



# **The struggle for good leadership in social movement organizations: Collective reflection and rules as basis for autonomy**

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## **abstract**

This paper analyzes how leadership is practiced in social movement organizations (SMO). Drawing arguments from Critical Leadership Studies, and based on qualitative empirical research conducted within the organizations of the Spanish protest movement 15M, this paper analyzes the perceptions of leadership, fields of tension and practices for dealing with these tensions. By empirically investigating a rather unexplored area of research, the paper makes three contributions. First, it offers in-depth investigations of leadership-practices in SMO, showing that activists are highly aware of the importance of leadership. Second, it contributes to leadership theory by confronting views of critical leadership studies with the empirical results. Activists share quite precise views on what good leadership means for them, which we propose to characterize as autonomous, reflexive and rule-based. Third, with the emphasis on collective reflection and rules, it highlights two aspects of leadership in SMO that have been widely ignored in discourses, but turn out as important means of dealing with challenges of autonomous leadership.

## **Introduction**

The goal of this paper is to analyze characteristics, challenges and leadership practices in social movement organizations (SMO). To explore this, we also discuss tensions that arise by implementing aspired forms of leadership, and

how activists deal with these tensions. Broadly, in our study leadership is defined as a process and practice that provides guidance to groups or organizations (Crevani, 2018: 88).

New social movements are often described as leaderless. Also, SMO, which distance themselves from established and hierarchical organizations, emphasize self-organization and are highly skeptical of traditional notions of leadership. Thus, it is often claimed that leadership has a negative connotation in emancipatory movements (Western, 2014) and that their organizations do not fully use the potential of leadership for effective organizing. We argue that this is not the case in the organizations this study investigated. Activists try to avoid permanent leadership positions but see the necessity for leadership work, thus focusing more on processes than on persons. They share quite precise views on what good leadership means for them and they invest much effort in implementing it.

Civil society protests, movement activism and voluntary self-organization have increased worldwide (Kaldor and Selchow, 2013: 923). Consequently, studies on social movements have gained importance (for an overview see Della Porta and Diani, 2015). Yet, we must distinguish between social movements and the organizations of these movements. Although SMO are increasingly being recognized by scholars (Gerbaudo, 2012; Morris and Staggenborg, 2002; Sutherland et al., 2014), so far the topic has not been given much attention (Walker, 2012). Thus, in contrast to the rich debate on leadership in general organization studies, leadership in SMO is still an under-explored topic. Further, most writing on leadership in SMOs 'has mirrored "mainstream" leadership theories, which perceive leadership as the product of individuals with certain traits, styles and/or behaviors' (Sutherland et al., 2014: 760), and there is yet little empirical data on how SMO actually deal with leadership. The purpose of this paper is to fill this gap by exploring how leadership is practiced in SMO.

The theoretical basis is critical leadership studies, which interpret leadership not only as the acts of individual persons but as a process of the whole system involved, thereby clearly distinguishing between leadership and leaders (Day, 2001; Wood, 2005). Critical leadership studies theorize what movement actors

often wish to put into practice, namely, a focus not on leaders but on relations and processes. An interesting approach within critical leadership studies is Western's (2014) heuristic concept of Autonomist Leadership in emancipatory social movements. This concept was a useful orientation framework for our research that, in contrast, focuses not on movements as such, but on their organizations.

The analysis is based on qualitative empirical research conducted from 2014 to 2017 in organizations of the Spanish protest movement 15M, which emerged in 2011 as an answer to the political and economic crisis (Della Porta and Diani, 2015; Romanos, 2017; Taibo, 2011;). Many organizations have been founded in the course of this movement, ranging from the nation-wide platform against evictions, to smaller groups like youth without future, the protest grandparents, women's or lawyer initiatives, and social centers. 15M can be characterized as an emancipatory movement in the tradition of libertarianism (Flesher Fominaya, 2015). Our findings indicate that leadership practices in the investigated SMO are autonomous,<sup>1</sup> reflexive and rule-based.

The paper contributes to an understanding of leadership in three ways. First, it complements the empirical picture by in-depth investigations of leadership-practices in SMO. Second, it contributes to leadership theory by confronting views of critical leadership studies with the empirical results, thus going beyond normative or theoretical ascriptions. Third, with the emphasis on collective reflection and rules, it highlights two aspects of leadership in SMO that have been widely neglected to date and may stimulate further research to better understand leadership in SMO.

The paper is organized as follows: We begin with a literature overview on leadership in SMO, and present the theoretical background, the definition of leadership used in this paper and the goals of the study. After a description of the methodology, we present and discuss the findings.

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1 autonomous: 'having the freedom to act independently' (Oxford Dictionary); 'independent and having the power to make your own decisions'; 'an autonomous organization...is independent and has the freedom to govern itself' (Cambridge Dictionary).

## Leadership in social movement organizations

Although leadership in social movements is gaining scholarly attention, it is still an under-explored topic (Barker et al., 2001; Melucci, 1996). The Sage Handbook of Leadership (Bryman, 2011), for example, does not mention leadership in social movements at all. Nevertheless, Gerbaudo (2012) argues against a 'spontaneous' or 'leaderless' image of current protests and states that complex forms of leadership have emerged. Morris and Staggenborg (2002) argue for considering actions of leaders and structural contexts to uncover diverse levels of leadership, and DeCesare (2013) proposes an interpretative approach to leadership in social movements. There is wide consensus that new social movements tend to alternative, nonhierarchical forms of organizing, which emphasize direct and participatory democracy and autonomy (Benski et al., 2013; Polletta, 2002). Many authors argue that new social movements reflect key principles of anarchist thinking (Bratich, 2007; Gibson, 2013; Graeber, 2011), such as the rejection of imposed authority, hierarchy and domination (Wigger, 2014). They are thus characterized as autonomous: 'Autonomous movements can be understood as movements organized in horizontal networks, underlain by principles of self-organization, direct/participatory democracy, autonomy, diversity and direct action' (Flesher Fominaya, 2015: 145). Well-documented examples are the alter-globalization movements (Della Porta et al., 2015; Maeckelbergh, 2012), the *Spanish Indignados* (Hughes, 2011; Romanos, 2017) and *Occupy* (Castañeda, 2012; Graeber, 2012; Sitrin, 2012).

A reason for emphasizing alternative forms of organizing is the prefigurative character of these movements. Prefigurative organizing (Siltanen et al., 2014; Yates, 2015) regards internal organizing practices as crucial for achieving social change by actualizing ideals in the here and now. Activists attempt to create social change by applying internal practices 'according to the principles they want to see govern the whole society' (Leach, 2013a: 182). Based on this ideology, aiming at egalitarian, participatory structures in society needs non-hierarchical structures. Thus, practices, social relations, decision-making, and culture themselves are the goal (Boggs, 1977). While prefigurative strategies have a longer history in movements like civil rights, women, peace and environmental movements, currently also broader movements with a

focus on social justice started to apply them (Leach, 2013a). Prefigurative movements share the idea to prefigure not only social goals but also the desired concepts of organization in daily practices (Maeckelbergh, 2011; Reedy, 2014; Yates, 2015), including voluntary association, self-organization, direct democracy, and autonomous forms of leadership (Graeber, 2004).

Yet how does this work when it comes to SMO and what do we know about leadership in these organizations? Despite some similarities of social movements and SMO, a clear distinction must be drawn. Consequently, Diani (2014) argues that SMO often reflect the movement's mechanisms, without matching all their stereotypical traits. Contrary to movements, which are more fluid networks of activists and activities, organizations usually are designed to last longer, to focus on more specific goals, and they therefore need more structure – and other forms of leadership.

Studies on SMO have addressed the problem of how to establish organizational clarity without giving power to individuals by making a sharper distinction between leadership and leaders, thus following older anarchist ideas that 'Anarchy is not without leadership, it is without followership' (Ehrlich, 1979: 108). Related empirical papers focus on internal structures and decision-making (Della Porta et al., 2009; Graeber, 2012; Leach, 2009; Polletta, 2005), or on meeting structures (Haug, 2011, 2013; Thorburn, 2012). Few studies deal with tensions and conflicts (Laamanen and Den Hond, 2015; Maeckelbergh, 2012). Some authors point out the risks of leaderlessness like hidden internal dynamics, informal power, and inefficiencies (Freeman, 1970; Polletta, 2002; Vecchio et al., 2010). Epstein (2001: 8) states that an '(a)nti-leadership ideology cannot eliminate leaders' but bears the risk of informal authorities.

Nevertheless, there are very few empirical studies on leadership practices in SMO. Choi-Fitzpatrick analyses tensions between efficiency and inclusivity. Mechanisms to solve them are staging, which means manipulating organizational procedures, and scripting, which refers to using language to reinforce these procedures (Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2015: 123). This is instructive, yet, the research focuses on leaders' views. Sutherland et al. (2014) analyze, how leadership is understood and performed in anarchist SMO, calling these

practices anti-leaders(hip). They describe processes of the management of meaning and focus on organizational practices of non-hierarchical and shared leadership such as distributed and rotating formal roles, distributing tacit knowledge or enhancing accountability through symmetrical power relations. Although they describe these processes as challenging and conflictual, they stress their functionality and argue 'that just because an organization is leaderless, it does not necessarily mean that it is also leadershipless' (Sutherland et al., 2014: 759). As their analysis is based on four case studies they conclude that 'future studies could develop a much more nuanced analysis of the realities of leadership in SMOs' (*ibid.*: 775).

To conclude, although SMO are a phenomenon of high significance (Simsa and Totter, 2017), empirical insights on leadership practices in SMO are scarce and this paper shall contribute to fill this gap.

### *Critical leadership studies*

Critical leadership studies are a particularly apt theoretical basis for studying leadership practices in SMO. They have a radically different understanding of leadership than the mainstream management literature. In classic models, the assumption persists that leadership is the result of designated leaders and their acting. Therefore, an organization is perceived as shaped by its leader's decisions, style and personality. Leadership is ascribed to a person with certain qualities, a formal position within a hierarchy and the exercise of authority. Different approaches of dominant models focus on the leadership style (Bass and Riggio, 2005; Burns, 1978; Lewin et al., 1939; Wunderer, 2009), on the innate characteristics of the leader (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Bolden and Gosling, 2006), on the relationship between leaders and followers (Stippler and Dörffer, 2011), or on a combination of the organizational context and specific styles of leadership (Fiedler et al., 1975; Hersey et al., 1988). The common feature of these approaches is the emphasis on a clear top-down hierarchy, a distinction between leaders and followers (Collinson, 2011) and the neglect of the contribution of followers to leadership (Western, 2013).

With critical leadership studies, there has been a shift in the focus of leadership research; ‘to understanding the emergent, informal, and dynamic “leadership” brought about by the members of the collective itself’ (Contractor et al., 2012: 994). Critical leadership studies have theoretically decentered the leader (Wood, 2005). They interpret leadership as a process, which is a relational, socially-constructed phenomenon realized through the interaction of diverse actors (Bolden, 2011; Gronn, 2002). Critical leadership studies distinguish clearly between leaders and leadership. The effects of leadership are not only seen as resulting from individual persons, but from the dynamics within the respective system; this ‘complementary perspective approaches leadership as a social process that engages everyone in the community’ (Day, 2001: 583). In line with this perspective, Lichtenstein and Plowman (2009) argue that dynamic interactions between individuals lead to emergent outcomes, and that conceptions of leadership thus should be reframed.

As critical leadership studies interpret leadership as a socially constructed and culturally specific phenomenon, different forms and practices come into view. Alternative forms of leadership are described with different terms, such as ‘shared’ (Pearce and Conger, 2002), ‘collective’ (Contractor et al., 2012), ‘collaborative’ (Chrislip, 2002), or ‘distributed’ leadership (Binci et al., 2016; Bolden, 2011; Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2012; Spillane et al., 2004). They all understand leadership ‘as a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals or both’ (Pearce and Conger, 2002: 1), with fluid processes of taking leadership roles according to contextual conditions (Pearce and Sims Jr, 2002), and outcomes understood as co-constructed by leaders and followers, thus ‘recognizing leadership as inherently a collaborative act’ (Ruben and Gigliotti, 2016: 469). This interactive perspective characterizes leadership as a complex process, which is open to for innovative organizing practices (Lichtenstein and Plowman, 2009; Lichtenstein et al., 2006).

Autonomist Leadership, which comprises ‘non-hierarchical, informal and distributed forms of leadership’ (Western, 2014: 673), is also a noteworthy framework within the critical leadership studies to analyse organizational

dynamics in new social movements. The prefix 'autonomist' shall resolve 'the paradox of leadership being enacted in leaderless movements' by breaking 'the emotionally binding ties that link leadership with hierarchy, elitism, authoritarianism and coercion' (*ibid.*: 676). Autonomist Leadership encompasses the five principles of autonomy, spontaneity, mutualism, networks and affect that drive and guide the leadership in emancipatory social movements.

Consequently, Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014) conceptualize leadership actors as the plurality of individuals who may be involved in acts of leadership, including formal or informal leaders, followers, or other stakeholders; they distinguish between leadership positions and leadership acting. Bendell et al. (2017) depict leadership as relationally co-constructed; as a behavior instead of a position or the inherent quality of an individual.

While the concepts of critical leadership studies are convincing, they still have two pitfalls. First, it is criticized that even alternative approaches often emphasize exceptionalism, 'an individual locus of action and a generalised other that is the object of leadership' (Bendell et al., 2017: 419). Second, there is a temptation to just change words from leaders to facilitators, spokespersons or simply members, which covers up more than it clarifies, as simply excluding individual leaders per definition prevents one from seeing differences in the leadership roles assumed that might exist in practice. Thus, 'by refusing to acknowledge any kind of leadership, organizations may be at risk of re-creating the same hierarchical relations they seek to abolish as informal hierarchies rooted in power are likely to emerge' (Sutherland et al., 2014: 763). To avoid these traps, we will intensively draw on our empirical material, guided by the following definitions:

Following Crevani (2018), we suggest a focus on the phenomenon rather than on individuals, and conceptualize leadership as an ongoing social process, in which leadership work contributes to the production of direction in organizing. Leadership work is enacted in interactions and refers to the co-creation of relationships (Crevani, 2018; Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012). Drawing on Sutherland et al. (2014), we assume that it consists of individual acts of agency, which manage meaning, define reality and provide a basis for



organizational action. Leadership work is done by specific actors but not necessarily by people holding leadership positions.

## Methodology

Our empirical research is explorative. It is based on qualitative research and followed a circular approach (Froschauer and Lueger, 2009) by leveraging diverse sources of data. Altogether, 92 qualitative interviews were conducted from 2014 to 2017 with activists and experts in Madrid, Sevilla and Valencia. Participatory observation in 16 cases allowed us to acquire additional knowledge. Out of the entire sample, 31 interviews with 20 female and 11 male activists were selected that were particularly appropriate for the research topic. These interviews were transcribed in Spanish. The resulting text body contains around 450 pages.<sup>2</sup> The sample includes activists of diverse SMO that identify themselves with 15M, including well-known organizations that operate nationally like Youth without Future or the Platform for Mortgage Victims and others that operate locally such as small neighborhood associations. Challenges due to the language context of the study (Kruse, 2015; Kruse et al., 2012) were met by group discussion. Further, memoing served to record thoughts and mutually control ideas.

Data analysis was organized in three steps. First, the textual data was coded according to main themes that were based on a previous topic analysis and relevant literature; specifically, equality/hierarchy, conflict/challenges, networks, organizational structures and routines, leadership/coordination, learning process/reflection, decision-making, communication and communication channels. Based on an inductive approach and in-depth analysis, we evaluated data regarding our research questions on characteristics, challenges and leadership practices. Second, according to the principles of summarizing content analysis (Mayring, 2000); the coded text material was analyzed further regarding the five principles of Autonomist Leadership. Yet, as not all categories were distinctive for the organizations investigated and substantial content was not covered adequately, we

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2 The quotations are translated literally into English and presented in italics; 'I' stands for interview number.

therefore, thirdly, conducted in-depth analyzes of the dimensions that emerged beyond the existing framework, namely reflection and rules.

### **Findings: Leadership practices in social movement organizations**

To explore how leadership is practiced in SMO, we will first describe the characteristics and challenges of leadership in SMOs. We will present how activists use the word leadership, what they mean with ‘good leadership’, and the problems that arise when implementing these concepts. Second, we discuss practices to deal with these challenges. Specifically, two practices emerged from our exploratory empirical work as particularly important, namely collective reflection and the application of rules.

#### *The characteristics and challenges of leadership in SMOs*

Western argues that movements like *Occupy*, the *Arab Spring* and the *Indignados* had difficulties moving beyond the phase of protest, because of ‘the disavowal of all leadership (including autonomous forms) that occurs within these movements’ (Western, 2014: 675). In line with this, our interviewees describe the movement as guided by the common goal of being non-hierarchical, horizontal, self-organized, participative and driven by the aspiration to build a radically new form of democracy. Thus, regarding the movement, our data show a clear rejection of leadership and leaders.

I’m a libertarian, I believe in the organization of society from below, based on self-organization, direct democracy, the rejection of leadership. I think that was one of 15M’s most important aspects... separations and hierarchies ended and a new season of horizontality, assembly and self-organization began. (I76)

And [15M is] also new in the forms it has taken: this occupation of the streets and this participatory, horizontal democracy without leadership. (I77)

Yet, when talking about organizations, the disapproval of hierarchy leads to the rejection of leaders, but not of leadership: ‘We have a philosophy of leadership, not leaders, rather the people involved that take decisions themselves’ (I52).

The term most-frequently and unambiguously used by interviewees to describe their perceptions of good leadership in SMO was *autogestión* (self-guidance). It refers to the following aspects: Leadership is important, but it shall not imply any form of hierarchy, formal authority or fixed roles; it shall enable more or less equal participation of all members and shall be transparent, empowering, and open to everyone. To quote just one example of this: 'My utopian ideal is that people should know how to govern themselves, that people should be able to govern themselves' (I52).

Activists of SMO thus try to ensure leadership without fixed – formal or informal – positions and stress the collective roots of successes. Leadership is associated with being very involved, empowering, responsible, and self-critical. It shall enable individual and collective learning by opening processes and fostering 'autonomy, power and choice' (I80), and by embracing failure and experimental forms of organizing. Leadership shall not be a 'top-down' process, but 'mediated from the bottom' (I77). A background for the surprisingly homogeneous views on good leadership are shared concepts of autonomous self-organization, a non-competing culture, and dispersed authority.

Power asymmetries should be avoided, and equality and interchangeability are important goals – everybody should be able to take on leadership roles. The overriding goal is described as to be able to act as a collective and the focus is clearly on leadership work and not on positions: 'We have a philosophy of leadership, and they are not bosses, but people who engage, who have to take actions, and in the end, who empower the others' (I52).

Activists often stress that instead of leaders they strive for speakers who as act as representatives and serve as communicative bridges between different collectives or different members of an organization. The ideal of collective, consensual decision-making prevails, yet for some situations also majority-decisions are accepted.

It was something absolutely collective. There was no structure that would have allowed for leaders. Everything was realized by spokespeople. There was no president, no coordinator, or anything like this. (I58)

The demand for a new mentality, this new collaborative paradigm, this was crucial. (I74)

Despite the often-mentioned rejection of individual leaders, *leadership work* (Crevani, 2018) by individuals is accepted and appreciated, as long as it is aligned with the ideals of autonomy. Individuals facilitating a decision-taking process, suggesting further strategies, coordinating the activities of a group, mediating conflicts, acting as representatives etc. are welcome, as long as this is not perceived as hierarchical, top-down acting.

What is rejected, in fact, by all interviewees are *leadership positions* whose holder's influence on decisions is only based on the position. Nevertheless, leadership positions held by individuals are accepted, as long as they fulfill the following conditions: The position must serve the collective, and it must be based on permanent legitimization by the other members. Usually, this implies the temporary holding of leadership-positions by individuals (for instance, the facilitator of a meeting). Only exceptionally, more stable positions arise (for instance, the long-time spokesperson of the nation-wide organization against evictions). This ideal of autonomous leadership implies certain difficulties in practice. While activists emphasize many aspects of success, they also are aware of the challenges. Issues that arise when groups seek to renounce the role of a single leader while at the same time acknowledging the importance of leadership, are informal hierarchies and inefficiencies.

Not surprisingly, the emergence of informal hierarchies and implicit leadership positions is mentioned as a problem. Besides differences in communicative skills and charisma, also different individual time-resources contribute to informal hierarchies.

It also changes our way of activism, the attitudes of the male who makes a leadership speech in the assemblies, which was what we were used to before (...) there are always people who speak more than others. (I40)

Sometimes somebody is more capable to do things and sometimes less. Of course, we have horizontal organizations, but it varies. And who leads ideas in the end is who can do it in this situation. (I68)

A further reason for the emergence of implicit leadership positions are unintended bonding effects: In spite of the ideal of openness, participation is often regulated by subtle mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, resulting in homogeneous groups of what activists sometimes self-critically call 'autochthonous members'. The term refers to those who have been engaged longer in the organization, and sometimes also to the somehow typical activists (better educated, more radically oriented, with long (family-) trajectories of protest). 'There are difficulties...to let go of the reins of those who have been doing it for a long time...the insiders should empower outsiders more and help them to feel at home more quickly' (I52).

Further, unequal gender relations are an obstacle to equality. Many interviewees talk about male dominance in assemblies and a gender gap of leadership-positions: 'Even within an assembly, albeit a space of communality, those who speak out the most, who speak loudly, are men' (I55).

Informal hierarchies sometimes result from very subtle forms of manipulation, like influencing group decisions, agenda-setting, and following individual preferences.

It is necessary to be very aware of the way in which the assemblies are manipulated, of how people behave ... It is very subtle to see how a person is influencing, is taking an assembly to what they want, so, in reality, it is not a decision from everyone, right? (I55)

Another constant challenge is to balance efficiency on the one hand and broad participation and egalitarian decision-making processes on the other hand, as the following quote illustrates:

Two political structures always have been controversial: the effectiveness of selecting a leading group and...the slowness but more participation and democracy when everything is based on assemblies' (I29).

Participation and egalitarian structures are very time consuming. Specifically, when it comes to new topics and strategic decisions, activists find it difficult to reach decisions:

If you want to realize an activity where everybody agrees to something, the liquid organization, with assemblies, social networks and diverse groups works

fine... The problem arises when you want to change strategies or when you have reached a goal. With this organization, it is very difficult to develop new goals, who should decide about that? (I74)

Most organizations are inclusive and open. Combined with non-hierarchical structures, this is a challenge as people can just show up and participate, sometimes without sufficient knowledge:

This is a topic of open assemblies ... somebody can show up, saying 'I want to speak', he takes the microphone and talks for 15 minutes. Then he never shows up again ... and he is given the same possibilities, the same voice and the same importance like people who have worked on this topic for four months. I don't think that this is good ... Very ineffective and not respectful. (I94)

Problems are also named regarding the necessity of high personal engagement. Activists talk much about exhaustion, tiredness and a lack of resources. Implementing new forms of leadership is demanding, both physically and mentally.

#### *Practices to deal with the challenges – collective reflection and rules*

Regarding the question of how actors strive to overcome the described tensions, our data showed two recurrent practices, namely collective reflection and rules. Both are frequently referred to by activists as the organizations' methodology, and as a means to deal with the difficulties of implementing ideal concepts of leadership.

Reflection is the review, interpretation, and understanding of experiences to guide present and future behavior (Boud et al., 2013). It is characterized as crucial for transformative learning (Mezirow, 2006). Activists stress the necessity of collective reflection to understand organizational dynamics, and to learn to ensure efficient organization without hierarchies. In this context, they often state: 'We move slowly, because we have a long way to go'. Activists are highly reflexive about the power of organizational structures, and specifically about leadership structures. Many interviewees emphasize the need to invest time in internal organizing, collective learning, and the development of tools and practices. Often, this is framed as using collective intelligence to empower the organization and as collective learning.

One of the things we realized, is the power of collective intelligence. The moment you put so many people together to think, things came out all the time, very powerful things. Then, we realized that we really have a capacity. (I59). It sometimes is still a bit chaotic. Still, I think that we have been learning a lot in these years. (I67)

Reflection goes along with experimentation. Activists engage in theorizing and experimenting with alternative forms of organizing, like participatory democracy, decentralization and horizontal decision-making. They emphasize the need for the creation of secure spaces in assemblies, where rules, organizing skills and proceedings are tested, evaluated and revises.

It worked by assembly, in a democratic manner... we wanted the politicization of everyday life, we understood that democracy had to be a fundamental thing. That's very difficult. Democracy is very laborious. It is very necessary, but very laborious. (I61)

In the SMO investigated, the collective reflection of leadership is a core underlying principle of what is believed to be good leadership. People who engage in leadership practices have to be open to permanent vigilance, comments, discussion, and learning. Reflecting on internal processes is part of daily activities. In many SMO, for example, the moderator role rotates, and at the end of each meeting, the group gives feedback and discusses which interventions had been helpful and what could be improved. Cases of absence of reflection, such as unwillingness to take part or un-reflected dominance, are heavily criticized.

The second important means of overcoming tensions are rules. They are often mentioned regarding their purpose of impeding formal or informal hierarchical structures and consequently fixed leadership positions. Besides very general rules, for example, that nobody should be able to impose their will on everyone else, a number of concrete rules are mentioned that guarantee participatory decision-making, mutual respect, and a productive way of dealing with conflicts. One group, for example, worked out explicit and detailed guidelines to guarantee 'good' communication. Many rules are dedicated to gender equality, such as a zipper system for speakers at meetings or for the nomination of delegates, or the techniques to secure equal speaking time. Often, these rules are accompanied by specific techniques:

We are learning to implement mechanisms that allow everybody to speak, with limited time. There are certain techniques ... Everybody who comes to an assembly gets a pink and a yellow card. The pink one means three minutes talking in the first part of the debate, the yellow, one or two minutes in the concluding part... Or, for example, we do closed rounds. Like, only seven persons may speak, then we close the round. Then we open a new round and five persons may speak (...). This works. It seems magic. (I85)

Methodologies of transparency ... were necessary because they allowed for trust ...also between people who did not know each other personally. (I59)

Other activists describe implicit rules – mainly regarding communication – that have been established without any explicit guidelines.

What we like most is that we do not have a document that explains our discursive strategies; it is not necessary because we – for some reason or the other – have internalized a specific language ... we are not monolithic, but from outside, a certain cohesion appears. That results from daily work. (I40)

The high importance of rules is remarkable, as movements and their organizations are usually characterized as specifically spontaneous. The organizations investigated share the goal of spontaneity only in the context of the goal to avoid fixed leadership positions. Nevertheless, our analysis shows that rules are a highly contentious issue; very controversial discussions are held on the extent to which existing rules are sufficient.

## **Concluding discussion**

Summing up the findings, the leadership ideals in the investigated SMO may be characterized as autonomous, reflexive and rule-based. Autonomy is used in the connotation of anarchist and libertarian socialist economics with the meaning of self-gestation or self-management, ‘to self-create, self-control, and self-provision’ (Vieta, 2014: 783). Leadership must thus serve the collective, being enacted widely without fixed positions and without a focus on individual leaders. Leadership work, such as individual contributions to achieving common goals and providing direction, is appreciated, when it is aligned with the ideals of autonomy: It must foster equality, being empowering and open to collective deliberation. Contrary to findings of other studies (Tait, 2005), we found that this perception of leadership is part of the



SMOs' identity, and thus motivating. Rejecting fixed leadership positions while appreciating leadership as practice creates challenges such as the emergence of informal hierarchies and tensions between efficiency with equality and broad participation, which are also found by other authors (Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2015; Epstein, 1991; Haug, 2013). The principal means to overcome these tensions in practice are collective reflection and rules. Reflexivity refers to regular and purposeful cycles of review and interpretation, and to experiments as a basis for collective learning. The respective practices encompass developments of skills such as social awareness, team orientation, and conflict management. Explicit and implicit rules have high degree of practical importance as a means to cope with the inherent difficulties of self-organization.

Regarding the aspect of autonomy, our findings are in line with existing literature. Autonomy is at the center of anarchist concepts (Reedy, 2014) and it is often described as a crucial goal of alternative forms of organization and leadership (Parker et al., 2014). Empirical studies of leadership in social movements also highlight autonomy as a guiding principle (Benski et al., 2013; Graeber, 2012; Western, 2014). Thus, by focusing on organizations of social movements, regarding autonomy, this paper complements the empirical picture, following Collinson's (2011) suggestion to better investigate the different contexts of leadership dynamics.

Collective reflection and its underlying principle of experimentation have been mentioned theoretically in concepts of prefigurative organizing (Maeckelbergh, 2011). Studies on alternative forms of leadership also argue that leadership should be open to contestation, change and reinterpretation (Fairhurst and Grant, 2010; Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014), while others stress collective processes of meaning making and the necessity of critical, reflexive feedback loops (Sutherland et al., 2014) and also of understanding processes collectively (Freeman, 1970). Yet, reflexive competences are usually described as the primary skills needed by individual leaders (Day, 2001). On an organizational level, reflection and respective leadership practices of SMO, have thus far not been a topic of intensive empirical research. Therefore, in this regard, this paper discusses a fairly new dimension.

Regarding rules, the discussion is more ambivalent. Literature on social movements often stresses the aspects of freedom, fluidity and spontaneity (Fyke and Sayegh, 2001; Western, 2014), and few authors describe the importance of clear, common, yet contested rules in activist groups or assemblies (Blee, 2012; Haug, 2013). While Žižek (2011: para. 47), addressing *Occupy* activists, encourages recapturing words such as discipline and work, to regain the ideological field and to ‘take all this from the right-wingers’, Leach refers to the limitations of rules and regulations:

Ultimately rules and regulations – no matter how egalitarian – cannot prefigure the new society. It is the cultures and communities we build around these counterhegemonic values that will help us sustain our structures of tyrannylessness (Leach, 2013a: 190).

Nevertheless, Western (2014) argues that it is an emancipatory task to acknowledge that tendencies of abusing power, like authoritarianism, are part of the reality of social relations in general. Also, our findings indicate that the development of these egalitarian cultures implies risks. Rules might help to mitigate and limit these risks.

Our results imply that the leaderless image of protests needs a more nuanced description with regard to movements’ organizational forms (Gerbaudo, 2012). While critical leadership studies might underestimate the emancipatory potential of leadership (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012), the activists do not. They have clear perceptions on how leadership work should be implemented, and are ready to invest in developing new forms and methodologies – as imperfect as their implementation sometimes might be. Nevertheless, the paper contributes to critical leadership studies (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Collinson, 2011) by showing how leadership practices in the investigated SMO aim at ensuring adequate processes instead of leadership positions, and they rely on the enactment of leadership work instead of on individual leaders. Critical leadership studies have decentered the leader theoretically (Sutherland et al., 2014), activists in the investigated organizations strive to do this in everyday practice.

Further, the paper contributes to concepts of prefigurative organizing (Leach, 2013b; Yates, 2015; Maeckelbergh, 2011) by offering further empirical

insights on how activists try to align their theories and societal goals with daily practices of organizing, which they refer to as *methodology*.

With the themes of collective reflection and the importance of rules, the paper highlights two practices that are widely ignored in discourses on SMO and that go beyond the symbolic processes mentioned by other authors (Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2015). A clear focus on these two dimensions in further research might not only help advance our understanding of leadership in SMO, but also serve to develop practical tools and innovative methodologies for emancipatory forms of leadership in general.

The paper has certain limitations. Although research shows that 15M has inspired other movements, such as Occupy (Castañeda, 2012), by focusing on just one case, it cannot suggest a universal framework for leadership at SMO. It can only build a basis for further empirical research. Above all, the practices of collective reflection and rules, which make it possible to avoid the abuse of power without excessive structures and bureaucracy, is in our view a promising field for further empirical research. The findings might also inspire further empirical research on practices of alternative forms of organizing (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011; Parker et al., 2014, Reedy, 2014) and on ethical dimensions of leadership that often are obscured by dominant concepts (Alakavuklar and Alamgir, 2018; Brown and Treviño, 2006). More open definitions, which emphasize processes and relations, prove useful for 'interpretation when engaging in the study of leadership work empirically' (Crevani, 2018: 87). They enable a view on changes already taking place and on leadership practices for radical forms of democracy and participation.

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