

**Worker Co-operatives and Spaces of Possibility:  
An investigation of subject space at Collective Copies**

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Accepted 3/16/2011 for publication in *Antipode*  
Available Online first <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2011.00939.x/full>  
Cornwell, J. 2011. Worker Co-operatives and Spaces of Possibility: An Investigation of Subject Space at Collective Copies. *Antipode* 00 1-21

## **Worker co-operatives and spaces of possibility: An investigation of subject space at Collective Copies**

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

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

### **Snap Shot**

It's really just important to see that we can do this. There's a myth you need a boss. There's a myth you need management. There's a myth you need the profit motive. ...these things are just myths. They're proven wrong all the time and we can work together much better without them. (*Adam Trott*<sup>1</sup>, Nov. 2006)

Walking or driving up Pleasant Street towards the University of Massachusetts, Collective Copies is on your left. Even though it looks open and the lights are on, the doors are locked. Collective Copies is having their monthly meeting. Behind the tall storefront windows, thirteen people are seated in a circle looking variously bored, engaged, tired and intent—they may be discussing the financials of their three locations, the purchasing of equipment, or they may be

talking about pledging between \$1000 and \$2000 towards the funding of a staff position for the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives (an ongoing topic begun in March, 2009).

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

Collective Copies was born out of a strike against Gnomon Copies in 1982. One of about 400 worker co-operatives in the United States, it has grown from four founding worker owner members to 13 today and from one small second story rental to three locations in the Pioneer Valley of Western Massachusetts: a large storefront rental in Amherst, and two collectively owned buildings, one in Florence and the other in Belchertown. Collective Copies has maintained its non-hierarchical collective structure and consensus-based decision-making process throughout its years of challenge, growth and success.<sup>2</sup>

By all measures, this non-capitalist enterprise<sup>3</sup> has been expanding for more than 25 years. The pay and benefits are higher than industry average and, despite a decision-making process that some people consider slow and inefficient, Collective Copies' annual revenue continues to grow, reaching \$1.5 million in 2007 (*Trott* 2008, 227).<sup>4</sup> Wages are based strictly on seniority. The difference between the lowest and the highest paid can never exceed two to one and the standard,

as one member points out, is set to provide home owning-wages for the area. Eleven out of 13 worker owner members are homeowners. All members of Collective Copies have full health coverage including medical, dental, mental and preventative and those members who have partners (same or opposite sex) or children have full coverage for them.

## **I. Introduction**

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

My concern in this paper pivots around questions raised in Harvey's 1990 exploration of the social construction of space and time through the capitalist "mode of production and its characteristic social relations" (418). How would we, Harvey asks, "set out to study the ways in which social space and time get shaped in different historical and geographical contexts?" The answer, he rightly suggests, is tied to the "explicit character of our ontological and epistemological commitments" (422). Harvey's critical realist epistemology, his ontological commitment to a world increasingly structured by capitalism leads him and many geographers to explore space and time *under* capitalism.<sup>5</sup> This commitment and the power of the analysis shaped by it have had the performative effect of shaping valuable research agendas and political strategies in geography and beyond. However, if we are able to understand the historical spatial-temporal organization of capitalist growth, and this understanding has performative affects, should we not also seek to understand the spatial-temporal organization of *non-capitalist* growth,

such as that of worker-owned cooperatives? Can I mobilize the explanatory power of historical geographic materialism with a methodological commitment to a politics of possibility? My research and this paper are, in part, an attempt to answer these questions.

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

My discussion is based upon three years of ethnographic research with Collective Copies and the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives including participant observation at monthly meetings, conferences and forums and 20 tape-recorded interviews.<sup>6</sup> The next section of the paper begins with a foray into the theoretical space of economy and subjects opened up by Gibson-Graham. Section three explores the production and management of work and subject spaces. I examine how the production of work space in matters of the shop floor, and subject space, in terms of feelings and communication, differs *in place* between a worker owned cooperative and a capitalist copy shop of similar size. In contrast to Harvey's (1998) treatment of the body as an

accumulation strategy in constituting capitalist subjects, section four explores governance as a constitutive space of co-operative subjects by looking at ethical decision making around surplus distribution and growth. In the concluding section, I argue that co-operative growth, rather than expressing an inherent logic of expansion, is an outcome of subjective experiences and desires. I suggest that the spaces of governance surplus and growth are integral properties in the “emergence” of co-operative space.

## **II Theoretical Space**

This paper is born out of the theoretical space opened up by Gibson-Graham’s feminist critique of political economy that deconstructs the discursive dominance of capitalism in order to open up a space of economic difference. Rather than defining everything with reference to capitalism, including and especially space (a tendency they call “capitalocentrism”), Gibson-Graham offer the language of a diverse economy in which non-capitalist transactions, labor and enterprises are differentiated and located alongside (rather than within) capitalism.<sup>7</sup> Because capitalocentric research agendas have resulted in the theoretical tendency to dismiss and discourage research on noncapitalist economic activity, Gibson-Graham stress the importance of *stance*. Kosofsky Sedgwick (2006) suggests that our trained, discerning academic stance, with its desire for prediction and explanatory power, for judging rather than exploring, has taken on a “paranoid” character that reduces the complexity of representation and negates the capacity of theory to nurture experiments. To mitigate this tendency, Kosofsky Sedgwick (2006) advocates “weak theory” and Gibson-Graham suggest cultivating an “open, concerned and connected stance and a readiness to explore rather than judge” in order to give experiments “room to move and grow” (2008: 620).

Non-capitalist and alternative capitalist labor, transactions and enterprises are increasingly being studied and theorized from the perspective of the diverse economies framework (see e.g., Amin 2009; Gibson-Graham 2006, 2008; Healy 2009; Leyshon et al. 2003; Roelvink & Gibson-Graham 2009; St Martin 2007). Alongside other geographers doing diverse/community economies research, I aim to employ Gibson-Graham’s “techniques for thinking” (2008: 620). For Gibson-Graham, ontological reframing *to produce the ground of possibility* involves

demonstrating the epistemological production of phenomena that are commonly considered structurally given. This technique of thinking encourages us to move away from knowing the economy as *essentially* capitalist in order to deny the forces of (economic) domination their assumed fundamentality or universal reality “and instead to identify them as contingent outcomes of ethical decisions, political projects, and sedimented localized practices continually pushed and pulled by other determinations” (Gibson-Graham 2006: xxxi). Gibson-Graham also suggest re-reading *to uncover or excavate the possible*, a strategy that entails, “reading for difference rather than dominance” in order to “bring into visibility the great variety of noncapitalist practices that languish on the margins of economic representation” (Gibson-Graham 2006: xxxii).

*A Postcapitalist Politics* (Gibson-Graham 2006) and a symposium on “Subjects of Economy” published in *Rethinking Marxism* in 2006 provide the theoretical framing for my focus on spatial subjects. Rather than theorizing the subject as fully subjected, Gibson-Graham (2006: 25), Butler and Connolly (1999) look for openings in the subject as a political space of becoming. By theorizing the becoming (Butler 1997), ambiguous (Connolly 1999) or negative (in the Lacanian sense) qualities of the subject, Gibson-Graham, Butler, Connolly and the authors of the “Subjects of Economy” symposium clear out a “breathing space” for new performances of economy through subjective energies of caring, social concern and collectivity (Gibson-Graham 2006: 51).<sup>8</sup> Along with the above-mentioned authors, in this theoretical space, I seek insight into the production of co-operative subjectivity in one enterprise, and in the movement in which it plays a role.

### **III. Work Space / Subject Space**

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

Harvey suggests that we need to “penetrate the veil of fetishisms” particularly by learning “how space and time get defined by these material processes which give us our daily bread” (1990: 423) so I first turn to the spatio-temporal production of material work space.<sup>9</sup> As Blomley (2003) and Gregson and Rose (2000) among others remind us, both property and space are reproduced through symbolic, practical, material and corporeal enactments. Enacted and

produced through stories and disciplined practices, behaviors and performances, our concepts of and behavior in work spaces condition and are conditioned by the way we understand ownership of that space.

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

Since there is no way to separate labor time from the laboring body, the worker's movements in a capitalist space tend to be subjected to hierarchical authority. As Harvey notes "Marx often fixed this [class] relation in terms of property rights over the means of production (including, in the laborers' case, property rights to his or her own body)" (1998: 405).<sup>10</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich's journalistic account of working for low wages in Minnesota illustrates Ellerman and Harvey's Marxian arguments. Much of Ehrenreich's time in Minnesota was sold to Walmart where she and her fellow employees were repeatedly warned that "time theft is doing anything other than working on company time, anything at all" (2001: 189). This in effect reduced her to thieving because the *time* for which workers are paid belongs to the employer and their movements and activities in *space* must be those for which they are hired (no one is hired or, as Ellerman might say, "rented" to go to the bathroom or use the telephone). The governance of Ehrenreich's labor time and space at Wal-Mart was out of her control—her bosses set her erratic schedule, the boundaries of her work section (women's undergarments, for example), the pace of her work,



and her breaks (when, where and for how long), all of which are policed by surveillance cameras and management.

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

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

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

### ***Worker-ownership of space and time***

In contrast to the employee in a capitalist firm, the worker-owner occupies and produces the work space as both owner and manager of her thinking, moving, laboring body. In their pre-collective lives many workers experienced the spatial and temporal constraints on their bodily movements based on particular ways of "representing space and time" (Harvey 1990: 419) that justified the rental of employee time. Working for Collective Copies, members cherish the temporal-spatial freedom they find in not having rented their time to a higher authority. Perhaps because, as Harvey suggests, "concepts of space and time and the practices associated with them are far from socially neutral in human affairs" (1990: 424), nearly every Collective Copies member that I interviewed cited control of their time as an invaluable aspect of working in the co-operative. They appreciate being able to take little breaks to compose themselves in a moment of crisis, to get a check cashed or pick up the kids when they need to and they don't think this is something they would be able to do at a "regular" copy shop. As Wright commented:

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

The management/governance of time and space at Collective Copies extends beyond emergency breaks from the floor. Nicole Wright makes the schedule but she gives everyone "exactly what they want" and expects people to volunteer for what hasn't been covered: "I write *please fill* and

expect everyone to work it out among themselves” (*Wright*, Nov. 2006). Sometimes that means sacrificing your favorite shifts for a while in order to support co-worker-owners and/or so you can have what you want or need in the future. For example, one worker gave up his favorite schedule while his co-worker’s wife was in nursing school but he was able to take an extended leave of absence later on. Collective members also schedule leave time. They can negotiate a “sabbatical” (a year off for a personal project) without losing their job and vacation time beyond their paid allotment. Rather than being governed by mandated constraints, however, the workers’ temporal-spatial work lives are negotiated with each other.<sup>11</sup> We could understand this space of temporal and spatial collective negotiation as a “momentary opening for the expression of a different subjectivity based on an ethic of care for the other” (Gibson-Graham 2006: 32).

At Collective Copies, the organization of objects in space is similarly not orchestrated by one owner or manager. Without my asking, one collective member brought up the difference between the layout of Collective Copies and that of a local capitalist copy shop of similar size: “The designers are physically above and away from the production workers and there’s probably another office away from that for the [owner]... sort of a top-down flow of work... (*Wetmore*, March 2008). The layout of Collective Copies is flat—just like the management structure. Wetmore is a tentative supporter of worker-ownership; he’s not convinced it could work everywhere but one of his best moments, he said, was when they “accomplished this very stressful and very disruptive change of orientation of the shop.”

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

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

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

#### **IV. Spaces of Possibility**

New spaces of possibility are opened up by collective ownership. I refer to governance, surplus and growth (of the subject, firm and movement) as “spaces” in accordance with Massey’s understanding of space. Massey refers to space as a product of interrelations and open processes with the possibility of multiple and heterogeneous trajectories, the political corollary of which “can force into the imagination a fuller recognition of the simultaneous coexistence of others with their own trajectories and their own stories to tell” (2005: 10-11). Following Ranciere (on political) and Massey (on space), Dikeç, refers to political spaces as those openings that “could possibly become the sites of democratic pronouncements” (2005: 181). Space, says Dikeç

does not become political just by virtue of being full of power or competing interests. It becomes political by becoming the place where a wrong can be addressed and equality can be demonstrated” (Dikeç 2005: 177)

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

In line with Graham and Amariglio (2006), Dikeç (2005) and Massey's (1999), emergent conceptions of space, I would like to inject the space of the subject into conversations on geographic space making because it seems to me that the qualitative character of an economic space is constituting and constituted by subjects who participate in producing it for themselves and for others. In the case of Collective Copies, democratic decision-making especially around surplus and growth are co-creating co-operative subjects and political space. The ability to govern co-operatively, and to direct surplus towards growth of the firm or the movement, in other words, constitutes an emergent co-operative subjectivity at the same time as it enables and constitutes co-operative growth.<sup>12</sup>

### *Space of Governance—cultivating democratic subjects*

According to the employment contract, as discussed above, the employer, or “capitalist” as Harvey following Marx would say, “has the right to whatever the laborer produces, has the right to direct the work, determine the labor process, and have the free use of the capacity to labor during the hours and at the rate of remuneration stipulated in the contract” (1998, 408). Worker owned co-operatives, in contrast, adopt a variety of governing models—from majority rule to consensus. Larger co-ops often elect representatives to make decisions for the co-operative.<sup>13</sup> Collective Copies makes decisions based on consensus which means 13 people have been heard (in Dikeç's (2005) terms their “democratic pronouncements” have been heard) and their opinions taken into consideration before an agreement is reached and an action moves forward (or not).<sup>14</sup> Inhabiting this democratic space, however, represents challenges and opportunities both for the co-operative and for the individual worker. Worker-owners are challenged to have patience, good communication skills and to be actively engaged in the business and with their co-workers. While these challenges provide opportunity for personal (and inter-personal) growth, the process, workers say, also enables them to make better decisions as a business.

According to Nicole Wright the pressures of “staying competitive in the market and being adaptable” are the same for the co-operative as they are in a capitalist shop but, she says, “when you have 13 people thinking about how to solve problems... we don't get stuck as you might as a single owner” (Nov. 2006). For Wright, the process of consensus-based decision-making means

making *better* decisions; it also means that she never leaves “feeling like, things were unfair.” She says, “I leave feeling like, for whatever reason, a different decision was made [but] I never feel like someone’s controlling my life” (*Wright*, Nov. 2006). At Collective Copies the fairness of the governing process resides in the ability (and place/space) to express one’s opinions as much as it does the obligation to listen to those of others (who may or may not agree). In contrast, the owner or manager(s) of a capitalist shop often has exclusive control over most decisions made in/about their business/work space. For example, of her solely owned copy shop, Lauren Olsen says, “I get my way all the time here” (Nov. 2006).<sup>15</sup>

While having a say in the governing process may, as Wright suggests, lead to better decisions, it also takes time and it can be frustrating to expose your feelings, ideas and passions to the group, especially when co-worker-owners challenge them. Although consensus has been “one of the biggest learning experiences” in Randy Zucco’s collective life, the pace of progress that depends upon thirteen people’s opinions can be frustrating for him, especially when the motion brought to the group is one of his ideas:

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

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

With 13 participating voices, communication is the key to successful decision-making and maintaining good will among members. While worker-owners would say they’re “not experts,” meetings among worker-owners are described by outsiders as extremely efficient.<sup>16</sup> The ability to communicate one’s ideas, feelings and opinions is aided by meeting a structure (having an

agenda, facilitator, note-taker and timer) but on a personal level (on a daily basis as well as during meetings) learning to communicate is an ongoing process for most of the worker-owners:

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

Communication is linked to the security enjoyed at Collective Copies because worker-owners are members “for better or worse.” When you have a say in the major decisions affecting your workplace and livelihood, even in hard economic times, it's nearly impossible to get fired or “downsized.” According to Strimer, who has been a worker-owner for 36 years, worker-owners are much more secure because “you have a full say in what you do”. It's important he says, for a worker-co-op to “stay on top of the financials ...so if the numbers are declining we have a chance to make mid-course corrections and we'll absorb it as a whole group rather than [firing] any one person.” (Nov. 2006)

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

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

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

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

In the language of Gibson-Graham we could call this transformative experience a process of resubjectivation—the cultivation of democratic subjectivities—or the emergence of co-operative

subjects. I am particularly interested in this emergence (and how it happens) because these co-operative “subjects” are not only sustaining themselves and their own worker co-operative, they are working on regional co-operative development and participating in co-op networks worldwide.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The decision to provide healthcare as a cost of production (covered by what we could call necessary labor), for example, stands in contrast to what Olsen decided for her capitalist business. Since Olsen had also been a member of Collective Copies before leaving to open her



own shop in a near-by town, I asked if the pay and benefits at her shop were comparable to those of Collective Copies when she worked there. “Um...” she said, pausing and looking at the ceiling:

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

A sole proprietor has the power to appropriate the surplus produced by her workers and decide where it should go (into her bank account, into the business, into her children’s college funds, for example).<sup>17</sup> CEC authors suggest that the exclusion from decisions about the surplus (that the workers produce and) that sustains the larger society may facilitate one’s constitution “as an ‘individual’ bereft of a possible community and communal subjectivity” (2001, 26). This exclusion from the opportunity to distribute surplus might also be part of what Harvey, following Marx, might call “the nexus of alienation.” (1998: 408).

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

opportunity for the co-operative movement. Currently five percent is invested in regional development of worker co-operatives.

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

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

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

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

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

Unlike capitalist expansion that is typically understood as a logical accumulation driven by the need to secure market share and higher returns, co-operative expansion is informed by a mixture of motivations and is the outcome of workers' decisions. While both enterprise models share some incentives and disincentives for expansion, contrary to the capitalist model in which more workers produce more surplus to be appropriated by the sole proprietor or shareholders, the co-operative model redistributes surplus to the workers who produce it. So, barring other incentives, individual worker owners have little to gain financially by adding additional worker-owners or another business (or location). This (re)distribution of gains is often understood as a disincentive for co-operative growth and accounting for it is key to co-operative development. The development strategies practiced by worker (and consumer) co-operatives in Northern Italy, the Mondragon Co-operative Complex in Spain, the Arizmendi co-operative development model in California, Evergreen co-operative development in Ohio and the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives are addressing this “disincentive” directly. They marshal surplus produced by individual co-operative businesses towards the goals of development and education. These strategies are exciting and I touch upon one in the following section, however, in line with this

paper's focus on co-operative subjectivity, the curiosity this section addresses is the fact that Collective Copies members decided to grow despite the absence of a profit motive. Long term benefits and risks aside,<sup>18</sup> expanding Collective Copies to two new locations entailed the extra labor of proposals and projections, renovations on two buildings, and hiring and training new workers, all at the cost of profit sharing during the first year (or more) when the start up is slow. Considering the pride that members take in donations, an understandable desire to maximize the size of profit share, and more work for the same or even less pay, how did how did members agree to purchase two buildings and expand to three locations?

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

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

Me: Is this a formal committee?

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

This subculture's unofficial membership changes over time but it consists of those collective members we would consider co-op activists or co-oppreneurs. For most members, the transition from when "work was just a job" to becoming a worker-owner has been a transformative one but for those who have become worker co-op activists, this transformation seems especially profound. Randy Zucco had no idea what worker ownership was before coming to Collective Copies 11 years ago. He discovered Collective Copies and worker-ownership when he answered an ad from a newspaper: "I found out because I came to the interview and there were [eyes wide, eyebrows raised] eleven people in the room interviewing me!" (Zucco, Nov. 2006). Though he said it took three years to actually feel like a worker-owner, he is now a worker co-op activist.

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

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

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

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

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

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

By growing itself as a business, Collective Copies has self-consciously created more co-operative space (and co-operative subject positions) in order to set an example and be able to invite more workers into the circle of worker ownership. One story that members love to recount is that of Ann St. Jean who had been working at Staples (the dominant North American office supply chain) for ten years and was a manager there when two members of Collective Copies' hiring committee came through her checkout line and asked if she might want to come in for an

interview. At the time she was not looking for a job and she “had no idea” what Collective Copies was all about but 8 years into her co-operative career she said,

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

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

At Collective Copies the space of collective decision-making cultivates subjects committed to maintaining their own co-operative and reaching out to participate in the wider worker co-operative movement. There are 11 worker co-operatives in the Connecticut River Valley of Western Massachusetts and Southern Vermont and workers at Collective Copies have been instrumental in organizing these co-operatives into Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives (VAWC).<sup>19</sup> VAWC began as an informal meeting of several worker owners in someone’s kitchen and evolved into a formal relationship of businesses with combined estimated revenue of \$6.75 million and growing (Project Report to VAWC Monthly Member Meeting, Oct. 2009). VAWC’s democratically governed monthly meetings are a nurturing space for co-operative culture; they are an opportunity for worker owners from different co-operatives to connect and share their experiences, problems, resources and opportunities with each other. Together these 11 co-operative businesses are building the culture of co-operation in the Valley by skill sharing, joint marketing, inter-VAWC purchasing, mentoring newer co-operatives and promoting co-operatives in the region through education. Following the examples set in other regions of the world, they are building “upon prior historical-geographical achievements” (Harvey 1998: 414).

The story of the birth and expansion VAWC as a federation and its relationship to the US Federation of Worker Co-operatives and other regional and global networks is pivotal (and I explore it elsewhere) but its inception and growth begins with co-operative subjects and businesses like Collective Copies. For example, Erbin Crowell, VAWC’s first paid staff person, had his own transformative experience as a longtime member of Equal Exchange (a worker co-

operative based in Bridgewater Ma). That is one reason he stepped out of the security he had there to put his “energy toward helping existing co-ops grow and helping new co-ops get started so that more people would have access to what [they] had at Equal Exchange.” (Crowell, Oct. 2008) He came into the region from outside to work with other worker co-opreneurs who are interfacing with producer and consumer co-operatives to open up dialogue and relationships across sectors.<sup>20</sup> Following the example of co-operatives in Emilia Romagna, he and the staff pilot project committee that includes two members of Collective Copies proposed a dues structure in which member co-operatives contribute 1/8<sup>th</sup> of 1% (inspired by to 4/10 of 1% in Northern Italy) of annual revenue and 5% of surplus to fund VAWC’s mission of support, education and development of worker co-operatives.

Collective Copies and VAWC are members of the US Federation of Worker Co-operatives (USFWC), a national organization dedicated to growing worker-co-operatives and democratic work places through co-operative education, advocacy and development.<sup>21</sup> Beyond member dues to the Alliance and Federation, Collective Copies supports these organizations by donating labor time, printed materials, as well as paid leave time so members can participate in workshops, conference calls and attend conferences. Three members took paid leave time to attend the first conference of the USFWC in New York in 2006 and in 2008 Collective Copies used frequent flyer miles and surplus to send six VAWC members, and one researcher to the USFWC conference in New Orleans. This support for the movement of worker-co-operatives (constituted by 13 member voters) demonstrates (1) collective support for their individual co-workers’ dreams (not all Collective Copies members are worker-co-op activists but the collective supports the dreams of those who are), (2) a collective desire to build the movement for ethical reasons, (3) a desire and need to learn from other co-operatives, to support the culture of co-operation and to foster the growth of inter-co-operation (among other topics, conference workshops address practical issues such as worker accountability, enterprise growth and financing).

Practical skills and business strategies come out of national and regional conferences but resulting friendships, self-recognition and inspiration are equally important for the growth of the movement. Participating in local, regional and national alliances and conferences is a way for

worker co-op activists to reaffirm their *co-operative identity* by *seeing themselves as part of a broader movement* and accumulating connections and strategies for success:

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

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

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

## **V Conclusion**

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

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

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

### **Acknowledgements**

Foremost thanks to Julie Graham who made this research and paper possible but sadly did not get to see it published. Infinite thanks to everyone at Collective Copies, especially Adam Trott, for your generous support of this research and the movement more broadly. Thanks to Katherine Gibson, Stephen Healy and



everyone in the Community Economies Collective, for your insight and encouragement. Thanks to Eve Vogel and the graduate students at UMass for both intellectual and emotional spurring.

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St. Jean, A. Personal INTERVIEW. May 2008

Strimer S. Personal INTERVIEWS. November 2006, February 2008

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### **Internet Resources**

The Community Economies Collective

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

The International Co-operative Alliance

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

The United States Federation of Worker Co-operatives

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

The Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives

<http://wiki.valleyworker.org>

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Italicized names refer to worker owner and former worker owner interviewees. I have a longstanding relationship with some interviewees and according to their request and my personal desire to honor their expertise; some of their real names have been used here while others have chosen to remain anonymous.

<sup>2</sup> For more about the “long-standing suspicion [toward] worker co-operatives among political and social analysts on the left,” see J.K. Gibson Graham (2003).

<sup>3</sup> Following the Marxian tradition of Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff (2000), I define capitalist workplace as one in which waged laborers produce surplus that is appropriated and distributed by non-producers (a sole proprietor, board of directors).

<sup>4</sup> Turner (1999) found that the lowest paid worker at Collective Copies made more than the manager of a capitalist shop of similar size.

<sup>5</sup> Peck (1996, 2002), Gough (2003), and Herod (1994, 95, 97, 2001) offer important analyses of the organization of capitalist labor processes; they share what Mehta (2008) following Heidegger, might call an ontic approach built upon the ontological commitments suggested by Harvey in this passage. In contrast my inquiry shares an ontic approach built upon the ontological ground of economic diversity.

<sup>6</sup> Interviews and participant observation were conducted between 2006 and 2009. Ten interviews were with members of Collective Copies. My relationship with the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives involves political action research, a collaborative book project, development of a certificate program at the Department of Economics at the University of Massachusetts and co-presenting at conferences and in university classrooms. These collaborations seek to represent the movement to itself and to the world in order to cultivate and support the movement of worker co-operatives.

<sup>7</sup> Also see Daly (1991) on “The discursive construction of economic space: logics of organization and disorganization”.

<sup>8</sup> Byrne and Healy draw upon poststructuralist Marxian theory and Lacanian psychoanalytical thought to highlight practices in co-operative firms that encourage a relationship to the economy

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that derives “satisfaction from engaging with the various antagonisms, conflicts, and contingencies that attend the co-operative and its relationship with the community in which it is constituted.”(2006: 249).

<sup>9</sup> An in-depth examination of labor geography lies beyond the scope of this paper. Please see Rutherford (2010) for a summary and critique of labor geography and Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2010) for more on labor agency.

<sup>10</sup> The distinction between the ownership of labor (slavery) versus the ownership of labor power (free labor) is blurred in a debate over the rental of time.

<sup>11</sup> Like many negotiations, this is not always easily or expertly accomplished. Unequal workloads can build work-place tensions.

<sup>12</sup> For Gibson-Graham, transformation begins with the subject, they quote Verela who says: “if you want to change yourself, change your environment. If you want to change the world, change yourself.” (Verela 1992 quoted by Gibson-Graham 2006, xxvii).

<sup>13</sup> For more information on governing structures see Hoover in Allard et al. (2007), and Lindenfeld and Rothschild-Whitt (1982).

<sup>14</sup> Members of Collective Copies more accurately call themselves *consensus-seeking* because they move forward with an abstention.

<sup>15</sup> The scope of this paper and its focus on *co-operative* space prevent me from further addressing subjectivity and identifications of capitalist space. For more on capitalist subjects, structures and workplaces see: Braverman 2003; Gough 2003; Herod 2001; and Peck 1996.

<sup>16</sup> Efficiency and meeting cultures vary among co-operatives yet 75 worker-owners representing their various co-operatives in New Orleans at the 2<sup>nd</sup> biannual conference for workplace democracy were elected representatives, heard updates, made comments and voted on several resolutions within two and a half hours.

<sup>17</sup> Surplus distributions made by sole proprietors such as community donations and/or bonuses to workers reduce personal profit gain. The above mentioned sole proprietor, for example, is known to the local community as a generous business person who supports non-profits and community groups. The difference I am highlighting is the *process of participation* in the space of decision-making.



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<sup>18</sup> These would be similar to other enterprise ventures—economies of scale, flexibility, market share, joint marketing—which certainly played a role in the group’s decision to expand.

<sup>19</sup> “The Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives is dedicated to building a sustainable local economy by facilitating the growth, development and promotion of worker co-operatives”. For more information on VAWC see [www.valleyworker.org](http://www.valleyworker.org).

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

<sup>21</sup> For more information about the USFWC see <http://www.usworker.coop/about/mission>