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From Collaborative Spaces to New Modes of Organizing: Society, Democracy and Commons on the Way to Novelty

François-Xavier de Vaujany, Stefan Haefliger and Paula Ungureanu¹

The adventure of the Research Group on Collaborative Spaces (RGCS) started as a working group in 2014. Gathering researchers from Paris, London and Montreal, it aimed at exploring and understanding further collaborative spaces and their relationships through multiple dimensions (work, innovation, management, knowledge, urban geography, competitive advantage, mobility, etc.). People from different fields (e.g., management, organization studies, sociology of work, urban sociology, economic geography, philosophy, anthropology...) joined what was and still is a very exciting discussion. As “spaces and places whose facilities, aesthetics codes, temporalities, enacted values, atmospheres, and spatial configurations are aimed at fostering horizontal collaborations” (de Vaujany et al., 2018: 102), “collaborative spaces”² pervade urban landscapes and more and more, our countryside. Coworking spaces, makerspaces, Fablabs, hackerspaces and labs in general, both internal or external (independent) embody and condense the search for open collaborations and horizontality³ which has been for a long time at the heart of our societies and their ‘management’.

As the recent pandemic slows down and its events become less totalizing of our collective life, the ‘collaborative spaces’ phenomenon reaffirms its importance in our experience. Remote work, mobilities, reconfiguration of urban landscapes, steady increase in real estate prices, quests for new ways of living, generalization of open strategies and innovative processes, the search for meaning at work, the consciousness of climate change and anthropocentrism, are claiming more than ever attention to collaborative places, spaces and temporalities. Attention to transitional, open and fluid elements of life and work is needed more than ever to understand how our activities are turning into a huge Lego work continuously re-assembled in space and place with the help of digital platforms and digital tools.

Perhaps one of the most pressing issues of the post-pandemic world is understanding how we have changed, and what has remained the same. What have we noticed after making return to the collective work life after the pandemic? Are cubicles back? The windowless,

claustrophobic office desks that keep workers separate make way for the open, attractive, and more inspiring “premier corporate real estate” that joins the war for talent in professional services. But HR strategy is only a small part of the picture. Knowledge creation has always relied on knowledge sharing in complex ways that include human-to-human exchange and learning (Nonaka and von Krogh, 2009) and outside the innovation debate we tend to forget that services are always co-created. Collaboration represents the core of the knowledge economy and any service that involves more than a mere transaction requires collaboration. We are returning to spaces that are collaborative else we can stay at home. This is true for businesses, public governance as it is for education. Contacts can be maintained online but new leads and new trust is built in person: between superiors and new hires, between colleagues, and between learning partners. The law firm, the multinational organization and the university alike are transforming and transitioning towards spaces that allow trust building and learning acceleration. Pre-pandemic, we may have envisioned work to be more collaborative than it was, less secretive, separate, distrusting. However, post-pandemic we imagine much more than just openness at work. The very fabric of space we live in changes: We may not want to go to work and nobody will force us. We may no longer want to commute unless it is for something valuable, enriching, enlightening. When do collaborative spaces enrich our lives? Where do we want to spend many hours, meetings, encounters?

The collective work of RGCS participants and the larger academics’ and practitioners’ community interested in collaborative spaces insistently suggest that our research objects are much more than a ‘surface’ plugged somewhere. They are ‘practices’ and ‘processes’. Indeed, many of us noticed that those communities that lived collaborative spaces as mere surfaces and anchored their business models in such a logic (i.e., divide and rent), died during the pandemic. The very strategic value of coworking spaces, makerspaces, hackerspaces and labs was (and still is) their activities: the events, practices and processes for which they come to be perceived as unique in the world (de Vaujany et al, 2018; Merkel, 2019; Yacoub and Haefliger, 2021). It means that their environment,

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² Since the beginning, our network has “purposefully not included “workplace” in this definition (i.e., collaborative workplace”) because of the increasing integration of both work/home practices and emotions (Bauman, 2013; Bohas et al, 2018”).

³ Of course, this quest for horizontality and the apparent flatness of many contemporary organizations as been quickly criticized by the organization studies literature, and social scientists in general.

connectivity, events, atmosphere overflowing from the neighbourhood, the life of their members away from the place or in other places (even the party in their apartments or the meetings in the bistros around the corner), played a huge role in collaborative life. And openness itself appeared as much more than a change from a state to another: it was a complex, fragile, both playful and serious process (Haefliger, Von Krogh and Spaeth, 2008; Orel and Almeida, 2019; de Vaujany and Heimstädt, 2022).

This leads us to another pressing issue of our post-pandemic life: Have we become any better at breaking boundaries and barriers? Can we say that being forcedly divided has increased our will of sticking together even through the hardest times? Have loneliness and fear rejuvenated our desire for collaboration? Managing the encounter with ‘the other’ is always a challenging experience (Skovgaard-Smith et al., 2020). And challenges increase with perceived differences (Ungureanu and Bertolotti, 2022;). From such standpoint, collaborative spaces are the materialization of boundary work: tangible experiences at the crossroads between different professions, social generations, organizational cultures, work attitudes, life values. Getting different types of entrepreneurs, entrepreneurs and employees, academics and practitioners, to collaborate at the boundaries of their worlds requires a continuous process of reflection on the differences between self and other (Ungureanu and Bertolotti, 2022), as well as engaged work of mediation, brokerage and curation (Merkel, 2015; Carton and Ungureanu, 2018; Fabbri and Charue-Duboc, 2016). What exactly, if any, is thus changing in the relationships occasioned by collaborative spaces? We know that processes that enable exchange and collaboration are supported by technology but also by our cognition. We are growing up in a world of collaboration, and we are growing into collaborators. No longer is the internet the frontier of our imagination, fluid networks are becoming the norm and as we take further steps in decentralization, we are accessing multiple levels of contact, sharing, exchange, co-imagination. Yet, as surfaced by the recent geopolitical events and the threats of an incoming economic recession, the divide from ‘the other’ is as present in our collective conscience as it has ever been, bringing about also conflict, resistance and exclusion. It is also noteworthy that in the era of digitalization ‘otherness’ refers to encounters between the human and the nonhuman world, and manifests through and within their interactions (Callon, 1986; Latour, 2007). For instance, recent studies are bringing evidence of how machines are joining our teams, provide feedback and act as more than tools (Beane and Orlikowski, 2015; Shrestha et al., 2019; Sergeeva et al., 2020). While many study the progress of technology and innovations in machine

learning and AI few focus on how humans learn to cope and grow, how we organise the subtle processes and encounters that enable getting along with machines, collaborating with and through machines. One of the most pressing questions of the recent time is what are the wider societal implications when we are learning from machines, being matched by machines, recruited by machines, and managed by machines? (See discussions by Kellogg and Valentine, 2021; Bailey et al., 2022). Platforms, new videoconference tools, avatars, metaverse, all the digitality we experience or hear about also echo and articulate this question.

In the way to the study and experimentation of collaborative spaces, our community (and probably our society as a whole) made a move from an emplaced, localized, surfaced view of our phenomenon to a more practice-based and processual approach. Beyond collaborative spaces, new modes of organizing work and more generally, lives, was and is at stake. But the opening of our research object also opened a different scientific and political space in which this journal (JOCO) is nested. These new modes of organizing, in particular all those searching more horizontality and openness, keep transforming societies, the way we live together and very process of togetherness.

The distinction between self and other, just as that between theory and practice, the human and the nonhuman, too often becomes a mind-body ontological distinction (Ungureanu & Bertolotti, 2020). In dichotomizing, we forget, as Schatzki and colleagues (2001) put it, that our bodies are our vehicles, and the self experiences and actively engages places *by way of the body*. Thus, collaborative spaces become means by which we connect cognitions and experiences of the body, and ultimately, re-elaborate the relation with ‘the other’. To understand how the human is expanded, enriched, threatened or supplanted by the nonhuman, or to learn about how that which we study as theory finds a manifestation in the bodily world of practice, we need to inquire about the interstitial spaces in which we enact the trials and errors of collaboration between the human and the non-human, or between theory and practice.

In addition to the relation between cognition and technology, phenomenological and processual views of collaborative spaces cannot ignore the generative role of emotions. In the post pandemic world, the old cubicle at work saved us from many interactions we did not want to face. However, openness is challenging because it can be emotionally overwhelming or even frustrating, as we need to grow up to work with others that may think faster, connect faster, change faster. “What on paper is a set of dictated exchanges under certainty, on the ground is lived

out in suspense and uncertainty” (Taylor, 1995, p. 177 in Shotter and Tsoukas, 2011). Studying the emotional tensions enabled by collaborative spaces can thus play an important role in understanding some of the most pressing issues of otherness and togetherness of our times. Theorizations about emotions related to commons’ processes in time of crisis can help us push the conversation further. On the one hand, democracy, ways of deciding together and legitimating collective decisions for a common good, is radically changed by what is at the end a hyper-individualization of our societies. From such standpoint, we are obviously more and more “alone together” (Coleman, 2009; Spinuzzi, 2012). The pandemic has strengthened but also more simply made this issue visible and sensible. Collaborative techniques (and collaborative spaces sometimes) foster inter-individual collaborations much more than commons. On the other hand, it has been suggested that resilience may become a core concern when a commons logic emerges among social actors who generally perceive themselves as separate such that they view their fates interconnected with a disruptive event and perceive their own behaviour as contributing to the common problem (Ansari et al. 2013). Studying collaborative spaces as *the bodily manifestation of commons’ emotions* in a post-pandemic world can thus provide a new lens for our network, and for all those interested in more nuanced understandings of commons and collaborative spaces.

Beyond simply acknowledging a necessity for openness, we want (with JOCO) to draw the implications of the societal, political, anthropological and ecological problems linked to new ways of organizing. If our first collective works stressed the presence of emplaced, spaced ‘collaborative spaces’, we want to explore further the process of temporalizing, spacing, emplacing, mattering of the phenomenon. **We want to explore further the very happening and becoming of working, making and more generally, new modes of organizing** (see Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). Through that, we want to develop also further a politics of work and new modes of organizing. Work has always been seen as political and deeply linked to democratic issues (de Vaujany, 2016; Turner, 2018; Hirvonen and Breen, 2020). **But beyond this observation, new ways of living and their interwoven activities, their semantic which more and more goes beyond any leisure-work divide (for the best or the worse), keep raising questions about togetherness and commons. The novelty of our quests keeps questioning the very ways we live together and maintain a symbiotic relationship with our planet.**

And in a world which is more and more liquid (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017; Bauman, 2013), strategic thought on issues of collaboration and work keeps lagging behind

because strategizing itself becomes also more and more non-emplaced (e.g., grounded in a ‘strategic node’ or actor) and ephemeral. New modes of organizing needs to build and re-build continuously their ways to strategize the world. A common ground in a liquid and dynamic organization remains the collaborative spacing and emplacement of collective activities, the encounter that defines a fleeting business model or an attempt at organising a platform of actors, complementors, consumers, suppliers and so forth, until the next update takes over and envelopes the last attempt. Competitive advantage has long been declared dead (McGrath, 2013) but for organizations to survive a form of competitive renewal needs to foster a constant sense of strategizing beyond the current configuration and sense and build a collaborative space that inspires minds and creates value for others and world around them. These new forms of organizing have become urgent for the common good in our societies.

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