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# The New Cooperativism, the Commons, and the Post-Capitalist Imaginary

**Marcelo Vieta and Doug Lionais**

This article explores the intersection of the commons and co-operatives resonating with the concept and practices of today's *new cooperativism*. We argue that the commons, understood as a transformative vision for the social stewardship of vital dimensions of social and economic life, is a key animator of the co-operative difference and that the new cooperativism re-establishes co-operatives within their radical commons heritage. We begin the article with a brief review of the history of co-operatives and their relationship to capitalism and crises. We then explore the issue of the commons as a unifying force of post-capitalistic thought and practice and connect it to the new cooperativism. To illustrate the possibilities inherent to the co-operative form for a more radical, post-capitalist vision, we then turn our attention to an illustrative case of new cooperativism today — Argentina's worker-recuperated enterprises. This case demonstrates the potential vibrancy of commons-based co-operatives for a post-capitalist alternative, offering tantalising details of the new cooperativism in practice. The final section provides a discussion of new cooperativism's possibilities for organising the commons and catalysing post-capitalist imaginaries.

## Introduction

In periods of capitalist crises, co-operatives often emerge as more resilient forms of business enterprise that protect communities from market fluctuations, company closures and other recurrent socio-economic ills. The 2008 global financial crisis demonstrated this counter-cyclical ability of co-operatives (Birchall & Hammond Ketilson, 2009; CECOP-CICOPA, 2011; Sanchez Bajo & Roelants, 2011). Co-operatives the world over also stepped up quickly to support communities' myriad needs during the COVID-19 pandemic (CECOP-CICOPA, 2020; International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2022; Vieta & Duguid, 2020).

Co-operatives seem to have a built-in capacity to respond to the multiple social, spatial, and ecological crises of capitalism. They address issues of social inequality by beginning to eliminate the capital–labour divide, returning control of economic activity to their members (Cheney et al., in press; Jossa, 2014; McMurtry, 2010). They address inequalities driven by processes of uneven development by grounding economic activity and wealth generation in local communities (Gordon Nembhard, 2014; Novkovic & Webb, 2014; Pérotin, 2013). Co-operatives have also shown some strength in dealing with the environmental crisis, adequately organising a community's control over natural resources or alternative power generation (Bianchi & Vieta, 2019; Huybrechts & Mertens, 2014; Tarhan, 2015). In short, co-operatives, at their best, respond to the crises and turbulence inherent to capitalism (Olsen, 2013; Rothschild, 2016; White & Williams, 2016). Yet, capitalism remains hegemonic and, despite evidence for their counter-cyclical nature and strong resilience, co-operatives have not been able to establish a strong, overarching counter-narrative to mainstream economics and business punditry.

Beyond their stability in times of crisis, then, we need to ask what the relationship is between co-operatives and capitalism. Building on Hudson's (2009) categorisations of the social economy, which includes co-operatives, we can view their relationship to capitalism as falling into one of three categories, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Relationship between co-operatives and capitalism

| Categories | Relationship to capitalism |
|---|---|
| C1. Co-operatives as an adjunct or safety net. | Co-operatives offer a release valve or coping strategy during moments of crises but essentially assume the system as is. |
| C2. Co-operatives as a parallel or alternative coordinating mechanism for the production and distribution of goods and services. | Seeks to create a space for co-operative values and practices but, again, ultimately accepts and works within the capitalist system. |
| C3. Co-operatives as a radical non- or other-than-capitalist approach to economic activity. | Envisions the construction of a post-capitalist paradigm. |

Although the history of co-operatives may be rooted in another approach to organising economic life (C3; see also MacPherson, 1979; Quarter, 2000), co-operatives have been largely normalised (C2), or absorbed into the capitalist system (C1; see Marcuse, 2015; Ratner, 2015). In the last few decades, however, alternative narratives inspired by notions such as 'another world is possible' and 'there are many alternatives' have seized the radical imagination. These new post-capitalist narratives are beginning to find some cohesion around a language of *the commons* (Bechtold, 2016; De Angelis & Harvie, 2014). 'The commons' is a useful concept for grounding a different narrative to global capital and state socialism since it proposes the communal ownership and stewardship of activities and resources deemed too important for private ownership and profit (Ostrom, 1990). Equally, notions of the commons promise bottom-up solutions to shrinking the neoliberal state (De Angelis & Harvie, 2014) and where co-operatives are increasingly viewed as an ideal organisational form (de Peuter & Dyer-Witheford, 2010; Korsár & Malmström, 2016).

The purpose of this article is to explore the intersection of the commons and co-operatives as articulated by the concept and practices of *the new cooperativism*. We argue that the commons is a key animator of the co-operative difference. We propose to further develop the concept of *the new cooperativism* with the goals of highlighting the transformative vision for alternative socio-economic realities prefigured by co-operative initiatives throughout the world today, underscoring their connections to the commons, and differentiating solidarity based and socially-focused co-operatives from strictly member-focused ones (Ridley-Duff, 2020; Vieta, 2010a, 2014b, 2016, 2018). Examples of the new cooperativism exist in, for instance, numerous contemporary experiments in collective organisation of socio-economic life in Latin America and among indigenous communities throughout the Americas that respond to and move beyond neoliberal capitalism (e.g., Giovannini & Vieta, 2017; Gudynas, 2011; Peredo & Chrisman, 2006; Peredo et al., 2019; Scott Cato & North, 2016; Vieta & Heras, 2022). These examples show that co-operatives are most effective as transformative organisations when they go beyond the economistic paradigm and mutual benefits to members and take their cue from ethical values that ground their commitments within the wider community — the site of the commons — as a key component of their purpose (MacPherson, 2012; Miner & Novkovic, 2020; Vieta, 2014a; Vieta & Lionais, 2015).

We begin this paper with a brief review of the history of co-operatives and their relationship to capitalism and crises. We then explore the issue of the commons as a unifying force of post-capitalistic thought and practice. To illustrate the possibilities inherent to the co-operative form for a more radical, post-capitalist vision, we then turn our attention to a contemporary example of new cooperativism in Latin America — Argentina's *empresas recuperadas por sus trabajadores* (worker-recuperated enterprises, ERTs). We develop the macro- and micro-sociological details of the ERT case via summative published articles and books (Ranis, 2016; Ruggeri, 2010, 2016; Ruggeri et al., 2014; Ruggeri & Vieta, 2015) and the in-situ qualitative work of one of the authors, including interviews with around 60 protagonists of Argentina's ERT movement and ethnographic site visits at over a dozen worker-recuperated firms between 2005 and 2018 (Vieta, 2010b, 2014b, 2019, 2020a). With their radical transformation of workplaces into community spaces, ERTs demonstrate the potential vibrancy of commons-based co-operatives for a post-capitalist alternative today.

Throughout, however, and as we will briefly illustrate with the demise of Atlantic Canada's historical Antigonish Movement, we also keep in tension the challenges in the co-operative form that must be adequately addressed and planned for if they are to remain viable 'new cooperative' alternatives to the capitalist status quo. In the final section, we discuss new cooperativism's possibilities for organising the commons and catalysing post-capitalist imaginaries.

## Capitalism and the Co-operative Response

The emergence of capitalism entailed, among other things, the shift from common access to private ownership of resources via practices and policies of enclosure (Marx 1867/1992; Neeson, 1993; Wood, 1999). While traditional Marxian analysis provides an understanding of the central processes of the enclosure of the commons and the overall tensions of capitalism, there were other historical criticisms of capitalism that focused more explicitly on providing alternative approaches to socio-economic organisation. Early co-operative thought, for instance, was a reaction to capitalism's challenges for working people (see, for example, Devillers, 2005; Holyoake, 1875/1908; Infield, 1956). Specifically, the modern intellectual roots of co-operativism can be traced to the utopian socialism of Robert Owen and his followers (McNally, 1993; Quarter, 2000) and the Rochdale Pioneers (MacPherson, 1979). The Rochdale Pioneers' bottom-up experiments in co-operation were more successful and long-lasting than Owen's top-down, paternalistic efforts at addressing working people's wellbeing, a point generally attributed to the Rochdale Pioneer's adoption of a set of operating principles that have come to be known as co-operatives' 'Rochdale Principles', the precursors to the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) "Statement on the Co-operative Identity" and its seven principles (ICA, 2018). These early experiments in co-operativism were both practical responses to the inequalities and difficulties that capitalism brought to working people, and utopian proposals intended to provide a transition from a crisis-prone capitalist system to a co-operatively based economy — a "co-operative commonwealth" (Gronlund, 1891) — that was more stable and just.

While a broader, co-operatively based economy has not yet come to fruition, co-operatives continue to be resilient in times of crisis, often playing an important role in stabilising local economies (Pérotin, 2006; Smith & Rothbaum, 2014). Co-operative banks have also demonstrated how financial stability may be secured (Lemzeri, 2013) and, in the US, credit unions have attracted members in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis (Chatterji et al., 2017). And worker buyouts or takeovers of failing conventional firms that see employees converting them into worker co-operatives have increased in numbers since 2008, especially throughout Southern Europe and Latin America, saving not only jobs and business entities but also entire communities from further decline (Jensen, 2011; Vieta, 2020a, 2020b; Vieta et al., 2017).

The resilience and promise of co-operatives have been attributed to what has been labeled "the co-operative advantage" (Spear, 2000; Vieta & Lionais, 2015) or "the cooperative difference" (Novkovic, 2008). This difference includes the positive outcomes that unfold from fuller stakeholder participation in a productive entity; the local embeddedness of co-operative firms that lead to more stable businesses and territorial economies; their ability to respond flexibly to market failures by, for instance, fluctuating salaries rather than laying off workers; and their creation of other positive externalities for their communities (Bianchi & Vieta, 2019; Borzaga & Depedri, 2014; Errasti et al., 2017; Olsen, 2013; Pérotin, 2006, 2013; Roelants et al., 2020; Zamagni & Zamagni, 2010). While economic analyses of co-operatives have traditionally focused on issues concerning their ownership and governance (e.g., Dow, 2003; Furubotn & Pejovic, 1970; Hansmann, 2000; Vanek, 1977), Novkovic (2006, 2008) has forcefully argued that it is the principles of co-operation itself rather than the ownership structure that sets co-operatives apart. Co-operatives that work do so because they are able to make the community a priority and operate for social rather than solely financial and individualistic reasons (Miner & Novkovic, 2020).

Since co-operatives are co-owned by members with mutualistic needs or goals, they are inherently well suited for organising community-based economic interests (Novkovic & Webb, 2014) and for securing good and decent jobs (Cheney et al., in press; Pérotin, 2013; Roelants et al., 2020). Indeed, community goals can ground co-operatives and form the basis for alternative approaches to local economic development (Vieta & Lionais, 2015). MacPherson (2012) has argued that 'concern for the community' is a key, though often ignored, principle of co-operativism. If co-operatives are unique interventions in the capitalist system, then that difference is, paradoxically, based on their appropriateness of fit with community-based visions for an alternate socio-economic reality.

However, despite tireless efforts by many protagonists in the co-operative movement, co-operatives have been historically marginalised or rejected by both capitalist interests and abandoned by many on the radical left as a mechanism for alternative development. While its rejection by capitalism tends to be rooted in a visceral and ill-founded dismissal of co-operatives, viewed erroneously as lacking potential for 'efficiently' organising a business, the left's abandonment is much more nuanced. First, the failure of early co-operative experiments to materialise a durable organisational alternative to capitalist growth, as particularly witnessed in the collapse of the Paris Commune in 1871, led many left political thought leaders to minimise co-operatives as a key tool for revolution (e.g., Luxemburg, 1900/1986; Lenin,1923/1969; Marx, 1875/1978, 1894/1981). Second, Marxists widely turned to a statist solution rather than the so-called "bourgeois socialism" of "producer co-operatives," sensing that they did not have the same revolutionary potential that was embodied in the proletariat takeover of the state (Jossa, 2005). Third, contemporary critics on the left view most co-operatives as living uneasily within the capitalist system, or of being comfortably assimilated into it (Atzeni & Vieta, 2014; Gasper, 2014; Jossa, 2005; Marcuse, 2015; McNally, 1993; Ratner, 2015). In this vein, co-operatives can be adapted to the demands of competitive markets and too easily internalise conventional practices of commodity production. As a consequence, co-operatives' more radical politics and practices of solidarity are compromised and even dropped when they operate within market-driven logics; as co-operatives on the whole need to compete on the same basis as capitalist firms, they tend to maintain only a minimum adherence to co-operative principles and are pushed to focus strictly on member benefit and revenue maximisation over larger social goals.

There is some credibility to the left's third critique of co-operatives. Although co-operatives started as responses to capitalism, they have been, for the most part, co-opted into the capitalist system, leading to what has been called "capitalism with a human face" (Brittan, 1995). Can co-operative principles and organisation, then, continue to be considered appropriate for alternative, post-capitalist economic realities? What historical and contemporary evidence is there that they can potentially be deployed for community-led alternative imaginaries and socio-economic practices?

## Post-Capitalism and the Commons

### A new left agenda?

The continual social, spatial, and ecological crises of capitalism led, from its early beginnings, to the search for alternatives. As history was being pronounced dead in the late twentieth century (Fukuyama, 1992), a growing anti- and post-capitalist project emerged, drawing on the alter-globalisation movements of the turn-of-the millennium that eventually united around the idea of 'the commons' (De Angelis, 2010; De Angelis & Harvie, 2014; Fournier, 2013).

As a central concern for a post-capitalist project, the commons is not only reactive to capitalist enclosures but also generative of alternative social spheres of life that offer protection from market forces (De Angelis, 2007; Dolenec & Žitko, 2016; Scott Cato & North, 2016); of spaces of collective trust and care (Cumbers, 2015); and even of a co-operative commons (Korsár & Malmström, 2016; Kostakis & Bauwens, 2014) or a 'labour commons' (de Peuter & Dyer-Witheford, 2010; Vieta, 2016). For De Angelis (2007, 2010), it is the very pressures

of ongoing enclosure that create opportunities for resistance out of which the possibility for transformational change is embedded. In this sense, the commons is not limited to a historical or defensive role, but also has a proactive role for producing flows of communal (rather than private) value that contribute to a more inclusive quality of life, community wellbeing, and social and ecological justice (Jeffrey et al., 2012). If the commons is to be a viable alternative to capitalism, then there needs to be a deeper understanding of its relation to the organisational forms and dynamics that can guide it, its philosophical and sociological underpinnings, and how it offers compelling alternative paths beyond capitalism. Towards this goal, we next draw on the critical theoretical work of Hardt and Negri, Casarino, and de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford.

Hardt and Negri (2005, 2009) argue that while, paradoxically, capitalism privileges the individual over the communal, it still requires the commons to function. Extending Marx's analysis of the co-optation of workers' capacities to co-operate in the labour process for the full functioning of the capitalist system of production and the creation of surplus value, they argue that the commons is the "locus of surplus value" (2005, p. 150). For Hardt and Negri, value is first produced as 'a common' and is then appropriated by capital as surplus value. Production is thus always already a process of the commons, although in a capitalist system it is ultimately subsumed into privatised and exploitative means and aims.

Casarino (2008) similarly argues that there is a need to distinguish between the common that capital appropriates — surplus value — and the common that is produced and that capital does not, and cannot, appropriate. In fact, Casarino continues, there is always a remainder to capitalism's appropriations in what he terms "the surplus common" (p. 22). Surplus common is the common returned to, or incorporated back into the commons. Thus, surplus common, that which evades appropriation, is generative of possibilities for other modes of being. "Revolutionary becoming," argues Casarino, "is living the common as surplus" (p. 22).

de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford (2010), in turn, imagine a commons-based alternative for labour in which labour operates via a "democratized organization of productive and reproductive work" (p. 45). Such a "labour commons," they argue, like those found in worker co-operatives, can transform workplaces into an "*organizational commons*," performed labour into "*a commoning practice,*" and generated surpluses into "*a commonwealth*" (2010, p. 45, emphasis in original).

The notions of "surplus common" and the "labour commons" are rooted in what we may call *commons thinking*. Commons thinking, as Casarino and de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford suggest, must be transferred into concrete and effective economic practice for articulating tangible alternatives. While there are myriad emerging examples of social enterprises that offer innovative forms for combining social purpose and business practice (Defourny & Nyssens, 2010; Quarter et al., 2018), co-operatives have the specific potential, given their focus on mutualistic goals and common ownership, to incorporate the commons into an existing business form that inherently privileges surplus commons and the labour commons. However, in order for co-operatives to become truly transformative — to manifest the commons within its organisational form, to become *commons-based co-operatives* — they need to overcome the limitations of their history and structure.

Echoing Miner & Novkovic's (2020) dual "cooperative enterprise model" and its possibilities for expanding the co-operative form from "an economistic to a humanistic paradigm" (p. 5), if co-operatives strictly focus on their member-owners as 'individual shareholders,' they necessarily adopt a neo-classical perspective that prioritises the individual (as shareholder) over the commons. Moreover, as Côté (2019) also suggests, if co-operatives are simply inserted into mainstream competitive markets as one more legal form of business in direct competition with other firms and even other co-operatives, competitive pressures and market demands will push the co-operative to behave isomorphically like capitalist firms, organise hierarchically, and even behave in exploitative ways (Atzeni & Vieta, 2014; McNally, 1993; Vieta, 2020a). In such scenarios, co-operatives offer little more than a capitalist coping mechanism, or at best, as we have already suggested, a reformed capitalism with a human face, ultimately supportive of existing socio-economic structures.

## The cautionary tale of the Antigonish Movement co-operatives

One clear historical example of the lost promise of the transformative potential of co-operatives as organisations of the commons is the demise of the Antigonish Movement consisting of mostly producer and consumer co-operatives formed in Canada's Maritimes region in the 1920s and 1930s. While replete with lessons as a precursor to today's new cooperativism, the Antigonish Movement ultimately failed to realise the commons-based co-operative potential due, in part, to its eventual adherence to a set of rules that divorced it from the alternative socio-economic model it had originally promised.

The Antigonish Movement emerged in a context where rural fishers and farmers in the region were exploited by monopsonistic merchants and distributers, and labourers in the industrial centres were exploited by monopolistic foreign and central-Canadian owners (Sacoumon, 1977). This fomented poverty and political anger towards industrial capitalism amongst the region's working class. The Antigonish Movement emerged in response to this regional angst and hardship, and was originally articulated as an alternative socio-economic reality for the lives of working people by a group of Catholic priests working out of the Extension Department of St Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia (Lotz & Welton, 1997; MacPherson, 1979). Via adult education methods that helped the local population learn about co-operatives as vehicles for taking control over their productive activity and socio-economic destinies, the movement brought considerable economic autonomy and democracy to the region. By the end of the 1930s, the movement had established across Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island 1,300 'kitchen table' study clubs, 17 fisheries co-operatives, 170 credit unions, 43 co-operative stores and buying clubs, plus 10 other co-operatives of various kinds (Dodaro & Pluta, 2012).

Two frameworks drove the Antigonish Movement. 'The Big Picture' spoke to both the movement's ultimate vision of bottom-up socio-economic change through economic democracy and autonomous community control via co-operatives. This was driven by the social doctrine of the Catholic Church as a middle way to socio-economic organisation between capitalism and state socialism. In turn, the 'Six Principles' included the codification of the following: (1) the primacy of the individual; (2) social reform must come through education; (3) education must begin with the economic; (4) education must be through group action; (5) effective social reform involves fundamental changes in social and economic institutions; and (6) the ultimate objective of the movement is a full and abundant life for everyone in the community.

Dodaro and Pluta (2012) argue that the Six Principles ultimately shifted the movement away from The Big Picture by dampening the bottom-up and community-based vigour of the Antigonish Movement co-operatives. This is, according to the authors, because the Six Principles were firmly set in the framework of neo-classical economic theory, prioritising the individual over the collective, and market logics over co-operative values, displacing the broader vision for social change and contributing to derailing the movement and to the ultimate degeneration of many of its co-operatives. By the 1960s, the movement became stagnant and whittled to a shadow of its former vibrancy and potential, losing, we can now say, its commons thinking.

Alternatively, co-operatives that uphold their commons roots serve as a critical educative space for nourishing a set of ethico-political values and practices that can ground them as transformative, community-centred entities. Concurrently linking the commons and community benefit and wellbeing to co-operatives holds the potential to rejuvenate the co-operative model, now specifically adapted to respond to and begin to move beyond capitalism and its recurring crises. A commons-based co-operativism similar to the original vision of The Big Picture builds on the mutualistic values of equity in co-operatives while also moving beyond ownership and governance conceived as a collective of individuals to a commons-based, socialised form of co-ownership and participation on which the co-operative operates *in trust* of the broader community (MacLeod, 2002). This way of understanding co-operatives-as-commons has been taken up by the emerging notion of 'the new cooperativism'.

## The New Cooperativism

While Vieta's (2010a) original conceptualisation of the new cooperativism downplayed its commons lineage, in recent years Ridley-Duff (2020) has contributed to bringing the term's commons characteristics to the fore, paralleling Vieta's more recent work (Vieta, 2016, 2018). The new cooperativism describes a way of organising co-operation that takes co-operatives back to their original radical roots but that is also connected to the responses and proposals by contemporary social movements and local actors against and beyond neoliberal capitalism. The new cooperativism forms a part of the social and solidarity economy (Yi, in press), the related proposals for economic democracy (Cumbers, 2015; Malleson, 2014), and the traditional aims of the co-operative movement. However, it is less concerned with formal co-operative structures than it is about imagining new forms of solidarity economies grounded in values of social justice and practices of collective action aimed at broadening social and increasingly environmental care and wellbeing. In this way, new cooperativism is as much a rupture from 'old' co-operative thinking as it is from capitalistic systems (Vieta, 2010a). Over the last dozen years, we have been attempting to conceptualise the tendencies and features of the new cooperativism (Lionais & Vieta, 2017; Vieta, 2010a, 2014a, 2016, 2018) and Table 2, below, highlights six key features of the new cooperativism.

Table 2: Key features of the new cooperativism

| **Key features of the new cooperativism** | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | *The new cooperativism espouses values and practices of subsidiarity, community-led and democratically based economic activity, and equitable distributions of resources and wealth.* | Entrenched within communities and usually embraces clear objectives for local community development, by and for the very people affected. Aims for more equitable distribution of social wealth and surpluses. |
| 2. | *It directly responds to crises and social needs.* | Tends to emerge as bottom-up solutions by working people and grassroots groups to myriad challenges (rising precarity and unemployment, local economic depletion, growing marginalisation, and environmental degradation).<br><br>Provides proactive, community-led alternatives to the privatisation of public goods and state downloading of social services.<br><br>Often without prior tight links to older co-operative or labour movements, its collective projects thus issue more from immediate social, cultural, economic, or environmental necessity rather than from pre-existing ideological commitments. |
| 3. | *It is ethical and sustainable.* | Ethico-political commitments emerge not from capital-centric frameworks but from everyday experiences and needs. Further, it is driven by more ethical and sustainable engagements with the other and the planet. |
| 4. | *It is rooted in equity, inclusion, and social justice.* | Its protagonists emerge from, engage with, and embrace broad coalitions of community members, multiple stakeholders, and social justice movements. |
| 5. | *Its organisational form is horizontal, democratic, and co-managed.* | Compared to both capitalist production and to more traditional co-operative experiences, it fosters more horizontalised work processes, more gender-sensitive and equitable divisions of labour, more directly democratic decision-making, and collective forms of co-management. |
| 6. | *It practices collective stewardship.* | Its means of social, cultural, or economic production are co-organised collaboratively rather than owned privately. |

The first three features identify the nature of the new cooperativism as based on lived experiences and social necessity. As such, the new cooperativism is proposed as a grassroots movement of working people moving beyond predetermined ideologies and based on immediate needs and common desires. In this way, it breaks free from dogmatic baggage that adherence to a pre-existing form may entail (such as strict commitments to vanguardist parties, states, or institutional hierarchies). The second and third features highlight how the politics of new cooperativism centre on a post-capitalist imagination, often because at the grassroots people are acutely aware, through commonly shared lived experience, of the various crises that capitalism can afflict. These first three features thus describe the context or conjuncture of new cooperativism with regard to economic necessity and the redistribution of resources and wealth.

The last three features describe the unique organisational characteristics of production within the new cooperativism. The fourth feature underscores its inclusivity of multiple community stakeholders and its respect for a plurality of identities, diversity, and equity. The fifth and sixth features describe an organisational design that is purposely more horizontal, driven by directly democratic principles and practices, collectively co-managed, and equitable. Taken together, features four to six emphasise how organisations practice socialised — or 'commonised' — forms of production and distribution of economic activity and social wealth. Moreover, the last three features accentuate how the new cooperativism entails understanding the firm not just as being of benefit to members or customers, but also as a productive entity permeated with an ethical responsibility to equity and sustainability that takes into consideration the broader community and ecology within which it is situated. Thus, in the fourth to sixth features of the new cooperativism, we see an economic model that is not only more socially just for those directly involved, but also one that holds to broader, non-individualistic social, cultural, and environmental commitments.

It is this 'commons thinking' — embodied in what we might call a 'commons sensibility' — that we are arguing is a key transformational feature of the new cooperativism. This commons thinking breaks with the "capitalocentric" framework (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Heras & Vieta, 2020) of older forms of co-operatives that leaves them open to co-optation within the hegemonic capitalist system. In the case study that follows we offer an example of this commons thinking inherent to the new cooperativism.

## Argentina's Worker-Recuperated Enterprises and the New Cooperativism

A new, worker-driven and community-centred socio-economic movement that highlights key aspects of the new cooperativism emerging in Latin America in the early part of the twenty-first century are the *empresas recuperadas por sus trabajadores* (worker-recuperated enterprises, ERTs). They have surged since the turn-of-the-millennium together with other new community-based experiments in local socio-economic organising throughout the region as responses to and proposals beyond recurrent neoliberal crises (Vieta, 2020a; Ruggeri et al., 2014), including: Indigenous, feminist, and campesino/a communities mobilising social, cultural, and economic life via the notions of buen vivir (roughly, living well) (Gudynas, 2011) and pluriversidad (pluriversality) (Vieta & Heras, 2022); landless workers' and peasants' movements occupying and self-managing abandoned land (Chaguaceda & Brancaleone, 2010); and neighbourhood assemblies, barter clubs, and other solidarity economy initiatives (Svampa & Pereyra, 2004; Vieta, 2020a).

On the one hand, the ERT movement — and each new ERT — first emerges as a defensive reaction by workers to lost jobs, shuttering workplaces, and threatened livelihoods. This was especially the case in Argentina during the intensification of neoliberalism throughout the 1990s and the socio-economic ills wrought by its monetarist and financialisation policies and the crisis-riddled years of the early 2000s that followed. On the other hand, ERTs are creative solutions by workers, progressive unions, and accompanying university and social

movement groups to these policies and their negative effects on workplaces and jobs. While eventually affiliating within umbrella ERT organisations, with unions, and more recently with the older traditional Argentine co-operative sector, supportive university programmes and the departments and ministries of some of the country's more progressive national, provincial, and municipal governments, ERTs at first emerged spontaneously and in praxis (Vieta, 2020a). The first ERTs also merged long-held Argentine traditions of democratic shop floor organising with a deep "reactivation" of "communitarian social experience" across social and economic sectors (Svampa & Pereyra, 2004, p. 233), and an intensification of demands for social justice and for a more inclusive and less exploitative system (Vieta, 2019). The result has been a bottom-up experiment in new cooperativism, forging new socio-economic relations beyond capitalist crises and enclosures while showing workers' and co-operatives' capacities for social transformation. With ERTs, not only are jobs, businesses, and local economies saved, but, more promisingly, new forms of community development and wealth creation are being spearheaded by the collective experiments that consequently emerge (Ranis, 2016; Vieta, 2020a).

Most usually, ERTs arise from formerly troubled or insolvent privately or investor-owned businesses that are taken over by employees and reopened as worker co-operatives. They have come to the stage with most force throughout Latin America in recent decades in countries affected most deeply by neoliberal economic crises, such as Uruguay, Brazil, Bolivia, Venezuela and, in particular and most famously, in Argentina. Over the years networked ERTs have formed numerous umbrella organisations representing the interests of self-managed co-operative workers throughout the country, successfully mobilised and lobbied for the reform of national bankruptcy laws and the use of expropriation legislation to assist converting troubled firms to co-operatives, and have, in effect, legitimised themselves by becoming alternatives to business bankruptcy and job loss (Ranis, 2016; Ruggeri et al., 2014; Vieta, 2010b, 2020a). Even so, most have struggled for the eventual worker-led co-ownership of the occupied assets to be legally recognised, ultimately appealing to the use of expropriation law. For instance, one of the more prominent recuperated factories, the ceramics maker FaSinPat (formerly Zanón), operated for eight years between 2001 and 2009 without legal status before winning the battle for its workers to become recognised as the legal owners of the factory (Ranis, 2016). Despite rare closures such as Hotel BAUEN in downtown Buenos Aires that never gained expropriation and eventually closed in 2020 after 17 years (Sobering, 2022), ERTs have shown themselves to be resilient organisations. At the time of writing there are more than 400 ERTs employing close to 16,000 workers in economic sectors as varied as printing and publishing, metallurgy, construction, ship building, wood work, newspapers and media, restaurants, food stuffs, health care, and fuels and hydrocarbons (Vieta, 2020a).

Through values of what ERT workers call "*compañerismo*" (an intense form of camaraderie emerging from common struggles) and an ethics of "*esto es de todos*" ("this belongs to all of us"), ERT protagonists mobilise their self-management project into new social relations of production, and new community-oriented enterprises. ERTs' new cooperativist values are underscored by what one of us has called their "radical social innovations" (Vieta, 2020a, pp. 19-22), similar to Côté's (2019) "new cooperative paradigm" model, and referring to the re-conceptualisation of the organisation's *governance*, *production processes*, *culture*, and *goals through social values* rather than strictly economic ones. They are "radical" because ERTs contest neoliberal capitalist practices and values *and* propose new ways of working and living motivated by other collective goals beyond the profit motive (Vieta, 2010b, 2019, 2020a).

We can identify four broad radical social innovations in ERTs' practices of the new cooperativism. The first two focus on the recontouring of the organisation at the micro-economic level, while the last two focus on community values and practices. The first radical social innovation explicitly taps into the sixth co-operative principle — co-operation among co-operatives — when ERTs forge new social and solidarity economy practices. These include building networks of solidarity between ERTs or between ERTs and other co-operatives as they network to share production and customers and barter production inputs, goods, and services between each other and even with surrounding neighbourhoods.

The second radical social innovation transforms workplaces. ERTs become vastly more egalitarian and horizontal workplaces by humanising the labour process and even rethinking the concepts of efficiency and growth by valuing workers' wellbeing over economic incentives. Based on our previous ethnographic research, the majority of ERTs design many breaks into the workday while horizontally and democratically re-contouring divisions of labour, decision-making, administrative structures, and remuneration practices (Vieta, 2010b, 2014b, 2020a). Moreover, more than two-thirds of Argentine ERTs practice complete pay equity amongst members, while almost all are administered by recallable workers' councils and workers' assemblies. ERTs, in contrast to some mainly economically-driven co-operatives, embrace the new cooperativism daily — especially its fourth to sixth features (see Table 2) — right on the re-configured shop floor.

Living the practices of the new cooperativism thus means re-thinking the very notion of work. ERT workers make a point of eating, playing, and resting together regularly in such practices as daily communal lunches and weekly soccer games or barbeques, and take regular mate tea breaks throughout the workday. In these ways, ERT workers explicitly bring Argentine working-class cultural practices into the shop. These seemingly modest reconfigurations of work time have beneficial effects for workers, helping ease the tensions and stresses that come with working for a living.

ERTs also embrace these reconfigurations of work in the concept of '*la fábrica abierta*' ('the open factory'), symbolising the eradication of the walls that contain the 'secret' activity of the capitalist factory by becoming community-based social, economic, and cultural organisations (Ruggeri, 2010; Vieta, 2014b, 2019). The concept of 'the open factory' leads to ERTs' third and fourth radical social innovations, making explicit the seventh principle of co-operatives — concern for community. The third radical social innovation has ERTs sharing their physical workplaces with surrounding communities. As a way of giving back to the communities that assisted them during their most difficult days of occupation, ERTs contribute to the socio-economic development of surrounding neighborhoods as they open up shops to the community and share their workspace with, for instance, neighbourhood cultural centres, art workshops, popular primary, secondary, and adult education initiatives (known as '*bachilleratos populares*'), and free community health clinics, often all organised as co-operatives. And their fourth radical social innovation sees the shop extend out territorially by sharing social wealth with the community when ERTs repurpose portions of their surpluses for community social and economic development outside of the firm. As illustrated by the parks maintenance and construction ERT, Unión Solidaria de Trabajadores (UST), some of these community development projects have included constructing community sports and recreational centres, initiating recycling programmes, and building affordable and dignified housing for workers and community members (Vieta, 2020a).

## Discussion and Conclusion

For the project of expanding the commons, there is something of deep interest emerging with the new cooperativism. Two possibilities stand out. First, the organisational goals of new cooperativism are rooted in egalitarian and commons-based production and distribution of surplus. The new cooperativism is thus ideally situated to guide the production and stewardship of Casarino's "surplus common" for maximisation of de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford's "commonwealth." Second, the new cooperativism is a break with old co-operative movements (though using the form of the co-operative and refashioning it for a new purpose beyond just the mutual benefit of members), whereby the co-operative form set to more community-based social ends (re)enables a post-capitalist economic imaginary and political vision. The economic imaginary and political vision of the commons, in turn, animate the co-operative form rather than the form becoming the end goal.

The new cooperativism is an evolution of co-operativism beyond capitalocentric forms of member-focused organisation and individual shareholdership. Indeed, it is a movement, if an

incomplete one, from member-based share ownership to commons co-stewardship. It is this commons-based approach within new cooperativism that signifies a rupture with pre-existing capitalistic *and* co-operative forms of economic organising and that is seeing the emergence of a new form of socially grounded co-operative organisation: a new *commons-based co-operative* form. The new cooperativism suggests that co-operatives need to move beyond individual-based constructions of ownership or a members-first mutuality to also consider themselves 'of the community,' as the notions and practices of "the open factory" of Argentina's ERTs suggest. In such a construction, co-operative members co-produce and co-govern the commons through a relationship of co-stewardship rather than ownership, and common benefit and wellbeing rather than private gain and individual accumulation.

Returning to Hudson's (2009) conceptualisations of the social economy, we are proposing the new cooperativism, based on a political vision rooted in the commons, as a different form of economic organising that prefigures a *radical non-* or *other-than-capitalist approach* to economic activity. Whereas traditional co-operatives often re-conceptualise spaces for accumulation based on an alternative set of mutualistic (member-driven) values, they nevertheless also tend to accept the primacy of the mainstream (capitalist) economy and the mediation of markets (Gasper, 2014; Ratner, 2015). The new cooperativism, on the other hand, holds on (albeit often as a work-in-progress) to the transformational goal of creating a post-capitalist imaginary and future. The welding of effective self-determined, democratic, and co-managed co-operative business structures and practices to commons thinking thus holds disruptive potential for opening up post-capitalist imaginaries. It is this melding and potential that is at the heart of the new cooperativism. The surplus common — the un-appropriated and un-appropriable output of commons production and commons life — is the foundation for a post-capitalist project. Knowledge of such commons projects reminds a community that another world is (still) possible.

Pragmatically, there is a need to find a balance within new cooperativism between ideals and action. No doubt, a materially functioning circulation of value must be established for co-operatives to survive. This may put pressure on co-operatives to adopt capital-normative practices in order to survive in competitive global markets. However, the Antigonish Movement offers a warning regarding how a focus on technical management and neo-classical economic norms can lead to loss of vision and place at risk the potential for community-based economic experiments. This warning should be heeded by the new cooperativism lest it become too much like the 'old' co-operativisms' tendency to co-optation.

On the other hand, the new cooperativism, especially as that demonstrated by Argentina's worker-recuperated enterprises, offers hope and inspiration to older co-operative movements. Twenty-five years on, Argentina's ERTs have continued to expand and consolidate amidst the ebbs and flows of both progressive and neoliberal governments, ongoing crises, a pandemic, and resurgent authoritarianism. This is in part due to its working class's radical traditions grounding its social and solidarity economy. But it is also because ERT protagonists have articulated how more-progressive, Big Picture-like commons thinking can be re-imagined and put into play by working people coming together in co-operatives and by taking seriously the principles of co-operatives co-operating and concern for community. Indeed, a commons-based new cooperativism can form the basis for a reinvigorated co-operative movement. The new cooperativism, in short, embraces the potential for real, other-than-capitalist social and economic outcomes in the present and, perhaps more importantly, for envisioning an enduring alternative to the exploitative and depleting forces of capitalism.

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