Fighting Precarity with Co-operation? Worker Co-operatives in the Cultural Sector.

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In an article entitled *In the Name of Love* Miya Tokumitsu reflects on "DWYL – do what you love" as dominant credo of contemporary work culture. She argues that the DWYL mantra suggests that "labour is not something one does for compensation, but an act of self-love" (Tokumitsu 2014: 11). The recent expansion of academic research on cultural sector work has shown that cultural workers often experience their work life as fulfilling, enjoyable and, indeed, loveable. However, behind the surface of fun, pleasurable creative work studies have also revealed a generation with little income, little security, but highly pressurized, precarious and individualized working lives. If there is one main finding that can be concluded from the research on cultural sector work, then, it probably is that the working lives of so-called creatives are complex and contradictory, combining work satisfaction and relatively high levels of autonomy with job insecurity, low pay, anxiety and inequality (McRobbie 2005, Ross 2006/7; McGuigan 2010, Huws 2010, Gregg 2011, Gill 2011).

More than autonomy and insecurity just existing alongside each other, it is precisely the experience of autonomy and fulfilment that makes cultural work an ideal field for introducing insecure and precarious working conditions, and for constituting the creative worker as an ideal entrepreneurial subject of neoliberal capitalism. Or, as Tokumitso puts it: "Nothing makes exploitation go down easier than convincing workers that they are doing what they love" (Tokumitsu 2014: 14).

The exploitation of cultural workers often does not take the form of traditional wage labour relationships. In 2011 artistic, literary and media professions formed the largest group of freelance workers in the UK, accounting for 265,000 out of 1.56 million freelancers (Kitching and Smallbone 2012: xx). A study about the early careers of 3,500 graduates in art, design, crafts and media studies subjects conducted by Ball, Pollard and Stanley (2010) between 2008 and 2010 confirms that close to half of the graduates in these subjects had engaged in freelance work in the first four to six years of their careers. 45% reported that they had worked freelance after graduating (Ball, Pollard and Stanley 2010, xxiii); and at the time of the study 48% were engaged in portfolio working, often combining paid employment, self-employment and unpaid work (Ball, Pollard and Stanley 2010: 207).

Freelance cultural workers form their own micro businesses, absolving the companies contracting them of any responsibility to ensure social security benefits and labour rights. In this sense cultural work has become a symbol for the dismantling of the welfare state and the rise of neoliberal work cultures (Gill and Pratt 2008: 3). Freelance cultural workers might not have a stable income,

job security, unemployment insurance, holiday and sick pay or paid parental leave but it all seems to be worth it, as long they can do what they love. While the anti-worker elements of this DWYL ideology, described so convincingly by Tokumitso (2014), are evident, it also seems a bit hasty to completely dismiss the desire to gain enjoyment and pleasure from one's working life. Instead it seems necessary to investigate the possibility of a genuinely humanized work process that is neither exploited nor alienated and satisfies the complexity of human needs.

While research on cultural work gives a rich picture of its merits, problems and contradictions, the question of how working conditions can be improved seems less clear. This paper therefore aims to explore avenues for resistance to precarious and exploited labour in the cultural sector. In particular, I will be focussing on worker co-operatives as an alternative way of organising cultural work. Worker co-operatives are organisations that are owned and controlled by the people working in them. The World Declaration on Worker Co-operatives highlights that worker co-ops have "the objective of creating and maintaining sustainable jobs and generating wealth, in order to improve the quality of life of the worker-members, dignify human work, allow workers' democratic self-management and promote community and local development" (CICOPA 2004: 3).

In the following I will begin by tracing some of the historical roots of current neoliberal work cultures and look at various starting points for resistance, before discussing the potentials and limits of worker co-ops to begin to reimagine cultural work.

1. From the social critique to the artistic critique and back again?

In order to understand the contradictions of cultural work and identify possibilities for collective strategies of resistance, it is worth taking a moment to review some of the histories and transformations of working cultures in the 20th century. Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) argue that post-Fordist work culture is to a certain extent a response to some of the demands of protest movements of the 1960s. Their so-called artistic critique of capitalism demanded authenticity and freedom and called for more autonomy, creativity, flexibility as well as less hierarchy and top-down control at work. However, these demands were realised in ways that coincided with a corporate drive for outsourcing risks onto individuals and reducing corporate responsibility for their workforce. According to Chiapello, "the development of flexible neo-capitalism can be seen as the result of the co-optation of proposals of artistic critique by business interests" (Chiapello 2004: 593). Neoliberalism built on and distorted the very real yearning for more autonomy and self-determination at work and in life. Thus, as Peter Frase (2014) argues, "neoliberalism can be seen not just as a tool to smash the institutions of the working class, but *also* as a mystified and dishonest representation of the workers' own frustrated desires for freedom and autonomy".

As Boltanski and Chiapello highlight, this was not the first time in history that capitalism co-opted the demands of its critics. Criticism in earlier periods was shaped by the so-called social critique that confronts capitalism as a system of exploitation, inequality, "the egoism of private interest in bourgeois society and the growing poverty of the popular classes in a society of unprecedented wealth" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007: 38). In the first half of the 20th century a strong social critique informed the creation of welfare states in Europe and to a lesser extent in America (Chiapello 2004, 593), which, combined with post-war economic growth and Keynesian economic policy, contributed to a period of relative prosperity in Western industrialised countries, often referred to as the 'golden age' of capitalism (Hobsbawm 1994: 259, Marglin and Schor 1992).

From the late 1960s onwards, cracks in this seemingly neat and polished version of capitalism became visible, not only in the form of economic crisis but also through an increasing dissatisfaction of people with hierarchical social structures, Fordist control and inflexibility at the workplace, global inequality and gender injustice, among others. It is in this context that we need to understand the shift from a social to an artistic critique (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007), or as Nancy Fraser (2013a) argues, from demands for redistribution to demands for recognition. In the decades that followed many progressive critics turned towards a politics of identity and difference rejecting unifying categories such as class and exploitation. Towards the end of the 20th century, the social critique, as a critique of exploitation that targets one of the basic foundations of the capitalist system, came increasingly out of fashion, while postmodern identity politics was gaining popularity. As Nancy Fraser puts it, the "critique centred on capitalist crisis was pronounced reductive, deterministic and dépassé" (Fraser 2013a: 227).

This lack of attention paid to issues of class, economic inequality and injustice provided an ideal climate for co-opting the demands for more autonomy, freedom and authenticity at work in a way that opened up the possibility for creating an ideal capitalist workforce: happy and committed while at the same time disenfranchised, cheap and always ready to work. This process was aided by both the rise of knowledge work in Western countries in the context of a new international division of labour (Fröbel, Heinrichs and Kreye 1981) including recent celebrations of the "creative industries" as "oil of the 21st century" (Ross, 2008: 32) and weakened labour rights as a result of neoliberal economic policies (McGuigan 2005: 230). Freedom thus also came to mean the employer's freedom to hire and fire, the freedom from ensuring social security, the freedom from the need to guarantee a stable income, the freedom from respecting worker rights.

It consequently seems fair to say that many of today's precarious workers are experiencing the bittersweet taste of freedom under capitalism, which already Karl Marx described as the foundation of capitalist exploitation. Capitalism rests on free workers who are free to choose which company to work for, they can decide whether or not to sell their labour power and to whom, entering free contractual relationships with their employers. The worker is "free in a double sense that as a free individual he can dispose of his labour-power as his own

commodity, and that, on the other hand, he has no other commodity for sale" (Marx 1990,:272). Left with a "free" choice the worker can decide to either sell her labour power according to conditions determined by capitalist labour markets or to refuse to do so, accepting all the potential life-threatening consequences of this free decision. Marx's image of the "double free" worker is thus as relevant as ever. A freelance cultural worker might be free from hierarchical control, but she is also free to starve. In this sense autonomy remains an illusion. The question is therefore how it can be possible to achieve autonomy that is not constrained by fundamental insecurity.

It might seem tempting to demand a return to the relative security of Fordist capitalism. However, as the artistic critique highlights, despite the fact that it offered certain levels of social security to large parts of the population in Western countries, the model of the Fordist welfare state was far from being without problems. Feminists for example have stressed that Fordist "state organised capitalism" was based on a paradox in that it essentially depended on the welfare provided by women through unpaid care work, while at the same time failing to reward and value it (Fraser 2013, 220; Pateman 2013). The family wage constituted the figure of the male breadwinner as the ideal citizen and housewives as dependent family members. Questioning and challenging these relations has clearly been an important achievement of feminism.

However, the inequalities and gender dynamics of work in post-Fordist capitalism (Gill 2002) show that the socialist feminist critique did not gain enough support. Nancy Fraser for example argues that by neglecting the critique of political economy the liberal feminist critique of "state organised capitalism" rather than pointing at genuine alternatives has unwittingly aligned itself with the expansion of neoliberal capitalism, in which "the dream of women's emancipation is harnessed to the engine of capitalist accumulation" (Fraser 2013a: 221). As liberal feminism gained in popularity, the demand for women to be integrated into labour markets tended to obfuscate that available jobs are often characterised by depressed wage levels, insecurity, overwork and high work pressure. The socialist feminist critique, which problematized the particular situation of women within the unifying experience of life under capitalism as an exploitative class society, did not get sufficiently heard.

In the context of the economic crisis of 2008 and the rise of debt, poverty and unemployment we are witnessing indications of a revival of the social critique. The Occupy movement's famous slogan "We are the 99%" poignantly criticises the inequality of a capitalist system that disproportionally benefits a small number of people at the expense of the majority. Similarly, the Indignados movement in Spain and the protests in Greece clearly highlighted the profound discontent of a generation whose life is shaped by job insecurity, debt and lack of democracy.

These protests have the potential to provide starting points for a collective and political response to insecurity and precarious work that goes beyond reproducing a neoliberal logic of self-managed, competitive and hard working individuals. However, such a renewal of the social critique rather than idealising

Fordist welfare capitalism needs to look beyond it and take seriously worker demands for recognition, authenticity and autonomy, thereby reconciling artistic and social critique.

2. Collectivity

Applying such a unified critique to the realm of cultural sector work depends on an agent to voice this critique and to demand and effect change. It thus requires recognising cultural workers as political subjects. As Ros Gill and Andy Pratt observe, the condition of precariousness also "offers potential for new subjectivities and new kinds of politics" (Gill and Pratt 2008: 3). Guy Standing has described the precariat as a "new dangerous class" that might become a key agent of social change (Standing 2011). Similarly de Peuter (2014) argues for going beyond the image of precarious cultural labourers as docile model workers of post-Fordist capitalism. Rather, it is necessary to take their various practices of resistance seriously - from organizing in co-working spaces, to uniting and building freelancer unions, to their engagement in wider social movements and protests. Precarious workers can thus be part of a workers movement to create an alternative that rejects both hierarchical control and alienated labour as well as (self-)exploitation and precarity.

A traditional means in the fight for labour rights is the union movement. Vincent Mosco (2011) highlights that apart from economic convergence and globalisation, increasing precariousness of employment is one important factor that has weakened the labour movement. Traditional labour unions have been struggling to reach the growing numbers of temporary workers, part time workers, freelancers and agency workers in the cultural industries (Mosco 2011, Mosco and McKercher 2009). Enda Bophy, Nicole Cohen and Greig dePeuter, involved in the Canadian research project Cultural Workers Organize, have investigated the prospects of reinventing labour politics in an age of precarity. They have found that, while the trend towards flexible and insecure employment and freelancing has confronted the labour movement with huge challenges, precarious workers have also started to organise collectively and to create new forms of workers' associations (de Peuter 2011: 422; de Peuter 2014: 268; Cohen 2012: 152).

One example in the US is the Freelancer Union, which aims at "bringing freelancers together to build smarter solutions to health care, retirement, wage security, and other broken systems. We call it New Mutualism."[1] Furthermore, more traditional unions have started focussing on freelance workers. In the UK the National Union of Journalists for example is actively encouraging freelance journalists to join the union, offering them specialist advice on issues such as fees, contracts, copyrights and employment rights[2]. In Europe Joel Dullroy and Anna Chasman have been advocating for the formation of a freelancer rights movement that unites isolated workers in order to collectively campaign for

[1] Freelancers Union. 2014 Online: https://www.freelancersunion.org/about/

[2] National Union of Journalists. Freelance. Online: http://www.nuj.org.uk/work/freelance/

improving working conditions and labour rights of freelance workers (Dullroy and Cashman 2013). In this context, the increasingly popular co-working spaces have the potential to offer freelance workers not just a desk for a couple of days or hours but also a physical space to organise and collectively reflect about political demands and actions. An initiative that tried to encourage collective ways of working particularly in the art world is the project Collective Futures, which mapped and organised workshops for creative collectives in Scotland (Creative Futures 2014).

All of these initiatives are attempts to create moments of solidarity and collectivity that might offer the potential to challenge individualised work cultures. Apart from union politics and labour struggles, another way for freelancers to come together and collectively confront precariousness is by creating organisations that are commonly owned and directed by the people working in them. Andrew Ross argues that "[a]utonomy is a critical goal, and while its attainment is more approachable for the self-employed, there is no reason why it cannot be nurtured inside organisations where the work process has been genuinely humanized" (Ross 2008: 39).

This raises the question of to what extent worker co-operatives can be such organisations that humanize the work process. Worker co-operatives seem to have the potential to maintain the autonomy enjoyed by many freelance cultural workers while at the same time creating a workplace that offers security instead of precariousness, equal rights instead of inequality, and solidarity instead of individualisation.

3. Worker Co-operatives

The history of the worker co-operative movement is long and contested. As a form of radical politics it has stood in the shadow of the union movement and revolutionary class struggle. Radical figures in the labour movement such as Rosa Luxemburg regarded worker co-operatives as doomed to either fail completely or to be co-opted and turned into capitalist businesses. She argued that under the domination of capital and competition "pitiless exploitation […] becomes the condition of each enterprise" (Luxemburg 2008: 80). Thus worker co-operatives would "either become pure capitalist enterprises or, if the workers' interests continue to predominate, end by dissolving" (Luxemburg 2008, 81). Similarly Ernest Mandel stressed that "[t]here have been many examples of worker cooperatives that went wrong; there have even been some that have 'succeeded' – in capitalist terms that is!" (Mandel 1975: 8).

Part of the reason for this dismissive evaluation of worker co-operatives might be the fact that one of the earliest and most influential thinkers of the co-operative movement, the industrialist and utopian socialist Robert Owen, always kept a certain distance from the political radicalism of his time (Thompson 1966: 806). Writing in 1820, Owen argued that realising human happiness would require overcoming competition and private property – not by means of class struggle and revolution, but by creating and expanding co-operative

communities (Owen 1820/1991: 276). Owen's belief that society could be changed without conflict and confrontation might be politically idealist, but does not diminish the relevance of his ideas about the potentials of co-operatives.

Karl Marx regarded the early co-operative factories that emerged in the middle of the 19th century as a positive development. He argued that they "have shown that production on a large scale, and in accord with the behests of modern science, may be carried on without the existence of a class of masters employing a class of hands; that to bear fruit, the means of labor need not be monopolized as a means of dominion over, and of extortion against, the laboring man himself; and that, like slave labor, like serf labor, hired labor is but a transitory and inferior form, destined to disappear before associated labor paying its toil with a willing hand, a ready mind, and a joyous heart" (Marx 1864).

In showing the real possibility of alternatives beyond exploitation and alienation co-operatives suggest a "concrete utopia" (Bloch 1995) or a "real utopia" (Wright 2010). "Concrete utopia" is, for Ernst Bloch, different from abstract utopia or wishful thinking as it is connected to the real, that which is possible: "The point of contact between dreams and life, without which dreams only yield abstract utopia, life only triviality, is given in the utopian capacity which is set on its feet and connected to the Real-Possible" (Bloch 1995: 145f). Co-operatives form such a point of contact. They not only envision, but practically anticipate a social alternative for economic organisation. They are part of a pre-figurative political project.

Carl Boggs has described pre-figurative politics as "the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture and human experience that are the ultimate goal" (Boggs 1977: 100). As a double strategy it combines immediate and immanent change with working towards systemic transformations. As Sheila Rowbotham argues, pre-figurative politics "see the struggle for survival and control as part of the here and now. They can thus contribute towards the process of continually making ourselves anew in the movement towards socialism" (Rowbotham 1979: 140). It seeks to achieve this through a politics of alternative practice and thus politicizes everyday life, breaking down the separation of life and politics (Boggs 1977: 104).

While pre-figurative projects practically demonstrate the possibility of alternatives, they at the same time are constrained by the very reality they are trying to overcome. For Marx worker co-ops were such a pre-figurative project that simultaneously challenges capitalist reality and is constrained by it: "The co-operative factories run by workers themselves are, within the old form, the first examples of the emergence of a new form, even though they naturally reproduce in all cases, in their present organisation, all the defects of the existing system, and must reproduce them" (Marx 1991: 571).

Nearly 200 years after Owen's first co-operative experiments, in the context of economic crisis, the expansion of precarious work and neoliberal individualisation, the idea of workers owning and directing their own

enterprises is being reconsidered as a political strategy (Restakis 2010, Erdal 2011, Wolff 2012, Novkoviv and Webb 2014). However, the concept of worker co-operation is a contested one that not only appeals to radical critics of capitalism but also to moderate reformers and can even be integrated into neoliberal discourses of entrepreneurship and individual responsibility.

In its neoliberal form the idea of workers setting up co-operatives and thus creating their own work can also connect to calls for self-help, self-initiative, entrepreneurialism and individual responsibility. David Cameron's vision of a so-called "Big Society" exemplifies the neoliberal impetus to transfer responsibility from governments or corporations onto individuals. He described the Big Society as a society "where people, in their everyday lives, in their homes, in their neighborhoods, in their workplace don't always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities" (Cameron 2010). Worker co-operatives can be seen as such a means of self help in times of unemployment and precarious work. Indeed, Cameron explicitly endorses co-operatives in the opening quote of the 2014 edition of the annual UK Co-Operative Economy report, where he describes co-operatives as: "A very powerful business model and one I admire" (Co-operatives UK 2014).

While Cameron's approach to co-operatives fits well into neoliberal capitalism, others argue that co-operatives are a means to confront it. From the latter perspective, worker co-operation has been described as a strategy for either a social reform of capitalism or for creating a radical alternative to it. David Erdal (2011) for example puts forward a reformist perspective, arguing that employee owned companies could help to create a more humane, a more just, more equal and a more productive economy. According to Erdal (2011) the benefits of employee ownership range from increased productivity, to a redistribution of wealth and increased happiness and health. Rather than contradicting capitalism, employee ownership revives what he describes as one of capitalism's key principles, that "people come alive as owners" (Erdal 2011: 173). For Erdal, employee ownership is a means not for confronting capitalism but for further diffusing it, stressing: "capitalism is good at creating capital; it is lousy at creating capitalists" (Erdal 2011: 44).

Erdal's arguments echo the view of the influential neoclassical economist Alfred Marshall, who at the 1889 Co-operative Congress argued that in a co-operative "the worker does not produce for others but for himself, which unleashes an enormous capacity for diligent, high quality work that capitalism suppresses" (Marshall 1889: 7 cited in Negri Zamagni 2014: 196). He therefore stressed that the most "wasted product" in capitalist enterprise is the "working capacities of most of the laboring classes" (Marshall 1889: 7 cited in Negri Zamagni 2014: 196).

John Restakis argues that the co-operative form does not question capitalism in any fundamental way, but can be used as a means to improve it. He defines co-operatives as "enterprises that are collectively owned and democratically

controlled by their members for their mutual benefit" (Restakis 2010: 3). While highlighting collective ownership and democratic control, Restakis argues that co-operatives, rather than fundamentally questioning capitalism, can contribute to taming corporate power and thus have the potential of "remaking and humanizing the current capitalist system" (Restakis 2010: 3).

Similarly Vera Negri Zamagni (2014) envisions a co-existence of capitalist and co-operative economic forms. She highlights that the service industries that depend on affective and creative labour are particularly suitable for co-operative business models. According to Negri Zamagni, capitalist companies "can continue to operate in those areas characterized by high levels of standardization and mechanisation in capital-intensive sectors". Co-operatives on the contrary should be controlling "those areas of economic activity where the quality of personal relations and the role played by the human factor are of key importance" (Negri Zamagni 2014: 207).

These arguments suggest an "economic pluralism" (Borzago et al 2009: 5) that acknowledges "the value of differences" and advocates the co-existence of various types of enterprises, from capitalist corporations to social enterprises and co-operative organisations.

A danger of this argument for "economic pluralism" is that co-operative workplaces remain confined to groups of privileged workers, for example in less resource intensive knowledge industries, while others stay trapped within exploitative structures of capitalist corporations. For Erdal (2011), Restakis (2010) and Negri Zamagni (2014) the idea of worker co-ops remains immanent within capitalism. Advocating worker co-operatives without questioning capitalism means to advocate a system in which workers "become their own capitalist" (Marx 1991: 571). Turning workers into capitalists might improve the conditions of individual workers but does not solve other structural problems of capitalism that lead to huge social inequalities, economic and environmental crises. A genuinely humanised economy that is democratic, socially just and truly sustainable comes into conflict with capitalism as a system that is by definition based on limitless accumulation, a drive for constant growth, exploitation and competition. If, as Erdal (2011), Restakis (2010) and Negri Zamagni (2014) seem to argue, worker co-operatives can overcome these problems and genuinely humanize the economy, this transformed economy no longer should be described as capitalist.

Rather than naturalising capitalism it thus seems important to take a more radical perspective that acknowledges that genuine alternatives are not only necessary and desirable but also possible. Richard Wolff in his book *Democracy at Work. A Cure for Capitalism* suggests the term "worker self-directed enterprises" to describe enterprises in which workers collectively produce, appropriate and distribute surpluses (Wolff 2012: 119). He highlights that the expansion of workers' self-directed enterprises could increase democratic decision power over the economy, realise a more just distribution of surplus, confront alienation and thus contribute to establishing a genuine alternative to capitalism. Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy argue that worker co-operatives

are "democratizing management, wage setting, and surplus distribution" (Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy 2013: 76), and so can contribute to the project of creating a radically different socially and environmentally just economy.

A radical approach distinguishes worker co-operatives from employee owned firms. Employee owned firms, like for example the British retailer John Lewis, reproduce the principle of individual ownership as workers own individual shares of the company. Employee ownership also says little about how decision-power is organized, which typically remains hierarchical and unevenly distributed (Radical Routes 2012: 90). Radical worker co-operatives on the contrary are based on collective or common ownership and democratic decision-making. Collective or common ownership is different from just co-ownership. The radical co-op network Radical Routes (2012) highlights that in a common ownership co-op, members do not own individual shares, which means that any surplus that is generated is not distributed to members but remains common property of the co-op. Common ownership also means that members have equal control and decision power over all matters related to the operation of the co-op.

If a common ownership co-op discontinues its business, the assets of the co-op are not distributed to individual members but are given away to another co-op or to help support the co-operative movement (Radical Routes 2012: 57). In contrast, if a co-op is co-owned by its members they can claim individual shares of the co-op's assets in case it ends its business activity (Radical Routes 2012: 57).

Interestingly, such common ownership co-ops described by Radical Routes correspond to Marx's vision of an "association of free men" as a alternative to capitalism:

> "Let us finally imagine, for a change, an association of free men, working with the means of production held in common, and expending their many different forms of labour-power in full self-awareness as one single social labour force. The total product of our imagined association is a social product. One part of this product serves as fresh means of production and, remains social. But another part is consumed by the members of the association as means of subsistence" (Marx 1990: 171).

The generated wealth is never distributed to owners as profit, but either serves as means of subsistence for individual members or remains shared property. Common wealth replaces private profit.

Radical worker co-operatives replace individual ownership and hierarchical decision power with common ownership and collective decision-making. It is because of this concrete utopian (Bloch 1995) element they can challenge the ideology of "capitalist realism", which as Mark Fisher argues acts "as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action" (Fisher 2009: 16). A radical concept of worker co-operatives keeps alive the possibility of real alternatives. It contributes to confronting the naturalization of capitalism, revealing, "what is

presented as necessary and inevitable to be a mere contingency" and making "what was previously deemed to be impossible seem attainable" (Fisher 2009: 17). As pre-figurative politics co-ops however are also part of an "attempt not just to imagine, but to make, the world otherwise" (Levitas 2013: xiii). Making the world otherwise confronts worker co-ops with concrete struggles and contradictions, some of which I will consider in the next section.

4. Worker co-operatives in the cultural sector

In the context of the Internet and digitisation, terms such as participation, collaboration, sharing, openness, access, peer production and co-creation have entered the everyday vocabulary of cultural producers and consumers worldwide. On the one hand, alternative cultural practices ranging from music file sharing to open source software production and open access publishing have challenged business models throughout the cultural industries indicating the possibility of a "commons-based alternative" (Bauwens 2012). On the other hand, corporate giants like Facebook or Google have discovered user-generated content as a way of harnessing the collective creativity of Internet users. They use a rhetoric of collaboration, openness and sharing not only to encourage users to contribute content and "share and express what matters to them"[3] but also for describing their practice of selling user data to advertisers, or in Facebook's words, of "sharing with third-party partners and customers"[4].

These developments show that while collaborative modes of cultural production are gaining importance, they often remain captured within corporate structures in which the rhetoric of openness and sharing serves to obscure the accumulation of private profit and power. In this context, cultural worker co-operatives might offer an alternative organisational form in the cultural sector that not only encourages the sharing of content and ideas but also of material resources and power through collective ownership.

By contributing to building alternative economic structures based on solidarity, co-operation and collective ownership, worker co-ops might also play a role in transforming working conditions in the cultural sector. However, as every pre-figurative project, worker co-ops cannot fully escape the pressures of the existing system. Alternative projects in the cultural sector need to navigate complex tensions and potentials conflicts between creative processes, economic necessity and political aspirations (see for example Hesmondhalgh 1997). In the following I explore the potentials and limits of cultural worker co-ops by looking at economic precariousness, individualised work cultures and socio-political inequality.

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[3] Facebook. 2015. Mission Statement. https://www.facebook.com/facebook/info?tab=page_info accessed March 9, 2015.

[4] Facebook. 2015. Data Policy. https://www.facebook.com/policy.php accessed March 9, 2015.

4.1 Economic precariousness

The prevalence of short-term, contingent employment and freelance contracts, strong competition and low pay often subjects cultural workers to a profound condition of precariousness (Gill 2011, Gill and Pratt 2008, Huws 2010, Ross 2006/7, 2008, de Peuter 2011, Standing 2011: 10). In the classical model of the 20th century welfare state social security was largely tied to employment. The trend to outsource work tasks and the rise of freelance labour has undermined this system. Freelance workers often do not have access to paid annual leave, sick pay, paid parental leave and unemployment benefits. In countries where health insurance is tied to employment, freelancers face an additional challenge of having to pay for either compulsory public or private health insurance. Guy Standing has consequently described economic precariousness as a condition of fundamental insecurity – insecurity in terms of the labour market, future employment, job development, skill reproduction, income and representation (Standing 2011: 10). In order to confront precariousness, worker co-operatives would have to offer stability and security.

The concept of worker co-ops focuses on democratising ownership and decision power and thus empowering workers by giving them more control over their working lives. These principles seem to confront precariousness at various levels. At the level of ownership worker co-ops break up the distinction between owners and workers, employers and employees. They suggest an alternative way of organising ownership that is neither private nor administered via the state, but based on common property. Greig de Peuter and Nick Dyer Witheford therefore describe worker co-ops as a form of "labour commons" (2010: 32): "By labour commons we mean the democratized organisation of productive and reproductive work" (de Peuter and Dyer Witheford 2010: 45). While in a capitalist wage relationship part of the wealth produced by a worker is turned into profits, co-ownership in a co-op means that workers appropriate all income collectively. The generated wealth is used to fund the workers' individual incomes as well as to further develop the co-op. A co-op thus offers security in the sense that all members benefit equally from the wealth they are producing.

At the level of decision power the principle of democratic decision making means that workers gain control over various aspects of their economic lives including business planning and business strategy, working hours, how income is distributed or how work is shared. Instead of subjecting workers to the decisions of owners or managers, co-ops enable members to take control over their working lives, rendering them more predictable, adaptable and shapeable.

However, in practice these potentials are challenged both on an internal and external level. At the internal level a key question is how the principles of worker co-operation are put into practice. Worker ownership can for example range from workers holding individual shares to a common ownership model. Democratic decision power can be limited to a system where members elect their managers, be based on a majority voting system or be practiced as a radically democratic consensus model. Internal structures also vary depending on the size of a co-op. Increases in membership numbers can create additional difficulties in terms of maintaining equal and democratic structures. Income

growth can help a co-op to flourish but might on the other hand also create new management challenges and increase pressure on individual worker owners. Depending how a co-op is organized internally workers will have different degrees of control over the co-op and their economic lives.

In addition to giving worker control over their economic lives, a key potential benefit of worker co-operatives is that members can escape the precariousness of freelance work by becoming an employee of the co-op. The co-op can use parts of its collective income to fund a stable and solidary social security scheme that benefits all members. However, this benefit can only be realised if the co-op is economically successful and secures enough income to fund the members' individual incomes and the collectively organized benefits. Being economically successful in capitalism means that the co-op needs to succeed in competing in a capitalist market.

While at the internal level the members of a co-op can decide how ownership and decision power are organised, they cannot overcome the dependencies that result from operating within a capitalist economic system. Cornforth et al (1988: 44) identified three degrees of dependency that can affect worker co-ops: strong dependency on other larger companies through sub-contracting; medium dependencies created through a highly competitive market, or relative autonomy that can be sustained through operating in a niche market. Dependencies can also be created through the need for financing. While capital requirements in the cultural sector tend to be rather low compared to other industries, starting or advancing a co-op might still require financial resources to purchase necessary production equipment such as computers, software, film or recording equipment etc. In order to maintain worker control, accepting money from an external investor is not an option for co-operatives. But also taking out bank loans is risky and it might jeopardize the co-op's autonomy and independence.

As participants in a capitalist economy, co-ops always are at risk of losing in the competition and thus being unable to secure a stable income for all members. Cultural industries have been described as particularly risky and unpredictable and economically unsuccessful cultural products by far outnumber the profitable ones (Garnham 1990: 161, Hesmondhalgh 2013: 27). Digitisation and online file-sharing have further exacerbated these insecurities, making it increasingly difficult to earn money from selling cultural goods. These uncertainties also impact cultural co-operatives.

Ownership does not necessarily mean security. Workers might end up co-owning very little or nothing. In order to increase chances of succeeding in competitive markets, worker owners might even reproduce patterns of self-exploitation, working long hours for little pay. When discussing the potential of co-ops to address precarious labour it is important to acknowledge the structural insecurity of cultural industries and the precarity of capitalist markets in general that co-ops also cannot escape.

At the economic level, worker co-ops are thus confronted with a contradiction between anti-capitalist potentials and capitalist reality. On the one hand, they

challenge key capitalist principles such as class divisions and exploitation and suggest the possibility of an alternative economic organisation based on common property and economic democracy. On the other hand, the legal structures available and the need to compete on capitalist markets tie worker co-ops to the capitalist system. Cultural co-ops are thus confronted with the "difficulties of reconciling the contradictory demands of economic survival and political ambition" (Comedia 1984, 96), that have often shaped alternative projects in the cultural sector and beyond. The extent to which worker co-ops are able to confront economic precariousness depends on their ability to navigate these contradictions.

4.2 Individualized culture

Recent debates on cultural production often emphasize the economic, social and cultural importance of collaboration, co-creation and community in the Internet age (eg Benkler 2006, 2011, Lessig 2008, Leadbeater 2008, Gauntlett 2011) or the inherently co-operative character of cultural goods (Hardt and Negri 2009).

This discourse on collaborative modes of production stands in stark contrast to individualized work cultures that prevail in the cultural sector. The prevalence of freelance work for many cultural workers means that they "become their own micro-structure" (McRobbie 2005: 376). Escaping the control and hierarchical work structures of standard employment, often comes at the cost of a constant pressure to manage, improve and monitor the self (Gill 2011) in order to succeed in a competitive market. Home offices or cafes tend to replace joint workplaces. Flexibility and temporariness as well as competition among cultural workers often further undermine the development of meaningful work relations, resulting in a condition of individualisation.

As Jeremy Gilbert argues, to confront this neoliberal individualisation there is "desperate need for new ways to imagine, conceptualise and institutionalise democratic forms of collectivity" (Gilbert 2014: 48). The co-operative model offers an opportunity to replace the one-person microstructure with a more collective organisational form. It is perhaps one of the most immediate benefits of co-ops that they can form a counterpoint to neoliberal individualisation and be a source for overcoming isolation and experiencing collectivity. This collectivity can for example enable economic solidarity and the creation of mutual support structures for childcare, paid leave or sick pay.

However, it is also important to acknowledge that not all co-ops have a strong political ambitions and the desire to transform working cultures in the cultural sector. Some co-ops might have chosen democratic structures for reasons of efficiency, convenience or for improving their individual working conditions. Similarly, in some long-running and very established co-ops, principles can get watered-down or become lost in everyday work routines. Catherine P. Mulder in her case study of the London Symphony Orchestra, which has been run as a self-governing orchestra since 1904, for example highlights that "the current musicians do not really grasp how unique and progressive their organizational structure is. Their ignorance could be due firstly to the orchestra's longevity; the

musicians may simply be unfamiliar with its revolutionary past" (Mulder 2015, 32).

The potential to challenge individualised cultural production is likely to be more powerful within politicised co-ops whose members are committed to co-operative ideals. A politicised environment is more conducive to workplace solidarity and broader political activism. Collective work structures can also inspire collaborative forms of cultural production that are more appropriate to an understanding of culture as common.

At the same time, under capitalism there are limits to the production of cultural commons. In order to generate income cultural co-ops still need to sell their products. This leaves cultural co-ops with the dilemma that while they might co-operate internally to produce in common they still are competing on capitalist markets, buying and selling commodities. This model of restricting access to culture and selling cultural good as commodities not only contradicts the idea of a co-operative and inclusive cultural sector but has also been economically challenged. As it is easy for every Internet user to share cultural goods such music, films, images or any other texts freely online with friends as well as strangers, securing a stable income from selling cultural commodities is becoming increasingly difficult.

These problems illustrate that challenging individualised production requires on the one hand politicised co-ops whose members are committed to co-operative ideals. On the other hand, transforming work in the cultural sector cannot depend solely on individual co-operatives. Structural shifts need to be enabled by changes in funding for culture that offer an alternative to the individualized access to culture based on commodity exchange. Policies that could decrease the dependency on selling cultural commodities for example include generous public funding sources for cultural co-ops or a guaranteed basic income. Such measures could have a double benefit: on the one hand, making culture more openly and equally accessible; and on the other, freeing cultural co-ops from market pressures.

Clearly, the demand for public funding for culture runs counter to the current climate of cuts and austerity. As Garnham has argued the policy discourse on creative industries is based on an individualised notion of cultural production that has been used to justify a shift in cultural policy from ensuring access to culture to introducing stronger copyright protections and thus exclusion from cultural products (Garnham 2006: 26). The effort to create a more co-operative cultural sector thus also needs to demand political change. Until income streams for cultural production are radically altered, cultural co-ops will continue to face a contradiction between the co-operative production of cultural commons and the competitive trading of cultural commodities.

4.3 Inequality

Research shows that the characteristics of precarious work – including long hours, low pay, no benefits, low levels of security, flexibility, informality –

privilege workers from wealthy backgrounds, without caring responsibilities, health issues or disabilities (Gill 2011). Less affluent individuals will likely find it difficult to afford the necessary education and continuous training, and to bridge periods without income. Caring responsibilities often create additional financial difficulties and make it impossible to be flexible enough to compete for jobs. Furthermore, the absence of defined workplaces renders workplace politics increasingly difficult, effectively undermining democratic processes and equal opportunities (McRobbie 2005: 380).

The co-operative model allows to envision different workplaces that offer every member opportunities for training and development, which combine flexible working hours with secure and regular pay, and ensure access to health insurance, sick pay, paid parental leave and child care. Such solidary and co-operative organisational structures could help making work in the cultural sector more accessible and diverse.

However, in order to be able to build such genuinely humanised workplaces co-operatives need to have a stable income. In a capitalist market economy setting up and running co-ops involves risk and often requires investing a lot of time and money, which many people unable to afford. While a solidary and co-operative model demonstrates the feasibility of alternatives, co-ops will not automatically abolish inequality in cultural sector work.

Co-ops are part of the effort of building alternatives to a "competitive individualism" (Gilbert 2014), by creating mutual support structures for child care, training, sick pay, secure work and income, and so on. The increased need for self-organised structures of support is partly a consequence of neoliberal austerity and the cutback of reliable public welfare systems. At the same time, the effort to build these support networks needs to be careful not to reproduce the neoliberal maneuver of replacing social solidarity with individual responsibility. To navigate these contradictions the co-op movement needs to be connected to broader political struggles. As Sheila Rowbotham argued already in the 1970s, despite its importance, "[s]elf-help community activity is not a substitute for the equally important radical struggles within the welfare state sector" (Rowbotham 1979: 137). In order to enact change a movement for humanising work needs to struggle at various fronts. Pre-figurative politics that build alternative organisations needs to be connected to other "local democratic and state power struggles" (Boggs 1977: 121) for redistributing wealth and challenging inequality.

4. Conclusions

In this paper I have considered worker co-operatives as an alternative to precarious, individualized and unequal cultural work. I have argued that despite facing various contradictions, cultural co-ops can offer a real possibility for humanizing work so that autonomy, freedom and sharing are freed from their neoliberal distortions. Instead of empty promises, co-operative workplaces could offer genuine autonomy by allowing everyone involved to partake autonomously

and equally in decisions about economic life; true freedom that is not constrained by necessity but instead is underpinned by solidary support to ensure a secure and stable income; and true sharing that, rather than being misused as a synonym for selling, comes to signify collectively shared ownership and decision power. Such workplaces could contribute to replacing competitive and individualized work cultures with more collaborative forms of producing cultural commons.

Co-operatives are not perfect, and in practice they are confronted with a variety of difficulties and contradictions. However, by introducing democracy into the workplace co-ops open up a space to begin to collectively envision, create and demand work structures beyond exploitation that both provide economic security and allow for pleasure, self-determination and autonomy.

Instead of merely envisioning an alternative future, co-operatives are the practice of building it. As a pre-figurative political project co-ops aim to create immediate improvements for the people working in them, while at the same time working to build a structural alternative to capitalist exploitation and competition, one co-op at a time. As dePeuter and Dyer Witheford argue, the co-operative idea is powerful because it entails opportunities for expansion:

> "Practices of cooperation among coops suggest the possibility that within the overall global system of capital a non-capitalist sub-system might grow its counter-power, reduce reliance on the primary system, and potentially render it redundant. In inter/coop cooperation we see at least a nascent possibility of how the social product of the labour commons can contribute to the expansion of a new system which seeks to continually enlarge its autonomy" (dePeuter and Dyer Witheford 2010, 40)

Such a radical vision of an alternative co-operative economy provides an outside point, a concrete utopia, that breaks through the naturalization of capitalism. However, while co-ops might be acting against the system, they are still acting within it and are thus confronted with its problems, such as resource inequality, precariousness and competition. Within this environment, success is not guaranteed and co-ops have to face contradictions between their co-operative, equal and democratic internal principles and the competitive and undemocratic structure of capitalist markets. Furthermore, as the neoliberal take on co-ops as a form of self-help and entrepreneurial initiative illustrates, co-ops are not immune from being incorporated and made productive for capitalism.

However, even in light of these problems and contradictions, adopting a "degeneration thesis" (Egan 1990) that dismisses co-ops as doomed to either turn into capitalist enterprises or fail completely (Luxemburg 2008, 80, Mandel 1975, 8), does not seem to do justice to their alternative potentials. The question much rather is how co-ops navigate the contradictions they are confronted with. As Boltanski and Chiapello argue it "is pointless to search for a clear separation between impure ideological constructs, intended to serve capitalist accumulation, and pure, utterly uncompromised ideas, which would make it possible to criticise it" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007, 20). It therefore seems

important to discuss how it is possible to improve the conditions for co-ops to flourish and expand.

Improving these conditions requires political reforms, which need to be demanded by broad movement for social change that can include social movements and other forms of political activism, radical political parties and a reinvigorated union movement. Important radical reforms could for example include the stricter taxation of corporate profits in order to redistribute wealth, a guaranteed basic income, public grants for starting co-operatives and increases in public funding for the cultural sector. Co-operatives will not change cultural production, work and the economy single-handedly, but they are an important component in a co-operative effort of taking control over the economy and making it work for everyone.

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