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Editorial

The more-than-economic dimensions of cooperation in food production

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A B S T R A C T

Moving forwards from an extensive literature on farmers' cooperatives, this Special Issue aims to explore the interaction and interdependence of multiple material and immaterial benefits associated with cooperation. The eight papers gathered here address a range of contexts to explore the inseparability of a set of 'more-than-economic' benefits of cooperation and consider the wider implications of viewing cooperation in such light. Responding to their insights, this editorial reflects upon the ontological ambiguity of concepts of economy and the political potentiality of cooperative activities. In addition, we highlight three key themes raised by the papers, which emphasize the complexity of processes and values included in cooperation: Relatedness and Embeddedness; Institutions and Formalisation; Histories and Futures. Reflecting on the transformative capacities of cooperation described in this collection, we argue that valuing cooperation as a process rather than a means to fixed-ends can carry its own emancipatory potential, given the ways in which this can work to counter the compartmentalising tendencies of capitalism. However, we conclude by cautioning that the addressing of more pervasive structural impediments needs to be integrated into cooperative endeavours if such potential is to be fully realised.

1. Introduction

Food and its inter-connectivity with social organisation, politics and culture is a mainstay of rural studies and has, over the years, been the subject of many papers in this journal. The impetus and sensibilities associated with cooperation have, however, undergone substantive changes in response to the continuing reconfiguration of our food systems and the institutions, communities, and environmental systems underpinning these (Bijman et al., 2012; Cook et al., 1997; Merrett and Waltzer, 2004; Mooney et al., 1996; Prager et al., 2012; Stock et al., 2014; van der Ploeg, 2008; Wolf and Bonnano, 2013) - prompting the need for this Special Issue. In particular, we contend that the politics surrounding cooperation present a fraught entanglement of aspirations, positioning and sometimes unexpected transformations, which are in need of careful assessment.

Twenty or thirty years ago the literature was largely concerned with the structure, organisation and performance of formal agricultural cooperatives in a Western context; predominantly aligned with the disciplines of agricultural economics, management and business (e.g. Rhodes, 1983; Vitaliano, 1983; Porter and Scully, 1987). Fewer academic studies concerned themselves with the philosophy or ideology of cooperativism as a movement (but see Lipset, 1971; Worsley, 1971) or the sociology of cooperation itself (but see Gasson, 1977; Sargent, 1982). Today, our parameters of enquiry have been widened – not only in response to the changing formations of cooperation apparent, but also due to the integration of different disciplinary and theoretical approaches. This means that we now need to be more precise in our questioning of what constitutes cooperation, who is cooperating and with what intention(s).

The Oxford dictionary outlines cooperation as *'the action or process of working together to the same end'*. However, the examples covered in this Special Issue do not always indicate that cooperation takes place toward a common goal. Moreover, we note that the idea of 'working together' can suggest simultaneity and similarity of action, whereas our papers include examples of cooperative behaviour that can involve different forms of action, along with actions that are separated in time yet remain connected by an expectation of reciprocation. Contrasting these interpretations with Dunn's (1988: 85) formal definition of an agricultural cooperative reveals other challenges: *"[A] user-owned and controlled business from which benefits are derived and distributed on the basis of use"*. Dunn infers a commercial orientation and degree of formality, whilst our papers tend towards the blurring of these narrow parameters. More recent definitions of agricultural cooperation incorporate a wider set of practices and principles and more flexibility of interpretation (e.g. ICA, 1995; see Ajates Gonzalez, 2017). This is in response to the often uneasy relationships between disparate motives for and benefits from cooperation (Mooney, 2004; Stock et al., 2014; Gray, 2016), particularly in regards to the balance of individual versus collective benefit (Emery, 2015; see Wynne-Jones, 2017).

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The increasing breadth in our understanding of cooperatives has been enabled by research into their normative, cultural and interpersonal dimensions (Gurven, 2006; Emery and Franks, 2012; Kasper and Mulder, 2015; Forney and Häberli, 2016). Here-in, particular focus has been placed on the values underpinning cooperation and the extent to which these are embroiled with, or constitutive of, farmer identity (Stock and Forney, 2014). The role of 'social capital' and network analyses has equally been central to understanding the relations and forms of relatedness within cooperative groupings and how this sustains or undermines them over the longer term (Tapia, 2012; Djanibekov et al., 2013; Crespo et al., 2014; Koutsou et al., 2014; Liang et al., 2015; Abizaid et al., 2015; Tregear and Cooper, 2016); although questions can be raised with regards to the adequacy of such conceptualisations of connection and care (see Wynne-Jones, 2017).

In addition, there is a body of work exploring cooperation as movement. Some of this is overtly class-based and emancipatory, engaging with ideas around food sovereignty, justice and political mobilisations (Desmarais, 2002; Stock et al., 2014; Bacon, 2015; Boone and Taylor, 2016; Diniz and Gilbert, 2013; Pahnke, 2015). Other work studies less overtly political movements, associated more with conceptualisations of local food, sustainability, alternative agriculture and bottom-up approaches to rural development (Baker, 2004; Fandiño et al., 2006; Ortiz-Miranda et al., 2010; Beckie et al., 2012; Balázs et al., 2016). Across these different strands, there is an important debate around the extent to which such formulations lay challenge to mainstream capitalist agricultural production, and the extent to which they politicise or depoliticise food production vis-à-vis the capitalist mode (Kimura and Nishiyama, 2008), which underpins many of the papers in this issue.

Moving forwards from these developments and the persisting tensions highlighted, this Special Issue aims to explore the interaction and interdependence of multiple material and immaterial benefits associated with cooperation. Our aim is not simply to criticise narrow economistic interpretations (following Mooney, 2004), but to explore the very inseparability of a set of 'more-than-economic' benefits of cooperation and to consider the wider implications of doing so, leading us to reflect upon the ontological ambiguity of concepts of economy and the political potentiality of cooperative activities. Here we emphasize the 'more-than-economic' rather than 'non-economic' dimensions to cooperation, to avoid depoliticizing and de-economising social organisational activities or presenting non-economic benefits as 'autonomous forces shaping development' (Hadjimichalis, 2006: 692–693).

Whilst we left our authors to untangle and engage with the 'more-than-economic' in their own way, their papers prompt us to highlight two specific approaches here. The first mirrors preeminent conceptualisations of sustainable development as the integration of social, environmental and economic domains. The second requires that we reconceive what we mean by 'the economy' and 'the economic' altogether. Whilst some of our authors are more or less aligned with a particular approach, we see that many of them start with the former interpretation and then arrive at a position much closer to the latter through the course of their analyses.

To elaborate, the first approach tends to maintain an idea of the economy as a separate sphere of calculable production and value. Although not eschewing the interdependence between the economic and extra-economic, such an approach can retain the same de-socialising and de-politicising effects as a purely empirical focus on, and reification of, the non-economic (de L'Estoile, 2014; cf Hadjimichalis, 2006). Indeed, it is along such lines that Tilzey (2017) conceptualises the 'reified trichotomy' of economy-society-environment as the product of capitalist relations of production and criticises Polanyian inspired visions of cooperative alterity for maintaining rather than challenging this compartmentalisation.

The second approach attempts to offer a less problematic way of understanding and organising human social relations. This follows the thinking of Mitchell (2014) who has argued that 'the economy' as a discrete object, or fact which is calculable and commensurable, emerged relatively recently in the 1940s. Prior to that, he argues, economics was considered a *process*; a process of economising or governing for the prudent use and allocation of resources. This switch has clear implications for decision-making in terms of its narrowly defined and apparently objective determination of value and benefit. Similar thinking, and empirical research, illustrating the inability of narrow, rational economental interpretations of economy to explain human social behaviour and value, has led to calls to extend our thinking on the matter. In Economic Anthropology, for instance, Gudeman (2001, 2008) separates the economy into a community/household realm and a market realm in which actions are motivated by very different temporalities and intentions (see Vladimirova, 2017). Others have argued that we need to "unthink the economy" altogether as a distinct institutional sphere, and instead see it broadly as 'the processes involved in making a living' (where 'making a living' is itself broadly defined not as earning an income but as living a decent and worthwhile life) (de L'Estoile, 2014; Narotzky and Besnier, 2014).

To further ground and enrich these broad divisions, we highlight a further three key themes raised by our papers which we expand upon in sections 3–5.

- Relatedness and Embeddedness
- Institutions and Formalisation
- Histories and Futures

2. Overview of papers

Before turning to this discussion, we provide an overview of the papers to introduce the reader. Geographically, they focus on cooperative endeavours in the UK (Wynne-Jones; Ajates Gonzalez), Switzerland (Forney & Häberli), Italy (Fonte and Cucco), Spain (Ajates Gonzalez), Greece (Spyridakis & Dima), Russia (Vladimirova), Canada (Wittman et al.) and Bolivia (Tilzey); providing very different contexts in terms of the physical environments and modes of food production discussed; along with distinctions in policy and institutional apparatus which have prompted or enabled the groupings in question. Whilst all of the papers employ a predominantly qualitative analysis, drawing on interviews, questionnaires and ethnographic research, some authors take a case-study approach working with specific groups (Ajates Gonzalez; Spyridakis & Dima; Vladimirova; Wynne-Jones) whilst others provide analysis across a sector or emerging movement (Fonte and Cucco; Forney & Häberli; Tilzey; Wittman et al.). Cooperation at a range of spatial scales is discussed, with differing degrees of formalisation and diverse actors represented.

Starting with a focus on the working and transformation of long-standing cooperatives, Forney and Häberli explore transitions taking place within the Swiss dairy sector in the context of increasing deregulation. Ranging from 'traditional' primary cooperatives of farmer members to former cooperatives that have been privatized into Public Limited Companies (with remaining farmer ownership), Forney and Häberli explore the role and remaining importance of the more-than-economic cooperative values of democracy, solidarity, and autonomy. By showing that these values persist (through reconfiguration), as well as creating tensions in all forms of cooperative adaptation studied, the authors argue against simplified dichotomies between 'traditional' and