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# Subjects of Scale / Spaces of Possibility: Producing Co-operative Space in Theory and Enterprise

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Subjects of Scale/Spaces of Possibility: Producing Co-operative Space in Theory and Enterprise

A Dissertation Presented

by

JANELLE CORNWELL

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Department of Geosciences

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ABSTRACT

SUBJECTS OF SCALE/SPACES OF POSSIBILITY: PRODUCING CO-OPERATIVE SPACE

IN THEORY AND ENTERPRISE

SEPTEMBER 2011

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This dissertation addresses key questions raised in Human Geography and Economic Geography concerning scale and the production of space, alternative economic geographies and co-operative economic development. It is the product of a five year ethnographic investigation with co-operative enterprises in Western Massachusetts and the broader Connecticut River Valley of Western New England. It explores neglected questions about how subjects are producing co-operative economic identities, enterprises and development strategies amid capitalist cultural dominance; and how structural, financial and governmental aspects of their enterprises participate in cultivating the desire and capacity to expand co-operative space. In line with poststructuralist feminist perspectives within and outside the disciplines of Human and Economic Geography, each chapter challenges ontological presumptions often made about the economy, scale, power and size and offers theoretical contributions based upon empirical research with co-operative enterprises.

The three chapters of this dissertation explore the co-production of co-operative space and subjects; the “practices of scale” in the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives; and co-operative development in a regional context. They challenge the presumptions that space and economy are (and must be) structured by capitalism; power is constituted by hierarchy, size and “scale”; and subjects and subjectivity are insignificant to the project of constructive development. Contrary to structuralist critiques of worker co-operatives based upon size, political conservatism and vulnerability, I argue that worker owned enterprises empower workers despite capitalist cultural dominance and relative size.



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## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation addresses key questions raised in Human Geography and Economic Geography concerning scale and the production of space, alternative economic geographies and co-operative economic development. It is the product of a five year ethnographic investigation with co-operative enterprises in Western Massachusetts and the broader Connecticut River Valley of Western New England. I chose the three article option so my dissertation consists of three distinct papers that share worker ownership and co-operative subjectivity as a common theme. These chapters explore neglected questions about how subjects are producing co-operative economic identities, enterprises and development strategies amid capitalist cultural dominance; and how structural, financial and governmental aspects of their enterprises participate in cultivating the desire and capacity to expand co-operative space. In line with poststructuralist feminist perspectives within and outside the disciplines of Human and Economic Geography, each chapter challenges ontological presumptions often made about the economy, scale, power and size and offers theoretical contributions based upon empirical research with co-operative enterprises.

The topic and three chapters of this dissertation address problems associated with capitalist enterprise and capitalocentric economic imaginary. “Capitalocentrism” is the term used by Gibson-Graham (1996) to denote the tendency to describe or define everything with respect to capitalism. Popular and academic economic discourses, on the right and the left, while varied in their perspectives often share a capitalocentric economic imaginary and structural understanding of the economy as singular and capitalist that precludes alternatives from being theorized, or theorized as powerful possibilities (Gibson-Graham 1996, 2006). Capitalocentric discourses, along with the policies and institutions through which they are performed, help to produce an array of problems, two of which this dissertation addresses. The two-fold problem of the dissertation is that capitalocentric discourse and structuralist economic imaginaries help to (1) produce subjects who feel alienated from economic agency and (2) produce economic institutions that alienate subjects from economic self-determination.

Common structuralist visions of the economy limit economic representation to capitalist relations of production. The economy is understood to be governed by the logic of profit and inevitability which limits subjects’ real and imagined capacity for intervention and ethical economic agency. Economic policy is relinquished to the “experts” and economic agency to the “bosses” and

entrepreneurs. We are distant from the management of the economy yet we are vulnerable to economic crisis. In contrast to singular structural or capitalocentric visions of the economy is Gibson-Graham's diverse economies framework. The diverse economies framework (see Table 1) is an open-ended ontological mapping of heterogeneous economic process, less than half of which are capitalist. Inspired by feminist economists accounting for household labor and labor of care, the diverse economies framework includes volunteer, co-operative, slave, feudal and capitalist labor processes; transactions might include barter, gift and monetary exchanges in formal, informal or black markets; and organizational forms such as co-operative, capitalist, alternative capitalist, non-profit enterprise, household, community or church organizations among others. This vision sets forth a radically heterogeneous economic ontology in which capitalist business is just one form of enterprise in a wider economic landscape that is populated by a diversity of capitalist, alternative capitalist, and non-capitalist forms of production, labor and exchange.

If we are to produce more socially and environmentally sustainable economies, we need to recognize economic diversity and cultivate diverse economic experiments. We also need to cultivate more powerful, more democratic, and less capitalist economic subject positions and the desire to inhabit them.<sup>1</sup> The diverse economies framework (again please see Table 1) helps make such experiments visible as sites of analysis and possibility.

Co-operatives are becoming increasingly visible as an important alternative to investor-led capitalist enterprise. The 2008 economic crisis and public bail out of large scale, private, investor-led banks brought attention to the importance of co-operative business models and has invigorated interest in co-operatives as a viable alternative (Birchal and Ketilson 2009).<sup>2</sup> In co-operatives, capital is subordinate to the interests of its users. Co-operative enterprises root capital in the communities of their members because they are owned and controlled by their stakeholders; they tend to be risk averse and thus are more stable during crisis than their investor-

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<sup>1</sup> Co-operatives are more democratic because they are democratically owned and operated. They tend to be more environmentally sound because members have multiple (including environmental) interests which they can represent in votes. Unlike capitalist businesses, they are not legally mandated to maximize profit at the expense of whatever values (including but not only environmental) they have.

<sup>2</sup> Birchal and Ketilson note that the co-operative banking sector fares better during a crisis because they tend to be risk averse. Moreover, consumer membership in credit unions grows during financial crisis because they are considered more secure and trustworthy than investor-led private banks.

led counterparts. For these, among other reasons, credit unions, housing co-operatives, consumer co-operatives, worker co-operatives and producer co-operatives are more stable and have fared better than traditional banks and privately owned businesses in past and recent economic crises (Birchal and Ketilson 2009). The United Nations recently recognized the contribution of co-operatives in meeting both social and economic needs by designating the year 2012, the “International Year of Co-operatives.”

Considering their substantial economic impact world-wide (e.g. they provide 20 percent more jobs than multinational corporations)<sup>3</sup> co-operatives are popularly misunderstood and underrepresented in schools of business and economics (Kalmi 2007; Chamard 2004; Hill 2000). The “co-operative difference” is often dismissed by scholars and invisible to the public because widespread understanding of “the economy” is largely colonized by capitalist discourse despite ubiquitous diversity in actual modes of production, labor and exchange.<sup>4</sup> In the so-called capitalist economy of the US, there are an estimated 30,000 co-operative enterprises operating in 73,000 places of business with more than \$3 trillion in assets, \$500 billion in revenue and \$25 billion in wages nationwide (Deller, Hoyt, and Hueth 2009). In the absence of co-operative education, however, co-operative managers are often trained in capitalist management practices. They miss out on key challenges and opportunities specific to co-operative enterprises; and the “co-operative difference” is often misunderstood even by non-profit co-operative developers. Co-operatives have difficulty recognizing their similarities across sectors, and neglect development opportunities within and across co-operative sectors.

Co-operative cross-sector isolation and ignorance of economic difference more broadly defined, limits both imaginative and material possibilities for producing more sustainable, democratic, environmentally sound community economies. Co-operative enterprises enable members to use capital for the purpose of their communities but how are co-operatives and co-operative subjects developing in the face of capitalist cultural dominance? The underlying questions that this dissertation addresses are: (1) How do co-operatives empower subjects? (2) How are co-operative subjects growing co-operative space?

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<sup>3</sup> [www.ica.coop](http://www.ica.coop) (accessed 6/15/10)

<sup>4</sup>Ironmonger (1996); Cameron and Gibson-Graham (2003) ; Gibson-Graham (2008, 615)

### Approach and Methodology

My approach to the research and writing of this dissertation is informed by a line of Marxian theory, poststructuralist, feminist and queer theory perspectives that challenge truth and fixed meaning, as well as objective reality and the supposed objectivity of science. This poststructuralist paradigm understands knowledge (and, by implication, research) as subjectively and socially constructed and theory is thought to have performative power; in Butler's words, theory has the power "to produce the effects that it names" (Butler 1993, 2). Derrida, Althusser, Baudrillard, Resnick and Wolff, Foucault, Gibson-Graham, Haraway, Sedgwick are among the theorists whose poststructuralist perspectives shape my approach. I employ what I would like to call "decolonizing methodologies"<sup>5</sup> for research and writing. Foremost among these strategies are Gibson-Graham's (2006, 08) techniques and ethics for thinking, Frueh's (1996) erotic scholarship, Sedgwick's tactile approach to theory and Tsing's (2005) ethnography of global friction.

Gibson-Graham's *A Postcapitalist Politics* and a symposium on "Subjects of Economy" published in *Rethinking Marxism* in 2006 provided the theoretical framing for my research focus on subjectivity. Drawing upon Butler's (1990, 1993, 1997) interest in the "becoming" of subjects, Gibson-Graham's work goes beyond theorizing the subject as fully subjected. With Butler (1997) and Connolly (1999) they look for openings "to identify the energies and intensities that might be harnessed by a politics of becoming" (Gibson-Graham 2006, 25). By theorizing the becoming (Butler 1997), ambiguous (Connolly 1999) or negative (in the Lacanian sense) qualities of the subject, Gibson-Graham, Butler, Connolly and the authors of the "Subjects of Economy" cleared out "a breathing space for fugitive energies of caring, social concern, and collectivity to be directed toward new performances of economy" (Gibson-Graham 2006, 51). Because the starting point of the research for this dissertation was a nascent collaboration among co-operative subjects, these chapters explore the co-constitutive process of the "becoming" of new co-operative subjects through collaboration and the "becoming" of the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives as a movement.

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<sup>5</sup> This subtitle is credited to Tuhiwai Smith (1999), whose book *Decolonizing Methodologies Research and Indigenous Peoples* (despite well-founded critiques) has been influential in shaping my methodological approach.

## Decolonizing Methodologies<sup>6</sup>

In the matrix of colonialism, universal reason became the mark of temporally dynamic and spatially expansive forms of knowledge and power. Universal reason, of course, was best articulated by the colonizers. In contrast, the colonized were characterized by particularistic cultures; here, the particular is that which cannot grow. (Tsing 2005, 9)

### Stance

Because capitalocentric research agendas have resulted in the theoretical tendency for dismissing and discouraging anything outside capitalist purviews, Gibson-Graham stress the importance of *stance*. Along with Latour and Sedgwick they suggest that our trained, discerning academic stance, with its desire for prediction and explanatory power, has taken on a “paranoid” character that reduces complexity of representation and negates the capacity of theory to nurture experiments. They advocate cultivating an “open, concerned and connected stance and a readiness to explore rather than judge” in order to give experiments “room to move and grow” (Gibson-Graham 2006, 4).

In contrast to structural readings and neoliberal paranoia that presume systemic logic and blind us to the potential of alternatives, Gibson-Graham encourage us to open an eye (and an *I*) to “emergent practices” that are fostering noncapitalist practices and experiments (2006, 4). They call forth (in themselves and others) a new academic subjectivity that is open to the possibility of other worlds beyond neoliberal capitalist dominance and empire. With Sedgwick they advocate a reparative rather than critical, judgmental stance, a performative rather than realist perspective, and reading for difference rather than dominance to produce the grounds for possibility rather than inevitability. They acknowledge the ethical choice made by scholars to produce particular kinds of knowledge and thus encourage reflexivity of the researcher’s I/Eye.<sup>7</sup> They point to Sedgwick’s concept, *weak theory*, as a means to getting theory to produce something new (2006, 7). Weak theory couldn’t possibly know, they say,

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<sup>6</sup> IBID

<sup>7</sup> In *Crafting Selves, Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace*, Dorinne Kondo introduces and deploys the concept of a “narrative eye/I” to challenge the empirical/theoretical binary (1990, 8). Kondo says that “[t]he narrative ‘I’ is meant to problematize the very terms “first person,” “personal,” “private” and, in its least complimentary form, “narcissistic” (1990, 35).

that social experiments are already co-opted and thus doomed to fail or to reinforce dominance; it couldn't tell us that the world economy will be transformed by an international revolutionary movement rather than through the disorganized proliferation of local projects. (Gibson-Graham 2006, 8)

My methodological stance, therefore, is *open* rather than critical; I approach the two enterprises of this investigation as experiments in a proliferation of possibilities. This entails an intentional "dis-identification with the subject positions offered by a hegemonic discourse," in favor of identifying "with alternative and politically enabling positions" (Gibson-Graham 2006, 77). Despite pressure to represent the enterprises critically, as small, exceptional, weak or destined to fail,<sup>8</sup> I approach them with curiosity (and a tape recorder).

### Cultivating Alternative Academic Subjectivity

"...an erotic response to life is not specifically genital but, rather, a state of arousal regarding life's richness. Erotic engagement is bodily, psychic, and intellectual..." (Frueh 1996, 2)

I was encouraged by Gibson-Graham's (2006) discussion of affect and emotion and Law's (2004) baroque spatiality to include my own thinking, feeling, moving body as one among the subjects of this investigation during the research process. I took Law's (2004) suggestion to "look down" for perhaps infinite complexity as a methodological impetus for looking *in*. The affects and emotions that surfaced throughout my research guided many of the methodological decisions I made, including the choice to focus on co-operative subjects and their development strategies. The question of co-operative subjectivity (for me) meant (among other things) asking about feelings. How does it feel to be a worker owner? And then, asking myself: How do these stories make me feel?

Listen to my story, said the Bouquet Scholar. Let us share each other's tongues. Take my story to heart, like a short and necessary kiss. Let it untie your (k)-n-o-t-s, unwind you from the rules that make your flesh afraid to move. (Frueh 1996, 19-20)

Opening myself up to subjective inquiry, during the research process, I became acutely aware that desire and envy were prominent among feelings that arose during my research with the Valley

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<sup>8</sup> If I were to approach this research from a critical, structural stance, I might presume weakness, insufficiency and conservatism in advance. For more on "stance" weak theory Gibson-Graham (2006, 08) and Sedgwick (2003)



Alliance of Worker co-operatives. Worker ownership struck me as an *embodied* movement in which values and ideals were practically incorporated into workers' lives in ways that my own economic situation precluded. While my "goal as thinker" was "the proliferation of different economies" (Gibson-Graham 2006, 6), this research cultivated an unwitting desire to experience that proliferation—through my own body. This desire led me to attempt a worker co-operative café start up (a failed project not documented in this dissertation but which I plan to address in future work). It also shaped my methodology by inspiring me to explore geographic concepts—such as scale, hierarchy, size and power—as inter-corporeal practices associated with a variety of feelings and motivations.

Sentiment, sentience, sense and sentence share the Latin root *sentire*, to feel, perceive, sense. To entirely distinguish intellect from the sense is a mistake. Through intellect a person discriminates and evaluates, but she does so through sense and senses as well. (Frueh 1996, 12)

The attention I paid to my own affective reactions (and the reactions themselves) during this research, in other words, shaped the questions I asked.

I focused on the Valley Alliance partly because the experience of meetings cultivated in me a visceral *sense* of possibility, capacity and hope. The stance that worker owners seemed to assume towards each other and "the economy" was *open*, reparative, and curious rather than judgmental. It was similar to the stance with which I sought to approach the subjects and enterprises of my research. There was a tangible sense of "arousal regarding life's richness" (Frueh, 1996, 2) in which the subjects of these meetings were open to each other and to the possibilities they could create for each other together. Paying close attention to the feelings that arose within me and others motivated the direction of my research because, from a performative perspective, my aim was to perform a knowledge of those processes that produced satisfaction, security, pleasure, hope and companionship. Rather than focus on capitalism, alienation, injustice, and frustration, even for the sake of critique, I attempted to explore, analyze and explicate those models and processes that were motivated by and produced the kinds of feelings that I want to experience myself and spread about the world through my work. There are always some disputes and bad feelings that surface in group processes but the co-operators I observed and interacted with dealt with these in particularly effective ways; the project of the co-operative movement and my research of it are motivated by positive experiences and the desire to proliferate them for oneself and others.

Attending to *feelings*, both my own and those of the other subjects of my research, engendered access to the motivations behind movement. It also inspired me to think through tactile metaphors and ways of exploring, sensing and producing that include more than visual ways of knowing. Sedgwick suggests that feeling is a mutual experience: something/one *feels* is also *felt*. In *Touching Feeling* she employs tactile metaphors, texture and the playful double meaning of “touching feeling”. For Sedgwick, tactile metaphors challenge dualistic understanding of agency:

It seems our sense of touch makes nonsense out of any dualistic understanding of agency and passivity; to touch is always already to reach out, fondle, to heft, to tap, or enfold and also to understand other people or natural forces as having effectually done so before oneself, if only in the making of the textured object. (Sedgwick 2003, 14)

I considered the making and “becoming” of VAWC and its subjects a practice and project involving touching and feeling, hefting, tapping of concepts, ideas and resources. Similarly, the practice of conceptual elaboration and understanding was for me a project of hefting, tapping, sanding and feeling. In such a metaphorical and practical context I explored not only the visual but tactile, auditory practical qualities of theoretical framings such as scale.

Tsing also uses a tactile metaphor that influenced my methodology: “Friction”, she says “refuses the lie that global power operates as a well-oiled machine...” (2005, 6). Texture is the sensation that makes the erasure of difference, struggle and history visible in the making of smooth “large scale” “global” economy. Smoothness requires sanding and erasure; the making of smooth space and smooth surfaces requires effort. Texture inspired me to bring theoretical concepts into the body and to investigate the feelings and friction involved with producing co-operative space and relationships; size, hierarchy and power; and co-operative identities.

### Methods and Data Collection

I chose qualitative research methods because I was interested in how co-operative cultures, identities and motivations develop. A long tradition of qualitative research methods in the social sciences takes many forms including surveys, ethnography, structured and semi-structured interviews, oral history, portraiture and others. My ethnographic research tools were designed to elicit information about behavior and activities, as well as personal stories, feelings and perspectives. While my research was not focused on capitalist forces, in retrospect my methods were similar to Burawoy’s extended case method in the sense that rather than collecting data about what co-operators *should* do, I collected data about what they were actually doing “with accounts of real events, struggles, and dramas that took place over space and time”. (Burawoy,

1998, 5). For me, this style of research cultivated mutual trust and friendships with research participants. Participants supported my research in a variety of ways; co-operative members included me on emails, and in meetings; Collective Copies purchased my ticket to New Orleans so that I could attend the US Federation of Worker Co-operative Conference in 2008. And I hoped (and still hope) that my research might support the movement in some way even if only by making it more visible to itself and others.

Data collection began informally in November 2005. Julie Graham, who had a longstanding relationship with several of the subjects and enterprises of this investigation, introduced me to VAWC in its early stages. In January 2006, the group granted me formal permission to conduct research with them in the form of participant observation and interviewing. I conducted participant observation between January 2006 and January 2011 on site at monthly meetings, events, celebrations, social events and conferences.<sup>9</sup> I conducted and transcribed 15 semi-structured, tape-recorded one-on-one interviews ranging from one to two hours in duration. Interviews and field notes were coded manually and with qualitative data analysis software.<sup>10</sup>

During the course of this research, VAWC's projects and relationships with the community expanded significantly. As VAWC and its projects expanded, the number of sites, participants, associations, collaborators and geographic extent of my research also expanded. This dissertation benefited from my participation in two VAWC-sponsored projects. The first is a collaborative book project involving two professors, one outside researcher, one VAWC representative and myself. Together we collected co-operative biographies of all the worker co-operatives and many of the food co-operatives in the region; and we conducted 40 interviews with current and former

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<sup>9</sup> Out of town conferences (New York 2006, Atlanta 2007, New Orleans 2008, Pittsburg 2009) provided time-intensive exposure and personal connections with participants, culture and missions. Some talks and speeches from conferences and celebrations were also recorded and transcribed.

<sup>10</sup> Data was coded according to themes and topics. For electronic coding, I used Atlas TI, a qualitative data analysis software that facilitates organization, coding and tracking of qualitative data.

worker co-operators and allied members of the co-operative community.<sup>11</sup> This dissertation also draws upon my experience with the formation of the University of Massachusetts Co-operative Enterprise Collaborative with which I was able to participate in curriculum design with representatives from VAWC and the Neighboring Food Co-operative Association, as well as two graduate students and two professors in the Department of Economics.

Throughout the field research process, I reviewed current and historical publications and other documents related to co-operative enterprise and their alliances. I also conducted an extensive review of scholarly work on co-operative enterprises and theory.

### Reading the Chapters

Read together, the chapters of this dissertation challenge the presumptions that 1) space and economy are (and must be) structured by capitalism; 2) power is constituted by hierarchy, size and scale; 3) subjectivity (and therefore subjects) are irrelevant/insignificant to the project of constructive development and/or strategic oppositions to “greater” forces. I deliberately focused on *co-operative* rather than capitalist space and the collective production of power through the empowerment of subjects. These chapters demonstrate that subjectivity and co-operative identity are significant within and to the movement for the co-operators themselves as well as for the development of the movement more broadly.

The three chapters could be read in terms of a scoping metaphor in which the first chapter zooms in to explore the feelings and practices of subjects in a single co-operative business; the second scopes out to the feelings and practices in a regional alliance of worker co-operatives; and the third is wider yet in scope touching upon feelings and practices involved in co-operative economic development in a regional context that is informed by international examples. Despite this “zooming” in and out which implies visual distance, as the subsequent chapters gain in scope I have tried to maintain what Sedgwick might call “cutaneous contact” between co-operators’ strategies and practices, and the motivational impulses behind growth and development. I have sought to understand these spatial extensions and strategies as they are motivated and produced by personal, collective processes. When I began this study, the Alliance was relatively small; I

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<sup>11</sup> Fifteen of these 40 interviews were designed by me for the present study but used for this dual purpose. Michael Johnson conducted some 25 interviews with co-operators in the Valley, which I in turn transcribed and also drew upon over the course of this research and writing.

was interested in the “becoming” of a co-operative subjectivity without which I could not imagine the “becoming” of a broader co-operative movement. As the movement grew, so did the “scope” of my research, however, the common thread weaving these chapters together is this deliberate focus on subjective practices, both those of the co-operators and my own as a researcher.

The co-operators’ practices that I chose to explore in each of the following chapters demonstrate a co-constitutive ethic of self care and concern for the community within and outside the co-operatives. Desire, motivation and empowerment related to care of the self and the other surface in all three chapters in slightly different forms. In Chapter One I explored how the desire to expand co-operative space was cultivated in practices of co-operative work and how those desires were empowered by co-ownership and co-governance of space, time, and surplus. I consider how Collective Copies participates in the movement of worker co-operatives and is itself able to grow partly because the dreams of a few co-operative activists are supported by their co-workers through the democratic process. In Chapter Two desire, motivation and empowerment interplay through “practices of scale”; I explore how issues of size, power and hierarchy feel, how they are negotiated in VAWC and its co-operatives and how those practices shape and motivate the movement. Chapter Three takes off from “reading” as a subjective practice through which one can learn rather than simply judge and moves to the process of co-operative subjectivation (and identity formation) through the negotiation of co-operative principles and values. This chapter explores the production of co-operative identity through ethical negotiations that balance an ethic of care for the self with the movement and produce a co-operative identity in the process.

All three chapters are an affirmation of subject and non-capitalist co-operative spaces. Contrary to capitalocentric and structuralist critiques of worker owned co-operatives based upon size, political conservatism and vulnerability, the chapters of this dissertation demonstrate that worker co-operatives empower workers despite capitalist cultural dominance and relative size. They challenge the dampening effects of critical, structural readings and (hopefully) participate in the proliferation co-operative subjectivity and subject positions. The focus of this dissertation displaces the narrative of competitive and capitalist logic by accounting for the ethical dynamics of care: self care and concern for the community through the co-operative process. Each of these chapters also engages with a particular set of literature within Human and Economic Geography that I explore in more detail below.

## The Production of Space: Chapter 1

As soon as we let go of the universal as a self-fulfilling abstract truth, we must become embroiled in specific situations (Tsing 2005, 2)

The “production of space” has long been of disciplinary concern in human geography. In Chapter One I consider how the spacio-temporal practices of worker owners at Collective Copies shape workers’ desire and ability to grow co-operative spaces through the expansion of their business and participation in the movement of worker co-operatives. In contrast to the many geographers focused on capitalist space (Harvey, Smith, O’Connor, Herod, Swyngedouw to name a few) my focus is on co-operative space. I was attuned to the different practices—I considered them the “decolonized practices”—of workers who collectively owned and managed their space, time, production, appropriation and distribution of surplus rather than being owned and managed by capital.

Chapter One sets forth a tension and conceptual link that runs throughout the next two chapters. The tension between subjectivity made tangible by ethnographic place-based study and the desire to abstract generalized lessons throws particularities into the face of what many see as structure, and history structured by capitalism.<sup>12</sup> Chapter One frustrated reviewers who wanted to see the broader implications of my claims. When I presented it as a paper at conferences, reactions to this *weak* theoretical account were *strong*. I was made aware that this quiet, small, presentation of possibility and growth in one little place did not *measure* up. This was not enough space, and there was not enough time—not enough labor hours logged—for this experiment to be significant.

I stood before the audience, exposed. I had no structure to protect me, no scale, no inevitable conclusions to offer. One co-operator was not enough, one co-operative was not enough and a local movement was too small to be significant. *I* felt insignificant. I had yet to articulate an erotic response: “...measurement is not the point. Movement is.” (Frueh 1996, 118). Key organizers in the *movement* of worker owned co-operatives had been *inspired* and *empowered* by the co-ownership and governance at Collective Copies. For me there was an important connection between co-operative subjectivity, empowered subjects and a broader movement, the exploration

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<sup>12</sup> Such tension has surfaced throughout the social sciences and received notable attention by scholars such as Burawoy (1998, 2009) and Polanyi (1958).

of which I chose to begin in Chapter One. This paper's theoretical contribution is an affirmation of subject space and the personal, interpersonal, business and community possibilities opened up by the collective ownership. Read alongside the other two papers, I believe the contribution of Chapter 1 is more visible.

### Studies of Scale: Chapter 2

Locally based and qualitative oriented, my research did not initially concern itself with scale until I ran into critiques of worker co-operatives that were based exclusively on "scale" and their significance (and therefore the significance of my research) was called into question with reference to "larger structures". I observed the silencing, disciplinary affect scale discourse could have on alternatives, situating these co-operative enterprises and their subjects in a subordinate position that was subjected to predetermined processes. A consideration of how a seeming demand for scale (or size) made me feel and its performative characteristics propelled my exploration in Chapter Two.

A lack of "scale" is a common critical response to elaborations of a local economic politics such as those employing Gibson-Graham's diverse economies framework (See Table 1) for cultivating and representing economic difference. Indeed, Gibson-Graham's (2002) response to similar critiques suggests that this kind local economic politics strikes a visceral chord among some scholars and activists on the left who see the local as weak and penetrated while the global is thought to be powerful and penetrating.

The question of scale and the worker co-operative movement and other "alternatives" to the "mainstream" or "larger structures" is part of a wider debate in economic geography described by Healy (2009) between realist and performative epistemological perspectives. Central to this debate, as Healy suggests, are divergent views about whether or not the economy can be categorized under the rubric of "mainstream" and "alternative" in the first place, and the understanding and placement of power and dominance in these categories. From a realist perspective, worker co-operatives appear as a vulnerable alternative up against the competitive pressures of *the* mainstream capitalist economy—their "scale" in size and locality (relative to the mainstream) are both cause and symptom of their vulnerability. In contrast to this vision of an economy made up of the mainstream (capitalist) versus alternative (non capitalist) organizations is Gibson-Graham's diverse economies framework that sets forth a radically heterogeneous economic ontology in which worker co-operatives are just one form of enterprise in a wider

economic landscape that is populated by a diversity of capitalist, alternative capitalist and noncapitalist forms of production, labor and exchange. While power in this vision is not absent, its location is not predetermined. The operative spatial imaginary of the diverse economies framework is concerned with ubiquity rather than scale or hierarchy and power is seen as multiple, co-existent and (also) potentially ubiquitous. From this perspective, the discourse of capitalist economic dominance helps to (re)produce the conditions it purports to describe in part by disallowing or silencing the production of other knowledges (Healy 2009).

Scale is one among quintessential topics in geographic literature on space making. For more than thirty years human geographers have developed, refined and critiqued the concept of scale. From critical realist perspectives (Brenner 2001, 2005; Chapura 2009; 98; Harvey 1968, 88, 98; Herod 2011; Howitt 1998, 2002, 2003; Swyngedouw 1997, 2000, 2004; Smith 1993, 96, 2000, 04—to name just a few) to post structuralist perspectives (Gibson-Graham 2002; Marston 2000, 04; Marston Woodward and Jones 2005; Moore 2008), the conceptual problems with scale have captured geographers' imaginations. Proponents at one end of the debate suggest that human geography would be little without scale (Hoefle 2006) while critics at the other call for the elimination of its use as a disciplinary concept (Marston et al. 2005; Jones, Woodward and Marston 2007). Geographers have raised important questions about the use of the scale frame for understanding (and shaping) geographic phenomena and the consequences of producing knowledge within the confines of a hierarchical spatial imagination. A performative perspective (Gibson-Graham 2002; Law 2004) raises questions about how we might use the scale frame to come up with new understandings and possibilities in the world.

Scale seems like a benign, useful framework as an ordering device we use to talk about the world in categorical terms. However, the reach of the concept “into our heads” (Tuhwia Smith 2005, 23) is deep. Collinge (2006) suggests the deconstruction of the scale frame has metaphysical implications beyond “mere error and point” (246). Chapura (2009) connects a scalar ontology with the metaphysical problem of accounting for (the being of/in) space. For some, deconstructing this category *feels* a bit like slipping through Lewis Carol's rabbit hole where reality is not only less familiar but downright illogical and maybe even chaotic.

A world without scale is no longer the world in which there is *one* right answer, *one* right strategy for transformation—and (for some) that's scary! Take, for example Hoefle's (2006) response to Marston et al in which he calls the questioning of scale's ontological status “simply bogus” in



philosophical terms, suggesting that geographers must be “suicidal” since eliminating scale is akin to eliminating geography’s very reason for existence. Hoefle asserts his disciplinary authority based upon the *size* of the of its territory in the bookstore: “Anthropology” he says, “occupies a full wall and is situated next to Cultural Studies, while a miniscule Geography section is located way back in the specialized stalls...” (2006, 242). He drives his point home by reminding us that there was no geography department “important” enough to accommodate an academic of Harvey’s “stature” (2006, 242).

The thread of anger that I perceived in responses to my research on worker cooperatives, despite their relative theoretical simplicity (scale = size), like Hoefle’s worms it way into more nuanced (peer reviewed) debates to varying degrees. The emotions (anger and anxieties) stirred up in the scale debates suggests that what Chapura (2009) calls “rhetorical baggage” associated with the term “hierarchy” such as its historical association with patriarchy...” is *more than rhetorical*.

My concern with subjectivity and space-making situates co-operative strategies in a provocative relationship with debates in human geography about scale. I embrace this relationship in Chapter One by injecting the scale of the subject into conversations about space making. In Chapter two, I take up the scale debates and their concern with spatial imaginaries of containment, size, power and hierarchy; the global and the local. Chapter two problematizes the subject positions offered by such frameworks in light of empirical research with worker co-operators. Inspired by Law’s (2004) “small and incoherent” global; Tsing’s (2003) ethnography of global friction; Sedgwick’s (2003) concept of texture and motivation; Frueh’s (1996) “erotics of the intellect” that “gives ideas to the body” (118), I follow Moore’s (2008) call to consider scale as a category of practice both my own and that of the co-operators. Consider my practice as a researcher:

The author loves stories that romance away the loveless narratives of popular culture and academic discourse. She believes in the alteration of narrative on behalf of love, in people’s invention of loving stories, which requires leaping into a narrative and making it yours, locating yourself in the world by authoring yourself into it, purging the soul-inseparable-from-the-body of horror as obsession. (Frueh 1996, 19)

The only way I could have my scale and eat it too was to internalize and invert it. This somewhat playful and reflexive internalization of the scale frame enables me to demonstrate specific and important practices in the space-making of co-operative worlds. –And it offers a methodological tool for exploring geographic expressions (read the changing of broad-scale patterns) of motivation and desire in other research contexts, other worlds.

### Alternative Economic Geographies and Co-operative Studies: Chapter 3

Chapter Three takes up challenge of co-operative expansion most directly by looking at co-operative development strategies in a regional context. This chapter speaks to an explosion of interest in “plural,” “diverse” and “social” economies (Mendell 2005, 2008; Moulaert et al. 2005; Leyshon et al. 2003; Gibson-Graham 1996, 2006; OECD 1996). There has been increasing effort to define, understand and expand “social enterprises” as a means of accomplishing social goals through various experiments in production and/or exchange (Amin et al. 2002, Paton 2003, Pearce 2003). Social enterprises occupy one sector under the broader heading of “social economy” which can be understood as the “universe of practices and forms of mobilizing economic resources towards the satisfaction of human needs that belong neither to for-profit enterprises, nor to institutions of the state in the narrow sense” (Moulaert et al. 2005, 2042). Social enterprises are represented by a range of organizational structures including cooperatives, non-profits, voluntary organizations, socially conscious businesses and various kinds of associations (neighborhood, housing, religious). They are variously defined as businesses with a social purpose, non-profits using entrepreneurial or “self-financing” methods (Alter 2004, Paton 2003) or, more broadly, as non-governmental organizations that use market-based approaches to address social issues (Kerlin 2006).

Despite increasing interest in diverse and plural economies, the literature on the social economy too often represents the economic contribution of social enterprises in capitalocentric terms. The “economic” activities of social enterprises are often understood with reference to market participation,<sup>13</sup> which undervalues non-market economic processes. Hence there is much energy focused on developing *profitable* social enterprises. Feminist economists, anthropologists and economic geographers have made it increasingly clear that our economic lives are more diverse than formerly assumed. Yet, “economic” impact/outcome is often solely accounted for by those activities which fit neatly into the categories of a capitalist representation and capitalist economic development strategies. The inadequacy of such representations comes to light when held up to Gibson-Graham’s framework of diverse economies (Table 1 below). The diverse economies framework helps us to recognize and analyze the economic benefit of activities that might otherwise be undervalued in economic terms.

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<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that non-capitalist activities cannot participate in the market.

Table 1. A Diverse Economy\*

| <i>Transactions</i>  | <i>Labor</i>  | <i>Enterprise</i>   |
|--|---|---|
| <b>MARKET</b>  | <b>WAGE</b>   | <b>CAPITALIST</b>   |
| <p><i>ALTERNATIVE MARKET</i></p> <p><i>Sale of public goods</i><br/> <i>Ethical 'fair-trade' markets</i><br/> <i>Local trading systems</i><br/> <i>Alternative currencies</i><br/> <i>Underground market</i><br/> <i>Co-op exchange</i><br/> <i>Barter</i><br/> <i>Informal market</i></p> | <p><i>ALTERNATIVE PAID</i></p> <p><i>Self-employed</i><br/> <i>Cooperative</i><br/> <i>Indentured</i><br/> <i>Reciprocal labor</i><br/> <i>In kind</i><br/> <i>Work for welfare</i></p> | <p><i>ALTERNATIVE CAPITALIST</i></p> <p><i>State enterprise</i><br/> <i>Green capitalist</i><br/> <i>Socially responsible firm</i><br/> <i>Non-profit</i></p> |
| <p><b>NON-MARKET</b></p> <p><i>Household flows</i><br/> <i>Gift giving</i><br/> <i>Indigenous exchange</i><br/> <i>State allocations</i><br/> <i>State appropriations</i><br/> <i>Gleaning</i><br/> <i>Hunting, fishing, gathering</i><br/> <i>Theft, poaching</i></p>                     | <p><b>UNPAID</b></p> <p><i>Housework</i><br/> <i>Family care</i><br/> <i>Neighborhood work</i><br/> <i>Volunteer</i><br/> <i>Self-provisioning labor</i><br/> <i>Slave labor</i></p>    | <p><b>NON-CAPITALIST</b></p> <p><i>Communal</i><br/> <i>Independent</i><br/> <i>Feudal</i><br/> <i>Slave</i></p>  |

\*Note: The figure should be read down the columns, not across the rows. Source: Gibson-Graham (2008, 616).

Canada, the United States and Europe have witnessed simultaneous expansion in social enterprises since the economic recessions of 1980's (Levesque and Mendell 2008, Kerlin 2006) though the character of each nation's social enterprises and the extent to which they are funded or supported by government vary significantly. The effort to define, measure and theorize social enterprises has been most prevalent in the EU, especially in the UK, where a decline in the welfare state has been met with increased government interest and resources directed towards researching and funding social enterprises (see, for example, Kerlin 2006, DTI 2004, Amin et al. 2000). UK efforts to formalize the sector are prominently represented in literature on social enterprise as are Canadian efforts which have arguably surpassed other regions in effectiveness, especially in the province of Quebec which boasts a plethora of institutional support systems that bolster social enterprises and the social economy as a whole (Mendell 2005, 2008). Social enterprises may represent a beacon of hope for the socialization of the economy, but a more critical account (more relevant to Europe and Canada where the 'welfare state' is more prominent) is that they represent an erosion of the welfare state (Mendell 2008, Amin 2002). Similarly in the U.S., some critics suggest that social enterprises denote the privatization of social problems.

According to Kerlin (2006), social/community enterprises are more diverse (in range of mission, function and structure) in the U.S. than they are in the EU—where they typically focus on social services such as housing and child, elder and health care (which, incidentally, may validate some claims that social enterprises are picking up responsibilities formerly allocated to the state). In contrast to the EU and Canada, social and community enterprises in the U.S. are supported foremost by foundations in the private sector rather than by the government. This may be one reason there is growing enthusiasm for developing profitable social enterprises in order to ultimately decrease dependency of non-profits on private (and in some cases public) funds. Consulting firms like Community Wealth Ventures, The Social Enterprise Group and Origo Social Enterprise Partners have sprung up to advise non-profits in the vein of social enterprising that is often large-scale, revenue-generating, market-based ventures.

Profitable social enterprise models in the US are primarily focused on directing surplus ("profit" in capitalist terms) from the production of value generating goods and services to a social mission. Co-operative enterprises are distinct social enterprises in this respect because the stakeholders of the enterprise (its members) appropriate and distribute surplus democratically which is not usually the case in other social enterprise models. The United States Department of

Agriculture defines co-operative enterprise as “user-owned, user-controlled business that distributes benefits on the basis of use” (Deller et al. 2009, 4).

The internationally recognized definition of co-operatives traces its lineage to the Rochdale Pioneers who began an early consumer co-operative in 19<sup>th</sup> century England and developed a set of co-operative values and principles in order to guide it. The principles and values they established have been revisited and revised democratically by the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA)<sup>14</sup> which last agreed upon definition and identity based upon principles and values in 1995.<sup>15</sup> This definition of co-operatives is recognized worldwide, however, for quantitative research purposes, at least for some studies in the United States; it has proven difficult to work with because assessing co-operative identity according to the ICA definition would require looking into the bylaws of individual enterprises (Deller, Hoyt, Hueth and Sundarum-Stukel 2009). In some countries outside the US, quantitative research on co-operatives is facilitated by standard incorporation guidelines and laws.

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<sup>14</sup> “ICA is an independent, non-governmental association which unites, represents and serves co-operatives worldwide. Founded in 1895, ICA has 251 member organizations from 94 countries active in all sectors of the economy. Together these co-operatives represent nearly one billion individuals worldwide.” (<http://www.ica.coop/al-ica/> accessed 06/26/11)

<sup>15</sup> The ICA defines co-operatives as autonomous associations of people united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise ([www.ica.coop](http://www.ica.coop)). The internationally recognized co-operative values are self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, solidarity, honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others. The seven principles, according to the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) are “guidelines by which co-operative enterprises put their values into practice” ([www.ica.coop](http://www.ica.coop)). These co-operative principles are:

- 1) Voluntary and Open Membership
- 2) Democratic Member Control
- 3) Member Economic Participation
- 4) Autonomy and Independence
- 5) Education, Training and Information
- 6) Co-operation among Co-operatives
- 7) Concern for community

Quantitative studies that endeavor to account for the economic impact of co-operatives in the US and Canadian contexts are becoming increasingly prevalent in literature on co-operatives (Deller, Hoyt, Hueth and Sundarum-Sukel 2009; Birchall and Ketilson 2009; Ketilson, Gertler, Fulton, Dobson, Polson 1998). These studies are invaluable for demonstrating the importance of co-operative enterprises and imagining future possibilities for co-operative development. The present work has benefitted from these, as well as ethnographies of worker co-operatives (for examples Ferguson 1991; Jackal 1984); co-operative economic theory (Ellerman, 1995, 2005, 06; Dow 2003); historical, case and other studies (e.g. Curl 2009; Novkovic 2008; Birchall 1994; Gordon Nimbhard 2004; Lawless and Reynolds 2004; Lindenfeld, Korty, and Benello eds 1992). My work is informed by these studies but differs in its performative perspective, qualitative approach; and focus on subjective motivation and co-operative identity.

The coherence of co-operative cultures is fostered by knowledge of the “co-operative difference” and identification with values and principles. We see a strong co-operative identity across sectors in the Basque Region of Spain and Northern Italy where there is a concentrated presence of inter-linked co-operatives along with clear development strategies. In the US context, however, association among co-operatives tends to be based upon sector or industry; co-operatives across sectors are relatively isolated.

Cross-sector isolation diminishes the coherence of co-operative culture and opportunities for interco-operative economic development. The lack of clear co-operative identity, the absence of co-operatives in educational institutions and texts, and the lack of empirical research on co-operative development led by worker co-operatives in the US may be partially due to political culture of the cold war. It may also be partly due to an historic antagonism between the political left and worker co-operatives (Gibson-Graham 2006). Bridging the gap between co-operative sectors, the development of co-operative identity and co-operative-led economic development are the topics of the third chapter of this dissertation “Co-operative Economic Development Strategies: Regional Alliance Building in New England USA”.

In this chapter, the diverse economies framework offers a language which highlights the “co-operative difference” and the importance of structural indetermination. The co-operative values and principles can be understood to have economic value and impact beyond the immediate

financials of co-operative enterprises.<sup>16</sup> These values and principles, typically understood as “non-economic” and therefore invisible within mainstream economic accounting can be shown to have economic value and strengthen individual enterprises and the co-operative economy more broadly.

Chapter three and this dissertation as a whole, brings an interdisciplinary geographic perspective to the literature on co-operatives. It contributes new, empirically-based knowledge on the topic of subjectivity and co-operative economic development strategies; and offers an analysis of “surplus” and subjectivity that is largely lacking in the literature on social enterprises.

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<sup>16</sup> The co-operative values and principles are also important in the management of co-operative enterprises. Novkovic (2008) points to the significance of their managerial function and their capacity to encourage entrepreneurship.

**CHAPTER 1**  
**WORKER CO-OPERATIVES AND SPACES OF POSSIBILITY:**  
**AN INVESTIGATION OF SUBJECT SPACE AT COLLECTIVE COPIES**

Abstract

If we are to understand the organization and growth of capitalist space, should we not also seek to understand the organization and expansion of non-capitalist economic spaces? In contrast to methods employed by theorists such as Harvey, Smith and other geographers focused on capitalist space, the diverse economies framework opens up to investigation such non-capitalist spaces. In this paper, using Gibson-Graham's "politics of possibility," I explore the production of work space and time in a growing worker owned co-operative copy shop in order to gain insight into the organization and growth of co-operative space. I argue that, in this instance, co-operative growth emerges from the transformative experience of workers having a say in their daily work lives, having equal authority to govern work space and time and to appropriate and distribute surplus.

**Keywords:** space, time, co-operatives, diverse economies

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Snap Shot

It's really just important to see that we can do this. There's a myth you need a boss. There's a myth you need management. There's a myth you need the profit motive. . . .these things are just myths. They're proven wrong all the time and we can work together much better without them. (*Adam Trott*<sup>17</sup>, Nov. 2006)

Walking or driving up Pleasant Street towards the University of Massachusetts, Collective Copies is on your left. Even though it looks open and the lights are on, the doors are locked. Collective Copies is having their monthly meeting. Behind the tall storefront windows, thirteen people are

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<sup>17</sup> Italicized names refer to worker owner and former worker owner interviewees. I have a longstanding relationship with some interviewees and according to their request and my personal desire to honor their expertise; some of their real names have been used here while others have chosen to remain anonymous.



seated in a circle looking variously bored, engaged, tired and intent—they may be discussing the financials of their three locations, the purchasing of equipment, or they may be talking about pledging between \$1000 and \$2000 towards the funding of a staff position for the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives (an ongoing topic begun in March, 2009).

Collective Copies offers a range of printing services including digital copying and printing, electronic file handling and creation, business and organizational services, typesetting and design, publications, self service copiers, FedEx and UPS drop boxes, passport photos, course packets, copy write clearances, ‘zines, yearbooks and certificates. If the doors were open and we walked into the main shop, the first thing to catch our eye would be a large display of Equal Exchange (a worker co-operative based in Bridgewater Ma) products—chocolates, teas and coffee. In a small town about 10 miles away from this Amherst location, another Collective Copies branch has a similarly prominent Equal Exchange display with an assortment of other products including peanut and almond butters from Once Again Nut Butter, yarn from Green Mountain Spinnery, a canning set from Mondragon Co-operative Corporation, salves from Co-op 108, cards from Inkworks and seeds from Fedco. What do these products have in common with Collective Copies? They’re all made in worker co-ops and their sale here shows their identity as one among a world-wide network of worker co-operatives.

Collective Copies was born out of a strike against Gnomon Copies in 1982. One of about 400 worker co-operatives in the United States, it has grown from four founding worker owner members to 13 today and from one small second story rental to three locations in the Pioneer Valley of Western Massachusetts: a large storefront rental in Amherst, and two collectively owned buildings, one in Florence and the other in Belchertown. Collective Copies has maintained its non-hierarchical collective structure and consensus-based decision-making process throughout its years of challenge, growth and success.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For more about the “long-standing suspicion [toward] worker co-operatives among political and social analysts on the left,” see J.K. Gibson Graham (2003).

By all measures, this non-capitalist enterprise<sup>19</sup> has been expanding for more than 25 years. The pay and benefits are higher than industry average and, despite a decision-making process that some people consider slow and inefficient, Collective Copies' annual revenue continues to grow, reaching \$1.5 million in 2007 (Trott 2008, 227). Wages are based strictly on seniority.<sup>20</sup> The difference between the lowest and the highest paid can never exceed two to one and the standard, as one member points out, is set to provide home owning-wages for the area. Eleven out of 13 worker owner members are homeowners. All members of Collective Copies have full health coverage including medical, dental, mental and preventative and those members who have partners (same or opposite sex) or children have full coverage for them.

### Introduction

Concepts of space and time as well as spatial and temporal social organization have long been of interest to geographers. Along with other social theorists and physical scientists, geographers' explorations of space and time shape are shaped by our ontological and epistemological lenses. From historical geographic materialist perspectives there has been a longstanding preoccupation with the production of space and time (both conceptual and material) "under capitalism" and the production of capitalist spatial and temporal organization My focus on space and time is partly inspired by the theoretical precedents set by Smith, Harvey and others who have illustrated the capacity of capital to produce *capitalist* space or, as Smith says, the ability of capitalism to achieve "the *production of space* in its own image..." (1984: xiii). Like many before me, I am intrigued by the questions raised by Harvey and Smith, but I explore them from an ontological approach that sees the economy as diverse rather than solely capitalist.

My concern in this paper pivots around questions raised in Harvey's 1990 exploration of the social construction of space and time through the capitalist "mode of production and its characteristic social relations" (418). How would we, Harvey asks, "set out to study the ways in which social space and time get shaped in different historical and geographical contexts?" The answer, he rightly suggests, is tied to the "explicit character of our ontological and

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<sup>19</sup> Following the Marxian tradition of Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff (2000), I define capitalist workplace as one in which waged laborers produce surplus that is appropriated and distributed by non-producers (a sole proprietor, board of directors).

<sup>20</sup> Turner (1999) found that the lowest paid worker at Collective Copies made more than the manager of a capitalist shop of similar size.

epistemological commitments” (422). Harvey’s critical realist epistemology, his ontological commitment to a world increasingly structured by capitalism leads him and many geographers to explore space and time *under* capitalism.<sup>21</sup> This commitment and the power of the analysis shaped by it have had the performative effect of shaping valuable research agendas and political strategies in geography and beyond. However, if we are able to understand the historical spatial-temporal organization of capitalist growth, and this understanding has performative affects, should we not also seek to understand the spatial-temporal organization of *non-capitalist* growth, such as that of worker-owned cooperatives? Can I mobilize the explanatory power of historical geographic materialism with a methodological commitment to a politics of possibility? My research and this paper are, in part, an attempt to answer these questions.

My ontological commitment to diverse economies enables me to see economic processes as diverse rather than dominated by an underlying capitalist structure (see Gibson-Graham 2006, 2008 for more on the diverse economies). This framework along with an epistemological commitment to performative action research shapes my approach to the concepts of space and time by encouraging me to *see* and represent difference in the economic spaces. Examining the production of co-operative work space, I draw on Lefebvre’s (1974) work on the production of space and his commitment to “what is possible?” the positive side of which calls for demonstrations of “the breadth and magnificence of the *possibilities* which are opening out for man [sic]...” (Lefebvre 1947: 229, 234). In the tradition of Gibson-Graham who address the issue of economic subjectivity as a problematic yet fruitful space for economic “becoming”, my interest in this paper is on co-operative subjects. How are non-capitalist subjects producing their work spaces and how, in this process, are they reproducing themselves, and their co-operative culture in the face of capitalist cultural dominance? I take cues from Harvey who, following Marx, elaborates a “theory of body formation under capitalism” (1998: 401); however, my focus is on body and subject formation in co-operative rather than capitalist production processes. I touch upon the orientation of objects in a place, and then shift to “spaces” of personal, political and economic possibility as they open up through governance, surplus distribution and growth.

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<sup>21</sup> Peck (1996, 2002), Gough (2003), and Herod (1994, 95, 97, 2001) offer important analyses of the organization of capitalist labor processes; they share what Mehta (2008) following Heidegger, might call an ontic approach built upon the ontological commitments suggested by Harvey in this passage. In contrast my inquiry shares an ontic approach built upon the ontological ground of economic diversity.

My discussion is based upon three years of ethnographic research with Collective Copies and the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives including participant observation at monthly meetings, conferences and forums and 20 tape-recorded interviews.<sup>22</sup> The next section of the paper begins with a foray into the theoretical space of economy and subjects opened up by Gibson-Graham. Section three explores the production and management of work and subject spaces. I examine how the production of work space in matters of the shop floor, and subject space, in terms of feelings and communication, differs *in place* between a worker owned cooperative and a capitalist copy shop of similar size. In contrast to Harvey's (1998) treatment of the body as an accumulation strategy in constituting capitalist subjects, section four explores governance as a constitutive space of co-operative subjects by looking at ethical decision making around surplus distribution and growth. In the concluding section, I argue that co-operative growth, rather than expressing an inherent logic of expansion, is an outcome of subjective experiences and desires. I suggest that the spaces of governance surplus and growth are integral properties in the "emergence" of co-operative space.

#### Theoretical Space

This paper is born out of the theoretical space opened up by Gibson-Graham's feminist critique of political economy that deconstructs the discursive dominance of capitalism in order to open up a space of economic difference. Rather than defining everything with reference to capitalism, including and especially space (a tendency they call "capitalocentrism"), Gibson-Graham offer the language of a diverse economy in which non-capitalist transactions, labor and enterprises are differentiated and located alongside (rather than within) capitalism.<sup>23</sup> Because capitalocentric research agendas have resulted in the theoretical tendency to dismiss and discourage research on

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<sup>22</sup> Interviews and participant observation were conducted between 2006 and 2009. Ten interviews were with members of Collective Copies. My relationship with the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives involves political action research, a collaborative book project, development of a certificate program at the Department of Economics at the University of Massachusetts and co-presenting at conferences and in university classrooms. These collaborations seek to represent the movement to itself and to the world in order to cultivate and support the movement of worker co-operatives.

<sup>23</sup> Also see Daly (1991) on "The discursive construction of economic space: logics of organization and disorganization".

noncapitalist economic activity, Gibson-Graham stress the importance of *stance*. Kosofsky Sedgwick (2006) suggests that our trained, discerning academic stance, with its desire for prediction and explanatory power, for judging rather than exploring, has taken on a “paranoid” character that reduces the complexity of representation and negates the capacity of theory to nurture experiments. To mitigate this tendency, Kosofsky Sedgwick (2006) advocates “weak theory” and Gibson-Graham suggest cultivating an “open, concerned and connected stance and a readiness to explore rather than judge” in order to give experiments “room to move and grow” (2008: 620).

Non-capitalist and alternative capitalist labor, transactions and enterprises are increasingly being studied and theorized from the perspective of the diverse economies framework (see e.g., Amin 2009; Gibson-Graham 2006, 2008; Healy 2009; Leyshon et al. 2003; Roelvink & Gibson-Graham 2009; St Martin 2007). Alongside other geographers doing diverse/community economies research, I aim to employ Gibson-Graham’s “techniques for thinking” (2008: 620). For Gibson-Graham, ontological reframing *to produce the ground of possibility* involves demonstrating the epistemological production of phenomena that are commonly considered structurally given. This technique of thinking encourages us to move away from knowing the economy as *essentially* capitalist in order to deny the forces of (economic) domination their assumed fundamentality or universal reality “and instead to identify them as contingent outcomes of ethical decisions, political projects, and sedimented localized practices continually pushed and pulled by other determinations” (Gibson-Graham 2006: xxxi). Gibson-Graham also suggest re-reading *to uncover or excavate the possible*, a strategy that entails, “reading for difference rather than dominance” in order to “bring into visibility the great variety of noncapitalist practices that languish on the margins of economic representation” (Gibson-Graham 2006: xxxii).

*A Postcapitalist Politics* (Gibson-Graham 2006) and a symposium on “Subjects of Economy” published in *Rethinking Marxism* in 2006 provide the theoretical framing for my focus on spatial subjects. Rather than theorizing the subject as fully subjected, Gibson-Graham (2006: 25), Butler and Connolly (1999) look for openings in the subject as a political space of becoming. By theorizing the becoming (Butler 1997), ambiguous (Connolly 1999) or negative (in the Lacanian sense) qualities of the subject, Gibson-Graham, Butler, Connolly and the authors of the “Subjects of Economy” symposium clear out a “breathing space” for new performances of economy through subjective energies of caring, social concern and collectivity (Gibson-Graham 2006:

51).<sup>24</sup> Along with the above-mentioned authors, in this theoretical space, I seek insight into the production of co-operative subjectivity in one enterprise, and in the movement in which it plays a role.

### Work Space / Subject Space

#### Capitalist ownership of enterprise space and worker time

Harvey suggests that we need to “penetrate the veil of fetishisms” particularly by learning “how space and time get defined by these material processes which give us our daily bread” (1990: 423) so I first turn to the spatio-temporal production of material work space.<sup>25</sup> As Blomley (2003) and Gregson and Rose (2000) among others remind us, both property and space are reproduced through symbolic, practical, material and corporeal enactments. Enacted and produced through stories and disciplined practices, behaviors and performances, our concepts of and behavior in work spaces condition and are conditioned by the way we understand ownership of that space.

In capitalist businesses, workers' movements in physical space are controlled by the employer's rental of work time or labor hours based on the employment contract. David Ellerman ties capitalist ownership to the concept of ownership from the Middle Ages during which time ownership of the land went hand in hand with rulership: “the governance of people living on land was taken as an attribute of the ownership of that land” (2005: 450). According to Ellerman, rulers of medieval land were neither representatives nor delegates of the people who lived on it (that would have been an “outlandish” idea) and this mentality has carried through to modern day capitalist corporations where “[t]he only people who are under the authority of the owners and their agents are the ones who work their property, the employees of the corporation” (2005: 451).

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<sup>24</sup> Byrne and Healy draw upon poststructuralist Marxian theory and Lacanian psychoanalytical thought to highlight practices in co-operative firms that encourage a relationship to the economy that derives “satisfaction from engaging with the various antagonisms, conflicts, and contingencies that attend the co-operative and its relationship with the community in which it is constituted.”(2006: 249).

<sup>25</sup> An in-depth examination of labor geography lies beyond the scope of this paper. Please see Rutherford (2010) for a summary and critique of labor geography and Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2010) for more on labor agency.

In democratic revolutions of preceding centuries, Ellerman says, “‘Rulership’ was taken out of the ‘ownership’—except in the [capitalist] corporation” (2005: 451) or sole proprietorship.

Since there is no way to separate labor time from the laboring body, the worker’s movements in a capitalist space tend to be subjected to hierarchical authority. As Harvey notes “Marx often fixed this [class] relation in terms of property rights over the means of production (including, in the laborers’ case, property rights to his or her own body)” (1998: 405).<sup>26</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich’s journalistic account of working for low wages in Minnesota illustrates Ellerman and Harvey’s Marxian arguments. Much of Ehrenreich’s time in Minnesota was sold to Walmart where she and her fellow employees were repeatedly warned that “time theft is doing anything other than working on company time, anything at all” (2001: 189). This in effect reduced her to thieving because the *time* for which workers are paid belongs to the employer and their movements and activities in *space* must be those for which they are hired (no one is hired or, as Ellerman might say, “rented” to go to the bathroom or use the telephone). The governance of Ehrenreich’s labor time and space at Wal-Mart was out of her control—her bosses set her erratic schedule, the boundaries of her work section (women’s undergarments, for example), the pace of her work, and her breaks (when, where and for how long), all of which are policed by surveillance cameras and management.

The legal authority over the workers is not based on the ownership of assets but the ownership of the employees’ labor which was purchased in the employment contract.

Thus changing corporate governance is not just about changing the bundle of rights involved in asset ownership. It is about the employment contract. (Ellerman 2005: 452)

The employment contract that legitimates subjection to authority over workers’ time and thus their movements in space is notably absent from a worker-owned business and from this absence a world of different economic relations, subjectivities and possibilities are born.

#### Worker-ownership of space and time

In contrast to the employee in a capitalist firm, the worker-owner occupies and produces the work space as both owner and manager of her thinking, moving, laboring body. In their pre-collective lives many workers experienced the spatial and temporal constraints on their bodily movements based on particular ways of “representing space and time” (Harvey 1990: 419) that justified the

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<sup>26</sup> The distinction between the ownership of labor (slavery) versus the ownership of labor power (free labor) is blurred in a debate over the rental of time.

rental of employee time. Working for Collective Copies, members cherish the temporal-spatial freedom they find in not having rented their time to a higher authority. Perhaps because, as Harvey suggests, “concepts of space and time and the practices associated with them are far from socially neutral in human affairs” (1990: 424), nearly every Collective Copies member that I interviewed cited control of their time as an invaluable aspect of working in the co-operative. They appreciate being able to take little breaks to compose themselves in a moment of crisis, to get a check cashed or pick up the kids when they need to and they don’t think this is something they would be able to do at a “regular” copy shop. As Wright commented:

Tom had been fired... from a competing copy shop, for taking his infant daughter to the doctor during some meeting... Today Tom had to pick up his kid; he left, went and picked up his kid. It’s like you do what you need to do. You live your life. (*Wright*, Nov. 2006)

The management/governance of time and space at Collective Copies extends beyond emergency breaks from the floor. Nicole Wright makes the schedule but she gives everyone “exactly what they want” and expects people to volunteer for what hasn’t been covered: “I write *please fill* and expect everyone to work it out among themselves” (*Wright*, Nov. 2006). Sometimes that means sacrificing your favorite shifts for a while in order to support co-worker-owners and/or so you can have what you want or need in the future. For example, one worker gave up his favorite schedule while his co-worker’s wife was in nursing school but he was able to take an extended leave of absence later on. Collective members also schedule leave time. They can negotiate a “sabbatical” (a year off for a personal project) without losing their job and vacation time beyond their paid allotment. Rather than being governed by mandated constraints, however, the workers’ temporal-spatial work lives are negotiated with each other.<sup>27</sup> We could understand this space of temporal and spatial collective negotiation as a “momentary opening for the expression of a different subjectivity based on an ethic of care for the other” (Gibson-Graham 2006: 32).

At Collective Copies, the organization of objects in space is similarly not orchestrated by one owner or manager. Without my asking, one collective member brought up the difference between the layout of Collective Copies and that of a local capitalist copy shop of similar size: “The designers are physically above and away from the production workers and there’s probably another office away from that for the [owner]... sort of a top-down flow of work... (*Wetmore*,

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<sup>27</sup> Like many negotiations, this is not always easily or expertly accomplished. Unequal workloads can build work-place tensions.



March 2008). The layout of Collective Copies is flat—just like the management structure. Wetmore is a tentative supporter of worker-ownership; he's not convinced it could work everywhere but one of his best moments, he said, was when they “accomplished this very stressful and very disruptive change of orientation of the shop.”

... It wasn't a magical feeling but it was hard work and everyone pulled together and we got it done at the time when we thought we would and it felt like a big useful change... immediately we were feeling better about how we were relating to customers and better about how we were relating to each other. (*Wetmore*, March 2008)

We can read this collective definition of space as shaping and being shaped by the “material processes” that give members their “daily bread” (Harvey 1990: 423) as well as a moment in the (re)production of a co-operative subjectivity where Wetmore and his coworkers' actions produced both material and emotional changes in their workplace and relationships.

Freed from the “employment contract,” worker owners jointly own the space itself, the products produced in that space and the surplus that is realized when those products are sold. These multiple spheres of ownership at Collective Copies beginning with the worker-owned versus employer-rented working body not only affect the collective production of space materially, in matters of the shop floor and the working body's motions in space but the joint ownership of collective assets, accounting, production and management tasks also invites workers into the space of responsible decision-making. This invitation stands in contrast to capitalist firms in which the right of management to control labor was generally assumed even before the development of scientific management by Taylor who insisted that management would be frustrated “so long as it left to the worker *any* decision about the work.” (Braverman 2003, 35 emphasis added).

### Spaces of Possibility

New spaces of possibility are opened up by collective ownership. I refer to governance, surplus and growth (of the subject, firm and movement) as “spaces” in accordance with Massey's understanding of space. Massey refers to space as a product of interrelations and open processes with the possibility of multiple and heterogeneous trajectories, the political corollary of which “can force into the imagination a fuller recognition of the simultaneous coexistence of others with their own trajectories and their own stories to tell” (2005: 10-11). Following Ranciere (on

political) and Massey (on space), Dikeç, refers to political spaces as those openings that “could possibly become the sites of democratic pronouncements” (2005: 181). Space, says Dikeç does not become political just by virtue of being full of power or competing interests. It becomes political by becoming the place where a wrong can be addressed and equality can be demonstrated. (Dikeç 2005: 177)

In this sense, governance at Collective Copies is a political space because it offers a place to make democratic pronouncements (where a wrong can be addressed) and it cultivates democratic subjects who must step into those spaces to speak and hear their democratic pronouncements. As Byrne and Healy demonstrate, the challenge for co-operators is keeping this space of recognition and decision-making *open* (2006, 250 emphasis mine).

In line with Graham and Amariglio (2006), Dikeç (2005) and Massey’s (1999), emergent conceptions of space, I would like to inject the space of the subject into conversations on geographic space making because it seems to me that the qualitative character of an economic space is constituting and constituted by subjects who participate in producing it for themselves and for others. In the case of Collective Copies, democratic decision-making especially around surplus and growth are co-creating co-operative subjects and political space. The ability to govern co-operatively, and to direct surplus towards growth of the firm or the movement, in other words, constitutes an emergent co-operative subjectivity at the same time as it enables and constitutes co-operative growth.<sup>28</sup>

#### Space of Governance—cultivating democratic subjects

According to the employment contract, as discussed above, the employer, or “capitalist” as Harvey following Marx would say, “has the right to whatever the laborer produces, has the right to direct the work, determine the labor process, and have the free use of the capacity to labor during the hours and at the rate of remuneration stipulated in the contract” (1998, 408). Worker owned co-operatives, in contrast, adopt a variety of governing models—from majority rule to consensus. Larger co-ops often elect representatives to make decisions for the co-operative.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> For Gibson-Graham, transformation begins with the subject, they quote Verela who says: “if you want to change yourself, change your environment. If you want to change the world, change yourself.” (Verela 1992 quoted by Gibson-Graham 2006, xxvii).

<sup>29</sup> For more information on governing structures see Hoover in Allard et al. (2007), and Lindenfeld and Rothschild-Whitt (1982).

Collective Copies makes decisions based on consensus which means 13 people have been heard (in Dikeç's (2005) terms their "democratic pronouncements" have been heard) and their opinions taken into consideration before an agreement is reached and an action moves forward (or not).<sup>30</sup> Inhabiting this democratic space involves challenges and opportunities both for the co-operative and for the individual worker. Worker-owners are challenged to have patience, good communication skills and to be actively engaged in the business and with their co-workers. While these challenges provide opportunity for personal (and inter-personal) growth, the process, workers say, also enables them to make better decisions as a business.

According to Nicole Wright the pressures of "staying competitive in the market and being adaptable" are the same for the co-operative as they are in a capitalist shop but, she says, "when you have 13 people thinking about how to solve problems... we don't get stuck as you might as a single owner" (Nov. 2006). For Wright, the process of consensus-based decision-making means making *better* decisions; it also means that she never leaves "feeling like, things were unfair." She says, "I leave feeling like, for whatever reason, a different decision was made [but] I never feel like someone's controlling my life" (Wright, Nov. 2006). At Collective Copies the fairness of the governing process resides in the ability (and place/space) to express one's opinions as much as it does the obligation to listen to those of others (who may or may not agree). In contrast, the owner or manager(s) of a capitalist shop often has exclusive control over most decisions made in/about their business/work space. For example, of her solely owned copy shop, Lauren Olsen says, "I get my way all the time here" (Nov. 2006).<sup>31</sup>

While having a say in the governing process may, as Wright suggests, lead to better decisions, it also takes time and it can be frustrating to expose your feelings, ideas and passions to the group, especially when co-worker owners challenge them. Although consensus has been "one of the biggest learning experiences" in Randy Zucco's collective life, the pace of progress that depends

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<sup>30</sup> Members of Collective Copies more accurately call themselves *consensus-seeking* because they move forward with an abstention.

<sup>31</sup> The scope of this paper and its focus on *co-operative* space prevent me from further addressing subjectivity and identifications of capitalist space. For more on capitalist subjects, structures and workplaces see: Braverman 2003; Gough 2003; Herod 2001; and Peck 1996.

upon thirteen people's opinions can be frustrating for him, especially when the motion brought to the group is one of his ideas:

I can have an idea that I think is the greatest thing in the world, you know, and *everybody* should understand this [laughing] and agree with me [laughing] and I can bring it, put it on the agenda, bring a great proposal and it can be shot down overwhelmingly! You know? And that's been one of the hardest things for me... (Zucco, Nov. 2006)

Despite the slowness sometimes entailed in the process of consensus and occasionally having your ideas "shot down," (or, as the case may be, shooting down a co-worker's idea) Zucco says, "I favor it, yeah, no matter what. I don't think any other way works. It's just amazing, to see everybody have a voice and everybody participate—I think that for me is the greatest thing" (Zucco, Nov. 2006).

With 13 participating voices, communication is the key to successful decision-making and maintaining good will among members. While worker-owners would say they're "not experts," meetings among worker-owners are described by outsiders as extremely efficient.<sup>32</sup> The ability to communicate one's ideas, feelings and opinions is aided by meeting a structure (having an agenda, facilitator, note-taker and timer) but on a personal level (on a daily basis as well as during meetings) learning to communicate is an ongoing process for most of the worker-owners:

For me it's like... my feelings of what's equal and what's right, as a person, really come to the fore often. That muscle gets used. So that ability to communicate what I feel and what I think is right is used all day long and I've been able to learn a little bit, with some patience, about how to communicate, uh [little laugh], *better*. (Trott, Nov. 2006)

Communication is linked to the security enjoyed at Collective Copies because worker-owners are members "for better or worse." When you have a say in the major decisions affecting your workplace and livelihood, even in hard economic times, it's nearly impossible to get fired or "downsized." According to Strimer, who has been a worker-owner for 36 years, worker-owners are much more secure because "you have a full say in what you do". It's important he says, for a worker-co-op to "stay on top of the financials ...so if the numbers are declining we have a chance

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<sup>32</sup> Efficiency and meeting cultures vary among co-operatives yet 75 worker-owners representing their various co-operatives in New Orleans at the 2<sup>nd</sup> biannual conference for workplace democracy elected representatives, heard updates, made comments and voted on several resolutions within two and a half hours.

to make mid-course corrections and we'll absorb it as a whole group rather than [firing] any one person." (Nov. 2006)

In part because it's nearly impossible to get fired, a sense of equality and security surfaces on the flip side of the vulnerability involved with exposing/sharing and communicating your feelings in the process of reaching consensus. For Zucco,

[i]t's the only fair way of doing it. I think anybody who's got the power to make the decision on whether or not to fire you, hire you, to pay you less, to hold back your wages, to do anything like that doesn't fly with me. So I don't see any other model other than the collective model. (Zucco, Nov. 2006)

For many worker-owners, taking on the collective responsibility of governance has been a process of personal growth:

On a broader, more personal level, I feel like it's made me grow up... Because working at a collective you have to deal with human beings. You can't avoid 'em; you can't silently scorn; you have to talk. You have to work things out with your co-workers cause they're not getting fired. It's definitely changed my life. (Zucco, Nov. 2006)

In the language of Gibson-Graham we could call this transformative experience a process of resubjectivation—the cultivation of democratic subjectivities—or the emergence of co-operative subjects. I am particularly interested in this emergence (and how it happens) because these co-operative “subjects” are not only sustaining themselves and their own worker co-operative, they are working on regional co-operative development and participating in co-op networks world-wide.

#### Surplus distribution—growing co-operative subjectivity

Among the major decisions made by consensus at Collective Copies are those involving the appropriation and distribution of surplus. By *surplus* I am referring to the difference between the value of the commodity or service and the costs of its production (including wages and benefits to the workers). From a Marxian perspective, the value that is realized through the exchange process, which is above and beyond the cost of inputs and what is necessary to reproduce the workers at a cultural norm (necessary labor), is produced by *surplus labor*. While most co-op members do not conceptualize their labor in terms of necessary and surplus labor, the distinction between the two is a useful accounting mechanism with which to measure exploitation or to understand the production of surplus value (to understand its origin in unpaid labor).

In a capitalist class process the surplus produced by workers is appropriated as surplus value by the capitalist (or board of directors of a capitalist firm) and distributed by them through a variety of payments (including dividends, salaries and bonuses to managers, interest payments, rents, and taxes as well as payments to the capitalists' accumulation fund). (Community Economies Collective 2001: 25)

At Collective Copies, in contrast to a capitalist shop, the boundary between necessary and surplus labor and the distribution of surplus is visibly and verbally negotiated. It is a process that entails the additional labor of meetings in which (as discussed above) individuals within the group represent their own interests as well as those of the collective business. In a capitalist shop, workers are typically excluded from these decisions, which are made by one or several people. The tensions that these decisions engender are not only less visible but are seldom openly negotiated (with the obvious exception of union-bargaining around necessary labor payments and working conditions).

The Community Economies Collective (2001) differentiates between surplus as property and surplus as potentiality. Citing Mondragón as an example, they suggest that,

appropriated surpluses derived from production constitute a vast reservoir of social wealth—which depending on how it is distributed, has the potential to energize and sustain profoundly different forms of social existence. (Community Economies Collective 2001: 26)

Rather than thinking of the “trauma of exploitation” in a capitalist class process as derived from having something stolen from you (your surplus labor), the CEC rethinks this trauma as derived from being “cut off from the conditions of social possibility that the surplus both enables and represents” (Community Economies Collective 2001: 26). Rather than being cut off from the “conditions of social possibility” enabled by surplus, in what is referred to as a communal class process (see Gibson-Graham and Resnick and Wolff 2001), members of Collective Copies and other worker owned co-operatives are actively engaged in producing, appropriating *and* distributing surplus and, therefore, exploring the possibilities it enables. For them, these processes are moments of connection rather than alienation.

Collective Copies' bylaws provide the basic framework for the distribution of surplus but the boundary between necessary and surplus labor varies according to costs of production including wages and benefits, which are rates that must be continually negotiated. Despite critics' suggestion that self-interest will be the downfall of worker co-operatives (Webb and Webb 1907, 1921; Gibson-Graham 2006 ch. 5: 101-26), members often make decisions that increase costs and thus shrink the size of surplus.

If we cared about making as much money as we possibility could, we could all probably make \$20,000 a year more each, I bet. If we stopped using all recycled paper, if we paid only half of our health insurance like everybody else, if we didn't give ourselves long-term disability insurance, if we stopped contributing ten percent of our profits to the community. (*Zucco*, Nov. 2006)

The decision to provide healthcare as a cost of production (covered by what we could call necessary labor), for example, stands in contrast to what Olsen decided for her capitalist business. Since Olsen had also been a member of Collective Copies before leaving to open her own shop in a near-by town, I asked if the pay and benefits at her shop were comparable to those of Collective Copies when she worked there. "Um..." she said, pausing and looking at the ceiling:

Ehhhhh, very close. Maybe not exact. We had our health care paid for entirely. Sometimes I pay for peoples' health care entirely, sometimes it's more of a fifty-fifty thing... Um, and there are probably some benefits that aren't as good as we did. And, on the other hand, you know they don't have the same responsibilities. You know, in a collective, you're all owners... (*Olsen*, Nov. 2006)

A sole proprietor has the power to appropriate the surplus produced by her workers and decide where it should go (into her bank account, into the business, into her children's college funds, for example).<sup>33</sup> CEC authors suggest that the exclusion from decisions about the surplus (that the workers produce and) that sustains the larger society may facilitate one's constitution "as an 'individual' bereft of a possible community and communal subjectivity" (2001, 26). This exclusion from the opportunity to distribute surplus might also be part of what Harvey, following Marx, might call "the nexus of alienation." (1998: 408).

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<sup>33</sup> Surplus distributions made by sole proprietors such as community donations and/or bonuses to workers reduce personal profit gain. The above mentioned sole proprietor, for example, is known to the local community as a generous business person who supports non-profits and community groups. The difference I am highlighting is the *process of participation* in the space of decision-making.

In contrast to employees in a capitalist firm, worker-owners' direct say in the appropriation and distribution of surplus cultivates a connection and mutual support (rather than alienation) among members and the communities in which they live. Not only do members refer to each other as family, they attribute their start up and success to the local community that has supported them from the beginning. The sale of pre-paid copy credits enabled founding members to raise start-up capital. These community connections are made stronger by the collective's commitment to donate ten percent of their surplus to the community. While members have various feelings invested in the donation process, all of them are proud of their donations, which come to around \$15,000 (in cash and copies) per year. The members' causes vary as much as their interests do so the donation process is ever-evolving. There have been donations to everything from animal shelters, soccer teams and penguin rescue to the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives and the Argentina Autonomist movement. The ability to return surplus to the community is in itself an expansive moment for the co-operative subject but surplus also represents a driving opportunity for the co-operative movement. Currently five percent is invested in regional development of worker co-operatives.

For Stephen Roy, a 25 year founding member, retirement is right around the corner. He sees the collective as a community resource, beyond the donation process, by providing good jobs long after the current worker-owners have left.

...the way it looks now is that you know, if there's still a Collective Copies after all of us are dead or retired or gone, the buildings will still belong to Collective Copies. So it's sort of a, it *is* a bit of a legacy. (Roy, March 08)

In contrast, the owner of a nearby capitalist shop looks forward to extracting her equity:

...it's really just about, you know, that I own this, some of this equipment. I can sell this equipment; I can sell the name, you know. If I opted not to do this anymore, I could get something out of this—so from that angle, I am more secure. (*Olsen*, Nov 2006)

#### Growth—co-operative subjects expanding the firm

Unlike capitalist expansion that is typically understood as a logical accumulation driven by the need to secure market share and higher returns, co-operative expansion is informed by a mixture of motivations and is the outcome of workers' decisions. While both enterprise models share some incentives and disincentives for expansion, contrary to the capitalist model in which more workers produce more surplus to be appropriated by the sole proprietor or shareholders, the co-



operative model redistributes surplus to the workers who produce it. So, barring other incentives, individual worker owners have little to gain financially by adding additional worker-owners or another business (or location). This (re)distribution of gains is often understood as a disincentive for co-operative growth and accounting for it is key to co-operative development. The development strategies practiced by worker (and consumer) co-operatives in Northern Italy, the Mondragon Co-operative Complex in Spain, the Arizmendi co-operative development model in California, Evergreen co-operative development in Ohio and the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives are addressing this “disincentive” directly. They marshal surplus produced by individual co-operative businesses towards the goals of development and education. These strategies are exciting and I touch upon them in the following section, however, in line with this paper’s focus on co-operative subjectivity, the curiosity this section addresses is the fact that Collective Copies members decided to grow despite the absence of a profit motive. Long term benefits and risks aside,<sup>34</sup> expanding Collective Copies to two new locations entailed the extra labor of proposals and projections, renovations on two buildings, and hiring and training new workers, all at the cost of profit sharing during the first year (or more) when the start up is slow. Considering the pride that members take in donations, an understandable desire to maximize the size of profit share, and more work for the same or even less pay, how did how did members agree to purchase two buildings and expand to three locations?

Among worker-owners at Collective Copies, there exists a subculture that is unofficially called the “rule the world committee” (Roy, March 2008). In reference to a proposal to purchase another building and open up a third shop, founding member Stephen Roy explains:

...there was and probably still is *ex officio* a “rule the world committee” [laughing] at Collective Copies...

Me: Is this a formal committee?

No, it’s ad hoc... I think the driving principle is to really promote worker-ownership by example. So by expanding, we promote worker-ownership by example. So, members of the collective had been talking for quite a while after the Florence store took off about opening another location. (Roy, March 2008)

This subculture’s unofficial membership changes over time but it consists of those collective members we would consider co-op activists or co-oppreneurs. For most members, the transition

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<sup>34</sup> These would be similar to other enterprise ventures—economies of scale, flexibility, market share, joint marketing—which certainly played a role in the group’s decision to expand.

from when “work was just a job” to becoming a worker-owner has been a transformative one but for those who have become worker co-op activists, this transformation seems especially profound.

Randy Zucco had no idea what worker ownership was before coming to Collective Copies 11 years ago. He discovered Collective Copies and worker-ownership when he answered an ad from a newspaper: “I found out because I came to the interview and there were [eyes wide, eyebrows raised] eleven people in the room interviewing me!” (*Zucco*, Nov. 2006). Though he said it took three years to actually feel like a worker-owner, he is now a worker co-op activist.

Zucco and other co-opreneurs articulate a marked difference between their activism (or idealism) before working in a collective compared to their activism during their lives as worker owners which often entailed a greater sense of fulfillment:

When I started at Collective Copies... I had ideas about how the world was unjust. And I was definitely unhappy with the economic system. I knew it was inherently flawed [laughing]. So, I think in a philosophical way, it helped transform that idea into a concrete solution. Like when I go to work, it’s like I feel like I’m helping change the world... I am part of the solution when I go to work. (*Zucco*, Nov. 2006)

Being “part of the solution” when they go to work, in some cases, means harmonizing activist ideals with their daily lives:

It’s like being a worker owner you get to realize more of yourself. The thing that I get to do in my life is to try and put some of the principles that I really feel are important to work, at work... (*Trott*, Nov. 2006)

For many of us, earning a living has come to be almost synonymous with earning a wage (and being or having a boss) but most worker-co-operators can no longer imagine working in a traditional capitalist business. Members derive a sense of pride in working for themselves and some worker-co-op activism is motivated by how it feels to be a worker-owner compared to how it felt to be a wage earner:

In terms of your spirit, it’s definitely more liberating to be a member of a worker co-operative [than a wage earner] for your ability to have a say in what you do all day long... so is it worth the extra stress of being a worker owner? It’s worth it so many times over that I can’t even imagine working that way anymore. (*Strimer*, Nov 2006)

By growing itself as a business, Collective Copies has self-consciously created more co-operative space (and co-operative subject positions) in order to set an example and be able to invite more workers into the circle of worker ownership. One story that members love to recount is that of Ann St. Jean who had been working at Staples (the dominant North American office supply chain) for ten years and was a manager there when two members of Collective Copies' hiring committee came through her checkout line and asked if she might want to come in for an interview. At the time she was not looking for a job and she "had no idea" what Collective Copies was all about but 8 years into her co-operative career she said,

...it's just really opened my eyes... I don't think I had the dedication to my day job when I worked for Staples. ... Here we're in the same boat and we're all working at it together—for each other—not for people you don't even know up in the corporate world. So that makes a lot of sense that I'd never thought of before so that changed my life in that respect. (*St Jean*, May 2008)

#### Growth—co-operative subjects and firms growing the movement

At Collective Copies the space of collective decision-making cultivates subjects committed to maintaining their own co-operative and reaching out to participate in the wider worker co-operative movement. There are 11 worker co-operatives in the Connecticut River Valley of Western Massachusetts and Southern Vermont and workers at Collective Copies have been instrumental in organizing these co-operatives into Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives (VAWC).<sup>35</sup> VAWC began as an informal meeting of several worker owners in someone's kitchen and evolved into a formal relationship of businesses with combined estimated revenue of \$6.75 million and growing (Project Report to VAWC Monthly Member Meeting, Oct. 2009). VAWC's democratically governed monthly meetings are a nurturing space for co-operative culture; they are an opportunity for worker owners from different co-operatives to connect and share their experiences, problems, resources and opportunities with each other. Together these 11 co-operative businesses are building the culture of co-operation in the Valley by skill sharing, joint marketing, inter-VAWC purchasing, mentoring newer co-operatives and promoting co-operatives in the region through education. Following the examples set in other regions of the world, they are building "upon prior historical-geographical achievements" (Harvey 1998: 414).

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<sup>35</sup> "The Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives is dedicated to building a sustainable local economy by facilitating the growth, development and promotion of worker co-operatives". For more information on VAWC see [www.valleyworker.org](http://www.valleyworker.org).

The story of the birth and expansion VAWC as a federation and its relationship to the US Federation of Worker Co-operatives and other regional and global networks is pivotal (and I explore it elsewhere) but its inception and growth begins with co-operative subjects and businesses like Collective Copies. For example, Erbin Crowell, VAWC's first paid staff person, had his own transformative experience as a longtime member of Equal Exchange (a worker co-operative based in Bridgewater Ma). That is one reason he stepped out of the security he had there to put his "energy toward helping existing co-ops grow and helping new co-ops get started so that more people would have access to what [they] had at Equal Exchange." (*Crowell*, Oct. 2008) He came into the region from outside to work with other worker co-opreneurs who are interfacing with producer and consumer co-operatives to open up dialogue and relationships across sectors.<sup>36</sup> Following the example of co-operatives in Emilia Romagna, he and the staff pilot project committee that includes two members of Collective Copies proposed a dues structure in which member co-operatives contribute 1/8<sup>th</sup> of 1% (inspired by to 4/10 of 1% in Northern Italy) of annual revenue and 5% of surplus to fund VAWC's mission of support, education and development of worker co-operatives.

Collective Copies and VAWC are members of the US Federation of Worker Co-operatives (USFWC), a national organization dedicated to growing worker-co-operatives and democratic work places through co-operative education, advocacy and development.<sup>37</sup> Beyond member dues to the Alliance and Federation, Collective Copies supports these organizations by donating labor time, printed materials, as well as paid leave time so members can participate in workshops, conference calls and attend conferences. Three members took paid leave time to attend the first conference of the USFWC in New York in 2006 and in 2008 Collective Copies used frequent flyer miles and surplus to send six VAWC members, and one researcher to the USFWC conference in New Orleans. This support for the movement of worker-co-operatives (constituted by 13 member voters) demonstrates (1) collective support for co-workers' dreams (not all Collective Copies members are worker-co-op activists but the collective supports the dreams of those who are), (2) a collective desire to build the movement for ethical reasons, (3) a desire and

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<sup>36</sup> Crowell is now the executive director of the Neighboring Food Co-op Association, an association of more than 20 food co-ops in western New England that is collaborating with VAWC in their efforts to develop the co-operative economy in the region.

<sup>37</sup> For more information about the USFWC see <http://www.usworker.coop/about/mission>

need to learn from other co-operatives, to support the culture of co-operation and to foster the growth of inter-co-operation (among other topics, conference workshops address practical issues such as worker accountability, enterprise growth and financing).

Practical skills and business strategies come out of national and regional conferences but resulting friendships, self-recognition and inspiration are equally important for the growth of the movement. Participating in local, regional and national alliances and conferences is a way for worker co-op activists to reaffirm their *co-operative identity* by *seeing themselves* as *part of a broader movement* and accumulating connections and strategies for success:

I have a lot of pride in that, especially after going to the conference. I don't think I realized the magnitude of it until the conference happened so I'm feeling really good about it right now. I think it's the key to social change, you know? (*Wright*, Nov. 2006)

A former elected board member of the United States Federation of Worker Co-operatives (USFWC), Zucco was one of the first worker-owners to represent a worker-co-op from the United States at the CICOPA—The International Organization of Industrial, Artisanal and Service Producer Co-operatives—General Assembly in Oslo, Norway in 2004 which he found similarly inspiring:

That was amazing! Countries from all over the world were there. It was pretty mind blowing to be amongst them—literally: Japan, Italy, South America, Canada, Africa, Europe, Poland—you name it! (*Zucco*, Nov 2006)

### Conclusion

This paper animates a tension between a desire to consider the growth of co-operative space and the danger of generalizing and making claims based upon a case study. However, one thing seems clear: there is a pivotal connection between (what some may call) the small co-operative subject and firm and (what others may call) the large co-operative movement. Champura (2009) notes, “As one's scale of observation (episteme) changes, provided the 'objects' in question are complex systems, one is not merely seeing the linear aggregation of constituent components but, rather, emergent properties with unique ontological qualities” (465). What surfaces in this investigation of subject space at Collective Copies are the co-emergent (and co-constitutive) properties of the co-operative subject, firm and movement. I have called these properties spaces of possibility because they are not things, or immobile structures or logics. Rather they are the *spaces* (ie: open processes with multiple heterogeneous trajectories) of governance, surplus and growth. They

constitute dynamic challenges and opportunities for sustaining and cultivating co-operative cultures and businesses.

In the case of Collective Copies, stepping into these spaces has sparked (and necessitated) personal transformations that cultivate in some members the desire for co-operative growth that has expressed itself in the expansion of their business, as well as participation in regional, national and international federations. Desire, is one quality of “emergence” and in this case, that desire is reinforced by the ability to direct surplus. Moreover, the ability of subjects to use their economic agency to develop themselves interpersonally, sustain (and grow or as the case may be, to shrink) their business and direct surplus (labor and value) to co-operative economic development has fed back or reinforced subjective identification as co-operators.

Certainly Collective Copies and co-operative subjects are small in size but a movement made up of voting subjects emerges from the skills and desires of those voting subjects. While Marx demonstrates “how the laws of motion of capital impinge upon differentially positioned bodies and so transform their internalized subjectivities” (Harvey 1998: 405); the story of Collective Copies and other worker co-operatives demonstrates that co-operative/communal work spaces also cultivate powerful subjective transformations. Collective Copies is one example of how the spaces of governance, surplus and growth opened up by a model of consensus and collective ownership has cultivated a co-operative culture that is so important for the expansion of co-operative space(s). The co-operative production of surplus and the governance of its distribution have opened possibilities for connection and community rather than alienation and exclusion. The expansion of this particular firm and the movement in which it participates is at least partly motivated and enabled by the transformative experience of becoming a democratic subject in the work place. The visibility and recognition of this transformation, as regional and national alliances demonstrate, is affirming, inspiring and enabling co-operative growth from the subject out.

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## Internet Resources

The Community Economies Collective

[www.communityeconomiescollective.org](http://www.communityeconomiescollective.org)

The International Co-operative Alliance

<http://www.ica.co-op/co-op/principles.html>

The United States Federation of Worker Co-operatives

<http://www.usworker.co-op>

The Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives

<http://wiki.valleyworker.org>

## CHAPTER 2

### SUBJECTS OF SCALE: THE VALLEY ALLIANCE OF WORKER CO-OPERATIVES

#### Abstract

Despite critical attention focused on scale, the “scale critique” that most often surfaces with respect to economic alternatives such as worker co-operatives conflates scale with size and size with power, both of which are attributed significance. In this paper I address some of the recent debates on scale in human geography including the call for the elimination of scale in favor of a flat ontology by Marston, Woodward and Jones (2005) and Moore’s (2008) proposal for a research agenda that investigates scale as a category of practice rather than analysis. I suggest that the “scale critique” is one practice of scale that produces size-based parameters as indicators of significance. I explore an alternative practice of the scale frame that (re)personalizes power and significance and disassociates it from size. Following Gibson-Graham (2002, 06), Sedgwick (2003), Law (2004) and Frueh (1996), I invert and internalize the scale frame and introduce a practice of scale that considers significance with respect to motivation and movement.

**Keywords:** Scale, texture, movement, worker co-operatives, power

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#### Introduction

My research on worker co-operatives did not initially concern itself with “scale” until I ran into critiques that were based exclusively on the small size and local extent of the regional movement with which I was working. After I had presented my research on spaces of possibility in Collective Copies (a worker collective in Western Massachusetts) an audience member or colleague would inevitably pull out what I have come to call “the scale critique”. This critique claims that worker co-operatives are a vulnerable alternative up against the competitive pressures of *the* large scale capitalist economy. Their “scale” in size and locality are both cause and symptom of their vulnerability and insignificance.

The “scale critique” is by now a familiar and expected reaction to research elaborating local political strategies (Gibson-Graham 2002, 03; Fickey 2011). In response to this critique of worker co-operatives we can cite examples that demonstrate large employment, extensive reach and capitalization in the co-op sector. There is the Mondragon Co-operative Corporation of Spain and their recent the collaboration with the United Steel Workers, a plethora of co-operative

enterprises in Northern Italy, the recovered factories in Argentina, the Evergreen co-operative development project in Ohio ([www.evergreenco-op.com](http://www.evergreenco-op.com)), the Arizmendi Association of Co-operatives ([www.arizmendi.co-op](http://www.arizmendi.co-op)), the International Alliance of Industrial and Artisanal Co-operatives ([www.cicopa.co-op](http://www.cicopa.co-op)), the U.S. Federation of Worker Co-operatives, the Network of Bay Area Worker Co-operatives and the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives. While these examples might impress some, everyone's scale tipping threshold is unique.

Despite much critical attention focused on scale, the "scale critique" that still most often surfaces with respect to economic alternatives such as worker co-operatives conflates scale with size and size with power, both of which are attributed significance. However, for me the question is not whether the worker co-operative movement *could* get bigger and thus become significant. The question is how and why *are* they (or are they not) scaling up? And what, in this context, does "scaling up" mean? Significance for me is about how and why their strategies including those dealing with power, size and hierarchy are making their lives better. Rather than following the route paved by size and power to "significance", what if we explored how size, power and hierarchy are used in practical strategies for a better world?

This paper advances theoretical reflections on scale that arise from five years of research with the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives (VAWC). VAWC is a collective of co-operatives dedicated to membership support, education and the development of worker co-operatives and the co-operative economy in the Connecticut River Valley of Western Massachusetts and Southern Vermont. With combined gross revenue of approximately seven million dollars, the Alliance is financed by the worker co-operatives themselves. In six short years, they went from a conversation in someone's kitchen to a formal alliance with co-operative strategies and financial commitments to carry them through.

What began for me as an ethnographic study involving participant observation at monthly VAWC meetings, evolved into thirty tape recorded interviews<sup>38</sup>, participation in a collaborative book project and co-operative curriculum development in the Department of Economics at the University of Massachusetts. Throughout this research practice I have kept an awareness of my

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<sup>38</sup> Interviews were conducted by Janelle Cornwell and Michael Johnson. In accordance with the wishes of participant subjects, real names are retained for some subjects; pseudonym names are given for those who preferred to remain anonymous.

own affect and reactions. I have been struck repeatedly by the difference between how critics hold the worker co-operative movement to an expectation and desire for “scale”, how worker owners locate themselves in this spectrum and the effect of these expectations on our individual and collective sense of possibility.

In what follows, I address recent debates on scale in geography including the call for the elimination of scale in favor of a flat ontology by Marston, Woodward and Jones (2005) and Moore’s (2008) proposal for a research agenda that investigates scale as a category of practice rather than analysis. I suggest that the scale critique is one practice of the scale frame that produces size-based parameters as indicators of significance. I explore an alternative practice of the scale frame that (re)personalizes power and significance and dissociates it from size. Following Gibson-Graham (2002, 03, 06), Sedgwick (2003), Law (2004) and Frueh (1996) I invert and internalize the scale frame and introduce a practice of scale that considers significance with respect to motivation and movement.

#### The “scale critique” and the scale debates

While human geographers generally agree that it is a social construction (Chapura 2009; Howitt 2003; Marston 2000, Moore 2008), some suggest that scale is a confusing, if not chaotic (Howitt 2002, 03; Marston et al. 2005), way to understand and categorize socio-spatial phenomena and processes. From critical realist to poststructuralist perspectives (e.g. Brenner 2000, 01; Chapura 2009; Cox 1998; Delaney and Leitner 1997; Gibson-Graham 2002; Herod and Wright 2002; Howitt 1993, 98, 2002, 03; Jonas 1994, 2006; Leitner 2004; Marston 2000, Marston Woodward and Jones 2005; McMaster and Sheppard 2004; Moore 2008; Prytherch 2007; Smith 1882, 93, 2004; Swyngedouw 2004), the conceptual problems with scale have captured geographers’ imaginations.

Problematic features of conceptual scale fall under six main critiques. The first is that it is mistakenly employed as an ontological rather than epistemological category and as a consequence, social processes are often tacitly embedded in geographers’ preconfigured scalar arrangements (Marston, Woodward and Jones 2005, Jones, Woodward and Marston 2007; Moore 2008). Rather than being treated as a way of seeing the world, scale is treated as if it was a thing (or set of things) existing already “out there” in the world. This is problematic because scales become naturalized and thus reified along with the values and processes associated with them. A related problem is that scale categories themselves are often incongruent. Some are defined by

political or legal boundaries (the national, for example) while others have no such clear boundaries (the community or urban scale).

Second, there is confusion between what Marston et al. call vertically stratified scales and horizontally extensive spaces (2005). The vertical perspective sees scales as levels: the higher up you go, the greater your scalar perspective. From a horizontal perspective scale unfolds as “chunks of ground” from a central point. For Marston et al, the difference between vertical and horizontally stratified scales is just a matter of vantage point, whether one is looking down from above (please see Supplemental File: Scale Figure 1) or out from below (see Supplemental File Scale Figure 2). This issue of one’s vantage point as a researcher is compounded by a third problem associated with scale: it sets the researcher above phenomena in the position of a “God’s eye” (Figure 1). This positioning, argue Marston et al. and others, gives the researcher a “methodological leg up” (2005). For Massey (2005) it is not the position above which is problematic but the perspective that distance lends truth. From a God’s eye view, far above the local, a movement such as VAWC may be less visible and (thus) less significant.

Fourth, the scale frame sets up a power-laden containerized spatial imaginary in which space is envisioned as a nested set of matryoshka dolls (Herod and Wright 2002; Moore 2008; also Supplemental File: Scale 1 and 2). In this case, worker co-operatives are doubly contained. First, because they are local, they are contained by greater geographic scales (regional, national, international, global). Second, as alternatives to the capitalist norm, they are imagined to be contained by and subject to global capitalism (which will inevitably dominate).

Fifth, the end points of scale, the global and local, are tied to a host of binary values (Gibson-Graham 2002, 03; Jones Woodward and Marston 2007; Marston et al. 2005; Moore 2008). The global is often associated with power and the local with weakness. Therefore local political strategies are seen as insufficiently up for the task of changing broad-scale patterns. If we consider VAWC and its co-ops local, we might also assume, from this perspective that they are incapable of affecting broader patterns (and thus, insignificant).

The sixth problem with conceptual scale, which is of particular concern in this paper, is the point raised by Moore (2008) that scale is often used as a category of analysis rather than a substantial category of practice.



Recognition that scales are not substantial categories of analysis, but categories of practice, directs our attention to the ways in which scalar narratives, classifications and cognitive schemas *constrain or enable certain ways of seeing, thinking and acting*. It opens up to investigation an array of questions about how scale operates as epistemology shaping what we “know about the world.” (Moore 2008, 214 emphasis added)

If we are to follow Moore’s lead and question how the scale critique is operating as an epistemological shaping of what is known about the world, we find that as a cognitive scheme it is constraining or enabling certain ways of seeing, thinking and acting, its effect is constrictive. It disallows visibility regardless of viability. As an arbiter of significance based upon size, this scale critique (a particular practice of scale) invests in a vision of a homogenous capitalist economy and diminishes or silences the efforts and practices—successful or not—of anything that appears smaller than “the system”. Size fetish and the imaginary of containment—economic experiments like co-operatives being “contained” by “something bigger” (and thus more important) such as larger scales, structures, capitalism—enacts momentary and ongoing containments of possibility.

As I encountered these critiques, I began trying to situate the worker co-operative movement in scalar terms. I noticed that if I applied a hierarchical scalar imaginary, my view was refocused away from the *process* of negotiations and strategies of people in places. It shifted to debatably universal spatial categories. This view erased the texture and distribution of effort, struggle, motivation and movement. For example, at a national “scale”, effort and presence is unevenly spread out over the country; and production of a “national” movement is happening in (local) places. Plus the “power” of this particular movement, is quite literally located in the co-operative subjects themselves and their collaborations, first with each other in their businesses and then with each other among their businesses.

As shown in Supplemental File (Worker Co-operative Alliances and Federations), worker co-operatives in the United States are collaborating locally, regionally and internationally. These federations make the movement more visible and are powerful sites of self-recognition. However, I cannot interpret national and international “levels” as the most powerful sites of this *movement*. Certainly national organizations are extremely powerful in terms of skill sharing, feeling like they are part of something larger, marshalling surplus and potentially accomplishing such things as collective health care, national development funds or even a national lobby. The movement *is* global but it is happening in each one of the co-operators and their co-workers, in each one of the co-operative businesses in each of the meetings through individual votes. Situating the movement

in scalar terms, though exciting, erases difference, struggle and possibility. I could not superimpose this movement onto a scalar imaginary, (in which I included myself as a researcher/author) without losing very important aspects of it.

Marston et al.'s controversial antidote to the conceptual chaos associated with the scale frame is to banish its use as a geographical concept and replace it with a flat ontology. In contrast to Marston et al, Moore's strategy redirects our attention to *how* we use it and to the ways in which spatial hierarchies are produced through *practices*. Of concern for me in this paper are two intertwined practices: my own practice as a researcher and the practices of the worker co-operators with whom I have been conducting research.

My purpose here is to take up Moore's idea and consider scale and its issues as practiced on the ground among scholars and worker co-operators. Considering scale as a category of practice suspends its ontological status, as something that exists already "out there". Instead, scale in this paper is viewed as a conceptual apparatus the existence of which begins in our minds. The focus on practice prompts us to ask how /why ontological presumptions of scalar arrangements come to be prefigured and to explore their effects. As Moore suggests, "... the tendency to partition the social world into hierarchically ordered spatial 'containers' is what we want to explain—not explain things with" (Moore 2008, 212).

#### From viewing to feeling

Regardless of their differences, most scale theories have in common a perceptual reliance on visual imaginaries, experiential distancing that excludes non-visual ways of knowing. In such representations, power and significance can be *seen* (under the guise of size and scale) but rarely theorized as *felt*. Even Marston et al.'s flat ontology (2005) is visually motivated. They write "we lose the beauty of the 'whole thing' when *we downcast our eyes* to the 'dirt and rocks'..." (2005, 427 emphasis added).

The focus on practice, however, suspends our attachment to the idea of scalar "views". Investigating scale as a practice invites the concept into the body where concerns of size, power and hierarchy co-mingle with experience and where experience co-mingles with others. It directs our attention to how issues of power and hierarchy *feel*, how they are negotiated and put to use in practice. Scale is rarely theorized as a property of the subject. As a thought experiment, internalizing the scale frame inverts its categories so that the scale of the subject is the outermost

layer (see Supplemental File: Scale Figure 3). The conceit of the global, in this practice, could be attributed to the subject. Rather than categorically contained, we might imagine subjects as potentially powerful and “containing” and producing world space(s) together with other subjects. A focus on practice invokes what Frueh might call the “terrifying voluptuousness of gravity and time” (1996, 13). It attunes us to texture—how issues of power, hierarchy and size *feel*—and movement—how these feelings shape and motivate our practices with (and without) *others*.

In what follows, I recount briefly the story of VAWC’s birth. Following Moore (2008), I explore how VAWC’s practical engagement with issues of hierarchy, size and power shape and motivate the movement. I then consider a spatial imaginary of containment with respect to power as something emerging from and held together by co-operative subjects.

### Practices of Scale

#### Birth of a movement

The Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives (VAWC) was born out of conversations at the Eastern Conference for Workplace Democracy in New Hampshire in 2005 after which members from three local co-ops began meeting as a way to stay in touch and share information. It has grown from an informal gathering of a few co-operators in a kitchen to the collaboration of eleven worker co-operatives including eight formal members, in the Connecticut River valley of Western Massachusetts and Southern Vermont.

VAWC businesses range in products and services from human-powered trash removal, vegetable delivery, photo voltaic panel installation, book sales, copy services, auto repair and web hosting, to the production of body oils, and wool yarn (see Supplemental File: VAWC Map; and VAWC Businesses and Non-member Allies for a brief description of businesses). From the outside each of these businesses appears to be very similar to “regular” capitalist businesses because they participate in markets selling commodities and services. They also appear to be very different from each other in terms of their markets, commodities and services. However, their common ground presumes something that their capitalist counterparts do not: democratic member control.

VAWC’s current vision draws heavily on the co-operative principles and values agreed upon by the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) in 1995. Like the co-operative principles, VAWC’s formation and ongoing efforts are the result of concerted effort, studying successes and challenges of other models, conducting ethical negotiations among member representatives at

monthly meetings of the Alliance and in the co-operative businesses themselves. As stated in their Member Agreement, they envision

a co-operative economy where one can live an entirely co-operative day: An economy built on workers' self-determination and freedom of action and association; an economy of breadth and depth that puts working people in control of their economic destiny while serving their communities in accordance with the co-operative values and principles.

(VAWC Member Agreement approved 4/28/10)

They are “dedicated to building a sustainable local economy by facilitating the growth, development and promotion of worker co-operatives” which they seek to accomplish by providing **support for members, developing new co-operatives**, and promoting worker co-operatives in the region through **education and outreach**.

VAWC has woven a web of supportive relationships which it counts among its considerable accomplishments. With these relationships they have put themselves on the map by accounting for the economic impact of worker co-operatives in the region; formalizing a membership agreement; funding a staff position; marketing jointly; and co-developing a certificate program in applied co-operative economics at the Department of Economics at the University of Massachusetts. They have organized events highlighting worker ownership, participated in conferences, spoken in classrooms, and contributed to the establishment of a high-risk capital fund overseen by the Co-operative Fund of New England. They are working to integrate the co-operative economy by connecting their web of relationships to consumer and agriculture co-operatives, and are working on a book about the co-operative movement in the Valley. The River Valley Market (a large food co-operative in Northampton Ma) awarded VAWC its Austin Miller award for their “embodiment” of the principle of community support (one of the ICA co-operative principles) and the staff pilot project received the “Co-operator of the Year Award” at the U.S. Federation of Worker Co-operatives.

VAWC’s strength is rooted locally in the workers who co-own the co-operative businesses but its activities through the connections they are making are global in breadth. How did this alliance go from a conversation in a kitchen to a membership agreement among eight worker owned businesses focused on mutual support, co-operative economic development and education strategies with financial commitments to carry them through? How did it “scale up” and what are its practices “of scale”?

Below I consider practical encounters with some of the problems associated with conceptual scale as “practices of scale”. These embodied practices offer what Howitt might call “an unsettling illumination of issues of scale” or the “simultaneity of personal and societal experience” (2002, 310). They are particular practices of coexistence that recognize the problems and possibilities of the self and other through the production of hierarchy, flatness, size, boundary-making and practical imaginaries of “containment” and power.

### Hierarchy

VAWC members, like Allen (2008), pragmatically distinguish the “‘power to’ act with others from the more familiar exercise of ‘power over’ others” (1615). VAWC, like most of its co-op members, makes decisions by consensus.<sup>39</sup> Issues of *hierarchy*, *power* and *size* are inherently rolled into the consensus process. It is a pragmatic rejection of hierarchy in the space of decision-making. There is a presumption of equality among participants; rather than anyone having “power over” others, there is a commitment to individuals achieving “power with” others. And “power with” can be, well, for lack of a better word, powerful!

Consensus decision making though considered inefficient, is a very powerful tool. You learn to communicate with people you learn to communicate about things that you feel really strong about; you learn to be patient about things you don’t really care about and you learn what people want to do; you get a sense of business or the group or the mission. My big lesson was, there’s nothing like a decision that’s made by 13 people who want to do it. Having 13 people (in CC we have 13 members) and having all 13 people supportive in one way or another of a decision is *extremely* powerful, very fulfilling. (Trott 09/06 emphasis original)

Consensus can be a point of friction but with it the movement gains traction.<sup>40</sup> Workers struggle with consensus in their own co-ops because the process can be arduous, frustrating and time-consuming. VAWC provides a formal venue for sharing decision-making strategies (and other

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<sup>39</sup> VAWC, like most of its members are actually “consensus seeking” because the member agreement allows for abstentions and includes a protocol for moving to majority rule when consensus cannot be reached on a particular decision.

<sup>40</sup> My use of the word friction is inspired by Tsing’s (2005) ethnography of global connection which she uses friction as “a metaphorical image” that reminds us of the “importance of interacting in defining movement, cultural form, and agency” (Tsing 2005, 5 and 6).

resources) and supporting each other during difficult times. For example, in times of conflict, when members disagree, there is often a desire to move from consensus to majority rule. Long term co-operators share stories and encourage each other to protect democratic principles. When you are not throwing people out the door, says former co-operator Kevin Cromwell, in times of conflict, “the ideal is to struggle” (8/09). They warn colleagues that slipping in to (formal and informal) hierarchical practices or falling back on majority rule can be divisive. In one meeting Steve Strimer recalled: “Hierarchy killed my last [co-operative] business” he said, “because we had to bring in a higher paid specialist.” (PO 4/26/06).

Resisting hierarchy through consensus-based decision making engenders the collective with the power of each participant’s full commitment. The power of consensus in VAWC is that it embodies the commitment of its 8 co-operative businesses and their members. Important projects, decisions or goals of VAWC (like the member agreement, dues, mission etc) cannot be solely approved by member representatives at VAWC meetings; they are approved within the co-operative businesses themselves. Member representatives bring VAWC documents to their co-workers and bring their co-workers concerns back to VAWC. For example to become a member, all 13 members of Collective Copies had to approve the member agreement and commit dues and surplus to the organization as did the members of Pelham Auto, Co-op 108, the Pedal People, Valley Green Feast, PV2d, Gaiahost Collective and Co-operative Holistic Care (see Supplemental File: VAWC Businesses and Non-member Alliances; and VAWC Map). No one representative made that decision for the other workers of their businesses. These agreements are thus shaped by the multiple scales of individual and collective interest.

Hierarchy in VAWC meetings is “contained” by the facilitator (when s/he does her job well) so everyone’s voice can be heard and no one person dominates dialog. There is little wasted time, attention and content; these resources are put to critical use. Social technologies such as having an agenda (with specific time allotted to each item is agreed upon in advance), a facilitator, time keeper, note-taker, and “circling up” so that each member rep can share their thoughts, contain hierarchy to the facilitator and time keeper. These practices facilitate efficiency in a flat decision-making space. They harness the power of consensus and direct resources so they can be used for the purpose of the movement rather than the aggrandizement of any one individual or co-operative. Thus hierarchy is acknowledged, resisted and put to use in *practice*.

## Size

VAWC and its members face specific challenges and opportunities related to size. These involve practices of governance, growth and development. They are approaching these challenges experimentally, learning from each other and from models used in other parts of the world.

Almost by necessity, VAWC started out “small”. In the beginning, says Sheila Smith of PVD,  
The co-ops themselves just needed a way to be in touch with each other because that had never existed before this. And now that we are in touch with each other, I think we’re starting to figure out, oh, this actually means now that we could expand and divide the labor and get some really interesting things done! (3/08)

Member representatives like Dan Urlu of Gaia Host Collective appreciate the “organic nature” of its growth. He says, it “would be nice to see slow steady growth because that is the way a lot of co-operatives grow is sort of slow and steady and if it’s expanding outward than it’s building a strong base” (Urlu 2/08).

The size of a decision-making group is thought to affect its ability to reach consensus. Effective meeting facilitation minimizes problems but the greater number of participants, the more difficult the process can be. Therefore, a commitment to consensus might constrain an organization’s desire for growth. Despite this, Nicole Wright a member of Collective Copies believes that co-operatives work best when everyone’s voice is in play:

...as people make decisions about their collectives they should always, always keep the power with themselves. They should never give it up and have delegates—no matter how big the place is—you should just be very careful about keeping your voice in play even when it seems like it makes more sense not to. (09/06)

A co-operative enterprise might actually be more powerful for its members and community as a smaller entity. Yet there are also benefits to growth so for some co-ops, the challenge is learning how make the model work for them and their values as the business expands. VAWC’s former staff coordinator Erbin Crowell remembers the challenges they faced at Equal Exchange (a worker co-operative based in Bridgewater Ma) as it grew from eight to 120 members and \$800,000 to \$26 million in sales during his tenure there:

You know, at Equal Exchange we had to make sacrifices that didn’t work for everybody. When we got to a certain scale where you have to make compromises. Does that mean you dispense with the model? I don’t think so. The hard work is to figuring out how to make sure it stays true to its ideals. (Crowell 10/08)

This means learning from other co-operative models and developing innovative governance strategies that facilitate member participation and equality in order keep the business driven by its values.

A growing co-op faces new challenges with respect to “buy in”, “founder’s syndrome” and nurturing the culture of co-operation that encourages member participation. Rapidly growing eight-year old Pioneer Valley Photo Voltaic (PV2d) has been practically engaged with these questions of size: What is a fair membership buy-in when founders worked for 2 years without pay? What if a worker wants to stay on but not become a worker-owner? How do non-voting workers affect the co-operative culture? How do other co-operative models facilitate and prioritize member participation? What is the balance between overextending, growth of the workforce and maintaining the co-operative ideals?

The challenges and opportunities involved with size have inspired some VAWCers, including Crowell and Trott, to study co-operative complexes and development strategies in other parts of the world. As a result, VAWC’s member agreement has been critically shaped by other co-operative experiments such as the co-operative economies of Emilia Romagna, Mondragon and the Arizmendi Association of Co-operatives in California. Inspired by strategies in Northern Italy, VAWC members agreed to set dues at 1/8<sup>th</sup> of one percent of gross revenue (or a minimum of \$500) to pay for staff *and* contribute five percent of surplus to a development fund earmarked for the purpose of expanding current co-operatives or developing new ones.

Worker co-operatives have no “natural” proclivity for growth. Contrary to capitalist models in which more workers produce more surplus to be appropriated by a sole proprietor or shareholders, co-operatives redistribute surplus to the workers who produce it. This redistribution of gains is sometimes understood as a disincentive for co-operative growth. Yet worker co-operatives and the Alliance are growing for multiple reasons including the opportunities presented by size, inter-co-operation and an ethical desire to extend autonomous economic opportunities to others.

Currently the size of each member co-op is disassociated from its voting power in VAWC. According to the member agreement, each member co-operative gets one vote regardless of its size. This decision differs from the strategy adopted by the Network of Bay Area Worker Co-operatives (NoBAWC) in which voting power is tied to the number of workers in each member



co-operative. The member agreement is a living document, however, so if the difference in size of each member co-op grows (for NoBAWC the difference spans three to more than 200 workers) members may want to revisit the question of co-op size and voting power.

The question of size presents opportunities, as well as a number of procedural challenges to the co-operative model that VAWC and its members are exploring experimentally. They are testing the viability of other models and developing their own strategies to grow in the context of their commitment to democratic values and principles through economic self determination.

“Local”, “National” and “Global” a “flattening” of scales

In my account of VAWC’s practices of scale thus far, the reader may find the language of “global”, “national”, and “local” conspicuously absent. While worker owners make overt connections between the word “scale” and “surplus”, during my research, the discourse of scale was not among the most time honored. The bulk of VAWC’s organizing effort is spent in a relatively “local” manner; however VAWCers also participate in and network with regional, national and international organizations of co-operatives.

Adam Trott was immersed in the staff pilot project when I asked where the bulk of his VAWC energy was directed. He said most of his effort was focused locally. He continued,

My angle on VAWC stuff is really focused on VAWC members. But there’s a lot of time spent working with Melissa on the national, working with other local groups like NoBAWC and trying to get the Portland Alliance of Worker Collectives together again. People in NY seem to call every other month... some folks in D.C. want us to come down and do a workshop, Raleigh North Carolina, California... and so, there’s a spread. It’s all about using the resources that we have—the National Co-operative Business Alliance is a resource; the USFWC is a resource, so we try to write little things in the newsletters and emails and say, “hey this is what’s up”. (12/09)

Regional and national conferences are intensive sites of self-recognition, cross-pollination of ideas, and networking of opportunities and resources. For example, at national conferences, co-ops can have conversations about marshaling surplus, local federations, and financing healthcare and they can support each other in dealing with common issues concerning accountability or burnout. Not only are conferences an opportunity for VAWCers to see themselves as a part of a larger movement, they have also been an opportunity for others to see VAWC. The energy of

VAWC at conferences has attracted several collaborators from outside the Valley that have added to the momentum of the Alliance and its projects:

With Erbin and Michael *seeing* that this thing is happening and coming and choosing this stuff as their work, is *huge!* I mean these are *really* great people who came from outside the local *into* it because of what was happening. (Trott 12/09 emphasis original)

VAWC is a member of the U.S. Federation of Worker Co-operatives (a national organization) which is a member of the International Organization of Industrial, Artisanal and Service Producers' Co-operatives (CICOPA, an international organization—please see Table 1 for more detail). Participating in the USFWC and CICOPA could be read as a practice of “scale” but just as VAWC has no power over any one of its member co-operatives, neither the national nor international organization has power over VAWC or its members. By maintaining autonomous co-operative identities as a basic membership requirement, the organization can benefit from what Adam calls “an efficiency of hierarchy” without the national or international levels having any “power over” them. Adam explains,

Melisa Hoover [the current elected director of the USFWC] understands that there's a lot of power that could happen in her position. She's an executive director of a national federation. But she says, “you people have to tell me what to do because if I'm just sitting here making stuff up, it's going to get weird”. (Trott 12/09)

“There is no hierarchy at that level—they have no power over us. It's more like the national becomes supported and informed by our work.” (Trott, personal communication 05/28/11). He sees the national organization as a resource for local co-operatives and regional movements as well as increasing inter-co-operation across distance.

Promotion of regional, national and international co-operative enterprises presents an “uncontained” de-centered concept of local sustainability. Erbin Crowell, former VAWC staff coordinator, now director of the Neighboring Food Co-operative Association, is actively engaged with promoting co-operative enterprises across distances. He challenges the presumption that the local is “good automatically just by consequence of being local” (10/08). He is more concerned with thinking more deeply about what the local could look like in terms of “worker self-determination”, “interconnecting different sectors of the economy” and “building sustainable economic systems” (10/08). In contrast to investor led enterprises, he says, “the co-operative model itself roots businesses in the communities of their members” who can advocate for their communities within the decision-making of their businesses (Crowell 10/08). So a national

enterprise like Organic Valley (a farmer co-operative) or Equal Exchange (a national worker co-op that works internationally with farmer co-ops) “owned, controlled and guided by the people who live in each of those communities and can speak for those communities” is community based but not necessarily local (10/08). The cross sector “Go Co-op” campaign in New England alerts consumers at local food co-ops to both local and beyond-local co-operatively produced goods.

The “global” challenge from a co-operative perspective is to enable people in places to have a say in the economic decisions that affect their lives. It means appreciating multiple spheres of interdependence, enfolding experience and place-based expertise into the decisions that reproduce people and their enterprises. Rather than people and local economies being contained and subjected to global capital, the co-operative model flips that relationship on its head. It allows people to hire and subject capital to the purposes of their needs and communities.

#### VAWC “containing power”

VAWC is not hierarchically “contained” by national and global co-operative alliances nor are the member co-ops “contained” by VAWC. Rather the alliance is *made* by and for its member co-ops. The members themselves hold and direct the collective power of VAWC.

*Containing* voting membership to the worker co-operatives themselves was a way to make sure the group embodied the autonomous voices of individuals in each co-op. Since not all participants in early meetings were co-operative members, however, drawing definitional boundaries required difficult discussions and conflicting feelings about excluding non worker co-operators. While there were benefits to non-worker owners participating in meetings, there were also complications. For example, non-worker owners did not bring with them an understanding of specific challenges and opportunities of worker ownership yet early on, they tended to dominate dialogue. Not having the experience of monthly meetings (as worker owners do) they often failed to respect the etiquette involved with running an efficient meeting. Another issue was that they came with strings attached; they often (unintentionally) pulled the Alliance away from its focus on co-operatives. In one of VAWCs early meetings this tension became clear when two non-worker owners requested VAWC participation and surplus for organizations that were beyond the preview of its provisional mission. Steve Strimer expressed his frustration: “When does this ever end?” he said. “What can we hope to accomplish with [these other organizations]? There are so many people pulling us in all these directions.” (PO 3/24/06).

The co-operative production of the VAWC map brought the power invested in co-operative identity to the fore. Like the *inverted* map of South America that “reminds us of the ways in which habitual conventions (in this case the unquestioned domination of north on top) condition spatial hierarchies and power relations” (Corner 1999; 218), the VAWC map project reminded participants of the kinds of power and conditions of economic democracy they sought to make visible. Should University of Massachusetts student-run businesses be included? How about support organizations? One early participant from the Sirius community (an eco-village in Western Ma) fell into this grey area because the eco-village, while allied in principle, was not a worker co-operative. Would Sirius be on the map? Would Sirius pay dues and get a vote? One worker owner was strongly against it, he pointed out “worker co-ops are about creating jobs—and Sirius isn’t.” (PO 2/22/06). Other VAWC participants expressed their various opinions—which ranged from favoring inclusion to partial membership and a weighted voting structure. The voice that lingered and seemed to sway consensus came from Adam Trott who said, “there is one group for worker owned co-operatives and I think it has to have some integrity as such.” (PO 2/22/6). The map that was drawn included all the worker co-operatives in the Valley but excluded any organization that fell outside of the International Co-operative Alliance’s (ICA) co-operative identity ([www.ica.co-op](http://www.ica.co-op)). Thus the map (see Figure 4) *contains* the conceptual integrity of co-operative principles and values and *makes* them visible. [Figure 4 goes here]

The co-operative governing experience that member representatives bring with them is part of the reason it was important to draw the boundary of membership around co-operative identity. This has had “scalar” consequences in terms of how power is contained and resources directed. Co-operators know how to run a meeting effectively and those who do not, gain this experience in VAWC. The Alliance is thankful to have a host of non-member participants but they do not pay dues or have a vote. Their presence and agenda items are approved by VAWC members; their input is encouraged but member representatives are given priority when speaking time is low. Holding onto this “power” minimizes the diffusion of critical resources like time, attention and surplus.

VAWC’s commitment to self-funding ties its mission to the multiple scales of interest represented by the worker owners’ themselves. This may appear as a limitation since it precludes outside funding (from philanthropists for example) but it enables them to hold onto the principles of co-operation including self determination. Staff time is paid for the co-operatives themselves because they do not want staff time devoted to seeking grants, nor do they want external funding

sources shaping their agenda. VAWC directs external funding to the Co-operative Capital Fund, a high risk capital fund that VAWCers helped to organize with the Co-operative Fund of New England. The decision to self-fund the movement *contains* and directs the power and energy within VAWC and resists being contained by external power.

#### Subjects “containing” / “holding” power

our *mindscape* has to stop believing that one person is marginal. So, okay, we’re moving slowly; we’re only reaching a certain segment of the population right now. That is an interpretive starvation! We just have to get *over* our limitations and work through our limitations and... You know, the Margaret Mead quote: “Never doubt that a small group of dedicated people can change the world. Indeed it’s the only thing that has.” I believe it a hundred percent. So this marginal, this local stuff, this and that has to be on a national scale. It’s like, if you feel like undervaluing *yourself*, that’s a perfect way to go. (Trott 12/09 emphasis original)

Adam’s mindscape and the practices of VAWC, provoke us imagine an experiment in ontological flatness and an inversion of scale in which significance and the qualities of scale are attributed to the subject. Subjects and localities are not just “contained” by greater, more powerful spatial and economic rings. They “contain” or “hold” and produce these spaces together with others.

Worker ownership gives flesh to the idea of flatness, equality and the significance of feelings in the workplace. For Ben Ryan, of Pelham Auto, it is important to be a member of a worker co-operative because, he says, “I want to *have a say* in my working life. I want my *desires addressed*. I don’t like the sort of *power relationship* where someone has *power over* me. I want it to be sort of an *equal step*” (5/09 emphasis added). Resonant with Allen’s (2008) pragmatic account of power, these practices of power are subjective, contingent and manifest experientially through co-operative negotiation of needs and desires.

The subordination of capital to workers’ needs is a significant inversion of power relations in a typical business. Rather than having power over them, capital is hired for the purpose of meeting worker and community needs. Rejecting “power over” necessitates recognizing the *significance* of coworkers’ feelings including those associated with values outside the typical realm of business. While interested in financial solvency, they are not beholden to maximize profit; they can have difficult discussions about “paying themselves less because of a commitment to

something else” (Zucco 09/06). For example they donate ten percent of their surplus to the community; single worker owners in several co-ops agree to smaller patronage dividends to pay for more expensive family healthcare plans to extend care to co-workers’ families; and members of Collective Copies take a pay cut to exercise an environmental ethic by using more costly recycled paper.

The opportunity to hold onto personal values in the context of their working lives has been a powerful experience for some worker owners like Adam Trott whose activism is partly motivated by concern for others who do not have that opportunity:

I don’t want anyone to have to *rent themselves* to live. No one should have to do what someone else tells them to do to make a living. That goes against my beliefs in humanity, my beliefs in what freedom is... And I feel so motivated by that that I can spend a 12 hour day at work and I’ll spend four more on the computer doing VAWC stuff because it’s ridiculous. (Trott 12/09)

However, extending co-operative opportunities to others is just one among motivational impulses for interco-operation. Another, as Erbin Crowell says, is that “...it makes good business sense” (2008). There is a “transactional efficiency when you are working with other folks that understand the values that are guiding your business” (10/08).

Internalizing the scale frame makes tangible the multiple “scales” of interest that co-mingle in subject space. In a worker co-operative these spaces of the subject are recognized, integral to and a part of the functioning business. Concerns for the business are addressed but feelings and desires that seem to belong to other spaces or so-called “scales” (workers’ homes, communities, regional spaces for example) are folded into decisions that reproduce the business itself. They can thus connect the many “scales” or spaces of their lives with practices in their business through ethical decision-making with their co-workers.

Integrating outside interests into their working lives empowers many worker owners to “be themselves” and “live in line with their values” (Wright 09/06). Co-workers encourage each other to pursue personal dreams such as taking a sabbatical, rebuilding a classic car, starting a publishing company or becoming a co-opreneur. The effect for Ben Ryan is that it encourages, “certain aspects of themselves to come out”, that he says makes fellow worker owners “more interesting to be around” (5/9) Steve Strimer who was supported by his co-workers in his dream

of beginning Leveler's Press at Collective Copies echoes this sentiment: "... being encouraged to be myself-that's the other aspect of worker-ownership that's huge for me" (Strimer 09/06).

Feeling uncontained and unprotected by externally imposed levels of hierarchy and ownership is not always easy. It is difficult, for example to step up and say something bothers you but change is sometimes accomplished through interpersonal friction. It is a learning process for many worker owners including Randy Zucco who says, "...I'm more capable of opening my mouth and saying, this isn't working for me. This is my work-place too" (09/06). When the model is working for them, however, there is strength (even a power) in the collective recognition of vulnerability.

Together worker owners "hold" and produce the power of the co-operative. Workers have the power to make proposals, as well as the power to block them. An entrepreneurial spirit might feel "contained" by the pragmatism of consensus when his/her proposal is blocked. Cautionary skepticism expressed by voting members may hold a co-operative back but it also protects it from risks and fast-pace changes. This is the "hard" stuff of the movement: holding the responsibility of self representation; working through the frustration of impasse or the divisiveness of falling back to majority rule and feeling the power of a decision that everyone is behind. But they face these challenges and opportunities *together* by developing fair governing structures and meeting technologies for keeping everyone's voice in play.

There is an experimental balance between containing and feeling contained by the friction of consensus versus (the preferred feeling) of holding and being held by the power of the collective. The struggle is to make the model work for them, maintain the space for members to represent themselves, their communities and values in the context of a successful business. The spatial imaginary of containment—one worker's desire being contained or frustrated by the collective—gives way to the feeling of being held and holding with others the democratic values and the co-operative business itself.

### Conclusion

As I read them, the above practices dealing with power, hierarchy, size and the production of local, national and global networks evacuate the "containing" properties of "scale", "power" and "the economy" as they are often imagined. Economic power and "significance" are recognized as properties of people. Power, significance and "scales" are internal to the subject yet drawn out

and realized through the co-operative process. Social technologies like meeting structures and bylaws are established in service of the co-operative *process*, rather than institutionalizing a pattern that cannot be broken. Scale, size and hierarchy are approached experimentally: this movement “of scale” is *made* large by those moved to make it; size is something to experiment with and figure out in the context of collective values; and hierarchy is held together or resisted *in practice*.

From an internalized perspective of scale, the seed of the co-operative movement, even in its tiny global form is planted in the breast of the co-operative subject (see figure 3). In order to bloom, that seed depends upon a web of supportive relationships. Having an equal say in the workplace and appreciating the dynamic experience of power and vulnerability has cultivated global transformations in particular people, who in small groups, are making big changes in their communities.

Movement seems the antithesis of structure yet there is “hard” stuff (both figuratively and literally speaking) in any movement. The hard stuff of establishing workable models, the texture of decision-making structures, marshaling surplus, dealing with burnout and interpersonal conflicts could bring the movement to a halt. – But this friction seems to be propelling the co-operative movement forward. Those who have been touched by this model persist, learn from mistakes, work to make it better and share it with others.

An internalized scalar perspective provides a spatial imaginary that appreciates the subjective matter of “significance”. It flattens the imaginary terrain, bringing a “god’s eye” eye to eye with others, where we can *touch* one another. There is power and vulnerability in imagining *ourselves* as researchers uncontained and unprotected by the structure of scale. Internalizing the scale frame attunes us to the feelings associated with power, hierarchy and size in our own spheres of experience. Those moments in which we feel “contained”, supported or held, or in which we are containing, supporting or holding others become opportunities for practical and ethical engagement. It widens the ontological playing field and makes laughable those battles that seek to claim “significance” as if it were scarce territory. In this context, the critic who dismisses or demands scaling up in order to claim significance is expressing less information about the “world out there” than s/he is her own subject world and the connections she is making with other subjects. Considering research practices in this scalar context opens analysis up to the possibility



that my/our work is *significant* and could be adding to the momentum of the movement(s) that move us!

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## CHAPTER 3

### CO-OPERATIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES: REGIONAL ALLIANCE BUILDING IN NEW ENGLAND USA

#### Abstract

This paper is an exploration of co-operative development experiments in a regional context. I introduce two regional federations of co-operatives: the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives, an alliance of eleven worker co-ops and the Neighboring Food Co-op Association, an association of 20 co-ops as they develop local and regional strategies inspired by international examples. I explore processes of building a co-operative identity through association and how co-operative identity has bridged a gap between co-operative sectors through interco-operation and opened up opportunities for co-operatives and their associations to benefit from the economics of interco-operation and co-operative development.

**Key Words:** co-operative economic development, ethical thinking, co-operative identity

#### Introduction

The United Nations General Assembly recently turned a global spotlight onto co-operative enterprises by declaring 2012 the International Year of Co-operatives (IYC). The goals of this initiative include increasing public awareness about co-operatives and their contributions to socioeconomic development, promoting the formation and growth of co-operatives, and encouraging governments to enact policies conducive to their formation and growth (<http://social.un.org/coopsyear/>). Of course these goals cannot be accomplished by the UN alone. Ideally, they will be taken by the many people in places who are already working in and developing co-operative economies in their communities. The language of the resolution *recognizes* and *appreciates* these efforts and their contributions to social economic development and thus *encourages* and invites governments to promote co-operatives in collaboration with co-operative movements.

Co-operative economic development stands out as an alternative to the cycle of growth, competition, crisis and decline associated with capitalist development. The capacity of co-operative enterprise to meet both social and economic needs stems from the fact that they are created for the purpose of serving member needs rather than for the accumulation of profit for owners or share holders. Co-operative enterprises are place-based, member owned, and

democratically controlled; they tend to root capital in the places of the communities of their members. They have greater longevity and fare better in crisis than traditional private sector businesses<sup>41</sup> and tend to be risk averse and thus more stable. Co-operative economic development is motivated by the needs, values and principles of their members, the people who use their services. Rather than being an incidental consequence to enterprise, social benefit is the goal of co-operatives.

The UN's recognition seems to be calling co-operatives into a global movement. Shining a spotlight on co-operatives as a viable alternative has meant accounting for the economic impact they are having in places across the globe—in effect, making visible what already exists. The International Co-operative Association (ICA) is playing a lead role in compiling the data on co-operatives. According to the ICA 800 million people worldwide are members of co-operatives which provide over 100 million jobs—20% more jobs than are provided by multinational corporations worldwide ([www.ica.coop](http://www.ica.coop) accessed 6/15/10). In the United States, approximately 25% of the population holds membership in a co-operative ([www.ica.coop](http://www.ica.coop) accessed 6/15/10). There are an estimated 30,000 co-operatives operating in 73,000 places of business in the US with more than \$3 trillion in assets, \$500,000 billion in revenue and \$25 billion in wages nationwide (Deller, Hoyt, and Hueth 2009).

These statistics are impressive but they say little about the coherence of co-operative economies worldwide which, vary greatly from place to place. Co-operative enterprises share key characteristics but they differ in sector, services and products, management and governance structures, as well as practical awareness and adherence to co-operative values and principles. The coherence of co-operative cultures also varies from place to place. In places like the Basque Region of Spain and Northern Italy, for example, where there is a concentrated presence of inter-linked co-operatives, we see intentional development strategies and a strong co-operative identity across sectors. In many other places co-operative enterprises, while beneficial to their members, exist in relative isolation from each other.

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<sup>41</sup> For example, in a study commissioned by the Québec government, Ketilson, Gertler, Fulton, Dobson and Polsom (1998) found that six out of ten co-operative businesses survived more than five years compared to four out of ten private sector businesses and more than four out of ten survived ten years compared to two out of ten regular businesses.

In the US context agricultural purchasing and marketing along with shared service and consumer co-operatives, including credit unions, represent the largest co-operative sectors. Worker owned co-operatives are currently the smallest sector. Prevalent regional and national associations exist within co-op sectors. The largest cross-sector co-operative association is the National Co-operative Business Association which is also the US “point organization” for the International Year of Co-operatives. Inspired by co-operative experiments in other parts of the world, smaller co-operative associations, including one that is the focus of this paper, are beginning to make connections across sectors, and to develop a clear co-operative identity and strategies for regional co-operative economic development.

This paper is an exploration of co-operative development experiments in a regional context. The Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives (VAWC) is a co-operative of co-ops in the Connecticut River Valley of Western New England dedicated to building a sustainable economy by facilitating growth and development of worker co-operatives ([www.valleyworker.org](http://www.valleyworker.org)). There is a relatively high concentration of worker co-operatives in the Connecticut River Valley. It is home to 11 of the estimated 400 worker co-operatives nationwide (Hoover 2008)<sup>42</sup>. The Alliance is made up of eight formal worker co-op members whose combined gross revenue is just over seven million dollars. They employ approximately 70 people, 60 of whom are worker owners. Since 2005 when they began meeting informally, they have developed a network of supportive relationships, a formal mission and member agreement, a worker co-op funded staff position, joint marketing and a co-operative curriculum and internship program in collaboration with the Department of Economics at the University of Massachusetts. VAWC is inspired by and borrowing strategies from the international co-operative economies of the Mondragon Co-operative Corporation and Northern Italy, cultivating a co-operative identity within and across co-op sectors and marshaling surplus toward their goals of development, support and education.

In the same area yet covering a more extensive region, the Neighboring Food Co-operative Association (NFCA) is an association of food co-ops working in a similar vein. The NFCA is

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<sup>42</sup> Estimates of the number of worker co-operatives vary greatly. I note Hoover’s high number because organizers of the data commons project (<http://datacommons.find.coop/about>) who have been engaged with connecting and mapping co-operatives initiatives nationwide insist the number of worker co-operatives is much higher than Deller et al’s (2009) estimated 233, and higher than Hoover’s high estimate of 400.



“committed to a shared vision of a thriving regional economy, rooted in a healthy, just and sustainable food system and collaboration among co-ops” (<http://www.nfca.coo/> accessed 06/14/11). Membership includes 20 food co-ops from Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont. As of 2009, NFCA member co-operatives had a combined membership of 80,000 individuals; they employed 1,400 people and had annual revenue of \$185 million (<http://www.nfca.coop/>). In addition to working collaboratively with other food co-op associations such as the National Co-operative Grocers Association, NFCA is committed to developing cross-sector relationships. Among these is their relationship with VAWC.

In this paper, I explore how the Valley Alliance and the NFCA have been inspired and informed by international co-operative examples and how they are applying international strategies to a unique regional context. I compare Gibson-Graham’s (2006) reading of the Mondragon Co-operative Corporation (MCC)<sup>43</sup> and their analysis of an “historical antagonism between left labor politics and worker co-operatives” (2006, 111) to the reading of international examples by key VAWC and NFCA organizers. Like Gibson-Graham’s “ethics of thinking” that produces ground for possibility, these co-operators’ readings have opened possibilities for ethical economic practices and improved livelihoods. I focus on specific strategies borrowed from international examples with attention attuned to dynamic decisions relating to necessity, surplus, commons and consumption, specifically the marshalling of surplus towards the goals of member support, co-operative development and education and the impact of these decisions on co-operative identity.

I draw out key lessons from the VAWC and NFCA experiments that address challenges and future possibilities including the value of demonstrating impact, self-funding development, and the benefits of interco-operation. I consider the process of developing a co-operative identity through association and co-operative decision-making; and how developing a co-operative identity has led co-operators to recognize commonalities and discover opportunities across sectors. I offer an exploration of how co-operative identity based upon co-operative values and principles has enabled these two organizations to bridge the oft cited, problematic gap between

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<sup>43</sup> The Mondragon Co-operative Corporation is one of the largest co-operative complexes in the world. Since its founding in 1956, it has grown from a small worker owned company into a co-operative complex of more than 250 enterprises with assets worth more than 33,000 million Euros and a workforce of more than 83,000.

co-operatives across sectors and begin to take advantage of the “co-operative difference” through the economics of interco-operation.

In what follows, I offer a brief discussion of Gibson-Graham’s ethics of thinking and two different readings of Mondragon. I present co-operative readings by people in Western New England who are building a coherent co-operative movement in the region and explore what they learned from international examples and how those lessons affect their strategies and future possibilities. In conclusion, I try to extrapolate key lessons for a broader conversation about co-operative economic development and economic diversity.

### Reading for Difference and Possibility

Imagining the economy as set of diverse practices open to ethical possibility means letting go of a structural vision of the economy as already or (in a development context) necessarily on its way to being capitalist. Gibson-Graham’s diverse economies framework provides a language in which to begin thinking about economic diversity as constituted by practices of people in places. This ontological reframing of the economy, one of Gibson-Graham’s “techniques for thinking”, has opened a burgeoning research agenda focused on ethical practices, processes and possibility (Gibson-Graham 2008; see also Diverse Economies Online Bibliography).

A performative lens suggests discourse and an “ethics of thinking” has material consequences. From this perspective, the tendency to look for dominance (of global market forces for example) actually helps to produce the conditions it purports to only to explain or predict. Gibson-Graham’s research agenda acknowledges the performative power of social inquiry and confronts the discursive erasure of economic difference by making visible the plethora of so-called marginal non-capitalist economic practices (Gibson-Graham 2008, 7). With Law and Urry (2004), they propose an ethical engagement with an “ontological politics” that entails choosing methods of inquiry that expand rather than foreclose political possibilities. They advocate reading for difference and possibility rather than dominance. For Gibson-Graham the project of building new worlds

involves making credible those diverse practices that satisfy needs, regulate consumption, generate surplus, and maintain and expand the commons, so that community economies in which interdependence between people and environments is ethically negotiated can be recognized now and constructed in the future. (2008, 623)

What is at stake in Gibson-Graham's "politics of possibility", "ethical thinking" and "practical ethics" is made strikingly clear in their reading of Mondragon and the "historical antagonism between left labor politics and worker co-operatives" (Gibson-Graham 2009, 111). They recount late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Fabian and revolutionary socialist critiques of co-operatives (including influential thinkers such as Beatrice and Sidney Webb 1907; 1921 and Karl Marx 1972) that still resonate today (Gibson-Graham 2006). These views, summarized by Gibson-Graham suggest that

Cooperatives are unable to build sustainable interdependencies, that they are economically flawed and not really distinguishable from capitalism, that cooperators are prone to the individualistic self-interest of the co-operative, and that co-operatives are short-lived as well as politically conservative and disinterested in solidarity with the more political struggles of the left. (2006, 111)

Along with the prominent view that co-operatives are insignificant and unthreatening to the dominant world order, co-operatives have been and are still judged and dismissed by a critical leftist position. Rather than learning from cooperative experimental challenges and failures this kind of thinking dismisses co-operatives as real possibilities in an economy dominated by capitalism.

#### Lessons from Mondragon

Rather than viewing Mondragon's imperfections as essentially shaped and limited by a capitalist world order, doomed to corruption and irreplicability, Gibson-Graham view it as a surprising, complex and unfinished experiment, the outcome of innumerable, contingent decisions and actions (2006, 103). Instead of dismissing it, they explore co-operators' decision-making around what they have called four ethical co-ordinates that have led to Mondragon's consolidation.

Gibson-Graham's reading of Mondragon challenges common explanations and critiques shaped by a structural understanding of the economy. They step away from pessimistic structuralist readings that constrict possibility in favor of an understanding of systemic inevitability. Such "essentialist ways of thinking," they say "constrict the ethical space of becoming, obscuring possibilities of (self) cultivation and the way that co-operative practice itself calls forth and constitutes its own subjects." (2006, 111). They juxtapose these structural visions of economic determination, with MCC's founding father Don Jose Arrizmendiarietta's understanding of the economy as a space of structural indeterminacy open to change and decision-making (2006, 103).

They pose the story of Mondragon as an example of possibility rendered through processes of both ethical thinking and practical ethics.

In this tradition of thinking, they suggest that Father Arizmendi was not alone. They point to a broader movement of social Catholicism that encouraged workers to see themselves as agents of social and industrial transformation (2006, 125) the imprint of which can be seen in Northern Italy today. Considering Mondragon a project of ethical thinking much as it is an ongoing project of ethical economic practices spurs the imagination away from pessimistic judgment and towards curiosity and questioning in field of indeterminacy rather than structural logic. In line with Father Arizmendi, Gibson-Graham advocate such a stance in the project of constructive development.

This kind of “stance” or ethics of thinking has been adopted by many social entrepreneurs who are inspired by, rather than strictly critical of MCC. The United Steel Workers Union for example, has been inspired by Mondragon’s ability to empower workers and root capital in place. They announced a formal collaboration with MCC in 2009. The Arizmendi Association of Co-operatives, a co-operative development association in the Bay Area of Northern California borrowed lessons from Mondragon (<http://arizmendi.coop/about>). They built upon the success of one worker co-operative to develop a chain of six independent co-operatively owned businesses—each co-op contributes surplus to develop the next business. Another project inspired by Mondragon is the Evergreen Co-operatives, a large scale development experiment in Cleveland Ohio (<http://www.evergreencoop.com/>). And, of course, the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives and the Neighboring Food Co-op Alliance have also been inspired in part by Mondragon’s successes and challenges.

#### Necessity, Surplus, Commons and Consumption

If we can imagine limiting our analysis to *one factor*, we might say that the “difference” embodied in cooperatives exists in members’ ability and responsibility to engage with decision-making around what Gibson-Graham have called “four co-ordinates” of economic deliberation. They suggest that “an ethical praxis of being-in-common could involve cultivating an awareness” of these four co-ordinates, necessity, surplus, consumption and commons:

- What is *necessary* to personal and social survival;
- How social *surplus* is appropriated and distributed
- Whether and how social surplus is to be produced and *consumed*; and
- How a *commons* is produced and sustained (Gibson-Graham 2006, 88)

Social entrepreneurs and ‘co-opreneurs’ have studied Mondragon’s decisions around these co-ordinates and taken lessons and strategies to inform their development practices in their unique contexts. Co-operative members are engaged in decision-making around these co-ordinates and those of the above mentioned experiments are making ethical choices to direct surplus towards development. The following examination of VAWC and NFCA demonstrates the importance of decisions made concerning these coordinates: the production of a cultural ‘commons’ in the form of shared identity, values and resources through the marshalling and distribution of surplus toward development and education.

Below, I offer a brief historical introduction to the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives. I then consider how key organizers of VAWC and NFCA have ‘read’ Mondragon and co-operative complexes of Northern Italy and the lessons they have taken from these examples. I describe similarities and differences between these experiments in their unique contexts and how these have shaped their adoption of various practices including the marshalling of surplus towards the goal of development.

#### The Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives

In 2005, members of three worker co-operatives who met at the Eastern Conference of Workplace Democracy in New Hampshire decided to stay in touch and share information. Beginning with a few people in someone’s kitchen, this informal monthly gathering grew into the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives (VAWC). VAWC is a collaboration among eleven worker co-operatives in the Connecticut River Valley “dedicated to building a sustainable local economy by facilitating the growth, development and promotion of worker co-operatives” ([www.valleyworker.org](http://www.valleyworker.org)).

Products and services offered by VAWC businesses include vegetable delivery, photo voltaic panel installation, copy services, auto repair, human-powered trash removal, web hosting and book sales, organic body oils and wool yarns. The Alliance has eight formal members who pay dues and contribute surplus. They envision a co-operative

economy built on workers’ self determination and freedom of action and association; an economy of breadth and depth that puts working people in control of their economic destiny while serving their communities in accordance with the co-operative values and principles. (VAWC Member Agreement approved 4/28/10)

They are moving towards this vision by providing membership support, developing new co-operatives and by promoting worker co-operatives in the region through education and outreach.

#### Inspiration from International Examples

In the fall of 2008 as the Alliance was becoming more strategic in their mission, two VAWCers<sup>44</sup> went overseas to study cooperative economies in Europe. Adam Trott returned from the Basque region of Spain and Erbin Crowell from Northern Italy with newfound strategies and inspiration. Crowell and Trott's attitudes towards the co-operative complexes of Northern Italy and MCC are characterized by openness, curiosity and discernment. Their surprise and excitement regarding these experiments resonates with Gibson-Graham's approach to MCC as a surprising, complex unfinished experiment. They went to learn rather than judge.

Crowell: My visit to Italy was a revelation in terms of how I viewed the potential for co-operative development in my own country... In many ways, it was a confirmation of some of the ideas of what a 'co-operative economy' could look like when co-ops reach critical mass in a region (Crowell 2009, 27).

Trott: ... every interaction with Mondragon is exciting with the potential to learn about their model... I was on a totally different level of curiosity [than the non co-operators in the five day delegation]... in every workshop, I remember writing this down. In every workshop of every day, *innovation, interco-operation and maintaining the cooperative culture* were *the* themes. (Trott 2009 emphasis original)

Upon returning to the States, they shared this excitement with each other and with members of the Alliance. They formed a VAWC subcommittee and set off together on what they affectionately called the "road show" going to the monthly meetings of each of the worker co-operatives in order to connect with all of the worker owners in the region.

The product of Crowell's thesis for a masters in co-operative management, "The Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives: Exploring the Potential of Co-op Led Development" was a report to VAWC members. This report includes key insights from the "road show", fellow co-operators like Trott, as well as Crowell's own experience as a long time worker owner at Equal Exchange

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<sup>44</sup> I use the term "VAWCer" to describe an individual involved in the Alliance who is usually a member representative as distinguished from a member—which would be an entire co-operative business. VAWC is made up of co-operatives but it probably wouldn't exist without VAWCers.

(a worker co-op based in Bridgewater Ma). Rather than looking for structural logic or inadequacies, Crowell's goal was to deduce key characteristics that had helped MCC and the co-operative economy of Northern Italy expand and thrive in order to present "some options for how these lessons might be applied to VAWC's evolution, and finally to propose a set of priorities for a one year pilot project" (Crowell 2009, 7). This document critically shaped VAWC's member agreement so, for the purpose of this investigation, I have taken it to be representative of a VAWC "reading" of Mondragon and the co-operative complexes of Northern Italy.<sup>45</sup>

In the report Crowell (2010) describes at length "four core characteristics" shared by MCC and the Italian co-operative movement. In abbreviation these are:

1) **A coherent economic alternative.** Crowell notes that co-operatives across sectors and industries share a "clarity of vision, purpose and structure", a co-operative identity and shared legal structures that distinguish them from conventional enterprises and extend into policies of internal and external mutuality such as internal and external allocations of surplus for co-operative development;

2) **An emphasis on interco-operation.** Shared vision and identity provides an affinity for interco-operation and belief that the most effective way to develop co-operatives and build the movement is to work together through federations, consortia, targeted purchasing, trading, partnering, and shared services for marketing, technical assistance, joint ventures and benefits.

3) **Development of resources to support development.** "Both the Italian and Mondragon movements have integrated systems for the development of cooperators' resources including collective accounts, internal capital accounts and external development funds" (Crowell 2009, 43). Technical and organizational support is integrated with, accountable to and funded by the movement itself.

4) **Civic and legislative engagement.** These movements are able to demonstrate their shared economic impact; "their unique contribution to local, regional and national economies is recognized, protected and promoted" and this in turn influences a legislative environment conducive to co-operation and co-opreneurship.

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<sup>45</sup> I take this liberty bearing in mind the diversity of perspectives among member co-operators, the fact that there is no one collectively agreed upon "reading", and that individual levels of interest in this topic vary significantly.

Crowell's analysis resonates with a pluralist vision of the economy in which difference—specifically the co-operative difference—is and should be recognized, protected and supported. VAWCers like Crowell, Trott, and members of the advisory board recognized and were motivated by the co-operative difference to devote their surplus labor to formalize their association of worker co-operatives. There is no inherent structural logic driving this association, no predetermined outcome. As Trott comments

It just became so clear that there's no easy answer to getting us together with real economic relationships. We just have to do it. We just have to say we need to do this; we need to get together; we need to put our money where our mouths are. We need to dream big; we need dare to dream; we need to make this happen. (Trott 2009)

This is a local transformation coming from the co-operators themselves. The recommendations to VAWC were based upon these core characteristics and priorities drawn from lengthy conversations with member co-operatives to address what they were interested in and what might be feasible in the context of the Valley.

#### Applying lessons to a unique context

Of course, no system is perfect, and it is not possible to simply transfer these experiences to our own region even if we wanted to. However, I propose that co-operators interested in successful models for co-operative development can look at ways to emulate some of the key aspects of these movements in ways that fit our own history, culture and goals. (Crowell 2009, 54-5)

MCC and the Italian movement share some characteristics but they also differ in important ways. Unlike VAWC whose members started separately and shared no common history, MCC developed from a common vision, a genealogy that traces back to Father Arizmedi and the co-operative started by his students. This is significant for Trott who says, "MCC is all about internal capital accounts" with the surplus marshaled into a more centralized pool. He compared this structure to Emilia Romagna where "a lot of associations are much less centralized. You can have a unique structure; you can have unique membership or unique industry" (Trott 2009). In this respect, VAWC is more similar to Emilia Romagna. So they borrowed and changed aspects from both. Trott explains:



So between Emilia Romagna and Mondragon, and somewhat Arizmendi Association of Co-operatives in the Bay area, we came up with a model that we think would be doable to get us started while also reaching a threshold of where we need to be. We also saw problems of NoBAWC, (Network of Bay Area of Worker Co-operatives), and the US Federation of Worker Co-operatives where the dues were *just* enough to *exist* –to administer the federation and the meetings. (Trott 2009 emphasis original)

To move beyond just administration and existence toward the mission of development, the staff pilot project was created. The staff pilot project was designed to be funded by the member co-ops themselves yet with sufficient funding to demonstrate its potential; to connect with the membership and be informed by the broader effort of building a co-operative economy (Crowell and Trott 2009). Thanks to the organizing efforts of the “road show”, a VAWC advisory board of five representatives and Crowell’s report to VAWC, by April of 2009 members had approved the pilot project. The first part time staff person was paid with three years of accumulated dues plus a matching grant from the Co-operative Fund of New England that included provisions for “step down” as the project became self sufficient. They launched the pilot project in May 2009 with four outlined priorities: 1) building member relations, 2) launching a marketing initiative, 3) developing relationships with allies and 4) developing a proposal for a long term staff position.

Building member relations was a key aspect of every component of the pilot project and continues to be important part of VAWC staff’s work today. In order to demonstrate their collective impact, and develop a long term staff position, VAWC needed to know what they had to work with. However, some co-ops were initially reluctant to share their financial statistics. As paid hours enabled the project coordinator to meet more regularly with members and develop a joint marketing campaign, relationships grew stronger; the value of demonstrating shared impact became clear. Member co-operatives created a co-operative commons by sharing information about gross revenue, bylaws and employment statistics with which VAWC was able to demonstrate their collective power to themselves and the broader community.

Over the course of a year, the staff project coordinator worked with the project advisory board and VAWC members to develop a member agreement that would establish a clear identity, vision and mission, and dues structure. There were challenges and opportunities throughout this process (which I discuss below) but after much discussion, several iterations and revisions addressing

concerns that came up in monthly meetings, the agreement was approved by consensus in April 2010.

The membership agreement addresses common challenges to co-operative success. These challenges include access to financial resources, educational barriers, isolation, sectoral division, risk aversion, lack of clear governance, decision-making and conflict resolution processes and a lack of awareness of the co-operative model. Key aspects of the agreement were drawn directly from VAWC's exploration of how other co-operative experiments are facing these challenges. The agreement establishes identity rooted in the ideals of co-operation; it defines membership according to the ICA definition, values and principles of co-operation. This in effect brings a formerly incoherent group of co-operative businesses into alignment with a much broader movement and consolidates the group itself according to common values and principles. These common values and principles motivate the responsibilities and benefits laid out by the agreement and its co-operative development goals. However, establishing a common economic identity and marshaling resources towards goal of development involved intense negotiations around the question of surplus.

#### Surplus negotiations

“Democracy is an asset... but also a process” (VAWC presentation 6/10/11)

The negotiation process of developing a formal member agreement and long term staff position was not limited to monthly VAWC meetings. Proposals were brought by representatives back to their co-op businesses where the agreement would ultimately be voted upon to establish formal membership. Member representatives would return to VAWC meetings with concerns expressed by their co-workers. These rounds of negotiations involved questions about maintaining individual co-operative autonomy, concerns about a dissolution clause, 10% of worker time reserved for education and mission related work, and provisions for dues and surplus.

Some of the most difficult decisions for VAWCers have also been the most powerful. For example allocating surplus to development was a sticking point in the process of reaching consensus. After getting feedback from co-workers, representatives raised these issues with the advisory board, at monthly VAWC meetings, and over lengthy email exchanges. They expressed concerns that the dues requirement (based on gross revenue) plus five percent of surplus seemed like “double dipping” (PO 3/31/10). They were also concerned with a dissolution clause that

would require members to include in their bylaws a provision that would distribute remaining assets of a dissolved co-op be allocated to VAWC. They were uncomfortable with the provision that members reserve 10% of paid work time for activities related to mission and education. And they disliked its initial title “Contract of Association” which seemed stodgy and too legalistic. A sample of a barrage of emails exchanged one day demonstrates the complicated feelings and respect involved with these negotiations:

To be honest, my list of issues with the contract is quite long... The contract is asking for a considerable amount of contribution, both in money, time (which is more valuable than money in my life), and sovereignty. ... the contract focuses heavily on what members are obligated to, but makes no guarantee of return on investment... (email 2/4/10)

... I hesitate to say we should just take a step back and formalize our membership with the 1/8 of 1% dues, but that's pretty much what I want to suggest. I understand that this is a meager budget, but it's a real beginning of formal solidarity...and that's what's important. (email 2/4/10)

Only through poking as many holes in the document as we can will this happen. (email 2/24/10)

The spirit and energy you express here is right in tune with the spirit and energy with which I bring concerns about the document. I currently do not see a match between the stated intentions and the actual document. That does not mean in any way that I question the intentions. In fact, quite the opposite. If I questioned the intentions, I wouldn't even engage in the conversation. (email 2/4/10)

This seems to be striking deep issues with folks. I think we should set up a special "summit" to get this right. I don't want to bring this to [my co-op] until all the members of VAWC (people who show up to meetings) can agree on it. Does this sound like something that would be useful?  
(email 2/4/10)

Crucial questions regarding ethical commitments and identity were raised: “what will VAWC would do for us?” but also “what can members do for themselves and the community?” These

negotiations fortified members' ethical commitment to the values and principles and VAWC's identity as a co-op of co-ops dedicated to the development of both present and new co-operatives.

The resulting "Membership Agreement" that was established by consensus defined identity according to the ICA principles and values. The internationally recognized values and principles adopted by VAWC are: self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, solidarity, honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others. The seven principles, "guidelines by which co-operatives enterprises put their values into practice" are: 1) Voluntary and open membership; 2) Democratic member control; 3) Member economic participation; 4) Autonomy and independence; 5) Education and training; 6) Co-operation among Co-operatives; and 7) Concern for community (VAWC Member Agreement Approved 4/28/10).

Dues were set at 1/8<sup>th</sup> of once percent of gross annual revenue to fund a part time staff position. Members also agreed to the provision that requires five percent of annual prepatronage surplus<sup>46</sup> be allocated to a separate development fund because, according to VAWC, building a co-operative economy requires "external mutuality"--"mechanisms for moving financial resources among enterprises from areas of surplus toward areas of need and opportunity for economic development" (Membership Agreement approved 4/28/10). The agreement *encourages* (rather than requires) members to make available 10% of their members' work hours for "education, training and mission related work that contributes to empowerment of their members, advancement of their co-op and the wider co-operative movement and expressions of concern for community" (Member Agreement 4/28/10). The agreement also encourages members to invest in internal capital accounts, enplace provisions in their bylaws to protect themselves from conversion to a conventional business, and to uphold solidarity by having member representation at monthly VAWC meetings.

The process of defining the association, creating a member agreement and staff position entailed acknowledging and enlarging the space of interdependence for VAWC and its members. It increased capacity for marshalling surplus toward the direction of collective goals. They created a

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<sup>46</sup> The amount remaining after a business has covered its costs of production, including workers' pay and benefits (called profit in a capitalist business) is usually called "surplus" in the co-operative context. "Prepatronage" surplus is that amount *before* it has been divided for distribution (usually to the workers themselves, the community and the business).

new commons in the form of values and principles, shared information and technology, services and support. The creative process is ongoing but their accomplishments to date have demonstrated that a common co-operative identity and a little surplus can go a *long* way.

### The Economics of Interco-operation

The economics of interco-operation involves mutual recognition of similarities and differences among and across sectors.<sup>47</sup> The diverse co-operative economy is made up of three basic co-operative types or sectors based upon membership.<sup>48</sup> These are: consumer co-operatives, in which the consumers are the member-owners; producer co-operatives, in which the producers (broadly defined but often agricultural) are the member-owners; and worker co-operatives, in which the

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<sup>47</sup> The 2008 economic crisis and public bail out of large scale, private, investor-led banks highlights the importance of co-operative business models as a viable alternative (Birchall and Ketilson 2009). The co-operative subordination of capital to the interests of the users of the enterprise cuts out the antagonistic relationship between users and owners that is institutionalized in most capitalist models. Profit-maximizing owners or shareholders of a ‘traditional’ business have a vested interest in charging the highest price to consumers in return for the least expensive goods; and those consumers, who may depend upon the goods and/or services provided by that business, have no say in its governance and whether or not it survives. Similarly, a typical employer has a vested (profit) interest in maximizing labor at a minimum cost; while the employees, dependent upon the success of the business for their livelihood, have little or no say in its governance or whether or not the enterprise stays in the community. In contrast, co-operatives are owned and controlled by their stake-holders whose interest lies in the sustainability of the enterprise and community. For these among other reasons, credit unions, housing co-operatives, worker co-operatives and producer co-operatives fared better than traditional banks and privately owned businesses in past and recent economic crises (Birchall and Ketilson 2009).

<sup>48</sup> There is confusion between the terms “type”, “sector” and “industry” in the literature on co-operatives. Some authors use them interchangeably. In my field research the term “sector” was generally used to denote the kind of co-operative based upon membership—consumer, producer, worker or some kind of hybrid (for example consumer—worker co-operative hybrid). Deller et al. (2009) developed their research on co-operatives according to the four “sectors” based upon industry and services but they note that most co-operatives can be considered either “producer” or “consumer” in membership.

workers are member-owners. Associations of co-operatives within sectors and industries are common in the US, however, cross-sector co-operation has historically been a challenge.

VAWC members are cooperating with each other through inter-purchasing and joint marketing within the worker cooperative sector as well as among the consumer cooperatives in the Valley. Collective Copies leads the way in this endeavor selling products from other worker cooperatives including Equal Exchange, Green Mountain Spinery, Fedco, Once Again Nut Butter, Inkworks and even canning equipment from Mondragon.

In the early days, VAWCers were hesitant to see themselves as aligned with co-operatives from other co-operative sectors. However, developing a shared identity among worker co-operatives based upon the co-operative principles and values cultivated a shared identity across sectors. What does a worker owned auto shop have in common with a consumer food co-op? Shared values and principles related to common needs and desires. As their relationships and networks expand so too do the possibilities related to their mission, which include strengthening themselves as well as their communities. Meetings are often held at the local food cooperatives and a manager of one food cooperative regularly attends VAWC meetings.

VAWC marketing and media outreach focuses on the cooperative economy. Their “Working for a Cooperative Economy” ads run exclusively in the newsletters of four local food co-ops. They have written articles for the US Federation of Worker Cooperatives’ Newsletter and have been featured in the National Cooperative Business Associations’ member Newsletter. They advertise jointly on the local radio station and have been featured individually and collectively on the public broadcasting station, in the Daily Gazette, CNN Money, The Advocate, and Grassroots Economic Organizing (GEO). They write “letters to the editor” in local newspapers and make an effort to maintain media presence.

In Western New England there is a relatively high concentration of co-operatives of all sectors.<sup>49</sup> Around the same time that VAWC began meeting in 2005, a core group of about 15 food co-

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<sup>49</sup> These include local and national producer co-operatives in dairy and vegetable production as well as consumer co-operatives in social and financial services like housing co-operatives and credit unions.

operatives in the area had begun meeting and asking themselves similar questions.<sup>50</sup> The group, according to Deluca (who was a board member of Franklin Community Co-op at that time) was “really trying to figure out, what should we focus on and why? How do we develop a strategy cooperatively?” (Deluca 5/11).

They formed the Neighboring Food Co-op Association (NFCA) which grew into a network of more than 20 food co-operatives. Like VAWC, the NFCA is committed to a shared vision of a sustainable local economy and collaboration among co-operatives. In 2007 (when they were only 17 members), an independent study found that NFCA member co-ops were responsible for purchases of more than \$33 million in local products, including \$10 million in fresh farm products, \$18 million in locally-processed foods and \$5 million in other products; they had a lower staff turnover (36% compared to supermarkets’ 59%); more full time staff (62% compared to 43% in supermarkets); and that taken together, member food co-ops in Vermont were among the top 25 employers in the state (<http://www.nfca.coop/>).

In addition to working collaboratively with other food co-op associations such as the National Co-operative Grocers Association, NFCA is committed to developing cross-sector relationships. Cross sector partnerships include those with Deep Root Organic, a co-operative of 20 member farms in Northern VT and Southern Quebec; Organic Valley, an organic dairy co-operative with 1636 farmer members; Cabot Creamery, another dairy co-operative with 1,200 family farm owners; the UMass Five College Credit Union that has more than 26,000 members and \$327 million in assets; Equal Exchange (an internationally operating worker co-op) and, importantly for the present discussion, the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives.

VAWCers were sad to lose Crowell as staff project coordinator in early 2010 but in his new post as director of the NFCA, in accordance with their mission to collaborate with other co-ops, he regularly attends VAWC meetings. The shared co-operative identity based upon values and principles is opening new spaces of possibility for the Alliance as well as the NFCA. For example

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<sup>50</sup> It should be noted that the history of regional food co-ops associating in the area is rich. There was a successful association of regional food co-ops with a central distribution center. According to Suzette Snow Cobb and Crowell, the association dissolved when the distribution center was sold to a private interest (personal communication 4/21/11). I believe this story has many lessons for the movement; however, such an exploration is not within the scope of this paper.

the River Valley Market (a food co-op/NFCA member) hired PV2d (a worker co-op/VAWC member) to install photo voltaic panels on their building. Relationships with food co-ops also benefit newer worker co-ops like Co-op 108 that produces organic body oils now sold in regional food co-ops across four states. VAWC staff has also begun to network with some of the local credit unions and agricultural cooperatives. Together with NFCA and the current vice president of marketing of the UMass Five College Credit Union, they are planning a gathering of co-operatives across sectors to commemorate and begin discussions about the International Year of Co-operatives.

### Education and Alliances

Staff time funded by surplus has significantly expanded the breadth and depth of VAWC's ability to engage with members of the community within and beyond the co-operative network. One important relationship that developed thanks to a friend<sup>51</sup> of VAWC is a collaboration with the Department of Economics at the University of Massachusetts (UMass). Immediately after spotting Nancy Folbre's (a professor of economics at UMass) NY Times blog about worker co-operatives, Michael Johnson wrote to her asking if she had heard of VAWC. She had not but she was *curious*. He and Trott representing VAWC met with Folbre to talk about what a collaboration between VAWC and the Department of Economics might look like. They envisioned a certificate program in applied co-operative economics. In January 2010 they convened the first meeting of what would become the UMass Co-operative Enterprise Collaborative (UMACEC) (<http://www.umassecc.org/>).

UMACEC meets once a month on the same week as the VAWC meetings. VAWC representatives bring reports and/or questions from UMass back to the co-operators at VAWC meetings and members reps bring reports/questions/concerns back to and from their worker co-ops. Economics professors and two econ graduate students bring reports/questions/concerns to their respective committees. Despite, and indeed because of all of this democracy, by May 2010, the outlines of a certificate program had been drawn and the creation of a new course for the department was forged. The program offers courses in co-operative economics and connects students with internships and research projects with VAWC member co-operatives. In May three

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<sup>51</sup> VAWC "Friends" are those members of the community who are welcomed to attend meetings of the Alliance though they are not members of worker co-operatives, their goals align with VAWC's mission.



graduate research assistants were hired to work collectively with VAWC reps and two UMass professors to create a curriculum for the first class; and two undergraduate interns began developing an internship program with the VAWC member co-operatives.

This collaboration flies in the face of a discipline that, with some exceptions, has largely ignored the co-operative (especially worker co-operative) sector of the economy.<sup>52</sup> Feedback from the co-operatively produced curriculum was so positive that the following semester enrollment doubled and the group is working on additional courses and possibilities.

I just got the course evaluations for Econ 397EC, The Economics of Cooperative Enterprise and am attaching them to this email. These are the most positive evaluations I have ever received for any course I have ever taught and our entire group deserves credit for this. (personal communication email 2/17/11)

If we are to take seriously the performative affects of knowledge production, UMACEC is an inspiring experiment. As Gibson-Graham and Roelvink write,

Small actions and networks can be seen to have sweeping global effects, and rapid large-scale change can emerge from diffuse local transformations. Theory has taken on a new relation to action—to understand the world *is* to change it. (2009, 342)

This project is a substantial expansion of ‘the commons’ in terms of education. Forty five students have now taken the course, three undergraduates have worked with VAWC directly, two of whom have written articles for *Grass Roots Economic Organizing* and were inspired to enroll in a Phd program to study co-operative economics.

VAWC and NFCA have co-sponsored speaking events at the University that have reinforced their internal and external identification with the co-operative values and principles and expanded their relationships within and beyond the co-operative economy. Among these speakers, Nobel Prize Winner Elinor Ostrom, an economist famous for her work on governance of the commons will be coming to speak at UMass in September 2011 after which VAWC has invited her to a small gathering. In April 2011, Tom Webb (co-founder of St Mary’s University Masters program of Co-operative Management) came to speak at the University of Massachusetts Isenberg School of Management, after which Webb along with representatives from VAWC, NFCA, the Five

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<sup>52</sup> For more on the conspicuous absence of co-operatives from economics textbooks (which we can imagine performatively participating in the material absence of co-operatives) please see Kalmi (2007), Chamard (2004) and Hill (2000).

College Credit Union and the Department of Economics had dinner with leaders in the School of Management with whom they hope to engage in conversations about a curriculum of co-operative management. Through small conversations and big events like these, future possibilities are envisioned.

### Future Possibilities

VAWC and NFCA's identification with the co-operative principles and their cross-sector collaborations have empowered them to accomplish incredible things in a short period of time. They have also opened up ideas and conversations that no one would have expected five years ago. One of the ideas stirring at a conversational level in the co-operative movement of Western New England, is the possibility of developing a cross-sector co-operatively controlled development fund.

Cross sector collaborations may also open doors to new kinds of worker co-op development. For example the NFCA has been involved with food systems planning, especially in Vermont. Deluca explains that initial gatherings of managers and board members of about 15 food co-ops had brought up an interest in "systems thinking and scenario planning" (5/11). As a group they imagined plausible stories into the year 2020, to begin thinking about possible strategies. They used that process, says Deluca, to engage in

a strategic conversation based on our sense of different ways the future *could* go... [and consider] What do we want to do now to help shape our long-term desired outcome which was primarily a thriving regional economy with two ways into that—a healthy food system and cooperative economy, cross sector collaboration. (Deluca 5/11)

They ended up "zeroing in on the importance of developing collaborative relationships with like-minded organizations—whether they be food co-ops or food systems leaders and try to be assiduous about not reinventing the wheel" (Deluca 5/11). They identified and developed relationships with leaders in the regional food system to begin thinking about what reasonable priorities could be and consider what roles worker co-ops might play. They "ended up identifying 50 organizations and having 30 conversations with co-op leaders at different scales" (Deluca 5/11)

The economic impact of food co-operatives impressed food-systems leaders especially in Vermont. So when the board for the administration of a USDA grant to Vermont was compiled, Deluca was asked to participate on behalf of the retail sector because:

food system leaders realized that the food co-ops had a values level connection with the system development goals because they were being much more proactive about sourcing local food, having local food in their stores, having positive relationships with farmers and things like that. (Deluca 5/11)

There have been feasibility studies to investigate what value added products could be produced locally. For example, oats came up as something that could be produced by farm co-ops, processed by worker co-ops and sold through food co-operatives since they already knew the extent of the demand in their stores. This project was so exciting for Deluca that he applied for and is now working in the position of international program director for the International Year of Co-operatives at National Co-operative Business Association.

#### Lessons from VAWC

One thing that we are clear on is that while a lot of great work has gone into the development of this agreement, it is in reality a starting point and framework for our work together as worker co-operators. We will surely need to make changes and adjustments in the future. As has often been said, we build the road as we travel — what this agreement does is try to clarify how we intend to build that road together. (VAWC Agreement Letter 5/20/10)

Among lessons that we might take away from the VAWC experiment are those concerning the possibility enabled by what Gibson-Graham have called “an ethics of thinking”. For not only have they emulated some of the specific strategies employed by co-operators of Mondragon and Northern Italy, they share a similar practice of thinking. They have a capacity to imagine the economy as something that they participate in producing through ethical practices. Gibson-Graham read Mondragon co-operators’ commitment to the co-operative principles as a process of subjectivation through which they become communal subjects. We can see this process in the becoming of VAWC; which is simultaneously a becoming of co-operative subjects produced through processes of negotiation and deliberation around the co-operative principles and how they played out in their own lives.

The VAWC experience demonstrates the importance of building member relations and a clear co-operative identity. This identity imbues mission and efforts with clarity and opens possibility for alliances outside the parameters of their internal identity. Another lesson that seems of import is the value of accounting for economic impact. This enabled co-operators of both VAWC and

NFCA to know what they had to work with, to demonstrate their impact to themselves and the broader community and to consider a horizon of possibilities that might open up through collaboration. Member-led, self-funded, honoring difference while working with commonalities, “organic” (people-led, patient) development informed by co-operative values and other models, these could be transferable lessons used by others in their local contexts.

Another important lesson is that marshalling surplus is important but the *process* of how that is accomplished is equally significant. Engaging in the *process* of working and planning with others on the basis of equality, identifying common values and goals, struggles and opportunities, resources and deficiencies to which surplus might be directed is also a process of developing co-operative identities.

### Key Challenges

Co-operative firms face challenges that alliances like VAWC and the NFCA seek to address through shared technology, information, market and financing strategies. At the enterprise level, co-operatives face pressures familiar to any capitalist business as well as other challenges and advantages specific to co-ops. These challenges differ among sectors. For example, considering its consumer membership, food co-operatives have an advantage over capitalist businesses in terms of a loyal customer base. However, effective management must still balance the needs, desires and values of members with the solvency of the business. As Suzette Snow-Cobb (manager of Greenfields Market, food co-op) suggests, weighing the needs of the whole, “the staff, suppliers and the community and the environment” while trying to understand and meet member needs without “overemphasizing the individual part” is a challenge (4/8). This can be especially difficult considering the relative scarcity of effective training for co-operative management and the common usage of accounting mechanisms geared for capitalist businesses focused on profit as the bottom line.

Problems with access to financial resources, conflict, governance, management hierarchies, burnout and lack of participation can be challenging for worker co-operatives. When these issues are entrenched, they may become acute during times of growth and constriction. Developing governance structures that can accommodate growth, as well as autonomy and democratic values, is a key challenge but becoming too internally focused can also be problematic. Such difficulties have led to the dissolution of some co-operative businesses. Learning from the experiences of

former worker co-operatives points to the need to overcome isolation among co-operatives and develop mechanisms of mutual support, finance and education.<sup>53</sup>

Regional and national alliances like VAWC, NCFA and the US Federation of Worker Co-operatives are addressing these issues. However, developing relationships and institutional systems of support takes time and energy; devoting these scarce resources to the movement does not come “naturally”. For example, while allied in some respects, three regional worker co-ops in the Connecticut River Valley decided that the dedication of time and surplus to VAWC was beyond their present capacity. Nurturing the culture of co-operation, education around values and principles, and demonstrating the financial benefits of interco-operation are thus key challenges to the movement.

Overcoming “siloization” challenges cross-sector co-operators to understand and work with their differences as opportunities for collaboration. Again, this challenge is met in the face of limited time, resources and education. Snow-Cobb is one co-op manager facing this challenge head on but she explains: “It’s almost that there’s so much just in our natural foods coop world that it’s hard to get out of the day to day of that to think about the next level” (4/08).

Connecting values and principles to the “good business sense” of interco-operation is thus another challenge that co-operators are approaching experimentally (Crowell 12/08). Cultivating big picture, cross-sector co-opportunities while caring for day to day business activities and personal health (avoiding burnout) is aided by the allocation of surplus to mission-related activities.

### Conclusion

That ownership piece is huge, it’s a very different shift in thinking... there’s something about being part owner and having an interest in seeing it survive and do well in a different way. (Snow-Cobb 4/08)

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<sup>53</sup> Coontz points to the demutualization of two formerly successful worker co-ops: Burley Design a 28 year worker co-op sold to a private entrepreneur when it was under financial pressure and Good Vibrations “demutualized at the peak of business success” (2009, 5).

Alliances like VAWC and the NFCA offer an alternative to economic development focused on attracting profit driven capital, export based development and necessary insertion into *the* global economy. They subordinate capital to members' needs including healthy food, livelihood and community. Co-op member-owners (consumers, producers, workers) have a stake in the continued success of their enterprise. Their vested interest in its success may include, but is not limited to profit. The democratic process, while not perfect, is a space for ethical economic negotiation. Growth is a question—of values and expanding interdependence—rather than a systemic, crisis bound logical goal.

The UN recognizes these differences and is playing its role (big or small depending upon effect and one's perspective) to marshal a shared vision of the co-operative economy. In collaboration with actors from co-operative networks worldwide, they have created a common logo that co-operative enterprises can use to draw awareness to shared values and principles. The idea in itself is exciting. It has sparked conversations among co-operators across sectors and distances and thus forged new relationships and possibilities. It is important, however, to know *difference*. In some places the word "co-operative" is associated with repressive government activities.<sup>54</sup> Co-operative branding—to the extent that the campaign is successful—will mean different things in different places.

Whatever exciting opportunities are presented by the International Year of Co-operatives—and from my vantage point there could be many—the VAWC experience makes visible the kinds of possibilities opened by the collective process of expanding the commons (knowledge, values, technology); and marshaling surplus (for mutual support, development and education). It demonstrates the importance of an ethical, dynamic practice of thinking and the potential of a regional transformation sparked by a movement begun in someone's kitchen.

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<sup>54</sup> For example, citing Mayfield (1985, 166-7) Gibson-Graham (2005) note that "co-ops" in the Philippines can be associated with oppressive state-sponsored practices.

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<http://social.un.org/coopsyear/>

[www.valleyworker.com](http://www.valleyworker.com)

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#### Interviews

Crowell, E. Personal INTERVIEW. December 2008

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## CONCLUSION

Contrary to capitalocentric and structuralist critiques of worker owned co-operatives based upon size, political conservatism and vulnerability, I have argued that worker owned enterprises empower workers despite capitalist cultural dominance and relative size. The transformative experience of co-operative self-governance and incorporating collective values into working lives can be powerful. It has motivated and empowered worker owners in the Connecticut River Valley of Western New England to associate and marshal surplus towards the goals of mutual support, development and education. In this growing democratic movement, subjectivity and co-operative identity are as “significant” and “powerful” as “size”.

Read together, these empirically-based chapters challenge the following presumptions: 1) space and the economy are (and must be) structured by capitalism; 2) power is constituted by hierarchy, size and “scale”; 3) subjectivity (and therefore subjects) are irrelevant/insignificant to the project of constructive development and/or strategic opposition to “greater” forces.

In Chapter one, I explored the co-production of co-operative subjects and spaces at Collective Copies of Amherst, Belchertown and Florence Massachusetts. I suggested that the authority to co-govern one’s work space and time, as well as the production, appropriation and distribution of surplus has been a transformative experience for worker owners. For some, this experience has sparked the desire to grow co-operative space. I also suggested that this desire and capacity to expand co-operative space is reinforced and augmented by visibility and (self) recognition found through participating in a co-operative broader movement.

In Chapter two, I considered “practices of scale” both those of co-operators in VAWC and my own as a researcher. I internalized and inverted the scale frame to (re)personalize power and significance and disassociate scale from size. Like the democratic process itself this conceptual inversion recognizes the significance of individual subjects and subjectivity. In this chapter I sought to show how multiple spheres of interest (“scales” of interest concerning family, environment and health) are enrolled into the decisions that reproduce the business itself through the democratic process. This “flat ontological” practice attributes significance to subjects and their feelings; considers power the outcome of practical encounters; and the size (local, national, global) of a movement something *made* rather than structurally predetermined.

Chapter three builds upon the concepts developed in the previous two chapters and considers co-operative economic development in a regional context. In this chapter I considered Gibson-Graham's ethical thinking practices and those of key organizers of the co-operative movement in Western New England. I explored the strategies, struggles and opportunities faced by the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives and the Neighboring Food Co-op Association as they develop local and regional strategies inspired by international examples. These strategies illuminate the importance of cross-sector co-operative identity in regional co-operative economic development and the production of that identity through the democratic process.

The chapters of this dissertation co-evolved with the development of many exciting, surprising and ongoing co-operative projects. I hope these pages shed some light on the co-development of subjects and spaces and the *process* of co-operative economic development. This focus on process reminds us that the consolidation of any economy (including what we think of as global capitalism) or power is made through multiple, imaginative and contingent material practices. It suggests the *texture* of joy, hard work and personal relationships, conflict and love involved in the making of worlds and world views. –And the importance of recognizing and developing diverse economic strategies for living with others in a more caring world.

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### **Internet Resources**

Arizmendi Co-operative Association

[www.arizmendi.coop](http://www.arizmendi.coop)

Diverse Economies Progress in Human Geography Online Bibliography:

[http://phg.sagepub.com/content/suppl/2008/06/02/0309132508090821.DC2/Diverse\\_Economies\\_Online\\_Bibliography.pdf](http://phg.sagepub.com/content/suppl/2008/06/02/0309132508090821.DC2/Diverse_Economies_Online_Bibliography.pdf) (accessed 6/20/11)

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[http://www.sustainweb.org/pdf/StrategyforSocialEnterprise\\_ProgressReport\\_2003.pdf](http://www.sustainweb.org/pdf/StrategyforSocialEnterprise_ProgressReport_2003.pdf) accessed 12/12/08

The Community Economies Collective

[www.communityeconomiescollective.org](http://www.communityeconomiescollective.org)

Evergreen Co-operatives

<http://www.evergreencoop.com/>

Data Commons Project

<http://datacommons.find.coop/about>

The International Co-operative Alliance

<http://www.ica.co-op/co-op/principles.html>

National Co-operative Business Alliance

<http://www.nfca.coop/>

United Nations International Year of the Co-operative

<http://social.un.org/coopsyear/>

The United States Federation of Worker Co-operatives

<http://www.usworker.co-op>

The Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives

<http://wiki.valleyworker.org>