

Title: Performances of Solidarity in worker co-operatives: a cross-comparative research between Argentinian and British cases

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Abstract

This paper offers a conceptualisation of solidarity as a form of political activism that can evolve and enact transformative practices. We discuss two worker co-operatives, GrafiCoop in Argentina and PrintCoop in the UK, and explore how solidarity is enacted in their practices that make the production of new forms of resistance possible. In particular, the analysis is made on three layers - representations, social relations and identities-. In the analysis of representations, we scrutinised the representation of the role of the co-op and the link with political action, and the attachment between social and economic dimensions. Then, we turn to the analysis of social relations, and examine the connections with other institutions and federations and the solidarity relationships with them. Finally, the analysis of identities revolved around the historical idea of collective movement. We conclude that solidarity can become a form of transformative social innovation in those cases that have not been coopted by neoliberal rationale.

Introduction

As consequence of the limitations of the current economic system with regard to social exclusion, low levels of social welfare, morality, governance and sustainability (Laville, 2013; Dash, 2014; North and Scott Cato, 2017), a range of actions have been put into practice by many social groups, and these form the basis of this paper. As a part of the response, Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) organisations -such as co-operatives, mutual organisations, and associations- have proved to be a solution to the internal limitations of the prevailing economic model. The SSE is not an agreed term, since the concept merges two counter-hegemonic economic traditions -the social economy (Coraggio 2010) and solidarity economy (Callié, 2009), with different world-views with diverse understandings of development. It is, therefore, an umbrella term that reflects the need for a system transformation taking into account redistributive justice, sustainability, and participatory democracy through economic actions that put social and environmental aims in first place and involve producers, workers, consumers and citizens through collective and solidarity actions (Eme and Laville, 2004; Utting 2015).

The SSE is defined by its own values of social justice, reciprocity and solidarity, and in opposition to a market ideology. In particular, SSE organisations have social objectives and, although they may engage in some market activity, the economic principle does not prevail over the social objectives of the organisation. Indeed, this is the core of the social innovation of the SSE: they are

democratically structured organisations that seek to meet economic needs through non-economic strategies, with the collective as the main source of the process (Dash, 2014), and in our opinion SSE organisations are agents of social transformation. In the current neoliberal context, a range of SSE alternatives appeared around the world (Scott Cato and Raffaelli, 2017). This raises questions with regard to whether these solutions to economic limitations provide a transformation of the economy and politics into a better form, which is associative, equal and grounding in the commons, or do they respond merely by providing palliative services as a means to keep the system afloat?

Our purpose in this paper is to study Social Innovation (SI) in worker cooperatives, which is understood as a change in social relations that provoke new forms of organisation, practices, and knowledge (Avelino et al. 2015), as it can provide interesting insights with regard to their transformative potential. The article explores the enactments of solidarity in two worker cooperatives, one in Argentina and another in the United Kingdom, and their articulation with political activism and transformative practices. Although the neoliberal ideology is presented as apolitical, hence, in those co-ops permeated by it the economic element might overcome the political. In contrast, in the origins of the SSE, it combined both political and economic claims; hence, we consider their coexistence is crucial to remaining their transformative potential.

This paper is structured as follows. The first section outlines a comprehensive theorisation of the SSE and the significance of solidarity as its central value in the study of worker co-operatives. The second section discusses the research context and the methodological design. The third section presents the findings of this research in the two case studies: Argentina and the UK. Findings are structured in three parts: the first one present the representations of worker co-ops, their roles in society and their pursue for a new economy; the second revolves around their social relations in the pursue of another economy; the third presents co-ops identities with regard to the existing economic system. Through the three layers of the co-operative practice solidarity is traced. The fourth section

of this paper presents the discussion in which we question whether solidarity can enact transformative practices. We conclude with some reflections about the role of solidarity in transformative practices, and insights for future research.

Solidarity as the inception for social transformation

Although with particularities in each continent, an interest in the SSE occurred in both Europe and Latin America (Laville, 2013; Coraggio, 2017). The selection of the concept of SSE is part of our counter-hegemonic understanding of economic action. It challenges the marginalisation of alternative economic activities and the hegemonic economic wisdom (Gibson-Graham, 2008). In this paper, the cases of Argentina and the United Kingdom are analysed and compared. It focuses particularly on worker co-operatives, which are a particular formation in relation to collective work, and question whether the SSE is a form of resistance within the current hegemonic economic discourse or whether it has been co-opted. Solidarity becomes instrumental in this analysis as we consider it is the foundation for transformation. We explore solidarity not as an action of giving something to other, but as a transformative force that can trigger further social transformation, particularly in political terms.

The proposal of the SSE encompasses both an alternative economic theory and a counter-hegemonic programme for political action. Reproduction of life is utterly social, a reality that has been neglected by neoclassical theory, although uncovered by substantive economists (Coraggio, 2011; Muellerleile, 2013). In the transition from a market economy to an economy with a market, the re-embedding of the economy in society and the role of ethical principles as economic regulators are instrumental (Coraggio, 2017). Relying on solidarity, which refers to a relationship of equals in a consensual democracy rather than philanthropy (Laville 2013), it is possible to build up democratic and reciprocal social relations in order to counteract marketisation. In order to conduct

an analysis of the role of the SSE, capacity-building, a dimension associated with market articulation and finance, technology and management, becomes central (Utting, 2015). It is also linked with institutional and social innovation, an ability to learn and adapt to changing circumstances; all these elements respond to the economic side of the SSE.

The political side of the SSE refers to two levels: first, they reintegrate democracy into economic life (Laville 2013), and secondly they participate in the public debate providing responses to social problems in a novel manner that neither the state nor the market is able to achieve (Laville 2011), and their efficiency should be tested for their capacity to provide solutions to social issues (Laville and Salamon 2014). The analysis of the political dimension is operationalised through the analysis of institutional complementarities and participation (Utting 2015). The former focuses on the links that SSE organisations establish with other institutions, such as the market, government, or the SSE itself. It is also central to the field of collective action in achieving economic and political empowerment. Political power is built up through contestation, from where new practices and new democratic collective management can be tested, and becomes central in the construction of alternative institutional forms (Evans, 2008). Finally, participation is understood politically, such as popular participation (Utting, 2015). Although the concept might have a range of interpretations, it becomes relevant for our analysis its understanding in relation to active citizenship and a reconfiguration of power relations (Laville, 2015; Amin et al., 2003), which chimes with the understanding of political activism.

Hence, the SSE provides a novel articulation of existing spaces that becomes relevant in finding spaces for change, and this is the focus of this paper. These spaces protect the SSE against hegemonic turns that intend to dilute its transformative agenda. Hence, the strength of the political dimension of SSE organisations is what prevents them from becoming absorbed by the hegemonic rationality, and is a vital element of their transformative power. Moreover, separation of the social,

economic and political elements in the neoliberal discourse has led to a narrow understanding of the potential the SSE might bring to the whole society (McMurtry, 2004). This is a consequence of the acceptance of the neoliberal discourse, whose power is based on separating integrated spheres of human life (Gibson-Graham, 2008; Dash, 2014). In contrast, our conceptualisation suggests that worker co-operatives are a tool for transformative social innovation, as they change economic social relations, provoking new forms of organisation, practices, and knowledge (Avelino et al. 2015).

One central element in the analysis of the SSE is solidarity, which has been theorised in two opposite ways. Mainstream economics understand that rational economic individuals should take care of their own, which was reflected in some works (Anheier and Kendall, 2002). Western literature focuses on philanthropic solidarity, related to charitable and asymmetric relations, with little attention being paid to reciprocal solidarity, a solidarity that arises between peers (Laville and Sainsaulieu, 1997). This is the transformative element of the SSE, as individuals contradict the 'economic man' principle and work together in cooperation, community and solidarity (McMurtry, 2004). This type of solidarity is the basis for constructing diverse social relations. In addition, solidarity works as a bridge that connects autonomous initiatives that put forward alternative models to the alienation of neoliberalism (Daskalaki and Kokkinidis 2017).

This transformative sense of solidarity actions as a means for political activism is important for the interrogation of transformative practices in the neoliberal context. Within an economic perspective that proposes a transformation of the economic structure in pursuit of redistributive justice, sustainability, and participatory democracy, the analysis of worker co-operatives can shed light on this matter. In this sense, and making alternative forms of employment can contribute to the enlargement of the frame of reference of economic and political actions (Coraggio, 2011), making counter-hegemonic practices visible (Gibson-Graham 2008). Worker co-operatives are based on the values of self-management, democratic decision-making, solidarity, and production of goods taking

people into consideration (Novkovic, 2008). Moreover, they should be considered as organisations operating with a double focus, a political and an economic (Scott Cato et al., 2007). Therefore, worker co-ops can be conceptualised within the SSE, and some insights into the transformation that the market has provoked on its values are reported in subsequent sections.

Research context and design

The expansion of social movements with multiple demands, such as feminist, ecological groups or the SSE in the 1970s, was considered by dominant groups as an expression of social disorder, as they were putting forward a strong version of solidarity and the idea that ‘another world is possible’ (Laville and Salmon, 2014). In contrast, the SSE also appeared linked to structural adjustment policies as a justification for the withdrawal of the state and a reallocation of responsibility from the state to civil society, proclaiming this new responsibility as a form of active citizenship (Smith, 2010; Levitas, 2012). The partnership between the SSE and government encouraged social businesses to adopt the SSE discourse and combine it with neoliberal governance (Laville, 2011). Therefore, the two forms of solidarity recognised in the historical account, namely, collective and philanthropic, were present in the global neoliberalisation process (Laville, 2015). Particularly, a range of options in the provision of livelihood appeared in Argentina associated with co-operative entrepreneurship, whereas in the UK it provoked a rise in poverty and lack of secure employment, increasing the reliance on voluntary welfare provision (Scott Cato and Raffaelli, 2017).

Thus, in the light of neoliberalisation, and the discussion about the influence of market economy on culture, it is pertinent to call into question to what extent those organisations that emerged as alternatives to capitalism back in the 19th century upheld their principles untouched. In order to answer this question, this paper focuses particularly on two worker co-operatives in Argentina and the UK. The selection of the cases was based on a theoretical selection (Cohen et al., 2011). They

are not representative of the whole co-op movement in the two countries; they are a means to the analysis of the way in which transformative action enact practically. Both were selected based on previous links established with the co-ops. Preliminary interviews with longstanding members were conducted in order to explore similarities, as well as informal conversations with others, who were the gatekeepers to the rest of the members.

The two cases of this research are PrintCoop and GrafiCoop. PrintCoop is a British printing worker co-op founded in the 1970s by a group of members of political activist groups in London, who decided to buyout a company that was threatened with closure. As a consequence of the impact of technology on the industry, it is currently made up of 12 people. It is run as a flat structure, under the premise of one member one vote and they are all paid equally. GrafiCoop is an Argentinian printing worker co-operative founded in 2010 by a group of young professionals who had already taken part in other co-operatives. This had brought them into contact with reclaimed enterprises and alternative understandings of labour relationships. It is located in downtown Buenos Aires and has three productive departments: printing, media and design. Nowadays GrafiCoop is made up of 12 workers, and all of them are young. Furthermore, another element that makes GrafiCoop stand out is that it is part of the *Federacion Red Grafica Cooperativa* (FRGC) (Co-operative Graphic Network Federation) (Raffaelli 2014).

Fieldwork took place between February and November 2015 and relied on an ethnographic approach, using documentary analysis, unstructured observation, and active unstructured interviews as the research method for gathering data. The number of members of the two co-ops conditioned the total number of interviews conducted, which ended up as 7 in each organisation. In general, they took place during working time and lasted between 50 to 100 minutes. The analysis of the gathered data was focused particularly on three dimensions to reflect the enactments of solidarity in the two worker co-ops: a) on the representations of a new economy, 2) the new social relations underlying

this transformative economy, and 3) their identity with regard to the existing economic system. Overall, analysis was the result of iteration between data, theory and analysis, and the latter two adapted to the former. Ultimately, this research was transformed by and is a result of the empirics, and theory is a means to explain it, and not the other way around.

FINDINGS: The enactments of solidarity

The articulation of the social and economic dimensions in worker co-ops

Broadly speaking, PrintCoop represents itself as an ethical business: towards the interior it is about ethical labour relationships and business, and towards the exterior about minimising the impact on the environment. In their own words:

“We are a business first and foremost; we have to compete with other businesses”

PrintCoop 34.

PrintCoop represents itself primarily as a business with the objective to create decent jobs, and to generate a strong working environment on which they can rely. Its aim is to provide a better option in terms of employment within the boundaries of the current hegemonic system. Moreover, ecological concern is central in the representation of PrintCoop; it has been a pioneer in working with recycled paper and taking the environment into consideration. Although in recent years the importance of minimising pollution appeared as a marketing strategy, PrintCoop made this decision grounded on ethical principles.

Understanding PrintCoop as an ethical business allows the separation of the social and economic dimensions. Economically speaking, the co-op’s primary interest is in being effective and efficient; these are the foundations of their autonomy and sustainability. Due to the impact of technological change in the printing sector, PrintCoop has specialised in a ‘niche market area’. It reflects the

strong ability to adapt to the changing environment (Utting, 2015), as PrintCoop has established strong articulations with the market and has found a way to adapt to the current limitations of the printing industry. In social terms, along with the fading of individual political activism and the idea of ethical business, the economic dimension has overcome the social in PrintCoop:

“PrintCoop was at the start a sort of a community press but it moved toward doing more commercial work and it also always was improving the quality of its products. So we could go for different types of business...” PrintCoop 33

Social justice in PrintCoop is focused on reducing inequality between members to a minimum. Indeed, it has a flat structure with no managers and all members are paid equally, which does not occur in GrafiCoop. Therefore, the social dimension of PrintCoop is confined to the co-operative itself. Relying on the typology made up by Vuotto (2012a), PrintCoop can be conceptualised as a business-oriented organisation, in which primacy is given to the ownership and the rights it endows. GrafiCoop represents itself as a ‘self-managed organisation’ that balances the entrepreneurial and the socio-political dimensions, as these quotations illustrate:

“I think we could be introduced as a company nowadays, without mentioning we are a co-operative. However, we recognise ourselves better as a co-op because of political and social aims it includes” GrafiCoop 1

GrafiCoop’s members ‘reject the use of business language’ deliberately and represent the co-op as an economic and socio-political organisation. Its main aim is to ‘create jobs’ rather than ‘create decent jobs’ as was the case of PrintCoop. This difference might be imprinted by the socio-economic crisis Argentina experienced in 2001 and the significant high unemployment that it provoked (Beccaria and Mauricio, 2005). The socio-political representation is expressed by the idea of enlarging and strengthening the co-operative movement. It intends to irradiate the co-op model outside the organisation and spread the word about another way of economy.

Contrary to the differentiation between the economic and social dimensions made in PrintCoop, they are difficult to differentiate in GrafiCoop. Its members actually acknowledge the limitations in achieving economic sustainability, although in some cases it is a consequence of the mutual determination of the two dimensions. This reflects the weak ability of GrafiCoop to adapt to the external environment, to the market and its changes (Utting, 2015). Despite this limitation, GrafiCoop represents itself as a producer not only of goods but also of social relations; social and economic goals are mutually determined. In the articulation of these two antagonistic dimensions, the role of solidarity becomes central in concealing them. According to the typology developed by Vuotto (2012a), GrafiCoop can be identified as an activist organisation, in which the focus is on ensuring workers' rights in relation to the nature and content of the work but also on constructing a solidarity structure. Thus, although social and economic objectives appear as opposing in mainstream economics, GrafiCoop contradicts this and highlights the role of solidarity as a mediating influence.

The power of networking and synergistic social relationships

The social dimension of PrintCoop outlined before contradicts the collective values of co-ops and exposes the level of individualism of social relations. Moreover, the links between GrafiCoop and the co-op movement are weak for several reasons. Many members do not consider being involved in the movement as part of their responsibilities; although they 'are members of various bodies, [they] don't really have a lot to do with them'; their focus is the co-op. Hence, fostering social relations with other co-ops is not central for all the members of PrintCoop. One person in PrintCoop manages the 'contact with lots of groups', who explained the different stages in the relation with the broader movement:

“So in 2004 I was thinking about where we could get more business from. And I thought what about this co-operatives thing. (...) I didn't get any business from that but I did meet

lots of people and got started to get interested in it (...). After 2004, when we started to look at the cooperative movement as a business network where we could get contracts and work, we talked about it even more". PrintCoop 33

The idea of the co-operative movement as a business network is explicit in the quotation, in conjunction with the discursive detachment between the co-op and the movement. The main motivation for networking with other co-ops arose from looking for more business and enlarging the business network, and this is still the case. Regarding the political role of the movement, it is as a lobby group but not as a collective. Moreover, very few members of PrintCoop are linked with the co-operative movement, which results in a specialisation of some of the members, as if networking were a particular skill. Despite these macro restrictions, there are individual experiences that aim to reverse this trend. A PrintCoop member has set up a co-operative business consultancy that aims to strengthen new co-ops. Also, very interesting initiatives for crowd-funding have been launched from the co-operative movement, which can enlighten locally but also globally.

GrafiCoop's relationship with the co-op movement is strong, in which solidarity is instrumental to enlarging the co-operative movement. GrafiCoop is one of the members of *Federacion Red Grafica Cooperativa*, FRGC (Co-operative Graphic Network Federation), a printing co-operative network founded in 2003 that seeks to foster both commerce and political representation for its members. Currently, it consists of 30 cooperative-members, which employ more than 800 workers. It works as a combined commercial structure in which co-ops altogether perform as a single organisation, which allows them to increase production and provide services that they cannot do on their own, and therefore generate greater economic turnover (Raffaelli and Pacenza, 2012; Raffaelli, 2014). In addition, FRGC is heavily linked to national federations, which work as propellers for ensuring sustainability.

The benefits that workers' co-operatives gain from being associated in a federation in economic and social-political terms have been studied (Raffaelli, 2014; 2016). These networks help in strengthening and sustaining counter-hegemonic economic ventures and challenge neoliberal rationale through transformative practices (Daskalaki and Kokkinidis 2017). Strong links with other institutions complement the collective representation of the GrafiCoop and its attempt to strengthen the co-op movement. It aims to surpass the limits externally imposed on them and generate relationships that allow them to enlarge their impact, both in concrete and discursive terms.

“We would like there to be more graphic design co-ops within the co-operative movement, not only GrafiCoop. Many times we end up being an intermediary for accelerating some processes. Very often we attract clients who are too big for us, but not for other co-ops [of FGRC]. Then, we work to broaden the provision of services, not only from GrafiCoop, but of any other co-op. That is also useful for us” GrafiCoop 8

According to its members, GrafiCoop was ‘founded around FRGC’ and all its efforts are towards the consolidation of printing worker co-ops. An example of this is the printing shop that FRGC opened in downtown Buenos Aires, reinforcing solidarity links that articulate economic and social dimensions. Hence, GrafiCoop is part of a thick network of relationships, which ensures its sustainability. This demonstrates GrafiCoop’s strong links with other institutions (Utting, 2015) and the collective actions pursued to achieve economic and political empowerment also suggest a reconfiguration of power relations towards the transformation of the economy.

The co-operative identity and collectivisation

In the two co-operatives, the practice of co-operative work is understood differently from the ‘capitalist’ labour form in terms of labour relations, duties, responsibility and involvement; in both co-ops the three main principles of co-operation are present: democratic member control, primacy of people over capital, and community concern. Moreover, co-operative work is a radically different

way to understand labour relationships, in which autonomy, responsibility, and involvement are key skills. This is acknowledged in both co-ops and unlearning process implies workers' identification with the co-operative discourse, whose final goal is gaining back the autonomy that capitalist labour relations have taken away from the workers' realm.

Despite the similarities highlighted in the process of identity formation, there are diverse reflections about the values on which co-operative work is based. Aligned with the ethical business representation, co-operative identity in PrintCoop is a form of labour relationships and a managerial strategy based on ethics and fairness rather than competition. Although ethical principles might appear as part of the re-embeddedness of economics into society, cultural and political resistance play a part in accomplishing this, which is absent in the co-operative identity of PrintCoop. It does not aim to challenge the market economy; rather it provides an alternative within it, based on a distinct rationality of multidirectional power relations. Finally, the political element that was present decades ago seemed to have disappeared.

“They remember the political old days when there were riots and stuff over here, and I think they used to go and join them. All these political [ideas] seemed to calm down since then. (...) If they said to me we’ll shut down today and we’re all going to lose some money, because we are going to go to some march, it’s not forced but... [breaks off]. (...) It’s not like it was” PrintCoop³⁷

Based on these quotation, it is possible to say that making a living has surpassed the radical standpoints of co-op identity for PrintCoop members. The hegemony of capitalism is challenged in the means of production, but not as a system; power relations are the focus of disputes but not structures.

By contrast, values of co-operative identity in GrafiCoop are immediately related with a divergent understanding of labour relationships based on solidarity and political action. It is a collective construction that goes beyond the co-operative itself, and to what solidarity is central.

“Helping others to set up a co-op is a political action, and that is what we do. (...) In my mind, every action is political, not only those of parties. It is similar to old cooperative solidarity and the solidarity from where unions and other organisations emerged”

GrafiCoop 3

The idea of political and economic transformation is embedded in the co-operative identity for GrafiCoop. Through co-operative action, it attempts to give rise to a social transformation similar to what co-ops provoked at the beginning of the 20th century in Argentina (Giovannini and Vieta, in press). The significance of solidarity is central for this, as it calls into question individualism and creates reciprocal bonds that overcome it. The role of the crisis in 2001 in this understanding of co-operative identity is undeniable, and the footprint of very radical ventures, such as reclaimed enterprises (Ruggeri and Vieta, 2015).

Discussion

Having analysed the social practice of both co-ops, this section draws an overarching conceptualisation of them and compares the role of SSE organisations in Argentina and the UK and discuss their representations, social relations and identities. The purpose of this is to answer the question about to what extent worker co-operatives in the UK and Argentina rely on the value of solidarity, which can subsequently pursue for transformative political practices.

PrintCoop is concerned about ethical businesses —mainly in relation to decent working conditions and minimising pollution— and the social and economic dimensions are separated. The idea of SSE as a means to a moral and economic end is rooted in liberal economic theory and denies any political purpose (McMurtry, 2015); this accepts the palliative intention of SSE and misses its

radical potential. PrintCoop has absorbed the neoliberal discourse and it occupies a dominated position towards economic livelihood and welfare services, and ameliorating neoliberal impacts. Furthermore, the concept of dual function organisations (McMillan, 2004) is useful for the analysis of GrafiCoop. There is a first immediate aim —economic sustainability—, and a further aim linked with social transformation —enlarging the co-operative movement and strengthening another economy. Whereas the immediate aim is economic, the long-term objective is political, which is the midwife of the radical impulse. It is not possible to say that this double function will last; however, the fact that worker co-ops are still under formation fifteen years after the crisis might suggest so (Ruggeri and Vieta, 2015). The effort of building up the co-op movement is still a part of the collective memory. Moreover, the double motivation chimes with a broader understanding of well-being, in socio-political and economic terms.

Overrepresentation of the economic dimension in the British co-op puts forward the idea that neoliberal ideology has slipped into co-op discourse, which also reduced to its minimum any expression of political action. Moreover, the social dimension in PrintCoop represents the idea of fair labour relationships, suggesting that market discourse has been internalised. On the contrary, the social and economic dimensions are mutually embedded in GrafiCoop making it impossible to think of one apart from the other. These two dimensions are attached to solidarity, and it is what also makes possible the enlargement of the co-operative movement.

The interaction of GrafiCoop is made on the basis of reciprocity and co-operation that creates a positive synergy which contributes to their sustainability. Through association, organisations can minimise their weaknesses and enlarge their strengths, as well as being a recognisable organisation by society. This capacity for association challenges the external limits imposed on SSE organisations and enacts a different form of social relations that reproduce SSE values. Moreover, the expansion of the boundaries of the sector enable its enlargement in economic, political and

discursive terms. In contrast, the isolation of PrinCoop undermines their capacity for socio-political action. Atomisation is an acceptance of the external constraints imposed on the sector and reflects the loss of radical standpoints in PrintCoop. The lack of value in collective action is a reflection of neoliberal influences in the co-op movement, which have to a different extent transformed the social relations within it.

Regarding the analysis of the identities in the two co-operatives, the main difference that should be highlighted is the fact that a binding ideology is stronger in Argentina than in the UK. This might be a consequence of the radical impulse of Argentinian co-ops and the recent effort put into building it up (Giovannini and Vieta, forthcoming). The identification process is constantly dialectical, made up of several layers. Both co-ops show some elements that belong to the neoliberal ideology, such as the lack of ownership and involvement; however, co-operative ideology still works as a shield.

We would hypothesise that differences pointed out throughout this paper respond to two opposite directions of travel in the general movement of co-operatives that are not unique to the selected organisations; but are part of a movement in each country. On the one hand British co-ops have been experiencing an erosion of political principles (Scott Cato and Raffaelli, 2017). This caused them to lose its radical element: neoliberal discourse is barely confronted, individuality is accepted, solidarity diluted and a move towards marketisation is the current reality. On the other hand, neoliberal ideology provoked a de-collectivisation of Argentinian society during the 1990s (Wyczykier, 2007) but the socio-economic crisis had a boomerang effect. The effects of the crisis could only be tackled collectively, as shortcomings were greater and resources very limited. Hence, political action is deeply embedded in co-operatives in Argentina, which provides a broad well-being and aims to transform the hegemonic structure. The strong articulation between the political and the economic dimensions in co-operatives is an element for transformative social innovation.

In addition, although at first glance the two cases might appear different, deeper analysis taking in consideration of their history is required. The political situation experienced in Argentina during the socio-economic crisis in 2001 might be comparable to what happened in the UK in the 1970s. It was a time of turmoil and people who had never participated in any form of political activity decided to do something on their own. The historical proximity of the crisis in Argentina might be the explanation for a much stronger radical impulse in Argentina than in the UK. The impulse to create these organisations is still alive in Argentina (Giovannini and Vieta, forthcoming; Ruggeri and Vieta 2015); meanwhile after the process reached maturity in the UK, it began to decline. Absence of political action in individual representations is partly a consequence of the depoliticisation of society imposed by neoliberal ideology (Wyczykier, 2007). However, the Brexit vote or the results of the last election suggest that society is reaching a crisis with austerity, and people do not believe in the political system. Although this discussion goes beyond the scope of this paper, the lack of faith in politics and the undermining of society open up the space for potential radical change. It could be suggested that the reaction against neoliberalism may be different in organisations founded after the 2008 economic crisis in the UK.

Concluding Remarks and Future Research

In this paper, we put forward the idea that solidarity social relations are a form of political activism that can enact in transformative practices; the role of the political dimension is instrumental in the transformative role of worker co-operatives. Solidarity was a regular topic in GrafiCoop, and in contrast, barely discussed in PrintCoop. Moreover, it was noticeable that respondents in Argentina were much more likely to link their participation in the SSE with a political motivation. Moreover, contradictorily, British interviewees had a highly politicised and critical interpretation of current economic events, greater in PrintCoop than in CommuniRing, while they appeared to accept the

market ideology in terms of their interpretation of their workplace. This suggest that political action does not translate into political ideas in the UK, whereas this articulation looks straightforward in Argentina.

Moreover, market ideology also sabotages channels for collective participation and fruitful links with other organisations. The fragmentation of organisations responds to neoliberal interests and the individuality neoliberalism proposes, and isolated organisations are more permeable to the neoliberal discourse. In the paper we exposed the main differences between British and Argentinian SSE are given by their political action and collective formation and their role in preventing the SSE discourse from becoming absorbed by neoliberalism.

Moreover, in our understanding the separation of the social and economic dimensions was a feature of neoliberal ideology, in opposition to co-op principles. We have shown that co-ops are shaped by market economic principles in reality, which does not allow a real confrontation of this ideology. The smaller impact of the market rationale in Argentinian co-op might be explained by the fact that the memories of the crisis are still fresh and resistance is vivid. In the UK, although there are elements of resistance and history and idealism in people, the market discourse is much stronger. However, although this is not the focus of this research, political events in the last years, including the Brexit vote or the recent election results can suggest that society is reaching a crisis through austerity, and people no longer believe in the political system. If this were the case, perhaps a similar crisis to the one that Argentina experienced in 2001 is about to happen in the UK, which could create more radical potential. This is a possible topic for future work.

Finally, this paper challenges the monolithic idea of worker co-ops, and in contrast presents political activism as a process of struggle and constant transformation. Those organisations that are inclined towards the alleviation of the economic consequences have lost the SSE radical values over time, and in contrast they chime with market companies. The reasons for this move can be found in the

links that these organisations establish with the market or with the government. This latter will also be scrutinised in a future research.

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