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I Was the Revolution, Once: Worker Co-operative Formation, Frustration, and Futurity at Blake House

Simon Ball

This short article gives an account of the creation and experience of setting up a worker co-operative in the film industry. In it, the author recounts the political, creative, and practical decisions behind his actions. He also reflects on the joys and frustrations of running a worker co-operative, especially the perils of self-exploitation. The article concludes with reflections on the future of worker co-operatives.

I Was the Revolution, Once

Forming a worker co-operative seems to me to be a rite of passage. It's a natural step in the mental evolution of a person who has a bad experience at something, and then works out how to never have to have that bad experience again. For me my bad experience was having to go to work for someone and follow orders, get in line, hold my lip and hope for the best. I did try, honest, but the traditional method of employment in the United Kingdom didn't suit me and I had to make changes in order to avoid it effectively.

I studied film directing at university, which is probably the one course I could have chosen with the lowest prospects of employment in the real world of graduation. I didn't mind the risk and did very well indeed with my studies. One particular module was called 'Business Start-up', and for my final submission I wrote up the foundational business plan for a production company called 'Blake House'. It would be the perfect film production company. Filmmakers would slot into their role, effortlessly glide into crews to produce material and there would be no formal hierarchy — everyone would just be doing what they loved.

The name itself was taken from a block of flats in South London called Blake House, where my friends and I would run what could be called prototypical co-operative workshops. Filmmakers would come with their project and the members would offer constructive criticism and support to help people get their work done. At the end of it we would mess around royally, and while this messing around has stayed with me on many levels, the ethos of the workshops is what lingered in my mind longest, fomenting a desire to work within a network of mutual support.

Once you graduate and go on the dole all of that goes out the window. I was stuck writing infinite CVs for jobs I didn't want at production companies I didn't care for, while my Job Coach would teasingly suggest that the new coffee shop down the road was offering barista training. I did quite well at being an extra on film productions, and I managed to get myself a job on £50 a day (if I was lucky) shepherding the extras for the production, working out their money at the end of the day and standing in when I would get a chance (as that would mean an extra £150 on my day rate).

I bounced around a few different productions at an international film studio, but I was subjected to the most awful boss who would scream at me for the lowest of offences. For example, the B Unit Director had an office next to us and would sometimes ask how I was getting on. When I would go back into our office, I'd get a big old yelling informing me that I shouldn't, under any circumstances, ever speak to anyone, ever. Needless to say, after that the writing was on the wall.

Next, I managed to get a job working for a friend as an editor, which was my first full time position. It was down the road and the money was stable and it allowed me to start having a bit of a life. It didn't really help that the work was the most inane, boring task based work I had ever come across in my life (multinational engineering corporation executive communications etc.), and my friend quickly turned into a boss of the worst kind. It wasn't long before I was pulling 4 a.m. shifts delivering make-up tutorial videos and wondering what all the fuss was all about with life.

While this was all going on, I had fallen madly in love with my now wife Ieva, who was having an equally bad time of it trying to make her way in the world as an aspirant film director. It didn't help that no one in England could spell or pronounce her name correctly (it's Ieva, with an I not an L, pronounced [yeh]-[va], certainly not Ieva, and certainly not pronounced [yay]-[va]) and that she had no professional network outside of university. Ieva's post-graduation life was mainly getting dailies on random TV programmes or working in cafes.

In our spare time between shifts, we would dream up what we wanted to do with our lives. The Blake House idea had stayed with me, so Ieva and I developed it into a functioning business plan. Around this time, we also were sniffing about politics for the first time in our lives, mainly to do with the thought that if things were so rosy out there in the world, why are we having such an annoying time? We were searching for something or someone or somewhere to aim for, and we must have cycled through a million different ideologies before Ieva chanced upon an article which talked about 'Bullshit Jobs' (Graeber, 2013).

This article managed to articulate a lot of the thoughts we were having in a very eloquent package, and soon we became aware of *Strike! Magazine*, where the article was originally published. On the *Strike!* website, there was an 'about' page that informed us that the magazine was a workers' co-operative. I think we had come across the term before, in theory, but had never seen it acted out in reality. It took about 5 minutes of research for us to be sold on the concept, and wouldn't you know it, the business plan we were forming fit the worker co-operative model to a tee. We felt like we had reverse engineered the whole business structure and soon lapped up as much information as we could.

When reading the co-operative principles for the first time, it did feel as if something simply 'clicked' in the mind, as if here were a set of guidelines that someone wanting to do good in the world could read and think, 'fair enough'. They're malleable enough to allow for limitless creativity and provide a strong foundation for what I could loosely term as 'good' work. We took them almost as a background process, taken for granted. If we had to weigh up an important decision, we could always filter it through the seven principles to get some decent guidance.

This was a good discovery for us, as it meant we could quickly legitimise our idea and communicate a positive message to potential clients. We managed to get some alumni funding for a business start-up from our old university that allowed us to find a co-operative developer who helped us incorporate our co-operative. The ethos of our co-operative was simple — to provide good jobs to those who don't fit in to the conventional film industry and use the surplus we generated from our labour to fund our members' creative endeavours. We would only take on work for organisations 'doing good' (as we would define it) in the world, and we would never compromise on this ethos.

We had the good fortune to emerge at the same time as a campaign called Altgen was running, which offered a 'young co-operators prize' which galvanised our efforts to formalise our ideas. We didn't win the prize, but saw that Altgen were heading to an event called Worker Co-op Weekend, so we jumped in our car and managed to receive a lot of support from experienced heads in how to get going.

Then it followed that we went on a wild ride of labour, literally. We turned our film production service from an offering that charged £60 a day (our first pricing idea was to undercut anybody who ever held a camera on price) into a successful enterprise that hired employees and freelancers and leased offices. Each project that arrived in our inbox was a step up in complexity and prestige and neither of us could work out where these emails kept coming from.

Of course, it would be remiss of me to neglect the networking effort that Ieva put in to putting herself out there and attracting attention for Blake House. We worked well as a duo — Ieva would visit an organisation and bring in a project brief and several memory cards full of footage, while I would sift through it all and deliver a coherent output to the client's specification. We did attempt to add new members to our co-operative, and we came close on a couple of occasions, but it never felt right. Either the person was not able to give the same level of dedication to Blake House as we were, or it just felt wrong to invite a stranger into the ownership equation.

I can see this two person co-operative business structure could probably be seen as 'not a real co-op' by some co-operative purists. However, in our industry we found that most practitioners did not want a full-time job, much preferring a nomadic freelance lifestyle, working when they needed to or a project caught their attention. It ended up not making any sense to involve others into our top-level workflow, as whenever we did, we ground to a halt and production stopped.

That's the beauty of the co-operative principles though, because throughout all of our interactions we always had them as the bedrock of our practice. It informed our working relationship on projects, so while Blake House might have commissioned a cinematographer for a particular project, when we were working on the project as a unit, we operated as a co-operative, with each member acting in their full capacity with dignity and respect. This way of working enabled us to offer well-paying job to dozens of people and produce work that much larger creative agencies would struggle to pull off.

Of course, all of this work led to some form of breakdown. We were exploiting ourselves to the point of exhaustion, where we were making the output of our labour our life's work. It ought not to have been that way, because our life's work, as defined by our governing documents, was the creative work we never were able to finance because we were never able to find the time to think and breathe for even a minute to allow personal creative ideas to flourish.

It all came to a head when Ieva and I got married. We had taken on a project with a client who was incredibly slow at responding to our communications and kept setting the date of delivery back and back until it was clashing with our wedding and honeymoon. Work and labour were eating into what should have been the most important day of our lives. By the time I had managed to send off our work, I had had enough, and we needed to amend our business. It didn't help that this client, despite being co-operative in name, tried to sue us for the work we delivered after refusing to pay our invoice, an action that shattered my confidence in co-operation itself. Why was I beating myself within an inch of my sanity producing films for clients that were, by my own definition, doing good in the world, but who would then act to try and decimate a small micro co-operative and run them out of business?

It was a grand irony, because Blake House was formed to be the alternative to exploitative and unfulfilling places of work, and we had become what we set out to replace.

This was a time of great personal growth for me, and if I was just going to sit down and be upset then I wouldn't be writing this article, as Blake House would be out of business and I would probably be doing something completely different with my time. The thing with worker co-operatives is that there is an often repeated slogan that they survive longer than traditional start-ups by a considerable margin. It's probably because when the co-operative is operating at its full capacity, it resembles a well-oiled machine. Perhaps all labour is like this on some level, and it's a good thing that in our history Blake House has been able to produce tangible things that people can see.

It's not easy to change your business after 6 years of trading, especially if it's been successful and working well. It can appear like a mid-life crisis or some kind of mental breakdown, but if anything in life I am honest with myself and especially earnest to make some form of impact. If I feel like my output has stagnated, or is no longer doing good in the world, then for my own sake I have to change or what is the point of living? It's certainly not to work, that's for sure.

Our co-operative is probably an anomaly here, as I'm sure everyone in the UK co-operative movement doesn't work themselves into the ground like we did. But at our professional peak we were making videos for all sorts of high level important left-wing institutions around the world. We believed we were on the front line of history leading the charge to revolution, only to discover that revolution is an industry in itself and there is no golden moment of success where the revolution happens.

So now I'm a burned out 31 year old searching for things to do. I thought I was the revolution, and my life was the revolution, but when I tried to make suggestions that would lead to the

solution to the issues that our clients were campaigning on, I was shunned. Our job was to create content for niche, repetitive TV channels, not to launch the revolution.

I have had ups and downs over my time so far. I've achieved a lot and seen it all. We've recently had a baby girl, our first, and I want her to grow up knowing that her parents are part of the movement that is working to make the best world possible, that there is a place for her in the grand co-operative machinery to find her passion and add it to the mix.

Reflections on the Future

This *Journal* is a form of knowledge exchange with figures who have been in co-operative circles for years, and I would wager that a lot of readers will have a vaguely similar co-operative journey to my own. The past is alright, and it's interesting the first time you hear it, but I want to know what's going on and where we're going. What follows are some thoughts about the future of co-operativism in the UK.

I can say this with confidence, because I believe fully that the Left/Right divide in our politics is like a wheel forever turning. It is a theatre based fully on dividing the people of the nation into sides, much like football teams, causing logjam after logjam, division after division, a never-ending cycle of annoyance, discontent and sheer inefficiency. As somebody who analyses hours of documentary interview footage at a time, the co-operative principles and values, practiced at a national scale could legitimately solve all of the issues that plague our daily news cycle. I am fundamentally bored of the daily narrative and I would like to solve it. My only true outlet for my politics is within the co-operative movement, so please read this as a manifesto for what could be achieved if we stepped outside of our comfort zone and made one united push for the promised land. A new Jerusalem.

There is a history within this movement of utopic dreaming, and I am tapping into that rich, rich vein with full velocity. For example, I have on my computer a piece of software that can generate astounding works of art based on the text prompt I give it. I have a chat program that can do all of my writing for me, based on what I ask. Soon I will have a program that can generate music based on the prompt I give and give it 18 months or so and I could probably print my own feature films just by typing in short synopses. All of this is free and out there, and it doesn't take much thought to imagine that well, soon all things could just be automated. You could have a drone deliver your grocery order to your front door where you could sit down and watch television content tailored perfectly for your mental disposition. There would be no work, as there would be nothing to do. It's not a world I would want to live in.

If you lived in this automated utopia, why would you even bother to practice creativity when the machine can beat you to it, and it's just easier to let it get on and produce? It's crucial that there is existential purpose for all people, that we all have something to do that contributes to the story of our world.

A co-operative world allows all citizens to participate in tasks they love doing, with colleagues who may well be best friends without the hierarchical domination of a boss and an employee. However, we all know that running a co-operative runs into its own difficulties with regards to internal conflict resolution. These differences of opinion form an interesting drama that often can be the death of even the most well-established co-operative enterprise. The thing that always struck me about the co-operative movement was that the experiences of practitioners was always freely passed down to the coming generations. I remember sitting down with a long-term co-operator who explained how to avoid most internal arguments from day dot. 'We've already done it, so you don't have to'. We had our own new dramas to solve, of course, but we saved a huge amount of time thanks to this form of knowledge exchange. But then when you are in the heat of the moment thinking about how to solve an argument amongst members, the issue really becomes that you have to play out the scenario in real time. People say things that can cause harm and hurt, and people may make decisions that, with hindsight, turn out to be bad.

My proposed solution is to use AI for the betterment of all and to solve this issue by making games to troubleshoot co-operative problems and solutions. Let's say, for example, I could create a working model of a co-operative, where I play as a member going through the various day to day activities. We code in where the fault lies in the management and utilise AI to create a choose your own adventure style narrative experience where co-operative members can trial different solutions and see what happens. You train the AI with all of the company information, so that it gives you the logical output of what would happen based on a suggestion, you find out what the best method of solving the problem is in a controlled, safe and, dare I say, fun environment and you then apply it to real life.

It does, in theory, sound like a lot of work, and something not realistic for smaller organisations to countenance. But this is now, and it's a very reasonable aspiration to create. For example, I have been recently producing a video as a collaboration with the AI where I have taken footage from my seven years of co-operative events and had the computer reinterpret the footage into a new form. The thing that struck me most from the process was that all of us in this movement are so alike in our passion for making the world as good as it possibly can be. And we're all united in wanting to have a jolly good chat at the end of it all too, preferably round a bonfire with a pint of good co-operative ale.

We should never look at co-operative businesses through the faulty spectacles of modern day capitalism. We are fighting together to build a better world. The good thing about the Co-op Marque is that is known around the world as a marque of good repute. It has significance in that it provides food, mortgages, and funeral care. It is there at all stages of one's life and it is a marque of something greater than private enterprise. It is the physical manifestation of the communities of our nation banding together to help each other out.

However, it is hard out there right now, a lot of co-operatives are dying when they really ought to be flourishing. Since our personal recalibration, our business does its best to earn enough to keep going, but it is a heavy toll to place on oneself to not only do the work, but run the whole operation. It's the cost of doing business as a co-operative, and I wouldn't change it, but we need to be better at seeing when a co-operative is in danger of closing and reaching out to offer useful help.

I have always been bemused by people calling the Co-operative Movement a movement. I don't want this movement to be still, or chunter along at a snail's pace. I want this movement to gallop, to eat up the ground in front of it with a lust for life that is irresistible to all people that see it. If we built this movement, make it really move, with the principles and values that we hold, there is nothing that can stand in our way. It is up to all of us, each constituent part of the wider whole, to stand up and take responsibility, to say that I want to be part of the movement that changes the world. I want to be on the side that writes history. We all have the power to do so, it all starts by saying 'I believe'. I hope that you believe too.

The Author

Simon Ball is a filmmaker creating Some Quality Entertainment. As part of Blake House, he has created films for organisations such as the International Labour Organization, the Labour Party, Trades Union Congress, the National Union of Teachers, the New Economics Foundation, the National Institute of Health and Care Research, and Co-operatives UK among many, many others. He has a lot to say for his experience.

Reference

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