

Are Worker Co-operatives Ideal Sites of Participation For Workers?

A discussion of the Factors Impeding the Realization of Full, High Level
Participation by Members in Worker Co-operatives

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Sam Gindin (1998) states that “the nature and structure of capitalism guarantees that workers lag behind the productive forces; they are dependent on others and do not have the capacity to control, coordinate, or to develop the productive forces” (p.79). Yet, the development of co-operatives alters this phenomenon, and creates a model whereby workers begin to take collective ownership of the ‘productive forces’. As such, worker co-operatives have the potential to expand the breadth and depth of the levels of participation exercised by workers within their workplace. In her discussion of participation and democracy, Pateman (1970) argues that “a system of industrial democracy implies the opportunity for full higher participation by employees” (p.72). Several authors writing about worker co-operatives make similar arguments, advocating that co-operatives serve as vehicles for the implementation of full participation and workplace democracy for their members. While I acknowledge that co-operatives do constitute a system of greater participation for workers, than that which is found in traditional hierarchal workplaces, both personal experience working at the Skydragon Community Development Co-operative and the work of other scholars researching co-operatives, suggest that there are several factors impeding the realization of full or higher level participation by workers in co-operatives.

It is important to be concrete about how participation and democracy are practiced within such organizations so that myth does not overpower analysis, and the opportunities for positive transformation are not overlooked. Such analysis is especially important during the current economic climate as workers across the globe increasingly look for more just and sustainable economic systems in which to actively engage. Thus, I seek to outline common factors that impede full participation in worker co-operatives in order to better understand the actual potential worker co-operatives have for becoming sites of progressive social change.

Throughout this essay, I seek to address the question: ‘Is the actual experience of worker co-operatives consistent with principles of full participation’? The first section of the paper

briefly outlines relevant measures of participation, and describes why several scholars have commended worker co-operatives for their enhancement of participation amongst labour. Then, in an attempt to answer the question posed above, I will begin by explaining three prevalent factors impeding the realization of full participation within worker co-operatives. This section will look at the ‘outside pressures’, such as the regulations imposed by the capitalist system, funding sources and current systems of law. I will also investigate the ‘informal power structures’ existing within co-operatives which constrain the participation of members. Like all organizations embedded in society, co-operatives replicate inequalities grounded in social constructions of power such as gender, age, race, and class; thereby enabling those in dominant positions of power (typically white, middleclass, heterosexual, able-bodied men) to exercise greater levels of participation. A third factor which I will explore is the need to develop a broader definition of who is included within the realm of participants in order to counter the parochialism of worker co-operatives which is caused by the tendency of these organizations to narrow their scope to the interests of their members only. Examples from the Skydragon Co-operative and relevant literature will be used to outline these trends.

I focus this paper on explaining how co-operatives do not yet completely adhere to principles of full participation in order to better understand what areas of improvement are needed to make these organizations the sites of progressive social change worker- members envision when they devote their time and effort to becoming part of co-operatives. As such, I also attempt to demonstrate some of the strategies and actions used to address and mitigate the three challenges I discuss in the first section. I conclude by arguing that, despite the challenges imposed upon them, worker co-operatives do successfully create spaces of resistance through which the possibility of progressive social change can be realized.

Discussion of Main Concepts

Before engaging in the main discussion of this paper, it is important that I define the main concepts referred to throughout the essay. This paper is centered on worker co-operatives, which are defined by Carter (1996) as “an organization owned and controlled by those working in it” (p.57). Although a variety of ownership structures exist amongst co-operative models, they all share a similar principle of having the means of production be collectively owned and kept in trust as community assets of the co-operative members (Rothschild-Whitt & Lindenfeld, 1982). Worker co-operatives present an alternative to traditional hierarchal workplaces for members make decisions based on a one member-one vote system so that authority tends to reside in the collective as whole, rather than a few top level managers. Additionally, co-operatives aim to ensure equality amongst members by combining administrative tasks with performance tasks, and intellectual work with manual work within role definitions so that there is little specialization of work amongst members (Rothschild-Whitt & Lindenfeld, 1982). Greater equality is also promoted by implementing limits on the income ratio in operation between the lowest and highest paid members of the co-operative.

The concept of full or higher level participation also requires delineation. As Pateman (1970) argues, there are variations in the levels of participation to which workers have access. Pseudo participation occurs when workers ‘participate’ in decision making processes when those with greater power have already decided the criteria upon which workers will have influence (Pateman, 1970). For example, when workers decide amongst themselves which of the allotted shifts they will work, but are not able to decide the length of the shifts, how they are arranged during the week, nor how many workers will be on during each shift. Such systems create a feeling of participation, yet all members do not have equal power in the decision making process. Thus, full participation refers to a process where “each member of a decision making body has

equal power to determine the outcome of the decisions” (Pateman, 1970, p.71). Full participation is fostered by the implementation of democratic structures within the workplace whereby workers have equal influence in determining the conditions affecting their immediate environment. In theory, worker co-operatives serve as vehicles for full participation, and also enable members to engage in higher level participation which Pateman (1970) defines as engagement in decision making that relates to the running of the entire enterprise.

Worker Co-operatives as Sites of Full Participation

Several authors (Albert and Hahnel, 1991; Cormier, 2005; Fine, 2006; MacLeod, 1997) writing about worker co-operatives advocate that these workplaces constitute sites in which full participation and workplace democracy can be realized for, and by, co-operative members. Thus, before outlining the factors impeding the actualization of full participation within worker co-operatives, it is necessary that I briefly outline the ways in which co-operatives are cited by scholars as participatory and democratic workspaces. One of the most prominent reasons why worker co-operatives have the potential to be places in which full participation can be actualized is because of the importance these organizations generally afford to worker control of the entire production and decision making processes. For example, Rothschild-Whitt and Lindenfeld (1982) argue that co-operatives have “the potential to build democratic workplaces because the people who perform the work of the organization are those who set its goals and policies” (p.1). Through collective decision making processes, such as the one member- one vote system, as well as the use of job rotation, internal education and workers maintaining membership on the administrative boards, workers control the design and delivery of their work. Thus, by altering the structure of power typically found in traditionally hierarchical workplaces, full participation can be realized. In Pateman’s (1970) words, “the whole body of employees has taken over management decisions, and the distinction between the management and those permanently subordinated to them has been abolished” (p.72). In effect, workers become the most important ‘stakeholder’ in the co-operative.

Worker co-operatives can further enhance the full participation of their members because within these organizations workers learn the skills necessary for participation in direct democracy. As MacLeod (1997) discusses, worker co-operatives like Mondragon in Spain favor the personal development of workers rather than the economic bottom line, because one of their

central objectives is to “encourage creativity, initiative, and communication above property, obedience, and pedigree, and [they enact] systematic programs of formation [to] guarantee the permanent development of all workers” (p.39). Additionally, the division of labour within co-operatives is generally more egalitarian, so that all members share in both the administrative and performance work, as members combine intellectual and manual tasks. Such shared labour provides a counter to mainstream workplaces where workers’ creativity is discouraged through the enforcement of work in standardized, specialized and alienating workplaces.

Not only do workers gain greater insights into the entire production process through this more equalitarian division of labour, they also develop the personal skills needed to make democracy work. Mackay (2006) notes that co-operatives enhance workers’ capacities in conflict resolution, creativity, pedagogy, advocacy and group-facilitation. As workers become more comfortable in practicing the skills derived from such participation in collective self management at work, they are likely to extend their use beyond the workplace(Cheney, 2006). Thus, worker co-operatives enable workers to gain the knowledge and confidence to participate in other institutions of society, increasing their participation in the systems directly relevant to their lives.

Co-operatives can also expand the boundaries traditionally limiting eligibility to participate in workplace decisions to those ‘in the shop’, towards the inclusion of the people residing in the communities in which co-operatives are located. Carter (1996) argues that as co-operative members usually live in the local community, they are more likely to balance the drive for profit with the concerns of the community in a way that better reflects the needs and interests of local community. In this way “the whole community becomes involved in the creation of real, long term wealth, rather than the spurious ‘wealth’ of advertisement-induced mass consumption (Porritt, 1984, p.141 as cited in Carter, 1996, p.59).

The structure of worker co-operatives infuses more democratic principles into the workplace, thereby enhancing and deepening the participation of workers within their workplace. As such, worker co-operatives are often celebrated because of the belief that the introduction of greater equality and participation into the workplace ultimately contributes to the reduction of the current power, wealth and income inequalities in society (Carter, 1996; MacLeod, 1997; Cornforth, et al, 1988). Due to limited scope, the concepts outlined above can not be explained in more detail. However, several authors' work develops our analysis within these areas. For a further discussion on the measures of participation, as well as the ways in which worker co-operatives enhance participation and decision-making power amongst labour, please refer to the references listed at the end of the paper.

Challenges to Realizing Full Participation Within Worker Co-operatives

While there are several ways in which worker co-operatives enable greater participation than that which is found in traditional hierarchal workplaces, both personal experience and the literature on co-operatives suggest that several factors act as impediments to the realization of full or higher level participation within these organizations. As Rothschild-Whitt and Lindenfeld (1982) note; “organizational democracy is not impossible to achieve, but neither is it easily created or maintained” (p.9). The next section of this essay will discuss three challenges to the actualization of full participation, which I argue co-operatives have yet to overcome.

1. The Influence of Outside Pressures

A primary challenge to worker participation is the ‘outside pressures’ encountered by these organizations which limit the scope of decisions in which members can actively participate. The most prominent outside pressure constraining the realization of complete participation is the capitalist system in which worker co-operatives operate. Carter (1996) argues that co-ops “in a capitalist market will be under pressure to adopt existing work processes characterized by hierarchal control, division of labour and managerial prerogatives”, and thus if they are to “exert radical impact on the workplace, it requires broad structural reform of the capitalist economy” (p.66 & 68 respectively). In other words, a truly full level of participation would entail not only worker control of the co-operative’s initiatives, but also capital itself; industrial establishments, raw materials, and capital equipment needs to become the collective property of workers’ associations (Guerin, 1970). As workers do not yet have control over this capital, they remain subject to the will of those who do own capital, and thus must make accommodations within their organization in order to acquire the recourses needed within the co-operative. For example, the Skydragon Centre does not own the building in which it is located, thus the workers can not exercise control over how the space is modified to best suit the needs of the co-operative due to

the private property rights of the owner. Additionally, the centre has little participation in deciding the price of the equipment purchased by the co-operative for these amounts are set by the retailers. Nor does the co-operative have much bargaining power to negotiate for their ideal outcomes while they remain in a highly competitive, globalized economy undergoing a massive recession. These examples highlight the larger system of capitalist production, and the subsequent government regulation established to secure private accumulation, which frame the context in which co-operatives are located. Surviving within the capitalist system means that co-operatives swing between achieving their full participation goals, and being forced to make accommodations to the demands of the environment of the existing society.

Another key outside pressure constraining the realization of full participation amongst co-operative members is the mechanisms through which the co-operatives receive funding. Co-ops' reliance on financial resources for their continued operation means that the financial stability of the organization greatly influences the initiatives in which the co-operative can partake. For example, members of Skydragon had identified the upgrading of kitchen appliances as a top priority for the continued sustainability of the co-operative's café, yet the lack of permanent financial resources prevented the centre from following through with the collective decision to purchase the necessary items. Full participation can only be exercised as far as the financial resources enable.

Additionally, Cheney (2006) notes that in difficult financial times, the typical position taken within a variety of workplaces regarding the implementation of greater democratic practices is 'not now, we'll be able to afford to do that later', thereby compromising the goals aimed at facilitating greater equality and participation in order to meet the financial needs of the co-operative. This trend is most commonly exemplified in the persistence of poor wage structures amongst co-operatives as inadequate funding results in members engaging in self exploitation,

working long hours with low wages (Carter, 2006). At Skydragon, several worker-members were compelled to accept wage levels well below the living wage deemed necessary for the area (please refer to the Hamilton Living Wage Coalition for further information, statistics sourced from the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton, 2009) because they believed and were told that the co-operative could not sustain such a 'high' budget at this time. Cornforth (1988) also notes that co-operatives often come to rely on volunteers to fulfill what should be paid positions. Unfortunately, the promised times of stability and prosperity proclaimed by co-operatives do not always arrive before committed workers are forced to leave the organization, either because they have exhausted their financial resources or their energy. These trends exemplify that funding limits co-op members participation because they do not have full power to make decisions about wages, their quality of work life, nor the directions in which the co-operative's operations undergo unless they have stable and adequate sources of funding upon which to rely. Yet should co-operatives receive proper funding, there is no guarantee that conditions will not be attached to it by the funding source which may force co-operatives to complicate their mission in order to meet these demands and regulations.

Another external pressure to which worker co-operatives are subject is the laws and regulations of the country in which they are located. Scholars writing on worker co-operatives have argued that the demands accompanying these regulations, such as responding to repeated government communications and accommodating the mandates of inspectors, have pressured some organizations to create special jobs aimed at meeting these requirements (Rothschild-Whitt & Lindenfeld, 1982). As in more traditional workspaces, such specialization tends to result in the development of key roles or leadership positions whereby certain members end up being the sole bearers of integral knowledge required for the co-operatives functioning. As will be discussed in

the following section, the consequence is that these workers maintain more power than other members not privy to such roles.

As co-operative members do not have 'political equality'; the same amount of political power in determining the laws and regulations to which they must abide (Pateman, 1970), their ability to fully participate in designing the work of the co-operative is constrained. The outside pressures to which co-operatives are subject increasingly put co-operatives in a position of influencing decisions, rather than in the position of power to determine the outcomes of the decisions made within the co-operative. This is more akin to Pateman's description of pseudo power whereby members can choose from a limited number of predetermined options, developed by those with more authority than other members.

Mitigating the Outside Pressures

Yet despite the external pressures of the environment in which co-ops exist, there are actions worker-members can take to ensure they have greater power to decide the parameters in which their co-operative operates. A key action that some co-ops are taking to ensure they adhere to their values of full participation is to consistently and collectively examine the way in which these values are enacted; in terms of the labels used, the practices represented and the preferences of workers (Cheney, 2006). Such a practice must become a core component of the organization's constitution. Also, it is important that the examination include the development of a collective understanding regarding how much adaptation and modification of the organization's values is permissible in order to accommodate outside pressures. By building in systems whereby members can actively evaluate the co-operative's adherence to their original values, co-operatives work to keep themselves from becoming overtaken by the pressures of the outside environment.

These pressures are also mediated by establishing networks between co-operatives in order to exchange necessary resources and services. For example, the Skydragon Co-operative purchases the products used in its café from fair trade worker co-operatives in the Global South, thereby working in tandem with like minded organizations and bypassing the inherent oppressions of capitalist based economics and markets. The more co-operatives are able to directly source their supplies from alternative organizations and through alternative economies (such as fair trade), the more they are able to lessen their dependency on traditional markets. As such, they remove themselves from the constraints imposed upon the decision making power of the worker-members.

2. The Existence of Informal Power Structures

Another challenge co-operatives have yet to overcome, in terms of actualizing full participation for their members, is the informal power structures existing within these workplaces. Despite organizational mission statements emphasizing workplace democracy and equitable participation amongst members, all “organizations have informal processes of control which individuals or groups use to circumvent formal control structures to accrue power and influence” (Carter, 1996, p.67). Freeman (1972) argues that these informal power relations reflect broader societal inequalities grounded in social constructions of power such as gender, age, race, and class. Thus, the organization of co-operatives replicates these oppressions, enabling those in dominant positions of power (typically white, middleclass, heterosexual, able-bodied men) to exercise greater participation within the co-operative than those occupying less privileged social positions.

One exemplification of the replication of broader social inequalities within co-operatives is evident in the fact that women occupy only 30 percent of all co-operative directorships in Canada (Cormier, 2005). Another example of this marginalization is found when considering the

demographics of the Skydragn Co-operative's share holders. Those able to afford shares tend to be from middle class backgrounds; therefore this class has greater representation in directing the initiatives of the co-operative, constraining the influence those from lower socio-economic standpoints have in decision making process. The social constructions of privileged identities results in certain co-operative members being able to exercise greater levels of participation and power than those who occupy socially marginalized spaces. As such, participation is stratified amongst members in the same manner as is evident in social relations within society.

Informal power systems also exist within worker co-operatives as a result of the methods through which organizational tasks are structured. Inequitable or highly specialized divisions of labour amongst members often lead to the development of an elite group of members who end up having greater control of the higher levels of decision making power. Because they come to learn the inner workings of the co-operative better, and develop knowledge about the tasks required to sustain the organization's operation, it becomes difficult for other members to work in the co-operative without deferring to those occupying specialized roles; thereby enabling a few people to develop positions of power over the rest. Such informal power relations relate to Michel's (1984) 'iron law of oligarchy', which posits that the need for organizational leadership leads to the creation of an elite, or expert 'management', effectively blocking the maintenance of democracy amongst organizations. This trend was exemplified at Skydragon when one of the founders of the co-operative occupied a 'supervisory role' over the projects of the co-operative, effectively becoming an executive director who managed the café, newspaper, space rental and other functions held by Skydragon. Rather than members collectively deciding how each project would develop, this one member determined the co-operative's future plans, and oversaw its daily activities, having sole authority and veto power while the rest of the members could only negotiate with him what they thought best for the organization.

As the business of co-operatives becomes more complex, especially in light of the outside pressures previously mentioned, the specialist knowledge required to maintain the co-op's operation increases (Cornforth, et al, 1988). Thus, rather than engage in the principles of full participation as outlined by Pateman (1970), the majority of co-operative members increasingly engage in pseudo or partial participation whereby their level of influence in the co-operative's operations is diminished, and those occupying 'expert' roles become the informal leaders and decision makers.

The differentiation of participation levels amongst co-operative members also tends to increase as co-operatives become bigger. Frequently within large cooperatives, representative structures come to replace direct democracy structures because direct participation is no longer feasible. For example, due to the immense size of the Mondragon Co-operative in Spain, the organization uses representation systems to make decisions, and the only time the entire membership meets is at the general assembly meetings held twice a year (Carter, 1996). This structure changes the relationship of workers to the organization as members no longer have the same rights of direct ownership and control. Differentiation between members' levels of participation is further evident in larger co-operative structures as wage ratios increasingly expand. The income ratio of Mondragon has shifted from 1:3 to 1:7 in order to "ensure that there is successful recruitment of top level managers, engineers, and analysts needed to keep the co-operative competitive" (Cheney, 2006, p.185). The increasing specialization and accumulation of power amongst a few people which accompany the expansion of co-operatives alters the depth and breadth of member participation. The more levels of representatives that are created, the more worker- members are alienated from the co-operative as they no longer directly take on the responsibility of deciding how the organization should progress and develop. In the same manner that voters elect officials who agree to 'bring their constituents voices forward', but are not able

to directly participate in deciding which laws are passed, so too do the workers remove themselves from participating in determining the outcomes of decisions when they elect representatives to sit on co-operative councils on their behalf. The existence of informal power relations within worker co-operatives tends to mean that members 'own' the co-op, but practical control rests largely with elite groups, who likely are not selected by the entire membership, nor necessarily responsible to it for their actions.

Countering the Development of Informal Power Relationships

While informal power relations do pose significant challenges, several worker cooperatives are taking action to counter the constraint of full participation caused by these relations. Specialization of tasks, and the subsequent power accompanying this structure, can be avoided by diffusing organizational knowledge and competencies as widely as possible through procedures such as skill sharing, job rotation and internal training. Additionally, higher levels of participation can be encouraged by ensuring that no distinction exists between 'policy', which tends to be decided democratically, and the 'implementation of policy', which tends to be left to elite groups (Cornforth, et al, 1988). Greater levels of direct participation can also be implemented in larger organizations such as Mondragon through the use of a quasi 'shop steward system' whereby members have greater influence and connection to the leaders through representatives charged with advocating for worker's interests (Carter, 1996). Informal power relations exist within co-operatives, causing a stratification of participation levels amongst members, yet democratic procedures can become accepted and institutionalized within worker co-operatives in order to maintain the principles of full participation to which these organizations aim to adhere.

3.The Need for Broader Definitions of Participation

The third challenge this essay will explore which co-operatives have yet to mediate in order to actualize the principles of full participation is their exclusivity in how, to whom, and where they seek to extend participation. While the current organization of worker co-operatives is positive in that it enables worker- members to have a direct relationship with the entirety of the co-op's operations, it also results in the tendency amongst worker co-operatives to narrow their scope to only the interests of their members, and sometimes the surrounding community. In other words, because worker co-operatives are aimed at receiving input and direction only from its members immediately involved, worker co-operatives do not always take into account the perspectives or needs of those who are not members of the co-operative. This exclusivity causes worker co-operatives to remain isolated from the broader struggles in society which are aimed at enhancing the participation of 'the people' in the decisions and processes shaping their lives. Full participation then becomes a goal that is only to be realized by co-operative members working within the sphere of the co-operative.

Extending the Realm of Participation

In order to counter the parochialism of worker co-operatives, a broader definition of who is incorporated within their realm of participation is needed. There are two ways in which worker co-operatives could extend their parameters of participation; the first is to have co-operatives become federated with each other, and the second is for co-operatives to become participants in wider resistance movements for social change. MacLeod (1997) argues that organizations like co-operatives could have tremendous power if they only worked together. By establishing networks and alliances between co-operatives, both within nations and across borders, co-operatives could build an alternative movement to the current system. Theorists such as Bakunin originally envisioned worker co-ops as a vehicle through which vast economic federations could be formed

that would “share out industrial production among different countries so that crises in trade and employment, enforced stagnation, economic disaster, and loss of capital would disappear” (as cited in Guerin, 1970, p.55). Although not as extensive as Bakunin argued for, such tendencies are evident in the direct exchange of goods and services between co-operatives, as when Skydragon purchases its coffee and teas from fair trade co-ops. If these instances were entrenched into a comprehensive production and consumption system, participation within co-operatives would not be limited to the specific co-operative in which a worker was a member, but would encompass a wider alliance aimed at extending the economic, political, and social areas in which people have control and decision making power. Such networks are beginning to be facilitated through organizations like the Canadian Cooperative Association and the Ontario Worker Cooperative Federation, as well as through individual partnerships between co-operatives, to share skills and best practices. Yet greater depths and breadths of networking are needed to build solid relationships between co-operatives and thus to realize a fuller system of participation for worker-members.

The parochialism of worker co-operatives can also be mediated by their increasing participation in broader resistance movements within the communities in which they are located, as well as across the globe. It is in this area that the Skydragon Co-operative poses as an inspiring example for an integral part of their mission is to become central components in the “reclamation of the economic terrain as a medium for communitarian values and practices” (Mackay, 2006). Thus, the co-operative partners with other progressive organizations within the community to develop community education and capacity building, and it is also involved in various activist movements such as the Living Wage Coalition aimed at countering the oppressive economic, political and social structures that inhibit broad based participation of community residents. Moreover, through activities such as the Mayday festival, the Skydragon co-operative mobilizes

activists from varying realms, such as academia, anarchists, the women's movement, and labour organizations under one common goal. Such activities broaden the objectives of co-operatives, placing them as members of a wider community aimed at building sustainable alternatives to the current system. In turn, community members, not just members of the co-operative come to influence the organizations development and partake in sustaining its operations.

Not only do co-operatives need to extend their understanding of full participation to include being active members in the immediate community, they must also be connected to the global resistance strategies grounded in advancing direct participation in order to enhance the co-ordination and collaboration between the varying sites in which reclamations of common space and self management systems are being developed. As worker co-operatives seek to maximize the participation and control of their members over their work, so too do peasant/farmer organizations seek to maximize their control over their labour; as do radical midwife collectives seek to directly participate in deciding how their employment is structure and work is conducted. These affiliations are also connected in ideology and practice to communities like the Indigenous peoples of Canada who fight to be able to actualize self governance and autonomy. All of these examples signify people working collectively to enhance their direct participation and decision making power within varying realms of their lives. Such collaborative initiatives are beginning within co-operatives such as Skdyragon, and by the International Co-operative Alliance, whose goal is "to form partnerships with other related enterprises and find allies amongst the community" (Cheney, 2006, p.193). The parochialism of co-operatives limits the participatory potential of these organizations and perpetuates their isolation amidst repressive capitalist forces. Full participation of co-operative members requires the realization of the importance of participating in broader social movements.

The Potential of Co-operatives for Social Change

The co-operative model contains the potential for full participation, yet the ‘outside pressures’ of capitalism mediate this potential because co-operatives are forced to accommodate a larger system not yet in the collective control and ownership of workers and their communities. Compounding these challenges are the ‘informal power structures’ within co-operatives which perpetuate hierarchy, thereby differentiating access to participation amongst differing co-operative members. Co-operatives also have yet to effectively address the need for a broader breadth of participation to be fostered between co-operatives, and between other spaces of resistance aimed at developing direct participation and democracy. As such, the actual experience of co-operatives is not completely consistent with principles of full participation as outlined in the beginning of the essay.

Yet, while worker co-operatives do not completely adhere to the principles of full participation, there are actions, such as those outlined in the above sections, that can be taken to mediate or counter the influence such pressures have on the operation of co-operatives. Moreover, personal experience and literature discussing potential strategies for building our ‘ideal’ societies posits that co-operatives can create spaces of resistance through which the possibility of progressive social change can be realized. While the scope of this essay does not enable me to comprehensively outline what I mean by ‘progressive social change’, I seek to borrow from Kevin Mackay (2006) in order to provide the reader with a general sense of what I am referring to. He defines progressive social change as a “program of transformation that aims at fundamentally altering human structures in the direction of equality, freedom, health and sustainability, whereby the development of human potential and opportunity for creative expression, intellectual achievement, spiritual/philosophical cultivation and physical development is optimized” (Mackay, 2006).

One reason why worker co-operatives contain the potential for such change is that they offer an alternative to mainstream methods of organization and participation. Co-operatives “break down the hegemony of the prevailing ideology which says the hierarchical authority structures and corresponding stratification systems are necessary incentives for work” (Rothschild-Whitt & Lindenfeld, 1982, p.17). It is through co-operatives that workers are able to directly control both how their work is organized and what outcomes, products, or services are produced. The “promotion of solidarity, variety and collective self management are not assumed because we postulate a suddenly beatific human nature, but because the structure and incentives of the participatory planning process promote these goals (Albert & Hahnel, 1991, p. 99). As such, co-operatives demonstrate that sustainable alternatives to the existing order are possible, thereby challenging us to continue to resist societal structures impeding our direct participation.

Day (2005) argues that the demonstration of viable alternatives is necessary for it works to render hegemonic systems redundant and lessens our dependence upon them. The demonstration of viable alternatives is also important because it is only through partaking in such endeavors that people are able to work out the challenges inhibiting the development of our ‘utopic’ visions. Realistically, revolution will not lead directly to the realization of a utopian society; it must be a process through which we evolve towards utopia. Moreover, history has proven it is impossible to translate a generic application of a schematic model, such as a plan for utopia, to varying local circumstances (Scott, 1988). As such, co-operatives present one space through which we begin to engage in the trial and error processes required to realize our visions of social change. As this essay delineates, the challenges noted above can be witnessed in co-operatives, yet strategies have also been developed to mitigate them, and thus people have learned to improve these organizations so that they come closer to ideal visions of equitable and just workplaces and societies. Scott (1998) argues that there is value in such ‘muddling through’

because through this work, people gain the practical skills and important intelligence acquired when responding to constantly changing environments. Co-operatives serve as a site through which people can build, and rebuild, the process through which radical transformation will be achieved.

Co-operatives also have the potential for revolutionary change because they offer a model of resistance that engages with the capitalist system from within. Their position within capitalism is critical for as Gindin (1998) argues, the “socialist utopia will not come from ideal communities established on the margins of capitalist society, but through engagement with and within capitalist society” (p.85). Co-operatives have the benefit of working legally within the current capitalist system while possessing characteristics that are fundamentally subversive to it, providing institutions that educate, disseminate progressive ideas, and create social spaces in which democratic skills can be nourished. In this way, “global systems of corporate governance can be undermined from the ground up, and the ability of hostile governments to destabilize democratic reforms at the level of electoral politics is similarly undermined” (Mackay, 2006). Poulantzas (1983) also argues for working within the system for he believes that state power can only be taken when the relationship of forces within the state apparatus becomes the strategic sites of political struggle. Once the relationship of forces is shifted within the state network itself, this apparatus becomes a site of power for the struggles of the popular masses, and the balance of power is more easily tipped in favor of those seeking radical change. Taken as a whole, the work of collectivist organizations can lead to a broader participatory economy, infusing democratic principles into the system and transforming the state apparatuses towards the radical left.

Worker co-operatives remain a beacon of creativity and agency, alongside other sites of resistance such as feminist collectives, alternative trade organizations, and people’s alliances existing across class and national boundaries, who also seek to alter the global neo-liberal,

capitalist, patriarchal and other oppressive forces shaping our lives. Following Day's (2005) notions of the evolution of resistance and the ontological development of alternatives, worker co-operatives contribute to a strategy of mobilization that works collectively on multiple fronts to raise awareness, build coalitions, and transform institutions and systems of governance. Thus, worker co-operatives create spaces of resistance through which the possibility of progressive social change can be realized.

Concluding Remarks

Worker co-operatives are an extension of the resistance movements originating throughout history. Like the Levellers in the seventeenth century, the proponents of the French Commune and the socialists working under Lenin's leadership, advocates of the co-operative model seek to establish a system of collective ownership of the commons; of the land, the production processes and their labour. Yet, understandings of collective ownership vary amongst co-op members; some seek to establish an alternative workplace in which they can fully participate and control the entire operations of their work, while others seek to establish sites of resistance through which transformation of the state can be realized. Both models face immense challenges in achieving their goals for full participation. As Carter (1996) notes, we often "envisage worker co-operatives replacing the power of large private industrial and financial corporations, but the method of this transition remain unclear" (p.64).

It is only through the systematic outlining of, and strategizing against, factors that impede full participation in worker co-operatives that the potential worker co-operatives have for becoming sites of progressive social change can be better understood. Thus, in this essay, I have attempted to demonstrate that despite external and internal limits constraining co-operatives, these organizations manifest a great deal of value for those committed to achieving just societies. As these organizations continue to persist in providing alternatives to the current system, we continue to acknowledge that there are indeed viable options available to us. We also progress forward towards our visions of utopia, learning the skills and knowledge that can only be obtained from trial and error. In doing so, we "transform circumstances and [individuals] in order to work out [our] own emancipation" (Marx, 1980, p.295).

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