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“Rethinking co-operatives: From local to global and from the past to the future”

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New cooperativism (in Greece) and old challenges requiring systemic solutions

How to learn from old cases of failure and imagine innovative ways for contemporary resisting degeneration based on local contexts? In the early twenty-first century, a new wave of cooperativism (Vieta, 2010, pp. 2–3) emerged in crisis laden Greece stemming from within ‘a broader resistance movement [marked by] an enhanced emphasis on autonomous self-organization, social solidarity, networking and opposition to state policies and neoliberal capitalism’ (Kioupkiolis and Karyotis, 2015, p. 296) that gave rise to the Worker Cooperatives’ Network of Athens (WCNA). To avoid the wicked problem of degeneration, WCNA (members) adopted tacitly a series of safeguards to avoid arriving at a degenerated movement like favouring a more horizontal division of labour, promoting direct democracy instead of formal representation, adopting collective ownership, establishing a solidarity fund, committing themselves to become rooted within social movements and independent from the state (Rothschild and Whitt, 1989; Kokkinidis, 2015; Daskalaki and Kokkinidis, 2017). Hence, WCNA took proactive measures which have been identified as crucial to resist the persistent threat of degeneration (Diamantopoulos, 2013; Diefenbach, 2019) from a social movement/Marxist perspective (Rothschild and Whitt, 1989; Egan, 1990; Jones, 2010). Yet, by 2016, the momentum of the *subject* of the research (Thomas, 2011) –WCNA– not only seemed to confirm Malleson thesis (2014) that egalitarian driven work collectives are doomed to be marginal but almost reached the point of failing to even *reproduce* itself (Stryjan, 1994).

In turn, his paper focuses on the experience of an insider activist researcher to support WCNA in resisting degeneration. After analysing the life-cycle of WCNA and two of its constitutes in light of the relevant literature, a middle-range (Merton and Merton, 1968) theorization emerged that builds ‘little by little a strategic knowledge’ (Foucault and Gordon, 1980, p. 145) that predicts challenges for evading threats while also a set of organizational tools for supporting the attempts of radical co-operators to resist degeneration was (co-)developed.

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Biographical note

Orestis Varkarolis is a PhD student at Nottingham Trent University (UK) researching the Worker Cooperatives' Network of Athens (WCNA) as a founding member of Pagkaki which in turn is a founding member of WCNA. He has also authored the book 'Creative Resistance and Anti-power' published by Pagkaki (2012).