



Servicing bikes, serving community: Exploring community-before-profit in cycle repair worker co-operatives

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This paper starts from the critique, put forth by social and solidarity economy and post-growth scholarship, that the prevailing circular economic (CE) agenda reproduces central capitalist features like the pursuit of economic growth and technocratic resource management. As it has been argued, these features problematically undercut socio-ecological objectives such as material sufficiency, social wellbeing, and democratic control over resources. As ‘engines’ of the economy, however, enterprises may structure themselves and carry out activities in ways that challenge — or at least avoid reproducing — these capitalist logics, with co-operatives being a key example. This paper presents qualitative fieldwork with not-for-profit worker co-operatives focused on cycle repair and guided by post-growth values of community wellbeing and participation, economic democracy and justice, and ecological sustainability. It reflects on how these co-operatives leverage circularity to serve and build their communities, and how communities support circular resource management in cycle repair. The study also highlights pressures on the co-operatives’ activities and trade-offs between workers’ economic interests and other socio-ecological interests. It concludes by suggesting avenues for practitioners to strengthen relations between cycle repair co-operatives and communities.

Introduction: Circular Economy and Co-operative Organisation

Communities, enterprises, and productive sectors worldwide are increasingly impacted by intersecting and mutually intensifying socio-ecological pressures. One particularly prominent response to these predicaments is the circular economy (CE). Whilst there is no one agreed-upon definition (nor an actualised CE reality), the main recurring conceptual clusters have been captured as follows:

The circular economy is a regenerative economic system which necessitates a paradigm shift to replace the ‘end of life’ concept with reducing, alternatively reusing, recycling, and recovering materials throughout the supply chain, with the aim to promote value maintenance and sustainable development, creating environmental quality, economic development, and social equity, to the benefit of current and future generations (Kirchherr et al., 2023, p. 7).

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Crucially, many CE stakeholders promote decoupling resource use from economic activity and gross domestic product (GDP) growth by adopting strategies such as redesign, reuse, repair, remanufacturing, recycling, and sharing. These strategies are considered important for safeguarding resource availability and creating employment in the face of ecological and economic instability (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021; European Commission, 2020). However, as many studies have pointed out (see Corvellec et al., 2022), the CE agenda tends to adopt a technocratic and neocolonial perspective on resource management, prioritising powerful industries over community economies and Global North economies over those of the Global South. Furthermore, its premise of green growth is problematic not simply because infinite green economic growth on a finite planet is biophysically impossible, but also because it directly conflicts with and undermines the core CE principle of reducing raw material throughput. Indeed, a CE focused on GDP growth is unlikely to solve most environmental problems (Parrique et al., 2019), nor does it address the socioeconomic relations that drive the environmental crisis.

Thus, it becomes relevant to turn to circularities that *do* seek to challenge — or at least avoid reproducing — the hegemonic CE agenda. This often occurs on a small scale, such as within community economies or individual economic organisations. Notably, the latter mirror and sometimes drive the broader logics around growth — what Hinton (2021) terms “relationship-to-profit” — making them important agents in reproducing or challenging for-profit and not-for-profit logics (see also Parrique, 2019; Robra & Hinton, 2024). This paper focuses on co-operative organisations, which strive to enact a social and solidarity economy by transforming the structures of production and consumption in which they operate and directing economic activity towards need satisfaction and wellbeing (Villalba-Eguiluz et al., 2023; Ziegler et al., 2023). Even though ecological sustainability in co-operative identity is debated (Guerreschi & Díaz López, 2023; Ziegler et al. 2023), many co-operatives deprioritise economic growth and subordinate it to principles of sustainability, justice, democracy, and wellbeing (Parrique, 2019; Preluca et al., 2022; Schmid, 2018). The integration of social, ecological, and economic concerns is also reflected in the seventh co-operative principle: “co-operatives work for the sustainable development of their communities” (International Co-operative Alliance [ICA], 2015, p. 85).

Both circular (Ünal & Sinha, 2023) and co-operative activity (Ghauri et al., 2021; Langmead, 2017; Novkovic, 2012) balance social and economic interests, yet the intersection of both activities remains understudied (Bellemare et al., 2022), obscuring the ways in which various interests are balanced. This paper thus explores the connections and tensions between circularity (cycle repair), worker co-operatives, and the latter’s “sustainable development of their communities” (ICA, 2015, p. 85). Specifically, it investigates how *de facto* or *de jure* not-for-profit worker co-operatives leverage their communities to carry out circular activity, deploy circularity to serve and build their communities, and the challenges and trade-offs involved in doing so.

Before outlining the empirical details of this study, I want to further unpack the theoretical relevance of this research objective by taking a closer look at the notions of community, cycle repair, and not-for-profit. The concept of community here refers to the diverse range of people who volunteer in, take courses in, have their cycles repaired at, buy from, or are cycle donation recipients of the co-operatives (and, to some extent, to the local cycling community).

Many studies on cycle repair and community focus on community bike workshops (Batterbury & Dant, 2019) and bike kitchens (Bradley, 2018; Martin, 2014; Valentini & Butler, 2023), thus worker-co-operatives remain underexplored. Note that I generally use the term “cycle” rather than “*bi-cycle*”, following de Chatillon (2022). Furthermore, the focus here is on co-operatives that decentre profits and profitability. Worker co-operatives can still pursue worker self-interest rather than social interest (Steinberger et al., 2024). Hinton (2021) warns that “[a]n economy of worker cooperatives is still a market economy of privately-owned businesses that can operate for the profit of the private owners” (p. 12). She argues that, whilst the co-operative model might democratise the profit motive, “it does not necessarily take us closer to a sufficiency-based, post-growth economy” (p. 12). Conversely, my sampled (circular) worker co-operatives prioritise

sustainability, justice, democracy, and well-being, which are important constituents of a post-growth (circular) economy (Hinton, 2021; Robra & Hinton, 2024).

Empirical Design: Cases and Methods

Between March and August 2024, I conducted nine formal in-depth interviews, three informal interviews, seven observations, and analysed published co-operative documents during fieldwork with various not-for-profit cycle repair enterprises in the UK. For this paper, four co-operatives are included in the sample, which consists of formal and informal conversations with eight mechanics; three other co-operatives were excluded as they were not specifically worker co-operatives. Although comparative research between them — or with non-co-operative cycle repair shops — would have been interesting, the study is limited to worker co-operatives. The four worker co-operatives, two legally and two functionally not-for-profit, are located in four different cities and were identified through practitioner recommendations or online searches using keywords. All names are anonymised.

The multiple-case approach helps contextualise and aggregate insights about each co-operative. To better understand the broader co-operative context, I also conducted interviews with two expert organisations on co-operatives in the UK. Furthermore, having volunteered in one of the co-operatives and engaged with customers and volunteers during observations, I also draw on these insights to make sense of the co-operatives' communities. In the data, I coded segments reflecting mutual relations between (1) circularity (cycle repair) and (2) "building sustainable community" in the context of (3) worker co-operatives, based on key concepts from circularity literature (i.e. reuse/salvaging, repair, refurbish, maintenance) and post-growth literature (sustainability, justice, democracy, and well-being). The three most prominent relationship patterns structure the results section.

Results

The three key relationship patterns between the co-operatives, their circular (cycle repair) activities, and their communities are: practical participation and empowerment, interlinked work environment and service quality, and embedded resource flows. As will become clear, cycle *repair* extends beyond fixing bikes — incorporating other strategies like maintaining, reusing, or salvaging bikes and parts — and invites social dynamics that are not strictly *circular*.

Practical participation and empowerment

All the participating worker co-operatives, unlike most conventional cycle shops, have a history of running or regularly organising repair and maintenance courses, activities, and programmes. For instance, one co-operative's to-do list involves a show-and-tell session (i.e. the customer is invited to follow along as the mechanic repairs the cycle) and a slot for finishing a requested "refugee bicycle". Though usually open to everyone, the co-operatives place particular emphasis on supporting individuals who face psycho-social or practical barriers (such as linguistic or time constraints) to participating in cycling and cycle mechanics — such as gender minorities (e.g. trans and women), low-income groups, or refugees. Facilitating access to DIY repair skills, affordable professional repairs, or shared tools is seen as a key lever for building sustainable communities by democratising circularity.

Two worker co-operatives also aim to make cycling more accessible — *indirectly*, by providing specific groups (e.g. refugees) with cycles or offering car drivers training in cyclist awareness to improve road safety; or *directly*, by providing cycle training for those new to or uncomfortable with cycling.

Core to these goals is enabling more inclusive sustainable mobility. Some complement this with policy work or partnerships to promote urban cyclo-mobility (e.g. safe cycling infrastructure).

However, all mechanics acknowledge the challenge of balancing social commitments with their core economic activities, requiring regular and sometimes substantial trade-offs. A common example is deciding whether or not to run certain social schemes given their administrative burden and unpaid labour. Another is balancing (minimum) wage and keeping prices affordable. The need to accommodate customers to greater or lesser extents also reflects the co-operatives' immediate environments, where socio-economic status varies.

Interconnections between work environment and service quality

Before addressing the wider community, it is relevant to highlight some dynamics between the member-worker “community” and repair work. While good repairs happen across business types, some mechanics believe respectful, self-governing workplaces with stable staffing and worker well-being can improve service quality. Co-operatives typically address exclusion and bias via policies and practices like non-violent communication, shared reproductive labour, or inclusive recruitment. These co-operative practices and values contrast with a phenomenon described by one mechanic as “Saturday Boys” — seasonal, unskilled summer workers common in “regular” bike shops — which they observed to be often paired with underpayment and staff turnover, resulting in poorer repairs.

The wider communities benefit not just from quality repairs, but from welcoming, inclusive environments — qualities reportedly missing in many non-co-operative shops. Mechanics emphasise making customers feel “welcome”, “belonging”, and “safe” (e.g. to ask “basic” questions). Through localised, diverse recruitment — considering ethnicity, gender expression, sex, class — staff better reflect the communities they serve, a trend observed to varying extents in the sampled co-operatives. Some mechanics contrast this culture with the “macho culture” they associate with many conventional shops. This inclusive culture may also help retain customers and volunteers, which in turn supports the co-operatives' ongoing circular activities.

Embedded resource flows

All mechanics interviewed expressed major qualms with the cycle industry, mentioning “monopolistic”, “profit-driven”, and “increasingly unsustainable” models, with rising production of “throw-away cycles” alongside constant innovation in “elitist” models. The mechanics note that the cycle industry is dominated by a handful of companies (e.g. Shimano), setting ever-changing standards to ensure profitability, and controlling the entire componentry supply chain, making it financially unviable for smaller companies to compete.

Though little has been realised, several co-operative members aim to localise and “co-operativise” parts production. For some components, local partnerships have emerged (e.g. frames, mudguards). Reuse is also seen as a way to reduce supply chain dependence, and it instead requires and leverages the wider community (beyond local producers), as several co-operatives salvage parts from donated cycles. In one co-operative the dismantling of these old cycles is done by (community) volunteers. Many are refurbished and resold or donated to social projects — thus circulating back into the community. Sometimes, cycles are not rebuilt but their parts are salvaged for future repairs.

Even though this tighter loop of resources might be desirable, it also presents trade-offs. Reused parts enhance affordability but often wear out sooner. New (non-circular) parts from established companies cost more but last longer, as they might save entire systems from wear, reducing resource use in the long run. Thus, mechanics make ongoing and complex assessments around various resource use dimensions, including: affordability (for customers), quality (durability of the repair), circularity (ecological values and aims), and financial viability (of the co-operatives). These tensions reveal the co-operatives' integrative — and non-hegemonic — engagement with circular activity. Based on what mechanics reported, half of the co-operatives prioritise reuse for social and ecological reasons; the other half favour new components for quality and longevity.

Table 1: Summary of relationship patterns between circularity, community, and worker co-operatives

Practical participation and empowerment	Running trainings, events, schemes (linked to repair and cycling). Focus on empowerment of gender minorities, low socio-economic status, refugees. Additional policy work (with partners) to improve cyclo-mobility. Cycle donations and volunteering by community.
Interconnection work environment and service quality	Co-operative values improve worker well-being, improving customer service. Stable customer and volunteer base stabilises circular activity. Co-operative workplace culture may better represent diverse community. Low staff turnover (through membership) enhances repair work quality.
Embedded resource flows	Aspiration to localise and co-operativise cycle manufacturing economies. Less dependency on monopolistic supply chains through reuse. Reuse relies on community: cycle donations and volunteers dismantling donated cycles.

Source: Author

Discussion

Deploying circularity to build community (and vice versa)

Whilst cycle repair is the central activity, it spills over into a range of other circular strategies and social interests. The circular activities at the core of the worker co-operatives thus become a site for building inclusive, democratic, and sustainable communities, but the co-operatives also rely on those communities: as demonstrated above, community voluntary work and cycle donations are important contributions.

An applicable concept, regularly referenced in growth-critical and co-operative literatures (Guinan & O'Neill, 2019; Piñeiro Harnecker, 2007; Ranis, 2016), is community wealth. Beyond financial circulation, wealth encompasses material and immaterial assets and community inclusion (Dubb, 2016). The findings highlight ways in which the co-operatives enact community wealth — from addressing social inequalities in access to cycling and repair knowledge and skills (see Cahen, 2016; de Chatillon, 2021) to advocacy for local production (see Table 1).

It can thus be argued that circularity plays a central role in building and retaining wealth in the community, as resource flows become more embedded and community-controlled. Given the socio-material relevance of cycles to urban sustainability and the co-operatives' social efforts to enhance bike equity (Cahen, 2016), cycle repair may constitute an important thread of socio-ecological transformation in community fabrics. This aligns with what scholars identify as the political transformation potential of repair (see McLaren et al. 2020). Bringing people from diverse backgrounds together in one space, around a shared cause — here functional mobility — and as empowered users rather than alienated consumers, is a socio-political act (Bradley & Persson, 2022).

As circularity catalyses sustainable communities, it is important to consider the socio-economic dynamics underpinning ecological engagements. As one mechanic summarised: "Carbon footprints and stuff is not our approach to environmentalism, if you know what I mean. We believe in ownership over assets, in control over labour, in democracy".

Triangulating objectives and realities

Despite these potentials, as many mechanics note, running a cycle repair worker co-operative is hard work. Challenges often involve tensions between workers' economic and socio-ecological interests (Novkovic, 2012), or between the co-operatives and their wider political-economic contexts (Langmead, 2017).

Trade-offs in repair (e.g. environmental, quality, and affordability) have also been documented elsewhere. A key example would be the negative effects of mass production and constant innovation on resource reuse or repair work — the latter becoming more labour-intensive and thus less affordable (de Chatillon, 2022).

Tensions between co-operatives and their political-economic contexts take many forms. For example, the co-operatives in this research occupy different socio-economic niches in their cities. While an in-depth discussion is beyond this paper's scope, it is reasonable to suggest that contextual diversity — shaped by factors such as cycling culture and infrastructure, property availability (in terms of financial accessibility, visibility, capacity), and customer socio-economic status — influences the co-operatives' services, pricing, and revenue (Cahen, 2016). Also relevant, but beyond this scope, are austerity's negative impacts on co-operative capacity, community finances, and the necessary socio-technical developments, such as safe and extensive cycling infrastructure (Aldred et al., 2019).

These observations suggest the co-operatives' role is somewhat fraught: engaging simultaneously in fundamental community-building and circular work often involves a level of self-exploitation — the very condition that worker co-operatives are designed to resist through their enterprise structure. Still, it is equally valid to (re)frame “the contradictions inherent to co-operatives' dual social-economic characteristic ... as creative moments that help worker-members to constantly reassess their practice, and their place within, against, and beyond the capitalist economy” (Langmead, 2017, p. 1).

Concluding Reflections: Avenues for Change

This paper aimed to expand the literature on how organisations at the intersection of circular and co-operative activity navigate the balance between social and economic interests — specifically by demonstrating the connections and tensions between cycle repair and community development within not-for-profit worker co-operatives. Although these co-operatives, to varying degrees, embody non-hegemonic forms of circularity, they operate within exploitative, for-profit economic systems that constrain their efforts to democratise and circularise cycle repair. Nevertheless, the dynamics of community and circularity appear to sustain and reinforce one another: circularity builds community, community builds circularity.

In conclusion, I want to reflect on ways practitioners might further strengthen the relationship between circular resource use in cycle repair, worker co-operatives, and community development. While co-operatives should resist the lure of internal growth and profitability, an important strategy is to increase the sector's share in the economy — for example, through company conversions or the creation of new co-operatives (Garcia Jané, 2024). Equally vital is expanding and consolidating the broader cycle repair ecosystem serving diverse cycling communities. One entry-point is establishing a (secondary) purchasing co-operative, allowing worker co-operatives to “pool resources to negotiate better supply contracts, thereby lowering their costs to more effectively compete against larger national chains” (Dubb, 2016, p. 4). This strategy could also support advocacy for circular design (i.e. standardised, repairable, reusable parts), enabling co-operatives to combine the “advantages of larger scale while maintaining individuality and sensitivity to local conditions (Dubb, 2016, p. 4), as well as meeting user and worker needs that circular design aims to address.

Taking this further, co-operativising the production and distribution of standardised circular cycle parts could enhance the feasibility and sustainability of cycle repair activity, as both mechanics

and the growth-critical repair literature (e.g. Cooper & Salvia, 2018) have emphasised. However, this is far from realised at the moment, and more exploration is needed on how to implement this and whether it actually addresses the durability limitations of component reuse. Another promising direction is integrating end-user and worker co-operative models, ensuring both users' and providers' protection from exploitation, while fostering stronger cycling communities. Although this model has been explored to some extent by Steinberger et al. (2024), further investigation is needed to realise its potential.

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