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Pegasus company
The self-management cooperative tackling job insecurity

Francesca Martinelli

Centro Studi Doc Foundation

CIRIEC España
CIRIEC International
GENERALITAT VALENCIANA
Conselleria d'Educació, Cultura i Esport

Expanded abstract

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The COVID-19 pandemic showed the essential role of social protection in the current context, and the relative difficulties of the “grey zone” workers who usually do not receive health insurance, pension, family and sick leave, and unemployment benefits. This paper brings the case of self-management cooperatives and studies their role in addressing this situation in Europe. Self-management cooperatives are an attempt by workers isolated in the labour market to find an alternative to the business logic of individualisation and competition in favour of peer-to-peer exchange and democratic, collective working practices. Through the self-management cooperatives workers self-organise to obtain better working conditions and access to social protections. From the 11 case studies it emerges that the model of the self-management cooperative can be an important tool to regain control over work, through the re-appropriation of one’s own work dynamics, means of production and “voice”.

Keywords: self-management cooperative, job insecurity, Pegasus company, worker cooperative, grey zone, self-employment

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic showed the essential role of social protection in the current context, and the relative difficulties of the “grey zone” workers who usually do not receive health insurance, pension, family and sick leave, and unemployment benefits. This paper brings the case of self-management cooperatives and studies their role in addressing this situation in Europe.

Performing arts workers, as well as all grey zone workers in general, have long been excluded from the various support mechanisms offered to employees, experiencing isolation and job insecurity that have been exacerbated by the advent of the gig economy. To cope with these difficulties, in Europe since the 1980s entertainment workers have begun to experiment with new forms of cooperatives to combine the independence typical of their work with the social protection of employees. Because of this ability to combine the continuity of a working relationship with respect for artistic individuality, performing arts cooperatives can also be defined as self-management cooperatives.

Over the years, this mix of autonomy, increasing protection and being part of a community has attracted all the figures that revolve around the world of entertainment (technicians, teachers, photographers, communicators, etc.) as well as other professionals who usually work with high levels of independence (artisans, journalists, riders, etc.). That is why in the last decades in Europe we have observed the increase not only of cooperatives of entertainment workers but also of freelancers.

Today, more than 60,000 European grey zone workers and freelancers use this innovative model of cooperation, which we call a Pegasus company in direct contrast to the dominant paradigm of the unicorn company. In a Pegasus company the goal is not the profit, but to enable workers usually isolated in the labour market to enter a community and gain more bargaining power also with the support of innovative technologies.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the self-management cooperative model was particularly important because it provided support and advocacy for workers who, if they were not in the cooperative, would have found themselves without social protections.

1.1. Research question and methodology

This article is based on questions and research that the author has been asking and conducting for several years. The research started with the doctoral thesis discussed in May 2017 (PhD began in 2014; Martinelli, 2017). Being a little-studied topic with a scarce bibliography in the field, the thesis had used typical qualitative research methods to understand the structure and functioning mechanism of the self-management cooperatives Coopaname (France) and Doc Servizi (Italy): text analysis had been combined with a year of participant observation, field research and semi-structured interviews.

The experience of the thesis has since been enriched with quantitative research tools: the professional background in the Doc Servizi cooperative has allowed the author to have access to data from the cooperative, and to be able to build useful databases for the statistical analysis of certain information.

The other case studies that are enriching the model have been added over the years thanks to the continuous research work in Europe and around the world of structures like those already studied. The case studies have been modelled always using qualitative research tools, in particular text analysis and semi-structured interviews (between November 2020 and March 2021).

Analysis of worker cooperatives whose members are freelance workers is still scarce. This paper aims to fill this gap by advancing knowledge of how cooperatives are experimenting with working relationships built on alternative organisational models and challenging the individualisation of the labour market.

2. From loss of control over one's own work to self-management cooperatives

The atomisation of careers, outsourcing and the massive spread of new technologies are just some of the reasons for the increase in the number of freelance and self-employed workers. As the number of freelance and self-employed workers grows, so does the number of workers on the margins of employment, where the rules determining working hours, social protection and safety standards are not clearly defined and regulated. Workers, in fact, end up in the so-called "grey zone" of work, oscillating between self-employment and employee status but without clearly belonging to either one status or the other. This leads to a progressive loss of control over one's work, which also implies a loss of control over the dynamics governing one's work, over the means of production and over one's "voice".

This does not mean that all workers passively accept the deterioration of working conditions. In fact, there are many new self-management organisations emerging from below. These include self-management cooperatives that represent an attempt by workers isolated in the labour market to find an alternative to the business logic of individualisation and competition in favour of peer-to-peer exchange and democratic, collective working practices.

2.1. The self-entrepreneur: from the self-made man to the difficulties of the grey zone

Today, Europe is in a phase dominated by the development of the tertiary sector, also referred to as post-industrial or post-Fordist, in which the spirit of the self-entrepreneur and the self-made man has increasingly taken hold (Foucault, 2015; De Lagasniere, 2012). In response to the phenomena of polarisation and de-industrialisation of employment due to the impact of new technologies (OECD, 2017), the number of self-entrepreneurs and micro-enterprises has been growing since the 2000s (Eurofound, 2020). They are often workers who move individually in the market to respond to the new needs of businesses, which not only outsource a large part of previously in-house functions, but also require more flexible professionals with increasingly specialised technological and social skills (Frey and Osborne, 2017; De Masi, 2018; World Economic Forum, 2016).

New forms of work are emerging that go beyond the logic of salaried employment based on the desire or need for flexibility on the part of the employer or employee (Eurofound, 2020). Beyond the classic one-to-one employment relationship, we observe the growth of multi-employer/contractor relationships for each worker, one employer for several employees for a specific job, or even multiple employer-multiple employee relationships. When workers have multiple jobs and multiple sources of income at the same time, they become "slashers", a phenomenon that is steadily increasing in Europe (Soru and Zanni, 2021). Increased flexibility

is also linked to more discontinuous or intermittent activities, which are carried out from multiple locations thanks also to the support of ICT (Eurofound, 2020).

The post-Fordist system thus overcomes the logic of the dependent relationship and makes "work 'explode' into a myriad of many 'jobs'". (Bologna, 2020, p. 24). Everyone responds to the rules of 'his' market and reasons individually and according to the logic of success and profit. In the world of new professions, where in the absence of professional registers or forms of certification of skills it is not clear how to assess the quality of the work done, profit and success become the criteria of the value of work (Fumagalli, 2015; Bologna, 2018): the dream of the start-up founded in a garage growing into a unicorn company (Lee, 2013; Rodriguez, 2017) thus becomes a reference point for the self-made man.

The increase in the number of self-employed and micro-enterprises is accompanied by a deterioration in working conditions in Europe. This deterioration is linked to the gradual dismantling of the mechanism created by Fordism, whereby the employee receives a salary from the employer in exchange for his services, which then translates into full-time permanent employment with access to the welfare state. While wage employment increases in the global South, in old, industrialised countries, such as Europe, self-employment and temporary and part-time jobs increase (Corsani, 2020).

More and more workers find themselves on the margins of both dependent and self-employed work, in an area that is difficult to identify under European labour laws, which are based either on classic full-time employment or on the recognition of liberal professions. The literature speaks of workers who end up in the "grey zone" of work, situated between dependent and independent work (Supiot, 2000; Corsani, 2020). The grey zone encompasses a wide diversity of situations and very different degrees of autonomy, as it identifies all those jobs that have an indeterminate physiognomy, oscillating between dependent and independent work, and which, for this reason, cannot be perfectly framed as dependent or autonomous work (Castelvetri, 2010). The grey zone includes temporary work, part-time and on-call work, employment relationships through agencies, dependent self-employment, and self-employed workers without employees (own-account workers) (ILO, 2016). A common feature of these forms of work is discontinuity, which indicates intermittent work activity, in which periods of activity alternate with periods of inactivity (Bologna, 2015; Graceffa, 2017; Corsani, 2020). The grey zone includes not only artists, musicians, actors and in general all those figures who have always been linked to intermittent and discontinuous work activity, but also those who set up a new business and freelance workers such as translators, trainers, graphic designers, small artisans, teachers, researchers, platform workers and so on.

For workers in the grey zone, the more the figure of the employer becomes blurred, the more frequent is the phenomenon of so-called "diffuse responsibility" (Bologna and Banfi 2011, p. 601), whereby responsibilities that would be the responsibility of employers fall directly on them (business risk, access to social protection, market competition, ...). This shift of responsibility can lead in some cases to the loss of control over one's work, which corresponds to the loss of control over the dynamics that regulate one's work, means of production and "voice".

2.2. Working on the margins of dependent employment: little protection, competition, and self-exploitation

If in Foucault's vision the transformation of the self-entrepreneurial subject into a micro-enterprise would have freed him from the control of large economic forces. Translated into the reality of the facts, this condition also identifies new situations "outside the law" (Bureau and

Corsani, 2015) because due to labour relations of ambiguous (in)dependence, many of the activities carried out by the self-entrepreneur end up in the so-called “grey zone” of labour.

Being part of the grey zone means that working hours, health and safety requirements and responsibilities are not regulated in the same way as in classic salaried employment. And workers in the grey zone have only limited access, or no access at all, to social protection schemes such as unemployment benefits, sickness and maternity leave, pensions, and insurance covering accidents at work (Eurofound, 2020). For example, in Europe, more than 50% of self-employed workers are not covered by unemployment benefits (OECD, 2017). Unlike employees, they also do not have access to continuing education and safety training, which leads them to be more at risk of occupational accidents.

Moreover, grey zone workers are often isolated workers in the labour market, thus subject to difficult competition and dumping mechanisms, not protected by minimum wages, and paid discontinuously and irregularly depending on the opportunities they find, even though their work is continuous (“invisible” work, Bologna, 2018). This implies that they earn on average less than those who have a classic employee contract. A precarious condition that can become permanent in some cases, leading to the condition of “entrapment” (Borghi, Cavalca and Fellini, 2016). These assumptions lead to situations of self-exploitation in which even the boundaries between private and working life become more blurred (Bologna and Fumagalli, 1997).

2.3. Digital platforms and the absence of control over the means of production

The increase in the number of freelancers is mainly linked to the fact that they can easily enter the market thanks to the spread of laptops, smartphones, and the Internet (Charhon, 2019). Thanks to technology, workers can therefore choose to get out of the dynamics of salaried employment and regain control over their work activity, from time to the means of work production, which coincide with their knowledge and skills conveyed by ICT tools (Drucker, 2000; Fumagalli, 2015; Bologna, 2020).

Especially in recent years, we have seen the enormous growth of the business of platforms, i.e., digital infrastructures that allow two groups or more to interact (Srnicek, 2017) and, via application, match a consumer with suppliers of services or goods. The application thus acts as a digital intermediary to organise and manage the activity of the suppliers (e.g., drivers, riders, guests, etc.) according to the consumers’ needs. Today, digital platforms offer digital services and/or intermediate physically delivered services (Vandaele, Piasna, and Drahokoupil, 2019) and generate work remotely or locally (Wood et al., 2018). These platforms usually use an in-house algorithm that automatically assigns tasks, shifting several managerial responsibilities from humans to machines (Aloisi, 2016). As platforms consider themselves only a “matching system” between suppliers and consumers, they practice a radical form of outsourcing, as they also outsource their core business activity and assets (e.g., the driver in Uber, the riders in Deliveroo, the host and the house in Airbnb, etc.) (Smorto and Bonini, 2017), and therefore consider those who offer a service through a platform as independent workers and freelancers, not employees of the platform. Today, not only low-skilled workers use platforms, but also workers who base their profession on knowledge and skills, such as creative workers (Bellini and Lucciarini, 2019) or teachers who access platforms to find new job opportunities.

What all platform workers have in common is that they are gig workers, workers who deliver unique and occasional performances through platforms that extract value from work. For these

workers, the phenomenon of diffuse responsibilty reaches enormous dimensions, because digital platforms outsource all business risks to the individual without concern for “due compensation” (Smorto and Bonini, p.17). Gig workers today complain of income insecurity, lack of compensation for their capital assets, health and safety risks, lack of transparency regarding surveillance practices and evaluation systems to the task allocation of the platform algorithm for which they work (Vandaele, 2018).

The choice of platforms to consider workers as independent does not mean that they have control over the platform or their work. In fact, control on platforms is present, simply instead of being centralised it is decentralised, marrying from the manager to the customer, as shown by the various reputational models (Stark and Pais, 2020). At the same time, power remains at the centre of the platform, as platforms exclude people when they deem it necessary. What is lacking is transparency or a clear set of rules governing such exclusion.

2.4. Fragmented workers in the labour market and the difficulty of making their “voice” heard

Workers on the margins of traditional labour relations are finding it increasingly difficult to express their voice in social dialogue institutions such as trade unions. This is mainly because social dialogue is based on a clear distinction between employees (who need social protection) and employers (who take risks and are autonomous). From this vision, trade unions base their strategy on the exclusive defence of a single model, that of classic employment marked by an open-ended contract of employment (Graceffa, 2017). Despite this vision of trade unions, not only new professions and new forms of work do not fit into this model (Eurofound, 2020), but most freelancers do not identify with either a subordinate worker or an employer (Murgia and Pulignano 2019).

A structural difficulty of trade unions in defending employment due to the changing world of work in which they were born has been observed for about fifty years (Colombo and Morese, 2017). The rise of self-employment has represented a further difficulty in the union’s ability to represent and negotiate. The flexibilisation of labour relations makes workers structurally isolated (Bologna, 2020) and there are numerous studies that have shown how the fragmentation of work makes traditional union representation particularly difficult (Avogaro 2019; Borghi, Mori and Semenza 2018; De Vita, Lucciarini and Pulignano 2018; Marino et al., 2018; Pulignano, Carrieri and Baccaro 2018). Above all because unions are used to work in the context of a much more confined (physically and temporally) dependent job.

Moreover, the very fact that workers are defined as independent hinders their ability to be collectively represented, as self-employment is generally considered incompatible with union membership. Therefore, isolated in the labour market, grey zone workers suffer from a lack of representation precisely because they often face barriers to joining a union and are not always covered by collective bargaining agreements (ILO, 2016).

And since it is very difficult for a person to go it alone to contest his/her working conditions if there is no external party that somehow shares the risks related to the contestation (Bologna, 2020), self-employed workers and freelancers often choose to unite in bottom-up structures tailored to their needs. In addition to trade unions and professional associations, bottom-up initiatives are emerging that include cooperatives, freelance associations, self-organised movements and “quasi-union” (Borghi, Mori and Semenza, 2018).

2.5. The revival of self-management organisations

The spread of the enterprise culture borrowed from Silicon Valley paradigms does not mean that workers passively absorb the exhortation to self-responsibility and competition. Situations where workers find themselves with little bargaining power, in poor or impoverished economies, in conditions of isolation and exploitation, have always represented fertile ground for worker "resistance" and in some cases even for the emergence of self-management organisations (Reteuna, 2010; Allegri and Ciccarelli, 2013; Bologna, 2020), in which workers seek to regain control through the shared management of the means of production (Albanese, 2001).

In recent decades, the world of the self-employed and workers suffering new forms of precarity has seen a resurgence of bottom-up movements of all kinds – co-working, associations, self-organised unions, cooperatives, online communities, fablab, buy out. For some scholars they are coalitions between professionals inspired by the models of collaborations between citizens born in the 18th century, such as associations, cooperatives or mutuals (Allegri and Ciccarelli, 2013), for others a "transversal organization", i.e., a way to build alliances and thus have opportunities and services that as excluded from the welfare state alone could not be obtained (Bologna and Fumagalli, 2011; Bologna, 2015). In common, all these experiences have the need for workers to share the burden of responsibility and to become part of a community of peers to respond to needs and achieve together (ideal or instrumental) goals that they could not achieve alone.

Among emerging organisational alternatives and multiple working relationships, cooperatives, and in particular worker cooperatives, have been rediscovered as an option for linking autonomy and social security through collaborative work (Eurofound, 2020) and promoting solidarity despite new challenges in the contemporary labour market (Murgia and de Heusch, 2020).

This research aims to focus on the study of the model of self-management cooperatives that bring together independent and freelance workers, who operate in different sectors. These are cooperatives in which workers self-organise around the aim of ensuring better working conditions for workers usually isolated from the labour market. As we will see in the 11 case studies presented, the form of the self-management co-operative can be an important tool to regain control over one's work, through the re-appropriation of one's work's dynamics, means of production and voice.

We decided to call these cooperatives Pegasus companies in open contrast to the unicorn company model. The Pegasus company is an innovative model of cooperation that fights economic inequality by enforcing the bargaining power of isolated workers and applying disintermediation to supply chain management by building cooperative digital platforms. By working together instead of alone, workers gain more control when proposing themselves in the market and can also negotiate better working conditions, where the digital platform is used to scale and increase the impact of the cooperator's aims.

3. Case studies

In the next paragraphs we will focus directly on cooperatives with the aim of providing freelancers with mutualised entrepreneurial solutions, decent working conditions and access to social protection systems. I define this cooperative model as a self-management cooperative, or Pegasus company (Martinelli, 2020). They can also be called independent worker cooperatives, as reported by Hyungsik Eum in *All for one*, a 2019 publication by CECOP.

The first self-management cooperatives were born in Italy in the 1970s, with the first experiments carried out in Verona in the framework of MAG, Mutual Society for Self-Management (https://magverona.it). Born as a model of aggregation of professionals who choose the cooperative form to mutualise resources in a predominantly agricultural context, self-management cooperatives are cooperative enterprises in which the worker members, as workers, collaborate in the enterprise and observe its general directives, rules, and objectives, and as members take over the management and organisation of manual or intellectual activities according to their personal skills and abilities.

The main peculiarity of the professionals who come together in self-management cooperatives is their "infungibility" which makes them unique and irreplaceable and can be understood as the set of specific skills that make them experts in the sector in which they operate to the point of being autonomous in the organisation of their own work activity (Martinelli, 2020). Self-management cooperatives make it possible to safeguard and enhance this autonomy, which is unavoidable for certain professions, such as the artistic and highly intellectual ones, and today sought after by many workers in search of better work life balance conditions (Chung and van der Lippe, 2020). At the same time, in cooperatives, professionals are no longer forced to suffer isolation in the labour market or to live in the grey zone, because by joining with other professionals they optimise labour costs, obtain greater protection, and become part of a community.

Within the co-operative, workers mutualise services or equipment (e.g., accounting services, marketing services, consulting and legal services, co-working spaces, etc.) to support their productive or commercial activities, which are then carried out autonomously (CECOP, 2019). Although the main objective of these cooperatives is not to provide employment solutions to workers, cooperatives of this type place a strong emphasis on generating sustainable employment by joining the forces of workers who are usually isolated and precarious in the labour market and providing collaborative solutions (Martinelli, de Heusch, Toncelli, Shamku, 2022).

Among self-management cooperatives, there are those composed of workers with a legal status of self-employed and those that provide workers with the more protective status of employees, while allowing them to maintain their autonomy and control the work process (Mondon-Navazo *et al.*, 2021).

the following pages we will analyse case studies of cooperatives that bring together different types of workers, but all of them share a common membership in the "grey zone" of labour. Our choice has been to subdivide self-management cooperatives according to the prevailing typology of members they gather. We will therefore analyse cooperatives of performing and creative workers (Doc Servizi, Lilith, Smart); Business and Employment Cooperatives (BEC); cooperatives founded by gig economy workers; and cooperatives that bring together workers from impoverished, precarious, and low-income sectors.

3.1. Cooperatives of performing and creative arts workers

Artists and workers in the performing arts were the first to be excluded from the various support mechanisms offered to employees. Working in the performing arts has always meant dealing with multiple clients, inconstancy in working relationships, fragmentation of work, isolation, and the impossibility of performing in the same place for long periods of time (Howes, 2016; Panteia and EENCA, 2020; Culture Action Europe & Dâmaso, 2021). Due to these working conditions, artists often find themselves on the margins of labour relations and end up in the "grey zone'"of work (Supiot, 2000; Corsani 2020).

To cope with these difficulties, they began experimenting with new forms of cooperative enterprise to combine the intellectual independence typical of their work with the social protection of employees. In this paragraph, we are reporting three case studies of long-history cooperatives born in the fields of the arts: the Italian Doc Servizi, the Finnish Lilith, and the Belgian Smart.

3.1.1. Doc Servizi (Italy)

Doc Servizi was founded in 1990 in Verona, Italy, as a workers' cooperative. It was created by a group of musicians to obtain decent work, fight undeclared work, and to collectively enhance their work as professionals in the performing arts (Martinelli, 2021a). Today it is the largest Italian cooperative operating in the field of entertainment with more than 6,000 members working in all professions of the performing arts.

In the cooperative, artists acquire the double status of worker-members (Martinelli, 2017): as workers, they become employees of the cooperative and have access to its social protection systems; as members, they become entrepreneurs of the cooperative and, through democratic management, can choose how to run the business to achieve the goals they would not achieve on their own. In addition, the co-operative's professionals organise themselves to be free to manage their specific activity and at the same time be able to collaborate with others.

Over the years, members have organised themselves to provide more and more services to carry out their work in the best possible way (job management, business promotion, professional communities, specific business units, training) and find new job opportunities within the cooperative. Since 2012, Doc Servizi members have introduced an internal digital platform to manage all this activity and support their self-management (Martinelli *et al.*, 2019).

Regrouping workers usually fragmented in the market; Doc Servizi has begun to advocate for its members. Two examples where its expertise was involved are a decree dedicated to the safety of technicians delivered in 2014 and the first Italian collective bargaining agreement (CBA) for the professionals of the arts who work in a cooperative signed in 2014 (Chiappa, and Martinelli, 2019), and renewed in 2020 to protect all freelancers of the cultural and creative industry and regulate platform work.

Today Doc Servizi is part of a larger network, called "Rete Doc", made up of eight companies that together have more than 8,400 members and cover all sectors of the cultural and creative industries, communication, education, and technological innovation.

3.1.2. Lilith

Lilith was founded in Helsinki, Finland, in 1997 by a group of musicians and producers. Today, it is the largest co-operative in the country, with more than 400 members in different creative fields, such as culture, arts, crafts, design, welfare, development, services, and media. Its members include a production company and a publisher.

By joining Lilith, independent workers become employees instead of being self-employed, while maintaining their autonomy and flexibility as owners of their cooperative (Cecop, 2019).

Lilith's business model is designed to grant its member-workers the status of employees and to provide them with a safe and secure working environment and a place to focus on multiple professions and skills (Cecop, 2019). To achieve this goal, the co-operative takes care of all legal duties that employers must fulfil according to Finnish legislation, and provides its members with training courses, workshops, workspaces, tools and equipment, discounts on various products and services, networking opportunities and meetings.

3.1.3. Smart (Belgium)

Smart is a multi-stakeholder cooperative and was founded in 1998 to support artists in the development of their activities through mutualised services and a digital platform facilitating the billing of their multiple and interrupted activities.

In the beginning Smart was a non-profit association and in 2016 it became a multi-stakeholder cooperative. Focused first on artistic and creative workers, then Smart opened to all freelancers and recently also to platform workers. In the cooperative, workers become together members, economic promoters and employees thanks to fixed term or permanent employment contracts.

Smart allows freelancers and entrepreneurs to develop their economic activity autonomously by accessing a double solidarity: that linked to the mutualisation of means and risks and that linked to access to the most protective employment status, that of an employee (Martinelli, de Heusch, Toncelli, Shamku, 2022).

Smart considers itself a “shared enterprise”, a shared production tool that is altogether the means and the service for and of freelancers, but many observers have also identified it as a “quasi-union” because of the advocacy activities it has developed as well as the actions it has undertaken for food delivery riders (from Take Eat Easy and Deliveroo) (Vandaele, 2018; Xhauflair *et al.*, 2018; Murgia and de Heusch, 2020).

Today Smart is a network of co-operatives and companies active in eight other European countries and has about 26,000 members.

3.3. Business and Employment Cooperative (BEC)

The BEC is an entrepreneurial platform supporting entrepreneurs in many ways: legal, administrative, and accounting management, entrepreneurship education. It was created in France in 1994 (*cooperative d’activité et d’emploi*) to answer to the social need of isolated self-entrepreneurs in any sector by offering them a viable alternative to setting up a business individually, which is the cooperative where they can test their business (Bost, 2011).

Facing the disruption of the welfare institutional arrangements, BECs aim to build a new one providing the growing number of freelancers with a secure collective framework and democratic economic relationships (Boudes, 2020). Concretely, BECs make it possible to try out an entrepreneurial activity because, during the entire period of stay in the company, they offer numerous services to the entrepreneur, including legal, fiscal, and administrative support and the opportunity to invoice through their own structure (Martinelli, 2017). Moreover, in BECs mutualism is particularly important not only in individual and collective entrepreneurial training, where forms of peer support are activated, but also in the economic and financial sphere, with the experimentation of new forms of business risk sharing (Bureau and Corsani, 2015). These experiments show to have a positive “collective effect” on each entrepreneurial activity (Ballon *et al.*, 2018; Corsani, 2020).

Mostly important, BECs are the only type of self-management cooperatives that are recognised as such by law. In France, in 2014, the Hamon law recognised the existence of BECs and of the figure of the employee-entrepreneur-cooperator (Boudes, 2020). The employee-entrepreneur-cooperator is an entrepreneur who retains his autonomy in the management of his business (branding, customer management, tariff setting, etc.), but at the same time becomes an employee and a member of the cooperative (Martinelli, 2017). Also, thanks to the support of the law, the movement has been able to grow and today counts 200 cooperatives and more than 10,000 entrepreneurs.

This model was then exported to the Czech Republic (BEC Družstvo) and Switzerland (Neonomia), and recently there is a project ongoing in North Africa.

3.3.1. Coopaname (France)

Coopaname is a BEC based in Paris, France, that today counts more than 800 members. Coopaname was founded because in 2004 there was still no BEC in Paris. This was an important limitation in the dialogue with institutions in France. Therefore, the cooperative was created to become the "showcase" (Veyer, 2007, 2011) of the whole movement and to represent its political needs. Precisely because of this role, Coopaname also actively participated in the drafting of the Hamon law, deploying energy and resources in this project with the aim of supporting not only the activities of its members, but of the whole freelance sector.

Not least because of its origin, Coopaname is consider as the political laboratory of the BEC movement, and its objective is to become an alternative model to the models of individual entrepreneurship and to the traditional work of employees through the strength of its community, which is the engine of its action (Martinelli, 2017). The BEC pursues this objective by multiplying the opportunities to participate in the governance system, to exchange knowledge and practices, to work together thanks to coworking spaces and an extranet communication system.

3.3.2. BEC Družstvo

BEC Družstvo is a Business and Employment Cooperative (BEC) operating in the Olomouc and Moravian-Silesian region, which are the regions with one of the highest unemployment rates in the Czech Republic and was formally established in January 2012.

The main objective of BEC Družstvo is to support employment in rural areas through the implementation of the BEC methodology. It focuses on supporting the development of micro-enterprises of disadvantaged people, especially the unemployed, but also people without a stable job and people who want to legalise their activities by getting out of the black economy (Martinelli, 2021). Today, BEC Družstvo is the leader of a network of five BECs in the Czech Republic and works to improve the ecosystem to develop other similar experiences in the country.

The cooperative acts as a non-traditional business incubator for new entrepreneurs, where disadvantaged people can test their business idea with the support of experts and a group of peers who are facing similar problems, while benefiting from adequate working conditions and a secure income, both provided by the BEC. For this reason, BEC participants are also called "paid entrepreneurs", who are employees of the cooperative.

3.4. Cooperatives founded by gig economy workers

In most cases, digital platform owners absolve themselves of responsibility as employers and treat workers as self-employed. For example, online food delivery platforms such as Deliveroo, Uber Eats and Glovo deny the existence of employment relationships with their workers, leaving an increasing number of workers misclassified as independent contractors and deprived of their basic labour rights. As a result, in 2016 there was a wave of protests in the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Italy and Spain to denounce the exploitative nature of this work. From these protests, new gig worker self-management organisations are springing up across Europe, these are associations, autonomous unions, federations and even cooperatives.

Gig workers see self-management cooperatives to regain control over their work, because their democratic structure allows them to collectively define their working conditions and take control of the platform. Among the gig workers who have decided to find a cooperative alternative to the exploitation of their labour are not only riders and cycle couriers as we will see in the examples of By-Expressen (Denmark) and York Collective (England), but also teachers. To put an end to the exploitation of online teaching platforms that do not grant them any rights and work-life balance, an international group of teachers created MyCoolClass in England.

3.4.1. By-Expressen (Denmark)

By-Expressen is a bicycle courier cooperative operating in the logistics sector in the Copenhagen area, Denmark. The cooperative was founded in 2012 by three bicycle couriers, with the vision of spreading cargo biking as a solution to the challenges of the logistics industry within the green transition, through a local approach.

By-Expressen has not been influenced by the prospect of working on international platforms, nor has its business been affected by their arrival on the Danish market (Martinelli, 2021b). In fact, the key element of By-Expressen's business is differentiation: the cooperative operates in the logistics sector at all levels. They deliver everything, and their business model is based on B2B relationships with customers operating in various sectors.

They use a teamwork approach, which is a non-hierarchical, horizontal, and tailor-made approach built around their work and personal needs. All workers are employed by the cooperative, with access to the relevant social protection systems, and paid the same hourly wage, regardless of the type of work they do or their responsibility in the cooperative. To organise their working time, By-Expressen has a scheduling team that ensures that each delivery person receives the timetable for the whole month a month or two weeks in advance.

3.4.2. York Collective (England)

York Collective is a bike courier cooperative founded in January 2020 in York, UK. The idea to found York Collective dates to meeting with the rider cooperative federation CoopCycle (Martinelli, 2021b) in 2018, but it took time to adapt the federation's platform to the UK system.

The co-operative was founded by four young people who had experienced working for gig economy platforms as riders and the associated lack of social security and safety. For this reason, the cooperative's aim is to offer a response to the exploitation of the gig economy perpetrated by irresponsible multinationals under the aegis of innovation (Martinelli, 2021b).

To guarantee decent work York Collective pays by the hour and not by the drop and uses a higher benchmark than the minimum amount for gig economy workers. Riders have both insurance as members of the cooperative and a guarantee of safe working conditions.

3.4.3. MyCoolClass (England)

MyCoolClass is a cooperative of teachers founded in England in April 2021. The cooperative was created to address the exploitative situation experienced by teachers who use online platforms to offer courses: low payments, no guarantees or protection, and heavy hours.

The cooperative reunites over 300 freelance teachers from all over the world. Within the cooperative teachers upload their CVs, build courses, and set prices. The teaching activity is built around a platform owned by the cooperative. The teaching platform offers a library for sharing content and a teacher-student matchmaking system. The platform can help to scale the cooperative's activities and get more teachers involved.

Today, MyCoolClass is a working cooperative that brings together those who created the project and manages the structure and operation of the platform. The teachers are all freelancers because this makes contract management easier, considering that the cooperative is international, but working conditions are defined by individual teachers. The aim of the cooperative is to create another level of membership and to get teachers to become members of the cooperative as well.

3.5. Cooperatives bringing together workers from impoverished, precarious, and low-income sectors

With the entry into the service society, more and more professions that were in-house end up being outsourced. This implies a progressive deterioration of working conditions that ends up involving even professions that until recently enjoyed good working conditions. We will analyse the experiences of a group of young interpreters and translators who have chosen the cooperative model to counteract the precarious working conditions for those working in the sector (Soglasnik Language Cooperative) and of some Dutch journalists who have decided to fund their own publishing house and run it as a cooperative (De Coöperatie).

While some sectors have become impoverished, others have always been characterised by precariousness, low income, and undeclared work. This is the case, for example, of the Afro hairdressers of Matongé in Brussels, who after a raid by the labour inspectorate found a way to legalise their activity by founding a self-management cooperative (RCOOP).

3.5.1. Soglasnik Language Cooperative (Slovenia)

Soglasnik Language Cooperative (Slovenian: *Jezikovna zadruga Soglasnik*) is a cooperative of language workers, including translators, language teachers, proofreaders, and interpreters, founded in 2014 in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia.

It was founded in 2014 by a group of young language students who had just finished their studies and wanted to enter the labour market. They wanted to work for a fair wage and in a fair working environment that was not purely profit-oriented but based on personal participation and shared responsibility for management (Martinelli, 2021b). Therefore, they discovered the cooperative model and in 2014 founded the Soglasnik Language Cooperative, the first cooperative in the language sector in Slovenia. The cooperative aims to ensure fairer payments not only for its members but on the Slovenian language market (against price dumping) by combating the precarious conditions of workers in the language field.

Most of the clients of the Soglasnik Language Cooperative are organisations that choose to support their model of fair prices, which are not the cheapest.

3.5.2. De Coöperatie (The Netherlands)

De Coöperatie is a cooperative of independent journalists founded in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, in 2016. The members of De Coöperatie decided to reverse the power relationship among the publishing company and journalists by transforming the publishing company into a cooperative owned by freelance journalists (Martinelli, 2021b). In this way, the journalist is no longer dependent on the publisher, but the publisher is at the service of the journalist. Today, De Coöperatie has about 700 journalists throughout the Netherlands.

As a publisher, De Coöperatie has a publishing platform that supports three specific channels that are linked via a content database and journalists can publish the same article on several channels. The cooperative has established a new income model for journalists, which is no

longer based on media advertising, but on crowdfunding. De Coöperatie offers a co-working space that can be rented as an office, training programmes and group accident insurance.

By working together, journalists have the opportunity, even if they are self-employed, to be better protected, to join a network and to become better journalists by focusing more on the quality of the content they create.

3.5.3. RCOOP (Belgium)

RCOOP is a cooperative that brings together hairdressing and beauty treatment professionals and was founded in 2018 in the Matongé district of Brussels, Belgium. RCOOP was created to provide an innovative solution to legalise the economic activity of hairdressers in the Matongé district, in a co-working space that is a beauty salon, thus supporting self-management and self-entrepreneurship.

By joining the cooperative, each hairdresser or beauty treatment specialist acquires the status of an active independent member (*indépendant associé actif*) and can start working formally under the umbrella of the cooperative using his VAT number. In this way, the cooperative guarantees access to the profession in Belgium. If people joining the cooperative do not have a diploma to work in the sector, the cooperative supports them to obtain it.

In the RCOOP, members are considered as self-employed workers who collectively participate in the cooperative, which carries out accounting, control, and management of VAT declarations for them. Members receive a monthly emolument from the cooperative, which is a kind of salary, based on the turnover of each activity. The cooperative offers customised entrepreneurial and commercial support (e.g., development of a business plan), and training to improve both entrepreneurial skills (social media communication, business, etc.) and financial and accounting skills (Martinelli, 2021b).

4. Discussion

The case studies, although at different levels of development and size, all represent experiments of self-management cooperatives for workers in the labour grey zone. They are presented as alternatives to the dominant entrepreneurial culture and are situated in overcoming the trade-off between individual autonomy on the one hand and social rights and collective belonging on the other (Mondon-Navazo *et al.*, 2021).

Adding up all these experiences in Europe, today more than 60,000 professionals are already working in alternative models of work organisation that allow them to develop their professional and entrepreneurial projects in an environment that does not restrict their freedom of action but guarantees protections and safeguards that are not found in more traditional forms of work organisation.

The fact of identifying across the continent the need to seek cooperative and collaborative solutions to the limitations and difficulties experienced by grey zone workers and isolated professionals and entrepreneurs, contributes in turn to support the thesis of “evolutionary convergence” (Martinelli, 2017, 2020). All the realities mentioned consider it necessary to fight isolation, worse working conditions than those of employees, the risk of obsolescence of skills and self-exploitation and, for the time being, the solution to these problems shared by these realities scattered throughout Europe is to join a cooperative in order to obtain greater protection and better economic conditions, to enter a community and not lose at the same time the freedom necessary to run one’s own business. In this way, self-management cooperatives counteract the processes of self-employment and atomisation of the workforce by allowing

workers to regain control over the dynamics of their work, their means of production and their own “voice”.

4.1. Improving working conditions through practices of mutualisation and sharing of entrepreneurial responsibility

The experiences of the first self-management cooperatives in the performing arts (Doc Servizi, Lilith and Smart) show that artists were unwitting forerunners of the times because they were among the first to explore cooperative models that now provide viable and effective solutions for other workers. The working conditions that have always been typical of the arts sector, including both economic and social difficulties and the need for independence and flexibility, are now shared by other parts of the workforce. With the growth of workers involved in the dynamics of the gig economy and the number of freelancers, these cooperative experiments are therefore increasing, as they present themselves as valid alternatives to the isolation and uncertainty of income due to the inconstancy of working relationships. Over the years, cooperation therefore seems to have proved to be an ideal solution for achieving both the continuity of a working relationship within a community and respect for individuality, leading to the adoption of this model not only by all those figures who revolve around the world of entertainment (event organisers, photographers, communicators, etc.), but also by other professionals accustomed to a high level of independence (IT, teachers, translators, journalists, riders, etc.). The main reason for joining a cooperative is that by working together instead of working alone, professionals become part of a community, gain more control when proposing themselves on the market and can negotiate better working conditions with clients and institutions.

Concretely, the cooperatives described in the previous paragraphs focus on some specific needs of the members they bring together regardless of their background or profession: improving members’ working conditions by offering shared services and mutualising costs, allowing members to access more sustainable careers while maintaining a certain level of independence in the management of their work, and supporting each member’s business development and the construction of a community of peers (Martinelli, de Heusch, Toncelli, Shamku, 2022).

The cooperative also becomes a tool to find legal recognition for atypical or unrecognised work situations, because they are new or characterised by a large presence of undeclared work (as in the case of Doc Servizi and RCOOP), allowing even those who would not be entitled to it to access social protection mechanisms.

In most of the cases studied (except for De Coöperatie and MyCoolClass) cooperatives hire workers as employees to allow them to access the social protection mechanisms typical of this status. In all cases, cooperatives aim to offer better working conditions than those offered on the market, without allowing workers to give up organisational flexibility. Cooperatives’ offers vary according to workers’ needs and the sector in which they operate. For instance, there are cooperatives that guarantee higher rates than those on the market (Soglasnik Language Cooperative, MyCoolClass, York Collective, By-Expressen, De Coöperatie), others offer income integration systems (De Coöperatie), secure income (Smart and BEC Družstvo), new job opportunities (Doc Servizi and Lilith), the possibility to undeclared worker to work in a self-declared way and with respect for legality and safety at work (RCOOP and Doc Servizi) or training aimed at improving one’s own skills to ensure the professional growth of members (Coopaname, Neonomia, Doc Servizi, BEC Družstvo).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the cooperative model of self-management was particularly important because it provided support and advocacy to workers who, had they not been in the cooperative, would have found themselves without social protections. For example, Doc Servizi acted as a safety net for entertainment workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, becoming one of their spokespersons with the Italian government, supporting them 24 hours a day to access health care, sick leave, unemployment benefits, COVID-19 support measures, and organising training courses that enabled members to acquire new skills (Martinelli, 2021a). During the COVID-19 pandemic, RCOOP members became even more aware of the meaning of declared work: as part of the formal system, RCOOP hairdressers were entitled to government aid because they paid taxes, even though the beauty salons were closed (Martinelli, 2021b). Despite the unpredictability of the future activities of the workers, Coopaname managed to get their employees access to the redundancy fund (*chômage partiel*) by using the information they had on the individual activities of previous years.

4.2. Controlling the means of production through collective ownership

The entry of digital platforms into the labour market has introduced new ways of controlling work even for those workers who had managed to circumvent the dynamics of salaried employment. While remaining self-employed, once they have entered the mechanism of platform work, workers are in fact subject to the control of the platforms that regulate their activities, and without clarity in algorithm mechanisms they suffer from various forms of exploitation.

In the case of self-management cooperatives, whenever technology is used, it is used ethically. Every time technology is introduced, its aim is to reach the needs of members. Technology is adapted to these needs, and not used for exploitation or labour control. Thus, technology is not at the core of the business, the purpose of the activity, but a tool to support the economic activity of the members (Martinelli *et al.*, 2019).

In none of the cases studied is human responsibility transferred to an algorithm based on unequal and non-transparent rankings. In fact, cooperatives prefer or systems of collective work organisation, where, for instance, working hours are defined according to the needs of individuals and always by a group of people (York Co-operative and By-Expressen) or self-organisations' systems (Doc Servizi, Smart, MyCoolClass). Moreover, cooperatives use platforms to guarantee the transparency of work and track it, also against practices of self-exploitation or undeclared work (Doc Servizi, Smart, York Collective) or to explicitly regain control over the means of production of their work and thus also greater economic power (De Coöperatie).

Although technology enables economies of scale, the value generated is always used to generate more funds for mutualisation for the benefit of the community (Murgia and de Heusch, 2020). Thus, there is a shift from a logic of control towards a logic of community. For cooperatives using platforms, the business model is not one of intermediation and value extraction, but is one of disintermediation (Martinelli *et al.*, 2019). Indeed, the platform is owned by the members of the cooperative and thus becomes a technological tool that ensures the sharing of costs and resources and the generation and redistribution of wealth. Once management costs are covered, any further value produced returns to members and owners, excluding any risk of speculation.

Similarly, the use of data is based on transparent systems that allow members to know how they are used and for what reasons. Obviously, this is possible because a relationship of mutual trust is established between the cooperative and its members. Moreover, this trust is

the foundation of the mechanism of self-management cooperatives because the autonomy that members enjoy is based on a strong relationship of trust between the freelancers and the permanent workers in charge of running the organisation. Indeed, if on the one hand, members must trust organisations, which might also behave unfairly towards them (Mondon-Navazo *et al.*, 2021), organisations have to trust members, who, because of their autonomy, might offload any kind of responsibility onto them, even when they perform illegal activities (e.g., working longer than the hours allowed by law or collective agreements).

4.3. A new way to access representation

Workers who are usually isolated in the labour market and experience job insecurity usually struggle to implement their representation and trade union rights (ILO, 2016). When they join a cooperative, on the other hand, they can better exercise their rights of representation.

By joining a cooperative, workers become part of a community and overcome isolation. Being part of a collective, they find both a concrete alternative to exploitation and a voice to defend their rights and negotiate better working conditions when entering the market (e.g., access to social protection, safe work, better tariffs, etc.). In case they also become employees of a cooperative, they can exercise their representation and trade union rights and be protected by collective agreements, without risking being disadvantaged if they join a trade union (Martinelli, 2019).

There are also cases (Doc Servizi, Smart, Coopaname), in which the cooperative may also find itself playing a representative and spokesperson role. In the cases studied this happened when the cooperative brings together workers who, if isolated, would not have had access to, for example, collective bargaining. When these workers become employees, they automatically assume a status that is recognised by the unions in the pattern of their classic way of establishing dialogues with employers in favour of employees. The only difference is that cooperatives are not a classical employer but become a kind of representative of the interests of its employees as members. The classic scheme of representation is thus overturned (Martinelli, 2019) because the cooperative gives a voice to a perspective of discontinuous workers that is unfortunately often difficult for trade unions to reach and that is precisely that of workers who belong to the grey zone of labour.

This new role, which some self-management cooperatives have found themselves playing, opens the exploration of new forms of alliance between cooperatives and trade unions (Martinelli, 2019). For cooperatives, the alliance with trade unions means allowing their members to access higher and more efficient levels of negotiation through union experience in collective bargaining and other forms in which traditional representation is expressed. For trade unions, recognising allies in this type of coperative can instead mean having support in better understanding and therefore representing the needs of all those who are looking for representation but who can only be reached with difficulty by the currently existing trade union organisations.

4. Conclusion

In our neoliberal society, workers are increasingly becoming isolated self-entrepreneurs in the labour market (Foucault, 2015). In this context, the myths of Silicon Valley and its start-ups known as unicorn companies are driving the activity of many entrepreneurs. At the same time, atomization of careers and flexibility of work are counterbalanced by a growing desire for encounters and coalitions that lead to new experiments also in cooperative form. We call

Pegasus company a new form of cooperation that allows to combine both the intellectual independence typical of self-employment and the social protection due to employees.

In open contrast to the typically capitalist model of the unicorn company, a Pegasus company consists of an innovative model of cooperation that fights economic and social inequalities by strengthening the bargaining power of workers by introducing new forms of collaboration and mechanisms to redistribute wealth equitably also using new technologies and platforms.

The choice between unicorn and Pegasus is not only a choice between legendary creatures, but metaphorically reflects different ways of reasoning driven by completely different goals and ideals. If the unicorn is a metaphor for the statistical rarity of a start-up's "market breakthrough", in a Pegasus company the reference to Pegasus, the winged horse of Greek mythology, is intended as a reference to the European origins of the cooperative model, and indicates both loyalty to the knight (the person) and the poet's freedom to reach the highest peaks of thought (the seven cooperative principles) without being intimidated by earthly obstacles.

Moreover, in Greek mythology, Pegasus is also a constellation that comes into being when the winged horse decides to fly to the highest part of the sky to become a cloud of shining stars visible to all. A constellation is like the network of people that make up the cooperative: if you remove even one star, there is no longer a constellation but only a mass of stars. But by becoming a constellation Pegasus also changes the shape of the sky and is visible to all, just as everyone should see that there is an alternative to the ethics of success and profit, namely that of cooperatives.

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