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Notes on a British Town Council

Husted, Emil

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Alternative organization and neo-normative control: Notes on a British town council

This paper explores how normative control is enacted in an alternative 'minor party' in Southwest England called *Independents for Frome.* Based primarily on ethnographic data and interviews, I argue that this case constitutes an example of 'neo-normative' control, where homogenizing norms are substituted by a celebration of difference, fun, and individualization. This conceptualization allows me to discuss the relationship between alternative organization and neo-normative control. In doing so, I argue that neo-normative control has progressive and 'alternative' potential if practiced alongside procedures that (1) prevent autonomy from turning into isolation and marginalization, (2) ensure that solidarity does not morph into an unquestioned hegemony of the strong, and (3) enable responsibility to the future to be carried out in an accountable manner. This leads me to call for critical performativity projects that team up with 'allies' *within* the formal political system instead of focusing exclusively on extra-parliamentarian organizations.

Keywords: Alternative organization, normative control, political parties, town councils, critical performativity

Introduction

Understood as a mode of organizational power that targets the 'hearts and minds' of members and operates through cultural standards rather than bureaucratic structures, the concept of 'normative control', initially coined by Etzioni (1964), has long played an important role in organization studies (e.g. Kunda 1992; Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Costas 2012). A central assumption in most studies applying the concept is that normative modes of control thrive on homogeneity (Rothschild-Whitt 1979) and contribute to the production of obedient but 'inauthentic' subjectivities (Hochschild 1983), which often leads to employee burnout and cynicism (Fleming and Spicer 2003). However, recent years have seen a surge in new variants of normative control that counter this 'totalitarian' tendency (Willmott 1993) by celebrating difference and individualization while encouraging organizational members to have fun and simply be themselves. Fleming and Sturdy (2009) conceptualize this more liberal and 'authentic' management style as 'neo-normative' control.

Initially, normative modes of control were seen as particularly prevalent in religious communities and political organizations (Etzioni 1964; Kanter 1972; Rothschild-Whitt 1979), but within critical management studies, the concept has been applied most frequently to corporate settings characterized by high levels of employee commitment (Fleming and Spicer 2004). To be sure, a handful of more recent studies have investigated dynamics of normative control within explicitly political environments (e.g. Polletta 2002; Maeckelbergh 2009), but rarely in relation to organizations engaged in electoral politics (Rye 2014) and hardly ever with a focus on neo-normativity (Husted 2020).

The present paper sets out to remedy this shortcoming by exploring how neo-normative control is enacted through the organizational culture of a 'minor party' in Southwest England called *Independents for Frome* (IfF). What makes IfF an interesting case is that they have managed to win all 17 seats in the Frome town council for two consecutive terms without any kind program or manifesto. All that defines the group is a set of normative principles for good governance and a common distaste for ideological dogmatism and party discipline. Besides this, the group is unified by nothing more than the diversity and independence of its members. Furthermore, there is little formal leadership within the group and very few explicit rules. This peculiar setup leads me to pose the following research question: *How and with what consequences is organizational control practiced in a political organization that lacks clear bureaucratic structures and manifest party discipline?*

Throughout the paper, I conceptualize IfF as an 'alternative' organization, understood as a counter-hegemonic collective based on values of 'autonomy, solidarity and responsibility' (Parker et al. 2014, 625). This conceptualization not only fits perfectly to a group conceived precisely as an alternative to traditional party machines, it also allows me to enter a conversation with the literature on alternative organization, which is currently dominated by studies of extra-parliamentarian organizations such as cooperatives and activist networks (e.g. Kokkinidis 2015; Reedy et al. 2016; Reinecke 2018). My contribution to this literature is empirical as well as theoretical. First, by studying a local party organization, I add an otherwise missing party-political entry to the 'library of alternative case studies' (Parker and Parker 2017, 1382). Second, by discussing the question of alternative organization in relation to the concept of neo-normative control, I advance the theoretical debate by arguing that this particular management style has progressive potential, in the sense of allowing members to exercise their autonomy through the collective (Reedy et al. 2016). To realize this potential, however, it must

be accompanied by practices and procedures that mitigate the risk of introducing a 'tyranny of structurelessness' (Freeman 1972).

The paper is structured as follows. I begin by introducing the concept of normative control and trace its genealogical development to more recent discussions of 'neo-normative' control mechanisms. The next section is dedicated to methodology, which is then dovetailed by the analysis of IfF's organizational culture. The analysis is divided into three sections that each focus on a core aspect of neo-normative control: difference, fun, and individualization. I close the paper with a discussion of alternative organization and neo-normative control, focusing on the need to launch a critical performativity project that also takes into consideration 'allies' (Parker and Parker 2017) that operate *within* the formal political system.

Normative control and after

At least since the rise of the Human Relations School in the 1930s, the idea that informal conditions significantly affect the inner-workings of formal organizations has been at the center of organization theory and industrial sociology. For instance, in Roethlisberger and Dickson's (1939, 554-555) account of the Hawthorne Studies, they famously describe how covert 'patterns of relations' govern 'both the kind of behavior that is expected of a person and the kind of behavior he can expect from others' at the industrial plant. Based on close observations of shop floor interactions, they argue that factory workers are controlled far more by informal norms – 'the logic of sentiments' – than by the formal ordering of the corporation (Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939, 564), thereby challenging the structural and economic determinism of previous management theory (e.g. Taylor 1911).

The concept of normative control, however, was not explicitly developed until Etzioni (1964) highlighted it as one of three organizational powers alongside physical control (coercion) and material control (economic incentives). Understood as a type of power that works through the 'manipulation of symbols' and relies on personal qualities rather than formal positions, Etzioni (1964, 61) conceptualizes normative control as particularly prevalent in religious communities and political organizations, because it mitigates the alienating effects of formal controls and tends to generate high levels of membership commitment (Wiener 1982). This idea was later picked up by Kanter (1972) in her account of 'utopian' communities and by Rothschild-Whitt (1979) in her work on 'collectivist' organizations; that is, contra-bureaucratic groups governed

by substantive (value-based) rationality rather than formal (instrumental) rationality. A key insight in both studies is that normative control is most effective when exercised in homogenous environments structured around 'de-individuating (…) strategies for removing the individual's sense of isolation, privacy, and uniqueness' (Kanter 1972, 110). As Rothschild-Whitt (1979, 513) argues:

> Collectivist organizations (…) rely upon personalistic and moralistic appeals to provide the primary means of control. (…). The more homogeneous the group, the more such appeals can hold sway. Thus, where personal and moral appeals are the chief means of social control, it is important, perhaps necessary, that the group select members who share their basic values and world view.

With the work of scholars like Hochschild (1983), Czarniawska-Joerges (1988), Kondo (1990), and Van Maanen (1991), the focus on normative modes of control was (re)introduced to occupational settings. However, it is the work of Kunda (1992) that is usually credited with placing the concept of normative control at the heart of critical organizational analysis. Through an ethnographic study of a Silicon Valley corporation called *Tech*, Kunda shows how organizational culture can be employed as an ever-present instrument of control that targets 'the underlying experiences, thoughts, and feelings' of employees and supervisors alike (Kunda 1992, 11). What characterizes *Tech* is an almost complete absence of structures and regulations (the only rule is: *Do what's right*). This type of 'designed ambiguity' creates a corporate culture where employees identify with a 'member role' that implicitly forces them to work around the clock in an attempt to meet insatiable managerial demands. Hence, as Kunda (1992, 11) notes, 'under normative control it is the employee's *self* – that ineffable source of subjective experience – that is claimed in the name of corporate interests'.

Since then, a range of studies have explored similar dynamics under different headings such as 'concertive control' (Barker 1993), 'social control' (O'Reilly and Chatman 1996), 'socio-ideological control' (Kärreman and Alvesson 2004), and 'brand-centered control' (Müller 2017). A general point that runs through such studies is that the worker's authenticity, his or her *true* self, is sacrificed in the process of constructing what Whyte (1956) calls 'the organizational man'; that is, an employee subjectivity that obediently conforms to the espoused values of the corporation. For instance, Hochschild (1983, x-xi) defines norm-based 'emotional

labor' as 'the *pinch between* the real but disapproved feeling on the one hand and an idealized one, on the other', while Kunda (1992, 183) highlights 'depersonalization' as a widespread strategy among employees at *Tech*. In these accounts, the organizational self is thus seen as a 'false self' that somehow suppresses the 'true self' (Hochschild 1983, 194). However, while recent studies have confirmed the 'totalitarian' (Willmott 1993) and inauthentic nature of normative control regimes (e.g. Casey 1999; Thornborrow and Brown 2009; Westwood and Johnston 2011), others have pointed to developments in the field where authenticity is actively encouraged rather than silently suppressed.

Just be yourself…

As mentioned, the fundamental premise of normative control is that employees are exhorted to identify with potentially appealing but inauthentic 'member roles' (Kunda 1992) or 'self-conceptions' (Thornborrow and Brown 2009) that are 'deemed congruent with managerially defined objectives' (Alvesson and Willmott 2002, 619). While this type of management has significant advantages, in the sense that it is both invisible and inexpensive, it has likewise been shown to foster disbelief and burnout, often leading workers to engage in cynical behavior (Fleming and Spicer 2003) and 'decaf resistance' (Contu 2008). Consequently, within recent years, new management techniques have emerged that focus specifically on the 'search for authenticity' (Hochschild 1983, 185) as well as more flexible and autonomous work-lives (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). According to Fleming and Sturdy (2009), this new trend signals the rise of what they call 'neo-normative' control. Under this 'tailored variant of normative control' (Fleming and Sturdy 2011, 182), organizational members are invited to collapse the distinction between their 'true' and 'false' self, fusing the two into one harmonious subject:

> In short, employees are encouraged to *be themselves* rather than normatively conform to an externally engineered, homogeneous and organisationally based identity. A key element of this apparent new freedom is having fun at work. This reflects a development in the management of fun from the emphasis on conformity and organisational loyalty associated with normative control, towards one of diversity and instrumentality (…) (Fleming and Sturdy 2009, 570).

As such, while classical forms of normative control thrive on homogeneity and uniformity (what Kanter (1972, 91) calls 'communion'), neo-normative control plays on heterogeneity and individualization. Costas describes this as a shift from a metaphorical image of the organization as a 'family', where members are assigned pregiven roles and positioned in paternalistic relationship (see Fleming 2005), to a culture of friendship that 'appears more open, egalitarian, and individualistic' (Costas 2012, 377). Such management techniques are frequently seen in service sector businesses that profit from the employee's ability to perform in a sincere and authentic manner. In these cases, workers are not necessarily required to 'love' the corporation itself, as is implied by many normative control regimes (Andersen 2015); they simply have to love 'being *in the* company' (Fleming and Sturdy 2009, 574).

With neo-normative control, we thus encounter a 'just be yourself' discourse that shuns uniformity and celebrates difference. One key aspect of this particular type of cultural control involves an invitation to have fun at work, not least because it is seen as a way of expressing authenticity and resisting the standardizing force of classical normative control (Westwood and Johnston 2011). As Butler et al. (2015, 497) note, 'humour – manifested as parody or sarcasm – serves as a way of distancing oneself from the norms of good corporate citizenship'. However, as they and others likewise point out, humor is an ambiguous phenomenon that is 'not inherently opposed to power' and may even be 'well-suited as a tool for exercising power in the contemporary context' (Karlsen and Villadsen 2015, 515). For instance, in the following analysis, we shall see how an exhortation to be positive and optimistic helps minimize resistance against proposals sponsored by influential councilors.

(Neo)normative control in electoral politics

As exemplified by Kanter (1972) and Rothschild-Whitt (1979), as well as Etzioni (1964), the concept of normative control applies well to studies of political organizations, which possibly has to do with the ideological nature of the phenomenon (Czarniawska-Joerges 1988). As a *Tech* manager in Kunda's account of corporate culture notes: 'The idea is to educate people without them knowing it. Have the religion and not know how they ever got it!' (Kunda 1992, 9). However, while plenty of studies have explored normative control in extra-parliamentarian organizations such as NGOs (e.g. Pfeiffer 2016), social movements (e.g. Osterman 2006), activist networks (e.g. Sutherland et al. 2014), and alternative groups (e.g. Reedy et al. 2016),

hardly anyone has investigated such dynamics within the realm of electoral politics (for exceptions, see Rye 2014; Husted 2020; Ringel 2019).

This particular gap is surprising, not only because it is relevant to study how some of the most powerful organizations are governed, but also because normative control seems manifested so evidently in the notion of 'party discipline' (Willmott 1993; Rye 2014). However, the purpose of this paper is not only to address the lack of literature, but also to explore how normative control is performed in formal political groups that explicitly distance themselves from the ideological whipping associated with party organizations. Hence, in what follows, I will analyze the cultural control that permeates IfF as an example of neo-normative control. It is 'normative' because it works through the culture and targets the hearts and minds of councilors, but it is 'neo-normative' because it actively promotes difference, fun, and individualization. These three elements will thus serve as the main leitmotifs in the following analysis.

Methodology

Empirically, this paper relies on qualitative data generated through different classical methods such as document analysis, participant observation, and semi-structured interviewing (see table 1). In that sense, the paper's methodological framework corresponds to what Alvesson and Deetz (2000) call 'reading texts', 'asking questions', and 'hanging out'. However, as illustrated by the vignettes preceding each sub-analysis, the observations constitute one of the most important sources of data, in the sense that they served as analytical starting points that helped me re-formulate research questions, readjust interview guides, and re-interpret documents (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002). The observations were conducted during the course of five full days in early April 2019 and four full days in mid-October 2019. Although I attended a number of events during those days (town hall meetings, panel debates, etc.), significant insights about Frome and its residents came from talking to people, strolling through the streets, and visiting some of the town's most celebrated sites (e.g. a community center, a food bank, a so-called 'library of things', as well as old cobbled shopping streets). The events described in the vignettes were selected based on the three elements of neo-normative control (difference, fun, and individualization), in the sense that they all illustrate dynamics otherwise concealed by this more liberal management style.

During the observations, I assumed the role of 'overt outsider' (McCurdy and Uldam 2014), meaning that I was always open about my research but acknowledged my limited knowledge of IfF and British town governance more generally. Making virtue out of necessity, I applied a strategy of 'strangeness', where the organization in question is treated as a peculiar phenomenon to be investigated, and where 'nothing should be taken for granted and nothing should be assumed to be uninteresting' (Neyland 2008, 100). By 'immersing' (Schatz 2009) myself in the inner workings of IfF, albeit for a short span of time, and by trying to take few things for granted, I was able to generate insights that would have been 'inaccessible from the standpoint of the nonparticipating external observer' (Jorgensen 2015, 1). For instance, by staying at former mayor David Appleton's residence during my first five days in Frome, I learned – much to my surprise – that some female councilors felt silenced or even marginalized within the incumbent council. This insight clearly sharpened my understanding of future events, although it obviously provided me with a 'male' view of gender inequality within IfF. To compensate for this, I made sure not to impose my initial perception of these issues on female councilors during interviews. In doing so, I came to realize that David's account was somewhat different from accounts provided by other councilors. This discrepancy is also reflected in the final vignette.

	Quantity	**Time of collection**
Observations		
First visit	5 full days	April 3-7, 2019
Second visit	4 full days	October 15-18, 2019
Interviews		
w/ councilors	13 interviews	First and second visit
w/ town hall staff	5 interviews	Second visit
w/ external consultants	2 interviews	First visit
Documents		
Books on Frome	3 books	Prior to visits
Newspaper articles	5 articles	Prior to visits
Councilor writings	7 documents	First and second visit

Table 1: Overview of collected data

Besides the observations, I conducted twenty semi-structured interviews. Thirteen of these interviews involved councilors of the second administration (the 2015-2019 council), five of them involved town hall staff, and two of them involved external consultants connected to IfF. The interview respondents were recruited through a combination of 'purposeful sampling', where people are selected based on their knowledge and position (Patton 1990), and 'snowballing', where one respondent leads the researcher to the next (Ekman 2015). Hence, the rationale guiding the recruitment of respondents did not necessarily lead me to construct a fully representative account of neo-normative control in IfF, but it helped me tease out the 'polyphony' of the organization (Justesen and Mik-Meyer 2012, 48). For ethical reasons, the names of councilors mentioned in the forthcoming analysis are all pseudonyms. However, based on their statements and due to the special nature of the case, it might be possible for insiders to identify their real names. All interview respondents have been made aware of this. I chose to keep the actual name of the organization, as it would have been too difficult to conceal the identity of Britain's only all-out independent town council.

In terms of documents, the forthcoming analysis relies on a selection of key texts. While some texts are written by observers pondering the idiosyncrasies of IfF and Frome in general (e.g. Harris 2015; Morrison 2018; Reading 2012), other texts are written by the councilors themselves. One particularly important source of data is David Appleton's own account of the IfF uprising, as reported in a 2014 monograph. This book initially introduced me to Frome and its alternative council, and I will therefore quote from it at various points in the forthcoming analysis (to ensure the anonymity of its author, the book is not included in the reference list). However, to balance this somewhat dominant account, I likewise collected writings from other councilors, some of which can be found on various website associated with IfF and some of which were shared with me in confidence. Reading these occasionally contradictory accounts once again helped me question taken-for-granted assumptions and dominant narratives, while keeping an ear out for polyphony.

Independents for Frome: Organizing an anti-party party

The journey to Frome is, perhaps in more than one sense, not as linear as one might expect. Although the town is located in the top-right corner of Somerset County, just twenty-five miles south-east of Bristol and merely a hundred miles west of London, visitors must choose between an agonizing two-hour bus ride through the city of Bath or a slightly more comfortable train

ride involving a stop-over in small-town Westbury. Keen on minimizing my local bus experience, I opted for the second itinerary. When I eventually arrived in Frome, I was greeted by the town's former Mayor and IfF co-founder, David Appleton, who had generously offered to accommodate me in his homemade garden shed – complete with queen size bed, wood burner, armchair, book shelve, tea pot, and an artistically decorated long-drop right outside the door. It was, by all accounts, a perfect place to begin my observations. After a quick but delicious vegan dinner, David escorted me down the road from his house to the Frome town hall where the Annual Town Meeting was scheduled for seven o'clock. Through the rain-covered surface of a first-floor window, I could see a surprisingly large number of people conversing in what appeared to be the council chamber. 'Let us hope we can find a seat', David said, before pushing open the heavy doors to the old town hall building.

When asked about the origins of IfF, most people trace the legend back to a public meeting in an upstairs room at the Cornerhouse pub in downtown Frome in late 2010, where a large gathering of local Froomies collectively decided to field candidates for the 2011 town council elections. Prior to this particular meeting, a significantly smaller group of resourceful locals had been complaining to each other about what they perceived as the dysfunctional character of the incumbent council (dominated by Liberal Democrats), focusing specifically on the councilors' apparent inability to get anything done and on the confrontational atmosphere of town hall meetings. Leonard Davenport, one of the central actors in this group, recalls:

> Eight years ago, a few of us who lived in Frome went to the pub on Friday nights and started moaning about the town council. I went to quite a few town council meetings and it was completely dire. It was *really* bad, *really* depressing. There was nothing going on, but they were so bitchy with each other, they had no visions, and it felt so alien. No members of the public went – or, had the courage to go. And finally, one Friday night after too much drinking, someone said: Why don't we do something about it – why don't we stand? I then put an advert in the paper and the rest is history.

An impressive number of people responded to the advert and the Cornerhouse was thus packed to the limits that fateful night in 2010. However, what initially unified the people gathered at the pub was not so much a particular ideology or a well-articulated program, but a shared

frustration with something external to the group itself[1]. Although the particularity of people's grievances varied significantly (from the council's unwillingness to address environmental issues to its failure to restore a derelict community center in the heart of Frome), everyone seemed to agree on the name of this external enemy: *Party politics*. Understood as a mode of government, not uncommon to British politics, where ideological mudslinging and general indolence entirely eclipse constructive dialogue and actual initiative, party politics therefore quickly became the 'constitutive outside' (Staten 1986) that mobilized and amalgamated the otherwise irreconcilable group of dissatisfied citizens. However, this type of unity, predicated almost exclusively on what Laclau (2005a, 96) calls a 'moment of negativity', also meant that the number of political views represented by the group equaled the number of people present at the Cornerhouse. The solution to this incredible political diversity was to create what they jokingly referred to as an 'anti-party party', consisting of 17 individual candidates with 17 separate agendas, the only common denominator being that they were *independents* whereas all other candidates were *partisans.*

Lacking common political direction or a manifesto for that matter, the group – now known as *Independents for Frome* – convened in early 2011 to explore which principles and values they shared, besides the obvious anti-party sentiment and a burning desire for change. What came out of those deliberations, as well as more informal meetings between David and Leonard, were a set of principles and a document called 'Ways of Working' (we shall return to the latter). The principles consist of 10 statements, some merely descriptive and others more commanding, that define the group and spell-out its post-election mode of operation. One principle underscores that IfF should remain independent, as 'party politics are corrosive and serve no purpose at the local level'; another states that the council should be a 'positive hub' that creates space for 'thinking the "unthinkable" to produce "the supposedly undoable"'. A third key aspect of the principles is to increase the level of public involvement and consultation, with an emphasis on the importance of transparency and openness, as well as an ambition of forging creative alliances to make Frome 'cleaner and greener'.

The cynicism and ridicule that occasionally met the IfF candidates on the campaign trail silenced in May 2011, when the independents won 10 out of 17 seats in the Frome town council,

[1] In fact, during the interviews, I came to learn that the IfF councilors came from very different political backgrounds. While most had never before been a member of a political party, some had previously been associated with The Green Party, Labour, the Liberal Democrats, and even the Conservatives.

and it vanished entirely four years later, when IfF claimed the remaining seven seats, thus becoming Britain's first all-out independent town council. The group's absolute majority was defended in spring 2019, which allowed IfF to continue its quest to reinvigorate local government for another term. During the eight years that have passed since the by-now mythical meeting at the Cornerhouse, all original candidates have been replaced by new faces, but the principles have remained more or less untouched.

Notably, unlike most political associations, IfF is not a membership organization. Although the group is formally registered as a 'minor party', there are no rank and file, just like there are no support groups or 'ancillary organizations' (Duverger 1954, 51). More significantly, perhaps, there is no official leadership either. The mayoralty is mostly a ceremonial role (it is the 'kissing babies bit' as Leonard Davenport explained), and the position rotates every year. To be sure, one of the councilors is bestowed the title of 'leader', but this is purely done to satisfy higher levels of government who usually expect to deal with the party leadership. That position rotates as well. This means that there is little division of labor within IfF and no clear concentration of authority – formally, at least – which essentially means that 'there is no structure to it', as another councilor explained (Interview 3, 25 min).[2] However, the lack of an evident administrative structure provides a fertile ground for other modes of organizational control and less formal processes of decision-making, as pointed out by Freeman (1972) in her seminal work on the 'tyranny of structurelessness'. This is the focus the present analysis.

Hence, in what follows, I will analyze how the weak structure and strong culture of IfF (represented most clearly by the Principles and the Ways of Working) can be said to facilitate an implicit type of organizational control that exhibits the characteristics of neo-normative control, as conceived by Fleming and Sturdy (2009; 2011), albeit in a completely different empirical setting. Transporting the concept of neo-normative control from one setting (e.g. business firms) to another setting (e.g. political organizations) makes new insights available and provides a fresh perspective on a concept otherwise saturated by negative connotations. The analysis is thus structured according to three main elements of neo-normative control: difference, fun, and individualization – all of which are clearly present in the case. My aim is not to take a stand on whether this more liberal variant of normative control is good or bad, but

[2] After a couple of years in office, IfF established more formal roles such as 'chairs' and 'sponsors'. This led to a clearer division of responsibility and authority.

merely to describe its characteristics and discuss the implications for alternative organizations such as IfF.

Difference: In the absence of party discipline

When David and I entered the council chamber, after climbing the stairs to the first floor of the town hall building, an unfamiliar sight revealed itself. Unlike any other town hall meeting I had heard of, the room was full of people chatting in a joyful but heartfelt tone, while commuting between the tea arrangement and the canapé buffet. Having studied the pictures of councilors prior to my arrival, I scanned the room for familiar faces, but it was genuinely impossible to distinguish governors from citizens. One person was, however, easily identifiable – the Mayor. Sarcastically sporting his ceremonial chain, Tim Blythe, a middle-aged schoolteacher turned politician, circulated the room before picking up a beautiful ukulele. Suddenly joined by 15 additional ukulelists and a cajón player, the Mayor and his band launched an acoustic version of 'This is gonna be the best day of my life' by American Authors, encouraging people to sing along. The impromptu concert was followed by another session in which a woman in green and purple lycra, with a rainbow-colored sweatband strapped around a curly wig, delivered an aerobics lesson to the sound of the Dallas theme. Thus began this year's Annual Town Meeting in Frome. The first topic on the agenda was 'Questions from the public'. An elderly person raised her hand and asked about the ongoing renovation of a bus stop outside of her house. The Mayor said, in a surprisingly serious tone, that they would look into the matter. The town clerk nodded his head in agreement.

So, what does it mean to be an anti-party party? As the vignette above shows, it is about having fun and establishing an engaging working environment, but according to the IfF councilors, it is primarily about freethinking and can-do attitude. In other words, it is about independence, in the sense of a privilege (being free) and an obligation (using that freedom productively). From this perspective, a party organization represents all that is wrong with contemporary politics, not only because of its oligarchic structure and its frequent unwillingness to cooperate with opponents for the greater good, but also because of the fierce discipline that parties typically instill in their members. As one of the initial 17 candidates, Susie Roberts, put it in a letter published by the local newspaper:

> A party (…) traditionally suggests a strict adherence to a firm set of ideas or ideology; whipping freethinkers into line to ensure consistency (…). We are a group from all walks of life and all ages who accept that we have come together from different perspectives and experiences; we welcome debate and independence of thought; we actively encourage freedom of action and there is no party discipline.

Or, as David Appleton argues in his book on independent politics:

> By their very nature, political parties demand a uniformity of views and opinions from their members and therefore they miss out on the richness diversity brings. A group of independents will bring to the table a range of views and experiences that better reflect the wider society in which they live.

What the IfF councilors perceive as the main problem with party discipline in a local context is, as one put it, that 'the main parties will all say that they are for Frome but know that they have to comply with what they're told nationally' (Interview 3, 19 min). One example of this, highlighted by more than one respondent, is that conservative councilors often appeared immune to sound arguments about public spending during their time in office, simply because they had to follow the path set out by Westminster: 'We are in a period of austerity, so we shouldn't be borrowing money' (Interview 4, 48 min). Even when public spending supposedly could be proven to yield long-term benefits for the town, the Tories remained unwilling to borrow money, which several IfF councilors interpreted as a sign of unwavering loyalty to the national party leadership. To escape this type of disciplined passivity, no IfF councilors are forced to occupy a predetermined position or to defend causes they do not personally believe in. There is no whipping, and everyone is free to vote as he/she pleases, partly because no one is in a position to whip others into compliance.

This raises the question of how a fully independent council manages to act collectively, and how it simultaneously prevents opaque power dynamics from emerging in the absence of bureaucratic rules and party discipline. The group's own answer to this question is called 'Ways of Working' (coincidentally abbreviated WoW). The WoW is a document that almost all respondents interviewed for this study mentioned as the key factor governing the group's internal affairs, and it contains a list of eight connected guidelines for proper conduct within

IfF. To set the tone, the document is prefaced by a Piet Hein quote ('The noble art of losing face may one day save the human race') and concluded by an Alexander Meiklejohn quote ('Democracy is the art of thinking independently together'), both of which summarize essential aspects of the WoW. The main elements of the document are as follows:

1. A willingness to participate in rational debate leading to a conclusion.
2. Understanding the difference between constructive debate and personal attacks.
3. Avoidance of identifying ourselves so personally with a particular position that this in itself excludes constructive debate.
4. Preparedness to being swayed by the arguments of others and admitting mistakes.
5. Relative freedom from any overriding dogma or ideology which would preclude listening to others.
6. Trust, confidence and optimism in other people's expertise and knowledge.
7. Confidence in the mechanisms and process of decision-making that we establish, accepting that the decision of the majority is paramount.
8. An acceptance that 'you win some, you lose some'; it's usually nothing personal and there's really no point in taking defeats to heart.

One councilor summed-up the rationale behind the WoW in the following way: 'You agree to differ, you have to listen, and you have to be willing to change your mind' (Interview 4, 40 min). Particularly the twin-notions of *listening* and *changing one's mind* was important to most respondents interviewed for this study. As such, there seems to be no obvious ideology governing the inner workings of the group. In fact, the whole idea of being independent is supposedly to 'take the ideology out' of local government and minimize the level of 'dogmatism' (Interview 2, 73 min) instead of 'sticking to the party line regardless' (Interview 5, 16 min). As another councilor expressed it:

> Independents for Frome is a non-ideological grouping of independent-minded people with the best interests of the town at heart. Party politics is, in theory at least, driven by ideology: you have a free-market party, you have a socialist party, you have some sort of middle ground liberal approach, and

> you have those who are keen on independence for a particular region (…). For me, that gets in the way of loads of stuff. You have to run everything through the ideology. It doesn't give you the opportunity to say: this is just a good idea no matter where it comes from. (Interview 9, 11 min).

If there is an ideological framework to the project, it would be what Gerbaudo (2019) in his recent book on new party formations calls 'participationism'. With this term, Gerbaudo (2019, 81) refers to the bourgeoning conviction that public participation in decision-making processes constitutes 'the normative criteria of a good politics, making legitimate only those processes that actively engage ordinary citizens while being suspicious of top-down interventions'. This ideal runs through most of the bullets in the WoW document, but it is reflected clearest in the first point, as well as in several initiatives launched by the IfF council such as participatory budgeting and community forums. During the interviews, a handful of councilors likewise highlighted 'involvement and engagement' as the backbone philosophy of IfF (e.g. Interview 1, 17 min). As one of the founding councilors puts it in David Appleton's book: 'The antidote to alienation is participation'.

This non-ideological ideology, represented by an anti-party party, aligns surprisingly well with the political theory of deliberative democracy (Bohman and Rehg 1997). In short, this theory subscribes to the view that political decisions are legitimate when justified in terms that those involved find reasonable (Rawls 1993), and when participants in a decision-making process act 'communicatively' rather than 'strategically', meaning that they allow the outcome to be decided solely by 'the unforced force of the better argument' (Habermas 1996, 306). According to deliberative theorists such as Cohen (1989), this not only guarantees more legitimate decisions (the 'procedural' argument), but also better decisions (the 'substantive' argument). One key element in achieving this ideal is to ensure that those affected by a decision are able to access the 'reason-giving' behind it (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 3), effectively rendering participation the *sine qua non* of deliberative democracy. In that way, IfF seems to represent an institutionalized version of deliberative democracy: they avoid the stultifying rhythm of the party machine and sidestep the conforming effect of party discipline while maintaining a focus on rational debate and ideological flexibility.

However, the intense focus on maximum participation and adequate reasoning gives rise to thorny questions about consensus-formation (Martí 2017). Because, if the outcome of

deliberation is decided by nothing more than the 'better argument', then consensus seems to be an inevitable by-product. According to Mouffe (1993) and other critics of the deliberative tradition, however, the dream of harmonious consensus between otherwise irreconcilable views is a post-political fantasy that clouds exclusionary mechanisms unfolding under the cover of 'ideal speech situations' (Habermas 1990, 88) where people debate in a truthful, respectful, and constructive manner. Regardless of how it is achieved, consensus always marginalizes certain views and identities, since what appears 'rational' to some may be 'irrational' to others. Deciding on the precise meaning of rationality is a (if not the *the*) political question and it cannot be resolved through ideal-type deliberation (see Mouffe 1999). This is why the IfF culture cannot be conceived as 'ideologyless', but rather as imbued with a particular kind of ideology that emphasizes dialogue and participation as moral virtues *per se*. Those not complying with these ideals, such as conservative naysayers, remain excluded from the decision-making process as well as the IfF community more broadly.

In that sense, there are indeed limits to how different and independent councilors are allowed to be within IfF. Moreover, these limits are not only procedural. One example that clearly illuminates the more substantive border between accepted and non-accepted difference is the case of travelling communities. For decades, groups of travelers have settled in North Somerset (a government report from 2017 identified around 100 plots and pitches in the region), leading some councilors to question their overall presence in the area. However, most members of IfF typically frown upon such questioning and subtly silence those few trying to voice concerns about the travelers. Although no formal decision has ever been made regarding traveling communities, everyone seems to know that this particular topic is considered unethical and should be left unaddressed. One councilor argued that the group's unwillingness to deal with this topic is an example of how 'political correctness' sometimes curbs the council's ability to realize its non-ideological aspirations:

> It's one of those things that are off limits – to criticize their way of life – when actually I think you should be able to say: this is pretty shit show (…). There was no decision, and no one's actually said anything, but you just feel uncomfortable voicing your level of displeasure with that particular group. (…) You think: if I air this particular opinion, they will be hostile to it. And so, then you don't. (…). Let's put it this way: I don't think those opinions would be welcome to the point where it would lead to you perhaps being

> ostracized in a way that you wouldn't be for any other subject. (…). This is a shame, but that's where we're at (Interview 8, 46 min).

As mentioned in the theory section, neo-normative control relies on a 'just be yourself' discourse that celebrates diversity and encourages people to exercise their authentic self in defiance of 'organizational groupthink' and 'outdated management ideologies' (Fleming and Sturdy 2009, 573). This conceptualization fits well with the official lack of party discipline within IfF and the group's ideological diversity, where the only thing that supposedly unites the group is the independence of its members. However, as Fleming and Sturdy (2009) point out, notions of authenticity are always predicated on a particular understanding of what it means to be different or, indeed, independent. There are always limits to difference. As shown above, this is also the case in IfF, where the notion of independence is demarcated by what one councilor referred to as 'political correctness'. This, however, raises questions about how IfF councilors recognize each other as authentic/independent beings, and how this understanding is policed within the group. These questions are at the heart of the following sub-analysis.

Fun: The non-politics of positivity

The next question at the Annual Town Meeting came from another senior citizen and was prefaced by a tactful apology. 'I hate to spoil the good vibe, because everyone's having such a good time, but one part of Frome has been neglected', she said. The Mayor and the town clerk once again received the question, which concerned some people's unlawful habit of parking cars at a busses-only parking lot, with great professionalism. Once all enquiries had been addressed, the meeting moved on to the next topic on the agenda: the Mayor's review of the past year. Tim Blythe stood up and asked his assistant to start a PowerPoint presentation containing numerous pictures of himself wearing the ceremonial chain. The Mayor's account of his one-year tenancy turned out to be one of the funniest speeches I had ever heard a politician deliver. Blending matter-of-fact descriptions of his mayoral duties with self-deprecatory remarks about people 'speaking to the chain' rather than to him and about the importance of changing shirts between the many photo-ops, Blythe entertained his audience with the comedic timing of an actual funnyman. One of the stories included in the review was about a weekly column in the Frome Standard, one of the town's two newspapers, reserved specifically for the Mayor. Unlike previous Mayors, however, Blythe quickly decided not to use

the column for negative campaigning and political mudslinging. As he said in a moment of sudden gravity: 'I try hard not to be political, but to keep it positive at all times'.

Although fun is not explicitly mentioned in the 10 principles for IfF-style governance or in the WoW document, the idea that local politics should be lively and enjoyable permeates the discourse surrounding the independents. For instance, one councilor argued that stopping the 'complaining letters in local newspapers', 'telling stories', and being 'incredibly positive' were key ingredients in the group's political success (Interview 1, 6 min). Another councilor noted that 'humor is great' because it reminds people 'not to be so pompous and dogmatic' (Interview 8, 41 min). Similarly, in his book on independent politics, David Appleton argues that 'keeping it light' is an essential part of running an independent council. As he notes:

> Independents for Frome is not a party, but we know how to party! From the start we have encouraged food and drinks at meetings, we try not to go on too long and we positively encourage a degree of mirth. (…). Words like 'worthy', 'admirable', 'duty' and 'giving back' need to be banned at an early point. (…). Serious causes must be approach with good humour, otherwise they are too boring and cannot compete with the Premiere League and Grand Theft Auto.

As illustrated by the Mayor's closing statement in the vignette above ('I try hard not to be political…'), an interesting distinction between *positivity* and *politics* operates at the heart of the IfF town council: negative rhetoric is generally seen by the councilors as the very language of politics, whereas positive rhetoric is perceived as non-political by nature. It is as though smiles and laughter have the ability to take the politics out of otherwise political articulations. Other councilors supported this argument and added that 'optimism' is vital for any independent politics (e.g. Interview 1, 6 min), and that 'Yes' is always a better answer than 'No', because it forces participants in a debate to be edifying and constructive rather than dismissive and destructive (Interview 2, 23 min). As one particularly plainspoken councilor put it: 'If you hit life from an optimistic perspective, you got a much better chance of the outcome being successful. If you're pessimistic, you're fucked from the start' (Interview 8, 40 min). In fact, as David Appleton notes in his book, in the years following the IfF take-over, Frome gradually acquired an image as 'a place where people say Yes'. David lists this as one

of the group's major achievements during its first term in office, alongside initiatives that has helped alleviate poverty and increase sustainability.

One councilor argued that, within IfF, the word 'political' is used in at least three ways: 'There's party political, there is political as informal networks and scheming (…), and then people like Tim [the Mayor] will sometimes use political to mean mudslinging' (Interview 6, 51 min). Since the council engages in none of these activities, the councilors generally perceive their work as positive and, thus, more or less non-political. As another councilor put it when asked to supply a dictionary definition of IfF: 'Independents for Frome is a non-political… actually, it's an anti-political group of citizens… I mean, anti-*party* political group of citizens aiming to reinvigorate local politics' (Interview 2, 41 min). The exhortation to be positive and affirmative has implications for how disagreements are handled within the group. On the face of it, disagreements are – true to the deliberative philosophy of the group – resolved through the force of the better argument. It is supposedly a matter of arguing and listening. However, when digging deeper into the matter, it turns out that very little is properly discussed at council meetings. In fact, very few councilors could think of instances where serious debate had taken place. To an outsider, the lack of debate within the council might appear strange, especially given the political diversity harbored by the group. There seem to be two explanations for this conundrum. Consider the following statements from two fellow councilors:

> [When confronted with disagreement] we just argue and listen to each other. Sometimes we take a vote, but usually it's just discussion (…). But I can't think of any issues where we've been really divided at IfF meetings (…). I think that if there's something different that somebody wants, and other people don't agree with them, it just doesn't get very far. You know, they just don't get the support and therefore can't take it that much further (Interview 5, 21 min).

> There's very little that really gets discussed at council meetings. I can think of about three things in four years where we genuinely had a proper discussion. It's all largely been agreed. It can be difficult and – James [another councilor] said this to me recently – there are certain things where you go, "Oh, I'm not sure I agree with that". But because, in some sense, we're on the same side and when your colleagues have promoted something,

> it's sometimes difficult to say, "I'm not going to vote for that". Very occasionally, people will vote against things, but it's often a token gesture. It's almost unheard of that things don't get carried through (Interview 6, 45 min).

While both councilors mention the lack of genuine discussions at IfF meetings, their explanations vary immensely. Whereas the former seems to believe that the group's political unevenness has been straightened out by rational debate (or, what Leonard Davenport called 'the power of discussion and conversation'), the latter suggests that most matters are 'agreed' in advance and that the remaining opposition is silenced by a feeling of 'being on the same side'. The importance of letting go of an argument in order to support colleagues was also highlighted by a third councilor who noted that: 'You just have to let go if it doesn't go your way. If you can't be persuaded, and everyone else thinks it's a good idea, you just have to suck it up' (Interview 4, 41 min). A fourth councilor linked this sentiment to the dominant culture of positivity that thrives within the group. This link, he explained, can be used as an advantage in terms of getting certain proposals accepted by the council. Because, once people have internalized the culture of positivity, it gets extremely difficult for them to oppose initiatives sponsored by colleagues. In a passage that bears an uncanny resemblance to the manager's statement in Kunda's account of *Tech* ('the idea is to educate people without them knowing it…'), the councilor puts it like this:

> It's not that difficult to do. If you believe in yourself and if you believe in optimism and you believe you can make a difference, in the sense of being progressive, then you can pass that on to other people. They may not know that they've absorbed it, but they have. (Interview 1, 6 min).

Like the case analyzed by Fleming and Sturdy (2009; 2011) in their work on neo-normative control, humor and positivity are important elements in the organizational culture promoted by the IfF town council. Humor creates a lively working environment and can sometimes allow people to reclaim their 'authentic selves' (Westwood and Johnston 2011). However, as shown above, the exhortation to be positive can also be a way of disciplining people in the absence of formal (party) discipline; that is, as a way of policing what it means to be authentic and independent. When palpable party discipline is substituted by less constraining virtues such as 'freethinking' and 'can-do attitude', other techniques are needed to turn an irreconcilable group

of individuals into a single entity acting in unison. In the case of IfF, positivity and optimism constitute such disciplining techniques, in the sense that these virtues occasionally prompt people to comply with majority views, because no one wants to be a naysayer that blocks the progressive agenda. As a group of proud independents, no one wants to be seen as 'political' and partisan, so they try hard 'to keep it positive at all times'.

Individualization: The political is personal

Two days after the highly entertaining town hall meeting, I was invited by David to participate in a Friday night panel discussion at his daughter's organic bakery, alongside three other researchers who had come from near and far to study what the locals only half-jokingly referred to as The People's Republic of Frome. The topic of the event, 'Is representative government failing?', had been selected by David based on our expertise and possible also his own answer to the question (a resounding 'yes'). Approximately 30 people were present at the bakery when the event was kicked-off. We each delivered a short talk, containing more or less coherent answers to the question of representative government, and then the floor was opened for comments. A handful of participants (including the speakers) praised IfF and highlighted the positive impact the council had on the town. One London-based participant mentioned that, when talking to locals about IfF, she could feel their hearts leap: 'It gives them agency and power'. We all smiled and nodded. However, at the end of the session, a female councilor named Betty expressed a wish to modify the story of IfF as the 'shiny example' of DIY politics. She said: 'You struggle alone, with froth at the mouth, for the causes you believe in and let go of the rest'. The room fell awkwardly silent, until David spoke up in a witty tone: 'What you meant to say, Betty, was that "I" struggle with froth at the mouth – not "you" struggle'.

Betty's intervention at the Friday night panel debate is important because it highlights the third component of neo-normative control, as practices by the IfF council, namely individualization. What Betty pointed to that night was the experience that some councilors have of being isolated within the collective and having to fight for political causes without much back-up from the rest of the group. David's response to Betty's intervention highlights the individualizing aspect of this dynamic. By correcting Betty and (although jokingly) relegating her statement from a general level (represented by the word 'you') to an individual level (represented by the word 'I'), David quite literally exemplified what Deetz (1992) calls 'subjectification of experience'; that is, 'the idea that experience and meaning are strictly personal and private' (Kärreman and

Alvesson 2010, 61). The immediate consequence of this so-called 'discursive closure' is that the issue at hand loses its relevance as a matter of public concern and becomes something that may be explained by reference to a particular personality or an idiosyncratic mode of being (in this case, Betty's mode of being). One councilor elaborated on this:

> I'm a confident person, I've done senior roles in all sorts of places, but I find myself silenced around some of this here. And I ask myself why. It's because you're part of the politics, so to actually say to the people in power [influential councilors], "You've got power, you're leaving me out", is not a power play. So, all of us – and I hear it particularly amongst the women – say, "Well, I don't know very much". My version of that kind of negative talk is, "Well, I'm too pushy anyway, I'm not handling it very well". So, there's a variety of versions of, "It's my fault". You reflect it back as your problem. (Interview 6, 7 min).

As such, according to some councilors, intra-group marginalization quickly gets to be seen as an issue that has little to do with the internal structuring of IfF and more to do with the person feeling excluded. As the councilor above notes: 'It's my fault'. Furthermore, drawing attention to the experience of marginalization tend to be regarded by more influential councilors as 'not a power play'; that is, as an admission of frailty that does little good in terms of strengthening one's position within the group of independents. Therefore, most councilors allegedly avoid such unwanted exposure by keeping experiences of exclusion to themselves and by justifying these feelings with reference to presumed personal characteristics such as not knowing enough or 'not handling it very well'. This is an example of what Hochschild (1983, 56) refers to as 'latent feeling rules', which are unspoken emotional conventions meant to maintain a given social order. In the context of IfF, the purpose of such feeling rules is to maintain the idea that the group consists of 17 individuals, connected by little more than a shared sense of independence. Since there are no evident authority structures within the group, the feeling of power inequality is easily brushed-off as a personal problem rather than a structural problem.

Fleming and Sturdy detect similar dynamics in their study of a neo-normative call center. Here, an 'individualized sociality', driven by what one of the workers at the call center refer to as 'forced' individualism, is discussed by the authors as a sophisticated type of 'managed *detraction'* meant to obscure 'the harsh effects of traditional controls' (Fleming and Sturdy

2011, 192). The power structures are real enough but difficult to address as a collective concern, given the individualist culture saturating the organization. In other words, the 'just be yourself' discourse is here seen as an ideological veil that clouds the alienating nature of technical and bureaucratic control by imbuing workers with a false sense of freedom.

This is not the case in IfF. Most councilors genuinely feel free from bureaucratic rules and party discipline, and they indisputably have more space for freethinking- and action than partisan councilors, but the individualized culture of the group nonetheless serves to detract – that is, to redirect attention – from more informal power dynamics. According to most of the interviewed councilors, as well as the council's main consultant, power in IfF is largely predicated on two things: experience and confidence. Knowledge of local government and the internal workings of town councils generally allow councilors to exercise a greater degree of influence than councilors with no such credentials. As the consultant notes, the second administration did not pay enough attention to 'the processes of the group', meaning that 'the more experienced and the more dominant people got to run things and quite a lot of people, I think, felt left out or left behind' (Interview 7, 42 min). One councilor links this type of experience and confidence based power to questions of gender:

> I suppose some people have been taken along by the risk taking and the spending and so on, because what does it matter anyway, and if the others are convincing. So, if Leonard and I and Kenneth and others are pushing something – that being an issue because we're three strong men – then people like Deborah, Olivia, and Kathrine are gonna go along with it... who happen to be less forceful women. So, there's definitely a power in that. There's a lot of power in gender, I guess. (Interview 2, 73 min).

This quote resonates with the previous quote about the individualizing dynamics in the group, in which one respondent points to her and other female councilors' experience of being 'silenced' by male colleagues who appear more confident playing the 'power play'. Being experienced and confident has allegedly allowed some of the male councilors to influence the council's decisions in terms of 'risk taking' and 'spending' in a disproportional manner. At least, this is how a large part of the councilors, including 'the blokes', sees it (Interview 7, 43 min). Another female councilor explained the gendered character of the group's informal

power dynamics by recalling a newspaper cartoon depicting a business meeting involving a woman and her five male colleagues. In the cartoon, the woman looks angrily at what appears to be a male manager. The caption reads: 'This is an excellent suggestion, Miss Triggs. Perhaps one of the men would like to make it'. With this reference, the councilor not only pointed to the experience of 'not being heard' as a woman but also of having to find more unorthodox ways of exercising influence such as teaming-up with female staffers (Interview 4, 33 min) and creating a so-called 'older women's support group' within IfF (Interview 10, 9 min).

Summing-up, in the case of IfF, one could argue that 'traditional notions of command and discipline' that often characterize political parties (Rye 2015, 1053) have been replaced by a culture of independence that celebrates difference, encourages positivity, and views the authentic individual as the primary loci of competent political action. An unwanted by-product of this 'just be yourself' discourse seems to be that some councilors, especially women, feel marginalized by their more experienced and confident male colleagues. Reversing the old feminist credo that 'the personal is political', it could be argued that IfF-style governance relies on the idea that 'the political is personal', meaning that political ideas begin with the individual councilor and are carried through by the individual councilor. The extent to which political ideas are realized by the council is thus a matter of individual councilors' ability to convince their fellow IfF representatives to agree on the matter – often prior to formal discussions. To succeed in this matter, it helps to be confident and knowledgeable of governmental affairs, but it also helps to project a feeling of optimism. In fact, it is about being 'positive' rather than 'political', since that is precisely what ties the group together.

Alternative organization, neo-normative control, and critical performativity

As noted in the introduction, IfF is easily characterized as an 'alternative' organization. Whether one subscribes to Parker et al.'s (2014) normative conception of alternativity as something involving 'autonomy', 'solidarity', and 'responsibility', or whether one prefers a more minimal definition as a 'general and undifferentiated counterpoint' (Cheney 2014, n.p.), the group of independents meets the mark. In terms of the latter, one could argue that the whole *raison d'être* of IfF is predicated on a shared rejection of the institutional order represented by the notion of 'party politics'. In that way, the group becomes 'an *other* in relation to the way things stand' (Laclau 2005b, 47), and that makes it alternative by definition. In terms of the latter, one could equally argue that 'autonomy', 'solidarity', and 'responsibility' are words

frequently used to signify the group. Whereas the notions of autonomy and solidary seem unified in the somewhat oxymoronic idea of a 'group of independents', responsibility to the future – associated by Parker et al. (2014, 632) with words like 'sustainability, accountability, stewarding, development and progress' – seems to underlie most initiatives launched by the IfF town council.

Sticking with the latter definition, however, we need to pause for a second and ponder how exactly autonomy and solidarity is reconciled within the group. Claiming to find 'solidarity in difference' is obviously one thing, realizing it in practice is another (Fleischmann et al. 2019). Because, as Parker et al. (2014, 630) note: 'How can we be both true to ourselves and at the same time orient ourselves to the collective? How can we value freedom, but then give it up to the group?' While previous studies have emphasized prefigurative practices (Reedy et al. 2016) and socio-spatial tactics (Daskalaki and Kokkinidis 2017) as examples of how autonomy and solidarity might be reconciled in extra-parliamentarian settings, I will suggest that neo-normative control constitutes a *potentially* promising way of being 'different together' (Parker et al. 2014, 631) in a context of electoral politics (see also Husted 2020). To realize this potential, however, certain qualifications seem required.

Toward alternative party organizing

That neo-normative control is potentially liberating might appear counterintuitive given that, in the work of Fleming and Sturdy (2011, 195), it is primarily associated with profit-related motives and is seen as a way 'in which the firm mines, captures and screens the social and emotional skills of the employee'. By asking people to invest their private selves in work-related tasks, the corporation not only breaks down the boundary between work and non-work, it also gets 'authentic' employees that are able to serve customers in a more personalized manner. However, if we transport the concept of neo-normative control to a voluntary non-profit context such as town government, the picture changes significantly. In the absence of profit-related incentives, the 'just be yourself' discourse could be seen as a potentially more liberating management style that provides an escape from the homogenizing effects of bureaucratic rules and normative control mechanisms (manifested as party discipline) by allowing individuals the freedom to realize their 'autonomous' selves through the collective. In that way, neo-normative control can be said to facilitate an alternative mode of organization

that, in principle at least, encourages what Reedy et al. (2016) refer to as 'individuation' (group-enabled autonomy) without compromising the collective project.

However, as we saw in the analysis, individuation often turns into individualization (meaning isolation and marginalization) when practiced in a culture that celebrates positivity, optimism, and can-do attitude. In other words, it is difficult to balance-out autonomy and solidarity in a 'place where people say Yes', because naysaying is easily equated with old-school party politics and thus seen as an un-solidary attempt to block the council's progressive agenda. As one councilor put it: 'If you're pessimistic, you're fucked from the start' (Interview 8, 40 min). If the personal agendas of individual councilors are at odds with proposals sponsored by dominant figures within the group (often experienced and confident males), it is difficult to oppose these without appearing negative and 'political'. Hence, in these cases, solidarity with the group unintentionally curbs individual autonomy. Furthermore, the unstructured character of the group makes it hard to confront such informal power dynamics. At least, problems related to the distribution of power are frequently seen as personal rather than structural, precisely because there is no apparent division of authority within the group and therefore no structural arrangement to blame. This predicament does indeed bear resemblance to the 'tyranny of structurelessness' associated with the 1970s liberation movements, where the absence of formal rules often became a 'smokescreen for the strong and the lucky to establish unquestioned hegemony over others' (Freeman 1972, 232).

There are at least two reasons why the problem(s) of structurelessness and individualization are especially pertinent in formal political organizations compared to extra-parliamentarian organizations such as those typically studied by scholars interested in alternative organizations (e.g. Kokkinidis 2015; Reedy et al. 2016; Reinecke 2018). For one, organizations engaged in electoral politics represent constituencies that far exceed the boundaries of the group. This means that the 'unquestioned hegemony' that Freeman refers to above is exercised over entire communities rather than just a small group of members. This makes the otherwise internal problem of power inequality an external problem of political accountability. Secondly, since political parties (unlike social movements or activist networks) are tasked with developing policy proposals, the scramble to gain influence has an additional dimension. In these organizations, it is not just a matter of influencing the identity and the procedures of the group itself, but also a matter of influencing the future of the wider community.

This means that, to appear alternative, neo-normative control must be practiced alongside procedures for ensuring that independence and *autonomy* does not turn into individualization, that *solidarity* with the group does not turn into an unquestioned hegemony of the strong, and that the heavy *responsibility* that comes with the 'right to govern' is exercised in a transparent and accountable manner. Perhaps one future task for alternative organization studies is to heed the call from Parker and Parker (2017) and team up with 'allies' *inside* the formal political system to help them build such procedures; to launch a critical performativity project within a setting otherwise neglected by the alternative literature.

This could be done by simply adding more party-focused entries to the emerging 'library of alternative case studies' (Parker and Parker 2017, 1382), but it could also involve more deep and direct engagement with alternative party organizations. Wickert and Schaefer (2015) have developed the foundations for the latter approach under the heading 'progressive performativity', highlighting strategies of micro-level engagement and reflexive conscientization (ongoing and critical dialogue with practitioners) as central to such interventions. During my two visits to Frome, I sought to follow this approach by feeding critical observations about structurelessness, individualization, and gender inequality back to the IfF councilors (e.g. during the Friday night panel discussion and more informal conversations). Whether this leads to progressive change remains to be seen, although several councilors readily expressed an ambition of addressing my observations. This might be interpreted as a sign that new 'opportunities for changing the current organizational reality' is gradually being 'talked into existence' (Wickert and Schaefer 2015, 120), which seems like a good starting point for any kind of progressive alteration.

Conclusion

I began this paper by asking: *How and with what consequences is organizational control practiced in a political organization that lacks clear bureaucratic structures and manifest party discipline?* Based on my analysis of IfF, the answer seems to be that members of such collectives are governed by a type of (neo)normative control that works through difference rather than uniformity. The IfF councilors are constantly encouraged to 'be themselves' and to think independently instead of conforming to any kind of well-articulated ideology. This conclusion, however, raised another question: if difference is the main organizing principle, how does the group then manage to act in unison? How do they agree on particular policies,

and why do few issues seem to cause serious debate within the group? Here, the answer seems to be that virtues like humor, positivity, and optimism help curb resistance toward dominant views within the group. At least, it is extremely difficult for less experienced councilors to oppose proposals sponsored by strong characters within the group because, in doing so, they risk being seen as overly negative, pessimistic, or even 'political'. The consequences of this type of control is that some (particularly female) councilors feel silenced or even excluded from the collective, leading them to focus on a few key issues and disengage from the rest.

In the discussion, I argued that alternative organizations like IfF need to develop practices and procedures that help prevent a so-called 'tyranny of structurelessness' if they want to preserve their alternative potential; that is, the ability for individual members to exercise personal *autonomy* through the *solidarity* of the collective (Reedy et al. 2016). I also proposed that organization scholars interested in alternative organizations should aid this development through critical performativity projects. My more general contribution to the critical performativity debate is thus to suggest that we begin to study alternative organizations operating *within* the realm of electoral politics instead of exclusively focusing our energy on extra-parliamentarian groups. Just like critical scholars have begun to explore the (previously unheard of) possibility of locating 'allies' in corporate settings (e.g. Wickert and Schaefer 2015), we should also consider the prospect of forging alliances with alternative parties. In both cases, it is a matter of trying to change things from within the 'belly of the beast' (Parker and Parker 2017, 1383), instead of sticking firmly to an antagonistic view from the outside.

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