

Existing through differentiation: a Derridean approach to alternative organizations¹

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Abstract. This paper offers a Derridean framework for reflecting on what “being alternative” means, and, more precisely, how it operates. Asking the question, *What are the processes through which an organization is constituted as an alternative?*, we examine the communicative practices of differentiation in a particular organizational setting. We use empirical material taken from the case study of UPop, an alternative university in Montreal, Canada. Our study shows that “the alternative” is constituted through movements of differentiation, which oscillate between being against and not being like.

Keywords: alternative organizations, Derrida, *différance*, movements of differentiation

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INTRODUCTION

The latest economic crisis in global capitalism provoked an increased interest in anti-capitalism in business management. Scholars have increased their consideration of forms of “organizing capitalism differently” by studying their business and organizational models, processes of creation and development, and objectives and impacts (Barin Cruz, Aquino Alves, & Delbridge, 2017: 323). For instance, *Organizations* and *M@n@gement* published special issues on “post-capitalism” (Zanoni, Contu, Healy, & Mir, 2017) and on “organizing alternatives to capitalism” (Barin Cruz et al., 2017), respectively. Thinking about and studying alternatives is now a line of research that is well recognized and present in organization studies and management.

Studies in this area have been prolific in outlining and analyzing different forms of alternative organizations (cooperatives, worker-owned organizations, *autogestion*, etc.), setting out their key features (Parker, Cheney, Fournier, & Land, 2014b) and discussing their ambiguous relationship with, against and beyond capitalism. Extending this line of research, in this paper we reflect on what “being alternative” means, and, more precisely, how it operates. We ask: *What are the processes through which an organization becomes constituted as an alternative?* To answer this question, we examine the communicative practices through which the alternative is constituted in a particular organizational setting. In other words, we study how people, things, discourses, slogans, images, etc. *do* the alternative, or, to paraphrase Cheney (2014: par. 10), *make* an organization *look like* an alternative. In this paper, we use empirical material taken from our case study of UPop, an alternative university in Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

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From a theory standpoint, we base our inquiry on Derrida's (1982) notion of *différance* (with an "a"), a neologism that articulates two seemingly different meanings found in the verb "to differ": the action of postponing (in time and space) and the action of not being identical. Applying this framework to UPop shows that being alternative is grounded in a movement of differentiation which oscillates between two processes: similar/dissimilar and oppositional/consensual. As we will show, UPop's members constantly try to define their organization by "what they are not" and by "what they are." They also struggle to find a middle ground between being overtly ideologically committed (*against* capitalism) and being more neutral and sticking to their mission: educating people to think critically (*beyond* and *despite* capitalism).

This article contributes to the exploration and understanding of what it means to be "alternative" by going beyond managerial logics or discourses. It explores the ongoing making of the alternative in line with the Derridean approach, through the close study of language (considered here as linguistic events populated by a parliament of things—see Latour, 2006). In so doing, the article puts forward an analytical strategy for studying how the alternative is constituted through communication. More specifically, the Derridean approach adopted in this study allows us to focus on the absence/presence dynamic through which values, spaces and documents are voiced by and give voice to the alternative organization. Finally, this article shows the usefulness of Derrida's notion of *différance* to understand the constitution of the alternative as movements of differentiation, which implies the ongoing production of detours, suspensions, gaps, and intervals between what represents the alternative organization and its haunting absences.

ALTERNATIVE ORGANIZATIONS: IN, AGAINST, DESPITE AND BEYOND CAPITAL

We begin with a "minimal" definition of alternative organizations that is shared by scholars: alternative organizations are moved by anti-establishment values and their goals are directed at changing the world (Chatterton, 2010; Parker, Cheney, Fournier & Land, 2014a; Reedy, King & Coupland, 2016). In other words, alternative organizations are politically active organizations that aim to challenge capitalism itself or, more specifically, to fight against oppressive work management (Dorion, 2017) or dominant ideologies (e.g., patriarchy). In management scholarship, we find many case studies of "types of alternatives" as cooperatives (Cheney, Santa Cruz, Peredo, & Nazareno, 2014; Paraque & Willmott, 2014), anarchist organizations (Land & King, 2014) or social movements (Fournier, 2002; Polletta, 2002; Sutherland, Land & Böhm, 2014). Alternative organizations range from value-rational and collectivist organizations (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979), democratic organizations (Polletta, 2002), and post-capitalistic organizations (Paraque & Willmott, 2014) to organizations related to social entrepreneurship (Vidaillet & Pezè, 2017; Zaroni, Contu, Mir & Healy, 2016), such as those involved in "inclusive innovation," "inclusive business," and "social business" (Dorion, 2017: 145). Most of these studies are based upon the idea of utopianism (Fournier, 2002; Parker, 1998; Parker, Fournier & Reedy, 2007) or hybridity (e.g., Brandsen & Karré, 2011; Dessein, Garicano, & Gertner, 2008; Pache, 2013; Silbey et al., 2013), revealing a particular view of alternative organizations as anchored in "better principles," challenging alienating and heterodox thinking, inspiring hope and prefiguring better futures

(Dinerstein, 2015; Maeckelbergh, 2011; Parker et al., 2007: xi; Parker & Parker, 2017).

Three principles characterize these types of organizations (Parker et al., 2014b): autonomy, solidarity and responsibility. First, autonomy implies respect for oneself and freedom in one's actions. For some scholars (e.g., Chatterton, 2010; Kokkinidis, 2014), autonomy is the organizing principle *par excellence* of alternative organizations. It echoes values of self-organization and mutual aid (Chatterton, 2005). The second principle, solidarity, is related to the values of "co-operation, communities and equality" (Parker et al., 2014b: 360) that are central to breaking hierarchical forms of organizing. Responsibility—the third principle—implies a commitment to the future: "to the conditions for our individual and collective flourishing" (Parker et al., 2014b: 632), which means that our actions must be more conscious and respectful of the environment and of humanity in general (e.g., consuming organic or local food). Put together, these principles reinforce the political nature and engagement of alternative organizations. Alternative organizations are the result of choices made (partly) against a hegemonic and dominant mode of thinking (i.e., "capitalism" or "neoliberalism") that aim to "encourage us to see that there is always another way of getting things done" (Parker et al., 2014b: 633). Parker and colleagues show that the relationship between the dominant mode of thinking and alternative organizations is the nodal point for studying alternative organizing. Indeed, the latter are ideologically "against" a "system," which makes them at first glance "anti-capitalist."

Interestingly, alternative organizations have not always been defined as "anti-capitalist." For instance, these organizations historically challenged bureaucracy and authority, but not capitalism itself (Satow, 1975). In the same vein, focusing on the democratic aspects of cooperatives shows that the founding values of this type of organization were generally located in social movements aligned with anarchist or communist ideas which departed from capitalism (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979). Moreover, alternative communities populate a "counterculture" in challenging conventional assumptions about modern work (Miller, 1985). Indeed, alternative communities are characterized by "work-based ritual structures" which symbolize how they will achieve their professed mission (Miller, 1985).

Following Gibson-Graham's (1996, 2006) work, alternative organizations started to be framed as anti-capitalist, even though she warned scholars of the dangers of reducing the definition of "alternatives" to being mainly "against" capitalism (Gibson-Graham, 1996). This reduction, she argued, would reinforce the dominant paradigm of capitalism instead of valorizing the plurality of possible economies (for a similar argument see Boggs, 1977; Maeckelbergh, 2011; Yates, 2015). Following this idea, Chatterton (2010) suggests that alternatives cannot be defined merely as being in opposition to something: people live with confrontations and identities that oscillate between being capitalist and being anti-capitalist. Hence anti-capitalist practices:

[should be understood] as not actually just "anti-," but also "post-" and "despite-" capitalism. It is simultaneously *against after and within*. Participants problematize alternatives as things which have to be fought for and worked at in the here and now. (Chatterton 2010: 1207, emphasis added)

As we can see, the relationship between alternative organizations and capitalism is ambiguous (Parker et al. 2014b): even if alternative organizations strongly reject capitalism, they cannot exist without it. Moreover, “variety and difference, not capitalist identity, are the norm” (Parker et al., 2014b: 19). Alternative organizing scholars thus share and recognize that alternatives are not simply about being against but are also “in and beyond capitalism.”

A similar argument can be found in the debate around the (im)possibility of autonomy in social movements (Böhm, Dinerstein, & Spicer, 2010). Autonomy—“self-established rules, self-determination, self-organization and self-regulating practices” implemented “vis-à-vis the state and capitalist social, economic and cultural relations” (Böhm et al., 2010: 19)—is (im)possible, as “capital, the state and discourses of development continuously seek to ‘recuperate’ autonomy and make it work for their own purposes” (2010: 27). In sum, autonomy is possible because it is never quite complete (it is a form of hope), but it is also impossible because autonomous social movements are embedded in social, economic, cultural and political relations that shape what they are. Inspired by this language game, we state that there is also a sort of (im)possibility of being “alternative” as alternative organizations are embedded in an ever-changing and adapting reality (e.g., Chia & Tsoukas, 2003) deeply marked by capitalism. Moreover, being “alternative” is far from being a given state of fact (see Parker & Parker, 2017) as capitalism itself is not stable. Being alternative is rather *a process that has to be continuously negotiated and redefined*.

Building on this processual view of alternative organizations and on the consensus that alternative organizations should not be reduced to anti-capitalism, we question *how* this ambiguous relationship with/in/against/despite/beyond dominant paradigms operates by exploring how an organization is constituted as an alternative. This theoretical and practical move is anchored in three important assumptions with respect to the current literature on alternative organizing. First, we do not *a priori* define capitalism as the dominant paradigm to which alternative organizations are opposed. Rather, we leave open the question of “being alternative to what”. Second, we do not “hun[t] for alternatives” (Parker & Parker, 2017: 16–17) as if they simply existed out there for us to discover. Nor do we begin by “straight away considering difference as a central criterion for interest” (Parker & Parker, 2017: 16–17). We instead focus on the movement, the oscillation between being in, against, despite and beyond, through which the “alternativeness” of an organization is constituted. Third, and more importantly, we question the “constitution” of the alternative by focusing on the ways alternative organizations discursively position themselves in, against, despite and beyond a dominant “other.” This focus allows us to unveil the flowing nature of alternative organization, in particular, the communicative practices that bring about the “alternativeness.” As we develop next, Derrida’s concept of *différance* offers a robust and relevant theoretical framework to achieve our agenda.

DRAWING ON DERRIDA’S DIFFÉRANCE

Since Cooper’s (1989) seminal article on the contribution of Derrida to the study of organizations, Derridean ideas and concepts have been employed in different manners in topics as diverse as accounting (Baker, 2011; Burrowes, Kastantin, & Novicevic, 2004; Ezzamel & Hoskin, 2002;

McKernan, 2011), strategy (Clegg, Kornberger, & Rhodes, 2007; Ortmann & Seidl, 2010; Rasche, 2011), improvisation (Griffin, Humphreys, & Learmonth, 2014), race, culture and diversity (Riad & Jones, 2013), to name a few. Along with French poststructuralist thinkers (such as Foucault and Lyotard), Derrida's work has greatly influenced the emergence of postmodernism in organization studies, and more broadly in the humanities and social sciences (Chia, 1995; Hassard, 1994; Jones, Sharifi, & Conway, 2006), mostly by questioning the notion of organization and challenging the modernist and cognitive stances (Chia, 1995).

Within critical approaches, Derrida's ideas have been particularly associated with the linguistic turn (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000; McKernan, 2011), and thus on the intricacies between language and the world (King & Land, 2018). Most of the literature in critical organization studies has mobilized Derrida's practice of deconstruction (Caputo, 1997; Jones, 2003; Rasche, 2011) to question conceptual hierarchies, such as organization/disorganization, order/chaos and culture/nature, that were formerly taken for granted.

While Cooper's (1989) initial call to pay attention to Derrida's work seems to have been well received in the critical organization studies community, we did not find any reference to his work in the alternative organization scholarship. However, as mentioned, we believe that Derrida's approach, and more specifically his concept of *différance*, offers a strong heuristic for unpacking the ambiguous relationship between alternative organizing and capitalism.

DIFFÉRANCE

Building on Saussure's conception of language as a system of differences, Derrida (1982) coined the neologism *différance* with an "a." It embodies the two meanings of the French verb *différer*: (1) to defer, or postpone, in time; and (2) to differ in space. By combining these two meanings, Derrida subverts the illusion of presence, viewing *différance* as a continuous absence and "as a force that is continually beyond our grasp and therefore never properly present" (Cooper, 1989: 487).

To explain this presence/absence dynamic, Derrida relies on the traditional conception of the sign as that which we put in place of the absent other we wish to be present in the text (see also Cooper, 1989). In this sense, the sign represents the present in its absence (Cooper, 1986). Without going into too much detail, for Derrida (1982: 61) language is organized around the opposition between a present sign and its correlated absent. In written language, for instance, the meaning associated with a given term always implies other absent meanings—those that "haunt" the text (Cooren, 2009). As Derrida (1982) noted:

Différance is what makes the movement of signification possible only if each element that is said to be "present," appearing on the stage of presence, is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element. (Derrida, 1982: 288)

The sign is thus a differed presence, and this differed presence is the actual state of the world. So, to understand the presence of something

implies understanding what is always already absent, i.e., submerged or deferred. As he argues elsewhere:

[...] no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. This interweaving results in each “element”—phoneme or grapheme—being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system. This interweaving, this textile, is the text produced only in the transformation of another text. Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces.” (Derrida, 1981: 26)

Following this idea, meaning is dispersed along a chain of signs: “it cannot be easily nailed down, it is never fully present in any one sign alone, but is rather a kind of constant flickering of presence and absence together” (Eagleton, 1996: 111). Meaning is always caught in a play of difference and deferral (Derrida, 1982).

Derrida further emphasizes this play of difference by highlighting the silent “a” in *différance*, a linguistic invention he uses to distinguish his neologism from the common spelling [*différence*, with an “e”]. In French, the “a” only becomes apparent in the written version but, still, the two versions of the words differ from each other (Cooper, 1989). The letter “a” captures the deferral explained above. Because the “a” in French comes from the present participle [*différant*] “it brings us closer to the action of ‘differing’ that is in progress, even before it has produced the effect that is constituted as different or resulted in difference [with an e]” (Derrida, 1982: 284). Following this idea, *différance* [with an “a”] can be said to designate the process or the movement that constitutes difference [with an “e”]. Moreover, as Derrida also noted, the “a” in *différance* neutralizes the active connotation that is usually associated with the verb “to differ.” In French, the ending *-ance* implies both the active and the passive. Hence,

What is designated by “différance” is neither simply active nor simply passive, [it] cannot be thought of either as a passion or as an action of a subject upon an object, as starting from an agent or from a patient, or on the basis of, or in view of, any of these terms. (Derrida, 1982: 284)

This quote highlights Derrida’s insistence on the processual character of *différance*, conceived as a continuous process of differentiation among signs that are held in space [to differ] and in time [to defer]. He calls these processes “spacing” and “temporizing,” respectively. In the process of spacing, *différance* is operated through the creation of intervals and gaps among signs. By this, the “present” sign is positioned as being unlike, being another or being discernible to its absent other. The spatial dimension contains the idea of dissimilarity that we find in the adjective “different” [in French, *différent*] and the idea of opposition inscribed in the word “dissensus” [in French, *différend*]. With respect to temporizing, the operation of *différance* is held through the detour and suspension of the signifier/signified relation. It is the traditional structure of the sign, as explained previously. Temporizing thus implies that the meaning of a sign is continuously postponed. Derrida argues that for something to differ/defer, it is necessary that “a detour, a respite, a delay, a reserve, a representation” and an “interval, distance, spacing occurs among the different elements” (Derrida, 1982: 283). The spacing and

temporizing effects of *différance* move meaning to a future state that can never be fully grasped: meaning remains “to come” (Rasche, 2011).

While Derrida’s reflection on *différance* takes the structure of language as a starting point, his work aims for a broader scope. As Caputo (1997: 104) claims: “Différance is not restricted to language but leaves its ‘mark’ on everything.” This can be explained because for Derrida, the “text” is not limited to its written dimension (Rasche, 2011) and because the world and language do not collapse into each other. For Derrida (1976), language is *essentially* imbricated in the world and is produced out of a set of very specific, even historical, determinations. As such, understanding the logic of language can help us understand the logic of the world. In this sense, we can take *différance* as a theme to “think up or master” the logic that characterizes any system of signification (Derrida, 1982: 283), such as alternative organizations.

Hence, we argue that alternative organizations follow a similar logic to the one that characterizes language: any present element will always be related to absent elements from which the present element *differs both temporarily and spatially*. The notion of *différance* allows us to consider the dynamic of the alternative at work in alternative organizations as a process of differentiation: “a movement by which language, or any code, any system of reference in general, becomes ‘historically’ constituted as a fabric of differences” (Derrida, 1982: 287). This process of differentiation is to be understood as a spatial and a temporal movement, which implies the ongoing production of detours, suspensions, gaps and intervals between a present sign and its haunting absences.

Having set out the theoretical approach of our study, we now move on to the analytical application of Derrida’s framework. We explore the “being alternative” of an alternative university, UPop (which stands for *université populaire* [people’s university] in French). For this, we observe how organizational actors perform the “alternativeness” of their organization through their claims, actions and the activities they plan or the strategies they develop. Importantly, by following a Derridean perspective, our analysis draws attention to those things that are not said or done. This allows us to study the manifestations of the alternative, as well as the absent others, such as capitalism, traditional pedagogy, activism and so on.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

UPop was established in Montreal, Canada in 2010. As a *université populaire* (people’s university) it offers free classes on various subjects, from September to December and from February to April or May in public spaces (bars, bookstores or coffee shops). This non-profit organization emanates from the “Night of Philosophy” held by students at the University of Quebec in Montreal (UQAM) in 2009. For one night, UQAM opened its doors to offer philosophical seminars and art performances. This event was a success and eight of the students who took part in the organization of that night decided to go further and create an alternative university, inspired by the European folk high school movement, and more specifically the French model of a *université populaire*. Historically, these *universités populaires* (also called “free universities”) were born in Denmark in 1844 and spread throughout Europe at the end of the 19th century. They were created as social movements to contest the elitism of “ivory tower”

universities and to offer knowledge to factory workers. They stopped their activities during the two World Wars but reappeared progressively in the 1960s. In French-speaking countries, the most famous university of this type is the *Université populaire de Caen*, created by French philosopher Michel Onfray. The eight students who created UPop drew upon this model. When UPop was created, Quebec was witnessing a huge wave of unprecedented student protests (known as the “Maple Spring”) against the rise in tuition fees proposed by the provincial government. The strikes took place in 2012, but a charged political climate had been building around the Liberal government since 2010. More generally, since the 1990s the metamorphosis of the university into a “corporation” had become a concern. In the academic domain, North American scholars assume that universities are now places of consumption, which function like private companies (among others see Kamuf, 2007; Sosteric, 2010; Vásquez, Del Fa, Sergi, & Cordelier, 2017). In this context, UPop presents itself as an alternative movement, providing a place for encounters, reflection and knowledge sharing. It aims to be dynamic and uniting. The overall objective is to understand the world in order to change it.

UPop’s organizational structure is very simple. An organizing committee oversees the semester. At the time of our study, the group comprised eight members (three women and five men): Ana, Éloïse, Emma, Édouard, Bernard, Nestor, Alan and Pierre. The founders left UPop in 2010 and Édouard is the “oldest” member—he has been involved almost since the beginning. Emma and Éloïse have been involved since 2014; Bernard has been a UPop member for five years; Nestor and Ana joined in 2016; and Alan and Pierre became involved in May 2017. They are all volunteers—as are UPop’s teachers. For Édouard, UPop is currently in good shape: the team is stable, and the members complement one another and work effectively. They are all motivated by leftist political ideas—some are anarchists and radicals. They work in art (cinema and theaters), science popularization, journalism, translation or academia. They all share an anger about society, the politicians in power and neoliberalism.

UPop’s organizing principles are based on a horizontal hierarchy: all decisions are made jointly. No one is assigned a specific task and everything is done organically. The division of responsibilities is informal, and tasks are distributed according to the seniority of the members. But, as Lionel—a former UPop member—told the first author at the first meeting she observed (February 22, 2015), “each of us does a bit of everything. Who does what? We don’t have that kind of answer.” However, since Édouard has more seniority than the others, and thus a more extensive knowledge of UPop, he deals with the finances—a task that he has carried out for a long time. The others share tasks depending on their expertise and availability. The committee is in charge of choosing the courses that people propose on the web platforms and of organizing semesters (finding places, creating a course schedule, etc.). They also create collaborations with editors and “sustainable” organizations that echo UPop’s values. Anyone can propose a course, but those who do so mainly come from academia (PhD students or professors). Other proposals come from social movements or activist organizations (for example, militant groups that advocate for a transformation of the electoral system, groups engaged in breast cancer action or against the “gentrification of cities”). UPop has no official form of funding. A hat is passed round at the end of each course and usually collects about \$50 (CAD). Bernard recently had some luck in getting money from an organization for which he provided a course.

Finding funding is the main challenge and contributes to UPop's fragile nature. The committee refuses to accept money from banks to avoid having to put names or logos on their pamphlets and website.

UPop organizes two semesters per academic year: one in the autumn, running from mid-September to December, and one in winter, running from February to April or May. During a semester, up to ten courses can be offered in public places (usually in coffee shops, bars or bookstores, but sometimes in theaters). A "semester" is made up of several courses divided into three to five sessions. A course can be given on a weekly or bi-weekly basis. For example, the 2015 winter semester was divided into seven courses:

1. *L'intime public: sorties danse + théâtre* [Intimate Audience: Dance and Theater], developed in collaboration with Usine C, a cultural institution in Montreal, during which a series of four outings took place;
2. *L'environnement, chose publique* [The Environment: A Public Affair], five sessions held in a bar in downtown Montreal;
3. *Austères à s'en rendre malade* [Getting Sick of Austerity], five sessions held in a bar in a neighborhood in the south of Montreal;
4. *Initiation à la littérature en langue des signes* [Introduction to the literature in Sign Language], ten sessions held at the SKOL cultural center;
5. *Les trois infinis: le petit, le grand et le complexe* [The Three Infinities: The Small, the Big and the Complex], five sessions held in a bar;
6. *Des livres qui ne nous laissent pas intact-es II* [Books That Do Not Leave Us Intact II], four sessions held in a downtown bookshop; and
7. *Contre l'austérité, la décroissance !* [Against Austerity, For Degrowth], four sessions held in a bar.

The format of the courses is quite traditional and is similar to a seminar. Compared to other initiatives (for instance, some of the free universities in Mexico or Argentina that follow Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed²), more attention is paid to the critical rather than the pedagogical dimension.

The case of UPop is particularly interesting for the study of alternative organizations. First, as a free university, it follows the alternative historical movement in education that was reborn in the 1960s, and, more recently, Quebec's student-led social movement. Second, UPop's founders and volunteers define it as an alternative university. Third, UPop clearly positions itself as anti-capitalist, which corresponds to a restrictive definition of an alternative organization. Of course, as shown in the literature review, this blunt political stance hides ambiguities and even contradictions that clearly position UPop at the same time in, against, despite and beyond capitalism. Lastly, it embodies particular "alternative" values: horizontal structuring, community-based, refuses money from banks or private sponsors and is tuition-free. Studying UPop from the inside gave us the opportunity to examine and understand what makes it an alternative to traditional forms of education.

2. See *The Universidad Trashumante* in Argentina or *Unitierra* in Oaxaca Mexico

ANALYTICAL STRATEGY

The analytical strategy followed for this paper was inspired by interactional analysis (Bencherki, 2014). Beginning with the selected empirical material, we identified seven “communicational events” (Vázquez, 2016) that illustrate different ways of constituting UPop as an alternative university. These communicational events were transcribed according to the convention system developed by Gail Jefferson (2004). After listening to the audio recordings, while reading the transcripts we identified interactional patterns that emerged from these events, which guided the selection of specific excerpts. These excerpts were then analyzed during several data sessions organized with researchers and PhD students who specialized in the analysis of interaction. Combining the analytical methods proposed by conversation analysts (Pomerantz & Fehr, 2011) and ethnomethodologists (Garfinkel, 1967) with Derrida’s *différance*, we searched the empirical material for instances of where differences were explicitly voiced (how does UPop position itself vis-à-vis the others?). Then, focusing more specifically on seven moments that were particularly rich in detail, we analyzed how the alternative was made present and how, in that process, other things or entities were made absent. We thus focused on the marks of differentiation, i.e. the detours and suspensions (temporization), as well as the gaps and intervals (spatialization) between the alternative and that which it is against.

EXPLORATION OF THE MOVEMENTS OF DIFFERENTIATION

As a reminder, the idea that alternative organizations are simultaneously in, against, despite and beyond capitalism reveals the intricacies of *being alternative*. From there, we question how this ambiguous relationship with/in/against dominant paradigms operates by exploring how UPop is constituted as an alternative.

This section is structured as follows. First, we begin by describing the communicative practices through which a strong anti-capitalist stance is voiced and cultivated in UPop’s public discourses (launching ceremonies and media): What signs of anti-capitalism are present? What are the absent others? How are they portrayed? Second, we focus on the limits of this anti-capitalism statement by analyzing the empirical material taken from a committee meeting where questions of responsibility around civic activism are discussed. We organize the analysis around seven excerpts presented as “vignettes.” The analysis of the vignettes shows the dynamic of the “alternativeness” by focusing on what is made present through words and on what is silenced. This analytical strategy highlights the intricacies of language that “make” UPop an “alternative.”

SHOUTING FIERCELY AND PROUDLY, "WE ARE DIFFERENT, WE ARE ANTI-CAPITALIST!"

1 I enter "Bar Pop" on Boulevard Saint-Laurent: I'm now inside UPop Montréal. I'm hit by the bar's noisy
2 atmosphere; people are talking with a beer in their hand. I'm inside UPop Montréal. A woman at the door
3 welcomes me with a smile, offers me a program, a pretty apple-green flyer. Written on it: "5 years of
4 going to bed smarter than when you woke up." In the middle is an image of two books, one on top of the
5 other, cut to look like pieces of cake with a pencil for a candle: metaphor, metaphor. The woman suggests
6 that I sign up for their mailing list so I can get updates. I sign up, then take a seat. The atmosphere is
7 friendly, people greet each other with kisses on the cheek; they know each other. I hear "UPop," "UPop,"
8 "UPop" a lot, the word stands out, people laugh. Am I really in a university? Two flyers, one of the
9 general schedule and the other about the class "Getting Sick of Austerity." I have a quick look at the
10 flyers, I read: "*Over the course of these 5 sessions, our presenters will cover the principal links connecting
11 the economy, neoliberalism, and the health system. The impact of neoliberal thought on health systems in
12 Quebec and elsewhere will be explored from different angles, as well as the way in which austerity
13 measures affect public health.*" My reading is interrupted by a young man getting the evening underway. I
14 write down what he says in my notebook: UPop is "*getting knowledge out of the places we're used to... In
15 5 years, there have been more than 55 classes in 281 sessions, 125 speakers in 20 gathering places, and
16 we've had more than 9,000 participants, nothing says they're 9,000 different participants, but it's all
17 good.*" The assembly laughs, applauds, expresses its joy. "*Our values are knowledge sharing, critical
18 thinking, and getting together.*" This much I already know from their website. So far, so good. Next, three
19 authors who have come to present their books published by Lux Éditeur, one of UPop's partners, begin to
20 speak, and then other speakers take over. From this moment on, I hear and write in bulk: "*We must
21 contribute, we must help change mentalities,*" "*UPop is also a criticism of society in order to think about
22 different socioeconomic models,*" "*Personally I'm for an alternative democratic system without money,*"
23 "*Yeah, I'm on the radical left, an anarchist even!*" "*We have to take the bull by the horns,*" we have to
24 "*demystify,*" "*these neoliberal dogmas that force us to swallow such a bitter pill,*" and the diatribe
25 continues. I'm writing even faster: "*triumphant neoliberal,*" "*austerity'll make us sick,*" "*disrupt the
26 discourse,*" "*impact on our lives,*" "*infinitely stupid.*" The audience applauds when the speakers talk about
27 critical thinking and action. They mention Siriza and quote Illitch: "*School is the advertising agency
28 which makes you believe that you need the society as it is.*" I'm surprised! This militant political discourse
29 against neoliberalism and Big Money is everywhere.

Excerpt 1: The Winter Semester Launch in January 2015

This excerpt highlights the different communicative practices through which UPop states openly and proudly that it is an alternative to capitalism. The description in lines 1 to 8 shows that the physical context of the launch and the friendly atmosphere are set in an alternative space that is different to universities and other more traditional academic venues. Indeed, by holding the launch of its winter semester and anniversary celebration in a bar, UPop positions itself as being unlike the ideal type of university, that is, one with a campus. Moreover, by moving knowledge to other places (such as a bar), UPop's values take on a different meaning: universities do not belong to an exclusive "happy few" who pay for tuition but are open and accessible places. The alternative is made visible when the sharing of knowledge, developing critical thought and getting together take place in twenty locations that are not the usual places in which "academic knowledge" happens (e.g., UPop is a way of "getting knowledge out of the places we're used to," line 14).

The feeling of a sense of community—people showing signs of familiarity, conviviality and proximity to each other—demonstrates the desire to offer an informal and inclusive space. The location and the atmosphere are the first marks of differentiation. It is clear that you are entering a "distinctive" space where knowledge is shared in a different way. By so doing, UPop creates a gap (a spatialization in Derridean terms) by

setting a physical boundary between itself and, in this case, traditional universities. Yet, this act of differentiation (moving UPop to other settings), which can be defined as an act of exclusion, also brings about what UPop wants to question and challenge. As the note in line 8 nicely illustrates (“Am I really in a University?”), traditional universities haunt the place.

A second manifestation of the alternative highlighted in this excerpt refers to ideological statements. For instance, in lines 14 to 29 the speakers (the teachers who are presenting their courses, UPop’s members and the guest authors) define UPop as being anti-capitalist. Several quotes relating to capitalism, neoliberalism, austerity and conservative (right-wing) parties, demonstrate a strong opposition to the established and hegemonic order. Here, differentiation is accomplished by adopting a strong political position, “Yeah, I’m on the radical left, an anarchist even!” (line 23). Most of the quotes are affirmative, even dogmatic (e.g., “We must contribute, we must help change mentalities,” lines 20–21; “We have to take the bull by the horns,” line 23). Some expressly refer to being alternative or different: “UPop is also a criticism of society in order to think about *different* socioeconomic models;” “I’m for an *alternative* democratic system without money,” lines 22–23). These bold statements place UPop on the radical left of the political spectrum. In that sense, alternativeness is voiced through strong opposition. In doing so, capitalism, as the absent “maleficent” other, is also strongly made present. Differentiation is at work here mainly through spatializations in the form “dissensus” (being against). A pronounced gap between UPop and capitalism is created through its political discourse. In this excerpt and throughout the entire event, the speakers produce a discursive battlefield between good and evil, making them both present so that the battle can take place. With regard to temporizing, it is important to note that most of UPop’s rhetoric uses the present tense (“Our values are,” “we must contribute,” “UPop is also,” “we must take the bull by the horns”). It seems that in order to position itself on the battlefield, UPop needs to state—in the present moment—what it is and how it must act.

This oppositional positioning can also be observed in the opening speech of the winter 2017 semester held in a famous performance hall in Montreal, *La Sala Rossa*. The venue is full (approximately 150 people) and the audience is completely committed to the event: they shout, applaud and whistle.

1 Édouard: So, I'm going to tell you very briefly about UPop. Of course, UPop gives classes on all sorts of
2 subjects in all sorts of places in Montreal. So, we're sometimes in bars, sometimes in coffee shops,
3 theaters, libraries. We have three main goals. The first one is, of course, to "transmit knowledge," and I
4 have a short story to tell you about this. Lately I was interviewed by Radio-Canada about UPop. We
5 talked about UPop at length and one of the journalists says, "yes, UPop is a beautiful concept, but for that,
6 there is public education." So, after hearing that, I thought that it was important to say tonight that, of
7 course, public education exists, it's fantastic, it's free. But having said that, our educational system, we all
8 know that, is becoming more and more about professionalization; people are going there to get degrees, to
9 get a job, and so on and so forth. So, it's a bit important I assume to have a place like UPop, which is,
10 what we can call a free university. What does free mean here? That means: no degrees, no exams, no
11 registration, no fees; because everything is free; and that is a crucial dimension for the transmission of
12 knowledge. So, yeah, I thought it was important to mention that. Moreover, it's also important to bring
13 this transmission of knowledge outside traditional places of knowledge. Because what happens? We have
14 the tendency to think that to learn, we have to go into those places and commit to their ways of thinking.
15 No! We can do that in coffee shops, drinking a beer, and joyfully yelling at each other [people in the
16 audience say "WOOHOO"]. The second objective that I would like to mention is being together. We're all
17 very busy, we have plenty to do, and we're all doing our own thing. Sometimes we're very upset against
18 all sorts of things and fail to exchange with others. We fail to remind ourselves, "Ah yes, I could
19 exchange, I could also learn from others." So, this is a very important part of UPop. We're often asked if
20 we're gonna record podcasts or videos of courses and put them online. But, besides the logistics, and due
21 to the fact that we have no funding for that, being together is an essential part of UPop. We want to
22 maintain that and we're proud of it! The third objective, maybe the most important one, is to keep UPop's
23 values alive: critical thinking. The sad event that just happened in Quebec City [a shooting happened in a
24 mosque in Quebec City] brought critical thinking to the forefront. If we look at the media's handling of
25 this kind of event, one media outlet in particular that says it's critical and rigorous... this same outlet has
26 just said that it was "reverse terrorism" [chuckles in the audience]. So, that's very troubling and I think
27 that we're facing big media that can say these kinds of things. So, it's very important to develop our
28 critical thinking to defend ourselves against such phrases... So being in UPop, even if sometimes there are
29 subjects that we already know and issues about which we already have a lot of indignation and frustration;
30 to be in contact with those things allows us to question them again and not focus on our own thinking. It's
31 important to confront these issues. So that's UPop for those of you who didn't know about it, and even for
32 those who knew, it's always good to be reminded. It feels good to be together here tonight and to do that
33 year after year!
34 ...
35 The most difficult thing for us is to get people to know about us and talk about us. Advertising costs a
36 fortune. We do some from time to time when we're fortunate enough to get some small grants. So, please
37 take some pamphlets, put them anywhere you can, it'd be very helpful. With that we'll become something
38 and we're going to be wealthy enough to buy boats [laugh] NO [shouting]! It will allow us to destroy
39 capitalism! ["YEEEEEAH!" in the audience.]

Excerpt 2: Winter Semester Launch January 2017 - Opening Speech

As in the first excerpt, Édouard, one of UPop's members, reminds those present of UPop's core objectives: to transmit knowledge (line 3), gather people together (line 16), and develop critical thinking (lines 22–23). While developing these ideas, Édouard refers to a conversation he had with a journalist from *Radio-Canada* (Canada's national French-language public broadcaster) (line 4) and he positions UPop vis-à-vis public universities. He also names UPop's "enemies:" the media and universities, two entities which UPop is against. First, the media represents mainstream thought (lines 5–6 and line 25) and is on the "other side." Second, Édouard speaks about universities as "those places" that have "ways of thinking" from which people have to be extricated (line 14). He also refers to the corporatization of the universities, which UPop resists by being free, open and accessible (lines 10–11). In positioning UPop against and in resistance to these two "mainstream" and "outsider" institutions, Édouard clearly expresses UPop's differentiation.

In this second excerpt, the gap between UPop and traditional universities is reinforced through two main arguments: 1) UPop is free—it is not about professionalization; there are no degrees, no exams, no registration and no fees; and 2) UPop creates a convivial space (also present in excerpt 1). Note that in this excerpt, traditional universities are explicitly brought to the fore in the opening speech, while in the previous excerpt their haunting presence was implied by the physical setting. It thus seems that in order to specify its difference, particularly in relation to the question of “free education,” UPop had to expressly voice to expressly voice that which it is against. This excerpt also points to a new enemy: the media. UPop is not on the side of the media as it proposes critical and reflexive thinking. This excerpt shows how UPop creates a “battlefield” by describing its enemies, its allies, its own spaces that it occupies and the values it claims. In other words, from this excerpt we start to discover how the alternativeness discursively emerges from various elements that are voiced and made present (political stances, for instance) and others that are silenced or excluded (the media, the university, etc.).

This process of differentiation is even more apparent in the following two excerpts, which offer examples of the allies that UPop mobilizes to fight capitalism. They quote two different interviews, one published in 2016 by *Vice*, an alternative media outlet, and the other shown in a short film on social initiatives in Montreal in 2017 produced by students at a Montreal business school.

1 Édouard: If you closely study organizations that wish to help, educate, or change society or advance
 2 the arts... they are slot machines.
 3 Journalist: What is the solution in your opinion? Is there one?
 4 Édouard: Yes. The revolution!
 5 ...
 6 Édouard: UPop’s fundamental point is critical thinking. No content is of interest to us if there’s no
 7 critical vision. By that, I mean having a critical vision of the economy, feminism, or science... whatever
 8 the chosen subject is. We’re not pretending. Unlike universities, we encourage teachers to defend their
 9 own point of view; they can say, “I have this opinion,” “I’m a Marxist,” “I’m an anarchist,” “I’m queer.”
 10 I’m not saying that teachers should say, “be like this,” or “do like me.” They don’t pretend to hold the
 11 absolute truth. They’re just trying to put their discourse in perspective; the kind of discourse that we never
 12 hear because of the dominant discourse that we hear all the time... we could change society through
 13 revolution or education.

Excerpt 3: Interview in Vice - 2016

1 For me, UPop is the incarnation of democracy. We formulate hypotheses on issues that matter. Once you
 2 have an idea... a good idea; once you have it very clearly, it sticks with you in the future. People need to
 3 develop their critical thinking; people need to have knowledge about society. We have to pile up money in
 4 order to print pamphlets; with them we’ll build a giant laser that will destroy capitalism! That’s our goal
 5 for the future if you want to know the truth! [smiling] The system is unfair and unequal. If people start to
 6 think for themselves and if we show them that the emperor has no clothes... because we know that the
 7 emperor has no clothes, but not enough people are aware of it. We try to offer people binoculars to
 8 acknowledge and see that he’s naked.

Excerpt 4: Interview Short Film - 2017

Note how both interviews connect the definition of UPop to a political statement: revolution (lines 4 and 13 in Vice's interview) and democracy (line 1 in the short film interview), which they articulate with critical thinking. Interestingly, the tone with which both interviewees address these questions is quite open (excerpt 3, line 4) and humorous (excerpt 4, line 4). To some extent, we could say that they know they have a captive audience: they are talking to their allies, those who share their point of view and, hopefully, will get on board with their mission.

SYNTHESIS

Excerpts 1 to 4 show how differentiation is used to prepare the battlefield: which territories to occupy, which enemies to fight, allies to be mobilized, and values to sustain. The "good" (free knowledge, being together, critical thinking, destroying capitalism, anarchism, left-wing ideas, democracy) and the "bad" (professionalization of the university, tuition, diplomas, exams, capitalism and neoliberalism, austerity, media monopoly) are made present/absent in these discourses mainly through creating dissensus (spatialization) and affirmative/present identity statements (temporizing). As we have shown, through the physical setting, political statements and media coverage, UPop creates a distance from its enemies (traditional universities, media and capitalism) by stating and specifying that, "right here right now," it is different to capitalism (and its manifestation in education). Our Derridean perspective allows us to show that by classifying itself as an alternative to capitalism, UPop has to discursively and physically position itself as being unlike, being another or being discernible to these absent enemies. UPop's manifest-type rhetoric (characterized by the use of present tense statements) makes these enemies vividly present, as they are expressly referred to.

This process of differentiation echoes the oppositional character of alternative organizations that we find in most of the literature on this subject. Polemic and disruption are at the heart of UPop's discourses. Being a resistance force is UPop's signature: a distinctive feature of being alternative and something that is worth celebrating. Unsurprisingly, anti-capitalism appears in these excerpts to be the locus of UPop's "alternativeness" and makes UPop's existence "as an alternative organization" possible. Without capitalism and its impact on society (and more specifically on education and media), UPop would not have a dominant paradigm to fight against, and thus no allies to recruit and no mission to accomplish. As the excerpts show, UPop has to discursively create "enemies" (bureaucratic corporate universities and the media, which are on the side of capitalism) and "allies" (the places where the semesters are launched and the courses held, as well as alternative media and other means of outreach) to wage this battle. For UPop to exist as an alternative university, it has to constantly recall and re-instantiate the battlefield. We see here how the alternative is constituted as an ongoing movement of differentiation *against/with* capitalism.

TO BE OR NOT TO BE AN ACTIVIST... OR THE LIMITS OF ANTI-CAPITALISM

We next extend the exploration of this difference-making by examining the meetings at which the members question UPop's relationship with activism. Such discussion seems consistent with UPop's strong anti-capitalist position demonstrated in the previous vignettes.

Indeed, we expect politically charged statements to be followed by actions, or at least to prefigure concrete involvement. We have chosen a moment from the end of a meeting when UPop's members addressed the organization's future. The topic being discussed concerns how to encourage UPop's students to be socially and politically involved without compromising UPop's mission. The committee tries to find a consensus because it does not agree on this particular topic. Some of the committee members fear that UPop will be seen as an activist organization and they do not consider it as such. The excerpt begins with Édouard reacting to Lionel's suggestion to increase UPop's engagement in political activism. In Lionel's view, UPop does not have to limit itself to knowledge sharing. He feels it can also expand its reach by offering tools to help students engage in concrete political action.

- 1 Édouard: We need to take a position on that, UPop shouldn't become responsible for the actions
 2 Bernard: ... it could even come from us
 3 Nina: Yeah, that's it, while remaining detached...
 4 Lionel: A class is meant to empower people about how they're going to take part in public opinion, to
 5 empower people to act... That's already a citizen engagement, it's already in our [identity]...
 6 Édouard: Well... to bring people together, but not to encourage action...
 7 Bernard: [That's not in UPop
 8 Édouard: [That's not in UPop
 9 Emma: [No uh, that's the thing...
 10 Lionel: UPop is not about encouraging action...
 11 Eloïse: In UPop the debate and the critical thinking are leading...
 12 Lionel: ((He takes a pamphlet and read)) "To Foster the development of critical thinking and citizen
 13 action". That's what got me started. When I saw that, I was all "oh yeah, we forgot to talk about
 14 that..." and not by saying you have to go with a certain group... just that you can do something...
 15 you can do something and connect with organizations. I think it's super relevant but not to have
 16 them go, "UPop told me to do it". This action has to be part of an idea of critical thinking also...
 17 That could represent a huge backing from the teachers to build that... but it's true that we could
 18 have some quick tools for it...
 19 Édouard: But it depends... we can't force the teachers to do that... but we can suggest to the teachers this
 20 aspect so that they think about it... and so that those who want can put some of that ((people
 21 agree)) in their classes. In the form, we can add the option of having an extra session where, they
 22 get organized to get things done. The teacher isn't forced to do it... He doesn't have to be involved
 23 in that... absolutely not. A guy said once that when we name some problems he always feels
 24 powerless... what do we do... It's typical, we always end up at the same spot but let me tell you,
 25 the answer is super simple: do something! Get together and talk about it, after the "What do we do
 26 we feel powerless" stage, in two seconds everyone has ten thousand ideas, you have to propose it,
 27 imagine that the teacher is there to tell you what to do, that's got nothing to do with it, it's just to
 28 get together and talk about it. I don't know, suggest that UPop becomes like...
 29 Nina: ...A laboratory...
 30 Édouard: Not UPop really, that UPop suggests that it happens...
 31 Nina: UPop has to offer a space where people can discuss among themselves but without leaning toward
 32 a certain type of action...
 33 Édouard: I'd say that UPop isn't forced to organize how to say. It's not UPop that decides that a teacher does
 34 four or five sessions or that he's going to talk about one thing or another, I think that it's not UPop
 35 who has to decide that there's this in a class.
 36 Lionel: We could think about organizing a more informal session where people can get together and talk
 37 about action but that doesn't necessarily involve the teacher, if there's a demand in this class as you
 38 say, the teacher doesn't have to intervene in the question of what do we do? After class, we can
 39 facilitate the logistics of that and not go further and just say... you have the Bar to...
 40 Eloïse: It's hard to distinguish because UPop's responsibility in that case...
 41 Nina: Maybe if we had a structure that was clearer about that, like if we say to the teacher that the last
 42 class of the session is a "citizen action" class, so it's optional, you can give it or not... And that's
 43 where people get to have their say... We shouldn't... I'm afraid of there being a kind of constant
 44 call to militancy throughout the duration of the class.
 45 Édouard: That's why I'd prioritize that it comes from the teachers, we can suggest it to the teachers, that the
 46 teachers who want to, who feel it's relevant... And maybe they didn't think it was possible but I
 47 don't want teachers to think that if they come to teach a class at UPop that they have to do some
 48 citizen action like, um, Nina says, that if people come to a class and feel like we're preparing them
 49 for action it would be really annoying...
 50 Emma: [Yeah, no proselytizing...
 51 Nina: [It has to be limited to a very optional session at the end...
 52 Édouard: [And suggested by the teacher! that the teacher was like "oh yeah, what a good idea" and um, look
 53 at the last class, I'm suggesting this idea for those who want to come...
 54 Nina: Because there are teachers who aren't militant at all they're just researchers.

Excerpt 5: Organizing Committee Meeting - February 2015, Montreal

This moment exemplifies the tensions and contradictions that impact UPop's process of differentiation: should UPop explicitly encourage political activism, or should it stick to the development of critical thinking (which could lead to citizen activism and social change)? The tension that the members of the organizing committee express has to do with responsibility, which is intrinsically related to UPop's mission. They argue that UPop *should not be responsible for the actions of individuals who attend or teach classes*, because these actions are not part of the organization's mission and values (lines 1 and 2). Moreover, the committee members are afraid that political action or activism cannot be controlled, and this would turn UPop into an activist organization. For example, we note Édouard's and Nina's resistance to the proposal to encourage activism (lines 11, 19-28, 33). Similarly, in her interview, Éloïse said, "I don't think that UPop should encourage activism: it does not correspond to critical thinking and free speech, which are UPop's main values." In short, it appears that critical thinking and free speech do not go together with activism and could possibly call into question UPop's responsibility, which has to be protected. Thus, UPop's distinctiveness lies in two spatial movements that seem to look in two different directions: 1) "not to be like" activist organizations or traditional universities; and 2) not to be associated with possible action taken on its behalf. Both movements imply the creation of a gap between UPop and the things it is against. While in the first section of the analysis, this gap was clear, these excerpts highlight the degree of differentiation/association, that nuance UPop's anti-capitalist stance.

Here again, examining the verb tenses as temporal markers in discourse shows how the movement of differentiation (temporizing) is done. For instance, the modal verb "should" in Édouard's statement in line 1 ("UPop shouldn't become responsible for [the] actions [taken by students]") demonstrates UPop's duty of responsibility. This sets the tone for the discussion as it prompts a series of present tense statements that affirm UPop's identity: "That is already in our identity" (line 5), "that's not in UPop" (lines 7, 8), "UPop is not about encouraging action" (line 10), and so forth. When thinking about its duty, UPop's members react by stating what they believe UPop is and is not, as if they need to confirm in the present time an identity that could be threatened in the future (e.g., if UPop became responsible for the students' actions). Differentiation is thus at work both temporally (past/present/future identity) and spatially (not identical to/not associated with). We elaborate further on this in the following paragraphs.

The use of documents is relevant to the issue of temporality (the pamphlet, line 12). They help UPop's members to define the organization's mission. These documents, written *in the past* (probably in 2010 when UPop was created), materialize UPop's values. Note, for example, how the conversation changes after Lionel reads out UPop's mission from the pamphlet: "to foster the development of critical thinking and citizen action" (line 12). From that moment on, the doubt the committee had about citizen action dissolves. By bringing up a past statement, printed in a document, the pamphlet authorizes them to address this as a legitimate topic and to discuss potential solutions.

With regard to spatiality, the vignette is filled with expressions that move from being identical ("we are," "we should be") to non-identical ("we are not," "we should not be"). This alterity of dissimilarity is mostly

manifested with respect to activism: UPop is neither a political nor an activist organization. In this case, UPop’s alternativeness is characterized by the oscillation between being an activist and/or politically neutral, as we can see in Éloïse’s response to this debate (March 15, 2016, interview): “UPop is a university and it is education. People are free to choose where they’re going to be actively militant.” So, UPop *is* a free educational organization. In that sense, being a free educational organization that favors free speech and develops critical thinking is a (safe) alternative to not being a political organization. This compromise absolves UPop of any responsibility. Since it is an educational organization, the political action that teachers or students might engage in *after class* is not UPop’s responsibility. Following this logic, and to “incite” citizen action, Édouard proposes relying on the teachers (line 45-46): *they* will have the choice of leading students in political action (or not). As individuals who are “outside” UPop—they are not considered proper members—they *can* encourage political engagement. These elements define *who* and *what* should be identified as being “UPop.” In fact, by speaking in *their own names* (if they disassociate themselves from UPop), teachers will protect UPop’s “responsibility” and “autonomy.”

This strategy is also discussed in the following two excerpts taken from an organizing committee meeting held in July 2017.

- 1 Nestor: Course proposal number 3: [he reads] “Understanding the collaborative economy” by L from
2 [name of the organization].
3 Éloïse: She came to the launch I think.
4 Ana: Yeah... It was not very convincing...
5 Édouard: Yeah... It was not indeed...
6 Ana: She didn’t have a very critical perspective...
7 Édouard: She thought the collaborative economy was cool and good...
8 Ana: Yeah, she was talking about Airbnb and Uber...
9 Bernard: No! She was not on their side I think; she was more into small stuff...
10 Ana: Hm, I understood that she was defending them...
11 Bernard: She was unclear then.
12 ...
13 Édouard: What I remember is that she was really defending her own company. We should not forget that it
14 would be great to have diverse perspectives on the subjects. We need critical people. For example,
15 G, he was a bit radical but he was at least critical! He was capable of seeing the right things and to
16 criticize.
17 Nestor: Yes, you’re right! I don’t know what to do with that...
18 Éloïse: But, I think it’s a very timely issue, no?
19 Nestor: Yes, it is...
20 Édouard: Yes, but...
21 Ana: Is it really embarrassing that she represents her organization?
22 Édouard: Let’s say... we always ask people to represent themselves on their own. We try to avoid having
23 teachers who are here to defend their own organization. They have to come in their own name. So
24 maybe we can see with her if she will be willing to present herself as L and not as [name of the
25 organization] and try to see if she would be OK to open the subject a little bit more.

Excerpt 6: Organizing Committee Meeting 1 - July 2017

1 Bernard: OK. So, my top class here would be with PM, a doctor in public health, specialist in security... He
2 would like to do a class in city planning, pedestrian and cyclist safety: what is to be done? What are
3 the miracle solutions that have been tested? Why don't we apply them? Why is Coderre shit
4 [everyone laughs loudly]! We'll be in the middle of the electoral campaign. Elections are on
5 November 5. We just put this class right at the beginning of the session and it'll be a pretty nice
6 opportunity to blast Coderre every week!
7 Édouard: So, urban planning, we're talking about traffic?
8 Bernard: Yes, you know. We're talking about... 5 people were hit every day by a car when I made my film 8
9 years ago... Everything is done for cars, no? Recently they said that there are over 20,000 new cars
10 each year...
11 Édouard: And how many classes can we do on that?
12 Bernard: So PM was saying 3.
13 Nestor: What's his name?
14 Bernard: PM. Each time something comes up on pedestrians, we hear him from Public Health. He's often
15 with Projet Montréal.
16 Nestor: Personally, I'm a member of Projet Montréal, I'll be involved in the campaign and I wouldn't like
17 that a UPop class would become advertising for Projet Montréal. It has nothing to do with it...
18 Bernard: No! It's about living safely in the city... and by sheer coincidence Projet Montréal is the only one
19 defending these issues...
20 Nestor: Agreed.
21 Emma: We're often worried about that subject, to ensure that our classes are not about advertising... but I
22 think we also need that. It's not advertising... We can have...
23 Édouard: [defend our ideas
24 Emma: [A strong position and say well... there is no such thing as absolute objectivity. I think it's fine to
25 promote some... positions and say, "they are mine," "they are ours."
26 Nestor: No, but Projet Montréal wouldn't want that... their director would say that we want to intrude...
27 Emma: But he's not in Projet Montréal. He's not a deputy at all...
28 Bernard: No. He is not a member of Projet Montréal. He makes reports because it's what he does for a
29 living... but he is an employee of the Public Health Department. A doctor. He's autonomous.
30 Nestor: OK. OK. And I agree with you, we can defend...
31 Emma: We can have a position without advertising as such.
32 Bernard: And it will show what else is done in the world. Because we know how to do these things. Studies
33 are super strong... Popular education has to be done in that sense. More so during an election
34 campaign... Hahaha!
35 Nestor: Haha!
36 ...
37 Bernard: I really would like to have 3 very explosive classes on the subject.
38 Édouard: Yeah. It's good to feel involved during a highly political moment...
39 Everyone: Yeeee:::::eesss [enthusiastically]

Excerpt 7: Organizing Committee Meeting 2 - July 2017

These two excerpts echo the previous discussion about UPop's "neutral" political positioning vis-à-vis civic activism. However, a new element appears: the issue of groups or organizations in UPop's courses. In its teachers, UPop sees a way to encourage resistance and critical thinking. It therefore opens the door to organizations or groups that are involved in politics and social movements. The challenge is to keep a neutral position at the same time: people must be there on their own behalf and not on behalf of an organization. UPop must remain neutral. In excerpt 6, for instance, the committee discusses the course proposed by L from a specific organization. As the conversation discusses her and the specific organization she works for' (which does not totally correspond to UPop's values), Ana asks (line 21): "is it really embarrassing if she represents her organization?" Édouard answers: "we *always* ask people to *represent themselves on their own*. We try to avoid having teachers who are here to defend their own organization. They have to come in their own name. So maybe we can see with her if she will be willing to present herself as L and not as [name of the organization]" (lines 22 to 25). Édouard's answer is quite clear: UPop *always* asks people to represent themselves and not to speak on behalf of an organized group, and even

more importantly, not to speak on behalf of UPop. Thus, “neutrality” is an old rule. They have followed it from the beginning, so things must go on as they are and as they have always been (temporizing). The same sort of discussion occurs in excerpt 7 when the committee discusses Bernard’s idea to have a course on road safety led by PM, a physician working in public health. Some fear that PM will be speaking for *Projet Montréal*, a left-wing political party in which he seems to be involved. Bernard reassures them by saying: “No. He is not a member of *Projet Montréal*. He makes reports because it’s what he does for a living... but he is an employee of the Public Health Department. A doctor. He’s autonomous” (lines 28-29). The autonomy of teachers is thus crucial for protecting UPop’s responsibility.

Here, differentiation takes the form of non-association (or degree of association). This raises the question of representation: who/what is authorized to represent (be associated with) UPop? Non-association can be seen in different layers here. First, UPop is autonomous (it should not be associated with any other organizations, political parties or activist actions)—this is an integral part of its definition. Second, teachers are autonomous (they must speak on their own behalf and not on behalf of any organization for which they work or with which they are involved). This double autonomy must be cultivated to protect UPop’s responsibility: UPop is *not* responsible for the teachers’ or the student’s actions.

In sum, these excerpts show that differentiation is underpinned by being a non-identical movement (“we are not a political party or an activist organization”) and by being a movement of association (“we should not be identified either, we are identified as a free educational organization”). The line between them is thin.

However, this appears to be somewhat contradictory. In its launches and through its discourse, UPop proclaims its political commitments (see vignettes 1 to 4). Moreover, the committee wishes to encourage action, but the organizers are reluctant to have courses led by organizations that might promote their own agenda. Emma highlights this contradiction in the July organizing committee meeting (excerpt 7, lines 21–22): “We are often worried about that subject, to ensure that our classes are not about advertising...” She then adds, “there is no such thing as absolute objectivity. I think it’s fine to promote some... positions and say, ‘they are mine,’ ‘they are ours’” (excerpt 7, lines 24–25). They all agree on this and are concerned about a course taught by a spokesperson of a particular organization (excerpt 6). Note how they move from talking in the past tense when referring to this course (lines 1-16), to the present tense when addressing UPop’s current (line 22-23) and future (24-25) modes of action for dealing with self-promotion in UPop’s courses. In addition, affirmative expressions such as “we always ask,” “we try to avoid,” which are used to refer to UPop, contrast with conditional ones (“maybe we can see with her,” “try to see if she would”) when referring to the teachers. This has the effect of drawing a blurred line between UPop and the teacher. While there is this distinction between UPop’s “we” and the teachers’ “they”—which is reinforced by the affirmative versus conditional mode—the unavoidable affiliation of the teachers with UPop’s program and their identification as spokespersons for this alternative university, makes this distinction problematic. Differentiation as spatialization (in terms of dissimilarity) is crucial here for UPop’s members but is very difficult to maintain. At the same time, differentiation is thought of in temporal terms (remember the

word “always” and the reference to documents written in the past): being non-identical is anchored in the present and in the past, while the future remains uncertain.

SYNTHESIS

Excerpts 5 to 7 illustrate the ambiguity of differentiation when questions about neutrality, autonomy and responsibility appear. Here the alternative is constituted through statements like: “we *cannot* be that,” “we *are* that,” “we *must* be that,” and “we *should* be that.” It is not solely a movement of radical opposition, as we saw in the previous analytical section. For dissensus (being opposed to) to occur, affirmative and mandatory statements are preferred, while conditional and future statements are used for drawing the line in terms of dissimilarity (not being identical to/associated with). Also, the definition of UPop (who we are) is postponed and remains pending when other actors (events, times, documents or teachers) enter the game and threaten its autonomy and responsibility. The latter are the cornerstones of the process of differentiation. People (such as the teachers)—and, as we also saw, objects (a pamphlet)— represent and thus are to some extent responsible for UPop’s “alternativeness.” Representation frames how an organization becomes different, and thus how dissimilarity and *dissensus* are constructed.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The analysis shows that UPop’s alternativeness is constituted by complex and multiple movements of differentiation that imply an ongoing production of detours, suspensions, gaps and intervals between those that represent UPop and the haunting absences. First, these movements of differentiation highlight a dynamic of absence/presence. In that sense, alternative organizations depend on the absence/presence of values, principles, discourses and ideologies to which they are opposed/aligned. Our analysis exemplifies the complex movements caused by the desire to be different. Of importance is the setting of a battlefield in which the field, the enemies and allies are constantly being voiced. We also note here the use of manifest-type rhetoric and affirmative present stances of identity (we are/we are not).

Second, we discover that it is difficult to maintain this thick line of opposition when questions of responsibility and autonomy arise. In these examples, UPop’s “alternativeness” vacillates between values, political positioning and practical decisions that reveal movements of opposition, contradiction, resistance and alignment (detours, gaps, suspensions and intervals). Of importance here is the degree of differentiation that comes from being associated or not being associated with, which also highlights questions about representation. As we have stated throughout the paper, differentiation (in time and space) is at work here in two correlated movements: similar/dissimilar (“we are this,” “we should not be that”) and oppositional/consensual (“we are against this, we want to destroy capitalism, but we are not responsible for others’ actions”).

Our study thus highlights the importance of *sameness* and *consensus* in the constitution of the “alternative.” As mentioned in our analysis, UPop cannot exist without that to which it is opposed: capitalism, activism, censorship, inequality and non-critical thinking haunt UPop’s

actions and discourses. To be alternative, UPop needs to alternate between what it shares with, and what it rejects from, each of these discourses. A discursive battlefield between good and evil has to be constantly re-enacted, requiring both parties present for the battle to take place. In this sense, the alternativeness is constituted by the oscillation between “what we are”/“what we are not,” “what we should be”/“what we shouldn’t be,” and “what we agree on”/“what we disagree on.” As we have shown, this oscillation evolves in a diffuse manner and can take different forms: being anti-capitalist but not political or activist, being focused on education without a formal structure, or being an open space for free speech and critical thinking while retaining a mainstream pedagogy.

As mentioned, in the case of UPop the cornerstone of the movements of differentiation (similar/dissimilar, oppositional/consensual) lies in the notions of responsibility and autonomy. Around this, UPop’s alternativeness appears as an ongoing process that is constantly made and unmade: “we are anti-capitalists but we are not activists” (said differently: we want to destroy capitalism, but we won’t be responsible for destructive actions done in *our* name). Interestingly, this ambiguity, shows yet another facet of the process of differentiation, that of association/disassociation. The vitality and verve of bold oppositional statements are softened here. Being “alternative” is not just about being against capitalism, it is also about not being identified/linked with activist associations or individual activist actions (even if those individuals are part of UPop). As noted, UPop prefers to be defined as “alternative,” as in “being a free educative organization” to preserve its autonomy and keep its original identity alive (“we *were always*”).

So where is the locus of the alternative? In trying to respond to this question, we do not settle the relationship between the alternative and dominant paradigms as being one of opposition, and we do not define capitalism as the dominant paradigm to which alternative organizations are opposed. On the contrary, we bring a more informed understanding of what an alternative can be and, in particular, we try to understand how the alternative is accomplished. Following Derrida, we can say that the alternative is always a dynamic of presence/absence, and that movement or vacillation is constitutive of being an alternative organization. So, we cannot think of “alternative” in binary terms. Alternative organizations are against, despite and beyond what they want to differ from (which is not solely capitalism), aligned with hegemonic discourses and simultaneously engaged in counter-discourses. They are always negotiating their “alternativeness,” sometimes in ambiguous and contradictory ways. Since UPop’s being is always in movement, it depends on these processes of differentiation, on these “others” from which it differs or to which it historically adheres.

Hence, being different in an economic and social context of ideological and structural convergence requires a great amount of effort that must be repeated over and over, as the silences and absences that haunt such organizations are numerous. This paper is therefore a first step toward the unveiling of dynamics of *différance* as constitutive movements of alternative organizing. The Derridean perspective we develop in this article allows us to focus on the linguistic events where the alternative emerges in various ways. Derrida breaks from the Saussurian perspective for whom language is a “system of differences” in considering the signifier as irrevocably “floating” (Keucheyan, 2017: 72–73). A Derridean approach

sees these signifiers as the locus where the alternative is voiced and cultivated.

We think that such an approach will allow future research on alternative organization to: 1) bring nuance and subtlety to categorizations that would otherwise be too clear-cut (Alternatives to what? To whom? Against what?); 2) explore more deeply and accurately the relationships between the different actors involved in these organizations (members, targets, observers [Johansson & Vinthagen, 2016]); and 3) be aware of the multiple “sites” of the alternativeness: physical sites (e.g., spaces), abstract sites (e.g., ideologies, events), temporal sites (e.g., when the alternative is done: In the past? In the present? In the future?). Moreover, we think that such a framework can help disclose power relations, individual actions, actor positioning or identity stakes as various events of possible voicing and *authorization* of the alternative, meaning events where the alternative is done and undone in an ongoing manner. Thus, the Derridean approach leads us to consider the alternative as a specific language with its own particular signs and representations.

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