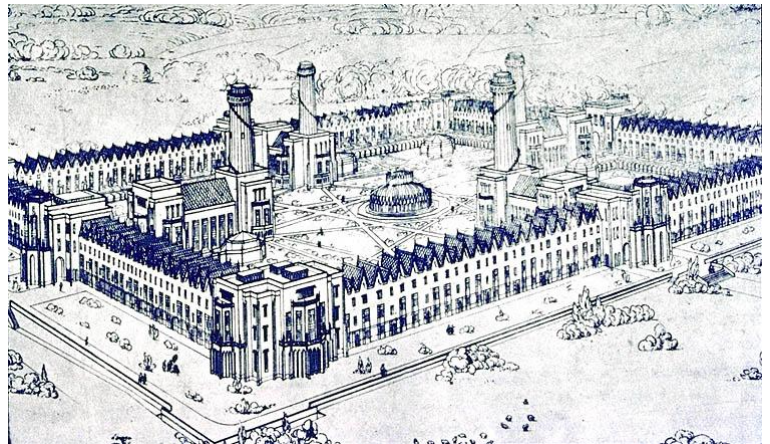


Re-visiting the Owenites—contemporary cultural co-ops

Co-operatives as an alternative business model to solely commercial firms are a widely known concept, partly through UK supermarket experiences. But, as Kate Oakley summarises early findings from her recent project, there's much more to the practice of co-ops. Her interview study shows that the political, historical and ethical meanings attached to the idea of a co-op—and of working co-operatively—is what motivates workers and keeps them going in the long term. Institutional support, however, to maintain a co-op structure against mainstream pressure is often inadequate.

Kate Oakley

In Dundee recently to carry out some research, I was struck by a small grey plaque affixed to a wall commemorating Fanny (Frances) Wright. Wright, who later became a US citizen and is perhaps best known as an abolitionist and utopian thinker, is also described on the plaque as a 'Chartist Lecturer' and crucially 'Owenite'. The unfamiliarity of these phrases—a contemporary plaque is perhaps more likely to say 'feminist' or 'social reformer'—reinforced a theme that had frequently occurred to me over the past few months. As part of a [project](#) funded by the AHRC and Nesta,¹ I've been looking at co-ops in the cultural sectors in Scotland—interviewing artists and film-makers, theatre directors, jewellery makers and musicians—among others. I am interested in why they decided to form co-ops, what the organisational structure offers them, and whether co-ops and other collective forms of organisation can offer a counterweight to the precarity and isolation that often accompanies cultural work. But what also came through in these conversations is not just the future but the past, the



"New Harmony [in Indiana, USA] as envisioned by Robert Owen" (wiki commons).

¹ ↪ www.pec.ac.uk

long history that co-operatives have in the UK and the sense—very strong in some of my interviewees—that this history has been forgotten.

[New Lanark](#), about 80 miles south of Dundee, and original home of the ‘Owenites’ is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. With its spectacular location in the Clyde Valley, pre-Covid it saw some 400,000 visitors a year, and has appeared on the £20 banknote in Scotland. While the mill of course was not a co-operative in either a formal or informal sense, Owen is regarded as one of the founders of the co-operative movement and his later [utopian experiments in the US](#) sought in varying ways to explore co-operative principles. He is hardly a forgotten figure, his statue sits proudly outside the Co-Op Bank HQ in Manchester, yet as one focus group attendee in Glasgow commented, ‘when you say co-op, people just think you mean the supermarket.’

[As Katherine Trebeck and Peter Kelly have argued](#),² Scotland is in some ways well-placed to witness of revival of co-operative ways of working. It has a [First Minister publicly committed to a wellbeing economy](#),³ a Community Empowerment Act which is said to make it easier for communities to acquire land or buildings for community use, and many local authorities that are keen to support community wealth building and local procurement. It has used citizens’ assemblies to inform policy on the future of Scotland and on climate change. And while it sometimes seems hard to recapture the political optimism that was the flip side to the darkest days of the pandemic; it is also clear that we are in a series of crises that demand radical action.

In a post pandemic landscape characterised by increasing anxiety and atomisation, [co-operatives] seem very much an approach for our times. Advocates of what is called platform co-operativism for example suggest turning private Internet platforms such as AirBnb or Uber into co-operatives owned by all users.

Yet many of those I spoke to, whether they worked in co-ops or other forms of collaborative enterprise, felt isolated and largely abandoned by public policymakers. Lockdowns and the various restrictions necessary to combat Covid had obviously played their part. Collaborative working does not require physical co-location, but for many of my interviewees it is inseparable from it. Membership organisations who cannot meet physically together have drifted apart without the social glue that is needed to maintain them.

As part of the [CUSP’s interests in good work](#)⁴ and my own research interests in [cultural labour](#), I’ve been looking at the potential for cultural co-ops for some time.⁵ In a post pandemic landscape characterised by increasing anxiety and atomisation, they seem very much an approach for our times. In recent years the co-operative model has gained renewed popularity and been adjusted to suit contemporary working realities. Advocates of what is called platform co-operativism for example suggest turning private Internet platforms such as AirBnb or Uber into co-operatives owned by all users. But I also think it matters that we see co-ops and other collective forms of enterprise as part of a longer history, relevant of course to contemporary workplace struggles, but not appearing out of the blue. This history and the narrative it provides could engage today’s cultural workers, not as a history lesson, but as a way of connecting to wider questions about democratisation, about power and about place.

² ↪ <https://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2020/05/19/build-back-better-whats-it-going-to-take-scotland/>

³ ↪ https://www.ted.com/talks/nicola_sturgeon_why_governments_should_prioritize_well_being

⁴ ↪ See for example, Isabelle Ferreras: [Democratising Firms—A Cornerstone of Shared and Sustainable Prosperity](#) — The Jus Semper Global Alliance, May 2021.

⁵ ↪ See Boyle & Oakley, *Co-Ops in the Cultural Industries*, 2018.

More than the supermarket—the practice and understanding of co-ops

My current project⁶ involves looking at the practice and potential for cultural sectors co-ops in Scotland. The aims are to examine how widespread understanding of co-ops is among creative workers and students, to probe these issues in three distinct parts of the country, with different ‘creative economies’ and importantly, to explore what skills and training people think they may need to set up a co-op, and how higher education can respond to that. I’ve been talking to people in Glasgow which has the largest concentration of cultural employment in Scotland, in Dundee, also home to a well-respected art school, but with a lively videogames sector, and in rural Dumfries and Galloway.

There are over 500 co-ops in Scotland, but less than 50 that would be understood as part of the cultural industries. Some

Co-operatives of any sort operate for the benefit of their members, and any surplus generated by the business can be disbursed to members... the key principle of a co-op is about shared decision-making, regardless of any financial stake a member might have, everyone getting gets an equal vote in major decisions.

of these are relatively long established, the [Media Co-Op](#) in Glasgow has been around for several years,⁷ while others have been formed in the last couple of years. What rapidly became clear as we put out calls for interviews and focus groups, was that there were many organisations that strictly fall outside the definition of a ‘co-operative’ but which nevertheless see themselves as adhering to co-operative principles. Not waiting a narrowly legalistic definition to constrain the discussion, we

included a variety of collectives for the research. What began as desire to widen the pool of interviewees however, produced a much more fruitful discussion about the particular political role and history of co-ops, and the institutional support and climate that is needed to support them.

Co-operatives of any sort operate for the benefit of their members, and any surplus generated by the business can be disbursed to members, perhaps in the form of dividends for a consumer co-op, or in sharing any surplus among staff in a workers’ co-op. Beyond this however, the key principle of a co-op is about shared decision-making, regardless of any financial stake a member might have, everyone getting gets an equal vote in major decisions. [As David Boyle and I](#) argued in a pamphlet for Co-Ops UK, this is exactly the sort of control that may creatives say they want but are told is only available to them as entrepreneurs. While there is no strict legal definition of a co-operative in the UK and while they can be established as an industrial and provident society, they can also be established as a company limited by guarantee or more often these days as a Community Interest Company (CIC), a form that was established to support social enterprises in particular.

What was striking among the more recent organisations that we spoke to was that many had been encouraged to adopt the organisational form of a Community Interest Company, even if they had originally wanted to become a workers co-op. Some spoke of feeling ‘pushed’ into a adopting a CIC or other social enterprise form. They had approached business support agencies (such as Scottish Enterprise) for advice on how to move from what was often a loose collective of artists or cultural workers, and were told that forming a workers co-op was ‘too complicated’ or would ‘take too long’. Yet for those people, forming a co-operative was a political statement, an association with the politics of (small l) labour that was not captured by the idea of ‘social enterprise.’

⁶ ↪ See <https://www.pec.ac.uk/news/our-first-commissioned-research-projects>

⁷ ↪ [media co-op | award-winning media production for social change](#)

While the difference between legal structures and set ups may seem a little arcane, it reflects struggles that have taken place throughout the history of the co-operative movement. In her article entitled, *What would Rosa do?*,⁸ Marisol Sandoval considers views of co-ops as part of a struggle between reformist and revolutionary change, quoting Rosa Luxemburg's hostility to co-ops, which she deemed incapable of transforming the capitalist mode of production and likely to be absorbed into entrepreneurial models or—if they insisted in sticking by their politics—to fail. The global success of co-ops such as Mondragon⁹ suggests that this is not necessarily the case, although it is clear that while they provide alternatives to capitalist modes of production within capitalism, they cannot be deemed to have the transformative effects that their founders perhaps envisaged. For Tara Mulqueen,¹⁰ this tension goes right back to the start of the co-operative movement in the early 19th century when 'Villages of Co-Operation,' and utopian communities such as the ones Fanny Wright was involved in, were as much a part of the co-operative idea, as were shops and other businesses. The founding of the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers in 1844, is often cited as the moment when the movement became more pragmatic, turning away, 'from understanding co-operatives as a project of community, and towards framing them as businesses.'¹¹

The founding of the Co-operative Party during the First World War was of course a wider form of political engagement, but much as the for Labour Party, with whom it has had an electoral pact since the 1920s, social democratic reformism has held sway (with some exceptions) for the majority of that history. While the Co-Operative party retains members across both Houses in Westminster as well as the Senedd and Scottish Parliament, its absorption into the official opposition has no doubt blunted some of the radical aims the founders envisaged. Today, a Conservative Prime Minister (David Cameron) can admire the 'business model' of a co-op¹² and co-op organisations themselves will talk in terms of business or competitive advantage of the model.

Yet the economy remains a political sphere, the workplace somewhere we are often confronted by questions of inequality or exploitation, the act of working involves constant political choices. Mine and others' research on cultural labour bleeds into questions of representation and of consumption—who and how people produce culture in the workplace shapes our society. This research was focussed on co-ops as places of work and production, but wider questions of politics and social movements kept poking through. In Scotland, this debate has a particular inflection. The almost total collapse of the Labour Party in a country it once dominated, and the rise of the Scottish National Party (SNP) has led to a certain 'rebranding' of co-operatives. In interviews with policymakers, while support for community-owned businesses remains a plank of economic development policy, terms like Social Enterprise are often preferred to co-operative. The Co-Operative Development Service, a part of Scottish Enterprise the national economic development agency, retains the term in its title, but recent years have seen a stronger focus on broader notions like the 'health and wellbeing economy.' Glasgow City Council, now SNP rather than Labour controlled, has also changed its emphasis from co-ops to social enterprises in a city that was once seen a stronghold of co-operatives.

Some of this simply reflects the running down of economic development services across the country and cuts in public spending. All of the policymakers I spoke to have seen staff and funding cuts in the years since 2010, resulting in less

⁸ ↪ Sandoval, M. (2016). What would Rosa do? Co-operatives and radical politics. Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture, 63

⁹ ↪ See J.K. Gibson-Graham, (2003) Critical Sociology, Enabling Ethical Economies: Cooperativism and Class Volume: 29 issue: 2, page(s): 123-161 for an excellent discussion of this case

¹⁰ ↪ Mulqueen, T., 2012. When a Business isn't a Business: Law and the Political in the History of the United Kingdom's Co-operative Movement. Oñati Socio-legal Series [online], 2 (2), 36-56. Available from: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2050353>

¹¹ ↪ See above page 41

¹² ↪ See [BBC NEWS | Politics | Cameron launches 'co-op movement'](#)

time to give advice to new organisations or carry out the necessary research, and very little money for public support such as start-up loans. At the same time, there is a feeling of initiative over-load with, as one local authority interviewee put it, ‘the Council now has a social enterprise strategy, a circular economy strategy and green growth—but all in different departments and they don’t necessarily see that it is the same thing.’

For the SNP, which describes itself as ‘centre-left and social democratic,’ terms like social enterprise or community business are less clearly identified with labour history and hence with the Labour Party. Given the dominance of the SNP, one focus group member argued ‘the history of co-ops and their politics could be barrier to their growth in Scotland,’ but for other interviewees trying to ‘take the politics out of it’ doesn’t work. As one Glasgow attendee said, ‘the political baggage is part of it, it’s essential to the formation and sustainability of co-ops.’ Other research supports this argument. Research carried out for [Cultural Workers Organise](https://www.culturalworkersorganize.org)¹³ suggests a positive relationship between discussing co-operative principles at work, and wider engagement and sustainability.

For most of the organisations I spoke to, the decision to form a co-op was politically motivated, the ‘business advantage’ of being a co-op rarely registered. One recent graduate and co-op member was inspired by the idea that it would be ‘fun and democratic, with everyone having chance to have their voice heard.’ Getting away from hierarchy was frequently mentioned. An interviewee from an artist co-op in Dumfries and Galloway told us of her experience setting it up: While keen to ‘stop running it through my bank account,’ she would have liked more time to talk to advisers and reflect on organisational models. ‘I was enjoying researching ownership models, and wanted a flatter model,’ but felt she was rushed into forming a limited company (a CIC), complete with a board of directors, a form she still feels does not reflect

“they wanted to create a company for workers and freelancers that was equal and treated people decently.”

her priorities. Another interviewee commented that they have come out of the media industry and did like some aspects of the way it runs, they wanted to create a company for workers and freelancers that was equal and treated people decently—an

aspiration that was born out by one member who said, ‘I can’t imagine being in a situation at work where I could not voice my opinion and say no, that’s wrong.’

Throughout the interviews there was a sense that many of those involved in co-ops and other collectives wanted to push things further. People were interested in what they could learn from social movements in terms of flat organisational structures and collective decision-making methods such as sociocracy. One local authority policymaker linked this explicitly to climate change, which he argued was starting to change how people view capitalism overall, ‘there are cracks in the physical and social fabric, people are starting to say, wait a minute what’s going on here?’

The connection between co-operative working and wider social movements was examined by Robert Hollands and John Vail in their work on the Amber Collective,¹⁴ a group of radical film-makers and photographers, primarily working in Newcastle and the North East of England. Set up as they were in the late 1960s, [Amber](https://www.ambercollective.org) drew inspiration from the events of May 1968 in Paris and the anti-Vietnam war movement, as well as art world radicalisation such as the six-week occupation of Hornsey Art College and its aftermath. Reading Holland and Vail’s account of the early years of Amber in some ways seems as far from the present moment as Owenite communities of the 1820s do. Not just because of the spirit of optimism that is evident, but because of the physical and social infrastructure that underlay such initiatives.

¹³ ↪ www.culturalworkersorganize.org

¹⁴ ↪ R Hollands & J Vail, 2012, [The art of social movement: Cultural opportunity, mobilisation, and framing in the early formation of the Amber Collective Poetics](#) 40 (1), 22-43

Hollands points out that universities and art schools, radical bookshops and film clubs, trade union meetings and community centres, festivals and squatting all provided a dispersed but tangible underpinning—what he calls a ‘cultural opportunity structure’—to the ferment of ideas and relationships that formed the Amber Collective.

By contrast, despite the influence of contemporary social movements and the sense of crisis that pervades our society, the opportunity structure, cultural and political, looks somewhat different. It is possible to exaggerate this of course. The

When he was studying art, everything he was taught encouraged co-operation and collaboration—‘but once we got to the degree show that the end of it—it was all about business and competition.’ The very real need to help students get work when they graduate is dominated by entrepreneurial models.

world is exhausted by the pandemic and the atomisation that accompanies it, and much political activity has moved into more polarising online spaces, though the streets are still alive with protests from Black Lives Matter to Extinction Rebellion. But the dismantling of arts schools,¹⁵ polytechnics and other forms of adult education (outside of universities), has narrowed

entrance to cultural education, and high fees have produced an indebted graduate population with fewer options. While critical education undoubtedly survives in universities, contradictions abound. As one interviewee told us, when he was studying art, everything he was taught encouraged co-operation and collaboration—‘but once we got to the degree show that the end of it—it was all about business and competition.’ The very real need to help students get work when they graduate is dominated by entrepreneurial models.

Outside of education, spaces of collectivity from pubs to community centres, nightclubs to playing fields have been lost to development, and collective organisations such as trade unions or political parties have lost members. While membership of organisations such as the RSPB or the National Trust is very high, this is often of a passive type—without the need for much collective decision making. A striking theme that emerged in the research was just this. As one interview said, ‘Most new staff have not worked in a co-op environment, so they do need to understand what it involves. You will be invited to become member, do you know what that means? You have to help run the business, are you ready for that? We are so used to current structures, that when people are given power they don’t know how to take it.’

One interviewee, who helps run a co-operative makerspace in Glasgow, noted that all new members are taught about what a co-op is, way before they learn anything about making stained glass. A lot of people understand classes as being taught he said, whereas in their organisation, everyone is working on the same piece at the same time, so the co-operative ethos runs through production itself, not just the set-up of the organisation. In this case, ‘members’ are the general public as the makerspace is free to those who want to use it (who in time become co-op members). But the way it operates often produces bafflement. ‘They say, what time is class and we say, there are no classes, we are all teaching each other.’ Some people really love the co-op ideals, but they find the idea that they don’t pay and there is no ‘teacher’ difficult to understand—‘you can see almost fear in their eyes.’ Others commented that those who have worked in conventional organisations, particularly for a long time, don’t always know how to work in a flat organisation, hence co-op founders often end up with continuing ‘managerial’ roles—trying hard to give away power. Burnout for such people is a real issue, as most research on co-ops affirms—it is very hard to get all members to equally commit, and equal distribution of benefits does not always mean equal distribution of labour.

¹⁵ ↪ See Banks, M & Oakley, K. 2016. The dance goes on forever? Art schools, class and UK higher education. Special Issue, International Journal of Cultural Policy, 22, 1, pp 41-57.

Conclusions—making good

So what is the future for cultural co-ops and what would it take to repair the opportunity structures that make them

“mutual support,’ or the collective practice of producing things together... making was the common denominator in what they, did, ‘making self, making community, making connection as well as making things’.

possible? There are obviously a huge range of measures that would be needed from planning law to retain community spaces, to debt-free higher education to truly begin that repair work, but in keeping with the theme of this short paper there are some relatively

practical, shorter-term measures that concern awareness raising, collective and business support and higher education.

Tara Mulqueen draws attention to something that was very evident in my interviews—the idea of co-operation as a practice. This can be what Yeo and Yeo refer to as, ‘the continual practice of mutual support,’¹⁶ or it can be the collective practice of producing things together. One interviewee who works at a woodworking collective put it beautifully, when she said that making was the common denominator in what they, did, ‘making self, making community, making connection as well as making things’.

For Sandoval, it is the meetings, the conversations, the sometimes-lengthy discussions and the occasionally-prolonged decision-making processes that is the work of co-operation. For both Sandoval and Gibson Graham¹⁷ that work is the job of repoliticising the economic sphere—creating alternatives in the workplace that may bleed into wider society. Indeed as one focus group attendee detailed, the lengthy discussions they had had about something as seemingly mundane as cleaning the theatre spaces where they worked (who should do the cleaning? Should everyone? Could cleaners be bought in?) showed how questions of class, gender, hierarchy and what counts as ‘work’ become apparent.

For many arts co-ops, collective production is at the heart of production and while elements of competition can tarnish this, much about contemporary education stresses collaboration and even collective outputs. Recent graduates in one

The history and global reality of the co-operative movement, the fact that alternative ways of working exist, have existed and have succeeded, was what many felt was sorely missing.

focus group spoke of being trained in co-operation having done a lot of collaborative work as part of their education, despite the highly competitive atmosphere. When I asked what people felt was needed from higher education therefore, the answer was less about specific skills, not even about decision-

making processes, but rather simply—‘teach history and the fact that co-op exists.’ The history and global reality of the co-operative movement, the fact that alternative ways of working exist, have existed and have succeeded, was what many felt was sorely missing. As with teaching about entrepreneurship, it was less the legal aspects of setting up a co-op that people felt was important—rather it was the ethos and politics of co-ops, alongside the fact of them. The expansion of creative or cultural industry degree courses, in addition to those in music, film and TV, video games and fine arts have been a feature of the UK HE landscape for a number of years now and the market is still growing. As someone who has taught on such courses, I am very familiar with the demand from students for work-related learning and help with career planning and we need to respond to this, but beyond entrepreneurial models we need a stronger emphasis on co-operative and collective models and on co-operative ways of working. Ideally, cultural co-ops can be brought in to advise and work on this alongside students and staff.

¹⁶ ↪ See Yeo, E., and Yeo, S., 1988. On the Uses of ‘Community’: From Owenism to the Present. In: S. Yeo, edtr. *New Views of Co-operation*, pg 30. London: Routledge

¹⁷ ↪ J.K. Gibson Graham (2003) *Enabling Ethical Economies: Cooperativism and Class*, *Cultural Sociology*, 20, 2, pp 123-158

Similarly business support agencies need both the skills and the time to provide more help to potential co-operators. While mutual aid is the foundation of the co-operative movement and organisations like Co-Ops UK can offer a wide

In all the interviews, there was a clear need to expand support organisations and networks, not simply for practical advice, but for the feeling of fellowship and solidarity that these can offer.

range of support and advice, including legal and financial advice, access to finance, collective insurance and marketing, this will generally help those already established as co-ops. Those looking to set up a co-op may still be advised by lender or other institutions to contact economic

development agencies—very few of whom have the requisite specialist knowledge or time. In all the interviews, there was a clear need to expand support organisations and networks, not simply for practical advice, but for the feeling of fellowship and solidarity that these can offer. The politics of the co-operative movement may still seem too radical for some agencies, happy to use enterprise or even to talk of community, but wanting to steer clear of the politics of the workplace. But it is clear that existing support is inadequate to the hunger for change in the way that the cultural sector works and the way it treats its workers.

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