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Co-working communities: Sustainability citizenship at work

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**Introduction**

The spaces of work that built the dominant modernity in Westernised societies of the Global North in the twentieth century are changing (Dale and Burrell 2008). Many once-foundational jobs have been resigned to the past, are in short supply or have been dispatched offshore. In rhetoric, if not reality, a new spirit of entrepreneurialism has emerged to fill the void. The current political dictum of 'doing more with less' posits the notion that communities of citizens, not institutions, will now work to create the sustainable solutions we need for the future (Sennett 2012). Without the rigidity and security of mass-industrial work, sustainability citizenship in urban economies of advanced capitalism may be expected to take on collective entrepreneurial forms — constructing new organisations around sustainability ideals that challenge mainstream state and private institutional dominance and are directed towards alternative futures.

Such citizens see an opportunity to organise themselves and work collectively in ways that they believe to be unbound by, and outside of, capitalism (Kostera 2014). I refer to the protagonists of this emergent social group as 'sustainability citizens'. Many such citizens I encounter in my research do not see themselves as 'workers'. The notion of being a worker, to them, is something embedded in and constrained by the capitalist spaces of organisation (Dale and Burrell 2008). Instead they see themselves as freelancers and entrepreneurs, operating

outside of capitalist norms, with ambitions of influencing significant social, environmental and economic transformations (Kostera 2014).

Commonly framed as 'social entrepreneurs' (Peredo and McLean 2006), the citizens I research are uncomfortable with this discursive device, itself bound within capitalism. Instead they see themselves as having broader aims, and construct their identities accordingly. So, in framing this group as sustainability citizens, I draw on their rhetoric of alternative futures via projects that they claim circumvent capitalism. While some individual freelancers and entrepreneurs focus their ventures on environmental sustainability, others focus on social sustainability or economic sustainability. However, as I show later, they collectively organise themselves in order for their ventures to become entwined to meet sustainability challenges holistically — they do not differentiate between social, economic and environmental sustainabilities.

The aim of this chapter is to explore one such alternative form of citizen-based organisation, 'co-working' in shared member-based spaces, which enable peer-to-peer interactions that engender camaraderie and a collective sense of achievement that enhances individual sociality and productivity as a form of socially and economically sustainable work. Hence, I focus this chapter on the spaces of organisation and their cultures of sustainability. Under this broad definition, co-working takes various spatial forms, from ad hoc meet-ups at cafés to low-rent shared office and maker spaces to high-fee architecturally designed workspaces.

The starting points for this chapter are that co-working in its late neoliberal, post-industrial form has not yet attracted sufficient theoretical attention and holds great appeal to entrepreneurial sustainability citizens. Accordingly, my purpose is to conceptualise this

emergent phenomenon, to analyse how it relates to ideas of sustainability citizenship. My initial conceptualisation draws from the lived experiences and symbolic interactions of co-working in Austin (Texas, US), London (UK), Sydney and Melbourne (Australia) — participatory observation of how co-workers interact with the 'things' of co-working, and with each other, to derive shared meanings of what it is to co-work (Blumer 1986).

Drawing on four years' ethnographic participation in co-working, I make particular links between co-working and a specific idea of 'community'. Spinuzzi (2012) finds that community is a thread through co-working discourses, but how the co-workers he studies experience and define community remains unclear, despite its importance as a symbol in their everyday lives. Instead, I start by conceptualising co-working as a collective identity and aim to show how co-workers make sense of how they practice in more sustainable ways and how they foster a sense of collective working towards more sustainable futures.

Co-working is a key component of contemporary sustainability citizens' entrepreneurial identity construction, a symbolic expression of unconventional and to some extent anti-organisational work. I find that co-workers typically position their communal ways of working against conventional views of other forms of work created through neoliberal and bureaucratic organisation. To co-workers, their working 'community' seems postmodern, more humanistic, fluid and sustainable than working in a factory, office or retail space. It offers a distinct 'habitus' (Bourdieu 2005) of entrepreneurial sustainability citizenship, and a sense of belonging to a social movement towards change.

However, I reflexively critique the 'sustainability' of these perspectives. Through dialogue between theory and case study vignettes, I show that, while some co-working ventures are

small-scale, others are grown only by adopting the norms of conventional organisations. I uncover a tension between community idealism and the organisational realities of co-workers.

Co-working has experienced exponential growth since its emergence in 2005. From fledging ventures in San Francisco, within a decade protagonists speak of more than 7,000 co-working communities globally, with many interconnected through franchising and partnering (Foertsch and Cagnol 2013). Many co-workers presuppose the collaborative potential of co-working as a social movement for sustainable change (Gandini 2015). However, as co-working grows, others seek to rapidly redefine it: co-working and co-workers are stratifying.

For some, co-working is solely emancipation from conventional solid government and company organisational structures and the alternative sense of belonging that community symbolically affords them. Meanwhile, some entrepreneurs seek to profit from the commodification, growth and consequent institutionalisation of communities of co-workers. This tension between the supposed utopia of community and the apparent dystopia of modern organisation is not uncommon (Bauman 2001, Cohen 1985, Kanter 1972, Sennett, 1999). Yet it must be resolved for co-working to become a practicable and sustainable alternative, or, as many of its protagonists postulate, 'the future of work'.

**Citizens, not workers**

Spinuzzi (2012, 431) illustrates how co-working can have different meanings for different co-workers and his definition — the first founded on empirical research — stresses the tangible and spatial:

Coworking is not a concrete product, like a building, but a service — in fact, a service that proprietors provide indirectly, by providing a space where coworkers can network their other activities by engaging in peer-to-peer interactions.

Spinuzzi's proprietors commodify work-based interaction by sub-letting spaces that are seemingly socially-constructed to foster collaboration.

For 'Chris' and 'Rick' — two co-workers interviewed for my research — co-working was not a service but a fluid, collegial way of working. Early protagonists of co-working, these friends met while studying in a Texan university town but lived and worked in Austin when I interviewed them. We met in the lobby of the hotel with the fastest Internet in town. They each had a mobile device, a power source and connectivity, so the lobby space was all that they needed to co-work. It was a loose arrangement. Both were busy, taking on freelance 'tech' development work to pay the bills while making time to work on more economically and socially sustainable 'game changing' projects on the side.

Co-working has always been laissez-faire for Chris and Rick. While studying, they rented a space in their university town to work together off-campus, on their own projects. To cover the rent, energy and Internet costs, they figured out that all they needed were eight co-workers. Membership was straightforward: they had a shared understanding that they'd all chip in and, if a member left, that member simply needed to find a replacement. This co-working group did not last long though; tech entrepreneurs tend not to stay long in a small town after graduating — it isn't Palo Alto. As group members moved on, they became increasingly difficult to replace from their existing network. Eventually Rick, and then Chris, left for the city of Austin, handing their co-working space back to the landlord.

Chris and Rick did not see the activity of co-working as their core business, or as providing a service. It was merely a means to an end that improved their work through its sociality and potential to improve productivity. For example, when Chris got stuck in a piece of code, Rick or another co-worker might well have the solution, thereby saving Chris time and effort. Though certain spatial conditions may have assisted, when we met in Austin, I got no sense of what their old co-working space looked or felt like.

However, I did get a strong sense that they understood the advantages gained from working collectively, independent of conventional organisational constructs, free from the Weberian iron cage (Clegg 2012, Clegg and Baumeler 2010, Gabriel 2005). Neoliberal governments and the corporate sector promote individualism and entrepreneurialism to provide for the future, because they no longer can or are not willing to (Sennett 2012). Retrenchment and difficulties finding conventional employment detaches workers from the institutional structures on which they once depended (Sennett 2012). For many citizens this stark reality begins a journey towards perpetual 'precarity' and poverty (Bauman 2011, Sennett 1999, Standing 2014).

For others, like Rick and Chris, the withdrawal of state support and the casualisation of the mainstream workforce has become an incentive to entrepreneurship and freelancing, reforming, even revolutionising, business and society (Ruef 2010, Sennett 2012). This Schumpeterian 'new model army' sees entrepreneurialism as a calling, a commitment, a duty to self, gaining self-fulfilment (Ruef 2010, Sennett 2012), and with a sense of greater purpose than other work. Co-working offers attachment to an alternative form of collective working

that co-workers call 'community'. Together they gain something greater than solidarity, what Sennett (2012) refers to as '*beruf*' (German for a 'calling' beyond profession or vocation).

**Community working**

Co-working communities tend to be homogeneous, and focused or themed. Some are communities specific to tech entrepreneurs and developers, or to social entrepreneurs, or to freelance architects. Ruef (2010) finds that entrepreneurs in general tended to work most closely with extant networks that accelerated both the growth and progress of projects and ventures with entrepreneurs typically limiting their searches for business partners.

These tendencies reflected extant notions of community. First, as a flight from established society, communities set boundaries against constitutive outsiders (Bauman 2001, Cohen 1985, Kanter 1972). Second, utopian ideals of communes have always centred on commitment, harmony, cooperation and mutuality. Community offers refuge from convention, from the mainstream, from modernity (Bauman, 2001; Kanter, 1972). It is co-working communities' homogeneities that bring these collectives together around communal ideals that bind them. However, we cannot call Chris and Rick a community, nor do they speak of their experiences in their university town as communal; their idea of co-working is perhaps something more akin to the Australian idea of 'mateship' — being there for each other when required. Notions of a co-working community come into play when more members are required to cover the costs and co-workers look beyond their immediate networks.

An early co-working space in Sydney that I visited originated with it's founder's vision to work in a post-industrial backstreet warehouse space. But, to cover the costs, he needed enough likeminded freelancers with a shared ideal of working in more socially and economically sustainable ways to join him. Though his search for members began with close friends in the tech sector — former colleagues and friends of friends — he foresaw the challenge of member turnover. To create the space that he wanted to work in — one that would attract sufficient likeminded members — required upfront investment in installing facilities.

Put together on a shoestring budget, with a handful of friends, it had a handmade feel. Community is not easily defined, and yet we know, or rather feel, it when we see it (Bauman, 2001). With a matching web presence, this Sydney space, community and associated events attracted the occasional new member, but there seemed to be no plan to grow. The website and social media did not over-promise but rather reflected a self-sustaining community. Events tended to be regular tech-focused workshops or seasonal celebrations of community. Members cleaned and stocked the fridge, and the flat-pack furniture looked a bit tired.

The occasional visitor could co-work for free for one day every other week, a loose arrangement regulated by a space host employed to meet and greet members and visitors, and generally muster the community interactions and maintain a sense of commitment and harmony. Simple etiquettes were observed at the bike rack, the lounge space and workstations. The host made it clear to visitors that certain desks and spaces were the preserve of individual members. Visitors sat at a separate desk. You were an outsider if you were new. But, if you keep coming back, you'd know if your face fit and whether the community was willing to invite you in further, as a member. This co-working space seemed to bring in

enough membership fees to cover costs with everyone getting on okay. Longstanding members had carved out their spaces to make it feel like home.

Sociality, rather than spatial boundaries, organised this workplace. Its familial communal rituals were informally observed by its members and reinforced by its host. They had unwritten rules to maintain a certain harmony and commitment to their shared *beruf* of entrepreneurial sustainability citizenship. They had built their collective identity and sense of self through their aesthetic repertoires to unify, generate and maintain their collective way of co-working — their habitus (c.f. Meinhof and Galasinski 2005).

In providing 'habitus' (Bourdieu 2005) to homogenous entrepreneurial groups, such as sustainability citizens, co-working is a space of dispositions. The fluid communal habitus at the Sydney co-working space maintained its social boundaries through ongoing symbolic interactions between members across the space. For co-workers to imagine themselves as community members was entirely plausible. It was a familiar, helpful, term even if without clear definition. Though community is not in Bourdieu's vocabulary, his conceptualisation of the habitus trope is useful in understanding the collective identity work that co-workers construct and opens us up to the idea that, despite the symbolism, co-working may not be community. Habitus is not the preserve of community; habitus is found in other social groupings, such as organisation (Dale and Burrell 2008).

The same homelike, homemade, post-industrial, relatively long-established, worn-in aesthetic and habitus is one that I found again at a London co-working space — also an early co-working space in the short history of the phenomenon. Not unlike the Sydney co-working space, I first found it difficult to find from the main street. Close to a major transport

terminus, hidden down a backstreet, I found no obvious signage until I poked my head around a half-opened heavy door and found a stairwell, which led me up to the top floor. Though contained within this post-industrial relic of the past, the first thing that greeted me was the events board, filled with activities planned to promote work towards solution-focused collectivism and sustainability speaking of the future.

Inside, the habitus felt as if it was constructed by its early members and nurtured by their successors. Like the Sydney co-working space, it was low budget and felt more home-like than work-like. Sharing and caring was a recurring theme. From the library space, to the message board, to the kitchen, there was that familiar sense that its members had co-built their sense of belonging. It was not a big space, but was crammed with desks in no particular order, soft furnishings and greenery. It was difficult to avoid other members in the space — you just had to get along. Anyone coming into the space that did not quite fit would know it, and not stay long. A distinct habitus includes and excludes.

As the first of a leading global network of co-working spaces, many co-working symbolic interactions have had trials, and been honed, here. Ideas such as weekly communal lunches and evening learning events offer co-workers more than a hot desk or office services. They offer workers opportunities to connect with others, to learn and to explore ideas. Such community-style events are organised. As at the Sydney co-working space, the role of the host was essential. Here, the host's job was to know the members. As her knowledge of their ongoing needs grew, she was better able to identify opportunities to connect individuals who might assist or have similar needs. Such connecting of 'weak ties' (Granovetter 1983) and consequent skills-sharing is symbolic of community, yet also organisational.

The organisation (and spirit) of cooperation and mutuality at this London co-working space enabled all to flourish individually and collectively. Such symbolic exchanges maintained a habitus that changed with the comings and goings of members. Few current members were there at the start. Identities had changed and grown, but the collective habitus was perpetuated through reinforcement by the space host.

**Organising co-working**

The mainstay of my ethnographic study was at a Melbourne co-working space. It too, had a homelike, handmade feel when I joined in 2011. It too was 'hidden in plain sight' in a postindustrial relic close to a major transport terminus. The host here also welcomed and connected me. I felt a similar entrepreneurial, social sustainability-focused habitus constructed through frequent ritualistic collective events such as 'town hall meetings', 'mixed bag lunches', social evenings, wellbeing classes and club meetings.

At this co-working space, the organisational role played by the host was pivotal, yet members also organised events. The habitus of mutuality and cooperation proved seductive to prospective members. The idea of combining work and play drew many new members, and we quickly outgrew the original space. As we grew, we moved into new spaces in the building, co-created architecturally-designed spaces in which members defined the habitus.

One problem of such community growth is keeping track of members. This habitus held such broad appeal that the diversity of its members quickly increased. The host's role as gatekeeper and connector split into separate tasks. A 'community catalyst' role was created to focus solely on pervasively identifying shared interests and strengthening ties. The key competence

of its incumbent was to foster connections, to build social groups, to create a network and organise the community. This left gate keeping to the host.

Clubs and groups formed around business ideas and social activities. Members with services to offer others, in need of resources for their fledgling ventures or simply wanting to socialise, used community social media, bumped into others at events and made connections that were 'catalysed' rather than occurring through happenstance. The community catalyst organised social cohesion — the 'community glue' that complemented increasing diversity and members' entrepreneurial zeal. The management team recognised that habitus would attract and embed new members but that habitus alone would not sustain entrepreneurs and freelancers. In the spirit of individualism, interactions needed to be purposeful and instrumental, in short, organised. Ultimately, the primary goal for many members was to grow new ventures not community.

Prominent in the symbolism of this co-working space was an idea that the community could foster innovation collectively. The catalysing of connections was underpinned by purposeful entrepreneurial rhetoric. Catchphrases and slogans abounded on walls, on desks, online and on t-shirts to symbolically combine the erstwhile distinctive rhetoric of homeliness, togetherness, innovation, social responsibility and political activism — embedding the idea that this diverse community was distinctly innovative, sustainable, citizen-based and, together, could be 'world changing'. Skills were shared, ideas were grown, and new ventures were built. They outgrew spaces and new co-workers took their place. Practitioner case studies of sustainability citizens joining together to become sustainable enterprises abound from this space, such as 'Our Say' (Halamish 2013), an online platform to enable citizen engagement in democracy.

As if to prove these points, the feel of the Melbourne co-working space changed as it exponentially grew, and its original members left as they achieved their entrepreneurial goals. Habitus takes time to socially construct, uniquely through the dispositions within each space and this co-working model's rapid growth demanded that it become more of an organisation than a community. With scale and diversity came complexity and the need to organise. Interestingly, this shift from community to organisation mimicked the formation and institutionalisation of early modernity (Dale and Burrell 2008), contrary to the intent of co-working's originators. When seen through an entrepreneurial lens, work and organisation are seemingly inseparable, and community is merely a symbolic means to an end, and it becomes a commodity (Bauman 2012, 2001). As Kanter (1972) writes, community is often short-lived, differing in meaning for its originators compared with their successors. Community becomes a 'spray-on solution' (Cohen 1985).

**Is co-working sustainable?**

Co-working is both structural and agent-driven (Bauman 2012, Giddens 1991) and mainly made up of individuated citizens who choose not to engage with mainstream business (Bauman 2012, Sennett 2012). Instead, co-workers look to the margins, to the urban post-industrial landscape to work on their own ventures and envision creating their own economy. Without recognisable identity constructs to hang on to, co-working offers a solution of attachment to a solid, if nostalgic, ideal of community.

Familiar but intangible, the symbolic resources that construct community offer something to belong to, and enable a sense of social becoming. Hidden in the plain sight of the mainstream,

co-working protagonists are not easily found but exist in previously neglected urban spaces. Once inside, we find spaces in which members envisage alternative sustainable futures — perhaps a collective ideal with a vision of rising together as the proverbial 'phoenix from the flames' of current capitalism, collectively forging an alternative.

Co-working is a space of dispositions, a habitus where members symbolically construct a collective sense of belonging that sets boundaries against the constitutive outsider. However communal in feel, the dominant dispositions within co-working spaces are entrepreneurial. The symbols of community are thus adapted for entrepreneurial identity work, and commodified for ambitions towards the capitalist ideal of 'progress'.

Central to this entrepreneurial movement is identity construction towards becoming established as legitimate capitalist entrepreneurs who can make a difference and, in their rhetoric, 'disrupt' the mainstream. They collectively construct their symbolic repertoires, embedding themselves in their chosen aesthetic, reciting their rhetoric, practicing their rituals, and establishing their habitus. To co-work and co-create towards the sustainable futures they envisage they must agree and affirm their dispositions communally to realise themselves as a social movement. Their co-working habitus constructs their *beruf* (Sennett, 2012).

This conceptualisation of co-working illustrates how entrepreneurial sustainability citizens work in liquid modernity though they do need to (re)attach to something solid. Co-working symbolised as community offers this. A recurring theme through the above vignettes is the difficulties of up-scaling co-working as community. When membership grows and weak ties ensue, co-working requires organisation. So the co-working movement faces a dilemma: to

sustain community ideals, each community must consider its scale and scope. To stay small will be to remain communal, but forever at the margins.

To grow will be to organise, to institutionalise and to mainstream, not as an alternative to current capitalism, but embedded within its structures — a very real tension of identity construction being played out in co-working today. Some seek to explore its growth potential. Others would prefer the belongingness of the commune. The problem entrepreneurial sustainability citizens confront is to remain citizens or become entrepreneurs — distinctions made by Bauman (2012) and Standing (2014). Until now co-workers have been largely ambivalent. However, as co-working becomes more popular, it becomes more stratified.

Some new spaces offer a more communal habitus and others a more organisational habitus. Small-scale, self-sustaining communities (such as the Sydney case discussed here) continue to rely on the dedication and goodwill of longstanding members to maintain habitus. Global co-working providers have emerged to meet the growing demand and offer standardised 'cookie cutter' spaces in which entrepreneurs can efficiently join, navigate and leverage the collaborative potential of working alongside other entrepreneurs before outgrowing the space. Hence the current key dilemma is whether to build and maintain sustainable closed communities or to offer a viable scalable business model with commercial appeal.

Though the aims of community and of organisation are not necessarily oppositional, inevitably one must be prioritised. Community is not scalable, and small-scale co-working organisation is not profitable. At this point in time, of rapid co-working expansion, this research debunks the myth of community as an organisational form designed to meet entrepreneurial business objectives (Dale and Burrell, 2008). Though early protagonists

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adopted the community trope to develop their business models, the need for organisation has superseded the ideal of community to gain economic sustainability over social or environmental sustainability. I would argue that, here, community has become Cohen's 'spray-on solution' (1985). The underlying tension involves subscription to neoliberal political rhetoric and incentivisation. The single unified co-worker identity is no longer sufficient.

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