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# The ambivalence of coworking: On the politics of an emerging work practice

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## Abstract

Self-employed media and cultural workers are key users of co-working spaces, where a growing number of independent workers share desks and office amenities, escape the isolation of working from home and seek contacts for paid work. Informed by interviews with coworking space operators and members, this article assesses coworking as a response to precarity. We argue that social and political ambivalence is intrinsic to the culture of coworking. First, we situate coworking in a political–economic context, claiming that coworking emerged as a worker-developed response to changing economic conditions but, in its current form, is increasingly commodified and ultimately reinforces labour flexibilization. Second, we survey meanings attached to coworking, highlighting tensions between coworking’s counter-corporate identity and its recapitulation of neoliberal norms. Third, we address subjectivity formation, proposing that coworking spaces are a stage for the performance of network sociality. We conclude by considering coworking’s political potential as a platform for collective action. This article forms part of the Special Issue ‘On the Move’, which marks the twentieth anniversary of *European Journal of Cultural Studies*.

## Keywords

Coworking, cultural industries, creative industries, cultural work, mutual aid, precarity, self-employment

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## Introduction

Efforts to understand current labour market transformations could begin with a visit to the Impact Hub Islington, a London coworking space on the top floor of a former warehouse. The open-concept office is abuzz with conviviality; a few dozen people – most in their 20s and 30s – hunch over laptops at desks whose arrangement offers no clues to office hierarchy. This workplace aesthetic is the latest version of what Ross (2003) terms the ‘no-collar’ workplace, exemplified by web businesses in the dot-com boom era. Whereas the denizens of the feel-good workplaces in Ross’ study are employees, the Hub’s occupants are mostly workers with no employers – freelancers and the self-employed. At the Hub and other coworking spaces, members pay a fee to access a desk, shared office amenities, professional development events and contacts that may lead to contracts. Obscure a decade ago, today there are some 8000 coworking spaces in 80 countries, populated by independent workers and micro start-ups looking to temper the isolation of working from home and for a break on office rent.

Coworking dovetails with scholarly research on labour in cultural and creative industries, as most coworking occupants produce texts for these industries, develop digital media and provide communication and creative services for a variety of sectors. The socioeconomic context in which coworking is embedded is similar to that detailed in accounts that identify precarious work, individualized risk, and compulsory entrepreneurialism as interlocking tendencies shaping contemporary media and cultural work (Gill and Pratt, 2008; McRobbie, 2016; Oakley, 2014). Collective responses to such conditions, however, have received less sustained attention in media and cultural labour studies. This article draws from a larger project exploring cultural workers’ contributions to the recomposition of labour politics within and against precarization (culturalworker-organize.org). This research identifies the proliferation of ‘alt-labor’ (Eidelson, 2013), groups outside established unions working to sustain cultural work without necessitating a return to the ‘standard’ employment relationship. It is in this research context that we engage coworking as an emergent site where cultural labour is performed and responses to precarity are enacted.

Business perspectives dominate research on coworking. Scholars describe coworking from the viewpoint of workplace design (Salovaara, 2015), offer typologies of coworking spaces (Kojo and Nenonen, 2016), and study ‘knowledge exchange’ (Parrino, 2015) and ‘dynamics of innovation’ (Capdevila, 2015) within coworking spaces. Outside business disciplines, one of the first empirical studies of coworking focuses on the heterogeneous meanings of the practice (Spinuzzi, 2012), though here again, coworking is assumed to be benign and its operations of power are unquestioned. In contrast, this article can be situated in an emerging strand of critical coworking research that foregrounds the structural context of neoliberal capitalism and precarious work (Avdikos and Kalogeris, 2016; Gandini, 2016; Papageorgiou, 2016).

We set out to assess coworking as a strategy for mitigating precarity – or the social, financial and existential insecurities exacerbated by unstable employment in contemporary capitalism. How do advocates conceive of coworking? How does coworking allow the self-employed to confront work-related challenges? What forms of worker interaction predominate in coworking? What are the politics of coworking? Does coworking

reinforce or challenge the precarization and individualization characteristic of project-based labour? Our article draws on documents (e.g. reports, websites) produced by the coworking sector; news coverage of coworking; and 16 semi-structured interviews with operators, members and advocates of coworking spaces in seven cities (Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal, Kitchener, London, Berlin and New York City) conducted between 2013 and 2017, and thematically coded.<sup>1</sup> For our multisited ethnographic fieldwork, we purposefully selected coworking spaces that represent a cross-section of organizational models and occupations within creative industries. Some spaces in our study cater to a niche (e.g. writers), others are pan-professional, and the spaces cover diverse institutional forms (e.g. for-profit, non-profit). Most interviews were on site, enabling us to tour spaces and observe coworking milieus. We attended public events at coworking spaces and one author worked from a coworking space for 1 month.

We argue that social and political ambivalence is intrinsic to the culture of coworking. Our argument is developed through a four-part analysis. First, we locate coworking in a political-economic context, proposing that coworking emerged from below – a worker-developed response to changing economic conditions – but, in its current form, is commodified, increasingly corporatized and ultimately facilitates the flexibilization of labour. Second, we survey the production of meaning about coworking, highlighting tensions between coworking's counter-corporate identity and its recapitulation of neoliberal norms. Third, we consider dynamics of subjectivity formation, describing coworking spaces as a stage for the performance of 'network sociality' (Wittel, 2001). Rather than dismissing coworking as inevitably or exclusively aligned with 'the new spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005), in which autonomy, flexibility, creativity, and networks are embraced at the expense of stable employment, social protection, and a critique of exploitation, we conclude by assessing coworking's potential as a platform for collective action. Coworking, we suggest, is animated by a tension between accommodating precarity and commoning against it, illustrative of the entanglement of the new spirit of capitalism and 'postcapitalist politics' (Gibson-Graham, 2006).

## **Paying to work: coworking's political economy**

The term coworking may be new, but the practice is not unparalleled. Artists, for example, have long shared studios, and companies that rent serviced offices short-term predate coworking. Coworking lore attributes the term and the inaugural coworking space to California programmer Brad Neuberg. Embedded in early 2000s Silicon Valley tech culture, Neuberg had spent time working with a start-up operating out of Regus, a multinational serviced-office firm. Regus' 'corporate drone feel', as Neuberg describes it, was the affective foil to the shared collaborative workspace he imagined would merge the sociality of traditional office employment with the 'freedom' of independent work (cited in Dullroy, 2012). Neuberg launched the San Francisco Coworking Space in 2005 as a pop-up in a feminist community centre in the Mission District, a neighbourhood iconic of dot.com-era gentrification (Neuberg, n.d.). Coworking's diffusion, according to Neuberg, derives from an open-source ethos: to curious visitors Neuberg recalls saying, "Take this idea, steal it, and make it your own"; basically I was giving people permission to take coworking and remix it, just like the open-source roots I came from' (Neuberg, n.d.).

Neuberg's project ran for less than a year, but other spaces sprung up, their numbers virtually doubling annually between 2006 and 2012 to about 2000 worldwide. Reflecting the digital labour force and participatory media moment from which it emerged, coworking's uptake was spurred by early devotees' online efforts: a Wiki hosted a coworking 'manifesto' and directory of spaces, while coworking's unofficial organ, *Deskmag*, profiled spaces and chronicled their spread. Also influential was the 'Jelly', a label for 'casual work-togethers' born in 2006 in New York, when two roommates welcomed a rotating cast of freelancers from predominantly creative and tech sectors to their apartment for occasional work sessions to combat isolation and facilitate idea exchange. Jellies pollinated commercial coworking upstarts: the communal apartment where the Jelly premiered was home to the cofounder of one of Manhattan's first coworking spaces, New Work City, for instance (Bacigalupo, 2014). Small-scale coworking programmes in activist spaces sparked more formal initiatives. For example, a visit to a coworking session at a Brooklyn art-activist venue inspired the founder of one of Chicago's early coworking ventures (DeGuzman and Tang, 2011: 323). And the counter-globalization movement roused the founders of The Hub – tagline: 'another world is happening' – which evolved into a global network of social enterprise-oriented coworking spaces. Coworking's initial incarnations were worker developed, highly informal, frequently free, linked to activism and marginal to capitalist accumulation.

Such dynamics were short-lived. By 2015, there were approximately 7800 coworking spaces and 500,000 coworkers worldwide (Foertsch, 2015), an expansion entwined with structural shifts in contemporary capitalism. One coworking space operator describes what her members have in common: they 'all have their own businesses'. But most of these businesses are solo self-employed freelancers or companies-of-one, many reluctantly. As a media freelancer in her 30s explains, like many of her peers, she 'ended up going into self-employment partly through choice, because (we) wanted to create our own careers, and partly because, what's the alternative option?' Systemic constraints and self-determination push and pull workers into the permutations of self-employment characteristic of coworking's early adopters and core base: freelancers, independent contractors and microenterprises. Coworking's rise mirrors ongoing post-Fordist transformations eroding the normative status of 'standard employment': less than one-quarter of the world's workforce fits the 'standard' model (ILO, 2015: 13) of a full-time job with a single, stable employer, and self-employment is expanding (Hatfield, 2015; Tal, 2015: 2).

Theorizing self-employed workers as either 'marginalized' subjects of the 'risk society' or empowered 'portfolio' workers flattens the heterogeneity of self-employment (Smeaton, 2003). Rather, self-employment is located on a 'continuum' and shaped by differing dynamics of privilege and precarity depending on occupation, sector, household income and social location (Cranford et al., 2005). Self-employed workers nonetheless face numerous challenges: low pay – a recent study finds that UK self-employed workers earn on average half of what employees make (Hatfield, 2015) – reduced access to social protections and employer-supported entitlements, 'feast-or-famine' patterns of paid work, a chronic search for work, exclusion from collective bargaining rights and frequent misclassification as independent contractors. Coworking spaces respond to a narrower challenge: lack of an employer-provided worksite and prohibitive individual office leases in most cities. Coworking promises to mitigate the isolation (or other frustrations) of

working from home or cafés. Coworking spaces also recognize self-employed workers' fluid schedules and incomes by offering 24/7 access and tiered memberships, from drop-in to monthly: 'we've embedded within the model massive amounts of flexibility', says one operator.

Coworking spaces house a spectrum of professionals in creative industries and the business services that support these industries, including writers, website designers, communication consultants, graphic designers, event planners and accountants. Work performed in coworking spaces varies but typically shares a proximity to cognitive capitalism and a distance from unions, tending to emerging or expanding, largely non-unionized post-industrial occupations. Be it writing articles or designing logos, most work in coworking spaces is a byproduct of outsourcing, of organizations externalizing work in discrete projects or tasks to dispersed providers working independently on contract or on spec. Work in coworking spaces is quintessentially mobile, enabled by the diffusion of digital communication infrastructure. Coworking spaces also favour work that is organized autonomously in that it is neither exclusively dependent on employer-owned tools nor entirely beholden to employer-determined schedules. Coworking seizes this autonomy: one operator co-founded a space for independent video game developers because 'they had the means of production and means of distribution, but they needed a studio to do this stuff'.

Coworking fulfils some unsatisfied needs of self-employed workers in creative industries but goes beyond accommodating idiosyncratic work routines: coworking spaces constitute infrastructure that makes flexible labour regimes more robust. By housing the outsourced, by providing a place to work for workers without an employer-supplied office, and by fostering social bonds between otherwise disparate workers, coworking props up the fluid labour market and risky speculative production activities upon which contemporary capital thrives. One of the paradoxes of coworking is that it reinforces the processes whose effects it is a partial defence against: coworking simultaneously reacts to and facilitates the fragmentation of employment into so many 'gigs', the rise of involuntary entrepreneurialism and the restructuring of firms according to a contracting-out model. In an age of increasingly unbound work, coworking spaces are an emergent site of the 'respatialisation of work' (Halford, 2005) – a process whose scope is reflected in coworking's diversifying user profile. A growing number of large corporations install employees remotely in coworking spaces because managers view coworking environments as an innovation stimulant, a recruitment venue and a low-overhead location for temporary project teams.

As capital benefits from coworking by offloading the costs of maintaining a flexible labour supply, it also draws value from coworking as a fresh site of accumulation. In its predominant form, coworking is a commodity, a service for which customers pay a fee. A commodified service, coworking invites disembedded workers to buy back access to the resources, including workplace community, from which they have been dispossessed. Because self-employed workers tend to secure their livelihoods through commercial relations rather than employment structures or collective bargaining, it is unsurprising that many seek to address work-related challenges through the market. A private solution to precarity, coworking exemplifies what McRobbie (2016) describes as 'labour reform by stealth' (p. 13). Although coworking takes a variety of forms, from municipally

supported programs to non-profit spaces, most spaces are for-profit, even though for most, profit margins are slim. One operator describes coworking's economic model of splitting rent across itinerant tenants as fundamentally flawed. Another says coworking 'isn't a money making project'. Uncertain profitability has not deterred efforts to wring value from coworking, however: spaces proliferate at such a clip – 37,000 spaces are projected by 2018 (Waters-Lynch et al., 2016: 17) – that there is talk of a coworking 'bubble' (Moriset, 2013: 16).

Competition drives multiple strategies reshaping the nascent coworking industry. Franchising and ownership concentration has become a feature of the sector, with multi-site international coworking brands emerging. A rapidly expanding giant is New York-based WeWork, which rents short-term deskspace to individuals and teams. WeWork has 218 coworking spaces in 53 cities across 18 countries. What makes WeWork noteworthy is not its franchise ambition, loft aesthetic or even free beer gimmick, but that as of 2017, WeWork has a market valuation of US\$20 billion. Amid the bonanza of speculation on sharing-economy start-ups, WeWork is teeming with venture capital, priming WeWork to enter the urban commercial property landlord elite. Coworkers have thus become objects of speculation by financialized corporations jockeying for position in global-city real estate. Illustrating coworking's gentrifying effects, realtors now advise landlords to lease to coworking operators to enhance a building's allure and potentially raise rents (Green, 2016). Outside the property sector, corporate titans like Barclays and Verizon, independently or in partnership with coworking companies, have renovated their offices to provide coworking to draw rent from under-utilized space and to place entrepreneurs in close range of investors.

Expanding beyond coworking, WeWork's 'coliving' start-up, WeLive, rents sparsely furnished suites in buildings with shared amenities and common spaces. Packaging aestheticized dormitories as an antidote to creative-class alienation, WeLive bets on a future where young workers continue to face soaring housing costs in cities where creative work concentrates (Rhodes, 2016). WeWork's corporate strategy is to extract market opportunities from precarization. And despite its collectivist rhetoric, WeWork demonstrates coworking's class divisions: in 2015, WeWork's cleaning staff – low-waged workers hired through a contracted company – demanded higher wages and benefits and tried to unionize amid threats of being fired for doing so (Ramey, 2015). Befitting a business premised upon outsourcing, WeWork deflected responsibility for cleaners' livelihoods, claiming that the cleaners worked for the contractor.

Coworking is more heterogeneous than WeWork, but this behemoth illustrates how far collaborative workspace has come. Inside a decade, an innovation from below was drawn out of the economic margins, harnessed by capital and imprinted with corporate power relations. Coworking has evolved into multiple permutations, from sector-specific to pan-professional spaces, small-scale operations to multifloor facilities, metropolitan to small-city locations. Operators are under pressure to differentiate in an increasingly crowded coworking 'market'. Some forecasters see coworking as a harbinger of a wholesale transformation of the 'workplace' into a 'consumer good', envisioning a matrix of sites in which mobile workers toil, a respatialization of work from which hotel and retail chains are strategically placed to profit (Munn et al., 2013).

As coworking spreads, so too does a model neoliberal workplace: a shock absorber for workers who traded security for a limited form of autonomy; a hive of non-union workers whose coworking fees subsidize firms reaping savings from precarious work; and a largely unregulated workplace where policies such as equity appear difficult to enforce. Understanding the scope of coworking's ambivalence and how the idea of paying to work became attractive requires turning to coworking's symbolic dimensions.

## A place to be productive: making coworking meaningful

Part of what makes coworking distinctive is the significance ascribed to it. Representations of coworking, its articulations of work and identity, the forms of belonging it promises and other aspects of the culture of coworking are an index of shifting attitudes towards and expectations of work in contemporary capitalism. A survey of meanings attached to coworking reveals numerous tensions. Foremost among them is the ideological tension between the positioning of coworking as subversive of prevailing corporate protocols and the appeal by coworking advocates to conventional capitalist criteria to legitimize the practice.

Among some of its most enthusiastic supporters, coworking possesses a renegade persona. People we spoke to differentiated coworking from 'corporate' practices, however nebulously defined: 'A lot of us left the corporate world for good reasons'. Coworking's counter-corporate identity derives from a contrasting stereotype of the trappings of modern office employment: 'for a growing number of people', reports the article 'Coworking is Awesome', 'work no longer means being tethered to a cube or rigid schedule' (Johnson, 2014). *Deskmag* (n.d.) similarly narrates coworking as contracorporate:

Until recently, the form and function of workspaces has been dictated by corporate tradition. Yet a growing proportion of workers are now freelancers, contractors or small companies that have the opportunity to redefine the concept of the workspace for themselves.

Emphasized here is the agency of people who cowork rather than systemic forces of employment transformation – coworking, as one interviewee describes it, is 'a change in the way we allow ourselves to work'.

The figure of the coworker is imbued with self-determination. Referring to the relations between coworking operators and members, one operator comments, 'We are independent. Our people are not my employees. These are all individual people'. A coworking space, another interviewee stresses, is 'not a company that you go to every day – you're not an employee. You want to come here two hours and leave and go to the pub for the rest of the day? By all means, do'. Crafting coworking's identity as a space of production beyond employment carries an appealing, if not utopian, implication: that coworking spaces evade, perhaps transcend, power relations between those who sell their labour power and those who buy or manage it. This sense is reiterated by the emphasis on co-working's lack of routine. 'People come and go as they please', says one coworker. Another adds: 'everybody wants freedom and flexibility – that's all you want, really'. Such comments reinforce wider assumptions that self-employment favours personal

empowerment, defined largely as control over one's work time. In coworking discourse, the autonomy of people who cowork is tied to being detached from an employer. A freelancer suggests this much: '[being] an employee didn't suit me anymore and I wanted to have more liberty'.

Ideological limits to coworking's political positioning are exposed when we consider the themes downplayed in coworking discourse. Few interviewees dwelt, for example, on precarity. Indeed, some pushed back when we raised the topic of precarious livelihoods. 'I think that if you talk to the majority of people right now that are in this space, they'll say [the safety net is] a lie anyway', says one operator. 'There is no safety net. You can have a good-paying job, and, if you're living in Toronto, rent is expensive, everything is expensive, if you're paying off a student loan or something like that, forget it'. Another was alert to labour flexibilization but carefully qualified,

I don't think it would necessarily [be that] people feel scared. [...] The ground is shifting beneath them every single day: they don't have security in employment, they don't have benefits, it's freelance, contract, it's startups. It's shaky stuff for a lot of people – not that it's not successful, but it's uncertain.

These remarks typify precarity's status in coworking discourse: it is not so much occluded as ordinary. The isolation of working alone aside, rarely is coworking framed as a response to precarization. This tendency reveals coworking's class composition: while data on coworkers' earnings are uneven, coworking is an out-of-reach luxury for, say, the 80 percent of UK self-employed workers with subpoverty-level earnings (Phillips, 2015). Precarity is coworking's constitutive outside, keeping a low profile in representations of the practice – highlighting hardship would jeopardize coworking's trademark upbeat affect.

Coworking disengages class but embraces work. The *Coworking Manifesto* (n.d.), written by early coworking architects, positions coworking as a platform for work that tackles weighty societal challenges, a vision that aligns closest with the social enterprise-oriented coworking space niche. More broadly, ideas about work that circulate in coworking discourse tend to focus on individual experience. Consider the coworking advocate who explains his desire 'to play a part in shifting the world's relationship with work... [I]f more people see their work as an opportunity to realize their potential as human beings, then I'll have done my part'. He adds,

We came up with this really toxic relationship with work, that it's something that I have to do for somebody else, and the fun and joy that I get from life is something that I'll do in between. [...] We shouldn't have to be so disconnected from the work that we do. (cited in Johnson, 2014)

These sentiments echo the 'do-what-you-love' mantra (Tokumitsu, 2014) – a motto emblazoned on flags outside of WeWork's offices.

By endorsing the do-what-you-love idea overtly or otherwise, coworking replays a double-edged narrative about work in creative sectors. The embrace of meaningful work inserts coworking into a genealogy that spans Renaissance notions of self-realization

through work (Mills, 1951: 217), utopian-socialist, craft-centred ideas of ‘good work’ (Spencer, 2009: 44–46) and the refusal of alienating factory labour that drove many young people to post-industrial employment (Ross, 2009). The elevation of ‘passionate work’ (McRobbie, 2015) has been criticized, however, for justifying the monetary devaluation of labour, sugarcoating self-exploitation, concealing the privilege dividing those who can and cannot choose gratifying work and foreclosing a critique of exploitation.

In coworking discourse, individualizing outlooks on work coexist with invocations of collectivity. People we interviewed sharply distinguished coworking from what might be perceived as analogous models, such as serviced offices or accelerators. We were told that compared to those models, coworking prioritizes ‘community’. Coworking spaces were described as a ‘community of people’, ‘a place for community’ and ‘actively creating a community’. Although generally ‘community’ operates as an empty signifier in coworking parlance, our interviewees often specified community, from suggesting co-working satisfies a ‘biological need to be around other people’ to associating coworking with ‘a mindset’, ‘the personality of wanting to interact’. However imprecise, the prominence of the term community in coworking discourse demonstrates that work continues to act as a basis of collective belonging, a dynamic with unique importance to individuals otherwise separated by labour flexibilization. More instrumentally, however, the promise of community is built into coworking’s commercial premise: ‘You’ve got to create value in different ways, especially if you’re asking for money’, one operator says. ‘The value for [coworking] is that there’s community’.

Another popular claim is that coworking boosts productivity. Narratives of coworking as a place to be productive are set against typical office alternatives for freelancers. Working from home is characterized as problematic, partly, admits one coworker, because ‘I found that I was always working’. Although coworking is presented as a way to prevent work from overtaking life, home is also portrayed as a poor place to work because of its ‘distractions’. Articulations of home’s ‘distractions’ reflect gendered divisions of care work: one male interviewee suggests a need to escape the bustle of family while a woman who coworks lists domestic chores among the diversions from doing paid work. Home-based distractions range from ‘neighbours’ to ‘bed’. Coworking is framed as superior to working from home, cafés and libraries – sites characterized as ‘just not an effective way to work’, not ‘productive, fluid working environments’.

Productivity is coded as a praiseworthy attribute of people who cowork. One operator describes members of his space as ‘very disciplined’, while another observes that ‘people who are here are pushing... that’s part of the community, and that’s the spirit here’. Underscoring the ambivalence of the community trope, productivity is described by an operator as a virtuous result of simple co-presence: ‘People are way more productive [...] when they are working collaboratively, even when they are not working on the same project – just to be in physical relation to each other ...’. One operator acknowledges the competitiveness tacit in such mimetic behaviour:

If you know everyone is working on something ... you get that community feel, which [...] helps sort of drive you ... because it’s like, ‘I gotta get this done: so-and-so over there is working on her book, and so-and-so over there is working on a TV thing ...’ Everybody is pretty focused and disciplined about it, and it helps you be more productive.

Coworking spaces work to facilitate productivity. Exercises like ‘lock-in nights’, for instance, turn ‘awful’ work tasks into a premise for a ‘party’, albeit one ‘you can’t leave ‘til you get the job done’. An extreme example of regimented productivity is Hoffice, a Swedish model where private homes are repurposed as communal offices:

Everyone in the group works in 45-minute shifts, based on research suggesting people can’t concentrate for more than 40 minutes at a time. When the shift ends, an alarm clock buzzes, and the group takes a short break to exercise or meditate. Before starting again, everyone explains what they hope to get done, to add a little social pressure to actually accomplish something. (Peters, 2015)

Coworking is positioned as a subcultural practice when its exponents fear coworking may ‘go mainstream’ or complain about the term being ‘co-opt[ed]’. Such worries, a residue of coworking’s grassroots origins, are somewhat misplaced considering: coworking abides by a normative corporate metric of productivity; the self-regulating worker is a *de rigueur* post-bureaucratic labour management model; coworking’s key word, ‘community’, is a linguistic device shared by large employers who use it to cultivate loyalty and obscure antagonism; giving workers greater control over their schedules is established practice in sectors where creative labour is assumed to require a measure of autonomy; and varieties of the do-what-you-love mantra have lurked within the human resources discipline for decades. If coworking’s counter-corporate identity was historically tenuous, it is now mostly a relic; employers now look to coworking for insights on organizational behaviour and office design. Coworking thus refines the practices of the ‘corporate’ institutions in opposition to which coworking’s meaning was initially formed.

Representations of coworking that rehearse the do-what-you-love script, narrate a post-conflict workplace, or mythologize the autonomous worker are illustrative of the ascendancy of the terms of the ‘aesthetic critique’ over those of the ‘social critique’ associated with the new spirit of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). These codes of coworking also fit neatly into the paradoxical situation theorized by Virno (2004) as ‘the communism of capital’, wherein one-time oppositional desires for transforming the relations of production appear to be realized within, rather than require moving beyond, the capitalist organization of work and value. What is striking about the coworking idiom is the extent to which it integrates and remixes prevailing work sensibilities, making it an especially powerful expression of how, ‘[w]ith each reconstitution of the work ethic, more is expected of work...’ (Weeks, 2011: 76). More is expected, ultimately, of workers, which becomes clear when we consider coworking as a platform for the performance of network sociality.

## **Staging network sociality**

Coworking, one interviewee says, attracts a particular ‘personality’ – someone ‘wanting to interact [...] and valuing the people around’. Beyond generic sociability, coworking’s distinct offering is a stage for the performance of ‘network sociality’ (Wittel, 2001), which designates social relations that are temporary yet purposeful, informational,

project based, and blur work and play (p. 51). Network sociality is a mode of interaction exemplified by freelancers, pronounced in cultural industries and digital media, and rooted in a view of relationships as economic resources (p. 53). Coworking spaces formalize a setting for network sociality where the predominant style of conduct is ‘entrepreneurial’, that is, self-reliant, responsabilized, and human capital–building behaviour, the objective of which is not only income but autonomy and self-realization, pursued through work and the market in an economic climate saturated with risk and competition (Dardot and Laval, 2013). Coworking is a socio-spatial practice through which forms of interaction and subjectivity favoured by the post-Fordist organization of work and neo-liberal policy regimes are enacted. To this end, despite their reputation for being informal, coworking spaces can be highly choreographed sites of enterprising interaction. Coworking’s network sociality is nevertheless hybrid: lax *and* instrumental, convivial *and* opportunistic, enthusiastically adopted *and* reluctantly undertaken by self-employed workers whose ‘entrepreneurship’ may not be chosen (Oakley, 2014: 156).

‘Openness’ is a tenet written into the coworking movement manifesto. But coworking spaces can be choosy about their membership profile: ‘[our coworking space] curates a social environment through its member selection’ (Surman, 2013: 193). Some recruit members from the same sector or profession, while other spaces are committed to what interviewees referred to as ‘diversity’ – understood, however, not in terms of class, gender, race or sexuality, but a spectrum of professional skills – so as to optimize the potential for members to collaborate, another coworking key word. The population thus assembled – ‘our curated community’ – is not entirely self-organizing but is the subject of monitoring and affective management. Rather than the coldness of the boss, however, coworking offers the warmth of the ‘host’, a nodal point in a coworking space’s labour economy. Explains one staff host:

[W]e get to know [our members] and speak to them about their projects, about what kinds of challenges they’re facing and what they’re looking for, and what it is that they can offer as well, and then help connect them to other people we’ve met. So, at a basic hosting level, that’s what we do: we’re connectors, and we live-network. [...] We’re a friendly and welcoming space as well. [...] First thing in the morning, I try and eat my breakfast in the kitchen and sit with just my laptop. [...] Sometimes it’s nice to come to a place like this where there’s people here, and you can have a cup of tea, and there’s someone there to welcome you. [P]eople should feel hosted all the time here – nurtured.

Hosting is gendered work, in terms of both the tendency for women to play this role and the language used to describe the duties involved (e.g. ‘mother of the space’ (cited in Merkel, 2015: 128)). To create conditions for network sociality, the host strengthens weak ties between members, which means the host must ‘know what everyone is working on and find opportunities for them to collaborate’. Casting and hosting animate the claim that coworking uniquely facilitates what one interviewee calls ‘accelerated serendipity’.

Coworking’s appeal is not fully captured by, say, a less alienating option than working from home. They provide ‘professional space’, including a desk, WiFi, printer, and other basics, but also spatial provisions that boost the perceived credibility of self-employment,

such as a mailing address or a place to meet clients. Primarily, though, consensus is that 'what you're getting out of it is this network of people'.

Dynamics of network sociality in coworking can be expected to vary by occupational demographics, among a myriad of additional factors. Yet, network sociality's entrepreneurial premise – 'networking reduces risk; it generates security' (Wittel, 2001: 57) – probably abides universally in coworking. Network sociality in coworking has at least four intersecting dimensions. First, a coworking space is a location at which to access information about income-earning opportunities (see Potts and Waters-Lynch, 2016), thereby supporting workers whose employment status makes them personally responsible for maintaining a steady flow of paid work. Second, a coworking space is a site to secure contracts or 'join forces' to pitch a project – reports of members 'hiring each other' reveal coworking spaces are terrains of transversal relations of exploitation, where the positions of exploiter and exploited are fluid and reversible. Third, a coworking space is a medium through which members establish visibility and communicate 'reputation' within their respective professional fields (Gandini, 2015, 2016) – one coworker tells us she refers fellow members to her clients, for example – with reputation holding special significance for project workers who lack connections (Gandini, 2015, 2016). Fourth, a coworking space is a platform for enhancing skills through workshops and peer-to-peer knowledge sharing – an education element that is especially important to independent workers responsible for maintaining their 'employability' (Dardot and Laval, 2013: 265), a continuous exercise amid perpetual technological change.

Coworking responds to labour precarity in a manner that redoubles network sociality – a mode of conduct that requires one to be active, to take initiative and to seek out contacts. The imperative to practice network sociality is acute for new entrants to creative industries, and joining a coworking space has been described as one of the 'survival strategies' adopted by young workers seeking to 'strengthen their position within the labour market...' (Papageorgiou, 2016: 7). If coworking begins as a stopgap measure for individual coworkers, coworking spaces are becoming institutionalized as strategic sites for independent workers to make professional networks. Gandini (2015) thus conceptualizes coworking spaces as distinctly '*relational milieus*' (p. 200). Networking platforms where labour forces necessary to flexible, project-based knowledge economies are, to a large extent, self-organized, coworking spaces could be seen as functioning as a kind of informal hiring hall where paid gigs are aggregated and labour-power presented for sale. And while coworking spaces prioritize face-to-face interaction between members, digital technologies are poised to be layered into the dynamics of network sociality: WeWork, for example, has developed an app that allows members to search for and connect with potential in-house partners, thereby enclosing network sociality within its corporate brand and utilizing member-generated data to promote the value of a WeWork membership.

Coworking spaces' open-plan interiors and friendly atmospheres give the impression that power is flattened. Network sociality is, however, a workaday translation of the 'political rationality' of neoliberalism (Rose, 1996: 154), whether considering that co-working is coextensive with neoliberalism's hallmark labour policy priority, flexibilization, or that coworking's culture of informality embodies the ideal of the minimally regulated workplace: 'The idea here is that nobody is watching you. [Y]ou

just make sure whatever you're doing is [not] stopping anyone else from getting their work done – that's the only rule...' The view that coworking is outside of politics – 'it doesn't need to be political all the time', says an operator – coheres in part because coworking occupies a historical moment in which 'entrepreneurship' is 'the new common sense' (Szeman, 2015). Recent critical ethnographic research singles out enterprise as coworking's prevailing ethos: 'However communal in feel', concedes Butcher (2016: 101), 'the dominant dispositions within co-working spaces are entrepreneurial'. '[T]he neoliberal subject *par excellence*' (Szeman, 2015: 474), entrepreneurs 'are actors needed by states and capital alike to invent new forms and spaces of accumulation ...' (p. 476), channelling responses to uncertainty through the market. Be that as it may, one of the paradoxes of coworking – that the burden of individualized risk is shared – opens a cramped space of political possibility.

### Mutual aid: between coping and commoning

In coworking, desires for autonomous work merge with capital's need for flexible, self-motivated workers who bear the costs of production and make few demands on companies and the state. And although our analysis is critical of coworking, we are not unsympathetic. As one interviewee puts it, 'A lot of [coworkers] are just people who are following the path of a changing workforce [...] who deserve a good place to work...' We also want to document instances of and opportunities for oppositional undercurrents, which are invisible in a perspective limited to viewing independent workers in creative industries as ideal subjects of neoliberal exploitation. It is not inevitable for coworking spaces and participants to accept precarity, cement competitiveness and bury antagonisms that define work under capitalism. So, to conclude, we assess coworking's alternative political possibilities by recasting the practice through the lens of mutual aid.

In the early 1900s, Kropotkin (2006 [1902]: xiii) disputed social-Darwinist assumptions by arguing that the law of 'mutual contest' coexists with a countervailing tendency, the law of mutual aid, vital to the 'maintenance of life'. Redressing needs unmet by the prevailing order, Kropotkin theorized mutual aid as anchored in affective bonds, enacted in practices of co-operation, formalized in institutions and sustained by beliefs and customs. He attributed the persistence of mutual aid to a 'vague feeling [...] of human solidarity' (p. xv) he speculatively traced to 'unconscious recognition of the force that is borrowed by each man (*sic*) from the practice of mutual aid ...' (p. xvi). Mutual aid seeds 'progressive social institutions' where none previously existed, where they have been eviscerated, or from whose support certain groups are marginalized (p. viii). Mutual aid is reproduced culturally:

the nucleus of mutual-support institutions, habits, and customs remains alive with the millions; it keeps them together; and they prefer to cling to their customs, beliefs, and traditions rather than to accept the teachings of a war of each against all ... (p. 215)

Mutual aid is fuelled by recognition that co-operation is necessary to adapt to and survive adverse material conditions. Discussing institutions such as guilds and fraternal societies, Kropotkin highlighted labour as a key practitioner of mutual aid: 'For everyone who has any

idea of the life of the labouring classes it is evident that without mutual aid being practised among them on a large scale they could never pull through all their difficulties' (p. 237).

The concept of mutual aid enables us to consider coworking spaces' political potential. Especially prior to coworking franchises, coworking spaces were often started by small, self-organized groups of independent workers. These institutions emerged outside of unions to help largely unorganized workers – and those that traditional unions cannot assist – adjust to post-Fordist conditions. One operator flags mutual aid as coworking's kernel when she sums up the practice as 'collaborating to achieve something that [members] couldn't independently'. At the most basic level, people who cowork pool economic resources to reduce the cost of rent and counter isolation, thereby bringing disparate workers together in one space. One operator proposes that coworking is a 'social good' by 'providing space for people who would otherwise never be able to afford it, and having the opportunity to meet people you'd otherwise never be able to meet'. More broadly, coworking spaces function as infrastructure for mutual aid in which independent workers are placed on a more level footing with their counterparts in standard employment, allowing members, as one host put it, 'the same support structures that you would have if you were part of a wider organization...'

In theory, coworking resolves the organizing conundrum of how to aggregate dispersed independent workers in media and creative industries. But, as a freelance rights advocate warns, usually freelancers join independent worker associations 'more [for] emotional support and connections, rather than any ideological drive'. This bears out in coworking. Says one operator, a goal is 'getting us back to a place of community, of humans being together', emphasizing the importance of rituals like sharing meals. This type of conviviality in coworking can be proto-political, as one operator describes, 'It's just the nature of collaboration in a coworking space ... we all talk about the same problems ...' Informal mutual aid in coworking can range from providing feedback on work to exchanging warnings about bad contracts, and 'helping one another through whatever kind of scenario we might be struggling with'. Such mutual support fosters social bonds and common ground that might serve as conditions of possibility for collective action on precarity; as one operator remarks, as 'trust' develops, it becomes possible to explore other ways to 'share [...] risk'.

In the context of media and cultural workers' ongoing efforts to collectively address labour-related challenges, we see potential in coworking as a space for the development of strategies to address precarious work. To be more than a means of coping with precarious work and to challenge systemic forces underpinning their members' precarity requires coworking spaces to become sites for consciousness raising, policy advocacy and collective organizing. Experiments along these lines are emerging. Coworking spaces frequently host events, and while programming mostly focuses on small-business advice and skill development, events sometimes critically address livelihood issues. The Hub Islington, for example, presented a freelancer-focused series including the workshop 'Freelancers, Unite! What Rights Are We Fighting For?', which featured labour activists, gauged members' grievances and shared contract negotiation strategies. The series emphasized the fact that independent workers are excluded from many of the social protections flowing from normative models of standard employment and that 'basic sustaining elements of life should not be dependent on an employment contract'.

Putting this idea into practice, coworking spaces in the Canadian province of Ontario have extended social protections for freelancers by combining to offer a health benefits plan, with members forming a buyer group to purchase discounted insurance. And, notably, some coworking spaces (e.g. Third Door in London, Collab&Play in Los Angeles) have begun offering childcare.

Such services meaningfully improve independent workers' lives but maintain a power imbalance: individuals continue to shoulder the costs of social reproduction. Recognizing that changing social policy requires collective pressure, campaigners have tested co-working spaces as 'political meeting houses' for a freelancer rights movement in Europe. Mobilizing coworking spaces is difficult, however:

They have a lot of daily concerns to worry about, like making sure the WiFi and the printers are working, and showing people the desks. And there is a very high turnover rate ... [Members] are often there for a couple of months, and then move on. [...] So, there are structural things within coworking spaces that make them not the revolutionary beds that I hoped they would be.

Regarding such resource strain, we see potential in unions funding coworking spaces as part of a new strategy to organize the unorganized: workers need spaces to occupy, and unions need access to dispersed and isolated workers. As to the challenge posed by coworking's membership churn, this shows how a defining feature of post-Fordism, labour mobility, restricts coworking's capacity to act politically, specifically as a base for sustained organizing. Nevertheless, so established is coworking that it is now difficult to imagine a collective response to independent worker precarity that does not in some way involve these spaces.

Coworking is deeply ambivalent. It emerged from below and was subsequently harnessed by private market interests. Coworking softens effects of flexploitation, albeit in a manner that tends to deepen neoliberal subjectification. Pushing back against both recuperation and individualization requires that coworking spaces explore alternatives to capitalist ownership conventions. This is not as improbable as it might seem: our research reveals multiple models of coworking beyond for-profit businesses, including publically supported, non-profit and free coworking. We highlight a small but growing number of coworking spaces structured as co-operatives, a longstanding institutional form of mutual aid. A variety of co-op types exist (consumer, worker, stakeholder), but legal co-operative status generally designates a member-owned organization that adheres to co-operative movement principles such as 'open and voluntary membership' and 'democratic member control' (International Co-operative Alliance (ICA), n.d.). While the ethical-political commitments of co-ops are uneven, and contentiously so, the co-op model provides a framework for economic democracy at odds with capitalist logics on matters from surplus distribution to workers' participation in governance (de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford, 2010). Amid ongoing economic volatility, growing corporate power, and widening inequality, there has been renewed interest in co-operatives, including their relevance to digital media and cultural production (Sandoval, 2016; Scholz and Schneider, 2016). While not a panacea, co-operativism is one tactic to extend coworking's politics into collective ownership and self-management.

With its low overhead, roots in resource sharing, satisfying unmet needs and voluntary membership, coworking seems well suited to the co-op. Several spaces in our research had considered the co-op model, yet ultimately decided against it. For one, efforts to form coworking co-ops confront ideological bias. One operator who initially pitched a coworking co-op regrets that co-ops carry ‘negative connotations’, more ‘hippy’ than ‘business’, which conceivably put off prospective members who regard themselves as entrepreneurs. A coworking co-op founder says that sceptics dismissed the co-op idea as unworkable, predicting that ‘you’re all going to be arguing and bickering all the time’. Another obstacle is that co-ops and coworking are perceived as having contrary temporal logics and ethos of belonging. A coworking membership is attractive, says one host, precisely because it is open: members do not wish to feel ‘tied’ or ‘stuck’. An operator elaborates,

[Coworking members are] coming for flexibility, and [...] co-operatives require commitment. [Co-ops] require people who say, ‘I am going to commit to this for a long period of time’, and take on some responsibility, which is a little counter to where they are right now. [...] It has to have fluidity and dynamism about it for it to be a coworking space [...] and co-operatives challenge that.

The mobility of labour, alongside the valorization of fluidity, appears again to inhibit coworking’s politicization.

These are not insurmountable obstacles. Montreal’s ECTO is among a growing handful of coworking co-ops in Canada (e.g. Cowork Niagara, Quebec’s Créagora). It only seems logical for people ‘sharing’ a space to also ‘govern’ and ‘own’ that space, one ECTO cofounder says. ECTO’s early members were drawn to the space by its co-operative values. Distinguishing itself from ‘lone-ranger entrepreneurship’, ECTO has the legal status of a ‘solidarity co-operative’, or multi-stakeholder co-op. With about 200 members, ECTO founders frame it as a ‘collective project’ and as a demonstration of co-operatives’ contemporary relevance. ECTO articulates the ‘collaborative economy’ to traditional co-op principles, such as democratic member control. Beyond its board of directors, ECTO holds assemblies to deliberate over large decisions, and member participation in governance is ‘now just part of the culture’. Rather than profit optimization, ECTO is conceived as an exercise in ‘collective organizational development’, where ‘learning to be with others and find solutions to different problems that arise’ is paramount.

Like all co-ops, ECTO operates within, not outside, capitalist imperatives. Yet, ECTO experiments in ‘postcapitalist politics’ (Gibson-Graham, 2006), and not only by adopting the solidarity co-op form. For instance, some ECTO members engage in reflections on ‘open co-operativism’, a strand of activist theory and practice that brings together emerging digital and urban ‘commons’ initiatives on the one hand and the longstanding traditions of the co-op movement and solidarity economy on the other (Conaty and Boiller, 2014). Such ideas were discussed at the conference Commons Space, which ECTO hosted in conjunction with the 2016 World Social Forum in Montreal. ‘As a common’, says one ECTO founder, ‘the idea is that we share our resources’, which encompasses how to be an ‘agent working with other co-operatives,

and [...] building [other] co-operatives'. Put this way, we can imagine a distinctly *co-operative* network sociality, with coworking spaces shifting from ad hoc project teams to fostering and housing worker-owned co-ops in which not only market risk, but also ownership, decision-making power, and proceeds, are socialized – coworking spaces thus doubling as mutual-aid accelerators, a counterforce to neoliberal start-up culture.

Approaching coworking from the perspective of mutual aid has wider theoretical, political and research implications. While precarity is widely theorized as an effect of neoliberalism, the case of coworking suggests a need to also be alert to the persistence of neoliberal processes and subject positions within mutual-aid type responses to precarity. Coworking's roots in self-organization and its occasional operation as a platform for activism are, however, kernels of coworking's potential to both offer independent workers more than a means to cope with precarity and to expose the welfare gaps glossed over by the new spirit of capitalism. Deepened engagement with mutual aid could amplify coworking's transformative prospects. Centring mutual aid in coworking discourse, for example, may prompt experiments that further mobilize coworking spaces as a site on which to foster sustainable livelihoods and alternative economies. Coworking's politicization requires intensifying its connections to other currents of mutual aid-oriented labour politics, including unions, but also the co-operative movement, workers' centres and urban commons initiatives. A mutual aid lens also has implications for research in media and cultural labour studies, as it could help to enlarge the scope of inquiry to collective strategies, infrastructures of support and alternative economic models in media and cultural industries that begin to confront the challenge of remaking relations of production.

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