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Worker Cooperatives and Social Transformation: An Anti-Essentialist Marxist Perspective

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Worker Cooperatives and Social Transformation:
An Anti-Essentialist Marxist Perspective

A Thesis
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the Faculty of the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
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Abstract

Worker cooperatives have risen in popularity in recent years, both in the academic literature and in the real world as an alternative to “business as usual.” However, less attention has been paid to worker cooperatives’ potential for greater social transformation, and even less have they emphasized the voices working class individuals and communities of color. This thesis addresses the issue of worker cooperatives and social transformation with special attention to anti-essentialist theory and the perspectives of workers themselves. Specifically, I examine the recent anti-essentialist Marxist literature on the methods of economic inquiry and class justice, combined with fieldwork at the Evergreen Cooperatives in Cleveland, Ohio, in order to argue that worker cooperatives, while indeed possessing the potential to catalyze social transformation, are not sufficient in and of themselves. I conclude that a class-conscious, ideology-affirming narrative is the deciding factor between individual benefit and collective empowerment.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis is a project of imagination. Its purpose is to expand our vision of what sorts of alternative economic futures are possible beyond capitalism. The key research question it answers is: “Can worker cooperatives play a role in enacting social transformation toward just economic futures?”

This research question, while motivated by issues faced by marginalized communities (*i.e.* low-income neighborhoods, subaltern communities of color), goes beyond typical concerns of community development and instead investigates the potential of worker cooperatives as a local, place-based, strengths-based approach to presenting an ethical challenge to the capitalist mode of production as a whole. In other words, it’s as much of a political project as it is a properly “economic” one.

At the most general level, what I’m interested in is relating Marxian political economy to community economic development. My approach utilizes Marxian political economy as a critical social theory informed by recent French philosophy — namely phenomenology, poststructuralism, and psychoanalysis. The historical figures I look to the most in this regard are (besides Marx, of course,) Foucault, Merleau-Ponty, Lacan, Derrida, and Levinas.

This approach comes naturally as a byproduct of my education in Philosophy and continuing interest in the philosophical methods just mentioned. And while recent decades have yielded countless works both pertaining to Marxism and French philosophy, thinking about their conjunction has not been taken as a serious consideration by scholars on either side. Anti-essentialist Marxism, which I will describe below, remains a marginal offshoot from orthodox Marxism(s), and it has only recently begun to be explored in relation to worker cooperatives thanks largely to the *Rethinking Marxism* community.

Exploring the connections between recent French thought and Marxian political economy has led me to the camp of anti-essentialist Marxism, pioneered by Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, who themselves were following the post-Marxist philosophical advances of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. The core tenets of this school of thought, to be further explored in the next chapter, include the Althusserian method of overdetermination; class as a process of surplus production, appropriation, *and* distribution; a distinct approach to normatively grounding class justice; decentering “capitalism” as a totalizing and hegemonic force; and cultivating subjects to be practitioners of the local.

This distinct style of Marxism was then carried on by the likes J.K. Gibson-Graham — a shared pen name for coauthors Kathryn Gibson and Julie Graham — and those associated with them largely at UMass-Amherst.¹ Many of them have gone on in

¹ See Gibson-Graham (2003a, 2003b, 2006, 2017), DeMartino (2003, 2013), Byrne and Healy (2006), Healy (2011), Ruccio (2011), and Kristjanson-Gural (2011).

recent years to formulate what they call a *community economies* approach to rethinking our relationship to economy and society. This approach challenges the dominant practices of “seeing [‘the economy’] as inevitably capitalist, assuming that it is a determining force rather than a site for politics and transformation, and separating economy from ecology.”²

My own thinking about community economic development also lies outside of conventional approaches and concerns. While most conversations regarding community development have tended to revolve around attracting big businesses to create jobs locally and achieving external investment from funders in exchange for equity, I have always been much more sympathetic to something now known widely as *community wealth building*.

Community wealth building emphasizes an assets-based, bottom-up approach to generating genuine wealth for oftentimes marginalized and subaltern communities.³ One aspect or tool of community wealth building is the *worker cooperative*, a business enterprise both collectively owned and democratically managed by the workers themselves. It is, in effect, democracy in the workplace.⁴ In a society where democracy is lauded as a foundational social principle with normative weight, one in which we vote for civil leaders and public officials, why don’t we extend that same principle of

²Community Economies Collective, “Community Economies Research and Practice.”

³ See especially The Democracy Collaborative (2005), Dubb (2016), and O’Neill and Howard (2018).

⁴ Richard Wolff, *Democracy At Work: A Cure for Capitalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012).

democracy to voting for our bosses and making our own decisions at work? The aim of worker cooperatives, at a general level, is to extend the tenets of direct democracy into the social sphere where most adults spend the majority of their lives.

Indeed, the uptick in academic writing around worker cooperatives has been spurred on by the rising public interest in them. The United Nations designated 2012 the International Year of Cooperatives, the theme of which declared, “Cooperative Enterprises Build a Better World.” Worldwide, nearly one billion people are members of some kind of cooperative enterprise ranging from credit unions to agricultural production. And of the 300+ co-ops in the United States, over 150 have been founded since the year 2000 (United Nations).

The basic arguments being put forth in the literature on economic democracy were that the capitalist mode of production is unsustainable both economically and ecologically, that worker cooperatives demonstrate a more effective way of doing business, and that burgeoning cooperative practices might shed new light on ethical concerns for communities facing profound economic injustice.⁵

One reason I choose to engage with the anti-essentialist Marxist perspective in this project is not that I think they have correct ontological claims to truth. Rather, they are the scholars having the most serious and involved conversations about worker cooperatives in the way that I also wish to converse about them. That is, *how should we think about worker cooperatives in terms of class justice? What is their role in the*

⁵ See Wolff (2012), Schweickart (2002), and Gordon Nembhard (2012), respectively.

greater movement toward social transformation? In what ways can worker organization reorient our thinking about community and thus about community development?

These questions, and the approach outlined above, lie at the heart of the project at hand. Joined by the voices of workers and community members I talked to during a 2019 research trip to the Evergreen Cooperative Initiative in Cleveland, Ohio (afforded by a generous grant from the University of Denver), I hereby set out to investigate whether worker cooperatives in the United States can function as a solidarity-based, class-just community wealth building tool — carrying with them the aim of social transformation.⁶

In Chapter 2, I will examine both economic and philosophical theories surrounding worker cooperatives as well as their increasing relevance and urgency. Why do we need to focus on *transformation*? What precisely is unsustainable about the dominant mode of production, particularly in the United States? How different could our economic society really look, specifically for economic disadvantaged populations?

Furthermore, what are the guiding principles of worker cooperatives? How do they operate in the context of class justice? Do they support or inhibit efforts toward social transformation?

In Chapter 3, I will recount my experience visiting the Evergreen cooperatives in Cleveland and draw attention to several contemporary empirical cases. These include Cooperation Jackson, the Boston Ujima Project, and the Valley Alliance of Worker Cooperatives.

⁶ The scope of my investigation pertains specifically to the United States. However, cooperatives worldwide have shared equally, if not even more deeply rooted histories, political motivations, and results. For an overview of global cooperative developments, see especially Ranis (2016).

In Chapter 4, I will engage with various critiques of worker cooperatives and tie my findings in Cleveland to two important works: Sharryn Kasmir's *The Myth of Mondragón* and Minsun Ji's *With or Without Class?*. Given various challenges, limitations, and common pitfalls, what can we do to support the seeds of transformation? Here I will also offer a preliminary conclusion based on my analysis concerning whether economic democracy can in fact represent a stage toward an alternative economic future centered around the principles of class justice.

Finally, I will conclude by examining the limitations of this project and some possibilities for future research. I am particularly interested in pursuing more deeply the community development, postdevelopment, and community wealth building literature in order to challenge the way many people tend to think about community development. In short, what we look at and call "community" is a snapshot of an ongoing creative, ecological, and metabolic set of practices within relational networks of power. What implications does that have for the *lived experience* of communities, especially those to be "developed?"

The aim of this thesis is to reimagine what is possible by examining the process of economic experimentation and social transformation that is already happening all around us. I hope that this project not only inspires others to do the same, just as I have been inspired by those before me, but that it opens the door for a more meaningful and sustained dialogue around what it means to contribute to building a society worth living in.

Chapter 2: An Anti-Essentialist Marxism: Critique of Orthodox Marxism⁷

2.1. Introduction

Marxist thought has provided the foundation for a vast amount of socio-political critique since the nineteenth century. From Marx's own writings, spanning decades that include critiques of religion, human subjectivity, and political economy, to the various schools of thought following from them, Marxian and Marxist⁸ thought equips us with a powerful toolkit for understanding, critiquing, and ultimately transforming society.

While that remains the case, there exists a growing number of scholars who believe that "orthodox Marxism," or Marxist thought as it has largely been interpreted and employed, is in need of an update. At best, these traditional interpretations of Marx no longer adequately capture the dynamic, evolving, and increasingly complex web of social relations that comprise the human subject today. More urgently, however, lies the danger that failing to update our application of Marxian and Marxist thought can actually *hinder* our efforts toward social transformation by preventing us from recognizing, supporting, and proliferating such efforts that are already taking place all around us.

⁷ The terms "anti-essentialist Marxism" and "post-structuralist Marxism" are frequently used interchangeably both here and in the literature. Both cases denote a lineage following Marx and including the likes of Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze, among others.

⁸ Throughout this essay I use the term "Marxian" to denote ideas from Marx's primary texts (*e.g. Capital*) and "Marxist" to denote various lines of thought which follow Marx but are not his words directly.

The concealing or revealing of alternative possibilities illuminates the need for this sort of theoretical project, and this is the goal particularly of *anti-essentialist* (or *post-structuralist*, if you rather) Marxism. J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006) write that

Unless the economy is explicitly written out, or until it is deconstructively or positively rewritten, it will write itself into every text of social theory, in familiar and powerful ways. When it is not overtly theorized, it defines itself as capitalism because it lacks another name.” Gibson-Graham’s own project includes producing a discourse of economic difference and “theorizing non-capitalist forms of economy as having constitutive effects on capitalism itself. (39)

This means that, against the prevailing narrative that a totalizing and overarching capitalist system acts as the causal agent and determines the effects of social and economic life, other coexisting economic forms and institutions also have effects on the dominant capitalist one (see section 2.2.1 on Overdetermination). These tasks, according to Gibson-Graham, are distinctive in the literature of Marxian political economy and demonstrate the unique contribution that anti-essentialism can offer this tradition of inquiry.

The tradition Marxian political economy cares deeply about class. An anti-essentialist approach, however, necessitates a new way of thinking about it. While orthodox Marxism has tended to understand class as a social grouping based on a shared experience or qualitative commonality, what the project at hand aims to do is re-envision class (and thus, class justice) in a way that accounts for how individuals exist in today’s complex social economy, ultimately reflecting class position as a social *process* of surplus production, appropriation, *and distribution*. This means that, rather than thinking of class as a location in an income bracket (as in modern economics) or distance from the means of production (as in Marxian thought), it entails a constant interplay among the

flows and movement of surplus value. Surplus is always caught up in the motion from production to appropriation to distribution and back again. In return for this distinction, we will gain a theoretical framework that invigorates the ethical dimensions of the economy, encourages the creation and proliferation of economic difference, and guides us toward a more robust conception of class justice.

Theorizing the class process in this way also “yields a distinctive and partial kind of knowledge of the constituents and effects of class processes but does not accord explanatory privilege to the process of class,” Gibson-Graham write (2006, 56). Talking about class is our entry point into the larger conversation. Our histories, experiences, and ways of seeing the world lead us to discussions of class, labor, economic structures, and so on, but it is important to remember that those investigations are only pieces of a larger puzzle — pieces that may even conflict or be contradictory to one another. Issues of race, gender, mental health, and community wellbeing, among many others, are equally valid lenses through which to look at the economy. Yet they are *all* required of theoretical discourse if we are to be true to the desire for economic difference and diversity. That is, we cannot simply privilege one particular kind of knowledge (*i.e.* the class process) as having more explanatory power than any others.

DeMartino (1992), in post-structuralist fashion, remarks that discourse is an attempt to freeze the constant movement and transformation of concepts, meanings, and things *as if* they were secure, stable, and self-identical objects. It is in some sense a technique of bracketing the complexity and possibly contradictory nature of different processes in order to examine how they interact with one another. What an orthodox style of thought might deem as “necessity” is instead produced as an effect of other

historically contingent phenomena. Rather than asking what contingencies arise from an identified necessity, we must ask what must be necessary in order to see what is contingent.

This style of analysis as a performative act implies a more complex politics that would not have been revealed through orthodox analysis. In dominant discourse, all identities and activities tend to become fixed to the hegemony of Capital. Its totalizing force arises from its supposed encroachment into all parts of the social sphere. Economic arrangements are either capitalist or marginal, domestic labor is subsumed under capitalist reproduction, and social institutions enact capitalist regulation. Similarly, taking class as the primary agent driving social change leads clearly to the idea of vanguardist revolution, where social transformation is possible only given a unique alignment of political circumstances (*i.e.* structural crisis and working-class mobilization). But different forms of social transformation — dare I even say revolution — are possible and indeed happening right in front of us, if only we make ourselves vulnerable to the act of seeing.

Liberating class from its confinement within social structures, class politics becomes, in Gibson-Graham's words, "an ever-present experience with significant (though not unidirectional) transformative effects" (2006, 68). The contribution of the anti-essentialist perspective engenders partial, local struggles for justice, ongoing re-articulation of self and community, and diversity even within the concept of class itself. This new form of knowledge, coexisting with many other forms of knowledge, gives new life and meaning to the idea of political struggle and class transformation. In other words, the vision of politics that emerges specifically from an anti-essentialist perspective

focuses on realizing class justice in contexts in which it is readily achievable, sustaining class justice where it may have already been attained, and actively advocating for class justice in places where it has been more elusive.

2.2. An Anti-Essentialist Methodology

2.2.1 Overdetermination

The reformulation of class as a process becomes possible when scholars choose to accept *overdetermination* as a starting point of inquiry. While the philosophical tradition of anti-essentialism has rarely been associated with Marxian political economy, the purpose of bringing the two together is to displace the idea of “the economic” as a singular hegemonic totality that has dominated the discourse of political economy, especially orthodox Marxism. The payoff is that we will be able to rethink identity and social determination in a way that renders visible instances of class justice already underway. Thinking in terms of overdetermination offers a link between two significant traditions that can complement each other but have not been given the chance.

Coming from the work of Louis Althusser (1967) overdetermination is, at a basic level, a different way to approach causation, subjectivity, and constitution. Gibson-Graham view Althusser’s philosophical thought more generally as part of a counter-tradition “intent upon undermining the certainties of Western thought” (2006, 27). The Western canon largely relies on the idea of stable essences that lie at the nature of what things really are. But when looking through the lens of overdetermination, what a thing “really is” is really a matter of how it is represented. Its identity is always open, incomplete, and subject to constant reinterpretation. Meanings shift, identities are in

transition, and even the whole of society is “decentered” in the way that it is irreducible to any one element or set of elements. Instead, the way something appears to us is the result of a complex system of infinite determinations.

If there an infinite number of determinations that constitute an individual economic subject, how is it possible to decide which objects of inquiry have more explanatory force? For anti-essentialist Marxism, there isn't a metric for assessing what is more or less important. When it comes to causal explanation, overdetermination leads us to thinking about qualitative difference instead of quantitative distinction. What we identify as “society” is really the consequence of the overdetermination of all that is. Capitalism, then, is a contingent phenomenon that both constitutes and is constituted by the greater fabric of society.

Still, the majority of Marxist analyses rest on the so-called “inner tendencies” of capitalist production. The greater economic logic of capital accumulation necessitates an economy of growth, while the more micro-level phenomena of the profit motive and its subsequent drive toward increasing competition in the marketplace necessitate the development of technology and the enhancement of labor productivity, among other things. But to essentialize capitalism in this way is to assert that all forms of capitalism, both historical and current, are merely representations of one fundamental nature, the thing that capitalism “really is” at its core. This “immutable core” is located “within what Althusser would call an ‘empiricist’ epistemology: the truth of the economic object is given in the object itself, and is available to the (universal) intelligence of the knowing subject,” Gibson-Graham write (2006, 32). This means that, in effect, what you see is

what you get with capitalism. The idea of what capitalism “is” is closed, defined, and complete.

This also problematizes the notion of economic difference — theorizing and proliferating diverse forms of economy and alternative economic practices. By essentialist logic, various noncapitalist (and even noneconomic) activities are given meaning only through their fixed relation to the hegemony of Capital. The anti-essentialist project, then, is an “open-ended process of social construction in which social meanings, structures and subject positions are always being fixed and always under subversion” (36). Gibson-Graham continue, “Each social element therefore has a surplus of meanings (and exists in a variety of discursive relations to other elements) rather than holding a fixed or preestablished [*sic*] social location” (36).

Through the methodology of overdetermination, Capital itself is demoted in the constitution of the subject to a determination on equal footing with all other determinations. It loses what can feel like an unstoppable and all-encompassing encroachment into every part of individual and collective life. The implication of this thinking is that the economy is always already a space of constant subversion. Capitalism itself is not an essence, but rather a discursive moment, thus revealing the plausibility of alternative economic futures.

It is important to identify one thing overdetermination certainly is not: a metaphysical or ontological claim to truth. On the contrary, it is a position that is completely apathetic to ontology altogether. It is above all a *discursive choice*, not a presumption about the way the world “really is.” One way to think about overdetermination is as sort of a thought experiment. It asks: If there really were no

ultimate economic and otherwise social essences, what might we be able to see and do differently? Gibson-Graham call overdetermination a *motive*, rather than an achievement, that guides the process of our inquiry.

Thinking in terms of essences (*e.g.* capitalism as a hegemonic totality) prevents us from seeing all the opportunities that already exist around us to create a better world. By giving up our concerns about causation and ontology, we open ourselves up to discovering a vast array of diverse economic practices. Capitalism itself is displaced as an especially forceful cause of social phenomena and is repositioned instead as an effect of the complex of infinite determinations. The result is that we enable ourselves to consider a multitude of economic experiments and alternative economic practices that we would not otherwise see or recognize as such.

2.2.2 Class as a Process

As mentioned above, orthodox Marxism understands class as a social grouping based in shared experiences or qualitative commonalities. Gibson-Graham (2006) identify three shared attributes and experiences commonly invoked in thinking of social groups as classes: power, property ownership, and exploitation. Power distinguishes classes on the basis of autonomy in the labor process⁹ and other instances of oppression and domination; property ownership refers mostly to ownership over the means of production; and exploitation separates those who produce surplus labor from those who appropriate it. Within each of these demarcations, there are those who “have” and those who “have not.” Some have power, others do not. Some own the means of production,

⁹ The labor process as described here, following the first volume of *Capital*, refers to the process of labor becoming objectified in the concept of use-value.

others do not. But the project of anti-essentialist Marxism asks us to move beyond thinking of society as structured by two major class groups and instead to “embrace the complex multiplicity of classes and class locations in the historical setting of particular social formations” (49).

Conceiving classes as social groups leads to ascribing “objective” qualities to each individual based on the group to which they belong, thereby essentializing their social location. In most Marxist scholarship, especially following the three volumes of *Capital*, the most important quality in determining class position is the degree of ownership over the means of production. Capitalists possess a monopoly on the means of production such that they purchase labor-power from workers, while the workers themselves have no other way of accessing the means of subsistence than through wage labor.

In the context of today’s economy, this rigid thinking leaves much to be desired. Gibson-Graham (2006) ask, “If we define class in terms of power over the labor process, ownership of (industrial) property, and exploitation, how do we understand a situation in which one of these dimensions changes?” (51). In such a case, we would then have to make a choice between theorizing ambiguity or elevating only one of these aspects above the others in terms of priority. Moreover, in a highly developed capitalist economy, it seems that there would be no way of conceptually dealing with workers who do not actually contribute to surplus production. The demarcations between classes blur quickly and leave us without much to work with.

Following Resnick and Wolff’s major theoretical development (1987), Gibson-Graham (2006) define class as a three-fold *process*. First, there is the instant where

surplus is produced. Then it gets appropriated either by workers or by others. And finally, the surplus that was appropriated is distributed throughout society. These are three distinct yet overlapping moments in the continuous flows of capitalist production, and they demonstrate how capitalist society both constitutes and is constituted by other parts of the greater social process. Redefining class in this way, the authors claim, can reveal new possibilities for creating alternative, class-diverse economic futures.

2.2.3 Class Justice and Normative Critique

In the vein of Gibson-Graham's (1996) recasting of class in a way that promotes alternative economic futures, DeMartino (2003) writes that mounting a challenge to something like global neoliberalism requires an explicitly normative critique on the part of heterodox political economists. A normative critique would support the progressive aspects of resistance, such as promoting international solidarity, but would also lay the groundwork for an extended political imaginary. Its power lies in its ability to foster new visions of alternative economic practices.

Because DeMartino's (2003) elucidations on class justice became a cornerstone for my thinking through related facets of anti-essentialist theory, as well as for the analysis to follow, I will outline it in greater detail below. However, I must first point to Stephen Cullenberg (1998) for first drawing attention to a central question when thinking about justice from any Marxist perspective: Where exactly does the injustice of capitalist production occur? Since most Marxists are likely inclined to think of it in terms of exploitation, Cullenberg (1998) then asks what exactly is wrong with exploitation in the first place.

He begins exploring the answer by acknowledging that exploitation is not equivalent to unequal distribution of productive assets or power over the production process. Moreover, things like income inequality, hierarchical workplace relations, and environmental degradation might still be present in a society without exploitation — a conviction that later leads DeMartino and other anti-essentialist Marxists to flesh out an idea of class justice beyond the mere elimination of exploitation.

One reason for the near-default objection to exploitation may be a tacit, though foundational, normative judgment regarding a particular ethic or idea of the good society.¹⁰ If that is the case, then scholars working in this field must continually ask themselves how they can convince others of their opposition to exploitation. They must also confront any political imperatives, if any, that may be implied by their normative critiques.

Burczak (2001) argues that, instead of focusing on ownership of the means of production as in orthodox Marxism, we might fare better to locate exploitation in the violation of the principles of appropriative and contractual, rather than distributive, justice. He accomplishes this through a technical combination of David Ellerman's labor theory of *property* (rather than of value), Resnick and Wolff's theory of exploitation, and Martha Nussbaum's interpretation of Aristotelian virtue ethics, and he sees in Marx's own work "an underlying moral commitment to the promotion of human dignity, human flourishing, and complete human being" (163). The result is not so much a challenge to

¹⁰ The ancient questions of the good life and the good society were, of course, the primary motivation for this scholarly undertaking. More importantly, I suspect that it is also what leads students and others with some interest in the economy to the classical political economists, including Marx, as well as the likes of Aristotle and Aquinas.

unequal distribution of the means of production, but an investigation into appropriation and the wage-labor system. Most important for this project, Burczak (2001) argues that such a normative foundation, resting on widely-held beliefs concerning human dignity, both retains the Marxian commitment to eliminating exploitation while simultaneously advocating for the advancement of cooperative production.

DeMartino (2003) asserts that many political economists, even on the far Left, base their critique on demonstrating how neoliberalism actually *does not* achieve all (maybe not even many) of the things it promises. “But the problem with this strategy,” he writes, “is that it implicitly adopts the normative standards by the advocates of neoliberalism as the appropriate terrain on which to conduct the battle” (1). When theorists ascribe the problem of neoliberalism to its inability to deliver on something like rapid economic growth, for example, they establish growth as a social good to which economic activity should aim. “Growth” becomes the normative terrain, as DeMartino calls it, and the challenge to neoliberalism is simply to show that it does not achieve the growth it promises. The issue of concern in this analysis is not the desire to pursue growth in the first place, but rather that neoliberal practices are not an effective way to pursue it. Instead, DeMartino suggests that we adopt a different normative standard entirely, questioning whether *growth* in and of itself is a social good worth pursuing at all, rather than debating economic tactics.

Neoliberalism, according to DeMartino (2003), rests on a normative foundation of welfarism — not utilitarianism — which precludes interpersonal comparison on the basis of utility. This is why neoclassical economic theory, which underlies the practices of neoliberalism, assumes a rational, self-interested, utility-maximizing individual agent

with ordinal preferences and an insatiable desire for “more.” He argues that welfarism is an impoverished normative standard, largely due to its unconcern for equality, and that by offering a critique of neoliberalism without opposing welfarism, scholars on the Left implicitly adhere to it. Their silence gives credence to the belief that welfarism is indeed the appropriate framework for judging social action, and it perpetuates the status quo that holds neoliberalism in place. The task of Leftist scholars, therefore, absolutely must include attacking welfarism as a normative guideline for any social analysis at all.

So if we should, rather than opposing neoliberalism simply for failing to deliver on the presumed social goods it promises, level a critique against neoliberalism for “promising the wrong things” and operating under a woefully inadequate moral framework, then what are the qualities that a more adequate theory of justice should espouse? What kind of social principles can provide a normative foundation for a Leftist movement toward, in Marxist language, substantial (rather than merely formal) freedom and equality?

DeMartino (2003) identifies four tenets that the contribution of anti-essentialism to Marxism brings to light. Together, they form the basis for a robust conception of class justice. First, class justice must be comprised *at least* of the distinct but overlapping categories of productive, appropriative, and distributional justice.¹¹ Second, a comprehensive account of social justice must possess internal complexity, including issues of class justice while simultaneously expanding beyond them to issues of race,

¹¹ These categories refer to the moments of the class process: the production of surplus value, its appropriation, and its distribution. As three distinct sets of practices, each carries its own partial criteria for justice.

gender, and so on. Third, even an account of justice that would fit the requirements already mentioned needs to be combined and articulated with a multitude of other normative principles (not limited simply to these criterion for class justice). And lastly, class justice might be *immediately* achievable and in fact may *already be achieved* (partially, at least) even within what orthodox Marxism has conceived as a totalizing and all-encompassing regime of “Capitalism.” Discovering already existing instances of class justice may be just be a matter of knowing where to look — and doing away with normative elegance and cut-and-dried ethical codes along the way.

An approach to justice drawing from Marx should pay homage to two central principles in Marxian thought. First is the opposition to exploitation, and second is the development of social arrangements conducive to human flourishing. “Exploitation occurs when those who produce surplus value are excluded from the process of its appropriation,” DeMartino writes (5). In this view, *Capital* levels a normative critique of the capitalist mode of production, and that critique is centered around the indefensibility of class exploitation.

The second principle is rendered from Marx’s great adage “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” (1875). This declaration serves as a roadmap to the “higher phase” of communism, what Marx also identifies as the end of prehistory and the beginning of history. As DeMartino (2003) notes, it is something of a *marker* that signals the achievement of the transcendence of capitalism and the realization of social arrangements compatible with human flourishing.

Does the end of exploitation automatically entail the realization of from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs? Are these aspirations

contextually distinct and more or less important given different circumstances?

DeMartino (2003) claims that this is how they are presented in Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program* (1875). He argues that exploitation, for Marx, is predicated on an ontological claim regarding the material inner-contradictions of the capitalist mode of production. The dual nature of capitalist production necessitates crises which then open up the possibility for class transformation.

Marx's political imaginary envisions the end of exploitation as setting up the first phase of communism, where the means of production are commonly owned, and the conviction that each produces according to their ability and receives according to their need as being the realization of a later phase of communism in which the bourgeois right of equality in exchange is replaced with entirely voluntary worker participation. Against this view, DeMartino (2003) recasts these two Marxian cornerstones as "partial, distinct but compatible components of a more adequate, composite normative principle [...] able to assess social action and enact policy "at each and every moment of historical development" (6).

This act of seeing is made possible through a commitment to anti-essentialism in viewing class as a process, enabling a more robust class analysis often lacking from other Marxist approaches, which tend to focus on only one or two of these moments and their causal dominance. In virtue of giving full and equal attention to each moment in the process of class, the anti-essentialist perspective avoids the dangers of offering a reductionist account of capitalism.

For the purposes of constructing an adequate normative framework that can rival welfarism and guide Leftist analysis, recognizing the moments of production,

appropriation, and distribution as equally distinct parts of the class process demands what DeMartino (2003) calls a *composite* account of class justice. The degree to which any social arrangement can be called just in terms of class depends on its “performance,” for lack of a better term, in each area. The questions of who should contribute to surplus production, how much each person should contribute to surplus production, and the conditions under which surplus is produced, all require ethical decision-making on the basis of a specified normative standard. Similarly, appropriating surplus and making it available for use yields ethical questions concerning which appropriative apparatuses are morally just, who does the appropriating, and what kind of authority the appropriators have. Finally, the process of distribution forces us to ask how surplus gets divided up and by which techniques it gets “delivered.”

Consistent with the methodology of anti-essentialism explained thus far, an expanded account of class justice arising from it does not establish itself as a claim to truth. That is, anti-essentialist methodology does not assert itself as *the correct* one above all the others. Instead, the anti-essentialist concerns for justice ask us to advocate for taking seriously the idea of surplus and to further elaborate conceptually other accounts of justice. In effect, the perspective of anti-essentialism should not seek as its goal to replace other perspectives, but only to add complexity to our investigation and bolster our commitment to justice.

To begin the normative discussion itself, DeMartino (2003) states that Marx already provides an effective entry point given the two principles outlined above. The first deals rather obviously with class, but DeMartino (2003) claims that the second is often interpreted apart from it; even non-Marxists have worthwhile ideas on distributive

justice, albeit abstracted from the concept of class altogether. For instance, neoclassical theory advocates for free markets at least in part due to the belief that markets efficiently encourage each economic agent to maximize their individual contribution to the social good. But “from each according to his ability” opens up further questions about the normative grounding of contribution, what gets defined as the social good, and what the proper means are for enacting this principle, DeMartino (2003, 12) says. Similarly, the latter half of the phrase, “to each according to his needs,” insofar as it seeks to provide the conditions for substantial freedom and equality described above, demands rich and complex answers to the difficulties of assessment, measurement, accountability, and incentive.

Regarding the first principle, the opposition to exploitation, Marx thinks that “a class process is exploitative and thereby unjust if those who produce surplus are excluded from the process of appropriation” (15). It readily follows, then, that those who produce surplus should also be the ones who appropriate it. But against the popular Marxist interpretation that exploitation is a form of social theft, the anti-essentialist perspective focuses much more on the process of subject formation.

DeMartino (2003) cites Cullenberg (1998) in linking the idea of exploitation as theft to the “general myth of property rights” (16). In this formulation, property rights remain grounded in a Lockean theory of property, which itself is grounded in the essentialization of a universal natural law. The anti-essentialist position by contrast eschews basing normative evaluation on any notion of property rights in lieu of “the recognition of the way in which patterns of surplus appropriation constitute the individual and construct relations among individuals in the formation of society” (16).

In the words of Gibson-Graham's Community Economies Collective (2001), "The trauma of exploitation is not that something is taken from you. Rather, it is that you are cut off from the conditions of social possibility that the surplus both enables and represents" (16). All this is to say that exploitation, while it may still be helpful at times to think of it as an act of theft, also reveals a much deeper concern for providing the social and material conditions for human flourishing. Because the process of surplus allocation plays a performative role in shaping social institutions, it must be recognized as an integral part of community formation. As DeMartino (2003) notes, exploitation is not so much a denial of one's property as it is a denial of *participation* in a fundamental process of self-representation and community interaction.

It cannot be underemphasized that a distinctly anti-essentialist approach to class justice comprises only a small part of a more composite conception of social justice. Given the anti-essentialist method stemming from a commitment to overdetermination, class cannot be ascribed greater explanatory force when thinking about social causation. Thinking about issues of class is not *the* path toward achieving justice, but merely an entry point into the larger conversation and a partial knowledge comprising a greater assemblage of collective knowledges. The anti-essentialist position sees the act of creating normative frameworks "as an endless process of articulation rather than a contest among unchanging and unyielding normative truths" (23). Overdetermination escorts us away from ontology and epistemological truth and allows us to devise conceptions of class justice that are robust while simultaneously recognizing the scope and role it has in examining the larger complex system(s) of society.

The lack of an ethical codebook within this view of class justice is apparent, but DeMartino (2003) notes that “normative ambiguity is an inescapable component of a rich, political, and civic life” (24). The anti-essentialist perspective lights the space for us to lay the path, or a series of paths, ourselves. It opens the conceptual space for constant democratic deliberation and re-articulation. Without ambiguity, uncertainty, and a little bit of messiness, we would not be able to see all the ways to achieve justice that have been in front of us all along; the rest of social theory can keep its elegance.

Madra (2006) adds to the post-Marxist discussion of ethico-political foundations and normative critique by imploring us to think about how *subjectivity* animates class. Communism itself, according to Madra (2006), is predicated upon a shift in subjectivity and the ideological definitions of what constitutes justice and injustice. This follows from Gibson-Graham’s (2003) Foucauldian contention that an “ethics of the local” relies on the cultivation of ethical subjection, to be explored in detail in the section below, and opens up the opportunity for thinking about social transformation in terms of (Lacanian) psychoanalysis, to be explored in Chapter 3 below.

Madra’s (2006) main argument is that ethical critiques such as those from Cullenberg (1998) and DeMartino (2003), among others, assume an ontology that transcends time and space. Rethinking class analysis by making central the question of sexual difference, or the “sexuating” of class in terms of the forms of surplus appropriation, reveals both exploitative class structures and communist class structures to have failed to “domesticate the Real of class antagonism” (222). In the end, Madra (2006) contends that *any* serious discussion of exploitation and class justice going forward must include the inescapable subjectivity of class.

2.2.4 An Ethics of the Local

Gibson-Graham (2003) contend that globalization discourse, analogous to the discourse of capitalism as a hegemonic totality, subordinates the local as marginal, passive, and dependent. If locality were to become the “active subject of its economic experience,” they say, it would be unsettling to the structure of all that is currently in place (50). But to see that locality is not necessarily confined by the global and that the local can indeed possess its own agency and self-determination requires displacing the binary between them. If we continue to accept the anti-essentialist conviction that particularities (*e.g.* persons, places, practices) cannot be subsumed under a universal law, it follows that *there is no possibility for the global order in the first place.*

The authors speak about what it means to be “practitioners of an ethics of the local” (50). Drawing on Foucault’s work in the second volume of the *History of Sexuality* (1985), they separate the two aspects of morality into the ethical principles and the cultivation of the ethical person. The process of subject constitution entails a self-formation that takes place through what Foucault calls practices of the self. This dual moment of morality serves as a template for thinking about the cultivation and constant (re)articulation of an ethical *local* subject oriented toward location, interpersonal engagement, and the process of becoming. That is, when outlining a vision of an ethics of the local, we have to ask both what its core principles are as well as how we might cultivate ourselves as practitioners of it.

The global obviously entails the concrete quality of geographical subordination, but as a presumed totality it also stands as a sign for universality and sameness. A view that establishes localities as irreducible, self-determinant agents, then, undermines

universality by honoring otherness. An ethics of the local must root itself in particularity and contingency, respecting each instance of individual difference, and it must cultivate local capacity. Thus, a methodological practice informed by this view has both the power to deconstruct the binary of global and local as well as the potential to transform local subjects through practices of the self.

Particularity regards the global and the local as equal beings: autonomous but in necessary relation with each other, revealing both what is actual and what is possible on equal planes. The global, Gibson-Graham (2003) contend, is merely a projection of a local particularity on a world-scale. Accepting this proposition leads us to confront several political ideas that are used to perpetuate injustice today. Neoliberalism, for instance, emerges from a specific discourse that takes one particular vision of the economy, economic activity, and the economic subject and projects it onto the dominant international political and economic agendas.

The recognition of particularity also necessitates a recognition of contingency. If the global is the (continuous, ongoing) result of a historical movement from the particular to the universal, then the inverted motion must also be possible. That is, if the global can be established, it can also be dismantled, displaced, deconstructed. Gibson-Graham (2003) write that “‘Things could be otherwise’ is the positive implication of contingency and the sign of political possibility” (53). When we refuse the “inevitability” of the global, the economy becomes a space of potentiality and creativity, and we finally open our eyes to the vast set of alternative practices occurring today which lay the path toward new, unique futures.

Respect for difference applies both among a set of localities and also within each one individually. “Locality is the place where engagement with the stranger is enacted,” the authors write, briefly appealing to the phenomenologies of Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Nancy, and others (these thinkers have been integral to the turn toward the Other in contemporary phenomenology). “[I]t is the place of exposure, of one to another singularity [...], the crossroads where those who have nothing in common (all of us) meet to construct community” (53). Affirming a presupposition of absolute alterity, where persons are each entirely unique, leads to a recognition of otherness. When they claim that all of us are “those who have nothing in common,” the authors are affirming the irreducible specificity that all of us are as “solipsistic” — in Levinas’s language — beings. Yet the beauty of community is the being of all of these radical alterities existing together. Capitalism and globalization reduce economic otherness to the realm of the Same, but localities, for Gibson-Graham (2003), are the spaces in which infinitely particular beings can encounter the Other and thus establish community among a constellation of particular beings.

Anti-essentialist Marxism implores us to consider what the respect for difference and otherness might mean for the economy, both in terms of its conceived composition and the activities that are ascribed to it. Against the totalization of a capitalist regime, an ethics of the local calls for the proliferation of economic diversity. It asks us to regard non-capitalist and otherwise alternative practices as equal rather than marginal or subordinate. “This rich narrative of a highly differentiated economy,” Gibson-Graham (2003) write, “could undermine the capitalocentric imaginary” (54). Just as with the discourse of overdetermination, a discourse that embraces qualitative difference can

render visible social practices and relations that we would not be able to recognize otherwise. In doing so, it simultaneously expands the vision and imagination we are able to have of the future.

In order to cultivate an effective practitioner of an ethics of the local, these principles of particularity, contingency, and difference mandate the cultivation of capacity. This capacity refers to our ability to be different, to re-orient ourselves and embody new kinds of economic relations, to become something other than what the regime of the Same wants us to be. The hegemonic discourse of capitalist totality and globalization enforce a binary relation that positions the economy itself as the prime mover. In other words, the economy plays the active role in constituting passive subjects and dictating the boundaries of social possibility. This is why Gibson-Graham (2003) call the task of “radically repositioning the local subject with respect to the economy” the urgent ethical and political project at hand (54). Deconstructing discursive representations of this sort reposition the economy as a continuously contingent process and equally as constituted as it is constitutive. When localities and the particular subjects that comprise them are given agency in economic discourse, the cultivation of an active ethical local becoming becomes possible. That is, the process of becoming allows us to continuously form and transform ourselves in a way that defies the reduction of the Other to the Same.¹²

¹² Gibson-Graham enact this in the practice of their Community Economies research. The latter half of “An Ethics of the Local” is largely devoted to providing their stories, illuminating the way in which research as a process of listening and engagement enables the cultivation of an ethical local subject. For instance: “The people engaged in our research conversations had a chance to encounter themselves differently—not as waiting for capitalism to give them their places in the economy but as actively constructing their

An ethics of the local highlights one way in which we might, rather than or perhaps in addition to resisting and opposing one massive, hegemonic, totalizing force that we call Capitalism, simply move beyond it by collectively choosing a different future. Explicating on Ernesto Laclau's post-Marxism,¹³ Gibson-Graham (2003) write that an ethics of contingency "involves the cultivation of ourselves as subjects of freedom — self-believers in our economic capacities, responsible to our political abilities, conscious (we would add) of our potential to become something other than what we have heretofore chosen to be" (71). They note that, if recognizing contingency expands the domain of choice and ascribes to us a greater degree of responsibility, then the ethical practice of contingency entails the cultivation of ourselves as choosers, "especially in areas where choice has been understood as precluded to us" (71).

The movement forward in human history, then, with capitalism and all of its discontents fading from sight on the shores behind us, is a matter of choice. But in order to choose, we have to be able to imagine. To imagine, we have to be able to recognize the instances of alternative economic practices happening right now all around us. And to be able to see these forms of human activity as lights on the path (or a series of paths) toward new economic futures, we must proliferate a discourse of economic difference — displacing the binary relation of economic totality and reorienting ourselves as harbingers

economic lives, on a daily basis, in a range of noncapitalist practices and institutions." See *ibid.*, 68.

¹³ Laclau, along with frequent coauthor Chantal Mouffe, are largely responsible for the emergence of a distinct style of "post-Marxist" thought emphasizing discursive constitution, hegemony, and anti-essentialist identity in the twentieth century. See Laclau (1991) and Laclau and Mouffe (2001).

of a world that celebrates the specificity, particularity, and wonderful uniqueness of us all.

The purpose of this chapter has been to outline the theoretical foundation for the inquiry and analysis to follow. By starting from the standpoint of overdetermination and representation; reconceiving class as a process of surplus production, appropriation, and distribution rather than as a social group; considering a robust criteria for class justice; and emphasizing the moral agency of the local, we can begin to see whether, under this framework, worker cooperatives can play a part in enacting social transformation.

To that extent, the chapter that follows is an exploration of worker cooperatives specifically from an anti-essentialist Marxist perspective in the literature. When we do, in fact, view cooperative economic practices from the lens of overdetermination, the class process, and class justice, among other anti-essentialist tenets, what are we able to say in regards to their potential for social transformation? Following that discussion, I will present two ethnographic investigations of cooperatives in Mondragón (Spain), Denver (United States), and Woojin (South Korea), in order to make space for the lived experience of cooperative workers. Finally, I will present my fieldwork from the Evergreen Cooperatives in Cleveland, Ohio, and consider what first-hand accounts from the workers themselves might illuminate that is hidden from theoretical discourse.

Chapter 3: Analysis of Worker Cooperatives from an Anti-Essentialist Perspective in Existing Literature

3.1. Introduction

This chapter explores the *applied* literature to demonstrate a distinctly anti-essentialist analysis of worker cooperatives. It also further establishes the foundation for my own field work at the Evergreen Cooperatives — an experimental network of worker cooperatives in Cleveland, Ohio, inspired by the Mondragón ecosystem — as well as to the greater research question posed by this thesis.

By exploring critical approaches to ethical economies, Marxian value theory, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and economic democracy, the first half of this chapter aims to illuminate what scholars in this style of thought are saying *specifically* in regards to worker cooperatives both as individual firms and as a collective movement.

Following that, I present two major works that have become seminal to my own analysis: Sharryn Kasmir's *The Myth of Mondragón* (1996) and Minsun Ji's "Revolution or Reform?" (2016). Both of these works draw attention to potential objections, obstacles and challenges, and complexities for worker cooperatives seeking to play a role in social transformation: The former in relation to the infamous namesake cooperative network in the Basque region of northern Spain, and the latter in regards to comparable cooperatives in both the United States and South Korea. Finally, this chapter concludes

with an analysis of my experience at the Evergreen Cooperatives. I recount a few key conversations with cooperative workers and other members of the surrounding community and argue that, from my perspective, the cooperatives align with Kasmir and Ji's respective findings and ultimately fall short of representing a move toward social transformation beyond merely individual economic opportunity.

3.2. Anti-Essentialist Themes in the Literature on Worker Cooperatives

3.2.1 Enabling Ethical Economies

One difficulty in articulating alternative economic futures is defining what exactly the alternative is. In "Enabling Ethical Economies: Cooperativism and Class," Gibson-Graham write that "since the alternative is defined in terms of the norm (ableit as its opposite or reversal), the existing malign system is fully implicated in the alternative liberatory one" (2003, 125). In their commitment to strengthening the sustainability of community economies, "A crucial first step is to revitalize the economic imaginary by freeing it from the leaden grip of capitalocentrism" (125). This movement involves re-politicizing the economy and, in the spirit of Foucault, exploring economic power as unstable, fluid, and always available to be reversed.

Gibson-Graham believe that "a vision of the economy as diverse, multiply identified and complexly overdetermined and economic power as diffuse, segmented, and in motion opens up the possibility for local non-capitalist practices to be the focus for an invigorated economic politics" (127). This brings to light the role of *decision* in the economy. As the economy is theorized more and more as a self-regulating system of coordination, it's important to recast social causation in terms of overdetermination. That

is, our individual and communal decisions play an equal part in determining our social circumstances.

Both gradualist and revolutionary socialists have leveled critiques against the cooperative movement — and not without justification. Their assessment that the cooperative movement lacks “an appropriate economic analysis for building new cooperative economies” and “a strategy for overthrowing and replacing the capitalist system” is important and should be taken seriously (155). However, Gibson-Graham argue that economic experimentation both historically and in the present day has been stifled by a lack of theories of economic difference which could be drawn upon in the creation of alternative economic practices. When we view cooperatives like the Mondragón ecosystem, consisting of 200+ interconnected and uniquely-managed individual cooperative firms, in light of economic difference — as part of a set of economic activities which are diverse and coexisting — then we can see that its decisions (*i.e.* wage-setting, surplus distribution) “have brought into being distinctive spaces of collectivity in which we can see a communal class process being enacted” (156).¹⁴ Given this lens, the project of economic emancipation is shifted from one of replacement to one of strengthening and proliferating already existing non-capitalist economic practices as well as enabling spaces for the creation of new, often subversive, non-capitalist practices.

¹⁴ The Mondragón cooperatives, located in the Basque region of northern Spain, are often looked to as one of the first (and most successful) experiments in sustaining a cooperative-dominant economy. I will outline more of its history and prominence while reviewing Kasmir’s (1999) work later in this chapter.

3.2.2 Value Theory and Justice

Perhaps the most exciting thing about adopting the anti-essentialist approach is the kind of politics that it enables. Against the rather orthodox view that considers the Marxian and Marxist “project” to be achieving justice via establishing socialist or communist societies, the idea of class justice described above brings to light an entire set of more immediate alternative practices that might enable partial and localized justice in the here-and-now. But given the anti-essentialist commitment to overdetermination, it’s not a guarantee that a perfectly socialist or communist society would lead to social justice on the whole, either.

This is a central concern of David Kristjanson-Gural (2011) ’s article “Value, Cooperatives, and Class Justice”. Narrowing in on the aspect of exploitation, he argues that the elimination of exploitation at the firm level is necessary, but not sufficient, to support DeMartino’s (2003) idea of class justice. Using the lens of Marxian value theory applied specifically to worker cooperatives, he claims that workers may collectively appropriate surplus value yet be subject to an unfair redistribution of labor time. Failing to pay attention to the value theory critique of labor time distribution risks aiming to build a cooperative-dominant economy that may end exploitation but continue to contribute to class injustice.

Tracing the distribution of value is a complex task, amplified by the 150+ years of capitalist economic development since Marx’s writing of *Capital*. Kristjanson-Gural (2011) asks whether we can really begin to determine whether value distribution promotes justice if part of the very definition of value (socially necessary labor time) is tied to the ability to pay. He affirms that “the question of class justice has to consider

what alternative measure of value we may need to develop in order to move beyond an economic system based on profit and the ability to pay” (353). For instance, introducing competition among firms in different industries, unproductive workers providing the necessary conditions for capitalist reproduction, and unpaid domestic and communal work necessitates a new way of formulating value.

Kristjanson-Gural (2011) argues that value redistribution through exchange is qualitative distinct from and should not be conflated with exploitation. As they both contribute to class injustice, however, eliminating one is not sufficient for eliminating class injustice on the whole. While exploitation is concerned with the moment of appropriation, a robust conception of class justice also examines the process of production and distribution. Questions pertaining to fair compensation for unproductive workers and the provision of non-workers in society, for example, are no more clearly solved in the class structure of a worker cooperative than they are in that of a capitalist firm.

Exploitation takes place within a given enterprise, but value itself is a social substance involving a complex set of factors arising from both within and outside any individual firm. The author asks: “How can workers collectively self-appropriate something that is constituted as the result of the interaction of all production and demand conditions in the economy?” (356). It is a tenet of Marxian value theory that some successfully competitive firms benefit from “superprofits” as a result of selling output at an exchange value exceeding the amount of value they contributed themselves. The extra surplus-value transfers from less efficient firms to more efficient ones, and from labor-intensive firms to capital-intensive ones.

Additionally, the capacity for a firm to create value is overdetermined by the conditions of effective demand. Demand may signal an excess or deficiency in production relative to social necessity, but it doesn't preclude goods such as low-income housing and vaccines from being socially desirable. Even the very concepts of exchange value and value rely on some idea of how much abstract labor time is socially necessary, which is not a determination made solely within an individual firm.

The existence of these transfers alone is enough, Kristjanson-Gural (2011) claims, to imply that class justice can occur even among cooperatives free of exploitation. He argues that we must reconsider the meaning of exploitation, typically conceived as the exclusion of workers from the appropriation of the *entire* surplus. This is only applicable, he argues, in the early stage of Marx's analysis. The introduction of competition and market conditions accompany a second and third moment of redistribution resulting not from capitalist control but rather from the interactions of firms as a whole — what Kristjanson-Gural calls “a systematic crediting of labor effort that affects distributive justice but which is conceptually distinct from exploitation” (358). This means that, even if worker cooperatives eliminate exploitation in virtue of the symmetry between those who produce and those who appropriate, their workers still do not receive the full value value that they contribute.

Value theory renders visible various facets of class justice that we might not otherwise be able to see. It can also help to design and implement a solution to the unfair exchange that the author claims intercooperative competition would produce. Kristjanson-Gural (2011) argues for institutional solutions existing on *at least* the levels of the firm, the cooperative association, and the greater economy. These

institutions “would seek to reconcile the normative claims of the workers to nonexploitation with the normative claims of workers to get full credit for their labor expended” (358). In effect, they would avoid or compensate for the market transfers arising from exchange and its effects on the formation of value and exchange-value.

The Mondragón cooperatives, as a large and robust network of cooperatives spanning an array of sizes and industries, can provide direct inspiration in this regard. At the micro-level, surplus-value distribution is not left to individual workers. Instead, the general assembly votes on an agreement that in various ways limits the size and distribution of surplus-value itself. At the meso-level of the cooperative association, workers from first-degree cooperatives (which produce goods and service) are, by institutional rule, represented on the boards of second-degree cooperatives (which produce the conditions of existence for the first-degree cooperatives).

Kristjanson-Gural (2011) agrees with Gibson-Graham (2006) that these agreements incentivize cooperatives differently than if they were individually independent, and that they provide much of an explanation for why the Mondragón cooperatives have managed to avoid some major problems other cooperatives face. He also points to Healy’s argument (explicated below) that such institutional agreements represent a collective decision that, once pronounced as the law, takes on a life of its own and provides structure and constraint for future decisions concerning the class process. Each of these cases has proven, the author argues, that institutions beyond those directly related to exploitation are necessary to insure that class justice is promoted.

All of these questions, for Kristjanson-Gural, ultimately point to recasting what “socially necessary abstract labor” might mean in a society dominated by a communist

class process. He doesn't rule out that a communist society might be "devoted to the pursuit of profit and thus subject to the equalization of profit" (361). In that case, institutions at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels would be essential to mitigating social and environmental injustice that unregulated intercooperative competition would entail. Then, the definition of socially necessary abstract labor and thus value itself would also have to be recasted in terms of these new rules of competition — a "market socialism" that the author believes may be more ethically defensible in the end. We might even envision a communist class process, drawing from Resnick and Wolff (1987), in which workers no longer produce a surplus such that "all labor is immediately necessary labor and no exploitation exists" (361). In this way, Kristjanson-Gural (2011) encourages us to imagine a future where relationships might not be mediated by class at all, where subjectivities are oriented "toward the provision of need rather than the quest for profit" (362).

3.2.3 Psychoanalysis and the Cooperative Subject

Lacanian psychoanalysis is another tool that can help us think through, in anti-essentialist fashion, the role worker cooperatives can play in subject formation and in the cultivation of ourselves as subjects who can create a different world.

Byrne and Healy (2006) first theorized cooperatives as sites of practices which attempt to situate a subject's relation to work and the community economy toward a particular orientation. They call it "working in the gap," where cooperative subjects "derive satisfaction from engaging with the various antagonisms, conflicts, and contingencies that attend the cooperative and its relationship to the community in which it is constituted" (241). Such subjects are post-fantasmatic in relation to the economy,

they argue, as their personal narratives no longer revolve around capitalocentric fantasy along with its symptoms and resentments. In other words, cooperative subjects refuse to fix their identities in relation to Capital or Capitalism, thus traversing the psychoanalytic fantasy that capitalism stands in the way of enacting alternative economic futures.

Fantasy, in Lacanian terms, “can be understood as a subject’s reasonable response to a fundamental and unavoidable gap or lack in identity” (243). It is what is used in an attempt to reconstruct the unity of prelinguistic wholeness sacrificed in the process of becoming a subject (*e.g.* acquiring language, repressing pleasures). Fantasy “offers the promise of a return” to that unity, a closing of the gap between the subject and all that it was separated from. The work of fantasy also constructs the symptom. Fantasy, as a mere projection of meaning, is never able to eliminate the gap in identity or provide an “uncorrupted” language beyond the signifier. The authors argue that “fantasy protects us from the anxiety of the lack, and it gives a name to — symbolizes — the thing that blocks us from getting what we desire” (243).

One can never get beyond or outside of fantasy. The desire to do so often generates politicized attempts to “enforce a closure on the social” and eliminate a scapegoat, often to dire social consequence (245). The historical instances of Nazism and Stalinism, for example, and even contemporary notions surrounding issues like the immigration debate in the United States, fuel racist, fascist, and imperialist ideals, among others. Even within the various traditions of Marxism, the authors argue, there exists a dangerous desire to restore the wholeness of an unalienated economic subject freed from conflict and contradiction.

Byrne and Healy (2006) do believe, however, that one can at least develop a different relationship to fantasy through acknowledging the structure of fantasy and the Utopian impulse. They note that, while Marxism may be thought of as a project of becoming, psychoanalysis of this sort may also be thought of as a project of giving up. Bringing them together as complements articulates a challenge to the omnipresence of Capitalism as the symptom standing in the way of emancipatory politics. Doing so can help us imagine worlds previously precluded from our imagination and see already-existing non-capitalist activity previously hidden from our vision.

Drawing from Laclau and Mouffe's Radical Democracy project,¹⁵ the authors argue that "the goal of democratic struggle is not to fill in the institutional authority or articulate the positive content of the law, but rather, to maintain the negativity that makes institutions and law changeable" (246). Cooperatives maintain such negativity by traversing capitalocentric fantasy and working in the gap. The contingencies and antagonisms reflected in different social contexts necessitate a proliferation of difference in the conception, organization, scale, and overall process of individual cooperatives. This openness to contingency and welcoming of uncertainty undermines individual and communal identities fixed to the totalizing power of Capital, instead fostering subjects post-fantasmatic to the economy — subjects which insist, with Lacan, that "the Big Other does not exist."

Interestingly, the authors recount the general consensus during a 2002 worker cooperative conference that new cooperative employees who come in with too much

¹⁵ For a comprehensive introduction and overview to Laclau and Mouffe's collective work, especially in regards to Radical Democracy, see Smith (1998).

idealism and faith in coops as spaces free from capitalist contradiction never end up working out as worker-owners (248). Instead, the best people are those who can think both as a worker *and* as an owner, embracing the conflicts and contradictions inherent between them. Cooperatives, then, are perhaps not spaces of emancipation, but rather sites of reorientation.

Taking up this alternative language of subjectivity, capitalism, and economy (a central conviction of anti-essentialist Marxism) allows one to see how worker cooperatives can be sites of non-capitalist activities which coexist with — and sometimes even contradict — capitalist ones. Without it, it is difficult to refute the idea that cooperatives are anything other than capitalist, doomed to fail in its shadow despite Utopian intentions. Seeing cooperatives and their workers as embedded subjects of communal economies transforms the leftist perception of worker-owners from the new faces of an old vanguard to ethical subjects “confronting their own relationship to the lack” (253). By reorienting their relationship to work and the economy, cooperative subjects are already enacting non-capitalist futures and cultivating new forms community. It is simply up to us to see them that way.

Thus, Byrne and Healy (2006) argue that “the economy could become a force for the repoliticization of the subject” (255). What if, they ask, the role worker cooperatives play in social transformation is to become important social locations “for the production of subjects invested in the democratic process, through identification with fundamental lack, through working in the gap?” (255). Such a task may also help the emancipatory psychoanalytic project of cultivating a different relationship to desire in the economic sphere: the desire for non-exploitation.

The broader question of whether worker cooperatives are a desirable alternative to capitalist class relations was taken up by Healy again in a special issue of *Rethinking Marxism* (2011). He agrees with other Marxian theorists that cooperatives are special given both the symmetry of their surplus production and appropriation as well as the democratic organization of surplus distribution. However, a third response regarding the desirability of worker cooperatives is that they are *ethical* economic spaces. That is, cooperatives allow their workers “to be cognizant of and responsible for the consequences of their decisions and actions” (366). The structure of the cooperative itself “refuses an imaginary closure of the class process,” recalling the political consequences of attempting to go beyond fantasy. “There is always another way to be a communist,” he says following Özselçuk and Madra (366).

Cooperatives, in effect, create the conditions for the emergence of economic subjects not defined by capitalism’s insistence on worker passivity, powerlessness, resentment, and exploitation. And while these principles do not provide formulaic rules for answer questions or making tough decisions, they do serve as core values that guide the cooperative along its path.

It’s important to note that these features do not eliminate necessity from contingency. Worker cooperatives offer a specific kind of freedom, Healy notes, but that does not mean that they transcend the communities in which they are embedded. It also, as stated before, does not mean that cooperative subjects are liberated from alienation. Instead, looking through the lens of psychoanalysis allows us to embrace the antagonism between individual urges and societal demands and, thus, acknowledge “the reciprocal relationship between the enterprise and larger society” as “unconscious” in the sense that

the agreed-upon arrangements and products of previous decisions exist without worker-owners giving them much thought.

To illustrate this point, Healy uses the analogy of a wedding ceremony to describe a particular meeting of the Valley Alliance for Worker Cooperatives (VAWC). The purpose of this meeting was to ratify legally binding agreements which would formalize the structure of intercooperative organization. “Like the ‘I do’ of a wedding,” he writes, “the ceremony of the legal pronouncement departed from ordinary speech. Affirming the agreement out loud gave it an uncanny gravity that seemed deeply significant to the cooperator members” (368). This is to say that the task before cooperative members was whether to say “I do,” to make a public commitment to creating the conditions of intercooperative solidarity, and not to figure everything out before proceeding. The declaration was not the end of the conversation, but it was a necessary step forward in the investment toward a future of intercooperation. The process Healy (2011) describes in the Pioneer Valley is a true example of that oft-recited adage from Mondragón: “We build the road as we travel.”

The VAWC meeting also highlights a central concern for cooperative democracy: “Who can speak in the name of the cooperative?” This is a concern I encountered during my trip to the Evergreen cooperatives in Cleveland, Ohio, which I recount in a later chapter. For the VAWC, answering that question “underscored the performative dimensions of legal discourse in cooperative and intercooperative governance” and demonstrates the performative power of language (369). All that was needed at the time was the affirmation of their commitment in order to direct surplus distribution to support and expand cooperatives. By proclaiming “I do,” the VAWC members changed the very

nature of the organization, henceforth defining membership in terms of this distribution of surplus. That is, VAWC membership would be limited only to those cooperatives willing to distribute surplus to the intercooperative development fund being considered.

By determining who can speak for the cooperative, Healy argues that the VAWC also provides another reason to believe that worker cooperatives are politically progressive. That is, “a new approach to regional development that involves partnerships among cooperatives” (370). This approach can be thought of in terms of Gibson-Graham’s community economies approach,¹⁶ where economic relationships are “guided by ethical principles in a spirit of deliberation and experimentation” (370). In the very experimental decision of the VAWC to establish a capital fund (Healy recounts one member asserting that no one knew how it was going to work, but that they needed to commit to it anyway), the speaking of the law in the name of the cooperative transformed the organization.

And here we find one more democratic capacity for cooperatives: the ability for worker-owners to pronounce the laws that govern them. In turn, Healy argues, the law asserts itself despotically, enabling the intercooperative (the VAWC, in this case) to act on behalf of the those involved with it, “to do things they themselves, individually, could not do” (372). Such decisiveness was possibly because the organization’s members trusted their capability of speaking on behalf of their representative cooperatives. Pronouncing the law, then, brings to light the freedom that exists between

¹⁶ See especially Community Economies Collective (2001) and Gibson-Graham and Community Economies Collective (2017).

the organization's symbolic representation and the concrete, unfinished work of collective becoming.

3.3. Historical-Empirical Literature on Cooperatives and Social Transformation

3.3.1 Overview of Major Works

Recently there has been a growing body of literature dealing with the political, potentially radical history of worker cooperatives as opposed to looking at them as simply a different way of doing business. I present a few major sources here chronologically.

David Schweickart has been something of a thought leader in conversations surrounding economic democracy. His book *After Capitalism* (2002) outlines economic democracy in terms of worker self-management, a market for goods and services, and social control of investment. He argues that economic democracy represents a “successor-system” to the inefficient and unsustainable capitalist mode of production, making the project inherently a *reformist* one rather than a revolutionary one (he thinks, in fact, that there's no other way to read Marx himself than as a reformist), and he affirms the view of worker cooperatives as *communities of practice*. It's the “practice” part that will eventually lead us into the next system.

Richard Wolff (whose earlier work with Stephen Resnick is discussed in Chapter 1) approaches this question boldly in his aptly titled book *Democracy At Work: A Cure for Capitalism* (2012). He outlines a concrete vision for a truly democratic society, beginning with democratically empowering workers within their workplaces. If workers had the power to own, manage, and meaningfully participate in the institutions that

largely define their livelihood, it would render a society based on the capitalist mode of production obsolete.

In *Worker Cooperatives and Revolution* (2014), historian Chris Wright, like Schweickart, investigates the possibilities of “What’s next?” in light of the financial crisis of 2008 and global protests of 2011. He says that the success of such a movement will be determined by the grassroots initiative.

Peter Ranis reflects a similar sentiment toward grassroots initiatives in *Cooperatives Confront Capitalism: Challenging the Neoliberal Economy* (2016). Key to his argument is that the current success of cooperatives is revitalizing the role of labor unions as well. This question will be taken up especially with regard to the works of Sharryn Kasmir and Minsun Ji below.

3.3.2 The Myth of Mondragón

One of the most important contributions to the empirical literature on worker cooperatives is Sharryn Kasmir’s *The Myth of Mondragón: Cooperatives, Politics, and Working-Class Life in a Basque Town* (1996). In it, Kasmir draws on her eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Mondragón and surrounding Basque towns to situate the hallmark cooperatives in their social, political, and historical context from a workers’ perspective. While many scholars and activists look to cooperatives as an alternative to both capitalist and socialist organizations of work, she finds not only that cooperative workers in the Basque region are more passive than those involved in the syndicates of private firms, but that the cooperative ideology itself mitigates working-class action, works toward the reform and reshaping of the working class, and ultimately

erodes the greater pursuit of social transformation. The book is, to date, still one of the only in-depth criticisms of the Mondragón system.

Kasmir includes a wealth of literature that argues against the team concept, quality circles, and quality-of-work-life-programs as tools to expand managerial control and weaken unions by discrediting conflict. She cites Wells (1987) and Greiner (1988) to emphasize the transition of power relations to *personal* conflicts and the way workers evaluate and criticize each other's work. This is not so different from something I heard during my first few minutes at Green City Growers, when the greenhouse Harvest Manager told me, "They're [the shop floor workers] the police out there."

This concept of worker ownership itself, Kasmir argues, causes workers to identify with their company and embrace its gains and losses as their own. In this way, employee ownership takes the place of home ownership in representing a property-owning middle class in a region experiencing increasing wealth disparity and polarization. Again, my conversations at Evergreen fit this perspective, where the vast majority of conversations with worker-owners centered around the ideals and opportunity of ownership for its own sake.

The above may seem like a contingent side effect of cooperative ownership in its social context, but Kasmir insists that the Mondragón cooperatives, founded by Jesuit Father José María Arizmendiarieta in light of the Spanish civil war, were purposely created with the reformist initiative of transforming Basque society through *enterprise*, cooperative education, and the institution of middle-class values rather than class or nationalist conflict (73). This "pragmatic," "ideology-free" framework that persists in the

cooperative imagination today implies that economic justice is achieved through a form of business than through class-conscious political action.

Kasimir's main thesis is that the cooperatives, after their inception, divided the working class of Mondragón (87). They marked a transformation of the position of the citizen from that of a worker to that of a consumer. The various cooperatives in Mondragón emphasized the latter, causing cooperators to become less involved than other workers in many labor struggles and indicating the existence of a rift between themselves and the rest of the working class.

Indeed, while syndicalists organized against capitalism as a system dominated by values such as individualism, competition, and economism over humanism or solidarity, cooperators in Mondragón entirely left the labor movement after the 1962 general strike. One member of the prominent trade union ELA remarked that the syndicate "was irreparably damaged when they left," severing the collective ties that cooperators might have to labor struggles to follow (109).

The Ulgor Strike in 1974 is probably the most notable of all the successive labor struggles. Kasimir argues that one factor leading to the Ulgor Strike in 1974 was the cooperative's rapid growth and its subsequently compromised labor-management relations, which failed to include to the education or ideological training of what it means to be in a cooperative (110). At Green City Growers in Cleveland, workers read entrepreneurial and business literature, but I didn't once hear of education concerning what it *means* in a larger sense to be a cooperative. The Evergreen cooperative education struck me as a simple course in business.

More transformative than the initial strike at Ulgor, however, were the actions of the General Assembly (the cooperative governing council) following the firing of several dissenting workers. While reinstating fired workers is common practice following a strike, the General Assembly of Ulgor voted to uphold the firings, marking a lack of solidarity between cooperators, who are themselves workers, and other non-cooperative members of the working class.

This led the Basque nationalist group ETA to declare that, in the capitalist mode of production, there is no possibility for cooperation between labor and management. Cooperative worker-owners were seen as an “aristocracy within the factory” (116). This is similar to my own observations at Evergreen, where “members of the co-op” functioned like a higher, more powerful class body in the workplace.

Kasmir contrasts the role of the Workers’ Council (union syndicate) and the Social Council (cooperative governance). While the Workers’ Council is, by design, a collective body that challenges management, the cooperative Social Council is designed under the pretense that workers and management share many similar interests. The Social Council is there to defend workers when things go wrong, but the everyday practice is that of collaboration in the planning and decision-making process rather than conflict over managerial decisions.

Which is a better strategy for representing workers? Kasmir suggests considering a distinction between *rights* and *powers* (135). For instance, the Workers’ Council fights for its members to have dedicated time for syndicate matters and provides resources in the form of external lawyers, economists, and other specialists. The Social Council, by contrast, is not able to use outside resources, and its members have little time available to

dedicate to challenging controversial decisions and proposing alternatives. Cooperative workers certainly have democratic rights, but their apathy limits the effective *use* of them. This led to the conclusion that the structures of democracy needed to be changed in order for workers to be able to truly participate in their firm and the Social Council's subsequent vote to dissolve itself in protest of their limited powers to be meaningfully involved in management decisions (140).

Regarding cooperative ideology, Kasmir argues that the processes which enable dissent and reframe it as “dialogue” can create the sense that the system, rather than workers, is the causal agent. She thinks that this is part of the reason workers feel passive or apathetic (149). Interestingly, Gibson-Graham also argue for privileging the particular over the universal (as discussed in Chapter 1) and stand behind cooperatives as one way of enacting local, ethical economies. But can cooperatives really be considered democratic in such a way if it turns out that they generate passivity among workers and limit their capacity for meaningful participation?

These problems are compounded when the day-to-day practices of worker cooperatives begin resembling and reproduce the defects of the capitalist mode of production. Consumerism, education for the sake of production, the production of socially unnecessary goods, competition and economism, public stock options, contracted workers, shift schedules, and just-in-time production are only a few ways in which contemporary cooperatives behave more like multinational corporations. Kasmir quotes one worker who remarked, “Cooperatives are no different from capitalist firms. If anything, they are more sophisticated at capitalism because the workers have no protections” (189). In fact, Kasmir notes that workers at the Clima cooperative, who are

represented by a Social Council, organized in protest to a series of controversial decisions rather than taking the route of collaborative planning. If cooperative workers are once again turning to syndicalism, then the potential for worker cooperatives to enact social transformation on the whole seems more and more infeasible.

Schweickart (mentioned at the beginning of this section) is careful to note that worker cooperatives won't solve the problem of the alienation of labor. However, he still sees worker cooperatives as a gateway to a "successor system" of economic democracy. Perhaps, then, the question relevant to the project at hand becomes: *How much progress is enough to constitute "social transformation?"* Kasmir and Schweickart might at least agree that cooperatives don't solve all the discontents of capitalist society. But if they turn out to merely be more complex forms of capitalist business, without substantially transferring power to workers, are they worth pursuing in this manner at all?

3.3.3 With or Without Class?

Minsun Ji's work, like Kasmir's, investigates the role of worker cooperatives with respect to their ability to transfer political power to workers in the quest for social transformation. In her *Labor Studies Journal* paper "Revolution or Reform?" (2016) she compares case studies of union cooperatives in the United States and South Korea. Echoing the work of Kasmir nearly twenty years earlier, Ji's major finding is that the degree of class consciousness among workers shapes the nature of union-coop partnerships.

Ji cites Greenberg (1986), who originally argued that the radical potential of worker cooperatives lies in the belief that workplace democracy encourages participation in other social institutions and fosters a commitment to public interests (360). This

contradicts Kasmir's more recent ethnographic findings that cooperative practices such as shift work actually *eroded* social life (the very institutions in which class conflict is often carried out) in the Basque region — something that, following Antonio Gramsci, she identifies as hegemony (1996, 65).

Ji is careful to note that the spillover effects identified by Greenberg don't occur naturally on their own. Instead, as initially observed by Wright (2014) worker cooperatives only produce transformational practices when workers are committed to “radical ideology,” which can be both supported and undermined by collaboration with union partners (360). This is consistent with Ji's own ethnographic project, which found that taxi cooperators in Denver, Colorado, sought cooperative membership primarily for the sake of individual economic benefit (Kasmir would call it the attainment of middle-class values). Bus cooperators in Woojin, South Korea, by contrast, saw themselves as a collective body politic of workers, even to the point of disavowing the concept of “ownership” to emphasize solidarity among workers (368).

The notion that worker cooperatives lose out on their transformational potential through their lack of class-consciousness is also consistent with my experience at the Evergreen Cooperatives. There, 100% of cooperative members I interviewed referred to themselves as individual business owners rather than as collective worker-owners. That may be a good justification for why their cooperative education revolves around ideas like open-book management rather than labor movement history, as in Woojin.

The ideological differences between the two cooperatives also have direct consequences for their relationships with partner unions. Ji reports that the union partner of the Denver taxi cooperative limits its core function to professional political lobbying

surrounding specific business issues (366). In the South Korean cooperative, the main role of its union is to build solidarity with other community groups and advance the efforts of working class struggle (371). A radical workers' self-management school, which includes a cultural travel course, is just one way of accomplishing that mission.

Ji concludes by considering the trajectory and future of each cooperative. She argues that Denver's union-coop members have more of a tendency to work toward becoming owners — capitalists, in her view — while Woojin's cooperative members tend to work toward mobilization and stronger working-class solidarity. “Thus, while the union cooperative in Denver is best seen as an alternative *capitalist* institution, committed to converting workers into business owners,” she writes, “the union-coop in Korea is best seen as an alternative *labor* institution, committed to converting individual workers into a class-conscious labor movement” (371-2, emphasis hers).

Being intentional about the latter — an alternative *labor* institution rather than an alternative capitalist one — might be the key to the research question I first proposed here. It also demarcates the tension that, at least within a Marxian framework, the capitalist mode of production necessarily has with labor. Even so, is there really not, as the Basque ETA argued, *any* possibility for cooperation between labor and capital?

3.3.4 Rejoinder

What stands out to me about both Kasmir and Ji's work is that, by focusing their methods on gaining the perspective of workers, they hear many similar themes and arrive at some of the same suspicions as I did during my time at the Evergreen cooperatives in Cleveland.

Kasmir's ultimate finding is that, contrary to the scholarly narrative surrounding worker cooperatives, co-ops can actually and have historically divided working classes and diminished their potential for political action. Ji, while taking this view seriously, shows that co-ops also have the potential to *amplify*, not just denigrate, militant labor struggles.

The takeaway, it seems to me, is that the cooperative is not primary. That is, not only is the cooperative *system* not the causal agent of change (as Kasmir and Gibson-Graham argue as well), but particular cooperative entities themselves are not the determinant of the potential for social transformation. The research suggests that worker cooperatives have the chance both to bolster and to harm efforts toward radical social transformation. Which path they choose may be contingent upon the ideological framework of the workers involved. Whether there are intentional efforts toward building solidarity and carrying the sentiment of the working class, or whether the cooperative predominantly reproduces the (capitalist) values of individualism, economism, and middle-class property ownership might make all the difference.

3.4. Fieldwork at the Evergreen Cooperative Initiative in Cleveland, OH

3.4.1 Overview

Thanks to a generous grant from the University of Denver's College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, I was able to visit the Evergreen Cooperatives in Cleveland, Ohio, for about a week in March 2018.

During that time, I had conversations with dozens of co-op workers and members of the surrounding communities, focusing my interviews especially on the workers of the Green City Growers co-op and non-cooperative community members in and around the

Glenville neighborhood in East Cleveland. This was partly due to access and partly due to my own curiosity: Since Green City Growers was established much more recently than the original cooperative laundry facility, did co-op workers perceive it as being caused by the success of the cooperative ideal? Given the question of solidarity, did the cooperatives and their workers feel connected to one another? Were workers truly involved in building a movement or simply engaging in what was available to them? And how did long-time residents of the surrounding communities, who were not involved with in cooperatives, feel about them? That is, were the benefits of cooperation being extended to the community beyond simply job creation?

I want to be transparent about the challenges and limitations of my fieldwork. Due to some challenges in access, including being threatened by off-site co-op executives who told me not to return on account of bad PR (and contrary to the request of workers themselves), it is difficult in some ways to qualify my fieldwork as substantial qualitative research. The number of co-op workers I was initially set to interview, as well as the time I was given with them, was greatly reduced. In addition, my conversations with community members typically involved approaching strangers eating a meal in public or passers-by walking down the street. Thus, statistically speaking, we should be careful in considering how representative their voices can be considered of the whole.

That being said, I observed nearly unanimous beliefs and patterns of thinking both among co-op workers and local residents. Co-op members, in short, were largely concerned with individual economic benefit and did not see themselves as part of a movement for greater social transformation, while members of the surrounding

community remained suspicious and apprehensive of the cooperatives from their inception. I've chosen to recount a few key interactions below.

3.4.2 Conversations with Community

My most memorable encounters in Cleveland happened not within the cooperatives, but during conversations with ordinary people outside of them. There seemed to be a prevailing cultural narrative that Cleveland needs some help, but that previous efforts have come at the expense of community participation and self-determination. Indeed, the way citizens of some of Cleveland's lowest-income neighborhoods take care of each other is unrivaled by anywhere else I've ever been.

"If you could build anything for your community, what would it be?" I asked an Uber driver living on the east side, on the way to Evergreen Cooperative Laundry. Clinics and recreation centers, he said. He would rehab housing, too, so that people always have a safe place to go whether it's home or elsewhere.

Michael ("MP") was on his way to the store when he offered to show me around the surrounding neighborhood of Glenville. "Do you know Candy Land?" he asked, referring to the children's board game. As we walked past the house he and his girlfriend live in, just a few houses down from his mom, he pointed to the shed in his yard. In it, a whole collection of life-sized Candy Land pieces that he built and painted himself. Candy canes, the bridge, even a giant makeshift sculpture of Humpty Dumpty. He said the he constructs life-sized renditions of board games and sets them up for kids to play in — a kind of Daddy Day Care thing, he joked. I asked him why he does it. "I do it for the kids," he said more somberly than before, "Someone's gotta look after them."

MP told me that everyone in Glenville knows each other, but that didn't seem to extend to the Evergreen facility. For being in the same spot for nearly a decade — and for seeming, to an outsider at least, to be such a big deal in this community — hardly anyone had heard of it or knew anything about it.

While eating lunch at a marketplace and community hub one block away from the Laundry facility, I sat down with Vale and Marvin. Vale is building a teaching kitchen and community room in the back of the market, which will be connected to a small clinic. She hopes to teach everyone from school children to the retirement community across the street about food justice. The systemic relationship between food and justice isn't something that many people in Glenville have ever thought about. In fact, my conversation with Vale is the only time that "justice" in any context ever came up during my trip.

I asked Vale what her community needed the most: "black-owned businesses."

Marvin, born less than a mile from where we sat, spent most of his career as a police officer and now works for the sheriff's office. He's also spent most of his life living in or near Glenville. He thinks that people need jobs so that they can buy more things locally, and while he liked the idea of worker cooperatives -- "if you own it, you're gonna make more money," he said -- he had no idea that Evergreen existed. "We didn't know about it, and we're right here."

I explained the story of Evergreen and how the Laundry is also connected to Green City Growers, a large and much more recent greenhouse space a few miles away. "Green City Growers is *all white*," Vale said. "They're the ones who came in overnight and put themselves here." Vale thinks that their real motivation is to take

advantage of the marijuana legalization looming in Ohio's future. As I talked to more people in east Cleveland about the new greenhouses, that suspicion seemed to be unanimous.

When I told them that Evergreen, whose first site was the Laundry, was initially funded by the city and the Cleveland Foundation, among others, Marvin was quick to remind me that "the Cleveland Foundation ain't black, that's for sure."

"They did that real quiet," Vale added.

"They didn't want us to know," Marvin confirmed.

3.4.3 Engagement with Evergreen

The Laundry facility exists at the front of where a school used to be. I walked in and met Allen, the general manager for six years. In a place ran mostly by workers of color, many of them women, hired intentionally from the surrounding neighborhoods, I didn't expect the "boss," per se, to be a white male sequestered in his own office. I only had a minute to introduce myself before he asked me to stop by the next day and got up to leave. "I don't hear the washing machine running, and it's costing me."

When I first came to Green City Growers, I hadn't set up any formal meetings or interviews. I walked in and was introduced to Jason, the "business guy" and manager on site. "You really feel the ownership out on the floor," is one of the first things he told me. His explanation revolved around the idea of checks and balances. Referring especially to the worker-owners, who must work continuously for a year and be voted in by the rest of the co-op members, Jason said that "they become the police out there." As a manager, he doesn't have to worry that the work is getting done. He knows that the owners of the co-op will exert their own pressure on new workers who don't yet hold ownership in the

company. His idea of "feeling the ownership" seemed a lot more like efficient discipline to me.

Jason and I enjoyed conversation about his life and upbringing, work, and what being in a cooperative meant to him. He had grown up on the west side of Cleveland in a similarly struggling neighborhood. For Jason, cooperation isn't just a better way of doing business; it's essential. "That's the only thing that's going to save us," he said with conviction, "togetherness."

This shared belief is also what makes Green City Growers, and cooperatives in general, special. Jason loves the generally positive culture of his workplace. "We spend half our lives here," he said, "I can't work in a [negative] place like that." The co-op recently started creating workshops based on The Great Game of Business, which strives to create an open-book management culture where employees think like owners (in this case, of course, employees largely are the owners).

A lot of cooperative commentators have pointed to the additional responsibility of being an owner rather than simply a worker. In Jason's case, this seemed absolutely true. The uncertain future of the cooperative is something he takes with him when he leaves work for the day. "It keeps you up at night," he told me. "A lot of people's livelihoods depend on the success of this business."

The "everyone's tight" mentality came through especially in my conversation with Chris, who had been scheduled for a 50-cent raise months ago but has yet to receive it. He's about to become, with the democratic blessing of more senior worker-owners, a member of the cooperative. He also currently has one of the toughest jobs, dealing with aphids in his face (literally) all day.

"I'm trying to be a team player right now," Chris said concerning the delay in his raise. When I asked what he's looking forward to as a soon-to-be worker-owner, he chuckled. "I just got bills to pay," he said, "I gotta take care of myself."

One of the biggest questions I have had throughout this entire project is whether cooperative workers and worker-owners feel like they're part of a broader social movement or whether they experience work in the cooperative as just another job. Chris gave me an answer before I could even ask the question. "I care about my position. I come in and do what I gotta do," he said. "It pays the bills. It's just a job, you know?"

While Chris isn't the only one who feels that way, the feeling isn't unanimous. Veronica was laid off from her old job when the company folded -- something so many of us from the Rustbelt have experienced in our lifetimes. Her friend told her about Green City Growers, and she's been with them nearly since their inception five years ago. She's a proud member of the co-op.

Being part of a co-op has its advantages, she says. It's different than any other job she's heard of. Co-op membership means that you gain access to the Cleveland Housing Network, a nonprofit that provides affordable short-term mortgage options. The worker co-op helps you be an owner in a variety of ways.

When asked if it was just a job or something else, Veronica said she felt like she's part of something else. "Here I feel more relaxed, like a family," she said. She also acknowledged the things Green City Growers is doing all over the community. They donate produce to the local homeless shelter and hire from the immediately surrounding area, among other things. However, she doesn't think that too many people feel the same

way that she does. For a lot of workers, she says, the cooperative is their first job, or "they don't understand the meaning."

For someone like Kendall, working at Green City Growers is the first job he's had in a while. It's a learning experience more than anything: "a wake up call," he calls it. He says that being in a cooperative is the last thing he expected, and he highlights its value of teaching people "something different." "I feel like I'm part of something bigger, so I perform like I'm part of something bigger," he says.

The mentality that fuels Jason can also be seen in Kendall. He feels that a lot of people depend on him, and that everyone in the cooperative depends on each other, to keep the business afloat. If not, they'll be back on the streets. "This is it for a lot of people."

My conversation with Keisha was the last I had at Green City Growers, and it nicely wrapped up and reflected the dominant feelings that I had been hearing during my time there.

Keisha has been with the cooperative for six years and is a supervisor in the basil unit. For her, the number-one advantage of being in a cooperative is simply being able to say that you're an owner. She explained to me more about how co-op membership gives worker-owners access to the Cleveland Housing Network, LegalShield, Aflac, and more. She also explained that, once voted in, new worker-owners generally reserve \$40 per paycheck until they hit \$3,000. This money goes toward things like capital investment. If a worker-owner decides to leave for any reason, they get that money back like a security deposit.

Keisha wouldn't say that being in a cooperative empowers you to do something you couldn't do before. It's just exciting to be part of the ownership. "You feel good about yourself individually," she said, as many others had as well. She said that "the mind frame is totally different" in a cooperative. In order to feel personally fulfilled when you come to work, "you have to want to come to work," and that's something she hadn't experienced until she started working at Green City.

"What is it about ownership that's so important to you?" I asked.

"I've never owned anything," she answered. "I can pat myself on the back."

That feeling of personal achievement came through again when I asked what she would do if she could only change one thing about the cooperative. She thinks that workers need to be rewarded more. Even something like a perfect attendance certificate, a tangible acknowledgment that she could hang up on her wall at home, would mean the world to her. Then she could inspire her own kids, saying "Look how hard I worked. You can, too."

So does Keisha feel like part of a movement? "Not yet," she said. She does think that the greenhouse is good for the surrounding community — being felon-friendly is one way the cooperative extends economic opportunity in a way that other businesses wouldn't — but she believes that Evergreen needs to "find another way to advertise." Open positions and the general experience of a cooperative mostly proliferate through word-of-mouth, so most people don't know about it.

3.4.4 Initial Impressions

These were thoughts I didn't expect to hear, and they're certainly not ones that I had read about anywhere before. Local and national media, including the academic

literature, looks to cooperatives as inclusive and equitable alternatives to business-as-usual. They are supposed to be rooted in and representative of the communities that they serve.

I'm not arguing here that they aren't so, but I wonder how well Evergreen is bringing that vision to life considering such deep suspicion of the Growers, general ignorance of the Laundry, and a funding and management base that seems to be top-down at the expense of actual community desires.

So many things about this Evergreen site still seem to revolve around money and economic advantage, with no mention of greater systemic struggle. I came at a time of year when aphids, small parasitic insects, were wreaking a bit of havoc on new lettuce and basil plants. Several people expressed concern for the aphids not only as being harmful to the plants and overall business revenue, but as being threats to individual profit. A poster on the wall boasted "94 days without a lost time incident" (perhaps turning safety into a profit-concern). The value many found in the mandatory financial literacy course was "how everything impacts your bottom dollar." And while many workers agree with Jason that the collective mentality of Green City Growers makes it special, the fact that the business still hasn't turned a profit means that "everyone's tight."

My plans to talk to workers at the Laundry were cut short as well. Evergreen's Executive VP's off-site concern was still, as he had told me in our communication before, whether to "invest in production" or "invest in the [cooperative] ecosystem." Any time spent talking to me was time not spent making money in production.

Allen, who manages the Laundry facility, had told me that some people take words from interviews and "put a negative spin on them," so perhaps it was a move to

tightly control the business's PR. Whatever it was, the "higher-ups" who worked miles away in an office downtown were intent on making sure that I didn't have access to any part of the cooperatives or their workers, rather ironically silencing already-marginalized voices to someone who just wanted to listen.

Regarding my interviews, the first thing to note is that people, in general, feel good about working in a cooperative. If nothing else, it's different than what they have done before, and typically to great benefit. These benefits, however, are mostly perceived as individual benefits relating to workplace culture and individual accomplishment. Those who do emphasize a feeling of collectivity or togetherness still stop short of feeling rooted in a broader sense of place — namely, the immediately surrounding neighborhood — and never consider themselves as part of a social movement or struggle against systemic oppression or even the status quo.

Second, and in the same vein, Evergreen, while radical in theory, seems in practice to derive its "unique value proposition" from profit sharing by way of collective ownership. The more social programs like the financial literacy course, for example, certainly set it apart from traditional production-based jobs where you clock in, work, and clock out, but they're not enough to make it a radically different kind of workplace. Being a cooperative with the potential for social transformation requires more than profit sharing and open-book management.

Third, nothing during my time at Evergreen made me feel that the cooperative was in any way radically democratic. I will admit that my exposure to the cooperative decision-making process was limited to what workers told me in conversation, but none of the workers really talked about having input in any decisions other than voting newer

members into the co-op. Additionally, my encounter with the Executive VP gave me the perception that off-site executives still had a lot of power and control over the day-to-day operations, undermining the feeling that most writers, reporters, and academics have about economic democracy. I recognize, of course, that this personal interaction both motivates a large personal bias and, at the time of my trip, prevented me from possibly seeing Evergreen's democratic ideals in action.

While, recalling my conversation with Vale and Marvin, some people have accused Evergreen of being too top-down, Jason assured me that all the evolution post-launch has taken place within his own building. In other words, all of Green City Growers' operations are run by them. "Evergreen [the larger organization] doesn't even know that we have the aphid problem, or that we're throwing away lettuce," he told me.

That made me curious about the relation between all the different branches of Evergreen. The organization's biggest inspiration is the Mondragón cooperative network in the Basque region of Spain, which are said to thrive on the relationships among its 200+ cooperatives and throughout all levels of its network. When I asked Jason if the greenhouse ever talked to the Laundry (which he calls "the other Evergreen") or any other organizational branch (e.g. the solar cooperative, the nonprofit affiliate, Evergreen Business Services), he simply responded, "Minimally." They can look to each other for consultation, but, for the most part, Green City Growers is an independent business not really connected to the others.

What I have taken away from the visit to Cleveland so far, as I stated at the beginning of this chapter, is the role of narrative. Evergreen objectively has a radical organizational structure, at least in terms of the United States context. It has proven itself

to be a valuable tool for community economic development and even community wealth building. However, it appears to lack the elements of solidarity and class consciousness needed to enact social transformation toward a radically new kind of economic future, which is really what I am the most concerned with.

Chapter 4: Empirical Literature

4.1. Introduction

This chapter provides an empirical examination of worker cooperatives. It first considers the idea and *ideal* of economic cooperation and its role as the foundation for the so-called “solidarity economy,” situating worker cooperatives further in the context of a global movement. Second, it chronicles the emergence of worker cooperatives as well as their impact and prevalence today. Third, this chapter outlines the “anchor institution” model, for which the Evergreen Cooperatives are best known in the United States, and how transitions can be an effective strategy for converting existing capitalist firms into cooperatives. Finally, the chapter concludes by briefly discussing the major literature related to the history of cooperatives (past and present) in terms of social transformation.

4.2. Economic Cooperation and the Solidarity Economy

Worker cooperatives exist as one form of cooperative among many others, including producer cooperatives (*e.g.* coffee farms), consumer cooperatives (*e.g.* co-op grocery stores), service cooperatives (*e.g.* childcare), and housing cooperatives (*e.g.* joint ownership). While worker cooperatives are the particular focus of this thesis, cooperatives of all sorts have been praised and promoted in virtue of their social, political, and economic benefits. Indeed, the United Nations even declared 2012 the International Year of Cooperatives with the theme “Cooperative Enterprises Build a

Better World,” the objectives of which were to increase awareness and promote growth (United Nations).

Despite their name, established cooperatives are not the only way to engage in a larger set of activities that can be called economic cooperation. Many emerging local development strategies, often referred to as “community wealth building,” model themselves on a foundation of cooperation over competition. These include entities such as anchor institutions (*e.g.* hospitals and universities), community development corporations or “CDC’s,” community land trusts, public banks, and even member-owned credit unions. In all of these examples, cooperation among individual community members as well as local businesses motivates a system of equality and inclusion.

Another way of thinking about economic cooperation might be in terms of the *solidarity economy*. The solidarity economy seeks to connect cooperative practices invisible in the mainstream economy and bring them to light, recognizing them “as pieces of the same transformational project” (Kawano 2010, 3). This project is one of shifting our entire economic framework toward the service of society, rather than the other way around. While the focus here is on cooperative enterprises, the solidarity economy is made up of activities including fair trade, unpaid domestic care work and proximity services, microfinance and social currencies, and others.

When inquiring about its potential for radical change, it is worth noting that the movement is gaining traction — quickly. The U.S. Solidarity Network notes that, in the past 25 years, the United States has seen the growth of 550 Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFI’s) and 10,000 credit unions, together controlling over \$600 billion in assets. 30,000 cooperative institutions generate more than \$500 billion in

revenue and \$25 billion in wages. From telephone and electric to housing and childcare, cooperatives in the United States serve 43% of the nation's population (Kawano). In addition, conscious consumption, social justice movements, and ethical ways of being in community have become a focus of popular thought.

Laville (2009) notes that many worker cooperatives in particular rose out of the post-industrial service sector as a way of eschewing the pursuit of an alternative economic system in order to fight instead for self-management in the workplace. In 1985 in the UK alone, worker-owned intellectual and cultural service cooperatives accounted for 45% of cooperatives and 32% of jobs in the service sector. Similar traction took hold throughout much of Europe and Canada. However, Laville argues that these anticipations of an alternative economy either quickly abandoned economic experiments or turned toward “an innovatory business project,” thus prefiguring company rehabilitation processes seen throughout the 1970s and 80s (4). What began as utopian visions directed toward an alternative economy eventually gave way to a realism regarding job creation and social cohesion.

While this transition might indicate a sort of “business unionism” noted by Ji (above), cooperatives have enjoyed success in other ways despite it. Bhuyan et al (1998) note that, among 162 non-agricultural cooperatives surveyed, 44% of respondents said they could not have opened a traditional business. In this case, the nature of the cooperative structure itself increased access to business opportunities. In fact, research on the economic impact of cooperatives in the United States found that cooperatives have created over 2.1 million jobs (Deller et al 2009) and have a 90% operating rate after 5 years of business — versus 3-5% of traditional businesses (Williams 2007). The largest

worker cooperative in the United States alone provides jobs for 1,600 low-income women of color in the South Bronx and has set the standard for wages, benefits, training, leadership development, and workplace democracy in an industry otherwise known for high turnover and poor working conditions (USSEN).

Cooperatives are not just more effective forms of business within themselves; they also deliver benefits to the communities around them. Zeuli et al (2003) found that, since most cooperatives are owned and managed by local residents, they are more likely to promote growth and stay in their community. As community-based business anchors, cooperatives stabilize communities by distributing, recycling, and multiplying capital and expertise (Gordon Nembhard 2012). As an economic empowerment strategy, cooperatives have the potential to significantly increase income and provide access to quality goods and services. WAGES in Oakland, CA, found that Latina worker-owner's increased their median income from \$24,000 to \$40,000, which is \$2,000 above the national average for Latinx workers (WAGES).

4.3. Women in the Solidarity Economy

Women, both in and outside of the normally-defined workforce, bear much of the burden of economic systems based on inequality. From rigid gender roles encouraging unpaid domestic labor to unequal pay in male-dominated workplaces, women often face disadvantaged positions of power and economic opportunity. And despite making up most of the social and solidarity economy — 66% in Europe, 70% in Canada, and 80% in Africa, according to Women of the World (2012) — women are still seen as peripheral to the economy as whole. Since gender equality is integral to sustainable human

development, any movement toward social transformation should be evaluated strongly in light of the opportunities and freedoms women possess.

It would be easy to assume that, given their egalitarian nature, worker cooperatives create economic spaces in which women can thrive just as well as men. Indeed, several scholars have noted the congruency between the ideals of feminist economics and those of worker cooperatives. Matthaai (2009) argues that worker cooperatives in the solidarity economy challenge us to rethink what it means to be “economic man,” while Gunn (1984) notes more generally that both feminism and the cooperative movement strive to reduce social inequalities in all its forms.

These suspicions and assumptions are not entirely unfounded. The United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (2014), for example, supports employment in the social and solidarity economy particularly for “poor women facing labour [*sic*] market discrimination and work-family conflict” (10). Because of their flexibility, businesses in this sector are more likely to be accommodating in terms of time management and opportunities for paid work alongside the reality of unpaid care work. Additionally, the cooperative economy’s emphasis on care work and the notion of care itself increases access to services that improve women’s wellbeing and create opportunities for greater participation in the labor force.

Nevertheless, emerging empirical research should remind us to be wary of worker cooperatives as a silver-bullet solution to solving societal inequalities. Theis and Ketilson (1994) were some of the first scholars to find that, even in worker cooperatives, women around the globe are underrepresented in co-op membership, often hold a lower status, and participate less in decision-making processes. More recently, Miller (2012)

found that, particularly in the United States, women faced additional barriers with respect to tenure, hours worked, income, and occupational segregation. While further research is needed both in the American and international contexts, Miller (2012) concludes that worker cooperatives need to invest in gender-aware programming in order to reach their full potential for gender equality.

4.4. Cooperatives and the Environment

As greater public attention is drawn to the severity of climate change, business firms, I suspect, will have no choice but to contend with the demand for sustainable development and practices. Nadeau (2012) believes that cooperative firms can play a lead role in mitigating the negative consequences of global warming even in the United States, which he says has been remarkably slow to develop policies concerning both the status of cooperatives and the environment. He considers the rapid growth of cooperatives as an organizing activity, especially in the rural energy and farming sectors, to argue that their grass-roots nature is perfectly situated for the shift to renewable energy and energy efficiency.

Wolff (2012) agrees that the nature of worker cooperatives almost automatically implies a concern for environmental sustainability. Private and state capitalist enterprises, he argues, see environmental concern as an unaffordable luxury. There is less incentive for executives to care about the local environment as they often work at an off-site location and live in places less vulnerable to the effects of pollution, for example. On the contrary, because cooperative workers tend to “live, play, and raise families in and around their sites of work,” the costs and consequences of environmental degradation are

of immediate importance to them (134). For Wolff (2012), the incentive structure of cooperative firms makes all the difference.

This position is not far from Schweickart (2002), mentioned above, who identifies overdevelopment and poverty as the two causal factors undermining environmental security. He argues that it is logically impossible to resolve these basic tenets under an economic system, like capitalist production, that is driven by growth, expansion, and unrestrained mobility. Capital necessitates growth for stability, whereas economic democracy is less concerned with the gains of market seizure. If cooperatives can utilize new technologies to increase leisure or the quality of work, then Schweickart (2002) claims that that is good enough for many of them.

Similarly, Booth (1995) also remarks that the conventional capitalist corporation, due in large part to its growth imperative and subsequent resource exploitation, may not be the most feasible form of business organization in terms of environmental sustainability. Producer cooperatives are attractive alternatives, he argues, as the empirical research suggests that they use natural resources more efficiently and in alignment with community interests rather than an expansionary imperative. They accomplish this, of course, through democratic participation and the appropriation of surplus earnings. Since the goal for many cooperatives is maximizing income per worker, contrary to typical corporations which maximize shareholder profits, they face stronger incentives to reduce non-labor costs, including energy and materials, as opposed to the cost of labor itself. In other words, labor (which is, of course, the workers) in a worker-managed cooperative is not seen as an expendable cost of production. And while

capitalist firms also possess the incentive to minimize non-labor costs, pay cuts and sweeping layoffs are often the dominant “solution.”

The caveat, Booth (1995) finds, is that cooperatives may actually be *more* growth oriented than capitalist corporations in economies where there exists substantial unemployment. This may be due, in my interpretation, to an increased pressure to seize market share, expand production facilities, and ultimately create new job opportunities for those actively seeking them. That being said, taking even gradual steps to employee self-management can naturally help efforts for resource conservation and ecological preservation.

Restakis (2010) notes that cooperation has served as a means of managing resources since the emergency of agriculture thousands of years ago. Nevertheless, he questions whether such cooperation can be effective in the context of resource depletion and environmental degradation on a global scale. “Globalization changes everything,” he says, highlighting the fact that greenhouse gases generated in one locale produces global warming everywhere, or that oversight in food production in one country can infect people across the globe (260).

In a similar vein to Schweickart (2002), Nadeau (2012), Wolff (2012), and others, Restakis (2010) blames a structural conflict between short-term corporate interests and sustainable cooperative solutions. He argues that any change to the current climate situation must include a political solution that advances social interests, like the survival of the human species, over economic interests. This necessitates democracy in the structures that drive economies, which is, of course, a way of *humanizing* the economy.

4.5. Transitions and Anchor Institutions: Pathways to Cooperation

Transitioning an existing business into a worker-owned enterprise is one of the more effective ways of proliferating cooperatives. In addition to being a community wealth building strategy, transitions to employee ownership can also function as a job retention (and thus, economic empowerment) strategy. Given the sheer number of “Baby Boomer” business owners about to retire, 2-4 million new worker-owned businesses could be created in the United States by the end of this decade by simply enabling the sale of businesses to their employees (Alperovitz 2013). As an example, the Ohio Employee Ownership Center reports that, after nearly 100 successful transitions, they have created more than 15,000 employee-owners and generated an average of \$40,000 *per employee* (Ohio Employee Ownership Center).

Leveraging anchor institutions has become a popular approach not just for sustaining cooperatives but for building community wealth more generally, due in large part to the Evergreen Cooperatives and Greater University Circle Initiative in Cleveland. Anchor institutions, put rather simply, are institutions (often public or nonprofit) that tend to not move location. They also tend to be more sizeable institutions such as universities and hospitals. Wright et al. (2016) note that the number of employees who work for Cleveland Clinic, University Hospitals, and Case Western Reserve University in the University Circle neighborhood alone number greater than 33,500. Additionally, of the Greater University Circle neighborhoods’ 60,000 combined residents, 24% were actively seeking employment as of 2013. By sheer size alone, utilizing anchor institutions in innovative ways can provide jobs and increase the economic wellbeing of local citizens.

Anchor institutions can be high-impact drivers of economic empowerment especially for low-income communities of color. Schildt and Rubin (2015) call equity and inclusion a moral *and* economic imperative, citing research showing that regions which extend greater economic opportunities to people of color have lower income inequality and experience longer growth periods and shorter downturns. Anchor institutions are prime for extending economic inclusion in virtue of their place-based nature, large and growing size, social mission, tendency to drive regional innovation, stable revenue streams less susceptible to fluctuation, and ability to focus urban development and anti-displacement efforts.

The “Cleveland Model” is one of the best examples of how a community is leveraging anchor institutions for economic inclusion and growth. In the Greater University Circle area, local universities and hospitals purchase goods and services from worker cooperatives (in this case, the Evergreen Cooperatives) who employ residents of the surrounding community. These institutions also make investments of patient capital in a non-profit corporation which finances and assists the cooperatives. The municipal government plays in role in partnering on economic development with the non-profit corporation, thus helping spur the development of the cooperative ecosystem as a whole. Each step helps to build equity and resilience in the local economy.

4.5. Major Historical Literature

While Schweickart (mentioned in the previous chapter) looks to the future for the possibility of economic democracy, John Curl argues that cooperatives of various forms have actually been a significant part of the American heritage from the start in *For All the People: Uncovering the Hidden History of Cooperation, Cooperative Movements, and*

Communalism in America (2009). For Curl, this sheds light on a multigenerational struggle of the American working class for social justice in the face of capitalism, competition, and wage-slavery. As for how cooperatives might enact substantial social transformation? Curl says national laws and regulations need to change.

John Restakis also looks to the past and present to show how much cooperatives are already thriving in *Humanizing the Economy: Co-Operatives in the Age of Capital* (2010). The book provides a wealth of case studies to demonstrate not only that economies emphasizing shared human values instead of profit and individualism are possible, but that they are, in many places around the world, already underway. To fight the ideology of corporate capitalism, Restakis argues, we need to incorporate cooperation and democracy into our economic thinking.

On the question of whether worker cooperatives really do have radical potential to fight capitalist ideology, Jessica Gordon-Nembhard (2012) suggests that the African-American heritage should be the first place we look. In *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice*, she argues that African-Americans throughout entire generations have utilized cooperatives to encourage civic engagement and address socio-economic issues like market failure, asymmetric information, distrust of opportunism, excessive market power, and barriers to entry (11). Not only does the very existence of Black-owned cooperatives stand in the face of economic injustice, oppression, and exploitation inherent in capitalist society, but, as Gordon-Nembhard notes, cooperatives can be and have been used extensively by marginalized populations to develop social capital and economic independence (24).

Finally, all eyes are on Cooperation Jackson, an extension of Mississippi's renowned "Jackson-Kush" plan. The cooperative is notable for its intention of radical transformation in the United States and solidarity with other movements internationally. The narrative of the cooperative is heavily rooted in Pan-Africanism, which I believe is integral to its success. Even the title of their first major publication, *Jackson Rising: The Struggle for Economic Democracy and Black Self-Determination in Jackson, Mississippi* highlights political struggle as the core of the project (Akuno and Nangwaya, 2017).

These authors all believe, to varying degrees, that economic democracy and worker cooperatives in particular have a role to play in a more equitable economic system. But what about their potential to enact social transformation on the whole? Can cooperatives truly represent a pathway to alternative economic futures, like Schweickart and Restakis suggest, or are they simply one part of a much larger project?

Chapter 5: Analysis and Recommendations for Policy

5.1. Rejoinder of Theory to Observation

I have chosen to analyze the existing literature and my own research findings through the theoretical lens of a distinctly anti-essentialist Marxism. The relationship between theory and empirical observation always entails confronting the question of whether the specified theory reduces the complexity of the data or rather expands on something that initially looks simple. It is my suspicion that anti-essentialist theory of any kind, and especially an anti-essentialist Marxism, does the latter.

The theoretical framework of this project gives us a way of teasing out complexity and nuance that might otherwise be hidden from our analyses. For instance, how are we to make sense of the class position of a cooperative worker-owner in Glenville, Cleveland? Anti-essentialist Marxism embraces the coexistence, even when contradictory, of being both a worker and an owner and the societal roles and responsibilities that come with them. It also emphasizes (or perhaps *re-emphasizes*, against the dominant theoretical narrative) that change happens at the level of the particular — that is, the local — and gives us more robust criteria for thinking about the conditions for class justice.

However, my experiences in Cleveland, along with some of the existing theoretical and empirical research, gives me the impression that the Evergreen

Cooperatives are missing a piece of the “social transformation” puzzle. While worker cooperatives are often presented as (and I think they often are) pathways to more just economic futures, it was difficult for me to view the day-to-day practices of the Evergreen Cooperatives as more than business-as-usual. The cooperative model was seen by nearly every worker and worker-owner I interviewed as a way to maximize individual opportunity rather than as a vehicle for radical social change.

This suspicion most closely resembles the findings of Minsun Ji (explicated in Chapter 3), who observed that cooperatives in the United States tend toward a sort of pragmatic and non-ideological “business unionism” that promotes individual economic opportunity. By contrast, worker cooperatives in South Korea use the model as a platform for politically (read: *very* ideologically) organizing workers in class struggle. During my fieldwork in Cleveland, worker-owners, who are the sole bearers of the title “members of the co-op,” took pride in the fact of ownership rather than seeing themselves as contributing to a vision of an alternative economy.

While some scholars and activists might object that these cooperatives do not represent the whole in regards to their mission, practices, or otherwise, Sharryn Kasmir makes the case that the entire historical purpose of worker cooperatives, beginning with Father José María Arizmendiarietta in the Basque region of Spain, was to instill middle-class values in order to put an end to class conflict entirely (also explicated in Chapter 3). So are the Evergreen Cooperatives, which emphasize middle-class values at the peril of losing the potential for radical social transformation, successful as a worker cooperative *qua* their original intent? That depends on who you think paints a more accurate picture of what cooperatives are intended to do. Certainly, as noted throughout the chapters

above, worker cooperatives have been used for *both* working class struggle and the reinforcement of middle-class values.

This is where the theoretical lens of anti-essentialist Marxism can help us view projects like these in a more robust light by drawing complexity — and possibility — from the surface of their experience. As Gibson-Graham (2003b) argue, economic experimentation has been stifled by a lack of theories emphasizing economic *difference* which could provide a basis for creating and implementing alternative economic practices. When we view the Evergreen Cooperatives in light of difference, rather than through the rigid structural accounts of orthodox Marxism, we can start to see decisions being carried out through a communal class process.

Similarly, a substantial respect for difference and otherness in the economy might undermine the capitalocentric imaginary, as Gibson-Graham argue elsewhere (2003a), and subsequently expand the possibilities we are able to envision for the future. Instead of working to overthrow a totalizing and hegemonic Capitalism, an “ethics of the local,” perhaps even like the one found in Evergreen, might help us simply move beyond it by collectively choosing a different future. Anti-essentialist theory helps us see that the possibility of social transformation, then, relies on our capacity to *choose* in domains where choice has otherwise been precluded.

5.2. Some Policy Recommendations

It is somewhat difficult to provide government policy recommendations in support of working class struggle (perhaps this reflects my distinctly American perspective). It is hard to say how the State, especially in the U.S., might support radical social projects of any kind or magnitude. Part of what drew me to the idea of

cooperatives in the first place was their link to the struggle for self-determination, especially in marginalized communities (*i.e.* economically disadvantaged people of color). Cooperation represents how we can take matters into our own hands instead of waiting on the initiatives of government (welfare or otherwise) or philanthropy.

That being said, there are ways that governments municipal and otherwise can support cooperative development efforts, and the social and solidarity economy more generally, for other economic and social reasons. In short, worker cooperatives often offer jobs with greater benefits and pay than corporate positions, with better working conditions and higher job security. Governments may also be interested in proliferating cooperatives in the interest of climate sustainability and access to higher-quality resources. For more, see the empirical literature explicated in Chapter 4 above.

Galera and Salvatori (2015) have closely examined social enterprises in different phases of maturity, particularly in Europe. During the embryonic phase, which includes those located in post-Soviet countries, the authors claim that the quality of policy measures, development programs, and institutional reforms is “extremely low” (8). However, most notably in Ukraine, bottom-up initiatives, especially in relation to social provisioning, highlight the potential for the construction of local welfare policies.

In countries with emerging social sectors, such as Germany and Austria, social enterprises are mostly present in non-welfare sectors, including renewable energy production. In Croatia specifically, national policies promote visibility, provide support services, and support research into social networks more generally.

Scandinavian countries like Sweden represent social enterprises undergoing progressive consolidation or institutionalization. There, interventions in child welfare

and care for the differently abled have spurred workforce integration and increased opportunities for meaningful employment. The authors note an “especially favorable support system” by way of access to loans (10). In addition, the unique “choice system” within the range of health and social services gives cooperatives and social enterprises a greater chance to compete in the marketplace.

Finally, social enterprises in countries such as Italy, France, Belgium, and the United Kingdom have been fully institutionalized due to effective social movements and access to external support. Galera and Salvatori (2015) report that social enterprises in these countries have been shifting recently to other areas of community interest, including social housing, renewable energy, cultural enrichment, and recreational services. In the UK, government support has aimed to remove barriers, consolidate multi-sector relations, and enhance their capacity to attract additional resources. This relies largely on the purchasing power of the *public* sector, analogous to the anchor institution model described in Chapter 4.

The authors conclude that, in each stage of development, networks of social enterprises in Europe have proliferated at a faster rate when established from the top-down as opposed to resulting from grassroots social movements. While this does not give conclusive insight into state-sponsored support for social transformation, it does show that cooperatives and other social enterprises thrive when provided with an ecosystem of financial and technical support across an array of economic sectors.

Outside of Europe, Lee (2020) also examines the efficacy of top-down measures to support social enterprises. She notes that researchers and policymakers have become interested in the social and solidarity economy due to its potential to alleviate challenges

including poverty, inequality, and climate change, among others. She recounts the case of South Korea, which was also a notable area for Minsun Ji's (2016) findings outlined above. There, a decade of governmental support has rapidly proliferated the existence of social enterprises, including worker cooperatives. The result has been an improved outlook for achieving many of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This top-down, state-sponsored approach is different than the typical European example, and it actually more closely resembles the project of the Evergreen Cooperatives in the United States. In the circular economy and urban agriculture sectors of the Korean economy, the greatest successes have been job creation and poverty alleviation, especially for vulnerable populations. The number of social enterprises involved in the environmental sector is still low but gradually increasing, which is promising for Korea's nationwide goal to reduce carbon emissions. Plus, it is likely that the more data that is tracked and made available relating to complementary effects, the greater the case for sponsoring cooperative development will be.

Lee (2020) admits that other sectors of the economy require more research before drawing conclusions, but much of the Korean solidarity economy's current success might be owed to having strong missions coupled with mission-aligned practices — confirming Ji's (2016) findings and confirming my own suspicions about the central role of cooperative ideology. She emphasizes the importance of regional contexts as well as democratic collaboration among local governments, academia, and the private sector. Encompassing the full spectrum of cooperative activities, from social services and education to health and renewable energy, should be a central task for empirical research

into this topic going forward. Doing so will help policymakers understand which measures are best to support and how.

An obvious way that governments can support the creation and proliferation of cooperatives is through municipal funding. In New York City, for example, the municipal government offered over \$1 million in funding to help neighborhood organizations scale up their efforts to develop worker cooperatives, in addition to updating economic development assistance materials to include resources and information about worker cooperatives (Pleasant 2014). However, in light of this project, it is important to recall a caveat mentioned in Chapter 3. While the city of Cleveland was instrumental in providing early-stage funding for the Evergreen Cooperatives, several members of the local community resented it for not being a truly community-driven initiative. To make matters worse, the leaders put in place were mostly white men — not representative of the communities they were intending to serve.

As discussed in Chapter 4, supporting transitions of existing businesses and leveraging anchor institutions are two of the most powerful ways of proliferating cooperatives. To this end, creating and supporting employee ownership technical assistance centers, much like the Ohio Employee Ownership Center or the Rocky Mountain Employee Ownership Center in Colorado, can raise awareness and ensure the success of these operations. The Democracy Collaborative (2014) recommends State support in the form of linked deposit programs to reduce the costs of financing employee ownership and directly supporting worker cooperatives as an economic development strategy, which has hitherto been led primarily by private nonprofit organizations. Cities

can also work with anchor institutions to connect public health to community wealth via a Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) mandated by the Affordable Care Act.

Anchor institutions can pursue some of their own strategies independent of public policy. These include investing in sustainable neighborhood development such as employer-assisted housing, transit-oriented infrastructure, and business support services for local businesses. Universities and hospitals in particular can be major hubs for talent and intellectual property, making it imperative for them to provide equal access and opportunity for low-income people of color. Since anchor institutions are often one of the largest employers in a city, and since they make major investments into construction and development, creating pathways to these jobs through internal hiring provisions or partnerships with others in the social sector can create job and career advancement opportunities for those facing barriers to employment.

In South America, Brazil and Venezuela are examples of governments that have supported the creation and development of worker cooperatives. Ranis (2016) notes that Venezuela even established a Ministry of the People's Economy, now the Ministry of Communal Economy. This led to state-owned banks investing over \$1 billion in cooperatives between 2003 and 2008 alone. In 2003, Brazil also established a National Secretariat of the Solidarity Economy. According to Wright (2014), cooperatives receive support from the ministries of Agriculture and Social Development, and the national government funds university programs that are similar to start-up incubators in the U.S. but for cooperatives and social enterprises.

An alternative political philosophy to State intervention would include approaches like horizontalist and autonomist movements. In Argentina after the 2001 financial crisis,

“horizontalism” became a way of describing how people were building relationships based in equality and autonomy, with no one having power over anyone else. It can equally be used to describe more recent movements in Spain, Greece, and even in the U.S. with the Occupy Wall Street movement. Sitrin (2014) calls horizontalism a process of creating new forms of relating rather than a political program, making it the basis for contingency and direct democracy.

Similarly, autonomism, which has been a dominant post-Marxist school of thought especially in Italy, eschews political programs in favor of direct democracy and self-organization. Autonomism is especially suited to the project of worker cooperatives as it emphasizes the radical potential of everyday working-class praxis. This might be thought of, in many ways, as another formulation of Gibson-Graham’s urge to recognize local economies as agents of transformative change. Class struggle might instead refer not to vanguardist or State-supported resistance to the totalizing economy system of Capitalism, but to formulating new ways of being together in local communities — something worker cooperatives actively support.

In summary, I do not believe that anything the State could do will push us toward “social transformation” in the sense of this project. Government support for cooperatives in the name of working class solidarity seems far-fetched in the United States. That being said, there are policies which governments and other institutions can promote in order to spur improvements in the lives of working class individuals. This top-down approach has proved to be successful in the sustaining and proliferation of social enterprises at least in Europe, parts of Asia, and South America. More data is needed to make similar conclusions in the United States, and we should expect more to become

available as the social and solidarity economy grows. Ultimately, worker cooperatives can and should be recognized for their purely economic and social benefits, but focusing on those benefits should *not* impede the pursuit of larger societal goals.

5.3. Final Remarks

Do worker cooperatives represent a substantial move toward social transformation beyond mere economic development? The answer, I think, is *it depends*. Given existing research and my own conversations with workers and community-members near the Evergreen Cooperatives in Cleveland, it seems that cooperatives are not the *primary* factor when thinking about the potential for radical change.

Cooperatives can, as Sharryn Kasmir noted during her fieldwork in Mondragón, divide the working class and erode the greater struggle for an alternative economic future. Minsun Ji acknowledges this as well but, in her comparative study of union cooperatives in Denver and South Korea, found that cooperatives can also *amplify* militant labor struggles. Worker cooperatives, then, are an effective way of politically organizing class-conscious workers. That is, the cooperatives structure itself does not inherently lead to social change without the narrative preceding it.

As for the Evergreen Cooperatives? I think that they are good drivers of economic empowerment in their communities — due largely to local hiring, fair(er) wages, and the anchor institution model — and that there is a lot of inspiration that we should take from them. However, we should be cautious when looking to them as an instance of enacting social transformation. While worker cooperatives might be an improvement upon corporate business-as-usual, my conclusion is that they cannot represent a step toward a radical and alternative economic future without the ideology

already being in place and without coming “bottom-up” from the community itself. Even then, cooperatives should be careful of eschewing the role of unions and syndicates, as in Mondragón, and instead work together simultaneously to organize and promote working class struggle.

So what is ultimately next in the pursuit of social transformation toward an alternative economic future, and what role do worker cooperatives have to play in it? The answer, as stated above, depends. The existing research shows that worker cooperatives can indeed play a role in spurring, accelerating, and sustaining radical change and the project of class struggle — but they can also have the opposite effect (as in Mondragón).

My ultimate argument is that, for worker cooperatives to be effective catalysts of an alternative economy, they have to make a class-conscious narrative and practices of working class solidarity central to their core vision. Ji’s example of taxi cooperatives in South Korea, and Kasmir’s remarks on the failure of the Social Council at Ulgor, among others, lend credence to this belief. Particularly in the United States, the radical potential of worker cooperatives has been most apparent in the African-American tradition and in the greater Black struggle for economic self-determination, exemplified in everything from the writings of W. E. B. DuBois to the establishment of Cooperation Jackson.

In this regard, I think the single greatest thing cooperatives can do to ensure the success of this mission is to invest in radical political education. In my personal conversation with Minsun Ji, she told me that those she has worked with have most enjoyed classes on labor movement history and working class art. Gordon-Nembhard (2012) cites study circles as being integral to cooperative successes. Ratner (2015)

remarks that the Metal Workers' Union in Brazil studied liberation theology and the psychology of liberation. Members of Cooperation Jackson engage with queer studies and climate justice. Education informs the narrative.

A program of radical education might also help us push a systemic shift beyond sole considerations of class. The lens of overdetermination (Chapter 2) has not only shown us what is to be missed by ascribing special explanatory power to issues in class of the economy, but the increasing movement toward the intersectionality of, *inter alia*, race, gender, class, and the natural environment in social-theoretical discourse highlights each as partial, distinct, yet interrelated component of a more robust framework of social justice. If our goal is truly systemic change on a society-wide scale, then we must recognize the ways in which our efforts, whether beginning from issues of class justice or otherwise, are both complementary and mutually empowering.

To conclude, worker cooperatives *can* transfer power to workers and organize them as agents of political struggle. However, as is perhaps often the case, we can *assume* that worker cooperatives are operating toward a radical end without realizing that they may be ineffective at best, substantially counterproductive at worst. Thus, our movements toward a more just economic future *must* be ideological and focused. To that end, cooperatives can be an effective way of organizing and amplifying working class struggle, but we should not fall into the trap of making them our ultimate goal.

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