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We own it, we run it: do worker cooperatives resolve the problems of alienation?

Jason Budge | Interdisciplinary Studies | Session 5A

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The title of my presentation is “We own it, we run it: do worker cooperatives resolve the problems of alienation?” As an introduction, I would like to familiarize you all with the ideas that me and my research are in conversation with.

I am studying how we can develop and globalize (or not globalize) in a more sustainable, ethical, and socially just way. I was inspired by the geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham, who argue that scholars have the responsibility to research forms of economic organization that are non-capitalist in nature but are considered unimportant, irrelevant, or are simply unknown in discussions of economies in order to bring attention to and legitimize these forms of economic organization. My research is an effort to implement this kind of academic praxis by researching worker cooperatives and their effects on worker happiness and fulfillment. In doing so, I hope to bring attention to the cooperative movement and generate a discussion of its merits and faults, and ultimately to question dominant or normative ways of organizing labor.

With these broader themes in mind, I would like to begin by providing a few research questions that guided my work this summer. First, I want to ask bluntly, “Do worker cooperatives offer a more effective way of organizing the workplace in regards to worker happiness and fulfillment?” Of course, if they are able to do this, how? I would also like to ask whether Marx’s theory of alienation is still relevant in the modern era, and whether it is helpful in analyzing the contemporary worker experience. These are questions that I want to explore with you today and maybe tease out some interesting findings.

I think it is important to understand what I mean by alienation. I draw this theory from the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* by Karl Marx. There are essentially four forms of alienation that Marx argues the modern worker experiences in a capitalist workplace. Marx asserts that the worker is alienated from the product of her labor, in other words, she does not own the object which she is producing, but is merely paid to produce it. In the second sense, she is alienated from the very act of labor in that it is not a meaningful activity for her as a human. The third form of alienation is the alienation of workers from each other: we atomize ourselves into individual units competing against each other. The fourth sense is the alienation from the worker’s “species-being”, or the loss of the worker’s innate humanity.

I would like to emphasize that while Marx’s theory of alienation has certainly guided and informed my research, the worker experiences I documented do not easily or simply fit into Marx’s criteria. Rather than forcing the experiences of these workers to gel with Marx’s theory, I would like to let the experiences speak for themselves and that I act more as a facilitator of a dialogue between the theory and the experiences.

In order to capture the richness of the worker experience, I opted to use in depth interviews. I also used a questionnaire so that workers who could not commit to a full interview could still have their opinions heard. I focused my research on three different industries: pizzerias, bicycle shops, and bakeries. Most of my current data is from pizzerias and bicycle shops, but I have begun to expand the scope of my research to include bakeries as well. This presentation is based off the data from workers from six different sites, three pizzerias and three bicycle shops. There is one cooperatively owned pizzeria, one pizzeria with an employee stock ownership plan (ESOP), and one corporately owned pizzeria. As for the bike shops, there is one cooperatively owned bike shop, one independently owned but conventionally organized bike shop, and one corporately owned bike shop.

My research indicates that there are some important differences in the experiences of workers in cooperatives and workers in conventional businesses. Workers in cooperatives generally appear to be prouder of the work that they do and the products they sell, and happier that they work for a business that supports the local community. Workers in conventional businesses tend to want more input in workplace decisions, especially in regards to community involvement and the overall business mission. I am going to discuss three important themes in my research: the relation of the worker to her job, the role of the community in the worker experience, and the importance of structure and input in worker satisfaction.

Most workers in my study expressed pride in the actual labor they performed, while pride in the job itself varied. I discovered that pride in a job well-done is a common experience to all the workers in my study. They love closing the business with perfect balance in the register, fixing a customer complaint graciously and instantly, and delivering a good product to their customers. What is interesting is that despite this, participants in the conventional businesses often dislike the tasks they have to perform or feel like they have to go “on autopilot” in order to accomplish them. These same workers also agree that they work their jobs because of the money they provide. When I asked if their job is meaningful to them, every worker from a non-cooperative business answered that their job is meaningful because of the paycheck they receive. Given a choice, most of these workers would not choose to stay in their current job. In contrast, workers in cooperatives not only enjoy the labor they perform but are also proud of the job they have. For them, being a worker-owner is much more than just a job. As one worker-owner puts it, “I’ve made more money at my other jobs, but I feel good about this at the end of the day.”

I would also like to point out a curious phenomenon that emerged from my research. One of my interview questions was, “Do you feel like your job defines who you are?” Not a single participant answered affirmatively. Many of the workers felt that their friends and family saw their job as defining them, and many recognized that their job makes up a large part of their life. But they never agreed it defined them. They often pointed out other important aspects of their lives, such as gardening or writing, that they felt were more indicative of what actually defined them. Workers in bicycle businesses noted that the cycling community is a huge part their lives, but that the actual shop is only a part of that larger community.

The community, in fact, plays an important role in several of the interviewee’s work experiences. This was one of the more interesting findings from my research. It appears that

when the business places the local community at the center of its business model, the worker feels more connected and proud of their workplace. Worker-owners at cooperative workplaces are very proud of the emphasis cooperatives put on serving the local community. In our interviews, these workers were often most excited about how much their cooperative has been a part of the community. They love that their business gets to be a Berkeley institution of sorts, that they get to see customers continually coming back over the years. Worker-owners consider the community to be one of the integral components of the cooperative model.

In the case of conventional businesses, it was overwhelmingly expressed that more local, community driven business decisions would make the workers happier, especially in the bicycle businesses. When I asked how they would run the business differently, workers in conventional businesses often wished that they could see their business care more about the community members than about profits. Several participants are dissatisfied with the scale of their businesses and the top-down, hierarchical decision making structure that is often too far removed from the local customer base—it begins to feel too “chain-like” or “like a Walmart”.

I would now like to turn our attention to the role of workplace structure and worker input in worker satisfaction. By workplace structure I mean schedules, evaluations, and other forms of accountability. These are both important to understanding the worker experience. I have found that workers in cooperative workplaces tend to want more and better structure, but I am satisfied with their input, whereas workers in conventional businesses are often satisfied with the amount and quality of structure, but want more input in business decisions.

I believe that the tendency for worker-owners to desire more and better structure in their workplace stems from the recent expansion of their businesses. In the past, the cooperatives were smaller and more anarchistic in nature, allowing for an unstructured workplace. With more members and a highly successful business, the cooperatives are realizing they need to either codify unspoken workplace rules or update defunct bylaws. However, the cooperative workplace structure allows for maximal worker input in business decisions. Instead of complaining about the responsibility of running a business, worker-owners more often discussed their concerns about members not voicing enough of their opinions.

Workers in non-cooperative businesses seem to be satisfied with the amount of structure in their workplaces. Several agreed that “being told what to do” and having someone to go to makes the workplace less stressful and easier to just do the job. However, these same workers are not entirely satisfied with the amount of input they have. They often wish the business was being run differently or was focused more on customers than on profits. They feel that the top of the business doesn’t always know what is important or best for the base of the business, at the local level. There is often a disconnect between business decisions made at the top and what the employees feel is best. The exception to this is the ESOP pizzeria, where there are mechanisms in place that allow for some employee input. This seems to garner the respect and satisfaction of its workers.

I would now like to end my presentation by returning to Marx’s theory of alienation and by offering some insights on how my research may now inform or guide the theory. It is important to point out that while Marx looked at the worker in the capitalist system, I am looking

at the worker in her own variegated experiences. One important result of this difference in methodological approaches is that the workers I interviewed rejected Marx's conception of labor as the defining principle of humans. My findings on worker input may indicate that more input in business decisions in fact does have an effect on worker happiness and fulfilment. My findings also suggest, however, that workers prefer to have more structure in their workplace. Things like evaluations and schedules that were eschewed by some of the earlier worker cooperatives may actually be desired by workers in today's generation. These workers have also emphasized the importance of community focused businesses, and Marx's theory would be improved if the role of the community was taken into consideration.