

# Ethnography Unbound

*Power and Resistance in the  
Modern Metropolis*

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS  
Berkeley Los Angeles Oxford

## Managing Without Managers: Crisis and Resolution in a Collective Bakery

*Ann Arnett Ferguson*

The members of Wholly Grains bakery collective are, as is often the case, discussing a change in the organization.<sup>1</sup> For the past month they have been delivering bread to two stores in the Safeway supermarket chain, and now that decision is being carefully evaluated because it marks a big departure from their traditional outlets. The bakery has been forced to add the Safeways as an emergency measure because of the recent closure of People's Co-ops, a local chain of consumer co-ops, which were among their best outlets. Now they are deliberating. Should they continue to supply these two stores? Should they consider expanding to even more branch stores in the chain? Or should they halt supply entirely because it compromises their principles?

I have recently begun field work at the collective and am sitting in on the Steering Committee meeting at which the discussion is taking place. One member who works on delivery expresses his doubts. "I don't like it. There's no room for negotiation, for one thing. They tell us what we can deliver and they set the markup. We don't deal with individual stores but with someone in the central office. The whole psychology is different than at our other stores."

"Whatever Safeway wants, Safeway gets," chimes in someone else.

Another member points out that sales at the Safeway stores have been good and have replaced some of the business lost when People's Co-ops closed down. Someone offers reasons why they should supply Safeway stores: they will finally have a chance to reach masses of people who don't shop at alternative or specialty food stores. One of the coordinators mentions that two more Safeways are willing to carry their bread and are just waiting to hear from them. The delivery shift representative on the committee expresses concern about drivers' workload

if additional routes are added. By now the discussion has run well over the allotted time, so the topic is closed (for the time being anyway) with the decision that the delivery shift, because of routing and scheduling constraints, will make the final decision about additional stores. However, the decision to continue to supply the two Safeways on a regular basis is approved.

I dutifully recorded this exchange in my field notes, little realizing at the time that it provided important clues to solving the puzzle at the heart of my study: since it is widely assumed that collectives are ephemeral, fragile organizations, here today and gone tomorrow, how has Wholly Grains managed to stay in business for over fourteen years? What is the secret of its survival as a collective?<sup>2</sup>

Collectives such as Wholly Grains are outgrowths of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>3</sup> This is consistent with the pattern observed over the past two hundred years in the United States of worker cooperatives emerging from the wake of social upheavals.<sup>4</sup> While few were in operation in 1970, by 1975 about 5,000 existed, providing services that ranged from illegal abortions to whole-grain bread.<sup>5</sup>

Many of these experiments were short-lived. Some flourished for a while, then either went out of business or were reorganized along conventional capitalist lines.<sup>6</sup> However, a few, like Wholly Grains collective bakery, in which I did field work for six months, first as a participant observer, then as a worker, neither folded nor became regular businesses but persisted as vital, productive organizations based on principles of worker control and participatory democracy.

Founded in 1975, Wholly Grains is a remnant of a relatively large network of cooperative wholesale and retail stores and warehouses in the Bay Area whose aim was to wrest the monopoly of food production and distribution away from giant corporations. The guiding philosophy of the larger, now defunct network, "food for people, not for profit," still remains the ideal that informs the decisions made by the collective about new products, pricing, and distribution.

In spite of the turnover of members over the years, the composition of the collective still reflects the student movement from which it sprung: the majority are white, from middle-class families, and highly educated. About half are men and half are women.<sup>7</sup> From the beginning there has been a strong commitment to diversify the class and racial composition of the group to fit the image of the kind of organization it would like to create. But the few people of color who have come into the group have not stayed long. One member told me that he believed the collective works best when it is homogeneous. This homogeneity is continually reinforced by the fact that most new mem-

bers come through friendship networks, a recruiting practice widespread among collectives.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, Wholly Grains has changed considerably over the years. It has grown from three to twenty members and from a symbolic hourly wage of \$1 when it started to the current \$7.25 with benefits. Productivity has been increased through the addition of small machines—a loafer, a “state-of-the-art” mixer, and a slicer—a vast improvement from the first years when mixing was done in an antiquated machine, loafing by hand, and all loaves sent out unsliced. They now produce about twenty different kinds of bread, muffins, and rolls using all whole-grain flour and no refined sugar.

In the early days a few people did all the tasks necessary to get the bread baked and distributed. Now production and distribution is divided up among teams, called “shifts.” There are four main production shifts: bread, sweets, delivery, and bagging and loading. Trainees are expected to work on at least two shifts in order to be considered for full membership. In principle, this means that everyone is involved in skilled as well as unskilled work.

Members are no longer paid according to the actual length of time each individual takes to do a task. The wage bill is now monitored and controlled by the “efficiency standard,” a calculation of the average rate of time required to accomplish a particular task. This change is one which I will argue threatens collective social relations.

The collective has weathered the turnover of members, the instability created by internal reorganization, and financial crises such as the seasonal cash flow problems, typical of any small business. In spite of the lack of the institutional support that other small businesses can rely on, such as bank loans through regular financial channels, the collective has grown to what is perhaps an optimal size for its present level of production. How has Wholly Grains managed to accomplish this?

#### ARE WORKER COOPERATIVES VIABLE?

Democratic workplaces are short-lived, unstable organizations that must, sooner or later, degenerate into conventional business enterprises run on capitalist lines. Inevitably, democracy is undermined as leaders within the group emerge and take charge. These are assumptions about the durability of organizations such as Wholly Grains that have been “a cornerstone of twentieth century social science.”<sup>9</sup>

In the last decade, however, social scientists in the United States have become increasingly interested in “the movement against bureaucracy and toward greater autonomy and participation in the workplace” of which Wholly Grains is a part.<sup>10</sup> Worker cooperatives are now of in-

terest because they have the potential of resolving some of our economic problems “in a way that is in keeping with our most deeply held tradition, our democratic heritage,” of saving jobs, reducing the need for supervision, cutting costs, reducing worker dissatisfaction, and being as productive as capitalist firms.<sup>11</sup>

The dominant theme in this recent literature is the difficulty of keeping these anomalous enterprises alive and healthy given the external pressures and internal dilemmas they face. There are many case studies of failed experiments that seek to establish the causes of degeneration; a few tell of successful ventures.<sup>12</sup> All, whether pessimistic or optimistic about the chances of survival, tend to emphasize the primacy of either internal or external factors.<sup>13</sup>

In this chapter I argue that the collective’s internal structure and the external environment in which it is located should not be treated as separate entities but should be seen as inextricably interrelated in a dynamic process. There are no inherent paradoxes or tendencies within this alternative form that lead it inexorably down the path toward normalization, nor do systemic pressures always shape outcomes. My contention is that it is an interplay between the internal organization of the collective and specific factors in the surrounding society that have created the terms of the bakery’s longevity.

As it makes decisions every day, the collective has indeed been dogged by pressures to make a profit, to be efficient, to rationalize production, and to obtain capital. It has become bogged down in the slow pace of democratic decision making and frustrated by personality conflicts. That in spite of all this Wholly Grains has been able to reproduce collective social relations is, I will demonstrate, a result of the specific conditions in the environment that it can draw on to support collectivity. When the collective can tap these resources, then pressures toward degeneration can be offset.

To illustrate this relationship between the external environment and the continuity of the internal structure of the collective, I will examine three organizational crises of the bakery to show how they were shaped by external conditions. First, however, it is essential to indicate what is indeed different about Wholly Grains—what is “collective” about the collective.

#### STRUCTURING POWER: THE INTERNAL PROCESS

We are all too familiar with how the conventional capitalist firm works; every individual in the United States will probably work in one at some time or another. Our schools prepare us for entering “the world of

business." But we are unlikely to be familiar with an organization that is

worker-controlled; directly democratic (consensus decision making; no internal hierarchy); autonomous (not subordinate to any hierarchical organization); and nonexploitative (using resources, skills, and surpluses to help enrich community life rather than reinforce the commodity relations of the dominant system).<sup>14</sup>

Or, as Wholly Grains describes itself:

[We are] not just another bakery outlet. It's true you can buy freshly baked bread there, as well as cookies, baked on the premises, granola, and other natural goodies. But you can also find right-on politics, and a collective, worker-owned organization dedicated to producing food for people, not for profit.<sup>15</sup>

Two organizational principles set Wholly Grains apart from the conventional capitalist firm: worker control and a minimal division of labor. Both are grounded in an ideology of collectivity that not merely reflects production relations but, more important, is essential for their reproduction. The following is a brief description of how these ideally structure the operation of the bakery.

Unlike the typical bureaucratic organization where power and control is concentrated in the hands of a few and exercised by owners or by the managers who represent them, at Wholly Grains authority resides in the entire collective membership or in subgroups and committees established by the collective whose members are subject to recall. The collective meeting is therefore the highest decision-making body. This is the place where decisions are made about all major matters: the type of bread produced, where it will be sold, how profits will be distributed, the "hiring" and the "firing" of members, and the physical relocation of the bakery. Most major decisions are made by consensus, but this is not a hard and fast rule since occasionally votes are taken.

The structure for coordinating the operation and facilitating day-to-day organizational decisions has changed over time. Presently, two coordinators elected by the members are paid for a certain number of hours of coordinating duties in addition to their regular work in the bakery. A steering committee consisting of the two coordinators, a representative from each shift, and representatives of standing committees is authorized to make certain decisions between collective meetings and carry out tasks delegated by the group as a whole. Standing committees such as personnel and finance meet whenever necessary. Finally, each shift is supposed to meet at least once a month to discuss matters directly related to their own work.

Hardly any written rules and regulations exist as a mechanism for exercising social control: there is no thick manual spelling out the rights, duties, obligations, sanctions, and penalties of each position, just a few sheets of paper with information about hiring, firing, and wage policies. In fact, the only policy identified consistently as a rule was that missing a shift twice in a year without notifying someone of one's absence was grounds for discharge. Even this "hard and fast" policy was not etched in stone. During the time that I worked at the bakery, the Steering Committee discussed the case of a member who had violated the rule more than once to see whether they would in fact rehire that person. Somewhat exasperated by my probing about the firmness of rules after this deviation from policy, one member tried to make me understand: "Look, they're just a set of guidelines. You need them to guide you, otherwise you lose control. But they're not a punishment."

While this ambiguity of expectations and outcomes can be extremely frustrating for the newcomer who must learn piecemeal about the custom and practice of the group, rules function to institutionalize power relationships, so they have to be kept to a minimum and always regarded as provisional. Furthermore, this arrangement leaves room for newcomers to reshape custom almost immediately, as I found soon after I began working on the bagging shift. I was questioning the efficiency standard set for the baggers. I expected some rationalization from longtime members, but the response from the very people who had done the calculation was, "Well, it's probably time to revise the standard. There have been several changes in the work since we calculated it. It needs to be done again." I found myself responsible for coordinating the effort to establish the new rate.

Wholly Grains also rejects prevailing practices and assumptions about the appropriate division of labor in our society. Members are expected to take on routine, manual work such as bagging bread as well as skilled work such as baking and mental tasks such as calculating production figures. Trainees should work on at least two different shifts (in other words, become familiar with at least two different jobs in the bakery) before they can be admitted as members. People hired on as "baggers," the most routinized job in the bakery, expect to begin training before too long to take on other tasks. Thus an effort is made to integrate individuals into several levels of the labor process to prevent the development of an internal hierarchy between mental and manual, skilled and unskilled labor. This prevents an individual or group of individuals from wielding power over others by virtue of their knowledge or their ability. One member that I talked to divides her hours between baking (the most skilled job in the bakery), bagging bread (the least skilled), coordinating the scheduling of shifts, and me-

diation, and at the same time was coordinating the search for a new location for the bakery when it was being evicted. Longtime members told me that at some time or another they had done every task in the bakery.

The machinery that keeps this system in motion is a never-ending cycle of meetings. All decisions, major and minor, provisional or final, are made at meetings. Special committees, which must also meet, mushroom out of each regular meeting to tackle projects or iron out problems. And just as Robert's Rules of Order play out and reinforce certain social relationships in the world outside the collective, the process at Wholly Grains affirms the ideal that power is distributed equally to all members. While meetings are organized around agendas, with time-keepers and facilitators to ensure smooth flow, there is usually no attempt made to force a decision, no matter how pressing it might seem. Until I became conscious that the most important thing that happened at the meetings was not the actual decision made but the decision-making process itself, I would leave feeling dissatisfied about the lack of closure on topics.<sup>16</sup>

Meetings serve many functions. In addition to being the mechanism by which democratic decisions are made, they are also the site where individuals are reshaped into members of a collective. Here grievances are aired, positions are tested, tongues are held, and acquaintance is made with the foibles and strengths of other members. The meeting is in fact the place where the culture of the collective becomes visible as something removed from what we take for granted as "normal."

Indeed, the "normal" features of our work life are the very elements that the collective must struggle against. Outside of the bakery, for instance, it is taken for granted that it is "normal" to have clearly defined job responsibilities; to receive a wage with a concomitant status meted out according to one's position within a system of ranked jobs; to have or be a supervisor, manager, owner. But at Wholly Grain, there must be a continual struggle *not* to become "normal." The practice of the group must reflect a consciousness of the necessity to remain different, oppositional, and not to become institutionalized. A key defining factor of the collective, therefore, is the ideology of the group, its shared assumptions about worker management and control, a consciousness of its difference.

The culture of the bakery is characterized by an affinity for innovation. Change is not something to be staved off by structure, but celebrated. An illustration of this tendency is the two major structural reorganizations of the group that have taken place since its inception. Even at this writing, another alternative organizational form seems to be emerging out of everyday practice. This is one reason why it is so

difficult to transmit the norms of the organization to the researcher or to a new member—there are many, and they change over time.

But the role of the collective is not seen as being one of exercising social control through inculcating members with values in the mechanical way that an ordinary business might indoctrinate a new employee with the company philosophy. "You can't give collective membership. You have to feel like an owner. You can't feel like you're working for someone else" was how it was described at a collective meeting in the evaluation of the performance of a trainee.

Members see themselves as responsible for the production process and capable of doing whatever task is necessary. As one member said about her experience of being a part of the collective, "Now I have more self-direction. I like my co-workers, I like not having a boss. I feel good about what I'm producing, I'm not ripping anybody off." She does a lot of calculations for invoices, something she thought she would never be good at, so now, she says, "I feel like I can learn whatever I want to learn." It is something she is able to do because of the wide dispersal of skills. One of the baggers tells the following story to illustrate this:

One night, when we were about halfway through the shift, we discovered that 200 loaves of Wheatberry hadn't been baked. X suggested that we bake it ourselves and since Y who is an experienced baker was working that night, we began helping her right then and there to get the dough going. We were up till 4 in the morning waiting for the bread to cool. But we got it done. Honestly, I felt like one of Santa's elves when Santa got sick.

For the individual member, the "spirit," the sense of self-efficacy called empowerment by some members, is crucial to the vitality of the organization. Empowerment is a concept that is hard to pin down neatly. It has a multiplicity of meanings and behaviors attached. It includes responsibility and reliability; self-directed action for the benefit of the community of which you are a part; being autonomous, and at the same time achieving that autonomy only through experiencing oneself as part of a collective venture.

The search for or experience of empowerment is one of the major reasons why people put up with the heavy work, open-ended responsibility, and insecurity of the collective. One woman contrasted her experience at Wholly Grains with that at one of the giant mass-production bakeries: "Hey! I made a wage you can live on and had good benefits. We were unionized so we had to take regular breaks. But all I did was push buttons. The machines did everything. I never even saw the dough; that was mixed on a whole other floor." She sought refuge in the collective from the stultifying boredom of this experience.

## A CONTEXT FOR SURVIVAL: MARKET NICHE AND COMMUNITY

Wholly Grains takes advantage of two salient features of the environment to offset pressures to normalize. The first is the market niche the bakery occupies in the Bay Area. The debate over whether to add Safeway outlets to regular delivery routes illustrates one aspect of this market niche: the ability of the bakery to expand into new, mass markets at the same time that some of their original outlets disappeared. The second is a loose network of individuals, institutions, and alternative organizations that sustains Wholly Grains with services, with customers, and with a pool of potential members whose background and education suit them for collective work.

### *The Market Niche*

I became aware of the market niche that the collective occupied when I accompanied one of the drivers on the delivery shift. We delivered bread to three types of stores: countercultural and alternative food-stores, neighborhood and local market chains, and branches of large supermarket chains.<sup>17</sup>

The traditional outlets are represented by the cooperatively run, community-based stores in the area. They range from tiny markets with crammed shelves to a large collective grocery store and deli in the city. Stores such as these retain a sixties activist, countercultural ambience. Flyers announce demonstrations and consumer boycotts, while posters of political figures such as Nelson Mandela are on the walls. Some attempt is made to keep goods as low priced as possible, many products are sold in bulk, and decisions about what goes on the shelves are made on the basis of the politics of food.

The second type includes a wide spectrum of stores from Mom-and-Pop small neighborhood stores to large but locally owned supermarket chains. The neighborhood stores cater to an ethnically diverse clientele and carry a range of foods and convenience items. The fact that these stores now carry a good selection of whole-grain breads demonstrates nicely the growth in the demand for whole-grain breads in the last decade.

This growth is reflected even more vividly in the new chain stores that have burgeoned to feed the demand of an affluent sector of the population preoccupied by their own physical and mental health and racked with anxiety about the adulteration of food.<sup>18</sup> These consumers have the money to pay for specially produced "pure" food as well as gourmet, custom-made items. Stores with names such as Living Foods, Real Foods, and Whole Foods have transformed the image of the small, slightly dingy health food store of the past to places to buy sausages

without preservatives, tofu pâté, freshly squeezed tangerine juice, frozen health food dinners, and even obtain (at \$3.29 a dozen) Aracana eggs whose pedigree was announced in the sign above them: "great eggs, richer flavor, claimed lower cholesterol, from wild-running hens in Sebastopol of Peruvian descent." These chains also tend to be innovatively managed: there is little centralization; the manager of each store works out relationships with individual organic producers who sell their produce directly to the store. Salaries are dispensed by the managers from profits, an incentive to keep the stores lean and productive.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, bread is delivered to branches of Safeway, one of the giant supermarket chains. Safeway's operation is completely centralized, so unlike the other places that Wholly Grains does business with, negotiations are not conducted at the individual stores but with someone in a central office. This relationship is the only one in which the autonomy of the bakery becomes problematic. However, the very willingness of such a chain to deal with a bakery like Wholly Grains reveals the demand that now exists for this kind of product. Supermarket chains are beginning to pay attention to this demand and capitalize on it.

### *The Community*

The Bay Area attracts a large number of individuals searching for alternative, politically meaningful occupations and lifestyles, likely candidates both as consumers of bakery products and as participants in collective life. In addition, major universities in the area seem to be an important source of potential members. A third of the members are recent graduates of the nearest one, with degrees from departments such as Peace and Conflict Studies, Anthropology, and Political Science. I believe they see the bakery as the site for putting into practice some of the theories that they acquired in the academic setting.

Several other collectives exist nearby and are not only a source of potential members already schooled in the organizational practice but also a place to move on to for people who are having conflicts in their own collective. It is possible that if these options did not exist, people who were committed to collective activity but who were having problems with the group might stay on to struggle around divisive matters, weakening the organization. There are several examples in the group of people coming to Wholly Grains from other collectives or leaving to join others.

Neighboring collectives provide not only a pool of committed new members and an outlet for disaffected old members but also a range of services. For example, Wholly Grains' ability to distribute its products beyond the Bay Area is augmented by a network of alternative orga-



nizations. Each week boxes of bread are delivered to a trucking cooperative that distributes Wholly Grains products to stores throughout Northern California and to an organic produce distributor for supplying stores to the south.

Not only is Wholly Grains sustained in many ways by this community, but it also is self-consciously an active part of it. The "talking bread" program nicely exemplifies this aspect. The bread talks to the consumer through inserts in the package noting upcoming political events, cultural programs, and community concerns. Most of these inserts are created by the organizers of the event itself, but the bakery also uses it to communicate with its customers. A recent talking bread advised consumers that the price of their bread would be going up 3 cents because of a rise in the price of flour. It connected this price rise with the "greenhouse effect" and encouraged people to tune into the local listener-sponsored radio station for a day of programming on the global environmental crisis.

The location in which the bakery is situated is therefore highly conducive to its success. There is a population to draw from whose education, life-style, and political leanings make it open to alternative work situations; several other cooperatives and collectives help to compensate for the dearth of institutions built around co-ops; and the consumer demand for whole-grain bread continues to grow. The collective is able to use this environment to offset pressures to degenerate into a more conventionally run business.

#### CRISIS AND RESOLUTION: THE REPRODUCTION OF THE COLLECTIVE

I have presented Wholly Grains as a collective enterprise, one that is substantively different from the capitalist firm. This version is an idealized one, reflecting the organization as it ought to be, the vision of the members of the group itself. While it suggests the principles and the problems they are likely to encounter, it obscures the actual essence of the collective: its fluid, flexible, changing nature in which a constant effort to reproduce collectivity must be made in the face of pressures from the environment that foster capitalist production relations.

I turn now to examine actual situations in the bakery that have the potential to undermine or transform collective relations: organizational crises that challenge the collective nature of the bakery. These situations are defined as crises because they are crucial points around which struggles are waged, the resolution of which tend to tip the scales either on the side of collectivity or on the side of more conventional organization. These crises are triggered by external pressures that impinge on

the group, in some way threatening its survival as a collective and placing in jeopardy some of its fundamental assumptions.

Just as these crises are precipitated from outside, the group's ability to resolve them as a collective depends on its ability to dip into the community in which it is located for support. When the collective is able to reach out and extract resources for its survival, then problems can be resolved in the direction of collectivity. When the environment is not a source of sustenance, then the tendency to make decisions detrimental to the collective can be intensified.

The three crises that I have selected took place during the period that I did my field work. The first, the white flour debate, a crisis of principle, was relatively easily resolved in a manner that reaffirmed the goals of the collective. The other two, the management and the delivery shift crises, typify chronic dilemmas of the organization that are likely to crop up again and again. While the outcome of the struggle over management and coordination was the restoration of collective relations, the delivery shift crisis was still in flux when I left the bakery and had the potential to be a divisive factor in the group.

#### *The White Flour Controversy: A Crisis of Definition*

When Wholly Grains' members make a decision about a new product, it is grounded first and foremost in their commitment to using certain ingredients such as whole-grain flour and not using others, refined sugar for instance. Their production goal as a collective is not primarily centered on profit but to further certain objectives basic to the organization.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, they are in competition with other bakeries largely constrained only by considerations of profit and loss. So it is not surprising that there is always pressure to become more competitive, thus more profitable, by watering down the standards of the product "just a little bit" to make it more palatable to a mass audience.

Everyone in the collective has some stake in this growth: more profit translates potentially into higher wages, better benefits, a cushion for emergencies, or relocation to a more comfortable setting. Yet when the white flour crisis came to a head, the resolution seemed to fly in the face of profitability and expansion and uphold the principles of the bakery.

The crisis erupted when one of the bakers began experimenting with a whole-grain loaf that had some organic white flour added to the mix. He baked a few loaves for people to taste, and for a number of weeks there was a great deal of taste-testing going on. While some members scathingly dismissed it as "cotton candy," others seemed quite enthusiastic about it. Whether to add this hybrid to bakery production was put on the agenda of the bread shift meeting where, surprisingly, there was

support for the white flour bread. Then one of the oldest members spoke up: "This is a whole-grain bakery," he said. "We're part of the Whole Grain Association. If we start using white flour and it sells, I'm afraid we'll be drawn more and more to white flour. If we decide to add white flour, I'll have to resign." This speech, delivered with a great deal of passion by one of the quieter members, stunned shift members. It was clear now that the addition of white flour bread would be seriously divisive. Word of what happened at the meeting went around the bakery rapidly. I was told that the question of white flour would probably be put on the agenda of the next collective meeting to be discussed by the whole group. But it never was, and the subject was dropped. Within weeks the "white flour" baker left to join another collective bakery in the area, one with less uncompromising nutritional stands that uses white flour and sugar.

The crisis was ostensibly resolved by the decision of the baker who was its chief proponent not to remain in the collective. But the decision to add a little white flour to make one variety more widely appealing than others might not have been so easily shelved if the market for Wholly Grains type of products had not been flourishing. Indeed, that baker and his supporters could very well have won the day. As it is, however, the market for whole-grain breads is expanding as people become increasingly conscious of what they eat and anxious about what has been added to food to make it last longer on the shelves. Right now, Wholly Grains, instead of watering down its principles by making its bread more acceptable to a wider audience, can afford to stick to its standards knowing that there is a growing demand for what it produces. In fact, the market situation is favorable enough at this point that some members were talking of producing an even more "pure" and possibly more expensive bread that contains only organic ingredients.

#### *Structuring Power: The Management Crisis*

The present system of coordination in the collective is a new one put in place to undo an arrangement where one member managed the operation and was paid more for doing so. This system deeply undermined the character of the collective. According to one member, for a time "apathy and stagnation were the result."

But the decision to hire a manager was a desperate survival strategy adopted because the bakery was facing a severe financial crisis. One of the founding members proposed to take on the position in return for a higher salary than the rest. "We hired him because we hoped he'd provide leadership, move the collective forward," I was told. "We got

through the financial crisis, but he didn't turn us around as a collective."

Resentment of the manager and resistance to the new setup began to surface after only a few months. It crystallized around a new member who led a struggle for the restoration of what she described as "a real collective, what I expected to find when I joined." She was appalled instead to find that "they couldn't call themselves a democratic workplace. There was a manager and he was paid more than the rest of us. He controlled all the information about the operations of the bakery so it was hard for us to make any real decisions at the collective meeting." She found support from some old members who were rejoining the group as well as from others who were disturbed about the inequitable relationship that had evolved. What had seemed to be the only way out of a bleak financial situation had become an intolerable one. They began the task of developing something new, and they found outside help to do so.

The members were able to call on the services of a consulting firm in the area whose "primary purpose is to help develop and improve the effectiveness of democratic organizations."<sup>21</sup> With the firm's help, the present system of coordinators and committees was developed and steps were taken to improve the business operation of the bakery.

It is hard to predict exactly what would have been the outcome of this crisis without the support of outside mediation and expertise and impossible to be sure of the result without the infusion of enthusiasm, ideals, and expectations of personal empowerment brought into the group in the form of new members. It is possible that the struggle to oust the manager would have occurred anyway. On the other hand, it seems likely that the managerial structure would have become more and more entrenched as the "efficiency" of this method of control was demonstrated by an improved financial condition.

While the new system has reinvigorated the collective principle at Wholly Grains by rejecting the conventional division of labor and authority and redistributing power throughout the membership, it is not, as one longtime member of the collective observed, "all that successful." Only months after the changeover, one of the coordinators, a respected person who had led the struggle against the managerial structure, resigned. In her formal resignation at the collective meeting she said: "I don't mind doing the things that a coordinator has to do. But I don't want to be the coordinator. It's not the new structure. That's OK. It's me. I'm a perfectionist and I take on too much of the stress of the job."

Since then, no one has come forward willing to run for the position. The former manager explained this to me: "People understand that the position incurs the resentment of others. They saw [her] going crazy



without getting paid anything extra for it. They don't want to take it on."

But it is far more than just the lack of monetary incentive that makes members reluctant to take on the job. The coordinator role in the collective is not simply a neutral figure but the day-to-day locus of collective power. One of the consultants described the position as being "like a lightning rod in that framework. You take every shock on."

Also highly significant is the meaning of the role that members bring from the outside world. Managing others and being managed are relationships which I believe the majority of members of Wholly Grains are consciously rejecting. One member explained to me my first evening working on the bagging shift, "We're not very good at training people—telling them what to do—but you must have figured that out by now. We don't like to do that kind of thing. That's why we're here."

The management crisis was resolved by a thorough restructuring of a relationship that threatened to reshape the bakery along more conventional lines and by reestablishing some process by which power can be shared among the entire membership. The presence of new members with a strong commitment to workplace democracy and yet untested ideals about what a collective should be facilitated this resolution. New members provide a regular injection of enthusiasm and optimism into the group.

Also crucial was the existence of a consulting firm in the area specializing in worker cooperatives. Even though the new system seems to conform only partially to the blueprint worked out with the firm's help, it nonetheless brought about a dispersal of managerial responsibility and knowledge that seems to be shaping the newly emerging structure. A member who has recently been doing some of the calculations essential for production remarked, "I used to be totally mystified by the bake sheet. I have to do it now, and it's really quite simple." She envisions a system of coordination that parcels the duties and tasks out among many people. This seems to be indeed what is evolving.

#### *A Warrior Caste? The Delivery Shift Crisis*

More than half of the income of the collective goes to pay members' wages and benefits. The rest goes to buy ingredients, packaging material, and insurance, pay the rent, repair machinery and equipment, and so on. These are all costs which are outside the control of the collective and which they must absorb in some way. What is spent on wages, however, is regulated entirely by the collective as members themselves decide on how much of their intake they will use for that purpose.

During a financial crisis about two years ago brought on largely because of an ever-expanding wage bill, the collective agreed to adopt a mechanism to control labor costs, "the efficiency standard." Up to that time, productivity had been recorded but no norm established for how long tasks should take. At the time of the crisis, the ex-manager told me, "more people were on the shifts than ever, but we were producing the same amount as before. We had to do something."

The efficiency standard is based on the average time that it takes to do a task. Baggers, for example, are supposed to bag seventy-five loaves an hour, bakers to produce forty-two loaves an hour. Each shift has a half-hour leeway. Should a shift consistently go overtime, then wages are docked—they are not paid for the total number of hours worked. On the other hand, shifts that complete their task under the allotted time can receive bonuses. People that I talked to seemed ambivalent about the standard: "[The] efficiency [standard] is useful because rising labor costs are always a big problem for us. But it has its drawbacks. The system rewards people for going fast. Bakers may spoil a batch by forgetting to put some essential ingredient in because they are hurrying to get the work done."

The standard has a very different impact on the shifts in the bakery. Certain shifts are more easily monitored than others. A shift such as bagging, which produces a certain quantity of items per hour and in which the work takes place in the bakery in sight of other members, is more easily controlled than one such as delivery, which provides intangible services and operates all over the Bay Area. And in fact, the system is officially in place for all the shifts in the collective but delivery. At the same time that the bakers had to cut back the number of workers on a shift to conform with the standard and when baggers had been warned that they were operating below standard and "efficiency" would be enforced, delivery workers were relatively free to go about their routes as speedily or as slowly as they chose.

The drivers, under pressure from the rest of the collective to come up with shift norms, claim that it is well-nigh impossible to calculate how much time it takes to do deliveries because there are so many factors involved in their work over which they have no control, from traffic conditions to public relations in the stores. Nevertheless, it should not be impossible for them to come up with some reasonable average since they know that the other members would accept whatever they propose. It would seem, therefore, that what they are really doing is resisting any control (even in principle) over the terms of their job.

How has the delivery shift managed to retain control over their wage and the conditions of their work while others have not? To address this

question, I will examine the nature of the drivers' work and how that relates to who the drivers are.

The delivery shift had eight members at the time I was doing my field work. While delivery tends to be a male job in the work force outside the collective, half of the bakery's drivers were women.<sup>22</sup> One of the women and one of the men had been members for several years. The delivery shift is responsible for distributing Wholly Grains' products to retail outlets in the area every day except Sundays. On my day accompanying one of the drivers, I found that it could be a long and lonely day with no company but the radio. Drivers leave early in the morning to cover certain routes. Most routes are choked with traffic, and parking is impossible. On arrival at a store, they first check to see how much bread remains on the shelves, make a decision about how many fresh loaves to put out and how many to pull, arrange the loaves on the shelves as attractively as space assigned allows, take care of billing arrangements, then go on to the next store. Back at the bakery, the drivers unload the "returns" and do the necessary paperwork. It is a stressful, arduous day.

On the other hand there are many attractive aspects to delivery. As a driver you are out and about town. No one monitors or supervises your work—you are truly on your own. Since you are on your own, no one depends on you to get your part of a task done, so you have a much greater ability to pace yourself. The delivery shift seems to have a strong sense of identity as a work team. One of the members told me that they are the only shift that meets outside of the bakery and the only one that refused to allow the manager to attend their meetings as he was no longer a driver.

I would like to speculate on some possible reasons why the delivery shift has been able to resist the collective's efforts to standardize their work. First, experienced delivery people who want to join the collective are hard to find. Drivers make good money working for regular businesses. While a job with a regular firm might involve more supervision and less autonomy, it is still inherently a more independent and flexible occupation than most others. So they have less to gain from being a part of a collective. Second, the nature of the job is such that it cannot be monitored like other in-house tasks. Third, as the conduit between the production and sales ends of the operation, the delivery shift has the best overall picture of market conditions. Others have only a partial view. This knowledge is extremely valuable for the bakery in terms of decisions about future products and gives the drivers a lot of say in decisions. Finally, drivers work on their own outside of the bakery, so they are unlikely to experience the full impact of the culture of the collective, and the pressures to conform are more easily avoided.

The delivery shift crisis has created internal distinctions among collective members as one shift becomes differentiated from the others. But other members have become very sensitive to this potential "elite" in their midst. "A warrior caste" is how one person characterized them. And so the collective has begun the process of reining the drivers in. For example, a newly instated requirement of all recently hired drivers is that they work on the bagging shift, which is the least desirable, most routinized work in the bakery. Supposedly, this would involve drivers in on-site cooperative work as well as one part of the production process with which they are most directly concerned, the packaging. Still, this strategy is only partially successful. Some drivers pay lip service to the requirement; others refuse to bag. It appears that when drivers can survive on delivery hours, they quit bagging. Furthermore, the chances of drivers getting all the hours they need are excellent since their wage is still not controlled by the collective but by the drivers themselves.

This crisis was still unresolved as I finished my field work: the delivery shift was continuing to take their time over the calculation of a norm; the other members were grumbling over the number of hours that certain drivers were able to claim. Given this stalemate, the possibility for an entrenchment of inequity between work shifts looms large in the collective. It threatens the collectivity of the group as it contains the seeds of a division of labor where one work shift has greater control over the conditions of work and more access to the fruits of the collective labor than the others.

Yet my time with the group gives me reason to be optimistic about the outcome of this crisis. Once again, time and place seem to be particularly fortuitous for its resolution. First, several members of the delivery shift are also representative of that very infusion of new idealism and enthusiasm for workplace democracy that helped to turn the management crisis around. They have a personal stake in seeing the collective work as a collective.

The growing demand and appreciation of whole-grain products already noted means that while profits remain small, the bakery has been in a position to give some shifts bonuses and to not enforce the efficiency standard on shifts such as bagging that tend to consistently go over the norm. The forecast might be far more dismal if markets were shrinking and declining profits meant that the total wage bill had to be drastically cut.

Finally, the very nature of what it means to be a collective might point us in the direction of why there is likely to be a resolution given the previously listed external conditions: each individual is not only a worker but also an owner. So, paradoxically, while it might seem in each individual's interest to appropriate as much as he or she can as a

worker, because each is also an owner, it is in his or her best interest to control the wage so that the whole enterprise can grow. The drivers are able to manipulate the situation so that they maintain control over the size of their wages, while others act within the bounds established to ensure the survival of the collective. But it is possible that the combination of self-interest and collective vigilance of other members as well as the drivers' own sense of membership will induce the drivers either to conform to the collective will or to force a reconceptualization of how the wage is distributed among the entire membership.

#### WHAT ABOUT THE FUTURE?

Worker cooperatives in the United States have indeed found it difficult to survive. Born out of the turbulence of hard times, they have tended to degenerate as the economic situation improves. Yet Wholly Grains bakery collective remains in business after fourteen years in spite of internal upheaval and financial hardships. Can the terms of success of this one collective tell us anything about the prospect for worker cooperatives in the future?

There is optimism in the literature about the future viability of worker cooperatives. Jackall and Levin, for example, suggest three reasons for this optimism. The first is the persistence of the hard economic times that have historically given birth to cooperatives. Second, they speculate that the continued deskilling of work might result in large numbers of people seeking the "greater challenges and involvement" that work in cooperatives provide. Finally, they predict a recurrence of a sixties-type revolt by young people whose skills, education, and creativity are not being used by "an increasingly bureaucratized economy" and who, as in the past, will seek an outlet in cooperative organization.<sup>23</sup>

This forecast, while encouraging, misses what is significant about the present economic crisis: a fundamental shift in the economy has taken place. This change is brought into focus by Michael Piore and Charles Sabel in *The Second Industrial Divide*. They argue that the present economic crisis in the United States is not just a temporary downturn but the result of the outmoded nature of the mass production model of industrial development on which capitalism in the United States has been based. As mass markets stagnate, enterprises have competed for customers by distinguishing their goods from those of others and re-educating consumers to "appreciate" this uniqueness. In this process, firms have developed the technology to cut the cost of customized production, narrowing the gap between the price of mass-produced and

craft-made products. This has made it easier to win customers away from mass-produced goods.<sup>24</sup>

These fundamental changes in the economy require a new model for production, "flexible specialization," which is characterized by its flexibility: a propensity for innovation, for "accommodation to ceaseless change rather than an effort to control it."<sup>25</sup> It is based on skilled workers, working collaboratively, able to respond to frequent changes in the production process. Central to the success of such a model, Piore and Sabel argue, is its embeddedness in a community of similar, related enterprises and supportive educational, political, and cultural institutions.

Worker cooperatives such as Wholly Grains appear to be prototypes of Piore and Sabel's flexible specialization. But, significantly, Piore and Sabel do not consider them. Indeed, they do not consider alternative forms of ownership and control that would meet the requirements of flexible specialization. They take for granted differences in power between owners and employees and gloss over the conflicting interests of capital and labor. Because they don't problematize these dimensions of capitalist production, they don't pay attention either to the despotic character of most forms of "flexible specialization" or to the possible ascendancy of worker cooperatives.

Their analysis of the second industrial divide does point to a widening space within which collectives such as Wholly Grains can exist as viable financial enterprises. No longer just marginal, anomalous creatures of hard times, these organizations are in fact structured along the lines considered most adaptive under the present economic circumstances. At the same time, they continue to offer something unique, an alternative for people who are determined to create and control their own conditions of work.

#### AFTERWORD: WRAPPING IT UP

I knew I would have to go back to the collective and present my paper sooner or later. But I tried to put it off for as long as I possibly could. On one hand, I strongly believed that I was bound to give the members some accounting of the time we had spent together. They had taken me in, told me their life stories, taken time to show me how bread was baked, loaves bagged, the product delivered, and patiently answered my questions. Now it was my turn. They expected and had a right to have a look at what I had to say about their organization. Several members had told me during my field work that they wanted to see my paper and I had somewhat glibly assured each that she would be the

first to have a copy. I knew that their responses to my paper would be some of the most important I would receive. I wanted the group to validate my findings by recognizing themselves in the story I was telling. I hoped that what I had to say would resonate with their own experience. But what if it didn't? What if they did not find my presentation meaningful or could not recognize themselves in it at all? I barely whispered this question to myself, so I had no clear answer as to what I would do, how I would feel given this eventuality.

My commitment to take my paper back to the bakery and my desire for their opinion did not automatically inhere in the process of field work itself. The many aspects of this final act as a researcher were discussed in our seminar; it was something that we each had to consider independently based on the nature of our specific field sites. We counseled each other, felt it was most ethical to do so, but agreed it was a decision we had to make for ourselves. We concluded that going back was not always feasible or wise. While it was possible for most of us to contemplate doing so, we envisioned situations where this would not be the case. We had all selected groups to study with whom we shared certain basic philosophical and political assumptions. None of us had been covert in the field; our identities and purpose were known to all members.

There were other considerations as well. How best to communicate the information? Would sending a copy of the paper to the group be enough? While we had all tried to write clearly, making one's way through a thirty-page sociology paper can be a tiring task even for sociologists. Moreover, one of us had participated in a group of women for whom English was a recent second language, so just handing them a copy of the paper was an empty gesture. We decided that it would not be enough if we wanted real feedback from individuals. If we really wanted their opinions, we had to not only give them a copy of the paper but to make an oral summary presentation to the group.

During the months that I had been around the bakery, I had begun to feel very much a part of the membership. I worried about the imminent move to a new location, a drop in sales, and members who weren't showing up for work. I identified with the collective's goals; I wanted the bakery to thrive. Most important, I believed that the problem central to my paper—how the bakery was able to count on resources in the external environment to offset the many pressures to normalize—would be of interest and useful to them. So I decided to send my paper to the collective and to follow it up with an oral presentation to the membership.

But I was terrified to take the first step. The picture that I had painted was not always flattering and I had singled out one group

within the collective—the delivery shift—as being able to remain outside of the collective will. The bakery was a small, tightly knit organization, as one member described it, “like a village: you can't keep any secrets,” so it would be clear to everyone who I was talking about or even whom I had heard a story from. I was worried that this familiarity, this transparency would cause ill feelings and be divisive among the members. I was afraid that collective members would charge that my paper did not reflect their experience at all, that I was just wrong. I envisioned anger, resentment, and feelings of betrayal from people I had come to know fairly well and who had accepted me into their midst in an open and trusting way. I had to confront the fact that it was one thing to scribble observations in a private notebook, to share “theories” about what I was seeing with my colleagues in the seminar, to write a paper and make sociology out of the twenty lives and over a decade of experience of this unusual group. But it was quite another thing to stand in front of these twenty people and explain or defend what I had done.

I suppose I expected antagonism and resistance because of what had taken place in our own seminar when Charles Kurzman, who had done his observation of the class, presented his field notes, followed by his sociological analysis of what was really going on. As a group we had vociferously challenged his theories of us, and it was clear that the person he had singled out to make his point felt hurt and angry. We resisted being defined, objectified, classified, and categorized. Charlie may have been right about us, but once he had made his presentation we distanced ourselves from him by continually reminding him of his difference from us in the seminar.

One day I could avoid the collective no longer because it stood blocking my path in the shape of one of the members. This was not just any member, but one of the bakers, someone who was very much concerned with the emotional temperature of the bakery, the member most likely to be called upon to mediate when they were having problems. I felt that she was the right person with whom to share my dilemma. We greeted each other and she asked if I had finished my paper. Yes, I'd been meaning to bring it by, I told her.

Then I confided in her that while I wanted to know what the group thought about it, I was also concerned that it might hurt certain individuals and might force issues out into the open that could be divisive. She agreed to read the paper first and then let me know how she thought it might be best handled. In addition, I offered to come to a meeting of the collective to present my findings. A week later, she called to tell me that she liked the paper and had made copies for the other members to read, and that I was on the agenda of the next collective meeting.

The collective meeting is low-key and, given all my fantasies, anti-climactic. People greet me as I arrive with welcoming smiles and nods. I take my seat. We are meeting in the very same room in which I had met with the Steering Committee on my first visit to the bakery. Again we sit in a circle. The agenda is on butcher paper tacked up on a post. Once again the issues to be taken up at the meeting look likely to involve lengthy discussions: Three new members are being inducted into the group, the move to a new location is to be discussed, and there are problems staffing all shifts. Serious, life-and-death matters for the collective are to be deliberated on. My part seems like a mere diversion. I feel neither a stranger, as I did at first, nor at home, as I did later. Now I am a visitor.

By the time my turn comes, we are already pressed for time and I must be brief. I thank the group for allowing me to work in the bakery and to gather the data for my research, and I outline my argument. As I speak I realize that there are two or three new people in the room who are unaware that I had been a part of the group only a few months before and are probably a bit puzzled as to who I am. The person who had received the most negative attention in the paper avoids my gaze throughout the entire meeting. I conclude by explaining that my paper might be published as a chapter in a book, so I am especially eager to get comments from them.

There are few questions. One is about the book. One of the new members asks if I had discovered anything that would be useful to them in the collective. This question is seriously put, without a trace of irony. I go over my conclusion: there are certain crises endemic to the collective, they have managed to survive these, I believe, because of certain conditions in the environment in which they are located. Some crises are more difficult to overcome and endanger collectivity. I believe that how wages are distributed, as well as the ability of certain groups to stand outside the control of the collective body, is such a crisis and should be discussed. Surely, someone will take me up on this contention. There is silence, however. I get up and make a quick exit so that the rest of the long agenda can be covered.

But to my surprise this was not the end but rather the beginning of an exchange that continues. As I left, one of the delivery shift members, J., one of the most lively, argumentative, and opinionated members, told me that he had some comments on my paper. Later he sent me six single-spaced typewritten pages. We met twice in the next few weeks to discuss them. It was through this discussion and my subsequent meeting with other collective members individually outside the bakery that I learned how people really felt about the paper. I gathered from these conversations that people in the bakery were talking about what I had

to say. One member told me that the bread shift liked what I had to say. I also discovered the ire of one of the new delivery people, who felt I had ignored how diligent and committed the delivery team is.

One of the founding members said that my paper just goes to show that no outsider can really capture the reality of the bakery. Perhaps this is true. Yet as I reflect on his comment I realize that my position as outsider made it much easier for me to write the kind of paper I did. While I had stage fright about presenting my paper in case feelings might be hurt, I did not hesitate to take one position finally, discarding a number of other valuable, interesting positions I might have taken. I envisioned what it might have been like to write the paper as a collective effort with the bakery members. It would have been extremely difficult to come to any decision about which issues to emphasize and what perspective to take on those issues. I believe we could have generated a number of position papers and debates, a myriad of whole-grained perspectives. We could have come up with something truly practical and grounded in questions inspired by their most pressing needs. My bias tells me that to force one composite voice out of twenty-one would have produced one bland smooth product, a white-bread version of reality, that we could all feel comfortable with.

I am especially grateful to J. for his pages of comments. He meticulously went over the paper correcting factual errors I had made and providing background information where I had been vague or misleading. "It's of course very flattering," he wrote politely, "for our small organization to have been chosen as a paradigm of progressive producer, full of problems and potential. . . . Clearly I don't agree with all your facts and opinions on each critical issue which you choose to examine in some depth, but I agree with the overall thrust of the paper that the resolution of crisis is one of the more important facing a relatively small and relatively democratic producer/distributor co-op."

But the overwhelming message that I get from the six pages and from my intense discussions with him that followed is that this particular member of the delivery shift was contesting the formulation that I devised. He definitely did not agree with what I said about the role of the delivery shift. He challenged my assumptions and disagreed with my interpretations. These discussions help me to air my perspective with an insider. In this process I became clearer and more confident that what I have seen, though only one of the multiplicity of things to be seen and perspectives to see it from, is in fact there.

J. had questions of his own to raise in response to mine. These questions seem singularly fruitful to pursue. But he had neither the time nor the desire to follow these up on such an abstract level. He is busy with other collective members struggling to keep the old delivery trucks

running, delivering the bread, and helping to manage the business. I am left reflecting on the division of labor in which I find myself. Paradoxically, I was drawn to do research in a collective in order to examine their attempt to erase the distinction between mental and manual work and find myself firmly on one side of that divide: a mental worker interpreting the manual work of others.

## PART THREE

### New Immigrants