Creative hubs: a cooperative space?

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Abstract
How equitable and co-operative are creative hubs? Whilst their image is often one of creative conviviality, their political economies are often fairly diverse; including a range of forms of cultural industry from the corporate to the co-operative. Indeed, we might, for example, map a spectrum or a taxonomy of co-working ranging from corporate industries leasing communal space to cultural workers through to the worker's co-operative where responsibilities and profits are shared. Drawing on a range of historical material and contemporary interviews with worker's co-operatives in the cultural sector, this chapter considers the benefits brought by worker's co-ops to cultural hubs in London in both their contemporary and recent historical manifestations. Taking a critical and polemical stance, it argues that supporting worker's co-operatives should be central to any strategic provision for creative hubs.

Creative hubs, cultural work and creative industries policy.

Work in the cultural sector is increasingly precarious, persistently unequal structurally individualised and competitive (see for example Banks and Milestone 2011, de Peuter 2011, 2014, Hope and Richards 2015, Gill 2001, 2014, Gill and Pratt 2008, McRobbie 2015, Oakley 2011, Oakley and O'Brian 2015, Ross 2000). These realities of work stand in stark contrast to the idealised depictions of cultural work that are often promoted in cultural policy documents (McRobbie 2001, Banks and Hesmondhalgh 2009, Oakley 2011). Banks and Hesmondhalgh for example have identified a "reluctance of policy-makers and governments to address the specific conditions of creative work – even as they continue to vigorously promote the 'creative industries' that both contain and depend upon it." (Banks and Hesmondhalgh 2009, 415). Similarly, Kate Oakley argues that for many years "policy on creative industries concerned itself with supporting small businesses and expanding related training and education; little attention was paid to conditions of labour" (Oakley 2011, 285). Any policies targeting work in the cultural and creative industries have tended to focus on training, mentoring, internships and scholarships, but did not pay much attention to the cultural sectors potential to offer good work on a large scale (Oakley 2011, 286, Banks and Hesmondhalgh 2009, 425). Issues such as low pay, unreasonable working hours, insecurity, and discrimination have often remained absent from "relentlessly upbeat" policy narratives (Banks and Hesmondhalgh 2009, 425).

Given the absence of work in cultural industries policy in general, it is hardly surprising that policy literature on creative hubs emphasizes their potential contribution to business development, but pays little attention to working conditions. In its 2003 *Creative London* report, the London Development Agency for example stressed that hubs "provide a space for work, participation and consumption. This includes the help to nurture emerging talent and to link it to broader networks, a first-stop for businesses support and access to finance, and promotion of local talent and local businesses […] they support communities of practice, not for profit and commercial, large and small, part-time and full-time activity – they are not just incubators for small businesses, but have a wider remit" (London Development Agency 2003, 34f). Here, creative hubs are seen as both beneficial for creative businesses and their surrounding communities. Similarly a more recent report on creative hubs issued by the British Council identifies "a wide range of impacts including start-up ventures, jobs, new products and services, future investment (public and commercial), talent development, regional talent retention, informal education and engagement, training, urban regeneration, research and development, new networks, innovative models of organisation, quality of life enhancements and resilience" (Dovey and Pratt et al 2016, 5).

Existing literature on creative hubs tends to foreground business support services as key means for supporting the creative sector and local communities. Acknowledging the structural precarity of the cultural and creative industries Virani (2015, 7) argues that an approach to creative hubs that focuses on the services they provide to small creative businesses can create opportunities for growth and sustainability. He describes hubs as "a putative model for providing mainly business support in a local context for specifically the creative sector" (Virani 2015, 3). According to Dovey and Pratt "Hubs represent a collective approach to coping with uncertain social, cultural and economic environments and processes of creativity and innovation" (Dovey and Pratt et al 2016, 4).

However, whilst focusing solely on job creation, education, talent and business development can contribute to an expansion of the creative industries, it does little to improve the quality of jobs that are being created. Realizing any potentials hubs might have to encourage collectivity among cultural workers, reduce precarity and improve working conditions in the sector requires a shift in perspective that zooms in on the needs of workers, rather than industry and businesses.

Whilst the image of creative hubs is therefore often one of creative conviviality, as this book illustrates, their political economies are often fairly diverse: they include a range of forms of cultural industry from the corporate to the co-operative. We might, for example, envisage a spectrum or a taxonomy of 'co-working' -- often a key feature of hubs -- ranging from corporate industries leasing communal space to cultural workers through to the worker's co-operative where responsibilities and profits are shared (see de Peuter *et al* 2017). To accomplish a shift in perspective towards putting the needs of all producers in creative hubs first, we argue that policies, processes and practices connected to cultural hubs could take inspiration

from the model of worker co-operation.

Co-operatives

Worker co-operatives are businesses that are collectively owned and democratically controlled by the people working in them. The World Declaration on Worker Co-operatives highlights that worker co-ops aim at "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).

The co-operative model is as old as the history of capitalism. And yet it has not lost its appeal to those looking for alternatives to unequal, exploited and precarious work. In recent years the co-operative model has gained renewed popularity and been adjusted to suit contemporary working realities. Advocates of platform cooperativism for example suggest turning private Internet platforms such as AirBnb or Uber into co-operatives owned by all users (Scholz 2017). This movement envisions a true sharing economy in which technology is employed to serve people's needs rather than being used as a tool to facilitate super-precarious work. Another adaptation of the co-operative model is the suggestion to create freelancers co-operatives as a response to the rise in precarious freelance employment over the past decade (Co-operatives UK 2016). The report *Not Alone* issued by Co-operatives UK argues that co-operatives can provide important services for the self-employed including advice and companionship, back office support, legal and financial advice, shared workspace, shared equipment, access to finance, collective insurance and marketing (Co-operatives UK 2016, 49). These services largely resemble those often provided by creative hubs. However, the report does not just focus on what services are beneficial for the self-employed but on how these services should be delivered and highlights the advantages co-operative models have over commercial providers.

A co-operative insurance model for example is the so-called Bread Fund. In a Bread Fund 25-50 self-employed people come together as a group in order to collectively create sick pay insurance for all members. Each month the members pay a defined amount of money into the fund. If a member becomes unable to work due to health issues the fund pays this member a monthly sick pay allowance[1]. Contrary to commercial insurance schemes this co-operatively organised model ensures that all money paid into the fund is returned directly to members in need rather than contributing to the profits of a private insurance company. In addition, Bread Funds help to create a sense of community among otherwise isolated workers. Similarly co-working can beneficially be organised in a co-operative manner. Workplace Co-operative 115 was set up in London in 2002 as secondary co-operative of self-employed workers and small businesses in the creative industries to create secure, affordable and communal workspace. In an interview a member of 115 described

[1] http://breadfunds.uk

the decision to set up the co-op as a response to the lack of good quality workspace that also offers a true sense of community: "*We wanted to set up something where sole practitioners, and companies of two, can work in a way that felt good. And co-ops seem to offer that […] There are lots of places that are hubs, but have that sort of feeling of community that it feels slightly spurious sometimes, it feels a bit like it's a kind of add on and really it's a kind of money making proposition*" (Workspace Co-operative 115)[2]

Collaboration, community, mutual support and solidarity are among the core values of co-operatives. Co-ops therefore actively challenge individualised working cultures that often shape work in the creative industries and beyond (Sandoval 2017). While often remaining unmentioned in cultural policy documents, models of worker co-operation have in fact been successfully applied in the creative sector. The directory of Co-operatives UK currently lists 348 co-ops under the category 'creative'[3]. A series of interviews conducted with cultural sector co-operators across the UK[4] showed that co-op members often feel that the model offers a real alternative to dominant industry patterns. One interviewee for example stressed that co-ops are *"challenging the art system as it is now: highly exploitative, really bad relations between people" (Interviewee 4*). Similarly, another interviewee described the decision to start a co-operative as "*a reaction against what we met in a previous job. We were determined not to have a hierarchy when we formed a co-op*" (Interviewee 17).

A key structural difference to most workplaces is that co-operatives offer equal say and often also equal pay to all members. In practice this means that "*if you work here, you own the business, basically. And we are all on equal pay*" (interviewee 12). As a result of collective ownership and decision making, co-operators tend to experience their day-to-day work routines as highly self-determined: "*in short, working conditions are lovely, we get to decide what we do everyday*" (interviewee 21). The absence of hierarchies between workers and bosses is experienced as particularly rewarding: "*I have no boss! It's like, you get that we are all bosses and we are all workers […] Nobody has power over me and I don't have power over anyone and that is really important. So you get a sense of satisfaction, a sense of being listened to*" (interviewee 15). Instead of competitiveness and individualisation, as they are commonly experienced in cultural sector work, co-operators report about practices of mutual support and solidarity: "*it's about solidarity and not competition and inside the organisation people support each other*" (interviewee 1). Contrary to regular

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[2] This quote is taken from an interview Marisol Sandoval conducted together with Greig de Peuter at Workspace Co-operative 115 in April 2017.
[3] Co-operatives UK directory. https://www.uk.coop/directory?loc%5Bdistance%5D=20&loc%5Bunit%5D=3959&loc%5Borigin%5D=&keys=&cat=6 accessed on May 17, 2016.
[4] The semi-structured interviews were conducted between August 2014 and June 2015. They were part of a larger project on cultural work and the politics of worker co-operatives (Sandoval 2016, 2017).

businesses in which workers are expected to serve the needs of the company, co-operatives are designed to serve the needs of the people working in them. One co-operator for example stressed: *"We are able to respond to people's needs, you know. Day to day or periods in their life, we can step up and be flexible for people. And it's not just like another employment where they see what they can get out of you*" (Interviewee 15). Similarly, a member of another long-running co-op emphasised the combination of security and flexibility as a main benefit of her workplace: "*Very very secure working conditions and very flexible working conditions. In the truer sense, not in some horrible kind of 'neo-liberaly co-optive flexy work'! It's flexible, if I need to go home at 2 o'clock, I go home at 2 o'clock, that's ok*." (Interviewee 12).

However, this is not the reality of all co-operatives. Like many alternative projects, co-ops often are confronted with conflicts between creative processes, economic necessity and political aspirations (Comedia 1984, 96, Hesmondhalgh 1997). For example, starting and running a co-operative, similar to any other business, requires investments of both time and money. To maintain their independence co-ops do not accept venture capital or any investment that gives investors power over the operation of the co-op. This often means that a lack access of financial resources forces co-operators to invest considerable amounts of free labour, sometimes called "sweat-equity" (Whellens 2014): "[We work] *full time plus overtime. And we can't quite pay ourselves for this right now. Possibly later we can pay out something. We will see how it goes.*" (Interviewee 4). Especially newly founded co-ops often struggle to combine the benefits of self-determination and freedom co-ops offer with equally important economic security. As one co-operator stressed: "*What I do experience at the moment in my co-op is a lot of freedom in the way we work and I absolutely love and enjoy that whole process. The difficult thing is because of finances is creating the security, and can we develop our business to the point that we can actually guarantee a regular income and not always be stressing about where is this going to come from*" (interviewee 6). Co-operatives do not provide an automatic escape from precarious working lives.

While co-operatives might succeed in creating internal structures of support and solidarity, they continue to operate within competitive markets within an increasingly commercialised cultural sector. The difficulty in accessing funding and resources is exacerbated by the fact that co-ops seek to maintain their operative independence and therefore might reject external investment or refuse to accept contracts with a too powerful client. One co-operator for example argued: "*Also in terms of funding, it does boil down to that: We are operating on such a minimal budget. We need to find ways to fund ourselves without compromising our politics as well*" (Interviewee 22). He added that in addition to difficulties generating commercial income, funding from governmental or other funding bodies is often hard to obtain due to co-operatives' status as business rather than a charity: "*Yes, we find it actually quite tough for funding. For many reasons, but partially because we are not a charity and a lot of funders just fund charities*" (Interviewee 22)

Creating funding schemes to support co-operative organisations is an opportunity for cultural policy-making to specifically target working conditions in the cultural sector and overcome the primary focus on business support. However, the co-operators interviewed in this study expressed little confidence in current governments and policy makers to provide effective support for co-operatives. One interviewee argued: "*I don't think from a government level there is particularly very much support… occasional good words, but not that much on the agenda*" (interviewee 17). Another co-operator emphasised the underlying problem that the democratic structures of government at the moment are insufficient and lag behind the level of democracy practiced in many co-operatives: "*the thing about the government is that they have a massive control over resources and to build this new economy we need them to direct loads of resources towards this. So of course they can help. But I don't believe in the government in its current structures. I would want a far more participatory, democratic structure of government to be making these decisions*" (interviewee 6). Thus, while embedding financial support for co-operatives within policies on creative hubs would be an immediate and important step to encourage better quality work in the cultural sector, co-ops at the same time point towards the need for large scale structural changes in order to create a truly co-operative economy and society.

Past and present: co-operatives and creative hubs

As the 2016 British Council *Creative Hubs* report points out, there are already creative hubs in existence which are run along a co-operative model (Dovey and Pratt 2016) although they are relatively thin on the ground. The Roco Creative Coop hub in Sheffield was launched in 2012 and opened in 2015 in to support the creative industries in the city, and is registered as a community benefit society which is solely owned by its shareholder members.[5] £1.2 million was raised through community shares and social lending, which was used to convert seven listed Georgian townhouses in the city centre into a hub including 30 studios, co-working space, bookshop, design store, café, galleries, a bottle shop and maker space. Through the close proximity of these facilities, the Roco coop has aimed to facilitate and connect environmentally and socially conscious design, architecture, consumption and creative practice. The shop stocks primarily fairtrade and ethical products, there is a green roof and the creative facilities are strongly oriented towards encouraging design with a positive social impact (Dovey and Pratt 2016: 38).

Such spatial, working and affective linkages have the potential to cross-pollinate not only 'creativity', but a shared purpose of creating for the common good. As one of the initiators of the project, Chris Hill, point out, the political-economic logic of the co-operative model works to mitigate against commercial competition and paranoia about originality:

[5] https://www.theroco.org/join-us/ Accessed 1 November 2017

> 'The great thing about the co-operative model is that you're prepared to share things in the knowledge someone isn't ripping off your idea to turn it into their own profit.
>
> It's particularly true of creative workers where project groups can come together and dissolve when the project's finished. Roco will be a rallying point for these people; they'll know where to find each other.' (Collier 2014).

As this last part of this quote illustrates, the spatial proximity of the hub model means that it has a particularly potent potential to link together and to be 'a rallying point' for cooperative projects and practices.

The terminology of co-operative creative hubs may be new, but there are of course many historical examples of cultural policy and activity which has encouraged creative public cooperative space. The Greater London Council in the UK in the 1980s for example notoriously adopted a range of strategies to stimulate a more inclusive cultural sector and city, one which attempted to make cultural spaces more cooperative places run for citizens rather than commodified services oriented solely for paying consumers. These strategies included opening up the Royal Festival Hall at the Southbank Centre as a place where the public could go for free: before then it had been locked up all day, and you could only enter as a visitor who had paid for a performance (Kirsch 2017). It also included subsidising extremely popular free music festivals for Londoners, alongside community radio, women's theatre and a range of black arts projects (Bianchini 1987; Mulgan and Worpole 1986). Interestingly however whilst both encouraging cooperative *practice*s, and inclusive community arts, were the much-discussed hallmark of GLC cultural policy, it is hard to find too many specific named institutions which are defined precisely as worker's co-operatives in the literature on GLC history -- although they did exist, such as the cooperative book distributor Turnaround (McGuigan 1996; Lewis et al 1986).

It is true that the historical research into the GLC is still not as expansive as it deserves to be.[6] It is also more than possible that there are many instances of worker's cooperatives in that context which are simply not discussed or labelled as such. Yet the very fact that it is underplayed in the critical literature on the subject is itself both deeply significant and a missed opportunity that we should learn from. Indeed, in many ways it is symptomatic of a wider tendency in the literature on alternative cultural sector organisations to lump together various different types of 'progressive' groups -- even when their progressiveness or quality is being questioned.

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[6] The oral history project 'The GLC Story' has been recently constructing a history and collating resources on the GLC for younger generations. See http://glcstory.co.uk/ and their *GLC Story Oral History Project* zine (2017).

For example, in 1985 the searching and acerbic critique *What a way to run a railroad: an analysis of radical failure* took to task the organisational skills and assumptions of radical cultural groups that were born out of various strands of the libertarian movements of the 1960s and 1970s (the book opens with a list of recently deceased radical organisations). As the title indicates, the book devotes itself to questioning the organisational inadequacies and debilitating assumptions of radical political projects in the cultural sector, including participants mistaking their own self-righteousness and self-satisfaction for an effective project. The book functioned as a powerful rallying call for radical organisations to think hard about organisational structure. Yet interestingly, and despite discussion of different types of organisation including mutual aid, there is not a lot of intellectual traffic in the book with work on the structure of worker co-operatives or the wider co-operative movement. This is not so much a problem with this particular book as symptomatic of a wider *lacuna* in the existing literature on cultural policy and cultural organisations.

We would argue that cultural policy needs to pay far more attention to cultural co-operatives. This is particularly the case at a moment when there is a revival of interest in what has been termed 'the new municipalism', or 're-municipalism' -- in creating democratic, non-capitalist relationships, services and spaces which are also non-authoritarian and involve forms of co-production, for which Barcelona En Comú is often held up as the flagship example (Reyes and Russell 2017). Such projects often involve mayors alongside wider mobilisations which seek to reclaim civic institutions and infrastructure from private ownership, returning them to (or creating anew) public ownership, and exist alongside innovative digital platforms in order to enable participatory forms of democracy, coproduction and cooperation. The role of cooperatives is for example foregrounded very explicitly in Mississippi's largest city, Jackson, where the new mayor is working closely with Cooperation Jackson, which aims to find ways of building a solidarity economy 'anchored by a network of cooperatives and worker-owned, democratically-managed enterprises'.[7] Cooperation Jackson is inspired by both Black Lives Matter and the international cooperative movement; its 13 core principles 'were crafted by adapting aspects from the basic principles of the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation' from the Basque region/country in Spain.[8]

Within this bubbling up of interest in the potential formation of new cooperative dynamics in civic spaces comes the possibility for expanding cooperatives in cultural hubs, in the cultural sector and in cultural policy. Indeed, cultural policy-making in general has much more to learn from co-operatives. A "policy from below" framework that encourages "bottom-up solutions proposed by workers and their collective organizations" (de Peuter and Cohen 2015, 310) is a means of expanding the participation and democratic accountability of policy makers. More participatory forms of policy-making could take their inspiration from the wide

[7] http://www.cooperationjackson.org/ Accessed 10 November 2017.
[8] http://www.cooperationjackson.org/ Accessed 10 November 2017.

range of existing and historical alternatives, practices and visions of how cultural work could be organised, cooperatively and for the common good.

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