



“It’s a Co-op in Spirit, That’s What It Is”: Fostering Collaboration, Collectivity, and Egalitarianism in Food Cooperatives

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ABSTRACT: Drawing on ethnographic examples from London-based food co-ops shaped by different political-economic environments, this article explores how the cooperative spirit is understood, enacted, and experienced within two co-ops with very different organisational structures and logics. While one was started by anarchist squatters in Thatcher’s Britain of the 1980s, the other was founded by a local community centre during the New Labour years. Although these histories gave them different starting points in terms of cooperativism, they both faced challenges in its enactment relating to the different logics, ethics, and values of their members, and the structures of feeling in Britain. As cooperatives offer a valuable case study of more civically engaged networks of food production and consumption, an exploration of food co-ops offers valuable insights into the role of cooperation in a sustainable food system, as well as some of the barriers to its successful enactment. The paper highlights tensions between practice and ideology within cooperatives as well as the challenges of balancing collectivity and individualism, egalitarianism, and hierarchy. It argues that while practice and ideology need to go hand in hand in order to foster a strong cooperative spirit, collective reflection on future orientated goals is also a vital component of social transformation and pathways to sustainability.

Keywords: cooperative; collectivity; collaboration; egalitarianism; food co-op; skill; sustainability

Introduction

“For the first year or something that I was here,” Jenny¹ – the coordinator at St Hilda’s East Food Co-op in East London told me, “I couldn’t work out why it was called a food co-op, and I was like really? Am I missing something?” As Jenny observed, the organisational structure of St Hilda’s East Food Co-op diverged significantly from the classical definition of a cooperative as “an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a *jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise*” (International Cooperative Alliance 2021, emphasis added). There was no membership policy, there were rarely any meetings, and Jenny made the bulk of the decisions at the non-profit, one-day-a-week fruit and vegetable stall. “But then I thought, it’s a co-op in spirit, that’s what it is... rather than on paper. And I think probably one of the challenges is just how you keep that spirit,” Jenny continued.

But what is the cooperative spirit? How is it fostered and kept alive? Although often

¹ While I name the food co-ops I worked with and the managerial figures at St Hilda’s, I use pseudonyms for the other people involved with each co-op, unless they expressly gave consent for their names to be used.

mentioned by co-operators, it is a concept that is rarely defined. At times it refers to knowing how to behave as a co-operator – how cooperative practices, structures, and values are enacted and how successfully; at others, it reflects on the inclination towards cooperation, or the structure of feeling within a place and time and how cooperative this is perceived to be (see for e.g., Kasmir 1996: 188; Ulin 1996: 171; Hall 2018: 211). Clearly these are not unconnected, and within them is the notion of an ethic or code of values around collaboration, collectivity, and egalitarianism.

Cooperatives “serve as a valuable case in studying alternative forms of organizing food and agriculture networks,” providing “an opportunity for imagining and enacting alternative food futures” (Hale and Carolan 2018: 127). An exploration of food co-ops and the cooperative spirit, therefore, offers valuable insights into the role of cooperation in a more sustainable food system, as well as some of the challenges to its successful enactment.

Building on 22 months of participant observation (2015-17) as a volunteer-member at two London-based food co-ops – St Hilda’s East and Fareshares – I explore how the cooperative spirit is understood, enacted, and experienced within the co-ops. Each project started in, and was shaped by, a different political-economic environment. St Hilda’s East Food Co-op began in 2005, at a time when the New Labour government was actively promoting community-based coping strategies. Fareshares was founded during the Thatcher era of the late 1980s by a group of anarchists and squatters, and has operated as a non-hierarchical, non-profit, volunteer-run project ever since. The structure of feeling of each era – its “particular quality of social experience and relationship” and how “meanings and values... are lived and felt” (Williams 2015: 23), has left its mark on their organisational structures, logics, ethic, and relationship to cooperativism. While this gave them different starting points in terms of cooperativism, they both faced challenges in its enactment, some related to forms of stratification. This highlights tensions between praxis and ideology within cooperatives (Rakopoulos 2020) which can impact not only on the cooperative spirit but also on pathways to sustainability, as I argue here.

Cooperativism, food, and sustainability

Within the British context, the history of the cooperative movement is deeply connected to food and sustainability. The first wave in the UK officially started with the foundation of a consumer cooperative in Rochdale in the northwest of England in 1844. By going directly to the wholesalers, the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers were able to ensure that the foods the co-op stocked were safe and affordable in an era in which working-class incomes were being affected by industrialisation. Food adulteration was also rife, and food prices were high due to the monopolisation of supply by profiteering local shopkeepers (Birchall 1994: 13). While the Pioneers’ actions were clearly practical, their principles, which included participatory democracy, open membership, profit sharing amongst members, and the promotion of education, were also ideological. They created space to think about more equal social and economic systems, while empowering members through education, collective ownership, and the development of democratic and collaborative skills and subjectivities.

Food co-ops also factored into the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. Countercultural co-ops attempted to promote a left-wing vision of a less consumer capitalist and more sustainable society through collective lifestyle choices and everyday actions. The means of food production, acquisition, and cooking became increasingly important

signifiers of countercultural ideals, in opposition to the increasingly industrialised food system, rapidly expanding supermarket sector and mass production. As well as providing the minimally processed, local, organic wholefoods favoured by many members of the counterculture, food co-ops were also spaces from which to disseminate information about countercultural cuisine and left-wing ideology in a non-hierarchical setting (Belasco 2007).

Both the first and second wave co-operators were effective communicators of their ideas, values, and practices, managing to capture imaginations beyond their own. By the turn of the 20th century countless other working-class people had taken up the Pioneers' principles and practices; and the 'Rochdale Principles' are still used widely by cooperatives around the world today. Countercultural food co-ops spread from the USA to many other parts of the Western world and the food-based ideals and practices of the counterculture are also seen as important precursors to the forms of alternative food networks present in the West today (Goodman DuPuis and Goodman 2014).

Despite the significance of the Rochdale Pioneers to the broader history of the cooperative movement, 21st century Britain seems to have much less of a cooperative spirit. The cooperative sector is "smaller, weaker and more atomized" than in many other countries in the OECD with significantly fewer cooperatives and mutuals (Lawrence, Pendleton and Mahmoud 2018: 17). It also has less legislation to either support cooperative enterprise or enforce specific organisational forms, which goes some way to explain St Hilda's more top-down structure. As Nash and Hopkins point out, the political environment in which a co-op is founded can influence its structures as much, if not more than "adherence to cooperative rules and principles" (1976: 15), and this is, no doubt, the case for St Hilda's. During the New Labour years (1997-2010), the government actively promoted third sector coping strategies as part of the 'third way,' a centrist political perspective often characterised in neoliberal terms. Food co-ops became particularly popular within local authority and primary care trust interventions into issues of food poverty and poor nutritional health in this period. Many of these food co-ops were not formally constituted as cooperatives and few involved official membership, shared ownership or democratic decision making.

As Sennett suggests, cooperation in its broadest sense requires considerable skill in "understanding and responding to one another in order to act together" (2013: x). Like craft skills (Venkatesan 2010: 168), cooperative skills must be learned through doing. Indeed, much of the cooperative's prefigurative potential is thought to lie within its collective practice. Rakopoulos suggests that the activities of cooperatives become "purposeful" through the combination of material practice and the articulation of future-orientated goals around social change, "eventually and hopefully leading to a broader cooperative social movement spilling into a sea of wider consciousness" (2014: 190-1). Through the combination of practice *and* deliberation, therefore, co-ops can attempt to not only shape the world around them, but also the activities and imaginations of those involved, and beyond. In principle, cooperative practice and ideology, therefore, go hand in hand to foster strong values and organisational structures around collaboration, collectivity, and egalitarianism.

In terms of sustainability, food projects and networks can also become laboratories for transformative learning (Levkoe 2006; Grasseni 2018) from which people not only educate themselves about issues of sustainability, but also "learn to exercise their democratic capacities through situated deliberation and practice" (Grasseni 2018: 272). The acquisition of such skills involves self-making as active citizens who engage "in food-related behaviours that

support, rather than threaten, the development of a democratic, socially and economically just, and environmentally sustainable food system" (Wilkins 2005: 271). Such democratic and educational processes resonate well with the spirit of cooperativism.

Cooperatives themselves are typically formed in response to specific needs and (often) financial imperatives, at times, due to pragmatism, at others a specific ideology. In austerity Greece, for example, an informal network of food co-ops quickly developed in response to the impacts of measures put in place after the 2008 financial crisis. By forging direct links with producers, and taking no profit themselves, the food co-ops were able to provide food at prices considerably below market rates, while also cutting out the middlemen perceived as profiting unfairly. Those involved saw the co-ops' activities as going beyond food distribution by fostering a solidarity economy intended to contest austerity measures while reconfiguring economic activities around reciprocity and mutuality. The intention was to awaken political imaginations, while also broadening social reproduction of the movement, again highlighting the combination of the practical and ideological (Rakopoulos 2014).

The cooperative model's long-standing connection to alternative relations of production and consumption resonates with notions of 'strong' sustainable consumption, and the idea of a "radical reorganisation of society" from the bottom up which goes beyond simply relying on conventional market approaches or individual actions (as seen in 'weak' sustainable consumption) (Hinton 2015: 238–39). Nonetheless, there are also potential issues as cooperative economic practices are often still "predicated on the existence of a functioning [capitalist] market," creating the contradiction of "being beyond and simultaneously within market structures" (Homs and Narotzky 2019: 133; see also Rakopoulos 2017: 193). This highlights one of the classic tensions within cooperativism (and perhaps sustainability), over whether to build a new system or simply create a more ethical enclave within the existing one (Hinton 2015 on sustainability; Plender 2021 on cooperativism and capitalism).

Through collective ownership and decision making about the management of a shared asset or sector, cooperativism aims to promote horizontal relations and egalitarian values among members through industrial democracy. As has often been identified within the study of cooperatives, however, there can be a considerable difference between the ideals of cooperativism and the practices of actually existing cooperatives. This has often led to forms of stratification built around issues of class, gender, diverse knowledge or value systems. These can lead to disenfranchisement, disengagement, and the formation of hierarchies (Müller 1991; Kasmir 1996; Ulin 1996; Rakopoulos 2017). Disparities between the principles and process of cooperation such as this inevitably have the potential to compromise the development of more democratic subjectivities and skills by undermining the cooperative spirit.

In the following sections, I explore in turn how St Hilda's East and Fareshares Food Co-ops were formed and developed, along with the ways in which they experience and enact the cooperative spirit.

A community centre food project

As an ethnically diverse borough with many interrelated issues around deprivation and nutritional health, Tower Hamlets, where St Hilda's East Food Co-op is based, has had many different community food initiatives over the years. The foundation of St Hilda's Food Co-op in 2005 built on this momentum. St Hilda's East Community Centre, where the food

co-op is based, had recently received a report about community food co-ops from the local cooperative development agency, which was looking for more sites. A local resident had also approached Lourdes (who was volunteer coordinator at the centre at that time) about setting up a food co-op. The resident had previously been involved with some co-ops in the USA and was keen to continue her involvement in London. With the consent of the community centre, Lourdes then got to work on starting the weekly fruit and vegetable stall.

In the early days, the food co-op only stocked non-organic fruit and vegetables, first from the cooperative development agency, and later from an East London social enterprise (Community Food Enterprise). Over time, and with the support of a grant from the Big Lottery's Local Food scheme, which attempted to make locally grown food more accessible and affordable to people, organic produce sourced directly from a local farm (Sarah Green's Organics) was also introduced. By the time of my fieldwork, there were also wholegrains from a large wholesale workers' cooperative (Suma) and Palestinian solidarity products from a social enterprise (Zaytoun). On the tables next to the boxes and baskets of fruit and veg, laminated signs gave nutritional information about the goods on sale, and details of who the various suppliers and producers to the project were. Within the monthly newsletter, Sarah Green also had a regular slot to say how things were going on the farm and what they were growing. All this worked to create stronger connections between producers and consumers, and a deeper context to the goods on the stall.

When I asked volunteers at St Hilda's what the food co-op was, many of them contrasted it with the supermarket, both in terms of the quality and freshness of the produce, and the unscrupulousness that some associated with the profit-making model that supermarkets use, therefore identifying and valuing the co-op's alternative economic credentials. Long-term volunteer Toyin explained to me that:

We know it [the organic food] comes from the farm. We've been to the farm as well, so you can trust it compared to the supermarket... With the food co-op, we have the facts of where the food comes from and a bit of history on the food, how it's grown and so on. But when you go to the supermarket you don't know where it's from.

The farm visit Toyin mentioned, catalysed much discussion of the time, care, and effort that went into growing Sarah Green's organic produce, as well as of various issues within the food system ranging from pesticide usage to the impacts of supermarket monopolism on food wastage and farmer's livelihoods. This highlighted the food co-op's role in creating space for education, experimentation, and deliberation in relation to food. The direct relationship between the food co-op and Sarah Green also attempted to foster a more collaborative and socially embedded relationship between consumers and producers, subverting aspects of commodity fetishism by making the producers and their labour more visible (Homs and Narotzky 2019: 136).

In less overtly or uniformly politicised food co-ops, such as St Hilda's, Homs and Narotzky argue that the "politicization processes emerge organically from collective practices rather than as an *a priori* abstract ideological framework." They suggest that one area where this is most commonly seen is in the shift in how people articulate their motivations for taking part in a food co-op, often moving from health and price related reasons to a greater

appreciation of the value of collective food provisioning and the relationships within it (2019:137). Echoing this form of consciousness raising, Rebecca, a volunteer who was on a college placement at the community centre, highlighted the value of schemes like the food co-op in helping young people such as her to question where their food was coming from and how it was produced in order to make better consumption choices in terms of health and ethics. Other volunteers also talked about how being involved with the food co-op had changed their relationship to what they bought, which often included incorporating more organic produce into their shopping. The reasons for this ranged from health to environmental concerns and solidarity with the producers. Aspects of social sustainability were also foregrounded as many of the volunteers saw the food co-op as a valuable resource for providing healthy and affordable food in an area where there were many people on low incomes. Therefore in relation to food, the co-op was able to capture imaginations and foster some degree of alternative economic relations through its practices. As such, volunteers at St Hilda's engaged in forms of green and ethical consumption and expressed a complex mixture of values, some more individual (health, personal taste, and ethics) and others collective (collaborative and community orientated provisioning, stronger connections between producers and consumers).

Ownership and decision-making

While there were clear examples of how food cooperative practices raised consciousness in relation to food at St Hilda's, when it came to the politics of cooperativism, there was more ambivalence. Lourdes told me that when St Hilda's East Food Co-op started, she had hoped that it would become a fully community-organised cooperative. She arranged meetings and encouraged volunteers to make decisions in this spirit, with the aim that St Hilda's East Community Centre would simply host the food co-op while the members ran it. This never happened, however. As she explained,

I think you need to have some driving forces... You need really key personalities who want to take on that role, because it's huge, it's massive and you know you need that ethical drive almost like this is part of my way I want to live, so unless you've got that it's very hard.

Within the pre-existing vertical structure of the community centre, there were also clear discourses around 'service provision' and support, which McLaughlin suggests can differentiate between providers and recipients, reinforcing the hierarchies contained within them, while setting expectations for each role (2009). Arguably, it would have required substantial work and a strong collective desire from participants in the food co-op to break with the more hierarchical rationality and practices of the centre, where those who provided support (paid workers) and those who received support (volunteers, community centre project service users, and food co-op customers) were more clearly defined. Having a paid position potentially also gave Lourdes "more time available to devote to cooperative duties and ends" (Ulin 1996: 173) than the volunteers might necessarily have felt they had. Lourdes told me that the centre itself had felt like another barrier to community ownership. "I tried. I really tried to think round it, tried to give ownership over, but it was really hard because the premises was St Hilda's." The community centre therefore, wanted to have a say

in what was going on. St Hilda's East Food Co-op has continued with this more vertical structure ever since.

During my time at the food co-op, Jenny, who reflected on the cooperative spirit at the beginning of this article, was the coordinator. In her early twenties, she had been a member of a grassroots workers' co-op in Newcastle, which operated as a wholefood shop and café. Her time at the Red Herring gave her a strong sense of what it felt like to be part of an autonomous collective, along with the challenges and rewards that came with it. These experiences, no doubt, contributed to her confusion about what made St Hilda's a co-op when she first started. As she put it, the Red Herring really "formed" her, teaching her about the political power of food and of cooperation, therefore fostering her own cooperative spirit.

In relation to St Hilda's cooperative spirit, she told me that for her the "big thing" was "ownership." "That's the big, big thing, that people feel it's theirs." She regularly attempted to foster this sense of ownership by encouraging volunteer collaboration and decision making. These decisions could range from the way the produce was laid out on the tables to choosing which jobs volunteers wanted to do each session or making suggestions about the overall running of the food co-op and what it stocked.

While some of the longer-running volunteers were very vocal about most aspects of the project, the jobs they wanted to do, or how it should run, some volunteers, typically the newer ones, tended to defer to Jenny. To counter this, she tried to find ways of encouraging people to be confident in their own decision-making skills and other abilities, creating situations in which volunteers would support and teach each other various tasks. The bigger the problem, though, the more quickly someone would take the decision to find Jenny. On many occasions, I also heard volunteers identify Jenny as "the boss" of the food co-op, to which she would reply, "we're all the boss," feeling uncomfortable with this authoritative role.

In their descriptions of what the food co-op was, volunteers often used terms such as community, care, friendliness, and family, highlighting the ways in which the project successfully fostered feelings of collectivity and collaboration. They rarely spoke of its more egalitarian or democratic qualities though, and there seemed to be considerable uncertainty and ambivalence around the food co-op's structures of governance or ownership. Long-term volunteer Claire for example, saw Jenny as the organiser; but suggested that the project was run by the volunteers, that "it is everyone's food co-op." Despite this, she felt that she gave 'suggestions' rather than making 'decision.' Alice, another long-term volunteer, said that she thought the community centre probably owned the food co-op. She did not feel like she was a decision maker, however. "But I think I could [make decisions]," she explained, and she saw this potential as "a very important part of the co-op."

While Alice and Claire had been drawn to the food co-op more out of an interest in food and community, Dave and Mark (who had both been customers for several years before becoming volunteers), had started interacting with the food co-op, in part, out of an interest in cooperatives. Dave, who had been involved with many different kinds of activism over the years, defined the co-op as a "community project where we, through the coordinator, come together to buy in bulk and distribute it amongst ourselves." On first impressions, he suggested, "it feels a bit more like a shop... You don't necessarily feel that you are part of a cooperative. But yeah, in a way we all are." While he acknowledged that if he was asked to design his idea of a co-op, "that wouldn't be it," he had a feeling that "people made suggestions," "people turned out as part of the community" and that they were part

of a “collectivity” in which they could have a say. As for Mark, although familiar with the idea that members should “have a say in the governance and structure and organisation” within a co-op, he acknowledged that at St Hilda’s he only really thought of Jenny due to her “facilitative position” and had never actually spoken to anyone about the co-op’s governance. This made him unsure of how things worked. “I see there are other people involved but I don’t really know how they work together.” As a consequence, he concluded that things worked much more informally than in a traditional cooperative, although he did feel that Jenny wanted “to get other people involved with decision making and thinking about how it’s running.”

At St Hilda’s, cooperativism was more inferred than it was verbally articulated. This inference was seen in the name of the project and in the kinds of practices that were modelled and fostered. By comparison, within the grassroots collectives of austerity Greece, talking about cooperativism and its aims as well as working with cooperative mechanisms were both important aspects of consciousness raising. During market days some of the co-operators gave talks about the aims of the anti-middleman movement, and there was always a meeting afterwards to further discuss the politics of the country, the movement and the more formalised cooperative structures they wanted to implement (Rakopoulos 2014). The lack of articulation at St Hilda’s left volunteers to come to their own understanding of what a food co-op was, what it was for and, in prefigurative terms, what it could do.

Given the relatively small cooperative sector within the UK, arguably there were less opportunities for people to have seen or experienced cooperativism first-hand, or to kindle an appetite and imagination for such methods. Those involved with St Hilda’s seemed much more ready to talk about the politics of food than they were about cooperation, and Jenny’s own values around grassroots action and egalitarianism made her feel that it was not her place to impose more formalised cooperative structures. If these were to be put in place, then they should come from the volunteers, not from her. This potentiality was clearly discerned by volunteers such as Alice who felt she *could* become a more active decision maker should she choose to. Nonetheless, there seemed to be a distinction for many between suggestions and decisions and who made which, highlighting a mixture of collaboration and stratification within the co-op.

Since leaving the Red Herring, many of Jenny’s jobs have involved food, community building, care and a desire to help others, often within the third sector. She is, therefore, very familiar with the methods and logics of volunteer coordination. Despite the tensions that the issue of hierarchy created for her, in line with the community centre’s ideals and her experiences in the voluntary sector, Jenny also felt that imposing structure, was a way to provide a more supportive environment:

I think one of the things about having a paid position, whether it’s me or whoever it is, is about the support for people ... paid workers, you know, they’re contracted to be there and it means that the co-op can be more inclusive, it can support more people, you have that guaranteed continuity, you have that guaranteed support there...

Therefore in her own practices, there were also competing values at work, with one system privileging forms of hierarchy on the basis of care and inclusion, the other organisational

egalitarianism. Pragmatics can often win out over egalitarian ideology within cooperatives in such situations.² As Jenny questioned, though, “is that at the cost of ownership?” Nonetheless, both sets of values privileged the notions of collectivity, collaboration, and community that were successfully fostered within the co-op. These clearly had transformative potential in terms of how people worked together and valued themselves and others (within the food co-op and its provisioning network) (Homs and Narotzky 2019). In sum, they created the sense of a cooperative spirit that Jenny hoped for, but not necessarily the ownership that comes with cooperative ideology.

DIY experiments

If St Hilda’s was formed during the New Labour years, in a model reflective of that place and time, then Fareshares Food Co-op’s model is also connected to a specific era. This first opened for “non-business” as a wholefood co-op in south London in 1988. It was set up by a group of anarchists and squatters as a “self-organised, volunteer-run, non-profit, vegan” project (Fareshares n.d.). Resembling the food co-ops of the 1960s and 70s, it was a place to buy wholegrains and ethical goods, while practicing alternative politics. In the early days, there were two slogans on the walls – “nobody’s business, everybody’s business” and “not a shop, an experiment in community,” presenting discourses of social anarchism, collective ownership, reconfigured economic relationships, and non-hierarchical organising. Anarchism and punk were important aspects of the zeitgeist at that time, which reflected a sense of disaffection with aspects of Thatcher’s Britain in an era of rising unemployment, economic volatility, and neoliberal restructuring.

Rather than adhering to one strict organisational structure or alternative vision, many of the co-ops and collectives set up in this era had a Do-It-Yourself ethos, experimenting “with different forms of cooperation,” adapting as necessary to their own particular situations (Müller 1991: 33–34), while prefiguratively practicing collective organising, horizontalism, and autonomy. When I asked Martin, one of the founder members of Fareshares Food Co-op, if there was anything else like it around at the time, he told me, “I didn’t know of any quite like that because it was never really a straight, legit food co-op as there was no membership... You became a member by using it.” He felt that this less rigid or conventional model was one of the elements that made Fareshares “some sort of educational tool” in relation to food politics, fostering less consumerist and more ethical forms of collective consumption and provisioning in a more accessible space.

Today, Fareshares still operates in a similar vein, aiming “to provide good food for the community at affordable prices in the belief that decent food is a basic necessity for health, regardless of means” as its website explains (Fareshares n.d.). It stocks “simple unadulterated food (often called wholefoods) and related products,” such as environmentally friendly cleaning goods and recycled toilet paper. In terms of its sourcing policy, it supports “patterns of consumption that promote social justice and sustainable agriculture and fosters an awareness of the political and ecological effects of consumer actions.” In order to do this, as much of the stock as possible is “organic, local, and ethically sourced. All of it is animal, sugar, and GMO-free.” Many of Fareshares’ suppliers are also cooperatives or “collectives

² In Robert Ulin’s work with French wine cooperatives, for example, he highlights a co-op in which a certain degree of member disempowerment was accepted due to the “necessary organizational complexity that follows from the exigencies of international marketing and finance” (Ulin 1996: 172).

that work for the same aims" (ibid.). The privileging of like-minded projects and the enforcement of stronger connections between producers and consumers resonates with some of the ideals of a solidarity economy and the ways in which it emphasises the "multiple social configurations of an economic system" (Rakopoulos 2014). It also highlights a common grassroots cooperative interest in scaling out rather than scaling up to create networks of cooperatives while resisting economies of scale and more conventional forms of capitalist accumulation (Homs and Narotzky 2019: 137).

Organisationally, the bulk of the decisions at Fareshares is made by consensus at the monthly meetings, and in between meetings there is a member mailing list and daybook for day-to-day communications. Shoppers are also expected to play their part, weighing out and tallying up their goods before telling volunteers how much they owe. This reconfigures these economic transactions along less consumerist lines while fostering a more cooperative sense of shared responsibility and sociality (Plender 2021). In line with the anarchist and cooperativist principles on which it was founded, this speaks to ideals of social and economic transformation. Participation in such alternative provisioning networks, Levkoe argues, is designed to further the development of more ethical food practices and democratic skills which can, in principle, then be applied in other areas of society (2006: 93), therefore fostering more active engagement with the food system and society.

Many of the volunteer-members and shoppers at Fareshares understood their interaction within the co-op in terms of sustainability, regularly discussing the social, economic and environmental elements of food and its consumption as well as the credentials of the products, producers, and suppliers of some of the goods on offer. It was not uncommon for those involved to actively avoid buying from corporate food outlets, instead privileging local and independent shops, market stalls, and alternative projects such as the food co-op. In doing so, they attempted to think more actively in "citizenship" terms about food system change and their role within this (Hinton 2015: 243).

The inconvenience of cooperation

Only a few of Fareshares' members would identify as anarchists today, and others feel no great connection or commitment to some of the DIY or cooperativist elements of the project. More than its left-wing politics, many of Fareshares' more recent (often younger) members seemed drawn to the project because of its ready supply of more affordable organic, fairly traded, and (for some) vegan foods. They also appreciated the co-op's environmental stance in terms of the goods it stocked and its position on packaging, which required customers to bring their own shopping bags and containers to decant bulk goods into. This was the site of much of their political action, whether based on acts of consumption (choosing local, organic, unpackaged or vegan goods, for example), entrepreneurialism in relation to ethical goods, or the choice of environmentally focused jobs of one sort or another. Where many of the older members were highly articulate about their political ideology, identifying their beliefs with the use of various 'isms,' for the younger members, their politics was more often framed around specific issues – typically climate change, food waste and, for some, growing inequalities.

Frictions over changing times and members' values sometimes cropped up in meetings and on the email list. If newer members did not fully see the logic or know the history of certain long-standing systems or if they felt that there was resistance to an idea that they put

forward for what they saw as the benefit of the co-op, they could feel frustrated. For longer-running members, frustrations could be felt if they had the impression that something was being done impetuously without fully following consensual processes, showing a cooperative spirit or working out all the practicalities before acting.

One meeting in which these generational tensions came to the surface, related to a new organic vegetable supplier. Hughes, the farm that Fareshares had been working with for many years, was no longer able to provide the co-op with as much fruit and veg as it used to, so, some work had been done to look into alternative options. As one newer member already had a relationship with a reliable supplier called Brockman's, they offered to take on the responsibility for this order along with another newer volunteer. More than one member of the co-op then wrote emails with relevant information about what steps might need to be taken in order to set up a new supplier – ranging from details of how to get them added to Fareshares' payment system, how the delivery would be received (by a person or by giving the business a set of keys) and the schedule for when the other orders came in and got unpacked so that the produce could be checked off properly and refrigerated in good time.

Before the payment system was fully set up, or some of the other issues around how and who would take delivery had been resolved, the newer members started to place orders as they were concerned about ensuring that customers were getting a good enough supply. When these issues were raised first on the members' email list and then in a meeting, it was clear that both groups were feeling frustrated. The more established members were concerned about not being able to pay the supplier and how a new delivery could impact the people who might be expected to unpack the goods as they were not arriving in time with the shop's usual delivery and unpacking rhythms. The newer members had a sense that the veterans were blocking them and that their behaviour showed a resistance to change. For a while this led to an impasse as the younger members decided to step down from the Brockman's order, feeling that everything had become too complicated. Once Brockman's had been added to the payment system, however, another member who had connections in both groups, decided to take on the order, which ran more or less smoothly from then on.

Nash and Hopkins suggest that cooperatives norms and practices work best, when there is "a maximum flow of information between all the individual members" affording each of them the "rights to formal participation in the decision-making, self-governing process," and also "the knowledge and the skills with which to exercise these rights" (1976: 12). As the example above suggests, however, communication did not necessarily always run smoothly at Fareshares. What a new volunteer got to know about how things worked could depend on who else was on their shift, how connected these shiftmates were to the collective as a whole, and the relationship of each of these volunteers to the concept and practice of cooperation. As not everyone always knew the processes or logics of the project, this potentially gave them less opportunity to mentally invest in its values and practices. This could also impact on whether they decided to attend the monthly meetings or not, meaning decisions were often made by the same group of people who saw this as a central element of their work with the collective. The hierarchies this created could not only lead to the feelings of impatience and frustration described above, but also the forms of disenfranchisement that stopped members from exercising their right to participate in decision making or, indeed, the cooperative as a whole.

In Ulin's work with wine cooperative in southwest France generational divides also

hindered the cooperative spirit. A member of the Monbazillac cooperative, for example, told him that when the co-op started there was “true cooperative spirit” fostered by the profound need to “survive difficult times together” (Ulin 1996: 174). Demarle noted that the new generation of cooperative members were completely different though, with different expectations of the cooperative based on their own interests and needs, and a desire for “greater dynamism” (Ulin 1996: 174).

For Fareshares, the need that brought the collective together was the inaccessibility of organic, vegan and fairly traded goods in an era of precarious livelihoods and anarchist energies that fostered the cooperative spirit (1980s Britain). While many of the newer members’ interests and activities also revolved around these ethical goods, during my fieldwork in 2015-17, they connected less with the collectivist methods of provisioning embedded in Fareshares’ cooperative structures. As with Monbazillac, they seemed to want more dynamism, questioning whether the cooperative, its logics and ways of working still responded to the needs of the here and now.

These generational issues came up in my discussion with Holly, a newer volunteer who worked for a cycling charity that promoted sustainability. She had been a member of the cooperative for around a year and a half at the time of our conversation, and worked a shift typically populated by other newer volunteers. Few of them attended meetings, or necessarily took on extra tasks within the co-op (such as ordering, finances etc.). Holly told me:

It’s amazing in a way that they [cooperatives] can function with everyone just doing their own bit and managing to work alongside one another, but they can be really annoying... tedious... Theoretically it can be a utopian way of working but in practice, it’s hard. It’s easier to do something yourself or to have someone tell you what to do.

She felt that the co-op was “just maintaining it how it was,” even though the relevance had shifted. She acknowledged that it was “still meeting a need” and that people travelled a long way to visit as it was “a really good place”. But that more could be done to question *what* need Fareshares was meeting today and to push things forward. She was not sure how “the people who’ve been here for longer would respond to that conversation” though, highlighting her sense of entrenched power and different interests within the cooperative.

I also spoke to Ed about the generational tensions at Fareshares. He was in his mid-50s and had been a member for around three years at that time. Ed was drawn to Fareshares for its cooperativism more than its food, and his own commitment to cooperation could make the fragmentation within Fareshares feel disappointing at times. Ed told me:

I think a lot of the skills and the assumptions that go into things like self-organisation have sort of atrophied or been eroded over the last 30 years. In 1980, I think about 80 per cent of people were in trade unions and now I think it’s about 10 per cent. So... those skills and those assumptions about people being able to organise themselves have kind of gone and I’m not sure how you get those back, or how you support or encourage those. It feels like starting from a very low base.

Similarly, Sennett argues that within advanced liberal contexts such as the UK, a “de-skilling”

is taking place in relation to cooperation due to various material, institutional, and cultural changes happening within society. These, he suggests, have led to greater stratification and atomisation, combined with a weakening capacity for cooperation, and also a weakening desire – in essence a weakening cooperative spirit (2013). Within contemporary activism, scholars have also identified a certain “unwillingness on the part of individuals to subject themselves to collective structures, norms, or identities.” This, in turn, is thought to have led to individualised, lifestyle-focused forms of action, which reconfigure the relationship between the individual and society (Sörbom and Wennerhag 2013: 454). Although environmentalism and ethical forms of consumption had always been a part of the food co-op’s remit, a more lifestyle-focused approach without the emphasis on collaboration risked changing the balance between collectivity and individualism, as well as weaker or stronger sustainable consumption, therefore reinforcing tensions around whether cooperativism and collective provisioning can be used to foster a new economic system or simply interact more ethically with the current one (Hinton 2015; Homs and Narotzky 2019).

It is not uncommon for those within a cooperative to have different values, interests, and politics, and as Rakopoulos suggests “it is impossible to conceptualise cooperatives as united, cohesive actors in democratic mobilisation over food concerns” (Rakopoulos 2014: 97). In the Sicilian anti-mafia, agricultural cooperatives he worked with, the ethics of food created class-based divisions, with administrators pushing a food activist agenda that interested them and the co-op’s consumers, but not the workers. At Fareshares, there was more agreement around the ethics of food and the values of more sustainable provisioning approaches. Instead, it was cooperativism itself that created generational divisions, both as a means of running the food co-op effectively and, more implicitly, as an activist method. As Holly’s comments show, there was also a lack of perceived space for deliberation on the needs Fareshares wished to address today. From both sides of the generational divide, this felt somewhat insurmountable, creating a level of stagnation, disillusion, and disengagement, which worked to disconnect cooperative practice and ideology, and to dampen spirits.

Conclusions

Anthropological engagement with cooperatives has often highlighted the challenges that can arise within a model premised on collaboration, collectivity, and egalitarianism. In many examples, the variant values, interests, identities, and experiences of those involved, combined with the complex contexts in which they are working, have hampered cooperative processes and spirits. Despite their different organisational models, at Fareshares and St Hilda’s they also ran into barriers. For St Hilda’s the organisational structure of the community centre and the project itself, combined with third sector logics around service provision, created a less conducive environment to strong forms of cooperation. Nonetheless, through collective practice and encouragement from Jenny, some level of shared endeavour and cooperative spirit were fostered, even if there were ambivalences around ownership, decision making, and the internal workings of the cooperative. Through these practices, volunteers developed a strong sense of collectivity, and for many, a greater appreciation of the values of more socially embedded food provisioning. Although “politicization processes” emerged from collective practices (Homs and Narotzky 2019: 137), the lack of an ideological framework meant these were informed by a mixture of individual and collective interests and subjectivities. From a sustainability perspective, without enacting the more participatory aspects of

cooperativism, arguably the skills, consciousness, and capacities needed to expand practices of “food democracy” (Renting, Schermer and Rossi 2012) that could feed into wider food system and societal transformation remained under developed.

At Fareshares, while volunteer-members had a greater opportunity to see, experience, and practice cooperative principles through its horizontalist organisational model, these approaches did not always capture member’s imaginations, diverse interests or values, leading to fragmentation, stasis, and more individualised actions. In relation to green and ethical consumption, this could overemphasise the role of sovereign subjects and their sense of spontaneous will in social or political change (Muehlebach 2012: 49–50) as opposed to the collaborative and collective practices and ideals of cooperation. As such, arguably, these consumption practices could represent weaker forms of sustainable consumption premised on individual acts (Hinton 2015: 238–9). This highlights the ways in which “intense individualization and collectivization [can] coexist” within contemporary society, which Muehlebach puts down to the moralising social order embedded within neoliberal structures of feeling (2012: 49–50).

If the “acquisition of a skill is embedded in a larger social knowledge about the value of that skill” (Venkatesan, 2010: 158), then the less cooperative context of contemporary Britain and the structures of feeling of this era have implications for how people understand and enact the cooperative concept, and how cooperation is valued and performed. While St Hilda’s had a collaborative spirit, and Fareshares had cooperative organisational features, neither had a coherent collective shared vision or articulation in relation to food, cooperation, or wider socio-economic structures. Instead, each project was imprinted with different logics, ethics, and values reflecting those of their members and the wider context in which they operated.

This highlights the fact that cooperative is not “a self-explanatory term but one claimed and contested by varied groups, associated with different political and ideological allegiances and formed as a response to different problems and needs” (Rakopoulos 2017: 195).

Arguably, the competing ideas often found within cooperatives make it harder to move from performing aspects of cooperativism to a fuller expression of collaboration, collectivity, and egalitarianism. In such a context, therefore, finding ways to bring together practice and ideology more coherently through material actions, collective discussions, and definitions of what needs the project is hoping to address, and what its aims and future visions are, becomes even more important in the successful development of cooperative skills, spirits and politics – however challenging. Within sustainability-oriented projects the same is true. Without the combination of collaborative action *and* collective reflection on future orientated goals, the transition from small scale practices to wider transformations remains less “purposeful” (Rakopoulos 2014: 190–1), more individual and more challenging.

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