



From exception to pioneering: Insights on combining professional autonomy and social rights from the *Syndicat National des Artistes Plasticien-nes*

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ENG Abstract: This article contributes to the limited research on solo self-employed (SSE) workers, who strive to collectively address social and labour rights issues while preserving their autonomy. It examines a unique case within the French context, the *Syndicat National des Artistes Plasticien-nes* (SNAP), a trade union created in 1977 within the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) to represent self-employed visual artists. Through extensive ethnographic research conducted both online and offline, the study explores how SSE artists organise collectively to improve their access to social rights while protecting their autonomy, which is particularly crucial for creative workers. The findings show how SSE workers can unite to advocate for social protection while redefining the promise of professional autonomy embedded in the so-called 'enterprise culture'. Additionally, it sheds light on an early example of SSE workers organising, which may provide useful insights for other groups of SSE workers, who are rapidly growing across Europe.

Keywords: Autonomy; Creative work; Ethnography; France; Organising; Social rights; Solo self-employed; Union.

^{ES} De excepción a vanguardia: pistas para combinar autonomía profesional y derechos sociales a partir del *Syndicat National des Artistes Plasticien-nes*

Resumen: Este artículo resalta la escasa investigación sobre lxs trabajadorxs autónomxs sin empleadxs, que luchan por tratar colectivamente las cuestiones de los derechos sociales y laborales sin renunciar a su autonomía. Explora un caso único en el contexto francés, el *Syndicat National des Artistes Plasticien-nes* (SNAP), un sindicato creado en 1977 dentro de la Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) para representar a lxs artistas visuales autónomxs. Basándose en una amplia investigación etnográfica realizada tanto online como offline, el estudio examina cómo lxs artistas visuales autónomxs se organizan colectivamente para mejorar su acceso a los derechos sociales protegiendo al mismo tiempo su autonomía, que es especialmente crucial para trabajadorxs creativxs. Los resultados muestran cómo lxs trabajadorxs autónomxs sin empleadxs pueden unirse para defender la protección social mientras redefinen la promesa de autonomía profesional arraigada en la *enterprise culture*. Además, arroja luz sobre un ejemplo pionero de organización de trabajadorxs, que puede servir de inspiración para otros grupos de trabajadorxs autónomxs sin empleadxs, que están creciendo rápidamente en toda Europa.

Palabras clave: Autonomía; Trabajo creativo; Etnografía; Francia; Organización; Derechos sociales; Trabajadores/as autónomos/as; Sindicato.

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1. Introduction

During recent decades, European labour markets have been characterised by a growing diversification of employment forms, which have contributed to weakening the social protection of workers (Castel, 2009; Gumbrell-McCormick, 2011; Pais, de Guzmán and Iglesias-Onofrio, 2023). Historically, access to social rights has been based on full-time wage-employment in most European countries (Córdova, 1986; Supiot, 1999). Along with temp and part-time work, the expansion of self-employment has thus resulted in the growing exposure of workers to risks and uncertainties, making individuals solely responsible for their own careers (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1996; Sennett, 1998). At the same time, such individualisation processes may be perceived positively, when individuals adhere to the principles of the 'artistic critic' explored by Boltanski and Chiapello (1999), praising autonomy and creativity as central elements of all spheres of life (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Serrano et al., 2022). On the labour market, these processes have fostered the diffusion of so-called enterprise culture, which celebrates self-realisation and risk-taking and actually results in the self-responsibilisation of workers (Du Gay, 1996; Gorz, 2001; Rose, 1990). Solo self-employed (SSE) workers – i.e. self-employed workers without employees – epitomise the ambivalences of enterprise culture, as their legal independence, on the one hand, reflects an individual search for autonomy and self-fulfilment, but on the other, it also deprives them of the collective protections usually granted to employees (Mondon-Navazo, 2017; Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009; Célérier, Riesco-Sanz and Rolle, 2016). Moreover, SSE workers not only have a lack of social protection, but also of collective representation, since this category of workers challenges industrial relations systems historically based on the dichotomy of employment versus self-employment. Indeed, in continental European countries, the SSE remain largely excluded from trade unions, which are still mainly focused on representing wage-employed workers (Mezihorak et al., 2023; Pernicka, 2006; Pongratz and Abbenhardt, 2018).

Despite a growing public interest, there is still relatively little research on SSE workers' attempts to tackle through collective action the shortcomings in terms of social and labour rights as well as an interiorised enterprise culture closely intertwining autonomy and self-responsibilisation (Mondon-Navazo et al., 2022). This article aims at fuelling this debate, analysing an historical exception in the French context. In France, trade unions are indeed historically focused on organising employees and express a reluctance to represent the SSE whose legal status is perceived as posing a threat to classical wage-employment (Borghi et al., 2021; Fulton, 2018). Against this background, however, there is a trade union, created in 1977, which has long represented SSE workers within one of the biggest French trade unions: the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT). For decades, the *Syndicat National des Artistes Plasticien-nes* (SNAP) has represented SSE

visual artists within the federation dedicated to entertainment, cinema, audio-visual, and cultural action, which is mostly composed of employees.

In France, artists and technicians working in the performing arts can enjoy a specific regime allowing them to be legally wage-employed (see Bureau and Corsani, 2016), but this is not the case for authors and visual artists, who mostly work as SSE. As creators of original artistic works, artists-authors can benefit from a specific social security regime, which allows them to accumulate retirement benefits or to receive daily benefits in case of illness, maternity, or disability. However, artists-authors are not protected against accidents at work or occupational diseases and are not covered by unemployment insurance. It is in this very specific context that SNAP was founded within the CGT: to support, defend, and represent SSE visual artists. Differently from the other trade unions of the federation, SNAP does not have any representative who is paid to take care of the union. Being excluded from classical mechanisms of collective representation and therefore also from funding that enables the work of trade unions representatives, such as the employers' contribution, SNAP relies only on the voluntary work of its members.

Drawing on a long-running ethnography conducted both online and offline within SNAP, we investigated how SSE workers managed to defend their autonomy – especially crucial in the case of creative workers – while at the same time collectively organising to improve their access to social rights. The contribution of this article is twofold. From a theoretical point of view, by drawing on feminist relational approaches that have elaborated on the concept of autonomy, it shows how workers epitomising the enterprise culture can manage to collectively organise to defend social protection without renouncing the pursuit of their professional autonomy. Moreover, at the empirical level, this research sheds light on an early example of SSE workers organising, which may provide useful insights for other trade unions and groups of SSE workers, who are rapidly growing across Europe and are increasingly in need of collective representation.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, we present the theoretical framework of this research, discussing the individualisation processes and the enterprise culture epitomised by SSE artists. After illustrating our research methods, we then present the main empirical findings, exploring how SNAP members managed to both defend their professional autonomy and claim enhanced social rights. We finally discuss our findings, underlining how this historical exception represents an attempt to unbundle autonomy and self-responsibilisation, two notions presented as inextricably linked in the enterprise culture.

2. Collective organising as a counter to enterprise culture

2.1. In search of autonomy: from individual self-realisation to the realisation of collective rights

In Western countries, the ambivalence of ongoing individualisation processes has been underlined by many authors (Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1996; Castel and Haroche, 2001). While the emancipation from traditional structures encouraged by industrialisation and urbanisation processes may constitute a step forward towards autonomy and self-realisation, modern individuals are also increasingly urged to bear the responsibility for their own lives without relying on collective support. It is thus left to each person to individually assume the consequences of social problems on their life course (Beck, 1992; Castel, 2009; Sennett, 1998, 2006). On the labour market, these individualisation processes gave rise to the injunction for workers to become 'entrepreneurs of themselves' (Foucault, 2008 [1979]), striving for autonomy and looking for fulfilling jobs while coping individually with the risks to which they are exposed (Gorz, 2001; Miller and Rose, 2008). This valorisation of self-realisation through meaningful jobs, which in turn results in the self-responsibilisation of workers, has been referred to as an 'enterprise culture' (Du Gay, 1996), which encourages workers to adopt a consumer-oriented outlook towards their jobs and themselves. The enterprise culture can thus be seen as a mechanism of power that shapes and controls workers' behaviours and aspirations and serves to align individuals with the dominant values of consumerism and market-driven ideologies (Du Gay, 1996; Rose, 1990). In this frame, artists are

often referred to as the pioneers of this type of professional culture, which also ambivalently embodies the valorisation of creative freedom and a passionate relationship to work (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999; Murgia and Pulignano, 2020), resulting in precarious working conditions and blurred identities and work-life boundaries (Del Marmol et al., 2017; Morgan et al., 2013; Pinochet Cobos and Muñoz-Retamal, 2022; Turrini and Chicchi, 2016).

By combining the search for autonomy and the individual management of social risks, the enterprise culture falls in line with the 'autonomy myth' conceptualised by feminist scholars (Fineman, 2008; Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds, 2014). According to this ideology, typical of contemporary capitalism, individuals are deemed to be self-sufficient and do not need any kind of collective support (Fineman, 2000). In this perspective, any form of collective regulation would encroach on their autonomy (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000). In this neoliberal approach to autonomy, the latter would therefore be incompatible with social protection mechanisms based on collective solidarity (Anderson, 2014; Fineman, 2008). Workers would then face a trade-off between social rights and autonomy, having no choice but to give up any inclination for autonomy if they want to be socially protected.

The supposed incompatibility between self-employment and social protection has been challenged by several scholars who have proposed redefining the concept of autonomy by acknowledging the vulnerability inherent to the human condition, which actually calls for collective protection (Goodin, 1985; Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds, 2014). In the specific context of work, therefore, there is thus room for conceptualisations of autonomy that distance themselves from risk-taking and self-reliance (Anderson, 2014; Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000). The ability to choose meaningful jobs or assignments, to decide on working time and place or to enjoy creative freedom – i.e. the dimensions of autonomy usually referred to in the literature – may not contradict the defence of social protection (Eurofound, 2013; Rosenfield and Alves, 2011).

2.2. Bringing together individualised workers: the case of the SSE

SSE workers epitomise the enterprise culture mentioned in the previous section (Fleming, 2017; Moisander, Groß and Eräranta, 2018). The legal independence of these workers may arise from their aspiration to escape the subordination characterising traditional wage-employment (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2013). Solo self-employment thus also reflects a desire for autonomy of workers, even if this promise is not always kept (Mondon-Navazo, 2017; Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009; Célérier, Riesco-Sanz and Rolle, 2016). At the same time, the SSE do not benefit from the social protections granted to employees and in many European countries must cope on their own with social risks such as unemployment or occupational accidents (Conen and Schippers, 2019; Dupuy and Larré, 1998; Serrano-Pascual and Jepsen, 2018). They thus illustrate the 'radical responsabilisation of the workforce' noted by Fleming (2017: 692-693) and the increased exposure to risks involved in the enterprise culture (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008; Moisander, Groß and Eräranta, 2018).

In this context, it seems particularly crucial for these workers to collectively organise and to claim better access to social protection. However, the collective action of the SSE is a complex issue in continental Europe, especially in industrial relations systems based on the coexistence of two main actors, i.e. trade unions and employer associations (Murgia et al., 2020; Conen and Schippers, 2019; Jansen, 2020). Because of their legal independence, differently from more deregulated institutional regimes, such as Ireland or the UK, SSE workers remain out of the scope of many European trade unions historically focused on representing employees (Mezihorak et al., 2023; Pernicka, 2006). For a long time, most trade unions considered the SSE mainly as entrepreneurs, closer to employers than to employees, or as bogus self-employed workers to be converted into employees (Haake, 2017; Heery, 2009). And although some professional associations or grassroots groups have emerged during recent decades to give voice to (genuine) SSE workers, they still lack the legal recognition and institutional resources characterising well-established trade unions (see Jansen, 2020). Only in recent years, also due to the recent spread of solo self-employment through platform work, have trade unions increasingly started organising these workers in continental Europe (Fulton, 2018; Lenaerts et al., 2018). In these contexts, however,

approaching the SSE is a challenging task, especially for trade unions used to interacting with union representatives within companies. Unlike employees, SSE workers are particularly individualised, since they do not share a workplace and are often not part of a work community (Murgia et al., 2020; Conen and Schippers, 2019). The creation of ad-hoc structures for the collective representation of the SSE and the construction of common claims are ongoing processes in several European trade unions (Countouris and De Stefano, 2019; Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017). To analyse this trend, an emerging research stream began to investigate the trade unions' initiatives to represent the SSE (Murgia et al., 2020; Gumbrell-McCormick, 2011; Pernicka, 2006). It is this line of research that this article proposes to fuel, analysing the practices of a trade union which was a pioneer in organising this category of workers and calling for better social protection, since it has represented SSE artists for almost 50 years.

3. Research design and methods: a long-running ethnography, both online and offline

It was in the frame of a research project aimed at studying collective representation of SSE workers in Europe that an ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in France to grasp the organising practices of the main trade unions attempting to approach the SSE (Murgia et al., 2020). While the interviews we conducted within several trade unions and employer organisations confirmed that the collective representation of SSE workers was still an emerging field in most French trade unions, we discovered during the fieldwork the existence of SNAP within the CGT – we thus decided to focus on this 'atypical case study'. Atypical case studies are defined as those empirical cases that could "challenge and assist theorizers to account for enigmatic counterexamples at the margins of generalized explanations, offering invaluable opportunities to improve abstracted representations of social phenomena" (Mabry, 2008: 218). In our study, thanks to an immersive experience in the studied context, it was possible to identify a case study that was never previously explored in the debate on the collective representation of the SSE, despite being a pioneering case within the French context, and more generally in continental Europe.

Regarding access to the fieldwork, we made contact with SNAP members thanks to the intermediation of federal representatives a few weeks after the lockdown measures taken in France in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. An initial online interview with one of the three co-secretaries composing the SNAP bureau was conducted, and the first author of this article was then invited to participate in the online meeting of the Executive Commission, which is composed of about 20 (voluntary) members, in charge of implementing the strategic orientations elaborated during the triennial congress.

Starting in May 2020, the first author could participate in all weekly online meetings. From September 2020, the frequency of the meetings decreased, but we could still participate in the Executive Commission meetings once a month, until we decided, at the end of June 2021, to end the fieldwork, which had then lasted over a year. During this period, we were also invited to observe five online meetings open more widely to non-SNAP members. The ethnographer also had the opportunity to join SNAP in three demonstrations organised in Paris to ask for the reopening, following pandemic closures, of cultural and artistic spaces. She could thus meet in person several SNAP members based in Paris. Moreover, she participated in a general assembly called by the CGT entertainment federation and in several activities organised at the Odeon theatre, in Paris, during theatre occupations that took place in 2021 in many French cities. Beyond the numerous ethnographic interviews conducted during events and demonstrations, ten semi-structured interviews with members of the Executive Commission and with two representatives at the federal level were also conducted and recorded. The study was conducted in French, then fieldnotes and interviews were all transcribed and translated into English. The monolingual texts were shared via a remotely accessible server every two weeks within our research team, to allow post-data collection based on collective conversations.

To analyse the documents provided by interviewees, the content of the SNAP website, the fieldnotes, and the interview transcripts, we decided to adopt an inductive and iterative approach,

typical of organisational ethnographies (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2013), by using the software Atlas.ti to code the collected data. In particular, we identified the recurrent topics regarding the working conditions, occupational paths, and subjective relationship with work of SNAP members, on the one hand, and the collective practices developed within and beyond SNAP to support SSE artists and to claim enhanced social rights on the other hand. Such an inductive process allowed us to build categories able to grasp the positioning of SNAP within the union landscape, its actions and campaigns, its internal organisation, and its relationship with the entertainment federation.

4. Findings: defending (collectively) autonomy and rights

4.1. (Auto-)representations of autonomy

As pointed out in the theoretical section, artists are often seen as an emblematic example of creative freedom. In this respect, at the time of the fieldwork, SNAP members were not an exception, as they claimed to have the opportunity to express their creativity through their working activities and to feel passion for their job. Most of the artists interviewed reported that their relative autonomy in deciding whether or not to accept a project enabled them to prioritise activities that brought them the greatest satisfaction and were most meaningful to them, for several different reasons. The dimension of pleasure thus mattered for many interviewees.

Twenty metres below the dome, and we're going to do a scenography where we'll hang paintings in the air. It's going to be a lot of fun. It's not very well paid, but it gives us a cool perspective! (Interview with a SNAP member)

However, in most of the stories collected, pleasure was not only about personal fulfilment, but was described in relation to the public or political value of their work as artists-authors. Indeed, several SNAP members claimed to provide a 'public service' or to refuse orders from private companies and instead dedicate their talent and skills to public organisations and associations closer to their political values.

So, as a sculptor, I respond to public commissions. Installing a work in a public garden is the most exciting thing for me. You're doing something for people. Sometimes I get orders from individuals, and it's also very, very interesting to respond to a request. Sometimes it's for cemeteries... So, you have an extremely intimate relationship with people. It's a really particular creative act [...] I think it's really interesting to explore. So, I'm a very public sculptor... It's about public service, in a garden, and it's about personal service, when someone asks me to do a piece for a grave. (Interview with a SNAP member)

I mainly produce communication materials for associations, local communities... I haven't done much work for companies. In fact, I haven't done any at all. In the end, it's a lot of people who come to me through activism. [...] For me, that works well as a way of 'networking', in inverted commas. Because... that way I know who I'm working with! (Interview with a SNAP member)

But even for artists-authors able to find satisfaction and a sense of realisation in their creations, their work autonomy in terms of place and time had a dark side too, mainly because of the blurring boundaries between professional and personal spheres and being conducive to extensive working hours. Preventing exhaustion was thus a constant challenge for SNAP members and required the deployment of strategies to regulate their passionate relationship with work.

I'm setting the framework for my work too. I'm in a coworking space, and I try to have a somewhat regular day. I don't want to seek the kind of framework you might have when you're an employee, but I try to have more or less decent hours, so that not all my time is working time. Because there's a very fine line between work and activism and other things, I have to structure things so that I'm not potentially working all the time. (Interview with a SNAP member)

Autonomy at work could also be strongly limited by external demands. Far from the mythical image of artists freely expressing their creativity in a studio isolated from the world, SNAP members were sometimes describing creative processes submitted to heavy constraints regarding

their content or their timeframe. In this regard, an interviewee underlined that overly precise customer specifications were experienced as limits to inspiration and a reduction in enjoyment.

I've given up the idea of making a living from it, so that I can paint what I want to paint. Before, I used to paint custom orders, but I stopped doing that. I was no longer enjoying it. You're a bit limited, because clients want a certain colour that matches their sofa... I don't do interior design. (Interview with a SNAP member)

A further limitation often cited by interviewees was the need to deal with increasingly limited resources and time constraints. In the excerpt below, a SNAP member described how external circumstances forced her to create a scenography that could fit into a reduced budget and a tighter schedule.

The phone rings, a director calls because he's got a project. I tell him, "Send me the script", and I start daydreaming, getting excited about it, sketching things out... And three weeks later, the phone rings: "Sorry, we haven't got the grant, we're not going to do it" [she laughs]. So, I'm drawing a line under my project. A month later, the phone rings: "We've got a bit of the grant back, so we're doing the project, but with less money". In the meantime, two months had gone by. But the première of the show is still scheduled for the same day. (Interview with a SNAP member)

The autonomy of the artists participating in the research was limited not only by restrictions on working time and working methods, but also by reduced incomes linked to uncertain funding. Most of the interviewees were thus expecting to receive a low income.

Apart from the after-school workshops, which bring in €300-400 per trimester, there's nothing regular about the rest, and I mostly charge a lot between May and July. And otherwise, it's discontinuous. But basically, since 2017, I've been fluctuating between €7,000 and €10,000 a year. (Interview with a SNAP member)

In a context of limited creative freedom and imposed working and pay conditions that were sometimes unsustainable, artists-authors could find themselves too isolated to be able to resist external pressures. Different from other artists such as actors or musicians, artists-authors actually reported working mainly on their own, as underlined by this interviewee:

When you're a performer, you work in a company. When you're an author, you work alone, and even when you work in places where there are other people around, in your practice, you're alone. So, in your relationship with all your contacts and all your clients, you're still alone. It's not a collective thing. So, the power relationship is complicated... (Interview with a SNAP member)

According to SNAP members, artists had thus to acknowledge themselves as workers and develop a thorough knowledge of their rights to limit their exploitation. This allowed them to navigate the complex landscape of self-employment, avoiding devaluing their work and instead being able to resist the frequent abusive practices of clients.

Free work is actually a pretty violent form of exploitation, and it takes a long time to realise it because you enjoy doing what you're doing, I think there's the idea of enjoying yourself and earning money on top of it, even though it's a job in itself. That's why I think it's so important to be aware of your rights and of the client duties, so that you don't get taken for a ride, and so that you don't experience these social confrontations so badly. (Interview with a SNAP member)

The need to cope with isolation and to make room for autonomy, perceived by interviewees as progressively limited by the numerous constraints imposed by clients, led this group of artist-authors to organise collectively to handle the difficult working conditions.

That's how I heard about SNAP: 'But what?! There's a CGT artists-authors' union? I'll join straight away!' And so, I did it. (Interview with a SNAP member)

For the artists we interviewed, collective organising therefore responded to the search for protection and autonomy, both in relation to their clients and in the broader sense of access to living conditions favourable to self-determination.

4.2. Unionising to demand social protection

For the SNAP members interviewed, defending the autonomy of artists-authors through collective action meant more than becoming aware of their rights to better manage their individual relationships with clients. The interviewees strongly expressed the conviction that enhanced social rights were crucial to enable artists-authors to both escape precariousness and develop a more fulfilling relationship with their work.

All professions that at some point managed to get out of terrible precariousness did so through these principles of collective rights, of mutualising things. I was thinking about miners. I mean, the solidarity funds in the mines, that's what at one point enabled people not to work until the last day of their lives. When they were ill, the fund paid for it – it was the beginning of social security, in a way. (Interview with a SNAP member)

This awareness of the solidarity mechanisms underpinning social rights was consistent with the CGT positions. Indeed, even if SNAP differed from other trade unions in that it represented legally self-employed workers, they shared with their other CGT comrades the commitment to defend and enhance the social rights of artists, regardless of whether they worked as self-employed or as employees.

In a way, that's our vocation at the CGT. It's because the CGT is a union of different trades. Most of them are employees who have decided that wage employment is what brings them together to fight for and win social rights. And as a small union, within the CGT, of non-employees, it was logical for us to adopt a similar approach. (Interview with a SNAP Executive Commission member)

Unlike most freelance associations, which tend to call mainly for tax exemptions or lower social security contributions for the self-employed, SNAP – in line with trade unions' objectives – preferred instead to advocate for a public system of social protection based on the payment of contributions. This political positioning was sometimes misunderstood by artists-authors eager to increase their net income, making it necessary to explain the importance of solidarity-based contributions. As an example, during an online meeting with SNAP members, an artist expressed her personal reluctance to pay contributions. SNAP Executive Commission members reacted collectively, making an effort to make her aware of the relevance of universal proportional social contributions.

During the online open meeting, Christelle introduces herself to the members of the Executive Commission. She explains that her income as an artist is not enough to reach the threshold for social rights. In this context, she asks: "Why do we pay contributions that do not entitle us to anything? Why would the SNAP CGT find this normal and why wouldn't we defend something different?" Three members of the Executive Commission then take the floor to answer her. The first person affirms that SNAP is in favour of all professional income being subject to contributions, in proportion to the profits generated. It would be dangerous to open the way to exemptions from social security contributions: "Afterwards, you enter a system where you accumulate privileges, we prefer the application of a fair principle". The second person argues that the payment of social security contributions confers a valuable form of legitimacy to artists-authors. A third member points out that Christelle would probably not question the level of her social security contributions if she were an employee, and that artists-authors already benefit from lower social security contributions than other self-employed workers. (Fieldnotes, online meeting of 28 October 2020)

As observed in several similar situations, the response to doubts expressed by an artist was handled collectively by the members of the Executive Commission. In all the cases we could observe, the artists who had raised doubts were satisfied with the explanations and convinced of the importance of paying social contributions. In the specific case of Christelle, we met her again in other meetings where social protection was discussed, where she not only raised no objections but also supported this union approach.

In line with this defence of social rights, SNAP members were contesting the exemptions from social security contributions announced by the government during the Covid-19 pandemic. Presented as a way of supporting artists affected by lockdown measures, such an exoneration, in

their view, had the result of weakening the social protection system in the long term. If SNAP activists were welcoming the fact that artists in trouble were temporarily exempted from paying contributions, they stressed the need for the State to bear the corresponding costs in order to guarantee both the continuity of artists' social security contributions and the sustainability of the social protection system as a whole. With respect to this, below is the statement posted on the SNAP website:

The exemption from *charges* (contributions) is the death of our social protection and public service! In the context of the health crisis and the suspension of our broadcasting activities, the SNAPcgt asks for the solidarity-based PAYMENT OF CONTRIBUTIONS by the overall Social Security system, so that everyone benefits from its full protection.

(Excerpt from the SNAP website, <https://www.snapcgt.org/chantiers/droits-sociaux>, published on 10/05/2021)

In such cases, when the SNAP asked to be heard by the national Government, the support of the federal representatives appeared to be decisive. Indeed, the CGT federation, dedicated to entertainment, cinema, audio-visual, and cultural activities, could benefit from an institutional acknowledgment and political clout which were much more significant than SNAP's. Members of the Executive Commission were well aware of this asymmetry and were grateful to the federation.

The federation supports us. For example, they wrote a letter to the Ministry of Culture, based on what we had done, using our figures about the support measures. So, they're relaying it. Because obviously, when it's the federation, it has a bit more weight than when it's the SNAP-CGT. (Interview with a SNAP member)

In this perspective, SNAP members explicitly connected their activities and claims with the union's affiliation to the CGT. Being part of a cross-sectorial organisation seemed therefore to play a role in developing a broader political vision and building ambitious counterproposals, focusing not only on artists-authors or self-employed workers but more generally on all workers.

We stand out from the other [artists] organisations, due to being in the CGT, because we have concerns which go beyond corporatist concerns. [...] The idea is to put the interests of all first, but not our own interests. And that's where we're going a bit further, as a trade union. For some time now, we've been trying to go further than just preserving our own little gains and status. We have to go further, we have to ask for more, we have to dream more. It's not easy at the moment, but we have to do it. (Interview with a SNAP member)

In parallel to building collective awareness of unionism, SNAP also offered its members concrete support to carry out the administrative procedures needed to benefit from the rights to which they were entitled. Artists-authors in difficult situations could thus consult SNAP for help, either by directly contacting one of the Executive Commission members or by attending meetings dedicated to discussing their problems. Before the pandemic, collective face-to-face meetings were organised every year to allow members to gather to complete their declaration together.

Once a year there are meetings where everyone fills in their contribution forms together. Some people come with questions, or their whole file, and problems, and... we answer them. That's really cool. It's political, but it's less militant, it's more about helping each other, in fact. Which is also totally fine. (Interview with a SNAP member)

Despite the commitment and focus on solving members' individual problems, this was not perceived as the union's main purpose. Here again, SNAP showed that it was far from classical SSE and employer organisations focused on building a service offer sufficient for members to consider membership worthwhile in an instrumental approach. The main reason SNAP members mobilised was to defend a shared political vision, not to become a service union to increase the number of members as much as possible.

One thing I've always defended is the fact that SNAP is not a service union. Of course, when a member has a question, we're there to try to answer it and find a solution to their problem, but our union nature means that we have to look beyond the problems we may have. We also have to put forward what we

consider to be possible solutions for the future. If we have members, great, and that gives us legitimacy, but we don't carry out our actions to get members. We carry out our actions because we are convinced that they are useful and that they can serve the general interest. Which makes a big difference. (Interview with a SNAP member)

At the same time, the SNAP case study also showed the differences between the studied group of artists-authors and the other CGT trade unions that were part of the same federation. Indeed, the legal specificity of SNAP, as a trade union organising SSE workers, resulted in very limited material resources, relying only on the energy of volunteer activists. Moreover, as the following interview excerpt underlines, the combination of a time-intensive artistic activity with an entirely voluntary union commitment was a critical element for SNAP Executive Commission members. While at the beginning of the fieldwork this challenge was less prevalent due to the pandemic, which led to the cancellation of many exhibitions and cultural events, during regular periods the level of commitment of SNAP members varied according to their workloads. However, the sharing of tasks between three co-secretaries and the centrality of a large Executive Commission – composed of 20 SSE artists – allowed a greater degree of flexibility to combine activism with passionate work, while making sure that the collective tasks were accomplished.

When you're secretary or co-secretary, it's still a fairly substantial workload, as long as you try to do it well... So it's good that it's rotating, also for the organisation itself, because I think it needs to rotate and renew itself. That's also what keeps a certain energy in the mess, you know. [...] And at SNAP we try to share responsibilities. I tend to think that three of us do fewer stupid things than one of us does on his own. And when it works well, you have more energy by putting your thoughts together, and so on, than you do individually. [...] In fact, I haven't been overworked these last few months, I've put my fingers back in the socket, writing texts, doing more things than I was doing at one point... Because at the same time there was a demand for it, and also because, quite honestly, I like doing that too. Trade union or political action is part of my life. So, I'm happy to do it. (Interview with a SNAP member)

Notwithstanding problematic elements, SNAP's exclusion from the classical collective bargaining areas also had positive implications. The following excerpt underlines that SNAP embodied, according to a federal representative, a more activism-oriented unionism.

In my opinion, this gives rise to another type of trade unionism. One that's not rooted in paritarianism, and one that's also closer to the people, and not tied up in these institutional issues. Let's just say that SNAP devotes 100% of its time to union action, and I think they are remarkably active for the resources they have. There aren't many places where activists are so committed... They have a simple and sincere relationship with activism. (Interview with a federal representative)

The increased orientation towards activism and collective mobilisation processes was also visible in the topics discussed by SNAP members. During the fieldwork, they were discussing alternatives to both wage- and self-employment relying on a lifelong salary, allowing individuals to combine several activities and change their lives while being socially protected. As an example, they addressed these issues with deputies of the French communist party, with the sociologist Bernard Friot, as well as with an artistic network called *La buse*.

Guaranteed income for all. And we're not talking about minimum income, we're talking about a real income, a socialised income, with sickness rights, with pension rights, and so on. For everyone. So, our demand goes beyond artists. It's not a very... well, we know we're dreaming, aren't we? [*she laughs*] But that's the project we have, and that's what we say to other artists: "That's what we want". And I think this project echoes. With a lot of people. And not just artists. (Interview with a SNAP member)

In this regard, however, it is interesting to point out that, even if this alternative project of social protection at the time of the fieldwork was arousing widespread interest, SNAP members were dedicating time and energy to this project without any illusions about its chances of success. Imagining other ways and defending them was from their perspective an end *per se*, as underlined by this interviewee, a member of the SNAP Executive Commission for more than 20 years:

For me, losing is no big deal. And I'm used to it, in fact, I lose all the time. I'd love to win, but the reality of our fight is that very often we don't win. And yet, you have to engage in these battles. And as I was saying earlier, I enjoy engaging in battles, even if we lose them. (Interview with a SNAP member)

Participation in trade unions was thus seen by the interviewed SNAP members not just – or at least not only – as an opportunity to collectively demand more social rights and to be able to enjoy real autonomy, but also as a collective space for identity construction and the elaboration of alternatives to the existing social and labour model.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This empirical exploration of SNAP's organising practices allowed us to see how the defence of professional autonomy can be combined with the demand for more social rights. SNAP's activists were thus eager to unionise SSE visual artists in order to break their isolation and help them to negotiate with their clients the autonomy margins they needed to develop an artistic practice that was meaningful to them. This search for improved working conditions was moreover combined with a strong commitment to social protection, considered to be a prerequisite for secure and fulfilling artistic careers. At the time of the fieldwork, SNAP Executive Commission members were thus advocating for the regular payment of social contributions, even if such a position could possibly dissuade artists solely concerned with their immediate income from joining them. They were also engaged in a long-term reflection on alternative models of social protection that would make it possible to uncouple income from classical market-driven work.

From a theoretical point of view, this research shows, first, that the enterprise culture, which leads workers to willingly embrace market demands (Du Gay, 1996; Gorz, 2001; Rose, 1990), can be collectively challenged. By resisting the individual responsabilisation of workers and looking for collectively built alternatives, SSE artists were in fact trying to overcome the neoliberal trade-off between individual autonomy and collective rights entailed in the enterprise culture (Fleming, 2017; Moisander et al., 2018). On the one hand, SNAP members were refusing to renounce the fulfilling and expressive dimension of their work, defending the professional autonomy and creative freedom expected, especially from creative work (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1996; Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999; Sennett, 2006). On the other hand, they were at the same time organising collectively to tackle the 'passion trap' (Armano and Murgia, 2013) that fosters self-exploitation by leading artists to accept low remuneration and long working hours in the name of a vocational or occupational sense (Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009; Del Mármol et al., 2017; Morgan et al., 2013; Pinochet Cobos and Muñoz-Retamal, 2022). SNAP therefore represented an attempt, through collective action, to reclaim the promise of autonomy enshrined in the enterprise culture, while at the same time firmly opposing risk-taking and self-reliance, historically presented as inextricably intertwined (Du Gay, 1996; Fleming, 2017).

By showing that individual autonomy is not necessarily in contradiction with social protection and collective representation, this case study thus contributes to the discussion on autonomy developed by feminist scholars (Fineman, 2008; Mackenzie, et al. 2014). It illustrates how the autonomy myth can be debunked, underlining the necessity of collective support to underpin freedom of choice (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000). In this perspective, the autonomy of individuals can only be conceptualised as relational, being socially constructed through supportive relations with others and with institutions (Friedman, 2008; Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000). At the same time, the ability to collectively organise to defend social protection without renouncing the promise of professional autonomy is not something that can be taken for granted but needs collective processes to be triggered. In the case study analysed, being part of a union with a strong role in the industrial relations system seemed to play a crucial role, together with the ability to mobilise and to remain as informal, inclusive, and horizontal as possible. SNAP's fight for a collectively built autonomy, relying on mutualised income, thus represents an empirical example of the relational conception of autonomy discussed by feminist scholars (Anderson, 2014; Mackenzie, et al., 2014).

In this frame, therefore, our study also provides an historical example likely to enhance our understanding of the collective representation of the SSE, whose development, especially in

continental Europe, is still in the making (Murgia et al., 2020; Conen and Schippers, 2019). In particular, this case study highlights how a complementary relationship can emerge between a small union of SSE workers and a traditional federal union representing mainly employees. SNAP's integration into the CGT was reflected in the defended political vision, which resulted in distinguishing SNAP from classical SSE and employer organisations, less oriented towards the defence of social contributions and more inclined to provide individual services to the SSE (Jansen, 2020). The support of the federation also enabled SNAP to amplify its voice by facilitating access to relevant institutional spaces. If the small size and limited material resources of SNAP accentuated the differences with employee unions composing the federation, SNAP was perceived positively at the federal level because of its capacity to embody and foster a different relationship to trade unionism, more rooted in the grassroots and social struggles. The case we investigated in the French union landscape could thus represent an inspiring example for unions eager to open up to SSE workers in different sectors and countries (Countouris and De Stefano, 2019; Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick, 2017) having become no longer an 'atypical case' but a pioneering experience with respect to the mobilisation of underrepresented categories of workers.

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