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“They are not going to be able to copy this”

Fighting the cooperative corner and creating third spaces of cooperation in food and farming

Raquel Ajates Gonzalez¹

Abstract – Cooperatives can be deconstructed into four components: legal form, governance model, social movement and informal cooperative behaviours that predate all other layers. In the case of agricultural cooperatives, this multifaceted character is increasingly being fragmented by the mainstream food system that is co-opting the less radical elements of cooperativism that can be easily absorbed without requiring a wider transformation of neoliberal industrial practices. This paper explores the activities of niche cooperatives in the UK and Spain experimenting with creative models of governance, finance and multilevel crosscutting collaborations attempting to fight back and reduce the risk of appropriation by the dominant regime. Drawing from the anthropological concept of “third space” and the permaculture principle that commends us to “use edges and value the marginal”, I argue that these initiatives are creating both real and symbolic spaces that foster growers’ and consumers’ self-efficacy to construct more inclusive and sustainable cooperative models. These social experiments not only disrupt and reframe the “professional agricultural cooperative” imaginary, but also reaffirm people’s infinite creativity to reinvent their food systems.

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There are tens of thousands of agricultural cooperatives (ACs) in Europe. In an attempt to deal with the globalisation of the food system that accelerated after WWII with the formation of the European Common Market and the introduction of agriculture in the WTO in 1995, ACs are increasingly mimicking the strategies of privately-owned businesses (Bijman et al., 2012). Following mechanisms commonly used by corporations, many European cooperatives have gone through mergers and acquisitions following a process of “consolidation of the sector” (Bijman et al., 2012). This trend is affecting members’ social capital, who often perceive themselves more as customers than owners of the cooperative (Nilsson et al., 2012).

More critical authors have referred to European ACs as *promoters of unequal globalisation*, denouncing some large ACs for cases of land grabbing and outsourcing some of their operations to developing countries, where they exploit their workers (Berthelot, 2012). Other civil society groups have also warned of the level of power concentration and the intensive monoculture methods that ACs are in-

structing their members to adopt, moving away from the original cooperative objective of transforming the world, to merely adapting to and reproducing the system they operate in (Soberania Alimentaria,

2013).

Much has been written about alternative food networks (AFN) and cooperation between consumers and producers (Goodman et al., 2011). However, when it comes to cooperatives, most of the AFN literature focuses on consumer cooperatives and more informal buying groups, often ignoring farmers’ cooperation. Why is this the case? What kind of cooperation can be labelled as alternative and why? To answer these questions, this article proposes an AFN analysis of farmer cooperatives with three aims:

- To contribute a new food policy perspective to existing research on ACs, a topic dominated by the economic discipline.
- To argue that certain elements of ACs can be more susceptible to co-optation than others
- To discuss how agricultural cooperatives (ACs) can be situated in a continuum of alterity, from those that are highly embedded in the dominant food regime to those that aim to create a new economic system starting with elements of food provision.
- To identify and analyse different types of strategies aimed at reducing the risk of cooptation being implemented by cooperative members in real life experiments of agricultural cooperation in the UK and Spain.

With the above aims, this paper will offer a dual contribution to the AFN literature. First, it puts forward the argument that a new wave of emerging niche cooperatives are opening up “spaces of possibility” in opposition to the dominant agri-food regime (Goodman et al., 2011). Goodman et al. (2011) have warned of how many AFNs are presented as “oppositional” even when they still rely on capitalist market relations and/or the estate for their reproduction. Following this critical analysis of AFN, I will explore how these tensions unfold on six niche cooperatives.

Secondly, this paper builds on the counter cooperative-degeneration argument proposed by Arthur et al. (2008) by providing supporting evidence that back up the validity of their concepts of *deviant mainstreaming* and *incremental radicalism*. These terms attempt to capture the internal dynamics of

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autonomous transformative social *spaces* trying to remain *deviant* and sustain a degree of alterity while surviving in the dominant capitalist system (Arthur et al., 2008).

In this XXI century imperialistic-like context of the globalised food system, I draw on Homi Bhabha's (1994) anthropological notion of "third space" and the permaculture principle that urges us to "value the marginal" to unravel and frame the social innovations that are emerging out of shared *deviant* food spaces, both physical and ideological and in between rural and urban spaces and people.

DATA AND METHODS

Data were collected in Spain and the UK between 2014–2015. It includes interview data from 41 interviews with members of five multi-stakeholder cooperatives, one workers' cooperative, plus policy makers from each country and representatives from industry bodies and civil society organisations. The theoretical underpinning for the selection of informants was based in the food policy triangle proposed by Lang et al. (2009) that reflects the contested food policy terrain, characterised by a constant pulling and pushing amongst the state, supply chain and civil society (Lang et al., 2009). Other data analysed were reports, constitutions and communications from the case studies. MSCs are cooperatives with two or more classes of members, e.g. in food, MSCs can have a membership comprised of consumers, producers, buyers and workers. Out of the six case studies, five are registered as MSCs; the sixth case is a workers' cooperative, rare in UK farming, following permaculture practices and with high work-er/stakeholder and political engagement.

RESULTS

A diverse range of resistance to co-optation mechanisms emerges from the data and are categorised under the four-layer analytical framework proposed: *-Informal cooperative behaviours:* including events, labour days, social media platforms to celebrate good farming practices, international networking, etc *-Governance:* their inclusive network governance models (based on consensus or weighted voting) introduce complexity but acknowledge the interdependence of different membership types, blurring borders between producers, workers and consumers. *-Social movement:* reviving the cooperative as a nexus for interconnected issues (land, gender, economy) e.g. organising "ethical markets"; developing new sets of principles, innovative cross-country *local to local* initiatives, a new fair trade label and an international network of coops. Some use marginal local breeds and varieties. Diverse members bring resistance experience from non-farming sectors.

-Legal form: opting for multi-stakeholder models to create economic microclimates with alternative currencies, double labelling in produce and unconventional strategies of growth.

CONCLUSIONS

By looking at cooperatives as niches for social, environmental and governance innovation, this research has gone beyond the conventional reductionist lens often applied to the study of ACs based on comparisons of their financial performance against that of private companies. This critical approach has revealed a range of deviant mainstreaming strategies of MSCs in two different countries. They balance on a tightrope, trying to survive as enterprises while advancing their visions for alternative food systems, the economy and society. Organising both internally and externally in line with more place-based and reflexive governance approaches, they place a focus on processes and relations rather than on standards that are more likely to be co-opted, as it has happened to some extent to the organic and fair trade movements. For this reason, it can be argued that these emerging cooperatives are *oppositional* models to conventional ACs that use cooperation as a means to perform better in the current system, without challenging it or attempting to transform it.

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