Editorial: The New Cooperativism

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Beyond “capitalocentrism”

Cooperative forms of associated labour and self-help communities long predate the capitalist era. Pre-modern examples of cooperative experiences include groups practicing collaborative production and mutual aid, the economic life of the commons, and the social organization of many indigenous communities. In the modern era, cooperatives developed as bottom-up responses to the callous exploitation of emergent industrial capitalism, in synchrony with other worker organizations such as friendly societies, mutual associations, and unions. Cooperative experiments that formed specifically because of the stark inequalities of the new economic order include Scotland’s Fenwick Weaver’s Society in 1761, Robert Owen’s worker-centred revival of the New Lanark mills in the first decades of the 19th century, the London Cooperative Society of 1824, the promising but short-lived Equitable Labour Exchange of 1832-1833, and the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers in the 1840s. Already by the early 19th century, utopian socialists like Owen and Charles Fourier were campaigning for a more equitable society for workers in the midst of a rapidly industrializing Europe via a socialized economy of cooperative communities. For classical anarchists such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Peter Kropotkin, cooperatives, as locally rooted, collectively owned, and federated associations, were vital for building the alternative to the capitalist state system. Karl Marx too had favourable views of “workers’ cooperative factories”⁵ which, for him, proved to be one of the two most promising victories for the struggle of “living labour” against capital.⁶ Indeed, although also critical of the potential for cooperators to become “their own capitalist” within a market system centered on the commodity-form,⁷ for Marx, worker coops provided “the proof that the capitalist has become... superfluous as a functionary in production....”⁸

Throughout the 20th century, cooperative modes of organizing social, cultural, and economic life proved to be viable alternatives to centrally planned or capitalist modes of production, distribution, and consumption. Cooperative experiments flourished in diverse socio-political contexts such as, to name only a few: the credit unions of Germany, Italy, France, and Quebec; Argentina’s rural coops and urban mutual societies; the USSR’s kolkhozy before their collectivization; Nova Scotia’s Antigonish movement of worker cooperatives; Catalonia’s self-management movement around the years of the Spanish Civil War; industrial coops in Nationalist and early Maoist China; Yugoslavia’s self-managed factories; post-colonial Algeria’s originally spontaneous self-

management movements; producer cooperatives in the plywood industry of the US’s Pacific Northwest; Chile’s cooperative agricultural experiments during the presidency of Salvador Allende; or Israel’s kibbutz movement.

By the late 1960s, thinking around cooperativism merged with broader social and economic demands for self-determination and workers’ control around the concept of autogestión (self-management). Inspired by the ideas of Marcuse, Castoriadis, Vaneigem, Gorz, and the Situationists, amongst others, the students and militant union protagonists of the May 1968 events in France, the May-June 1969 events in Córdoba, Argentina, and similar late 1960s movements throughout the world adopted the notion of the self-managed control of production as a key demand and desire. The fight for autogestión for these militant students and workers was not only a struggle for more democratic workplaces, less alienated and exploitative labour processes, and the return of the means of production to the direct producers. It was also characterized by a demand for more autogestión of life itself by recuperating production and reproduction from the ideologies and practices of possessive individualism, productivism, and consumerism.9

The 20th century, however, also saw cooperatives increasingly accommodate or get co-opted by centrally planned economies, monopoly capitalism, or the global post-Fordist system. These accommodations and co-optations were exemplified in the state’s takeover or control of traditional collectives and coops in Stalin’s Soviet Union, Mao’s China, or Nyerere’s Tanzania; workplace democracy movements or employee ownership plans in Europe and North America; Mondragon Cooperative Corporation’s outsourcing of production to the global South; or in the increased demutualization of agricultural, marketing, insurance, and consumer coops throughout the global North.

Nonetheless, cooperative models, as suggested by J.K. Gibson-Graham, have continued to show resilience for both resisting forms of global capital and foreshadowing new “economic imaginaries” beyond “capitalocentrism.”10 Even with the entrenchment of neoliberalism over the past four decades, cooperative practices and values that both challenge the status quo and create alternatives to it have returned with dynamism in recent years.11 We might call these experiments the new cooperativism.

Highlighted in the articles that make up this issue of Affinities, the new cooperativism tends to include five main characteristics: (1) It emerges as direct responses by working people or grassroots groups to the crisis of the neoliberal model. (2) Its protagonists do not necessarily have tight links to older cooperative movements, beginning their collective projects from out of immediate social, cultural, or economic needs rather than from pre-existing cooperativist sentiments. (3) Its politics tend to emerge at the level of the
everyday and tend to take on, when compared to capitalocentric frameworks, more equitable ways of redistributing social wealth and more ethical ways of engaging with the other and the earth. (4) It tends to involve strong practices of horizontalized labour processes and decision-making structures, often including collective ownership of social, cultural, or economic production; culturally- and gender-sensitive divisions of labour; and more egalitarian schemes of surplus allocation, when compared to capitalist production, and even when compared to older or more traditional cooperative experiences. And (5) it has stronger connections with surrounding communities than capitalocentric economic models; many of them embrace clear social objectives and local initiatives of community development.

**The new cooperativism as prefiguration**

While the callout for The New Cooperativism issue was not limited to the definitions provided by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), it did offer guidance for thinking about cooperatives, cooperativism, and cooperation. According to the ICA, a cooperative is “an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise,” and is guided by values of “self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity.” The principles that all formal cooperatives are asked to adopt by the ICA include: (1) voluntary and open membership; (2) democratic member control; (3) member economic participation; (4) autonomy and independence; (5) education, training, and information; (6) cooperation among cooperatives; and (7) concern for community.

Whether formally constituted as coops or existing as less-formal collectives, the new cooperatives reported on, theorized, or historicized in this issue also indirectly or directly take up and practice some or all of these defining principles and values of cooperativism. Indeed, the practices and values advocated by the ICA provide invaluable organizational goals for associated labour in control of its own product and surplus.

But today’s new cooperatives do not always necessarily manifest as formally constituted cooperatives. Rather, the new cooperativism embraces, more broadly, innumerable forms of collective economic practices and social values that are rooted in, as Kropotkin wrote over a century ago “mutual aid amongst ourselves.”

A major goal of this issue is to begin to make visible the myriad modes of cooperation present and emerging around the world that are both responses to new enclosures and crises and possibilities beyond them. That is, it seeks to sketch out some of the ways that people are collectively provisioning for their
needs, producing and distributing goods and services otherwise in short supply, or meeting their desires, as well as (re)imagining a world where such practices can proliferate. It is this present and future orientation of the new cooperativism that distinguishes it from reform-focused or more accommodative forms of cooperativisms that remain caught in capitalocentric schemas.

It can thus be said that the new cooperativism has a tendency to prefigure different, less-exploitative, and less-alienating forms of economic organization. A political concept of prefiguration does not shun “utopian” considerations but embraces them. Not as a new totality—a new and detailed socio-economic model, ready-made to replace the old one—but, rather, as a set of future-oriented possibilities or preliminary sketches that suggest alternative economic, productive, cultural, and social practices in the present and for tomorrow. Harry Cleaver argues, for example, that a perspective of utopian prefiguration is about “the search for the future in the present, and the identification of already existing activities which embody new, alternative forms of social cooperation and ways of being.”

For Gibson-Graham, the diverse “economic imaginings” and practices of some contemporary cooperative experiments engage in the (co)production and (co)invention of “solidarity economies” or “community economies” within and beyond capitalist standards. And José Luis Coraggio and María Sol Arroyo argue that new forms of cooperative entities, such as Argentina’s worker-recuperated self-managed firms, express, in practice, a “new ‘moral’ economy” desiring “to confront social injustice” in the marketplace, in the workplace, and in the community, while transforming their protagonists’ lives intersubjectively in the process.

The new cooperativism’s prefigurative potential is as much about rupture as about newness. The new cooperativisms presented in this issue suggest ruptures from prevailing ways of organizing economic life, where the few, shored up by the rights of private property, own the means of provisioning for the needs and desires of the many. They suggest ruptures from status quo hierarchies, where bosses or state agents rule. They also point to ruptures from dogmas of possessive individualism, where competition and one-upmanship reign. But perhaps one of the most prominent ruptures suggested in the articles are those affecting the subjectivities of the protagonists of the new cooperativism as they transform, in the process of carrying out their collective projects, from managed individuals to associated and self-managed social beings.

The new cooperativism also sheds light on the potentiality of crisis. Crises, as recent events underscore, are buried deep within the contradictions inherent to status quo socio-political, socio-economic, and institutional structures. These structures are riddled with weaknesses that can be—and are being—seized upon by collectives of the otherwise marginalized; moments of crises make socio-structural weaknesses visible. As Peter Bell and Harry Cleaver write, “crisis is, from
the point of view of the working-class subject, a moment not of breakdown but of breakthrough...”\(^{18}\) Moreover, socio-economic crises do not necessarily close off alternatives but can be potential openings for all types of class, identity, gender, age-based, cultural, and social struggles that show, Maurizio Lazzarato proposes, “other possibilities for living.”\(^{19}\) At the same time, these struggles put into relief the contradictions and inequalities of capitalist or state-controlled modes of production, financialization, and consumption. As Herbert Marcuse wrote during an earlier conjuncture of socio-economic breakdown in 1968:

> the strength of... moral [and]... operational values... is likely to wear off under the impact of the growing contradictions within the society. The result would be... resistance to work, refusal to perform, negligence, indifference--factors of dysfunction which would hit a highly centralized and coordinated apparatus, where breakdown at one point may easily affect large sections of the whole... [spawning] a collapse of work discipline[,]... wildcat strikes, boycotts, sabotage, gratuitous acts of noncompliance....\(^{20}\)

For Marcuse, these “growing contradictions” also had the potential to promote alternative economic realities such as “workers’ control beyond the limits of capitalist toleration....”\(^{21}\) In a similar vein, the experiments of the new cooperativism reported on, researched, theorized, and historicized by the contributors to The New Cooperativism issue of *Affinities* can be read as sketching out a few of the “breakthroughs” for new modes of economic, social, cultural, and political life made possible, in part, by the concomitant “breakdowns” of the current capitalist system.

**Overview of The New Cooperativism issue of *Affinities***

In early 2009, cooperative practitioners, affinity group activists, academic theorists, and researchers were invited to submit either theoretical papers or case studies that analyzed and demonstrated how cooperation, cooperativism, or cooperatives are being re-imagined today. Taken together, the 15 articles appearing in this issue begin to articulate the diversity of bottom-up responses to macro- or micro-economic crises and enclosures... and illustrate alternative cooperativist practices created to counteract them by the otherwise alienated, dispossessed, marginalized, or exploited.

Guided by the articles that constitute it, The New Cooperativism issue is presented thematically within three broad areas of focus:

“Historicizing and Theorizing the New Cooperativism” begins with long-time worker cooperator and historian John Curl’s synopsis of the working class history of coops in the US, in particular, leading to “the cooperative movement in
Century 21." Curl's assessment maps out the common threads of the “old” and “new” cooperativisms and synthesizes some of the work he recently published in his book For All the People: Uncovering the Hidden History of Cooperation, Cooperative Movements, and Communalism in America (PM Press, 2009). Greig de Peuter and Nick Dyer-Witheford follow with a Marxist analysis of how the worker cooperative, although “a deeply ambivalent organizational form” within capitalism, could be considered a site of “labour commons.” In such a cooperative labour commons, they see “the workplace” as an “organizational commons, the labour performed... a commoning practice, and the surplus generated, a commonwealth.” Stevphen Shukaitis lays out a genealogy of the concept of self-management through his own experiences at a cultural production coop and via an autonomist theoretical lens. In the piece, Shukaitis seeks to “ferret out--conducting something akin to an organizational autoethnography--hints as to whether or not self-management could be useful for radical social struggles today.” Andrew Gryf Paterson makes suggestive connections between Finland’s traditional collective practices of the talkoot (“a rural voluntary cooperative tradition and ongoing contemporary practice”) and similar cooperative possibilities he sees infused in collective online projects. Ultimately, in the contact points between the talkoot and online collaboration, Paterson finds “trans-disciplinary connections which can be of interest to researchers of peer-to-peer theories, rural and cooperative studies, social capital... [and] cultural practitioners and activists promoting collaboration [and] social and environmental change.” Sourayan Mookerjea’s contribution concludes this section with his analysis of India’s landless Dalit women farmers’ efforts in organizing a network of credit and marketing cooperatives in what they call the “Sangham strategy.” After situating and describing the Sangham, Mookerjea relies on his research to reassess “the historical situation of the new cooperativism.”

The next section, “Practicing the New Cooperativism,” presents six case studies or experiential accounts of the new cooperativism as it is currently being practiced or proposed in Canada, the US, the UK, and Venezuela, as well as the tensions present therein. Conor Cash’s article offers a spatial analysis of the historical interplay between the design of suburban landscape and Fordist capitalism, and the challenges faced by those trying to still live and resist in the in-betweens of this striated landscape. His critical analyses are woven around his own experiences with youth activist and DIY collectives on Long Island, New York in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Dara Greenwald introduces us to “a twenty-three person, decentralized, artist run cooperative” of geographically dispersed members from across North America. As Greenwald reports, the Justseeds Artists’ Cooperative is “a cross between a producers' cooperative, artisans' guild, artists' collective, and artist-run space” using online community-building and open source software tools to facilitate “decentralized communications and decision making,” an artist-focused marketing and
revenue redistribution system, and ways of collaborating with other online-based social justice groups sharing projects that are “trying to enact new economies and cooperative values.” Next, J. Howard’s short manifesto on food democracy proposes a deeper integration of consumer and producer food coops with non-capitalist distribution networks in what he terms “solidarity food cooperatives.” From his own lived-experience as a member of a multi-stakeholder food coop in Pennsylvania, Howard proposes that only by thinking about food production and distribution from the point of reference of cooperation and solidarity will a “comprehensive community-based food system” truly emerge that could bring “alienated growers and alienated buyers into a shared space wherein anti-capitalist ethics may take root.” Tom Malleson’s article, the first of two pieces on the new cooperative movement in Venezuela, maps out the history of Venezuela’s contemporary coops, the tensions between the state and bottom-up organization in the country’s self- and co-management experiments, and the potential openings for, as well as the challenges to social change and “the larger project of economic democracy” suggested by Hugo Chávez’s “21st century socialism.” Andre Pusey’s piece discusses in detail the possibilities and challenges of the social centre movement in the UK. Like Shukaitis, Cash, Greenwald, Howard, and van der Veen, Pusey draws on his own lived-experience with a new coop movement, as well as from interviews with other protagonists, in order to explore how social centres are exemplary cases for mapping out “the production of the new commons,” the intricacies of the “self-management” of cultural and productive spaces, and “the new cooperativism in practice.” This section ends with E. Wilma van der Veen’s proposal for a cooperatively redesigned post-secondary education project informed by the Canadian experiment she is involved in: the New University Cooperative (NUC). Here she both reports on NUC’s activities to date and offers an open invitation to the reader to consider being a part of the experiment. Contrasting NUC to the experiences of administrators, students, and faculty in traditional post-secondary institutions, van der Veen shows how new communication technologies and the cooperative model is being merged with values of inclusiveness, environmental sustainability, radical pedagogy, and co-ownership of learning in order to create another kind of university.

The issue concludes with the section entitled “Researching the New Cooperativism,” offering four diverse articles on how politically committed academic researchers are working with or involved in action, participant observation, policy-oriented, political economy, or social science research focused on the new cooperativism in three different national settings. Caroline Baillie and Eric Feinblatt’s report documents their action-based research work and collaboration with Argentina’s carta no (waste recycler) cooperatives. Baillie and Feinblatt detail their processes of seeking to work with numerous carta no coops, their self-critiques of their collaborations and interventions with these groups, and the promises and challenges of technology design and
implementation for social uses on the path towards new, alternative economic imaginaries. Vanna Gonzales applies social science and political economy-based approaches to explore the relationship between Italy’s social cooperatives and the country’s broader cooperative movement. She discovers that the two main cooperative confederations in Italy are actively involved in social cooperative development by advocating for and facilitating either “corporativist” or “associational” models for “shaping social cooperatives’ civic capacity” within the current conjuncture of the Italian nation-state. The section returns to Argentina with Héctor Palomino, Ivanna Bleynat, Silvia Garro, and Carla Giacomuzzi’s reassessment of the country’s worker-recovered company movement (WRC). In their piece, Palomino et al. deploy a mixed-methods survey analysis and discursive approach in order to map out the intricacies of the WRC movement, critique academic attempts at fixing “definitions” of WRCs, and reconsider local, actor-centred perceptions of inclusion into this promising and expanding phenomenon of worker-led new cooperativism. This final section of the issue concludes with Manuel Larrabure’s investigation of Venezuela’s Socialist Production Units (SPUs). Larrabure uses a Marxist-based “learning of praxis” and ethnographic approach to uncover how the protagonists of SPUs are coming to know and self-managing their own processes of production and organization as responses to their local needs and within the national context of Venezuela’s “Bolivarian Revolution.”

What all the articles in this issue show in their own way is that contemporary capitalist or institutionally defined limits to economic and (re)productive life can be overcome by the collective actions, self-direction, and struggles of the grassroots from within and beyond the very moments of crises and struggle they face. Around the world, myriad new cooperativisms are prefiguratively delineating other forms of productive, social, economic, political, and technological life more responsive to the needs of local communities and more caring of the planet. Moreover, experiments in alternative modes of collective and cooperative organization and production do not have to be short-lived, relegated to particular situations or crises only to disappear thereafter when the system re-stabilizes. As underscored by the new cooperativisms taken up in this issue, these experiments can indeed endure and continue to stimulate new economic, cultural, and social imaginaries long after moments of crises subside.
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4 Fairbairn, B. (1994). The meaning of Rochdale: The Rochdale Pioneers and the cooperative principles. Saskatoon, Canada: Centre for the Study of Cooperatives, University of Saskatchewan.


6 For Marx, the other great “victory of the political economy of labour over the political economy of property” was the “10 Hours’ Bill,” passed in the British Parliament in 1847, which effectively reduced the working day to 10 hours. See: Marx, K. (1978b). Inaugural address of the Working Men’s International Association. In R. C. Tucker (Ed.), The Marx-Engels reader (pp. 512-519). Melksham, UK: Norton Press (p. 517).

7 Ibid., p. 571.


For Gibson-Graham, “capitalocentrism” is one of the predominant worldviews of our epoch. Capitalocentric frameworks understand “the economy” as well as alternative forms of economic practices “primarily with reference to capitalism.” A capitalocentric worldview infiltrates both capitalist and many anti-capitalist projects and ways of thinking. See: Gibson-Graham, J. K. (2006). *The end of capitalism (as we knew it): A feminist critique of political economy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (pp. 6, 21).


In Spanish, Argentina’s WRCs are called empresas recuperadas por sus trabajadores and are thus also known as “ERTs” in the literature.

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