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Entrepreneurial Activism? Platform Cooperativism Between Subversion and Co-optation

Marisol Sandoval, City, University of London, UK

Abstract

Platform cooperativism proposes to create an alternative to the corporate sharing economy based on a model of democratically owned and governed co-operatives. The idea sounds simple and convincing: cut out the corporate middleman and replace Uber with a service owned and managed by taxi drivers themselves, create a version of AirBnb run by cities, or turn Facebook into a platform democratically controlled by all users.This paper discusses the ambivalences of platform cooperativism, exploring both the movement's potentials to subvert digital capitalism from the inside and the risk of being co-opted by it. Platform cooperativism aims to foster social change by creating a People's Internet and replacing corporate owned platforms with user owned co-operatives. It yokes social activism with business enterprise. As a result, the movement is shaped by tensions and contradiction between politics and enterprise, democracy and the market, commons and commercialisation, activism and entrepreneurship. This paper explores these tensions based on a Marxist perspective on the corrosive powers of capitalist competition on the one hand and a Foucaultian critique of entrepreneurialism on the other. It concludes with a reflection on the politics of platform cooperativism, drawing out problematic implications of an uncritical embrace of entrepreneurialism and highlighting the need to defend a politics of social solidarity, equality and public goods.

Introduction

At the heart of platform cooperativism (Scholz, 2017) lies the idea that democratically owned and governed organisations could replace corporate platforms such as Uber, facebook, AirBnb or TaskRabbit that exploit the labour of the many for the profits of the few. The term platform cooperativism gained momentum after Trebor Scholz (2014) popularised it to label efforts of creating online platforms based on co-operative structures. Scholz described it as a "remedy for the corrosive effects of capitalism", a way to "invigorate genuine sharing" that "does not have to reject the market". Since then conferences have been held across the world – from New York, to Hong Kong, to London – to discuss the prospects of platform cooperativism. The website Internet of Ownership documents efforts to build a platform cooperative movement, including a directory of cooperative platforms.

Platform cooperativism promises to breathe new life into the co-operative model, which is as old as the history of capitalism (Owen, 1991), and puts forward a vision of a People's Internet in which technology is made to serve the social good. An Internet, in which users do not just have the ability to create, communicate and debate, but the power to own and the right to decide. By giving power to the people it wants to create a real alternative to the sharing economy, which has been widely criticised for misusing the term sharing to fuel a corporate business model that requires minimum investment and extracts profits through widespread user surveillance and super-precarious work. The result is more accurately described as platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017) rather than a sharing economy.

In practice, platform coops come in a variety of shapes and forms. Looking at the Internet of Ownership Directory we find well-established examples such as the popular stock photography platform Stocksy[1]. Others only exist as concepts and ideas waiting to be developed, looking for "donations [that] will help us get the co-op fully up and running"[2]. Still others had to give up: "Gratipay. A pioneer in open source sustainability [...] 2012-2017. RIP"[3]. Some are putting forward a radical anti-capitalist vision of an economy beyond profit and constant growth, while others seem to believe in the possibility of a tamed, a fairer, a more ethical version of capitalism.

This paper wants to contribute to a better understanding of the ambivalences of the concept and practice of platform cooperativism. It aims to situate it within a broader conceptual framework of cooperatives and capitalist resistance, exploring both the movement's potentials to subvert digital capitalism from the inside and the risk of being co-opted by it. It asks what it means when resistance takes the form of an (cooperative) enterprise.

The discussion draws on an analysis of the self-descriptions of platform co-ops listed on the directory on The Internet of Ownership website[4]. I will first outline the model of platform cooperativism as a movement for social change. The next section examines the goal of creating a People's Internet and sets out a central tension between efforts to end free labour on the one hand and the commercialisation of alternative spaces online on the other. Drawing on a range of examples I then situate platforms cooperativism's affinity with entrepreneurialism within the contemporary social context. I argue that the yoking of activism with business enterprise presents the movement with certain challenges and limitations. To explore these further I discuss two potential lines of criticism: A first one that builds on Marxist perspectives and highlights antagonisms between competitive business pressures and political goals; and a second one, which draws on a Foucaultian critique of entrepreneurialism as part of neoliberal governmentality. I conclude with some reflections on the politics of platform cooperativism.

Platform Cooperativism and Social Change

Before there was the sharing economy, there was Wikipedia. Along with peer-production, file sharing, free and open source software, Wikipedia has continued to hold up a (imperfect) vision of the Internet as it could have been – a non-commercial space that allows online users worldwide to collaborate and to create a commons for and by everyone. But these non-commercial and collaborative online spaces could not evade the grasp of 21st century capitalism. They have been challenged legally by a crackdown on peer-to-peer file sharing and economically through co-optation, commercialisation and the rise of well-resourced corporate platforms. Spotify, Netflix and co symbolise the cultural industry's awakening to the potential of reviving corporate profits by using advertising and subscription fees while maintaining the accessibility and openness users demanded. Platforms like Uber and Upwork have taken this model a step further by capitalizing on the role of the middleman that connects consumers and precarious workers.

Platform cooperativism is an effort to take control over the collaborative potentials of digital technologies. As Trebor Scholz argues, it aims to contribute to a shift in power relations and to "positively develop a moral vision of digital work that does not tolerate surveillance, surreptitious extraction, and exploitation" (Scholz, 2017: 2). The idea sounds simple and convincing: cut out the corporate middleman and replace Uber with a service owned and managed by taxi drivers themselves, create a version of AirBnb run by cities, or turn Facebook into a platform democratically controlled by all users. To realise these alternatives, platform cooperativism relies on a refreshed take on a radical 19th century idea: co-operatives.

The International Co-operative Alliance defines a co-operative as "an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise"[5]. A key feature of co-operatives is that they exist to benefit their members, whether these members are consumers in a consumer co-op, tenants in a housing co-op or workers in a producer co-op. While historically the division between worker and consumer co-operatives was cause of conflict and controversy within the co-operative movement (Rowlands, 2014; Fensom, 2014), platform cooperativism is open to any types of co-operative enterprise. Many platform co-operatives emphasise that they seek to benefit a range of different stakeholders. The Media Coop for example describes itself as a "solidarity cooperative (also known as a multi-stakeholder co-op) with three kinds of members: readers, contributors and editors"[6]. Fairbnb aims to build a "multi-stakeholder co-operative designed to keep earnings within communities and ensure that decisions favour the well-being of neighbourhoods"[7].

Going beyond benefitting individual co-operative members and local communities, platform cooperativism also aims to ignite a people led movement for social change. Trebor Scholz (2017: 175) describes it as a "mindset", as "a

rectangle of hope", a term "that describes technological, cultural, political and social changes". The current excitement for platform cooperativism reflects both a hope placed in co-ops as part of a social alternative and a belief in the collaborative potentials of the Internet. Ever since first gaining popularity in the UK in the midst of early industrial capitalism, co-operatives have always been attached to great hopes for social change. In 1820 one of the early advocates of co-operatives, the industrialist Robert Owen (1991) for example argued that realizing human happiness required replacing private property, competition and social inequality with a society based on co-operation and common ownership.

Like platform cooperativism, which tries to create alternatives to the condition of super-precarity that workers are facing in the gig economy, Owen's cooperativism aimed to address the misery of the working classes in the emerging capitalist industry. He described the early capitalist social system as "the most antisocial, impolitical, and irrational" (1991: 276). Owen developed a detailed utopian vision of a society based on co-operative communities of 300-2000 members each, which would multiply and create large-scale structural change (Owen, 1991: 271). Despite all differences in time and context, contemporary platform cooperativism shares with Owen's cooperativism a belief in social transformation through the expansion of small bottom up alternative projects, rather than through claiming political power.

The vision platform cooperativism is proposing is to use co-operative models in order to mobilise the collaborative potentials of the Internet for the social good. It suggests taking the various forms of social co-operation that are already happening on sharing economy platforms and social media sites out of corporate hands and instead put them under the control of Internet users themselves through democratically owned and governed enterprises. Or, as Trebor Scholz puts it: "a different future of work is possible; a People's Internet is possible!" (Scholz, 2017: 164)

A People's Internet

Hopes for an open and collaborative Internet, controlled by the people rather than corporations, are not new and have shaped the Internet from its early days. Such hopes often revolved around a radical critique of copyright and calls for a free, commons-based culture. Eben Moglen (2003) in his dotCommunist Manifesto for example proclaimed "We, the creators of the free information society […] intend the resumption of the cultural inheritance stolen from us under the guise of "intellectual property," […]. We are committed to the struggle for free speech, free knowledge, and free technology". Wikipedia continues to symbolize such an alternative vision of a commons based online culture that is collaboratively produced and openly accessible for all Internet users. The online encyclopedia has been described "a communist project" that "anticipates a communist mode of production" (Firer-Blaess and Fuchs, 2014: 4) and

4

celebrated as the "most successful example of online commons based and oriented peer production" (O'Neil, 2011: 309)

Yochai Benkler, who coined the term commons-based peer production (Benkler, 2002, 2006) as a form of open collaboration of large numbers of people online, emphasises both continuities and differences between platform cooperativism and other models of an open and collaborative Internet. The main difference stems from the fact that co-operatives are organised and often legally incorporated as business enterprises. As Benkler (2016: 93) argues, peer-production is largely based on unpaid, voluntary contributions. Outputs can therefore be made available as commons, accessible to all Internet users free of charge. Due to this voluntary, free labour of software developers and content creators, forms of peer production such as open source have also been susceptible to co-optation. Software and other content that is released under open source and creative commons licenses that allow for commercial uses can be freely used by anyone - including corporations with commercial interests and large profits.

Wikipedia for example allows for commercial reuse of its content. As a result, Wikipedia articles have been legally sold in book form by commercial publishers such as the US based company Books LLC and the German VDM Publishing group[8]. The less restrictive and more open a license, the easier the voluntary and unpaid work of produsers can be appropriated and exploited for corporate profit interests (Fuchs, 2001). Peer production thus has not just contributed to a vast growth of common knowledge but also enabled a "communism of capital" (Virno, 2004: 110; Beverungen, Murtola and Schwartz, 2013).

Platform cooperativism is different. While peer-production projects primarily aim to make collaboratively produced culture openly accessible, the primary focus of a co-operative model is on directly benefitting a clearly defined group of members. Benefitting members for example means providing regular incomes to worker members and addressing the issue of precarious work and free labour. The emphasis on improving working conditions is central to the model of platform cooperativism as outlined by Trebor Scholz. In fact, the 10 key principles of platform coopertivism he defined almost exclusively focus on improving work. They include collective ownership by the people who generate the revenue; decent pay and income security; transparency and data portability; a good working atmosphere; workers should be involved in the design process of the platform; a protective legal framework; portable worker protections and benefits; protection of workers against arbitrary behaviour; rejection of excessive workplace surveillance; and the right to log off (Scholz, 2017: 180-184).

Avoiding the trap of free labour and providing a regular income for workers challenges co-operatives to generate a constant stream of income. As platform cooperativism is rightly critical of the systematic surveillance that underpins advertising-based business model, this income cannot come through the sale of

user data. The solution platform cooperativism resorts to is not public funding, but rather commercial strategies along with donation and crowd-funding models. Snowdrift for example is a platform coop that aims to "improve the ability of ordinary people to fund public goods" by proposing a "crowdmatching approach" for funding creative work[9]. In this model patrons match each others donations in order to provide a monthly income for selected projects. Similarly, Ampliative Art proposes a platform on which artist can make their work available for free, while users are encouraged to "voluntarily repay those actors through various types of donations in order to recognise their work and reward the enhancements received from the works offered"[10]. Another model is community shares, which differ from other forms of investment because every shareowner has only one vote, regardless the size of investment[11]. A similar strategy is crowd-owning, in which individuals can give money to a co-op by buying a share and becoming a member[12]. These strategies rest on the support of individual backers. They can be a useful tool to acquire funds for starting a co-operative project, but do not provide regular income. In the long-term commercial strategies, such as selling products and services as commodities or charging usage and subscription fees, are thus often needed to ensure a constant flow of income.

As Benkler highlights, this is a departure from models embedded within a commons logic and "a challenge that commons-based peer production did not face before" (Benkler, 2016: 93). Michel Bauwens and Vasilis Kostakis (2014: 356) stress that co-operatives, just like other businesses, rely on a proprietary logic and while internally democratic still engage in capitalist market competition. While this has the advantage of generating income for remunerating workers and escaping the problem of perpetuating free labour of cultural producers, it also marks a trend towards commercialisation and a departure from the logic of the common.

Bauwens and Kostakis suggest an "open co-operativism" as possible synthesis between commons-based models and co-operatives (Bauwens and Kostakis, 2014: 256). In particular, they argue that open co-operatives could use commons-based reciprocity licenses that continue to offer outputs free of charge as a common for non-commercial uses but demand a license fee for any commercial usages. According to Bauwens and Kostakis (2014: 258) this would have the benefit that "the participating for-profit companies would consciously contribute under a new logic. This proposal would link the Commons to an entrepreneurial coalition of ethical market entities (co-ops and other models) and keep surplus value entirely within the sphere of commoners/co-operators, instead of leaking out to multinationals". Ultimately an open co-operativism as laid out by Bauwens and Kostakis (2014: 261) "encourages commercialization, but transforms it into an ethical economy".

Platform cooperativism is not a mere return to non-commercial forms of sharing that have been happening online ever since the Internet's emergence. It seeks to cut out the corporate middleman and develop new strategies of monetising online

collaboration. As discussed earlier, platform cooperativism emerged as a response to precarious labour and aims to contribute to improving working conditions. Unlike for example labour unions, it does so not by demanding higher wages and stable contracts from employers and protections of labour rights from governments. In many ways the solution platform cooperativism is proposing is more radical: it goes beyond demanding better treatment of workers, by erasing the very distinction between workers and owners. In other ways however, the co-operative model tames worker activism because it places workers in a position where they have to participate in competitive markets, use commercial strategies and – in order to pay their own wages - "become their own capitalists" (Marx, 1991: 571). This confronts platform cooperativism with a central contradiction: While attempting to challenge precarity and resisting the corporate exploitation of the free labour of workers and Internet users, it simultaneously also strengthens entrepreneurialism and commercialisation.

As a movement, platform cooperativism yokes social change and business success. It aims to create social change through ethical, co-operative businesses. And while platform co-ops do not aim at maximising private profit but instead seek to contribute to the common good, they still rely on commercial income in order to sustain themselves. In many ways, the success of this vision depends on new forms of ethical consumption in which users and consumers abandon the products and services offered by corporate giants and instead opt to support co-operative businesses as consumer members – Fairmondo instead of Amazon, Resonate instead of Spotify, and People's Ride instead of Uber. While platform cooperativism offers a much-needed alternative to the corporate sharing economy it also raises questions about what it means if social change is to be facilitated through business enterprises. So, is it possible to challenge digital capitalism through setting up co-operative businesses?

Activism Meets Business Enterprise

From business ethics to corporate social responsibility and "corporate activism" to ethical consumption – the idea that capitalism can be tamed and reformed from the inside has become increasingly popular over the past decades. Critics have highlighted the democratically ambivalent implications of ethical consumption (Littler, 2008) and critiqued the limitations of corporate do-good ideologies (Banerjee, 2008; Sklair and Miller, 2010), which often serve as "ideological smoke screen" (Hanlon and Fleming, 2009: 938) and marketing strategies to improve image and reputation, while leaving the underlying business models and profit goals untouched. Businesses trying to be perceived as good corporate citizens that do their part in addressing today's global social challenges, is part of a more general convergence between business enterprise and activism. Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) used the term "commodity activism" to describe various ways in which "historical traditions of social activism are being hollowed out and rearticulated in commodity form" (Mukherjeee and Banet-Weiser, 2012: 3). They argue that in order to fully grasp

the meanings and implications of commodity activism, as it moves between corporate appropriation and critical cultural intervention, it is necessary to move the analysis "away from an either/or logic of profit versus politics, from clear distinctions between cultural co-optation and popular resistance" (Mukerjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012: 3)

Platform cooperativism too operates in this space where activism and business enterprise converge: A co-operative model that is committed to democratic ownership and control signifies a structural change and a departure from capitalist business structures based on private ownership and class hierarchy. And yet, a co-operative remains a business entity that operates and competes on capitalist markets. Platform co-operative Resonate for example stresses:

> "The beauty of the cooperative is that while it enjoys democratic processes and a more equitable distribution of wealth, they an also fully participate within capitalist societies – they are definitely NOT non-profits and can chase innovation, profitability and expansion just as much as traditional corporations."[13]

As this quote illustrates, for Resonate the commercial orientation of platform co-ops is not perceived as possible limitation, but a rather described as strength of the model. This ties in with the fact that the co-operative model has often been described as one that yields substantial business benefits including increased productivity, innovation, resilience and entrepreneurship (Erdal, 2011: 173). The 2015 UK Co-operative Economy Report (Co-operatives UK, 2015: 5) argued that sharing ownership 'boosts productivity', 'harnesses innovation' and 'drives entrepreneurship'.

However, for many platform co-operatives the primary goal is not simply economic success but to create social change through ethical alternatives to corporate businesses. Platform co-op Resonate for example wants to create a co-operative alternative to corporate streaming platforms such as Spotify. Fairmondo is making an attempt to challenge online giants such as Amazon and ebay through creating an ethical online marketplace, an "online home of the Good"[14]. Often the goal is to improve working conditions in a particular industry. Examples are co-operatives of taxi drivers such as Alpha Taxis in Paris, France; Co-op Taxis in Auckland, New Zealand; Co-op Taxiline in Edmonton, Canada; and Green Taxi in Denver, US. Others seek to provide solutions to the exploitation of workers on freelance platforms through bidding models and high commission fees. Loconomics is an example of such a freelancer platform co-operative based in San Francisco. Another example is Up&Go, a platform for co-operatively owned professional home services. The platform allows users to hire cleaning professionals, dog walkers and handyman that are members of worker owned co-operatives. Co-operatives offer a direct response to the insecurities of precarious work. They provide a much-needed sense of community and solidarity and create a practical alternative to individualised neoliberal work cultures

(Sandoval 2018). Co-ops encourage social solidarity and show alternative potentialities that can inspire collective action and social change.

Some platform co-ops have a more ambitious vision about contributing to large-scale social change, radically alternating the way the economy works and how wealth is shared. The non-profit Web Hosting Co-operative for examples states it aims "to change the way business is conducted on the internet. We strive for the good of humanity and believe all people should have a voice!"[15]. Fair.coop wants "to make the transition to a new world by reducing the economic and social inequalities among human beings as much as possible, and at the same time gradually contribute to a new global wealth, accessible to all humankind as commons"[16].

Unlike social movements or activist groups, platform co-ops are business enterprises and thus attempt to contribute to social change from within capitalism. It is important to see the drive to foster social change through co-operative enterprise within the contemporary social context. Cuts in public spending often mean that funding to support social causes is increasingly hard to obtain. At the same time, working realities are increasingly precarious - freelance work and forced self-employment have become the new norm within the so-called gig-economy (Ross, 2009; Friedman, 2014; Scholz, 2017; van Doorn, 2017). In this context, activism can begin to seem like yet another form of unpaid labour. Years of neoliberalism thus have driven the need to develop business models that generate funds to help address pressing social challenges and facilitate activist work.

Among the advantages of working towards social change through co-operative businesses is the prospect of getting paid for activist work while doing so within a co-operative and democratic organisation. Other opportunities arise from the fact that co-operatives, by insisting on principles of democratic decision-making and ownership, actively challenge the depolitisation of economic life. As for example Ellen Meiksins Wood (1981: 66-67) has argued, framing "essentially political issues" such as distribution of wealth or access to means of production as allegedly apolitical economic questions, is one of the key features of capitalist ideology and a major obstacle to socialist practice. Thus, the rejection of the economic as apolitical might point to platform cooperativism's radical potentials. It challenges entrenched assumptions that naturalise capitalist class divisions, practically shows that people can work without bosses and competition, and demonstrates that co-operation yields more benefits for individuals and society than self-interested behaviour. The expansion of such co-operative spaces could contribute to strengthening social solidarity and empower people to demand and create social change. However, the fact that platform co-operatives operate as business enterprises also brings certain risks and limitations. Criticism can evolve along two strands, which I will discuss in the following two sections.

Degeneration Thesis

From the perspective of progressive politics, co-operatives are highly ambivalent. On the one hand they promote co-operation, solidarity, common ownership and democracy and thus challenge capitalism's individualising and competitive logic. On the other hand, they operate as business enterprises and thus cannot escape competitive market pressures. This ambivalence is part of the reason why critics such as Rosa Luxemburg rejected co-operatives as a means for radical politics. Luxemburg (2008) argued that, caught in between political aims and business needs, co-ops would either fail in succeeding on competitive markets and thus dissolve, or succumb to the logic of competitive markets and thus lose their political vision. She stressed that as long as co-ops operate within capitalism, they "either become pure capitalist enterprises or, if the workers' interests continue to predominate, end by dissolving" (Luxemburg, 2008: 81). Similarly, Ernest Mandel argued 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). This so-called "degeneration thesis" (Egan, 1990), which argues that co-operatives are bound to fail politically, points at a first key challenge for platform cooperativism - a challenge that not just affects co-operatives, but alternative projects within capitalism in general. Writing about the alternative press the research group Comedia for example highlighted the "difficulties of reconciling the contradictory demands of economic survival and political ambition" (Comedia, 1984: 96).

This approach questions whether co-operatives can indeed fulfil their promise of promoting social change while also succeeding on capitalist markets. According to this Marxist perspective, unethical business practices in capitalism are not the result of immoral behaviour of individual capitalists, but inherent to the dynamics of capitalist competition. Marx argued: "looking at the thing as a whole it is evident that this does not depend on the will, either good or bad, of the individual capitalist. Under free competition, the immanent laws of capitalist production confront the individual capitalist as a coercive force external to him" (Marx, 1990: 381).

Marxists critics have highlighted that competition drives individual capitalists to continually accumulate and "reinvest in expansion" (Harvey, 2010b: 43) and to "intensify the exploitation of labor" (Holloway, 2003: 231). The example of platform capitalism and the "gig economy" show how systematic user surveillance and the extreme exploitation of workers have helped companies such as Facebook, Amazon or Google to gain monopoly powers. Nick Srnicek (2017: 127) argues that challenges co-ops are facing within a capitalist environment "are made even worse by the monopolistic nature of platforms, the dominance of network effects and the vast resources behind these companies. Even if all its software were made of open-source, a platform like Facebook would still have the weight of its existing data, network effects, and financial resources to fight of any coop rival"

Co-ops can challenge platform capitalism only to some extent. Clearly, a simple degeneration thesis that insists that co-ops are bound to fail overlooks the numerous examples of radical co-operatives that have had continued and substantial impacts of the lives of their members and communities around them (Sandoval 2018, Siapera and Papadopoulou, 2016; Scholz and Schneider, 2017). However, this critical perspective helps to understand why efforts to scale the co-operative economy and to "outcompete capitalism" are unlikely to succeed. It also suggests that the more radical a co-op's resistance against market logics and competition the more challenging it will be for the co-op to generate income, especially outside of niche markets. For instance, if a co-op has strict ethical rules about what clients to work for, about not accepting investment capital, about not to use any advertising as source of income or wants to use open commons licenses, economic success will be harder to achieve.

The platform co-op Resonate for example wants to radically alter how music streaming platforms work, benefitting both fans and artists. Instead of paying a monthly subscription fee, Resonate uses a stream to own model in which users pay a small amount for each time they stream a song until they reach the prize of a regular download, which is when they own the song and no longer need to pay for additional streams. The cooperative wants to counteract the under-payment of artists on corporate streaming platforms by passing 70% of its income on to the artist and the label. The platform's model for remunerating labels and artists differs greatly from established industry standards, one challenge for Resonate is to secure contracts with sufficient artists and labels if it wants to make its service attractive to users. Another major challenge for Resonate has been access to financial resources needed to build the platform. Since 2015 the co-op tried to raise funds through a crowd-owning campaign and eventually relied on unpaid labour to get a beta version of its streaming service up and running: "thanks to the recruitment of an amazing developer who has been able to work full-time for months (without pay) we will be launching an early beta version of the Resonate app in early 2017!"[17]

The example of Resonate illustrates on the one hand illustrates that breaking lose from established industry patterns is an economically difficult choice. On the other hand it shows a cooperative model does not automatically improve working conditions and might still rely on unpaid labour. Contesting the monopoly power of corporate platforms is difficult. So far existing alternatives to Facebook, Google, Amazon and AirBnb have remained small and unpopular. Larger capital resources for investments in technical development, advertising and marketing give corporate platforms an advantage over often underfunded co-operative projects. Out of 106 platform cooperatives currently listed on the Internet of Ownership directory, 17 are no longer operating, 7 only exist as a concept, 20 are currently under development.

Platform cooperativism is proposing a bottom-up strategy of transforming platform capitalism. It seems promising as it offers an avenue for positive critique – a strategy of actively creating alternative realities instead of merely criticising existing ones. Such a bottom up strategy is particularly appealing in times when many have lost confidence in neoliberal governments to regulate corporate power and support projects for social change. Many examples show that platform co-operatives can have positive impacts on their members and communities. However, thus far they have been unable to create large-scale structural change. Despite the fact that platform co-operatives are embracing business and entrepreneurship and operate as trading enterprises, they cannot fully escape a central dilemma of alternative projects – refusing to play by the rules of the capitalist game might mean to remain stuck within an "alternative ghetto" (Comedia, 1984: 100). As small-scale alternatives platform co-operatives are important, but challenging the dominance of platform capitalism and creating a "real sharing economy" seems to require broader alliances.

Entrepreneurial Activism

Underlying Luxemburg's dismissal of co-operatives is a critique of capitals' expansive logic. She warned against the political being taking over by the economic. Half a century later Michael Foucault described the economic colonisation of society as a key feature of neoliberalism. He characterised neoliberal society as an "enterprise society" (Foucault, 2008: 147) in which "the homo oeconomicus sought after is not the man of exchange or man the consumer, he is the man of enterprise and production" (Foucault, 2008: 147). Foucault argued that within the framework of neoliberalism, society is increasingly formed around the model of the enterprise (Foucault, 2008: 148). He described neoliberalism's expansive logic as a "generalization of the grid of homo oeconomicus to domains that are not immediately and directly economic" (Foucault, 2008: 268).

Critical scholars have described the encroaching of an entrepreneurial logic to all realms of society (Dardot and Laval, 2013) including education (Bialostok and Kamberelis, 2012), academia (Canizzo, 2015), health (Roy, 2008), relationships, bodies and sexuality (Gill, 2009; Favaro, 2017a). Political activism and campaigning for social change are no exception (Hearn, 2012). In the 1980s neoliberal management theorist Peter Drucker for example wrote enthusiastically about the potential to once and for all replace the uncontrollability of revolutionary politics with an embrace of entrepreneurialism in all sectors of society as a model for social change. He argued that after leaving behind the idea of social revolution as a "delusion of the nineteenth century" (Drucker, 2015: 312), innovation and entrepreneurial logic should be applied to "public-service institutions such as government agencies, labour unions, churches, universities, and schools, hospitals, community and charitable organizations, professional and trade associations and the like" (Drucker, 2015: 218)

From public-private partnerships, to the model of social enterprise, which suggests business solutions to social problems, to proposals to alleviate poverty through micro-entrepreneurship – examples of how Drucker's entrepreneurial vision has been realised are not hard to find. These models frame social issues as questions of business enterprise and markets rather than politics and social solidarity. As Jo Littler (2018: 191) points out "entrepreneurialism is deeply and extensively problematic: it channels all life activity into a mode of competition, extending inequality and validating the environmentally destructive model of economic growth".

Platform cooperativism's relationship with entrepreneurialism is ambivalent. On the one hand, the co-operative model upholds the idea of economic democracy as an alternative to anarchic market logics. On the other hand, the aim to create social alternatives through the vehicle of business enterprise feeds into an entrepreneurial model of social change. Can platform cooperativism be seen as an example of the entrepreneurialisation of activism?

As Wendy Brown argues, the encroaching of an entrepreneurial logic on ever more areas of social life has threatened politics and democracy. She describes the "homo politicus" as "the most important casualty of the ascendance of neoliberal reason" (Brown, 2015: 87). Brown argues, that "the neoliberal triumph of homo oeconomicus as the exhaustive figure of the human is undermining democratic practices and a democratic imaginary by vanquishing the subject that governs itself through moral autonomy and governs with others through popular sovereignty" (Brown, 2015: 79). This has led to a "generalized collapse of faith in the powers of knowledge, reason, and will for the deliberate making and tending of our common existence", i.e. in the "human capacities to gestate and guide a decent and sustainable order" (Brown, 2015: 222)

In many ways, platform cooperativism seems to actively challenge this development - it insists that another world is possible and that it can be built through collaborative human effort. However, part of Brown's (2015: 221) critique is that under neoliberalism deliberate human agency is being relinquished to the market. This again points towards the ambivalence of platform cooperativism: On the one hand it seeks to restore a collective alternative imagination, but on the other hand it surrenders to market power by relying on the organisational form of a business enterprise to advance this vision. As discussed earlier, in today's context there are many good reasons for alternative projects to adopt commercial structures. But the fact that these reasons exist also is testimony to the disciplining power of precarity, debt and high rents that leaves people with little agency outside market relations. Neoliberal reason has become so powerful and pervasive that "even social movements that understand themselves as opposed to neoliberal economic policies may nonetheless be organised by neoliberal rationality" (Brown, 2015: 202).

Among neoliberalism's attainments is that it has normalised the model of the entrepreneur. As Imre Szeman argues, "Everyone has to be an entrepreneur because in the absence of society – of the guarantees of formal and informal security and welfare once provided by community and state policies and programs – risk is a universal condition of existence" (Szeman, 2015: 475). Entrepreneurial reasoning is common within platform cooperativism. It can be seen for example in the language often used by platform co-operatives. For instance, music streaming co-op Resonate promises its members "a share in the profits, so if Resonate makes it big, so will you!". The Belgian co-operative car sharing platform Tapazz emphasises that anyone "can easily buy shares through online registration and payment. The cooperative structure makes it possible to participate without complicated procedures (with notary)." Positive News, a media platform owned by readers and journalists, highlights that "every shareholder has an equal vote" and explains to its shareholders that "you may be able to gain a financial return on your investment in the future, if the organisation is in a sufficiently profitable position". Patient-owned coop Savvy promises to make "patients the shareholders, meaning we work with patients and share our profits with them". Using terms such as 'shareholder', 'profit', 'investment' and 'shares' resembles a business vocabulary that can be seen as s form of economization, which "replaces a political lexicon with a market lexicon" (Brown, 2015: 207).

One might argue that while co-operatives operate within a capitalist market and therefore also reproduce its signs and language, their value lies precisely in actively challenging and subverting market logic by practicing workplace democracy. But collective ownership and democratic governance do not automatically protect co-ops from the dynamics of entrepreneurialism. As Brown (2015, 209) argues, "Democracy is an empty form that can be filled with a variety of bad content and instrumentalised by purposes ranging from nationalist xenophobia to racial colonialism, from heterosexist to capitalist hegemony". Studies have for example shown that co-operative businesses are not necessarily more equal and inclusive. Juliet Schor (2016) found that inequalities of race, class and gender tend to be reproduced within platform co-operatives. The case studies she and her project team investigated were "plagued with status-seeking subtle forms of social exclusion, and non-egalitarian behaviour" (Schor, 2016: 36). Equal opportunity standards tend to be largely absent within often comparatively small co-operatives, which diminishes their potential to actively challenge existing social inequalities that shape patriarchal capitalism as a whole.

As much as co-ops are unhinging the opposition between owner and workers, they simultaneously undermine the possibility of workplace politics regulated through trade unions. At the same time traditional trade unions are often struggling to embrace precarious work realities and to adequately support gig work and digital labour. In the absence of union politics, the heightened importance of personal networks and relationships, for example for recruitment,

often means that social inequalities are reproduced (Oakley, 2006; McRobbie, 2016: 68). The recruitment policy of Enspiral, a platform listed as "co-op platform" on the Internet of Ownership illustrates this problem:

> "Enspiral is a network primarily based on high-trust, personal relationships. We try to be as open and welcoming as possible to create a low barrier to entry, but at the same time, we don't have a drive to do recruitment. We don't really offer job opportunities. Everyone here has found their own way in, and their own livelihood to support them to do the work they are passionate about."

Such an approach reproduces a problematic entrepreneurial logic of self-initiative and individual responsibility. It is the individual's responsibility to find "their own way in" to be able to support "their own livelihood". And indeed, starting a co-op, not unlike any other business, requires a lot of time and commitment, which not everyone can afford. The entrepreneurial initiative and persistence required to start a co-operative enterprise within a capitalist context tends to favour a certain type of worker. And since platform cooperativism is as much about activism and creating social change as it is about business enterprise it also favours a certain type of activist: entrepreneurial, innovative, flexible and tech-savvy. Poverty, health problems, disabilities or caring responsibility can easily become a hurdle.

The concept of platform cooperativism effectively highlights the problem of precarious labour in platform capitalism that forces workers to become enterprises of and by themselves. However, it is not enough to replace the individualised entrepreneur of the gig economy with a co-operative entrepreneur. It rather seems necessary to reject entrepreneurial logic as such. If remaining uncritical of an entrepreneurial language and imaginary, platform cooperativism risks to inadvertently align itself with a neoliberal logic it set out to overcome.

Conclusions

Platform cooperativism has opened up an important debate about alternatives to the sharing economy and an Internet controlled by monopolistic corporations. It has the potential to unite activists, software developers, precarious workers and anyone using the Internet and digital technologies to create social change. As a movement it suggests a "concrete utopia" (Bloch, 1995) that not only envisions, but practically anticipates a social alternative for economic organisation in the digital age. And yet, as I argued in this paper, platform cooperativism is shaped by contradictions and tensions between for example politics and enterprise, democracy and the market, commons and commercialisation, activism and entrepreneurship.

Alternative projects within capitalism have always struggled with resource scarcity. Cutbacks in public funding and social welfare, combined with the normalisation of precarity have exacerbated these challenges. Neoliberalism has

reduced spaces for human agency outside of the market. In this context developing a co-operative business model seems double beneficial: it challenges individualisation and competition, while at the same time offering a way to generate commercial income to fund paid work and sometimes also provide resources for activist causes.

As I have argued elsewhere (Sandoval 2016), co-operatives are politically ambivalent – they can appeal to advocates of neoliberal self-help and individual responsibility as much as they can be seen as radical political practice. If platform cooperativism is to be part of a radical political project it is important to avoid a co-op fetishism that celebrates the co-operative form as necessarily progressive without considering its limitations. Two key limitations discussed in this paper are the constant challenge to navigate tensions between political goals and economic pressures on the one hand, and the risk of the expansion of an entrepreneurial logic into activist spheres on the other.

My argument to reject entrepreneurialism runs counter to Hardt and Negri's (2017) provocative call to mobilise the term entrepreneurship for left politics. They claim that under neoliberalism the term has been "diverted and distorted" and aim to "unmask underneath the ideology of the capitalist entrepreneur, the continuous expropriation of the cooperative power of the multitude" (Hardt and Negri, 2017: 139). The insight that entrepreneurialism mobilises the human ability to act and innovate does not seem particularly surprising. As Littler (2018: 182) observes, "entrepreneurialism has historically functioned as a potent and double-edged drive, one both facilitating creative energies and their capitalist capture". But while entrepreneurialism feeds on basic human capacities, there has never been a progressive meaning to the term entrepreneur, waiting to be recuperated. In the 18th century economist Richard Cantillon (2010) first defined the entrepreneur as a bearer of risks. Later, in the 20th century, the entrepreneur came to be understood as innovator who embraces change and thus drives the capitalism forward (Schumpeter, 2012; Drucker, 2015: 36). As Dardot and Laval (2013) argue, within neoliberal thought, entrepreneurship is the dominant mode of acting and relating to the self in a way that is inherently competitive and seeks to exploit business opportunities in an all-pervasive market. In other words, the term entrepreneur is not as innocent as Hardt and Negri would like to suggest. The entrepreneur is a capitalist invention and a neoliberal panacea – a subject equipped with qualities geared towards competition and thus particularly suitable for flourishing within capitalist market economies.

Entrepreneurialism channels human activity into a particular mode of acting that is based on individualism, instrumental rationality and competition. A way of working that is risk-friendly, fast-paced, competitive, always flexible and as a consequence often leads to stress, anxiety, exhaustion and overwork. Hardt and Negri's almost celebratory tone - claiming for example that entrepreneurship "signals the new potential of today's productive subjectivities" (Hardt and Negri, 2017: 232) – does not take sufficiently into account the problematic meanings

and practices that cannot easily be separated from the term entrepreneurialism. Their argument on the one hand brushes aside the real pressures and injuries put onto individuals by entrepreneurial modes of working. On the other hand, it fails to clearly reject those qualities of working and thus risks to uncritically transfer these demands onto activist work, reproducing inequalities of race, class and gender as well patterns of stress, anxiety, exhaustion and overwork.

As Bröckling (2016: 196) argues, the "interpellations of the entrepreneurial self are totalitarian". The entrepreneurial work ethics only leaves two possible outcomes for individual lives: self-optimization or inadequacy (Bröckling, 2016: 200). To prevent entrepreneurialism – and its particular modes of acting, relating and engaging with the world – from hijacking the realm of activism and campaigning for social change, it needs to be actively critiqued and resisted. Without a critique of entrepreneurialism, economization and marketization, platform cooperativism – or any other form of progressive politics – risks undermining alternative imagination and political action outside and against the market and unwillingly contributes to confirming the totality of the market and the "enterprise society" (Foucault, 2008), in which "the entrepreneur is abstracted and universalized into a model for all citizens (indeed, a model that may have the potential to replace the citizen as such)" (Szeman, 2015: 474)

Platform cooperativism seems to reject the dichotomy between democracy and market. It seeks to democratize the economy. However, the project of strengthening democracy through the market is limited by the fact that both operate according to different logics – the market does not care about principles of equality, justice, reason and deliberation, which are essential to democracy. Reducing political action to the market realm further threatens the "homo politicus" which Brown (2015: 87) has described as "the most important casualty" of neoliberal reason.

None of this is to say that the project of platform cooperativism is futile or has been co-opted. Rather, I am trying to offer a "solidary critique" (Favaro, 2017b) that contributes to debates on the movements' potentials by highlighting its tensions and ambivalences. Greig de Peuter and Nicole Cohen (2015) have suggested that working towards increasing labour autonomy requires (1) creating bottom up mutual aid infrastructures, (2) developing ideas for worker-centred policies from below and (3) challenging capitalist vocabularies through counter-interpellation. Platform cooperativism certainly has contributed hugely to creating co-operative structures of mutual aid. However, the latter two points thus far seem underdeveloped. As I have argued, platform cooperativism has adopted rather than challenged dominant business language. Likewise, there has been little debate on developing policies that could help strengthen the movement.

What seems needed not instead of, but in addition to the positive prefigurative practice –the "concrete utopia" platform cooperativism is already offering – is a negative critique of existing capitalist power relations. A contestation of those

very structures that often leave alternative projects with little choice but to opt for either accepting free labour and resource precarity or to adopt commercial strategies to generate income. Challenging this dilemma between structural precarity and commercialisation requires going beyond working within the constraints of neoliberal capitalism. The strategies of developing policies from below and effective counter-interpellation both seem important for this task.

As a co-operative movement of people around the globe platform cooperative could use its collective political voice to demand structural reforms that would improve the conditions for alternative co-operative projects to flourish. Such demands can include government support for the co-operative economy (Schneider, 2016: 17), but also larger social policy issues such as free and universal health care, childcare and education, a guaranteed basic income combined with appropriate living wage regulations and strict corporate taxation. A guaranteed basic income for example could open up important spaces for pursuing socially important work outside wage relations. A media fee, as proposed by Christian Fuchs (2014) could help co-operative digital media projects to operate free from commercial pressures. Co-operatives could fill an important role within a "social unionism" that seeks to combine economic and political struggles and rests on the "interweaving of labour struggles and social movements" (Hardt and Negri, 2017: 148)

After decades of neoliberal policy-making we are witnessing a dwindling of hopes in the willingness of governments to support such progressive change. And yet, insisting in the need for policies that build on social solidarity and strong social welfare system, that protect public goods and public funding remains crucial as a way of providing an outside to the logic of enterprise and markets. In today's context, resisting the totality of entrepreneurial logic and insisting in the possibility of alternative practice outside the market is as difficult as it is important. Improving the conditions for the formation of a movement for a co-operative and democratic Internet and society requires defending what Brown describes as "the essential conditions of democratic existence" including "limited extremes of concentrated wealth and poverty, orientation towards citizenship as a practice of considering the public good and citizens modestly discerning about the ways of power, history, representation and justice" (Brown, 2015: 17). Subverting capitalist "enterprise society" requires not a co-operative entrepreneur but social solidarity and a global cooperative movement.

For Correspondence: Marisol Sandoval, Department of Sociology, City, University of London, Northampton Square, London EC1V 0HB, United Kingdom. Email: Marisol.Sandoval.1@city.ac.uk

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