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Centering People in the Economy: Worker Cooperatives and the Solidarity Economy in Barcelona

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Centering People in the Economy:
Worker Cooperatives and the Solidarity Economy in Barcelona

James A. Hooks

March 2018

A MASTER'S RESEARCH PAPER

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Abstract

Centering People in the Economy: Worker Cooperatives and the Solidarity Economy in Barcelona

James A. Hooks

Are worker cooperatives and the solidarity economy viable tools for revolutionary change in a neoliberal, capitalist system? I approach this question by considering the arguments of utopian socialists, scientific socialists, and anarchists from the Industrial Revolution and the influence of these on the theory of the solidarity economy today. These theoretical perspectives are compared to the reality of members of worker cooperatives in the solidarity economy in Barcelona. The experiences of worker cooperative members are elucidated through focus group discussions and participant produced drawings. A comparison of worker experiences with theory shows worker cooperatives can be spaces for practicing equitable workplace relations but are ineffective in widespread change in isolation. In Barcelona, worker cooperatives have federated with the intention of creating a solidarity economy. Even though there has been significant impact on the local government, it is unclear whether this type of federation will gain enough economic strength to replace capitalism. To achieve this goal, worker cooperatives should unite with broader worker struggles in order to build political power for the working class.

Keywords: worker cooperatives, solidarity economy, socialism, anarchism, economic justice, Barcelona

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Introduction

The crisis of capitalism has indelibly marked the human consciousness and our physical environment. The ‘capitalocene’, as Moore (2017) calls it, is an epoch of hunger, sickness, death, and environmental destruction alongside the greatest wealth humankind has ever witnessed (Hardoon, Ayele, & Fuentes-Nieva, 2016) . In response to the continuous social, environmental, and financial crises caused by capitalism, communities across the world have attempted to articulate and practice an alternative way of life that promotes the values of cooperation, plurality, democracy, sustainability, and equity (Utting & Laville, 2015). Even though these practices have yet to bring a revolution and are challenged on all sides by the current oppressive order, they hint at what could be. This paper is about worker cooperatives, inside the solidarity economy, in Barcelona in the hopes of using their experiences to guide others likewise inspired to struggle against systems which exploit the environment, our communities, and our bodies.

This paper and research are closely connected to my politics and personality. I am a revolutionary socialist from a Marxist perspective. Because of this, I engage with this topic to not only understand how it presents a better option for people right now, but also to understand its potential for revolutionary change through the overthrow of capitalism. As someone with creative tendencies, I wanted to present my work on a topic which is dear to me in a manner that represents me. I hold no illusions to the type of research which attempts to separate the researcher from the research. Instead, I gladly imbue myself with this material just as all those who participated in the focus groups and in any way assisted with this project have done. Therefore, my prose is that of a narrative as I am recounting my exploration of this material instead of presenting a lecture on paper. I also do not wish to pretend like I planned and orchestrated this whole project in every detail. Many things about this project are spontaneous and depend on the moment. As situations arose I responded, therefore, this research is also as much the result of circumstance as of planning.

Even though my name may be attached to this work, it is a compendium of labor from multiple people, whom I have attempted to account for in the Acknowledgments, and I might

be the least qualified in my role. I make this claim not out of modesty but from fact. I am a masters level graduate student who not only has minimal experience in qualitative research but is at best an intermediate Spanish speaker and has no experience as a worker-member of a cooperative. In short, I speak of things in this paper that are not entirely from myself but from the mouths and pens of others. I hope that I have done them justice.

This paper continues the discussion of the role of worker owned cooperatives in revolutionary change. This is a topic which has had much debate in the political Left since the 19th century and has revived as a result of a renewed interest in worker cooperatives throughout the world. Recently, worker cooperatives and the solidarity economy in general are regarded as project to build a new system in the shell of the old. I add to this discussion by incorporating the experiences of worker members from multiple worker cooperatives who are actively attempting to build a solidarity economy. To accomplish this task, I present a brief overview of the historical arguments surrounding the role of worker cooperatives in revolutionary change. Then I provide some insight on the thought and principles of the solidarity economy. This is followed by examples of worker cooperatives in Barcelona both historically and recently. The recent example comes from a small focus group of worker members from 4 cooperatives in Barcelona. Drawing on the current experiences of worker members, I will discuss their perceptions of the social, political, and economic potential of cooperatives within the context of the solidarity economy. Finally, I will compare the experiences of workers to the arguments presented in the academic and political literature regarding the potential for worker cooperatives and the solidarity economy to overturn the capitalist system.

Literature Review

Worker cooperatives have long been a central institution in the solidarity economy. Even though cooperatives have been claimed as a part of the solidarity economy since its first formulations in the 70s (Migliaro, 2010) there has been little research with worker cooperatives who are purposefully organizing themselves as a part of the solidarity economy. This distinction is important. Even though cooperatives are enterprises based on a set of values and principles

(International Cooperative Alliance, n.d.), they have historically been seen as apolitical entities (Laville, 2015). However, by consciously engaging with and incorporating as a solidarity economy, worker cooperatives are making a political statement which denies the adequacy and totality of capitalism and looks forward to a non-capitalist future. By studying worker cooperatives in this level of political engagement, we can see what parts of the cooperative process they deem valuable and how they consciously act politically.

History of worker cooperatives

The first documented successful cooperative was the Rochdale Equitable Pioneer Society in 1844 in England. This group of cooperators founded a consumer cooperative in response to the corruption in markets at the time. Their cooperative was founded on the following principles (Fairbairn, 1994, p. 20):

- That capital should be of their own providing and bear a fixed rate of interest.
- That only the purest provisions procurable should be supplied to members.
- That full weight and measure should be given.
- That market prices should be charged and no credit given nor asked.
- That profits should be divided pro rata upon the amount of purchases made by each member.
- That the principle of 'one member one vote' should obtain in government and the equality of the sexes in membership.
- That the management should be in the hands of officers and committee elected periodically.
- That a definite percentage of profits should be allotted to education.
- That frequent statements and balance sheets should be presented to members.

The success of the Pioneers inspired many potential cooperators around the world who adopted their principles and adjusted them for their purposes (Fairbairn, 1994). Their influence remains today in the 7 principles adopted by the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA, 1995).

- Voluntary and Open membership

- Democratic Member Control
- Member Economic Participation
- Autonomy and Independence
- Education, Training and Information
- Co-operation among Co-operatives
- Concern for Community

The cooperative movement did not stop in England, it spread to countries around the world in various stages of capitalism and industrialization. Worker cooperatives were a piece of this movement.

Generally organized by trade unionists, worker cooperatives were regarded as a mechanism for independence from the capitalist wage system. This perspective was adopted by early utopian socialists such as Robert Owen as well as anarchists such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. However, Marx and other scientific socialists such as Engels disagreed with the utopian socialists and anarchists in their analysis of the potential for worker cooperatives to overthrow capitalism. This disagreement stemmed from their perspectives on how capitalism would be overthrown. Owen promoted cooperatives as a means for worker emancipation because he regarded individualism and competition as inhibiting factors to human advancement (1821). For Owen, the working classes had to be properly organized into communal societies and their achievements would convince the higher classes to dismiss individualism (1821). The class struggle, where the working class is actively exploited by the ruling class, is not central to Owen's philosophy of change. Instead, it is a shift in perspective and societal values, which is why he tends to focus on social organization instead of political power.

Proudhon theorized the capitalist system would be overthrown through a transformation of political economy via worker cooperatives and mutual credit systems based on labor (Bekken, 2012). He did not believe a revolution through political power or force would bring about a change for an equitable society. Instead Proudhon sought "to bring about the return to society, by an economic combination, of the wealth which was withdrawn from society by another economic combination" (Proudhon, 1846). Bakunin built on Proudhon's

political economy through a perspective which regarded the powers of the state and of property with suspect. However, Bakunin did not believe a gradual transformation of society would occur. Instead, he thought revolution would happen in the form of spontaneous uprisings by the working class (Bottomore, 1991) and that the control of resources would be managed from the bottom up through the free association of workers (Bekken, 2012). The anarchist collectivism espoused by Bakunin had a strong influence on the anarchists in Spain (Leval, 1975).

Marx recognized the possibility of worker cooperatives in emancipating labor, but he continued to link it to the necessity of broader political engagement. To Marx, worker cooperatives illustrate to the world “by deed instead of by argument...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” (1864). However, this is not enough to bring revolutionary change as the forces of capital will continue to berate and work against cooperatives. To fight capitalism, Marx encouraged cooperatives to broaden their focus from local production to national dimensions and secure the national means of production (1864). Furthermore, the overthrow of the Paris Commune in 1848 led Marx to believe that it is not enough for workers to build their own collective organizations, but they should also take state power (1864). It is important to note that Marx does not dismiss cooperatives outright as insufficient. Instead he believed the cooperative movement must be linked to the broader movement of working class political power.

With the success of the Russian Revolution in 1917, scientific socialism became the dominant political method for socialist organizations in the West and eventually throughout the world. The degeneration of workers states such as the USSR and China into highly bureaucratic nations and the oppressiveness of Stalinism caused many Leftist academics to reconsider their positions on state power and how to overthrow capitalism. One formation that has arisen is the solidarity economy, which can trace its theoretical roots to Proudhon (Frère & Reinecke, 2011) because of the emphasis on economic transformation over political power.

Solidarity Economy

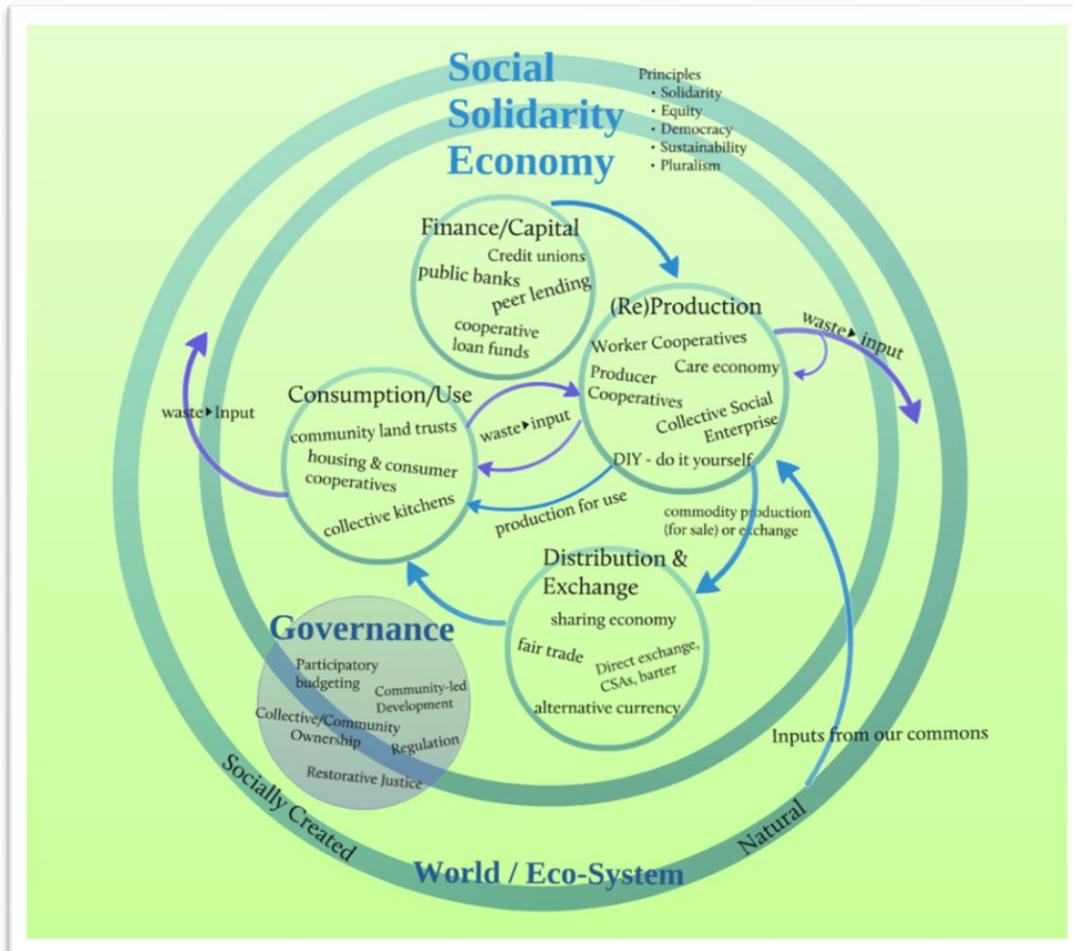


Figure 1: Solidarity Economy diagram from (USSEN, 2016)

As it is known, the term “solidarity economy” was first used during the Spanish Civil War to explain the connection between worker collectives in rural and urban areas (Miller, 2009). The solidarity economy as a comprehensive theory and practice developed in the 1980s in two parts of the world, France and Chile (Miller, 2009). During the Pinochet regime in Chile, community groups across the country filled the gaps in financial and social assistance that was withdrawn by the government. These groups spanned from workers and peasants’ rights organizations to Catholic Workers groups who began to call their economic practices ‘*economía solidaria*’, solidarity economy. The experiences of these organizations inspired Chilean philosopher Luis Razeto who began to use the term solidarity economy in his philosophical

writings on post-capitalist economic practices (Migliaro, 2010). Around the same time, in France the term *'l'économie sociale et solidaire'* arose to define the practices from the 'third sector' of the social economy, which seeks to meet the needs of those excluded from the mainstream economy, to that of the solidarity economy, which seeks economic transformation (Miller, 2009). Today these terms are used interchangeably throughout the world, but the Americas tend to use solidarity economy and Europe tends to use social and solidarity economy because of their history with the social economy sector. For this paper, I use the term solidarity economy since I am interested in transformational economic practices.

Networks, activists, and scholars have tended to define the solidarity economy by the principles which form the basis of economic activity. The Réseau Intercontinental de Promotion de l'Économie Sociale Solidaire, Europe (RIPESS Europe) defines the solidarity economy as an economy that "aims to overcome the impacts of the current crisis and to promote organizational approaches from local to global that support freedom, reciprocity, solidarity and egalitarian exchange" (2011). Similarly, the U.S. Solidarity Economy Network (USSEN) defines the solidarity economy as "an alternative framework for economic development grounded in practice and the following principles: solidarity and cooperation, equity in all dimensions (race, ethnicity, gender, class, etc.), social and economic democracy, sustainability, pluralism (not a one-size-fits-all approach), puts people and planet first" (2016). Xarxa de Economia Solidaria (XES) defines the solidarity economy as "a way of life that includes the integrity of the people, and the solidarity between peoples and cultures in a sustainable way, providing the basis for personal, social and environmental materials for the development of the human being" (Escoda Canet, Fernández Balansà, Navarro Juan, Puig Esparch, & Santamaria Puig, 2014). The variety in definition illustrates the plurality of the solidarity economy. Instead of creating a structure that movements form to, the solidarity economy is malleable to fit local needs and practices (Kawano, 2009). Despite the differences, there is much in common with these definitions. They all promote the values of egalitarianism, cooperation, humanism, and environmentalism. These values encapsulate an economic perspective which places people and the planet over profit.

These definitions of the solidarity economy by activist and practitioners are more transformative than those advanced by INGOs such as the International Labor Organization.

The ILO classifies the solidarity economy as “a concept designating enterprises and organizations, in particular cooperatives, mutual benefit societies, associations, foundations and social enterprises, which have the specific feature of producing goods, services and knowledge while pursuing both economic and social aims and fostering solidarity” (Di Meglio, 2014). From this brief comparison, it is notable that networks organized by those in the practice of solidarity economy tend to emphasize it as an alternative to capitalism while the INGOs define it as functioning within the framework of capitalism. In a sense they are both right because capitalism remains the dominant economic force in the world, however the distinction between actively pursuing an alternative versus accepting the status quo is important. How an organization defines the solidarity economy illustrates what they believe is possible and their goal. For the solidarity economy organizations, their end goal is a world without capitalism while the ILO’s end goal remains within capitalism.

Worker Cooperatives and the Solidarity Economy in Barcelona



Figure 2: 'El barri es casa nostra' Photo Credit: Drew Hooks 2017

Cooperatives started in three strands in Catalunya generally around the beginning of the 20th Century after the passage of the Ley de Sindicatos Agrícolas 1906 which provided a legal entity for agricultural cooperatives (Planas, 2014). One formation were agriculture producer cooperatives which diffused new techniques and increased price setting power for the producers. Another was cooperatives established by the Catholic Church as a means to diffuse class struggle between an increasingly mobilized peasant class and landholders. Finally, there were cooperatives established through the assistance of *Acción Social Agraria*, a pro-union organization which helped workers and peasants establish cooperatives as a form of self-help and empowerment (Planas, 2014). The history of cooperative development in the agrarian region of Catalunya illustrate that cooperatives were not always entities for the power of workers, but could also be used to destabilize worker power and increase the power of landholders and bosses (Planas, 2014). This was a concern mentioned by worker members from the focus groups which will be discussed later.

In the cities of Catalunya, especially in Barcelona, anarchist groups would form cooperatives in their *ateneus* or community centers (Ealham, 2005). Then as now, these community centers were hubs of radical discussion and organizing as well as places for celebration. Each neighborhood has a festival during the summer and the *ateneus* play a central role in organizing these open-air festivals which provide a break from the drudgery of working life (see Figure 2 for a current example).

In Barcelona, cooperatives grew predominantly in the working-class neighborhoods of Saints, Poble Sec, and Barceloneta (Leval, 1975). A militant working-class politics developed in these neighborhoods and radical organizations such as the CNT and POUM grew in membership and power to the point where entire industrial sectors were filled with members of certain organizations. For example, the anarchists of CNT filled the ranks of the tramway workers (Wetzel, 2014). This organizing capacity paid off when the revolutionary moment struck during the Civil War and workers from each group controlled the production of their respective industries (Orwell, 2011). The example of democratic worker control of the means of production in Barcelona during the five years of autonomous rule in the Civil War is most likely one of the greatest inspirations for organizers today from all factions of the Left in Barcelona

and throughout the Western world. The allure of this example has attracted much research and writing but suffice it to say that through whichever democratic means of governance decided upon by each organization, the workers successfully managed an economy. Because of this history, it is no surprise that Barcelona today is a center of worker cooperativism that continues to inspire the world.

Today, the solidarity economy sector in Barcelona consists of 4,800 enterprises which employ eight percent of the city's workforce (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2016). Of these enterprises, 667 are worker-owned cooperatives. Because of the success and political influence of the solidarity economy sector, the city government in Barcelona has established an office dedicated to the promotion of the solidarity economy and they have pledged 24 million Euros to the advancement of the solidarity economy through education, technical support, investment in cooperative development, and preferred procurements (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2017). In addition to the support of the city government, worker-cooperatives and solidarity economy enterprises support each other through federations which generally take the form of second tier cooperatives (cooperatives of cooperatives). Specifically in regards to the solidarity economy, there is the Xarxa de Economia Solidària (XES) which is composed of 183 member organizations, seventy-seven percent of which are cooperatives (Xarxa d'Economia Solidària, 2017a). Founded in 2003 in response to the World Social Forum, XES has four objectives: "to promote the solidarity economy as a real alternative to capitalism, to be a socialpolitical agent and a creator of critical and propositional discourse, to boost the articulation of the initiatives of the solidarity economy in the territory, and to generate tools, resources and spaces for intercooperation at the service of the members" (Xarxa d'Economia Solidària, 2017a, p. 5). It is evident from their objectives that XES is not a simple industry organization, but a federation of cooperatives and associations with the intent to move beyond capitalism and be politically engaged. Their political engagement is highlighted in each annual report where they present their major political campaigns as a federation. Furthermore, XES engaged in political activity during the aftermath of the October 1, 2017 independence referendum by issuing statements of support for the referendum and engaging in the general strike on October 3rd (Xarxa d'Economia Solidària, 2017b, 2017c). Given the level of

engagement and the objectives of XES, it is apparent their socio-political vision expands beyond the solidarity economy as a survival mechanism, as was practiced in the 80s in Chile, to the solidarity economy as a method of social transformation. This focus on social transformation is what led me to seek members of worker cooperatives from XES for the focus group for this study.

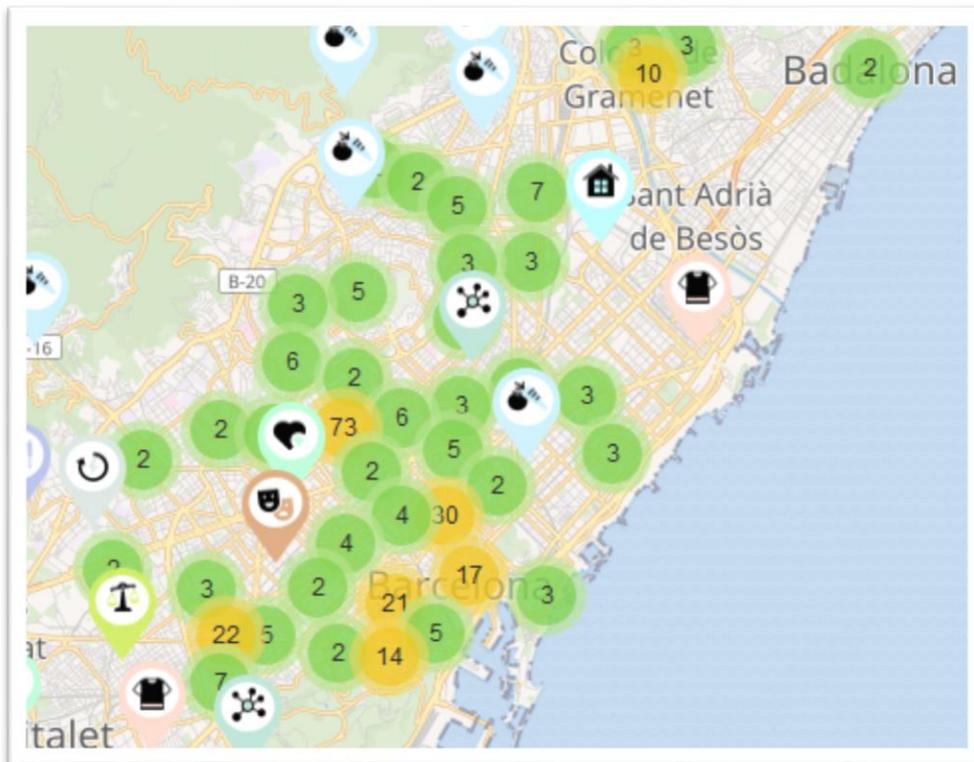


Figure 3: Screenshot of the Map of Solidarity Economy in Barcelona, Pam a Pam 2018

Methodology

Focus Group

The focus group for this study was conducted in July of 2017. I spent a month-long period of time in Barcelona to acquaint myself with the various worker cooperatives there and to recruit participants for the focus group. My original intent was to have 3 focus groups.

However, because of various time restraints on the worker members, I was only able to have enough participants for one focus group. I recruited participants by emailing a recruitment text to the worker cooperatives. The cooperatives to be contacted were selected from a map of the solidarity economy run by the organization Pam a Pam, a partner of Xarxa d'Economia Solidaria (XES) (see Figure 2). I contacted every worker cooperative in Barcelona that was listed on this map via email and sent them recruitment texts in both Spanish and Catalan. When possible, I introduced myself in person to the cooperative members to explain my study and gauge interest in involvement. In total, I had five members from 4 cooperatives participate. This low number of participants was primarily due to the fact that the study was conducted in July and everyone was busy finishing their work before August vacations. The low participation could also be a result of my ineffectiveness in speaking Spanish and lack of knowledge of Catalan, which could lead them to believe me not capable of leading an effective focus group. Another reason for the low participation could be due to the fact that the Ajuntament, XES, and the Universidad Autonomia de Barcelona conduct multiple studies per year on the cooperative sector, resulting in "survey fatigue" on the part of cooperative members. I had many members tell me this when I discussed my plans to do a focus group.

The day of the focus group was in late July. We met in the back of an *ateneu* in Poble Sec that housed a cooperative café. Our discussion lasted for an hour and a half. Participants were offered a remittance, which most chose not to accept. We sat around a table, drank beer, and talked about their experiences as worker owners of cooperatives. The atmosphere was relaxed, and the participants were eager to share their experiences as members of worker cooperatives.

I chose to conduct this study as a focus group because I wanted to have a group discussion with members of worker cooperatives about their experiences in a short span of time, but also in a manner that allowed for discussion, dialogue and the generation of new insights. Furthermore, since I was working on a tight budget, the cost of interpreting services was a consideration. The fair price of an interpreting service for one hour-and-a-half session is much less expensive than the price for five hour-and-a-half sessions. Focus groups are a qualitative research method that provides opportunities for participants to influence each

other and stimulate conversation more effectively than in a one on one interview (Kidd & Parshall, 2000). This was the case in our focus group as at times the conversation went in so many directions that it was difficult for the interpreter to keep up. Furthermore, participants did build on each other. Something said by one participant would trigger an anecdote or point from another. In this manner, my role was primarily to prompt the discussion and the participants were the ones who carried it.

The use of an interpreter in focus group interviews has a history in social science research, especially involving groups speaking non-European languages. Of course, it is preferable for research to be conducted in the language that both the researcher and participants are familiar with so as to ensure the best understanding. However, this cannot always happen, and researchers have had to reflect on how the inclusion of interpreters can affect a study. Interpreters and translators have the potential to be 'gatekeepers' to the language community in the study since the researcher relies on them to convey the meaning of the participants (Przepiorkowska, 2010). The feminist approach to this predicament is to include the interpreter in the project as a co-researcher where their language and cultural knowledge plays an visible role in research design (Berman & Tyyskä, 2011). The interpreting experience of this focus group happened in such a haphazard manner, so this was not entirely possible. Initially, I sought out comrades in Barcelona to see if any would be interested and able to assist me in the research as co-researchers. I also reached out to a professor at the Universidad Autonomia de Barcelona to see if any graduate students there would have any interest. My comrades were busy planning the international congress of our organization which was hosted in Barcelona and were not available. Similarly, students at UAB were on summer break and were busy with their own research projects. My experiences highlight an important aspect of planning research. Things take more time and generally do not go forward as planned. Instead of calling off the research entirely, I opted for Plan C and sought an interpreter from a cooperative interpreting service in Barcelona. They were also not able to assist me. Finally, I reached out to several licensed interpreters until I finally found one who was available and whose rate I could afford given my budget. I shared materials about cooperatives and my focus group questions with the interpreter, so they could have background knowledge of the topic.

We agreed to meet prior to the focus group in order to discuss the focus group questions and materials, but at the last minute they had a schedule conflict and was unable to do so and we were not able to reschedule.

During the focus group, the interpreting process was fluid. Three of the five participants spoke English confidently enough to fully express themselves and would co-interpret their responses with the interpreter. I also know enough Spanish to understand the general meaning of what was being said. Thus, interpreting was a group project, which at times, provided opportunities for the participants to clarify and expand on their points. Even though three of the five participants were confident English speakers, the remaining two participants were not left out of the conversation as they understood English and would respond to the points said by the English-speaking participants in Spanish. The focus group conversation was also recorded. This recording was transcribed by a classmate who is a native Spanish speaker. I translated the transcription, and I used the transcription of the interpreter as a guide. The reason why I had to translate is because during the focus group, with the conversation moving back and forth, the interpreter only had time to give highlights of what was being said to ensure I understood. Thus, I translated the transcriptions so as to have the responses of the participants in their entirety. These translations were proofed by the same classmate who did the transcriptions. Both the interpreter and the transcriber signed statements of confidentiality.

Participant-produced Drawings

At the beginning of the session, I asked the participants to draw a picture representing their perspective of the solidarity economy. I chose to do this because of personal experiences I have had in which drawing has helped me organize my thoughts on a subject. Furthermore, I thought this could be an “ice breaker” which could provide another source of information. Participant-produced or subject-produced drawings are not a novel idea in social research. Margaret Mead and Rhoda Métraux utilized this method in their study of U.S. students’ perceptions of scientists (Mead & Métraux, 1957). Other studies in this method have utilized what is known as the ‘draw-and-write’ technique in order to understand children’s conceptions of health related issues (Harrison, 2002) and the emotional impact of change on adults

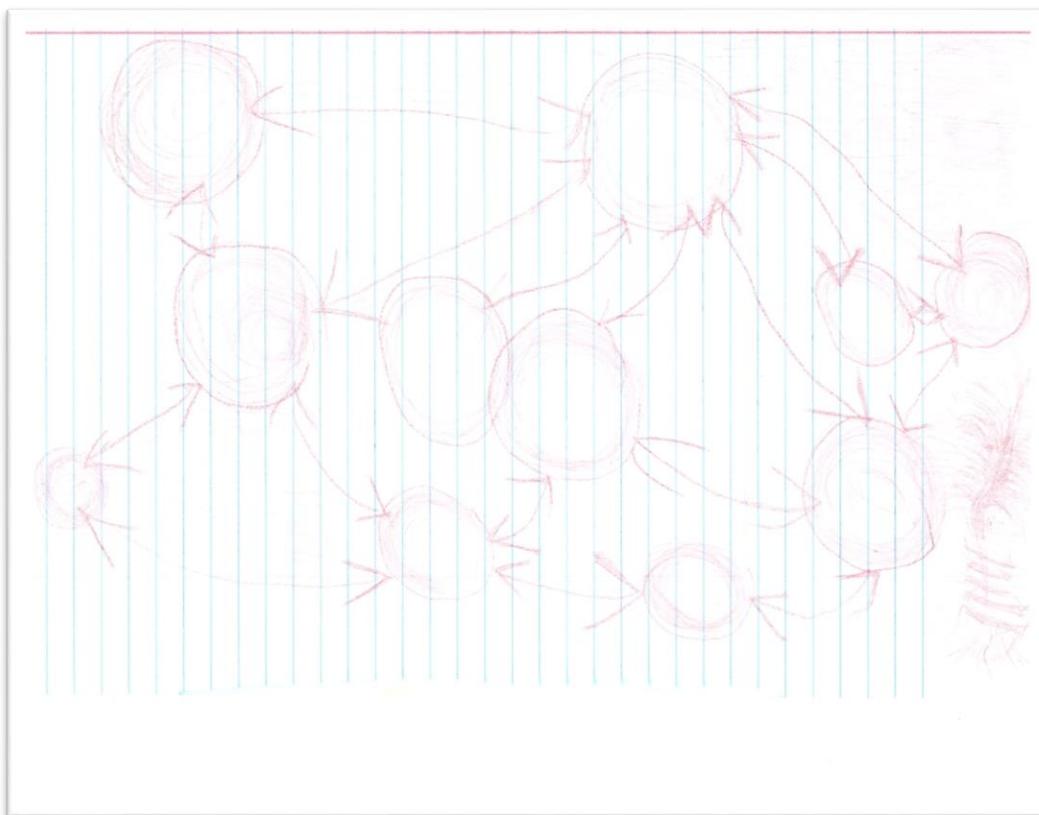
(Kearney & Hyle, 2004). Participant-produced drawings are useful as descriptive data in understanding perceptions of concepts (Ganesh, 2011). A drawing speaks more than just a hurriedly sketched picture, it is a discursive product which can be analyzed as readily as textual data (Harrison, 2002). For this study, the participant-produced drawings were used as a method to allow the participants to convey their conception of the solidarity economy. The participants used paper and colored pencils which I provided and were given 5 minutes to draw a quick sketch. Afterwards, each participant shared what they were attempting to convey with the drawings. By having the participants explain their drawings, not only was I given their interpretation of their own work, but it also started the conversation on the topic of the focus group. Furthermore, I am better equipped to interpret their drawings in a manner that more accurately reflects their intent (Ganesh, 2011; Kearney & Hyle, 2004). The participant interpretation and my interpretation of the drawings creates a dialogue between the researcher and participant in a manner which provides depth and richness to this project.

Visual images in research has its own set of ethical concerns and bias which should be addressed. The ethics of visual images in research has been discussed in the social sciences, especially anthropology, as the depiction of indigenous peoples and their lifestyle has acted as a form of extraction and maintains a hierarchy between the researcher and subject (Banks, 2001). In the context of this study however, the drawings were done willingly by the participants and they were handed to me with permission to use for the study. Furthermore, a highly structured drawing assignment increases the amount of researcher bias by having the participants draw essentially what the researcher expects them to (Kearney & Hyle, 2004). I attempted to resolve this issue by giving the broadest possible parameters within the context of the study. My prompt, "Draw what you imagine to be the solidarity economy", I hope, allowed enough space for the participants to share their thoughts without being unduly influenced by me.

Findings

Drawings

At the beginning of the focus group, I asked the participants to take five minutes and draw what they think when they think of the idea “social and solidarity economy”. These drawings are presented in Drawings 1-5. The image in Drawing 4 is unavailable because it was not given to me by the participant. However, I wanted to share the explanation, so I have given that below.

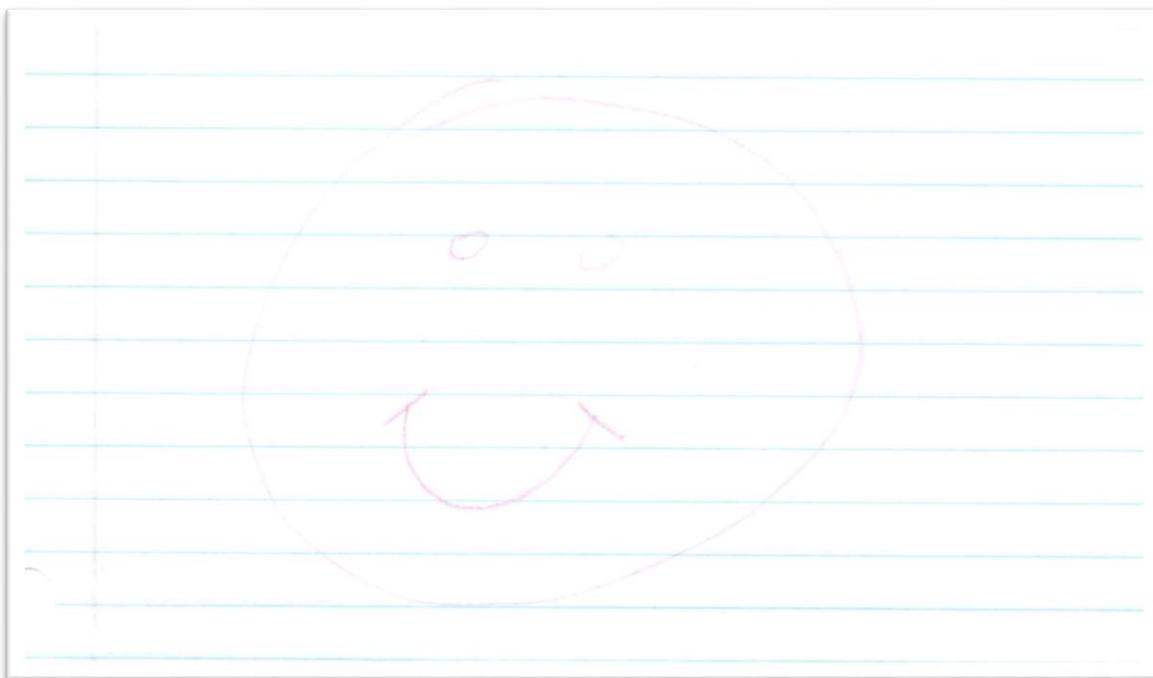


Drawing 1 – ‘Compartida’

<p>Participant Explanation</p> <p><i>Como es la economía popular compartida y de ida y vuelta, ¿no?, sería un poquito, lo que yo podría</i></p>	<p>As is the popular economy shared and back and forth, right?, would be a little, what I could describe, well in a</p>
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<i>describir, así de una manera muy rápida, sería una manera de compartir, de justicia</i>	very quick way, would be a way of sharing, of justice
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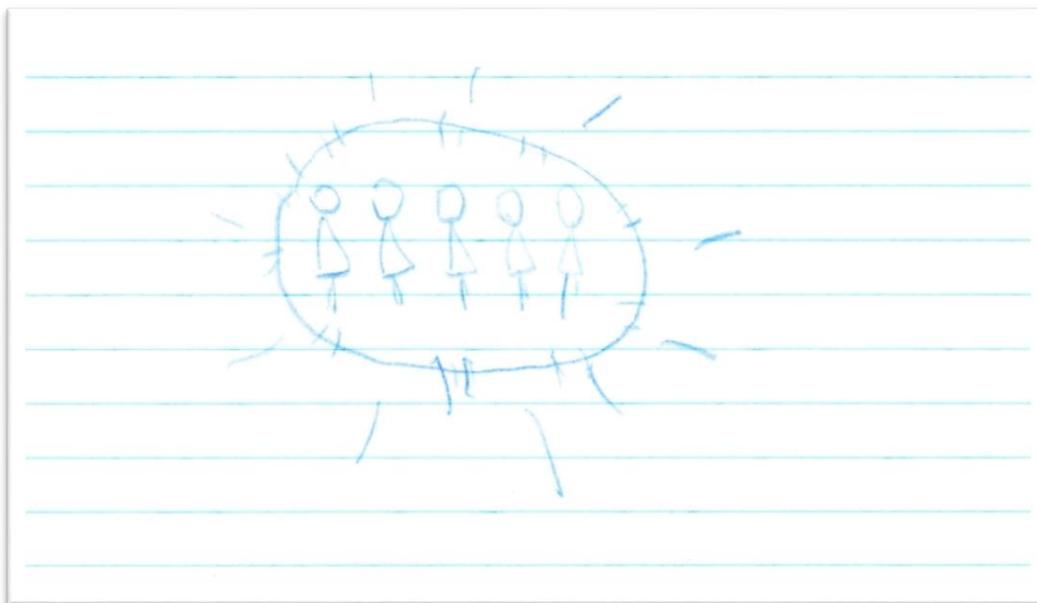
It is difficult to determine the orientation of this drawing, but maybe the drawing does not need to have an orientation. The circles and arrows are the focus of the drawing and they are in no need of a directional orientation to understand the conveyed meaning. I see in this drawing, as is mentioned by the participant, symbols of exchange. The circles are entities and the arrows represent relationship. No arrow is pointed in a single direction but each are pointing both ways, signifying a horizontal relationship between the circles where each helps and supports the other. Some circles are smaller and some are larger which could signify smaller and larger organizations or associations. In the center, two circles overlap, which is interesting because it could signify collaboration and inter-cooperation. Some of the negative space is shaded, which could signify spaces where ideas, values and mission overlap.



Drawing 2 – ‘Una cara sonriente’

<p>Participant Explanation</p> <p><i>Bueno, pues todo una cara sonriente, que tiene que ver con las personas, al final para mí la economía solidaria, es poner a las personas en el centro de la economía, y no poner en el centro de la economía...lo que hace la economía tradicional que lo que pone es el dinero en medio, entonces poner a las personas y que sean las principales valedoras de la economía.</i></p>	<p>Well, it is only a smiley face, which has to do with people, in the end for me the solidarity economy, it places people at the center of the economy, and it does not put at the center of the economy ... what makes the traditional economy which places money in the middle, so I put people, who are the main supporters of the economy.</p>
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Reflecting on this image and on the explanation by the participant, it is obvious how important centering people is for this person. This person perceives the solidarity economy to be one which places people in the center and works for them instead of have people serve the economy. Perhaps by having an economy that centers people, we would all smile more.



Drawing 3 – 'Un sol'

Participant Explanation	
<i>Bueno, es un círculo con personas dentro, pero que a la vez irradia, como si fuera un sol aquí afuera y luego me doy cuenta () que se abre porque no es un círculo cerrado</i>	Well, it is a circle with people inside, but at the same time radiates, as if it was a sun. Here outside and later I gave some () that are open because it is not a closed circle

I love this picture and the description by the participant. The figures are inside and make up the energy of the circle which transforms the circle into a sun. The rays come from these people inside and spreads outwards. The solidarity economy for this person is not only about empowering the people who are engaging in a solidarity economic practice, but also those around them. The light should not be kept within the group but should spread and help grow projects around them. For me, this light could be inspiration, technical assistance, financial assistance, and even political solidarity. This drawing neatly depicts how solidarity economic practices are not about people creating isolated enclaves but about people transforming the world around them. It should also be noted that the figures in the drawing appear to be wearing dresses which could be attributed to a conception of the person imagining the solidarity economy to empower women.

DRAWING UNAVAILABLE

Drawing 4 – ‘El intercambio’

Participant Explanation	
<i>Bueno ha sido muy rápido pero he puesto personas en el centro y luego he puesto en un poco () los intereses del individuo, del grupo, y luego lo que</i>	Well, it was done very quickly but I put people in the center and later I put in a little () the interests of the individual, of the group, and later what is drawn,

<p><i>se dirija, como el intercambio con las personas de otras redes o de otros espacios, y he puesto hasta abajo que sean propósitos delegado a valores, o una misión... Y lo económico sería como una consecuencia de eso.</i></p>	<p>like the exchange with people from other networks and other spaces, I have put down [figures] which represent values or a mission...and the economic theme would be a consequence of that.</p>
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Drawing 5 – ‘La empresa’

<p>Participant Explanation <i>Bueno pues, yo he pintado la empresa () porque creo que la palabra empresa hay que recuperarla está prostituida</i></p>	<p>Well, I drew a business () because I think that the word business should be recuperated. It has been prostituted</p>
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<p><i>pero el concepto de la cooperativa es una empresa donde se estipula para bienes y servicios, el concepto de justicia, escrito en una palabra (pause) porque a diferencia de otro tipo de organizaciones, como pueden ser asociaciones, u otro tipo de inter-relaciones en las cuales no interviene dinero, es importante que la gente tiene que vivir de ello, y después () lo más importante es las personas.</i></p>	<p>but the concept of the cooperative is a business where it is stipulated by goods and services, the concept of justice, to write in one word (pause) because unlike other types of organizations, such as associations, or other types of inter-relationships in which money does not intervene, it is important that people have to live on it, and then () the most important thing is people.</p>
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This drawing shows a business with a revolving circle, scale, and Euro symbol. Three people are positioned in front of the business, but their figures are much smaller than that of the others. However, this does not signify a diminishing of importance for people, since the participant said they are the most important in a solidarity economy. Instead, them being in the foreground could signify their importance and the business is in the background. The business with the figures of more or less the same size signify equal importance. The revolving circle signifies equality, the scale signifies justice and the Euro signifies money/exchange. This equal size is intriguing because it seems to contradict the previous statement of people being the most important. However, it could represent an understanding that, in the current economic context, there has to be an exchange component for the members to sustain themselves and the cooperative. These enterprises are not just places of exchange for the sake of exchange and profit in an exploitative manner, but instead are places of exchange in equality and justice.

Focus Group

In this section I will share the results of the focus group. The blocks of italic texts represent quotes from the participants. When the participants spoke in Spanish, I give the

transcription along with a translation. I block out texts in instances when names are used which could threaten the anonymity of the participants.

The focus group portion of the evening lasted for the remainder of the hour and a half. I had six prompts for this discussion:

1. Why did you decide to form a cooperative instead of a private enterprise?
2. Describe your involvement in the decision making and planning of your cooperative.
3. How does your cooperative interact with unions?
4. How does your cooperative relate to other cooperatives who offer similar services or products?
5. What relationships do your cooperatives have with the Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, the Generalitat de Catalunya, and the State of Spain?
6. Has your experience in a worker cooperative influenced your participation in other political spaces?

For the participants, being members of cooperatives were opportunities for politics, democratic engagement, and to follow creative pursuits for fair pay. Cooperatives were not isolated in their political engagement. Some members viewed cooperatives as extensions of their political lives.

Being in a cooperative for me, it's a consequence of my political life. I was born in the poorest neighborhood here in Barcelona, Nous Barri, so I'm very used to, you know, to work with my neighborhood, you know, to fight for rights, so it's easy for me to understand life in a political way. So for me, as I told you in the beginning, to work in a non-profit way, in a cooperative way, in a democracy, we're always talking about democracy and participation, it's part of my life, so it's a consequence.

One participant did say they did not have time to engage in political activity outside of the cooperative, however, this participant began to discuss the ways in which their cooperative engaged in politics.

I basically have no time since we started to cooperate with other political initiatives. I already had started, before I was working for a migration film festival, so I'm still doing that, and it's all like an association, and we are all programming films, and we are always in the area of migration issues...It's very interesting because we are, as a cinema we are inviting lot of initiatives, political initiatives, you get to know and learn about new ideas or people that are working in lines that you don't even imagine, or you didn't know enough well.

The example of migration is a salient one for people in Barcelona. Signs saying immigrants or refugees welcome, such as the one below, are all over the city.



Figure 4 – Picture of the banner 'Refugees welcome' hanging from the balcony of the Ajuntament de Barcelona – Credit: Xavier Gomez (2016)

Activist and immigrant rights groups want the government to accept migrants and refugees freely, however the Spanish State has heretofore refused to do so (Agence France-Presse, 2017). This example shows how the cooperatives through their work promote political activities and act in solidarity with political movements.

Furthermore, the participants said even though they are generally not members of unions, they participate in labor struggles and they comply with the demands of unions in their sectors.

<p><i>Cuando ha habido huelga general, nadie ha trabajado, si más, pero no se nos ha aplicado una reducción de salario; y como no tenemos trabajadores, todo mundo es socio y todo mundo es trabajador.</i></p>	<p>When there has been a general strike, no one has worked, but we haven't been applied a reduction in salary. And as we do not have employees, everyone is a member and everyone is an employee.</p>
<p><i>Teníamos dos trabajadores, ahora tenemos uno, por la estructura pequeña no tiene delegados sindical ni nada. Sí que es cierto que obviamente el convenio por el cual se remunera el salario del productor o de los productores hasta ahora por lo cual cumple con todos los requisitos marcados por el sindicato... y cumplimos con todo.</i></p>	<p>We had two employees, now we have one, because of the small structure there are no union delegates. it is true that obviously the agreement under which it's payed the salary of the producer or producers (up to date) so it meets all the requirements indicated by the union.</p>

Cooperatives were also seen as an extension of their individual political lives. Most of the participants had been a part of an association so they had experience in democratic group work, but a cooperative provided a way for them to be able to live off this work.

<p><i>Trabajábamos de manera voluntaria hasta que un momento pues dijimos vamos a hacer un proyecto de auto empleo, y como ya estábamos en XES, en la red asociativa y también la red de comercio solidaria, y se ajustaba</i></p>	<p>We were working in a voluntary manner until a moment when we decided to do a project of self-employment. And since we were in XES, in the associative network and also in the network of solidarity trade,</p>
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<p><i>bastante bien a la manera como funcionábamos internamente, pues este proyecto económico y de autoempleo de este grupo pues el formato más adecuado parecía la cooperativa y decidimos hacerlo así.</i></p>	<p>and it adjusted very well to the manner we were functioning internally, well, this economic and self-employment project of this group, well, the most appropriate format seemed to be the cooperative and we decided to do that.</p>
<p><i>Teníamos como 19-20 años y éramos un grupo como de veinte artistas, entre ellos (), plásticos que ya compartíamos un espacio común, y hubo una decisión de unos cuantos, de unos poquitos que nos trasladamos para desarrollar una actividad empresarial a otro espacio, como la manera ya de quedarse ya en el anterior que teníamos, ya que era la manera directa de encajar en el mundo empresarial, era la cooperativa, la manera que nos identificaba totalmente.</i></p>	<p>We were 19 to 20-year-olds and we were a group of about 20 artists, among them plastic [artists] that we already shared a common space and there was a decision from some of us, that some of us moved in order to develop a business activity in another space, as a way to maintain that which we already had, because it was a direct way to enter the business world, to be a cooperative, is the way we identified with totally.</p>

Additionally, cooperatives were seen as a way to develop spaces for marginal forms of culture and art to grow.

<p><i>Este modelo, creemos que juntando fuerzas con este tipo de nuevos cines pequeños, que tienden a ser asociaciones o cooperativas, pues pueden ser muy interesantes para poder llegar a programar películas que de otra manera sería imposible.</i></p>	<p>This model, we believe that joining forces with this type of new small cinemas, that tend to be associations or cooperatives, well they can be very interesting to be able to bring about movies that would have been impossible any other way.</p>
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Every participant expressed active engagement in the decision making and planning of their respective cooperatives. The democratic decision-making and planning processes varied with each cooperative. Some never formally voted however they never acted without the consent of the other members. Others had multiple sectors of decision makers with various responsibilities who all worked together. These various democratic experimentations highlight a core tenet of the solidarity economy, plurality. By not having a strictly defined democratic regiment, the members were able to find a democratic structure which worked for their purposes. It was repeatedly pointed out that even though only the members' votes carry legal weight according to Catalan law, these cooperatives with multiple decision-making bodies respected the decisions by those bodies and included them as partners. These non-member bodies spanned from a "Friends of the Cinema" group who took direction on themes for events to project groups who were temporary collaborators with a member of the cooperative on a specific project. These types of non-member groups emphasize the strongly held democratic values of the cooperative members. For them, it is not an issue of what is legal, instead it is about expanding democracy into all sectors of life.

Participants emphasized intercooperation and collaboration with other cooperatives and enterprises. One participant shared intercooperation is a principle of cooperation.

In the other hand, peer cooperation with other cooperatives is one of the core, I guess, spirits or values of the cooperatives, and we inter-cooperate with other cooperatives, but it's interdisciplinary cooperation.

Others shared their cooperation with similar enterprises extends beyond other cooperatives.

<p><i>Realmente nuestra relación con otras cooperativas, es como con otra empresa, nosotros tenemos clientes que son SA, SL, particulares y el nivel de relación diría que</i></p>	<p>Really our relation with other cooperatives is like with another company. We have clients who are SA, SL, private constituencies and the level of relation given to these is</p>
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<i>es el mismo que cuando hemos tenido alguna relación con una cooperativa.</i>	the same when we have some relation with a cooperative.
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Collaboration between enterprises can take the form of passing along work the cooperative cannot accomplish to partnering in order to receive larger grants and contracts.

<i>¿Cuál es la relación? Sí, a menudo, la nuestra de casa a los demás, normalmente es de colaboración en el sentido de que quizás nos venga algún cliente que nos pide algo que nosotros no podemos hacer, por ejemplo, y directamente pasamos el contacto de ellos.</i>	What is the relation? Yes, often, ours as in the case of others, normally it is collaboration in the sense that maybe if a client comes to us and asks us something we cannot do, for example, directly we pass the contact of them.
<i>Nosotros nos relacionamos en el ámbito de proyectos, bueno realmente tenemos una experiencia con otra cooperativa q se llama ██████, formamos una UT que son estas formas legales temporales para acceder a otro tipo de proyectos, proyectos más grandes. Y si no formamos esas formas legales también nos juntamos para participar en proyectos.</i>	We relate with each other in the scope of projects. Well, really we have an experience with another cooperative named ██████, we formed a UT that is a temporary legal form to apply to other types of projects, bigger projects. And without these legal forms, we also participate in projects together.

In regards to state structures, the participants acknowledged much more engagement from the Barcelonan and Catalonian governments and no support from the Spanish State. In Spain, laws for cooperatives are set by the regional autonomous governments, such as Catalonia. In many cases these laws were supported by the cooperatives, but in some instances, the cooperatives saw this as the government overstepping their bounds.

<p><i>Cada comunidad autónoma tiene su propia ley, y hace poco, hace un mes, dos meses, se modificó la ley de cooperativas, sacando un caso muy específico en el cual resumiendo decían (quiero recordar): cooperativas de más de 50 trabajadores, el 80% más de la facturación sea un solo cliente -creo que algo así- pues se les tiene que aplicar el derecho laboral. Y entonces, el movimiento cooperativista general se opuso a esa reforma porque violaba uno de los cinco derechos nacionales de cooperativismo, aprobados por la asociación internacional de cooperativas, que es el de la auto-realización y auto-gestión.</i></p>	<p><i>Every autonomous community has its own law, and recently, since a month, two months, the cooperative law has been modified, taking out a very specific case in which they summarized: cooperatives of more than 50 employees, where more than 80 percent of the billing comes from a single client, I think something like that, well they have to apply the labor laws. And so, the general cooperative movement was opposed to this reform because it violated one of the five national rights of cooperativism, approved by the international association of cooperatives, of self-fulfillment/accomplishment and self-management.</i></p>
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The instance of the ‘false cooperatives’ in the meat industry as pointed out by one participant illustrates an issue with the cooperative movement. If the cooperatives want autonomy in their dealings, how can they regulate when there are businesses that seek to further exploit their workers by taking advantage of the cooperative legal status? As it was explained to me by the participants, these businesses have their employees be members of cooperatives so they do not have to follow labor laws. This issue was discussed in the newspaper *El Periodico* (Noferini, 2017) and the law passed by the Generalitat on March 28, 2017 regulates cooperatives with more than 25 members who has 75 percent of their contracted accounts to a single business (Ley 5, 2017). These cooperatives are subject to the labor laws associated with other businesses of similar size in their sector. This case was brought

up to the Generalitat through pressure by the labor unions in Catalonia (Noferini, 2017) and the law was passed despite pressure from the Federación Empresarial de Carnes e Industrias Cárnicas (“Empresas cárnicas obtienen el certificado de Buenas Prácticas Sectoriales,” n.d.). Surely in this case, these businesses would not federate themselves with any cooperative federation, which would be the primary method of cooperative regulation other than the government. It should be noted, the participant who shared this also added they were in favor of the legal change, and none of the other participants said otherwise. This could be the case that there was a general discussion in the cooperative movement in Catalunya about this topic, however no broad reaching consensus was found before the Generalitat acted. Alternatively, it could show that even though cooperatives are gaining increasing support from the city and autonomous governments, their political power is significantly less than that of the labor unions.

Outside of legislation, the participants said the city and regional governments were offering more support to cooperative enterprises. They attributed this to the left leaning parties and platforms gaining more control in these levels of government. In the Ajuntament, Barcelona en Comun has held power for three years. In this period, they have created a department of the government to specifically support cooperatives and the solidarity economy.

So they've opened this line of help called Social and Solidarity Economy, so they are giving grants for these associations in cooperativism in Barcelona. So, they just opened it now with the aim of promoting this cooperativism. And we applied for several grants, but we don't know how it will develop because it just started, but this means that they are really trying to do something, but we'll see.

I will say that in the grants' submissions you have some boxes where you have to talk about your democratic ways of doing the work, and it's actually, it's making points to offer a lot of the grants. So it's the first time when I apply for a grant that they are asking me "how is my practice?". So it's amazing, that someone cares about this.

The Candidature d'Unitat Popular (CUP), a Left, anti-capitalist, Catalan nationalist party in the Generalitat, was recognized as providing support for cooperatives as well and pushing forward pro-coop policies.

The CUP, it's inside the Generalitat, you can see that there are certain things in Generalitat to support cooperativism. So, from this side we are very proud of having the CUP in Generalitat because they are helping us a lot, not only us, but cooperativism in Cataloña.

There was definitely excitement regarding the new support and interest in cooperatives from the city and autonomous governments, even though there exists a wait-and-see attitude regarding if the governments will actually follow through. In light of the independence referendum where Catalan voters chose independence from Spain (Jones, Burgen, & agencies, 2017), it will be interesting to see if the Catalan and Barcelonan governments decide to further support cooperatives as a method of democratic worker control of the economy as was briefly the case in 1937 during the Spanish Civil War. The independence discussion is currently at a stalemate as members of the Catalan government are in exile or imprisoned and the region is under martial law from the Spanish State. However, recent elections which gave even more seats in the Generalitat to pro-independence parties could signify a determination on the part of the Catalan public for independence (Jones & Burgen, 2017).

Conclusion

Do worker cooperatives in the solidarity economy provide a path for revolutionary change? After reviewing the literature and discussing with the members a few cooperatives in Barcelona, I do not have a definitive answer. It is certainly apparent the cooperatives follow many of the principles of the solidarity economy. The participants emphasized collaboration with potential competitors instead of competing. Even though they were not members of union themselves, the workers received the same benefits as if they were in a union and they participated in solidarity strikes. Finally, being a member of a cooperative gave the workers the

opportunity to earn a living in a manner which more closely aligned with their political beliefs and at the same time build an alternative economy.

These cooperators shared in the skepticism of relying on the state but were not opposed to the state being a mechanism to redistribute funds towards the cooperative and solidarity economy sector. Their involvement in local and national political struggles illustrate they are more in line with the perspective of Marx and Bakunin in that they are building political associations outside of the context of economic self-sufficiency. This places their intention and action within what has been historically referred to as a revolutionary politics.

In its efforts to incorporate as many practices as possible, the solidarity economy runs the risk of never achieving any sort of longstanding change to the economic system. There are many questions the solidarity economy movement has to answer before they can pursue a strategy for taking power. Some of these include their relationship to the state and which practices are a part of the solidarity economy and which are not. As the discussion about the solidarity economy continues, hopefully these issues will receive more debate.

This paper only scratches the surface of the relationship between worker cooperatives and the solidarity economy. Furthermore, it does not definitively show if there is a material argument for worker cooperatives changing an economy. Historically, revolutionary groups in Barcelona formed cooperatives, but the workers overthrowing the bourgeois government in 1937 was not the result of the economy slowly transforming because of cooperatives but because workers united and took over the factories, transit, and communication systems. Today, the city government lead by Barcelona en Comú is responding to the solidarity economy through offering funding, research, and priority contracts. However, it is unclear if the purpose is to overthrow the capitalist system in Barcelona or to broaden the opportunities for employment. If the purpose is to overthrow capitalism, then it needs to be asked if that is even possible in one city.

There should be a study which looks at all sectors of the solidarity economy. A hurdle with this is there has yet to be a large enough integrated solidarity economy to do so. Even in Barcelona, most of the supply chain for these activities are not in the solidarity economy. Can

economic practices with the principles of democracy, plurality, equity, sustainability, and solidarity persist in a global economy dominated by capitalism or are they doomed to recreate exploitation in some way? For practitioners of the solidarity economy, these points should be taken into consideration. Without actively building vertical and horizontal supply chains following the principles of the solidarity economy, then the enterprises and associations calling themselves the solidarity economy are deceiving themselves and others. Sure, there may be some prefigurative aspects of these enterprises such as their commitment to cooperation and democracy, but these institutions persist in some part due to the exploitation of other workers. From this predicament it is evident there must be active political struggle on the part of these solidarity economy organizations to transform the economy. This would serve two purposes, one, as a means to strengthen the solidarity between solidarity economy organizations in the face of the capitalist attack that will happen once they pose a threat, and two, to take the resources of the state into the hands of the working class so that more solidarity economy organizations can be developed.

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