

FOOD COOP IN METAPHORS: THE UNEASY TASK OF DESCRIBING ALTERNATIVE ENTERPRISES

The documentary movie *Food Coop* was realized by Tom Boothe with the objective to shed light on a specific organizational model for supermarkets. The film aims to explain how the Park Slope Food Coop (PSFC or the Food Coop) works by plainly showing moments of its organizational life and by interviewing members of the cooperative about their experience. In a nutshell, the PSFC is a cooperative whose consumers are its members. As members of a cooperative, they own a share of the organization, they control it democratically, and they benefit from its services (Mamouni Limnios, Mazzarol, Soutar & Siddique, 2018). What is specific to the PSFC's model is that members also work in the supermarket for 2 hours and 45 minutes each month. They perform all kinds of tasks, from cleaning to administrative work, from filling shelves to walking consumers out to the subway. This "free" labor force allows the PSFC to have significantly lower labor costs, enabling the application of lower margins on products and ultimately selling food at a lower price to its members.

The film was shot at the same time as its producer Tom Boothe was founding La Louve in Paris, a participative cooperative supermarket which uses the same model as the PSFC. *Food Coop* was thus used as a communication tool to explain the model both to prospective members of La Louve and to people who were interested in developing such a supermarket elsewhere in France and Belgium, in particular. In turn, they used the documentary as a "propaganda" tool to attract new members (see Ouahab's paper in this *Unplugged* section for a description and analysis of the film's distribution). Beyond the organizational model that is presented, it is therefore interesting to analyze in greater depth the message conveyed by the documentary and how it portrays the PSFC as an alternative to conventional capitalist supermarkets. In this regard, the metaphors used by the members to describe their experience of the PSFC are of particular interest. In this essay, we try to make sense of these metaphors in describing an alternative (democratic) form of enterprise.

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METAPHORS AND ORGANIZATION THEORY

The use of metaphors has had a long tradition in organization studies since Gareth Morgan's seminal book *Images of Organization* (Morgan, 2006/1986). Defined as the "ways of talking and thinking about one domain in terms of another" (Cornelissen & Kafouros, 2008: 957), metaphors are considered to be an important way to frame organizations. Several authors distinguish at least two different streams of literature that match distinct research strategies (Cornelissen, Oswick, Thøger Christensen & Phillips, 2008; Heracleous & Jacobs, 2008).

In the first stream, researchers use metaphors to describe and theorize organizational models. The metaphor helps them to highlight what is similar to (and what differs from) the image they use to describe an organization. It also helps them to create typologies of organizations. For example, Morgan (2006/1986) suggests eight different metaphors that would correspond to eight distinct sets of specific organizational characteristics and behaviors: machine, organism, brain, culture, political system, psychic prison, flux and transformation, and domination. In a

conversation with Oswick and Grant (2016), Morgan stresses that these metaphors are illustrative and correspond to an analysis of the history of organization. Hence, in his view, two additional metaphors should be added to the list to describe more recent organizational models: the global brain – to describe organizations based on big data – and organization as media. Among others, Cornelissen (2005, 2006) has criticized the overly unidirectional character of this approach and its dominant focus on similarities, and therefore suggests taking a domains-interaction approach.

The second stream of literature builds on this critique and adopts a more inductive approach to metaphors (Cornelissen et al., 2008), along with other tropes (Oswick, Keenow & Grant, 2002), as it considers them as cues to understand individuals' sensemaking processes (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, 1995). Instead of defining themselves the metaphors that would best describe an organization, researchers seek to understand a) why individuals use specific images to portray an organization and b) the construction process of a metaphor in generating new meaning (Cornelissen, 2005). For example, Hill and Levenhagen (1995) show how entrepreneurs make extensive use of metaphors to reduce equivocality and to cope with ambiguity by providing helpful interpretive schemes for both sensemaking and sensegiving.

In this piece, we follow this more inductive stream of research as we focus on the metaphors used by the members who are interviewed in the film to make sense of how they experience the PSFC. Such an approach also enables greater contextualization (Cornelissen et al., 2008), enlightening the specific use of certain metaphors.

METAPHORS OF THE FOOD COOP USED BY ITS MEMBERS

Since democracy is a crucially distinctive characteristic of cooperatives and, taking account of the rather flat organizational structure of the PSFC, a researcher following a more deductive approach would probably describe it by using metaphors such as the "community" and expect its members to use similar images. However, the metaphors used by members in the film are surprisingly diverse and sometimes portray organizations that are far from democratic. The "community" metaphor only appears in the film for the first time after more than 15 minutes. In what follows, we leave the community metaphor out of our analysis to focus on three other metaphors that arise several times in the film.

The dominant metaphor we encounter in the film is that of production. It first appears at the very beginning of the documentary when Boothe asks two members of the PFSC, who happen to be filmmakers, how they would explain the coop and its principles in a 30-second movie. One of them spontaneously answers: "if you really want good food [...] you have to work here" (2'33"). The concept film they suggest centers on high food quality at affordable prices, which is made possible by the members' labor. This metaphor of production thus articulates around two metonyms: the member-worker and the high-quality (affordable) food.

Members' labor is portrayed successively as being both positively and negatively rated by the members. "It's fun. I love it," (7'05") says a woman on the early shift who goes home to shower before going to her regular daily job. Then, a man who is shopping explains to another member who is working, that "the best thing to do is to have kids, then you never have to work again. Well, you get a year off" (7'43"). That members

experience the PSFC as an employer-employee relationship is highlighted again later in the movie by a woman who takes phone calls from the members. She explains that some members who call at the beginning of their shift to say they are not coming in “are expecting someone to be angry about them not coming. You know, they don’t work for me. We’re all members. [...] There is very much this sort of transfer and sort of ‘you are the employer whom I’m calling to say I’m not coming in’” (25’07”).

The production’s outcome is the second metonym of this metaphor. High-quality food at an affordable price is highlighted by a woman telling the member working at the cash register how good the sprouts are at the PSFC. At home, this woman compares the price of her groceries at the PSFC and two weeks later at Whole Foods, a regular supermarket, showing how much cheaper it is to shop at the PSFC. In the same vein, a long sequence of the film shows a member who works for the Food Justice Movement comparing the price and quality of lemons between the PSFC and other stores in a poor neighborhood. As well as highlighting that people in deprived neighborhoods often have no choice than to buy their food from “bodegas” (i.e., mini-marts), she shows that the bare items of non-processed food sold there are for the most part of low quality, not fresh and more expensive than in richer areas. By this, she wants to demonstrate that the PSFC equates with both high-quality and affordable food.

The military metaphor is the second that appears in the film and is probably the most surprising for describing a cooperative and its activities. This metaphor traditionally describes such organizational characteristics as hierarchy, limited autonomy of individuals, and discipline (Mutch, 2006), which intuitively seems to go against the representation of a democratic organization such as a cooperative. The scene that directly refers to this metaphor involves a member who coordinates the closing of the PSFC. He describes his work at the cooperative: “I haven’t ever told anyone this, but I look at this as a kind of quasi military exercise, the object of which is to keep everyone doing something” (40’36”). He also insists that the members who belong to the team he coordinates have to sign in, which is “part of [the PSFC’s] culture,” a practice that resembles calling the roll.

The other occurrences of reference to the military metaphor are more indirect. For example, they include the use of words that belong to the vocabulary of the army, such as when a member highlights the difference in culture between “squads.” The practice of giving members instructions via the intercom is also a very powerful image of discipline, which is a distinctive characteristic of the PSFC. When asked to suggest a title for the documentary, a member suggests “Attention Co-op members” because “Intercom is the soul of the Co-op” (16’35”). The members around her laugh but approve this statement. The central position of the intercom is exploited later in the film, as we see a long interview-free sequence taking place on Christmas Eve with all sorts of announcements as background sound.

The third metaphor is that of a cult. This comes through particularly clearly during the penultimate sequence of the film. Some members are packing food and a dialogue starts between a young woman and a man about how difficult it has become for them to shop in other supermarkets:

- “[...] everyone who is a member of the Coop is passionate about it.
- It’s funny.
- It’s almost freaky...

-I always said this place was a cult and now I speak the words like it's...

-I know, it's true. I really can't go back." (1h32'45")

The introductory information session that new members have to attend can also appear as part of the cult imagery. This is made particularly clear by a man who is responsible for the registers, as he speaks of "initiation." He explains how the earlier a member was initiated, which is signaled by a low membership number, the more respect they deserve. The cult metaphor finally appears as a watermark in the discourse of one co-founder when he states "if you ask someone for [...] the most precious thing [in their life], which is a little bit of their time on Earth – time on Earth, that's the most precious thing, not your money in your bank, that's time on Earth, that's all we've got in my opinion. So, we ask for part of that [...]. So if you're gonna give that, you're making a connection" (1h11'15"). This stresses the necessary devotion of the members to the cooperative – giving away part of their life and connecting to the organization.

MAKING SENSE OF METAPHORS OF NON-DEMOCRATIC ORGANIZATIONS FOR A DEMOCRATIC ORGANISATION

Cooperatives are need-driven and member-benefiting organizations. Such characteristics can easily explain the dominant metaphor of production. But how can we make sense of the use for a cooperative, which is democratic by essence, of military and cult metaphors which denote two very undemocratic organizations? In this section, we interpret these metaphors by adopting a comparative approach, despite its limitations (Cornelissen, 2005), and focus on the similarities and resemblances between entities (Oswick et al., 2002). However, we try to embed these comparisons in the specific context in which metaphors are used, to be as close as possible to how individuals experience the organization (Heracleous & Jacobs, 2008).

First, it should be acknowledged that members who use the military and cult metaphors realize their awkwardness with regard to the PSFC and what it stands for. They feel uncomfortable with using such metaphors. Either they say out loud: "This is freaky" or "I've never told anyone this before." Or they laugh at what they just said, suggesting that this should not be taken too seriously.

It should be stressed that these metaphors are mostly used in very specific contexts to highlight one specific characteristic or element of the PSFC, as described above. For example, the military exercise is referred to for its collective dimension involving everyone and assigning each member of the group a distinct task to fulfill the overall objective. This distribution of tasks goes hand in hand with the discipline required to meet the deadline for this given objective. It shows that work in a cooperative such as the PSFC is democratic by episodes. Sometimes, members just have to comply with orders for the collective good.

Another reason that could explain the recourse to the military metaphor can be found in the equality that both types of organization are supposed to thrive on. A member explains that thanks to the shifts at the Food Coop, he regularly meets people he would not meet in his regular life. This remark highlights the equality among members that theoretically applies to the army: one serves regardless of one's origin or social class. This creates cohesion in a context of social diversity. At the PSFC, work is

shared on an equal basis with fellow members and this may lead to a sort of friendship that crosses the boundaries of any individual's original social sphere. The interviewed member speaks of "shift-ship" because he thinks "friendship is like a funny word" to describe this (43'10"). As such, it is the recognition that a specific type of social capital, which is more egalitarian, is created among members by working at the PSFC.

The elements leading to the use of the cult metaphor tend to relate to a certain mindset that members have or need to have with regard to the cooperative – e.g., when speaking of "initiation" – and to the value-driven nature of such an organization. When the co-founder of the PSFC indicates that people have to commit to the cooperative by giving "the most precious thing in life," i.e. time, he is intending to create a sense of devotion to the organization. However, unlike in a cult, this devotion does not benefit just one or a few "chosen" people. Instead, members give a small share of their lifetime for the benefit of the community as well as for their own benefit. Such a mindset creates identification with the cooperative, which the co-founders estimate to be a critical success factor for the project. Insisting on the value of time rather than of money also echoes the anti-capitalist origin of the project and the values of solidarity and equality that lie at the core of the PSFC. Everyone can give time, unlike money, and all members give the cooperative an equal share of their monthly time.

Direct comparison with a cult arises in the discussion between members about their passion for the PSFC (see above). This shows a strong and shared attachment to the organization, which they want to share. "Speaking the word" to communicate one's passion about the cooperative and ultimately to recruit new members is probably what makes the cooperative most similar to a cult. By so doing, the members reaffirm the political behavior of the PSFC. At a local level, it wants to demonstrate that alternatives to capitalism are possible, that organizing the economic activity differently may be efficient and benefit all, rather than a few people. In the same way as a cult, the members of the PSFC stand up for their beliefs, which for some have become a passion, and try to convince others around them.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Overall, the message conveyed by the film *Food Coop*, from the perspective of the metaphors used by the members of the PSFC to describe their experience of the organization, is one of complexity. It brings together elements that do not seem to make sense separately to describe a democratic organization. Because members seem to find no ready-made metaphor to describe such a complex organization as the PSFC, because of the alternative nature of the enterprise, they need to rely on several distinct metaphors to make sense of different aspects of the organization and its behavior. As such, they are in the process of constructing a grand metaphor for the organization, which will build on the smaller ones identified above. In this regard, we follow Cornelissen and Kafourous (2008), who argue that complex metaphors are dynamically made up of smaller primary metaphors that are grounded in the embodied experiences of individuals.

The analysis above also highlights the importance of embedding the metaphor (Cornelissen et al., 2008) to clearly understand what is being portrayed: what element(s) of the described organization are used in the

comparison, what element(s) of the domain are chosen as a metaphor, and whether the comparison is made in terms of similarities or differences. Also, the way people speak about the comparison may provide clues about how to interpret the comparison. In the case of the PSFC, by showing that they use metaphors which they feel are inappropriate to describe the cooperative as a whole, members express their shame or embarrassment through laughter or withholding discourse.

As to the democratic character of the organization, it is striking how few references to democracy members make in the film. This is in contrast to ownership, which is stressed by several members. This is further highlighted by the rare appearance of the community metaphor compared to references to non-democratic organizations such as the army and the cult. A possible explanation is that the democratic dimension of the cooperative is so obvious that members do not even mention it. Another explanation might be the poor experience of democracy that members have at the PSFC. This is corroborated by the low level of participation in general member assemblies, for instance. Also noticeable are the thoughts of the environmental committee members with regard to the debate about the use of plastic bags, when they say how much confidence they have in the general coordinators, i.e. the employees of the cooperative, influencing the vote at the general assembly of the members.

The analysis in this essay is of course limited to what the producer chose to include in the movie. The absence of a voiceover leaves the words to the members of the cooperative. However, the selection of excerpts, and therefore what is said and conveyed to the viewer, is subject to the will and subjectivity of the film director. We may therefore wonder why he chose to keep negatively loaded metaphors, such as the cult or the army, and how these resonated for some of those who were persuaded to join a participative cooperative supermarket like the PSFC after watching the film. Such questions open paths for future research on the political dimension of cooperatives.

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