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Self-organising for a transition towards a circular society:

Insight from Follettian thinking

Anne-Claire Savy¹

Abstract

This article seeks to understand how a self-organised dynamic can emerge to engage the current transition towards a circular economy. Accompanying-research puts into perspective a collective citizen project of transition towards a circular society (TCS) with the perspectives of actors and theories of self-organising. The analysis of abundant material, in floating attention and inductive manual NVivo coding, demonstrates a self-organising development via individual commitment facing successive needs of cooperation to enact a TCS. The dynamic operates through cooperative work cycles, leading to a TCS project in continuous mutual reflexivity. These results contribute to self-organising theories, particularly mobilising Follettian thinking.

Keywords

Self-organising, circular economy, transition towards a circular society, NVivo, accompanying research.

Introduction

The habitability of the planet is no longer a certainty for future generations. Sixty years of debate, have initiated a societal change that is struggling to define the transition to be undertaken, but is institutionalising a transition towards a circular economy (TCE) (Savy et al., 2019). Aurez and Georgeault (2019: 13) define CE as a question of sustainable organising : "The circular economy is a principle of economic organising that aims to systematically reduce

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the quantity of raw materials and energy over the entire life cycle of a product or service, and for all levels of organisation of society, with a view to ensuring the protection of biodiversity and a development that is conducive to the well-being of individuals.” In France, the State is deploying a scheme to establish a CE policy (Art L.110-1-1 Law relative to energetic transition towards green growth) inviting the neighbouring economical actors to cooperate. However, its implementation does not seem obvious (Boldrini, 2018; Duret, 2007; Lozano & Witjes, 2016; J. Williams, 2019), since cooperation is not at the heart of conventional economic logic, based on competition, hierarchy and control. In particular, Abitbol notes that in "the literature on industrial ecology, the question of whether or not actors choose to participate is not addressed" (2012: 48). On an institutional level, the national standardisation organism AFNOR and ADEME (the national environment and energy management agency) advocate the coordination between actors and public engagement, without specifying how to implement this cooperation. However, since awareness of the 1960s/70s, citizens have been trying to self-organise to initiate a transition that some consider today as TCE. TCE is an organisational principle operating at every level of our society leading to a societal transition: a transition towards a circular society (TCS). In a democratic state, it is not possible to govern all exchanges of matter and energy on a global level. As a consequence, a TCS calls for a self-organising dynamic.

On a theoretical level, L'Allier & Audet (2020) note that management sciences have still shown little interest in sustainable transition, while transition management theorists have done little to study the role of management. However, a few works encourage the mobilisation of social and solidarity values (Abitbol, 2012; Adoue, 2007; Duret, 2007; Heikkurinen et al., 2019; Skawińska & Zalewski, 2018). So far, cooperation, i.e. the self-organising capacity of actors, is essentially studied in its capacity to create forms of order, as the trend of self-organising resulting from cybernetics (Probst & Rakotobarison, 1994). The Commons' work, initiated by Ostrom, explains self-organising as the capacity of citizens to create institutions to manage

common goods (Berthet et al., 2018; Perez & Paranque, 2012). Self-management, supported by the trends of social movements resulting from classical anarchism, prefigures alternative productive models, self-determined by actors (Vieta, 2014). Glémain (2013) shows how recycling centres are constrained by economic models, between salaried employment and voluntary work. Finally, recent works on alternative non-hierarchical value-based organisations highlight the conflicts that arise when these values meet conventional logic (Ashcraft, 2001; Dorion, 2017; Farias, 2015; Land & King, 2014; Lightfoot, in Parker et al., 2014; Peiro, 2019). Differing from these works on order-creating self-organising, the Follettian integration theory, mobilised by recent researchers, studies citizen self-organising – then called coordination – in its capacity to give rise to a spontaneous dynamic of cooperative action.

This article seeks to understand how a self-organising dynamic can arise to initiate a TCS. In this perspective, I conducted an accompanying-research in a constructivist posture that assumes the subjectivity of the researcher with a cooperative project of citizens. The aim is to understand why these citizens commit themselves collectively, how they self-organise and how they make a TCS project crop up practically.

Firstly, a review of the literature on the CE shows two transition trends, conventional and transformative, both calling for cooperation and yet mobilising little management theory. Secondly, the concept of self-organising, leading to the alternative Follettian integration concept is presented. Thirdly, empirical abductive research in accompanying-research is introduced, as well as the case of *The-Collective* project. The results show the outcome of a TCS project initiated by the commitment of citizens, developing through successive needs for cooperation, in a complex process of identification of issues and collective appropriation of individual contributions. These results are then discussed first in relation to the Follettian integrative dynamics model proposed by Stout et al. (2018). Complexified by multi-level networks and multiple iterations and interactions, the relevance of the model for transition

dynamics is shown. The results are also discussed in view of the limitations of other theories of self-organisation. Finally, the limits, contributions, recommendations and avenues of research conclude the article.

1. A lack of management theory about transition

1.1 Towards a conventional or transformative circular economy?

The TCE is a “fundamental transition [from a] linear economy, which runs from mines to dumps [into...] a small, closed, limited, planetary society, almost certainly dependent on solar energy [... which] will have to recycle virtually all its materials into a circular economy, in which the dumps become the mines” (Boulding, 1972: 22-23). Boulding's transition (1945, 1966, 1972) which arose from a reflection on a forward-looking economic model adapted to a "society of personal responsibility", called for a societal, systemic, non-productivist and non-increasing transition. It postulates that "humans must find their place in the cyclical ecological system" (Rodríguez et al., 2020: 538). It thus evokes the unsustainability of a management-chrematism in the sense of Aristotle – "an artificial and dissolute economic activity because it is strictly based on unlimited exchange and is far removed from other human activities" according to the "law of profit [...] contrary to the norms of solidarity to which citizens must commit themselves for common possessions" (Martin, 2016: 19-21). A CE can then be conceived as a management-oikonomia – a "human organisation" which "exclusively and concretely seeks to meet the needs of its members by the members themselves" (Martin, 2016: 19-21). The founder of other trends, such as “Cradle to Cradle”, this CE was initially forgotten, criticised for its economic language and its disregard of the limits of recycling. Then the conventional linear economy reinvested it in a search for growth in the face of resource shortages (Ellen McArthur Foundation, 2012; Pearce & Turner, 1990). Today, a CE is “a

rational utopia [...] a neutral construction [without authors] open to multiple interpretations and depoliticized” (Aggeri, 2020: 7).

Many of the current scientific works and companies involved in the CE are limited to waste reduction and recycling. They only aim at a “material and ecological efficiency technique goal”, not a “no-waste system” (Jaeger & Upadhyay, 2020: 742). They are limited to the intra-organisational level (Zeiss et al., 2020) mainly studying circular business models (Santa-Maria et al., 2021). Opening up to the inter-organisational is nevertheless approached by supply-chain management (Sehnem et al., 2019).

Several current works following the various developments on sustainability however, alert to the unsustainable character of this conventional CE (Jaeger-Erben et al., 2021; Schröder et al., 2020), supported by an apolitical discourse (Genovese & Pansera, 2019) and acritical scientific literature (Desvaux, 2017). Some works re-establish the transition to an oikonomia and envisage a transition to a “circular society” (TCS), with the CE constituting a “transformative circular system” (Jaeger-Erben et al., 2021). The TCS includes health, power, knowledge and technology, beyond matter and energy loops (Friant et al., 2020). The circularity of a TCS can be assessed by its ecological footprint.

1.2 A cooperative organisational logic?

Thus, whatever the approach, this transition attempts cooperation and questions organisational logic. In a conventional TCE approach, “the organisational CE activities are actions that spring up with the development of infrastructures and relationships with different actors to achieve material efficiency by closing ecological loops” (Alhawari et al., 2021: 13). These activities face “coordination problems between companies” (Jaeger & Upadhyay, 2020: 742) and dependence on the conventional linear economy (Camilleri, 2020: 1809). The resistance of our society to transitions can be explained by its management by formal organisations (Brunsson, 2020: 94). The interests of the latter, incompatible with societal interests, take precedence over

the latter, even in ethical approaches to openness to stake-holders or corporate social responsibility (Brunsson, 2015: 9).

In the transformative approach of TCS, reflection is on the multiple interactions of a circular society level: Arnsperger and Bourg (2017) propose a multi-economy for a "perma-circular society", while Schröder et al. (2020) suggest combining the objectives of a CE and human development. Others demonstrate that in a circular society, passive consumers become active everyday citizens (Hobson, 2020; Korsunova et al., 2021). Self-organising citizen initiatives and communities thus play a major role in engaging in ecological transitions (Atkinson et al., 2017; Boonstra & Boelens, 2011; Hasanov & Zuidema, 2018; Igalla et al., 2019, 2020; Ganesh & Zöller, in Parker et al., 2014; Seyfang, 2004; Seyfang & Smith, 2007). Besides the conventional economy, a cooperative citizen economy is emerging to create sustainable alternative practices, some of which claim to be part of CE.

Yet few management theories have been mobilised to study the organisation of this transition (Sehnm et al., 2019). Genovese & Pansera (2019) request the mobilisation of that logics other than those of the economic market. Brunsson invites us to move away from the logic of organisation in order to self-organise among "individuals [who] recognize that their true, long term interests, include the interest of their grandchildren's grandchildren, coincide with global sustainability" (2015: 15).

2. Bring out an order or dynamic?

2.1 Self-organising creating order

The phenomenon of self-organisation highlighted in complex systems' theory is a process of "increase in order as well as a function or goal, to which the order contributes"; it is a "dynamic and adaptive process" that emerges from the interactions between the elements of a complex system without "external control" (Boons, 2008: 42). Self-organising has been widely used in organisational management to understand the rise and evolution of organisations (Chiles et al.,

2004; A. Williams et al., 2017) or to improve their performance (Probst & Rakotobarison, 1994) without breaking with the hierarchical framework (Nederhand et al., 2016). Self-organising, which creates a new order within the conventional logic, raises the question of its capacity to create another organisational logic. This limit evokes the challenge of a system transition which must take place within it, the object of transition management (Chertow & Ehrenfeld, 2012; Rotmans & Loorbach, 2009; van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2019). Geels and his co-authors demonstrate that radical innovations, emerging from niches preserved from conventional constraints and logic, are capable of transforming their conventional regime by including it little by little. A double condition is required: the regime must recognise and preserve these niches, which accept to share their innovations in return (Geels et al., 2016; Geels & Schot, 2007).

2.2 Self-organising in an integrative dynamic

There is also another understanding of self-organising, which is not the creation of a new order, but the creation of a relational process of integration to improve the situation. Mary Parker Follett's integrative theory, based on the study of collective action in communities of citizens, is based on the creative and integrative power of a group process: the ability of participating individuals to improve their situation by creating new solutions that integrate their own interests (Stout et Love, 2014). As specific situations are linked to each other in a “total situation”, the same process is able to improve the whole system. Follett's ontological principles resonate with the transformative approach of TCS: “holism”, “cooperative style of relating” “relational disposition”, “functional method of integration”, and “participatory mode of association” (Stout et al., 2018: 108). From these principles flow alternative organisational notions: authority is that of the situation; power is necessarily ‘with’ others and ‘to’ improve the situation, and regulated by coercive control; leadership is multiple, emergent and facilitative; lastly, friction between different perspectives, conflict-difference, is a driver of

integration. These notions form the basis of an integrative organisational logic that works by "the confronting of diverse desires, the thereby revealing of 'values', the consequent revaluation of values, a uniting of desires" (Follett, 1924, introduction).

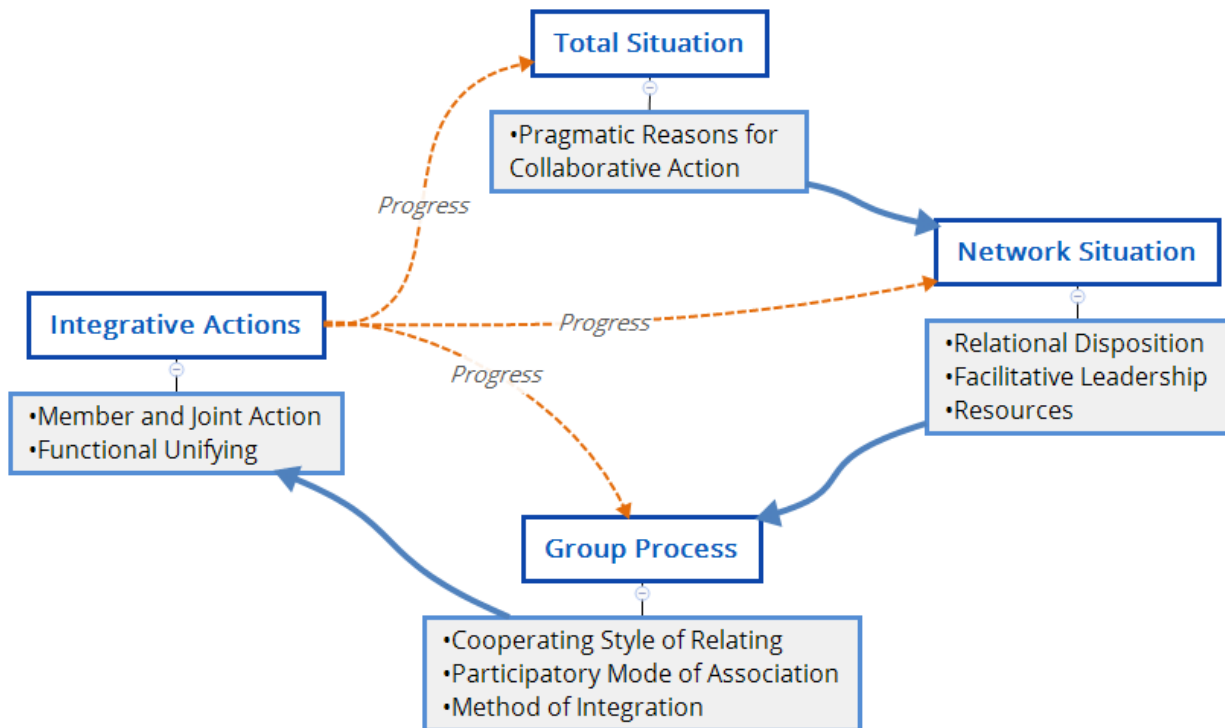


Figure 1: Adapted Integrative Governance Model (Stout et al., 2018, p. 100)

This logic consists of first “evoking” – bringing out the potential of the situation -, then “reciprocally interacting and integrating” – each expressing their interests and values to be unified – and then bringing out an integrative solution by “interweaving” without “absorption nor compromise”. This integrative logic is the basis for a dynamic self-organising process (Follett, 1919: 576), as modelled by Stout et al. (2018: 100) (refer to Figure 1). The process emerges from a total situation, whose "needs and opportunities" make collaborative action necessary. One or more individuals – with a “facilitative leadership” – then initiate a “network situation”, inviting others – with a “relational disposition” – to contribute. From this co-construction comes the "internal functions of a group process [with] cooperative styles of relating and a participatory mode of association". The functions then allow for the realisation

of integrative actions, designed and carried out in a systematically participatory and integrative way, through "functional unification". These integrative actions and processes and the reactions they evoke change the total and network situations and processes and move them forward (Stout et al., 2018: 100). Finally, the necessary integration in each component of the model can be assessed by indicators: 1) in the network situation, members are happy to cooperate, they decide and act together, to learn, evolve and participate in facilitative leadership; 2) in the group process, practices are systematically participatory – active listening, dialogue and joint effort, taking time to discover, define, decide – unifying differences without domination or compromise; 3) actions are integrative with "changes to individual member actions and innovative joint actions [...] based on complex integrative practices" – identification of information and issues, co-definition, co-determination and mutual evaluation; 4) the total situation is improved as well as the process components of Stout et al. (2018, p.109). This form of Follettian self-organising, creating dynamics rather than a new order, is a potential insight into the emergence of transitional self-organising.

3. Abductive accompanying research

The way in which a self-organised dynamic can arise to embark upon a TCS is studied through the observation of an empirical case of the appearance of a TCS cooperative action. A single exploratory case of self-organising initiating a TCS was chosen to understand it in depth (Yin, 1994). The relevance of this choice lies in the wealth of self-organising, characterised by the rich citizen diversity, and the reunited action fields of inclusive and ecological transition. It is first a question of understanding how the dynamics starts, why citizens collectively engage in a TCS: what their situation is, who they are and how they are structured? Then, of understanding how the dynamic works, how these first actors involve others and become active for the TCS: how the work force is constituted, how cooperation is organised? Finally, of understanding how the dynamics is implemented in concrete terms, how a TCS project

emerges: what issues lead to registering in the TCE, how the project is co-defined, co-conceived and how it copes with the obstacles.

3.1 The-Collective project case, part of the TCE

The-Collective's case reunites 30 to 60 citizens-actors, involved in 15 to 25 structures. Through various fields of action, they contribute to creating alternative, solidarity and ecological solutions for a sustainable daily life, by creating, experimenting, promoting and disseminating knowledge.

The-Collective is characterised by its location on a communal property *The-House*, threatened with demolition for the extension of an inter-communal business park. The one-hectare plot of land in a peri-urban area of the metropolis contains a biodiversity (not-yet identified), on the edge of a natural zone. It is accessible by metro, and then by either bus, or a pleasant walk along the canal. It forms a complex of approximately 1300 m² comprising a house converted into offices, some workshops, a storage area and a shed.

From the 1990s, a solidarity-based dynamic is present, institutionalised in 2002 with the installation of social and solidarity economy (SSE) structures and regional network heads. The majority of them, anticipating demolition in 2013, commit themselves to a Territorial Pole of Economic Cooperation (TPEC) project at the initiative of *The-Intercom* (the intercommunal authorities), moving to a more comfortable and more expensive location in 2015. Three frugal structures (AssoC, Asso2, AssoDI), allowed to stay without charge pending demolition, decide to preserve the place from demolition. They invite others to join them occupying it (during the day) and design a dynamic of sustainable alternatives that ensures its sustainability. *The-Collective* is thus created at the end of 2014, with 13 structures. Its decision to respond to an scheme for CE projects, at the end of 2016, marking an eventual creation of a self-organised project inscribed in the TCE, constitutes the key fact, starting point for an abductive approach.

3.2 Abductive accompanying-research in floating attention

An accompanying-research methodology was chosen to “almost” observe from the inside while supporting, consistent with my own civic engagement. From February 2017 to December 2020, I observed the organisation of the project in depth, avoiding influencing it, while facilitating its institutional recognition. The scientificity of this approach lies in the “[constant] to-ing and fro-ing [between] objective and subjective knowledge [... and to one's] own frames of reference” (Beauvais, 2007: 53; Bréchet et al., 2014; Dumez, 2016). In a committed posture, I participated with “restraint”, intervening as little as possible in the observed self-organising (Beauvais & Haudiquet, 2012).

My methodology was built up over time (Soparnot & Moriceau, 2019), guided by a floating attention (Dumez, 2016, p.70) on all of project exchanges. These made it possible to structure the abundant and diverse material collected into classifications, sequences and chronologies. First, salient elements, moments and processes appeared. Some were then made coherent through a narrative of the beginnings of the project's inclusion in the TCE (August 2019). Others led to the production of scientific reports and communications, opening a triangulation (De Rozario & Pesqueux, 2018: 327). Finally, two survey questionnaires of about forty open and closed questions, emerged from the previous understanding. They enabled a collection of the typology of citizen-actors (12/2019) and structures (07/2020) with regard to the cooperative action and the TCE.

Manual inductive coding of this data was carried out using NVivo, which led to the emergence of numerous categories (e.g. 401 codes of alternative practices), which were then structured question by question and by theme². Finally, summaries were drawn up and presented to the actors and then to researchers. Their feedback led to a final workshop with *The-Collective* (02-12-2020), which constitutes the last transcribed material.

² These French codes and structuration maps are available on demand.

The abductive to-ing and fro-ing – between observation of the field, of theory and feedback on these observations from actors, scientists and institutions – led to focus on the self-organising process and in particular on a TCS.

4. Presentation of results

The results indicate the emergence of a TCS project initiated by the commitment of citizens. An alternative creation dynamic emerges from the successive needs of self-help that appear, first on a citizen level to change for sustainable daily practices, then for structures to act in a conventional system, and finally between them to coordinate their activities. It manifests itself in an increasingly complex process of identifying issues and collectively appropriating individual contributions. The difficulties encountered, mainly due to a lack of common cooperation culture, slow down progress without halting it entirely, thanks to continuous mutual reflexivity.

4.1 Cooperation driven by citizens' commitment to transition

4.1.1 Individual commitment leading to a need to cooperate

The respondents to the actor typology questionnaire are 24 of the 43 active members of *The Collective* who were approached. Most of them live near *The-House*. Their profiles are diverse in terms of gender, age (25 to 76) and household composition. They come together on several common points. The first is their commitment to sustainable daily practices (for $\frac{3}{4}$ of them), for more than 10 years: alternative practices for living, shopping, travelling, communicating or even working. The second common point is the plurality of their skills and the wealth of their training (initial and continuous) in several fields of expertise. Each of them has acquired between two and five of the following eight areas: making/repairing, cultivating matter and energy, preserving living things, transmitting, exchanging information, understanding, and

organising. Finally, the third common and diversity point consists in their experiences of cooperative action, from multiple cultures and experiences.

Their practices consist in adopting frugal behaviour. To further reduce their consumption, they share and circulate their material and immaterial resources. They buy supplies through local food networks, and to do this, they form groups supporting farmers and investing in distribution. In order for their way of living, travelling and educating can be sustainable, they pool spaces and share knowledge and skills.

Thus, to make their daily practices sustainable, they need to cooperate, to organise collectively. In this way, they create a first level of self-organising among themselves.

4.1.2 Self-organising facilitating structures

To facilitate their cooperation, individuals build ‘structures’, thus creating a second level of self-organising. The 16 structures that responded to the dedicated questionnaire out of 27 structures of *The-Collective* solicited, simultaneously address several areas – among them culture, eco-construction, popular education, recycling and environment/energy, biodiversity and others.

For the most part these structures extend the common characteristics of the above-mentioned individuals, in different missions: reducing the impact of economic activity on nature and disseminating knowledge, sharing know-how and developing interactions on diversity and solidarity, or supporting experimentation on sustainable alternatives.

The typology of the structures is essentially collective and self-organised but not limited to it, since there are three individual enterprises. Half of *The-Collective* structures have a classic associative governance with a president and a committee. The other half have shared governance: decisions are taken and assumed by several people – either by five to 10 presidents, or even by all the people present – during collegial meetings that are held between every two months to every year. This shared governance allows for the active engagement of a wide range

of individuals in transition. All of them share and disseminate individual skills, creating collective transition competences around three axes: developing a transition culture, self-organising and developing a know-how of re-production.

The societal values of individuals come out as the frugal functioning of structures, even for individual entrepreneurs. This frugality, in the conventional economic system, leads to a limitation of resources and capacity for action.

4.1.3 Need to cooperate to create alternatives to the conventional system

In order to overcome the difficulties of developing alternatives within a conventional system, structures are again relying on cooperation. They try to coordinate themselves, thus creating a third level of self-organising. They gather around a sustainable alternatives place to be preserved *The-House*, by developing a project: "to carry out citizen projects that respond to the values of the social and solidarity economy and the protection of the environment; to coordinate, to bring *The-House* alive [...]; to organise mutualisation between members of all that is communal...". (Statutes of *The-Collective*, May 2015). Cooperation and its learning are written into the "Basic rules" posing "simple rules accepted by all to: decide (consensus), to manage participation, to avoid taking power and that everyone can express themselves [...] shared information; [...] find tools [...] (non-violent communication) ..." (collegial minutes 19-04-2017). This priority given to cooperation characterises *The-Collective* and distinguishes it from the TPEC previous project of move from *The-House* associations. This project, a third place, without a real common project, ended in bankruptcy a few years later.

The project of *The-Collective* addresses the three dimensions of sustainability – ecological, social-cultural-educational, and economic. The activities also embrace, but do not fully cover, the seven pillars of the CE (ADEME & Geldron, 2014): 1) sustainably sourcing (for all) ; 2) eco-design (as AssoMI's washable nappies) ; 3) territorial ecology (as AssoPI's biogas) ; 4) economy of functionality (sharing of spaces, services, tools and materials) ; 5) responsible

consumption (as AssoC's local food networks) ; 6) re-use, repair and re-purposing (for all) ; 7) recycling (as AssoARF's frying oils into fuel). *The-Collective* plans to coordinate its alternative circular practices jointly offering the conventional system a project to experiment with the TCS. This project "would be a place of experimentation to invent a new way of making society [...] of preserving natural and human biodiversity" (Project presentation document, 25-06-2019). This coordination creating a self-organised TCS dynamic, constitutes a third level of self-organising.

On all three levels, self-organising answers the difficulty of creating alternatives to a conventional society at its heart. Furthermore, it responds to the specific need of a CE to create spontaneous and transversal cooperation between various actors sharing a place. Finally, going beyond internal self-organising, it interacts with the system for TCS involvement.

4.2 A TCS dynamic fuelled by various actors

TCS's self-organised dynamic essentially works with volunteer citizens. *The-Collective* integrates their diversity, facilitates initiatives and cooperation so that a project emerges.

4.2.1 A force for voluntary mobilisation

Depending on the type of structure, two mobilisation strategies surface: in associations that are governed in a classic manner and individual companies, professionals encourage commitment by raising awareness and disseminating knowledge and services. Collegial structures mobilise through experimentation, sharing of knowledge and know-how and calling for active membership (as AssoC's support and spin-off for new local food networks).

This is a large-scale job, reaching almost 15 full-time equivalents, more than half of which are volunteers (in 2019), among 937 members. Adopting a chosen frugality with the practice of exchange and mutualisation, they receive modest incomes from their activities or resource allowances. This frugality is reflected in the structures resulting in modest (less than or equal

to €50,000 for 11/12 respondents) and sometimes unstable products from one year to the next (as AssoAL's rate of product ranging from 1 to 25 depending on events). Access to various funding sources is therefore very limited, as they require a stable and substantial balance sheet, administrative skills and time: "I don't know how to [fill out forms] and, [...] I have absolutely no time to look into it" (AD for AssoM). Thus, only six associations obtain financial aid (2019), all of which employ a staff member, therefore used to seek funds for this position, sometimes even voluntarily (PaD and AD).

The dynamics of a TCS are based on the commitment of individuals and their capacity to mobilise others. The frugality chosen as a transition value is increased by the gap with conventional logic thus reinforces the need of cooperation to activate a TCS.

4.2.2 Various actors randomly grouped together but engaged in TCS

The self-organised dynamic of *The-Collective* is driven by individuals, both involved in TCS but grouped together by chance: "... a society is above all people who find themselves together by chance [...] otherwise, it is a clan" (EB, doctoral workshop, 02-12-2020). The match between the applicant's values and project and those of *The-Collective* is verified through a quite strict and long reception procedure. This immediately restricts access to the most motivated who are rarely refused, except for lack of space. Rarely does an uncommitted TCS project fall through the cracks, such as a profit-making mobile home that was quickly asked to withdraw. The dynamics of self-organising are thus fed by the random input of new and diverse projects that contribute to a TCS.

4.2.3 A facilitating dynamic

To create self-organising, more than just juxtaposing various actors, the structures create opportunities to cooperate, particularly through their mobilisation actions (as AssoAl's events mobilising up to 400 volunteers). *The-Collective* initiates self-organising with work carried out

within cooperative commissions and workshops. It is facilitated with procedures – as the shared and rotating management of monthly public collegial meetings led by two members, with three members in charge of speaking, time and note-taking for the minutes – and material or digital communication tools – as May 2018's cooperative tools adapted by CM and CF from 'snowball' and 'think-listen' to summarise the project. Finally, *The-Collective's* dynamic is based on conviviality and the sharing of action – as a shared meal and cooperative action or reflection workshops before each collegial meeting.

Thus, the facilitation does not create self-organising, which only arises in the practice of collective action: "... regarding the construction of communal things, together, concretely, what we try to do and what is moderately successful ... " (FS, doctoral workshop, 02-12-2020).

4.2.4 Practical application through project co-design

The self-organised dynamic of transition is then put into practice by its structures' coordination project part of the TCE. The project is carried out through a succession of self-organising loops of cooperative work driven by a raised question, a document to be drawn up, or the contribution of a member, and requiring the agreement of each actor and validation by the collegial. The contribution could be a representation (as the FC's circular diagram), a project (as BM's eco-centre or PiR's perma-circular area), an organisational method (as ChA's working meals with elected representatives at her home). Thus, loops produce ideas that are recorded in writing, simply juxtaposed or sometimes synthesised, but not necessarily used by others.

New structuring ideas may then arise from a retrospective reflective look – as a researcher-observer does. Such a phenomenon of ideas cropping up occurred at the last doctoral workshop (02-12-2020) about the academic astonishment at the absence of observed conflicts that opened up a retrospective discussion on the project. The expression of four perspectives produced a new idea of a method of project. For EB, *The-Collective* should "...do things without the theory and then confront the theory with reality" while, for DG, the project should be more focused

on the search for circularity. According to ARG, "there is no one whose job it is to ensure follow-up, as [the researcher] does", and PaD considers that the project is not yet written, perhaps for fear of conflict. From these four ideas, a fifth one crops up, the idea of a 'backward project-memory': "describe what we do [...as] a project [...] we are working [... and] every [x] months [...] we remodel and move forward" (PaD, doctoral workshop, 02-12-2020).

The results thus show a self-organised TCS dynamic collectively appropriating the individual ideas of the various actors involved, over cycles of cooperative work. The unresolved collective appropriation of different perspectives can be explained by a lack of practical application, follow-up and fear of conflict. Efforts to synthesise, the contribution of new perspectives and collective reflexivity make it possible to overcome these obstacles, enabling comprehensive ideas to crop up, such as a reverse project method.

4.3 A project co-constructed through loops of appropriation

Beyond ideas, in practical terms, the project and its inclusion in the TCE arise from a complex process of collective appropriation – identifying the issues, co-defining and co-designing the project that faces the obstacles of a conventional culture unsuited to cooperation.

4.3.1 First loop: Emergence of a TCE project vision and identification of stakes

The idea of including *The-Collective's* project in the government's TCE scheme arises from joint approaches and initiatives by individuals: a previous research project on CE with AssoC, *The-Intercom's* interest for CE, a request by an elected member of *The-Intercom* for a CE project in *The-House*, and the DG's note (AssoC). The process of collective appropriation started with the September 2016's collegial agreement on DG's proposal, to develop this note in order to apply for an ADEME-Region call for proposals on CE. The process, fed by individual initiatives, is developing into several series of increasing collective work loops.

Firstly, a commission brings out different visions of the project (as ‘showcase’ or ‘fixed AssoAI’s events), summarised by PiR to be collectively reworked, in weekly cooperative workshops. The work produces a draft and a collective note soliciting the opinions of institutions and communities, both validated in the February 2017’s collegial.

Secondly, PiR and PoD takes charge of putting together the dossier, on a shared online document complemented and commented by the members and myself. Institutional feedback is taken into account – without the communities’ one who will answer later – limiting the project to the first phase of the note: the eco-renovation of *The-House* into a third place, a “showcase of the CE”. It aims to ensure the "launch of a dynamic of actors working for a TCE" with “realisation of events and training sites, and reflections on new exemplary and circular projects", such as an eco-centre.

Finally, *The-Collective* learns that its application is not selected – due to the absence of measures adapted to a third place – when the commune answered the note. Still reminding that the project couldn’t be carried at *The-House*, it opens up the dialogue channel, recognising the project addressing *The-Intercom*’s issues of social and solidarity economy and CE. *The-Collective* responds with a "spirit of cooperation" as an actor "committed to a CE".

4.3.2 *Second series of loops: Co-definition of the project and its inclusion in the TCE.*

The-Collective decides to "work on a project for a building intended to host structures of the circular and solidarity economy ..." (August 2017’s Collegial minutes). At the meantime, the situation with regard to *The-House* is changing: the threat of demolition is reiterated during winter 2017, then transformed into the prospect of a long lease in March 2018, and finally of a sale for a symbolic amount in June 2019.

The process of self-organising continues, with other work loops, sometimes in parallel, on different themes and methods, with contrasting perspectives on the inclusion of project in TCE: DG, SG, and FC share the vision of a CE-"real economy" (DG, CE round table, AssoAI’s event,

14-04-2019), while many are sceptical about a CE "already too connoted and reductive" (PiR, Loomio October 2017). An "appropriation" of a CE definition is written in December 2017, including the project in the TCE that disappear in a summary sentence of the project written collectively in May 2018. The process continues, without any further reflection on the CE for a while, but the CE reappears in the June 2019 project presentation document mentioned in the title, diagrams and a prospective plan, but not in the project definition. Nevertheless, the actor typology questionnaire, shows an overall agreement on the inclusion of the project in the TCE: despite the very divided opinions on governmental TCE as a real economy, actors consider (23/24 respondents) *The-Collective* already committed in TCE. Thus, the process continues, despite the diversity of perspectives which, nevertheless, constitutes an obstacle on the progress of the project.

4.3.3 Third loop: Co-design of a project

About 30 members of *The-Collective* co-design the project, and about 10 of them co-draft the document presented in June 2019, to *The-Intercom*. AM proposes a plan and the coordination. The participants of the first meeting share out the parts of the plan, which are reappropriated, and work on them individually and sometimes in small groups. The contributions are reflected upon, drafted, completed and reworked, in order to be validated by the participants and then by the collegial body: DG brings a perspective on realising the CE's national policy, AM a view on "making society" for transition, PiR a prospective project on a circular and perma-cultural place, SG a link to biodiversity and environmental scheme; and EB initiates diagrams of thematic circular interactions, conceived and explained by the concerned members and then formatted by CM; CM also produces a diagram of the functioning of *The-Collective*; I was asked to write a short summary of *The-Collective* reflections on the "budgetary elements". A 40-page document was thus co-constructed and received an enthusiastic welcome from *The-Intercom*. This moment marked the end of a cycle and of my observation. Other cycles followed

and after a slowdown due to the context – municipal elections, health crisis – the project continued with the technical elements of the file for an acquisition envisaged by *The-Intercom* in 2023.

4.3.4 Difficulties in cooperation

This complex process of self-organising is therefore fuelled by the diversity of the members, and their capacity to carry out cooperative work. But the diversity of collective action cultures is also an obstacle because of the need to co-construct and discuss any idea, tool or method: some dissatisfaction is expressed without being resolved. For some, too many debates slow the project down (FS, mini-questionnaire 09-01-2019), while for others "people [...] left because of lack of communication" (ARG, doctoral workshop 02-12-2020). Several issues may remain pending a collective solution, for "basic things", or fundamental questions such as the "ambition" of the project, the will to "institutionalise to fund jobs or keep the work essentially voluntary", or the way to "ensure the follow-up" (EB, DF, ARG, doctoral workshop, 02-12-2020). Furthermore, a lack of time available for voluntary work is mentioned, essentially affected to urgent issues (DF, ARG, doctoral workshop, 02-12-2020). Finally, *The-Collective's* desire to cooperate with its partners puts its cooperative organisation in tension with the more top-down organisation of institutions and communities. It must therefore adapt on several occasions to changes in the situation, without knowing what is at stake, nor having been consulted or merely informed. Faced with these difficulties, there are many moments of discouragement and departures: PiR withdraws definitively, after noting the impossibility for him to ensure the role of architect of the house renovation; AM withdraws punctually "waiting to see signs of a somewhat serious commitment" (AM, doctoral workshop, 02-12-2020). Thus, the lack of a collective culture of cooperation hinders, but does not halt, the progress of the project.

4.3.5 Support for initiative through mutual reflexivity

Faced with obstacles and failures, such as the refusal of an application, *The-Collective* did not organise a review meeting; the evaluation took place throughout the action. After the application's refusal, there was a break, and then another loop began a little later. Another form of evaluation took place throughout the action, through mutual reflexivity on the relevance to the project and the values of *The-Collective*. Any contribution, idea or action proposed is valued from the outset as an initiative and an opportunity for experimentation, to be facilitated and enriched. As soon as a difficulty is encountered, support can be provided, such as the workshop on the project summary sentence by CM. It is not considered a failure if it does not succeed. If the difficulty persists, informal exchanges can lead to a change of method, subject to immediate validation by the group: "PiR had finally given up on doing an emergence workshop, because [...] each association was too preoccupied with its own work to invest in *The-Collective* project [...] a discussion followed in the corridor for a good 15 minutes with CM saying that the project was too ambitious. PiR [...] that it was necessary to be utopian, and [...] at the same time to be concrete and CF [...] that it was necessary to put people at the centre" (field notes, 06-06-2018). A meeting was then held spontaneously, facilitated by AM bringing in the 'fox-terrier' method of a person dedicated to remind things to do, and another round of cooperative work began. If, on the other hand, the difficulty is not resolved despite informal exchanges, as in the case of a serious conflict of morals between several members living on the site, appropriate solutions are sought until the situation is resolved: a commission is set up, then an external mediator is appointed and, finally, the collegial decides to evict the members concerned. Thus, this form of evaluation by mutual reflexivity facilitates experimentation without thwarting it and recognises the limits.

The self-organised dynamic is realised by the co-definition and co-design of a TCS project, in complex cooperative work cycles, tending in mutual reflexivity, towards *The-Collective*

appropriation of the various perspectives. It is transformative, beyond its own experimentation, to be part of the TCE, without submitting to it, but inviting its partners to integrate its process.

5. Discussion

5.1 Insight into Follettian thinking

The emergence of this TCS dynamic can be seen as a relational process of integration, in the sense of the Follettian thinking modelled by Stout et al. (2018). The process here aims at the improvement of the total situation through a TCS, a sustainable frugal society, mutualising and circulating its resources. It becomes complex in a three-tier system.

The TCS dynamic is initiated by a need for cooperation between citizens to adopt sustainable practices to improve their shared situation. The integration network thus created, the first component of the Stout et al. (2018) model, partly presents the indicators of integration. The change in practices and the long and diverse training paths are evidence of the dispositions to evolve and learn. The varied but unanimous experience of cooperative action attests to everyone's willingness to decide, act together and participate in facilitative leadership. Nevertheless, the differences in participation in the life of *The-Collective*, the tensions over listening and sometimes over decision-making show diversity in these actor dispositions. To integrate diversity and co-construct a culture of cooperation, each member is encouraged to experiment with all roles, to bring and develop their own resources, skills, postures and personal inclinations. Nevertheless, some are particularly solicited for their particular skills – as facilitative leadership capacity and spirit of synthesis, practical ingenuity, artistic creativity – and also availability.

The second component of the model, the functioning of the group process that evokes participation, soliciting interactions and accompanying integration, appears at the level of the structures and *The-Collective*. *The-Collective* regularly welcomes new members, leaving it to chance to bring in diversity on a triple condition – commitment in transition, active

participation in actions, and in project. It encourages interaction by creating regular opportunities for meetings. The conditions for cooperative work integrating reciprocal ideas are sought by advocating a listening attitude, constructive dialogue and the dissemination of information necessary for decision-making. If the facilitation team ensures these conditions, more latitude can be observed during the cooperative workshops. Flexibility seems to be necessary for the formulation of ideas, reflexivity and collective appropriation, but this is time-consuming, with repetitive, monopolised or irrelevant speech. The synthesis work – as for the minutes – then takes on a very important role; these results show its complexity, difficulty, as well as importance for an integration of ideas to go further than a simple juxtaposition. The recording of ideas, their recurrent consultation and the contribution of outside views and questioning are the assets, particularly for a transition project without a model.

In the Follettian model, integration is needed in each component: the involvement of citizens, the identification of issues, the systematic processes of collective appropriation and finally the change of the situation itself. These elements indicate the integrative character of the actions. The crossing of themes, the diversity and plurality of the participation of all in the reflection and of up to 10 people in the document make this process more complex, as well as the combination of the levels of the networked system and the evolution of the situation.

Finally, mutual evaluation takes the form of continuous mutual reflexivity. It encourages, enables and facilitates the initiative to create ideas.

5.2 Overcoming value vs. conventional logic conflicts

The conflicts identified in the literature, arising when alternative organisations become institutionalised, appear through debates on the inclusion in the TCE or the economic and institutional ambition of the project. Here, the diversity and collective appropriation systematically sought are managed at different levels: through the shared governance of the structures, the hosting strategy of *The-Collective* and the cooperative design of the project. The

dissonances characteristic of alternative organisation (Dorion, 2017) remain present and continue to feed the dynamics, even if they slow down project progress. Conviviality and shared values remain a priority over institutionalisation. These results thus propose an alternative to the search for determinism by the individual in self-management: a codetermination through integration. The obstacles particularly consist in the lack of common cooperative culture and available volunteer time – easier to mobilise for urgent resistance than for experimenting new projects – and a conventional organisational logic relating institutions and communities. In the perspective of a TCS, these results encourage the development of research on self-organising, which creates convivial dynamics rather than institutions.

Conclusion

These results contribute to the Follettian theory by illustrating it; they extend this theory by opening it to the study of transitions, as suggested by Brunsson (2015). In this perspective of transition, and in particular of TCS which requires the emergence of spontaneous dynamics, a complexification of the process appears. The network becomes a system of networks at different levels. The integration process becomes iterative with multiple interactions and loops crossing each other and gradually leading from idea to project. The difficulty of making this transition within the conventional system slows down the process, which therefore needs more time and support. Furthermore, these results also provide a lead for experimental project methodology with the notion of a ‘backwards project’, a project without a model, self-organising according to its progress and recording its memory as it goes along. They also question the scientists on their possible participation in the constitution of this memory. In particular, they point to the possibility of accompanying-research within multidisciplinary teams, inviting inter-doctoral cooperation. The question of the researchers' commitment to their field is particularly questioned in a period of urgency to carry out a transition. This research presents the limits of an exploratory study of a single case, with no model value. The doctoral

framework also brings some limits: individual, so no relevant for interdisciplinarity; time limited, so even if extended, it could not be stretched enough to study the entire process up to the completion of this self-organising project in connection with communities; and funding by an ADEME, identifying the doctoral student in the field on the one hand and raising more institutional study expectations on the other. Questions therefore remain. Would the results be the same if, once owner, *The-Collective* would be in charge of rehabilitation and the costs? Would the dynamics be sufficient enough to integrate the dissonance?

Furthermore, the discrepancy between the integrative dynamics of transition and the conventional organisational logic of institutionalists opens up an avenue of research on the tension between self-organising and institution. To what extent does a self-organising need to be structured? At what point does this structure lead to institutionalisation and does it become an obstacle to the creativity of a self-organising dynamic? These questions open up a discussion with deterministic theories. They question neo-institutional approaches to the social construction of reality over a generation (Savy et al., 2019). They invite transition management to deepen the concrete articulation between the regime and the radical innovations of niches created by participants or citizens but not by the regime. How can the regime specifically support the niches, accept its own questioning and incorporate their radical alternatives? How can the niches find the motivation to act, beyond that of resistance? Finally, they question the actor network theory on the construction of facts before they are reappropriated, as “stronger facts” by the “few [...who] seem to prevail only when the heavy lifting has been done by others” (Latour, 1989: 419). The Follettian integration approach would allow us to study this construction of “softer facts”, “the simplest way to propagate a statement” (Latour, 1989: 504-505). Is their collective appropriation possible without the risk of “transforming it to the point of making it unrecognizable [...] accommodated, incorporated, negotiated, adopted and adapted by all”? (Latour, 1989: 504-505). Similarly, work on “boundary objects” (Star & Griesemer,

1989) could shed light on the role of individual contributions in the integration process. Finally, the results showing the concern for conviviality, invite to cross-reference the research on self-organising of TCS with the current study on convivialism (Alphandéry & al., 2020).

The time and support needed for this spontaneous dynamic of transition within a conventional system requires recognition of the role of this self-organising, and thus of citizen initiatives, in the engagement in TCS. This article contributes to the recognition of this role, especially for the attention of institutions and communities, which are themselves committed as well as challenged by TCS. More knowledge about the conditions of cooperation and its wide dissemination seems necessary. Hybrid support from public solidarity financing and cooperative banks could be envisaged (Glémain, 2013: 167) accompanied by an individual valuation of volunteer time.

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