The political economy of post-conflict Northern Ireland: The contribution of worker cooperatives

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Abstract:

Northern Ireland provides a complex portrait of a divided post-conflict society, one where neoliberal economics are embedded into a fragmented landscape, emulating rather than transcending polarisation between divided communities. Indeed, peace processes are amongst the "competitive strategies" for the continuation of the neoliberal political project, dominant in both academic literature and practice of peacebuilding. As the politics of neoliberalisation have become common ground within political elites otherwise busy planning their countermove on the political chessboard of ethnic-resource competition, peace has failed to materialise as improved living standards for some of Northern Ireland's poorest communities. As a result, the neoliberal reading of peacebuilding economics is coming under increasing criticism. Yet, beyond the institutional addiction to neoliberalism on the one hand, and its critique on the other, there is a lack of imagination as to what an alternative, progressive and inclusive post-conflict transformation looks like. Northern Ireland's political battleground may not leave much space for alternatives, but it does not mean they do not exist. In fact, the exploration of new repertoires for more progressive and shared politics is precisely what this research aims to investigate.

This PhD research consists of an empirical, qualitative study of worker cooperatives in Northern Ireland. Worker cooperatives provide a new terrain of investigation, building on existing literature by investigating the overlooked role worker cooperatives play in providing an alternative rhetoric to place-making in a divided society. The engaged, embedded ethnographic approach to research (with in-depth interviews and participant observation) led to a significant set of interviews with worker cooperatives, the wider cooperative sector and key stakeholders. This body of work points to the processes and complexities at play in actually existing alternative economies in the Northern Irish case study, highlighting as much the therapeutic practices they foster, the desire for emancipation they respond to and the anti-capitalist and anti-sectarian politics they are driven by. The research also explores the competing claims over the meaning of the social economy that play out in policy, between opposing notions of charity and entrepreneurship on one side, solidarity and cooperation on the other, eliciting the wider contestation as to the meaning of peace in a divided society and the power dynamics that drive the exclusion of alternative economic narratives.

This study aims to contribute to emerging academic debates on social and diverse economies: the research fills a gap between the critique of a neoliberal interpretation of peacebuilding and on the other hand, the envisioning of alternative economies. However, the research also engages critically by drawing from the compassionate gaze that feminist geographers have called upon when investigating alternative economies, while critically assessing the forceful limitations imposed upon them, the compromises they engage in, and the institutional attempts at co-option they confront. Finally, informed by the analysis of institutional challenges faced by worker cooperatives, the research provides lessons for promoting cooperative economies.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the research

How a research project comes to life is always an interesting phenomenon – sometimes born out of luck, stumbled across by accident, sometimes part of lifelong endeavours, political or otherwise. More often, what really gives birth to a study is silenced in favour of demonstrating the necessity for the study itself – its contribution to providing new knowledge or to challenging existing theories. Yet, how a social phenomenon turns into an object brought under the microscope of academic investigation bears repercussion on the research process itself.

I landed in Ireland more than 10 years ago, for an internship with a victims' organisation that supported the Bloody Sunday families in seeking justice. As I arrived in Derry in the midst of a short-lived euphoria over the release of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry findings – shedding light onto the events of 30 January 1972 when the British army opened fire onto the crowd, killing 14 people – I found the atmosphere in the city electrifying. What I witnessed in Derry and later in Belfast attested to the wider processes at play in Northern Ireland, a society slowly emerging from the ashes of a deadly conflict. The predicaments with seeking justice from a government that saw the peace process as drawing a veil over the Troubles were evident. The fragmented nature of memory interlaced everywhere in the cities' landscape. Segregated neighbourhoods, a divided sense of identity and the legacy of collective trauma chimed with the growing disillusion that peace did not materialise for many as improved living standards, health and education. Still, I was not sure if this was 'peace', but there was a palpable tint of hope in the air.

A year later, after a break to complete my Degree in France, I moved to Belfast – a one-way ticket and packed suitcase in hand. Fate of circumstances, I landed a job in a trade union anti-sectarianism organisation. A different but not unrelated story unfolded here. I learnt from old 'Tankies', 'Rotten Prods'[1], feminists and others who

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[1] The tradition of the "Rotten Prods" refers to trade unionists and workers who defied the Unionist cross-class alliance and engaged in industrial actions that transcended ethno-national divisions. For example, in July 1920, Labour-supporting Protestants joined the thousands of Catholic workers who were violently evicted from the Harland & Wolff and Workman Clark's shipyards (Parr and Edwards, 2017)

saw in social class a unifier beyond the divided nature of orange and green identities. I learnt of the trade unionists, legends in their own rights, who had organised across communities a hundred years ago, and also those, much less known, who had made peace possible. Those that replaced Union Jacks with Spanish republican flags, Martin McGuiness and Ian Paisley with Karl Marx and Rosa Luxembourg. There were those who, wanting to add into the weft of this collective fabric of history, worked tirelessly to plant seeds of hope for better futures. And those who kept the flame of the past alive, which, in an environment where collective memory is a sore point, highly fragmented and politically charged, is no mean feat. If you observed closely, everywhere you went the dire legacy of a yet-unresolved conflict was met with pockets of resistance thriving to propose an alternative, a resistance which I hope this thesis helps testify of. Richmond compares resistance to the black matter of the political universe, invisible but everywhere present (2011, p. 423). Even in an environment described as a "toxic mix of neoliberalism and sectarianism" (Murtagh and McFerran, 2015, p. 1598), resistance endures.

It is in this context that worker cooperatives started to emerge – or to be precise, re-emerge – as practical initiatives to foster employment and sometimes to bridge the sectarian divide. Cooperatives began burgeoning at the feet of interfaces – those so-called 'peace walls', metal sheeting fences and concrete barriers carving up Unionist and Nationalist neighbourhoods into segregated territories; by the wastelands, derelict factories and industrial hangars; in the city centre – a quarter of which had been formerly flattened by bombs; from the Glens to the rural fields, as they had done more than a hundred years earlier. Northern Ireland was experiencing the same economic recession that followed the 2008 financial crash elsewhere, a financial crash that fed a mounting opposition globally and the re-emergence of alternative economic practices (for example in Latin America, Dinerstein, 2015; Ranis, 2016; Vieta, 2014). Harrison contends "quite early after the meltdown, people began to spot that cooperative and mutual institutions had, to a large extent, come out of the crisis looking less idiotic than most" (2014, p. 10). Against austerity policies – "a societal punishment […] imposed on everyone but the guilty" (Peet quoted in Aalbers, 2013, p. 1088) – thinking about the role of cooperative practices received increasing consideration alongside more traditional trade union, socialist and anti-sectarian politics. There was a bit of a moment for cooperatives in Ireland: emerging cooperatives, conferences, residentials,

trade union and political workshops, support with the creation of the first cooperative development organisation in Northern Ireland. A gathering of hopeful politics across the political spectrum and across Ireland that brought cooperators together into a movement. One that I was fortunate to witness and participate in and that provides the inspiration for this research project. It is those collective endeavours that I intend to bring here under the microscope of academic investigation.

Setting the scene: Northern Ireland

Ending a conflict that claimed the lives of over 3500 people, the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement (GFA) was signed on the 10 of April 1998 by most parties in Northern Ireland. The 'Troubles' refers to the latest incarnation of a conflict waged over the sovereignty of Ireland since its colonisation by Great Britain. Fuelled by the spectre of wars of religion raging across Europe in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, heightened by the plantation of Ulster – the displacement of Irish Catholics by Protestant settlers from Great Britain – leading eventually to the partition between a Unionist dominated Northern Ireland State (1921) and the creation of an independent Irish Republic (1923) in the wake of a bitter civil war: violence and insurrections have been a constant feature of Irish politics. In its final embodiment known as the Troubles, the conflict resumed in 1968. Under Unionist hegemony – a government defining itself as for and by Protestants belonging within the United Kingdom – Catholics/Nationalists took to the street in a civil rights protest over discrimination in housing, voting and employment. A brutal repression ensued, escalating into a bitter conflict between Irish republican paramilitaries, Ulster loyalist paramilitaries, and British armed forces over the old-time question of Northern Ireland's inclusion within a United Ireland or a United Kingdom. Thirty years of violence – people burnt out of their homes, indiscriminate bombing, shoot-to-kill policies, internment, torture, discriminatory policing and 'counter-terrorist' campaigns – left an indelible mark in the form of sectarianism, trauma, and more strikingly 3,720 people dead and many more injured. The conflict eventually came to an end in 1994 with a paramilitary ceasefire and in 1998 with the signing of the peace agreement. An end of violence yes, but not a resolution: the peace process postponed rather than settled the constitutional question, shifting ethno-national disputes into the political sphere (Farrell, 1976; Brennan and Deutsch, 1993; Tonge, 2006).

Peace does not exist in a vacuum. Peace processes are shaped by the wider economic context they operate in, an economic conjuncture which since the 1970s has been dominated by the advancement of free trade, globalisation and capital mobility. As well as governance structures that have been criticised for embedding sectarianism, institutionalising segregation (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006) and increasing communal resource competition (Nagle, 2012), the Northern Irish peace process also provides "competitive strategies" for the continuation of the neoliberal political project (Selby, 2008, p. 22), a phenomenon that is not unique to Northern Ireland (Ahearne, 2009; Paris, 1997). Indeed, the ceasefire set the scene for the implementation of a series of reforms accelerating and exacerbating already engaged processes of privatisation and dismantling of public services, corporate expansion with a focus on FDI-related economic growth, de-industrialisation and financialisation – reforms which Northern Ireland had been partly shielded from in the 1980s (Coulter, 2019; Horgan, 2006). It is an institutional addiction to neoliberal economics that dominates post-conflict economic policy (Nagle, 2009), one that has fostered common ground within political elites otherwise in disaccord (Coulter and Shirlow, 2019). Yet, this neoliberal reading of peacebuilding economics is coming under increasing criticism. By privileging capital accumulation over wellbeing and quality of life, "endless economic growth" imperatives over long-term social needs (Barry, 2021, p.1; 2015), scholars have pointed to the 'neoliberal peace' failing to materialise as improved living standards for some of Northern Ireland's poorest communities (Knox, 2016), with little consideration for how the widening of social inequalities fuels competition over diminishing resources, sense of loss in some communities, enduring inequitable outcomes in others (Kelly, 2012; Horgan, 2006; Coulter, 2014; 2019).

This research project depicts a complex portrait of a divided post-conflict society, one where neoliberal economics are embedded into a fragmented landscape (Brenner et al., 2010; Peck et al., 2010), emulating rather than transcending social polarisation (Muir, 2014). Yet, beyond the institutional addiction to neoliberal economics and top-down peacebuilding on the one hand and its critique on the other hand, what and where are the alternatives? In particular, if orthodox economics play a fundamental role in shaping peace processes and outcomes, what of alternative economies? As Murtagh contends, "if economic modernity is a driver of some form of sharing and if poverty is the hallmark of segregation, then economics deserves to be a more meaningful

component of conflict management and peace-building" (2017, p. 20). Understanding the emergence and contribution of worker cooperatives as alternative practices embedded in a fractured post-conflict economy is precisely what this thesis investigates. Could worker cooperatives contribute to offer a little more room for "progressive, shared and future-oriented inclusive politics" (Shirlow, 2018, p. 392) in light of Northern Ireland's political battleground?

Rationale:

The enthusiasm that animated the first steps of an infant cooperative movement led to interesting experiments in worker cooperation in Northern Ireland. From a radical media cooperative, to a group of cleaners fighting the legacy of sectarianism and poverty in their communities, the worker cooperatives that have emerged in the last ten years or so stand in sharp contrast with the way Northern Ireland is often caricatured in the media and the academic literature. Indeed, Murtagh (2016) points to a lacuna in the policy discourse and academic research on Northern Ireland when it comes to cooperatives and more broadly the social economy.

Worldwide, scholars have devoted their attention to cooperatives as a possible alternative to profit-driven obsession (Schweickart, 2011; Wright, 2010; Ranis, 2016). A cooperative is defined as "an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise" (ICA, 2018). Cooperatives are social businesses whose economic activity is imbued with and driven by ethical considerations, rather than fairness and social justice being an add-on to profit-making strategies. Worker cooperatives, in particular, bring together workers as collective owners and stewards of their enterprise, governed by principles of independence, solidarity, democratic control and concern for the wider community (Gradin, 2015).

With more than a billion members worldwide, cooperatives play a fundamental role in fostering a vibrant and diversified local economy where the local community is the main beneficiary. The ICA points to cooperatives across the world "act[ing] together to build a better world through cooperation" (ICA, 2018). Multidisciplinary research on cooperatives has highlighted their role in economic democracy placing them on a

spectrum that ranges from representing an alternative to neoliberalism to constituting a merely efficient business form, from concepts of resistance and autonomy to a tool in strategies of privatisation (Amin, 2009; Birchall, 2003; 2013; Cornwell, 2012; Dinerstein, 2014; Gibson-Graham, 1996; 2006; Harvey, 2000; Healy, 2015; Leyshon et al., 2003; Perotin, 2006; Rowe et al., 2017). Whether or not they can provide an alternative between market-driven economy and a state plagued by ethno-nationalist resource competition; offer an efficient and resilient economic model capable of driving those in needs out of poverty; or even advance a vision of society where democracy and collectivism prevail, what is evident is that worker cooperatives stand in sharp contrast with the discourse that prevails in Northern Ireland on what an economic policy after 30 years of conflict should look like.

Worker cooperatives provide a new terrain of investigation to investigate the political economy of post-conflict Northern Ireland (McAleavy et al., 2001; Nolan et al., 2013; McMahon, 2018). This thesis contributes to building on the existing literature by investigating the overlooked role cooperatives play in providing an alternative rhetoric to place-making, contributing to conflict transformation and to workers' emancipation in a divided society. This research aims at building on the exploration of new repertoires of political mobilisation in Northern Ireland (Coulter, 2014; Doyle and McAreavey, 2014), mapping alternative forms of (cross-) community engagement on bread and butter issues (Nagle; 2009). As well as producing new knowledge, investigating the contribution of worker cooperatives in Northern Ireland also addresses the limited attention bestowed to the history of labour, collectivism and mutual aid, a history which in the case of Irish cooperatives has suffered from "consistent downplaying" (Bolger, 1977, p. 112).

Second, the research on worker cooperatives in Northern Ireland brings a new light to the exploration of local alternative economies embedded in a segregated space. The research speaks to the processes of fragmentation of space in this post-conflict society (Graham and Nash, 2006; Nagle and Clancy, 2010) shaped by class and ethnicity. In the backdrop of post-industrial, impoverished and segregated neighbourhoods in Northern Ireland, the context of this study provides interesting lessons on alternative economies where the "local" is not commonly associated with autonomy or solidarity but instead with conflict, trauma and territorialism.

The study also contributes to current emerging academic debates on social economies, as criticisms of neoliberalism are opening up spaces for exploring alternative economic practices (Gibson-Graham, 1996; 2006, Cornwell, 2012, Harvey, 2000). The research examines how worker cooperative seek to offer an alternative and remedy to the specific problems caused by neoliberal practices embedded in Northern Ireland's policy landscape. The research takes here a nuanced approach from the studies of alternative, diverse and solidarity economies, by drawing both from the compassionate gaze asked of critical and feminist geographers when looking at diverse economies (Gibson-Graham, 1996, 2006, 2008; Cornwell, 2012), so not as to restrict their possibilities, while also putting in perspective the contradictions, complexities and difficulties that cooperatives grapple with. The research builds on emerging literature that contends for reading the economy in diversity without abandoning nonetheless a critical assessment of the forceful limitations imposed upon them (North et al, 2020; Miller, 2015; Zanoni et al., 2017; Chatterton et al., 2019; Dinerstein, 2014, 2015, 2017). I am also interested in critically engaging with ethnographic empirical accounts of alternative economies to analyse whether worker cooperatives are expressions of critical agency, investigating both the antagonistic and hopeful politics that motivate them, evaluating the struggles and contradictions they face as non-hegemonic practices. This research not only aims at raising awareness of worker cooperatives in Northern Ireland, bringing them out of the interstices and obscurity in which they currently operate. The research also seeks to inscribe itself in the tradition of other studies that commemorate marginalised history, not only of cooperatives but also of labour, to uncover critical agency and its contribution to building social change in the present.

Aims and objectives:

Worker cooperatives in Northern Ireland offer a new terrain of academic investigation to the study of post-conflict Northern Ireland, serving to illustrate the politics, the complexities, the processes and impediments to the emergence of alternative economies in a context increasingly dominated by neoliberalism.

By looking at the economy in its diversity (Gibson-Graham, 2008; North and Cato, 2018), this research brings to the fore alternative economies of resilience, resistance

and solidarity. In doing so, it contributes to dispelling the idea that capitalism is "the only history worth remembering" (Rodgers et al., 2016, p. 93) and therefore the only present worth writing about. Examining the trajectories of real existing worker cooperatives, the research seeks to capture the perspective of those who inhabit alternative economic spaces, interrogating the motivations that drive the emergence of worker cooperatives. This study portrays the visions of those engaged in trying to build a more egalitarian, democratic and sustainable economy. In particular, the research brings to the fore the antagonistic politics at play in alternative economies, contesting the role of critique (of neoliberalism) as inhibitive of the emergence of alternative practices (Miller, 2015, North et al, 2020).

The investigation of worker cooperatives in Northern Ireland also speaks of the compromises and contradictions alternative economies are engaged in (Dinerstein, 2015; Chatterton et al, 2019; Graefe, 2002). The research evaluates, through the compassionate gaze of an ethnographic outlook, the messy realities of worker cooperatives (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010), looking at the potential for workers to create non-exploitative and ethical work practices, to reintegrate social justice and solidarity into economics (Vieta, 2014; Healy, 2011; 2015; Safri, 2011; Schweickart, 2011).

Notwithstanding, wider relations of power shape the way alternative economies are constructed and maintained. In fact, worker cooperatives remain marginal – this research looks at merely ten projects, some of which no longer exist. The research assesses institutional barriers to cooperation, including the insignificant research and policy attention towards cooperatives. I investigate how cooperative have been more recently cast aside from economic policy to the benefit of more recent concepts of social enterprises and entrepreneurship, a phenomenon accelerated by the neoliberal peace process and mirroring similar developments in Great Britain (Huckfield, 2022; Cato and Raffaeli, 2018). The research sheds light onto the neoliberal penchant that permeates the social economy policy, discussing the undeniable attempts at institutional level to tame the re-emergence of more radical community efforts. In doing so, I hope for the findings of this research to speak of the wider complexities of resistance in environments increasingly defined by an intensified process of neoliberalisation (Brenner et al, 2010).

In foregrounding practices of resistance, creation and compromises, the research echoes calls for a closer engagement with actually existing alternative economic practices as critical to building our understanding of the possible (Zanoni et al., 2017; Cornwell, 2012). Without romanticising alternative economies, the research recognises that even the more modest projects are valuable on their own (Murtagh and Shirlow, 2012, p. 58), especially when they produce tangible impact for the people involved in them. Instead of dismissing them as too small to matter, I evaluate how worker cooperatives, despite their modest contribution, provide interesting insights in what solidarity economies in a post-conflict society look like.

Methodology:

As a result, this research consists in an engaged attempt at building an understanding of alternative economies through the case study of real existing worker cooperatives in Northern Ireland. An ethnographic focus on worker cooperatives contributes to dispelling the myth of the too often assumed but un-investigated positives of alternative organisations (Kociatkiewitz et al., 2021; Wright, 2010, 2019). It equally contributes to dispelling the myth of their inevitable demise (Eisenschitz and Gough, 2011; Rothschild-Whitt, 1979). This echoes Wright's call for empirical accounts "that are neither gullible nor cynical, but try to fully recognize the complexity and dilemmas as well as real potentials of practical efforts at social empowerment" (Wright, 2010, p. 107).

The main focus of the research is an in-depth qualitative study of ten worker cooperatives in and around Belfast, utilising in-depth interviews and participant observation as research methods. Second, the views of representatives from the wider cooperative sector and key stakeholders were also gathered through semi-structured interviews: other cooperatives (consumers/users cooperatives), key interviewees in political parties, policy, trade unions and the community sector. Through continuous engagement with the sector – conferences, regular conversations with gatekeepers, participation in cooperatives' activities – I embedded myself in the cooperative movement and achieved a significant set of interviews (40+).

Ethnography is well placed to uncover the processes and complexities at play in actually existing alternative economies. Drawing from in-depth qualitative interviews that offered opportunities for an immersion in the world of worker cooperatives (Forsey and Horsey, 2012), I put under the microscope the motivations that drive the emergence of worker cooperatives, the everyday processes at play and the institutional barriers they grapple with. In three of the ten projects studied, interviews were complemented by participant observation. Ethnography entails an immersion into the field, making possible the exploration of the processes and messy realities of cooperation. I sought to study in cooperatives, highlighting the knowledge contained therein. I did so with the help of the cooperative sector, the indulgence with which cooperators and gatekeepers welcomed me into their worlds and for which I am immensely grateful. Inspired by the very ethical blueprint that imbues cooperatives' activities, I chose to enact a cooperative approach to research. In recognising agency and resistance, the research aims at looking through the eyes of the very people normally "subjected" to research – for they are not subjects to be categorised and analysed (Valentine, 2005; Benson and Nagar, 2006). In fact, the reader will quickly notice the availing of in-depth interviews with cooperators, a form of acknowledgement that participants are indeed the 'real experts' on cooperation in Northern Ireland. I deliberately give ample space to the interviewees' interpretations, with the aim to provide what Van Maanen (2011, p. 225) describes as "more room in our texts for the voices of those we study and hence reduce the indignity of speaking for others that some ethnographers feel."

The qualitative framework infuses the writing of this thesis with narrative and detailed accounts. The research avails of the diverse economies emphasis on "thick description" with a view to foster "the imagination of different economies, their practices, and subjectivities" (Zanoni et al., 2017, p. 583). Yet, the research also attempts at supplementing rather than substituting rich description with an appropriate level of theory for an in-depth qualitative empirical study. Instead, ethnography and theory "conjoin to produce a concrete sense of the social as internally sprung and dialectically produced" (Willis and Trondman, 2000). The in-depth portraits of the worker cooperatives featured here and the context-dependent knowledge they provide add with complexity, detail and depth to our understanding of worker cooperatives,

contributing to further mapping out spaces where alternative labour relations are enacted.

What's next:

This thesis is structured as follow. The introduction summarises the thesis aims and rational for the research. Chapter 2 contextualises the research, laying the foundations of our understanding of the political economy of post-conflict Northern Ireland. This provides insight into the context in which worker cooperatives operate, eliciting the intensification of the neoliberalisation of politics in Northern Ireland, whereby the peace process becomes synonym of privatisation schemes, public sector cuts and austerity reforms (Coulter, 2019). In evaluating the social and political impact of this neoliberal interpretation of post-conflict management, I also shed light onto the absence of alternative narratives, and in particular cooperatives, in the academic literature on Northern Ireland (Murtagh, 2016).

Chapter 3 sets out the theoretical concepts that will help inform the analysis of cooperatives' contribution to Northern Ireland's political economy. The research builds on a conceptual framework of alternative economies and cooperatives and their role in social transformation. Despite a lacuna in the literature and economic policy in Northern Ireland, cooperatives benefit from a long historical tradition and have fascinated many authors in political theory (Buber, 1949; Vieta, 2014; Ness and Azzelini, 2011; Wright, 2010). A multidisciplinary review highlights empirical research on the cooperative business model, but also its conceptualisation in relation to capitalism, from its utopian roots to historical experiments. Discussing the more recent theoretical gap between the promise of non-exploitative economies on the one hand and those critiquing cooperatives and social economies as neoliberal subterfuges on the other, helps situate this research at the crossroad of emerging academic debates on alternative and solidarity economies.

In chapter 4, I set out the methodological framework of this engaged, ethnographically-informed, cooperative and participatory research, situating the research with regards to the emergence of ethnographic studies into cooperative experiments with the aim of highlighting the actions of workers and communities too

often overlooked in traditional accounts of the economy (Amin, 2009; Leyson et al., 2003; Wright, 2010, p. 107). The chapter also provides confessional tales from the field, discussing the messy realities of fieldwork, the dilemmas of participatory research and research ethics.

The subsequent three chapters detail the findings of this research. Put bluntly, I investigate intent and outcome of, and barriers to worker cooperatives in Northern Ireland, providing a multifaceted response to the research question 'what is the contribution of worker cooperatives to the political economy of Northern Ireland'. Chapter 5 focuses on the reasons that lead to the emergence of alternative economic practices. Drawing from in-depth interviews with worker cooperatives, including those no longer trading, the research contributes to new knowledge on alternative economic practices, accounting for the heterogeneity, imperfections and potential of worker cooperatives. Despite diversity of intentions in setting up worker cooperatives, the chapter evaluates the desire for empowerment and community capacity building in a context of socio-economic deprivation, hardship and exclusion; the drive for building economies centred on environmental and social justice and sustainability; and finally the rejection of neoliberal, sectarian and patriarchal hegemonies that motivates the emergence of worker cooperatives, bringing to the fore spaces of critical agency too often overlooked in the literature on post-conflict Northern Ireland.

Drawing from a sustained immersion into the field, I take an inward look into cooperation in chapter 6. Through three detailed portraits of worker cooperatives in Belfast, the chapter interrogates the worker cooperatives' focus on decent work and on ethics of care. This chapter investigates ethics of care in worker cooperatives, building knowledge on the potential of cooperatives to provide alternative forms of engagement on cross-community issues as well as other tangible aspects such as employment, living wage and fulfilment at work. In particular, the chapter demonstrates a common purpose towards therapeutic practices, from economic marginalisation, alienation at work, and even from the legacy of the conflict.

While previous chapters focus on 'grassroots' perspectives to cooperation, chapter 7 evaluates their contribution within the institutional framework of Northern Ireland's social economy policy. The analysis shifts to the social economy policy at both central

and local government level, informed by interviews with an enterprise agency, local council and other policy stakeholders as well as the impact those policies have on the sector. In evaluating the competing claims over the meaning of the social economy, I set out to illustrate the wider contestation as to the meaning of peace in a divided society and the power dynamics that drive the exclusion of alternative economies. Contrary to the communal resource competition that inform politics in Northern Ireland, it is a different conflict between competing notions of charity and entrepreneurship on one side, solidarity and cooperation on the other playing out in the policy arena. The chapter also discussed the lack of allies in the trade union movement, political parties and the wider cooperative movement before concluding on emerging attempts at reclaiming cooperatives' past, present and future.

The conclusion provides a summary of the research's main findings as well as policy recommendations to support the development of the sector, based on the policy work done through a six-month internship in a cooperative development organisation.

Chapter 2 - Contextualising the research: Northern Ireland, the neoliberal peace and the poverty of alternatives?

Belfast's trajectory in newspapers' front pages has been nothing short of spectacular, from one of the most bombed cities in Europe during the Troubles, to a now 'thriving cosmopolitan' city. It has become a must-see destination for Game of Thrones aficionados and international tourists who get to enjoy the proliferation of touristic attractions, trendy cafes and restaurants that epitomise the architecture emerging out the conflict and industrial era. However, for those stepping a few hundred meters outside the city centre, the 'peace dividends' promised by FDI-gone-gaga politicians and fund managers at the start of the peace process are hard to notice (McCabe, 2013). The picture here is dominated by barbed wires and derelict houses, not high-tech glossy buildings. What's more, 109 fences, walls and invisible lines divide Belfast neighbourhoods, separating the lives of Northern Ireland two main 'communities' (Black, 2016). It is in this environment that the worker cooperatives portrayed in this research operate. In fact, as this chapter discusses, they provide a significant departure from the enduring ethnic resource competition and increasing neoliberalisation that dominates Northern Ireland's political landscape.

This chapter sheds light onto the context in which worker cooperatives trade in Northern Ireland, laying the foundations to gain a thorough understanding of the political economy of post-conflict management. The chapter introduces the Northern Irish peace process, defines neoliberal economics, reviews the concept of the 'neoliberal peace' (i.e. the neoliberalisation of the economy that accompanies peace processes) and examines its implementation in Northern Ireland. I conclude by pointing to a lacuna in the academic literature on post-conflict Northern Ireland which cooperatives are absent from.

A- The peace process in Northern Ireland: an introduction

The Good Friday Agreement marked the end of thirty years of conflict known as 'the Troubles' over the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. It followed from the ceasefire declared by both the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) and loyalist paramilitaries in 1994. Much has been written on the Troubles, covering the

armed conflict between Irish republicans, Ulster loyalists, and British armed forces over Northern Ireland's inclusion in a United Ireland or United Kingdom; the systemic discrimination against a nationalist, predominantly Catholic community in employment, housing, education, voting that fuelled a civil rights movement; discriminatory policing and 'counter-terrorist' campaigns led by the United Kingdom with evidence still emerging over collusion with paramilitary groups (Tonge, 2006; Coogan, 1972; Ellison and Smyth, 2000; Hillyard, 1993; McEvoy, 2001; Walker and Starmer (ed), 1999; Urwin, 2016)[2].

Ending a conflict that claimed the lives of over 3500 people, the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement (GFA) was signed on the 10 of April 1998 by most of the mainstream parties in Northern Ireland. The agreement outlined the governance structures of the devolved and now shared Assembly and Executive and guaranteed the representation and rights of the two main communities – referred to as nationalist and unionist– with a view to address the past grievances that had led to the eruption of the Troubles in the first place (Coulter and Murray, 2008; McGarry and O'Leary, 2006, 2009). However, the power-sharing experiment was far from straightforward. In fact, more than twenty years on from the signing of the GFA, political turmoil has continued to be a constant of Northern Irish politics. Within the first few years of its existence, the Assembly collapsed four times fuelled by uncertainty over the decommissioning of the IRA. Northern Ireland was finding itself again under direct rule until all parties signed the St Andrews Agreement (October 2006), with the notable inclusion of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) formerly unsupportive of the Good Friday Agreement (Coulter and Murray, 2008; Higson, 2008). By the time the Northern Ireland Executive resumed, the political landscape had changed dramatically with votes being polarised to the benefit of Sinn Féin and the DUP, ending the leadership of the SDLP and UUP over the Peace process (Evans and Tonge, 2009; Nagle, 2012).

This was not going to be the only political stalemate Northern Ireland would come to know. Sinn Féin and the DUP, despite initially giving the appearances of an amicable

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[2] Also see *Spotlight on the Troubles: A Secret History*, 2019; *Unquiet Graves*, 2018; Brennan and Deutsch, 1993; Guelke, 2007; Renon, 1998; Lundy, 2009; Amnesty International, 1978.

partnership, increasingly clashed over the management of flag and parade disputes and the implementation of the Welfare Reform. In yet another series of peace talks, both the Stormont House Agreement (November 2014) and a year later the Fresh Start Agreement (2015) were signed, reaffirming the parties' commitment to peace (Coulter and Shirlow, 2019). The respite was short-lived. In January 2017, the Assembly collapsed again, partly fuelled by the scandal of the *Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme*. Arlene Foster, who was the Enterprise Minister when the shambolic 'cash-for-ash' scheme was set up, refused to step down as First Minister, triggering Martin McGuiness' resignation as First Deputy Minister (*BBC News*, 2017). In the backdrop of increasing tensions over support for the Irish Language and the Brexit referendum, Northern Ireland power-sharing institutions came again to a standstill (Nagle, 2018). The Assembly was revived only three years later in January 2020 and has since been plagued with conflict over the implementation of Brexit through the Northern Irish Protocol and the management of the Covid pandemic. In fact, Brexit has created an untenable situation for the DUP which supported the Leave vote, now firmly opposed to the Protocol, and an opportunity for Sinn Féin to reinstate the United Ireland agenda into the mainstream political discourse. If anything, as John Barry (2017) notes, the cacophony over post-Brexit arrangements has hardened attitudes, not softened them. Yet, elections also show that this "war of attrition" (Neill, 2011, p. 84) in the political sphere is not only leaving many behind, it is becoming increasingly unreflective of what politics on the ground mean for ordinary people (Shirlow, 2022).

Much has been written on the political institutions – characterised as consociational – that enabled power-sharing in Northern Ireland (Lijphart, 1969; McGarry and O'Leary, 2006, 2009; Higson, 2008, Hughes, 2011). The peace process, as seen above, inscribes Northern Ireland in the jurisdiction of the United Kingdom until both communities wish otherwise. Over the last 20 years, reforms have been implemented in the police and the criminal justice system, human rights and equality commissions have been established and parties which would never have been in power together have shared the burden of running a devolved government (Shirlow and Coulter, 2019; Taylor, 2009). More strikingly, the political violence that plagued the region for three decades has decreased to levels unimaginable before the ceasefire. Shirlow and Coulter (2019, p. 4) note that it is estimated that the peace process has saved the lives

of 2400 people who would otherwise have been added to the long list of casualties of an ongoing conflict.

However, consociational politics have also been criticised for embedding sectarianism and replacing bombs and guns with "ethnic outbidding" and "resource competition" in the political sphere (Murtagh, 2011, 2017; Nagle, 2009; Shirlow, 2008, Taylor, 2009). Overall, peace processes over the globe – a rather recent phenomenon according to Selby (2008) – have taken the form of elitist projects that rest on the assumption that security, state-building and democratisation will inevitably usher peace. In this idealised vision of peace, a now dominant 'paradigm' for peacebuilding practitioners (Pugh, 2011; Bleiker, 2012; Richmond, 2006), Luckman (2017, p. 100) notes a tendency to overlook the relationship between violence of the one hand and structural issues of power and inequality on the other (also highlighted by Lipschutz, 1998). The literature and practice of peacebuilding operates on reductionist discourses that places an overbearing emphasis on either ethnicity (Pugh, 2011) or poverty as if there was exclusively one single cause to conflict (Cramer, 2008). As a result, scholars have noted that under the influence of international agencies and peacebuilding practitioners, the Northern Irish peace process, instead of paving the way for a "positive peace" – one which would see the social conditions responsible for flaring up tensions transformed (Galtung, 1996) – has failed to confront the material dimensions of inequality and injustice responsible for violence (O'Dowd, 2009; Taylor, 2009; Coulter, 1999; 2014).

There is no denying the benefits of peace, even if it accounts to no more than a cessation of hostilities. Instead, what is critical is the extent to which Northern Ireland "while no longer at war, is not quite yet truly at peace with itself" (Coulter and Murray, 2008, p. 18). What is also critical is to assess how political economy developments – too often neglected in peace studies – shape the peace process and its outcomes (Pugh et al., 2008).

B- The political economy of peace: neoliberalism and the neoliberal peace paradigm

By the time Northern Ireland emerged out of decades of conflict, the economic landscape had changed dramatically. Often characterised as a revival of laissez-faire economics, an economic revolution called neoliberalism had unleashed across the world. In fact, the word has become pervasive, dominating the literature, academic or otherwise. Yet, its meaning remains contested, with no universally accepted definition (Goldtsein, 2012). Some focus on the intellectual doctrine that emerges in the inter-war period in Europe before being associated with the Mont Pelerin Society (1947) and later the programmes of Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman and the Chicago School (Dean, 2014; Amable, 2011). As a political project rather than an academic construct, neoliberalism gained prominence and influenced policy implementation in Pinochet's Chile and with Thatcher and Reagan in the UK and the US, transforming the economic conjuncture for the years to come through the advancement of free trade, globalisation and capital mobility. Some authors emphasise its role as a global hegemonic ideology (Harvey, 1990; 2005) while others focus on its fuzziness, its diversity as political-economic trends that are always in movement and nowhere the same (Brenner et al., 2010). Despite this ambiguity, authors have identified a core of policy trends, whose implementation remains context dependent, such as the privileging of privatisation and lean government, de-regulation, corporate expansion, reduction in taxation, financialisation and an aversion towards social redistribution, in particular with the dismantling of welfare systems and curbing of trade unions (Brenner et al., 2010, pp. 394-395; Peck et al., 2010; Jessop, 2013).

In the United Kingdom, the transition to a new economic regime led by Margaret Thatcher was achieved through an attack on trade unions (its climax being the miners' strike in 1984-1985), programmes of privatisation and deindustrialisation, economic policies centred around the promotion of entrepreneurship and a business climate favourable to attracting Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) (Jessop, 2015). Although the turn to neoliberalism and globalisation in the 1980s and 1990s had already affected Northern Ireland's economy, there was some resistance to implementing free-market orthodoxy before the transition to a peaceful society was set in motion. On the ground of the instability of both its economy and political situation, Jim Prior, Secretary of

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State for NI declared "we are all Keynesians here" (in Coulter, 2019, p. 128). Instead, it is Tony Blair following New Labour's neoliberal turn (Jessop, 2003) who best understood that peace could open new market opportunities (Coulter, 2014, p. 769). Instead of the large subsidy previously spent on conflict containment being redirected towards health, education and the local economy (Horgan, 2006), local politicians and Westminster saw in neoliberalism a means to rebuild an economy hindered by bombs and guns. Indeed, by 1998, there was nothing new in looking to neoliberalism to reconstruct divided societies.

Peace does not exist in a vacuum. It cannot be divorced from the broader economic context in which it operates. By 1998, the global shift to neoliberalisation had permeated practices in post-conflict reconstruction (Pugh, 2011). Indeed, the assumption that peace rests on free-market economics has become an undisputed orthodoxy in development and peacebuilding thinking. Lipschutz (1998) refers to this dominant paradigm as the "neoliberal peace" (also Selby, 2008; Bleiker, 2012), which put bluntly sees a "combination of peace, democracy and free markets" (Richmond, 2006, p. 292) as the golden mechanisms which the international community disposes of to nurture a peaceful social order between and within states. An emerging literature influencing international agencies now declares that it is "Capitalism, and not democracy, [that] leads to peace" (Gartze, 2007, p. 182). The logic goes: stretching the therapeutic virtues of neoliberal doctrine, neoliberalism allegedly makes war irrelevant, elevating living standards of populations across the world and eroding the authority of nation states and salience of ethnic identities, hence removing cause for conflict (McDonald, 2009; Purcell, 2003). Thomas Friedman states that, now free to engage in consumption, "…people in McDonald's countries don't like to fight wars anymore, they prefer to wait in line for burgers" (quoted in Selby, 2008, p. 16). By encouraging individualism and entrepreneurialism, neoliberalism shows individuals they can succeed on their own (Strong, 2010). Privatisation is then conceived as an alternative to an overburdened state plagued by conflictual ethnic politics and cost duplication (Gerson, 2001; Nagle, 2010).

Paris (2002) points to a new form of globalisation, not of goods or capital, but of this very idea of peace. And as Watson and Hay (2003) demonstrate, discourses can be powerful, having performative effects as they justify policies and reforms on the

ground of being forced to perform in an increasingly competitive global race. The neoliberal peace is a discourse, whereby peace processes have now come to signal peace dividends and international investment (Selby, 2008). Since the 1990s, most peace processes and peacebuilding programmes - Guatemala, Israel and Palestine, South Africa, former Yugoslavia, Namibia, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Mozambique, Angola and Rwanda – have rested on the implementation of this neoliberal peace paradigm (Lipschutz, 1998; Paris, 1997; Cope, 2014). Countries emerging from conflict are subjected to the same 'shock treatment' (Klein, 2007) that had been implemented in the Global South in the 1970s and 1980s through structural adjustment programmes (Willet, 2008): forced to privatise their public assets, remove barriers to trade, establish control on their labour force and limit social welfare in exchange for financial aid (Eckes, 2011, p. 183; Stiglitz, 2002). Those programmes, now a cornerstone of the Washington Consensus, have come to dominate peacebuilding practice and rhetoric (Pugh, 2011).

Yet, Lipschutz (1998) notes that the assumptions underpinning the neoliberal peace are almost entirely flawed. Contrary to conventional wisdom, in the backdrop of globalisation, the state is not withering away. In fact, neoliberalism was never simple redeployment of the laissez-faire doctrine abandoned on the onset of the 1929 financial crisis. It does not signal a reduction of state intervention, but its realignment towards preserving the market order (Amable, 2016). Moreover, the theory that globalism erodes ethno-national identities and transplant them with new ones forgets both how robust identities are (Yiftachel and Ghanem, 2004) and how disorientating globalisation is (Nagle, 2010). If anything, Harvey (2005) notes that neoliberalism rests on nationalism to remedy the destruction of the social fabric and forms of solidarity bonds.

Remarkably, under neoliberalism, we are promised a 'rising tide' in economic growth and prosperity that will elevate all countries equally across the globe. Inequalities and unevenness are silenced in this idealised vision of free-market economics. Recent studies report that the richest 1% owned 82% of the global wealth (*The Guardian*, 2018) while unemployment and cuts in welfare have increased mortality rates (Brazys and Regan, 2017, p. 412). The attack on organised labour accompanies a decrease in the real value of wages and increasingly precarious nature of work in this global single

job market subject to the decisions of multinational corporations, not the alleged 'invisible hand' of the market (Dicken, 2011; Petras and Veltmeyer, 2001; Kalleberg, 2009). The literature also highlights the crisis-driven nature of neoliberalism, whereby speculation and financialisation through increasingly riskier instruments implemented on a global scale foster an extremely volatile environment (Acharya and Richardson, 2009; Aalbers, 2013; Harvey, 2009). Interestingly, the 2008 financial crisis did not precipitate the end of neoliberalism but opened up new avenues for dismantling the last relics of post-war welfare states and hasten the commodification of labour (Dean, 2014, p. 1085; Amable, 2016).

As a result, neoliberalism has been interpreted as political project restoring and consolidating the power of a transnational capitalist class within capitalism[3]. Framing neoliberalism within the development of capitalism highlights the fallacies of neoliberal peacebuilding. Many scholars stress capitalism's tendency towards overproduction and over-accumulation, accompanied by instability, inequality and poverty (Harvey, 2005, 1990; Wright, 2010). Others describe capitalism as an economic system that is both socially and politically unjust – Schweickart would say capitalism is unethical (2011). In particular, it is becoming evident that continuous GDP-measured economic growth, a commonsense of neoclassical economics, is neither possible nor desirable for most. Producing and consuming more of the same thing may be vital to capital accumulation, not so much to people's quality of life and the planet (Barry, 2015). As Adler (2007) summarises, capitalism may be progressive, but the unevenness in the aggravation of inequalities, underemployment and unemployment, the recurrence of crisis and war are on the other hand indefensible. In this respect, it is not a system transformation but regime shift (Jessop, 2003), a change in social order or a new mode of regulation (Dumenil and Levy, 2012) which occurred due to the crisis in the post-war economic settlement, dominated by Keynesian policies, a class compromise between labour and capital and a Fordist system of

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[3] Schweickart describes capitalism as the economic system dominant in our time, an economic system which governs the "relations between human beings interacting with non-human nature in order to produce goods and services that they desire". In a capitalist society, the laws and customs that govern this relationship consists in most people working in exchange for a wage for corporations or private individuals who own the means of production. Prices are determined by competition i.e. what is usually referred to as "the market" while enterprises compete to deliver those goods and services and make a profit (2011, pp. 24-25).

production and consumption (Harvey, 1990; 2005). In support of this argument, neoliberalism has often been understood as a project of redistribution, essentially from everybody else to the rich, in particular at the expense of labour (Aalbers, 2013). Not all countries compete on an equal footing in this global race. Western financial institutions profit from managing crises in the periphery – a projected $4.6 trillion since 1980 according to Harvey (2005, p. 20) while many countries in the Global South have regressed in their development, leading authors such as Petras and Veltmeyer (2001) to conclude that neoliberalism carries the same imperialist agenda as previous phases in capitalist history (Wood, 2005).

Neoliberalism does not simply intensify the disparity between territories, it feeds on the unevenness of the landscape it operates within, its regional specificities and the diversity of its inherited institutions (Brenner et al., 2010, p. 208). Questioning the appearance of uniformity given by the interpretation of neoliberalism as hegemonic, geographers focusing on the variety within existing practices have described neoliberalism as a process whose integration within existing local framework is hybrid and piecemeal (Brenner et al., 2010; Peck and Tickell, 2002). Understanding neoliberalism as an uneven and unequal process of redistribution highlights the risk in assuming that peace dividends will materialise for those in need. The conspiracy of hope that often accompanies peace agreements, when international leaders claim that economic prosperity is around the corner, threatens peace itself, giving false hopes of economic returns. Instead, empirical evidence shows that neoliberal practices in societies emerging from conflict at best obstruct peace building, at worst spur violence (Ahearne, 2009; Paris, 1997). If anything, market reforms, resulting in the increase in inequalities and new forms of segregation, can themselves fuel violent ethnic and political mobilisation. The neoliberal peace as a discourse offers new avenues for the continuation of the neoliberal political project, now reaching territories previously shielded from it due to political circumstances, something the next section explores in the case of Northern Ireland. As Selby contends, "peace processes and the appearance of peace are amongst the competitive strategies of neoliberalising states and societies in an era of global capital" (2008, p. 22).

C- The double transition in Northern Ireland: 'a toxic mix'

If geographers have emphasised the heterogeneity and hybrid nature of neoliberalism (and by extension the neoliberal peace), we ought to analyse existing forms of neoliberalisation in specific contexts. The propagation of the neoliberal peace paradigm operates through top-down imposition from international institutions and the shaping of peace agreements and reconstruction programmes by international advisers. In this respect, the role of the Clinton administration in bringing about a peace process in Northern Ireland is well documented (McGarry and O'Leary, 2009). In an atmosphere of deep optimism in the therapeutic virtues of globalised markets, US administrations and successive British Prime Ministers were not shy in their promise that Northern Ireland would benefit from inward foreign investment and sustained economic growth if paramilitary ceasefires were to hold (Coulter, 2014, pp. 764-765; Knox, 2016, pp. 485-86). However, neoliberalism "was never a matter of imposing, from above, a singular regulatory template" (Peck et al., 2010, p. 107). Neoliberalism relies first and foremost on local elites for its implementation (Selby, 2008; Amable, 2016).

As the Northern Irish peace process unravelled, The Times announced that the peace dividends were not far off (McCabe, 2013). Shortly after the ceasefire, capital flowed into Northern Ireland, causing the region to display the appearance of a prosperous thriving economy: spike in employment, unmatched GDP growth levels and increase in productivity (Smyth and Cebulla, 2008; Horgan, 2006, p. 657). In the minds of politicians and public servants, Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) were key instruments to bring prosperity to Northern Ireland. Indeed, as McCabe (2013) explained, the peace agreement occurred at a time where the US, freed from the Cold War, were looking for investment opportunities abroad. They invested a mere €1.5 billion into Northern Ireland in the latter half of the 2000s (Coulter, 2019). Building on this success, Invest NI, an institution charged with sustaining economic development, managed to secure millions of pounds as incentives for FDIs. Yet, competing for inward investment to enhance the attractiveness of the region is a costly business that pays little attention to how any money coming in is actually retained locally. In fact, Kelly (2012) shows that most of these incentives failed in achieving the employment creation promised, with enterprises relocating away shortly after

receiving their hefty subsidy (ex: Valence Corporation, HCL Technologies). Overall, out of the £1 billion invested in the first five years of its creation, Invest NI only secured 328 stable employment positions (Coulter, 2014, p. 766). Undoubtedly, the money invested through Invest NI did not reach local workers' pockets: most jobs also went to call centres, feeding a burgeoning sector that relied on some of the lowest wages in Europe (Smyth and Cebulla, 2008).

Monumental investments were made in those sectors of the economy that were said to generate profits for local communities. While employment in the traditionally strong sector of manufacturing declined, beset with low productivity and wages below UK averages, jobs in the service economy proliferated (Royle, 2015; Smyth and Cebulla, 2008, p. 179). The attraction for foreign direct investment materialised primarily, beside call centres, in the "knowledge-based manufacturing and services" sector, with limited bearing on employment creation. The *Industrial Strategy for Northern Ireland* reflected this attraction for alleged 'high-growth' sectors, such as Pharmaceutical industries, Financial services and Creative Industries whose contribution to local employment is questionable (O'Hearn, 2008, pp. 106-107). It is indeed GDP-measured economic growth that is prioritised over all else – employment, quality of life and wellbeing, environmental sustainability – and pervades public policy in Northern Ireland. The last *Industrial Strategy*, in consultation before the Assembly collapsed in 2017, displayed a similar focus on growth delivery rather than job creation (DfE, 2017, p. 24). The Strategy also made references to Estonia as a comparable "small open economy", which is telling considering that Estonian wages are 57% lower than in the UK (NIC-ICTU, 2017). The recent success in creative industries contributes to present Northern Ireland as an economic marvel. Again, as Stephen Baker (2014) questions, where the millions generated by events such as the European Music Awards and Game of Thrones went is another question altogether. As well as the tendency for profits to be extracted by international shareholders, research shows that FDIs have often bypassed the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland (O'Hearn, 2008).

Competing for inward investment is not a win-win situation, always having to offer more at the risk of offsetting any benefit. As well as being wealth extractive, FDIs also increases territories' vulnerability to economic shocks (CLES, 2020). The opening of the region's economy to international market fluctuations since the peace process has

come with its own set of difficulties. Taking the lead from the speculative practices associated with financialisation and from the property boom in the South of Ireland, Northern Ireland's property market is a case in point. Speculation in real estate led house prices to increase by 281% compared to 179% in the rest of UK, with the generated profits being reinvested into the construction and the hospitality industry that gave Belfast its facade of vibrant city (O'Hearn, 2008, p. 109). In the wake of the international financial crisis, a third of households were in negative equity (Coulter, 2014, p. 766). In fact, by 2019, the Northern Irish economy overall had not yet recovered from the financial crash (MacFlynn, *Belfast Telegraph*, 2019).

In the neoliberal interpretation of post-conflict recovery that dominates public policy in Northern Ireland, privatisation plays a major role. As the Assembly collapsed in 2002 and Northern Ireland returned to direct rule, New Labour's Treasury, now solely responsible for setting the budget, made it crystal clear that regeneration was not going to be funded through public money. By 2007 when the devolved assembly resumed, the Strategic Investment Board had created 38 Public Private partnerships (PPPs) for a total value of £5.3 billion (Coulter, 2019, p. 128), with the aim of extending the involvement of corporations in funding infrastructure projects to water, roads, transports, health and education (Horgan, 2006, pp. 663-664). By 2017, private companies were involved in 31 infrastructure projects accounting for £1.73 billion in value (Coulter, 2019, p. 129). Private Finance Initiatives (PFIs) and Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) contracts have proven particularly expensive for the public purse, an estimated £5.8 billion over the next 25 years at a staggering 300% interest rate (Coulter, 2019). In fact, Aalbers contends that Public Private Partnerships are a weapon of choice in the neoliberal redistribution project, "socialising the risks [while] privatising the profits" (2013, p. 1086).

Developments in Westminster shape processes of neoliberalisation onto the Northern Irish landscape. Following the return of the Conservative Party in power, the Welfare reform was passed in Westminster in 2012. Bearing a disproportionate impact on Northern Ireland – with levels of worklessness well above UK averages (27.7%) (Tomlinson, 2016), the Welfare reform was eventually implemented through the Fresh Start Agreement. In doing so, Sinn Féin – who initially opposed the reform – and the DUP committed to nothing more than simply sanctioning those on benefits in what

Tomlinson calls a "war against the poor" (2016, p. 104). The agreement also induced public sector cuts with mass redundancies in Northern Ireland's main employment sector (almost 7,500 redundancies). And it confirmed the reduction of corporation tax at 12.5% despite both financial consultants and Stormont's own researchers deeming it counterproductive (Coulter and Shirlow, 2019).

Privatisation is only one of the neoliberal strategies on which the *Entente Cordiale* between Sinn Féin and the DUP rests. Overall, austerity driven reforms are central elements on which Sinn Féin and the DUP leadership have found common ground (Murtagh and Shirlow, 2012; Coulter 2014, p. 771), with neoliberal economics being the new common sense for both parties. The DUP's buy-in to Westminster's neoliberal turn was to be expected, with Coulter summing up that "Insofar as the party ever gives any consideration to matters other than the ethno-national preoccupations that inform the 'constitutional question', its impulse is invariably to endorse the most reactionary modes of social and economic policy" (2019, p. 129). Sinn Fein's economic realignment on the other hand is far more astounding considering its economic policy was based until the 1990s on the democratic control of "the means of production, distribution and exchange" (quoted in Murtagh & Shirlow, 2012, p. 51). In a context of polarisation of electoral politics and the transition for both parties to wider cross-class voter base, the capitalisation on a middle-class support partly explains the shift to a consensus on foreign direct investment and privatisation (Tonge, 2006; Evans and Tonge, 2009). Nagle and Clancy (2010) note that in their interpretation of neoliberalism, nationalist and unionist parties differ. The unionist economic rationale aims at consolidating the integration in the United Kingdom while a nationalist reading of those neoliberal policies seeks to foster North/South cooperation and economic harmony for a United Ireland (Nagle and Clancy, 2010, p. 196).

This neoliberal reading of peace by both mainstream political parties that are, economic policy set aside, fighting a sectarian battle in the political sphere, is unlikely to change in the future. Recent economic policies have had to acknowledge (yet not remedy) the endurance of unacceptable levels of inequalities, social deprivation and sectarian divisions. The *Programme for Government* before the Assembly collapse in 2017 established that quality of life was a measurement for economic prosperity (NI Executive, 2017). Locally, the *Belfast Agenda* had to contend with the city comprising

eight of the 10 most deprived wards in Northern Ireland, 56,000 residents in poverty, 7,322 people in housing stress and disparaging life expectancy gaps between the most and least deprived areas (Belfast City Council, 2017). Yet, the shift is only symbolic, with an economic policy that continues to privilege orthodox economic growth as a measure for economic success (Belfast City Council, 2019a). The imperative for growth at all costs has become commonsensical in public policy, a rhetoric of 'prosperity for all' that disguises strategies of capital accumulation for a few. Indeed, it is not job creation that the industrial strategy for Northern Ireland promotes. Neither is it inclusivity, environmental resilience, nor the reduction of socio-economic inequalities. The focus of the £5bn investment in the next 10 years planned by the *Belfast Agenda* and the ambitious Regional City Deal remain on wealth extractive FDIs and industrial sectors such as digital and hi-tech services, with little understanding for their accessibility to residents in a city where a third of the population does not have qualifications above NVQ Level 2 (Belfast City Council, 2017). In addition, revelations continue to emerge on Invest NI, an organisation that knew one of its supported companies handed over a £4 million-worth building for £1 for the sole purpose of avoiding taxation (*Belfast Telegraph*, 2017). The more recent *New Decade, New Approach* (2020) signed by the main political parties and marking the return of the Assembly in 2020 and the subsequent NI Executive *Programme for Government - Draft Outcomes Framework* (NI Executive, 2021) recently under consultation, both reiterate the need to integrate inclusivity and environmental sustainability within the economic strategy. Yet despite pledges around a Climate Emergency Bill (passed in 2022) and promises on worker rights, it is difficult to see how the assembly can manage to enact progressive policies under the austerity-obsessed Tory leadership (Byers, 2020). More importantly, attempts at embedding social and environmental concerns in economic growth strategies continuously fail to reflect on the fact that an economy that puts private wealth and profit above the social needs of communities will create the type of deprivation it aims at tackling. As John Barry concludes: "It is the "myth" of exponential and permanent economic growth itself that is the problem and needs to be abandoned" (2015, p.313).

Neoliberal economics have engendered dire consequences for communities in Northern Ireland. By the early 2000s, 20% of the population could not afford at least six necessity items with the cost of fuel, food and clothes being higher than elsewhere

in the UK (Horgan, 2006, p. 660). The region was beset with higher levels of worklessness compared to England and Scotland (14% of working age household in 2016) (Joseph Roundtree Foundation, 2018); while those in employment in the private sector received wages 16% behind those in the rest of the UK (Coulter, 2019, p. 127). Overall, the annual disposable household income was 17.9% lower than the UK average in 2018 (ONS, 2021). Low pay is indeed a significant issue in Northern Ireland, with 1 in 4 workers earning less than the Real Living Wage (NERI, 2019). Throughout the peace process, the proportion of households on low income has increased while the rise in the inactivity rate owing to disability and long-term sickness is concomitant with the impact left by both conflict and poverty (Smyth and Cebulla, 2008, p. 185; Horgan, 2006). Recent studies depict an ever-bleaker picture with 24% of children living in poverty (Stewart et al., 2018), almost 30,000 people reliant on food banks to survive (Coulter, 2019, p. 136). The peace process sees similar patterns emerging within both communities, with a continued differential rather than equalisation between communities (Horgan, 2006). In fact little attention is paid to how the widening of inequality fuels a sense of loss for some – with an increased propensity for Protestant households to be at risk of low income – and enduring discrimination for others – the disproportion of Catholics on housing waiting list being a case in point (Wallace, 2016). Instead, what statistics suggest is how economic structures mirror and contribute to ethno-national divisions (Coulter, 2014), with a lack of consideration for how material conditions foster different trajectories between and within communities, fuelling sectarian competition and polarisation.

The economic conjuncture of post-conflict Northern Ireland presents a widening of inequalities between the top and bottom of the socio-economic pyramid. Knox (2016) notes that the living standards (in education, health, disability, unemployment and crime) in the most deprived wards have declined relative to those in more well-off neighbourhoods across Northern Ireland. More troubling for the outcome of the peace process is the fact that the same 12 postcodes in which the conflict was concentrated remain blighted with enduring deprivation and poverty (Coulter, 2019). This is where the double transition is most controversial: the Troubles disproportionately affected working class communities, over-represented in the ranks of those who fought and those who died from the conflict (Coulter, 1999, p. 71). If free-market economies widen the gap between the richest and poorest, providing opportunities for those

already well-off at the expense of those desperate to see benefits to peace after a conflict that disproportionally affected them, then we ought to question how neoliberal peace building can foster sustainable peace.

Peck et al. (2010) remind us that the practices of neoliberalism feed on the specificity of pre-existing social relations and inherited institutions of the territories they are inscribed in. As a result, neoliberal practices reproduce, re-arrange and intertwine with rather than transcend local forms of polarisation (Muir, 2014; Yiftachel and Ghanem, 2004). Neoliberalism fuels ethnic resource competition over an increasingly diminishing pool of resources (Nagle, 2009) as the social disintegration it causes results in some communities 'doubling down' on their ethno-national identities. Sectarianism, instead of disappearing, is sustained into a less violent phenomenon on the political scene, enduring side by side with neoliberal economics (Murtagh, 2017, p. 3) leading Murtagh and McFerran to describe Northern Ireland politics as a "toxic mix of neoliberalism and sectarianism" (2015, p. 1598).

Against the backdrop of austerity and deprivation, the lines of fissure between deeply divided communities have sunk further. There are more walls and fences that carve up neighbourhoods into sectarian enclaves than before the peace process. Some have increased in height, solidifying in space the experience of violence and continuation of fights and threats that punctuates everyday life (Dixon et al., 2020; Shirlow, 2000; Mesev et al., 2009). Ten years after the peace process, the majority of the population continued to live in highly segregated areas (where at least 81% of neighbours are from the same background) (Shirlow, 2008, p. 78). Where to work, shop, go out is still defined by ethno-religious identity. Shirlow (2000) reported that 43% of the unemployed people he surveyed refused to work in a place dominated by the other community, which is unsurprising when considering the prevalence of sectarian intimidation and harassment in many workplaces (Nolan and Law 2013). Graham and Nash point to "micro-geographies of segregation" (2006, p. 255), those mental maps that decipher an everyday landscape in which trauma and violence interweave (Dawson, 2016). Those are not only reproduced across generations through family and community socialisation, but also rooted in everyday experiences of fights, threats and insecurity (Connolly, 2000).

The fragmented space that emerges over the ruins of the conflict embodies a complex interaction between narratives of threat, processes of territorialism, ethnic outbidding and competition (McManus, 2017; Murtagh, 2011). Shared space is a rarity. Indeed, shared space in Belfast tends to be gentrified – more easily accessible in desirable postcodes (Murtagh, 2011). For those without disposable incomes, 'shared space' is contained to spaces of consumerism, in the city centre and the retail parks. As Stephen Baker contends "the apparent choice today is between sectarianism and shopping" (2014, p. 10). Looking at post-conflict Belfast further highlights the intricacies between segregation and market-led approaches. The space on display – shaped by capital accumulation rather than social needs – is a feature of neoliberal post-conflict cities, one that epitomises the fallacies of the double transition. In Belfast, "non-controversial" representations of the city emerge, shying the visitor's eye away from social exclusion and segregation. Unless, of course, trauma is transformed into a commodity as part of a profit-seeking strategy through "dark tourism" (Royle, 2015). At the other end of the spectrum, regeneration projects such as the Titanic Quarter (Kelly, 2012; Dawson, 2016; Neill, 2011), Tribeca Belfast in the Cathedral Quarter (Baker, 2020) or the Waterfront (Boland et al., 2017) turning the city into a post-modern collage driven by capital accumulation (Harvey, 1990) embody what shared space really means for political and economic elites, creating a "Potemkin village" (Nagle, 2009) that obscures reality of poverty and sectarianism. It is in the Titanic Quarter, a post-industrial wasteland where an expected £7 billion are turning the old Harland and Wolff shipyard into a regenerated area, that the Titanic museum, a glossy aluminium mastodon, was erected. Meant to represent the bows of the ship, the local rumour retorts that it looks like the iceberg, rendered famous by James Cameron's adaptation of the historic tragedy. Unequivocally, the comparison is more in fitting with the story as the building sinks deprived communities affected by years of conflict into around 60 million pounds of debt. In this space of remembrance, the sectarian violence that marked the shipyard's life (the forced expulsion of Catholics in the 1920s) is forgotten. The museum commercialises the atrocious working conditions on the shipyard – entry costs £18. The project, like many other regeneration projects (Muir and Rhodes, 2008), has not concerned itself with consulting the local community (Dawson, 2016, p. 147-149). This exemplifies the failure not only of the Northern Irish peace process but of the neoliberal peace paradigm itself.

There is no evidence to suggest that the neoliberal interpretation of peace can help transcend ethno-national conflict. In fact, the neoliberal peace creates new forms of segregation, widening inequalities and reproducing ethnic polarisation, therefore jeopardising the support for peace in those communities most affected by violence. As a discourse, the neoliberal peace is plagued by class bias. Policy-makers consider that discriminatory barriers to economic success have been eliminated, not that prosperity has passed working class communities by (O'Hearn, 2008). These areas remain stigmatised as the cradle from which sectarianism emanates, without acknowledging that military containment strategies confined the Troubles to those areas (Graham and Nash, 2006: Kelly, 2012) or how sectarianism affects all in society (Hughes, 2011, p. 6). Ahearne (2009, p. 24) concludes that there is no peace dividend for the poor, only peace penalties. In this context, what seems required is to "explore alternative spatialities to deeply divided and antagonistic sense of identity and territoriality" that defines Northern Ireland and the normalisation of class divisions (Graham and Nash, 2006, p. 262). As Stephen Baker questions, "Doesn't peace in a divided society require mutuality and co-operation?" (2014, p. 9).

D- Exploring alternative narratives

Yet, beyond the institutional addiction to neoliberal economics and top-down peacebuilding on the one hand and its critique on the other hand, is there an alternative? The peace process in Northern Ireland suffers not only from a democratic deficit (Stewart et al., 2018) but also from a lack of imagination as to what a progressive and inclusive conflict transformation looks like, one that goes further than neoliberal conflict management and instead centres on addressing the structural issues at the root of the conflict (Coulter, 2014). In fact, it is unclear whether the peace process has opened up space for alternative narratives beyond the binary politics that traditionally informed political discourses in Northern Ireland. In this "visionless peace" (Barry, 2017, p. 54), electoral politics are like trench warfare, holding up ground to a stalemate, not making advances. They are read as a game of opposition (barring entry to the other) rather than motivated by aspirations for a better future. They reflect the poverty of alternatives to zero-sum ethnic contests and neoliberal hegemonies. Consequently, scholars have stressed the necessity of exploring new repertoires of political mobilisation (Coulter, 2014; Doyle and McAreavey, 2014).

However, the fact that their emergence is constrained does not mean they do not exist. What is often missing from the critique of the neoliberal peace is the agency of those marginalised by it, compared by Richmond to the dark matter of international relations (2011, p. 423). Indeed, if geographers have highlighted the diverse forms of neoliberal practices embedded in specific contexts (Brenner et al., 2010; Peck et al., 2010), peace too is understood as a heterogeneous process that displays hybridity – and hence opposition (Pugh, 2011; Richmond, 2011; Richmond and Mitchell, 2012). As a result, there has been an increased recognition of the complex ways in which critical agency operates through everyday practices in situated contexts (Watson, 2012; Richmond 2011; Pugh, 2011).

Set as an alternative to consociationalism, bottom-up approaches to conflict management have put an emphasis on the role of the civil society[4] to foster community reconciliation (Nagle and Clancy, 2012; McManus, 2017; Cochrane, 2005, Power, 2011). The civil society has also received increasing attention from international peacebuilding practitioners and scholars, conscious of the limitations of top-down approaches. In fact, within the neoliberal peacebuilding paradigm, a focus is placed on building state legitimacy through fostering relations between state and civil society in a way which Richmond (2006) notes is still largely limited and non-emancipatory.

In Northern Ireland, the Good Friday Agreement ought to contain the conflict at the elites' level with the hope that the civil society would follow, especially considering the instrumental role the third sector played in bringing about negotiations for peace. Throughout the conflict, the British state had encouraged the development of community and voluntary organisations, based on a simplified reading of the conflict as a community relations rather than structural issue (Nagle and Clancy, 2010; Acheson et al., 2004; Etchart, 2016). By the time the Good Friday Agreement was signed, the third sector, a £500 billion industry, employed more people than manufacturing (Hughes, 2011). International monies, primarily from the European Union (PEACE programmes) and International Fund for Ireland, shaped the sector's

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[4] Defined as voluntary and community organisations, trade unions and social movements, religious organisations and all other organisations and networks "between the family and the state" (Nagle and Clancy, 2010, p. 104)

role as a central actor in the post-conflict transition (Acheson et al., 2004; Atashi, 2011; Ahmed et al., 2013) entrusted with the cultivation of empathy and trust between communities and celebrating what Hughes describes as "the role and virtues of apolitical civil society organizations" (2017, p. 5). Indeed, in the discourse on the neoliberal peace, the civil society has been continuously portrayed as inherently good, capable of driving divided communities away from violence (Cochrane, 2005). While it is true that Northern Ireland possess a thriving and vibrant community sector – over 6000 organisations, employing 53,620 people and generating £729 million income (NICVA, 2021) – the sector has struggled to deliver a progressive counter-narrative to the liberal peace paradigm. Hughes (2017) highlights the sector's buy-in and collusion with New Labour's roll-out of neoliberal policies that placed partnership with community organisations as pivotal in mitigating the impact of free-market policies and the consequential breakdown of social fabric. Peacebuilding and community organisations have become a form of business, seen as imposed from above, engaged in superficial box-ticking exercises and increasingly fostering a caste of middle class cadres unrepresentative of the communities they are meant to serve (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2004; Nagle, 2009). Competition for funding has also increased polarisation, fuelled by dissatisfaction over the absence of tangible improvements (Karari et al., 2013; Atashi, 2011). The peacebuilding civil society approaches predominant in Northern Ireland tend to operate with the same silo vision as the top-down neoliberal peace, leaving the structural issues that gave rise to conflict unaddressed. Acheson et al. (2004) point to cross-community organisations thriving through politics of avoidance and denial of sectarianism (Acheson et al., 2004), relying on the assumption that cross-community contact alone will suffice to reduce prejudice and foster trust (Knox, 2011; Connolly, 2000). Indeed, the revival of interest for bottom-up approaches is often framed in such a way that the civil society's contribution is limited by the conceptions the agents of the neoliberal peace have set for it, side-lining those who have most to gain in standing up for themselves (Watson, 2012). After all, if as Gramsci contends the civil society is the fabric which coexists with the State, it can also resist it. Yet, in Northern Ireland there is "'little room' for progressive, shared and future-oriented inclusive politics" (Shirlow, 2018, p. 392).

Genuine mobilisation across the sectarian divide is rare but not inexistent. John Nagle (2009) points to the social movements that have provided cross-community

engagement based on class, gender or LGBT identities (Nagle and Clancy, 2010; Ashes, 2008). In particular, there is a general lacuna in the literature on peacebuilding, at both elites and civil society levels, on the role of class. After all, scholars have highlighted the reductionist nature of the neoliberal peace discourse, from which labour is a notable absentee (Pugh, 2011; Cramer, 2006, 2008). It is not just that everyday issues such as employment creation, education and welfare remain overlooked in the transition from conflict (Richmond and Mitchell, 2012), it is also that the neoliberal practices of peace eclipse the role of labour (Cramer, 2008), both in bringing about peace and in post-conflict transformation. Alternative approaches to reconstruction such as cooperatives, trade unions, public enterprises, welfare policies are cast aside to the benefit of an agenda that claims the primacy of the right of the individual, an individual which according to Watson (2012) is an amorphous one: in the design of post-conflict reconstruction, gender is also systematically ignored and marginalised.

In Northern Ireland, much of the role played by politically motivated groups has been understated, such as the role of women in the transition to peace (Ashes, 2008) and the role of political prisoners in mobilising for peace (Shirlow et al., 2010; Edwards and Bloomer, 2008). So is silenced the role of the biggest civil society organisation not to split across sectarian lines, the trade union movement, despite its influence in the ceasefire negotiations, the 1996 rally for peace (Baker, 2020, p. 23) and ICTU's anti-sectarian unit, Counteract, which ran from 1990 to 2006 and later became Trademark. As Stephen Baker (2020, p. 23) contends, much is unknown about the work of trade unionists like Joe Law, founding member of Trademark and his contribution to challenging sectarianism and build class solidarity across communal cleavages (Belfast Trades Council et al., 2017). If, as Shirlow highlights, many residents in working class neighbourhoods are keen to engage in class politics (also in Cassidy, 2005, 2008), mobilise around gender issues or other form of non-communal issues, rediscovering radical community organising is indispensable.

The social economy has provided another tool for cross-community engagement on bread and butter issues, offering to some a form of activism more apt at tackling economic and social inequalities. While social economy organisations have benefited from a limited focus, Murtagh (2016; 2017) has raised awareness of the role

of projects like the Ashton Community Trust, the Stewartstown Road Regeneration Project on the Suffolk and Lenadoon interface and the John Hewitt Bar in Belfast which redistributes its profit to the Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre. The social economy's instrumentalisation through neoliberal roll-out policies, offering communities means to "pull themselves up by their collective boot straps" (Levitas, cited in Shirlow and Murtagh, 2004, p. 59) in the face of public service cuts is something which I elaborate on in the next chapter. Yet, rather than thriving neoliberal social entrepreneurship, atomisation and fragility best describe the state of the social enterprise sector in Northern Ireland. Despite their impact being modest and their potential limited, Murtagh (2016) acknowledges their value per se. As he concludes, "if economic modernity is a driver of some form of sharing and if poverty is the hallmark of segregation, then economics deserves to be a more meaningful component of conflict management and peace-building" (2017, p. 20).

While scholars worldwide have devoted their attention to cooperatives as a possible alternative to profit-driven obsession (Schweickart, 2011; Wright, 2010; Ranis, 2016), cooperatives are practically absent from the literature on post-conflict Northern Ireland. Even Murtagh's comprehensive research into social economics in Northern Ireland relegates cooperatives to historical artefacts, brushing over a vibrant history (as we will see in the next chapter) without analysing its current ramifications. With exception of historical research (Doyle, 2014; Etchart, 2016), and a commissioned report at the start of the peace process (McAleavy et al., 2001), there is clearly a lacuna in the literature on Northern Ireland with regards to cooperatives. Worker cooperatives not only highlight the importance of employment in economic recovery, something which has not been extensively studied (Cramer, 2006), they may also offer a grassroots, bottom-up alternative to both the top-down neoliberal economy and elitist-driven consociational process of peace-building. If as we have previously seen, the neoliberal peace does not foster the kind of radical transformation in working class areas most affected by the conflict, then clearly alternative economic strategies that provide employment and community empowerment are worth investigating. As discussed in the next chapter, the literature on worker cooperatives questions whether they hold the potential to provide an alternative between market-driven economy and a state plagued by ethno-nationalist resource competition; offer an efficient and resilient economic model capable of driving those in needs out of poverty; advance a

vision of economies where democracy and collectivism prevail; or even provide a genuine cross-community experience that is so badly backing. As the fallacies of the neoliberal peace process suggest, acknowledging and discussing alternative narratives is valuable on its own. As a result, this research aims at raising awareness of worker cooperatives in Northern Ireland, bringing them out of the interstices, shadows, marginalised spaces where they currently operate, and investigates their contribution to post-conflict transformation.

Chapter 3: Theorising alternative economies – situating worker cooperatives

> "We must emphasize that these neoliberalisms are […] fully lived realities in which people and states have their own theories, and elaborate their own discourses and critiques, about the worlds they inhabit and the ways in which these should be organised" (Goldstein, 2012, p.205).

Processes of neoliberalism, integrated into local contexts, do not solely engender the continued instability, inequality and poverty that many scholars decry. Their interaction with local landscapes also creates contestation and resistance (Brenner et al., 2010). If anything, the cracks and limitations in the system (Leyshon and Lee, 2003) feed a mounting opposition and resurgence of alternative economic practices: indigenous collectives, worker recuperated factories, occupations, anti-globalisation demonstrations. In Latin America for instance – the very site on which neoliberalism emerged and which found itself thereafter under the yoke of structural adjustment policies, grassroots initiatives –land occupations, agricultural collectives, cooperatives of all forms, workers' roadblocks (Piqueteros) and recuperated factories – have enabled labour movements and indigenous communities to organise against neoliberalism (Dinerstein, 2015; Lechat, 2009; Ranis, 2016; Coraggio and Arroyo, 2009; Piñeiro Harnecker, 2007; Piñeiro, 2009; Azzelini, 2018). This resurgence of interest for worker cooperatives is sometimes framed as part of wider counter-hegemonic struggles – like those cited above – sometimes as practical experiments in local economic development, with attempts at enacting economies that are at least more democratic, more sustainable and more equitable. This interest in cooperatives is also inscribed in both literature and policy as forming part of building the wider social economy, a sector tasked with offsetting the negative ramifications of neoliberal policies. As a result, this chapter seeks to define and theorise worker cooperatives, situating this research at the crossroad of emerging academic debates on alternative and solidarity economies. Multidisciplinary research highlights cooperatives' role in economic democracy, placing them on a spectrum that ranges from representing an alternative to capitalism to constituting a merely efficient business form, from concepts of resistance and autonomy to a tool in strategies of privatisation. The chapter starts with reviewing the empirical accounts of cooperatives' efficiency and sustainability as alternative businesses, in order to frame their potential in relation to

the neoliberal peace. It is their conceptualisation that interests me next, as part of framing more widely alternative economies in relation to neoliberalism. From their infancy, cooperatives have been conceived as one of the oldest emancipatory alternatives to capitalism – by workers movements as much as by political theorists – warranting a review of their emergence in modern history and the intellectual movements that accounted for their development (namely Utopianism, Marxism and Anarchism). Through historical contextualisation, this chapter also attempts at reviving the vibrant but forgotten tradition of cooperation in Ireland. Then, I investigate the resurgence of interest for alternative, anti-capitalist and diverse economies in light of the advent of neoliberalism, in order to situate and justify the theoretical framework employed here in the investigation of existing worker cooperative experiments in Northern Ireland.

A- Introducing cooperatives: the empirical relevance of the worker cooperative model

In most countries, one finds a long tradition of cooperative economic practices, from indigenous practices to friendly societies, modern cooperative businesses, credit unions and farming collectives. In fact, Bowles and Gintis claim that most of the history of the human species is marked by cooperation, which explain its survival and success (2011, in Mayo, 2017). While there is no denying that choosing a time and place for the birth of cooperatives obscures the fact that, in its diversity of forms, cooperation takes its roots in almost all countries and cultures, the birth of the modern cooperative movement is often dated to the Rochdale experiment in 19th century industrial England (Moulaert and Ailenei, 2005). Since then, cooperatives have been defined as jointly owned and democratically controlled businesses created to "meet the common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations" of their members (ICA, 2018). They are governed by seven principles, forming an internationally recognised cooperative 'Bill of Rights' which imbues their economic activity with ethical concerns (independence, inclusivity, member control, solidarity, profit redistribution, education, concern for the community). Cooperatives are often categorised by sector (such as agricultural or financial) or differentiated by the type of membership or function of the member as a stakeholder (users in consumer cooperatives, tenants in housing cooperatives, producers in agricultural cooperatives,

etc.). In worker cooperatives, workers collectively own and run the company under the principle of one member one vote. Sometimes worker cooperatives have been referred to as workers' self-management, workers' control, or practices of *autogestion*, pushing the boundaries of legislative and policy definitions to include more radical experiments. At other times, worker cooperatives have been swallowed under broader denominations of the social economy sector, in particular social enterprises, unreflective of their distinct and long-standing history (Huckfield, 2022). By worker cooperatives, I include in this research organisations in which both elements of members' ownership and democratic running of the organisation are present, even if in varying degrees (Definitions of the ICA and CICOPA (2005); Zevi et al., 2011; Rastoin, 2010). I exclude from the investigation employee ownership alone (ex: John Lewis group in Great Britain or ESOPs). Finally, the study concentrates on organisations that define themselves as cooperatives, assuming the identity and enacting the principles of cooperation (even if again in varying degrees) – shifting the focus away from other forms of social economy organisations (such as social enterprises).

Cooperatives' economic contribution is far from insignificant: with a billion members worldwide, an economic activity generating $2 trillion turnover and employing 280 million people (Eum, 2017). 10% of the entire working population works in a cooperative. That is 20% more employment than multinational companies (Polat, 2010, p. 4). In Europe, agricultural cooperatives account for 50% of input supply, credit unions for 20% of the market. Retail cooperatives count 29 million members and employ 400,000 people (European Commission, 2013:47). CICOPA (2022) (the industrial cooperatives' international confederation) represents 65,000 worker cooperatives providing 4 million jobs worldwide. To account for their substantial presence across the globe, academic research has investigated their resilience and specificity as an organisational form. In this respect, the case for cooperatives has long been made.

There are multiple economic advantages associated with cooperatives in general, some specific to worker cooperatives (Cheney et al., 2014). Born out of economic hardship, cooperatives have continued to provide an efficient response for preserving employment and decent living conditions (New Economic Foundation, 2018). Their

resilience, especially in the face of crisis, has long been demonstrated, from the role of German Raiffeisen banks in the 1860s and 1930s, to the role of worker takeovers during industrial restructurings in the 1970s and 1980s (Birchall and Ketilson, 2009). Empirical research demonstrates the efficiency of the worker cooperative model as opposed to conventional enterprises. Worker cooperatives are found in every sector, addressing a wide variety of socio-economic needs (Vieta and Lionais, 2015). They tend to be larger than conventional firms (Pérotin, 2016), in an economic landscape that is inaccurately represented as "big business" dominated (90% of firms have less than 20 employees in the UK, US and France). Worker cooperatives also survive longer than conventional enterprises (Gowan, 2019). In the UK, the cooperative sector displays survival rates at least twice superior to those of other firms in the first years of business. Worker cooperatives in particular contribute for every £1 of turnover to 35% more employment than all other UK employers (Cooperatives UK, 2020). The efficiency of the cooperative model lies in its democratic management, offering – if not flat – fair pay structures (Wolff, 2012) and greater investment in training, research and innovation (Ettighoffer, 2009). Since the business aims aligns with the interest of the workers, cooperatives ensure loyalty and commitment (Birchall and Ketilson, 2009). When confronted with recession, worker cooperatives tend to adjust wages rather than employment, protecting jobs over profits (Rastoin, 2010, Zevi et al., 2011, Pencavel and Craig, 1994). For Pérotin (2016), this means that rather than small, marginal or niche businesses – as they are often described – worker cooperatives can provide a serious business alternative, performing in all types of industries and sectors and potentially outcompeting conventional businesses. In fact, there are examples of significantly large cooperatives that disprove cooperatives' relegation to the niches or margins of the economy, such as Mondragon, a worker cooperative created in 1955 in the Basque Country now reaching 92,773 employees and ranking as seventh largest group and third biggest employer in Spain in 2008 (Redondo et al., 2011; Errasti et al., 2017). Despite several shortcomings in light of its global expansionist strategy (Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2014), Mondragon still inspires many to explore the potential of the worker cooperative model - not only in academia (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Wright, 2010; Schweickart, 2011) but also in practice with for instance the Evergreen cooperative in Cleveland (Rowe et al., 2017).

Beyond their economic performance, cooperatives also foster autonomy, democratic decision-making (Rothschild, 2009; Piñeiro Harnecker, 2007; Vieta, 2014), trust and improve members' confidence (Spear, 2000; Majee and Hoyt, 2009; 2010). The literature describes cooperative experiments involving those often marginalised by economic development strategies such as ex-felons (Healy, 2015; Rowe et al., 2017), the unemployed (Casper-Futterman, 2011), or contributing to gender empowerment (Abdo, 2011). Their role in alleviating poverty has also been widely documented (Birchall, 2003; 2013). Empirical research on cooperatives also highlights a possible role in the transformation of values (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979). Evidence suggests that cooperatives help create bonds and pride in countries torn apart by conflict, playing a role in the reintegration of ex-combatants (Weihe, 2004; Parnell, 2001), fostering empowerment and integration (Piñeiro, 2009). Despite a lack of extensive studies in relation to peace, research is emerging accounting for the role of cooperatives in reconciliation, in particular their potential in creating cross-community networks (Boudreaux, 2007; Chan, 2011).

None of the advantages mentioned above imply that cooperatives are a panacea. Long recognised is the tendency for the democratic character of cooperatives to degenerate over time (Vieta and Lionais, 2015; Errasti et al., 2017) and their tendency to under-invest (Birchall, 2013). Underinvestment is a particular concern for most worker cooperatives trying to access capital without relinquishing control over the organisation (Gunn, 2006). Not all worker cooperatives remunerate labour fairly. Some exclude part of the workforce from access to membership and operate a vertical hierarchy with high pay differentials (Safri, 2020). As Birchall and Ketilson (2009) note, the negatives are the reverse of the advantages: lack of discipline, reluctance to invest, short-sightedness and the absence of genuine democracy can result in failure.

On the other hand, a supportive environment encompassing tailored advice, benevolent legislation and financial assistance is an essential component of successful cooperative economies (Doyle and Lalor, 2012; Zevi et al., 2011). What the Mondragon experiment illustrates is the role played by this cooperative ecosystem, including in-house access to finance through its own bank, the Casa Laboral, to research and development, education, promotion and marketing (Lizarralde, 2009). As a result, more attention has been paid to the ecosystems in which cooperatives operate.

In an attempt to rethink local economic development so that it fosters a congenial ecosystem for cooperatives to flourish, approaches such as community wealth building have emerged. In Cleveland, the approach has materialised as a network of worker cooperatives (a laundry service, a solar panel enterprise and vegetable producer cooperative) set up in 2009 to offset the regionally depressed economy (Rowe et al., 2017). In Preston, in the UK, the focus has been on local procurement strategies in favour of community businesses enabling the council to redirect 18% of its budget to the locality (Next System Project, 2018; CLES, 2019).

If empirical evidence demonstrates that cooperatives, and more specifically worker cooperatives, foster social cohesion and integration as well as economic development, why are they relegated to the back seat of economic development strategies? The extent to which worker cooperatives constitute either local relief or offer a global strategy that can counter the negative effects of globalisation is the next question. When discussing alternative economic practices, Williams and Windebank (2003, p. 128) remind us that how an alternative is defined also depends on what the mainstream is perceived to be. As alternative economies, whether worker cooperatives provide an alternative to paid employment in conventional enterprise, economic marginalisation and deprivation or capitalist exploitation in the workplace and beyond is indeed a question that has animated a vibrant literature right from the infancy of the cooperative movement. Capturing the attention of various intellectuals in conceiving an emancipatory economic alternative, the theorisation of worker cooperatives' relation to capitalism and later neoliberalism is what I will retrace in the next section, starting from the 19th century intellectual traditions of Utopianism, Marxism and Anarchism before moving to contemporary approaches to alternative economies.

B- Historical contextualisation: worker cooperatives as one of the oldest visions for emancipatory alternative economies

In left-wing economic thought, workers cooperatives have played a fundamental part in envisioning an economy beyond capitalism. Its significance in social transformation has been the centre of debates on the role and nature of worker cooperatives (and more broadly cooperatives) in 19th century literature. As a result, worker cooperatives sit at the intersection between diverse and sometimes divergent

traditions, which I account for in this section. Sometimes worker cooperatives have been referred to workers self-management. Other times they have been referred to as workers' control to highlight the more radical and sometimes revolutionary aspects of those experiments. Modern worker cooperatives may seem far from radical experiments in workers' control (Rahmena, 2016). But retracing their history is vital to understand their current trajectories, especially when contemporary literature on the social economy neglects to situate its antecedents within wider political struggles (Huckfield, 2022). In other words, as non-hegemonic economic practices, worker cooperatives have – at some times and in some places – contributed to counter-hegemonic struggles (Baldacchino, 1990).

1. The birth of modern cooperatives: the influence of utopianism, socialism and anarchism

Utopian socialism provided the inspiration that would ignite the spark for the first modern cooperatives to come into existence. In the backdrop of Great Britain's early industrialisation, utopian socialists like Robert Owen, William King and William Thompson in Ireland dedicated their lives to promote cooperation as a practical instrument against the ills of capitalism. Robert Owen, pioneer of cooperation, envisioned common ownership and cooperative unions as the basis of a project ("a village of cooperation") that could help alleviate the pauperisation and dire working conditions that afflicted the working class of his time. With inconclusive experiments in New Lanark, Scotland, and in Indiana with the cooperative community New Harmony, Owen's impact on the cooperative movement is inspirational in nature. In particular, it is William King who brought his vision to life, by building on the idea of a cooperative village whereby cooperative shops allowing workers to store up capital would provide the very first step towards developing a fully cooperative community (Restakis, 2010, p. 35; Buber, 1949, pp. 60-61).

It is under the influence of utopian socialists and alongside the political movements of Chartism in England and the two revolutions in France (1830, 1848) that cooperatives emerged, primarily as consumer cooperatives in England and as producer cooperatives

in France[5] (Buber, 1949, pp. 58-59). In the end, it was the weavers and cobblers of Rochdale who were going to set the stone for the modern European cooperative movement, creating the first conclusive experiments with cooperation in 1844 (Restakis, 2010, pp. 36-40). They established the founding principles of modern cooperatives i.e. "open membership, democratic control, distribution of profit in proportion to trade, payment of limited interest on capital, political and religious neutrality, cash trading [and] promotion of education" (Mayo, 2017, p. 37). Ten years later, there were nearly a thousand cooperatives in Britain. The founding moment for modern cooperatives materialised out of a practical attempt by working people to better their living conditions, thereby defining the movement ever since. The relation between cooperatives and political theory on the other hand has been far more ambiguous.

Marx's work was rendered famous more for his critique of capitalism and his vision of social transformation than for his views on cooperation. In fact, he was the one responsible for the denomination of 'utopian' being attached to early socialists like Robert Owen. Yet, Marx's view on cooperatives was deeply ambivalent (Buber, 1949). On the one hand, Marx's vision for transcending capitalism centred on power, which essentially meant taking control of the state through the political act of a revolution. Accordingly, all those who concentrated on bringing an alternative system to life rather than the end all be all struggle to overthrow capitalism deserved to be coined with utopianism (Allen, 2017, p. 154). Yet, when his confidence in the imminent success of revolutions was shattered by the failure of 1848, he drew more attention to extra-revolutionary struggles like cooperatives. Similarly, the Commune de Paris with its radical experiments in workers' control and elected town councils brought him closer to the mutualist tradition, leading him to declare:

> "If Co-operative production is not to remain a sham and a snare; if it is to supersede the capitalist system; if united co-operative societies are to regulate national production upon a common plan, thus taking it under their own control, […] and thereby take it under their own control – what else,

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[5] Especially under the provisional government's "social workshops" of Louis Blanc that followed the 1848 revolution in France.

gentlemen, would it be but communism, 'possible' communism?" (Marx, 1977, pp. 75-76).

Eventually, Marx and Engels saw in cooperatives a practical element that could help build a socialist strategy, overcoming the subordination of labour to capital in the workplace.

"We acknowledge the cooperative movement as one of the transforming forces of the present society based upon class antagonism. Its great merit is to practically show, that the present pauperising, and despotic system of the subordination of labour to capital can be superseded by the republican and beneficent system of the association of free and equal producers." (Marx, 1963, p. 1469).

Factories run and controlled by workers demonstrated how a new mode of production develops and is formed naturally out of the old (Marx, 1968, p. 1178). In the "titanic struggle between classes in the canvas of history" (Restakis, 2010, p.47), cooperatives looked weak, small and bound to the danger of individualism without a potential to resolve capitalism's contradictions and offer a vision beyond it (Wright, 2010; Leyshon et al., 2003, p.111; Gibson-Graham, 2003). Instead, Marx offered a grand narrative of the inevitability of emancipation, making utopianism redundant and potentially counterproductive. This would leave a visible mark on the way cooperatives are conceived in relation to capitalism (Harvey, 2000). In particular, it would feed the existing contention with anarchist thinkers, who opposed the central role of the state with the decentralised role of cooperatives (collectives) in the transition to socialism (Rothschild, 2009, p. 1028).

Subsequently eclipsed from the Marxist conception of socialism, worker cooperatives brought together under federal structures remained at the heart of the mutualists and broadly speaking anarchist analysis of a systemic transformation towards a new, post-capitalist society (Rothschild 2009, p. 1028; Wright 2010). For revolutionary anarchists (like Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin), cooperatives played here a central role by practically enhancing people's lives and demonstrating scope for alternatives (Vieta, 2014, p. 788). At the heart of the classical anarchists' vision for a

new society was a belief in peoples' abilities to liberate themselves and a faith in cooperation and mutual aid that had been the bedrock of human history (Kropotkin, 2006). Anarchist thinkers were not blind to the danger associated with cooperatives, in particular the tensions and contradictions between individualism and community and the presence of conflict and egoism (Buber, 1949, pp. 41-42). But worker cooperatives could form the basis for a new society, voluntarily co-operating with each other through federations, guaranteeing the emergence of a new political system that would eventually replace capitalism.

As a result, worker cooperatives became according to Wright (2010) the quintessence of a certain vision of systemic transformation, one that took place within the "interstices" of an existing society flourishing until they could, through cumulative effect, outcompete capitalism. As the revolutions of their time ended in centralisation, cooperativism stood in sharp contrast to both those seeking ruptural transformation and those engaged in parliamentary struggles characterising both the revolutionary socialist/Marxist and social democratic traditions dominant in the 19th and 20th Century.

2. Worker cooperative experiments in the 20th Century: at the intersection of theory and practice

As Rochdale shows, cooperatives did not emanate solely from the minds of utopian thinkers. They are instead fundamentally lived experiments. While the first conclusive experiments with cooperative emerged in industrial Great Britain, they did not result in similar waves of worker cooperatives as in other European countries like France (Buber, 1949). Worker control in the industry had played a central role in the imaginary of revolutionary socialists. It also initially entertained a strong connection to the labour movement. Yet as the growth and persistence of consumer cooperatives in Britain eclipsed worker cooperatives, the labour movement also eventually grew apart, focusing on the improvement of working standards instead (Gibson-Graham, 2003; Huckfield, 2022).

20th Century Europe on the other hand provided the terrain for more radical experiments with worker ownership and control. The First World War provided the

climax for the proliferation of cooperative experiments, especially workers self-management, as part of revolutionary movements in Germany, Italy, Russia, Hungary, Poland and Bulgaria (Ness and Azzelini, 2011; Vieta, 2014). Set against the appalling living conditions that accompanied the war, workplace collectives and industrial actions promoted a vision for workers' control as the basis for the transformation of society (Vieta, 2014). This was certainly the case in Russia, where the first soviets or workers' council emerged spontaneously in 1905 as strike collectives and played a fundamental role in the Russian revolution in 1917. Factory occupations also took place in Germany in April 1917 and in Turin in September 1920 influencing the writings of both Rosa Luxemburg and Antonio Gramsci on the role of worker cooperatives in developing working class consciousness. In particular, Gramsci, while stressing the challenges posed by the cultural dominance of the capitalist system, saw in the factory council a recipe for democracy at work which by challenging private property and control over production (i.e. industrial legality) constituted a counter-narrative to the capitalist cultural dominance (Ness and Azzellini, 2011; Ranis, 2016; Forgacs, 1988).

In the aftermath of the civil war in Spain and Stalinism in Russia, worker cooperatives and factory councils remained on the margin of economic development in Europe. Nonetheless, the cooperative model spread across all continents, sometimes forming part of anti-colonial struggles as in Algeria (Ness and Azzellini, 2011). In East Europe, Asia and Africa, cooperatives often faced co-option from the state (Restakis, 2010). Overall in the second half of the 20th Century, cooperatives remained increasingly detached from the struggle of transforming society. Debates around the role of factory councils re-emerged sporadically, around the potential of the Yugoslav Model and later the revendications of May 68. Yet, cooperatives of all type eventually declined, not only in the imaginary of alternative economies, but also in number, increasingly outcompeted by the development of statist welfare provision, and later under attack from a more aggressive form of capitalism.

3. The Irish cooperative movement: a historical perspective

Despite a lack of attention, there is a rich history when it comes to the Irish cooperative movement, from its birth against the background of land agitation and

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political conflict in pre-partitioned Ireland. Cooperatives appear at the end of the 19th Century influenced by Robert Owen and later social reformers Horace Plunkett and George Russell who had considerable success in establishing agricultural cooperation (Doyle and Lalor, 2012, p. 13). In the North of Ireland, Owen had a direct impact on the development of consumer cooperatives, with the first consumer cooperative established in Belfast at the end of 1829. Although most initial experiments with cooperation were short-lived, cooperatives found support in the form of consumer cooperatives predominantly in the protestant working classes and middle classes (with social reformer MacCormac, a Belfast physician) (Geoghegan, 2005). In the South, Robert Owen's influence led to the creation of a cooperative commune in Ralahine, County Clare in 1831, which similarly to New Harmony, proved short-lived (Bolger, 1977, pp. 13-23).

In 1893, cooperatives were recognised in law through the Industrial and Provident Societies Act passed in the midst of the fierce economic and political rivalries that shaped Ireland at the end of the century. In particular, while cooperation in Great Britain has primarily taken the form of industrial-based shops, in Ireland Horace Plunkett promoted cooperatives in agriculture (especially creameries). In parallel, the cooperative movement found support in rural Nationalist communities in the backdrop of land agitation, and shaped Irish nationalism with linking economic emancipation to anti-imperialism (Doyle, 2014). In 1894, the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society was set up, with at its head Horace Plunkett. While cooperatives grew significantly in the first decade of the century, cooperation also made enemies: from both nationalists and unionists on the Home Rule question, to Gombeen politicians who saw it as "preposterous" for ordinary people to deal with financial matters (Doyle and Lalor, 2012, p. 129) and even from the Catholic Church for the 'atheistic label' attached to cooperatives (Bolger, 1977, p. 95).

Despite modest numbers and an oversight in the literature (Gavin et al., 2014; McMahon, 2019) it would be misleading to assume that worker cooperatives have simply been inexistent. In Ireland as much as anywhere else, experiments with workers' control of the industry have captured the attention of intellectuals and trade unionists in conceiving an emancipatory alternative to working class injustice. Indeed, Bolger (1977, p. 10) describes the strong ties between the labour movement and

cooperation in the early 19th century Ireland with cooperative workshops accompanying strikes. These experiments did not result in similar waves of worker cooperatives as in other European countries like France (Buber, 1949). Instead, worker cooperatives were eclipsed by both consumer cooperatives (as in Britain) and agricultural cooperatives. In the *Reconquest of Ireland*, James Connolly pointed to the advantages of cooperation, rallying Irish farmers and workers under the support of trade unions. He wrote:

> "In the towns cooperative societies of consumers have taken a firm foothold in the North and the extreme South, whilst the result of the beneficent activities of the cooperative distributive societies during the great Dublin Labour Dispute left such an impression upon the minds of the workers in the Irish Labour movement, that a great crop of cooperative enterprises under the auspices of that movement may be confidently anticipated in the near future." (James Connolly, 1987, p. 259)

Unfortunately, worker cooperatives did not develop as Connolly had predicted and, similarly to what happened in Great Britain (Gibson-Graham, 2003) the antagonism between cooperatives and the labour movement deepened. Connolly had argued for trade unions investing in cooperative societies to work towards the shared goals of "common work, common ownership and democratically controlled industry" and establish a "Cooperative Commonwealth" (1987, pp. 260-262). However, he also highlighted the non-socialist tendencies that impinged on the nascent cooperative movement (Connolly, 1988, pp. 214-221). He was ultimately proven right on the latter. Indeed, in 1913, the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (IAOS) general assembly acknowledged its divergence with the class struggle: "We make no war upon capital or capitalists. We aim at being capitalists ourselves, […] The idea of a war of classes is wholly alien to our movement, which, of its nature, makes for social and economic peace" (Father Finlay cited in Bolger, 1977, pp. 108-109). Instead of fostering the ownership of the means of production, consumption and exchange, the Irish cooperative movement aimed at enhancing individual private property.

As a result of industrial development and partition, the cooperative sector in the North of Ireland was going to follow a different path from the Republic. Northern

cooperators had long felt isolated within the IAOS due to the predominance of Munster creameries and the industrial profile that set Belfast apart. In the wake of partition, the Ulster Agricultural Organisation Society was created with Harold Barbour as president. By the 1930s and 40s the movement was near moribund on both sides of the border. The last creameries existing in the North disappeared during the Second World War, absorbed into war effort for food production. Although the agricultural movement endured, Bolger notes a lack of cooperative consciousness and cohesion in the traditional sectors of cooperation (Bolger, 1977). Instead, the post-war era saw housing associations and credit unions flourishing both North and South. While cooperatives in the UK declined in the second half of the 20th century, in Ireland the credit union movement established itself as one of the most influential in Europe, showing a contrasted picture of welfare states both enabling and restricting the development of the cooperative sector (Mayo, 2017, p. 44). Despite a revival in Northern Ireland of cooperative businesses as part of local community development initiatives during the Troubles (Etchart, 2016) cooperatives were eventually sidelined to the benefit of other preferred approaches, in particular charities and NGOs. Since the 1980s, it is the voluntary sector which has dominated the civil society in Northern Ireland, sometimes to the extent of representing a substitute for a devolved government inexistent before 1998 and too often suspended afterwards (Acheson et al., 2004; Hughes, 2017). In the wake of the peace process, cooperatives remained present in both communities but in different forms. At the start of the peace process, consumer cooperatives were found primarily in Unionist neighbourhoods, credit unions in Nationalist ones (McAleavy et al., 2001; Patton, 2007). Those historical developments give the cooperative movement its characteristics today, with a prominence in the agricultural and financial sectors, but also with a cooperative movement that has developed increasingly apart from its radical beginnings and is traditionally divided along sectarian lines.

However, it would be misleading to portray cooperatives as solely falling victim of sectarian logics. At various moments in their history, cooperatives have played a less-known role in bridging the sectarian divide (Bolger, 1977; Etchart, 2016). In the very first years of the existence of Northern Ireland, cooperators, deeply aware of the diverse political affiliations that co-existed in the movement, ensured that religion and politics were kept outside of cooperatives. Bolger notes that at a cooperative AGM in

Fermanagh in 1922 one could see "farmer, labourer and artisan, … banker and humblest millworker, Hibernian and Orangeman, Freemasons, Sinn Féiners (Republican or Free Staters) and Unionists …." coming together (Bolger, 1977, p. 141).

This last account highlights how collective, alternative organisations have been consistently silenced from the dominant economic narrative, one that "tends to legitimate capitalist forms of organizing" and "reinforces the idea that capitalist organizational structures are the only history worth remembering" (Rodgers et al., 2016, p. 93). After all, Bolger stated in the 1970s that cooperation in Ireland has been continuously overlooked: "By consistent downplaying, the cooperative movement was thus relegated in the public mind – a useful institution but of minor importance" (1977, p. 112).

The cooperative movement's participation in the class struggle certainly did not pan out in the way mutualists and utopian socialists had envisaged. In fact, cooperation grew apart from the rest of the labour movement, in particular in the country attributed to their birth, the United Kingdom (Gibson-Graham, 2003; Huckfield, 2022), but also in Ireland. Yet, cooperation continued to provide across the world efficient responses for preserving employment throughout the 20th Century, demonstrating resilience in the face of crisis. In fact, it is during crises that their contribution to fostering alternative economic narratives resurges, explaining the more recent increase of attention in the wake of the neoliberal turn.

C- Problematising alternative economies: making sense of diverse, solidarity and anti-capitalist economies

The extent to which alternative economies and practices – worker cooperatives included – can produce more desirable outcomes, i.e. more democratic, sustainable and equitable economies in a neoliberal economy portrayed as hegemonic is source of debate. Processes of neoliberalism embedded in local landscapes produce uneven and hybrid outcomes but also contested and defied ones on the ground (Brenner et al., 2010). Local initiatives have mushroomed in the advent of neoliberalism to provide autonomy – if only for the people embedded in those projects – and politicise

communities through direct action (Chatterton, 2017; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006). Worker buyouts and worker cooperatives provide in this respect practical examples for safeguarding employment (Ranis, 2016; Zevi et al., 2011; Kokkinidis, 2015), echoing the appeal for workers control that animated early 20th century experiments within the labour movement.

1. Eroding neoliberal hegemonies: rediscovering agency in the workplace …

Transcending the old-time debate between mutualist and revolutionary socialists, an emerging literature attempts at reinstating worker cooperatives as one of the many practices that participate to oppose and alleviate the negative consequences of modern capitalism (Ranis, 2016; Wright, 2010, 2019; Schweickart, 2011; Wolff, 2012; Allen, 2017; Vieta, 2014; Hahnel and Wright, 2016). Worker cooperatives (Schweickart, 2011) or Workers Self-Directed Enterprises (Wolff, 2012) appear as a fundamental tool to foster economic democracy. They are considered in this respect alongside a diversity of other forms of political action – democratic socialism, welfare reforms, trade unionism and grassroots community activism – that can contribute to chip away at modern capitalism. It is in their attempt to escape capitalism – by providing spaces governed by principles radically at odds with capitalism – that worker cooperatives contribute to its erosion (Wright, 2019, p. 52).

In particular, it is the often taken for granted private ownership of the means of production in the hands of a few – a central tenet of capitalism – that sparks the interest for worker owned and run enterprises. The re-examination of the labour process elaborated by Marx in worker-owned and run enterprises shows that the workers' collective ownership of the means of production challenges capitalist exploitation within the firm (Birchall, 2013; Cheney et al., 2014; Safri, 2011; Ruccio, 2011). Workers across the world sell their labour in exchange for a wage, giving up their autonomy, their creativity in the labour process and the value they create. This disconnect, from the act of producing and from the value created, appropriated by distant shareholders and controlled by management structures, leads to their alienation (Adler, 2007; Wolff, 2012). In contrast, worker cooperatives' potential in transforming the labour process in the workplace suggests that they may foster a process of "disalienation" (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2021; Azzelini; 2018). The "communal class

process" (Healy, 2011; Safri, 2011) at play in worker cooperatives contributes to 'demystify' the dominant language of neoclassical economics, reintegrating the role of relations of power in shaping economic geographies, dispelling assumptions of rational and free individuals (Leyshon et al., 2003; Borzaga and Depredi, 2009; Bowles and Gintis, 1990; Gradin, 2015).

By fostering economic democracy, worker cooperatives can also contribute to producing more sustainable and equitable economies. In other words, it is not just that workers are exploited and robbed of the true value of their labour that is at stake, but the fact that a minority gets to make decisions of what to produce, where to produce it and how to produce it. At present, those economic decisions are excluded from collective oversight despite their wider impact (workers, families, suppliers, nearby shops, local authorities, welfare and tax systems, the environment etc.). Democracy in the workplace may not guarantee decent work, environmentally-friendly practices, fair pay, but it makes room for ethical decisions considering workers' interests differ significantly from those of remote shareholders (Schweickart, 2011; Barry and Smith, 2005). In worker cooperatives, decisions that promote work-life balance, challenge the current tendency for overwork, redistribute profit (for example providing social benefits and healthcare) become conceivable (Wolff, 2012; Wright, 2010; Schweickart, 2011; Majee and Hoyt, 2009, 2010). In particular, growth is not a requisite for stability in economic democracy (Schweickart, 2011, p. 151). Worker cooperatives can contribute to a job-focused recovery rather than a growth-focused recovery, a significant departure from the "greening" of the status quo normally on offer. Hence, worker cooperatives' potential in tackling climate breakdown at community level is undeniable, by tying in the transition away from fossil-fuel and carbon dependent economies to the creation of decent employment. Co-ownership and democratic control over assets, capital and labour become key elements to drive the decarbonisation of the economy, giving communities a stake in shaping the economic decisions that affect them and building legitimacy from the ground up. Worker cooperatives participate to grow "from the bottom up and from those building a sustainable economy in practice" (Cato, quoted in Barry, 2015, p. 308)[6].

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[6] For more on the ecological argument for cooperatives, please see the brief produced on behalf of Cooperative Alternatives, Perrin and O'Hara, (2020), *Co-operative led solutions to addressing the*

Worker cooperatives have faced a revival of a sort in an academic literature that aims of drawing the contours of an economic project beyond neoliberalism, reinforcing the role of economic democracy in the path to socialism, theorising ways in which worker cooperatives could shape a counter-project (Hannel and Wright, 2016; Schweickart, 2011; Wright, 2019). While cooperatives enable a shift in the balance towards cooperation rather than competition, there is no denying their insufficiency in dramatically transforming social relations under capitalism (Wright, 2010). Indeed, theorising worker cooperatives as counter-hegemonic risks 'overegging' their potential. Doing so also excludes from the analysis the diversity of practices that make up alternative economies but also the processes of co-option, the contradictions and the limitations they face.

2.   … Or Neoliberal subterfuge?

While worker cooperatives offer the promise of communal class process and economic democracy on the one hand, plenty of authors have also warned that they do not escape capitalist exploitation altogether. Worker cooperatives remain impacted by market prices, suppliers' practices, competition, in a way which significantly hinders the agency of workers to reclaim the value of their own labour, and is insufficient to end alienation in the workplace (as highlighted by Marx) and class injustice outside the firm (Ruccio, 2011; Roberts, 2011; Kristjanson-Gural, 2011). Market conditions offset the democratic running of cooperatives (length of the workweek, wages, profits) while struggles with access to capital often results in dependency on financial institutions. Some even warn of workers becoming no other than the capitalist rentiers they are replacing, 'in it' for the yearly bonus. Over time, the democratic and egalitarian values that set cooperatives apart risks degenerating and becoming supplanted by profit-maximising strategies that ensure their survival. In fact, while some cooperatives engage in emancipatory and redistributive practices, others foster self-exploitation, participating in sweat equity, when workers sacrifice their wage for the cooperative to survive (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979). Shaped by the economic

climate emergency, September 2020, https://www.coopalternatives.coop/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Green-transition-FINAL.pdf

conjuncture on which they depend, cooperatives are small, marginalised and at the mercy of neoliberalisation strategies (Harvey, 2019, p. 122; Wolff, 2012, p. 77).

On the one hand, these warnings echo calls for better support, through public financing, publicly subsidised cooperative development and education (Wolff, 2012; Baldacchino, 1990). Empirical research from countries such as France, Italy (Doyle and Lalor, 2012; Restakis, 2010, pp. 73-86), Spain (Zevi et al., 2011) and Quebec (Mendell, 2009) demonstrates the role of this congenial support not only in unleashing cooperatives' potential but also in providing them with political direction (Eisenschitz and Gough, 2011, Baldacchino, 1990). In assessing the more progressive aspects of the social economy sector, Graefe (2002) and Eisenschitz and Gough (2011) note the role of wider support structure, whether it is through state-led strategies, support from the trade union movement or inter-cooperative networks. In Quebec for instance, the social economy has been supported through consultation and government recognition, resulting in the establishment of the *Chantier de L'Economie Sociale* as a representative actor of the sector, advocating on behalf of its members and influencing public policy, especially with regards to local regeneration (Mendell, 2009). In France, worker cooperatives benefit from preferential taxation which rewards collective ownership and taxes individual profit and from in-house financial instruments developed by the cooperative movement (Zevi et al., 2011). In Italy, legislative frameworks (the Marcora Law) enable workers to claim their unemployment benefits to rescue their enterprise (Gowan, 2019). If worker cooperatives are willing to constitute themselves as an alternative to class injustice, cooperatives need to develop institutions, providing solidarity finance, advice and support, and partly shielding cooperatives from the interference of the market and the state (Kristjanson-Gural, 2011). Moreover, worker cooperatives' isolation from the wider collective struggles beyond the "refuge from the heartless, competitive world of capitalism" they create (Wright, 2019, p. 52) is otherwise their downfall (Baldacchino, 1990).

On the other hand, the limitations of the cooperative model mentioned above speak of wider processes of instrumentalisation triggered by roll-out neoliberal strategies. Following the dismantling of welfare institutions (roll-back), Peck and Tickell (2002) distinguished roll-out creative moments whereby neoliberalism contributes to create new institutions and disciplines, eliciting a widening and deepening of the scope of

market logic into spheres previously sheltered from it. It is within this framework that the re-emergence in both academic literature and political discourse of the role of community efforts through the prism of the social economy can be understood. As Graefe points out, the role of the social economy in social exclusion and social cohesion responds to the need for alleviating neoliberal reforms, promoted to fill the gap left by the collapse of state welfare provision, thereby extending "market relations to new spheres of social life" (2006, p. 69). The social economy is itself a contested concept, used as an umbrella term for a wide spectrum of activities that encompass – depending on the countries and traditions – cooperatives, associations, charities, NGOs, mutual organisations, foundations and social enterprises (Graefe, 2002; Moulaert and Ailenei, 2005; Doyle and Lalor, 2012; Amin, 2009, p. 9). Some social economy initiatives, in particular social enterprises, have benefited from a wave of supportive policies and legislations by governments around the world. While in some countries it has led to an increased support for collective approaches, elsewhere the political discourse has emphasised the advantages of a more innovative and flexible economy, less bureaucratised than the welfare state, able to respond to social needs and access marginalised populations (Leyshon et al., 2003; Cato and Raffaelli, 2018). In the UK, this shift in public policy is manifest in David Cameron's Big Society project (2010), promoting communities' self-reliance often as a means to provide local services 'on the cheap' (Cato and Raffaelli, 2018; Huckfield, 2022). It is in this context that alternative economies' vulnerability to neoliberalisation strategies has been assessed: providing access to an exploitative labour market for those left traditionally behind, fostering privatisation through outsourcing valuable public services and contributing to the development of social entrepreneurs and professionals providing relief to populations they are increasingly detached from (Leyshon et al., 2003). Hence, local economic practices, vulnerable to co-option, risk producing fragmentation rather than emancipation. The social economy, rather than an inherently left-wing enterprise based on solidarity and autonomy, has therefore been interpreted as a bourgeois or conservative project, tempering the effects of neoliberal policies (Eisenschitz and Gough, 2011; Graefe, 2006; North et al., 2020; Ó Broin, 2012).

It is undeniable that compared to social enterprises and charities, worker cooperatives, defined by internationally shared principles, hold more potential for self-empowerment, where collective ownership and decision-making ensure the

benefactors and the beneficiaries are in fact the same people. However, worker cooperatives are also far from immune from the co-optation that affects the social economy in general and can represent a means for workers to manage their own exploitation and misery. In particular, their capacity to offer diverse activities in depressed areas and in competition with third sector organisations and conventional businesses is often limited (Amin, 2009). Evidently, they are condemned to the same issue of scale as the rest of the social economy, struggling to build up, grow and provide a viable template that could be replicated globally (Harvey, 2000). On the other hand, the research – as detailed in Chapter 7 – evaluates the perspectives of cooperators that set themselves apart from other forms of organisations such as social enterprises – eliciting their refusal to engage with strategies of neoliberalisation, their resistance against it but also their dismissal by institutional actors as a result. Worker cooperatives participate to a social economy aiming at more democracy, not philanthropy (Barry and Smith, 2005). Moreover, if cooperatives can only foster shared and progressive politics in congenial environments, embedded in social movements that attempt at eroding capitalism, what does it entail for their study in a highly neoliberal and sectarian environment like Northern Ireland?

Nonetheless, there is a huge theoretical gap between the promise of non-exploitative economies on the one hand and neoliberal subterfuge on the other. In part, the gap results from the analysis of worker cooperatives (and alternative economies) as ideal types rather than actually existing practices (Rahnema contends industrial democracy is relative, 'pure' workers control having never really existed (2016)). In Wolff (2012) for instance, the reference to worker self-managed enterprises, as a democratically run enterprise in which all workers are owners and participate in the collective decision-making process (i.e. all workers are members) differs dramatically from the reality of worker cooperative businesses. What it provides in imagination is less relevant of course to the study of actually existing worker cooperatives. Encouraging us to investigate "real utopias", i.e. empirical examples of emancipatory practices, echoes calls from feminist and critical geographers to provide ethnographic accounts of the nitty gritty reality of alternative economies, putting the spotlight on the actions of workers and communities too often overlooked in traditional accounts of the economy (Amin, 2009; Gibson-Graham, 2014; Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2011).

3. Feminist critique, diverse and post-capitalist economies

If capitalism produces powerless workers, it is hard to understand how those would even be capable of transforming and revalorising their work (Pettinger, 2019). Defining alternatives and their possibilities also depends on how the mainstream is conceived (Williams and Windebank, 2003, p. 128). After all, if economies are constructed, if markets, transactions and organisations are not entities set in stone but instead made in real life – in other words if there is contingency (a concept highlighted by Marx himself) – then there is a possibility for change, for struggle and for transformation.

Responding to the exclusion of activities (primarily carried out by women, such as care, household activities, etc.) within the capitalist sphere, both Feminist and Marxist economic literatures have attempted at presenting what is normally rendered invisible through conventional views of the capitalist economic system (Cameron and Gibson Graham, 2003; Pettinger, 2019; Mies, 2014). Adding and expanding on this understanding, critical theory not only highlights practices, hidden and denied, that participate to the capitalist economy, but also those economic activities that obey logics other than capitalist, to recognise "the co-existence of various constellations of surplus production, appropriation and distribution at any particular space and time" (Gibson-Graham, 2013, p. 4). Looking at the economy as diverse rejoins other accounts of economic hybridity where non-capitalist economic modes endure, even if in the background (Leyshon et al., 2003, p. 9; Wright, 2010, 2015). After all, Polanyi had long showed that the emergence of market economies is accompanied by counter-movements, including in fact modern cooperatives – the first building society formed in 1775 in Birmingham predates the laissez-faire doctrine of Adam Smith by a year (Mayo, 2017, p. 30). Not only was the economy never solely capitalist, but capitalism itself could not have survived without the continuation of cooperation and mutual aid, present in the networks of family, neighbourhoods and communities (Leyshon et al., 2003; Wright, 2010).

In bringing to light ethics of care, feminist approaches to alternative economics show that there may be different ways of thinking about economies beyond capitalism. Against structuralist understandings of neoliberalism as invading all aspects of social

life, coercing everyday practices, Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006) argue that in economics too the personal can be political. While Gibson-Graham's categorisation of economic organisations (transactions and labour) as capitalist, alternative-capitalist and non-capitalist is not uncontroversial (Amin, 2009, p. 10), their intention to think beyond capitalism, without denying the relations of power between economic practices, enables them to 'queer' or diversify their understanding of the economy, and contribute to resisting capitalism's hegemony (1996; 2006; 2008; Kruzynski, 2016). In fact, it is precisely by portraying capitalism as the only game in town (North and Cato, 2018) that alternative economic activities remain invisible, assigned a lesser value or simply silenced (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p.56). After all, if cooperatives have long existed and been present almost everywhere, performing at least as well as their conventional counterparts, why else is there a "cooperative blindness" (Birchall, 2003, p. 69) with so few explicit references in the literature on economics, economic recovery and community development?

The approach Gibson-Graham encourages us to take is one of creativity and open-mindedness in our evaluation of alternative economies. Corragio (2018) translates this opening up of possibilities as reaffirming ethics in the economy, bringing out of the obscurity what capitalism obscures. With a more compassionate look at alternative economic organisations such as cooperatives, feminist geographers demonstrate how ethical economies and alternative economic practices, rather than being too little too late (Pettinger, 2019), may in fact transform the experience of living of cooperators, their families and their communities altogether (Cameron and Hicks, 2014; Cameron, 2009).

Concepts of alienation and exploitation in capitalist workplaces are reframed, remaining powerful and current. Feminist geographers like Cornwell (2012) highlight how cooperatives become sites of compromise, where the labour process is transformed and where democratic subjectivities are nurtured. Langmead's (2016, 2017) ethnography points to cooperative workplaces that create mutuality and shared experiences at odds with concepts of alienation. Workers regaining control over the workplace engage in collective decision-making processes opened to ethical considerations. Healy (2011, p. 366) highlights the emergence of this subjectivity as "another way to be a communist". By rejecting the emphasis on "strong theory",

deemed either patronising or debilitating, the diverse economies' perspective makes possible the exploration of prefigurative and ethical economies otherwise overlooked (Cima, 2021; Gibson-Graham, 2014). The appeal for engaging with the often messy reality of alternative economies (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010) provides a template for the empirical investigation of actually existing worker cooperatives in a more empathetic way. In a way, the focus on everyday practices beyond capitalism echoes the emphasis on resistance to the unidimensional nature of dominant state-centred peace-building approaches described in the previous chapter (Chan Shun-hing, 2011), highlighting how the "hidden, small scale and marginal agencies" produce new forms beyond the neoliberal peace (Richmond 2011, p. 419).

On the other hand, while extremely powerful, this approach risks providing 'panglossian' readings of the economy, with more focus on what is not capitalist rather than the degree to which practices can be emancipatory. There are indeed concerns with conceptualising agency as depoliticised, as hopeful readings of the economy can sometimes lead to naivetés where new modes of exploitation are turned into promising economic experiments and logics of co-option and instrumentalisation are overlooked (Gabriel and Sarmiento, 2020). Instead, the question becomes – as Cornwell contends – how can we "mobilise the explanatory power of historical geographic materialism with a methodological commitment to a politics of possibility" (2012, p. 727)?

4. Situating the research at the intersection of current debates on alternative economies

How to apply the interpretative lens of critical theory to real existing experiments without condemning them without trial or over-emphasising their possibilities? This is indeed the focus of recent debates in the study of alternative economies. With an increased engagement of feminist diverse economies research with critique – evaluating the contradictions of non-hegemonic economies – and with critical theorists pointing to the need for more hopeful and diverse accounts of economic possibilities, scholars have attempted at bridging the gap between anti-capitalist critique and diverse economies by resisting the temptation of the structuralist/post-structuralist dichotomy (North, et al., 2020; Miller, 2015; Dinerstein, 2015; Zanoni et al., 2017; Wright, 2019). Critical theories of capitalism play an

invaluable role in enriching our understanding of alternative economies. As Schweickart contends, "we cannot afford to forget Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci, Bertolt Brecht, the Frankfurt School, CLR James, Raya Dunayevskaya, Paul Sweezy, and many, many more" (2011, p. 7). Especially as the thesis will demonstrate the relevance of those theories and of the traditions of anti-capitalist struggles in inspiring and driving some of the worker cooperative projects portrayed in this research. Instead:

> "We argue that to do so we should, as a scholarly community, at once remain 'anti-performative, de-naturalizing and reflexive' of capitalism(s) (Fournier and Grey, 2000) to keep developing sophisticated critique that fosters antagonism and become more proactively performative of alternatives supporting more forcefully, *and* visibly non-capitalist organizing (Gibson-Graham, 2003, 2006). We argue that these two modalities of resistance—through antagonism and social imagination, respectively—should not be regarded as standing in a relation of inherent contradiction, but rather as complementary, and mutually reinforcing each other." (Zanoni et al., 2017, p. 578)

Drawing from these perspectives, this research aims at investigating worker cooperatives with the compassionate gaze of the ethnographic method, being receptive to the contradictions they face, the processes they are engaged in, the outcomes they produce, for whom, and the institutional attempts at co-option they grapple with. The research frames cooperative economic practices as sitting on an unequal footing with neoliberal hegemonies, although it is acknowledged that they are side-lined and rendered invisible by those, in an attempt to put capitalism back in its place (North and Cato, 2018) without denying its effect. Reinstating agency is imperative – looking at alternative economies is otherwise meaningless (Pettinger, 2019) – but it does not close the discussion on the impact of the social relations in which they take place (Wright, 2019).

Reading the economy in diversity responds to calls for open-mindedness in engaging with lived realities of cooperation, making room for the variety of ways in which workers and communities respond to and resist neoliberal hegemonies. Moreover,

beyond theory, alternative economies produce real material outcomes for people, outcomes that cannot be underplayed and require a less pessimistic gaze when doing research.

There is diversity in the motives, intents, politics and incentives to participate in creating more democratic and sustainable economies. Academic research also highlights a diversity of institutional frameworks and historical trajectories for cooperative and labour movements, fostering resistance in very varying degrees to neoliberalism. While some initiatives may represent cheaper substitutes to the welfare state provision, others may reintegrate genuine community control and democracy within the economy. Some projects may be born out of a desire for radical social transformation, others may respond to shared problems with pragmatic solutions (Doyle and Lalor, 2012). In trying to make sense of this diversity, North and Cato (2018) distinguish between social enterprises, when they take part in neoliberalisation strategies as alternatives to welfare provision; the social economy (mainly present in North America and Europe) which aims at integrating in the economy those that are traditional marginalised by it; the solidarity economy (as found in Latin America and Southern Europe) which, beyond simply shielding communities from the devastating effects of the neoliberal roll-back and globalisation, also aims at providing more sustainable collective ways of living with dignity (community and diverse economies perspective); and antagonistic economies that aim at fighting back against capitalism and enacting critical resistance. In this respect, the research engages with the antagonistic politics that drive the emergence of some of the worker cooperatives projects studied. Indeed, what if the practices looked at here are less about what is not capitalist and more about confronting capitalism. In accounting for the cooperators' visions and intentions when constructing cooperative economies, I am interested in investigating how critique of neoliberal (and sectarian, patriarchal, etc.) hegemonies can be generative rather than inhibiting the emergence of alternative economic practices. After all, as Miller (2015) contends, why choose between hope and rage? Why can't it be both?

Reclaiming anti-capitalist praxis brings collective critical agency to the fore, demonstrating the role of collective actors in bringing about social change (Wright, 2019; Wolff, 2012). In those particular cases, cooperators can be framed as organic

intellectuals (Gramsci, in Forgacs, 1988; Filippini, 2017) challenging the colossal efforts invested in the social reproduction of capitalism, through education, engrained habits, ideology and culture. If capitalist hegemony is understood not only as control but also as consent, achieved on the ideological terrain by the control of a dominant social group imposing its own worldview, then the role of organic intellectual in articulating a new worldview is essential. And, if as Wolff (2012) notes the capitalist organisation of enterprises is a central feature of this 'capitalist common sense', worker cooperatives as alternative practices may in fact be part of creating a new language, an alternative economic narrative.

On the other hand, this research aims at investigating the power relations in which alternative practices are embedded. In this respect, Dinerstein (2015, p. 52) reminds us that alternative economic practices are not "liberated zones" but instead they are embedded in an environment dominated by neoliberal, patriarchal (etc.) hegemonies. Drawing from her approach provides insight into the struggles those alternatives are engaged in. If anything it is by confronting the very uncongenial environment in which they emerge and operate that alternative economic practices can be better assessed. After all, other workers' struggles have been granted a similar analytical lens. For instance Hyman (1975) sought to evaluate attempts at social empowerment in trade unions by looking at the powerful actors engaged against it. This approach produces humility, rather than defeatism, humility deriving from the appreciation that the forces engaged against those projects are in fact colossal. Those colossal forces also need to be brought under the microscope of academic investigation if we are to fully understand cooperatives' potential and possibilities.

For Dinerstein, the question becomes not whether – in our case worker cooperatives – can engender radical transformation but rather how does the state and capital "cope" with them (2015, p. 224). In fact, one notices an overall side-lining of more collective responses and radical approaches to the social and solidarity economy in policy frameworks, replacing concepts of social justice and solidarity with partnership and governance (Novkovic and Golja, 2015). Cooperatives have been more recently cast aside to the benefit of more recent concepts of social enterprises and entrepreneurship, a phenomenon accelerated by neoliberal roll-out policies in the UK (Huddersfield, 2022). In contrast with the European tradition where cooperatives are the prevalent

model of social economy organisation, in social enterprises, the democratic governance and the collective control are left out. Indeed, the policy discourse translates "dissident" organisations rooted in genuine radical collective practices (including indigenous practices) into concepts of entrepreneurship (Chatterton et al., 2019; Dinerstein, 2014, 2017). The social economy, which through cooperatives represented a way to democratise (socialise) the economy, has instead become a way to commodify the social. Shedding light onto the processes of instrumentalisation is vital in order to explore how critical agency is co-opted but also facilitated.

D- Post-conflict Northern Ireland: Cooperatives and the revival of social economies

With regards to this thesis' primary question, the academic literature's focus on social enterprises and the neoliberal interpretation of peace described in chapter 2 suggest that Northern Ireland may not provide a congenial environment for cooperatives.

In Northern Ireland, cooperative societies benefit from recognition in law, under the *Cooperative and Community Benefit Societies Act (Northern Ireland) 2016* and before that the *Industrial and Provident Societies Act 1893* and *Industrial and Provident Societies Act (Northern Ireland) 1969*. The change in legislation was accompanied by a transfer of the cooperative and mutual registry from the Northern Irish Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI, now DfE) to the Financial Conduct Authority, a UK-wide organisation.

Despite legal recognition, the sector is difficult to assess, with few choosing to register as a cooperative society, preferring less expensive forms of incorporation such as companies (limited by guarantee) or limited liability partnerships. Nonetheless, co-operatives UK's database portrays a sector in line with its historical tradition, dominated by agricultural cooperatives and credit unions. In 2019, the database counted 257 cooperatives (271 in 2017 at the start of this research), representing £1.1 billion in annual turnover and 779,000 members. The agricultural sector accounts for the biggest turnover, with 36 agricultural cooperatives accounting for £0.89bn i.e. nearly 92% of all cooperatives' turnover in the region (and 26.46K members). On the other hand, 151 credit unions account for the majority of cooperatives as well as membership, with over 423,220 members out of the 457K total cooperative

membership, but only a small part of the turnover (£0.07bn) (Co-operatives UK, 2020). In fact, Northern Irish credit unions account for a third of the entire credit union membership in the UK and for over half of the sector's assets UK-wide (Bank of England, 2019). Worker cooperatives on the other hand are marginal, in number, membership and turnover. In this research, ten worker cooperatives, trading or dissolved, were studied.

Little has ever been written about worker cooperatives in Northern Ireland. At the start of the peace process, research was commissioned by the government (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, OFMDFM) to look at the role of cooperatives in general (McAleavy et al., 2001). It painted the picture of a wide sector, supporting an estimated 4500 jobs but divided along sectarian lines between mainly Protestant consumer cooperatives and Catholic parish-based credit unions. To offset the lack of a unifying voice, expensive registration process and low capacity in the sector, the research commissioned by OFMDFM advocated for financial and legislative support, with an understanding that cooperatives would contribute both to employment, poverty alleviation but also social reconciliation between communities. At present, the suggestions of the 2001 report have not materialised despite demand from the sector and research advocating the need for ad hoc cooperative institutions (such as a Cooperative Development Agency) (New Economic Foundation, 2018). Research on worker cooperatives across Ireland is also rare (see Gavin et al., 2014; McMahon, 2019; Nolan et al., 2013), highlighting the demise of the worker cooperative movement in the Republic of Ireland after the closure of the Cooperative Development Unit (ROI) in 2002. In 2014, Gavin et al. (2014) identified less than 20 worker cooperatives across the whole island still in existence, highlighting how Ireland fosters a rather unconducive environment for worker cooperatives. Worker cooperatives in Northern Ireland have undeniably not benefited from the same growth as the rest of the UK. Even in the UK, the 500 worker cooperatives last recorded (Co-operatives UK, 2015) seem small compared to the 3000+ worker coops found in France or 25,000 in Italy (Pérotin, 2016). Yet, their marginality reveals more about the institutional context they operate in than the fact that they inexistent or part of a new phenomenon in Northern Ireland.

Instead, it is the social economy which has been the focus of institutional development in Northern Ireland, mirroring developments in Great Britain, with a sector increasingly defined by concepts of social enterprises and entrepreneurship (Defourny and Nyssens, 2012; Huckfield, 2022). Inexistent before the peace process, the social economy policy developed in the early 2000s, responding to the lack of awareness in the sector, dire need of finance and prevalence of small organisations (Murtagh and Shirlow, 2012; DETI, 2007; PwC, 2013; SENI, 2019). While institutional barriers to the growth of the sector are investigated in chapter 7, it is evident that cooperatives do not benefit from specific statutes in those policies. They appear in various surveys (DETI, 2007; PwC, 2013) but are always subsumed under the umbrella of the third sector, social economy or social enterprise sector. While Murtagh and Goggin (2014) note that understanding the social economy as simply embedded within a neoliberal strategy is too simplistic, the absence of research and discourse on worker cooperatives hints at processes of co-option and approaches that aim at depoliticising the role of the civil society in Northern Ireland (Hughes, 2017). This echoes analyses of the civil society in Northern Ireland describing a buy-in from the sector into neoliberal strategies and a failure to deliver an alternative narrative to the neoliberal peace (cf. Chapter 2). Yet, this research also contends with evaluating the contribution of worker cooperatives with a view to account for the perspectives of cooperators who stressed their distinct identity, enthused by principles of democracy, equality and cooperation, rejecting the neoliberal penchants of Northern Ireland social economy policy. Their perspectives speak of the complexities with which workers "maintain legitimacy, integrity and autonomy where they can" (Richmond, 2011, p. 434). In this respect, the research investigates the contribution of worker cooperatives to fostering social, solidarity and antagonistic economies, bearing in mind the Irish cooperative sector's disconnect from its radical origins and other forms of collective struggles, paralleled with an uncongenial policy framework. By evaluating whether the social economy policy is replicating the same silo vision that top-down approaches of the liberal peace paradigm – leaving the structural issues that gave rise to conflict unaddressed – I also aim to assess the role of more progressive and inclusive politics which suffer from constant overlook from both policy and research in relation to Northern Ireland.

Conclusion:

Wright (2019) concludes that anti-capitalist praxis requires collective actors able to build solidarity in the face of fragmented class structures and diverse forms of identity. Northern Ireland provides a particularly salient example of fragmentation and division as a barrier to facilitating solidarity for sustained collective action. Instead, research on worker cooperatives in Northern Ireland brings a new light to the exploration of local alternative economics and community economies where the return to the 'local' rarely questions what stands behind the local itself. In indigenous struggles in Latin America (Dinerstein, 2015), local identities and a strong sense of community play a role as an incentive to resist oppression. But what if the local, or the community, which cannot be conceived uncritically as inherently progressive, is considered problematic? What if 'community', instead of being associated with grassroot control, advances particularistic and sectarian interests? (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2004, Leyshon and Lee, 2003). With reference to the previous chapter, to what extent do worker cooperatives contribute to make more room for future-oriented, shared and inclusive politics in Northern Ireland is part of the question I hope to answer in this thesis.

At the same time, the need for alternative economic strategies that foster a more equitable and sustainable transformation becomes even more desirable in a context where the neoliberal interpretation of peace is so dominant. At minima, if worker cooperatives are more efficient and resilient than their conventional counterparts, they provide workers with an opportunity to offset some of the most disastrous impacts of neoliberalism. They may participate to reintegrate the language of class, social justice and solidarity into economics. Rather than creating "emancipatory islands" (Wright, 2019, p. 52), some cooperatives may even form part of an anti-capitalist political project. North et al. (2020) conclude that the re-appropriation of the means of production can feed into building a counter-project that also challenges in the present, rather than succumbs to, the worst aspects of neoliberalism. Whatever their outcome, this research seeks to bring worker cooperatives out their invisibility, filling a gap in the literature on post-conflict Northern Ireland. In doing so the research seeks to inscribe itself in the tradition of other studies that commemorate marginalised history, not only of cooperatives but also of labour, and uncover critical agency and its

contribution to building social change in the present. In looking at how alternative organisations such as cooperatives fail to be remembered, commemorated and taught (whether in school, at university, in policy-making institutions), Rodgers et al. (2016, p. 93) highlight the process of silencing that privileges a narrative centred on capitalist ideology, with a focus on competition and individualism rather than cooperative concepts of collectivism and solidarity. As Rodgers et al. conclude (2016), commemorating marginalised history, of labour, of cooperation, of resistance, contributes to shatter the image of capitalism as a cohesive, dominant and sole narrative. Instead, showing a picture of complexity and featuring critical agency can contribute to building opportunities for social change in the present.

In seeking to bring them out of the shadows, the literature on alternative economies calls for a tolerant and open-minded inspection. As Wright (2010) stresses, envisioning alternatives requires a hard-to-find happy medium between cheerleading and cynicism. This approach also echoes the focus on agency in the literature on peacebuilding (Richmond and Mitchell, 2012, p .24). The theoretical framework outlined in this chapter calls for a closer engagement with actually existing practices, looking both empathetically but not uncritically at worker cooperatives. In the theoretical gap between non-exploitative economies, neoliberal subterfuge, and post-capitalist economies, what seems to be missing are empirical studies that account for the often messy realities of worker cooperatives (Gibson-Graham, 2014; Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010, p. 481; Langmead, 2017). Engaging with this gap in the context of Northern Ireland offers an interesting perspective to the debates mentioned above. What is needed, then, are accounts of "empirical cases that are neither gullible nor cynical, but try to fully recognize the complexity and dilemmas as well as real potentials of practical efforts at social empowerment." (Wright, 2010, p. 107)

Chapter 4: Methodology – cooperative research in post-conflict Northern Ireland

> "How do the 'powerless' engage in politics and international relations should be its starting question, not whether they do. How are they facilitated, blocked and co-opted, and how do they maintain legitimacy, integrity and autonomy where they can, should soon follow. It should also be borne in mind that such critical agency should not be romanticized. It should be understood through a methodological lens that prevents its co-option and instrumentalization." (Richmond, 2011, p. 434)

My decision to research worker cooperatives in Northern Ireland stemmed from personal experience. Nearly ten years before I put pen to paper on what is now a PhD thesis, I found myself in the middle of a cold wet night standing on an empty festival field in South Belfast. The field had just emptied of thousands of revellers, leaving behind a mountain of plastic pint cups and other unfathomable waste. Our team was faced with what then looked like an unsurmountable task: to clear out this waste site for the next day's concert, armed with only litter pickers, gloves and a high dose of courage. We were all equal heroes in this deed, sharing both labour effort and responsibilities. Those who were paid more – on paper labelled as managers – were contributing any additional income back into the cooperative, the Belfast Cleaning Society. Despite being cold to the bones, on the brink of pure exhaustion, standing long hours on the remnants of past drinking and partying, I remember that – as one participant later put it – "the craic was ninety".

It is around that time that the cooperative movement in Ireland was experiencing a revival of a sort – or so it seemed. In the years that accompanied the post-2008 recession, alternative economic practices and rhetoric seem to mushroom in post-conflict Northern Ireland, led by community activists such as Trademark, an anti-sectarian trade union community organisation in which I worked. Thinking about the role of cooperative practices was given increasing consideration alongside more traditional trade union, socialist and anti-sectarian politics. There was a little bit of a moment for co-ops. New worker cooperatives like the Belfast Cleaning Society mentioned above were being set up, including in interfaces and traditional working

class areas in the North. Support was being developed, initially funded by the Cooperative Hub across the water in Great Britain and with the creation of the first cooperative development organisation in Northern Ireland, Cooperative Alternatives. Research projects were undertaken in Trademark on cooperatives in Ireland and the role of worker buyouts in other European countries (Nolan et al., 2013). Networking events were organised across Ireland bringing together northern and southern cooperators culminating in the creation of the Irish Workers Cooperative Network in 2012 and contributing to lobbying in the Republic for legislative change with *Forfás* (the national policy advisory board for enterprise and trade) and the *Oireachtas* (the Irish legislature) committee on jobs and innovation. Witnessing first hand and partaking in some of this myriad of activities that brought together a cooperative movement provided inspiration for this research project. There is never any denying that research is a collective endeavour. Thinking otherwise is ludicrous. Yet, this experience imprinted very firmly on me that this project was never mine in the first place.

A- An ethnographic, engaged and cooperative approach to research

In this research, I seek to examine the contribution of worker cooperatives to the political economy of Northern Ireland. To do so, I adopted a multi-disciplinary focus, based on critical theory, encompassing elements of human geography, political science and economics. Through an engaged ethnographically informed approach, I sought to uncover the processes and complexities at play in actually existing alternative economies in the Northern Irish case study. This ethnographic study is informed by an interpretive and reflexive methodology combined with critical theory, in an attempt to underline the voices, experiences and agency of those marginalised by neoliberal peacebuilding and the social, political and economic contexts in which they are situated (O'Reilly, 2009; Bryman, 2016; Blaikie, 2010).

The contribution of ethnography to our understanding of work practices (Watson, 2011; Smith, 2020) and in particular social and alternative economies (Amin, 2009, p. 13; Wright, 2010; Cornwell, 2012; Lechat, 2009; Langmead, 2017; Gibson-Graham, 2014; Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2016) is well acknowledged. Empirical studies that account for the messy everyday realities of worker cooperatives (Chatterton and

Pickerill, 2010, p. 481; Langmead, 2017) provide a departure from a theoretical literature that oscillate between the promise of non-exploitative economies at one end of the spectrum and social economies as neoliberal subterfuge at the other (Eisenschitz and Gough, 2011). An ethnographic focus on worker cooperatives contributes to dispelling the myth of the too often assumed but un-investigated positives of alternative organisations (Kociatkiewitz et al., 2021; Wright, 2010). It equally contributes to dispelling the myth of their inevitable demise, showing the invisible ways of working, producing and living driven by ethical considerations rather than a (strictly) capitalist logic. The ethnographically informed methodological approach chosen also reflects a shift in academic praxis where embeddedness, engagement and accountability provide opportunities for "sustain[ing] the imagination of different economies, their practices, and subjectivities" (Zanoni et al., 2017, p. 583). In parallel, there has been a similar call for more embedded qualitative accounts in post-conflict societies that bring to the fore the hidden stories of those marginalised by – but who also in a myriad of ways resist – neoliberal peacebuilding (Luckman, 2017; Cramer, 2008; Bleiker, 2012).

As a debated concept, ethnography conventionally refers either to the use of certain methods such as observation (Bryman, 2016, p. 423; Hammersley, 1998) or to a thick detailed written output (Van Maanen, 2011a). Here, ethnography entails a sustained engagement in the study, an immersion into the field making possible the exploration of everyday processes and practices at play in existing worker cooperatives and the wider relations of power within (Willis and Trondman, 2000). I sought to "study in" cooperatives and highlight the knowledge contained therein (Van Maanen, 2011b, p. 220), capturing from within the perspectives of those who inhabit alternative economic spaces. To do so involved attending craft markets, working cleaning shifts, serving at a café, observing cooperative meetings, attending workshops and conferences and reinventing the world with participants during those informal conversations that occurred at community hubs, cafes, pubs – in other words being part of this social world I was meant to 'study'. I did so primarily by living in Belfast for over seven months during which I carried out most of fieldwork. I returned on many occasions, from a couple of days to a couple of weeks and later undertook an internship locally (partly based in Belfast, partly done remotely in Liverpool due to the pandemic). Aided by this embedded experience, I carried out in-depth ethnographic interviews with

cooperators, with the aim of providing what Van Maanen (2011b, p. 225) describes as "more room in our texts for the voices of those we study and hence reduce the indignity of speaking for others that some ethnographers feel."

The qualitative in-depth framework infuses the writing of this thesis with a narrative and detailed account. Rich portraits of worker cooperatives are produced with a view to reveal economic diversity and impose as little violence as possible to the 'field' (Gibson-Graham, 2014). The study avails of the in-depth ethnographic interviews as the primary method and deliberately gives ample space to the interviewees' views and interpretations. In writing this thesis, I chose the active voice, as a matter of simplicity, without wishing to overlook the collective efforts which this research stems from. While this is partly concomitant with Gibson-Graham's emphasis on "weak theory and thick description" (2014), this research supplements rather than substitute rich description with an appropriate level of theory for an in-depth qualitative empirical study (Zanoni et al, 2017). "Ethnography and theory should conjoin to produce a concrete sense of the social as *internally* sprung and dialectically produced" (Willis and Trondman, 2000, p. 6). Indeed, without theory, ethnography "withers on the local vine" (Burawoy, 2000, p. 10). The research therefore provides rich and concrete examples of cooperation, highlighting the social process therein. To build knowledge from the ground up, cooperators' motivations, justifications, and accounts are given credit to. But the research also contends with the impediments they grapple with, speaking of wider relations of power. Without looking at external forces as natural, their impact as uncontested, their outcome as a-historical, ethnography can investigate how external forces are reframed, reproduced and resisted in local contexts (Burawoy, 2000).

As "the ethnographer enters the field with an open mind, not an empty head" (Fetterman, 1991, p. 90), fieldwork was preceded and informed by a thorough literature review that highlighted notions of decent work, anti-alienating work practices and alternative economies. Yet, concepts of care emerged out of the immersion in the field, not to cast aside but to complement and build on this existing literature. In the back and forth between induction and deduction, retroductive reading takes place: the ethnographic approach leaves us open to surprises, to discard and build on pre-conceptions, and therefore to refine theory (Belfrage and Hauf, 2017). This is

precisely what occurred in this research. The immersion in the field materialised by staying with friends during fieldwork, comrades who offered me a roof, one of whom was a research participant. The conversations that we had 'off the research' such as her personal experience of illness were key to highlighting ethics of care, despite this not being a theme I had deemed central at the initial reading phase. Yet, during ad-hoc craft sessions – gluing Frieda Kahlo wrapping paper on recycled plant pots and cans – we discussed the therapeutic effect of craft. Following a sudden Eureka moment on one of those long walks I often took across Belfast, left to the unconscious roaming of the mind, I started reframing what I had heard and observed as therapeutic practices, not just from ill-health but also from economic and social marginalisation, from a capitalist system that grinds creativity down and from the legacy of the conflict. The idea of "healing" provided a key for reading previously acquired data. Eventually, as North notes, the field speaks (2018, p. 42). What is highlighted here is also how the theoretically-informed, more abstract knowledge, often privileged, is balanced with equal consideration for the more ethical, connected, detailed, rich form of knowing (Salami, 2020). The emotional work, often considered as 'dirty work' for upsetting the notion of neutral and clinical research (Langmead, 2016; Shaffir and Stebbins, 1991; Townsend and Burgess, 2009) can be resourceful and creative, as well as more receptive to participants' insight.

The outcome of fieldwork is undeniably a product of the interaction between the researcher and the field. For some, acknowledging our findings as constructed is an admission of bias, partiality and lack of scientific rigour. But "to say that our findings, and even our data, are constructed does not automatically imply that they do not or cannot represent social phenomena" (Atkinson and Hammersley, 2007, p. 16). Yet, rather than objectivity and replicability, qualitative research speaks of authenticity and trustworthiness as standards we should measure good practice by (Bryman, 2016, p. 386; Arksey and Knight, 1999, p. 53).

1. Cooperative research, cooperative approach

Beyond questioning what objectivity in research stands for, the very idea of value free research is here challenged (Dowling, 2016; Ferdinant et al., 2007), recognising how knowledge is "inherently partisan" (Russell, 2015, p. 224). As Gillies

and Alldred (2011) contend "the research we produce and the values we promote are inevitably grounded in partial, invested viewpoints". Drawing from critical theory, studying in cooperatives is underpinned by a thirst for knowledge that can produce social change (Harney et al., 2016; Moore, 2018; Dowling, 2016; Atkinson and Hammersley, 2007, p. 14). Simply put, "it is not enough to merely observe the world we live in, merely to understand it; the point is to change it" (Ferdinant et al., 2007, p. 532). Hence, this research aims at mapping and showcasing workers' cooperatives as alternative economic practices. In doing so Erick Olin Wright (2010) stresses the importance of portraying their dilemmas and complexities: envisioning alternatives cannot turn into a programme of 'propagandist cheerleading'. However, raising awareness of cooperative projects and demonstrating their social value also contributes to putting them on the map of a policy framework they are currently cast-off from. In this respect, there is a performative effect to demonstrating the existence of alternative economies (Gibson-Graham, 2008; Chatterton, 2017; Cameron and Hicks, 2014; Healy, et al., 2018).

Understanding the power relationships those alternative economic projects are subjected to mirrors the call for more egalitarian and democratic understanding of the research process itself. In parallel to wanting academic research to have some value for the real world (Hunter et al., 2013), participatory, activist, militant and feminist research stress the importance of challenging the exploitative nature of the research process itself (Juris, 2007; Russell, 2015; Pusey, 2017; Faulkner, 2017). As McLaren (1991, p. 150) summarises "a critical astringency must be brought to our understanding of field relations, which can come about only if we are able to situate and analyse our ethnographic practices within larger structures of power and privilege". In recognising agency and resistance, the research aims at looking through the eyes of the very people normally 'subjected' to research – for they are not subjects to be categorised and analysed (Valentine, 2005; Bourdieu, 2003; Zanoni et al., 2017), especially considering how they "often […] have a better grasp of their own situation than is commonly supposed" (Luckman, 2017, p. 114). I do not claim that this research aims to 'empower' research participants, something deemed patronising (Gillies and Alldred, 2011; Edwards and Mauthner, 2001). In fact, when one participant was asked about empowerment strategies in cooperatives – a term used by other participants – she quickly pointed out that she was already empowered! Without rejecting the

possibility for empowerment out of research, I recognise here the complexities around and the collective and reciprocal (rather than top-down) nature of empowerment. Instead, acknowledging who the 'real experts' are (i.e. participants) (Dupont, 2008), facilitating the production of alternative knowledge (Pain and Francis, 2003), giving back (Kindon and Elwood, 2009), co-building local community capacity (Guta et al., 2013) to remedy injustice (Kindon, 2016), working 'with' rather than 'on': all those aspects contribute to "doing research differently" (Kesby et al., 2005, p. 144).

Rather than a full-on participatory action research, I chose to take a cooperative approach, which for a study on cooperatives seemed fitting. This cooperative approach is inspired by the ethical blueprint that imbues cooperatives' activities. It is notable that one participant referred to Freire's critical pedagogy as a key principle to the functioning of the cooperative he was a member of. As a result, this project contains certain elements that attempt at mitigating the potentially exploitative nature of research (Dowling, 2016; Ganiel, 2013). First, informal conversations with key gatekeepers in the first year of the PhD enabled the integration of their suggestions in the research design. Those suggestions included the need to accurately assess the size of the cooperative sector, answering the question 'who are we?', as well as gathering the views of key stakeholders to contribute to a local government consultation. Second, participants were encouraged to feedback on findings to make sure their views were accurately represented and to foster co-learning. In those worker cooperatives where participant observation was carried out, I sent out a written portrait of the cooperative to its members. As well as portraits of cooperatives, quotations used in the academic output and full transcripts were also shared with participants for feedback. Discussion was also encouraged (Minkler et al., 2002), with participants challenging some of my questions and interpretation – something I welcomed. As the 'experts' on cooperation in Northern Ireland, participants' real names are acknowledged in the research – with their consent –so that their contribution is recognised (Cornwell, 2012). In fact, out of the 42 interviews carried out overall, only four participants requested to be anonymised. With a view to create reciprocity with cooperators (Kesby et al., 2005), I volunteered in some of the worker cooperatives. While unpaid work was contrary to the cooperative ethos, I considered volunteering, since I received a maintenance grant irrespectively, as a means to redistribute institutional resources. Finally, as 'giving back' was sometimes difficult within the

confines of the PhD, I did an internship with a cooperative development organisation. This resulted in the creation of a cooperative database (which was one of the gatekeepers' suggestions), turning research findings into persuasive policy recommendations and further participation in local workshops and seminars[7].

2. Reflexivity: neither 'alien' nor 'native'

In addressing the inevitability of power relationships between researcher and participants, the literature highlights not only participants' involvement in the research but also reflexivity (Dowling, 2016). In fact, what relations the researcher takes in the research bears implication on what renders a study unique. Acknowledging the 'self' is increasingly recognised as good practice by ethnographers. Past credentials in Northern Ireland were influential in gaining access to participants. I entered as *de facto* a participant observer (Atkinson and Hammersley, 2007) relying on existing networks and friendships, a field that was neither 'alien' nor whom I was a 'native' of. At times, I stood as a complete outsider, re-enacting the uncomfortable moments that characterise ethnographic studies: being practically useless in situations where participants needed money, skills and expert advice I did not have; the uneasy questioning and awkward observing of someone else's daily life; topped up by a foreign French accent and incomprehension at some of the local slang despite having previously lived in Northern Ireland. I had to navigate life in a historically-charged post-conflict city, loaded with trauma and a divided sense of identity; as well as the internal tensions and conflict within and between cooperatives, yet all of whom I was

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[7] The database is available here: https://www.coopalternatives.coop/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Co-op-Infographics.pdf
The policy briefs are available here:
- Perrin, O'Hara, McManus and Robb, (2020), *Belfast Inclusive Growth Strategy: a co-operative perspective*, July 2020 - https://www.coopalternatives.coop/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Inclusive-Growth-Strategy-Briefing-Last-version-with-mutual-change-only.pdf
- Perrin and O'Hara, (2020), *Co-operative led solutions to addressing the climate emergency*, September 2020, https://www.coopalternatives.coop/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Green-transition-FINAL.pdf
Workshops recordings are available here:
- Podcast: June 2020, The CombOver, S01 E09 - Cooperatives in Northern Ireland, Interview by Maurice Macartney, available here: https://rss.com/podcasts/the-combover/51943/#
- Seminar "Co-operatives and the Local Economy in NI", 29th September 2020, https://www.coopalternatives.coop/general/co-operatives-and-the-local-economy-in-ni/;
- Seminar "Worker and Employee Owned Co-operatives – the Future of Work?", 27th October 2020 https://www.coopalternatives.coop/blog/worker-and-employee-owned-co-operative-the-future-of-work/

in a privileged position to leave behind at once. On the other hand, I wore with pride past experience in the cooperative sector, a sort of battle scar that ensued participants' indulgence. In fact, the constant side-lining of cooperative organisations in Northern Ireland meant that had I not had this previous experience, this research project would not have existed in the first place. A researcher is never fully an outsider or an insider (Downings, 2016, p. 40) – if anything prior knowledge meant that, as Moore in her critical ethnography in Northern Ireland acknowledged, "I knew enough to know that I do not know enough" (2018, p. 388).

B- Research design and methods: Interviews, observation and stakeholder research

The main focus of the research is an in-depth qualitative study of workers' cooperatives in and around Belfast. The study encompasses ethnographic interviews with ten worker cooperatives, supplemented with participant observation and multiple interviews in three of those projects.

Second, the research relies on semi-structured interviews with representatives from the wider cooperative sector and key stakeholders: other cooperatives (consumers/users cooperatives), key respondents in political parties, policy, trade unions, community sectors as to their views about the potential contribution of cooperatives to post-conflict transformation. Overall, 42 participants were interviewed in this research.

Worker cooperatives in Northern Ireland form the case study of this research with multiple units of analysis (Blaikie, 2010). The case and setting have intrinsic interest and came first before the methods and theories. Ed Mayo (Cooperatives UK) contends "when you have seen one co-op, you have seen one co-op" (quoted in Langmead, 2017). However, the terrain on which this research operates, a post-industrial, fragmented, divided society, is not unique by any stretch of the imagination to Northern Ireland, providing lessons on the emergence and complexities of alternative economies in post-conflict and neoliberalised societies (Flyvberg, 2006; Burawoy, 2000). Moreover, the in-depth portraits of the worker cooperatives featured here and the context-dependent knowledge they provide – a case study in its own right (Platt,

1988; Baxter, 2016; Flyvberg, 2006) – add with complexity, detail and depth to our understanding of worker cooperatives, contributing to further mapping out spaces of resistance where alternative labour relations are enacted. Beyond academic contributions, the research also aims at providing lessons for policy-makers with recommendations that address the lack of awareness of the cooperative sector.

1. Qualitative research with worker cooperatives : Interviews

Qualitative in-depth interviews were carried out in ten worker cooperatives, irrespective of whether they were currently trading or not. Because the research draws attention to the visions of those engaged in trying to build more egalitarian, democratic and sustainable economies, I did not want to silence the voices of those whose cooperative projects had failed. Instead, I wanted to paint a detailed and complex picture of the reality of alternative economies. Interviews were carried out in the Belfast Cleaning Cooperative, a cleaning organisation; Trademark, an anti-sectarian trade union charity; Thart Aris, a feminist co-operative selling organic and recycled products; Creative Workers, a media cooperative; Lúnasa, a café; BlackWater Valley, a rural cooperative selling soil and compost, all trading at the time of fieldwork. I also carried out interviews in Union Taxis, a taxi-driver worker cooperative which had closed down; Just Books, an anarchist bookshop and library that had reverted back to an informal organisation; Farmageddon Brewing, a craft beer company formerly co-operative; and with the Market Development Association on a worker cooperative project "en devenir" called Bread and Roses. Within those ten projects, I carried out participant observation and multiple interviews (with several cooperators in the same organisation) in the Belfast Cleaning cooperative, Creative Workers cooperative and Thart Aris. Observation and multiple interviews were also conducted in another worker cooperative that remains anonymised for reasons detailed at the end of this chapter. Sustained participant observation and multiple interviews were made possible in those cooperatives because of their geographical accessibility on a regular basis and as they were trading at the time of research. Overall, the study of worker cooperatives in Northern Ireland is ethnographic in nature. Even in those cooperatives where sustained participant observation did not occur, the research reflected an ethnographic engagement with the field: attending events, visiting premises, feeding animals, tasting products.

The workers' cooperatives were identified through discussions with gatekeepers, previous work experience as a cooperator and information available in the public domain, as well as word of mouth once in Belfast. The internship I later carried out confirmed the marginal number of worker cooperatives in Northern Ireland and provided an overall mapping of the sector[8]. Even then, it is undeniable that the information found in the public domain is insufficient to provide an accurate image of the size and contribution of the cooperative sector. Research by the Third Sector Research Centre has highlighted the need for "micro-mapping" using for example word of mouth to gain knowledge of "below the radar" organisations, those that do not appear in formal listings (TSRC, 2014, p. 37). Due to worker cooperatives' 'under-the-radar-ness', I do not suggest that I have interviewed all worker cooperatives in Northern Ireland. These were at the time, especially in and around Belfast where the study was concentrated, the cooperatives gatekeepers and I knew about.

Access was relatively straightforward due to existing networks, with initial discussions with gatekeepers leading to a quick snowballing of participants and resulting in a significant set of interviews. Yet, access to an organisation does not provide access to people (Bryman, 2016). Participation in the research was voluntary and, in some instances, members did not wish to participate in an interview. Overall, the research was welcomed and participants were eager to be interviewed. Drawing from an ethnographic framework, I used in-depth semi-structured to unstructured interviews as a part of a multi-method approach (Arksey and Knight, 1999; Valentine, 2005; Dunn, 2016) allowing for some main topics to be explored while also wearing off tracks into a more participant led interaction. The unstructured interviews – compared to structured ones – offered space for digging into the complexities of cooperation, allowing participants' rich stories to emerge, without closing off new avenues and stripping away context (O'Reilly, 2009). Yet, the interviews were also informed by the observation in some cooperatives which defined general themes. As Jacobs (2011) highlights, even interviews as conversation (Burgess, 1988) are not in actual fact equal and easy conversations. The researcher decides what to ask and what

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[8] Compiling together information from public databases i.e. Company House, the Financial Conduct Authority (the mutuals and coops registry), the Department for the Economy's former cooperative register, Cooperatives UK data explorer and local knowledge of cooperative organisations in Northern Ireland.

answer is adequate. Instead, the interview as conversation provides a framework for making participants at ease, highlighting the reciprocity in the research process. Some interviews had a more serious quality, others involved laughter, all were unique, receptive to each participant's rhythm. Hockey and Forsey (2012) argue that in-depth interviews can be the primary method of ethnography, bringing to the fore participants' own narrative in a way which observation alone cannot convey. Rather than "manufactured data" (Watson, 2011), an interview too can provide an immersion into the field (Hockey and Forsey, 2012). As participants decided where the interview took place, location became a crucial element to this embodied experience (Elwood and Martin, 2000). Sometimes, participants chose for the interview to take place "outside the iron cage" (a concept from Weber, used in a worker cooperative workplace in Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2014, pp. 650-651), in coffee shops which made for a relaxed comfortable atmosphere (and a noisy recording) outside of the gaze of fellow workers. Others chose to have the interview in work premises, as a means to showcase their work or due to time constraints and practicalities. Placing the interview reflects on the relationship with work and at work, and undeniably affected the content of the discussion (Elwood and Martin, 2000). All interviews but one were face to face.

Since nearly all research participants wanted to keep their name in the research, they received a full transcript. I undertook the time-consuming task of transcribing all interviews in worker cooperatives. Although time consuming, Hammersley (1998, p. 152) highlights how transcription is a crucial step in data analysis, allowing for organising, re-organising and thinking through data.

2. Qualitative research with worker cooperatives : Participant observation

Before fieldwork started, I had not accounted for using participant observation to the extent I did. I was concerned that participant observation would end up providing too much of my own personal narrative of cooperatives rather than the narrative of cooperators themselves, something that deserved consideration in a context where cooperatives have remained mostly invisible. I was also painfully aware that my lack of skills (media and IT, beer making, baking, etc.) would disrupt their rhythm of work rather than provide a helpful pair of hands. I still believed that participant observation could be used, especially to limit the research as a one-way

process of extracting information (Kesby et al., 2005; Kearns, 2016), but I considered it secondary. Fieldwork took over. A few weeks into fieldwork, I was asked by one of the groups to volunteer. Despite my initial plans to sit on a table and write notes, I was thrown into the reality of work and quickly became keen on participating. As one participant put it, regular presence and participation into the activities of the cooperative resulted in "a barrier disintegrating", with the participant appreciating me "coming in to see it rather than just ask about it" (Anonymised). Participant observation fostered trust and reciprocity, enabling the move away from an extractive model of conducting research towards research being co-created. It also allowed for informal discussions and at times helped provide feedback on the research findings in a more accessible way.

Rather than participant observation being the panacea for truly participatory research, there is a need for flexibility when doing fieldwork. Moreover, the researcher's immersion into the day-to-day routine of participants brings to light different elements of work practices in worker cooperatives: the more than discursive, participants' interdependence and relationships with each other as well as with others (consumers, other businesses, etc.). The focus is placed on the sensory– I observed participants being tired, annoyed, walking out of meetings, argue but also laughing together, using banter, spending time with customers, friends, family. By creating reciprocity and helping out, I gained 'a feel' for the place. Working alongside participants, I shared both exhaustion and sense of belonging, engaging in that collective and shared way of being that cooperators were enacting in running their business together. The approach provides knowledge learnt by practice (Langmead, 2016). Ethnographers have acknowledged the embodied and sensory element of ethnographic practices. Pink (2009) contends that sensory knowing provides a less intellectualised form of academic practice that nonetheless deserves a place in academia. "By pushing at the boundaries of modern western paradigm that we are set in as academics we might integrate other ways of knowing, remembering and imagining into academic practice" (Pink, 2009, p. 41).

On the other hand, participant observation comes with its own dilemmas. First, participant observation can be problematic when it means taking over paid work. Giving my labour 'for free' was the antithesis of what some of worker cooperatives

stood for. In the cleaning cooperative for instance, I had to argue that I was receiving a wage (university maintenance grant). Yet, by helping out during shifts, I initially became concerned that finishing work earlier and clocking out early would reduce the other workers' income. Instead, we used the (short!) time created by having one more pair of hands to engage in informal conversations and carry out interviews, especially considering participants' childcare responsibilities and busy work schedules. Second, participant observation led to 'blind-spots', especially as the nature of the work I was participating in meant I could not take notes at the same time. While the role of the ethnographer is to see through 'fresh eyes' and look at the field as 'alien' even if familiar (Atkinson and Hammersley, 2007), the day-to-day routine of the workplace and mechanical activities can absorb the energy of the researcher away from observing. This is what Kiri Langmead found in her research on social enterprises (Langmead, 2016) and something I experienced in this research. Work expectations took precedence over observation, whether it meant writing down notes, or even sometimes engaging in informal conversations. Falling back into work was also a consequence of the discomfort with being 'the researcher', work sometimes providing a much needed respite and break from the pressure of research. Although writing fieldnotes during participant observation would have been impractical and created too obvious a barrier, there is no denying that I sometimes did not feel confident enough in my recollection of specific phrasing and anecdotes. In the end, the notes I took convoluted into an undecipherable blurb of entangled events, reflections, methodological scribbles. I may have missed out on the kind of notes that could have been used more directly as 'data'. Instead, fieldnotes were used differently, translating in the narrative this 'feel' for the place mentioned above. Observation gives texture and colour to academic outputs, especially to ethnographic accounts, and helps contextualise interviews. However, it tends to be dismissed as a form of academic work on its own. Does it become a form of invisible work that only serves to make other methods stand out? As Skinner (2012) after 10 months of carrying out observation recounts:

> "I developed a growing sense of panic that all my activities and conversations and insights into local knowledge, local issues and reactions, indeed, a local social world which was increasingly becoming my own, would all be to no avail; that I was not going to return back to my university with 'data'.

I panicked and went into interview mode. I spent a fortnight cycling around the island visiting all the people I had been working with, re-holding the conversations we had had over the months. […]

Returning from the field, the interviews more than 'complemented' the participant observation as Burgess (1993: 106) suggests of them. The interviews overshadowed my fieldnotes and became the core of the writings, leaving the fieldnotes to become timelines and context points." (Skinner, 2012, pp. 1-2)

Despite the interviews overshadowing to some extent the observation, participant observation reinforces here the importance of a shared experience, a collective way of being, underpinned by ethics of mutual aid and solidarity that are integrated in the research process itself. Participant observation plays a vital role in the analysis, in the details, in the complexities and above all in the relationships that were fostered with participants. It correlates with the depth of the interviews quoted in this thesis.

Before moving onto the second set of interviews in the research, here are the portraits of the worker cooperatives interviewed and observed as part of the ethnographic study of worker cooperatives in Northern Ireland:

Belfast Cleaning Society

The Belfast Cleaning Society was established as the first cross-community worker cooperatives in Belfast in 2011. At the heart of the creation of the Belfast Cleaning Cooperative is a group of women from both sides of the Springfield road interface who had met through a series of cross-community training delivered by Trademark and decided to continue working together. The Belfast Cleaning Co-op is now over ten years old. The cooperative has been a living wage organisation since its infancy and employed at the time of writing fourteen workers, the vast majority women (only one men) with set hours cleaning contracts ranging from 16h to 35h a week. As part of this research, I interviewed Alice and Josephine, two founding members of the cooperative, as well as Teresa and another worker who preferred to remain anonymised.

Trademark Belfast

Trademark is a registered charity and recently registered worker cooperative. Established more than 20 years ago as the anti-sectarianism unit of the Irish trade union movement, following in the footsteps of Counteract, Trademark brings together socialists, communists and trade unionists. Situated on the *Cupar Way* interface in West Belfast, Trademark delivers political economy, anti-sectarianism and anti-racism training for trade unions and community groups, and has more recently taken on an incubator role for worker cooperatives. After helping set up the Cleaning Cooperative as its first 'in-house' project, Trademark developed cooperative consultancy skills, to support other cooperatives such as the Creative workers Cooperative, Farmageddon Brewing Co-op, Lúnasa, Union Taxis Co-op, and more recently, Thart Aris and Blackwater Valley Cooperative. Interviews were carried out with Stiofán, a founding member of Trademark as well as Alice, mentioned above, who also works in the cleaning cooperative.

Thart Aris

Thart Aris, which means 'Around Again' in Irish, is a feminist worker cooperative that brings together feminist activists Naomi and Kellie, both interviewed in this research, and their daughters. The cooperative sells organic craft, including organic body sprays and oils, feminist candles, cushions, tote bags and jewelleries, recycled plants and bottle candles and pre-loved clothes. Thart Aris embodies a conscious attempt to foster anti-consumerism, environmentally friendly practices (recycling) but also politics (including feminist politics) in a wider sense.

Creative Workers Cooperative

Creative workers cooperative was set up in 2012. The media cooperative, which offers film, digital content, web-design and photography, emerged out of the vision of friends, Clem and Gerard, whose collaboration in creative work started informally in late 2010 before the cooperative officially registered in November 2012 after a third member, Colin joined the team. First located in King's Street in Belfast city centre, in an office adjacent to Lúnasa café, the cooperative moved to the Cuppar Way Interface

in West Belfast, sharing a building with Trademark and the Cleaning Cooperative, forming a worker cooperative hub both symbolically (cooperation amongst co-op) and physically. The cooperative works predominantly with the community sector and is rooted in the members' experience of political activism and interest for democracy, autonomy and collectivism. All three members were interviewed as part of this research.

Lúnasa

Lúnasa, which refers to an Irish folklore harvest festival that celebrates earth and rebirth in August, was a cooperatively-run café at the heart of Belfast city centre. Created in 2013, the café offered in a distinctive European atmosphere in the city centre of Belfast. Started from a group of five people, Lúnasa cooperative has been impacted by internal conflict, indebtedness and unlucky circumstances. While the co-op was brought to financially sustain the wages of those involved, the repayment of its two loans restricted any wages, resulting in the membership slowly leaving. The café was also struck by a fire and closed for two years which increased the financial burden of the cooperative. When I started the research, I interviewed Elena, the only founding member left in the cooperative. Despite a café that was well attended by the local community, the cooperative closed down while research was ongoing.

Farmageddon Brewing

Farmageddon Brewing Cooperative was created in early 2010s out of a farm in Ballygowan created by a group of friends interested in craft-beer production, including Susan whom I interviewed. As a cooperative business, Farmageddon was successful, the cooperative model giving it an "edge" appreciated by consumers. It employed two full-time members of staff. Yet, due to difficulties in accessing funding, opening bank accounts and a lack of support from institutions, Farmageddon stopped trading as a cooperative and switched to a Company limited by share in March 2018. Having been put on an accelerator programme since its transformation, Farmageddon is now exporting across the UK and is a key craft-beer producer in Northern Ireland.

Blackwater Valley

Blackwater Valley Co-op was set up in late 2017 by a group of friends in Moy, County Tyrone. The Co-op recycles silt from a quay in Rath Bay and compost from a mushroom producer – normally disposed of at a financial cost for the producer – and mixes both ingredients to form the basis for top soil sold to garden centres, landscape gardeners and individuals. Seán, who helped set up the co-op, explained in an interview that while the members were in full-time employment elsewhere or continuing their studies, the co-op has managed to generate a reasonable turnover and profit (after paying wages). At the time of the interview (Spring 2019), the cooperative was considering hiring a full-time worker and expanding their activities to sell at filling stations and supermarkets.

Just Books

While registered formally as a worker cooperative in 2011, Just Books was set up by the *Belfast Anarchist Collective* in 1978 when they opened premises on Winetavern street. The interviewee, Jason, who was involved in setting up Just Books as a worker cooperative and is also involved in the Belfast Housing Co-op, explained that Just Books had long run as a democratic collective before its registration as an IPS (Industrial and Provident Society) and now reverted back to running as a collective rather than a registered co-op. The collective still runs a bookshop, a library, a café and organises political events. The library provides free access to books twice a week and a lending service to individuals and organisations in exchange for a small fee.

Union Taxis

Union Taxis was a taxi cooperative set up in West Belfast by trade union activist Eoin, whom I interviewed, and his colleagues. Inspired by an article read in the local Andersonstown News advocating for worker cooperatives as an alternative economic model, the cooperative put together plans for a cooperative taxi depot that would put an end to the "highly exploitative and non-trade unionised environment" of private taxiing (Eoin, Union Taxis). Despite trading for nearly two years, Union Taxis closed as a result of sustained opposition, from both the private depot owner who used

intimidation tactics to prevent taxi drivers from joining the project, and local Sinn Féin activists who opposed on two occasions the planning permission put through local council.

Bread and Roses café and the Market Development Association

The Market is traditional Republican working-class enclave of Belfast City Centre, encircled by two of the wealthiest quarters of the city. Fionntán, interviewed on behalf of the Market Development Association, explained that in 2016, the association organised a Social Education project, as part of Easter 16 commemorations that included local history projects and political education delivered by Trademark with a view to reclaim local heritage and history, raise class-consciousness and build alternatives. Off the back of the Social Education project emerged the idea of building community wealth by regenerating the "Tunnels" i.e. the derelict archways under East Bridge Street. The Tunnels project includes in its design a workers cooperative café and social space, named Arán agus Rósanna (Bread and Roses), a childcare facility run as a social enterprise and a gym (Community Interest Company). The Tunnels project was granted £2.6 million by Stormont and Belfast City Council but was stalled by legal disputes over speculative re-development in the area. The workers cooperative café is yet to be set up.

3. Stakeholder interviews

I conducted a second set of semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in the cooperative, policy and community sectors. I gathered the views of cooperative development organisations, including Cooperative Alternatives (interviewing its founding member, key practitioner and board member, Tiziana) and Trademark (mentioned above). Other cooperatives including the agricultural cooperatives Jubilee, Northern Counties and Azora, the craft beer cooperatives Lacada and Boundary, the Irish League of Credit Unions and the Ulster Federation of Credit Unions were also interviewed. Finally, the research also gathers the views of key respondents in political parties (with responses gathered from People Before Profit, Green Party, SDLP, the Cooperative Party, Sinn Féin and the DUP not having responded), policy (Belfast City Council, Work West), trade unions (the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, Belfast

Trades Council) and the community and voluntary sector (in particular Glór Na Móna a community organisation in West Belfast and Creggan Enterprises, a social enterprise and former cooperative in Derry) as to their views about the potential contribution of cooperatives in post-conflict transformation. Other interviewees are anonymised. The aim of these stakeholder interviews was to analyse the views of local politicians and economic elites as well as civil society organisations on the double transition process and how supportive they can be of worker cooperatives. In fact, an important aspect of the theoretical underpinnings of this research was to discuss the barriers and challenges to the development of worker cooperatives. The aim was also to enquire about the potential allies of worker cooperatives and to contextualise the role worker cooperatives play within the broader cooperative sector in Northern Ireland. The semi-structured interviews with stakeholders took place alongside the ethnographic study in Belfast.

While some of the interviews reflect the 'studying up' concept of power relationship in research (Nader, 1972), with interviewees who had far more social capital, control to what knowledge was shared and resources than I did (Valentine, 2005), other interviews – especially in the cooperative sector – had more of an ethnographic quality. Irrespective of the length and power relationship in the research, the drive to carry out ethical research remained. However, interviews with policy makers allowed for opportunities to question responses and provide insight into what cooperatives would have responded had they been in the room, allowing for consistency with the engaged and ethical approach without resorting to deception (Cassell, 1988). Due to the significant amount of interviews overall in the study, ranging from 30 minutes to four hours, I used a confidential transcription service to help with stakeholder interviews. Although they required less of an ethnographic approach, this still involved thorough reviewing, with local dialect, places, idioms, context-specific knowledge, and even Irish language punctuating the interviewees' response.

C- Confessional tales of the field

1. Dilemmas in participatory research

Despite good intentions, scholars have questioned whether we can ever do more than just produce bottom-up knowledge (Pain and Francis, 2003). Impact in participatory research is a tricky thing: easily co-opted, restricted by institutional pressures to conform (Pusey, 2017), underpinned by inescapable power dynamics.

There is no denying that the cooperative approach to this study provided for a more participant led process as well as delivered impact. First, participant observation played a considerable role in challenging some of the extractive aspects of research. Participant observation and ethnographic encounter helped with feedback: informal conversations with participants during routine activities offered an easier means for feedback than having to comment on a ten-thousand-word chapter. I also presented the research at joint sessions and participated in a podcast and workshops to help build awareness of cooperatives in Northern Ireland. In fact, instead of the difficulty in creating rapport and gaining access that the academic literature points to, I soon found myself overwhelmed by the number of activities I was asked to contribute to in such a short space of time. A couple of months into fieldwork, I was invited to write academic articles – on findings I did not have; contribute to the creation of promotional material (videos, online applications) to help raise awareness of cooperatives and to contribute to local seminars. I was also contacted by and referred through word of mouth to cooperatives in different sectors – agricultural, consumer cooperatives, credit unions. Although the remit of the study was worker cooperatives, I decided to carry out those interviews to interrogate the scope for a cooperative movement – rather than sector. These interviews highlighted the cohesion (or lack of) between cooperatives, as well as the potential for social value existing in other forms of cooperatives, especially emerging ones. Overall, there is no denying that those activities helped deliver impact, with cooperatives for instance learning of each other and potential for further cooperation amongst cooperatives.

But I see it changing. I see I suppose maybe the work that you've done, and the work that maybe [others] ha[ve] done has brought us into contact with more co-ops and you think "oh right ok". (Naomi, Thart Aris)

On the other hand, all those activities created challenges with managing workload, negotiating different rhythms of work and especially navigating the slowness of academic research with more fast-paced activities on the ground. I was limited by own capacities to do volunteer work, observe, write up notes, conduct interviews, walk across the city, attend seminars, all this alongside activities central to my own reproduction and wellbeing. Eventually, concerns for academic deadlines and finishing the PhD took over (Birch and Miller, 2002) accentuated by a global pandemic that put everything to a stop. I had initially considered organising focus groups to feedback on findings: the pandemic and time constraints made this impractical. By the end of the PhD, 'giving back' also took on a different meaning: while during the research it involved working alongside participants, attending workshops, doing policy work (internship), it eventually meant writing up and publishing (itself a terrain of struggle) with the hope to allow for the legitimacy that academia has with policy makers as an "amplification chamber" (Russell, 2015, p. 227), re-joining the concept of activist research that breaks the distinction between research on the one hand and activism on the other (Juris, 2007; Pusey, 2017, p. 5).

Yet, the pitfalls of participatory research are clear: whether it is questionable what research offers to participants in terms of direct benefit, some have highlighted that the benefits to researchers are more obvious (a Degree, a job, tenure, intellectual recognition) (Dupont, 2008), although those benefits are increasingly vulnerable to the commodification of university research and paralleled casualisation of researchers. There is ultimately a struggle in working within the "academic-recuperation-machine" (Pusey, 2017) which identifies numbers of interviews, references, publications and originality of the theoretical framework – irrespective of its top-down imposition (Banks and Armstrong, p. 12) – as measures for success. There is also a concern for "going academic" (Pusey, 2017, p. 5), one I can certainly relate to as I often felt that I was translating in academic jargon what participants did and said, rendering the research practically useless for them (North, 2006) but providing me with credibility as a well-rounded researcher. Writing their accounts for an academic audience was far

less helpful than helping them navigate the day-to-day demands of a democratically-run business: accountancy, business and cooperative advice were far more valuable than research skills. On the other hand, I eventually determined what questions to ask, what was left in and out of the research. As far I let the field 'speak', the ultimate decisions were mine to make. Power relationships in research are inevitable (Wynne-Jones et al., 2015). At times, the participants themselves reproduced the very hierarchy I was contesting, i.e. that of the superior expert status of the researcher. Like Dowling (2016), I too was asked what they were doing wrong and what they could do better, something which was entirely against my intentions. Their participation in the research was also hindered by lack of time, money, resources.

Moreover, if power constantly keeps tabs on, co-opts and silences alternatives, is there not a risk of co-option in research? I was and remain concerned that I made "previously hidden practices visible, knowable and thus governable" (Guta et al., 2013, p. 443). Providing more accurate indicators for the cooperative sector meant presenting a bleaker picture that may diminish the position of the cooperative movement in lobbying with government. Moreover, the research portrays the antagonistic politics of projects that aim at challenging neoliberal and sectarian hegemonies. Of course, as we will see, the uncongenial nature of the environment cooperatives operate in is an element of response. If setting up a worker cooperative is hard, only those with strong political and ethical will are likely to engage in the process. However, by highlighting their antagonistic nature and their desire to provide a counter-narrative to the neoliberal peace, I am aware that there is a risk for further taming, silencing and discarding of those initiatives by policy makers. In particular, I made policy recommendations to support the development of the sector, not to make it more amenable. Nonetheless, the institutional recuperation of alternative economies is a risk every research contends with. Despite this risk, I could not decide to silence, tame and underplay participants' voices under the guise of making them more attractive to institutional support.

Finally, I also look back on attempts at redirecting resources as naïve. In hindsight, I question who bears the cost of research: funders, institutions, or the community of cooperators who gave me time, trust, valuable information, challenging and enlightening conversations, but also those who offered more practically a subsidised

roof over my head, political direction and emotional support. In the "globalised neoliberal university" framework (Howitt and Stevens, 2016, p. 54) in which this research took place, I also acknowledge that I had little resources to deliver impact, especially as a PhD student (Taylor, 2009). Wanting to do more meant running the risk of promising too much, with expectations difficult to manage.

> But yeah it would be great if the peace process was able to continue and workers' cooperative had a big thing to do with it. […] So that would be a fantastic thing to happen. You push that, you get that sorted out Ellie [laughs]
> *[laughs] I'll try my best*
> You start it off! (Josephine, Belfast Cleaning Cooperative)

Rather than portraying the impossibility of cooperative research here, I simply intend on demonstrating that cooperation is a hard line to navigate. Yet, it was never an option not to, as a cooperative approach undeniably gave this research the legitimacy it would otherwise lack.

2. Research ethics

Ethics is now considered as an integral part of the research and not just an add-on to research methodologies. Ethics is more than just the responsibility to make sure participants provide written or verbal consent and to ensure their anonymity and confidentiality is protected. Considering the potential harms that could occur to participants, the researcher and the university also encompasses fostering greater reciprocity and behaving according to values of honesty and integrity (Brewer, 2016; Gillies and Alldred, 2011). This concept of "new ethics" (Brewer, 2016) echoes participatory and feminist methodologies arguing for doing research 'ethically' beyond what is often considered by bureaucratised university ethics committees (Banks and Armstrong, 2012; Ferdinant et al., 2007). There has also been an increased understanding for the anxiety associated with doing research (Browne and Moffett, 2014), dealing with crises, difficult or dangerous situations (Belousov et al., 2007; Sluka, 1990; Lee, 1995). There is no denying that this research occurred in crises: Brexit and its impact on political relations in Northern Ireland, with the devolved

Assembly collapsing twice during the PhD, a global pandemic and ethical issues detailed below.

Making sure information does not get used against participants is a real concern, especially as many highlight the lack of special treatment afforded to social researchers in protecting participants confidentiality in delicate situations (Jacobs, 2011; Elliott and Fleetwood, 2017; Inckle, 2015; Brewer, 2016). As Inkle (2015) decries, signing an informed consent form does not mitigate for the variety of harms that can result against participants – it also does not take away from the ownership of participants towards their own information, their lived experience, their points of view. Anonymising worker cooperatives – when there are so few – would have been difficult. I offered participants the possibility of keeping their names in the research, as well as the name of the cooperative or the organisation they collectively ran. Keeping their name in the research meant that they automatically received a transcript, giving them time to edit, alter or withdraw their information altogether. When anonymised, participants could still request their transcript. With regards to observation, I accounted for separate consent forms signed with the members present for observation to be possible (respecting cooperative's flat structure and the one member one vote principle). Observation obeyed ongoing consent, waiting to be asked to come in or checking in instead of assuming consent given once would be forever granted. In those cases where I carried out participant observation, I sent out a portrait of the cooperative so participants could see how their information played out in the text, what was used, in what way and what left out.

In the end, the participants did not care for all the paperwork or found it annoying (one participant compared the consent form to a request to turn on Cookies on a website). Instead, ethical research was done through the day-to-day interaction with participants and not through a formalised ethics procedure. Interestingly, contrary to putting the wellbeing and safety of participants and researcher in opposition, as I was sometimes overworked, away from home, I found that the balance between participants and researcher's wellbeing could be struck through care. As I was researching therapeutic economics and saw participants care for themselves and for others, trying to avoid exhaustion, I could not fail to consider the impact on my own wellbeing. Care of

participants and for participants can become complementary to the researcher's wellbeing.

3. The messy realities of fieldwork

Ethics processes too often underplay the 'messiness' of fieldwork (Abusidualghoul et al., 2009; Shaffir and Stebbins, 1991). No matter how carefully prepared, how all plausible eventualities are accounted for, research never pans out as it should and social phenomena are never static (Baxter, 2016, p. 140). As Simpson (2006) suggests, "you don't do fieldwork, fieldwork does you". In this research, there was a significant ethical issue relating to safeguarding in one of the cooperatives I studied with. There was no ethical breach and I became aware of the issue well after I had left the field, as things unfolded dramatically in front of the public eye and the organisation broke apart. I was left in a considerable conundrum. The organisation had experienced significant backlash, with abuse and threats made against participants, highlighting the reality of violence in Belfast. What it also highlighted was underlying governance issues and safeguarding concerns in the cooperative, with information not being shared across the organisation. I felt increasingly concerned for mitigating the potential harm writing up could cause. Most worrying was the risk of further threats to the participants or of information being 'turned' against them. On the other hand, how could I balance my responsibility towards the organisation, considering the effort, time, trust, indulgence that the group had given to a research which I deemed also theirs, which they had contributed to co-construct. Leaving their account behind is a travesty to the participatory approach – especially as I did not gather their consent in making this decision. Eventually, after nearly a year of back and forth, I decided not to use the organisation and the seven interviews with its members in the research beside the remit of this chapter. Of course, there is no denying that their work still transpires not only in the confessional tales written here, but also interwoven silently in the narrative and the analytical insights of the research. 'Data' is never just a matter of events, interview quotations and anecdotes: it is also the silent frame that structures a project. I could have easily silenced this ethical issue altogether, without explanation. As the work that I carried out in the organisation was a substantial part of my research experience and theirs, I wanted it acknowledged somehow. Moreover, as a friend reminded me, cooperatives are not institutions, they do not brush difficult issues under

the carpet. In writing this account, I do not intend on arguing that I made the right decision, if ever there is one. Instead, I acknowledge here that "The truth is that once we step into the complex flow of other people's social experience we are novices and bumbling incompetents, largely oblivious to the complex and multiple layering of our informants' lives, identities and histories" (Simpson, 2006, p. 125).

Conclusion

Each methodological focus – in-depth interviews, participant observation, semi-structured interviews with stakeholders – reflects a thematic aspect of the study of the political economic of cooperation in Northern Ireland. In other words, each methods brings to light certain elements of response to the question 'what is the contribution of worker cooperatives to the political economy of Northern Ireland'. In the following chapters, I investigate this question by looking at intent, outcome and barriers. In chapter 5, based on the interviews with ten worker cooperative projects, I put under the microscope the motivations that drive the emergence of worker cooperatives, with a view to enable the voices of those projects that have failed to still resonate in the research. Chapter 6 puts the focus on three detailed case studies of worker cooperatives where participant observation was carried out, with the immersion in the environment and multiple interviews producing qualitative in-depth findings. Finally, chapter 7 discusses the institutional barriers and challenges grappled with by the sector, including the social economy policy framework and the lack of a cooperative moment and allies, drawing from the interviews with key stakeholders.

Chapter 5: Charity or solidarity? From self-help to workers' control: the role of social conscience and critical agency in the emergence of worker cooperatives in Northern Ireland

The contribution of the grassroots economic projects this research sets out to analyse stands in sharp contrast with the economic discourse that prevails in Northern Ireland. Chapter 2 introduced the neoliberal nature of the peace process, whereby the institutional discourse that portrays a vibrant economy conceals a bleaker picture of enduring poverty levels and sectarian divisions. Yet, there is a lack of vision, creativity and political will when it comes to alternative strategies for post-conflict social transformation. In such a "toxic mix of sectarianism and neoliberalism" (Murtagh and McFerran, 2015, p. 1597), how do alternative economic practices emerge? As practices that have remained un-noticed in the literature on Northern Ireland, lacking government attention, it is interesting to consider what motivates the development of alternative economies.

The literature on the social and solidarity economy highlights a diversity of intent when mapping alternative economic practices (cf, Chapter 3). As authors have already questioned, not all social economies aim at offering radical change (Doyle and Lalor, 2012). While the emergence of some cooperatives may be promoted against the backdrop of austerity politics, others might seek to resist neoliberalism (Eisenschitz and Gough, 2011). In distinguishing patterns within this myriad of intent, North and Cato (2017, pp. 6-8) set aside the more neoliberal-inspired social economy and social entrepreneurship from the solidarity economy that centred on offering sustainable and inclusive ways of living with dignity (community and diverse economies perspective) and antagonistic economies which aim at fighting back against capitalism and enacting critical resistance. Existing research on Northern Ireland (Murtagh, 2017; PWC, 2013; DETI, 2007) suggests a dominance of the social enterprise model, indicating that cooperatives have been swallowed into broader social economy strategies (as defined by North and Cato, 2017) in line with neoliberal roll-out policies (Peck and Tickell, 2002). In this context, is the potential for radical agency slim?

With 245 cooperatives across the North of Ireland, there are likely to be at least 245 reasons why individuals and communities decide to set up a cooperative. Even the

worker cooperatives interviewed in this research offer diversity in choosing to set up as cooperatives, in choosing to produce a particular product or provide a particular service. This is reflected in the diversity of sectors of production they trade in, ranging from cleaning services, taxi, café, organic craft, media industries (design, film, website), production of soil and compost, craft beer to political education and anti-sectarianism community organisation. There is also heterogeneity in the intent behind establishing grassroots alternative economic practices within the membership of those cooperatives. Despite a diversity of approaches and intentions, between and within cooperatives, similar themes emerge out of the practical experiences of the worker cooperatives featured here. Drawing from interviews with worker cooperatives, whether they were trading or not, this Chapter demonstrates that existing alternative economic practices encompass a combination of elements of social, solidarity and antagonistic economies.

First, worker cooperatives as alternative collective economic practices respond to strategies of social emancipation or "empowerment", to use the vocabulary of participants themselves, as they seek to foster community capacity building through decent employment in the face of social deprivation, hardship and exclusion, but also in response to the poverty of alternatives on offer.

Second, worker cooperatives aim at enacting a vision of a hoped-for-economy, inspired by alternative values and ethics with a focus on anti-consumerism, environmentally-friendly practices and a drive for social justice.

Finally, and more importantly, a significant number of worker cooperatives are driven by a rejection of capitalism, patriarchy and the sectarian politics that are context specific. Fostered by visions that are fundamentally anti-capitalist and anti-sectarian, the projects highlight what is too often obscured in research on post-conflict transitions: critical agency. Evoking the antagonistic desires that drive those projects puts the spotlight on those spaces of resistance too often overlooked in literature on peacebuilding, neoliberalism and more specifically Northern Ireland.

A- A strategy for social empowerment?

Erick Olin Wright (2010) saw in social emancipation a marker for real utopias, economic initiatives that contribute to build alternatives in the present. Social emancipation is in fact one of the recurrent themes stemming from the interviews with worker cooperatives across Northern Ireland. Interviews have highlighted a shared desire for what some have referred to as "empowerment" in a context where cooperatives are set up as means to address exploitative work practices, lack of job opportunities and social deprivation. After all, there is nothing surprising in deprivation and precariousness giving birth to worker cooperatives when the history of cooperatives itself stems from hardship (Birchall and Ketilson, 2009). Here, we see worker cooperatives emerging in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, at a moment when cooperative practices were given more consideration as alternatives to the austerity policies whose outcome consisted in lack of opportunities, loss of social mobility and decrease in real term wages for workers (Huertas-Noble, 2015; Wright, 2015).

The worker cooperatives featured here demonstrate the importance of employment, often overlooked in post-conflict economic recovery (Cramer, 2006), positing the importance of job creation rather than economic growth in post-conflict political economies. Through the pulling of resources together, workers are able to create job opportunities otherwise absent. Participants have referred to this collective safety-net that would otherwise make starting up a business impossible. In fact, it is a story of exclusion and poverty that fuels the emergence of most cooperative projects, with lack of access to the labour market, precarious working conditions, zero hours contracts (especially in the hospitality industry) becoming the norm of pre-cooperative work experiences. A recurring theme in the spark that ignited the start of cooperative projects was the "bullshit, bullying, the usual type of bosses that were giving us shit" (Clem, Creative Workers) prevalent in hospitality industries. Creative Workers Cooperative for instance, set up in 2012, is born out of a desire to "lean on each other" (Gerard, Creative Workers Cooperative) and pull resources together to provide the type of decent employment opportunities that the media and hospitality industries do not offer. "It meant there's always a wage for us, even if I'm not working, Clem will be earning, if Clem's not working I'll be earning …" (Gerard, Creative Workers). Emerging out of the vision of friends who worked in a bar despite being trained in

creative industries, the cooperative aims at providing an entirely different type of work, not only in offering safe and secure conditions, but also work that was vocational, consistent with education and workers' interests. As one participant explained:

> … we've seen it quite a lot, when the background of some of the members who have worked in bar and stuff, that has nothing to do with the creative industries, and you can get very easily trapped. […] We all know people who are in call centres and just worn down, they have no hope of ever doing what they really want to do. (Colin, Creative Workers)

Other cooperatives similarly aimed at addressing the exploitative conditions of the industry they already worked in. It was the precariousness of the cleaning and taxiing industries for example that motivated the emergence of two worker cooperatives. The Belfast Cleaning cooperative, set up in 2011 on a West Belfast interface, emerged out the "friendship" that developed from local women's groups participating in training and "seeing the inequalities and the treatment and the unfairness with the way cleaners were treated" (Alice, Belfast Cleaning Society). It is as an attempt to "rectify" the precarity-ridden cleaning industry in which most trainees worked that the cooperative was set up.

> … It (i.e. the cleaning coop) is a lot different than if you work for [company] and they go "Here, there's six hours for you this week" cause they're all on zero-hour contracts which is a disgrace, absolute disgrace … So you know a cleaner could go in and go "there's your eight hours this week, oh by the way I've got five hours for your next week". How's a mother, or a father gonna feed two or three children if they have a zero-hour contract? It turned me out. (Alice, Belfast Cleaning Society)

In a similar fashion, Union Taxis was set up in West Belfast by trade union activist Eoin Davey and colleagues. Part of the impetus for setting up the cooperative was the misfortune of a retired taxi driver who returned to taxiing to financially survive. At the mercy of the depot owner, he paid a higher depot rent, often for less work. Eoin explained:

It gave me a better hope that we could set out on a venture say within a cooperative sense and try and build an alternative to some of the private taxi operators that existed in West Belfast at that time. I knew that there was quite a lot of discontent with the drivers, they would have frequently given off about how they were exploited, manipulated, how the depot rents were quite high in terms of what they were getting back, there was no security of employment, there was no security of earnings …. So I thought that we could try and establish a workers' cooperative run taxi service that built in the job security, that wasn't there at present and it would be of huge benefit to workers, and try and tie it in with a few ideas as to how we could also benefit the community and developing I think at the time a community social fund and social contract, where you'd try and tie the community into using the taxi service … (Eoin, Union Taxis)

As a result, worker cooperatives were conceived by participants as a means to offer a "voice" (Seán, Blackwater Valley) otherwise absent, to "create something for ourselves" (Elena, Lúnasa). Yet worker cooperatives also represented more than "empowerment" from an individualist standpoint, as benefiting solely those involved directly in cooperative projects. Instead, the interviews with worker cooperatives demonstrated how projects were shaped by ethics of solidarity where empowerment was understood as a collective process. The participants referred to sustaining employment for others in the sector, to create more jobs and not "not to absurdly grow and accumulate wealth" (Elena, Lúnasa). In Creative workers, the cooperative was set up to get other creative industries workers "out of the trap" (Colin, Creative Workers) and as I started observation the cooperative had recruited two new workers. At the border of Mid-Ulster and Torrent Valley, one of the most deprived area in Tyrone, Blackwater Valley Co-op was set up in 2017 by a group of friends to produce recycled soil/compost for garden centres and gardeners. Blackwater valley was set up as a cooperative to give workers a voice but also with a keen eye to benefit the wider community and local economy.

You'll not join the co-op simply just as a job, you'll join it because it's a co-op, it's a community … You're driving it forward because you want to better

the co-op, you're not simply just there to better yourself. (Seán, Blackwater Valley)

In this context, through sustaining decent employment, worker cooperatives offer those left behind by the double transition (precarious workers, women, etc.) forms of emancipation with a particular focus on community control and community wealth building. It is interesting that most worker cooperatives described above are established in areas with high levels of deprivation (Lower Falls, Springfield/Highfield, Moy). As a result of their geography, the social deprivation that worker cooperatives combat is often entangled with the legacy of the conflict. For instance, West Belfast encompasses some of the postcodes that were the scene of the conflict, postcodes that still today remain blight with enduring deprivation and poverty (Coulter, 2019). The interfaces that punctuates this geography of segregation and deprivation are the mark of past violence, with Shirlow (2008) noting that on average a third of the Troubles victims died within 250 meters of an interface. These neighbourhoods contend with continuous forms of violence and trauma. Recent articles point to more deaths now occurring from suicide since the signing of the peace agreements than during the conflict itself (McDonald, 2018). Overall, as we have seen in chapter 2, not all communities are equal in their experience of the post-conflict transition, with living standard differentials increasing between the most and least well-off neighbourhood across Northern Ireland (Knox, 2016).

It is in this context that worker cooperatives provide alternative sources of employment and community building strategies where all else have failed. In that respect, worker co-operatives tackle one of the misgivings of the double transition, that peace will be accompanied with economic benefits for all. There is little belief in the concept of "peace benefits" for most of those interviewed in this research. Fionntán from the Market Development Association points to a form of social containment, where working class communities bear the blunt of austerity politics:

> … the security barriers that would have been in place have just shifted from military containment through to social containment. And it's a big thing in the inner-city areas throughout Belfast, both nationalist and unionist – whatever descriptor your use – that they'll talk about peace walls and interfaces. And

everybody will wring their hands, all the liberal narrative in the media, academia, politics, they'll wring their hands on how we need to bring down these interfaces and reunite the communities living on them. We're dealing with social interfaces. So you're excluded from the business parks. You're actively excluded from the city centre. And when this is raised, there's silence. […]

It's that sort of difference between systemic violence and subjective violence. So if [someone] shoots a policeman or a British soldier or whatever it might be, then it's all over the news … "we need peace, we need peace". But you have a thousand silent suicides and you'll get a bit of handwringing in different areas about it and "this is terrible", you may be get a dramatic statistic and have a Newsline article about it. But then it just fades into the ether. (Fionntán, Market Development Association)

The Market Development Association is indeed located in a traditional Republican working-class enclave of Belfast City Centre, encircled by some of the wealthiest quarters of the city, Lanyon Quarter and the Gasworks, and beset by (social) housing shortage, lack of job opportunities, low educational attainment and over-development (MDA and PPR, 2019). Inspired by the story of Marinaleda (the cooperatively run village in Andalucia), the Market Development Association has been granted £2.6 million by Stormont and Belfast City Council for a regeneration project of the Tunnel archways under East Bridge Street, a regeneration project that includes a worker cooperative café and social space, named *Arán agus Rósanna* (Bread and Roses). Over the last few years, the project has been stalled due to legal disputes over an international developer being granted planning approval for a skyscraper on the land adjacent to the Tunnels (*The Irish News*, 2018; Jackson, 2019). The experience of the Market neighbourhood provides an example of cooperative projects challenging growth-oriented regeneration strategies that focus on profit accumulation instead of local needs. In fact, Fionntán refers to the "creaming off public money" that developers rely on in their commercial venture. He opposes this "phantom economics", "sort of devil-may-care ultra-commercial speculation" to a bottom-up regeneration project with community-led enterprises like "the Tunnels project that could be long-term sustainable economic development having a real meaningful impact on these communities" (Fionntán, Market Development Association).

However, cooperators have looked at worker cooperatives as an alternative not simply to the dominant economic model that leaves so many behind but also as an alternative to the mainstream community and voluntary sector. They attempt at offering those excluded from economic transitions opportunities to gain control which stands in sharp contrast with community development strategies prevalent in Northern Ireland. "Empowerment" here is to be understood in contrast to many coping strategies that focus on bringing relief to communities without giving them a stake in it. For instance, the Belfast Cleaning Cooperative was set up with the help of Trademark as an alternative to the lack of imagination and creativity of the community sector. Kellie, who worked previously in Trademark, explained how the Cleaning Cooperative was created after a series of training which intended on bridging the divide between women from both sides of the Springfield Interface in West Belfast:

> They'd basically done all the stuff that we could actually do with them and they said that they wanted to stay together and do something else. And then the idea of the workers co-op came up. I think that exposure to the other, and working together can absolutely foster good relations, because it's about work and it's not about identity. […] And it's something that could be explored to greater detail because they've tried everything … well they haven't tried everything else but you know, how many residentials do you want to do? How many workshops do you wanna do? Why don't you look at something different going there's actually an economic need for jobs, […] there are services that need to be carried out, be it cleaning, be it childcare […] There are problems that have been caused because of the conflict but can be dealt with in a different way without concentrating on the conflict. So you concentrate on poverty, on employment, mental health problems … and then you set up a cooperative business and deal with them that way. (Kellie, Thart Aris)

The lack of imagination and creativity highlighted here is not a direct critique of those working in the community sector but rather a symptom of the lack of security created through funding schemes whereby charities are not provided the resources and time to imagine alternative forms of community development (Kellie, Thart Aris). The experience of the Belfast Cleaning cooperative responds to a different form of peacebuilding, one that provides employment and dignity in the socially deprived

interface areas (Cramer, 2006). Indeed, Kellie's response speaks of worker cooperatives' potential for conflict transformation as fostering a shared identity that is possible for people to experience as workers, as opposed to divisive and exclusive ethno-nationalist ones. Her response also speaks of an alternative form of peacebuilding that stands in sharp opposition with other regeneration strategies that too often lack local community input (Boland et al., 2017). Hughes (2017) points to the lack of counter-hegemonic narratives in the community sector in Northern Ireland where community sector "cadres" make most of the benefits out of "servicing" those "deficient, deviant and dependant neighbourhoods" (Hughes, 2017, p. 11). Responding to the need for a revival of class-based community organising able to deliver benefits for the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland, worker cooperatives appear as one of the possible forms of organisation that fosters class solidarity, rather than charity or entrepreneurship. As one of the participants puts it:

> Charity disempowers people … solidarity empowers … that's [the] difference … [..] It's lifting people up to stand on their own two feet. Whereas the other's saying, well you're always going to have to rely on me, I'm here to help but .. you know, there's very little dignity in that at the end of the day, whereas with solidarity it's all about dignity, and that's always about ensuring that people retain that dignity and that they build on it, they build their self-esteem. … I'd say it's encompassing, it lifts people in a physical, spiritual, emotional, financial, community. (Eoin, Union Taxis)

While the vast majority of worker cooperators are critical of concepts of entrepreneurship (which will be detailed in chapter 7), worker cooperatives aim at tackling a wide array of issues that are interconnected and too often overlooked by political and economic elites, in particular the interdependence between social deprivation, segregation and violence, physical and mental health, addictions, lack of education and employment opportunities. Worker cooperative initiatives offer alternative perspectives where cultural, political, economic and social disempowerment is considered as part of a same problem. This is where the distinction with other forms of organisations dedicated to local regeneration resides as worker cooperatives consist in egalitarian, democratic and community driven businesses. Kellie summarises the potential for cooperation as contributing to "an alternative

narrative", "an alternative business model, new ways of looking at how we operate in this system, which is fundamentally broken". She adds:

> … I think worker co-ops could provide a whole different dynamic to Northern Ireland and a can-do kind of self-help attitude as well […] worker co-ops could absolutely be at the core of that in terms of looking at alternative economic models and challenging loads of problems and loads of issues that we have in this society (Kellie, Thart Aris).

While the barriers faced by worker cooperatives in Northern Ireland will be discussed in chapter 7, the examples of worker cooperatives that are no longer trading – such as Union Taxis, Farmageddon, and Lúnasa which closed down while the research was ongoing – show that "empowerment" is far from an easy process. The other aspect of community development located in deprived and marginalised neighbourhoods is the difficulties of operating in an environment where disempowerment has long been the norm. It is likely that prospective workers might not take the leap of faith to get involved, may lack the social and economic capital to do so, especially considering the lack of awareness and education around alternative economies. Looking back on his experience of trying to empower taxi drivers like him in West Belfast, Eoin explains:

> I'm not going to be overly critical of them because that's the environment in which they've worked. And some of them had worked in that environment of taxiing for ten, fifteen, twenty, some thirty years. They knew nothing else, they didn't know that it could be constructed in an alternative fashion that would benefit them. They always supposed that there had to be an owner and that owner had to make all the choices on their behalf, whether it benefitted them or whether it cost them. They were so much in that bubble of exploitation, of disempowerment, that there was no leap of faith there and they couldn't see a way out of that. (Eoin, Union Taxis)

Even if the cooperative journey towards empowerment is fraught with difficulties, what cooperators highlight here is the importance of concepts of worker control and community control, where people can have a stake in the economic decisions that

affect them. But whether they do in fact foster neoliberal entrepreneurship or radical change is another question. Yes, worker cooperatives seem to be created as a response to economic exclusion, exploitative working conditions and/or market failure. Does this signify that they provide another version of disciplining left-behind communities into self-reliance, providing for those excluded from the labour market insecure and low-paid work as Graefe (2002) suggest? Although not all cooperatives have managed to reach a level of sustainability that enables them to pay the living wage, it is clear that the vision of cooperators contradicts these suggestions. On the one hand, most worker cooperatives' first aim is to provide employment, too often overlooked in post-conflict reconstruction (Cramer, 2006), a tendency that needs to be confronted for it to be any post-conflict economic recovery. On the other hand, more than simply access to the labour market, worker cooperatives offer avenues for social emancipation by giving workers a stake in the economy. Rather than managing misery, "empowerment" here seems to echo Wright's vision for "social emancipation" (2010, 2019) driven by egalitarian, democratic values and principles. Eoin's interview extract below speaks of the 'spill-over' effect of cooperatives whereby the democratic control exerted over work spreads to other aspects of life, fostering a yearning for a political engagement which seeks, as Eoin suggests, to "change politics":

> Workers' co-ops can be very liberating, liberating in terms of empower[ing] people. And if they empower people in their working lives, they'll empower people in their community lives and they'll empower people to think about how they can change politics, you know. So they give them a broader sense of awareness. At present, people are going to work and they feel that they've no control over their own working life, … how much they earn per year, whether they get a pay rise or not, what the length of their working week is, how much vacation time they can take off. … Whereas with the model of workers' cooperatives, if you can actively change those dynamics, and you empower yourselves as workers to set your wages, to create profit, to create opportunities for community funding, where you can change so many aspects of your life and you can show … [that] things can change, and change for the better. […] what you've shown is that your sense of empowerment can create change. (Eoin, Union Taxis)

Equally important in the vision of the cooperatives featured in this research, beside their response to the environment they operate in, is what type of economy they are hoping to build. In looking at economic ethics, as worker cooperatives providing a vehicle for fairness and social justice, I analyse below what kind of economies of hope are fostered through strategies of social empowerment.

B- Visions of a hoped-for-economy: ethical, sustainable and equitable economies

One way of understanding the emergence of worker cooperatives as alternative economic practices is to consider them, as we have in the previous section, as means to offset the negative impacts of neoliberal economic policies. Another way of framing the analysis – as highlighted by Cameron (2009) – is to consider how they seek to open possibilities for an economy centred on environmental justice and sustainability, social justice and equality, i.e. "as means not only of building a better present but a better future" (Cameron, 2009, p. 92).

Beyond economic results, cooperatives consist in attempts at building economies driven by fundamentally different ethics. This is evident in the worker cooperatives described above, whether it is through providing an emotionally rewarding working environment focused on helping others (Belfast Cleaning Society), producing environmentally friendly products (Blackwater valley, Thart Aris), participating to recycling (Blackwater valley, Thart Aris, Farmageddon) or producing vegan-friendly products (Farmageddon). This is consistent with what Huertas-Noble (2015) found, that as well as safeguarding jobs and building community wealth, worker cooperatives seek to contribute to environmental sustainability and economic justice.

In Farmageddon brewery, the brewing process is vegan-friendly, using no fish finings but instead pure natural by-products. The cooperative was created in early 2010s in a farm in Ballygowan by a group of local friends, who met through a shared passion for martial arts, and decided to add to the sheep, pigs, goats, chicken, duck-raising and vegetable production, the art of craft-beer production. The brewery epitomises more than just a business but also a drive to a different way of life, one where "there's pigs running by, people running after, or chicken turn up in your feet

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[…] and the kids are outside, it was just sort of mad ….. fun" (Susan, Farmageddon). Similarly, Blackwater Valley Co-op emerged out of an ethical decision to provide a product that made no harm to the environment, recycling silt from a quay in Rath Bay and compost from a mushroom producer – normally disposed of at a financial cost for the producer – and mixing both ingredients to form the basis for top soil sold to garden centres and hopefully at filling stations and supermarkets.

> I think it was very important that we sourced our materials organically, that we weren't doing major damage to the environment, especially now that you see how prevalent the likes of global warming and stuff like that there is. … We're taking two waste products essentially and turning them into a product that could be used by others. Because this silt and … compost were going to be binned …. So we thought instead of them taking that space in the likes of a dump, we'll take them and turn them into something beneficial. (Seán, Blackwater Valley)

In both cases, intent is driven by both ethics in terms of democracy at work (workers' voice) and bettering the wider community (anti-individualism), but also in terms of the products and services provided. In worker cooperatives, the ethical commitments to environmental sustainability, anti-consumerism, social justice are given value over making a profit (Schweickart, 2011; Barry and Smith, 2005). It is this added-value itself that drives some participants into cooperation. Cooperatives are then considered as an alternative to the capitalist value system which, as Kristjanson-Gural (2011) highlights, privileges environmental destruction over nature, consumerism over valuing work and human relations and where the core principle, irrespective of the social and environmental costs, is the pursuit of profit. In the case of Thart Aris, the decision to produce organic craft, including organic oils, feminist craft items, recycled plants and bottle candles and pre-loved clothes stemmed from a "political, ethical and environmental hue" (Naomi, Thart Aris). Born out of friendship between feminist pro-choice socialist activists, Thart Aris embodies by name the conscious attempt to foster anti-consumerism, environmentally friendly practices (recycling) but also politics (including feminist politics) in a wider sense.

... Everything is handmade, from scratch, it's produced in small quantities and we have zero interest, if someone came along and said can I buy that from you, can I buy the patent … absolutely not! You know if someone came along and mass-produced them, that would anti-everything that we're trying to do. […]… I'm not about making 30 grand a year! [laughs] There's more to it than that you know. Yeah I think it challenges that mass-production. […] it's not about mass-producing stuff, it's not about doing it just to sell, it's about creating it so that people who are interested in organic products like the organic products, people who are interested in feminist [products] like that, recycled stuff people really like you know. It's about the personal experience and the political one too. (Naomi, Thart Aris)

The interest for products that are considered ethical stems from a criticism of the neoliberal peace process, and especially the top-down economic regeneration of Belfast since the 1990s which fosters mass production and is driven by consumerism rather than local artisan products. The emergence of those cooperatives is driven by the intention to build 'Makerist' spaces, where authenticity is valued. As Naomi explains:

In terms of how it started, it evolved quite organically from … seeing what was done in other places and Belfast at that time was just starting to open up into things like markets, and Makerist spaces and that was starting to open up with the development of the city … and I think that's a very healthy thing. It's almost like a counter-culture. So it fitted in with that because … our sort of idea of the co-op would be quite – how do I put this?! – we would be in opposition to that neoliberal city developing the way Dublin and London has developed especially without some sort of … counterculture. Because really if you go to any big city in the world, that what's makes it, it's the things that you find, the small markets, spaces, the craft, whatever it is. So it was a desire to be part of that. It was probably a personal impetus to it … but with feminist politics at the heart of it. (Naomi, Thart Aris)

Beyond practices that are shaped by ethical commitments – in particular environmental sustainability and social justice – participants have highlighted how

worker cooperatives are *per se* ethical organisations, in the way they operate (democratic principle of one member one vote) and through giving workers control over of the labour process. As Schweickart (2011) notes, worker cooperatives are about re-integrating ethics into economics – through both ends and means. Many participants have explained that they chose to set up a worker cooperative because it seemed the "fairest model" of economic organisation (Creative Workers, Farmageddon, BlackWater Valley). Discussing why Lúnasa, a café in Belfast city centre, was set up as a worker cooperative, Elena mentioned:

> It just seems to me not only the fairest but the most logical way of organising work. Once you understand what happens to the surplus and once you understand how the structures that are in place … don't allow for sustainable growth but just continuous accumulation of wealth, it just seems like the ONLY conscious alternative. Really, it just feels like working for other people in worst conditions when you have no power whatsoever in the decision-making, in what's gonna happen with your future, what's gonna happen with your time, what's gonna happen with your money because … it's always a unilateral decision. … That's just not fair, that's just not just. (Elena, Lúnasa)

Rather than choosing to recycle, engage in artisanal production, foster anti-consumerist practices, it is through taking back control over their own labour that worker cooperators defined cooperatives as fundamentally ethical organisations. Of course, there is always a possibility that worker cooperatives end up taking part in "unethical" production (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979), but the case studies in the research tend to show otherwise:

> There's one thing that I've heard a lot. You know when people talk about conscious consumerism and trying to … buy clothes that are second-hand, … recycle, [etc]. … More than what you're buying, … what you're actually purchasing, you can be active where you work, who do you work for, who do you give your work force to. Because that idea of "Well it's my job, I have to do it, I'm sorry, I don't agree with this but it's my job", I don't see it defendable. … You have to take responsibility not for where you put your money and what you buy but how you make your money and what kind of

businesses you support with your work force. I understand this is a very difficult thing to do, because we're all skint, no-one has money and we are at the mercy of the markets and bigger players. … However, it is something that we can all do in small ways. Not everyone has to say "Ok, I'll start my co-op tomorrow!". But I think it is very important that what you do for the rest of your fucking life is not something that you're ashamed of or that you don't have any power [over]. (Elena, Lúnasa)

The worker cooperatives described in this research experiment with values and ethical commitments, driven by social and environmental concerns that differ from the very narrow focus on profit accumulation. Of course, recycling, and other environmentally sustainable economic practices both participate to revalorisation away from the capitalist value system, but at the same time are integrated into capitalist economies as Smith (2020) highlights. Yet, it seems to be a rejection of this very capitalist economy that drives some of those projects. Through politicisation, the ethical cooperative practices discussed here do not simply provide a nicer façade to neoliberalism, as is often highlighted as a criticism of the social economy, but form an opposition to it. As we discuss below, some of the worker cooperatives' emergence stems from a socialist vision of the social economy, one that Eisenschitz and Gough (2011, p. 3) argue, if tied to the traditional labour movement, can "go beyond exemplary, isolated, small-scale enterprises of the poor".

C- The role of antagonistic politics: anti-capitalist praxis

In her research on worker cooperatives, Cornwell (2012) drives attention to the spaces of possibilities that are opened up by alternative economic practices. Following an approach that sees diversity in economic practices, diversity as opposed to an all-hegemonic capitalism, Cornwell describes worker cooperators as non-capitalist subjects. But can cooperators in Northern Ireland be described as activists, militants or non-capitalist subjects (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010) in seeking to enact alternative economies? The emergence of some of the cooperatives featured in this research responds to a commitment to futures where, as Chatterton describes capitalism is "named, confronted and reversed" (2016, p. 403). In cooperatives like Trademark, the Belfast Cleaning Society, Creative Workers Cooperative, Lúnasa,

Union Taxis and Just Books, cooperation symbolises another way of being a socialist (broadly speaking).

> I'd say that being a cooperator is, it goes hand and hand with being a socialist. You want to see a new economy. I mean cooperatives are great for small scale … [but] I still want a control of industry and transport, and nationalised railway and nationalised health service. But in terms of smaller businesses, my ideal world they're all cooperatives, you know. (Gerard, Creative Workers)

In the Belfast Cleaning Cooperative, membership is underpinned by a strong trade union ethos. Some (but not all) of the workers described how their yearning for empowerment originates in socialist politics, including the family politics they were raise into:

> My dad was a trade union guy, my mum was trade union all the way. I was brought up in a real socialist environment. I've lived in West Belfast. Most of my friends, who I associated with, come from socialist republican backgrounds. So that was always there. The fight for me for equality was always there anyway. […] Coming from a socialist background anyway I kind of thought [the cooperative] was a great thing. […] I just thought yeah, this is the way everything should be. (Teresa, Belfast Cleaning Society)

Socialist politics also inspire the work of Creative Workers Co-op which was established as a political project to become a propaganda unit for the community sector. Interestingly, while the literature often draws on a historical disconnect in the UK and Ireland between cooperative movement and trade unions – and this despite common roots (Gibson-Graham, 2003; Bolger, 1977; Connolly, 1987) – here, experience of trade unions shapes the cooperators' desire to set up a worker cooperative. In fact, the political education that comes through the trade union movement can be a formative experience to understand the possibilities opened up by workers' ownership and control:

> Initially we were sort of getting involved in very small trade union that was new, it was called the Independent Workers Union. So we became more and

more involved in it and we were trying to get around to the idea of community organising ... the discussion along with that was that we needed … a more secure type of work. […] So we embarked on the idea that we should do something, start our own wee thing, draw together that idea of political activism and collectivism with a sort of trade union outlook. (Clem, Creative Workers)

One of the negotiations I think that I was involved in (as a shop steward) … I remember saying to [the employer] during those negotiations, well look, I'm looking at that but I don't see a cake … I see what you're giving us as a crumb! And I'm not happy with crumbs, and I know my work colleagues are not happy with crumbs, so go away and get a cake, and don't be giving me crumbs, you know?! [laughs] … But when I saw the workers' cooperatives … model, I said to myself, Jesus, I'm no longer negotiating slices of cakes here, I'm actually in a bakery baking the cake! And we determine where all the slices of the cake go! … Isn't that so much better? Isn't that such a move, a quantum leap in terms of the economy, in terms of workers' lives. It just ticked all the boxes for me Ellie. It made so much perfect sense. (Eoin, Union Taxis)

While some cooperators have gained this formative trade union experience in previous employment, or through activism, Trademark's role as an incubator for worker cooperatives as deeply rooted in the labour movement has played a vital role in rethinking alternative economic practices alongside more traditional trade union politics. As the anti-sectarian unit of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, Trademark – a charity and more recently registered worker cooperative – was set up in West Belfast 20 years ago to deliver political economy, anti-sectarianism and anti-racism and conflict resolution training for trade unions and community groups. The organisation sees in worker cooperatives a natural progression to the concept of industrial democracy. Because of the organisation's emphasis on industrial democracy, the focus is primarily on worker cooperatives, rather than other forms of cooperatives.

As trade unionists .. we understand the concept of having a strong voice in the workplace, so from industrial democracy in terms of having a strong

represented high density trade union in any workplace through to direct democracy, owning your own workplace. We get that spectrum, we understand ideologically that continuum. So it was a natural progression for us, with being trade unionists, industrial democracy, and being trade unionists, helping in direct democracy. […]

For us it was very simple, a worker owns the means of production if not distribution and exchange, it's the one third of Marxism [both laughs]. … It was just instinctively easier for us to go down that route. And it was also that much more political. (Stiofán, Trademark)

It is undeniable that while some cooperators articulated their engagement through very strong political identities, not all cooperators agreed that cooperatives were political entities, with views that differed even within the same cooperative. In the Belfast Cleaning Society, Josephine notes a diversity of political opinions which also stems from a rejection of being labelled and a desire to portray cooperatives as practical initiatives, rather than theoretical ones:

"Oh you must all be lefties, yous must be this and that". No actually, we're just trying to do a job and we're trying to create a business and we're trying to get women and men off unemployment ... That's all it is, it's just an alternative at the end of the day. […] I don't think it's left-wing. … well I don't know. … It's hard to describe. […] I go back to the socialist sort of side of it, I think it's just about equality and wanting everybody to be treated equality and paid equally and good working rights. If that's left-wing then that's what we are you know at the end of the day if you do want to put a label on it and put us in a box. But I certainly don't think that the [workers'] personal opinions are left-wing ... We don't talk about that at the table certainly. (Josephine, Belfast Cleaning Society)

The extract above echoes Chatterton and Pickerill's plea for understanding the motives behind activism while avoiding judgement (2010, p. 475). As they point out, people express diverse and sometimes contradictory identities and political opinions. Sometimes the practices whereby activists try to create a "post-capitalist world" in the present are messy and exemplify that building alternative economic geographies is a

process of experimentation and of "becoming" (Gibson-Graham, 2006) rather than a clearly defined trajectory. Rather than pre-existent political education, worker cooperatives also seem to provide space for the discovery of anti-capitalist politics.

Yet, there was overall a distinct reference to anti-capitalist politics that was discussed by some of the participants in this research, refuting the idea that "capitalocentrism" can indeed be inhibitive of the emergence of alternative economic practices. Cooperatives are considered by some cooperators interviewed as offering a vision for a different economy at a time where moving beyond capitalism seems to be ever so pressing.

> *Do you think co-ops are post-capitalist in that way?*
> I completely think they are. And I don't see what else could it be. Because if capitalism is about the individual, it's about acquisition, it's about wealth, …. I just see that rampant greed and satisfying of self and the pride in it, the entrepreneur …. What else is gonna replace that? I can't think of any other model! Call it cooperative, call it communal, I can't think of anything else that will counter that, or will genuinely provide an alternative, for me there's no other structure. Even a flatter structure, ... even Keynesianism as it stands, ultimately, it's not sustainable because it has to still be about growth, and growth and growth. That's the problem. So I think you know a flat structure in terms of sharing goods, resources, wealth all that, it can't be anything other than some form of cooperative system, it can't be! (Naomi, Thart Aris)

> … we've seen the fall out of an austerity from the economic crash but there's bigger thing coming over our eyes, there's gonna be … a collapse in the economy, there's gonna be serious environmental problems …, there's a report there that the civilisation may not last past 2050, 30 odd years away. The reality of having cooperatives, very living and breathing things, is gonna become much more popular I think. The idea of … developing a much more equal society because at exactly this moment there's real need, it's not some airy fairy idea of what it could be like, it's not going to be a knitting circle, it's gonna have to produce food, we're gonna have to sustain ourselves, we're gonna have to do it in ways that are not harming the environment, we're gonna

have to retake over everything essentially, but I don't think it's gonna be done in a big grand scale, it's gonna have to be done locally, in local communities. … We have to replace capitalism, we have to totally get rid of that. (Clem, Creative Workers)

The references made by worker cooperators to communal or cooperative systems providing an alternative beyond capitalism, but also against it – "We have to replace capitalism" (Clem) – is reminiscent of Pickerill and Chatterton's "autonomous geographies" (2006), Gibson-Graham's "community economies" (2006) and even Erick Olin Wright's "interstitial transformations" (2010). Worker cooperatives participate to building spaces of hope (Dinerstein, 2015; Harvey, 2000) where people seek to develop "non-capitalist, egalitarian and solidaristic forms" of organisations (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006, p. 737). Cooperators enact, in their everyday life, the changes that they wish to see based on their criticism of the current economic system. Worker cooperatives embody prefigurative politics, where cooperators attempt at becoming something other than waged labourers. Worker ownership and control become a form of resistance, but also of creation (Dinerstein, 2015). It might be that as Wright (2010) highlights, because they operate on the margin, their effect may simply be palliative – bettering the lives of those involved directly in those projects. Participants have been pragmatic about the limited scope for cooperation to foster social change. For instance, Just Books, a cooperative bookshop and library set up in 1978 by the *Belfast Anarchist Collective* but officially registered as a worker cooperative in 2011, stems from libertarian politics, inspired by the *Ateneos* (anarchist "workers education centres" prevalent in Spain at the start of the 20th Century). Jason explains that worker cooperation is indeed "accommodating" of capitalism:

It's buying things and running things in a different way but you're still part of a capitalist society, you still have to work within that. I don't think it's the same as taking control of your workplaces or land. That's a much more revolutionary process. I think it's good to give the example of how people can run things themselves but it's not really revolutionary. We're not getting rid of capitalism, we're sort of accommodating ourselves to it … (Jason, Just Books)

Similarly, Naomi from Thart Aris addresses the limitation of worker cooperatives as non-hegemonic practices and instead refers to desires of being authentic, linking political theory to practice in the everyday life:

> I think it was about putting our money where our mouth is and exploring alternatives. A lot of the time we talk about problems, and we talk about capitalism and neoliberalism and what are the causes and all the rest of it and at some point you have to stop and go, ok, well what are the solutions to this? What are the actual alternatives? It's ok talking about them but I suppose an element for me and Kellie was, what are we gonna do about that? Are we gonna actually set up a cooperative, ok it's not going to bring capitalism down, nobody's suggesting that .. But I think it's about being authentic. […] I suppose it's creating a space to get people to think differently, creating an opportunity to do that. And having being involved in left-wing politics, and even thinking abortion politics, once you create space, what you find is people will talk about it. People will do it, people will start to come forward. So I think it's about creating that space and going "yeah, here is an alternative". (Naomi, Thart Aris)

Yet, whether they are successful or not, participants also see in worker cooperatives as a way to enact alternative practices that are at odds with capitalism, contributing to proving – even if in very limited means – that another way is possible. By simply enunciating that other economies can exist, the hegemonic status of capitalism is confronted. As Trademark acknowledged, the support provided to set up the Belfast Cleaning cooperative aimed at demonstrating that worker cooperatives could work (Stiofán, Trademark). Even when capitalism is considered hegemonic, cooperators work towards creating a "new economic imaginary" that incites alternative economic spaces to emerge:

> … Somebody said to me a few years ago, 'capitalism works, I know you don't like capitalism but it works'. And I thought what a bizarre things to say? And I said, why don't you ask the people … whose labour is being exploited? We have climate change unfolding in front of our eyes … and you're telling me capitalism works. … the world is literally disappearing before our eyes and I

can't get that level of irrationality that capitalism is responsible for! There is no alternative, there is no other way of thinking! People can think that the world is gonna end before capitalism ends [laughs!] and I can't get my head around that. Of course there are alternatives! Of course the planet can be saved! Of course there's a different economic model which is fair to people and places and the environment and will create a more equal share of resources and wealth. Of course there is. And the only way is I suppose to get people out of that mind-set is to say here is an actual example, no matter how small it is, that it can work ... Our coop's not gonna change the world, it probably will change very little but at least we're trying to do it. (Naomi, Thart Aris)

The generative vision that gives birth to alternative economic spaces rests on performativity (Gibson-Graham, 2008). Participants have tied in this generative vision to the Gramscian concept of building the left hegemony (Forgacs, 1988; Filippini, 2017), meaning that alternative economic discourses stems from the critique of capitalism. As Stiofán in Trademark points out:

> … cooperatives are fundamental paths to the building of any left hegemony, fundamental part of building left power structures. The idea … that you're gonna have the perfect revolution and the perfect left-wing society and the perfect socialism is not .. you build it! And where do you build it? Well you can build it in a trade union movement, and we do that as well. You can build it in electoral politics if that's your choice, you can build left partisans. You can build it through left-wing cooperatives. So you know, neither one of them is the best way to do it, but all of them have to be done at the same time, you have to build the left wherever you are. The idea of building left hegemony for me is really important because it's about building a common sense understanding of the world that democracy is better than tyranny. So what does that mean democracy, what do we mean about worker control in the workplace that's cooperatives or industrial democracy if you're in a trade union. It means better local accountability through local councils, that's municipalism for me at the moment, that idea of building power out of the institutions back to the street, to the people. So you build that Left wherever you can and cooperatives are simply one part of it. And yes the criticisms that oh, … you're still .. selling

goods in a market and selling services … of course absolutely we know that but you know unless you wait for the perfect moment for a revolution, you'll always gonna be fucking waiting. So I kind of come down to the idea that you have to build these things, that no-one is going to give them to you. And I think coops can help do that. (Stiofán, Trademark)

Where these alternative spaces that emerge out of critical a desire for building a counter-hegemonic project differ from the "community economies" described by Gibson-Graham (2006) is how critique shapes their emergence. Trademark has played a distinct role by providing political education to trade unionists and other community organisations since it was established in 2001, succeeding to the trade union anti-sectarian organisation Counteract. Those political education programmes, fostering an understanding of capitalism, addressing financialisation and its role in the 2008 crisis, have left a strong mark on the community and trade union sector (ex: The Market Development Association, Glór Na Móna, etc). One participant from Union Taxis described the role of Trademark's political school in fostering political education and raising awareness of worker cooperatives as alternative economic organisations that could form parts of broader social and political movements. He explains here:

> … Most of us progressives want to get to a certain point, the only thing we're arguing over is … what's the best means to get there. And it doesn't have to be one means, it could be multiple means …. The cooperative movement should be used as a vehicle to bring forward some of that change, there's so much potential and that potential should be discussed within Trade Unions, by politicians, by community leaders … (Eoin, Union Taxis)

These interview extracts are clearly an ode to antagonistic politics, to the "revolutionary meal" represented by political education that is "going to feed you for the next load of months, sustain you, […] give [you] means by which you can actually formulate ideas" (Eoin, Union Taxis, about Trademark's political schools). Of course, for others, this anti-capitalist 'common sense' stems from different experiences, in the trade union movement, radical feminist organisations, previous work experiences and family. Yet, the role of Trademark for rethinking the role of alternative economics as

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part of more traditional socialist, trade unionist politics was described by some as invaluable.

Following the mantra 'Think Global, Act Local', participants view worker cooperatives not simply as alternatives economies in the context of globalised economic forces but as localised and geographically rooted attempts at social emancipation, fostered by a critique of those who reject the status quo in Northern Ireland. Some also seek a future beyond the sectarian resource-competition that informs local politics. Their critique points to the devastating effect of a neoliberal peace process that has failed to bridge the gap between divided communities, the entanglement between neoliberal economics and ethnic-resource competition.

Looking at the emergence of worker cooperatives in Northern Ireland contributes to depict the complex reality of building alternatives in the local. In Northern Ireland, the concept of community, often treated uncritically in the literature on alternative economies, is not unproblematic (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2004; Murtagh and McFerran, 2015), where Graham and Nash (2006, p. 262) highlight the absence of alternative spatiality to ethnic competition and territorialism. Yet, some cooperators aim at fostering solidarity beyond the deeply divided sense of territoriality that prevails in Northern Ireland. Some of the worker cooperatives are not only cross-community, set up as a clear conscious act to bridge the divide between the two main communities (Belfast Cleaning Cooperative, Trademark), others challenge neoliberal politics as much as ethnic-resource competition by dominant political parties and argue for unity being a product of social emancipation beyond the sectarian divide. As Leyshon and Lee (2003, pp. 17-29) contend, alternative practices do not simply value the local as a geographically bounded space, but rather view in the local a common purpose whose function is to unite people and foster solidarity.

> There's a common denominator here, poverty. There's a common denominator here, low paid jobs. And it straddles both sides of that peace line, that interface. Those that are suffering in the lower Shankill and throughout the Shankill are also suffering in the Falls. So there's common areas there where we can actually progress another … If they (politicians) actually took time to examine it and to do work on it, they could move working class people forward, which

their own political representatives are not doing, because Unionist politicians are not seeking to better the lives of their community at a working class level. But I would argue that the same is true within Sinn Fein. … Their policy is that "WE HAVE the vote of the working class, because they look upon us as their former protectors, guerrilla fighters, we served time in prison and everything else, and that's entitled us to their vote". […] But I'm sorry, if their proposals or their policies do not benefit my working class area and community and in fact they impoverish it and they're signing agreements with the Tories, why on utter God's earth would [they] ever think it was right to knock my door and trying to ask me for my vote. […] Sinn Féin signed the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 with the aim of furthering their aims of a united Ireland, that was twenty-one years ago. […] … am I to look for another twenty one years of austerity before we get any resolution to our community suffering? … So we just fix the premise on unity will solve everything and the national question will resolve all … I don't believe it will. And I don't believe it's the way in which you resolve it. You actually build communities up, you empower them, you give them control of their working lives, of their community lives, of bettering their own conditions. And then unity will come. […] Because of all regions in the UK, the North of Ireland, these six counties, the state that they call Northern Ireland, has the worst rates of unemployment, of poverty, of child poverty, of disposable income, the lowest average wage. And statistically, if you go through all those markers and then all the other ones on health grounds, that is the highest incidence of preventable deaths. Partition has failed working class Unionist communities every bit as it has Nationalist communities. There's the common denominator and the means by which [you have] unity, is by improving all of that, making it a class issue. That's how you win Loyalist Protestant communities over to the idea of a unified Ireland. Not by subjecting them to more poverty, subjecting them to agreements that [Sinn Fein] have signed off with the Tories. That's the road to failure, it's the road to postponing a united Ireland for God knows how long. (Eoin, Union Taxis)

Here there is a tendency for many projects to seek inclusivity and build solidarity as a form of resistance to both sectarianism and neoliberalism. Rather than leading to peace

– one of the assumptions beyond the orthodoxy of neoliberal peacebuilding (Gartzke, 2007) – capitalism is another form of "economic terrorism" to use Naomi's words, which communities are subjected to alongside the trauma and residual violence from years of conflict. As well as seeking to offer alternative avenues for post-conflict transformation, these interviews highlight the role of critical agency in peace processes, evocative of the work of Cassidi (2005, 2008) on left-wing progressive politics in working class Northern Ireland. As Naomi contends, the meaning of neoliberal peacebuilding in a neoliberal context is confronted and resisted through worker cooperatives:

> Are we trying to mimic Dublin and London and have our own little … statelet that we live in - are we trying to emulate all of that or are we trying to take that conflict and turn it into something other than the glossy office blocks that are faceless, and call-centres? You know, are we trying to make a creative space? What was the struggle for? What was the conflict about? And post-conflict society, what do we want it to look like? Even in terms of public space, in terms of spaces that you use, we have a new Titanic Quarter, the film industry is all bright and shiny and it's attracting tourists, but what else is there? What else is there in terms of creativity, in terms of real culture, in terms of experience? … I suppose from a post-conflict society point of view, it's not just the fact that we're not killing each other anymore. It has to be about more than that. And when I say more than that, it can't just be about being in a nice new shiny glossy city where well .. that's great but workers are still being exploited, public services are still being eroded. What has replaced it is, if you want to put it this way, an economic terrorism in the form of capitalism … and when I see that corporate identity trying to stamp itself all over Northern Ireland and make it Northern Ireland PLC ... I find that really troubling. Because that's a different type of conflict almost, a longer drawn out slower one but maybe people don't die, but I don't think there is any future in that, I find it really moribund. It doesn't make me hopeful about the future. So yeah I think different models, less exploitative models, more interesting spaces, places, experiences, things on a smaller scale, done well, I think that that is much more viable in terms of breaking down barriers. (Naomi, Thart Aris)

As well as being driven by antagonistic politics in their criticism of neoliberal peacebuilding, some cooperative also stem from anti-patriarchal politics. There is an interesting aspect in the role of feminist politics in fostering alternative economic practices, especially as it directly mirrors the work of feminist geographers in understanding non-capitalist economic spaces (Gibson-Graham, 1996, 2006). As Naomi in Thart Aris explains, there is a clear relation between self-determination from a feminist perspective and her experience in the cooperative. "If feminism is about autonomy and self-determination then it has to be. […] I think it's part of being self-determined". The desire for gender empowerment, in the Cleaning Co-op, in Lúnasa (as a rejection of sexism in the hospitality industry) and even in Just Books with the Belfast Anarchist Collective initially a women-only space, is also one of the motivating factors for the emergence of worker cooperatives. It is evident in the role played by the worker cooperative Thart Aris in fostering feminist politics through craft. In their understanding of creating spaces for alternatives to emerge there is a manifest influence of feminist activism, especially in their queering of the economy, that strikingly resembles the work of the Community Economies Collective and seems to demonstrate the influence of feminist politics in opening up spaces for post-capitalist practices in the everyday.

> I could take the easy road and say it's .. the fall of capitalism [laughs] will give rise to a different economic model but I don't think that's gonna happen in my lifetime so I have to get real. So I think … I keep coming back to this but I do think it's about creating spaces to do it. […]
>
> *Does that kind of fit with your feminist politics in terms of having revolution now instead of always that idea of ..*
>
> Constant revolution. Yeah I suppose it does. I haven't thought about it on that conscious level I suppose it was never that deliberate. Well … it is and it isn't. Yeah it does, I can't separate the two. I just can't the separate the two [laughs]. But I suppose the best way to answer that is would I have done it without feminist politics? Would I have done it with making something else, or doing something else? And the answer is no, I wouldn't. And Kellie wouldn't have either. (Naomi, Thart Aris)

While I do not want to portray cooperatives as either counter-hegemonic practices by nature, or suggest that all worker cooperatives stem from the same antagonistic politics, I instead wanted to re-instate the importance of critique as generative, rather than inhibitive, of alternative economies (North et al., 2020). Here, anti-capitalist, anti-sectarian and anti-patriarchal politics ignite the sparks of creation for some of the projects interviewed, with a desire to revive the role of cooperative practices among broader counter-hegemonic struggles (Baldacchino, 1990), or as part of wider local economic strategies (CLES, 2019; Rowe et al., 2017; Goldrick-Kelly, 2020).

D- Discussion

This chapter demonstrates that worker cooperatives in and around Belfast respond to specific problems, building capacity in communities where resources are scarce. They are driven by values and ethics centred on social and environmental justice, and offer a vision for radical social transformation at odds with the neoliberal peace process. Yet, it is evident that looking at empowerment as a motive for cooperation on its own, without considering the role of values and ethics, as well as the role of antagonistic politics is inconvenient. In other words, separating social economies, solidarity economies and antagonistic economies may not be suitable (North and Cato, 2018). It is a combination of strategies of empowerment, distinct values and ethics, and intention to resist neoliberal, sectarian and patriarchal hegemonies that drives most of the worker cooperative projects featured here, ranging from one end to the other of a spectrum. Naturally, there is heterogeneity in the projects mentioned. Indeed, there is no political 'purity' that binds together all worker cooperatives. Yet, this research finds that while being context-specific and diverse, alternative economics often encompass elements of the three aspects.

In wanting to put workers in the driving seat, worker cooperatives foster a more democratic and egalitarian distribution of power which reminisces the language of political engagement rather than entrepreneurship. Worker cooperatives offer those involved – if successful of course – the potential to exercise agency (Leyshon and Lee, 2003). Cooperative values and principles, promoting class justice and offering a vision for a people-centred economy are fundamental as to why cooperators decide to be involved in those projects. What stems from the interviews with participants is the

potential of worker cooperatives to create new economic "spaces" of "being-in-common" (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Cornwell, 2012; Smith, 2020), prefiguring a new geography that seeks to move beyond neoliberalism and sectarianism.

This is where the interest for the worker cooperatives in Northern Ireland brings a new light to the exploration of local alternative economics and community economies where the return to the 'local' rarely questions what stands behind the local itself. The cases looked at through this research do ask questions of what is wrong with capitalism but they do so in a way that attaches its focus on the local consequences of the implementation of neoliberal policies in an environment ripped with sectarianism. They oppose the specificities of variegated and geographically differentiated neoliberalisation (Brenner et al, 2010). On the other hand, the prevalence of those projects occurring in areas with high levels of deprivation differs from some of the research on alternative economies and activism (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010, p. 478). What is highlighted here is the critical agency of those who have been left behind by the 'double transition' exposed in chapter 2.

When looking at the values, the ethics and the politics behind cooperators' desire to establish worker cooperative projects, the critique of the environment they live in as well as of a global capitalist system stands out. This is where some of the participants' views, while in part evocative of the literature on diverse economies, differ substantially by considering capitalism as dominant and hegemonic. Instead, it is from the critique of capitalism that alternatives stem. As Zanoni et al. (2017) and North et al. (2019) demonstrate, critique too can be generative. Instead of restricting, preventing or discouraging the building of alternatives in the present, antagonistic politics foster a deeper understanding of the urgent need to 'fight back'. If it is to tackle defeatism that Gibson Graham (1996; 2006) inspired many researchers to look more closely into the already-existing hidden everyday practices of resistance, participants here chose to define resistance through their opposition to neoliberal, sectarian and patriarchal hegemonies. Resistance is understood with humility – "A wee co-op on the corner of the street on its own of course is gonna do nothing" (Stiofán, Trademark). This is a reminiscent of Hyman's approach (1975) that seeks to evaluate attempts at social empowerment (in his case in the trade union movement) by looking at the powerful actors engaged against it, producing humility rather than defeatism. What

this research shows is that participants reconcile, quite easily, their critique of a system which they may consider as dominant with developing possibilities for alternative economies in the present. They are not naïve to the difficulties. Even when the venture is proven to be futile, their engagement is rooted in praxis by refusing to go down without a fight.

Rather than the emergence of "autonomous geographies" or "diverse economies", we can look at worker cooperatives as seeking to be "spaces of hope" (in a both Dinerstein, 2015 and Harvey, 2000). The alternative economic spaces that are created through worker cooperation symbolises the desires of cooperators to try out, to experiment and as a result to plant the seeds of what post-capitalist economies could look like. And because this is an exploration rather than a pre-determined journey, some do fail. Those spaces of hope comport moments of negation where cooperators reject capitalist, patriarchal and sectarian hegemonies, where the meaning of politics is "open for discussion" (Dinerstein, 2015, p. 61), but also moments of creation where new practices are invented in the present.

What is important in Dinerstein's work (2014; 2015) is the role of those "architects of hope" (Harvey, 2000, pp. 234-238) striving to change the world they live in. The co-operators participating to this research can be portrayed as organic intellectuals in charge of providing an alternative economic narrative through both technical practice and education, a concept developed by Gramsci (Forgacs, 1988). In this research cooperators articulate a new worldview, one that contests the dominant common sense and contributes to developing a philosophy of praxis:

> "For the philosophy of praxis, ideologies are anything but arbitrary; they are real historical facts which must be combatted and their nature as instruments of domination revealed, not for reasons of morality etc., but for reasons of political struggle: in order to make the governed intellectually independent of the governing, in order to destroy one hegemony and create another, as a necessary moment in the revolutionizing of praxis." (Gramsci, quoted in Filippini, 2017, p. 196)

Gramsci's concept of organic intellectuals, used by others to frame those with progressive politics in Northern Ireland (Cassidy, 2005, 2008), helps reflect on how cooperators promote politics that challenge capitalist, sectarian and patriarchal hegemonies, provide political education through the practice of worker control and aim at fostering solidarity that contributes to raising class consciousness. Worker cooperators contribute to articulating a new vision for an economic reality beyond neoliberalism and sectarianism. They attempt at creating space for the emergence of alternative narratives, for an alternative economic language, one rooted in 'common sense'. Through their engagement in non-hegemonic organisations, they become players in their own social emancipation. As Gramsci notes: "the problem of creating a new stratum of intellectuals consist in the critical elaboration of the intellectual activity that exists in everyone at a certain degree of development" (Philippini, 2017, p. 73). Having emphasised the role of collective will and consciousness (McLaren et al., p23), the work of intellectuals according to Gramsci becomes crucial for it to be any social change. Of course, the role of this critical consciousness in impacting broader politics is another matter altogether (Baldacchino, 1990; McSweeney, 2014). Considering cooperators as organic intellectuals provides a departure from some of the literature on the civil society that has stripped away the concept of organic intellectuals from its association with transformative agency and class. Yet, as we will see in Chapter 7, the participation of cooperatives in wider counter-hegemonic struggles, and therefore their transformative potential, is also dramatically hindered in Northern Ireland (Baldacchino, 1990; McSweeney, 2014). Nonetheless, as Harvey (2000, p. 238) notes "where we learn it from becomes as important as where we see it from. Utopian schemas of spatial forms typically open up the construction of the political person to critique." Whether we consider them organic intellectuals, architects of hope or non-capitalist subjects in becoming (Cornwell, 2012), the visions that drives the emergence of some of the worker cooperatives in Northern Ireland stress undeniably the importance of critical agency. Critical agency may seem counter-intuitive to an environment dominated by neoliberalism and ethnic resource competition. Yet, the local and the everyday provide opportunities for both peacebuilding and neoliberalism to be resisted and reframed (Brenner et al, 2010; Richmond and Mitchell, 2012).

Rather than providing a Pollyannaish account of worker cooperative economies, there is no escaping the fact that some of the cooperatives interviewed in this research no longer trade, either as cooperatives (Farmageddon and Just Books) or as businesses altogether (Union Taxis, Lúnasa). Yet, in this chapter, attention was drawn to those organisations nonetheless. This is important for two reasons. First, it demonstrates the difficult task of building alternative economics in Northern Ireland, something I elaborate on in chapter 7. Alongside an institutionally hostile environment and a lack of visibility, most of the businesses described above are small, reflecting a lack of capacity prevalent in the wider social economy sector. In fact, many businesses do not survive past the first couple of years of trading, with cooperatives providing better odds with regards to resilience than their conventional counterparts (NEF, 2018; Pérotin, 2016). Second, looking at intent is a methodological choice to provide space for the voices of those whose projects no longer exist, i.e. to provide learning from failure. It responds to the desire for an alternative praxis that acknowledges both imperfection and potential and rises above the dangers of optimism and cynicism (Zanoni et al., 2017). It contributes to creating new knowledge on alternative economic practices, giving an opportunity to portray the visions –realised or not – of those engaged in trying to build a more egalitarian, democratic and sustainable economy. In fact, even in the cooperatives that no longer trade, the experience of worker cooperation was deemed successful by participants. In Farmageddon, the shift to a company model did not take away the collective approach to decision making, with directors (now shareholders) who continue to put "the responsibility […] on everybody's shoulder, not on a couple of people. Which we have kept as well. You know we support each other in [our] decisions." (Susan, Farmageddon). In Lúnasa, Elena, the chef and last member of the cooperative café before it closed recounted being "proud" of all the people who have been able to enjoy the distinctive European atmosphere of the café, its accessible and high-quality "working-class food". Despite the disasters that struck the initiative (fire, indebtedness, internal conflict), Elena explained:

> People who have nothing to do with us politically learnt about it, have been exposed to different things. I am very very very proud of that and I'm happy with that and from that perspective it is a success. (Elena, Lúnasa)

As I witnessed before its closure the restaurant being booked up, providing affordable tapas food, attended by a wide variety of customers from political circles, European residents and nearby working class communities, driven by a passion for the food itself, it is in fact hard to summarise Lúnasa as a 'failure'. Similarly, Eoin, who set up with fellow taxi drivers a collective taxi depot in West Belfast that was met with opposition from both private depot owner and local Sinn Féin activists summarises the need to learn from failures. It is by accounting for their attempts, their intentions and their politics - both in success and failure – that I have evaluated the contribution of worker cooperatives in this chapter.

> My attempt at establishing a workers' cooperative may have failed, but I don't view it in a strictly negative sense. It has positives, and I take the positives out of that there. I've learnt from that as well. And I believe we can all learn. So we don't just learn from the successes, we can also learn from our failures and that's what I take from that. (Eoin, Union Taxis)

The examples of cooperatives that no longer trade remind us that, as Leyshon and Lee (2003, pp. 8-9) note, economic geographies are not just social constructs, they are also material. To survive, they "need to be capable of consuming, exchanging and producing use values", they need to be effective. Otherwise, they are incapable of social reproduction. Whether they do, and what processed they engage in when they "work well" (Eoin) is the focus of the next chapter.

> Yes, I still believe that workers' cooperatives [and other cooperatives] are the way forward, they're the best way forward […]. when it works really well, Jesus it's transformative. It's transformative. (Eoin, Union Taxis)

Chapter 6: Enacting ethics of care: worker cooperatives in post-conflict Belfast

Through research on ten worker cooperatives in Northern Ireland, the previous chapter described how desire for social empowerment was a key motive for the emergence of a worker cooperative economy, whether worker cooperatives seek to foster community capacity, social empowerment and decent employment in the face of social deprivation; or whether, driven by a rejection of capitalist, patriarchal and sectarian politics, they are willing to plant the seed in the present of a future beyond neoliberalism and sectarianism. The critical agency that has been highlighted by looking at why cooperatives exist demonstrates a desire at being transformative, either for those involved directly in the cooperative project, or with respect to the wider narrative on what post-conflict economies should look like. Whether they are in fact transformative is an entirely different matter and the focus of this chapter.

In looking at what cooperative economies produce, theory has offered radically different responses. On the one hand, the promise of worker cooperatives is to foster non-exploitative economies. Workers, now with control over the means of production regain power over their pay, their working conditions and to an extent production itself, i.e. what they produce as well as how they produce. In cooperatives, workers and communities come first before profit, with income being reinvested to sustain decent employment and foster local community development (Eisenschitz and Gough, 2011; Wright, 2010; Gibson-Graham, 2003, 2006). On the other hand, plenty of authors have warned that worker cooperatives may not escape capitalist exploitation altogether (Ruccio, 2011; Safri, 2011). Over time, it is said, that the democratic and egalitarian values that set cooperatives apart degenerate and become supplanted with profit-maximising strategies that ensure their survival in a capitalist economy.

In attempting to bridge the vast theoretical gap between the promise of non-exploitative economies and neoliberal subterfuge, this chapter draws from the contribution made by ethnography to understanding work practices and brings to light the invisible ways of working, producing, running an organisation according to non-(strictly)capitalist ethical considerations. Looking at three distinct case studies in Belfast, where both participant observation and in-depth interviews with multiple cooperators were employed, the everyday reality of running a worker cooperative is

put under the microscope (Gibson-Graham, 2014, Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010, p. 481; Langmead, 2017). By focusing on a few case studies only, I do not wish to side-line the less successful projects. Rather, immersion into the environment of those three cooperatives produced qualitatively in-depth findings that enable rich details, nuanced accounts and a more compassionate gaze that conveys how ethical economies are constructed and maintained. However, rather than a focus on observation alone (Gibson-Graham, 2014), the case study avails of ethnographic interviews to provide a detailed account of everyday practices in worker cooperation seen through the eyes of those who live them out.

Through the thick and rich portraits below, I analyse how Belfast worker cooperatives transform the very idea of work by enacting ethics of care. The chapter explores how cooperative workplaces provide more than just a wage, but also quality of life beyond the workplace. The chapter investigates how they implement anti-alienating practices that foster dignity at work, creativity, fulfilment and pride. The attention is focused on how skills are learnt in common. Observing how safe spaces are nurtured and sectarian divisions addressed, I evaluate the attention to enacting therapeutic practices, superseding previous experiences of economic marginalisation without compromising the material conditions of living. Drawing a parallel between the feminist approach to diverse economies and feminist peacebuilding analyses, the culture of care shaped by everyday practices in cooperatives comes to the fore to create what Chan Shun-hing (2011) has called a "peace in the everyday". Care here becomes a radical act according to which austerity is met with solidarity (Emejulu and Bassel, 2018). An act of becoming by creating new cooperative subjectivities, and an act of rejecting, by opposing neoliberal, sectarian and patriarchal hegemonies. It is a fragile balance between rage (against capitalism) and hope (beyond it) (Miller, 2015) that is portrayed in this chapter, looking at how worker cooperatives enact in their day-to-day practices both resistance, creation and compromises (Dinerstein, 2015) in the post-conflict city.

A- The Belfast Cleaning Cooperative

The Belfast cleaning society is a cross-community worker cooperative set up in 2011 in West Belfast. The cooperative's first office, shared with Trademark and now Creative Workers Cooperative, offers a direct view to a multi-level 800 meter

long and 13.5 meter high barrier of concrete, metal sheeting and open mesh fence on the one side and the North Howard Street seven meter wide gate closing the connection between the Falls and the Shankill at evenings and weekends. The 'Cupar Way' peace wall, first erected as violence erupted at the beginning of the Troubles to contain what became a lasting conflict, is one of Belfast's deadliest interfaces. The office, at the very far side of the Twin Spires Centre stands in sharp contrast with the rest of the commercial units and shops confined to this buffer zone between the Catholic Falls Road and the Protestant Shankill Road. As a cross-community cooperative, the cleaning society is also crossing the biggest divide in Northern Ireland, i.e. the workplace, where 40% of workers avowed to experiencing sectarian harassment and intimidation in 2012 (Nolan and Law, 2013). The cleaning cooperative emerged out of the work of Trademark, a trade union anti-sectarianism organisation, following anti-racism and anti-sectarianism training with local women groups. Yearning to continue doing work together, the women involved in anti-sectarianism training participated in a one-off cleaning job at the MTV Awards in 2011 and subsequently decided to establish a cleaning cooperative. The MTV Awards experience proved formative. At the end of the concert, the women put the money earned back on the table and set up a cross-community workers' cooperative.

This peculiar set up and the unmistakable influence of trade union and socialist politics explain why the cooperative provides a cross-community working class alternative that fosters decent work in an area comprising some of the highest indicators of socio-economic deprivation. The cooperative's postcode ranks as 29th most deprived out of 890 areas (SOA) in the whole of Northern Ireland (NISRA, 2017), coupled with a low track record in enterprise, job creation, and investment (O'Hearn, 2008, pp. 110-112). Despite this harsh environment, the cleaning cooperative has been an economic success on account of the hard work and dedication of its members. Ten years old at the time of writing, the cooperative sustains employment for fourteen workers, predominantly women, working set hours between 16h and 35h a week. A living wage organisation from its infancy, it is with pride that the workers reported winning the living wage employer award, ahead of the likes of IKEA, in 2016.

1. Revalorising invisible and "menial" work

For what was initially a six women business, the cooperative has managed to build up an impressive portfolio of contracts across the city. As part of this research, I accompanied the cleaners at the Innovation Factory located on the old grounds of the Mackie's textile engineering plant in West Belfast. As a remnant of Belfast's bygone industrial past, the office complex houses a variety of businesses, offering entrepreneurial support in what is yet another 'peace line'. When I started observation, I worked in this four-storey building with three other women. Six months later, five women were permanently needed to cover lunch and evening shifts (4 to 8pm) five days a week. The success of the cooperative is highlighted by one of the founding members:

> We're not in debt, we don't have any money issues, as a business we're thriving. Every year we meet our targets, and we excel them. We're hitting our targets every year and every year maybe we're employing one person, but that's an extra person that we're taking off benefits and into a workforce. And unlike businesses if they lose contracts, we don't wanna see people getting sacked. We will bust our arses to get more contract and more tenders and keep them employed, we don't wanna see the end of it. (Josephine)

The Belfast Cleaning Cooperative has provided decent employment in an industry rife with precarious working conditions, including low pay and zero-hour contracts. Workers are recruited through the Shankill, Falls and Springfield Job Centres as well as local community organisations, word of mouth and social media. The cooperative pays specific attention to fostering employment for workers with little traditional work experience, in particular since many cleaners have gaps in their employment history due to caring responsibilities:

> We do have girls that [have convictions] and they're amazing and they're brilliant cleaners … and again I don't think they'd had a job because nobody would have employed them. Nobody takes on people who've never had a job before, even as I said with the other girl we have. She's never had a job because she just had children. So you sort of think we're giving everybody a chance

and we want them to do better. But it's sad that this is what they want to do, this is their only way into a working environment, to clean. That's what annoys me I sort of think there's bound to be other places out there that could do this. But [they don't] unless it is a workers cooperative that are all open-minded and all open about helping each other and giving back to the community. (Josephine)

The cooperative aims to provide not just employment for those who might otherwise struggle to access it, but also decent work. Through taking control over the running of their organisation, workers have continuously aimed at paying the living wage. While other cooperatives portrayed in this research have experienced difficulties in generating consistent reliable income, the Cleaning cooperative has had a relative success in this respect. Yet, keeping wages high in an industry that sees low wages as a pillar of competiveness has often hindered the ability to tender for contracts. By collectively putting resources together, the women in the cleaning cooperative have managed to financially revalue their labour. This is seen by one of the workers as a challenge to the old-time exploitation in capitalist enterprises:

I think that [co-ops] can show them there is a better path for you in a working environment, that you're not a slave to the system, you know, that you're equal or that everybody around you that you're working with, you're equal to them. You have that bit of pride, knowing that you're working a hard days work to put the money, not just in your pocket but in her pocket but not in their pocket. […] You know, will people wake up and smell the coffee and go "here, hold on, I'm a slave to work, I'm only after buying his jaguar car, ain't I a fantastic person, look at that car, I paid for that car that he's driving in! ... (Teresa)

Safeguarding employment collectively through solidarity is also at the heart of the cooperative projects. Collective decisions in favour of sustaining employment – such as workers taking on additional hours until there is enough to sustain a part-time or full-time job, or applying for tenders if a contract is lost – are made possible by the democratic governance of the business. All decisions, such as setting wages, organising collective events, training or tender for contracts are "put on the table" for all to decide. Flexibility is offered to work around other responsibilities. This is where

the cooperative epitomises the benefits of a people-centred economy that put workers, and especially here women, at the centre of the economic project. Accompanying the women on their cleaning shifts, and discussing their family lives, it became clear that cleaning was a 'second job', with participants privileging shorter shifts to allow for caring responsibilities. The cooperative also enables a shift away from work practices that have detrimental impacts on workers' health and wellbeing as well as practices that stand in opposition to the cooperative's ethos, whether it is with the use of environmentally friendly products despite the additional costs, or through the attention paid to the wellbeing of workers and feasibility of contracts. The attention to offering employment that is secure instead of precarious but also rewarding, enabling life out of work to be meaningful and allowing energy and time for family life, where workers are treated with respect is poles apart from what workers have previously experienced working in large cleaning companies in Northern Ireland. As a result of a focus on therapeutic practices, the cooperative has had to step away from financially rewarding contracts due to their incompatibility with the aims and ethos of the cooperatives. Discussing one of the decisions, Alice recounts:

> One the treatment from the guy who actually hired us to do the job […] … you watch someone, capitalist bastard like, a complete capitalist bastard, middle class up his own arse, needs a good kicking, terrible human being treating people like that and you're thinking why are we doing this? […] [The profit we made from that job] took an awful lot of pressure off waiting on customers paying their bills … we're always in a ten thousand pound deficit with waiting on people paying. […] Different big jobs like that, always made us have surplus chunk of money sitting there. And it was a massive learning curve! […] [But] we decided, we voted ... why would a democratically-run building on confidence equal workforce let someone treat them the way they do for a few pound a profit? That is completely against what we were, what our whole ethos was. You know we're trying to empower workers, we're trying to empower whether it's a woman or a man we don't care. We're trying to show that you're a good part of this company and this organisation. Why would we say that to somebody on one hand and then on the other hand send them out in the middle of the field at four o'clock in the morning to clean up someone's used condom or some drugs or broken bottles and think sure it's ok, we're

making a bit of profit here! It was just so against our ethos […]. I honestly don't miss it [smile] because the company's still running. You know four, five years later the company's still running, still making a profit, maybe not as big a profit but it's still making a profit. (Alice)

By collectively putting resource together, the women of the Cleaning Co-op participate to tackle the broader inequalities and unfairness that affects the cleaning industry. Cleaning, despite its value to society, is here highlighted as an economic activity rendered invisible and devalued (Ryan, 2009), often considered to be 'low skilled' and generally performed by women: "the cleaner's looked down upon and it's seen as a menial job and it's seen as like the lowest of the lowest" (Alice). Well before Covid-19, Alice stressed on numerous occasions the discrepancy between how essential cleaning was and the low remuneration of its workers. At the onset of the health crisis in Spring 2020, ICTU reported that 60% of workplace cleaners earned below the living wage in Northern Ireland (ICTU, 2020, No Going Back). The gender make-up of the cleaning co-op epitomises how women's labour is misrecognised, obscured or even silenced as part of exclusions and hierarchies of economic activities that foster inequalities central to capitalism (Pettinger, 2019). In this respect, the cleaning cooperative enables a revalorisation of work itself. The cooperative offers a space to develop skills and learn collectively. Training on equality, Health and Safety and Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) is provided for all workers. Skills are also shared between workers. While studies that highlight processes of "disalienation" (a concept used by Kociatkiewicz et al, 2021 and Azzelini, 2018) and therapeutic workplaces (Smith, 2021) too often focus on craft and artisanship (Pettinger, 2019), here it is the collective running of the organisation more than work itself that opens up spaces for sharing knowledge embedded in relations of trust and friendship. If craft consists in work that is already seen as producing value, as respectable or as worthy, the revalorising of work that is hidden, deleted or undervalued is an important aspect of the impact of worker ownership and control. The participants interviewed shared pride in their work, inside knowledge and qualified training. These accounts converge with the view that worker cooperatives entail a process of "disalienation" in the workplace:

What skills would you say you've learnt through the coop?

[laugh] cleaning! [both laugh] I hate cleaning. […] Ellie I'm the worst cleaner in the world. Well I'm not anymore but I don't enjoy cleaning. My house is tidy but I'll never win prizes. […] But … learning all the different techniques, and listening to people. … Some of the women that have taught me things over the years. You know our motto is we don't cut corners, we clean corners. But some of the things that they've taught me does save time and you're sort of going why did I not know that! **…** For example Stainless steel. … One of the women that used to work with us had said that she uses Mister Sheen which is a furniture polish to clean her stainless steel cooker hood. And from that day to this day that's what I use. It's amazing! [laughs] […] But yeah I was not skilled in cleaning. So I am now. But I still don't like doing it. But see for the company, I'll break my back doing it and I'll be the best cleaner you'll ever know because I want our reputation to stay where it is and it's quite high at the minute and I don't want it to be lowered. I'll break my back cleaning for the co-op. (Josephine)

While the cooperative makes every effort to tackle degrading working conditions of the cleaning industry, some elements associated with the exploitative nature of work are out of its reach. Instead, it is the industry itself that is at cause, whether it is due to the difficulties of travelling from one contract to the next, or whether it is the feeling of isolation from workers being scattered across town which limits the construction of cooperative and collective subjectivities. Finally, the model itself has limitations when it comes to being competitive in comparison to conventional companies, with prices curtailed by the industry. The cooperative model initially seemed to offer opportunities to cut costs. By not having to remunerate shareholders, the cooperative could pay the living wage (£8 to £8.50 per hour) and remain competitive in an industry that charged nearly twice what it paid workers (minimum wage). With the increase in the living wage and other costs, the cooperative continuously has to balance re-valuing labour without losing clients for being overprices.

If someone comes in and undercuts us to eleven pound, there's no way we can go any lower.[…] We can't compete with charging someone ten pound, ten pound fifty an hour if the workers gonna get nine. We've to provide all the

cleaning stuff and the uniforms and the insurance. That's ok if it's a company that's paying their workers six pound an hour and get wee young ones in , sure they're gonna make a fiver on it! But we're not because we're a living wage employer so the cleaners get the bulk of anything that we claim. […] So, we can't compete with that Ellie ….

[…] see when it comes to cleaning, you can't go in and say to somebody I'm charging you twenty-five pound an hour to clean your office because they'll look at you and go "oh wonder, would you!". You see this is the mindset as well, cleaning is a very very important role for any building to keep running. I've said this before and you've probably heard me say this before, you can imagine if all the cleaners stopped cleaning the hospitals and the schools … and you'll see the difference. But cleaning is seen as menial so they don't want to pay a lot for it. (Alice)

This interview extract is a reminder that cooperatives operate on a terrain in which business imperatives and culture of care, solidarity and equality are continuously negotiated, exemplifying the 'messy' and sometimes contradictory nature of democratic processes.

2. Social emancipation and gender empowerment: the limits to offsetting class injustice

At the heart of the cleaning cooperative's purpose is the desire for social emancipation and gender empowerment in which impact materialises both in and beyond the workplace. Confidence building becomes a collectively driven process fostered by cooperators. As one participant explains, there is a clear intention to educate other workers through example by showing that cleaners too can be the boss of their company:

[I] try to even educate the girls while you're at work which I do do with [another worker]. Whenever [she] and I used to work together and we would have been in places, I would have made a point of letting the [clients] know that we are a cooperative, we are not just your cleaners, we're a cooperative. .. And [she] has started doing it now too! (Teresa)

Empowerment also materialises in the impact working in the cooperative can have on workers' lives beyond the workplace, whether it is by permeating on other employment, by giving workers the confidence to start their own business or by setting the trajectory for long-term employment. As highlighted in interviews, the cooperative has provided employment to twenty women and men over the years, including workers who went on to open their own business. Discussing the effect of working two different jobs part-time, one participant describes:

> And I'll tell you the hard part is, owning your own business and working as a cooperative and then going into a structured hierarchy company. As much as I love working my job, I hate seeing managers speak down to other girls and I've become quite bolshy. Whereas I think six or seven years ago I'd have been quite quiet and never spoke back, I sort of know my rights now. […] There's loads of things that happened where I think to myself, definitely six, seven years ago, prior to the cooperative, I would have let people speak to me how I thought a manager can speak to a worker. And now it's the opposite. (Josephine)

Even though worker turnover over the years has been relatively high for a worker cooperative, the impact of bringing women through to employment and offering opportunities that they might otherwise not have is a source of pride and fulfilment for the remaining members:

> It's something that I am very proud of. … And even to see one woman empowered and her life changed is massive to me. Sometimes it's pure satisfaction. You know you see someone who wouldn't be given a job anywhere else, because of their background. And then you bring this person on board and you do training courses with them and they get their different qualifications within the cleaning industry. And then you see their confidence grow. You see them change from someone who maybe had a dependence on alcohol or medication and then they change to a person full of confidence. You couldn't buy it! You couldn't buy it like! (Alice)

These examples speak to the potential but also the centrality of facilitating gender empowerment and capacity building in the cooperative. On the other hand, it is probably in this respect that the cooperative faces its biggest challenge. Traditionally, slow growth refers to obstacles to generating fixed reliable wages. Here, difficulties in recruiting members, in getting workers involved in the running of the organisation when childcare takes precedence over work and as a consequence difficulties in growing the size of the workplace have produces some of the biggest impediments faced by the cooperative:

> There could be forty of us … We have turned down jobs, we have not put in contracts, we have not put in tenders when people have rung and asked us to because we can't get the workers. And when we do get the workers, they only want to work certain times, have children or have responsibilities … . Sorry but the customers don't think like that, we have to work around our customers too you know. Now, a lot of the time we facilitate that and … we work around that. [But] It's quite frustrating too … because the Belfast Cleaning Coop is going eight years as you know. And the Belfast Cleaning Coop could easily have thirty, forty, fifty workers, easily! Easily! We could easily have our own building by now, easily! See if there was six or seven people on board working hard to make it work, I have no doubt whatsoever in my mind that we would be really really really successful … It's still a business, it's still a viable business, it still makes a profit every year, it still pays the wages of twelve people. (Alice)

Despite the recruitment process clearly stating that workers are invited to become members following a six-month probation, few workers take the opportunity to be involved in the democratic running of the organisation. The members are then left with the responsibility of coping with queries, tenders, contracts and covering holidays often through sweat equity (i.e. unpaid work). A related issue resides in a lack of organicness where workers are brought in the cooperative as employees first, with decent wages and working conditions before being asked to take on responsibilities after a probation period. Divisions also transpire between those who carry out administrative tasks – the enablers as referred to by Wolff (2012) – and those who clean. When asked about it, the members have all acknowledged that the issue was

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symptomatic of a broader context of disempowerment, in particular for working class women, often carers in their family. In this context, being a member of the cooperative is considered an added responsibility with little understanding of the benefits, especially considering the lack of awareness of cooperatives and lack of former experience of democratic workplace.

> That is a very frustrating thing to me when you're of the thought and mindset of a worker co-op and of democracy and of equality, when you see another human being beside you going "I don't want equality, I don't want democracy, just give me my wage and let me go home I don't want to be part of this" … one minute you're trying to empower people and the next minute people don't want to be empowered and you're going. Why? Why do you not want to be empowered? … And then there's so many answers to that question ! … One, maybe lack of confidence. Two, education… they don't feel educated enough to be able to run a business. Three, family responsibilities […] … Four,….. partners, […] the partners are going "Why you're going to a meeting for? Why would you go to a meeting for?" … "I own the business" .. "aha Wise up … you're away to clean somewhere?" … This is the society we live in … So there was many ways that we've been hit […] [And] it just causes so much conflict … it's really frustrating for the members, it's very draining … it's so hard. […] And you have to think of working class women in West Belfast who have been put down for so many years, reared up through the Troubles, everything, the whole background of Northern Ireland. There's so many barriers as it is, not only as working class, not only as either Catholic or Protestant, not only as a woman … they need education, support and advice. But then I think Ellie, I'm one of them women! […] But not everybody has the opportunity, has the commitment, has the want, or the support to do that .. And you can't make people do it …". (Alice)

In other words, while the cooperative is in no circumstances a top-down initiative, the question remains as to how can one empower others. The concern for not being able to engage workers into the running of the organisation is an interesting reminder that exploitation extends beyond the more straightforward focus on how surplus is circumscribed through prices and rents determined by a market economy (Roberts,

2011). There remains an issue, highlighted by Kristjanson-Gural (2011) of class injustice whose impact can hardly be offset by a single cooperative and which reverberates in all aspects of life. For instance, the treatment and working conditions of workers in the wider cleaning industry directly (through price competition) and indirectly (through lack of confidence, under-valorisation of work) hinders the cooperative's capacity to provide dignity in and at work. This issue also evokes the role of gender exclusions, intertwined with class politics, and highlights that not all "hierarchies are reducible to the question of ownership of means of production" (Pettinger, 2019, p. 51). Ownership and profit extraction are not the only powerful source of inequalities. While the cleaning cooperative is an initiative for and by working class women from both sides of the interface, lack of education and lack of confidence in feeling capable of coping with the added responsibility of the business is a challenge and source of frustration for those members dedicated to driving the project forward. Those have expressed how this has become a source of conflict and exhaustion trying to cope with the added responsibilities spread on too few numbers.

As a result of those difficulties, training and education were stressed as a central element to mitigate the lack of buy-in from workers into the project. In fact, despite some workers claiming that they did not understand what a cooperative was, it became clear during informal conversation that workers were well aware of the difference between cooperatives and conventional companies, revealing lack of confidence rather than a lack of understanding of the cooperative model. Yet, due to cleaning work being outreach, added to the business' imperatives and childcare responsibilities outside of working hours, the cooperative faces a catch 22 situation in finding time to organise training. While seen as time-consuming and incompatible with the day-today routine of running a business, training was also highlighted as critical to the cooperative's empowerment strategy:

> Their mind-set is to go and clean somewhere, go home. So to me the education is very important part of being a co-op because you can't take mums, out of an environment, of a working class environment, probably have been unemployed for X amount of years, they see a job they take the job because they know they need the money. (Teresa)

The frustration of the founding members towards the lack of involvement of workers in the running of the organisation and the difficulty in balancing business considerations and time-constraints with providing space for collective learning, do not take away from the cooperative's success in providing for fulfilling work and creating opportunities for work to be revalorised. It is undeniable that those difficulties also result from a lack of support provided by government institutions, support which could otherwise free up time for training. Instead, what is highlighted here are the difficulties and compromises between running a financially sustainable business and addressing wider inequalities.

3. Fostering inclusivity and community capacity

The difficulties in providing social emancipation highlighted above demonstrate how worker cooperatives remain sites of struggle where outside hegemonies (neoliberalism, capitalism, patriarchy) pervade the day-to-day experiences of those collective spaces. Those difficulties also demonstrate how the cleaning cooperative aims at superseding individualist concerns with ethics of care. This is particularly striking when it comes to the way the cooperative allocates profit. Beyond personal gains, profit is re-appropriated for socially useful purposes, to pursue the cooperative's aims and ethos vis-a-vis the community. Despite small profits reinvested into uniforms and bonuses, the cleaning cooperative has donated goods to local charities, refugees, sponsored local sports teams and youth clubs. As Alice explains: "we really don't want to be millionaires, we just want to help community." The attention to growing as a business is a result intrinsically linked with redistributive practices: "the more profit, the more we can give back." […] Every time we've had any kind of money, it's went straight out to … "Can we sponsor this?" … (Josephine).

The cleaning cooperative inscribes mutual aid in its vision for contributing to developing the local economy. Through redistributive practices (Gibson-Graham, 2003), the cooperative expands the concept of solidarity beyond the iron cage. In addition, the cleaning cooperative is involved in fostering cooperation with other cooperatives. Alice in particular, through Trademark, has provided support – helping with accounts and registration, advising on cooperative governance and structure – to

other worker cooperatives, including Farmaggeddon cooperative, Lúnasa, Union Taxis, and more recently Thart Aris and Blackwater Valley Co-op.

At the heart of the cooperative project, there is also a willingness to address the legacy of the conflict and foster equality in the midst of deprivation and segregation. Considering its location on one of the many physical barriers rigidified by violence that divide Belfast and transform neighbourhoods into "sectarian ghettoes" (Dawson, 2016, p. 140), the cooperative's attention to providing a genuine cross-community experience is telling.

> Me and another girl across the wall here will have completely different upbringing now. Her upbringing will be completely opposite to mine. But the outcome's the same. She's still working class, she's still living in poverty area, she's still trying to make ends meet. […] And we were doing the very first training in 2011, 2010 with the women's group and when we put up on the flipchart … […] 'Things that you have in common' and it was unemployment, social problems within their own communities, long waiting list in the hospital, deprivation in the hospitals, high unemployment, high …. health problems with the women, young families, everything was a mirror image … [there] was the sixty-foot wall in between them but it was still just a mirror image of what they were going through. But one was raised up as 'Love Queen & Country', another one was raised up as 'Queen & Country here can go fuck itself' you know 'I want a free Ireland'. But that's their background and that's what there is in West Belfast. And now we have these women working together, don't really talk about Queen & Country or Free Ireland, doesn't mean that they don't have their beliefs ... But they're all just trying to make ends meet and get on with their lives and trying to help another human being out, trying to keep their wee business running. (Alice)

The cooperative provides space for self-education, respect and diversity which seems to indicate that the solidarity at the heart of the cooperative project may in fact foster truly genuine anti-sectarianism rather than an attitude of politeness, denial over divisions and conflict. This shared learning helps channel attitudes towards sectarianism but also racism and other forms of discrimination. Co-learning engages

cooperators in a two-way process, on the one hand by acknowledging (rather than silencing) historical and geographical divisions, on the other by opening up space for identities to evolve. Discussing how workers learn from each other, one of the participants explained:

> She'll say something and I'll go "Don't say that!", "Why?", "Don't say it". I think that self-education is real, you learn from your environment you learn from who you're with. … And I wouldn't turn around and say 'fucking orange bastard' even in a joking way I would not say it, even if though I'm joking I would not offend her. So she's learning and I'm learning because when you're brought up on different sides of the wall … Nobody's born a racist, nobody's born sectarian, it's what you're taught. But then un-teach yourself and I think this is helping, cross-community it's helping people to un-teach, to unlearn what you learnt when you were a child. And it's proven it, there's never been an issue in the co-op for religious, anyone's religion. Maybe what they're wearing to work, or too much make-up … (Teresa)

Addressing the legacy of the conflict interestingly does not consist in creating a shared space that is 'sanitised' of ethno-national identities. Instead, issues which are contrary to the cooperative's ethos of diversity and equality would be dealt with if needed. The fact that the cooperative has not had to confront such issues is partly connected to its formation in the wake of anti-sectarianism and anti-racism training. It also reflects the role of cooperative principles in fostering a broader sense of inclusivity (Gradin, 2015). Diversity in cooperatives highlights an approach to healing and reconciliation which rejects the entrenching of simplified sectarian identities and challenges its zero-sum-game politics.

> I don't care where you're from, you're part of the co-op, you're a hard-worker and you're trying to get on with your life, then you'll do me. That's the way we work. Religion, sexual orientation, political beliefs, whatever is in your background. … see as long as you're not sectarian, see as long as a person does not come in and shows … racism or sectarianism or hatred for any other human being, well that would cause a big problem because we're completely against all that. (Alice)

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Instead the approach fosters a better understanding of shared, multiple, multifaceted sense of identities (Graham and Nash, 2006, p. 266). It provides an alternative to more dominant reconciliation approaches and community relations policy by focusing on nurturing and creating common ground. While Dawson (2016) highlights how reconciliation operates a backward movement of addressing the legacy of trauma and violence, cooperatives participate to a forward movement that develops a shared vision and this whether they are cross-community or not.

> Even if it was a single identity cooperative, even if it wasn't a cross-community cooperative. See if it was a single identity cooperative that was say based in Bangor and then there was another one based in Saintfield and then there was another one based in the Shankill and then there was another one based in the Falls, they'd all be following the same principles. So … they'd be thinking of equality and the seven principles of cooperation, they wouldn't be bringing in religion. That's not to say people aren't allowed to have their religion. … But if everybody was following the same principles of cooperation and they're from all different walks of life, when they all meet up, they all know you're a cooperator, I'm a cooperator, you're a cooperator and we all follow the same code of ethics here. So of course it's gonna break down barriers, even in an interface, it's gonna break down barriers of any race, culture because everybody'd be under the one cooperation banner.
>
> *Is that a new identity then nearly? Like your identity is a cooperator instead of maybe your identity would have been a Catholic or a Republican*
>
> Hum, it's another label though! We're always getting labels at me [both laughs]. I'd rather be called a cooperator than a catholic to be honest with you [laughs]…. Yeah, I like that label [laughs] … We just need another couple million people in Ireland to do that Ellie! [laughs] (Alice)

Socio-economic inequalities are here put at the forefront of the cooperative's approach to building common ground, which is by no means trivial when considering the role played by socio-economic inequalities at the onset of the conflict (O'Dowd, 2009). The interconnection between social deprivation on the one hand and sectarian segregation on the other is reframed by the cooperative when attempting to tackle class-based and gender-based inequalities. The Cupar Way interface becomes not just

a symptom of deprivation and violence but its geography is transformed as an opportunity for people to take ownership of reconciliation through cooperation, solidarity and mutual aid. It offers a more rooted approach to local neighbourhood regeneration, one that does not accept class inequalities as the eventual outcome of a 'normalised society' but also one that does not foster a rigid understanding of cross-community contact as a solution to building community cohesion and trust (Connolly, 2000).

In conclusion, the Cleaning cooperative may offer a palliative means to reintegrate in the labour market people (especially women) who would have normally being excluded from it, offsetting through practical actions the effects of austerity, social deprivation and years of conflict. Yet, it also offers a transformative alternative based on solidarity, class awareness and capacity building between divided communities. Beyond its creation inspired by trade union politics, the cleaning cooperative has thrived as an economic, political and social alternative, not without difficulties, due to the dedication of the founding members and the hard work of the cleaners who have built up the co-ops' reputation up:

> It's proven in the last seven years it's went from strength to strength and that's all being because of the women working, you know. They're hitting their goal. Even if they don't understand what a co-op is, they're still pulling in the money to keep the co-op going, the ones who are cleaning out the toilets and hoovering the floors, they're keeping the co-op turning. (Teresa)

B- Creative Workers Cooperative

Creative Workers Cooperative was set up in 2012 (registered), in the midst of the economic recession that followed the 2008 financial crisis. Framed as an alternative to precarious work in the creative industries, this is yet the most outward-looking cooperative case study portrayed here. The influence of socialist politics is at the core of the cooperative's project, aiming to become a "propaganda unit" for progressive politics. Whether it is in their former premises on King Street or the new space they share with Trademark in West Belfast, visitors are greeted into the cooperative by the immediate after-smell of smoke and the bust of Lenin, enthroned with pride at the

centre of the office. As one participants explains, advancing left-wing progressive politics is at the heart of Creative Workers cooperative:

> We still make the joke sometimes, it's .. doesn't matter what we're putting out as long as it's propaganda. [laughs]
> *Propaganda for what kind of politics?*
> Left-wing, environmentalism, you know, anti-poverty, anything. Anything that … sits with our principles. And there's no set doctrine within the co-op but we would all be of the left. But we're not all Maoist, or Marxist-Leninist, or Trotskyist … we just leave it to we're all of the left. (Gerard)

As a result of their politics, Creative Workers Cooperative embodies a vision for building radically alternative economies, sustaining fulfilling employment for workers in the creative industries, building up a cooperative movement and promoting the work of community organisations:

> Initially we said we don't want to just exist as ourselves, and pat ourselves in the back once we've done that, we want to encourage other cooperatives and we want to be involved in other cooperatives, we want to sort of start to build an economy around them that becomes a wee bit more robust. (Clem)

The small three-member team pulled together the skills they had acquired in the media industry – design, photography and coding – to create a worker cooperative. The cooperative structure offers the possibility to make a living out of their passion for creative work. In their own account, working in the creative industries too often implies low wages and long hours for those lucky enough to get a foot in the door, or otherwise relying on alternative forms of equally precarious employment (working in pubs, restaurants). In fact, creative industries' contribution to employment is largely misplaced (2.9% of the total employment in Northern Ireland in 2016 (Department for Communities and NISRA, 2016; DCMS, 2018 for UK statistics)), despite featuring as a to-be-nurtured high-growth sector in economic policies such as the *Belfast Agenda* (Belfast City Council, 2017). When assessed in the context of mainstream economic strategies, the experience of Creative Workers exemplifies how approaches aiming at

facilitating Belfast's ascension as a globally competitive city too often leave local residents behind.

1. Creative labour process and democratic praxis

In the deliberative and collective space fostered by Creative Workers Cooperative, each worker brings a unique skill-set – design; film-making and photography; coding – and ensures that by pulling resources together the cooperative generates a consistent level of income. Yet, the consistency regarding wages has been a ten-year process in the making. When I interviewed the cooperative in spring 2019, the workers explained they had only recently reached financial sustainability despite being set up in 2012. Bringing up their wages to £200 a week, with a 24 hours working week, Creative Workers is now a living wage organisation. All three workers acknowledged having reached a milestone beyond the "existential crisis" (Colin) they previously faced.

Creative workers has undeniably developed a successful business, and this despite only producing one run of business cards and leaflets in their entire existence. Instead, work has been built up through word of mouth on account of its quality. A recent *Solid Fund* grant (*Solid fund* is a worker cooperative solidarity fund, a UK-wide scheme where individuals can contribute to finance worker cooperatives) has also enabled the co-op to buy film equipment and cut on renting costs in the long-term. Despite the tortuous journey in reaching a sustainable level of income – "until last year, [I was] earning below minimum wage every week, I know what poverty is like" (Gerard) – the workers have recently decided to hire two new employees offering them equal pay and flexible working conditions. In fact, there is an uncompromising aspect to nurturing fairer outcomes for all those involved in the cooperative and beyond, irrespective of length of employment, membership status or expertise. It was always in the vision of Creative Workers to take on more staff, to be a hub for employment in an industry characterised by a lack of opportunities. The members have referred to this as tackling "the trap" where many end up in jobs unrelated to what they trained for:

> But we boosted the wages recently. We had the opportunity to boost wages for ourselves, we chose to get two new people in and then work to grow them up. That was better to get two people employment than just boost ourselves

basically. One of them had got in touch with us and just said, listen, I'm working part-time in something that's not in the field, or remotely in the field, or connected to the field as such, and I hate it. […]

We want to get people out of that as quickly as possible. It's like great, good, keep spreading the word, get more people, get them out of the trap! […] Somebody wants to work in media, yeah we can help with that there. Can we, after looking through their records and the finances, can we support that? Yeah, ok, hurry up for it, come in! You know it's worth it like. Even it's just a short time base so they can see it and go yeah this is definitely what I want to do …
(Colin)

In line with their mission, recruitment is seen as a balancing act between getting people with the right skills and on the other hand getting people who have an understanding of democratic workplaces and democratic ethos. The interviews also revealed the idea of bringing people along, 'investing in them', taking a chance on them was described as a way to give back to those who did not experience control over and fulfilment at work. Instead of 'self-interest', workers' solidarity and cooperation permeates here through all aspect of the cooperative's workings:

There's a lot of people like me and Clem and if I had met me in 2010 I don't know if I had taken a chance. All I done is take pictures at gigs. It's a hard job to do in photography ... But if I had a look at my work in 2010 today, this guy has a long way to go. But if other people are like that, they need somebody to take a chance on them. So when we were looking, we started looking about two years […] at who we hire. So we always knew we wanted to take somebody out of Tech or somebody out of university, give them a chance, the same chance we had, the only caveat being that … politically they would need to sit well before we recruit them … and it is a bit of a balance to find you know what I mean. And we can't be too doctrinal about it. (Gerard)

Beside pay, the working week is one of the striking element of this democratic workplace where members enact more ethical economies motivated by radically different aims and values. All workers work 4 days a week, 6 hours a day (11am to 5pm), following a collective conscious decision to lower the working time in order to

improve work/life balance. While in conventional capitalist enterprises, workers make decisions on work or leisure based on wages set by competition of the labour market, those decisions are here in the hands of the workers themselves. Economic efficiency materialises in the ability to balance work with other elements that create the opportunity to live well beyond the workplace. Despite the industry's reliance on 'crunch time', the cooperative has through adjustments and re-learning work practices, attempted as much as possible to keep working hours within the four-day week. This democratic way of being as an autonomous collective provides opportunity to reclaim agency, enabling workers to concentrate on other aspects beside work such as raising a family. This is an interesting perspective that demonstrates the positives of cooperation and transformative potential of cooperatives, one that appears in worker cooperatives irrespective of the gender balance in the workplace:

> … I can't imagine myself going back to the average everyday business where I am told what to do and do it and switch off afterwards. I've too much invested in this and seen the benefits of it. And seeing my kids are two and four, being able to be at every big event that happens for them, without a single eyebrow raised … nobody questions, nobody bats an eyelid. You wouldn't get that elsewhere. And for me that's more important than taking a wage or taking 40 hours on a week or being able to buy a much bigger car, you know what I mean. (Gerard)

Non-hierarchical ways of working together and nurturing a deliberative space are ways control is expressed in this cooperative. The particular attention to foster a collaborative approach to working together, even though each worker comes with a different expertise, is seen as enhancing the creative process. As Colin explains, control extends beyond working conditions to have a say over what work consists of: "you can bring something to the table" (Colin). In fact, the interest in setting up a worker cooperative comes from a rejection of hierarchical working styles in media companies. Participants have mentioned that they are pleased to have gained control over their working lives but that although democracy can be challenging, the outcome of their product is often of better quality. Contrary to their experience in previous employment where junior employees are given little to no control over their work (one of the participants used the term "Mac Monkey" in reference to being handed text and

photos and told what the layout would be), skills are learnt here in a less hierarchical way. The democratic governance enables workers to gain back control over the creative process of their labour. Skills are learnt and shared in this space embedded in relations of trust and friendship. More specifically here, learning the craft and developing confidence are understood as part of working class capacity building project, as a "confidence magnifier" :

> We have a sort of a mind-set, we're afraid to talk about money, we're afraid to put ourselves out there or demand a wee bit more, we've a very sort of amateurish outlook but also the inherent working class outlook …. say a middle class person was gonna start and launch a business like this, they wouldn't have any fear about negotiating or demanding to be paid for things. It took us a long time to professionalise ourselves into that attitude. (Clem)

Training and education play a crucial role in up-skilling and confidence building with significant resources allocated by the cooperative to keeping skills current in an ever changing industry ((£1000 was spent over one month on tutorials). But as well as developing their own skill-set, participants took a shared approach to learning each other's skills. This was convenient to operate as a business and enhance collaboration on projects. Interestingly, one member referred to this as a "Mondragon" approach to safeguarding jobs and generating income by sharing skills together:

> That's a big part of all co-ops, Mondragon do this as well. They never lay anybody off, they want to re-train them and put them .. where other work is available whenever there is a downturn in one industry. So by the same token I've learnt the basics of graphic design from Clem, the basics of website from Colin and Colin can manage an editing problem on *After Effects* .. Clem can do the same in *Primer*. By no means are any of us experts in others' fields, but we can get our way around the software …. I think the co-op needs that. I mean if we have one person on a sick day we've lost a third of our workforce. … It's a skill-share thing, it covers our own back but also lets our own employees dip their toes in other areas and see if they like this ... (Gerard)

The shared commitment to what the participants have described as a 'collaborative' way of working, where all are consulted on the final product (yet expertise prevails) is seen by participants as a means to enact a democratic way of being in the present. This collaborative approach reverberates on the ways workers deal with clients to foster the development of a better product. If follows that cooperation here is not simply a means to improve working conditions but also principles and values that ricochet on all aspects of the business. Developing working relationships with clients is no longer just an "exchange" and is instead revalorised in a way that significantly differs from a strictly capitalist value system. Democratic praxis becomes a "living and breathing thing" (Clem) that infects all aspects of work:

> We sort of developed a workshop-based approach from looking at other design agencies, other sort of campaigns, political campaigns. So we did a lot of Freirean methodology into how we approach design practice. […] A lot of the time, because there's middle people, they try and communicate the ideas of an entire committee, a group, or an organisation and that goes through the bottleneck to the designer and … it's a totally different idea that's come out the end. … If we intervene at an earlier stage before everything is discussed to talk about the strategies of it or the ways to develop it … you get a better feel for it if you're doing it almost in a more democratic [way]. We tried to integrate this democratic way of communication, so it isn't just one person. … It opens it up to better design, it ends up with better product, everybody knows and has a say in it … (Clem)

This particular attention to the deliberative space of the cooperative, fostered by control and ownership of the business, is where Creative Workers is most accomplished in its attempt to foster alternative economies. Creative Workers was described by its members as 'transformative'. As Colin indicates, because of the personal and collective engagement in one's work, the cooperative "can transform then entire idea of working, your views on work. You're actually engaged with what you want to do, you're not limited to the idea of a job is a job". Yet, control for the members comes at a cost, that of responsibility. All participants have referred to the potential for "sweat equity", when members work well beyond their allocated hours to ensure the sustainability and survival of the business. This seems to be the case

when referring to enabling tasks, i.e. tasks where workers are not producers of goods and services but tasks that enable production such as administrative duties, dealing with accounts, tendering and contracts (Wolff, 2012). While the worker cooperative allows for motivation as workers are the ones to "reap the reward" (Gerard), it also fosters self-exploitation where responsibilities can become overbearing. On the other hand, sweat equity was also considered by participants as a consequence of the passion and connection to the project. Sweat equity is indeed the converse of agency in a project that has a life changing impact.

> You don't turn off, you don't leave your work at the door, like I said Colin was texting someone at 1am running numbers. And this is after doing a couple of weeks on crunch … to get that app done. So I wouldn't change it for the world but I'm not gonna pretend it's all rosy, if you're having a bad week in work you're having a bad week at home as well … If works piling up it's up to you to give your weekends up or whatever, it's not something that you can do "I've done my nine hours, I'm on the way home". What have you produced in those nine hours and is it enough to invoice this week? (Gerard)

As well as the drawbacks associated with the responsibility of running a business, there is an acknowledgment that the 'coffee and cigarette' induced decision-making process is neither conventional nor suitable for all. The collective and mutual interdependence that infuses the day-to-day routine of the cooperative epitomises a cooperative and socialist way of being rather than 'political rhetoric', in other words a democratic praxis that is at odds with conventional work practices:

> We have a very good close team, like we could argue until we're blue in the face about different points and different issues but.. everything is for the benefit of the co-op, at the end of the day it won't matter … it's like a mentality but you realise that not everybody comes equipped with that. Not everybody even if they're a socialist or claim themselves to be a revolutionary, live that in their everyday lives. … That sort of understanding … if you have to work alongside these people, you have to cooperate and you have to understand that there's give and take, it's a democratic place. … You can't run it in a sort of dictatorial style, like I've tried that! Doesn't work, you know! [laughs] (Clem)

Despite difficulties arising with running a democratic business, the worker cooperative was deemed to transform the meaning of work, whether it is fulfilment through work or beyond the workplace, by securing the material conditions of living as well as giving back control over the labour process itself.

2. Community solidarity and political "propaganda"

As for the cleaning cooperative, Creative Workers is another example that contradicts the theory of self-interest in cooperative membership (Gibson-Graham, 2003; Langmead, 2016). The cooperative attempts at sharing the rewards with a wider community, which refers to other workers in the creative industries – by taking them out of the "trap". Yet, the work of Creative Workers is predominantly targeted to the community and voluntary sector, despite having diversified its activity to encompass commercial clients in the onset of the early 2010s economic recession. The ability to work on projects for the community and voluntary sector, with NGOs, charities, community groups but also trade unions and youth groups is seen as a central element of autonomy at work, fulfilling the cooperative's aspiration as a propaganda unit. This symbiotic working relationship with the sector is based on shared ethics and values rather than monetary exchange. It reflects an embeddedness of the workers in their community and an attachment to what happens in their vicinity. As one of the participants explained, "there's a mutual understanding of the struggles of any organisation as well as … what it's like in the communities because we're from it" (Colin).

> [We] show people that we're not an advertising company who's going to do a slick video and forget about it. We'll be as engaged in this process because we want this campaign to win just as much as you do. Like, doing a video for PPR on housing, if you're not making that video, you're at that campaign anyway, you're at that protest, these are things you believe in and that means a lot to the people we're working with I think. […] it feels like you're doing real investigative journalism, it's propaganda, but it's propaganda with thought behind it, it's not a fancy slogan or a cool looking video, it's giving people a real voice and literally going to a resident whose stuck in eleven floors up, bad

health, it's precaire, there you go, there is your pulpit, tells us everything. That's the work we need to be doing. (Gerard)

Because of the working class nature of the organisation and former experience of political activism and trade unionism, doing work with and for the community sector is part and parcel of fostering redistributive politics. In fact, the control workers exert on the organisation's strategic direction enables them to advance progressive politics in their day-to-day job:

The majority of our work is based in community work, supporting community organisations. We're never gonna go away from that I think. … We'd rather maybe work [with] trade unions, community groups, social groups etc. And particularly on campaigns to bring in social change, positive social change. It would be boring death if I wasn't working on something to do with that there [both laughs] just because [of] the chance of making that change ... (Colin)

A particular attention is provided to fostering an inclusive space for clients and community groups and build on class-based, progressive elements beyond the divided nature of ethno-nationalist politics in Northern Ireland. As a result, participants have decided to stay away from political party work, not to "nail their cause to the mast" (Gerard) and instead focus on local community groups and trade unions. The attention to doing work with working class groups across the sectarian divide reflects a desire to build class unity and engage in politics that are not, in participants' words, "fluffy middle class-centred" (Clem). For a cooperative that is not defined as cross-community and with avowed socialist republican politics at heart, working across the divide also exemplifies worker cooperatives' strategies to foster inclusivity. Class solidarity is a driver to an egalitarian approach that still acknowledges and deals with political differences. It does not imply that ethno-national identities are silenced, but instead that the attention is put to fostering other types of politics on which the cooperative is uncompromising (progressive, environmental politics):

Whenever you mentioned that there was some politics that you didn't want to bring in the co-op, is that because you're trying to keep it kind of cross-community?

Yes absolutely! I mean I have no problem saying I think Ireland should be a 32 county for her own sovereignty. For example Labour and the Tories here, we're gonna get one or the other, they don't even stand a candidate here … we literally have no control over our own affairs, that's where I'm coming from in this. But at the same time, if we're going to East Belfast Mission, they do great work and they check us out and see on our website it's nothing but a republican issue … there's latent designations everybody has when they see that sort of stuff. It's best to keep that out. And then if somebody has a problem with climate change … or same sex marriage, that's not the sort of person we want to be working with. But I'm not gonna question somebody who's from the other end of the community as me who suffered themselves and you've no right to feel aggrieved. Why would I make that point? […]

… why I don't want any sort of nationalistic politics, because even though we might not see any problem with it, symbols mean different things to different people. […] We know there's historical issues, and nobody brings it up and there's always that tension, probably you can almost taste it when you're in Belfast, of what school did you go to, that sort of thing [both laughs]. […] But coming from a worker cooperative in particular, you know that anybody that's invested the time and effort into doing this has their heart and their head in the right place and really we're on the same boat. (Gerard)

This extract echoes the interview with Alice from the Cleaning Cooperative showing that even if they are not cross-community *per se*, cooperatives can help break down barriers across the ethno-nationalist divide by fostering inclusive, equality-driven, solidarity politics. This does not imply that there is no divide but instead that the attention is to promote inclusive politics. Cooperatives like Creative Workers promote work that fosters democracy, solidarity and cohesion. As Colin points out, "There's no walls that goes up in any of the co-ops that I've ever come across". Irrespective of its internal make-up, the cooperative here seems to provide the same sense of capacity building and solidaristic tendencies that pushes for an egalitarian agenda across the zero-sum-game of sectarian politics. What's more, although the cooperative was set

up with progressive politics at heart, the experience of worker ownership itself is viewed as a driver for politics, offering a space for learning. Being involved in campaign work can help develop a wider political understanding of the world.

> It also let you find out about issues and campaigns that you otherwise wouldn't find out about. Like, last year, we done one for SAIL, this transgender rights group. … You're not quite aware of it until you're taking an interest, you sat down and interview fifteen, twenty kids working through this and it becomes very real and very personal. And you become a lot less tolerant to toxic masculinity. What ten years ago I would have passed off as a joke, I might have maybe made the same joke myself, your work brings you to a place where you like to think you are. I like to think I'm really progressive. But then you realise you've got all these other ideas in your head that [you] have grown up in over twenty, thirty years that have never been challenged. (Gerard)

As the odd one out within creative agencies in Belfast pushing for progressive politics, working class solidarity inclusive intersectional politics, Creative Workers Cooperative is dedicated to making democracy work in practice everywhere it can, the cooperative providing an embodied experience of democratic praxis. But it also highlights the risk of offering an island of empowerment in the middle of a disenfranchising sea:

> There is a long way to go and we're three to five members, the town has thirty other advertising agencies doing what we do without our ethos. We're very much in a minority. But I mean I seen a thing on Twitter the other day, it's socialism or extinction and that's literally what we're facing in terms of climate change, *Sin é*, that's it [both laughs]! (Gerard)

The attention to collectivism and mutuality elicits the outward vision of some of the worker cooperatives in Northern Ireland, with attempts at tackling wider class injustices, even if the cooperatives on their own are unable to effect this change. The fact that workers here show a willingness to fight back nonetheless demonstrates how worker cooperators can become organic intellectuals promoting in both practice and hoped-for-ideals a left hegemony, an alternative and more compassionate economy.

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C- Thart Aris

Thart Aris, which in Irish means "Around again" is a feminist socialist initiative born out of a friendship between abortion right activists who came together to foster feminist, environmentally-friendly and anti-consumerist politics through their craft. The cooperative produced organic body sprays and oils, feminist candles, cushions, tote bags and jewelleries, recycled plants, recycled bottle candles and pre-loved clothes. At the end of this research, the cooperative members had parted separate ways and the organisation survived informally. Thart Aris provides a very different insight into worker cooperatives compared to the Belfast Cleaning Society and Creative Workers. It challenges the very idea of economic success, as a cooperative that uniquely was never set up with the intention to provide a sustainable living wage to its members. However, what it offers as a feminist political project and a therapeutic space informed some of the key findings of this research. Indeed, the very idea that worker cooperatives enact ethics of care is an analytic theme that was brought to light by my interaction with Thart Aris.

1. Beyond waged labour: the cooperative as a political project

Thart Aris is set apart from other worker cooperatives for being designed to provide something other than a wage. Employment is not the core mission of the cooperative project, for members who already have full-time paid activities outside of the co-op. As Kellie explains:

> Naomi and I both work full-time, we're both trade union activists, we're both pro-choice activists, so you know we're fitting this in around 40 million other things that we are doing. And it's not about making the money, it's about making the products because we love making the products, it's about hanging out with people and selling clothes, vintage clothes ... it's an anti-consumerist thing as well. You know, it's not about sweat shops and going to Primark and stack them high and selling cheap. So it's about education for people as well in terms of living more ethically and more I suppose environmentally friendly in terms of consumer society … as well. (Kellie)

Yet, the fact that the cooperative does not provide a regular and sustainable income is not a reflection of the model of organisation but instead of the priorities of its members. Naomi referred to the worker cooperative model as "workable", but simply not this project's main driver. Instead, the focus is on anti-consumerism, ethical production and ethical consumption. In this respect, the cooperative does more than sell products, it offers an experience, for both workers and consumers, driven by environmentally-friendly and feminist ethics.

Thart Aris embodies by name the conscious attempt at 'bringing around' feminist politics, used as a means to educate and inspire rather than as branding material. Craft becomes a tool to open up a space for dialogue on feminist icons and feminist politics. This is reflected in the products that are made, using culture as a means to connect and politicise on feminist narratives. As Naomi explains, craft becomes a continuation of feminist politics:

> I wanted to tell a story because I think female figures in history, whether they're activists, musicians, whatever, writers, the story isn't told. So I wanted a way to make that populist. […]
> So on the candles for example there is a bio about each feminist, just a few lines of either a work they've written, something that they've overcome in their life or something that they've put out there, a movement that they've been involved in ... my point is they're making their mark and this is a tribute to that. But it's also about continuation of it as well, it's about continuation of the politics, the music, the art that they thrived to change people or influence people with. So I think for me that is, if it sparks someone's interest in reading that, or lighting a candle or seeing their face, or liking the smell, whatever it is, or liking the colour of the candle, then they might go away and go read a book about Angela Davis, Virginia Wolf, or find out who they were. I think that's, that was really the idea behind it you know. (Naomi)

As well as an instrument serving the continuation of feminist politics, the cooperative consists of a conscious attempt at enacting in the present post-capitalist economies in a way which the members feel is authentic and in line with their political and ethical aspirations. For the members, who would not have set it up otherwise, workers'

cooperatives contribute to the flourishing of an alternative economic narrative. As we have seen in the previous chapter, setting up a cooperative is part of "putting your money where your mouth is" and trialling in the present with the messy realities of anti-capitalist praxis to build the alternative economies of the future.

> I have to say from the get-go, the reason we set it up was because it was going to be a cooperative. Had it not had been a cooperative, it wouldn't have been set up. It's just that simple. […] I think it was probably through looking at alternative business models and wanting to explore that and I suppose it would have been easier for us to set up as a company and I have to say cheaper as well, probably it wouldn't have cost us anything . (Naomi)

> The democracy of the structure, the fact that it is anti-capitalist, the fact that .. the equality, the ethics. The ethics around cooperatives are massively important to me. I'm a left-wing feminist socialist activist and I would be extremely anti-capitalist and I thought that this was the best structure that we could possibly use to set up so. (Kellie)

In this context, the ability to support the wage of the workers, although entirely feasible, becomes subsidiarity to the political project. What the cooperative provides to the members is instead intangible : as for other workers cooperatives, participants have described how the cooperative structure foster creative practices that are key to the counterculture Thart Aris is thriving to be an example of. In this cooperative, anti-capitalist politics re-join ethics of care:

> So yeah I suppose it's about, in a small way, every little turn of the wheel is a step closer to the revolution, isn't that another saying!? So it's about doing it in small ways. […]
> If feminism is about autonomy and self-determination then it has to be. And I don't see anybody coming up with another solution [laughs]. Now that clashes with the reality of your life and having to pay bills and having to keep a roof over your head and all the rest of it, and other things getting in the way. But I can speak for me … is it [the co-op] the thing that I do best, I like the most, I do well and I want to do more of? And the answer to all those things is yes,

yes, yes. And if I had a choice … well I do have a choice. We can stop doing it. We can just not do it. And it would easier not to do it … (Naomi)

2. Therapeutic practices and ethics of care

As well as opening up space for a "counterculture" within the community of market traders and wider community of consumers, craft is experienced by the cooperators themselves as therapeutic, non-alienating, stimulating creativity. While the literature on the social economy highlights the risk of self-exploitation and precariousness of practices that rely on self-help without providing the means to a decent living (Eisenschitz and Gough, 2011, Safri, 2011), the focus here is on care. In this particular cooperative, the therapeutic properties of "craft" are evident (Smith, 2021). Both members interviewed have also referred to the sensuous experience of craft. Indeed, both Kellie and Naomi mentioned a form of "alchemy", a joy and pleasure of a 'disalienated' labour which the interview extracts below capture

> I make rooms spray, pillow spray or body spray. … I use patchouli, clary sage and jasmine in the spray and I use patchouli, jasmine and bergamot in the oils. So the oils are for either putting in the bath or using on your skin directly when you come out of the bath. And then I just this year designed another one which is geranium, bergamot and frankincense. So it's a lot more florally. […] I love it! It's complete alchemy. The house spells gorgeous, I make them at the table here, the house smells gorgeous, I smell gorgeous and I love working with the materials, I love working with organic essential oils. (Kellie)

Once again, the sensuous experience that comes with using organic oils, candles, recycled products was deemed therapeutic as a consequence of the control members have on their labour, a therapeutic dimension of 'disalienated' labour that was shared by other worker cooperatives studied. Yet, it was a different understanding of trauma and healing discussed here, with Naomi making a clear reference to the role of therapeutic practices in the face of illness and to the role of worker cooperation in this therapeutic process:

I mean it is labour intensive […] but once you start, there is an element of it where it's like alchemy. [laughs] But I don't mean alchemy just in the scientific sense of it, I mean alchemy in terms of putting your own identity in, you're putting a bit of your politics in, you're putting a message in, you're putting something that you care about into it, you probably putting the weeks' stress into it [laughs] ... it's a bit like witchcraft I suppose [both laughs]. There's an alchemy to it so that for me where pleasure comes, […] And then you know, because I was ill the past year, that was one of the things that I was able to do and it didn't feel like work ... So purpose and there's a pride in it as well. You're not alienated from your labour, you're not doing it for someone else. Ultimately you are because you hope they're gonna enjoy the product but you own it, you can do it at your own pace […] it's a release I suppose […] it is creative, it is therapeutic. (Naomi)

Yet, as for other cooperatives, as the extract above clearly shows, the focus on therapeutic practices in craft is associated with gaining control over the labour process. Therapeutic practices therefore tie in directly with autonomy over the labour process itself. The concept of care re-joins here that of emancipatory, "anti-alienating" or "disalienating" work practices in worker cooperatives (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2021; Azzelini, 2018)

The pleasure that participants experienced in their work also resulted from the interactions with customers and other market traders. Kellie highlighted the experience of "engaging with people and having a bit of craic". As well as the alchemy and the sensuous experience of craft, the ethical aspect of re-using and recycling materials, the positive reception by customers and the social element of work tied in with the political project of the cooperative:

... I really really like that idea of re-using stuff as well … I'm starting to feel really guilty about consumption … and also I suppose getting a bit more conscious of simply having the latest gadget, or whatever it is, is not fulfilling. I suppose you come to that realisation more acutely in the past number of years. But the pleasure that you get in re-using something like an old teapot and upcycling it and somebody gets joy out of it, I keep coming off with clichés

this evening, but one person's rubbish is another person's treasure. But it is true! …. There's a real pleasure in that and the pleasure is that somebody else will find it, will be enthusiastic about it or will like it, or will get some pleasure out of that. (Naomi)

3. Irish, feminist, pro-choice: Building alternative intersectional spaces

Thart Aris' craft intends on bringing people along into politics in a way that is accessible and makes for true intersectional politics. The co-op exemplifies attempts to take ownership of the post-conflict city and open up a discussion on "what kind of society that we live in and how we would like that society to change" (Kellie). The accounts of participants evoke the alternative political spaces that are often silenced in the literature on Belfast (Nagle and Clancy, 2012; Baker, 2020), those that create identities that challenge the binary tunnel-vision of orange and green politics. As Nagle and Clancy (2012) contend, this does not imply that constitutional politics are left out of the door. In fact, Thart Aris emerges out of a conscious effort to re-affirm the use of the Irish language.

.. Thart Aris means Around Again … for me it's not just about recycling goods, it's also about bringing ideas around again, not just the products, or stories around again. […] But it's also as well to be unafraid to use the Irish language. And you know I have bad Irish language skills I have to say but I have some Irish. Kellie has some Irish. Our children are raised through Irish medium, [both our] children are Gaeilgeoirs. So you know we thought well let's be unafraid about it. Because there's such a stigma and a reluctance to do that. (Naomi)

Yet, as for other cooperatives, the attempt at stimulating intersectional, accessible, feminist, working class politics challenges the consociational narrative dominant in post-peace agreement Northern Ireland. Instead, the cooperative attempts at challenging the ethno-nationalist divide by fostering inclusive, equality-driven, solidarity politics with a particular understanding for identities that are shared, multiple and multifaceted (Graham and Nash, 2006, p. 266). As a feminist cooperative, Thart Aris pays a particular attention to bringing people into politics beyond the usual

suspects. Craft is seen here again as a vehicle for feminist politics but also for more inclusive politics:

> I have always been interested into how culture can further politics and I remember being involved in things like the anti-G8 protest and the things that had biggest draw in terms of a new audience, you know are bringing people in to the room that are not normally in the room – people you've never met before which is always a good marker of progress for me, always! – were the cultural events. So whether that was music, art, film, craft, that was always the things that brought new people in, younger people in and made for proper intersectional politics. You know people from migrant communities, women, younger people, whatever it was, LGBTQ. So there was a way of communicating your message so that people enjoy it. […] So from my point of view culture, whether it's art, craft, music, has always been a vehicle to communicate politics. … (Naomi)

However, the discussion on what makes a feminist cooperative is one that the members have described as contentious. Initially wanting to be an all-female cooperative, the participants have highlighted how cooperative principles foreground the idea of open membership. As Naomi recounts, "thinking right we're setting up an all-female, well it doesn't have to be all female and feminist but, we couldn't do that because that's not inclusive. It's stuck on my craw a bit I have to say but that's quite right." Yet, because of an emphasis on diversity and inclusivity, not everything goes when it comes to membership and cooperation: lack of alignment with the values of the cooperative, discriminatory behaviour or reactionary politics are elements that cannot be compromised on.

> I think if you're coming and you want to be involved with our co-op and you're a Tory [laughs] or you're right-wing in any way, or you start a sentence with "I'm not a racist but…" or you know there is no room for that. […] If they were anti-choice for example ... it's not gonna work because of what our co-op is founded on a particular message and that was the point to setting it up. So there's certain things that cannot be compromised. […] without equality, there is no starting point. So if you're coming to this and you're anti-choice,

you're not joining the co-op for cooperative reasons. You're joining it for reasons other than that, you're joining it to make money, you don't care what the values are. I mean if a co-op is based on values – which it is [in] any co-op – a particular set of values and those values don't chime with you, you know they don't resonate with you, you're not joining it as a cooperative, you're joining it as a vehicle to sell your t-shirts or to get whatever out of it. We can't compromise, I don't think that's us being exclusionary, I think it's someone not understanding what a cooperative is. (Naomi)

In the conflict over which narrative prevails in Northern Ireland, Thart Aris belong to those organisations and social movements that radically sets politics aside from a political discourse dominated by ethnic-resource competition and neoliberal individualism. Challenging both the anti-pluralist and more intransigent identitarian politics, the cooperative also challenges the idea that "neutral" means class segregation and individual choice (Graham and Nash, 2006; Baker, 2014). The cooperative pays attention to its product being ethical and therefore affordable. Indeed, the members explained how they stepped away from having intermediaries sell their products when it meant an increase in price. Moreover, the participants and I had conversations over what could be seen as a "hipster" element in craft and artisanal products and how the cooperative distinguishes itself from it. As a result the cooperative is involved in community events, such as *Solidarity with Palestine* or *Alliance for Choice* events, and with the local Irish School where they participate to Christmas markets and other local events. Speaking of the local school market, Naomi explains:

And I have to say that the products have sold just as well there as they have at a flea market which is more .. now not everybody that goes to a flea market's middle class, they're not. We do make a conscious effort to do that … I would agree that that is an issue. There is a hipster element [laughs] There is a hipster element to some of this. [but] I wouldn't say it's necessarily middle class. I wouldn't say it necessarily. (Naomi)

The cooperative, as seen in the previous chapter, stands in direct opposition to the gentrification process at play in post-conflict Belfast, with the rebranding of Northern Ireland PLC and the emergence of a culture unaffordable to working class

communities, unwaged and unemployed people, etc. As an inclusive organisation, the cooperative participates to building a counter-culture, a space set as an alternative to a conservative neoliberal agenda. The co-op participate to create more inclusive, ethical, feminist and anti-capitalist spaces.

> I'm thinking of a space like, if I can put it this way, of St George's market, which is a proper trader's market, has been there for years and years. It changed and evolved but it is a market and it's a market for local people versus the continental market which is at the City Hall now every year and attracts throngs of people. But it's expensive, a lot of the stuff is mass-produced, it's marketed in such a way that it's not authentic, you're paying whatever 6, 8 quid for a kangaroo burger and you're thinking to yourself "what the hell, what is this about?" You know compared to St George's market or something like the flea market which, I mean the flea market has a pizza place, it's all made on site with local ingredients, it's cheaper, by a local guy and the dynamic is .. rather than going in and buying your overpriced kangaroo burger, walking out again, you know, for me there's much more involvement there, more space for social relationships, for breaking down barriers, for all of that. (Naomi)

This is here the story of more than just a cooperative, but a reflection of the alternative spaces that emerge in Belfast, challenging the hegemonic construct of communities as binary (nationalist/unionist, loyalist/republican, catholic/protestant). The account of Thart Aris re-joins the work of John Nagle and Mary-Alice Clancy (2012) on movements (LGBTQ+, women, etc.) that transcend ethno-national politics, and to whom the very peace process is owed (Baker, 2020). With an increasing number of people who do not predominantly identify with Unionist and Nationalist politics (Shirlow, 2022b) and for whom bread and butter and equality issues are as important as the constitutional question, this research commemorates, reveals and examines a critical agency that contributes to building a radically different narrative of what post-conflict Northern Ireland should look like. In this respect, growing the cooperative becomes, not an internal mission to enlarge the business, but a spill over of the politics that drive the project forwards. When asked about the vision for continuing with Thart Aris in the future, Naomi described what feminist intersectional cooperation meant:

… It's about being communal and exchange of ideas, get more people involved, not just about employing people. … It's about being intersectional, because one of the things that we did with an organisation called Queertopia, which is an LGBTQ organisation and they love our products, we went to one of their events … and it wasn't about selling anything at it, it was about being part of that event. Our products are colourful, they're feminist, they said particular things. … It's about supporting that community. … I sound like I'm othering there, it's about saying that we are one community made up of sort of different things. And we also do things like Pride, … again it wasn't about selling stuff it was just about contributing to the space. We'll have to pay to be at those events, so it's about fundraising for them. We'll do things like we'll make up pampers that we'll give to organisations or other people trying to raise money. So ultimately it's about growing in different ways. It's about expanding the co-op in different ways … it's about an exchange of ideas, space, politics. It's about cooperating in more ways than one. (Naomi)

D- Discussion

The accounts of the three worker cooperatives described above may appear as overly positive, but I hope to have also portrayed the difficulties and complexities that workers in these organisations face.

The qualitative and in-depth study in these three case studies converge to suggest that worker cooperatives foster employment, dignity and confidence. Due to the profile of those organisations, being located on or near interfaces, in sometimes highly deprived areas, the worker cooperatives offer work (or else) opportunities for individuals traditionally marginalised by dominant economic policies. In those workplaces, we see a transformation of work. Not only do those organisations place their focus on bettering working conditions for workers – through reaching a living wage, an attention to health and safety (for example using cleaning products that are not detrimental to the environment or to workers' health), offering flexibility with working hours to work alongside other priorities (childcare in particular). But they also offer pride, autonomy and fulfilment through democratic participation in the management of the organisation. They foster both dignity in work and at work (Pettinger, 2019).

Interestingly, as we discussed the role of critical agency as a motive for the emergence of cooperatives in the first place, the outcome is clearly enhanced agency (or perceived agency) at work through providing collective control and stewardship. Worker cooperatives help valorise (or re-valorise) work, especially when it concerns labour practices that are seen as menial, hidden, or even in the case of cleaning seen as "dirty" (Ryan, 2009). Enacting economies driven by ethical considerations – social empowerment and mutual aid - enables work to be revalorised on grounds others than those of the capitalist value system. While it has been noted that skilled manual work can offer a means to avoid alienation, here the key factor in the "disalienation" process is not "craft", "skilled work" or "manual work" (Smith, 2021) but a worker cooperation that fosters shared learning and autonomy over the labour process itself.

In the spaces opened up by worker cooperatives, the labour process is transformed, creativity and autonomy are fostered, skills are learnt and shared collectively. It is very much an experience of "becoming in common" that the diverse economies literature has pointed to (Gibson-Graham, 2013, p.11). Profit is no longer the watchword, leaving decisions to be made on ethical grounds: social distribution of 'surplus' to local neighbouhroods, hiring new people, countering the impact of gentrification, privileging wellbeing, fostering trust, etc. The three cooperatives featured here share a common purpose towards enacting therapeutic practices, providing healing from the legacy of the conflict, social and economic marginalisation, from ill-health or simply from an economic system that is physically alienating, grinding down creativity and yearning for emancipation. The study of those three cooperatives shows a process of "disalienation" at play. Indeed, in Kociatkiewicz et al. (2021), disalienation was expressed as "being at home" while Azzelini (2018) concluded that in recuperated factories in Argentina a process of progressive disalienation takes place when production is ruled by values other than profit-maximisation but instead governed by solidarity. Yet, by drawing on a feminist understanding of the political, I am here attentive to practices of care. Care is understood here as a radical act (Emejulu and Bassel, 2018), of both opposing dehumanisation and marginalisation and creating spaces where workers as human beings are valued.

The non-hierarchical ways of working in the cooperatives featured here also play a role in fostering cooperative subjectivities. Whist we have previously seen in Chapter

5 the antagonistic politics that informs the desire for becoming a cooperator for some, in turn the experience of worker ownership and control is a driver for politics i.e. political education and further advancing progressive politics. Yet, this democratic way of being fostered by cooperatives is also a fragile process in the making, where workers have to balance responsibilities and maintain solidarity economies. It is an emancipatory process, but an uncomfortable one nonetheless that is constructed in the everyday. As Kociatkiewitz et al. (2021) indicate, worker cooperatives create disalienated spaces but not spaces that are not devoid of conflict, problems and arguments. Instead, all participants have mentioned that democratic governance requires learning and can be "uncomfortable":

> [To] take that step out and actually become a functioning worker-owned cooperative with a real democracy at its heart is not comfortable at all. You have to change everything about how you do everything, … it can be very messy, hands in and doing something from the ground up with absolutely no support ... You have to create something from scratch, it's not going to be handed to you and you've to, quite literally, take over buildings and you're not going to get something purpose built for you. (Clem, Creative Workers Cooperative)

In fact, in all three cooperatives, disalienation encompasses conflict and disagreements, limitations and compromises. As Langmead (2016) highlights, the dual socio-economic characteristic of cooperatives means that they engage in a constant balancing act between running a successful business on the one hand – even if successful here is not oriented towards exponential growth – and social imperatives on the other. In the Belfast Cleaning Society, the balance is most pressing between managing clients' expectations, keeping workers employed at a decent wage level and other priorities: childcare but also finding time for education. In Creative Workers Cooperative, workers had to balance work in the commercial sector – to make a living – and engaging in political and meaningful work in the community sector; as well as workers balancing a four day week and the responsibilities that come with running a business. In Thart Aris, one of the only examples of a cooperative not primarily based on providing employment, the attention is centred on therapeutic practices and political craft at the expense of building a financially sustainable business.

Yet despite having to balance different imperatives, the theory of worker cooperatives driven by self-interest and their inevitable degeneration (Langmead, 2016; Rothschild-Whitt 1979) does not hold when we look at the examples above. Instead, solidarity infuses all aspects of the cooperative and extends well beyond the workplace. Beyond the three case studies mentioned above, all worker cooperatives I have spoken to engaged in redistributive practices. Even when profit is marginal, the focus is to share the economic benefits with others, whether it means providing basic goods for asylum seekers, donating to charities, organising community events, volunteering for other cooperatives or community organisations, sponsoring local youth clubs, etc.

Beyond the 'nitty-gritty' of running a worker-managed business, cooperatives face wider issues and remain impacted by economic mainstream policies. Refusing to take capitalism out of the picture, we see how cooperatives engage in struggles and compromises to foster "diversity in alterity" (Anna Dinerstein, 2015). In particular, despite aiming at fostering social emancipation in working class neighbourhoods – for women, for cleaners, for creative industries workers – the cooperatives face challenges in tackling broader class and gender injustice. The literature on post-capitalist autonomous spaces has highlighted the "gulf between hoped-for ideals and actual lived reality" (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010, p. 484). Yet, too often, this literature focuses on affluent neighbourhoods and university educated "activists" (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; Langmead, 2016, 2017; Eisenschitz and Gough, 2011). The cooperatives featured here, located in predominantly working-class neighbourhoods, could have been forgiven for engaging primarily in "survival" strategies, providing a living for the people involved in those organisations. But instead the mere fact that they do engage in broader struggles against capitalist and patriarchal hegemonies – irrespective of the outcome – is itself striking.

In the post-conflict neoliberalised landscape in which these cooperatives operate, the dual social-economic characteristics of worker cooperatives also have benefits. Worker cooperatives can offer a means for communities to progress solidaristic economies that have a potential to break down barriers. The three case studies not only offer regained autonomy over what and how they produce, but also where they produce (Wolff, 2012), participating to reclaim ownership of the local geography. In the worker cooperatives mentioned above, there is a clear attempt to

engage with the deeply divided sense of territoriality that defines Belfast. Instead of an attitude of politeness and denial, cooperatives create space for sensitive conversations, co-learning and conflict resolution. In the worker cooperatives studied, conflict is addressed collectively, cooperatives acting as learning hubs for conflict transformation by fostering conflict resolution skills at the level of the workplace, skills that are invaluable in any workplace, even more so in a divided post-conflict society like Northern Ireland. Historical and geographical divisions are acknowledged and addressed (Dawson, 2016). But the reconciliation process at play also creates common ground across divisions. This is probably the most interesting aspect of worker cooperatives in Belfast, that they confront sectarianism with solidarity. This solidarity at the heart of the cooperative project enables local communities to take ownership of both social and economic aspects of post-conflict recovery and participate to a shared vision of a more equal and just society, whether the cooperatives are cross-community or not. It provides a very significant departure from the simplified and superficial contact hypothesis model of reconciliation.

Moreover, the projects described in this chapter seek inclusivity in their attempt at building solidarity that goes beyond the narrow focus on ethno-national politics. Instead, the focus is on a broader concept of diversity, embedded in the principles and values of cooperation shared across the world (ICA, 2018; Gradin, 2015). Worker cooperatives here develop co-learning and space for discussion as they oppose racism, sexism, and any form of discrimination that stands against in particular Principle 1 of cooperatives, i.e. that membership is open to all irrespective of "gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination" (ICA, 2018). The cooperators I have interviewed opened up to highlight the complex, overlapping and sometimes shared nature of identities, pointing to "the potential healing power of a cultural diversity approach that transcends zero-sum-game simplicities" (Graham and Nash, 2006, p. 266).

The 'shared space' that is on offer here differs significantly from Belfast's dominant policy framework (Murtagh, 2011). This shared space tackles the gentrification agenda, referred to as the embodiment of a "bourgeois version of a future society in Norhtern Ireland in which deviant sectarian division is replaced by the normality of economic individualism, choice, competition and class-based social differentiation" (Graham and Nash, 2006, p. 272). Worker cooperatives challenge traditional

normalisation strategies that have produced a 'twin-speed' city (Belfast City Council, 2017). The space projected by the worker cooperatives is not a gentrified space. Re-joining the literature on urban commons (Harvey, 2019), the decommodification of labour (through the communal class process in worker cooperatives) plays a vital but often overlooked role on counteracting the increased commodification of urban space (Azzelini, 2018). Worker cooperatives in Belfast provide more than just a space where work is transformed, they confront neoliberalism and sectarianism with class solidarity.

Chapter 7: Cooperative development under the neoliberal peace – survival, instrumentalisation and contestation

Previous chapters have highlighted the transformative potential of worker cooperatives in Belfast, not only in bettering the lives of those directly involved in them, but also through their wider political impact. They demonstrate that more ethical, alternative and autonomous ways of working are possible. In doing so, they also provide a significant departure from the enduring ethnic resource competition and continued neoliberalisation ongoing in Northern Ireland. Yet, worker cooperatives do not offer a panacea. For being inspiring, the projects studied in this research are also ridden with difficulties, as exemplified by the numerous projects that, as I put pen to paper, no longer exist.

Previously highlighted is the slow process of growing organisations, the time-consuming chore of achieving financial sustainability, often hindered by a lack of capacity (too few members, overwork, etc.). Internal issues around governance, interpersonal relationships and conflict also create barriers to development. But beyond the "nitty-gritty" of running a worker-managed business, worker cooperatives face wider constraints, in particular as they remain impacted by the mainstream economic landscape.

This research highlights a striking lack of awareness for the cooperative organisational form, affecting as much the workers involved in the projects as government departments, and resulting in limited support being provided to cooperatives. While there is a rich history of cooperatives in Ireland, in particular through credit unions and agricultural cooperatives (Bolger, 1977, Doyle and Lalor, 2012) the sector has not benefited from the same legal, financial and policy support that is found in many other European countries (Doyle and Lalor, 2012, p. 5). Instead, as interviews with cooperators suggest, Northern Ireland offers a less than congenial environment for cooperative development. Cooperatives are practically absent from policy, a lack of interest which reflects a wider shift where the new language of social enterprise has replaced the broader concept of cooperatives, de facto excluding them from the social economy sector. There is indeed a discursive dissonance between policy-makers that claim to support the development of a social economy that encompasses cooperatives,

cooperatives that, nevertheless, report being swallowed – or even suffocated – by the overall focus on social enterprises. Overall of course, the social economy sector itself remains largely eclipsed by the mainstream economy.

In an institutional framework that promotes ethnic-resource competition and entrepreneurship, initiatives that encourage alternative, collectivist politics are cast aside. The absence of a sympathetic policy, legal and cultural environment towards cooperative development is undoubtedly detrimental. Not only cooperatives do not benefit from a level playing field, but there is no incentive, only additional costs to register. The lack of strategic investment in a cooperative development agency capable of providing bespoke advice and support is also a significant barrier to the growth of the sector.

These institutional barriers to the development of a cooperative economy are the focus of this chapter. Yet, the competing claims over the meaning of the social economy analysed here speak of the wider contestation as to the meaning of peace in a divided society. Northern Ireland politics are built on such contestation, with a peace agreement that entrenches ethno-sectarian governance, competition and territorialism. But it is a different conflict that plays out here and is reproduced in the policy arena: one between competing notions of charity and entrepreneurship on one side, and solidarity and cooperation on the other.

A- The neoliberal peace and the death knell for cooperative support: processes of exclusion and domestication

1. The emergence of the social economy policy in Northern Ireland

In policy, cooperatives come under the remit of the social economy, a sector increasingly shaped by concepts of social enterprises and entrepreneurship since the 1990s (Defourny and Nyssens, 2012). The social economy is conventionally defined as associations, cooperatives, mutual organisations, and foundations (OECD, 2021) that challenge the principle of an economy solely purposed towards the quest of personal profit. In Northern Ireland, the devolved administration's interest for the social economy developed on the onset of the peace process, with the first

"Developing a Successful Social Economy" strategy established by the Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) in 2004 (Murtagh and Shirlow, 2012).

Today, the social economy remains under the remit of DETI, now Department for the Economy (DfE) responsible for the *Social Economy Work Programme* since 2012 (DETI, 2016; SENI, 2021). The cross-departmental *Social Economy Policy Group* also helps integrate the social economy across the policies of government departments. In parallel, Invest NI, the governmental agency responsible for business development and investment, also developed support programmes, including the *Social Entrepreneurship Programme* run through enterprise agencies until 2015 and the Social Enterprises Hubs (Invest NI and Cogent, 2016).

Stormont's interest in the social economy illustrates the broader dynamics in the Assembly when it comes to economic policy, with quality of life recognised as a measure for prosperity and greater emphasis on inclusivity and environmental sustainability (for instance in the outdated *Programme for Government* before the Assembly collapsed in 2017 (NIE, 2017) or the *New Decade, New Approach* that marked the return of the Assembly in 2020). It is in this context that the social economy has received growing attention, mentioned under Pillar 3 of the *Industrial Strategy for Northern Ireland* (DfE, 2017) to ensure the benefits of economic development materialise across all communities. The interest for the sector is linked to tackling social exclusion and poverty in a way that extends beyond traditional measures for social impact (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2004). In particular, reaching those "further from the labour market" is one of the promises for the sector to deliver (Interviewee working with both funding programmes and funding organisations in the Voluntary and Community Sector, hereafter referred to as Community and Voluntary Sector Interviewee). While the sector is primarily dominated by social enterprises, community share projects is another tool that is increasingly regarded as vital in neighbourhood renewal strategies:

> Building communities is important, it's about supporting people, it's about shaping places. So if you have a community that comes together and raises over £100,000 for a project in terms of community shares, they're going to take ownership of that project, they're going to take responsibility for that

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project, they're going to look to that project to deliver for them, whether it be economic opportunities, whether it be for community services or whatever. And in a way that investment is actually an end in itself because it's actually building a community behind a project. It's a clear demonstration of a community mobilising ... (Community and Voluntary Sector Interviewee)

Yet, the social economy illustrates the glaring discrepancies at policy level between rhetoric and practice. Despite a rhetorical shift, the social economy is still marginalised by a mainstream economic development attitude that pervades public service and politicians alike. In other words, when it comes to the economy, the attention is elsewhere. At departmental level, the *Social Economy Work Programme*, worth £150K per year – a sum insignificant in comparison to the government's economic investment (for instance, through the City and Growth Deals, DfE is accountable for an estimated £800M of investment in diverse projects around innovation, digital technology and tourism (DfE, 2022) – illustrates the sector's peripherality. In light of limited support, the sector has remained marginal. Since DETI's first social economy strategy, two surveys were commissioned both highlighting the prevalence of small low-capacity businesses (DETI, 2007; PWC, 2013). In 2007, DETI surveyed 396 self-defined "social economy" enterprises, half of which held a charitable status (DETI, 2007). In 2013, PWC (2013) gathered evidence on the existence of 473 social enterprises. The last report produced by SENI (2019) pointed to a growth in the sector, from 12,200 jobs in 2013 to 24,860 jobs in 2018. However, the majority of organisations were still small and undercapitalised, although less reliant on grants. SENI's report also reiterated the continued perception within the sector that the social economy is not high on the agenda of government departments (SENI, 2019; DETI, 2016).

The social economy policy in NI and Great Britain stands in sharp contrast with the European tradition where cooperatives are the dominant model (Defourny and Nyssens, 2006). In fact, in the United Kingdom, 'social economy' and 'social enterprises' are increasingly used interchangeably. In the UK, social enterprises are first mentioned in policy in 1999 (Teasdale, 2009) defined as "A business with primarily social objectives, whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the business or in the community, rather than being driven by the need to maximise

profits for shareholders" (PWC, 2013, p. 8). While cooperatives operate under the status of the *Cooperative and Community Benefit Societies Act (Northern Ireland) 2016* and registered through the Financial Conduct Authority, social enterprises have no specific legal status (Huckfield, 2022). Unsurprisingly, none of the policies and development instruments at governmental level refer to cooperatives. In fact, the main social economy policy, the Department for the Economy's *Social Economy Work Programme,* invests its entire £150K pa into the sector's appointed representative body, Social Enterprise Northern Ireland (SENI), a consortium of social enterprises and entrepreneurs.

In this institutional desert for cooperatives, Belfast City Council stands as the only body that provides recognition for the cooperative form. In the onset of the reform of local government (2015) partially transferring responsibilities for community planning to councils – making the social economy policy at local level rather piecemeal – Belfast City Council has taken the lead on developing the sector. Mentioned in the *Belfast Agenda* (Belfast City Council, 2017) the social economy is also embedded in the *Inclusive Growth Strategy* with a commitment to explore the development of cooperatives to meet procurement needs, valuing their contribution to sustainable and inclusive employment (Belfast City Council, 2019a, p. 10). The *Social Enterprise Plan (2019-2024)* (Belfast City Council, 2019b) was developed to that effect, aiming at removing barriers to procurement for local suppliers and promote best practice.

In addition, Belfast City Council set up the *Go Social* Programme, the only social economy tailored programmes at local authority level that specifically mentions cooperatives in its remit. The *Go Social*, delivered by the enterprise agency Work West and running between 2016 and 2019, has led to the creation of 44 new start-ups and 82 jobs in the Belfast area and has secured £500,000 in funding ("Social in the City Conference" attended on 31 May 2019). The programme was renewed in 2019, and funded at the cost of £90,000 (pa) (by Invest NI and Belfast City Council) with the aim to foster the creation of another 240 social enterprises and cooperatives.

> It was the first programme of its kind to be openly for that. […] We delivered programmes over the years, both formal and pro-bono, off our own back, […] and we worked with cooperatives within that because we certainly see co-ops

in that remit of social enterprise. But *Go Social* has been the first programme that was very explicit about that, trying to recruit and encourage co-ops and as a result we partnered with Cooperatives Alternatives as a delivery partner. (Stephen McGarry, Work West)

The integration of cooperatives within the remit of local economic development is no accident, but emerged out of the lobbying of cooperative development and political organisations like Cooperative Alternatives and Trademark. Around 10% of *Go Social* clients are in fact cooperatives, where Work West partners with Cooperative Alternatives and Trademark to deliver the cooperative side of the programme. Overall, the *Go Social* programme offers specialist advice in business start-up, marketing, fundraising, legal and governance structure which were previously delivered through the council's generic business support. The programme aims at tackling the specific barriers social enterprises and cooperatives face in the start-up phase (Belfast City Council Interviewee). Addressing the lack of awareness for the sector, including in local authorities, is one of the principal aims of the programme. As the delivery partner Work West explained "there is generally a lack of understanding about what the social enterprise sector is and certainly when it comes to cooperatives, multiply that tenfold." (Stephen McGarry, Work West). While the social economy policy at local authority level is still in its infancy, it is an ambition of Belfast City Council to raise awareness of the sector and create "more of a social economy culture across the city" (Belfast City Council Interviewee).

We're so behind. If you look at the likes of London, Edinburgh, our social economy sector is not where it should be. […] The awareness side is one of the biggest things, it is really trying to get into grass roots in the community, and also into schools, just to try and spread the word and get people, not even just acknowledging it but to be thinking like that … you know we always say people should be thinking more entrepreneurially but it's actually [about them thinking] more socially. (Belfast City Council Interviewee)

While the *Go Social* programme is the first programme of its kind since the dissolution of the Northern Ireland Cooperative Labour Agency in the 1990s, the cooperative sector remains marginalised. Investment into the social economy at local level –

through *Go Social* – is similarly insignificant when assessed in the context of the Belfast Agenda – with its £5bn investment in the next 10 years, an ambitious Regional City Deal that facilitates Belfast's ascension as a globally competitive city. As Work West contends "there's a great interest and a great desire to do more for the sector but relative to their spend on economic development and enterprise support, the investment in social enterprise and cooperatives is nominal" (Stephen McGarry, Work West). The constant marginalisation of the sector is in fact, I would argue, illustrative of the wider political nature of the peace process, reflected by the intensified neoliberalisation of the economic policy in Northern Ireland.

2. The social economy as a terrain of contestation: neoliberalism, territorialism and philanthropy

The peace process, neoliberal in nature, seem to mark the death knell for cooperative support despite a long tradition in Ireland of cooperative and community businesses. Illustrative of this slow demise in policy support is the Northern Ireland Cooperative Labour Agency, replaced at the end of the Troubles with the Social Economy Agency, and then SENI, now sole recipient of the Department for the Economy's investment in the sector. More than linguistic – from 'cooperative', to 'social economy' to 'social enterprises' – the shift is reflective of the discourses that have shaped economic institutions in post-conflict Northern Ireland. The interview with the director of Creggan Enterprises, Conal McFeely, formerly responsible for the Cooperative Development Agency, exemplifies the dismantling of the agency whose work faced increasing opposition from government departments that ran against cooperative development on the ground and favoured Foreign Direct Investment as the main driver for economic development. In this "battle of ideology", the social economy became a contested terrain of struggle where according to Conal, Invest NI (and other institutions) corrupted the meaning of the social economy by focusing on entrepreneurs rather than cooperators (Conal McFeely, Creggan Enterprises).

The peace process therefore opens up economic policy-making to a discourse that favours concepts of entrepreneurship in the third sector tying in with the funding opportunities that peace opened up. The testimony of Creggan Cooperatives, forced like many other cooperatives to register as a social enterprise in the 1990s, and the

work of the Cooperative Development Agency introduces a process of 'translation' whereby policy translates existing social economy experiments into a terminology that fits a new dominant logic, here through the promotion of individual entrepreneurship. Alongside the disappearance of many of the cooperative initiatives set up in the 1970s and 1980s, lobbying organisations such as the Cooperative Forum (mentioned in McAleavy et al., 2001) and the Assembly All-Party Group on Cooperatives (now replaced by an All-Party Group on social enterprises) no longer exist. Novkovic and Golja (2015) who note this phenomenon of translation elsewhere explain: "Indigenous forms of industrial enterprise that rested on collective action and provided for community development have been replaced by oligarchic tendencies in the appropriation of profits and socialisation of costs, creating social externalities that are now supposed to be addressed by social enterprises." Northern Ireland – and Ireland overall (McMahon, 2019) – offers a case in point here.

The institutional appeal for social enterprises becomes evident. On the onset of peace, social enterprises offered a seemingly 'apolitical' tool for an inflated bureaucratised third sector, which had long experienced pressure from international and local funders to register as charities and leave aside the political mobilisation of the 1960s and 1970s (Hughes and Markus, 2021). Through social enterprises, the social economy responds to similar budgetary challenges in an-inflated community and voluntary sector (C&V), making organisations previously reliant on funding "more enterprising" (Interview Social Economy Worker). Indeed, PWC's survey of the sector, commissioned in 2013 by government, aimed at assessing charities' willingness to develop trade activity. As an interviewee working with both funding programmes and funding organisations in the C&V sector explains, the emphasis is on "looking at new ways of funding, being investment-ready rather than [reliant on] just grants". Social enterprises are a convenient tool in this respect, as they offer a means to temper budget cuts for charities in a way cooperatives cannot. It is the vagueness of their status that represents an asset in becoming a charities' trading arm, something prevented by cooperative principles of independence and autonomy (Tiziana, Co-operative Alternatives). The development of social enterprises as an organisational model re-joins accounts of market-oriented approaches to tackling social exclusion which have been widely debated in reference to the Conservative Party "Big Society" project in Great Britain, associated with David Cameron, a project that *de facto* sees communities run local

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services 'on the cheap' as public money dries out (North and Cato, 2018; Cato and Raffaelli). Huckfield retraces the marginalisation of cooperative societies to the benefit of social enterprises during the New Labour administration, with an institutional attraction in social enterprises resulting from loose structures that "encouraged the growth of social finance and social investment – an infusion of external private funds to deliver so-called impact investment… ", something the democratic structure of cooperatives would not have permitted (2022, p. 1). He demonstrates the influence of marketised approaches to the social economy, failing to understand the role of democratic organisations in Europe's third sector (co-ops and mutuals). Similarly to Huckfield (2022), this research found a clear lack of understanding for the cooperative form in policy and business development circles, unaware of cooperatives' long history but also of alternative European strategies to the social economy that relied to a greater extent on democratic businesses. As far as some organisations were concerned, social enterprises had always existed, even though social enterprises generally did not emerge in policy before the 1990s (Defourny and Nyssens, 2012) and were first mention in the UK by HM Treasury in 1999 (Teasdale, 2009).

While there is no denial that the sector is in dire need of alternative strategies, the "Big Society" project failed to make an impact on those most in need (CLES, 2020). A similar story unfolds in Northern Ireland's deprived communities: the outcome of which replays the same leaking out of public investment away from the areas most in need. The closure of the Social Enterprise Hubs in 2017 exemplifies this the best, leaving under-resourced neighbourhoods with little to account for despite significant investment. 10 Social Enterprise Hubs aimed at supporting social entrepreneurs were piloted from 2012 across nine Social Investment Fund Zones as part of the Executive's *Delivering Social Change Framework* signature programmes (with £4 million made available) before they closed down in 2017 in the absence of an assembly to sign off their continuation. Yet, the political rhetoric of success towards the Social Enterprise Hubs overplays the real impact of those projects, as explained by Cooperative Alternatives, a cooperative development organisation lobbying for cooperatives. As Tiziana observes:

None of the Social Enterprise Hubs became self-sustained. … According to official reports, it seems the social enterprise hubs were a success, [but] in my opinion because they don't exist anymore they are not, especially in those areas that they were supposed to serve. We bring entrepreneurs in this areas … entrepreneurs are opportunistic and then they left as soon as the asset closed down. (Tiziana, Co-operative Alternatives)

The more recent appeal for embedding inclusivity and social concerns in economic development through inclusive growth strategies suggests a similar instrumentalisation of the social economy. Not content to serve as a community funding mechanism when public money dries out, the social economy becomes an add-on to neoliberal reading of the economic policy (Graefe, 2006) – one that tempers the effect on the ground of socio-economic inequalities, without addressing the fact that an economy privileging private wealth and profit above social needs will create the type of deprivation it aims at tackling in the first place.

These contradictions and clashes of discourses between a social economy policy linked to inclusivity, resilience and community wealth, and a mainstream economic policy that does not challenge the addiction of growth at all cost, are not lost on public servants. In fact, the extract below reflects the dilemmas perceived by institutional actors (Krueger et al, 2017), especially here in Belfast City Council, with an interview that also revealed a deeper understanding of the benefits of cooperatives to local economic development.

… there's two different sort of priorities within [The Belfast Agenda]. But what we are trying to do with ours is to try and include social value in everything that we do. … And part of that is looking at what is the social impact or the inclusivity and what does this mean for our residents. So it's not just attracting money into the city … you know like a big bank to come here, … that's great for the city, but what does that mean for our people … Can we ensure that they are going to give local people local jobs, what are they going to do for the surrounding community? So it's always going to be a learning process but ... we are trying to put inclusivity at the heart of everything that we do. […] [And] I suppose organisations like us should take more responsibility

for making sure it happens. … I think it's an easy thing to say, and I've probably been guilty of it, "oh the social economy sector … they'll have a big role to play in making that happen". And yes they do and they're more than willing to help, but I think sometimes there's just too much pressure put on people who are too busy to run businesses. You wouldn't put this much pressure on a private sector organisation! But I do think it's like our responsibility, with Govt organisations to make sure that happens. (Belfast City Council Interviewee)

As Elizabeth DeYoung contends, "Northern Ireland remains a fundamentally divided, disagreed, and dysfunctional place. This is a reminder of the difficulties inherent in not only managing conflict in divided societies, but in fundamentally transforming the contested spaces, attitudes and institutions therein." (DeYoung, 2018, p. 235)

In the divided society that emerged out of the conflict, competing claims over the meaning of the social economy play out, with discourses around charity, entrepreneurship and solidarity that make for a terrain of contestation between policy elites and cooperators. This clash of discourse also illuminates how the very nature of the society that emerges out of the conflict is contested between institutional agencies and grassroots networks, in their intention to shape new economic spaces. The shift and translation of collective models of organisations to a more recent concept of entrepreneurship in the third sector is far from just a linguistic shift, as Belfast enterprise agency delivering the *Go Social* programme argues : "to me it (i.e. a cooperative) is a social enterprise […] But we get too caught up in definitions" (Stephen McGarry, Work West).

Instead, the terminology used in policies is perceived negatively by cooperators on the ground who stress their distinct identity, enthused by principles of democracy, equality and cooperation (ICA, 2018). Those opinions, shared across the board, led to exasperation: "nobody understands what a cooperative is, they just keep talking about social enterprises all the time and you're like "it's not a social enterprise, it's a cooperative!" (Kellie, Thart Aris). Instead, it was the ethical concerns that imbued

economic activity which set cooperatives apart. As Naomi from Thart Aris summarised:

> A social enterprise is not about giving autonomy to workers or ownership to workers or you know trying to address alienation of labour. My experience of social enterprise is about making profit … and there is still a very very much hierarchical structure, management structure, wages structure that all still exists. For me the ethics … are an add-on, they are not a fundamental part of the building of it and maintaining it. That to me is different to a co-op. (Naomi, Thart Aris)

It is a tale of democratising the economy, not commodifying the social that unfolds here. Contestation arises around the meaning of delivering social good, not as an outcome but as a practice. Setting aside profit to be reinvested in socially-useful or charitable activities is at the antipode of what worker cooperatives stand for. Democratising the economy, giving workers, consumers, service-users a voice, challenging the ownership of the means of production, consumption and exchange, reversing hierarchical structures at work: all those elements constitute the 'social' of the economy. The lack of consideration for strategies of democratisation of the economy by ensuring economic decisions are made by those they affect, was deemed a downfall of social enterprises, making them vulnerable to neoliberal logics. It should be noted as well that the incorporation of cooperatives within the social economy displays similar attempts at containing the potential for democratisation to the third sector. There is indeed a popular perception that curtails the social economy's role as an economic activity, associated either with a form of charity or contrasted with what are considered 'proper' economic activities (in the export-led, globalised, entrepreneurial economy). After all, cooperatives can operate in all sectors of the economy.

The attention to the ownership of the means of production is particularly significant in the context of the social economy. The interview with a participant working with both funding programmes and funding organisations in the Voluntary and Community Sector suggests a rejection of worker cooperatives within the realm of the social economy. In this particular case, worker cooperatives were not equated with social

enterprises because they were not deemed as belonging to the social economy, shedding light onto the ideological rejection of worker ownership that pervades policy-making at institutional level.

> … I think the workers' co-op requires a consideration of where do the profits go? Do the profits go to the workers themselves? In this case, for me workers' co-ops … aren't social enterprises because the distribution of profits is amongst the workers, rather than re-investment back in the communities. … (Voluntary and Community Sector Interviewee)

On the other hand, the worker cooperatives interviewed in this research responded to the concerns for worker cooperatives being driven by individualist or particularistic interests. Cooperators questioned the ambiguous and imaginary concept of a community (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2004) that does not include workers. As a participant retorted:

> No!! The members are the community. The community is not something alienated … who makes the community? If the workers are getting better, their lives are better, they have more money in their pockets, they have less of an alienating feeling regarding life, the community rises. The community's made by workers, it's not like we're separate from the community. No, no, no, I don't see that at all. (Elena, Lúnasa)

Of course there is no denying that equating all social enterprises with neoliberal tropes and all cooperatives with resistance is too simplistic. Some social enterprises may well operate under a flat structure, foster the democratic involvement of local residents, offer good terms and conditions to their employees. Equally, cooperatives may themselves succumb to institutional pressures, encouraging self-help at the expense of political accountability, resorting to self-exploitative practices to run a business. While support to cooperatives is diverted towards social enterprises, public investment in the social economy is overall minimal. Instead, what the interviews with cooperators and political elites reflect is how the social economy becomes a terrain of struggle between competing interpretations of social good and community benefit.

What cooperators opposed is a subversion of the social economy policy to neoliberal and sectarian hegemonies and the attempts at taming their own cooperative projects. As one participant puts it so eloquently, cooperatives, by seeking empowerment aim at achieving "what political power is trying to frustrate, thwart, suffocate" (Eoin, Union Taxis). The social economy policy becomes "colonised" (Stiofán, Trademark) by concepts of entrepreneurship that social enterprises best fit into. It is not cooperatives per se, but the counter-narrative to mainstream economic thinking and the politics that animates those projects (as we have seen in Chapter 5) that are silenced, and with it the marginalised spaces they inhabit (gendered spaces, working class areas, etc.). The account of Trademark, one of the organisations that provides support for worker cooperatives in NI, oscillates between frustration and cynicism when assessing the lack of support for the sector:

> Those institutions are firmly and absolutely set against any kind of alternative economic strategy. It is not allowed to even exist or breed in those institutions so it shuts down, debate is shut down, discussion is shut down, it's just, a kind of .. it's like they put cooperatives like kittens in a bag and fuckin just throw them in the river, they don't want it. And that's really my .. and that sounds a bit cynical and aggressive but that's my experience of the last ten years you know. (Stiofán, Trademark)

As the social economy policy is increasingly defined under neoliberal terms, it becomes rigged against alternative economic practices that would offset the status quo. What is clear from this shift to support social enterprises at the expense of worker cooperatives, is that it is not the efficiency of the social enterprise form, or its resilience that pushed institutions to favour them – in fact recent surveys show otherwise (SENI, 2019). In the conceptualisation of what the social economy means to government agencies, collective and democratic organisations are to be excluded. The social economy, as noted by Eisenschitz and Gough (2011) is left atomised, each organisation competing for funds rather than demanding change, further fragmenting class solidarity. It is precisely the emergence of a new vocabulary and practice that replaces the solidaristic, cooperative, class-based, bottom-up community experiments witnessed in the 1970s with alternative strategies resting on the overarching concept of "charity" (Etchart, 2016; Acheson et al, 2004; Hughes, 2017) that cooperators aim

at opposing. We have seen previously that worker cooperatives emerged as empowerment strategies in opposition to the 'coping' strategies of the community sector that focus on bringing relief to communities without giving them a stake in it. Opposing the neoliberalisation of the sector, the cooperators interviewed here are engaged in attempts that "make space for alternative forms to do community good" (Tiziana, Co-operative Alternatives). For respondents, the refusal to seek alternative strategies that would provide empowerment and solidarity is interpreted as a betrayal to the radical roots of the community sector (as seen in Chapter 5). In confronting the charitable aims with solidaristic politics, the cooperative sector provides an alternative strategy to building community cohesion. As Cooperative Alternatives, a cooperative development organisation across Northern Ireland, cooperation seeks to "re-design or re-articulate that community benefit could be done differently".

> Cooperatives were actually reintroducing self-help, solidarity, all those values that were in the past of Ireland, but we lost because this idea of big charity that can do everything for you. … I was very adamant that community benefit didn't mean philanthropic benefit, it didn't mean you know the old way of intervening in the social issue with a very top-down approach. […] I really think that the way cooperatives [deliver] community benefit could have been representing an alternative but also broke down the chain of the dependency. Both from the grants system, but also the chain of dependency from the beneficiary. Because I work in that (charity) sector, I saw a lot of community centres where you keep doing flower arrangements for 340 years, where is the progress? Where is the independence? … What they are doing? Food banks! It's an industry that [is] preserving the status quo […] …. they are complacent with maintaining the status quo. And I think that sometimes, especially bigger charities, they have lost their radical feelings about changing things, so they are more interested in preserving their own organisation. (Tiziana, Co-operative Alternatives)

The social economy becomes here a contested terrain in a fundamentality divided and disagreeable society, where economic discourses are fractured around opposing notions of charity and entrepreneurship on the one hand, solidarity and cooperation on the other. Cooperatives remain cast-off from economic development strategies as a

result of the subversion of the social economy to capitalist logics. It is not just their subversion to an economic policy increasingly read through the prism of neoliberal orthodox thinking but also the devices and tactics that attempt at taming, suffocating and excluding alternative economies. In the midst of these strategies, the cooperators interviewed refused to 'play the game', i.e adapt their structure in order to access funding and recognition from institutions (North et al, 2020). Indeed, as we have seen in Chapter 5, most cooperators would not have set up a business if it was not a cooperative. Beside political and ethical considerations, cooperation is an efficient business model. In fact, when supported by public investment and ad-hoc structures (as is the case in Spain, Italy, France, Quebec, etc.) cooperatives are more resilient, efficient, bigger and happier businesses than conventional enterprises (NEF, 2018; Perotin, 2016), while social enterprises – despite receiving a lot of attention on the onset of New Labour's government in the UK – have continuously struggled to make a mark. In fact, Huckfield (2022) found that despite institutional attention, social enterprises remains small, undercapitalised and unable to meet their new welfare assignations. Yet, as a result of not playing the game, worker cooperatives have been left to struggle.

3. A cooperative sector left to struggle

While numerous studies point to the role played by supportive networks in developing a sustainable cooperative economy, from tax incentives to umbrella organisations lobbying and representing co-ops (for instance Confederations of Worker Co-ops: CGScop in France; Legacoop in Italy, COCETA in Spain or even wider Cooperative Development Agencies) to tailored financial instruments and institutional strategic investment (Zevi et al, 2011; Mendell, 2009), none of these elements exists in the context of Northern Ireland.

What becomes obvious is that the lack of education, visibility and awareness of the cooperative form is the most striking obstacle to a vibrant cooperative economy. This lack of awareness permeates all sectors of society, affecting as much public institutions, business development organisations that do not see cooperatives as a legitimate business model or the wider public, including cooperators themselves. It is no surprise that with the exception of the Co-op group, most cooperators admitted not

knowing about cooperatives before being involved in one. Indeed, the absence of any form of alternative economic education in the curriculum – including in schools – was seen by participants as further embedding of an individualist entrepreneurial culture that diverts the attention away from collective practices. The fact that business studies did not even include a module on business models other than the private limited company was evidence of this push towards capitalist entrepreneurship:

> No! I actually did economics as an A level in school and not one class covered cooperatives. I could tell you about supply and demand [laughs], I could tell you about business and acquisition, I'd never heard of a cooperative. […] I thought maybe because I wasn't educated as other people but yeah the whole of Northern Ireland probably don't know what a workers' cooperative is [laughs]. (Josephine, Belfast Cleaning Society)

As a result, the main obstacle to address the lack of visibility of the movement was "the dissolution with social enterprises" (Tiziana, Co-operative Alternatives). Indeed, the focus on social enterprises creates a real confusion on the ground with what projects 'deserve' publicly funded and supported. The fact that most resources – however meagre – are directed towards supporting social enterprises alone prevents not only any form of visibility but also the development of the sector. Institutional support becomes dependant on banning any form of democratic and collective ownership and control, if organisations want to access funding (Eisenschitz and Gough, 2011, p. 8).

Hence, the sector is left to struggle. That cooperatives do not operate on a level playing field is an understatement. The journey from setting up a cooperative, to registering a bank account, filing tax returns and running a sustainable successful business is hindered every step of the way. From their infancy, cooperatives face an uneven playing field, with registration costs being higher than most organisations (around £300 for registering). Moreover, the lack of awareness of the cooperative form mentioned above affects more than simply public agencies. The simple act of setting up a bank account, as financial checks cover several directors, constitutes a 'logistical nightmare'. Filing documents through HMRC is at best Kafkaesque, as participants highlighted that HMRC did not recognise mutual societies in their online submission,

leaving cooperatives in limbo. Once off the ground, financial support for cooperative development is quasi-inexistent unless they aim at exports. As local authorities no longer provide financial support, there is no access to seed funding, leaving some cooperatives to resort to taking on debt. The example of Lúnasa, which acquired two £15,000 loans (from Invest NI and from the Co-op Fund) showed how indebtedness can be fatal to small organisations, forcing all income to be spent on loan repayment (rather than staff wages, or reserves to grow the business).

Those difficulties combined create a hostile environment for cooperatives to survive. In fact, it led organisations like Farmageddon to drop the cooperative form.

> If you're looking for an investor or you're looking for a bank, or anything like that, they don't want to work with cooperatives. The trust in the business world is not there to support cooperatives. […] … we were told if we wanted investors, we had to be a Limited Company. […] And we wouldn't have done it without starting as a coop and we didn't want to change but we just felt we had no choice. When you've got investors going .. "first thing you do is you get rid of the coop". And that's advice from banks, that's advice from investors, people won't touch it. (Sue, Farmageddon)

The lack of awareness for economic cooperation was also reflected in the difficulties in running a democratically owned and controlled business without any prior experience. Indeed, registering an organisation as cooperative is one thing; creating a functioning democratic member-owned cooperative is another thing altogether. Cooperatives are human endeavours that require not only skills to function as a business, but also a shared commitment to a collaborative way of working. In a society that values first and foremost individual accomplishment and entrepreneurship, how is democratic praxis fostered? Support is desperately lacking when it comes to fostering the skills beyond business management that are required to navigating the intricacies of democratic governance, helping new cooperators develop a collective consciousness with ways of thinking, resolving conflict and understanding the complexities that come with collective liability. As a result, even considering the support provided through the *Go Social* programme, it becomes evident that advice and mentoring for cooperatives is inadequate. Cooperative Alternatives, the

cooperative development organisation that delivers the cooperative support part of the *Go Social* programme (Work West being in charge of the social enterprise support) explains:

> Cooperative development doesn't have a plain level field. It costs more to register, it costs more to set up, it costs more to develop the business plan […] so it takes more time, it takes more development, it takes more nurturing, more mentoring and more coaching, so it's more expensive, from the point of view of you know local authorities, they get more results and more employment with entrepreneurship programmes.
> *Do they though?*
> Or so they say! I agree, you know, it's temporary. On the other hand, we know that [a] cooperative enterprise … is more resilient, they work longer, they adopt a strategy of survival that entrepreneurship does not allow […] they have particular kind of standards where there is no differential of wage between the cooperative's [members] ... (Tiziana, C-ooperative Alternatives)

While the *Go Social* programme was established precisely to support both social enterprises and cooperatives, cooperative development organisations have criticised the programme's imbalance in favour of social enterprises. In fact, sessions dedicated to cooperative support remain supported on an ad-hoc basis (where cooperative development organisations are brought in on a consultancy basis, if and when required). They are also time-limited, failing to cover the wider range of needs that nascent cooperatives have. In addition, because the programme lacks any financial incentive and registration costs for cooperatives are relatively high (£300), organisations like Cooperative Alternatives tend to 'self-sacrifice' in order to support cooperatives' registration. The reluctance of central and to an extent local government to grant cooperatives the same institutional support as social enterprises is in fact one of the main barriers to addressing the sector's absence of a voice. As the sector lacks the visibility to raise awareness of the cooperative form as a viable business model, the government provision for business development becomes rigged against alternative economic practices. If social economy support, like the *Go Social*, does not capture organisations to foster models such as social enterprises, there is a tendency in generic business programmes to exclude small businesses (cooperatives, social

enterprises or even SMEs) entirely, following an approach advocated by Invest NI that focuses on scaling up already large firms – and this despite an economy where the vast majority of businesses (89.2%) have less than nine employees (DfE, 2017, p. 44). Cooperative respondents have reported the attempts at capturing people's interest and diverting them to mainstream forms of enterprises, such as private companies.

> ...I was pulled aside one day at an Invest NI event where they said, why are you setting up a cooperative? Just go and set up a private company. There was a lot of push-back .. They wanted to see … the start-up tech company type … that was all balls and all links to the gig economy. But we were very very adamant that we wanted to set it up this way and have this ethos [of a] worker-owned democratic workplace. (Clem, Creative Workers)

These attempts at preventing cooperatives registering and redirecting groups to other forms of organisations explain the cooperative sector's lobbying for its own cooperative development organisation. As Cooperative Alternative highlights, having experience in working with enterprise agencies, "we could never go there and catch the people before they were directed anywhere else, unless you know they were very determined …" (Tiziana, Cooperative Alternatives). Interestingly, one of the outcomes of this uncongenial environment – where there is no preferential treatment, no benevolent legislation and institutional attempts at suffocating them – is that setting up a cooperative is not for the faint-hearted. As Trademark reported, considering the lack of understanding from banks, funders, the wider population and the lack of infrastructural support, one requires a strong political and ethical drive to attempt at setting up a cooperative. As Stiofán asks "It's hard to set up a coop here, I can't imagine anywhere else in Europe it's harder to be honest with you than Ireland, North and South, South fucking nearly impossible I'd say! It's just hard to do it. So why would you?" (Stiofán, Trademark). Hence the distinctive radical raison d'être of many worker cooperatives featured in this research that we have seen in Chapter 5 may indeed be a direct outcome of the uncongenial infrastructural environment present in Northern Ireland.

As we have seen in this section, cooperatives are practically absent from policies in Northern Ireland, reflecting a wider shift in policy where social enterprises have

replaced the concept of cooperatives – and this despite cooperatives having a long-standing history. This shift reveals an instrumentalisation of the social economy policy whereby more recent concepts of entrepreneurship eclipse collective organisations on account of forging the entrepreneurial spirit of a community sector faced with funding cuts. In this uncongenial environment, cooperatives are left to struggle. However, support is not only lacking at the institutional level. In fact, the work of the cooperative development organisations mentioned above suggests a fractured sector that is lacking cohesion and voice. The network effect mentioned in reference to thriving cooperative economies involves more than just legislative and state support. It encompasses the ability of cooperatives to integrate into wider social movements, to build connections with the labour movement and to rally collectively under umbrella organisations that will advance their common objectives. This too, as we will discuss in the next section, is desperately lacking in Northern Ireland.

B- A dire lack of allies: 'firefighting', suspicion and isolation

While the subversion of radical community efforts and alternative economic practices at the institutional level is flagrant, Murtagh and Goggin (2014) suggest that characterising the social economy sector itself simply as a neoliberal instrument is too simplistic. Breaking away from pessimism, Eisenschitz and Gough (2011) have argued for a social strategy for the social economy, one that responds to the desire for social transformation of the cooperatives interviewed in this research. To make cooperatives practical tools for empowerment, the authors argue that connections with trade unions (such as in Quebec), wider socialist political movements (as in Italy) and the existence of a coordinated body lobbying on behalf of the sector and giving it a political direction are essential. Unsurprisingly, these elements are absent in Northern Ireland. From lack of political imagination, mistrust and simple neglect, cooperatives have remained fragmented and isolated.

1. Ethno-national politics or "fighting fires": "no time for love"

Much has been written on the continuation of the conflict in the political arena, with a competition between ethno-national identities that has if anything intensified

under the peace process. It is in this context of territoriality and zero-sum reading of the economy that cooperatives suffer from oversight at the level of political elites, thwarted by sectarian ethnic resource competition (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006; Nagle, 2012). Certainly, what the ethno-national outlook and neoliberal agenda have in common is competition, not cooperation.

Considering that cooperatives are found in both communities, the fact that Sinn Féin and the DUP have not supported their development is telling. As Coulter (2019) notes, the entente cordiale on matters of economics between the two hereditary enemies is well documented. Sinn Fein's understanding of the social economy may indeed be more rhetorical than practical. Interestingly, Sinn Fein's support for grassroots economic alternative projects on the ground, in particular with the history of cooperatives emerging in Republican neighbourhoods during the Troubles (See Ballymurphy for instance) and the former economic *Eire Nua* policy which until the 1990s advocated for democratic ownership of the means of production (Murtagh and Shirlow, 2012, p. 51) would have suggested a political will towards developing cooperatives. Yet, Sinn Féin's manifesto for worker cooperatives entitled "Ownership Matters: Worker cooperatives" (2019) developed by Senator Paul Gavan (Senator) and Maurice Quinlivan (TD), only marked a symbolic step towards supporting the development of worker cooperatives in the North and South of Ireland. The document stresses the role of worker cooperatives and worker buyouts in safeguarding employment and pledges to support further recognition for the worker cooperative model as well as promote cooperative support and worker buyouts. Instead, as the example of Union Taxis shows, Sinn Féin does not have a consistent approach to cooperative development, having sometimes participated to frustrate and thwart the emergence of worker cooperatives on the ground. The case of the Tunnel regeneration, a bottom-up social economy project in the Market area of Belfast highlights the disconnect between supporting a local initiative and the party's lack of backing for institutional support. There undeniably seems to be a mismatch between a narrative that favours grassroots progressive community development, and on the other hand the limited number of practical examples of cooperatives set up and supported under the auspices of Sinn Fein. In the DUP's policy, on the other hand, there is simply no hint to alternative economics. Interest on the ground from local councillors, and the tradition in more disadvantaged neighbourhoods to implement social economy

projects (eg East Belfast, cf. Tiziana, Cooperative Alternatives) has not materialised as policy support. A plausible analysis may be that cooperatives offer little interest to Sinn Féin and the DUP in advancing their pawn on the political chessboard of ethnic-resource competition, considering that cooperatives (although less so worker cooperatives than consumer ones) rely on a wide membership to operate and survive, a membership that de facto involves crossing the lines of territoriality and perceived clientelism both Sinn Féin and the DUP operate under. Overall, the lack of support from both Sinn Féin and the DUP reflects the parties' buy-in into the demands set by neoliberal governance, echoing the political shifts seen in Great Britain on the onset of New Labour (Byers, 2019; Murtagh and Shirlow, 2012). These political shifts have impacted the parties' relation to the community sector now seen as a low cost means to deliver public services, not as advancing democratisation and community engagement (Huckfield, 2022; Hughes and Ketola, 2021). In fact, Johnson argues that in the neoliberalisation process that infuses Northern Ireland's post-crash politics, it is the "Blairite settlement incapable of resolving the social cleavages that threatens any possibility of harmony" (2019, p. 503). I would argue it also restricts (although it does not prevent) the emergence of alternative economic narratives.

Other parties which were interviewed during this research (SDLP, PBP, Green) saw their political strategy absorbed by critiquing the cohesion between the two "hereditary enemies". The focus remained on reacting to the current establishment, leaving little space for envisioning alternative strategies of economic development. Instead, the time-consuming task of "fighting fires" diverted the attention away from questions of economics (Cll Barry McKee, Green Party). In what was seen as a desert of criticism against the austerity politics having become the cornerstone of both SF and the DUP policy, smaller parties were left with pointing to the endurance of socio-economic inequalities and deprivation levels. Despite expressing some interest, there was also a clear lack of awareness for the politicians interviewed, unless there was a direct involvement in a cooperative (for instance Cll Barry McKee, Green Party, who was involved in Boundary, a craft beer cooperative). This invisibility affected the politicians' understanding of cooperatives' social value in local economic development, their potential in revitalising deprived areas and the benefits of moving towards future-oriented politics rather than territorial manoeuvres. As the critique of

the mainstream economic policy fell onto those parties, there was little space for wider debates on the nature of the post-conflict economy:

> … people need to start thinking about over the next five to ten years what sort of economies there's going to be… how are we going to create wealth that is going to provide a decent standard of living for people? A debate and a discussion needs to take place [and] I don't think it's going to happen in Stormont." (Cll Brian Heading, SDLP)

In the absence of an Assembly and its elected representatives, public servants held most of the control over policy-making. While councillors provided the only electoral representatives standing in office, the limitations of decentralisation meant that local councils did not have much control over budgetary and policy issues. In addition, the instrumentalisation of the social economy sector we have seen above left political parties suspicious of the sector, especially when associated with outsourcing public services. This was particularly the case with regards to the outsourcing of leisure centres across Northern Ireland to GLL, an England-based social enterprise (discussed below in the interview extract). More recently, similar criticisms stemmed from the announcement that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive would be reclassified as a mutual in order to access borrowing, a reclassification that signals the privatisation of the state's housing provision (Smyth, 2020; Kenwood, 2021).

> In my view that illustrates one of the flaws of the policy [i.e. the social economy policy from BCC], … Some of these so-called social enterprises are a bit like the Blairism of the Labour Party! [both laughs] … If you look for example at the way in which GLL [an England-based social enterprise which previously council-owned leisure centres have been outsourced to] have awarded their higher management very significant pay increases, where the staff and leisure services haven't had a decent pay rise in years, sort of sums up the economic model and where the money's going in that enterprise. … I think it indicates some of the potential pitfalls in terms of outsourcing of services. … (Matthew Collins, People Before Profit)

While worker cooperatives would not have suffered from the same level of suspicion as social enterprises for instance, there were concerns that the social economy overall was used as a means to privatise services under public provision under the pretence of bettering the experience of service users and increased efficiency. As a result, there were legitimate concerns that supporting a cooperative economy would go hand in hand with accepting the fragmentation of a universalist welfare provision.

Undeniably, there is still much to be done to raise the profile of cooperatives among politicians. This is one of the ambitions of the Cooperative Party in Northern Ireland, influencing policymaking in Stormont and government departments. The cooperative party – which, as the Labour Party, does not stand candidates in Northern Ireland – has attempted to use their influence to tackle the common suspicion towards mutualisation of social care and push an agenda where nationalised public services and mutualisation with worker ownership and service users' control are not seen as incompatible (Paul Gosling, former cooperative development worker, in charge of producing the 2019 Cooperative Party Manifesto for Northern Ireland). Yet, those ideas – conventional in countries like Italy are still those of a small minority in NI. It is also unclear what the impact of the Cooperative Party is on policy considering the resistance of the public service to alternative economic thinking, the extremely divided nature of party politics and the difficult legacy of the Labour Party in NI.

2. The Labour movement: antagonism and mismatch

Political parties that provided an alternative to the sectarian reading of politics were not the only institutions that developed suspicion towards the cooperative movement. In fact, the relationship between the trade union movement and cooperatives is rather timid, characterised by one participant as "a hit and miss" (Colin, Creative Workers). Despite some of the cooperative projects featured in this research emerging out of involvement in trade union politics (Trademark, Union Taxis, Creative Workers Co-op and Thart Aris), the relationship between unions and co-ops developed on an ad hoc basis rather than as part of a common political project. Instead, participants have highlighted an antipathy and lack of knowledge from the trade union movement towards alternative economic projects such as worker cooperatives. This

antipathy is unusual when contrasted with other countries' trade union involvement with cooperatives and especially in worker buyouts (Cardinale et al.; Orbaiceta, 2013).

The "deep suspicion of cooperatives within trade unionists" (Stiofán, Trademark) and lack of involvement of the wider labour movement in Ireland stands in sharp contrast to the close ties that existed between the two movements in the early 19th century when strikes and worker cooperation were considered as two sides of the same coin. Instead of James Connolly's proclaimed "Cooperative Commonwealth" (Connolly, 1987), antagonism between cooperatives and trade unions grew, dividing the two movements, as they did in Britain (Gibson-Graham, 2003). The lack of a working relationship between trade unions and cooperatives has continued to this day (Irish Congress of Trade Unions Interviewee). There has been a revival of some interest for worker buyouts, with a motion passed through the NI Comity of ICTU. Toying with the idea of worker buyouts faced with an economic strategy that was FDI-centred and resulted in "low-skilled-low-pay" economies, there has been an engagement with the idea of connecting the usual trade union response seeking nationalisation with transfers of ownership to workers, rather than to the state. Yet discussions remained limited. More importantly, there has been no interaction beyond that between the trade union and cooperative movements.

Instead, fighting the rolling back/out of neoliberalism (Peck and Tickell, 2002) in the North took precedence over envisioning alternatives. Trade unions were described as "firefighting", reacting to recent attempts of privatisation and dismantling of the manufacturing sector, recent waves of austerity imposed by Westminster and Stormont that Northern Ireland had been "shielded" from before the peace process. Moreover, as an organisation that played a leading role in the peace process and continue to protect workers from and tackle sectarianism (the only civil society organisations that did not split along sectarian lines during the troubles), the trade union movement is also attempting at preserving unity across the sectarian divide, all of which curtails any attempt at providing a vision for moving beyond the mainstream economic policy. As a "field of a struggle", there is a perception of a "lack of ideological confidence in an alternative" while trade unionists are under "tremendous strain" "dealing with day to day issues and have not had a chance to get their heads out of it. We still have this crippling position of the divided society here, which again

makes people more cautious" (Irish Congress of Trade Unions Interviewee). Debates on alternative strategies to pressures by governments to keep companies local through subsidies struggled to take root. A second difficulty for cooperatives is also the deep suspicion of privatisation strategies that resulted from the instrumentalisation of the social economy in the roll-out of neoliberalism.

> … We were thinking about workers' control within the existing public sector as an alternative to shedding jobs and to the starving of finances from it, that the workers could do the job better. There's a bit of a double-edged sword about that, about us … running the public sector for the Govt for less money, you've all these sort of contradictions that are coming from it. […]
>
> I don't believe you can separate economic democracy from political democracy […]. And again it's a weakness for the cooperative movement, … if it is serious about trying to change things, … it won't change it within the capitalist system unless it looks to political representation, making changes at the higher level which create the conditions that further cooperatives and create the context for great transformation, [otherwise] it's just gonna be another wee adjunct of capitalist society, and it's never going to threaten it. (Belfast Trades Council Interviewee)

Interestingly, the lack of cooperation amongst what is traditionally considered as the two sides of the labour movement was met with real disappointment from cooperators. On a practical basis, cooperators felt that unions' organising skills and significant financial resources would benefit greatly small, sometimes struggling worker cooperatives. In the opinion of cooperators, it was a lack of imagination that clouded the union's involvement in the wider community, making them bureaucratic organisations dedicated to achieving some form of democracy in organised workplaces, but nowhere beyond (Clem, Creative Workers). Above all, this ideological blind spot for perpetuating the employment status that was criticised by some cooperators (Colin, Creative Workers). In this context, the lack of a strategy towards direct workers' control meant trade unions were perpetuating the status quo, preserving the exploitation of workers in the workplace through indirect democratic representation rather than challenging it entirely (Hyman, 1975).

… I don't think that's in the horizon for any of the trade unions around here to help workers organise themselves to run their own workers' cooperatives. … I think that should be the goal of every union, what is the point otherwise? "We're going to manage how exploited you are!" [both laughs] "We're gonna make it manageable" … It's enabling the system and enabling the status quo. So I think much more should come from trade unions. Workers are not organised here. [In] the Thatcherite area, you have all the dismantling of unions and internal disorganisation of the workforce. … This is the consequence. […] It does not even compute for people not to work for another person and not to work for a salary. And when it [does], the only alternative is to become an entrepreneur! … (Elena, Lúnasa)

While a lot of the interviews focused on the suspicion from the trade union movement towards cooperatives, there is also little evidence that the cooperative movement itself has engaged with trade unions on a broader basis. But strikingly, the same cultural hegemony that pushes cooperatives to oblivion impacts trade unions to become more consumerist centred, focusing on servicing individual members rather than collective gains (Naomi, Thart Aris). There was a conscious understanding from cooperators that neoliberalism was responsible for the depoliticising of the trade union movement and the wider cultural shift away from collectivism in the UK. As a participant summarised, trade unions have "improved people's lives massively, obviously the standard of living has gone up, but that was done through collectivism and collectivism has been so eroded by capitalism that trade unions are not unaffected by that, how could they be" (Naomi, Thart Aris). The neoliberalisation of the peace process economy is a one-two punch for cooperatives, drawing potential allies into a fighting mode that leaves little space to envision alternatives as well as creating suspicion towards any alternative that could be instrumentalised under neoliberalism (Graefe, 2006).

3. A cooperative movement: Division, distrust and neglect across cooperatives in Northern Ireland

As well as lacking allies in civil society and social movements, the most striking barrier to cooperative development is the absence of allies within the cooperative

sector itself. In fact, worker cooperatives have acknowledged that the fragmentation in the movement leaves them isolated, feeling like "islands" (Elena, Lunasa). There were many reasons for the movement being fractured and fragmented. First, the priority for most businesses is placed on financial sustainability and meeting responsibilities towards the membership. In that sense, cooperation itself occurs within the cooperative, between its members and not necessarily beyond. Yet, this isolation impacted on the ability to share knowledge and best practice and foster help across a network of cooperatives. As a result, and added to the fact that cooperation amongst cooperatives is part of cooperatives' DNA (ICA), there was also a clear desire from participants to grow the movement, something which this research, in a very small manner, may have contributed to.

The variety of sectors cooperatives operate in also limits capacity for collaboration. Combined with the fact that there was no funding for a cooperative development organisation, the work of building cohesion and networking was carried out without institutional support. This was furthered by the lack of presence of Cooperatives UK in Northern Ireland (which was seen as irrelevant to many organisations) and the inexistence of support institutions in the South – the Cooperative Development Unit (RoI) closing in 2002 – that hampered the emergence of a network across both sides of the border.

> You need investment in lots of small micro coops. We've tried as you know to bring people together at the time and the organisations themselves are weak, partial, don't last long, they're too busy, they're under pressure, they don't have the time for lobbying and campaigning and all the rest of it. So it's chicken and egg really, how do you do that. We're still waiting for some sort of strategic investment in cooperative development, it doesn't even have to be big, that's the tragedy of it. (Stiofán, Trademark)

The lack of strategic investment mentioned above leaves the cooperative sector divided and fragmented. The lack of investment into cooperative development hampers the awareness raising of the cooperative model as a separate entity, both from social enterprises and from businesses in general. Added to this, the variety of sectors cooperatives operate in and the legacy of sectarian divisions within the movement

(McAleavy, 2001) further hampers the fostering of a cohesive identity. For instance, the credit union movement remains separated along traditional sectarian lines. The Ulster Federation of Credit Unions, created under the influence of orange lodges, faced issues of capacity and transparency. On the other hand the Irish League, which operates North and South, seems more open to being part of a cooperative movement and contributing to the wider movement (for example investing in co-ops or social housing projects). Overall, there was also a misunderstanding about the ability of credit unions to provide finance for cooperatives. Owing to credit unions' focus on those most vulnerable to indebtedness, as well as the benefits they provide their members with such as the death benefit insurance (usually paying towards funeral costs), their rates make them unattractive to many cooperatives.

> … I would have to say the reason ours is 12% is it's a really high risk because the people that we loan to are on the margins and … something like illness or death in the family, suddenly their financial situation changes dramatically, and so their ability to repay would be drastically reduced. Now within credit unions, we would take that into account and we would work with that. … I mean the banks don't do that sort of thing. (Martin, ILCU)

Credit unions, in particular through the Irish league have also looked at investing bonds that provide social benefits such as social housing and were particularly interested in investing in green energy co-ops. Yet there was little dialogue between the credit unions and the rest of cooperative sector as to how credit unions could contribute towards other co-ops. While until recently the legislation limited the investment of savings into social projects (social housing, cooperatives) and the existence of corporate bank accounts for credit unions, the question remains as to why financial cooperatives have not played a more significant role in funding the rest of the cooperative sector. An element of response highlighted by Mangan (2009) is the pressure of an emerging enterprising discourse in the wake of aging membership, increased competition with traditional banks that have diversified their services and stricter financial regulations (also highlighted by Martin, ILCU). The slow demise of the mutual aid ethos that animated the movement's infancy fuels a disconnect between small and emerging cooperatives on the one hand, and established sectors (agricultural co-ops and credit unions) on the other.

While there is no doubt that the lack of resources put into networking across cooperatives strands furthers this disconnect, the divisions also reflect a certain disdain from worker cooperatives towards other forms of cooperation. This represented a barrier that some of the worker cooperatives erected between them and the rest of the sector, considering worker cooperation as the only true form of cooperation.

> I don't believe a farmers' cooperative is a cooperative and I don't believe a credit union is a full cooperative. […] Co-op Bank is exactly the same, hedge funds and trustees and millionaires…. I think the worker cooperative is a true cooperative because it's every single worker has a say, every single worker … ideally! (Alice)
>
> Just on agricultural coops there […] You can't really call yourself a cooperative, abiding by the cooperative principles, if you're paying kids £5 an hour to go and pick strawberries for 12 hours a day. (Gerard)

These criticisms are not unfounded, as the reliance on the exploitation of migrant workers in the agricultural sector and the crisis faced by the Cooperative Bank fuels a distrust towards larger cooperatives. The lack of resources invested, either by those institutions like the Co-op group (until recently the Co-op group community fund did not include cooperatives but only charities and not-for-profit organisations) or by credit unions despite their significant resources also contributes to widen the gap between worker cooperatives and the rest of the sector, and this – as seen below – despite common ground between emerging cooperatives, irrespective of type (consumer, agricultural or otherwise).

Finally, because of the lack of investment and in particular networking role that could be played by a Cooperative development agency, there was also a lack of political and strategic direction in the sector. In fact, Eisenschitz and Gough (2011) note that a coordinated network may be the key to the social economy resisting strategies of instrumentalisation that make it an addendum of traditional neoliberal roll-out strategies. As a result of institutional disinvestment, the absence of an organisation that could bring together all forms of cooperatives hinders the sharing of a similar vision of cooperation.

C- The way forward: past, present and future of reclaiming space for cooperative economies

While cooperative development exists in a vacuum, the movement is attempting at reclaiming the space that is "colonised" by the emphasis on forging the entrepreneurial spirit of the Community & Voluntary Sector, zero-sum ethno-national as well as neoliberal readings of the economic policy in Northern Ireland. Addressing attempts at taming practices that offer an alternative to neoliberal top-down peacebuilding, organisations across Northern Ireland have attempted at reclaiming cooperatives' past, present and future from the processes of silencing and exclusion we have described above.

1. The present: cooperative development by cooperatives

Cooperative support in Northern Ireland has emerged in a vacuum. Faced with a lack of strategic funding, a handful of organisations have faced challenges in offering a voice for cooperatives. Despite capacity issues, the work of raising awareness of cooperatives and the expertise necessary to advise cooperative businesses has rested on organisations like Co-operative Alternatives and Trademark, organisations that have attempted at reclaiming the space "colonised" by social enterprise agencies (Stiofán, Trademark). The ability to argue from within the social economy sector shows how those organisations are counteracting the institutional pressure against grassroots experiments like cooperatives.

> Yes, [the focus on social enterprises] is confusing the waters. But you know you have to be there, part of the social enterprise [sector] to make the argument … you cannot retreat in your own little kingdom [where] everybody agrees with you. […] I think that it's good that we are there to do the cooperative development alongside the social enterprises. … Because if we were not there, … we abdicate our own responsibility and then it would be the social enterprise agencies doing a cooperative development without knowing what they are doing. … And most of the people that went and referred themselves to a local enterprise agency were originally persuaded to become something else other than a cooperative. (Tiziana, Co-operative Alternatives)

As a result of this ad-hoc support, all cooperatives featured in this research have in fact mentioned that their journey would have been impossible without the support provided by Cooperative Alternatives and Trademark. This work, often carried out *pro-bono* over the years, also remains undocumented.

Trademark Belfast

Trademark's involvement in cooperative development dates back to 2011. As a social justice, conflict resolution, trade unionist organisation set up in West Belfast, Trademark first helped set up the Belfast Cleaning Society. The organisation was able to attract money from Great Britain through the Cooperative Hub in Manchester to train cooperative consultants locally. Its impact has been mostly through political education in the community sector and lobbying at council level and with political parties (like Sinn Fein) to support the development of worker cooperatives. It is as a result of their continuous work and the proposals and motions passed that the Belfast City Council *Go Social Programme* included cooperatives. Trademark also worked in the Republic of Ireland with Independents for Change, a group of left-wing progressive independent TDs to lobby for legislative changes. Most of the worker cooperatives interviewed in this research were supported by Trademark.

Cooperative Alternatives

In 2013, when the Cooperative Bank collapsed, the Cooperative Hub funding that had initiated this cooperative development disappeared. This coincided with the creation of Co-operative Alternatives, set up to deliver cooperative development across Northern Ireland. Cooperative Alternatives is a consortium of trained cooperative practitioners that has expanded its work to all types of cooperatives. The organisation's focus has supported the development of community shares, raising a total of £911,000 in the community for projects like Boundary and Jubilee Farm (at the time of the interview, Tiziana, Co-operative Alternatives). Co-operative Alternatives has also worked more closely across the board with other organisations such as SENI, the Department for the Economy, councillors, Belfast City Council and is a delivery partner to the *Go Social*, delivering programmes such as the Hive (Cooperative bank) and the Cooperative Foundation to support this work. In the

absence of a singular voice for cooperatives, the organisation offers not only tailored administrative, business and governance support for existing and nascent cooperatives, regular seminars to raise awareness of the cooperative form, but also a home for those wanting to build a cooperative movement.

Both Trademark and Cooperative Alternatives have attempted at building bridges within the cooperative movement. In the case of Trademark, the attention has been centred on worker cooperatives and building connections with the wider labour movement. For instance, work was undertaken in the aftermath of the economic crisis to bring worker cooperatives together through the all-island body the *Irish worker cooperative network* created in 2012. Trademark has also raised the profile of worker cooperatives through political education in the trade union and community sectors. Cooperative Alternatives has established wider links with other forms of cooperatives, contributing to the emergence of a wider cooperative movement, garnering the eagerness of others in the sector to stand united. Both organisations have also recently participated in the all-*Ireland Social Economy Network*, bringing together worker co-ops, community co-ops and social enterprises.

2. Educating, commemorating and reviving a cooperative past

At various moments in their history, cooperatives have played a less-known role in community development (Bolger, 1977; Etchart, 2016). In fact, alternative organisations have been consistently silenced, sidelined from the dominant narrative, one that "tends to legitimate capitalist forms of organizing" (Rodgers et al., 2016, p. 93). After all, Bolger stated in the 1970s that cooperation in Ireland suffers from constant dismissing (1977, p. 112). This silencing is not simply a process of removing cooperatives from the economic policy language, it is also a matter of commemorating and remembering the historical role of alternative collective organisations in the history of Ireland.

Some poignant examples of those grassroots experiments are being unveiled in this research and play a vital role in reviving local community history. For instance, the research revealed the forgotten history of cooperative projects such as the

Ballymurphy people's Cooperatives or Maydown cooperative and Creggan Enterprises in Derry.

The Ballymurphy people's Cooperatives was set up in the early 1970s following the creation of a Tenants Association in what was characterised as a social housing 'dumping ground'. The Whiterock Industrial Estate became the site for the advancement of cooperation, aiming at creating employment in the midst of poverty, through a garment factory, a garage, or even a wood workshop. Feargal (Glór Na Móna) reported that at one stage the Whiterock Industrial Estate employed around 35 people and served as a main entity for the development of several small co-op initiatives. Unfortunately, the conflict was fatal to the cooperative. The manager of *The People's Garage*, Séamus Mac Seáin, was injured by a UVF attack in 1974. In 1977, after enduring economic difficulties, the cooperative was turned to ashes by the British Army who supplanted the site with barracks (De Baróid, 2000).

Similarly to the experience of Ballymurphy, the city of Derry experienced a growth of worker cooperative initiatives during the conflict with for instance the occupation of Molins Factory closed in 1984 and converted into a worker cooperative, Maydown Precision Engineering. One of its co-workers, Conal McFeely, later helped set up the Creggan Cooperative Society in one of the most deprived areas of the country, through his work with the Northern Ireland Cooperative Development Agency. Creggan Enterprises still exists today as a social enterprise – as a successful organisation fostering local empowerment, co-production and community participation. The infrastructure has attracted £9 million pounds in investment into the area and supports social enterprises and indigenous businesses that all together employ over 300 people (Conal McFeely, Creggan Enterprises). While Creggan Enterprises is now registered as a social enterprise, it has set up a hybrid form of enterprise to keep cooperative principles alive.

The impact that cooperative projects such as the Maydown and the Ballymurphy people's cooperatives resides in their educational and inspirational nature. In particular the history of Ballymurphy people's cooperatives reveals the influence of figures such as Séan Mac Goill and Séamus Mac Seáin on the Irish language movement and the creation of organisations such as Glór Na Móna, set up with the

rent accrued through the occupation of the Whiterock premises by the British Army (£600,000 between 1977 and 2000). Preserving the memory of these community projects is also critical in inspiring new generations to set up cooperatives. For instance, the Whiterock co-ops was in fact mentioned by Alice (Belfast Cleaning Society), while Clem (Creative Workers) referred to the Sperrin Metal factories in Draperstown ((Ballinascreen/Bóthar Buí). Reviving history makes space for imagining cooperatives as part of a long tradition, "hitting home" as one participants puts it (Clem, Creative Workers). Hence, Glór Na Móna is involved in an oral history project, aiming at restoring a more radical vision for community development, where organising rather than funding is the ultimate goal, addressing the disconnect between charities and the community they are meant to serve (Cochrane, 2005).

> This history was never documented […] one of the things that we're talking about at present is trying to kind of revive that philosophy of cooperatives. […]
> I would hope that cooperatives could be viewed as a benchmark or a staging post for a better society, for a new way of doing things, like for the building of a better world, and hopefully we can get people to think […]. So I think that there's a big battle for hearts and minds to be won, or to be initiated by those who understand cooperatives and cooperativism. (Feargal, Glór Na Móna)

Similar attempts at countering this silencing and reviving the forgotten history of Grassroots community initiatives were undertaken by the Market Development Association and Trademark. This work intersects with other education programmes, such as Irish language festivals (Glór Na Móna), political economy education (Trademark), or Irish Oral History projects (Market Development Association) and can play a motivating factor for the flourishing of new cooperatives. Indeed, as Rothschild (2009, p. 1031) notes, "People need to be exposed to alternatives to learn that they exist and are possible". In this ideological battle over what history is remembered, it is not simply cooperatives that are eclipsed from the picture, but also the marginalised spaces they inhabit. Rediscovering the collective history of cooperatives also contributes to rebuilding a "history of resistance" and a "tradition of struggle" necessary for today's collective battles (Fiontann Hargey in Whelan, 2017).

3. Beyond worker cooperation: the future of cooperative economies in Northern Ireland

Despite mistrust and mismatch which left the cooperative movement fractured and fragmented, this research found an eagerness for many cooperatives to engage with the wider sector. In fact, while I had not anticipated that other cooperatives would be within the remit of this research, I was taken back by the enthusiasm in the sector. Those interviews offer interesting insights into the world of cooperation in Northern Ireland. While workers' cooperatives tend to consider themselves qualitatively different from other cooperatives, I have found in the consumer, financial and agricultural cooperatives interviewed a similar aim towards community capacity building, developing alternative eonomies, enacting radical change and commemorating radical history, providing care and genuine cross-community experiences, an attention towards the community beyond direct membership, providing a vision for living, working and consuming in a more democratic, fair and sustainable way. And this from the Lacada, a cooperative brewery set up in 2014 in Portrush to the faith-driven community agriculture project Jubilee. Laurie, who participated in establishing Lacada, on the Northern Antrim coast, referred to the French Revolutions, the Paris commune of 1871 and Spanish Civil War as instrumental in learning about worker cooperatives: "how the Soviets were set up [as] workers' cooperatives and taking over the means of production. All that stays with you.". In Jubilee, a community supported agriculture project set up near Larne in 2017 as a Community Benefit Society, one of the founding members of the project explained:

> From my theological background and as a Christian organisation, we rebel strongly against this idea that value is measured in units of currency, that how much you own, how much you earn, how much you consume designates your value, and rather the individual should be the unit of value. So it's one person, one vote, not one pound, one vote […]. … it's the Marxist concept of metabolic rift that we're divorced from the means of production, and a veil falls over it … and then it just becomes a commodity, whether it's food or clothes or … Whereas not only do we want to do that with food, via community supported agriculture, and reconnect people with … the actual realities of

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producing food, socially, economically and ecologically but also with the share offer you can do that with money. People are putting money, instead of going into Black Rock, some massive asset manager, it disappears, you've no idea what it's funding, […] Whereas this is an example for people to see this is what my money is doing … this square metre of this farm belongs to me, in a way … and to see that transformation over time. (Jonny, Jubilee)

Jubilee Farm – a Community Supported Agriculture project which offers care farming sessions with vulnerable groups, education and development of conservation agriculture programme – embodies a vision for agriculture that is at the polar opposite of the current industrialised agricultural system. This shows how community agriculture can be people-centred and respectful of the environment. The Jubilee farm project, like Northern Counties Cooperative and the recently set up Azora community farm, stand in opposition to what is normally portrayed as farmers' investment schemes. They represent attempts at reconfiguring food production in a way which benefit producers but also challenges power relations around land ownership, and remain centred on making "healthy" food accessible for all, linking environmental considerations with social and economic concerns. The concept of care, as for the worker cooperatives in this research, was essential to the project:

I like the concept of care because we talk about a theological term called creation care, which is like environmental and agricultural stewardship, that's kind of our big idea that sits over what we do. So linked to that, you know care for the environment, to care for the land, farming, farm animals links very closely to care for people, care for ourselves, and very important to us is that we get away from just an extractive model of dealing with nature, and people too … (Jonny, Jubilee)

In a similar vein, Northern Counties which was created in the 1963 as an agricultural cooperative was also centred on providing a lot more than just an investment scheme. Established in Swatragh, the co-op offers over 600 farmers a livestock mart, foster their collective bargaining power (ex: with abattoirs), provides a farmware store and access information and training. While the project is more traditionally entrepreneurial, the cooperative also offers a space for farmers to socialise, provides

living wage employment for 40 people in an area where jobs are scarce and invests into local projects to nurture a buoyant rural community. In particular, the co-op has recently brought its attention to reclaiming land for housing projects to try and revive rural communities which are experiencing a mass exodus of young people. For Northern Counties there was no question about being part of a cooperative movement and adhering to cooperation principles including ethical employment, concerns for the community and cooperation amongst cooperatives:

> We really want to have well into the future a sustainable rural economy and a sustainable rural area in the North of Ireland here where people want to live. […]
> [And] I would certainly like to build a real buoyant co-op movement and a co-op ethos within the business fraternity in Northern Ireland, because … unlike a lot of privately owned businesses where one or two individuals will get a big dividend at the end of every year's trading, obviously the co-op movement is completely different, and I think that's better for the community. (Paul, Northern Counties)

Even in the credit union movement, despite fragmentation and a lack of resources invested into other cooperatives, the participants interviewed felt without a doubt part of a wider community and human economy and despite divergences, there was a clear alignment along cooperative principles.

> [Credit unions can] give [communities] hope, give them a helping hand when they need it. They can give them a traditional financial services offering that the banks had moved away from providing because the costs they deemed to be too high. They could continue to see people as people. … So it's the local community, helping the local community, money going back into the local community from the credit unions. And it works, it works incredibly well. (Gordon, UFCU)

Another theme which was recurrent for the consumer and producer cooperatives interviewed was the attention brought to community relations and bringing together members from all communities. In fact, the sectarian divide that was highlighted by

the literature between consumer cooperatives and other cooperatives was not relevant to the emerging cooperatives that shared a similar aim at breaking down barriers:

> I had similar days when I'd look at that and I'd see old, young, Protestant, Catholic, religious, secular, different Christian denominations, atheists, humanists, people who are of the Bahá'í Faith, all … cooperating and working together. And I thought again, this is bringing people together who probably would never meet otherwise and I found that very inspiring. (Jonny, Jubilee)

These cooperatives which advocated for taking part in building a shared space beyond the legacy of sectarianism insist on that such a space should not resemble the standardised neoliberalised version of cities around the world. Boundary, a cooperative brewery set up in East Belfast bringing together 1200 members through a community share offer explained its ambition of being part of a craft movement connected to the local, bringing people together in a traditionally deprived area with no prior cross-community positive engagement. Similarly to Jubilee and other consumer cooperative projects, the co-op keeps prices relatively low and pays staff Real Living wage levels, sometimes at the expense of profit making. This is summarised by Jen who explains the vital role of cooperatives in place-making, in recreating the social fabric of divided cities like Belfast:

> … for the most part the changes here [in Belfast] of course are overwhelmingly positive. But one of the things that I think we're in danger of losing is kind of that community spirit and community connection as the city gets busier and becomes more like any other city …. we don't want to lose that identity of being a real community of people, and especially now that … it can be a much more diverse community of people! I think if there were more cooperatives here and if people understood what they were, my hope would be it would help people feel more connected … to this place, and have more of a sense of purpose. And in work, that's why so many of us don't enjoy what we do because we don't feel a sense of purpose in what we're doing. Whereas you know with a cooperative … I mean that's in the DNA, like you're doing this because you have a sense of purpose and you feel that it's something that you want to be a part of. … You know as someone who came here by themselves,

didn't know anyone and felt like … I didn't fit in anywhere at first, I can see how important it is to feel connection and to feel that you're a part of something, whether it's at work or a community group or volunteering or what have you, I think cooperatives would fit really nicely into that, and helping people feel that there's a place for them. (Jen, Boundary)

As for worker cooperatives, the projects interviewed here aimed at defining 'community' as something other than a divisive concept. Yet, the potential for healing long-lasting divisions cannot be overemphasized. The size of NI itself is a factor for cooperatives' wider engagement across different sections of society, especially when looking at community shares. This does not imply that barriers disintegrate entirely:

Because in Northern Ireland we are so small, (cooperatives) attract also people [on the] outside … So cooperatives in that respect really expanded the boundaries of how people define themselves […]I do buy in to the beautiful tool that cooperatives can represent, but I think that the real proof is when we have a situation like the 12th of July or a situation of conflict and it's interesting to see if the cooperative is enough to keep those conflicts at bay. … I do feel that that we have great examples of cooperatives across the line. […] But if you think that cooperatives can solve the divide, I disagree. Because it will require more. But it's self-empowering, it's working with people on the same level, I think that it's an important part of the healing process. (Tiziana, Cooperative Alternatives)

As with worker cooperatives, the lack of a cooperative movement is often due to the fact that co-ops themselves do not have the capacity to build those connections and that no organisation is funded to do this work. Of course, for being inspiring, the cooperatives mentioned here also face difficulties with finding investment, relying on community shared (rather successfully) to sustain themselves, and difficulties with members' engagement. Yet, the interviews with consumer, agricultural and financial cooperatives highlight the potential if *garnered* to build a more cohesive movement in Northern Ireland. All of this also points back to the fact that cooperatives in Ireland are still in dire need of research, funding and institutional support (Bolger, 1977).

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D- Discussion

Northern Ireland policy-making is the ground of many battles. Here the terrain of contestation is the social economy itself, with opposing claims between an institutional emphasis on forging the entrepreneurial spirit of the community sector, concepts of charity and philanthropy on the one hand, and collective democratic attempts at building solidarity on the other. As a result, cooperatives have been cast-off economic development strategies. Instead, the social economy policy favours social enterprises at the expense of cooperatives, with only Belfast City Council recognising both in its strategy, in effect side-lining collective democratic organisations. Swallowed under what is an imprecise and ambiguous concept, cooperatives suffer to gain any visibility despite many cooperatives interviewed stressing their distinct identity, enthused by principles of democracy, equality and cooperation.

Moreover, the social economy policy tends to reproduce neoliberal penchants, instrumentalised to offset the impact of roll-out neoliberal policies. What is at play here is a process of "translation", highlighted by Dinerstein (2015, 2019) through which policy-making interprets the social economy in a way that fits its own logic of power, using co-option, co-oercion, and sometimes erasure to distinguish between those organisations worthy of state resources and those with dissident, often transformative, objectives.

Despite being pushed aside to the margin of the economy and the third sector, cooperatives do not seek to be isolated islands, to be interstitial projects (Wright, 2010; 2019). In many respects, their intention is to be part of a wider movement. In fact, the social economy sector by employing notions of self-help, does not necessarily fragment the state's responsibility towards collective wellbeing. Instead, as Feargal explains:

> … they would be saying … "you're letting the State off the hook". That's good, that's fair enough. In our experience, the doing it yourself puts the State under pressure. … There's a counter-intuitive element to it, but also, the most important thing about doing it yourself is that idea of breaking the alienation

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> … it's the Freire example of conscientization, through active involvement in the process of change [people] grow, and out of that become leaders. If we don't create leaders then … forget about it! Who's going to lobby the state anyway?! (Feargal, Glór Na Móna)

As we have seen earlier, in attempting to offset the institutional pressures to comply with the dominant policy rhetoric, worker cooperatives have refused to engage with projects that contribute to the dismantling of the welfare state. These strategies also demonstrate cooperatives' commitment to redistributive practices, seeking in the state an ally, rather than a desire to exist despite it – contrary to other accounts on the social economy (Dinerstein, 2014; Chatterton, 2016). This echoes the work of Graefe (2002) on social economics and their interplay with the state (independence):

> It's a very specific way of promoting a certain type of businesses and trying to negate the existence first of all, of these other alternatives of creating wealth and creating jobs, those are obscured in a corner ... It feels like the State helps certain businesses and they just try to trick us at every corner. [But] we're probably the best allies you're gonna have! Because people like us, we do believe in the State. We do believe in taxes. We do believe in putting money together. […] We are never gonna do certain things because of the ethos of the company. These are the companies that believe in the strong state but nothing's spared for us. (Elena, Lúnasa)

Instead of a simplistic vision of social economy organisations as "enterprises of the poor" (Eisenschitz and Gough, 2011), what I hope to have shown are the undeniable attempts at institutional level to tame radical community efforts at empowerment and silence critical agency (also seen elsewhere, see Chatterton et al., 2019). The institutional framework appears to suffocate the cooperative experiments that foster alternative narratives to the dominant concept of entrepreneurship. Of course, this does not make social enterprises the "hereditary enemy" of co-ops stealing all public monies away from co-op development. In fact, the social economy as a whole, including social enterprises, receives very little investment from the government altogether. This does not imply either that social enterprise projects are per se neoliberal instruments, or that cooperatives are immune from instrumentalisation.

Interestingly, processes of side-lining of collective democratic economic experiments and pressures to push for neoliberal tendencies in the social economy are not misunderstood by participants (Chatterton et al., 2019). Not only does the neoliberal policy corrupt the meaning of the social economy, but social economy organisations are not oblivious to the pressures exerted on them to comply with those tendencies. Murtagh and Boland (2019) contend that social economic experiments are not simply vulnerable to co-option, they too can subvert the meanings imposed on them, attracting and diverting institutional resources towards transformative aims. While some organisations might work with it, a significant part of the cooperatives interviewed in this research refused to comply with these pressures, leaving them without public funding and support. Here, rather than diverting resources, it is an attempt at reclaiming the meaning of the social economy to mean worker cooperation that participants are engaged in. Translation is "a contested process" (Chatteron et al., 2019).

Theoretically-speaking, this assessment of the social economy policy in Northern Ireland draws attention to the invisibility of cooperatives as alternative economic organisations. This assessment also reaffirms the commitment made in this research look at the external constraints that are exerted against cooperatives. Hyman, in his Marxist analysis of industrial relations, said of trade unions "They find themselves accorded legitimacy, recognised and even encouraged, only when their aims and actions do not seriously challenge the continuation of capitalism" (1975, p. 92). A similar logic applies to cooperatives in Northern Ireland. We cannot assess their intention – driven by a desire for empowerment as well as anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal and anti-sectarian politics – and their outcome – enacting ethics of care and fostering therapeutic, transformative practices – without putting the analytical spotlight onto the forceful limitations imposed upon them.

As a result of those very limitations, cooperatives suffer from insufficient attention in Northern Ireland. Without preferential treatment, a lack of strategic investment to develop tailored advice and financial instruments, and the absence of a representative body, cooperatives are left without the support they need to thrive. They are also deprived of allyship, receiving little attention and support from political parties and trade unions. The pretence of the left to offer rhetoric but not pragmatic support to

cooperatives is indeed detrimental to the movement. The threat cooperatives offer to political parties is certainly not unique to Northern Ireland – it does mirror developments in the UK overall for a hollowing of the community sector from any counter-hegemonic tendencies (Huckfield, 2022). As a result, cooperatives are left without a cohesive movement, one that would offer political and strategic direction to build a buyout social and solidarity economy while offsetting attempts at co-option. The picture is not solely bleak. Attempts are emerging at supporting, commemorating and reviving cooperatives' past and present. The future also points to the development of cooperative economies beyond the sole remit of worker cooperatives that share a distinct vision for more democratic, just and sustainable ways of living, working and consuming.

To conclude, the contestation around the meaning and potential of the social economy elicits wider debates over what an economy formerly hindered by bombs and guns should now look like. This contested process makes space for those that do not identify with the zero-sum sectarian prism of politics in Northern Ireland and its neoliberal reading of economies (Shirlow, 2022a, 2022b). As well as the emergence of a centre ground – recently making the polls to the despair of parties like the DUP and to some extend Sinn Féin – the attention in this thesis focuses on those who increasingly find that sectarian politics do not serve them, identifying with alternative rhetoric of place-making in a divided society. I argue here that cooperatives can belong to those social movements identified by others (Nagle and Clancy, 2012; Baker, 2020) that transcend the "stereotypical ethnic schism" (Shirlow, 2022c) and neoliberal discourse prevalent in Northern Ireland. What is illustrated here is cooperatives' vital and contested role in place-making in a divided society.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Summary of the findings

More than twenty years after the Good Friday Agreement, political turmoil remains a constant of Northern Irish politics. As we speak, the devolved power-sharing experiment is yet again in shambles, beset by enduring sectarian conflict and the incapacity of political elites to project anything else but austerity politics on those who have suffered more than thirty years of conflict. In a context of deep fragmentation and division, it seems that the only source of agreement amongst the political elite has been the free-market interpretation of post-conflict recovery. In response to the increasing neoliberalisation that dominates the region's policy landscape, the voices of those interviewed in this research have asked one of the most important questions yet to be answered: "What was the conflict about? And post-conflict society, what do we want it to look like?" (Naomi, Thart Aris). It is in fact a tale of dissent that transpires here, interwoven in the narrative and analytical insights of this thesis. Indeed, the re-branding of Northern Ireland as an economic marvel has left much of the structural issues that gave rise to the conflict unaddressed. After all, Stephen Baker (2014, p. 9) asked, "in a city like Belfast, with two historically antagonistic communities, growing inequality has the potential to create violent competition for diminishing resources. […] Doesn't peace in a divided society require mutuality and cooperation?"

Northern Ireland's political battleground may not leave much space for alternatives, but it does not mean they do not exist. What the last political elections show is that dissent is growing for those who do not identify with the zero-sum sectarian prism of politics, with the hope that it would leave more space for debate on bread and butter issues rather than territorialism. Yet, there are also those who see Northern Ireland's neoliberalised economy as futureless and "moribund" (Naomi, Thart Aris), despite their limited presence in electoral politics. Peter Shirlow contends (2022a) there is an "underground silent revolution in which collective interest are fusing a people who seek, to paraphrase Seamus Heaney, hope and society rhyming". In this research, I argue that cooperatives play a vital but yet overlooked role in providing an alternative to the rhetoric of place-making in a divided society. It is those projects that are brought

to light here, inscribing this research in the tradition of others who have thought to commemorate marginalised history, of labour and of the variety of social movements that have at times contributed to transcend the sectarian divide (Nagle and Clancy, 2012; Baker, 2020). In doing so, what I have uncovered is the role of critical agency in shaping a future that is yet to be realised.

Critical agency is indeed the cornerstone of this research. The alternative economic spaces that are created through worker ownership and cooperation embody both the rejection of dominant established practices and on the other hand hope for a future beyond them. Confronted with lack of opportunities, economic hardship and social exclusion, a desire for social empowerment drives worker cooperative projects forwards, seeking to foster community capacity and decent employment in response to the poverty of alternatives on offer. Yet, in doing so, worker cooperatives also project elements of a hoped-for-economy, inspiring the pursuit of social justice, anti-consumerist politics and environmental sustainability. As a result, worker cooperatives contribute to building spaces of hope (Dinerstein, 2015; Harvey, 2000), demonstrating that more egalitarian and solidaristic ways of working, consuming and living are possible. Hope is critical in the desires of participants to try out, experiment and plant the seeds of what post-capitalist economies would look like.

A critical finding of this research is the relevance of antagonistic politics to the emergence of a worker cooperative economy (North et al, 2020), fostered by visions that are fundamentally anti-neoliberal and anti-sectarian. Both rage and hope cohabit in these alternative economic spaces (Miller, 2015) where new practices are trialled, even if in imperfect and incomplete ways. Through this critical agency, inhabiting the interstices where the neoliberal peace is resisted and reframed, some of the cooperators interviewed in this research contribute to articulating a new 'common sense' for an economic reality beyond neoliberalism and sectarianism (Richmond, 2011). They attempt at opening up space for the emergence of alternative narratives, where the meaning of politics is opened for discussion (Dinerstein, 2015, p. 37), enunciating in their desires and practices an alternative economic language. As organic intellectuals (Gramsci in Forgacs, 1988), or architects of hope (Harvey, 2000) they promote politics that challenge the ethno-neoliberal reading that informs Northern Ireland politics and confront it with class solidarity.

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There is no denying that the cooperative journey is not pre-determined. It is an exploration that encompasses contradictions and failures. In fact, many of the worker cooperatives featured in the research no longer exist, or no longer trade as cooperatives. It would have been easy to dismiss those projects for their marginality, for the difficulties they are ridden with. It would have been easy to dismiss their outcome as too little too late. Instead, the engaged ethnographically informed approach of this research contributes to create rich, nuanced and compassionate accounts underlining the processes and complexities at play in actually existing alternative economies in Northern Ireland (Gibson-Graham 2008; 2014; Pettinger, 2019). The worker cooperatives featured in this research provide more than just a wage. They facilitate work-life balance, foster dignity, creativity and fulfilment. They create an experience of "becoming-in-common" highlighted by others (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Langmead, 2016 ; Cornwell, 2012, Smith, 2021) that fosters shared learning and autonomy over the labour process, re-joining accounts of disalienation in the literature on worker cooperatives (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2020; Azzelini; 2018). They enact economies driven by ethical considerations other than the capitalist value system, thereby revalorising work and providing collective stewardship. The role of ethics of care is hereby exposed (Cameron, 2009; Healy, 2011). Three case studies, stemming from in-depth immersion into and engagement with the field, highlight a shared attention to enacting therapeutic practices, providing healing from the legacy of the conflict, social and economic marginalisation, from ill-health or simply from an economic system that is physically alienating, grinding down creativity and yearning for emancipation.

The ethnographic exploration of everyday processes also captured from within the reconciliation process at play in three worker cooperatives. Through the safe spaces they nurture, worker cooperatives provide tools for conflict resolution. The research revealed a clear attempt to engage with the deeply divided sense of territoriality that defines Belfast. Instead of an attitude of politeness and denial, cooperatives create space for sensitive conversations, co-learning where historical and geographical divisions are acknowledged and addressed (Dawson, 2016). These attempts at building trust and reconciliation highlight the complexities and shared nature of identities, whereby "shared space" goes beyond the "zero-sum-game simplicities" (Graham and Nash, 2006, p. 266) that traditionally inform community relations in Northern Ireland.

Inclusivity is hereby redefined as an attempt to build solidarity in diversity beyond the narrow focus on ethno-national politics. Worker cooperatives also contribute to building shared spaces that address processes of commodification, refusing to accept the normalisation of class segregation as the only alternative to ethno-sectarian territorialism (Baker, 2014). The initiatives described here illustrate worker cooperatives' potential to provide more than just a space where work is transformed, they prefigure a new geography beyond neoliberalism and sectarianism.

The compassionate gaze employed in this research contributes to convey how ethical economies are constructed and maintained but also to highlight the wider relations of power within (Cornwell, 2012). Alternative economies are not "liberated zones", neither outside capitalism nor totally absorbed by it (Dinerstein, 2015, p. 223). And capitalist ownership and profit extraction are not the only powerful source of inequalities that cooperatives have to contend with. In their attempts at confronting injustice, the investigation of worker cooperatives in Northern Ireland speaks of the struggles and compromises alternative economies are engaged in (North et al, 2020, Chatterton et al, 2019). The research makes a valuable contribution to emerging debates in the literature on diverse economies. The research contributes to filling a gap between the critique of a neoliberal interpretation of economic recovery dominant in development and peacebuilding practice (Selby, 2008; Lipschutz, 1998) and on the other hand, the envisioning of alternative economies. This is where the interest for the worker cooperatives in Belfast brings a new light to the exploration of local alternative economics and community economies where the return to the "local" rarely questions what stands behind the local itself. The cases looked at through this research do ask questions of what is wrong with neoliberalism, but they do so by engaging with the deep sectarian fragmentation and division that hampers solidarity and sustained collective action in Northern Ireland.

On the other hand, the research critically engages with diverse economies perspective to analyse the antagonistic politics at play in worker cooperatives and evaluate the struggles and contradictions they face as alternative practices (Graefe, 2002; North et al, 2020; Miller, 2015). By drawing from a feminist understanding of the political, I am here attentive to fostering "the imagination of different economies, their practices, and subjectivities" (Zanoni et al., 2017, p. 583) and to do as little violence as possible

to the field (Gibson-Graham, 2014). Yet, by engaging with rich description without abandoning theory, the research contributes to the current developments in the study of diverse and alternative economies that do not dismiss critique of capitalist hegemonies in order to engage with more hopeful readings of the economy in diversity (and vice versa) (Dinerstein, 2015; Wright, 2010; Miller, 2015; Cornwell, 2012; North et al, 2020). After all, why would critique narrow our understanding of the possible? Reinstating agency is imperative – looking at alternative economies would otherwise be meaningless (Pettinger, 2019) – but it does not prevent the discussion on the impact of social relations in which alternative economies take place (Wright, 2019).

If anything, it is by confronting the very uncongenial environment in which they emerge and operate that we can better assess alternative economies. As Dinerstein (2015, p. 224) contends, the question becomes, not whether alternative economies can be transformative, but rather how does the state and capital "cope" with them (also Graefe, 2002). In Northern Ireland, state and capital "cope" with alternative cooperative economies by suffocating them. The institutional framework de facto side-lines cooperatives, practically absent from policies, reflecting a wider shift in policy where the new language of social entrepreneurship eclipses collective grassroots initiatives from the social economy sector. The social economy policy becomes a terrain of contestation between competing notions of charity and entrepreneurship on one side, solidarity and cooperation on the other. Swallowed under what is an imprecise and ambiguous concept, cooperatives suffer to gain any visibility despite many cooperatives interviewed stressing their distinct identity, enthused by principles of democracy, equality and cooperation. Overall of course, the social economy sector itself remains largely overshadowed by a focus on 'big-business' economics. Yet, the competing claims over the meaning of the social economy speak of the wider peace process and contestation as to the meaning of peace in a divided society. The social economy policy reproduces neoliberal penchants, instrumentalised to offset the impact of roll-out neoliberal policies (Peck and Tickell, 2002; Graefe, 2006; Cato and Raffaeli, 2018; Huckfield, 2022). What is at play here is a process of "translation" (Chatterton et al., 2019), where the policy discourse translates "dissident" organisations rooted in radical collective practices into social enterprises and NGOs (Dinerstein 2017), resistance into partnership and governance (Restakis, 2010; Novkovic and Golja, 2015). Instead of a simplistic vision of social

economy organisations as neoliberalised, what this research has underlined is the attempts at institutional level to tame radical community efforts at empowerment and the resistance – even if marginalised – of those who refused to be silenced .

The absence of a congenial policy, legal and cultural environment is detrimental to cooperative development in Northern Ireland. Without incentives but only additional costs, the game is rigged against cooperatives. The lack of strategic investment in a cooperative development agency capable of providing bespoke advice and support is also a significant barrier to the growth of the sector. In fact, without this strategic investment, the sector is left fractured and fragmented, unable to create cohesion and strategic direction. At the other end of the spectrum, the sector lacks allies in trade union and political elites, thwarted by a dire lack of political imagination, mistrust and neglect, leaving cooperatives isolated. If the benefit of worker cooperative economies, as alternative economic spaces, is to sit outside the traditional realm of ethno-neoliberal politics in Northern Ireland, it is also one of their biggest impediments. As organisations that are independent (therefore not as easily controlled), engaging a collective membership – often beyond the boundaries of sectarian territories – cooperatives sit outside the political ecosystem that could help them flourish. While there is little interest in the DUP political machine for anything alternative, there is a clear discursive dissonance between Sinn Fein's narrative in favour of the sector and the lack of practical support provided to existing cooperatives. The worker cooperatives in this research are also held back by a rhetorical attitude on the Left that does not translate in meaningful allyship, sharing of resources and increased visibly from trade union and more progressive political parties. This reflected not only a lack of space given to the envisioning of alternative economies in Northern Ireland but also distrust towards a social economy sector increasingly instrumentalised by neoliberal roll-out policies.

While the research brings lessons to build our understanding of alternative economies, of the messy realities of cooperative and the perspectives of those who inhabit those alternative economic spaces, we do hope to also provide practical lessons for the development of cooperative economies. There is indeed much to be learnt to develop a truly inclusive, democratic and solidaristic social economy policy in Northern Ireland – something which policy makers have themselves acknowledged. This

research brings much to the fore when it comes to cooperation in Northern Ireland. Irrespective of the politics that fuels their emergence, some of the worker cooperatives featured here have had a transformative impact on those involved in these projects. Running a business, paying the bills, getting creative at work, collectively deciding where and when to work (and not to work), having the morning off to walk children to school: all these are by no means trivial. It would be a pity if the theoretical contributions of this research underplay the impact of these projects on the people involved in them. At the same time, it is important not to overstate their outcome considering their limited scale. Yet, on account of the very restricted support they receive, the fact that some of the worker cooperatives featured in this research currently contribute to foster anti-alienating, inclusive, shared, ethical economies demonstrate a strong potential for social value. To unleash the possibilities they offer with regards to community capacity, gender empowerment, conflict resolution and community relations, a policy framework that enables rather than inhibit this transformative potential would be more apt not only at supporting the development of cooperative economies, but also contribute to the more radical social transformation that peace requires.

As Naomi responded to the initial question posed above, what do we want Northern Ireland as a post-conflict society to look like:

> … different models, less exploitative models, more interesting spaces, places, experiences, things on a smaller scale, done well, I think that that is much more viable in terms of breaking down barriers. (Naomi, Thart Aris)

Policy recommendations

With a view to product impact, to create out of nearly five years of research more than an academic thesis dusting away in a library shelf, here are some recommendations drawing from an internship in a cooperative development organisation and echoing proposals made by others (Co-ops UK, New Economic Foundation, etc.) for the attention of those looking to support the development of cooperative economies:

- "Create a level playing field to overcome the barriers faced by cooperatives: Cooperatives are at a disadvantage. Their registration fees are significantly

higher than other forms of organisation. They lack access to banks, to investors and to support from enterprise agencies. If the aim is to grow the cooperative sector to foster the local supply market for procurement, at minimum cooperatives need to operate on a level playing field.

- A Cooperative Development Agency to provide in-house tailored support: Belfast City Council recognises the social and economic value of cooperatives but the support provided is ad-hoc and too often side-lined over a dominant focus on social enterprises. Meanwhile at central government level, all resources are invested into organisations lobbying for social enterprises. Because cooperatives operate under distinct values and legislative frameworks, cooperative development requires its own agency. To double the size of the cooperative sector by 2030, the Cooperative Unleashed report (New Economic Foundation, 2018) suggests the creation of a Cooperative Development Agency for Northern Ireland.

- Raising the profile of cooperatives as "legitimate" businesses: The cooperative capacity for social value is at present hindered by a lack of visibility and insignificant government attention. The recent report by the Cooperative Councils Innovation Network (2020) calls on local authorities and enterprise agencies to provide business support that is tailored to cooperatives. More education and awareness are needed to empower council officers and business developers to understand and help promote the cooperative business model. Education is also needed at a wider level, including policy makers, politicians and the wider public.

- Financial assistance and public investment in cooperative projects: Alongside tailored support, cooperatives need specific financial assistance. In some respects, financial support mirrors that provided to the wider SME sector. Yet, cooperatives need adequate financing, in particular considering the barriers they face to attracting traditional investment but also the opportunities they offer towards community investment (i.e. community shares and loan stock). This should include seed funding at the start-up stage, access to loans in the next stages of development and wider access to investment. Other beneficial

financial mechanisms include assistance through a regional community bank, cooperative solidarity funds[9], council investment through local pension funds, or direct investment in community shares (CCIN, 2020; CLES and Preston City Council, 2019).

- Embedding cooperatives into a wider inclusive economic strategy: Beyond targets set by the social economy policies at central and local government level, Northern Ireland institutions needs to rethink a more transformative approach to economic development, fostering the democratisation of the economy, in particular but not only through cooperatives, but also through wider approached to community wealth building in order to deliver 'value for people' rather than 'value for money'."[10] (Perrin et al, 2020)

Limitations and reflexivity

Every research has limitations. This project is no exception. Balancing a critical analysis of alternative economies, putting capitalism in its place and on the other hand trying not to curtail the envisioning of non-capitalist possibilities is no easy task. Erick Olin Wright (2010) warns against either cheerleading or pessimism. The assessment made of the worker cooperatives studied here may be a hopeful one. Yet, the fact remains that there were only ten worker cooperative projects interviewed in this research. And that by the time I complete this, three of the worker cooperatives closed down while three others were no longer cooperatives (existing informally or as a company). Saying that the sector remains embryonic is no exaggeration. I hope not to appear naïve to the difficulties faced by cooperative economies. Considering those, I wanted to shed some light onto the perspectives of those who refuse to go down without a fight. I also intended for this research to contribute to our capacity to further map out spaces of resistance where alternative labour relations are enacted. I hope for its findings to speak of the wider complexities of alternative economies in

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[9] For instance, the Evergreen Cooperative in Cleveland redirects 10% of its profit to fund other cooperatives and grow the sector (Gowan, 2019).

[10] For more on Community Wealth Building and cooperatives in Northern Ireland, see Perrin, O'Hara, McManus and Robb, (2020), *Belfast Inclusive Growth Strategy: a co-operative perspective*, July 2020. Available at: https://www.coopalternatives.coop/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Inclusive-Growth-Strategy-Briefing-Last-version-with-mutual-change-only.pdf

environments increasingly dominated by neoliberalism. Yet, it is a very fine line that needs navigating between putting the spotlight on resistance and creating policy impact. By depicting the sometimes radical politics that animated cooperatives initiatives, I ran the risk of fuelling further processes of silencing by policy makers. Why support radical initiatives that reject the political status quo? I also did not want the theoretical insight on how to conceptualise alternative economies to take away from what cooperatives did, for the people involved in them and the wider community. On the other hand, how can we evoke their therapeutic and transformative practices without discussing the very intents that drive those projects forward? Downplaying the role of antagonistic politics to shed a more 'attractive' light onto worker cooperative projects, one that would more easily foster institutional support, meant participating in further processes of silencing of critical agency in Northern Ireland.

In this project, I also chose for the cooperative principles that participants enacted in their day-to-day practices to inspire my methodological approach. I studied "with" cooperatives: "we" worked together, alongside each other, made decisions collectively, experienced the lows and the joys of cooperation, faced institutional pressures together, echoing each other's call for more governmental support. Yet, "I" alone decided what made the final cut. Even considering the participants' oversight on the interview transcripts and the portraits of their cooperatives, I reverted – especially when difficulties arose – to a more conventional and hence potentially exploitative mode of research. Despite best intentions, the participatory approach only went so far – hindered by academic requirements, times, resources and the fact that researchers are after all human.

Still, in attempting to demonstrate standards of authenticity and trustworthiness as barometers for good practice, I may also have revealed too much. In a field that was never "alien", I may have been "too close to it". This type of connection is often what opens research up for criticism. Yet as Coffey (in Fleetwood, 2009, p. 35) explains: "Emotional connectedness to process and practices of fieldwork is normal and appropriate. This should not be denied or stifled. It should be acknowledged, reflected upon and seen as a fundamental feature of well executed research. Having no connection to the research endeavour, setting or people is indicative of a poorly executed project." But sharing details of the "messy reality" of fieldwork comes at a

price. While it would be ludicrous to say that mistakes, accidents and unforeseen issues are not the norm, disclosing too much also fuels a terrain of political struggle: if left to novice researchers, to those with little social capital, resources, income, reputation, the damages are greater.

As a consolation for its imperfections, its – at times heart-breaking – disappointments and its shortcomings, this research still ignited in me a desire to dig deeper into the world of cooperatives in Northern Ireland. Alongside the examination of practices that were suffering from a suffocating institutional environment, there were also those who attempted at reclaiming cooperatives' past, present and future. There was also the many cooperatives – consumer, agricultural or financial institutions – I had not envisioned working with to begin with, that contribute to laying the foundations of an emergent cooperative movement in Northern Ireland, one driven by the same desires to foster radical change and commemorate emancipatory history, provide genuine cross-community experiences, redistributive practices and in doing so elaborate a vision for living, working and consuming in a more democratic, fair and sustainable way. The enthusiasm I faced, their desire to be interviewed, to speak out, to contribute to research, policy briefs, workshops, meetings, markets, to speak with a more united voice, not just with other cooperatives, but also with the labour movement, all converge to reinforce the need for further research. In fact, the cooperative sector is far from defunct, with new cooperatives that have emerged in the last few years, in housing (Belfast Student Housing Co-op and Belfast Co-Housing), technology (Rabble Cooperative), construction (Northern Construction Co-op), food/community agriculture (Belfast Food Co-op, Good to Grow) and even with the creation of the first local mutual bank, Northern Mutual. More research is indeed necessary to build our understanding of cooperation in Ireland, eventually adding colours to the quilted patchwork of alternative economies across the world. Nearly fifty years ago, Bolger pointed to the cooperative movement suffering from "constant downplaying" (1977, p. 112). Very little has changed since, with research on cooperatives – and even more so on worker cooperatives – being few and far between. But as participants whose voices resonate here argued:

> Maybe people will realise that it's just we're quiet but we're growing. Because it is growing. And […] we're not going away you know! [laughs] […] Maybe

we need to start being a wee bit louder ourselves. It'd be brilliant wouldn't it. Even throughout Ireland, not just Northern Ireland but throughout Ireland, and the UK! (Josephine, Belfast Cleaning Society)

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