

## COOPERATION AS THE INSTITUTION OF THE COMMON

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**Abstract:** This is an introduction to the issue of *Theoretical Practice (Praktyka Teoretyczna)*, titled “Cooperation as the Institution of the Common” (2018, no. 1).

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For a historian of socialist and communist ideas, the left's identity is of key importance to understanding the diverse political and economic strategies used by theoreticians and activists belonging to emancipatory movements. Moreover, the contemporary transformation of global, cognitive, extractive and financialised capitalism, together with the development of new forms labour and accumulation, make it imperative to redefine the inherited categories of class struggle and to define the subject of emancipatory politics and the very stakes of social conflicts today (see e.g. de Angelis 2007, 2017; Klein 2007, 2014; Hardt and Negri 2009, 2017; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Petras and Veltmeyer 2014; Fuchs and Mosco 2015; Moody 2017). This is also tied indirectly to the crisis of the left as such and the negation of communism, as an idea discredited by its implementations to date in the countries of the Soviet bloc or the South American social experiments, a problem that has affected both the traditional parliamentary social democracy of the "old" Europe as well as the latest anti-capitalist collectives of the likes of Occupy Wall Street. These problems apply to questions of key importance to all modern mass political movements: what is the multitude as the subject of politics, what is its relation to existing social groups and how does the practice of the multitude, its constituent and transformational power, make itself apparent in the social field?

This issue of *Theoretical Practice* proposes a possible response – both theoretical and practical – to the contemporary crisis of the left: a return to the tradition and idea of cooperativism. Grassroots institutions of associated labour and mutual help have, if not predated, then at least been contemporaneous with the history of industrial capitalism (McNally 1993) and they've presented diverse, progressive and effective reactions to the misery and exploitation brought about by the new system of production:

Cooperative experiments that formed specifically because of the stark inequalities of the new economic order include Scotland's Fenwick Weaver's Society in 1761, Robert Owen's worker-centred revival of the New Lanark mills in the first decades of the 19th century, the London Cooperative Society of 1824, the promising but short-lived Equitable Labour Exchange of 1832–1833, and the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers in the 1840s (Vieta 2010, 1).

From the success of the Rochdale Society on, cooperativism has remained one of the pillars of institutionalised resistance against capitalism and a laboratory for collective forms of life that seek to oppose both market logic and state centralism. The twentieth century saw the proliferation of different institutions of cooperation and communal life, from credit unions, rural and urban cooperatives, societies of mutual help, workers' cooperatives

and housing cooperatives to self-managed factories and rural communities like the *kolkhoz* or the *kibbutz*. However, the tragedy of the Second World War and the post-war capitalist transformation of the welfare states as well as the corrupted centralisation of the “communist” states ultimately subsumed most experiments in autonomous cooperation under the logic of the state-managed capitalism (and its crisis).

The *Affinities* journal special issue devoted to the phenomenon of “The New Cooperativism”, published in 2010, set out the characteristics of this new movement, one of which was that grassroots groups, which constituted the multitude of cooperative practices, did not necessarily have connections to older cooperative movements. Rather they presented a direct response to the social, technological and environmental transformations of their everyday life and the needs of their communities (Vieta 2010). This rupture in the long history of cooperative institutions is evidence of cooperativism, similar to the workers’ movement, having a long and rich tradition of organisation and struggles, a tradition that is nonetheless not reducible to this tradition. Cooperativism is rather the ever-present possibility of instituting, *within* and *against* capitalism, a form of life based on the developed socialisation of production and distribution and independent of the logic of capitalist accumulation. However, the institutionalisation of cooperation is not merely a reaction – cooperatives have always foreshadowed new “economic imaginaries” going beyond “capitalocentrism” (Gibson-Graham 2006a, 2006b) and prefigured alternative modes of wealth creation and sharing. This double relation – of continuity and discontinuity – to its own tradition, as well as a double relation to capitalism – as a kind of a “concrete negation”, a fostering of the further socialisation of labour but against the process of accumulation – makes cooperativism a genuinely *modern* phenomenon.

The modern stance — as Marshall Berman demonstrated — meant not only taming the world of nature with the assistance of the technical tools being developed, or the liberation of the individual from the rigid hierarchies of the *ancient regime* constraining them. For, by placing the rights of nature into the hands of man, modernity also entrusted him with the possibility of becoming the entity shaping these rights — of carrying out a transformation of reality, including of the human world, the social world (Berman 1988, 16). The modern idea of emancipation, or rather *liberation*, entrusted this *potenza* of transforming the world to the masses, which the process of the capitalist development made into the main economic, social and political power. The spreading of politics through the masses, connected to the activity of popular movements in the broadest sense, constitutes the distinguishing feature of an era for which “taking matters into one’s own hands” meant delegitimising old feudal orders, and subsequently also new, capitalist ones; this era thereby entailed the practice of liberation as a construction of independent social and political

institutions: free assembly, communist communities, armed resistance groups, political parties, trade unions and, last but not least, cooperative associations.

Cooperativists, irrespectively of their political, religious or moral creed, were instrumental in realising this truly modern idea of liberation – *within* and *against* modernity itself. Mindful of the fourth Kantian thesis of the *Idea of Perpetual Peace*, they presented the mechanism of liberating oneself from economic and political constraints as the “efficient management of human passions” (their empirical unsociability), which is used by nature to achieve the social destiny of man (his transcendental sociability). Let us simply quote the following words of Fourier: “Where distribution is concerned, the associative system has that invaluable quality of absorbing individual greed in the collective interest” (Armand and Maublanc 1949, 246). The attempt to reconstruct the limit moment for modern emancipatory politics therefore refers to two complementary approaches, whose incommensurability within the labour movement was decisive for generating further division, including within left-leaning cooperativism.

The first of these is the theoretical construction of a perfectly arranged world, which governed labour-movement thinking and constituted a kind of utopian regulative idea, or “principle of hope” (Bloch 1986), which allowed one to think about a future society, the germs of which were already hatching in the contemporary world. The second, in turn, was a kind of practical sense guiding action by making use of the potential of economic liberation as a preliminary measure for political independence, and self-organisation as a school for relations of participation in the future community. With the cooperativists, in this sense the heirs of Fourier’s and Owen’s ideas, both these tendencies culminate in the conviction that only the scientific, and as such the mathematical cognition of reality, can lead to a proper mastery of the forces latent in the physical world. And this mastery of “universal movement”, which simultaneously penetrates matter and spirit, nature and civilisation, must bring about the realisation of equitable social relations (indeed, in the Kantian sense, that is to say, as based on the moral principle understood transcendently, yet without this principle being imposed by any transcendental subject). After all, these also belong to nature, broadly understood. Such is the world that is well organised yet without a need for good will, a world in which human passions are neutralised or eliminated (Jameson 2005, 247), and this takes place precisely by getting to know the rules governing the universe. In this sense, cooperativists were primarily interested in the *practice* of cooperation as a world-transforming activity: the political goal was to change the world according to our knowledge about the world.

Cooperativism is situated at the touchpoint of the great ideologies of modernity, yet does not meld completely with any of them, and contradicts all transcendental divisions within the political field of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by the fact that it is,

in essence, a “practical ideal”, one resulting from the necessity to satisfy elementary social needs. In this sense, by using the term “minor” in the sense of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1986), we wish to treat cooperativism as a kind of “minor ideology” so as to show the ambiguous and thereby subversive character of this phenomenon. Cooperativism is therefore both an idea that is present in numerous ideological projects of the industrial age — the socialist, communist, anarchist, Christian-democratic, national and even liberal projects (Blesznowski 2018, 43) — as well as a self-contained complex of institutions, of consumer associations, manufacturing cooperatives, mutual assistance and loan funds, and farming companies, having won lasting achievements in the worker struggles of that period. It is both a continuous tradition of thinking about economic and political liberation as well as a multitude of often uncommunicated projects undertaken to satisfy the practical needs of a community. As a limit term — or use Deleuze and Guattari’s terminology — as a “nomadic” term (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), cooperativism is above all about becoming a part of the material basis of society, of practices of economic democracy, with the aim of reconfiguring the social field and changing the position of those subordinated to the rules of capitalism.

As a “major ideology”, cooperativism was a place of struggles between market, state and ethnic forces, and the result of social struggles. This doing it was a part of great ideological programmes and state policy directives. But the character of cooperativism as a minor ideology is manifested in action — in institutions whose genesis and later fortunes have been written into the dialectic of modernity, tugged at and pulled apart by diverse contradictions, which themselves should not be treated solely as “anti-modern” or “backward” phenomena within the inexorable progress of western civilisation (Hardt and Negri 2009, 83-95). If cooperativism is a modern phenomenon, it nevertheless presents an alternative to modernity, understood as capitalist development with its state institutions and exploitative economy. Therefore, any inquiry into the possibility of instituting cooperative forms of life in our day must be supplemented with an archaeology of cooperativism – an archaeology of an alternative modernity and a genealogy of a minor political philosophy that started and finished with the simple fact of human cooperation.

There are therefore two tasks that we must confront in order to return to cooperativism as a political idea: one is archaeological and involves outlining the genealogy of cooperativism as a minor ideology in and of modernity; the other is practical and theoretical and entails an analysis of cooperativism as a response to the current crisis of leftist, emancipatory, mass politics, as a practice. To engage in both of these tasks we propose to think of cooperatives as institutions of the common.

The contemporary discussions on the institutions of the common most often concern alternative forms of organising the production and distribution of immaterial wealth,

especially in the sectors of academic (e.g. Roggero 2011; Neary and Winn 2012; Neary 2012; Szadkowski 2015; Pusey 2017) and artistic production (e.g. Raunig and Rey 2009; Raunig 2014; Szreder 2017). This should come as no surprise since the notion of “the common” was introduced by Hardt and Negri together with the concept of “biopolitical labour”, the effects of which are, among other things, knowledge, codes, languages, ideas and affects, i.e. the “common” (Hardt and Negri 2009, viii). However, the question of instituting the common cannot be reduced to managerial problems – of devising the most efficient form of organisation of production and distribution. Institutions of the common are first and foremost institutions of class conflict, results of a constituent process and attempts to organise dissent and resistance. Examples of such institutions are to be found in revolutionary workers’ councils after the First World War, in gay and lesbian organisations after the rebellion in Stonewall in 1969 or in rural communities in southern Mexico after the Zapatistas’ insurrection. They are forms of self-organisation emerging in workers’ and popular counterpublics, as was the case with Polish Solidarność (Majewska 2018) or with the occupation of Teatro Valle in Rome (Raunig 2014). Institutions of the common are not the final ends of a class conflict, as if the contesting multitude was to transform itself into a depoliticised subject once it had created its institutions, repeating the modern dialectic of a revolutionary constituent power transformed into a constituted democratic order of the “people” (Negri 2009). Instead of reducing the plurality of political struggles and social needs to one dimension (of the constitutional order, of economy, of “democracy” in its representative form etc.), a politics of institutions of the common aims to translate differences between forms of life into a unique horizon of the common – the horizon of a communal life and solidarity in struggle (Curcio 2010; Lorey 2010).

For us, conceiving of cooperativism in terms of the common, that is, as a network of the institutions of the common, means, first, to recover its political potential in creating new social relations on the terrain of basic economics, i.e. in producing to satisfy one’s needs and those of others. It means rethinking the values of freedom, equality and solidarity from their most practical side, i.e. free, equal and mutual cooperation, and thus redefining communism as the “real movement” able to transform the present state of things on the basis of unfettered and horizontal cooperation. It seems that this practical and theoretical task is all the more actual today, during this crisis of late capitalism, which has managed to subsume almost all existing forms of social cooperation under the valorisation process. Returning to cooperativism as a political idea today also means breaking the seemingly natural relation between cooperation and capital and exposing the parasitic nature of the latter. What Marx wrote about capital in the nineteenth century seems even truer today, namely that, “vampire-like”, it lives only by sucking living social cooperation. The task therefore would be not to give a definition or a diagnosis of new “subject” of politics – a new incarnation of

the proletariat – but to analyse, from our contemporary perspective, the political potential of the practice that creates social wealth and social life: cooperation.

With this issue of *Theoretical Practice* we want to undertake both the aforementioned tasks. The first section of the issue is devoted to the latter task. It is devoted to the history of the Polish cooperative movement from the first part of the twentieth century and presents two translations of texts by renowned theoreticians of this movement. The first one is *Stateless Socialism* by Edward Abramowski, one of the most important Polish philosophers at the turn of the last century and one of the founders of the Polish Cooperativists' Society in 1906. *Stateless Socialism* is a chapter from his book which, published at the beginning of the century, clearly presents the main philosophical ideas behind Abramowski's grand vision of cooperativism as means of "working people's liberation" and outlines his critique of the socialist ideas of his time. Cooperativism, according to Abramowski, was a form of truly democratic politics that starts from the organisation of economic life and gradually transforms acting subjectivities and existing institutions. The second translation is of a text by Abramowski's student, the anarchist Jan Wolski, and contains his mature programme for organising labour cooperatives. *The Path to Socialism* – a work written during the Nazi occupation of Poland for the Inter-union Cooperative Committee (functioning in underground) and the Socialist Planning Commission – is a great testimony to the movement's experience and the organisational knowledge that cooperativists accumulated over the years. Both translations are preceded by introductions to the lives and works of Abramowski and Wolski, and were written by Cezary Rudnicki and Adam Duszyk respectively. This section of the issue closes with an article on the *Principles of the Common* by Bartłomiej Blesznowski and Mikołaj Ratajczak, who reconstruct the political "principles" of the Polish cooperativism using the conceptual tools of post-Operaist theory and the vocabulary of the institutions of the common.

So as not to transform the history and the memory of past struggles into a "monumental" or an "antiquarian" version of history, we didn't seek to look into the Polish cooperative movement for biographies of great leaders and thinkers, or for an explanation of the semi-peripheral condition of Poland's economy and society. The aim was to reconstruct a political philosophy of cooperativism on the example of the Polish cooperative movement. The cooperative movement presented a historically determined form of institutions of the common and, in the case of Polish history, the cooperative movement of the early twentieth might be one of the most, if not the most, important example of an alternative to capitalist modernity organised around direct socialisation that is based in the common (i.e. a form of socialisation beyond the relation of sovereignty or the principle of property). If the Polish cooperative movement has a legacy – that is, after it's subordination to the state regime beginning in 1936 and fully completed during the period of "really existing socialism",

followed by its almost complete dissolution during the neoliberal transformation post 1989 – it is in this idea of cooperative principles.

The second section of this special issue takes a closer look at the various forms of cooperative practices that have taken place in the past, are occurring today, and are sketching future perspectives. In her article *A Path to a Countermovement?* Aleksandra Bilewicz compares the “new” movements’ of consumer cooperatives that have emerged in Poland since 2010 with the “old” consumer cooperative movement that existed between 1906 and 1939 (initiated by Abramowski, among others). She makes use of Karl Polanyi’s concept of the “embedded economy” to show that the “new” consumers’ cooperatives are unable to provide “supporting structures” for reciprocity and redistribution and therefore encounter obstacles in their attempts to create a countermovement against market forces. The question of cooperativism as a possible “counter” to capitalism, and more precisely to “cognitive capitalism”, is taken up by Jan J. Zygmuntowski in his text *Commoning in the Digital Era*. Zygmuntowski explores the possibilities of platform cooperativism on a micro level in the context of the widespread adoption of ICT technologies, of social media and of sharing economy businesses. However, his perspective is not limited to the analysis of purely technological opportunities, but is based on a more general critique of the political economy of late, cognitive capitalism. Finally, Kuba Szreder in *Instituting the Common in Artistic Circulation* offers a dialectical analysis of the contradictions embedded in global artistic circulation. By joining the methodologies of Marxist and post-Operaist critique with the sociology of art and action research, the author sketches a possible passage from the opportunism and entrepreneurship of the self that permeate the lives of most contemporary art producers to the institutionalisation of an entrepreneurship of the multitude. In this way Szreder is able to show not only that the field of artistic production is a laboratory for contemporary modes of labour and production, but also that it can become a site of inventions for new forms of cooperative associations and mutual aid.

The third section of the issue is devoted to the economic question of money as a social institution and as a possible institution of the common. In his article *Between Money and Sovereignty*, Stefano Lucarelli explores the possibilities of local currencies as means to foster the democratic self-management of social wealth. He juxtaposes them with another form of complementary currencies, namely *crypto coins*, and analyses both as “political technologies” that create alternative monetary circuits. Lucarelli is interested in the political aspect of these technologies, posing the question as to the forms of democratic participation that they enable and the forms of sovereignty that they potentially define. By drawing experiences from select experiments with local currencies (Sardex, SoNantes and Sol Biolette) and *crypto coins* (Bitcoin), the author offers an analysis of the role of money in organising cooperation and shaping social institutions.

The issue closes with four review articles of books that have contributed to past and current debates on institutions of the common, cooperation and experimentation with new forms of resistance. Kamil Piskala reviews the most recent publishing projects (in Polish and English) devoted to the history and intellectual accomplishments of the Polish cooperative movement before 1939. Jan Sowa critically discusses Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Assembly* and proposes a shift in the post-Operaist perspective away from a focus on new forms of labour and production toward a political analysis of ongoing automation. Felipe Ziótti Narita gives a detailed insight into Pierre Dardot and Christine Laval's acclaimed book *Commun* and situates the discussion on the common in the context of the contemporary impasses of neoliberal capitalism. And, lastly, Justyna Zielińska and Jacek Zych review Jamie Woodcock's study of the call centre as a workplace in *Working the Phones*.

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**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** kooperatyzm, dobro wspólne, ideologia mniejszościowa, alternowoczesność, archeologia.