human relations
THE TAVISTOCK INSTITUTE

human relations
1–30

DOI: 10.1177/00187267261437665
journals.sagepub.com/home/hum


Alternative organizing, alienation and wage labour: Exploring the importance of democracy in UK worker cooperatives

Kiri Langmead
Edinburgh Napier University, UK

Simon Parker
City St George's, University of London, UK

Abstract

Alienation is seen as endemic to the labour process and organizations. Put simply, if workers do not own the means, conditions and results of production they will remain alienated from their product, productive activity, species being and fellow human and non-human others. Some scholars have highlighted that, through their structures of democratic control and collective ownership of the means, conditions and results of labour, worker cooperatives reverse the capital-labour relationship to create a non-exploitative class process and therefore hold possibilities for 'disalienation'. However, the idea that worker cooperatives can be 'disalienating' is by no means universally accepted, with others arguing that subsumption of labour to capital can only be *partially* addressed through a cooperative's internal structure. Central to this debate is a worker cooperative's position within the capitalist market, and we argue, their use of wage labour. This article, based on an 18-month ethnography with 2 worker cooperatives, addresses the question: *To what extent are members of worker cooperatives, engaged in wage labour, able to resist the forces of alienation?*

Corresponding author:
Kiri Langmead, Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, EH14 1DJ, UK.
Email: k.langmead@napier.ac.uk

Keywords
alienation, worker cooperative, alternative organizations, workplace democracy, employee ownership

Introduction

Alienation has long been studied in the sociology of work, psychology and political theory. Since the 1960s, there has been a shift, within the literature on work and organizations, from a Marxian to a psychological perspective of alienation (Luhman and Nazario, 2015). The former understands alienation as an objective reality intrinsic to capitalism (Braverman, 1974; Ollman, 1976). The latter views alienation as a subjective state of mind: a feeling of estrangement derived from a general sense of powerlessness, meaninglessness, and separation from the context of work (Luhman and Nazario, 2015). Despite efforts to address experiences of estrangement, and the shift in work 'away from low-discretion routine manual jobs and towards technical and professional jobs' that entail 'discretion, participation and intrinsic skills use' (Soffia et al., 2022: 835), accounts of estrangement and alienation persist (see, Azambuja and Islam, 2019; Courpasson, 2017).

Recent research on alternative organizations (Dahlman et al., 2022; Shanahan et al., 2024; Parker and Parker, 2017) has seen scholars explore a variety of different organizations, from political parties to sustainable banks, many of which are touted as potentially emancipatory (Parker et al., 2014; Zanoni, 2020) and even 'disalienating' (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2021; Watson, 2020). Some researchers focus on worker cooperatives arguing that, due to their organizational form, which reverses the capital-labour relationship by making all workers owners of the means, conditions and results of labour, cooperatives have the potential to create a non-exploitative class process (see Jossa, 2014; Lebowitz, 2003; Luhman, 2007; Vieta, 2019) where 'the antithesis between capital and labour is overcome' (Marx [1894]/2010: 317). However, others argue that if the value of products and labour is determined by capitalist markets, this reversal will only ever be partial (Roberts, 2011). Under these conditions cooperatives will continue to face the demands of competition (Atzeni and Ghigliani, 2007; Borowiak and Ji, 2019; Vieta, 2010), struggle to contain contradictions that emerge from pressures to scale-up, internationalize and professionalize (Bretos et al., 2017; Pansera and Rizzi, 2020) and, in some cases, slowly lose their commitment to democracy under the forces of degeneration (Cornforth, 1995; Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2014) and colonization (Dufays et al., 2020). These studies highlight that capitalism pervades more than just the labour process. Capitalism's 'laws of motion', including competition and commodification, compel the appropriation of workers' skills, intellect, sense of self, and capacity for cooperation; and drive the extension and intensification of the working day. As Harvey (2018a) argues, the structural forces of universal alienation operate 'irrespective of [the presence of] good or ill will' (p. 426).

Acknowledging the interconnection between neoliberal capitalism and alienation, we adopt a neo-Marxist perspective, focusing on a key area that has been overlooked in the debates so far: wage labour. Via an ethnographic study of two worker cooperatives, this article explores the practice of wage labour as an important site of struggle against universal alienation, and not just a secondary concern to democracy (Cheney et al., 2014) or

an issue of solidarity (Gibson-Graham, 2003). The article therefore addresses the following research question: *To what extent are members of worker cooperatives, engaged in wage labour, able to resist the forces of alienation?*

In answering this question, the following theoretical contributions are presented. Firstly, we argue that wage labour within cooperatives, and alternative organizations more broadly, is an important, yet overlooked, site of continual struggle against alienation. On the one hand our research shows that wage labour can create space for cooperative members to bring their values into the workplace, and through this reclaim control over their product, productive activity and reconnect to their species being (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2021; Watson, 2020). On the other hand, wage labour constantly opens the door to universal alienation, exposing workers to the 'laws of motion' that drive the separation of workers from their product, productive activity, species being and fellow human and non-human others (Harvey, 2018b). Instead of having their hands forced (Atzeni and Ghigliani, 2007; Borowiak and Ji, 2019; Vieta, 2010) cooperative members reappropriate their skills, intellect and sense of self as tools in the struggle against the intensification of work, the driving down of wages, and the push towards competition. Our second theoretical contribution is to offer an explanation as to what provides the conditions of possibility for this resistance. In doing so, we highlight the centrality of participatory democracy (Rothschild and Whitt, 1986) in maintaining wage labour as a site of struggle against alienation. We show that, through the praxis of democracy, values, aspirations, and realities are negotiated, perceived inevitabilities are challenged, and relations based on interdependence and mutuality are formed. The article begins by pulling together the literature on alternative organizations and worker cooperatives, followed by a discussion of alienation and wage labour. After that, we introduce our methodological approach and then present findings from two worker cooperatives: Beanies Wholefoods and Regather. The final section outlines the article's contributions and areas for future research.

Alternative organization, worker cooperatives and degeneration

Research on alternative organizing has bloomed over the last decade since the publication of the Routledge Companion to Alternative Organization (Parker et al., 2014). In this book, Parker et al. (2014) offer three principles to guide or determine alternative organizing: solidarity, autonomy and responsibility. Highlighting the challenges associated with meeting and maintaining these principles, a great deal of the alternative organization literature concerns the problems many alternative organizations face when confronted with hegemonic ideas like competition (Borowiak and Ji, 2019; Bousalham and Vidaillet, 2018; Vieta, 2010), growth (Sage, 2025) and pressures to scale, internationalize and professionalize (Bretos et al., 2017; Pansera and Rizzi, 2020). Since Webb and Webb (1921) introduced the degeneration thesis it has been argued that these pressures will inevitably lead worker cooperatives, and other alternative organizations, 'to adopt the same organisational forms and priorities as capitalist business in order to survive' (Cornforth, 1995: 1).

Continued concerns over this risk have resulted in the identification of multiple forms of degeneration. Cornforth et al. (1988) initially identified three types of degeneration: constitutional (the erosion of cooperative membership and membership benefits; for example Errasti et al., 2017), organizational (decision-making power resting with the few rather than the many; for example; Storey et al., 2014) and goal or cultural (profit and growth prioritized over social purpose; for example Arnaud and Château-Terrisse, 2024). Recently, Jaumier and Daudigeos (2021) introduced the term 'work degeneration', to 'describe situations where the work processes and related organizational routines of collectivist-democratic organizations begin to mirror those of for-profit companies' (p. 57). Focusing more broadly on alternative organizations, Shanahan (2025: 493) explores 'exposure degeneration' and 'insulation degeneration'; the former arising when exposure to hegemonic systems leads to mission drift, the later occurring when a 'refusal to compromise results in failure to effectively pursue its goals'.

Throughout this literature are positive voices about the potential of alternative organizations to resist or avoid degeneration through internal processes and practices. Offering an early contribution, Cornforth (1995) highlights the importance of reproducing active membership through 'careful selection and socialization' (Cornforth, 1995: 30; see also Harnecker, 2012; Somerville, 2007); reinforcing democratic values and structures through everyday actions and challenges to informal hierarchies (see also Jaumier, 2017; Kokkinidis, 2014; Ng and Ng, 2009); and maintaining an openness to opposition, criticism and difference through meaningful participation (see also Langmead, 2016; Rothschild et al., 2016). Focusing on the area of work, others have highlighted the importance of job rotation and job sharing (Atzeni and Ghigliani, 2007; Kokkinidis, 2015), the deconstruction of leadership and management as specialist roles (Vieta, 2018) and the preservation of craft skills in the face of pressure towards rationalization (Jaumier and Daudigeos, 2021; Vieta, 2019). Taking a processual approach to alternative organizing, Shanahan (2025) argues that avoiding degeneration requires organizations to combine symbiotic strategies, which seek compatibility with the hegemonic system, with interstitial strategies, which resist 'pragmatic compromise with the hegemonic system (p. 495)'. Similarly, Husted et al. (2026: 9) contends that alternatives must simultaneously compete with and be relevant to the hegemonic order and be *suggestive* of a new order. As Shanahan (2025) argues for the importance of 'impurity' in avoiding insulation degeneration, Husted et al. (2026) argue for alternative organizations to remain 'unfinished' to avoid termination. Alternative organizations should therefore be understood as a project of non-closure (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) in which the search for autonomy is not a search for a fictitious space outside of capitalism but for innovative practices and positive projects of self-valorization that point *beyond* capitalism (Böhm et al., 2010; Byrne and Healy, 2006). Drawing attention back to worker cooperatives, Meira (2014: 714) concludes that cooperatives, like other alternative organizations, are 'contradictorily intertwined with the capitalist system' and proposes 'an understanding of workers' praxis as situated and constrained but also rebel and insurgent' (see also Alakavuklar, 2024; Seda-Irizarry, 2011).

From this perspective, risks of degeneration are not a cause for despair or nihilism so long as the current system is imperfectly replicated (Just et al., 2021). Degeneration, entwining with capitalistic elements and trying, failing and trying again, are all part of

a political project that aims to inspire through imperfection, maintaining, as well as breaking patterns (Dahlman et al., 2022; Shanahan, 2025). The majority of the work on degeneration focuses on an organizational level of analysis for example, organizational forms (Dahlman et al., 2022; Shanahan et al., 2024), spaces of organizing (Husted and Plesner, 2017), and needs for growth and competition (Bousalham and Vidaillet, 2018; Sage, 2025). As such, it rarely considers the implications for an individual working and being paid in an alternative organization. However, it is important to examine how, at the individual level, workers experience the tussle between capitalism and post-capitalistic/alternative organizing and the various entangled economic relations within alternative organizations (Alakavuklar, 2024). How, for example, do the 'careful selection and socialization' of members (Cornforth, 1995: 30) or democratic values and structures face up to experiences and negotiations of wage labour, a prominent signifier of capitalism that pervades the internal and external context of alternative organization? One emerging stream of research looks directly at worker experiences via the concept of alienation and explores how alternative organizations can be potentially disalienating spaces.

Azzellini (2018: 770) argues that, by understanding labour as commons, Worker-Recuperated Companies engage in 'progressive disalienation'. Kociatkiewicz et al. (2021) explore disalienation via a study of two European worker cooperatives, where members choose what tasks to do, develop relationships during shared tasks and take part in democratic decision-making. Kociatkiewicz et al. (2021: 949) are 'suspiciously positive' about the two cooperatives but claim that both the organizations and their members are 'actively engaged in disalienation processes', discussing alienation and disalienation as a fluid process. Similarly, Watson (2020) discusses 'non-alienated' labour and how working in community-supported agriculture provides an opportunity to escape wage labour – working only for a wage – and instead work to produce a product they are connected to and proud of creating. Organizing work in certain ways allows the replacement of wage labour with the labour to produce multiple use values and to satisfy human need, thus creating possibilities for 'non-alienated labour'. Jaumier and Daudigeos (2021) explore the ways in which ideas around craft in a sheet-metal cooperative are drawn upon to resist the replication of capitalist working systems that encourage efficiency, the division of labour and tight managerial control. For Jaumier and Daudigeos (2021: 74) emancipatory work practices emerge, not from 'formal mechanisms of collective deliberation' but from 'individual initiative' and an underlying sense of autonomy that is enabled by the cooperative's democratic culture.

While providing valuable insights into alternative work processes, interestingly, wages are rarely if ever discussed, despite being a significant link to the capitalistic forms of working, that alternative organizations need to negotiate, challenge and struggle against. Furthermore, although we are encouraged to see discussions of alienation within the alternatives literature, in this paper, we highlight alienation as a point of ongoing struggle and conflict, which is especially important when studying alternatives and worker cooperatives. In the following section, we turn to discuss alienation in more detail.

Alienation and wage labour

Our study, like Kociatkiewicz et al. (2021), focuses on worker cooperatives, a common candidate for what might be considered an alternative organization. Worker cooperatives are 'groups of workers who democratically control and collectively own the businesses they work in' and that operate in accordance with the cooperative values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity (workers.coop, 2023: 3). Focusing on their internal structure, Roberts (2011: 343; emphasis added) identifies the defining characteristics of worker cooperatives as 'the absence of *formal* subsumption of labour to capital'. In this statement, Roberts recognizes that, at the level of the firm, cooperatives reverse the capital–labour relationship to create a non-exploitative class process (Jossa, 2014; Lebowitz, 2003; Luhman, 2007; Vieta, 2019). Unlike the capitalist class process in which capital extracts and appropriates unpaid surplus labour from productive workers, in worker cooperatives, the workers appropriate and distribute their own surplus labour. Under these conditions, 'the antithesis between capital and labour is overcome, if at first only by way of making the associated labourers into their own capitalist' (Marx [1894] 2010: 317). Thus, Jossa (2014: 9) argues that cooperatives 'sweep away that form of alienation that stems from the dominion of capital over labor', and provides opportunities for disalienation, as we have discussed previously. However, the inclusion of the word 'formal' in Robert's statement above is not inconsequential. In adding this word Roberts highlights, contra to Jossa's claim, that the subsumption of labour to capital can only be *partially* addressed through a cooperative's internal structure (Ji, 2020). So long as the value of products and labour is determined by the market, there will remain some degree of exploitation of labour by capital (Roberts, 2011).

Drawing together conceptualizations of alienation from the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, the Grundrisse and Capital, Fuch (2018) concludes:

> alienation for Marx on the one hand is the particular form of domination and exploitation that shapes the capitalist mode of production, in which labour creates commodities without owning the means of production and without controlling the conditions and the results of production. On the other hand, Marx sees alienation also as the universal form of domination, in which humans are not in control of the structures that affect their everyday lives. (p. 456)

In this quote, Fuch speaks first about the labour process and the subjective experiences of 'loss, unfairness and powerlessness' (Harvey, 2018a: 427) that arise from the alienated relation between the worker, their product (and its value), productive activity, and consequently their species being, and fellow human and non-human others (Harvey, 2018a). It is at the level of subjective alienation that existing literature on alienation within worker cooperatives focuses its attention. The 'other hand' of alienation is connected to the 'historical tendency within capital to create the world market, to establish its social (class) and metabolic relations everywhere and to inscribe certain identifiable laws of motion into human history under the rule of the coercive laws of competition' (Harvey, 2018b: 138); a tendency referred to by Harvey as 'universal alienation'. The coercive laws of universal alienation drive the intensification and extension of the working day, the appropriation of workers' skills, intellect, sense of self, and capacity for cooperation and

innovation, all in exchange for 'the value of labour power' (Harvey, 2018a: 426). These two hands are not, of course, separate. Universal and subjective alienation are overdetermined; they create and re-create one another.

The overdetermination of universal and subjective alienation can be seen most clearly in Marx's ([1891] 2010) analysis of wage labour. Under the economic conditions of wage labour, capital hires 'the productive activity of the labourer' and this productive activity realizes, not only use-value, but also surplus-value that is accumulated by capital (Marx, [1891] 2010: 15). For capital then, wage labour is productive. For the worker, wage labour is unproductive. It is performed, not to meet the needs of the worker or their community, but to secure a wage that they must use to acquire products produced by other workers; products that are used to sustain the worker and facilitate their ongoing engagement in wage labour. (Marx, [1891] 2010). Posited as exchange value, the product becomes 'independent and indifferent towards living labour capacity' (Marx, [1939] 2015: 379) and labour itself becomes external to the worker: the worker cannot define the product to meet their needs, nor can they use the productive activity as an expression of self. Rather, it is the capitalist exploiter and the coercive forces of the market, including competition and the drive for profit equalization, that determine what is produced and how, the exchange value of products, and the level and distribution of surplus-value (Byron, 2016). The denial of a worker's right to determine their product and productive activity and, as importantly, their opportunity to appropriate (Jaeggi, 2014: 63–64) alien surplus value by determining how this value should be distributed and allocated, is at once a denial of their 'rightful property' and of their 'rightful participation in a process that defines one's community and even oneself' (DeMartino, 2003: 17). Combined with the monetization of labour, this separation creates a 'relation of relatedness' in which workers are 'distanced from something in which [they are] in fact involved or to which [they are] in fact related – or in any case ought to be' (Jaeggi, 2014: 25). Understood as such, wage labour is alienating because it creates an obstruction to relations of appropriation that, in turn, leads to estrangement from their species being (Ollman, 1976). Work becomes, in other words, instrumental – a means to an end rather than something that the worker meaningfully identifies with through a relation of interdependence and co-constitution (Jaeggi, 2014: 94; 137–139).

The forces of universal alienation are further seen in the separation of wages and working conditions from the exchange value of the product. As Marx ([1891] 2010) explains, wages, and therefore necessary labour, cannot be understood as a share of the product's value. Rather, wages are determined by socially necessary labour time: the average labour time required to produce a particular service or product. As labour is viewed as a commodity (Marx, [1844] 2009: 29), fluctuations in wages will arise in response to the demand for products produced by workers, the availability of a specific labour-power and, to a lesser extent, according to the wages required for the workers own minimal subsistence. Similar forces will be at play in determining working conditions, including the extent of workers precarity, the length of the working day, and entitlement to certain benefits. As such, market forces create a 'condition of rigidification' (Jaeggi, 2014: pp. 51, 59) that reify both wages and work conditions; concealing practical questions about what we ought to do and how we should act (Jaeggi, 2014: 66). This not only makes wages appear as 'a fact of nature' that is 'out-of-reach and unchangeable'

(Zoubir, 2018: 721) but also creates competition between workers to achieve higher wages or better working conditions. As a result, workers are individualized and fragmented, rendering it 'impossible for them to realise that their interests are common' (Marx and Engles, in Lebowitz, 2003: 158). As the power to produce in mutuality with others is central to our species being, this impossibility at once alienates workers from fellow humans and from species being (Marx, [1939] 2015: 381).

The connection between wage labour and alienation outlined above highlights a particularly potent issue facing worker cooperatives and most alternative organizations; is it possible for any organization within capitalism to create an organizational space without alienation? As noted previously, the literature on alternative organizations focuses on the organizational level of analysis. More recently, the alternatives literature has focused on issues of degeneration (Shanahan, 2025) and the need for alternatives to be unfinished, 'less than perfect' (Dahlman et al., 2022; Just et al., 2021: 93) and always engaged with struggles against capitalistic forces. As a concept that is experienced subjectively, and that can be understood as an outcome of degeneration – a failure to resist, or avoid, the potentially degenerative pressure of universal alienation – a focus on alienation, and therefore wage labour, opens opportunities for the analysis of degeneration, and its resistance, on an individual and collective level. Existing literature concerning work within cooperatives has focused on the labour process, and the learning and resubjectification required for its democratization (Atzeni and Vieta, 2014; Jaumier and Daudigeos, 2021). References to wage labour are limited to discussions about the application of minimal wage-differentials (Azzellini, 2018; Cheney et al., 2014), pay solidarity (Gibson-Graham, 2003), and the benefits of cooperation in relation to job maintenance in times of crisis (Ben-Ner and Jones, 1995). Engaged, as they are, in practices of wage labour and production for the market, this article seeks to explore the extent to which worker cooperatives and alternative organizations can utilize structures of ownership and control to resist the pressures of universal alienation. In the next section, we introduce our two case studies and describe our approach to data collection and analysis.

Methods

An 18-month ethnographic study was conducted with two UK-based worker cooperatives by the first author between 2014 and 2016. The selection of the two case studies was based on their similarities, differences and geographical proximity, which enabled a constant comparison and critical reflexivity. Beanies and Regather are of similar size and, at the time of the study, both operated as worker cooperatives with clear social and environmental aims. Although differing in legal form, the cooperatives share the same non-hierarchical collective structure, with decisions made by consensus. In both cooperatives, members are paid the same hourly rate regardless of membership duration or core responsibilities; and both seek to create paid work that is non-exploitative and that supports a good standard of living. These similarities exist alongside differences in the cooperatives' age, sector, and core revenue, each of which exposes Beanies and Regather to differing forces of alienation and shapes the ways in which they resist these forces.

Beanies is a small community shop established in 1986 to promote and raise awareness of the benefits of vegetarian, organic and locally grown foods. At the time of the

Table 1. Participant information (Beanies).

Participant	Membership status	Length of membership
Evan	Director	13 years
Heather	Director	11 years
Dave	Director	18 months
Chris	Director	18 years
Gemma	Director	15 months
Jake	Director	5 months
Mark	Director	14 years
Rocky	Non-member	8 months

study, it had seven full-time members, all of whom were directors of the cooperative, one self-employed bookkeeper, and between six and eight part-time staff (see Table 1). While members have different areas of interests and skills, and tend to focus on specific tasks, there is an expectation that members can and will do any job within the cooperative, from office work like organizing rotas or ordering stock, to daily tasks, like packing vegetable boxes or serving customers. Beanies' directors aim to pay themselves the real Living Wage but accept that their wages must fall when there is a significant and prolonged drop in revenue. Part-time staff are paid just above the national minimum wage. The lead author held a part-time role at Beanies for 5 years prior to the research. For the first 6 months of the research, the researcher spent an average of 6 hours per week volunteering in the shop and attending meetings. Subsequently, involvement was reduced to attendance of fortnightly member meetings.

Regather was set up in 2010 with the mission to 'give people the choice and opportunity to live, work and play cooperatively and create a mutual local economy'. This was achieved through the development and delivery of projects centred on core areas of events, food, low-carbon economies and social enterprise support. Some of these projects generate revenue, while others attract grant fundings. At the time of the research, Regather had 15 members. Although only three of these members were named as directors, in practice, the six most involved members (all of whom participated in the research) engaged in decision-making processes about the day-to-day running and strategic direction of the cooperative (see Table 2). Each member had their own area of focus and took responsibility for core tasks, including business planning, strategy and finance, within this area. Regather pays employee-members the real Living Wage but, in contrast to Beanies, relies on the input of voluntary work by members to meet daily operational needs. The lead author had been a member of Regather since 2010 and remained a member throughout the research. For the first 6 months of the research, the researcher spent an average of 8 hours per week helping to pack and deliver vegetable boxes, contributing to events and attending meetings. During this time, the researcher gradually took on the role of cooperative secretary, tasked with reviewing Regather's governing documents, and arranging and chairing annual general meetings.

Table 2. Participant information (Regather).

Participant	Member status	Length of involvement	Work status	Project area
Fran	De-facto director	17 months	Paid; some voluntary contribution	Food
Lisa	Member	6 months	Voluntary	Food
Rachel	Member	2 years	Paid; some voluntary contribution	Enterprise
Nicole	De-facto director	15 months	Paid; some voluntary contribution	Food/events
Tim	Member	5 years	Paid; some voluntary contribution	Events
Gareth	Director	6 years (founder)	Paid; some voluntary contribution	Events

Data sources

Primary data consists of field notes and recordings taken during participant observations of daily work and meetings. Alongside benefits of trust, mutuality and historical knowledge, prior involvement in Beanies and Regather created opportunities for the researcher to 'fall into' their former worker role. The dual position of cooperative practitioner and academic enabled the researcher to (re)experience and '[grapple] with the complexity, intricacy and mundanity [. . .] of organisational life' (Cunliffe, 2010: 229), and to engage in a more in-depth and 'felt' exploration of the multiple, and at times contradictory voices, actions and practices of both the self and others (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007). In this context, feelings of resonance and misalignment became a source of data that pushed the first author to identify and question pre-formed assumption and expectations. For example, the first author's failed attempt to implement a more structured and regular member meeting schedule with the aim to facilitate greater collective decision-making challenged the positioning of such meetings as central to participatory democracy. Deliberation surrounding this failed attempt helped the first author to better understand members' pragmatic approach to meetings and decision-making, their focus on learning-through-action, and the importance of delegation within collectively agreed parameter. Through such questioning of assumptions and expectation, thinking and theorizing were transformed from an objective act to an intersubjective and collective *world-making* processes (Cunliffe, 2010) that occurred in and through the researcher's and participant's lived experiences and embraced the researchers' intentions to make 'some worlds more real and apparent and others less' (Cameron and Hicks, 2014: 54).

Alongside participant observation, the researcher collected 13 written narratives outlining cooperative members' employment journeys and conducted 7 focus groups lasting between 2 and 3.5 hours. During these focus groups, participants retold, relived, and collectively reflected on their written narratives. The aim of this process was to explore the 'multiple meanings that people attribute to [. . .] relationships, processes and events' (Cameron, 2005: 159), and through this, draw attention to the role of social relations in the negotiation, reconstruction, and confirmation of values and identities.

Access and ethics

Access to the research sites was negotiated via formal letters and key gatekeepers. Following initial approval, the researcher visited the sites to discuss the research in more detail, and to obtain organizational and individual informed consent. Particular attention was given to anonymity that, due to the relatively unique nature of the organizations, could not be guaranteed. Following repeated discussions of this issue throughout the research, both organizations requested that their name be included in research outputs; a decision that was founded in their desire to 'tell their side of the story'. However, in line with participants' requests, we acknowledge that what is presented here is unavoidably reductive; a snapshot of fluid processes that 'can never contain a whole person' (Josselson, 1996: 62), organization or situation.

Beyond the procedural ethics described above, the researcher maintained an ongoing awareness of how power was attained and used as they moved between the unbounded roles of researcher, cooperative practitioner and friend. This awareness was grounded in an understanding that access and informed consent is negotiated, not purely through signed consent forms, but through ongoing researcher-participant interactions (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). At a background level, this meant repeatedly questioning 'who' (researcher, practitioner or friend) was present in conversations and actions, 'who' was assumed to be present, and what needs and motives were at play. The researcher's embodied emotional response to these questions, both in the moment and when reflecting on the data collected, played a significant role in determining what was observed, recorded, and used in the research. Alongside these internal deliberations, the researcher actively sought opportunities to expose and explore their plural identity with participants. Conversations about participant discomfort at being observed or concerns about how they were being portrayed were purposefully instigated by the researcher, initially through the signing of consent forms and later by turning an observation notebook or voice recorder into a visible talking point. At the end of the research, the researcher shared a draft of the findings with participants and ran a 'collective findings review' with each cooperative. This process provided participants with an opportunity to raise concerns about confidentiality, and to identify areas where more context, or a more balanced portrayal, was needed.

Data analysis

As is understood in ethnographic work, analysis was not the final stage of the research process. Rather, it began in anxious decisions about what to observe and note down in fieldnotes, and continued immediately after each observation when the researcher noted down points of resonance, misalignment, empathy and frustration that challenged their assumptions and generated richer understandings of participants and organizations (Gilmore and Kenny, 2014). For example, as the first author 'fell into' their former worker role they re-experienced a strong sense of mutuality that was rooted, not in feelings of guilt over the demands their research was placing on members, but in their own experiences of democracy within the cooperatives. Through this experience, the first author came to understand mutuality

as a democratic 'way-of-being' and a form of tacit knowing, and subsequently re-observed surpluses of time, knowledge, money and skills, not as property or a source of future individual equity, but as collective resources and sources of potentiality (Cornwell, 2012). This democratic 'way of' being' would later re-emerge as a condition of possibility for disalienation, and therefore as a core contribution of this paper.

Analysis of the transcribed data, including focus groups, observation notes, and meetings, unfolded in five stages. Firstly, the researcher coded the transcribed data line-by-line, highlighting key phrases and sticking closely to the words participants used. Line-by-line coding was carried out shortly after each observation, allowing the process to shape the direction of the research, and supporting constant comparison between the case studies. As more transcripts were produced, the researcher returned to earlier coding, adding notes and making tentative links within and across the data. The second stage involved the rationalization of original codes to check they made 'analytic sense' (Charmaz, 2004: 508) and to create a path from the original codes to a more abstract level of analysis. For example, the in vivo codes of 'supplying rivals', 'open-door policy' and 'supporting like-minded businesses' were captured in a rationalized code of 'developing non-competitive subjectivities'. It was at this stage that ideas relating to alienation and disalienation were identified as areas for further investigation.

The third stage, 'focused coding' (Charmaz, 2004), was carried out for the purpose of this article 3 years after data collection This stage involved working more intensively with each code, constantly moving between data and theory to develop conceptual categories (see Table 3). Through this back-and-forth process wage labour emerged as a focal point and specific site of struggle against alienation. Once categories had been identified the first author entered the fourth stage: 'cut and sort' (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). Dividing data up between the categories helped the research to 'move beyond individual cases and to define patterns' (Charmaz, 2004: 512) in the data.

The fifth stage of analysis occurred during the writing of this article. Exploring data alongside the literature on alienation, alternative organizations and worker cooperatives meant that writing took on a more theoretically rich character through which the meaning, significance and impact of data on our understandings of dis/alienation were questioned (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). This questioning circled the authors back to stages 3 and 4, as conceptual categories were rewritten, new patterns were identified, and a more abductive approach was taken (Van Maanen et al., 2007). Through engagement with the peer-review process this interaction became ever more prominent as additional ideas around theory and the presentation of data informed our analysis. What began as a story of two cooperatives trying to organize themselves evolved into a theoretical story outlining the importance of participatory democracy as a condition of struggle against alienation. In the following, we explore what it is like to work in a worker cooperative and highlight instances of alienation and disalienation, at Beanies and Regather.

Table 3. Coding.

In vivo codes	Rationalized codes	Focused coding
Work as part of life More than just a job Passion into action Shared ethos Strong ethic	Realization of essence	Reappropriation of the right to defines one's product, one's community and oneself
Community flourishing Environmental values Concern for community	Producing in mutuality with human and non-human others	
Setting aside profits Profit as condition of possibility Cross-subsidization	Participation in surplus re-distribution	
Awareness of rising costs Need to pay bills Working within economic limits Financial viability	Impossibility of complete control	
Creating space for deliberation Lengthy meetings	Challenging socially necessary labour time	Reappropriation of the right to define the value and conditions of labour power
We can determine our work environment Resisting skewed work–life balance Questioning unsociable working hours	Defining working conditions	
Revenue for wages not profit Living wage policy/aspiration Resisting market norms Valuing volunteers Volunteering as solidarity	Defining the value of work	
Financial sacrifice Work-life imbalance Just enough to survive Surviving in competitive environment	Reminders of limits created by capitalism	
Supplying rival Open-door policy Supporting like-minded business	Developing non-competitive subjectivities	Reappropriation of the right to realize interests in common
Wages as collective resource Shared wage sacrifice Honouring the individual	Working in solidarity and mutuality	
We want a pay rise It's all on our time Needing return on investment Investing in failed projects Managing wage fluidity Risk of self-exploitation Draining personnel issues	Dominant narratives and limits to common interest	

These are a way to group the in vivo codes and rationalized codes into the three focused codes.

Findings

'More than just another job' bringing values to work and escaping from bad employment

In the winter months, it gets bitterly cold in Beanies, a cooperatively owned wholefood shop and grocery. Cooperative members and part-time workers keep warm by running up and down to the first-floor stock room, collecting tins and packets wholefoods that they place carefully on shelves. Despite the cold, there is little debate about whether the door should remain open. The open door invites people in, acting as a symbol of Beanies' ethos as a welcoming community shop. Members' desire to 'stay in this community' and to continue supporting and 'offering fairly unique options for the community' (Gemma) is a key reason why Beanies has remained in a the four-storey terrace building since 1989, despite it being poorly suited for use as a grocery.

The desire to meet the needs of their community and the sense of community connection felt by members of Beanies is equally visible in Regather. On a summer's day a mile and half from Beanies, a terraced street has been adorned with brightly coloured bunting and long communal tables for Regather's 'Little Sheffield Feast'. Attendees chat loudly over the sound of folk music that fills the air. Behind the scenes, volunteers fill trays with free stews, curries, and cakes, trying to keep pace with the ever-growing queue for food. This annual community event expresses a common interest that is shared by all members of Regather: to see 'their local community flourish'. Regather seeks to achieve this goal, not by acting for the community, but by empowering the community through the provision of affordable and accessible space, support and resources, and 'by generating profits that are set aside to support other local people to make their projects possible' (Rachel). In addition to supporting community flourishing, these acts saw members reclaiming their right to determine how surplus value should be distributed.

During Regather's early years, the aspiration to empower the community led to an 'open door policy' (Gareth) towards people who had ideas for projects that addressed a community need. This approach resulted in a diverse range of varyingly successful projects, including event production, education, catering, music recording and an organic vegetable box, that, since it was founded in 2010, have defined and re-defined Regather's business direction. Over time the need to pay wages and bills grew, and the direction of the cooperative became increasingly shaped by the need for financial viability. As Nicole recognized, there was a need to weigh up financial viability in 'every decision we make because otherwise we [. . .] would just be inviting people in everyday and [. . .] doing whatever we could for free'. From the struggles between community empowerment and financial viability, events organizing and the organic vegetable box were identified, through democratic deliberation, as Regather's core business focus; a move that sought to maintain Regather's responsiveness to community need, and to the aspirations and skills of members, while also recognizing the limits posed by the economic context. While this move reduced the scope for people to define their own jobs, it by no means eliminated it completely. During the period of observation, members sourced funding to pay for a community garden, compiled and distributed food growing kits amongst the

local community, and experimented with hydroponics. As Gareth explained, for members, Regather was much more than 'just another job':

> I think it's easy in a way to get obsessed by you know, this is a piece of work, some payment and [..] all you have to do is just turn up [. . .] And it's like no, actually, it's a lot more than that. I don't want to create that here.

Rather than seeing work as a means to an end, members of Regather sought to create a space where paid workers could apply their skills and energy to 'take action on things that they are passionate about' (Rachel), transforming work into a conscious, self-directed activity. In doing so, paid work was transformed into something that workers meaningfully identified with through a relation of co-constitution.

Although at Beanies the business focus and members' role descriptions were more stable and firmly established than they were at Regather, members were similarly able to express their values through decisions about the products that the shop sold. For some members, this meant seeking out local suppliers, for others it meant expanding the shops range of organic produce and making this produce more affordable through practices of cross-subsidization; practices that saw members reclaiming the right to define their product and productive activity. For Evan, the shop's focus on vegan and vegetarian produce was particularly important. Reflecting on his journey to becoming a member Evan described how the job appealed to him 'politically from an animal rights/vegan/vegetarian/ecological perspective'. Gemma, who had been at Beanies for just 15 months, described how she was enjoying 'doing something of value and being valued'. Gemma compared work at Beanies to her previous well-paid job where she had reservations about what she was selling and felt like her opinion was being ignored. Jake similarly described how his recent move to Beanies enabled him to escape the uncomfortable paradox between the destructive work he was doing in his previous job and the environmental values he held outside of the workplace. While these examples demonstrate members' ability to affirm themselves by acting in accordance with their values and democratically participating in what mattered to them, Beanies, like Regather faced external pressures that generated tensions between different values and limited their ability to fulfil their social aims. This became most apparent in discussions about wages, as illustrated in the next section.

Struggles with wages

In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, a prolonged reduction in revenue forced members of Beanies to accept a pay cut from £10 per hour to £8.50 per hour. Reflecting on this time, Chris described the 'different feel' that the pay cut created, and the challenges they faced 'keeping the morale up'. As Beanies recovered from this challenging period, they became increasingly aware of the need to meet 'future rising costs' (Dave); an awareness that Dave felt had previously been missing due to 'the strong ethics of the coop members, in putting others first'. Members began to balance this ethic, with future considerations in the discussion below:

Chris: If you are talking about the living wage, what we briefly talked about last time was a wages policy where we can decide where we want to be [and then] look at ways of increasing revenue in order to be able to facilitate that.

Jake: I know it's a spanner in the works, but shouldn't we be paying [the living wage] now? We obviously get more than the living wage, but [part-timers] are getting less.

Mark: Yes, but for part-timers that's different because they are not relying on that job for living [. . .]. Living wage is for people who use that job to live.

The first author considered protesting but as they did Rocky, Beanies' bookkeeper, challenged Mark's comment by highlighting the number of hours some of the part-time staff work; and Chris argued that paying staff as much as they can be part of their 'role as a socially aware and ethical employer'. In a conversation with the researcher after the members' meeting, Chris highlighted the role of member ownership in decisions about pay, and in doing so, challenged the reification of wages and working conditions and reconnected them, at least to some extent, to the exchange value of the product.

> When you are in a particular sphere of trading business – food and retail – there is a temptation to pitch your wage level at the market norm but there's no reason to do that. As a coop you can decide what you want to be earning and make your business work towards that.

While in Beanies, lengthy discussions revolved around pay, in Regather, they focused on the challenge of valuing volunteers. Volunteers were recognized as essential to Regather's success and often held responsibilities equivalent to those held by paid staff. During a discussion about how to value 'sweat equity' Rachel expressed her view that, in line with the principles of the Solidarity Economy, volunteering should be 'recognised as just as valid, or more valid, than work you are paid for because you are doing it for free'. She went on to argue that it needs to be a two-way relationship 'so volunteers know what they are getting out of it'. While agreeing with Rachel, Gareth warned against the use of exchange-based reward systems such as timebanks. Following a discussion with an established timebank, Gareth felt that in Timebanks, like in the capitalist system, the value created by volunteers is reappropriated; 'it is being created for one purpose and utilised in a different location on different terms' (Gareth).

Situated uncomfortably alongside conversations about volunteering was an acknowledgement first, that the organization could not continue to rely on the good will of volunteers, and second that wages for paid workers remained low. In her written narrative Fran wrote:

> My hours and work at Regather give me enough money to survive. [This] can leave me in a tough position sometimes, but my decision to continue with this life is reflective of my desire to see work as a part of my life, rather than creating a work-life divide, and trying to ensure I enjoy my work life as much as my downtime.

As illustrated in Beanies' discussion, low pay was a concern shared by members of both cooperatives and, in both cooperatives, members described low pay as a sacrifice they

are willing to make. For Fran, the sacrifice was justified because her role at Regather enables work-life integration. Gemma described how 'it became easier to accept a pay cut when it was for my benefit; you know, about being part of the decision-making process and taking ownership for my work'. Thus, while sacrifices were made, work within their cooperatives did not become a sacrifice of life.

Concerns about pay were balanced against concerns for working conditions. While Fran sought to achieve work-life integration, for Tim achieving a good work-life balance was 'the most fundamental reasons why I enjoy working for Regather'. Discussing this issue, Tim and Nicole agreed that the majority of people endure a 'skewed' work-life balance in the belief that 'that is the deal with work' (Nicole). In contrast, members of both cooperatives prioritized their well-being and enjoyment, highlighting that 'we work for ourselves so we can determine our work environment' (Dave). However, while Tim felt privileged to have a good work-life balance for Nicole the challenge of achieving a good work-life balance remained. This became evident when the lead author arrived at Regather one Monday morning to find Fran and Nicole discussing the pressures of running a stall at a local Saturday food market. Nicole explained that she had 'worked an extra 16 hours over the weekend for Regather', adding:

> I only got to see my partner when he isn't at work in the evenings and weekends, and I feel like Regather is increasingly encroaching on that time. I'm not really happy with it and I'm not willing to continue doing it.

In this exchange, Nicole pushed back against the self-exploitation that often accompanies work that is grounded in passion and a desire for change. The plan to run a regular market stall was put on hold.

Practices of solidarity and mutuality: Realizing common interests

Underpinning conversations about pay and working conditions was a strong sense of solidarity and mutuality. Beanies' decision to reduce members' wages to £8.50 per hour was taken to avoid redundancies and retain part-time staff hours; and when members expressed a desire for a pay rise this desire was preceded by 'we'. It did not arise from an individualized or competitive desires to maximize pay but rather from a collective feeling that '**we** deserve it' and '**we** want to be more financially comfortable' (Dave; emphasis original). At Regather, where it was not yet possible to pay everyone a full-time wage, the number of paid hours each member received was negotiated to ensure that everyone could meet their basic needs, while at the same time ensuring that the cooperative itself could continue to exist within its means.

Members' understanding of wages as a common resource was underpinned by a sense of solidarity that extended beyond the bounds of the firm in two main ways. First, members of both Beanies and Regather expressed a desire to share the benefits of their cooperative by creating 'a kind of open-source thing so that people could learn from our mistakes' (Gareth) and be inspired by the cooperatives' successes. In Beanies, this aspect of solidarity took on a temporal dimension, as illustrated in the discussion below. Here, Heather conveys a feeling of indebtedness to past members and with it a desire to maintain the cooperative, and its ethos, for future generations.

> [As members] we are not in it to make a profit off a business, selling it and thinking we will be alright. It doesn't work like that. [. . .] Which is why we are here doing this. Because if we had had to buy our own business and start it up ourselves, we probably wouldn't be doing it.

Second, both cooperatives sought to support, rather than compete with, organizations that shared their values. For Regather, this meant actively seeking out opportunities to collaborate, offering room and kitchen hire at reduced rates, and working voluntarily to support a common cause. For Beanies, it meant buying from, and supplying, like-minded businesses. During their time volunteering in the shop, the first author observed members putting together a regular order for a 'rival' organic vegetable box. While some members went about this task quite happily others, including Evan, expressed frustration at the time it took. This frustration drove Evan to propose, during a monthly members meeting, that Beanies stop supplying the company. Dave opened the proposal out for discussion by asking Evan to talk them through the implications.

Evan: Well, my main bug bear [. . .] is that it just feels fundamentally wrong that we are enabling a competitor at our detriment [. . .] I kind of feel like we are being taken for a ride.

Mark: [. . .] It's all on the back of us, our wages and our [time] and it's this community shop thing, don't get me wrong, but don't take us for a ride.

Mark and Evan agreed that the cooperative would not continue supplying their competitors 'if they weren't such nice people'. However, Heather felt that Mark and Evan were overlooking one of Beanies' core aims; to increase the availability of locally grown, organic produce. The company that Beanies were supplying did not only deliver organic vegetable boxes but also grew organic produce on a farm 6 miles away from Beanies. Alongside this aim, Heather also valued the fact that Beanies was 'helping another small independent [business] to develop'. Heather's justifications, that were said with passion and a hint of frustration, were considered alongside concerns about the financial margins, the need to maintain a good relationship with a local supplier and, the equally passionately stated risk of supporting a competitor in an already crowded vegetable box market. The balance fell in favour of continuing to support, and produce in mutuality with, their 'rival'.

Discussion

In our findings, we explore three main issues. Firstly, how workers in both organizations had the opportunity to express their politics, values and passions in their work and, in doing so, reclaimed the right to define their product and productive activity. Secondly, we show how wages and issues around low pay, work/life balance and concerns about valuing volunteer time are deliberated and negotiated by both organizations, with the aim of regaining control over the value and conditions of work. Finally, we show how members challenged dominant narratives and practices of competition both within and

outside of their cooperative, seeking instead to realize their interest in common through practices of solidarity and mutuality.

Within every one of these issues is a reference point to capitalistic forms of exchange, working and competing; and in every example, members sought to resist, satisfice, play down or negotiate with these underpinning logics of capitalism. Workers talk about how their work is not just 'another job', hinting back to experiences of alienation in previous employment. Others are far more overt about how work at the cooperative enabled them to escape past negative experiences of work. Similarly, discussions of wages, work-life balance and valuing volunteer time all stem from reference points of capitalism, with members struggling against the perceived inevitability of low wages, skewed work-life balance, and exchange-based rewards for volunteers. Finally, ideas of solidarity and mutuality are couched within concerns of competitive and individualized practices of wage setting, 'helping competitors' and not competing properly with 'rival' businesses. In each of the three issues, democratic decision-making is used to open spaces of struggle against universal alienation: a 'form of domination in which humans are not in control of the structures that affect their everyday lives' (Fuch, 2018: 456).

Recent literature suggests that worker cooperatives sweep away forms of alienation that stems from the dominion of capital over labour (Jossa, 2014; Vieta, 2019) providing opportunities for disalienation (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2021; Watson, 2020). Others, however, are less optimistic, pointing to market pressures and relations of production that drive down wages and open the door to universal alienation (Roberts, 2011) and degeneration (Cornforth, 1995). This article argues that wage labour is both an entry point for and site of struggle against universal alienation, and by extension, degeneration. Using data collected from two worker cooperatives, we highlight key points of struggle against alienation from the product, productive activity, species being and fellow human and non-human others, and demonstrate how workplace democracy provides an enabling practice for these struggles. In the following, we revisit our research question: *To what extent are members of worker cooperatives, engaged in wage labour, able to resist the forces of alienation?*

Bringing values into work: reclaiming the right to judge what is of value

Although members of Beanies and Regather continued to work for a wage, their work is, as Gareth explained, about 'more than a pay check'. Both cooperatives created the conditions through which workers could bring their politics and values into work, in a similar way to the cooperatives in Kociatkiewicz et al. (2021). The products produced at Regather, and those sold at Beanies, were determined not solely, or even predominantly, by the forces of the market, but collectively by workers to align with their social and environmental beliefs and with the type of world they aspired to create (Byron, 2016). Thus, in contrast to experiences of wage labour within a capitalist firm, in a cooperative, workers were able to utilize the means of production and capital in order to realize, or at least work towards, their 'own preconceived goals', such that labour was no longer 'distinct from selves but [was] indeed activity for self' and others (Lebowitz, 2003: 69); or in Fran's words, work became a 'part of life'. Through work at Beanies, Evan was able to express his 'vegetarian beliefs', such that his politics were no longer

confined to animal rights protests. Heather was able to express her passion for local, organic produce, not only through the products that they sold, but by actively seeking out opportunities to 'promote organic' farming. Rachel described how Regather opened opportunities for members 'to take action on things that they are passionate about' and to generate profits that can be 'set aside to support other local people to make their projects possible'.

As Rachel's quote shows, the fact that cooperative workers both create and own surplus value means that it is up to them, and not a manager or shareholder, to decide how that surplus is used (Ruccio, 2011: 336); a shift in ownership that, according to Jossa (2014: 9), allows cooperatives to 'sweep away that form of alienation that stems from the dominion of capital over labour'. Within the two cooperatives, the appropriated surplus value was transformed (Jaeggi, 2014), from source of future individual equity and an end in itself, to a condition of possibility: a 'means of enacting social commitments' (Cameron, 2009: 102), be that the creation of employment opportunities for young people, the development of a more sustainable food system or the progression towards improved pay and working conditions. Workers were thus able to reclaim, not only their right to determine what they produced and how, but also their right to appropriate surplus value, and thus their 'rightful participation' in defining themselves and their community (DeMartino, 2003: 17).

While workers at Beanies and Regather were able to transform their work from a means to an end into something that they meaningfully identified with (Jaeggi, 2014), like Roberts (2011), our research showed that members were not able to gain complete control over what they produced, or over the quantity of surplus value available for social ends. Nor could members fully determine wage levels or working conditions. As wage labourers producing for the market, members remained exposed to the pressures of universal alienation, including competitive market processes and the forces of supply and demand that placed limits on their level of control (Borowiak and Ji, 2019; Bousalham and Vidaillet, 2018; Vieta, 2010). As Jaeggi (2014: 39) argues, appropriation is a relation in which the appropriated 'always remains both alien and our own'. Regather, as a younger organization, was more exposed to these pressures and, as a result, they played a more significant role in shaping the organization's direction and focus. As Nicole reflected during a discussion with Tim, there was an ongoing tension associated with the need to think about the financial viability of products that pushes against the aspiration to give members' the freedom to define their own products. For Beanies, the impact of universal alienation was more subtle. Nonetheless, their desire to orient themselves to the product as an expression of human reality and *not* human need (Marx, [1844]/2009) came into conflict with a financial necessity to plan for future rising costs that lay out with members' control.

In both cases, the forces of universal alienation were collectively negotiated in a way that utilized workers values, skills and knowledge of past successes and challenges arising from the cooperative's paradoxical social-economic characteristic (Audebrand, 2017; Cornforth, 2004; Somerville, 2007; Zamagni and Zamagni, 2010). This process of negotiation, which was played out 'through oscillating decisions and actions' (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014: 484), itself contributed towards disalienation in two ways. Firstly, by creating opportunities for members to resist the appropriation of skills, intellect and

sense of self for capitalist ends, and apply them instead to the negotiation of 'freedom and uncontrollability' (Jaeggi, 2014: 64) inherent in competing social, environmental and economic priorities. Members used these negotiations as opportunities to reclaim the 'right to judge what is of value' (Cato, 2012: 49), and to 'make real the possibility that the economy can be a space of ethical action, not a place of submission to the bottom line' (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2011: 29). By creating spaces for mutual action and self-affirmation, members were able to reconnect to their species being (Marx, [1844] 2009, [1939] 2015), even if the outcome of the negotiation did not align with their personal values or beliefs, as was the case for Evan and Mark in discussions about supplying one of Beanies' competitors.

Secondly, ongoing negotiations reframed work as a relation of co-constitution, mutually formed by both market forces *and* workers unique responses to, and struggles against, these forces; a negotiation that enabled the cooperatives to adopt both symbiotic and interstitial strategies and thus tread the fine line between external and insulation degeneration (Shanahan, 2025). We argue, therefore, that wage labour forms an important site of struggle against universal alienation, and therefore, degeneration. Moreover, the struggle that occurs at this site is an ongoing process arising, not just from the power to enact values and fulfil purpose, but from the process of negotiating contradictions between those values and present reality. As we explore in the next section, participatory democracy therefore plays a crucial role in creating spaces of possibility for disalienation.

Resisting alienation through participatory democracy

Following the 2008 financial crisis, wages in Beanies dropped from £10/hour to £8.50/hour in 'fairly quick succession' (Chris); and in Regather, there was an ongoing reliance on voluntary labour to deliver projects that would otherwise have been financially unviable. For members, this created financial difficulties and sacrifice. At times, these sacrifices were accepted in exchange for 'being part of the decision-making process' (Gemma) and having greater ownership and control over their work. However, they also led to a loss of morale, concerns over future financial security, and for those at Regather who were combining low pay with voluntary unpaid hours, a more immediate concern of being in a 'tough position' financially. While in both cooperatives, members' sacrifices served as an ongoing reminder of the limitations posed by the capitalist context, like Cornforth (1995) and others writing on resistance to degeneration, we also identifies practices through which members refused to accept the inevitability of market norms. In Regather, members refused to position wage labour as necessary or desirable, situating voluntary labour as 'more valid, than work you are paid for because you are doing it for free' (Rachel). Further pushing against the inevitability of commodification, Regather refused to connect voluntary labour to exchange-based reward systems that quantify and 'trad[e] the value of the volunteer time' (Gareth), deciding instead to frame volunteering as an act of solidarity. In both cooperatives, members pushed back against undesirable working conditions, such as late evening shifts, weekend working and other practices that 'skewed' members' work-life balance. Most significantly, the cooperatives refused to accept the inevitability of minimum wage levels and competitive practices of profit

equalization that drive down both the value of labour-power and the conditions faced by workers.

As demonstrated in Beanies' lengthy and repeated discussions about part-timers' pay, these acts of refusal were enabled by participatory democracy that opened space for wages to be deliberated and determined, not solely by socially necessary labour time (Cleaver, 2000) and market norms, but by the (perceived and actual) needs of workers, the limits imposed and opportunities created by business revenue, and the cooperative's role as an ethical and socially aware employer. Through ongoing discussions, a 'less than perfect' (Dahlman et al., 2022; Just et al., 2021: 93), yet practical, scenario is presented and continually negotiated that breaks with structures of reification (Jaeggi, 2014: 60) and recreates, at least to some extent, the connection between the exchange-value of labour-power (necessary labour) and the exchange-value of commodities produced by that labour power (surplus labour). Such democratic practices are by no means perfect and are open to criticisms of being slow or messy, but they do avoid the discursive closure (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) and 'finishedness' (Husted et al., 2026) that have been linked to degeneration.

Alongside this opening up of previously concealed practical questions, the creation of space within the working day for lengthy, and at times repetitive, deliberations itself challenged assumptions about what constitutes socially necessary labour time. Here, attention shifted away from the prioritization of productivity and efficiency, and towards the maintenance of cooperative values of mutuality, solidarity and an ethic of care, through which connections with fellow humans are created and maintained. Thus, both the practice (and outcomes) of participatory democracy, and the values that this practice constantly recreates, can dampen and even remove the dormant or dynamic structures of capitalism, including efficiency, competition and individualism (Langmead, 2016). This in turn allows workers space to think differently, challenge dominant norms, and refuse to accept alienation from fellow non/human others as an inevitable consequence of wage labour.

Within the bounds of their cooperatives, members further resisted alienation from fellow workers through conscious practices of wage-setting that encouraged members to consider their needs in relation to the needs of others. In contrast to practices of inter-labour competition that position wages as an individual right to be fought over, in Beanies and Regather, labour was understood as a commons (Azzellini, 2018) and wages were framed as a collective resource to be shared for long-term individual-collective benefit (Cornwell, 2012); understandings that Azzellini (2018) argues contribute to disalienation. While the collective resource at Beanies was greater and more secure than that of Regather, the principle of shared benefit was equally applied in both cooperatives. As owners of their cooperatives, members did not seek to drive down wages or extend the working day in the name of surplus growth. Nor did they engage in individualized and competitive practices of wage maximization, or in practices that would maximize current member's profit at the expense of future members. It can be seen in Beanies' discussions about part-time wages, in members' agreement to accept a significant wage cut, and in their commitment to creating a sustainable cooperative, that the aim was to earn a 'decent living' while helping others to do the same. Again, maintaining this focus on serving the common good demanded ongoing processes of individual and collective negotiation

through which members sought to navigate the uncertainty of wage fluidity, the risk of self-exploitation, and the varying and at times conflicting needs of members and the cooperative.

This resistance to competition, and drive to connect with fellow humans, occurred both within and beyond the bounds of the cooperative. In relation to the latter, we saw the cooperatives supporting other organizations that shared their values, often at their own expense. During a heated discussion about supplying a 'rival' organic vegetable box in Beanies, the logic of competition and concerns over Beanies' survival did not simply disappear. Rather, through engagement with democratic practice, these concerns entered into a deliberation with the passionately stated aspiration to increase the local availability of organic vegetables; an aspiration that eventually won out. For Regather, the desire to support new socially and environmentally minded organizations was made explicit in their aim to support local people to 'take action on things that they are passionate about [and] make their projects possible' (Rachel); a desire that reflected democratic values of solidarity and an ethic of care. This support was provided through the provision of free advice and low-cost access to space and equipment that have, at times, put pressure on Regather's finances. Through these practices, the cooperatives deconstructed the inevitability of competition and positioned 'social relations as the explicit goal of production' (Lebowitz, 2003: 201). Thus, while the cooperatives did not escape the alienating competitive mechanisms of the market, they did seek to reappropriate the market as an enabler for networks of solidarity and mutuality. Through this, they remained simultaneous relevant to the hegemonic order and suggestive of a new order (Husted et al., 2026; Shanahan, 2025)

Looking at these acts of resistance against alienation, we argue that while workers continued to utilize wage labour as a means of survival, wages were no longer understood as exchange value: an understanding that reproduces labour power as a commodity to be pitted and compared against the labour power of others. Rather, wages became another means of reproducing the self as a collective being who exists within, and is reliant upon, a community, an environment, and fellow workers, as well as a wage (Lebowitz, 2003). Assisted by both the practice of democracy and the values of solidarity and mutuality underlying this practice, workers were able to see their interests as interests in common (Cameron and Hicks, 2014; Cato, 2012).

Conclusion

By offering a thick description of (dis)alienation in two worker cooperatives, this article contributes to a growing body of literature that points to the importance of considering alternatives as both processual and imperfect sites of perpetual struggle and failure (Dahlman et al., 2022; Shanahan, 2025). It does so in two main ways. Firstly, we argue that wage labour is an important, yet overlooked, site of continual struggle against alienation and degeneration. By focusing on wage labour, we draw attention to the overdetermination of subjective and universal alienation, and to the negotiations and sacrifices needed at an individual level to avoid or postpone the pressure of universal alienation, and therefore, degeneration. These negotiations and sacrifices are not only between capitalist and alternative discourses but also between subjective experiences of feeling less

alienated and often conflicting individual needs to make enough money to survive and to reduce work intensification (needs that are themselves the product of universal alienation). Here, we add to existing literature that has largely focused on the negotiations, and consequent imperfections, that occur at an organizational level. While this includes consideration over actions and practices that workers perform to resist degeneration, less consideration has been given to work itself as a site of both collective and individual struggle. Moreover, wage labour, as a structural element of capitalism and a point of entry for the degenerative forces of universal alienation, is a site at which dominant economic discourses are repeatedly replicated. As every replication offers an opening for an alternative discourse, wage labour is at once, a source of vulnerability to degeneration and a site at which workers can find freedom through the ongoing creation of variations to dominant norms (Dahlman et al., 2022).

Secondly, the article highlights the centrality of participatory democracy in maintaining wage labour as a site of struggle against alienation; a site at which freedom and uncontrollability can be continually negotiated (Husted et al., 2026; Jensen, 2020; Shanahan et al., 2024). The role of democracy in resisting degeneration has been shown elsewhere. Cornforth (1995) highlights the importance of reinforcing democratic values and structures, openness to opposition, criticism and difference through meaningful participation. Focusing specifically on work degeneration Jaumier and Daudigeos (2021: 74) argue that emancipatory work practices emerge from an 'extended participation'. Although they do not specifically talk about democracy, Shanahan (2025) and Husted et al. (2026) imply its importance by highlighting the degenerative risks of 'finishedness'. As noted by Byrne and Healy (2006: 250), democracy is an act of, 'keeping the negativity of communal production intact at every phase [. . .] of collective economic activity' and, as such, is an act of maintaining 'unfinishedness'. We add to this literature by arguing that participatory democracy plays a crucial role in resisting alienation in two ways.

First, it does so by creating opportunities for ongoing deliberation and dissent that enables members to pose previously concealed practical questions about what they ought to do and how they should act, thus breaking with structures of reification (Jaeggi, 2014). In this context describing or experiencing oneself, individually or collectively, as alienated becomes an immanent critique. As Jaeggi (2014) explains, understanding ourselves as alienated means understanding 'ourselves as persons who act' (p. 49) and therefore as persons who can use their 'power to act and form and impose [their] own meaningful mark on the world' (p. 24). By reframing paid work as a site at which self-directed action is, in fact, possible, members were able to reclaim the right to define what is, and what is not, of value; to determine what they produce and how; and decide how they relate to others, both inside and outside of the organization. The very fact that these processes of self-determination occurred within the constraints of universal alienation led to paid work being reframed as a relation of co-constitution, mutually formed by both market forces *and* workers unique responses to, and struggles against, these forces (Alakavuklar, 2024; Meira, 2014; Seda-Irizarry, 2011). This collective act of rethinking wage labour not only enabled the cooperatives to tread the fine line between external and insulation degeneration (Shanahan, 2025) but also transformed work into something that members identified with, and through which they retained and exhibited their 'distinctive character traits' and a 'dimension of obstinacy' (Jaeggi, 2014: 94). Experiences of disalienation were achieved

therefore *through* the assertion and negotiation of members values and needs alongside both the limits and opportunities created by repeated capitalist discourse, and not through the achievement, or even progression towards, some future notion of 'pure disalienation'. Thus, we argue not only that the replication of imperfect alternatives is an important part of the post-capitalist political project (Dahlman et al., 2022; Just et al., 2021) but also that the *process* of (re)producing 'less than perfect' alternatives matters on an individual, as well as organizational, level.

Second, participatory democracy enabled members to practice and reinforce principles of mutuality, solidarity and an ethic of care. These principles provided the foundation for members to deconstruct the inevitability of competition and position 'social relations as the explicit goal of production' (Lebowitz, 2003: 201); and to re-understand the self as a collective being who exists within, and is reliant upon, a community, an environment, and fellow workers, as well as a wage. Surplus continued to be generated, and wages continued to be paid, but both were re-imagined, from a source of future equity and an end in themselves, to a collective resource and 'means of enacting social commitments' (Cameron, 2009: 102). As relations to our fellow human and non-human, others are 'intimately bound' (Jaeggi, 2014: 49) together with our relation to self, the enactment of principles of mutuality, solidarity and an ethic of care became an act of self-conception that reconnected members to their species being (Marx, [1939] 2015). We draw attention, therefore, to principles of mutuality, solidarity and an ethic of care as principles that enable alternative organizations to continue to exist within, against and beyond capitalism (Chatterton, 2006); to be both relevant to the hegemonic order and suggestive of a new order through the reappropriation of capitalistic logics for non-capitalistic ends.

Given the centrality of democracy in resisting alienation, future research could explore how communication and communicative breakdowns (Dufays et al., 2020) impact experiences of alienation in worker cooperatives. As the two organizations in this study are relatively small, future research may wish to examine similar phenomena in larger cooperative organizations, perhaps ones where financial pressures are less apparent, and where participatory democracy is replaced with direct democracy. As Kociatkiewicz et al.'s (2021) study was conducted in another country and showed potential for disalienation, future research could also explore worker cooperatives in a non-UK context to better understand the role of particular economic systems and government policy on alienation.

We realize that not all alternative organizations are worker cooperatives; some may not even be particularly democratic. Both alternative organizations and worker cooperatives are usually subject to forces of the market, competition and growth, and are therefore vulnerable to degeneration. Based on this study, we would suggest that one way in which it is possible to encourage and speed up the 'impure' replication of an organization and system (Dahlman et al., 2022; Just et al., 2021) is through debate, dissent and discussion, regardless of whether workers are in a worker cooperative or not. Although alternative scholars such as Dahlman et al. (2022) and Husted et al. (2026) argue that a principled approach to alternative organization is too binary, Parker et al.'s (2014) mutually reinforcing criteria of solidarity and autonomy are, we would argue, still a useful guide for alternative organizing. However, they become far more politically performative when all

members of an organization can discuss, disagree, agree and co-create their work, product and purpose.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the research participants for their generous contributions of time, and passion for worker cooperatives. Thank you also to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

AI usage declaration

The authors acknowledge that they have followed Human Relations' AI policy. No AI was used for preparing the manuscript.

ORCID iDs

Kiri Langmead https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2980-5107

Simon Parker https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2080-8886

References

Alakavuklar ON (2024) Untangling alternative organising within and beyond capitalist relations: The case of a free food store. *Human Relations* 77(11): 1596–1619.

Arnaud C and Château-Terrisse P (2024) Constructing an alternative and resisting degeneration: The case of a multi-stakeholder cooperative in the field of regulated professions. *M@n@gement* 27(5): 19–37.

Ashforth BE and Reingen PH (2014) Functions of dysfunction: Managing the dynamics of an organizational duality in a natural food cooperative. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 59(3): 474–516.

Atzeni M and Ghigliani P (2007) Labour process and decision-making in factories under workers' self-management: Empirical evidence from Argentina. *Work, Employment and Society* 21(4): 653–671.

Atzeni M and Vieta M (2014) Between class and the market: Self-management in theory and in the practice of the worker-recuperated enterprises in Argentina. In: Parker M, Cheney G, Fournier V and Land C (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Alternative Organization*. London: Routledge, 47–61.

Audebrand LK (2017) Expanding the scope of paradox scholarship on social enterprise: The case for (re) introducing worker cooperatives. *M@n@gement* 20(4): 368–393.

Azambuja R and Islam G (2019) Working at the boundaries: Middle managerial work as a source of emancipation and alienation. *Human Relations* 72(3): 534–564.

Azzellini D (2018) Labour as a commons: The example of worker-recuperated companies. *Critical Sociology* 44(4–5): 763–776.

Ben-Ner A and Jones DC (1995) Employee participation, ownership, and productivity: A theoretical framework. *Industrial Relations* 34(4): 532–554.

Böhm S, Dinerstein AC and Spicer A (2010) (Im) possibilities of autonomy: Social movements in and beyond capital, the state and development. *Social Movement Studies* 9(1): 17–32.

Borowiak C and Ji M (2019) Taxi co-ops versus Uber: Struggles for workplace democracy in the sharing economy. *Journal of Labor and Society* 22(1): 165–185.

Bousalham Y and Vidaillet B (2018) Contradiction, circumvention and instrumentalization of noble values: How competition undermines the potential of alternatives. *Organization* 25(3): 401–427.

Brannick T and Coghlan D (2007) In defense of being "native": The case for insider academic research. *Organizational Research Methods* 10(1): 59–74.

Braverman H (1974) *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. London: Monthly Review Press.

Bretos I, Errasti A and Marcuello C (2017) Ownership, governance and the diffusion of HRM practices in multinational worker cooperatives: Case-study evidence from the Mondragon group. *Human Resource Management Journal* 28(1): 76–91.

Byrne K and Healy S (2006) Cooperative subjects: Toward a post-fantasmatic enjoyment of the economy. *Rethinking Marxism* 18(2): 241–258.

Byron C (2016) Essence and alienation: Marx's theory of human nature. *Science & Society* 80(3): 375–394.

Cameron J (2005) Focusing on the focus group. In: Hay I (ed.) *Qualitative Research Methods in Human Geography*, 2nd edn. Melbourne, Australia: Oxford University Press, 56–174.

Cameron J (2009) Experimenting with economic possibilities: Ethical economic decision-making in two Australian community enterprises. In: Amin A (ed.) *The Social Economy: International Perspectives on Economic Solidarity*. London: Zed Books, 92–115.

Cameron J and Hicks J (2014) Performative research for a climate politics of hope: Rethinking geographic scale, "impact" scale, and markets. *Antipode* 46(1): 53–71.

Cato MS (2012) The green economy: Why ownership and control matter. *Journal of Co-operative Studies* 45(1): 61–68.

Charmaz K (2004) Grounded theory. In: Hesse-Biber S and Leavy P (eds) *Approaches to Qualitative Research: A Reader on Theory and Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 497–521.

Chatterton P (2006) 'Give up activism' and change the world in unknown ways: Or, learning to walk with others on uncommon ground. *Antipode* 38(2): 259–281.

Cheney G, Santa Cruz I, Peredo AM, et al. (2014) Worker cooperatives as an organizational alternative: Challenges, achievements and promise in business governance and ownership. *Organization* 21(5): 591–603.

Cleaver H (2000) *Reading Capital Politically*. Edinburgh: Anti/Theses.

Connelly FM and Clandinin DJ (1990) Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher* 19(5): 2–14.

Cornforth C (1995) Patterns of cooperative management: Beyond the degeneration thesis. *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 16(4): 487–523.

Cornforth C (2004) The governance of co-operatives and mutual associations: A paradox perspective. *Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics* 75(1): 11–32.

Cornforth C, Thomas A, Spear R, et al. (1988) *Developing successful Worker Co-Operatives*. SAGE publications Ltd.

Cornwell J (2012) Worker co-operatives and spaces of possibility: An investigation of subject space at collective copies. *Antipode* 44(3): 725-744.

Courpasson D (2017) The politics of everyday. *Organization Studies* 38(6): 843–859.

Cunliffe A (2010) Retelling tales of the field: In search of organizational ethnography 20 years on. *Organizational Research Methods* 13(2): 224–239.

Dahlman S, Mygind du Plessis E, Husted E, et al. (2022) Alternativity as freedom: Exploring tactics of emergence in alternative forms of organizing. *Human Relations* 75(10): 1961–1985.

DeMartino G (2003) Realizing class justice. *Rethinking Marxism* 15(1): 1–31.
Dufays F, O'Shea N, Huybrechts B, et al. (2020) Resisting colonization: Worker cooperatives' conceptualization and behaviour in a Habermasian perspective. *Work, Employment and Society* 34(6): 965–984.
Errasti A, Bretos I and Nunez A (2017) The viability of cooperatives: The fall of the Mondragon cooperative Fagor. *Review of Radical Political Economics* 49(2): 181–197.
Fuchs C (2018) Universal alienation, formal and real subsumption of society under capital, ongoing primitive accumulation by dispossession: Reflections on the Marx@200-Contributions by David Harvey and Michael Hardt/Toni Negri. *tripleC* 16(2): 454–467.
Gibson-Graham JK (2003) Enabling ethical economies: Cooperativism and class. *Critical Sociology* 29(2): 123–161.
Gibson-Graham JK and Roelvink G (2011) The nitty gritty of creating alternative economies. *Social Alternatives* 30(1): 29–33.
Gilmore S and Kenny K (2014) Work-worlds colliding: Self-reflexivity, power and emotion in organizational ethnography. *Human Relations* 68(1): 55–78.
Guillemin M and Gillam L (2004) Ethics, reflexivity, and "ethically important moments" in research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 10(2): 261–280.
Harnecker CP (2012) Democracy and solidarity: A study of Venezuelan cooperatives. In: Atzeni M (ed.) *Alternative Work Organisations*. Basingstoke; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 103–128.
Harvey D (2018a) Universal alienation and the real subsumption of daily life under capital: A response to Hardt and Negri. *tripleC* 16(2): 449–453.
Harvey D (2018b) Universal alienation. *Journal for Cultural Research* 22(2): 137–150.
Heras-Saizarbitoria I (2014) The ties that bind? Exploring the basic principles of worker-owned organizations in practice. *Organization* 21(5): 645–665.
Husted E, du Plessis EM and Dahlman S (2026) A processual perspective on alternative organization: Reorienting critical research through a study of two political parties. *Human Relations* 79(1): 32–58.
Husted E and Plesner U (2017) Spaces of open-source politics: Physical and digital conditions for political organization. *Organization* 24(5): 648–670.
Jaeggi R (2014) *Alienation*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
Jaumier S (2017) Preventing chiefs from being chiefs: An ethnography of a co-operative sheet-metal factory. *Organization* 24(2): 218–239.
Jaumier S and Daudigeos T (2021) Resisting work degeneration in collectivist-democratic organizations: Craft ethics in a French cooperative sheet-metal factory. *Research in the Sociology of Organizations* 72: 55–79.
Jensen PR (2020) Alternative logics: A discursive approach to normative and alternative organizing. *Human Relations* 74(8): 1156–1177.
Ji M (2020) With or without class: Resolving Marx's Janus-faced interpretation of worker-owned cooperatives. *Capital and Class* 44(3): 345–369.
Jossa B (2014) Alienation and the self-managed firm system. *Review of Radical Political Economics* 46(1): 5–14.
Josselson R (1996) On writing other people's lives: Self-analytic reflections of a narrative researcher. In: Josselson R (ed.) *Ethics and Process in the Narrative Study of Lives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 60–71.
Just SN, De Cock C and Schaefer SM (2021) From antagonists to allies? Exploring the critical performativity of alternative organization. *Culture and Organization* 27(2): 89–97.
Kociatkiewicz J, Kostera M and Parker M (2021) The possibility of disalienated work: Being at home in alternative organizations. *Human Relations* 74(7): 933–957.

Kokkinidis G (2014) Alternative Organizations in a Global Context: Tensions, challenges and potentialialities. *Ephemera* 14(4): 1031–1039.
Kokkinidis G (2015) Spaces of possibilities: Workers' self-management in Greece. *Organization* 22: 847–71.
Laclau E and Mouffe C (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.
Langmead K (2016) Challenging the degeneration thesis: The role of democracy in worker cooperatives? *Journal of Entrepreneurial and Organizational Diversity* 5(1): 79–98.
Lebowitz MA (2003) *Beyond Capital Marx's Political Economy of the Working Class*. New York: Palgrave McMillan.
Luhman JT (2007) Worker-ownership as an instrument for solidarity and social change. *Ephemera* 7(3): 462–474.
Luhman JT and Nazario AF (2015) Alienation, police stories, and Percival. *Journal of Business Ethics* 130(3): 665–681.
Marx K ([1844] 2009) *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts*. New York: Marxists Internet Archive.
Marx K ([1891] 2010) *Wage Labour and Capital*. New York: Marxists Internet Archive.
Marx K ([1894] 2010) *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume III The Process of Capitalist Production as a Whole*. New York, NY: International Publishers.
Marx K ([1939] 2015) *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. London: Penguin Books/New Left Review.
Meira FB (2014) Liminal organization: Organizational emergence within solidary economy in Brazil. *Organization* 21(5): 713–729.
Ng CW and Ng E (2009) Balancing the democracy dilemmas: Experiences of three women workers' cooperatives in Hong Kong. *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 30(2): 182–206.
Ollman B (1976) *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in a Capitalist Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Pansera M and Rizzi F (2020) Furbish or perish: Italian social cooperatives at a crossroads. *Organization* 27(1): 17–35.
Parker M, Cheney G, Fournier V, et al. (2014) *The Routledge Companion to Alternative Organization*. Abingdon: Routledge.
Parker S and Parker M (2017) Antagonism, accommodation and agonism in Critical Management Studies: Alternative organizations as allies. *Human Relations* 70(11): 1366–1387.
Roberts B (2011) Exploitation, appropriation, and subsumption. *Rethinking Marxism* 23(3): 341–351.
Rothschild J, Chen KK, Smith DH, et al. (2016) Avoiding bureaucratization and mission drift in associations. In: Smith DH, Stebbins RA and Grotz J (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Volunteering, Civic Participation, and Nonprofit Associations*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 1007–1024.
Rothschild J and Whitt JA (1986) *The Cooperative Workplace: Potentials and Dilemmas of Organisational Democracy and Participation*. Cambridge: Cambride University Press.
Ruccio DF (2011) Cooperatives, surplus, and the social. *Rethinking Marxism* 23(3): 344–340.
Ryan G and Bernard R (2003) Techniques to identify themes. *Field Methods* 15(1): 84–109.
Sage D (2025) Alternative organization without vertical hierarchies of spatial scale? *Organization* 32(6): 914–924.
Seda-Irizarry IJ (2011) Crisis, class, and cooperatives: Some comments on the United Steelworkers -Mondragón Alliance. *Rethinking Marxism* 23(3): 374–383.
Shanahan G (2025) Two routes to degeneration, two routes to utopia: The impure critical performativity of alternative organizing. *Organization* 32(4): 489–507.

Shanahan G, Jaumier S, Daudigeos T, et al. (2024) Why reinvent the wheel? Materializing multiplicity to resist reification in alternative organizations. *Organization Studies* 45(6): 855–879.
Soffia M, Wood AJ and Burchell B (2022) Alienation is not 'bullshit': an empirical critique of Graeber's theory of BS jobs. *Work, Employment and Society* 36(5): 816–840.
Somerville P (2007) Co-operative identity. *Journal of Co-operative Studies* 40(1): 5–17.
Storey J, Basterretxea I and Salaman G (2014) Managing and resisting 'degeneration' in employee-owned businesses: A comparative study of two large retailers in Spain and the UK. *Organization* 21(5): 626–644.
Van Maanen J, Sørensen JB and Mitchell TR (2007) The interplay between theory and method. *Academy of Management Review* 32(4): 1145–1154.
Vieta M (2010) The social innovations of autogestión in Argentina's worker-recuperated enterprises: Cooperatively reorganizing productive life in hard times. *Labor Studies Journal* 35(3): 295–321.
Vieta M (2018) From capitalist firms to worker cooperatives: Democratizing the labour process and transforming communities via Argentina's worker-recuperated enterprises. In: *35th international labour process conference 2018*, Buenos Aires, Argentina.
Vieta M (2019) Recuperating and (re)learning the language of autogestión in Argentina's empresas recuperadas worker cooperatives. *Journal of Cultural Economy* 12(5): 401–422.
Vieta M (2021) Recuperating and (re) learning the language of autogestion in Argentina's empresas recuperadas worker cooperatives. In: Scott SM (ed.) *Languages of Economic Crises*. London: Routledge, 69–90.
Watson DJ (2020) Working the fields: The organization of labour in community supported agriculture. *Organization* 27(2): 291–313.
Webb S and Webb B (1921) *Consumers' Co-operative Movement*. London: Longmans, Green.
Workers.coop (2023) *The Worker Cooperative Code*. Available at: https://www.workers.coop/resource/workercode/ (accessed 7 April 2026).
Zamagni S and Zamagni V (2010) *Cooperative Enterprise: Facing the Challenge of Globalization*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.
Zanoni P (2020) Prefiguring alternatives through the articulation of post-and anti-capitalistic politics: An introduction to three additional papers and a reflection. *Organization* 27(1): 3–16.
Zoubir Z (2018) "Alienation" and critique in Marx's manuscripts of 1857–58 ("Grundrisse"). *The European Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 25(5): 710–737.

Kiri Langmead is Lecturer in People, Work and Organising at Edinburgh Napier University. Her research focuses on workplace democracy and non-hierarchical organising, with an emphasis on worker cooperatives. [Email: k.langmead@napier.ac.uk]

Simon Parker is a Senior Lecturer in Business and Society at Bayes Business School. His research interests focus on democracy, justice and fairness within alternative organizations, sustainability and corporate wrongdoing. His work has been published in leading outlets, including *Human Relations, Academy of Management Review, Journal of Business Ethics, Management Learning* and *Organization*. [Email: Simon.Parker.3@city.ac.uk]