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Reclaiming land, replenishing communities: MST co-operatives' engagement with local communities through post-capitalist practices

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This paper will discuss how co-operatives support their local communities through small-scale localised practices rooted in solidarity, co-operation, and mutual aid, creating a meaningful and positive impact. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of diverse economy, community economy, and solidarity economy, this paper draws from empirical data gathered in two co-operatives of the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), in Santa Catarina, Brazil. It aims to illustrate how these organisations embody post-capitalist principles through the ethical coordinates of necessity, surplus, consumption, and commons. The findings demonstrate that MST co-operatives actively challenge capitalist extractivism by prioritising democratic decision-making, reinvesting surplus in local communities, and restoring degraded land, thereby contributing to socio-ecological justice. In contrast to capitalist organisations that prioritise profit maximisation at the expense of social and ecological wellbeing, these co-operatives challenge *capitalocentrism* by including care for the territory they belong to as part of their responsibility. In terms of contribution, this paper offers empirical evidence to demonstrate how co-operatives care for their local communities. Furthermore, by providing contemporary examples of social solidarity enterprises, this study contributes to the diversification of the economic landscape and gives visibility to non-capitalist practices.

Introduction

The *capitalocentric* approach to the economy (Gibson-Graham, 1996) prioritises profit maximisation as its central metric of success, externalising the costs to society and the environment. Organisations operating within this framework are encouraged to seek endless growth, perpetuating social and environmental injustices through the private appropriation of surplus and the exploitation of people and nature. Scholars and practitioners argue that it is urgent to re-embed the economy in socio-ecological systems, fostering practices and organisational models that prioritise the wellbeing of humans and other-than-humans (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Kothari et al., 2014; Raworth, 2017). In this context, co-operatives are one of the organisations that can offer valuable insights into practices and relationships

anchored in solidarity and mutual aid. Co-operatives, by actively engaging in democratic decision-making and redistributing surplus beyond their base of members, contribute to the creation of more inclusive and regenerative economic systems. In this context, this paper argues that their practices, even when small-scale, can produce meaningful and positive impacts not only on their workers, but also on the territories they inhabit.

Grounded in the diverse economy framework (Gibson-Graham, 2006), the ethical coordinates of the community economy, and the solidarity economy, this paper examines how the co-operatives of the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), or Landless Rural Workers Movement, in Brazil, exemplify the role of co-operatives in supporting local communities. Their practices promote social and ecological justice, demonstrating the potential for post-capitalist principles to materialise through localised, everyday economic activity. Using the ethical coordinates of necessity, surplus, consumption, and commons (Gibson-Graham, 2006), this paper highlights how these co-operatives challenge the norms of capitalist enterprises, opting instead for a model that replenishes community and environment.

A key argument presented is that efforts towards democratising the distribution and appropriation of surplus for human and other-than-human communities signal a departure from capitalist business models. Unlike capitalist enterprises that prioritise shareholder value (Friedman, 1970), MST co-operatives redistribute wealth through the support of local initiatives and environmental regeneration without expecting any financial return. This redistribution challenges the notion that success is solely defined by financial growth while concomitantly reducing inequalities. Furthermore, the MST co-operatives exemplify the seventh co-operative principle, concern for community (International Co-operative Alliance [ICA], 2015). This principle highlights the interdependence between co-operatives and their local environment, reinforcing the reciprocal relationships that sustain both economic safety and social wellbeing. This study, therefore, contributes to the broader discourse on alternative economies by demonstrating that post-capitalist practices are not only theoretical aspirations but are actively embodied and practised by co-operatives.

This article is structured as follows. First, it articulates the theoretical discussions about community economy and solidarity economy as alternative pathways for community development. Next, the contextual background is explained, followed by a discussion of the methods and ethical considerations of the study. Finally, the empirical data is shared and discussed through the thematic division of the ethical coordinates of surplus, necessity and consumption, and commons.

Community Economy

Since the Industrial Revolution, capitalism has been the main model to refer to the economy. Parker et al. (2014, p. 3) characterise it as “an economic system whereby capital is invested in order to make more capital,” relying on the private appropriation of the means of production, the division between capital and labour, and the free market, with the pursuit of profit as the ultimate objective. Additionally, Raworth (2017) emphasises that capitalism relies on continuous growth, even if it does not support a healthy economy. These principles are inherently violent, as they were (and still are) achieved through exploitation, coercion, epistemicides, ecocides, and genocides — especially against racialised and Indigenous communities (Banerjee, 2008; Escobar, 2020; Prasad, 2023). Nonetheless, capitalism has repeatedly reinvented itself during crises, leading to a belief in its invincibility, and discouraging the exploration of alternative ways to organise society (Gibson-Graham, 2006).

Gibson-Graham (1996) discuss that the sense of inescapability from capitalism stems from several discursive commitments that render capitalism “a special and privileged place in the language of social representation” (p. 1). By bestowing capitalism with positive, phallocentric, and heroic narratives, it is elevated to a natural and righteous mode of organising the economy — a phenomenon referred to as *capitalocentrism*. Gibson-Graham’s work seeks to dislocate

capitalism from its hegemonic status, demonstrating how non-capitalist economic practices can foster agency and possibilities towards post-capitalist worlds. Central to their strategies is a discursive shift, reframing capitalism as only one set of practices among many. This change dismantles its unifying dominance, placing capitalist initiatives in an equal position with Indigenous and solidarity-based practices, for instance. The diversification of the economy is not merely a linguistic exercise but a foundational step to acknowledge new identities, imaginaries, and agency (Gibson-Graham, 2006).

Critics (see Dean, 2015; Johnson, 1997) contend that Gibson-Graham's approach is naïve, labelling it a discursive artifice that fails to address capitalism's structural problems, such as inequalities and exploitation. Dean (2015) describes diverse/community economies and similar approaches as depoliticised, aiming to change micro-practices rather than supporting revolution. Gibson-Graham (2006) refute this critique, emphasising the need to resist the intellectual critique that inadvertently perpetuates capitalism's dominance, while cultivating a structure of feeling that can embrace the uncertainty involved in creating post-capitalist economies.

Social transformation, according to diverse economy thinkers, does not occur through singular revolutionary moments but unfolds in everyday practices and the "nitty-gritty of economic life" (Roelvink, 2020, p. 459). This perspective encourages place-based research and localised action, recognising that meaningful change arises through small-scale, ongoing revolutions. It also challenges the binary of global versus local, framing the local as part of a network of interdependent relationships that both affect and are affected by other places (Gibson-Graham, 2002). Rather than being concerned with scaling initiatives up (i.e. having a highly coordinated effort or a hierarchical organisation of initiatives), diverse economy thinkers and practitioners are more interested in "ubiquity rather than unity" (Gibson-Graham, 1996, p. xxvii). They contend that granular, disarticulated changes in everyday life can lead to significant transformations on a wider scale (Gibson-Graham, 1996).

Collard and Dempsey (2020) recognise that Gibson-Graham's work is a reminder of "the incompleteness of domination, of what escapes, exceeds and grows in the interstices of capitalist and non-capitalist spaces and practices" (p. 245), and that it can spark imagination and transformation. But Collard and Dempsey (2020) caution that non-capitalist spaces can play a crucial role in enabling capital accumulation. This is a valuable point, as capitalistic practices can often shapeshift and co-opt initiatives originally designed to support local communities' needs. In this sense, Gibson-Graham (2006) emphasise the importance of cultivating ethical coordinates to guide collective action and ensure alignment with socio-ecological goals within specific places and times. These ethical coordinates are part of a set of concepts and practices of the community economy, and discuss the negotiations concerning necessity, surplus, consumption, and the commons required to build counterhegemonic projects of economies. They aim to shed light on who participates in the decision-making process, the underlying assumptions, and the potential implications once these decisions are implemented. This re-embedding of economic practices in social and ecological relations (as opposed to an asocial market) seeks "to embrace the interdependence of *economic* subjects, sites, and practices" (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 81, original italics).

Necessity considers how to define necessary versus surplus labour and how much (money, material wealth, non-material wealth, etc.) is sufficient to live well. From a community-oriented perspective, the coordinate necessity would observe the different practices of subsistence and how to address the local needs directly, aiming to increase wellbeing. The second coordinate, particularly important for co-operatives, discusses how surplus is produced, appropriated, and distributed, and how it might be used to strengthen communities. The negotiations encompass surplus in various forms — labour, value, or product (Gibson-Graham, 2006) and invite those involved in the surplus creation to discuss how to distribute it. *Consumption* examines how this economic practice can be used to foster local development rather than being an end in itself. And, finally, *commons* seeks to find ways to enlarge, reclaim, replenish, and share common pools, which might include natural spaces, culture, knowledge, among others. This coordinate also acknowledges the interdependence between humans and other-than-humans and

recognises that looking after the commons is also looking after communities (Gibson-Graham, 2006). By observing and documenting non-normative practices, researchers contribute to the diversification of the economy, creating openings for alternative imaginaries.

Concern for Community and the Solidarity Economy

The International Co-operative Alliance (ICA, 2015) states that co-operatives should consider the sustainable development of communities, working concomitantly in the triad “ecological balance, social justice and economic security” (p. 87). They define local communities as those that both include and are included by the co-operative, the places where the co-operative conducts its activities. This definition of community underlines the interconnectedness between co-operatives and their local environments, emphasising a reciprocal relationship.

While the triple bottom line model (economic, social, and environmental dimensions) and the concept of sustainable development have traditionally been used in corporate social responsibility and have helped raise awareness of socio-environmental issues, these concepts have limitations (Richardson, 2004; Safri, 2015). From a discursive perspective, they create a sense of equilibrium between the three dimensions, and, through sustainability accounting frameworks, they mask socioenvironmental trade-offs to secure profit maximisation. Furthermore, Kothari et al. (2014) observe that despite claims of inclusivity and sustainability, such approaches rely on reforms that preserve economic growth as the dominant development strategy. While they may appear transformative, these conceptualisations seek to reconfigure the capitalist economy without altering the principles (such as growth, accumulation, and free market) that generate the current worldwide crises.

Kothari et al. (2014) point out that it is urgent to rethink the idea of development as “linear, unidirectional material and financial growth” (p. 366) and move towards other (plural) concepts born from the community’s needs. These concepts encompass values such as respect for all kinds of life, wellbeing (including non-material aspects), solidarity, and sufficiency, among others. Examples include Buen Vivir, Ubuntu, Swaraj, degrowth, community economy, and the solidarity economy. Therefore, rooted in bottom-up traditions, this paper will adopt the concepts of community economy and solidarity economy to discuss how MST co-operatives demonstrate concern for their communities.

The solidarity economy is defined as a set of economic activities, such as production, distribution, consumption, savings, and credit, based on mutuality and equitable power relations, rather than hierarchical or exploitative contracts (Singer, 2002). It aims not only to reduce inequalities but also to promote community wellbeing. This is achieved through collective ownership, non-hierarchical and consensual forms of governance, mutual co-operation, and rootedness in local social and ecological settings (Johanisova & Vinkelhoferová, 2019). In this sense, the solidarity economy challenges capitalist principles of private property, accumulation, market primacy, and profit maximisation.

Unlike capitalist businesses, whose objective is “to make as much money as possible while conforming to the basic rules of the society” (Friedman, 1970, p. 17), organisations that are part of the solidarity economy have broader objectives and characteristics. According to Johanisova et al. (2020), they pursue goals beyond profit; use profits to replenish nature and community; operate through democratic and localised ownership and governance; are rooted in place and time; and often engage in non-market forms of production, exchange, or provisioning. Co-operatives are considered part of the solidarity economy (Johanisova & Vinkelhoferová, 2019) and embody these characteristics, challenging the view that the “social responsibility of business is to increase its profits” (Friedman, 1970, p. 17). The five characteristics significantly intersect with the co-operative principles, particularly democratic member control and the three aspirational principles of education, co-operation among co-operatives, and concern for community.

Through democratic goals and structures, co-operatives reduce the distance between decision-makers and those affected by the decisions, and keep a dialogic relationship with their stakeholders, which also leads to agile and context-attuned decisions (Mangan & Ward, 2024). This governance model enables both a refusal of capitalist values and relations and the enactment of new modes of work and relationships (Kokkinidis, 2015). Equally important, through collective discussions around surplus creation and distribution, co-operatives open up "possibilities of connection and community rather than alienation and exclusion" (Cornwell, 2012, p. 741), which allows the democratisation of wealth to their members. Vieta and Lionais (2022) extend this perspective by arguing that co-operatives should break from a traditionally member-centric orientation to embrace more inclusive, community-anchored purposes — what they call new cooperativism. Grounded in commons-based values, new cooperativism centres on egalitarian forms of surplus production and distribution, extending the surplus benefits to the wider community.

Brazil provides a fertile ground for studying these alternative economies and organisations, as the solidarity economy has flourished in response to socio-environmental inequalities (Safri, 2015; Singer, 2002). Having reviewed the core theories that guide this study, the following section delves into the Brazilian context of land concentration and the emergence of the MST in response to it.

Land Concentration in Brazil and MST

Land concentration in Brazil, a legacy from colonial times, is a longstanding problem that is at the centre of socio-environmental inequalities in the country, and sits on the expropriation and exploitation of peasants, Black, and Indigenous peoples (Pinheiro Machado, 2018). The Agricultural Census 2017 (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2020) shows that properties of less than 50 hectares accounted for 81.4% of the total number of rural establishments, but occupied only 12.8% of the rural land area. In contrast, properties exceeding 500 hectares (popularly known as *latifúndios*) represented 2.1% of all establishments and covered 58.4% of the total rural land area in the country. For properties larger than 500 hectares, 72.2% of the landowners self-identified as white, highlighting the concentration of land ownership within this group. Despite the magnitude of these inequalities, land reform has been debated for decades across successive governments, yet no substantial progress has been achieved.

MST was born in 1984 in response to this problem, where peasant workers from all over the country got together to form a mass social movement and demand land reform. Members of the MST occupy *latifúndios* that fail to fulfil a social, environmental, or economic function — for instance, land that has been illegally deforested, expropriated, or associated with labour violations. They remain in encampments until the government evaluates the case for expropriation and redistribution. This right is protected by Articles 184 and 186 of the 1988 Brazilian Constitution.

MST's radicalness creates tensions with *latifundiários* (owners of *latifúndios*), as it challenges their power and privilege. Unsurprisingly, mainstream media has often portrayed derogatory narratives about MST, labelling them as troublemakers, violent people, and lawbreakers (Hammond, 2004; McNee, 2005). The conflicting views between the movement's goals and what is reported about them erode their popularity and legitimacy, making MST militants unwelcome in most places. Therefore, when they finally settle down, after years of moving around and waiting for land concession, they face numerous other challenges — regenerating the land, building basic infrastructure (housing, sewage, roads), as well as developing trust with the community.

MST understands that its transformative project does not end with the expropriation of *latifúndios*. Its mission is to work towards a dignified life for rural workers and to contribute to the production of healthy food for all Brazilians (MST, n.d.a). Within this ideal, the MST's co-operatives were established as a tool to enable livelihoods and to connect food producers with local consumers. Current figures indicate 185 co-operatives across all regions of Brazil,

alongside 1,900 associations, and 120 industries (MST, n.d.a). The MST co-operatives are therefore guided both by the co-operative principles and by MST's values and strategies. They also openly state in their communications that their practices are aligned with the solidarity economy: "we fight for an economy that stimulates the production of goods and makes it possible to eradicate poverty and social inequality … a fairer economy based on solidarity" (MST, n.d.b; section *Desenvolvimento*, translated by author). Even though these guiding forces stem from different fronts, they are rooted in practices of solidarity and socio-environmental justice and naturally converge and reinforce one another.

Methodology

This research adopts the diverse economy methodology, an approach which prioritises ethical engagement, experimentation, and the recognition of economic diversity (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020). It seeks to "make new worlds and ways of being possible" (Roelvink, 2020, p. 453) by challenging capitalocentric narratives and exploring economic possibilities beyond traditional market-centric models. This methodology supports the researcher to move from the critique to action and move beyond the narrative that there is no position outside capitalism.

The study sites were two MST co-operatives in Santa Catarina, Brazil. Established in the 2000s and 2010s, they include approximately 50 to 150 members and are in rural neighbourhoods, ranging 15-35km from the city centre in each corresponding city. They produce fruit and vegetables and supply them to residents, local markets, public institutions, and commercial partners. The research design included insights and observations from gatekeepers — individuals within the co-operatives who facilitated access to participants — through preliminary meetings and consultations. Data was collected through ethnographic methods, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and inventories (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020). These methods enabled direct engagement with the co-operatives' routines, culture, relationships, and processes, and aimed to ensure rigour and credibility (Tracy, 2010).

The overt participant observation was held over three months in the co-operatives' headquarters, clients' offices, and members' farms. During this time, interactions between members, the offices' routines, meetings, production planning, the Ordinary General Assembly, and moments of leisure and rest were observed. The researcher participated in activities, such as administrative tasks, harvesting, produce separation, and delivery. The participant observation allowed the researcher to engage and experience first-hand the co-operatives' reality, learning through practice and multiple perspectives (Tracy, 2010). Working together helped establish trust between the researcher and participants. Incidentally, it tackled power imbalances, as participants were in control of what kinds of work the researcher would be assigned to.

The interviews were semi-structured and included a range of the co-operatives' stakeholders. They aimed to understand the interviewees' relationship with the co-operative, the strengths and weaknesses of the organisation, and the importance of socio-environmental issues in their decision-making (Safri et al., 2017). Using snowball sampling (Clark et al., 2021), 25 interviews were conducted, 15 in one co-operative and 10 in the other. Some were conducted in communal spaces and included more than one person; therefore, the total number of interviewees was 32 (17 men and 15 women).

The final method applied was the inventory (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020) to outline the economic practices of the co-operatives, especially those that are not acknowledged by the mainstream economic model. The discussion led to insights into what differentiates them from other organisations and the values and practices that hold them together. One session was held in each co-operative, of 1.5 hours on average, where 19 people participated — 12 in one co-operative, 7 in the other.

Ethical considerations included procedural and relational ethics, with attention to trust, consent, and representation (Tracy, 2010). While the study prioritised depth over breadth, a particular

limitation must be acknowledged. Broader access to participants, particularly to the government and community, was constrained by the polarised political climate in Brazil. Aiming to preserve co-operatives' members' safety, caution shaped the scope of the sample, limiting the external outreach. Additionally, participant names are pseudonyms to protect anonymity. Translation of quotes from Portuguese was done by the author.

Discourse analysis was employed to analyse the data, aiming to understand how these organisations contest and deconstruct capitalist assumptions (Gibson-Graham, 2000).

The next section explores how MST co-operatives are enacting post-capitalist practices through granular, everyday practices.

Findings and Discussion

Since its origin, MST has actively engaged in social causes beyond the redistribution of land for agrarian reform. Recent national-level examples include the donation of 7,000 tonnes of food to vulnerable families during the Covid-19 pandemic (MST, 2022) and a financial support campaign for families affected by the 2024 floods in Rio Grande do Sul (Sanz, 2024). At a local level, this commitment is reflected in the work carried out by the MST co-operatives within the communities they inhabit. For the co-operatives in this study, supporting the community is viewed as "a way for them [MST members, now co-operative members] to repay the historical debt to the society that helped them [when they arrived in the region]; to give back, you know?" (Beatriz, co-operative employee). Although the MST members were not organised in co-operatives in their early days, the solidarity shown by the community during those initial years has become integral to their co-operatives' identity. Therefore, for these MST co-operatives, concern for community transcends a procedural obligation, emerging instead from a genuine and embodied commitment that recognises the interdependence among co-operatives, members, and communities.

It is important to note that the support received from the community was neither uniform nor unanimous, and remains so today. Pedro, a co-operative member, illustrates how MST militants, pejoratively referred to as *Sem Terra*, are seen:

> There is this whole thing on television that *Sem Terra* is troublemaker; *Sem Terra* is rioter; *Sem Terra* is thief; *Sem Terra* this, *Sem Terra* that. They were heavily discriminated against in society initially. To some extent, they gained a bit of respect, but discrimination still persists in the region.

Yet, supporting the community is deeply ingrained in the MST co-operatives' ethos. Jenny, a co-operative member, mentioned, "Let's put it that way, it's the least we can do, right?", illustrating that aiding the community is not a *plus*, but a regular practice. Furthermore, it was through actions, not with rhetoric, that the MST co-operatives dismantled the community's initial mistrust: by producing nutritious, agroecologically grown food and attending to the local needs of residents and ecosystems. Through these actions, a new dialogical space emerged, where co-operatives and communities established bonds of trust, which support one another to become more resilient (Mangan & Ward, 2024).

The following thematic sections, based on the community economy's ethical coordinates (Gibson-Graham, 2006), will illustrate empirically and discuss how the MST co-operatives collaborate with their local communities to advance socio-ecological justice through post-capitalist practices. The empirical examples can be illustrative of one or more coordinates, as they interact with one another.

Surplus

In the MST co-operatives, surplus is distributed to the community in the form of value (financial donations) and product (food donations), and it represents a key entry point into the local social

life. In Brazil, religious celebrations and popular festivals, such as *festas juninas* and *feijoadas*, are a common feature of community life, and they often revolve around shared meals. In small towns, churches and community centres are key sites of socialisation, information exchange, and grassroots mobilisation. By contributing to them, through food and money donations, the co-operatives not only support cherished community traditions but also position themselves as trusted and engaged local actors.

Similarly, food surplus is also donated to non-profit organisations and low-income families, enabling food sovereignty and access to good-quality produce. Simone, a co-operative member, conveys the feeling around this practice: “Sometimes we get a bit more [food produce] than needed … so there’s really nothing fairer than donating it to someone who needs it, is there?”. This seemingly simple act of redistribution encompasses a deeper negotiation of surplus. Firstly, rather than pushing all their produce into commercial avenues and using the available surplus solely to expand commercially and grow, they choose to distribute it to the local communities, a contrasting stance to the capitalist principle of capital accumulation and profit maximisation (Friedman, 1970). Secondly, surplus redistribution is done through non-market supply chains (Safri, 2015), which are mediated by solidarity, rather than money, and emerges from within the co-operative’s embodied histories of dispossession and struggle — they know what it means to face hardship, so they aim to avoid others having to face it too. In this sense, surplus distribution becomes a site of post-capitalist intervention that enables collective survival and interdependence (Cornwell, 2012; Gibson-Graham, 2006). It further sharpens the contrast between how surplus is understood in capitalist enterprises versus worker co-operatives — the former aiming to privately appropriate surplus at the expense of people and planet (Raworth, 2017), the latter aiming to distribute it to members and the broader community.

In co-operatives, in general, capital serves people, that is, it is used to support members’ needs, in line with the principles of democratic member control and member economic participation (ICA, 2015). Expanding the distribution of surplus beyond organisational boundaries represents yet another significant contribution towards social justice, positioning surplus as a site of ethical negotiation that encompasses the community (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Vieta & Lionais, 2022). By treating surplus as a collective resource, these co-operatives enact a commons-oriented logic that disrupts economic extraction (Vieta & Lionais, 2022).

Furthermore, the MST co-operatives transform economies not through scaling initiatives up, but through actions grounded in relational practices — acting on what matters in that particular place and time, and for that group of people (Johanisova & Vinkelhoferová, 2019; Mangan & Ward, 2024). Therefore, these initiatives, per se, are significant and relevant, and transform realities. When positioning them alongside similar initiatives of the other MST co-operatives (185 in total) spread across Brazil, their ubiquity stands out and accounts for a significant accumulation of transformative action. What unites these dispersed actions is MST’s commitment to providing healthy food to the Brazilian population and the shared values of solidarity and social justice (MST, n.d.a), principles that stem both from the broader social movement and the co-operative tradition.

Necessity and Consumption

Food donation, discussed in the previous section, also exemplifies the ethical coordinates of necessity and consumption. Donating food to NGOs and families facing hardship addresses the immediate need for nutritious food for groups living in precarity. How these donations are offered — without conditions or public recognition — redefine food consumption as a relational practice rather than a market-mediated exchange, one that builds social ties through solidarity and mutual responsibility. As Gibson-Graham (2006) note, provisioning from the resources available in the community contests the notions of scarcity and absence that are predominant in the capitalist discourse. Such discourse carries in itself the idea of competition to access what is offered in the market (Raworth, 2017), and those with more money have a better chance of succeeding. When competition is replaced by co-operation, money and the market are no

longer the determinants of the outcome; instead, social bonds and mutual care are (Singer, 2002). Critics might argue that solidarity-based actions do not dismantle the structures that create inequalities, yet they occur every day and objectively improve the quality of life. Solidarity practices such as the food donations from MST co-operatives create a buffer that enables people to be supported and meet their human needs, without any strings attached.

Beyond donation, the co-operatives expand access to affordable, good-quality food through weekly on-site food fairs. As these rural communities are distant from urban centres, these fairs offer a local alternative to more costly and less accessible retail options, reducing the cost of living while shortening the distance between producers and consumers. Cláudio, a resident, explains that the vegetables sold by the co-operative are, at least, 50% cheaper — “in the city centre, I’ll pay R$80, R$90. There [at the co-operative], R$30, R$40”. These weekly interactions also represent an opportunity to raise awareness about food production, the problems associated with *agro* (how Brazilians refer to commodified agribusiness) and the need to move towards agroecology. Through these fairs, the co-operatives become a pedagogical space where consumption fosters education, dialogue, and new subjectivities (Cornwell, 2012). In contrast to capitalist consumption, which tends to be individualised, commodified, and abstracted from production processes, consumption within MST co-operatives allows consumers to know where their food comes from and who produced it. As noted by Gibson-Graham (2006), ethical negotiations around consumption can foster new forms of collective subjectivity, turning what is often a passive economic act into a generative and reflexive one. Consumers become aware of their implication in the capitalist modes of production and consumption, and can make better informed decisions.

Agro continuously demonstrates their power through mass advertising campaigns in the main media (with the motto “agro is tech, agro is pop, agro is everything”), and their practices rely extensively on monocultures, pumped by pesticides, the exploitation of labour and nature (Ribeiro Cardoso et al., 2019). Thus, taking a stance on agroecological ways of production is an act of resistance. Firstly, MST co-operatives are resisting commodification in different stages of the food value chain — in the production, by investing in agroecological ways of producing (natural inputs, crop diversity, seed sovereignty, just remuneration, mutual aid among workers), and in the commercialisation by focusing on food sovereignty though local provisioning rather than exports. It is a reclaimation of the material act of feeding and the political discourse around food, asserting that small-scale agroecological farming is not only viable, but necessary. Secondly, as Safri (2015) discusses, solidarity-based supply chains redefine economic relations by privileging co-operation, equity, and mutual support over competition and profit maximisation. In this light, when MST co-operatives align their commercialisation practices with solidarity principles, such as local distribution, just pricing, and reciprocal networks, they are actively constructing an alternative economy, rejecting the exploitative logic of dominant agro-industrial chains.

These examples demonstrate how MST co-operatives negotiate necessity and consumption as place-based processes oriented toward collective sufficiency. Needs are addressed not only through market transactions but also through mutual aid and locally embedded exchanges (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Johanisova et al., 2020). These practices give us a glimpse of what development could look like when thought by and for the community, reflecting unique needs and wishes (Kothari et al., 2014).

Commons

Commons as an ethical coordinate of the community economy draws attention to how resources are reclaimed, replenished, and governed for the benefit of all, including humans and other-than-humans (Gibson-Graham, 2006). In the context of co-operatives, Vieta and Lionais (2022) advocate for a commons-based co-operativism which, among other goals, fosters collective stewardship of the means of production — whether for social, cultural, or economic outputs. In MST co-operatives, the attention to the commons is exercised through daily

practices, such as providing access to the co-operatives' infrastructure, as well as long-term projects, such as reforestation.

The co-operatives expand the pool of commons by providing access to tractors and machinery (along with someone to operate them) for other local small-scale farmers who are not members of the co-operative. These are key equipment for food production that can considerably influence the harvest outcome and its economic return. Therefore, sharing them enables better work conditions, fosters collaboration instead of competition among peers, reduces the investment and environmental costs associated with new machinery, and improves the local economy. By democratising access to the means of production, MST co-operatives are enacting a dual reality, rejecting privatisation of the means of production, central to capitalist enterprises, and fostering an agricultural model that is rooted in mutual aid and solidarity. This expansion of the co-operative principles and values (which includes democracy, equity, and solidarity) to encompass non-members "(re)enables a post-capitalist economic imaginary and political vision" (Vieta & Lionais, 2022, p. 18).

Beyond that, these organisations are also replenishing the commons through the regeneration of local ecosystems, extending concern for communities to the more-than-human world. Restoration of ecosystems is particularly relevant in this context for two reasons. Firstly, most land granted by the Agrarian Reform Programme to the MST militants was in a state of severe depletion. Secondly, the settlements are surrounded by industrial farms using agrochemicals intensively, mostly for the production of tobacco and soybeans. As Roberto, a co-operative member, states: "We know that it's not just deforestation that harms the environment; pesticides do too .... They're poisoning the water, damaging Mother Nature, and harming the soil." Conventional agricultural models appropriate the benefits offered by the commons (especially fresh water, pollinators, and clean air) for private profit while externalising the environmental costs of their operations — namely pollution, chemical toxicity, and ecosystem degradation. In response, through different partnerships with government agencies and other co-operatives, the MST co-operatives invest in tree planting and water preservation.

A notable example that illustrates this is a recent land regeneration project led by one of the co-operatives in the study. Through alliances with other MST co-operatives in the region, the co-operative secured funding from the Federal Government to recuperate degraded areas in two settlements, which include the plots of co-operative members and several non-members. In this project, the co-operative was responsible for growing the seedlings and overseeing the services of the agrotechnicians during the recuperation. The residents of the settlement became stewards of the area being regenerated, being responsible to care for it and define the rules for using that space. The project benefited hundreds of families (land reforestation at no cost), and, in the long term, it will also improve the quality of life of other beings that rely on native trees and a protected environment to survive. As noted by Alex, a co-operative member, "Not everyone who lives here is a member. But when a benefit comes through the co-operative, everyone benefits from it".

The commitment to regenerating and replenishing the commons comes from a worldview where "Mother Nature" (Roberto) is "the mother of everything" (Arthur, co-operative member). This belief shapes members' relationship with the land: as nature provides everything they have, in turn, it is their responsibility to care for, protect, and respect it. In this view, looking after ecosystems' regeneration is looking after oneself — an understanding of the interconnectedness between ecological and social wellbeing. Raworth (2017) argues that this recognition of the embeddedness of economic and social systems in ecological systems is a crucial step towards a well-being economy, one that encompasses respect for all kinds of life (Kothari et al., 2014). These forms of ecological care demonstrate that the MST co-operatives do not solely serve their members, but are rooted in broader ecological and territorial responsibilities (Johanisova & Vinkelhoferová, 2019), what Vieta and Lionais (2022) describe as a "commons sensibility" (p. 16). Here, the commons are not static resources but relational and cared-for landscapes, co-governed by those who depend on them. Such practices materialise Gibson-Graham's (2006) ethical coordinates, linking economic activity with ecological responsibility, ensuring the wellbeing of both human and other-than-human. As Vieta and Lionais (2022) argue, in doing so, co-operatives prefigure post-capitalist imaginaries and break from capitalocentric forms of organising.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how MST co-operatives embody post-capitalist principles through their commitment to community wellbeing, surplus redistribution, and ecological regeneration. Informed by the diverse economy, community economy and solidarity economy frameworks, the analysis has demonstrated that these co-operatives not only contest the financial logic of capitalist enterprises but also actively construct alternative economic practices that centre democratic participation, and social and environmental justice. Unlike capitalist enterprises that externalise costs, MST co-operatives internalise responsibility for their surrounding communities. Through initiatives such as food donations, infrastructure sharing, and regeneration of degraded landscapes, these co-operatives actively work to strengthen the social fabric and expand the commons.

The discussion has also examined the role of surplus redistribution to local communities as a mechanism for resisting capitalist accumulation. By democratising the appropriation and allocation of surplus, MST co-operatives disrupt the logic of profit-driven enterprises and instead foster the replenishing of both human and other-than-human communities. This approach signals a departure from capitalist models, where surplus is concentrated among a privileged few. Through the embodiment of values of solidarity, co-operation, and mutual aid, these organisations are extending the wealth created to the territories they are part of, thus moving away from extractivist models. Their actions resonate with the call for a commons-based and community-oriented co-operativism (Vieta & Lionais, 2022), which, in turn, closely align with the principles of the solidarity economy (Johanisova et al., 2020; Safri, 2015). Equally, their practice illustrates the transformative potential of regenerative, distributive, and democratic organisational goals and structures (Kokkinidis, 2015; Raworth, 2017).

The empirical data from the two MST co-operatives illustrate how granular organisational practices can have a relevant positive impact on the territories they are inserted into if oriented by principles that decentre the financial aspect as the only metric of success. In fact, these practices are not isolated. When positioning them as part of a wider network of practices (Gibson-Graham, 2002), they account for significant contributions to communities, as exemplified by the 7,000 tonnes of food donated by MST to families in various parts of Brazil during the Covid-19 pandemic (MST, 2022). From a theoretical stance, these practices illustrate the systemic reimagining of economic life outlined in post-capitalist and solidarity economy frameworks (Cornwell, 2012; Kokkinidis, 2015; Safri, 2015). Moreover, analysing MST co-operatives through the lens of community economy's ethical coordinates — surplus, necessity, consumption, and commons — has highlighted everyday economic practices that co-exist with capitalist practices, helping to diversify the economic landscape.

Lastly, this study contributes with empirical evidence to demonstrate the seventh co-operative principle — concern for community. The examples shown reaffirm that post-capitalist economies are not distant utopias but tangible realities materialising in MST co-operatives and similar grassroots initiatives worldwide. Their commitment to democratic decision-making, social justice, and ecological regeneration serves as a compelling illustration of how economies can be restructured to serve communities (humans and other-than-humans) rather than capital.

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