosophy to understand workers' control, and have done relatively little to connect to contemporary anarchist political struggles and social movements (for exceptions see Kokkinidis, 2014 and Atzeni and Vieta, 2014). In contrast, studies of organization that do draw explicitly upon anarchist theory tend to focus exclusively on directly political forms of organization, failing to reconnect these ideas and practices to more everyday contexts of work organization. If these ideas of organizing are going to reach beyond protest movements then we need to understand how their principles and practices might be transposed into other organizational contexts and what happens when institutional entrepreneurs attempt to make anarchist principles and practices travel beyond the relatively narrow confines of protest movements.

The following sections of this paper take up this challenge by examining how anarchist principles travelled into a Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organization. A number of Voluntary Sector Organizations (VSOs) have explicitly sought to organize themselves along non-hierarchical and emancipatory lines (Kleinman, 1996) and there are discursive tendencies in the sector toward versions of mutual aid and direct action as a means of realizing social change by empowering the socially marginalized. In this sense, the sector provides a best case context in which to experiment with anarchist forms of organization. This is not to suggest that the sector is a hotbed of radicalism. Many VSOs mirror the organizing principles and practices of for-profit organizations, particularly as they face institutional pressure from funders to be more accountable, professional or even business-like (Sanders and McClellan, 2014; Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010). Whilst it should not be assumed most VSOs operate in a markedly different manner to conventional organizations, we are suggesting that

VSOs offer a particular potential for organizing otherwise due to their explicitly social mission. Our case organization's structure was quite distinctive in this regard, as it had its historical origins in an explicitly anarchistic social centre with a politically radical agenda for social change.

## **Case organization and methods**

In April 2012 the Chair of World Education approached Daniel to discuss organizational change. At this meeting he explained that WE had experienced dramatic changes in recent years. The organization had gone from an egalitarian to a hierarchical, authoritarian management style that eroded both their original ethos and staff autonomy. Some members had recently left, most notably the director, and the remaining employees were looking for an alternative to managerial hierarchy. Others on the management committee were more comfortable in traditional command and control structures. We were asked to facilitate a meeting to air different perspectives, explore possibilities for organizing without hierarchy and to support the organization through any subsequent changes.

Before explaining the details of the case it is worth saying something about research methods. The project was conducted in the spirit of engaged research within the 'performative turn' in CMS (Spicer et al., 2009), which seeks to bring about practical transformations in organizational practice (King and Learmonth, 2014). The idea was to break with more traditional notions of academic distance, objectivity, authority and expertise, and to collaborate with the organizational members in experimenting with new models of organization. Our intention was to work in ways that would be useful to the organization and not only to our academic careers. To do this we adopted three distinct roles: Participatory Action Researcher, Critical Consultant and Critical Researcher.

Using Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Kindon et al., 2007) we worked with WE to develop a reflexive understanding of their organizational practices and align them with the more anarchistic, participative, democratic values that they subscribe to. This approach has a long history, particularly with workers' cooperative groups in Mondragón (Whyte, 1991) and is well suited to working with anarchist organizations due to its democratic and participatory intent (Krimmerman, 2001). Throughout the project we have worked with organizational members to develop the project's guiding research questions. Daniel worked with WE for over 18 months as part of a 'working group on non-hierarchical ways of organizing'. In this capacity he took notes on meetings and observations that often doubled as both fieldnotes and official minutes. He worked with WE to



understand their problems and provided material for members to read and use, exploring concepts and practices like consensus-based decision-making (Seeds for Change, 2013) and prefiguration (Maeckelbergh, 2011). The participative approach also extended to making visible aspects of the research process and design, from ethical approval procedures to interview questions.

Secondly, at times we took a role more akin to that of (critical) consultants. Together we facilitated a workshop to enable members to air views on how they organized themselves, including attitudes to hierarchy and the strengths and weaknesses of the organization. We also facilitated connections with other organizations undergoing similar changes. Throughout the research Chris took a more advisory role, acting more as a sounding board for suggestions that organizational members made and offered practical suggestions as well as theoretical perspectives on some of the dynamics at work within World Education. Working in tandem, we were able to create the simultaneous closeness and distance that characterizes engaged scholarship.

Thirdly we also undertook more conventional case-study research using interviews to explore our academic interests. We conducted eight interviews, of around one hour each, with members of the organization and management committee. These interviews were transcribed and analyzed in terms of members' explicit orientations to hierarchy and organization as well as personal biography, experience of other organizations and the narratives they told about WE. In keeping with the ambitions and ethos of the research project, the focus of these interviews came from the collaborative research design process. We sought to combine our academic research interests with the concerns of WE's members, to generate a reflexive understanding that was both academically relevant and facilitated a deeper organizational understanding. As they explained, the research program should provide a useful insight into how different members understood the term 'non-hierarchical' and 'how far along this road [of non-hierarchical organizing] we want to travel'.

### **Who are World Education?**

Drawing on WE's annual reports, website, publications and interviews this section gives an historical account of the organization. According to their website WE are a UK based, regional charity 'supporting educators and youth-workers to develop the skills and abilities necessary to make sense of this complex world and

accelerated social change'<sup>4</sup>. A Voluntary Organization run almost exclusively on project funding, they currently have six part-time staff members and a management committee of ten people. At its peak their turnover was almost £400,000 a year. Since the austerity measures implemented by the UK government in 2010, the organization's income has fallen dramatically, like many public and voluntary sector organizations. Voluntary organizations have received a disproportionately large percentage of austerity cuts, with estimated cuts of £1.7bn between 2010 and 2017, before inflation (NCVO, 2013).

WE have two main lines of work: education and youth work. Education projects are mostly conducted in partnership with secondary schools and aims to 'educate people about different cultures' (interview with project worker). Operating as a Development Education Centre (DEC) they provide training, educational resources and a school linking project which supports educational trips to other countries. The youth work arm delivers global citizenship through participatory workshops, using street cultural forms such as hip-hop and graffiti. This approach is built around a Freirean pedagogical approach that uses dialogue to 'enhance self-understanding through a reflexive interrogation of values and ideas' and 'foster an open and outward-looking mindset via engagement with multiple contexts and global perspectives' (Organization Website). In common with many community organizations (Ledwith, 1997; Newman et al., 2004) this is based on 'democratic learning ... [where] everybody's a teacher and everybody's a student in a Freirean sense' (former chair). The idea is to challenge the top-down, hierarchical systems of education that young people are familiar with through formal schooling, and to facilitate a collective form of autonomous learning in a non-hierarchical relationship. As their annual report states, they use '[i]nformal approaches to educating young people; encouraging critical understandings of the interconnectivities of the global local and personal; facilitating positive participation in social change for justice and equality'.

These two strands of work combine in the overarching goal of creating a more just, equal and fair society based on individuals and communities that understand their mutual interdependence and interconnectedness with others throughout the world: a perspective that one education worker illustrated with a video clip of the 'Global Wombat'<sup>5</sup>. Within this overarching framework there are

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4 All quotes from websites are paraphrased to protect the anonymity of the organization. Whilst anonymity was not a particular issue for the members of the organization, it was stipulated as a requirement for ethical approval of the research by our institutions so rather than renegotiate this, we have opted to retain this principle. For a discussion of the limits of anonymity in organizational research, see Taylor and Land (2014).

5 <http://www.globalcommunity.org/flash/wombat.shtml>.

variations in approach. The education work in schools is more formalized and structured, while the youth work uses more participative, democratic approaches, enabling a degree of emergent self-organization on a project-by-project basis.

### *Beginnings: A social centre*

For its first five years, what became World Education was a social centre (cf. Hodkinson and Chatterton, 2006) providing a meeting space for local activists, a social change library, newsletter, permaculture garden, a veg box scheme and a variety of educational courses. Rooted in DIY, anarchist activism they were also 'home for a wide range of alternative, radical social groups— environmentalist, hunt-subs, anarchists and community activists. The centre provided a community for anyone feeling excluded from the rapidly globalizing, homogeneous culture dominant in wider society' (WE Annual Report 2012). The centre operated a loosely structured, consensus based approach similar to other activist organizations, with an explicitly non-hierarchical, horizontal decision-making structure where everyone, regardless of position, was paid the same and had an equal voice in running the organization (cf. Firth, 2011; Kleinman, 1996). These horizontal, anti-authoritarian structures and processes were explicitly framed in terms of anarchist principles of autonomy and free association.

### *Phase two: The emergence of World Education*

In order to fulfil its aims, the social centre successfully applied for funding and was able to employ part-time staff. During this second phase the focus was on environmental sustainability and work began with schools. With funding conditions and the institutional requirements of working in the formal education sector, WE became more professionalized and relocated to a serviced business centre. World Education was established as a separate charity and eventually replaced the social centre, which was wound down and the property sold to help fund the organization. This transition brought with it increased formalization and hierarchy as they became a legal charity with delineated jobs and roles. During the transition to this second phase some of the initial founders left, unhappy with the direction the organization was taking.

### *Phase three: Formalization and growth*

The third phase saw environmentalism moving into the background as the organization consolidated around International Development education. They received more funding from government agencies, mostly working with local authorities who contracted with them to deliver particular work packages. In this phase, WE's historical roots as an anarchist social center generated tensions with the new institutional context they were operating in. Concerned that they were

perceived as a ‘tin-pot’, ‘unprofessional’ charity, they wanted to ‘shake off’ their ‘hippy image’ (youth worker) so that they would be taken seriously as a ‘professional’ organization that the ‘council would be happy to partner with’ (education worker). One of the longest serving members explained to us that Council officials were confused by the absence of a clear authority structure, asking who was in-charge, who was responsible for decision-making and, ultimately, who could be held accountable. In order to secure funding in this context they tried to organize in a more ‘business like way’ so as to ‘look like a safe pair of hands for the funders’ (current Chair).

In this third phase, WE embarked on a strategy of formalization and growth with a focus on ‘reputation building’ and professionalization. The current members all spoke of this period as being more structured, formalized and outwardly professional. They rebranded with a set colour scheme, moved their offices to a more prestigious area of the city, built networks and alliances, and were recognized on a regional and national stage. In conventional terms WE were at their most successful, with five full-time employees and a turnover of between £300-400k.

This formalization brought an increase in hierarchy and bureaucracy, culminating in the formal appointment of a director. As one of the members explained:

Mary went on some sort of training course where it was like, “we should really have a Director.” So Mary was appointed as Director.

Working with the then chair of the Management Committee, who was a close friend and long-term ally, Mary appointed herself as Director. The first that the employees knew was when a new organizational chart was emailed around, showing the changes in pay and communication structure. One of the youth work team was promoted from co-ordinator to manager and the administrator was offered a new title of ‘centre manager’. This move was presented in terms of professionalization and efficiency but the current members gave a very negative account of these changes and positioned them as turning point in WE’s history. It was the point at which formal hierarchy and authority entirely replaced the more grassroots, autonomous, anarchist ethos that had historically guided the organization.

#### *Phase four: And back again?*

The fourth phase can be seen as one of crisis. Like many VCOs, in the wake of the austerity measures introduced by the UK’s Con/Dem coalition government after 2010, WE’s core funding was cut. WE have been active in campaigning

against the cuts (indeed one of our interview days was preceded with an anti-austerity banner making event) but this also led them to rethink how they operated. The structure and size of the organization, sustainable in times of funding abundance, became difficult to maintain. Jobs were lost and working hours were reduced. With the loss of core funding, WE's finances became precarious. The director's salary was not financially sustainable so Mary left to become a freelance consultant, taking with her one of the more viable funded projects. The Youth Team Manager and members of the Management Committee, including the Chair that had approved her appointment as Director, left around the same time, creating an organizational vacuum.

Without a formally appointed manager the organization reverted to more ad hoc methods of coordination. With a relatively small group of workers, mostly working in close physical proximity, this was not a huge challenge but represented more of a drift than an intentional change strategy. It was with the appointment of a new Chair, who had a background in social movements and a Masters in Activism Studies, that the group began a more intensive period of reflexive evaluation of their organizing practices. As this new Chair put it:

World Education is an organization which is aspiring to create a more just, equal, democratic, fairer world and it seems ironic, paradoxical, hypocritical, contradictory, that the way that it organizes itself replicates a lot of the problems within a world that is trying to move away from.

Drawing upon the language of prefiguration (Graeber, 2013; Maeckelbergh, 2011), several members explained that their organizational practices should match the values they aspired to realize through their work. Especially in their youth work, WE took an approach grounded in Paulo Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the oppressed* and a relationship of mutual learning, rather than teacher/student. Their concern in this work was to empower young people to take control of their lives, encouraging an active attitude of mutual aid and autonomy, rather than passive dependency. Members did not see this approach mirrored in the hierarchical structures that WE had adopted. For some, the Chair included, hierarchical organizing was both a result and cause of wider problems with the environment and society, and so could not be part of the solution to those problems.

To work through these issues, we conducted visioning workshops with WE, involving volunteers as well as workers, discussing some of the problems arising from hierarchy and how a less hierarchical way of working might fit better with the ethos and origins of the organization. As their annual report from this time put it 'should we go back to our roots in social activism, or seek out a niche that will allow us to remain in the educational mainstream?' In this sense 'crisis' was

reframed as an opportunity to re-evaluate the way WE was organized and to consider contemporary anarchist organizational practices of horizontality, consensus, participatory democracy and prefiguration as part of a critical, self-reflexive process of organizing (Steyaert and Van Looy, 2010). This process, and its results, are explained in the following sections, first looking at how the need for a change and the desirability of a more anarchistic way of organizing were understood, then examining some of the tensions arising from the framing of this change process in terms of 'non-hierarchical' organizing. Our analysis focuses on the ways in which 'anarchist' ideas were reframed in terms of 'non-hierarchical organization', simultaneously making the changes more acceptable and displacing some of their substantive content. Our argument is that the negative framing of change as toward non-hierarchical practices created an open discursive space in which directly democratic, anarchistic forms of self-organization could be performed. On the other hand, this openness has meant that, two years into the process, the organization still lacks a clear and shared understanding of what 'non-hierarchical' organization means and how WE should be managed.

### **Shades of anarchist discourse**

According to the current Chair the central aim of WE is 'creating a better world' and in doing so they 'should model the type of world we want to create, not just perpetuate the organization'. This is reiterated by the previous Chair who argued that the way WE organize themselves should be in 'the spirit of the organization's values, trying to make it as democratic as possible as participatory as possible, having an appreciation of the power of collective learning and gaining critical insights from other people ... pooling our collective insights so we can be as strong as possible'. At the heart of these statements is the belief that the means by which WE organizes itself should match the ends to which it aspires, fostering justice, equality and autonomy in both the wider society and in their own organizational practices. This conflation of means and ends lies at the centre of the anarchist belief in prefiguration (Maeckelbergh, 2009: 88). As the anthropologist David Graeber has noted when discussing the influence of anarchism on anti-capitalist activism from the 'battle of Seattle' protests against the G8 to Occupy Wall Street, 'Pretty much everyone in the activist community had come around to the idea of prefiguration: the idea that the organizational form that an activist group takes should embody the kind of society we wish to create' (Graeber, 2013: 23).

For some members, this perspective drew self-consciously on anarchist principles and was translated into demands for direct democracy, both in 'life'

and in ‘work’,<sup>6</sup> as illustrated by a picture in the 2011 Annual Report of the Chair holding a hand painted sign saying: ‘I want the right to self-management & to participate in making decisions that affect my life’. The ‘a’ in self-management had been replaced with the anarchist sign of the circled A, clearly referencing the political tradition within which he wanted to locate this demand. When asked about this in an interview, he cited a catalogue of contemporary anarchist influenced movements that had inspired him, including ‘things like Climate Camp, Earth First! gatherings and certain mobilizations leading up to the G8 summit in 2005 and indirect second hand experience like reading a huge amount about, not just theoretical, about people experiencing engaging in these processes... Bolivia anti-water privatization, Occupy... David Graeber’.

For an organization that had, in recent years at least, been focused on state funded education, the idea of drawing inspiration from Occupy and the Zapatista movement was contentious and not all of the members shared this political position. Whilst anarchist thought was explicitly discussed, and referenced symbolically, for example in the circled A appearing in official publications, some members worried that this would not be a good image for an organization that was still seeking funding for work with schools and local education authorities. To address this, proponents presented anarchist values as commensurate with the organization’s pedagogic practices in youth work and with the organization’s underlying ethos. Evoking consistency between means and ends, anarchistic methods of organization were legitimated by foregrounding WE’s working practices. By connecting anarchistic self-management with the ideals of equality, respect and collaborative learning underpinning youth work, prefiguration was translated into ‘walking the talk’ or ‘practicing what you preach’, and associated with a well-established and institutionally recognized set of youth work practices. The risk with this approach was that it exacerbated extant fault-lines in the organization. Those with a background in youth work were already more engaged with the idea of change and tended to see this as a much needed, positive reorientation. Those working in the more formal education sector, whose day-to-day work involved close coordination with schools and education authorities, tended to be more suspicious of ‘non-hierarchical’ working practices and inclined toward deploying the frame of ‘professionalization’ to legitimate more conventional forms of organization.

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6 See Kathi Weeks’ (2011) book *The Problem with Work* for a discussion of the political issues surrounding this distinction. We use the distinction here simply to flag up that the extension of democratic self-determination and autonomy to all spheres of life, including work, has been a theme throughout much of anarchist thought (Marshall, 2008), and was quite explicitly brought into the discussions at WE in this sense.

History also played a role in legitimizing change. Proponents presented anarchism not as something new but as a return to the organization's roots, for example by referencing the early days as a social centre and involvement in the environmental justice movements. By drawing upon the past, these institutional entrepreneurs constructed a narrative in which such ideas appeared natural for the organization. This move simultaneously challenged more positive accounts of professionalization and funding success in terms of an imposed 'hierarchy' that had caused WE to lose sight of its foundational values. This narrative was not universally accepted, however, and some members, particularly those working in the formal education sector, retained concerns about how WE would be perceived by external bodies, reasserting the need for a 'professional' demeanor against historical perceptions of the organization as 'unprofessional', 'tin-pot' and 'hippy'.

Against the counter-narrative that anarchist organization is unprofessional, a third strategy of legitimation was to work with business school academics. The narrative of a need for professional organization was strong, particularly amongst those workers and management committee members who came from education, unions or local government and were thus used to the forms of accountability and governance found in public bureaucracies and private firms. These modes of organizing had a strong degree of institutional legitimacy so appeared natural and normal when compared with models drawn from anarchism. Reflecting a kind of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), the perceptions of funding bodies and clients were evoked as requiring at least the semblance of a conventional organizational structure. Bringing business school academics in to run visioning workshops, conduct SWOT analyses and provide an overview of academically validated, 'alternative' organizational practices lent a degree of institutionalized legitimacy to what would otherwise have been, to some members, too radical to offer a sound basis for an organization that was still dependent upon external funding and collaboration with public sector organizations.

### **Translating anarchy**

One way to view these re-framings is through the lens of 'translation'. As sociological studies have used the term, 'translation' refers to a process by which particular practices, artefacts or ideas are transferred from one context to another. This transfer never leaves the objects unchanged, however, as they have to be translated to fit into the new context. By entering into a new set of relations, concepts, meanings, practices and even material objects are reconfigured, becoming something else in the process (see Czarniawska, 2010; Czarniawska



and Sevón, 1996; Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000). In this sense it goes beyond the strictly linguistic meaning of translation. As Czarniawska puts it, citing Latour:

It is important to emphasize, once again, that the meaning of “translation” in this context far surpasses the linguistic interpretation: it means “displacement, drift, invention, mediation, creation of a new link that did not exist before and modifies in part the two agents” (Latour, 1993, p. 6), that is, those who translated and that which is translated. (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996: 24)

This idea that a ‘new link’ is created is important from this theoretical perspective as the sociology of translation adopts a broadly anti-essentialist perspective (Land, 2007). The local relationships between humans, non-humans, meaning, artefacts, narratives and a range of other actants actively constitute a particular object, practice or organizational innovation. The connections made to translate a practice to a new context, assemble a new practice.

As we discussed in the previous section, anarchist theory, the practices and pedagogic principles of youth-work, a particular history of WE and even business school researchers were all mobilized as part of an attempt to construct a new assemblage of values, ideals and organizational practices. These were not uncontested, and narratives of professionalization and legitimacy were mobilized to resist the stabilization of this new assemblage. Those wanting a more anarchist organization in WE also had to translate anarchy into something that made sense in the very different context of the voluntary sector, education and youth work. Voluntary Sector Organizations are under increased pressure to be more business-like and adopt more conventional forms of management practice (Sanders & McClellan, 2014; Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010). Given that the label ‘anarchist’ is a highly mutable and contested term, as well as subject to significant moral approbation amongst certain social groups, one of the steps in this process was to linguistically translate ‘anarchist organizing’ into something else. This was a necessary step in constituting the idea as a quasi-object that could gain a degree of objectivity within the new context. As Czarniawska writes:

The simplest way of objectifying ideas is turning them into linguistic artifacts by repetitive use in an unchanged form, as in the case of labels, metaphors, platitudes... This is an attempt at a reproduction, a mechanical translation, intended to minimize displacement effects. Local labeling, for instance, is especially important in cases where ideas must be fitted into already existing action patterns, as it reflects the broader, societal categorizing... [For example,] decentralization can be almost any change in organizational structure, but by labelling actions in such ways, desired associations are created to master-ideas... such as modernity and community help [or] democracy and autonomy... Words are turned into labels by frequent repetition in an unquestioning mode in similar contexts, so that a possible “decentralization, why?” will give way to “decentralization, of course!” (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996: 32)

For this to happen effectively at WE, the ideas of ‘anarchist organization’ or even ‘alternative organization’, which were seen by some members as redolent of an undesirable, or now unrealistic, hippy past, had to be linguistically translated into something around which new organizational practices could be assembled. The crucial moment in this process was the translation of the ideas we have discussed in the previous sections into the simple label of ‘non-hierarchical organizing’. This label fitted well with the anarchistic ambitions of the institutional entrepreneurs driving the change, as it maps directly onto the broadest and most literal definition of anarchism as without (*an*) a leader/ruler/authority (*archos*). This anti-hierarchical position also had traction with those members who, whilst not anarchists, had been unhappy with the organizational form WE had adopted under Mary’s directorship.

### Assembling opposition to hierarchy

Whilst some members of WE baulked at the epithet anarchist, they could all agree on the desirability of non-hierarchical working practices. All of the current members spoke about the period under Mary’s directorship in negative terms. Complaints were primarily directed at the erosion of democratic decision-making that the organization had traditionally enjoyed, and the separation of a hierarchical elite from those they made decisions for. As one member put it, the Director’s departure was ‘why this all this sort of non-hierarchical business started to creep in really ... [the hierarchical approach resulted in] a lot of staff [being] quite disgruntled about how things were going with the management committee, a lot of the management committee resigned’ (Worker).

It was not only that Mary’s departure created an organizational hiatus. The hierarchical managerialism she had inaugurated was widely recognized as problematic, so provided a foil for the current changes. Internally there had been a separation between the management committee and staff meaning that decisions at a strategic level were not taking into account the views of WE employees, leading to a perceived disconnect in the organizations mission.

Members also spoke about the encroachment of micro-management and surveillance. Forms of communication, such as emails, had been monitored. Unnecessary, bureaucratic reporting and paper trails had been created, for example making members complete a request slip to use the administrator’s services, submit reports two weeks in advance of meetings and account for their daily activities to the Director. As one employee told us: ‘for the past three months I had to write down every meeting that I’d attended, every project I had worked on’. This account then provided the basis for target setting for the next

three months. These practices were seen as a largely procedural waste of time. For example, whilst there was an insistence on accounting and reporting, the resultant paper was just ‘put in a folder’ rendering it a ‘pointless exercise’. Overall, the members felt ‘hurt’ by these changes and by the way they were implemented without consultation.

If we attend to the flow of the interviews, some members also contrasted non-hierarchical working with their previous experiences of work and management. For example, one of the youth workers had previously been employed by an ethical cosmetics retailer and recounted this experience as a counterpoint to how ‘non-hierarchical’ organization might work, effectively distancing her expectations of work, and her aspirations for WE, from both the previous regime and from work in the commercial sector:

It was hard work... for not a great deal of money, erm, and despite the happy clappy ‘we’re fun, light-hearted’ front that it gives, its actually massively hard-sell. You have a lot of targets. They have a counter on the door which counts every single person that walks through. So when we would go in, we would duck and people would always think we were insane that we would walk through the door by going low and coming up again, but it was because we didn’t want to be counted into ‘coming in’. And at the end of the day they would calculate how many products had been sold compared to how many people had come in and the ratio of how many products per person basically, and each person was meant to buy on average three products. You were meant to acknowledge someone within 30 seconds of coming through the door; approach them within two minutes; and speak to them about three different products; and tell them different essential oils and ingredients within each of those products. And you would get mystery shoppers that would come in and do it, but we had a Nazi of a manager as well (Youth Worker).

It was clear, then, what the remaining members of WE did not want: hierarchical management of the sort experienced under the directorship or in other jobs. This opposition to hierarchy, allowed the group to coalesce around a recognition of the need for change as a way to avoid going back to hierarchy but by defining the new organizational principles in terms of negation – *not* hierarchy – a relatively empty, or at least under-determined, space was opening up that needed to be filled. If not hierarchy, then what?

### **Ambiguity and ‘non’ signification**

When we asked what ‘non-hierarchical’ meant to them, members articulated a range of perspectives. For some, like the current Chair of the Management Committee, non-hierarchical organizing meant autonomy, decentralization and collaborative working:

People taking an active role in being involved in the decisions that affect them, and taking responsibility for decision that are made as part of the organization; being proactive in getting support and supporting each other, in more of a network model than a line-management model... erm... so the consequences of that are you don't have people making decisions about others further down the organization without their say.

This description fits well with the main characteristics of anarchism laid out by Colin Ward, which proposes the horizontal network as a foundational structure for anarchist organizing, contrasting this with the bureaucratic pyramid (Ward, 1982: 26). There is also a strong emphasis here on direct action – being proactive and not having others make decisions for you – another cornerstone of anarchism.

A relatively new member of the management committee echoed this perspective, characterizing non-hierarchical organization in terms of horizontality, autonomy, direct action and personal responsibility:

a flat level of management, a lot of autonomy, a lot of expectation on individual staff, to be autonomous to be proactive, to support each other, no obvious boss but people that are skilled in, using people strengths not people's weaknesses.

One of the education workers reframed this in terms of collective responsibility but combined with an emphasis on open communication and respect:

I think it means more open and honest communication which is what we all want [...] but also the idea of shared responsibility. [...] So finding we together, but we can all contribute and respect each other's points of view, and come to a way of moving forward as an organization and also as individuals I suppose.

Whilst the first two perspectives resonate very clearly with anarchistic ideals of direct democracy and autonomy, by bringing respect and 'honest communication' to the fore, this last quote emphasizes more liberal concerns with diversity, inclusivity and respect/tolerance.

Moving even further away from anarchism, the financial co-ordinator, one of the longest serving members of the organization, framed non-hierarchical organizing in terms of a hand-off, 'laissez-faire' management style. Whilst this was still concerned with individual autonomy and trusting people to do a good job, there was no underlying analysis of power, thus reflecting a unitarist conception of the organization. Rather than a distinctive set of political values, embedded in an organizational structure, this perspective assumed that simply getting rid of hierarchy was adequate, neglecting the wide range of debates within social movements and anarchist thinking about less visible, or informal,

sources of power and authority and hidden modes of domination (see Freeman, 1972; Sutherland et al., 2014).

*Negation as anarchist change process?*

As these examples suggest, WE members interpreted ‘non-hierarchical’ organizing in a variety of often quite vague ways including respect, participation, openness, honesty, pro-activism, collaboration, creativity, co-working, community, networks, laissez-faire management, autonomy and freedom. By translating anarchist organizational principles into ‘non-hierarchical organizing’, a widespread commitment to change away from hierarchy could be mobilised. Rather engaging in a positive discussion about what an anarchist organization should look like, however, the direction of change was understood in terms of absence (not hierarchy). The emphasis was on what the organization was moving away from, rather than what it was working towards. Whilst ‘anarchism’ is itself a highly contested term and therefore always holds the possibility of multiple interpretations, it had the potential to be a positive signifier around which to mobilise organizational change. By contrast, ‘non-hierarchical organizing’, whilst retaining anarchism’s core rejection of hierarchical leadership, remained empty: an uncontentious non-signifier, lacking positive content. The result of this was that members could fill it with whatever they saw as desirable, from fairly anarchistic ideals of pre-figuration, direct democracy and free association, to more liberal ideas of diversity, respect and transparency.

Whilst this might be understood as a dilution of anarchism as a distinctive, if always contested, organizational ideal, the reality is more ambivalent. ‘Non-hierarchical’ constituted a empty discursive space in which members could democratically debate the positive content with which they would fill this space, discussing principles and practices of organization without concerns for fidelity to a particular political or organizational theory. In this, we argue, the negative move of rejecting hierarchy presented an opportunity for a radically democratic *process* of organizational change rather than emphasizing a specific *content* for this change. Through our research we sought to bring the organization’s members together to work through this in an open dialogue about organizational principles and practices. This process of developing non-hierarchical organizing thus embodied the ideals of direct democracy and self-determination that characterize contemporary anarchist social movements. Arguing that ‘democracy’ and ‘anarchy’ have historically been used interchangeably, David Graeber suggests that:

In its essence [democracy] is just the belief that humans are fundamentally equal and ought to be allowed to manage their collective affairs in an egalitarian fashion, using whatever means appear most conducive...

[It] is not necessarily defined by majority voting; it is, rather, the process of collective deliberation on the principle of full and equal participation. (Graeber, 2013: 183-186)

The absence at the heart of ‘non-hierarchical’ constituted a space within which the members of WE could engage in precisely this kind of ‘process of collective deliberation’ about what equality and participation might mean, and how they wanted to embody these principles in their organizational structures and management practices. In facilitating the change process in an open, democratic way, anarchist principles informed the change process itself, even if the final model of organizing was not a direct transplanting of the anarchist/social movement organizational practices that informed the initial impetus to change.

### **Practical challenges**

As one of the employees told us, the process was about finding ‘a new way about how WE can work’. Whilst the concern of this paper has been with how change was mobilized around contested anarchist principles, we have not had space to explore in detail the concrete practices of organizing that were developed within this change process. This is not to say that there was no concern with practicalities. On the contrary, without a set of clearly articulated organizational principles, practical techniques for non-hierarchical organizing became an important focus, but disembedded from the political traditions and movements that had given rise to them. In being translated into a new context, they were reconstituted and transformed by connection to local and divergent understandings of politics, democracy and organization.

To give an example, we ran some sessions on consensus decision-making with WE using Seeds of Change’s handbook (Seeds for Change, 2013). The idea had been to bring one of the most characteristic organizational practices of the contemporary anarchist social movements (Maeckelbergh, 2009; Graeber, 2013) into WE’s repertoire of organizational practices, and use it to facilitate democratic decision-making about the direction of desired change as well as providing a relatively durable tool for non-hierarchical organizing. The technique was interpreted in light of members’ extant conceptions of democratic process. Some, with experience of social movement activism, brought anarchistic understandings of consensus and direct democracy to these sessions. Others, working with consensus for the first time, translated the practice in light of more mainstream conceptions of democracy as majority rule. For example, one respondent described the new practice in management meetings of ‘voting with Jazz hands’. When we discussed this further it became apparent that she understood the hand signals associated with consensus decision-making in

terms of majority voting. The underlying principles of consensus and its associated political principles had not travelled. Instead, the practice appeared as an unnecessarily complicated, and even unprofessional, way to 'vote' for a majority rule. Although this was certainly an improvement on the managerial diktat of the Director, the lack of a substantive political ideology at the heart of 'non-hierarchical' organizing left it open to interpretations in line with dominant hegemonic conceptions of democracy and participation as one-person-one-vote and majority rule.

If approached from a normative perspective, oriented toward implementing anarchism as a mode of organization, we might figure this example as a form of 'misinterpretation'. From a more sociological perspective, however, we would understand this as a form of translation and transformation in which attention needs to be paid to a wide range of apparently 'contextual' factors that are actually constitutive of the new practices being developed.

## Conclusions

This paper has presented a complex and at times contradictory tale of the travelling of anarchist ideas of organization into the context of Voluntary Sector Organization. In translating 'anarchism' into 'non-hierarchical' our case organization achieved two things. First, they were able to mobilize a degree of consensus over the need for, and broad direction of, change. Second, they opened a discursive space in which a democratic dialogue could take place over the content of change and what 'non-hierarchical' organizing should mean. On the other hand, the formal negativity of the 'non-hierarchical' framing meant that this space could be occupied by quite divergent interpretations, ranging from anarchism to a liberal and laissez-faire style of organizing, without a genuine consensus over underlying values and a shared political approach to organization. This openness in turn inflected the interpretation of concrete organizational practices, for example when the tools of more radically democratic forms of consensus decision-making were understood through the framework of majority rule.

In summary, the translation of anarchist forms of organization to non-native contexts like the Voluntary Sector has real potential but if this becomes focused on attempting to transplant organizational innovations and practices like consensus decision-making it is likely that the process of translation will constitute an assemblage that bears only slight resemblance to anarchist organizing. On the other hand, the translation of 'anarchism' into 'non-hierarchical', whilst risking recuperation and a loss of substance, creates

possibilities for an open, collective discussion of what self-determination, equality and participation might mean in a range of organizational contexts. This would be a significant step forward both for practitioners and organizational theorists pursuing a 'critical performativity', when compared with the melancholic analysis of hierarchical, capitalist organization that dominates Critical Management Studies.

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