

*'IT'S NEED, NOT GREED': NEEDS AND  
VALUES AT WORK IN AN ITALIAN SOCIAL  
COOPERATIVE*

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**This dissertation is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**February 2018**





## DECLARATION

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated in the text. It has not been previously submitted, in part or whole, to any university or institution for any degree, diploma, or other qualification.

In accordance with the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography guidelines, this thesis is does not exceed 100,000 words.

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## ABSTRACT

Among the key issues that arise in research of cooperatives are their supposedly hybrid nature and how they are able to balance both social and economic goals. I contend that the concept of ‘needs’ has become an important differentiating factor for the cooperatives I studied in Emilia Romagna. Placing this concept centrally in an analysis of cooperative practice helps to reveal the interplay between various value systems, reaching beyond arguments of the degeneration of cooperatives or the reproduction of dominant models, which both assume a one-way flow of influence. The recent history of the cooperative movement in Italy shows that these institutions have developed along with changing conceptions of need, supported by broader social movements and value systems. The cooperative network is today of central importance, and seen as an egalitarian means to share ideals and drive local innovation. However, my research shows that the instrumentalisation of the concept of ‘need’ also naturalises certain aspects of capitalist practice and has consequences for the enactment of other values within the cooperative. For example, in one cooperative I examined, the focus on meeting the members’ needs for work was important in justifying a decision to merge with another cooperative despite a decision-making process that was seen as less than entirely democratic. This orientation also justified the use of precarious labour, and the need to protect members’ livelihoods helped to justify low pay for internships and municipal job placements, as opposed to furthering the cooperative values of equity and equality. While the cooperative workers desired an element of personal relations, this was sometimes seen to be at odds with the focus on production and the maintenance of jobs. The marketing of more ethical products with reference to their social added value highlighted the central role of individual consumer citizens in bringing about change, which also reinforced divisions within the cooperatives based on who was more or less able to make these choices. In conclusion, I argue that while ‘needs’, like ‘added value’, can unite social and economic concepts of value, this also naturalises certain aspects of capitalist practice, particularly in this case where employment emerges as the primary need to be met. This leads me to suggest that the focus on meeting needs, as opposed to focusing on achieving specific ideals such as democracy and equality, may not be as effective to create alternative practice.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Vera Zamagni and Patrizia Battilani, who welcomed me into the world of cooperative studies in Bologna, and to the numerous cooperative members and employees who made this research possible. Many of you have become friends as well as colleagues and research participants. I am sincerely grateful for your time and the ideas and stories that you shared with me. I would also like to thank my supervisor Robert Parkin. He has encouraged me and challenged me to do my best work throughout this process. He allowed me to find my own voice. There are a number of other academics and fellow students at the University of Oxford who have also contributed significantly to this thesis by reading and commenting on early chapter drafts. I would like to say a special thank you to Inge Daniels, Javier Lezaun, Iza Kavedžija, Karin Eli, Robin Smith, Marthe Achtnich, and Elö Luik for their valuable input on the arguments and structure of various chapters. This list of important people would not be complete without saying thank you to Jessie Hill, who believed in me and supported me, and to my family. First to my husband Shannon Pearson and his parents Tracy and Terry Pearson, who have supported me throughout this endeavour and made me feel truly at home in Oxford. I would never have embarked on this project if it were not for my own parents Katharine and Bill Foley, who encouraged me to believe that I can make a difference and that I should follow my dreams to whatever end. Finally, to my younger brother Terence Foley, and his son Jaxon, thank you for inspiring me to keep going and to lead by example.

Thank you also to Kayla Friedman and Malcolm Morgan of the Centre for Sustainable Development, University of Cambridge, UK for producing the Microsoft Word thesis template used to format this document.

## CONTENTS

<b>1 INTRODUCTION: IN SEARCH OF COOPERATIVE VALUES.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 <i>LA FESTA DEI LAVORATORI (WORKERS’ DAY) 2014</i> .....	1
1.2 ‘IT’S NEED, NOT GREED’ .....	6
1.3 COOPERATIVES: ECONOMIC VERSUS SOCIAL IN THE MARKET .....	12
1.3.1 <i>Cooperatives in Italy</i> .....	16
1.3.2 <i>Verdecura and Luminare</i> .....	20
1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	24
1.5 VALUES AS DESIRABLE OUTCOMES .....	26
1.5.1 <i>Socially mediated needs</i> .....	29
1.6 PREVIOUS STUDIES OF COOPERATIVES AS A SOCIAL ALTERNATIVE.....	32
1.7 METHODS: LOCATING COOPERATIVE VALUES.....	45
1.8 THE REMAINDER OF THE THESIS .....	51
<b>2 MEETING NEW NEEDS: SOCIAL COOPERATIVES IN CONTEXT .....</b>	<b>55</b>
2.1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT: CHANGING NEEDS .....	56
2.1.1 <i>Post-war reconstruction: working together to meet basic needs</i> .....	57
2.1.2 <i>Consumer culture and the emergence of new needs</i> .....	59
2.1.3 <i>Restructuring and the growth of the services sector</i> .....	63
2.2 PORTRAIT 1: A NEW KIND OF COOPERATIVE TO MEET NEW NEEDS .....	66
2.3 ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNTS: CHANGING VALUES.....	71
2.3.1 <i>Recent ethnographies of neoliberal Italy</i> .....	76
2.4 COOPERATIVES TODAY.....	83
2.4.1 <i>Is this just another example of degeneration theory?</i> .....	89
2.5 CONCLUSION.....	90
<b>3 COOPERATIVE NETWORK STRUCTURE AND INSTRUMENTALITY .....</b>	<b>93</b>

3.1 MAKING CONNECTIONS .....	94
3.2 PORTRAIT 2: MEETING A NETWORK SPECIALIST .....	98
3.3 THE NETWORK IN THEORY AND PRACTICE: AN INFORMAL STRUCTURE .....	102
3.3.1 <i>A layered network</i> .....	110
3.4 THE POTENTIAL VALUE OF NETWORKS: INNOVATION AND CHANGE.....	114
3.4.1 <i>Network power</i> .....	114
3.4.2 <i>Innovation potential</i> .....	117
3.4.3 <i>Enabling (generational) change</i> .....	119
3.5 CONCLUSION.....	133
<b>4 MERGING TO SURVIVE: LOCATING VALUE IN A SHARED NEED.....</b>	<b>135</b>
4.1 ‘A NECESSITY OF THE MARKET’ .....	136
4.2 DEMOCRACY IN THEORY .....	138
4.3 DEMOCRACY IN PRACTICE.....	141
4.3.1 <i>Verdecura’s democratic structure</i> .....	145
4.3.2 <i>A ‘directed’ democracy</i> .....	152
4.4 INTRODUCING THE MERGER: SETTING UP THE CONTEXT .....	154
4.4.1 <i>Leading up to the vote: seeking and sharing information</i> .....	159
4.4.2 <i>The extraordinary assembly: a unanimous vote</i> .....	165
4.4.3 <i>Discussing the merger</i> .....	167
4.5 CONCLUSION.....	171
<b>5 VALUING COOPERATIVE LABOUR: NECESSARY AND CHOSEN WORK</b>	<b>173</b>
5.1 THEORISING THE VALUE OF WORK .....	174
5.1.1 <i>Work as a right</i> .....	181
5.2 MUTUAL EXCHANGE IN (THE) CRISIS .....	183

5.3 VALUING DIFFERENT TYPES OF WORK .....	188
5.3.1 <i>Chosen work</i> .....	192
5.3.2 <i>‘Just’ work</i> .....	197
5.3.3 <i>Necessary work</i> .....	199
5.4 (SELF-)EXPLOITATION? .....	203
5.5 CONCLUSION.....	211
<b>6 DESIRING CARE: LINKING PEOPLE AND PRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>213</b>
6.1 PORTRAIT 3: NOSTALGIA FOR A MORE PERSONAL COOPERATIVE .....	215
6.2 THREE MODELS FOR UNDERSTANDING CARE .....	218
6.2.1 <i>Care provision in Italy</i> .....	224
6.3 <i>BILANCIO SOCIALE</i> : A SOCIAL BALANCE SHEET FOR A SOCIAL MODE OF PRODUCTION .....	226
6.4 CARE: THE MISSING LINK BETWEEN PEOPLE AND PRODUCTION .....	230
6.4.1 <i>Lack of time together</i> .....	233
6.4.2 <i>Limited time with leaders</i> .....	241
6.4.3 <i>Lack of consideration</i> .....	244
6.4.4 <i>Lack of means</i> .....	250
6.5 BUREAUCRACY AND SELF-CARE.....	252
6.6 CONCLUSION.....	256
<b>7 ADDED VALUE: THE LIMITS OF CONSUMER DEMOCRACY .....</b>	<b>257</b>
7.1 PORTRAIT 4: ‘ <i>STAI FACENDO LO SHOPPING?!</i> ’ (‘ARE YOU SHOPPING?!’).....	258
7.2 CRITICAL CONSUMPTION OR CRITICAL CONSUMERISM?.....	261
7.2.1 <i>Individual versus collective consumer activism</i> .....	265
7.2.2 <i>The Coop: competing through ethical standards</i> .....	267
7.2.3 <i>Food activism: alternative provisioning in Italy</i> .....	270

7.3 LUMINARE: MARKETING 360 DEGREES OF CRITICAL CONSUMPTION .....	272
7.3.1 <i>Added value</i> .....	276
7.3.2 <i>Luminare’s communication strategy</i> .....	278
7.3.3 <i>Orienting potential consumers to alternative models of production</i> .....	284
7.3.4 <i>Personal encouragement</i> .....	287
7.4 THE LIMITS OF CONSUMER DEMOCRACY .....	290
7.5 CONCLUSION .....	292
<b>8 CONCLUSION: A PRECARIOUS ALTERNATIVE .....</b>	<b>296</b>
8.1 PRECARIOUS COOPERATIVES .....	298
8.2 PRECARIOUS IDEALS.....	303
8.3 PRECARIETY AND LABOUR MARKET FUNDAMENTALISM.....	308
<b>9 REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>314</b>
<b>10 APPENDICES .....</b>	<b>332</b>

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- ACI - Alleanza delle cooperative italiane (Alliance of Italian Cooperatives)
- ANCPL - Associazione nazionale delle cooperative di produzione e lavoro  
(National association of production and work cooperatives)
- CGM - Consorzio nazionale di cooperazione di solidarietà sociale Gino Mattarelli  
(National consortium of social solidarity cooperation of Gino Mattarelli)
- CISV - Consortium of Social Enterprises in Villacenseo (a pseudonym)
- DC - Democrazia Cristiana (Christian Democrats Party)
- GAS - Gruppi di acquisto solidale (Solidarity Purchasing Groups)
- HR - Human Resources
- ICA - International Cooperative Alliance
- ICTs - new Information and Communications Technologies
- IYC 2012 - United Nations International Year of Cooperatives
- Km0 - Zero Kilometre local food markets, usually sourced within 60km
- MUEC - Master in economia della cooperazione (Master of Cooperative Economics)
- PCI - Partito Comunista Italiano (Italian Communist Party)
- PD - Partito Democratico (Democratic Party)
- PSI - Partito Socialista Italiano (Italian Socialist Party)
- SdBV - Settimana del Buon Vivere (Week of Good Living)
- Spa. - Società per azione (Public company)



# 1 INTRODUCTION: IN SEARCH OF COOPERATIVE VALUES

## 1.1 *La Festa dei Lavoratori* (Workers' Day) 2014

May 1<sup>st</sup> 2014 was a sunny spring morning in Bologna. Although it was a Thursday, many people would not be going to work that day, but instead observing the public holiday dedicated to the struggle of workers around the globe, over a century earlier, to reduce their working hours. Most people that I had come to know during the first seven months of fieldwork were planning to spend the holiday visiting with family or friends, but my plan for the day was to attend a Workers' Day rally and celebrations in the city's central Piazza Maggiore, before meeting a cooperative colleague for an afternoon picnic. I had anticipated seeing some cooperative organizations at the festivities, campaigning for labour rights alongside the national trade unions and worker rights groups that would be assembled in the square. Instead, when I arrived at the rally I was greeted by a flag flying prominently over the square's statue of Neptune that proclaimed, 'No-Coop'. This – the only visible reference to cooperatives – was the rallying cry of a group of students and the so-called precarious (*i precari*), who had organized a 'counter-demonstration' to the Workers' Day festivities.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bolognatoday.it/cronaca/1-maggio-no-coop-precari-studenti.html> [Accessed 20 August 2017]



Figure 1.1. No-Coop flag May 1<sup>st</sup> 2014, Piazza Maggiore, Bologna

This group of students and workers had gathered in the university quarter to protest precarious labour contracts and what they called ‘hunger wages’ paid to the employees of Coopservice. Posters hanging in porticos near the University of Bologna also bore the ‘No-Coop’ slogan in protest of the working conditions of Coopservice, a worker cooperative that provides services such as cleaning, security, and logistics to numerous clients including the University. Although the protest was focused on this specific case of objectionable working conditions, the ‘No-Coop’ posters encouraged collective action, proclaiming that these issues are common and that the Coopservice workers’ struggle is a collective one (*‘La condizione dei lavoratori è comune e comuni sono le loro lotte’*).



Figure 1.2. No-Coop poster, Bologna 2014

Political organizing around the concept of ‘precarity’ was popularized following demonstrations in Milan, Italy on May 1<sup>st</sup> 2001, which formed part of a Europe-wide EuroMayDay celebration (Csoba 2014: 72). Although uncertainty in providing for oneself is certainly not a new problem,<sup>2</sup> precariousness has become a common theme to describe modern labour struggles, and ‘the centerpiece of a new leftist political platform and social movement’ in Italy according to anthropologist Noelle Molé (2012a: 18). Social analysts have been using the term since the 1970s to describe declines in labour market security and the increase of various forms of temporary and part-time work (Vosko 2015). This coincides with the decline of Fordist models of mass production and

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Krause (2009: 61), for example, describes a period of labour struggles in the early twentieth century, with food insecurity for ‘precariously situated day labourers’ in comparison to those who had access to land for sharecropping.

the growth of the service industry. While Lash and Urry (1987) described this as a disorganisation of capital, others have instead described it as a re-organisation around flexible production, with the Emilia Romagna region of Italy often serving as an example of how a flexible network of small firms could overcome the challenges that faced mass production (Piore & Sabel 1984; Goddard 1996; Dunford and Greco 2006). Flexibility and precariousness have continued to be recurring themes in anthropological writing (Smith and Narotzky 2006; Muehlebach 2013; Spyrdakis 2013) and among theorists of gender, labour and class in Europe (Federici 2006; Berardi 2009; Standing 2011).<sup>3</sup> Although these works highlight different aspects, all point to flexibility and precarity as a salient aspect of modern capitalist organization in relation to the recent past.<sup>4</sup> More recently, following the 2008 market crash and subsequent European sovereign debt crisis, austerity policies that were introduced to generate economic growth, may be seen to intensify these trends of insecurity.

In their 'No-Coop' counter-demonstration, the students were also protesting the Labour Minister of Matteo Renzi's austerity government, Giuliano Poletti, who had formerly been the president of Legacoop, one of the two largest national associations of Italian cooperatives. In the few months since Renzi was elected Prime Minister, he and Poletti had already introduced changes to short term contracts and announced plans for further reforms to the labour market that some feared would further increase labour insecurity. Cuts to public budgets and welfare had already been rolled out in Italy and

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<sup>3</sup> Although Federici (2006) recognizes challenges with how the concept has been theorized and applied, she too sees a new kind of struggle taking place as work has moved beyond the factory or the office.

<sup>4</sup> Goddard (2017) notes various terms used to describe this discontinuity with the past, yet she also encourages students of current labour crises to consider continuities within capitalist practice, including the combinations of various types of practice within capitalism. Others have suggested that a precarious condition is actually the norm within global capitalism, with the Keynesian or Fordist phase of relative security being an exception (Neilson and Rossiter 2008), or considered there to be a cyclical pattern between welfare and subsequent 'marketization of social programs' (Schram 2015: 3).

other parts of Europe. In 2011 Italy's technocrat Prime Minister Mario Monti had agreed to €30 billion of austerity measures, in theory to avoid the worsening crisis.<sup>5</sup> However, the traditional measure of economic performance, namely growth in GDP, remained negative from the end of 2011 throughout 2014 according to the Italian National Institute of Statistics,<sup>6</sup> with overall unemployment of 12.6% and record high youth unemployment of 44.2% in August 2014.<sup>7</sup> Anti-austerity protests in Rome in October 2013 and in April 2014 responding to these conditions were so heated that they ended in violence.<sup>8</sup> What was unusual about this protest of precarious working conditions in Bologna is that the central antagonists in the 'No-coop' demonstration – Coopservice and the former Legacoop president – show that cooperatives are also implicated in this problematic of modern capitalism.

This dissertation tells the story of the management of two social cooperatives in the Emilia Romagna region, as they aim to provide for the needs of their members and other local workers by offering work and work placement opportunities. In these non-profit enterprises, revenue generated is seen as a means to provide work, rather than an end in itself. But is this focus on meeting the need of job provision enough to create alternative practice in the context of an increasingly competitive global market, characterised by neoliberal policies and government austerity?

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/financialcrisis/8934467/Italys-government-agrees-30bn-of-austerity-measures.html> [Accessed 20 August 2017]

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.istat.it/en/> [Accessed 10 January 2016]

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/matteo-renzi-under-pressure-italian-youth-unemployment-hits-record-high-44-2-1467816> [Accessed 3 January 2016]

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/italy/10391069/Protests-in-Rome-turn-violent-as-demonstrators-attack-economy-ministry.html> [Accessed 20 September 2017]

<https://www.rt.com/news/rome-austerity-protests-march-172/> [Accessed 20 September 2017]

## 1.2 'It's need, not greed'

At the time this research project began, cooperatives were in the spotlight thanks to the United Nations International Year of Cooperatives (IYC 2012), and presented as a ready alternative 'in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008-9 compared to the investor-led business and financial companies' (Webster et al. 2011: back cover).<sup>9</sup> The IYC 2012 website<sup>10</sup> explains that cooperatives were chosen because they are an alternative business model that can fulfil both social and economic ends:

The International Year of Cooperatives is intended to raise public awareness of the invaluable contributions of cooperative enterprises to poverty reduction, employment generation and social integration. The Year will also highlight the strengths of the cooperative business model as an alternative means of doing business and furthering socioeconomic development.

This framing of the cooperative model presents a common view of cooperatives as hybrid institutions combining both economic and social goals, and as opposed to traditional businesses, which are typically constructed as primarily economic in nature.

While doing research and preparation for my fieldwork, I landed on a local Legacoop website in Emilia Romagna that was promoting IYC 2012.<sup>11</sup> At the side of the page there was an image with the text, 'Co-operative Competition: It's need, not greed.' The image linked to a presentation about cooperatives made by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) that describes cooperatives as being based on human needs, in opposition to shareholder models that are characterised as being 'selfish'.<sup>12</sup> This formulation presents two rival visions of economic production: one represented by the

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<sup>9</sup> This edited volume was published in conjunction with IYC 2012 by both the Manchester University Press and the United Nations University Press.

<sup>10</sup> <http://social.un.org/coopsyear/about-iy.html> [Accessed 13 March 2017]

<sup>11</sup> <http://legacooprimini.it/2012-anno-internazionale-delle-cooperative> (the page is no longer active)

<sup>12</sup> <http://prezi.com/jsoepre45af4/2012-be-co-operatively-competitive/> [Accessed 13 March 2017]

cooperative, the other for-profit enterprise. The opposition of ‘need’ and ‘greed’ presents these business models as two ends of a continuum, where ‘need’ is morally superior to ‘greed’ or unchecked desire. The imagery of a honeycomb is used to signify cooperation, and is juxtaposed with fighting lions that represent ‘fierce competition’. These images of animals are followed by those of humans. First, a building cooperative, representing ‘co-operative competition’. Next, images of the stock market depicting ‘selfish’ competition. This vivid contrast between ‘need’ and ‘greed’ became the inspiration for my thesis title, as I hoped to study the way cooperatives practice their social values in the context of a competitive, profit-driven market.

I chose Bologna as the primary site for my fieldwork. Cooperatives are visible across the city and the historically ‘red’ Emilia Romagna region. The Coop supermarket is one of the most obvious, but CONAD, another popular grocery chain, is also a cooperative. There are trucks, signs and posters all around the city bearing the names of cooperatives large and small, local and national. They exist in almost all sectors of the economy and can be composed of various kinds of owner-members: retail (both consumer and retailer cooperatives), transportation (for example all the taxis in Bologna and numerous logistics companies linked to the retail cooperatives), manufacturing and construction, services like catering, cleaning and even communications, agriculture (the famous *parmeggiano reggiano* cheese is made in dairy cooperatives), banks, housing and also social cooperatives, which are the most recent type of cooperative in Italy. Perhaps not an alternative in this context, but a key part of the economic ‘ecosystem’, as some local scholars called it,<sup>13</sup> cooperatives represent about 8% of national GDP<sup>14</sup> and even

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<sup>13</sup> Cooperative scholar and economic historian Patrizia Battialini endorsed this idea of an economic ‘ecosystem’ that includes various business forms, each suited to particular ends (personal communication). Similarly, Stefano Zamagni has argued that the democratic nature of cooperatives makes them an important

more in Emilia Romagna, where they account for approximately 30% of the region's GDP.<sup>15</sup>

Cooperatives have a long history in Italy, and the movement has been considered particularly successful in terms of expanding and maintaining interest and membership since cooperatives first emerged in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century. This success has been noted in other anthropological studies of Italian cooperatives (Holmström 1989; Vargas-Cetina 2011; Rakopoulos 2015), and has inspired some English-language historical reviews of the movement (Earle 1986; Ammirato 1996), as well as popular works on cooperativism (e.g. Restakis 2010). Emilia Romagna had become the region with the most cooperatives by the early twentieth century with the creation of farm and construction worker cooperatives that outpaced the prevalence of consumer cooperatives (Zamagni and Zamagni 2010: 49). The cooperative movement there was likely bolstered by a series of factors including political support through post-war reconstruction projects, the local tradition of *mezzadria* sharecropping which utilized shared labour, and highly skilled artisans who worked in small shops and could benefit from economies of scale (Holmström 1989: 24, 30). Historical circumstances were also an important factor in local cooperative development. High unemployment at the turn of the twentieth century, with 55-60% of the region's population being landless labourers, provided a large source of labour for the creation of building cooperatives for public works and later post-war building contracts; this also spurred the growth of industrial coops to supply building materials (Ammirato 1996: 64; Holmström 1989: 26). Before the First World War, cooperative labour societies had a virtual monopoly of public works

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component of the market ecosystem (2008). This language serves to naturalize the structures of the economic system.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.alleanzacooperative.it/1-associazione> [Accessed 10 January 2016]

<sup>15</sup> <http://stories.coop/stories/emilia-romagna-cooperative-region-and-economy/> [Accessed 10 January 2016]

contracts in Emilia, as well as about 90% of contracts in Ferrara and 85% in Ravenna (Loyd 1925: 8). The success of cooperatives in the Emilia Romagna region can also be linked to historical strength of the Italian Communist party (PCI), with Bologna being the capital of the region and also a symbolic centre of Italian communism (Kertzer 1996).

Emilia Romagna's regional economy also provides important context. First described by Bagnasco (1977) as the 'Third Italy', the prevalence of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) has been an enduring feature of the Emilian model. As the Fordist model of mass production was slowing down under pressure from global competition and workers' demands, the Emilian model of flexible production provided an alternative path to growth (Piore and Sabel 1984; Goddard 1996: 41). As profitability declined in the 1960s and growth declined in the 1970s, the Third Italy that Bagnasco had described resisted this trend (Dunford and Greco 2006: 5). The proliferation of SMEs has also been linked to the PCI and their anti-monopolistic stance (Garmise 1995: 147), but entrepreneurial development in the region was also supported by family labour and local government policies that allowed small firms to avoid labour regulations (Yanagisako 2002).

The cooperative form itself has also been a site of innovation in Italy. The concept of social enterprise (*impresa sociale*) and a new form of business called social cooperatives emerged in Italy during the 1980s in response to unmet needs as the welfare state was beginning to be dismantled (Defourny and Nyssens 2010; Trundle 2014: 12). They arose independently in many parts of the country to help meet the needs of individuals who were no longer being cared for directly by the state. As such, some have seen these as part of a neoliberal decentralization of state-based welfare (Trundle 2014: 12-13). However, to early adopters of the social cooperative form, this shift also represented the culmination of a liberal movement that sought greater equality and social

inclusion (Marzocchi 2014), and supporters of the cooperative model have seen it as an innovative solution to ensure care provision through civil society (Restakis 2010).

There are two types of social cooperative in Italy, both traditionally relying on income from public outsourcing contracts. Type A cooperatives provide services for people in need, such as health services, recreation, social assistance and education – in these cooperatives the members are typically the care-workers, though they work in conjunction with the individuals in care and their respective families. Type B cooperatives seek to promote social inclusion through work and must have at least 30% of worker-members defined as somehow ‘disadvantaged’ (*svantaggiate*)<sup>16</sup> including those with minor physical or mental impairments, previous addictions, prison records, or long-term unemployment. Type B cooperatives may also gain municipal contracts for local service provision, for example waste management and street cleaning. Social cooperatives account for a large percentage of the cooperatives in and around Bologna, and they were also responsible for much of the growth in cooperative jobs during the current recession, with a 17.3% increase in jobs from 2007 to 2011 (ACI 2012: 3). Recent research has also estimated that each disadvantaged worker in a social cooperative saves the public purse €4,000 per year.<sup>17</sup> Such economic analyses of their contribution to society indeed seem to support claims of their being part of a neoliberal policy of the decentralisation of welfare services.

Before beginning my fieldwork, I read that cooperatives had been especially resilient to the financial crisis that started in 2008 (ACI 2012: 1). This was attributed to their high levels of reserves and also their long-term outlook, with the protection of

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<sup>16</sup> ‘Disadvantaged persons’ is a legal definition, laid out in art. 4, paragraph 1 of Law 381/1991.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.avvenire.it/Cronaca/Pagine/Cooperative-e-lavoro-i-risparmi-per-lo-Stato-.aspx> [Accessed 10 January 2016]

members' interests being prioritised over short term capital gains. Yet while cooperatives had initially been able to grow while the rest of the economy was shrinking (ibid.), the situation was not certain to continue, as *la crisi* seemed to become a new normal rather than a momentary shock that could be overcome through healthy reserves. Rather than being a temporary acute problem, *la crisi* seemed to have developed into a chronic situation without a certain cure. Caution and conservatism were important business practices that would help to ensure the long-term sustainability of businesses, but which also increased insecurity for workers. Cooperatives that had previously managed to resist market decline and maintain employment were no longer able to continue by simply reducing hours. Some, especially in the building sector, were starting to close, while others were forced to reduce their work forces in an attempt to remain solvent.<sup>18</sup> Social cooperatives also faced pressure caused by changes in regional and local funding of services in the context of an austerity government, requiring them to rely on uncertain market income in addition to negotiating public contracts.

This precarious economic environment was the backdrop to a year of research on the practice of cooperative values. I conducted fieldwork in Bologna and surrounding cities from September 2013 to early September 2014, focusing primarily on two social cooperatives that I call Verdecura and Luminare. The challenges of this rapidly shifting economic context is apparent in the lived experiences of those managing the two cooperatives that are the main focus of this dissertation. While Verdecura follows the traditional model of public funding via outsourcing, supplemented by private service

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<sup>18</sup> At the time of this research the 3Elle woodworking cooperative in Imola was in the news because it was struggling to keep its members working, while another nearby cooperative Cesi had already gone into bankruptcy, risking the jobs of over 400: <http://www.quotidiano.net/cronaca/3elle-concordato-preventivo-salvataggio-dipendenti-1.460127> <http://www.ilrestodelcarlino.it/bologna/cronaca/cesi-liquidazione-coatta-sindacati-imola-1.39415> [Accessed 13 April 2017]

contracts, Luminare was formed specifically as a market-facing entity as an innovative approach to meeting needs in this new context. This approach highlights both the difficulty of securing funding, and a belief in social enterprise, that is, enabling social change through productive market activity.

In the sections that follow, I consider the apparent hybrid nature of cooperatives as both economic and social enterprises, before introducing my research questions and defining key terms for the analysis. I then review anthropological research on cooperatives before discussing my research methods. The introduction concludes with a brief summary of the chapters that follow to indicate how each contributes to developing the argument of this thesis.

### 1.3 Cooperatives: economic versus social in the market

Although cooperatives compete within the free market, being guided by the twin logics of competition and efficiency, and limited by the requirement of profitability, they are also founded on a series of social values such as solidarity and equality. At the international level, the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) provides the following list of values: ‘Co-operatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. In the tradition of their founders, co-operative members believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others.’<sup>19</sup> These provide an alternative, social goal for cooperatives as opposed to the pursuit of profit, and are the foundation for the structural principles of the cooperative

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<sup>19</sup> <http://ica.coop/en/whats-co-op/co-operative-identity-values-principles> [Accessed 10 May 2016]

form. These social values often appear to be threatened by the drive for economic value through market exchange. In the study of cooperatives this has been described as degeneration theory or adaptive decline (Nash and Hopkins 1976; Bartlett 1992, 1993; Storey et al. 2014).

The distinction between economic and social goals in the discourse of cooperatives can be linked to both the shared history of the cooperative movement and industrialisation, and concurrent trends in Western discourse. In economic anthropology, as in Western society in general, there is often an ideology of separation between the social and the economic, with dichotomies such as moral versus economic, gift versus commodity exchange, and social versus market being commonplace.<sup>20</sup> This tendency to dichotomise is evidenced in the debates between formalists and substantivists in economic anthropology (Dalton 1961; LeClair 1962; Kaplan 1968; Sahlins 1972; Cook 1974), debates on gift and commodity exchange practices (Gregory 1982; Parry 1986, 1989; Carrier 1990; Zelizer 1996; Laidlaw 2000) and considerations of different spheres of value and exchange (Kopytoff 1986; Carrier 1997; Zelizer 2005; Gudeman 2009).

Karl Polanyi, who wrote about the disembedding of the individualistic free market from other, more embedded distribution methods in *The Great Transformation*, and Marcel Mauss, who in *The Gift* set out a model of the world-historical transition from total social exchanges to individual contracts, both had a more holistic vision of the individual within society that could contain both individualistic and social motivations. Mauss believed that achieving a completely free market based on contracts was just as much an ideal as that of a collective based completely on altruism (Hart 2014: 39), and in

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<sup>20</sup> This is a simplified view, with more recent anthropologists, particularly in feminist theory offering a more nuanced understanding of the entanglements of economic and social production (e.g. Edholm et al. 1977; Odih 2007; Bear et al. 2015).

his conclusions to *The Gift*, as well as his political writings (ibid.), he considered that the cooperative form, as well as the welfare state and other forms of social insurance, represented a return to a ‘group morality’ (Mauss 1990: 68). Likewise, in the gift he found both ‘obligation and economic self-interest’ (ibid.: 3). Even in Adam Smith’s writings, while he theorised about self-interest in the economy in *The Wealth of Nations*, he also wrote about morality and affect binding society together in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Muehlebach 2012: 27-30). More recently, Gudeman has described mutuality and the market as conceptually separate, but ‘dialectically connected [as] disembedded economies do not exist apart from embedded ones and the reverse’ (2009: 19).

Karl Polanyi developed the concept of embeddedness to describe how the market economy was becoming disembedded from society. Whereas historical and anthropological research had shown ‘that man’s economy, as a rule, is submerged in his social relationships’ (2001: 48), a self-regulating market required a separation of the economic sphere, with institutions with purely economic motivations (ibid.: 74). Human labour, land and money became ‘fictitious commodities’, according to Polanyi, which were traded and bought on the market according to the principles of supply and demand, despite the fact that they do not fulfil the definition of a commodity as something specifically produced for sale (2001: 75).<sup>21</sup> He theorised that the influence of supply and demand on these fictitious commodities led to a double movement in the nineteenth century: as the market expanded in geographical reach, other networks and policies were implemented ‘to check the action of the market relative to labour, land and money’ (ibid.:

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<sup>21</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary confirms this definition used by Polanyi and others: ‘6. a. *spec. in Comm.* A kind of thing produced for use or sale, an article of commerce, an object of trade; in pl. goods, merchandise, wares, produce. Now esp. food or raw materials, as objects of trade. staple commodity n. leading article of trade.’ It also recognizes a broader definition as it has come to be used: ‘b. *fig. and transf.* Anything that one “trades” or “deals” in.’

79). Although the economy is necessarily part of the broader social sphere, as Polanyi's concept of double movement would suggest, these two spheres remain ideologically separated as idealised motives for action, with the selfish pursuit of economic gain being just one of many possible socially determined motivations. Furthermore, as Polanyi outlines in *The Great Transformation* (2001), the market economy is itself a social construction created through various legal interventions.

As institutions, both cooperatives and the free market have their roots in the Industrial Revolution in nineteenth century Europe. Similarly, both cooperativism and neoliberal free market ideologies have at their core similar liberal ideals such as democracy, equality, and self-reliance. According to Johnston Birchall, the formation of cooperatives can be understood as part of the double movement theorised by Karl Polanyi, providing 'strength in numbers' for those most disadvantaged by the new self-regulating market system, as it became disembedded from existing social institutions that had provided protection from unbridled market forces (2010: 41-42). Early consumer cooperatives in England, such as the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society, can be seen as a direct response to the influence of these market forces. Yet although the purpose of the society was largely pragmatic – to ensure members access to basic necessities – it also marked the beginnings of a social movement.

In the context of an economic sphere that is seen to be primarily motivated by profit, the cooperative institution serves as a potential source of alternative 'social' motives. From the outset, cooperatives were established to help protect workers and their livelihoods from market forces and also to uphold a communitarian ideal that is opposed to the atomistic individualism that is the basis of the self-regulating market:

Co-operators have always been inspired by the ancient doctrine of human fellowship, by the new spirit of social service, by a firm faith that the day would come when each man and woman would work, not for personal subsistence or personal gain, but for the whole community.

(Beatrice Potter 1891, quoted in Cheney 1999: ix)

Although cooperatives developed as a reaction *to* the market, opposed to the underlying assumption of individualism within it, they are also *of* the market. Indeed, one of their primary roles is to provide access to the market for those who are somehow excluded (a prime example is the triumphant moment in the film *Si Può Fare* ('We Can Do That') about an early type B social cooperative, when one of the workers exclaims, 'We're in the market!'). Responding to the needs of both members and the market while being motivated by shared social values, cooperatives can potentially contribute to bridging this ideological divide.

### *1.3.1 Cooperatives in Italy*

As in other parts of Europe, early cooperatives in Italy were founded to help defend consumers and small businesses from the changes caused by industrialisation and urbanisation (Vargas-Cetina 2011; Ammirato 1996). In Italy, the movement emerged specifically in response to 'unemployment, low wages, poor working conditions, poor quality goods and high prices' (Thornley 1981: 152). Aside from some small 'alternative' cooperatives, most cooperatives were established to provide jobs, though they had coincident aims, such as giving workers a say in the management and providing improved working conditions (Holmström 1989: 40). The leaders of the cooperative movement themselves saw it as being more than commercial: 'They have always realised that without its soul their movement would be a cold and lifeless thing, and that its soul depends up on the education in true Co-operative principles of all their members' (Lloyd 1925: 115).

The influence of broader societal values on the cooperative movement in Italy is apparent in the role played by the national cooperative associations, which have themselves been supported by various religious and political movements. The cooperative

movement in Italy was first supported by the liberal ideology of Giuseppe Mazzini, a politician who advocated the unification of Italy, though the first league of cooperatives founded in 1886, the National Cooperative League of Italy, known today as Legacoop, was influenced by communist and socialist ideals (Zamagni and Zamagni 2010: 48). In the 1890s a Catholic cooperative movement also began and the Federation of Cooperative Consortia was founded in 1895 (ibid.). This group is still active today and known as Confcooperative. This led to a division between the so-called 'red' cooperatives of the League and the 'white' cooperatives supported by the Catholics (ibid.: 50). While cooperatives are often seen to 'exist in a politicised environment whose values and principles of operation are likely to be radically different from those held to obtain inside the cooperative' (Nash and Hopkins 1976: 12, 15), for the early days of the movement's development, and again for much of the second half of the twentieth century in Italy, the cooperatives' social values were also supported by the ideologies of these wider-reaching but mutually antagonistic social institutions: the Communist Party and the Catholic Church. Economic historian Patrizia Battilani has written that cooperatives have reflected these broader social values and movements since the beginning of the modern cooperative movement, especially in Italy, where this has helped to make them also economically efficient (2011: 157-9).

Cooperative values are prescribed at multiple and overlapping levels (international, national, regional and local). The ICA values mentioned earlier provide a shared frame of reference at the international level. In Italy, the social role of cooperatives is guaranteed by the Republican Constitution (1948): 'The Republic recognizes the social function of mutual cooperation, with no private speculative aims' (Zamagni and Zamagni 2010: 54). Cooperative associations, including Legacoop, Confcooperative, and the Alliance of Italian Cooperatives, also promote cooperative

values locally and nationally through educational programs, informational leaflets, regional associations, and their online presence. Finally, each local cooperative also has its own mission statement, vision, and/or statement of values.

Rather than promoting the ICA values explicitly, both of the major national cooperative associations at the time of the research focused on meeting the needs (*bisogni*) of their members through economic democracy. The Legacoop website explains:<sup>22</sup>

In Italy today, cooperatives are an important topic on the social and the economic level. It is a business model that creates value with values. That's because the goal of cooperative enterprise is not profit, but responding to the needs of members, in the name of responsible participation, equity and sharing. In summary: people, and in fact, their values, are at the centre of the cooperative.

Confcooperative also advertises the cooperative similarly:<sup>23</sup>

The cooperative society is essentially two things:  
an enterprise  
a company.

It has (as a business) an economic purpose and it is not done alone. It is born from a group of people coming together to meet a common need.

It is not only a mere economic entity. The economics and financial aspect has its importance, but the activity of a cooperative touches not in a negligible way: the social sphere, the economic sphere and not least the cultural sphere.

Thus, this goal of meeting the needs of members through an enterprise that is both economic and social is what is seen to set cooperatives apart from other types of enterprise.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.legacoop.coop/percorsi-personalizzati/valori-imprese-persone/> [Accessed 30 March 2014]

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.confcooperative.it/C19/Vademecum%20del%20cooperatore/default.aspx> [Accessed 30 March 2014]

<sup>24</sup> Additionally, needs satisfaction is part of the Legacoop definition of cooperative member (*cooperatore, socio*): 'The individuals associate to together in a cooperative to satisfy – with reciprocal aid – their own individual needs (*i propri individuali bisogni*)' (Rimelli and Bianco 1994: 115).

At the same time, however, cooperatives are normalised as part of a market ecosystem and are recognised as such by Italian law. Cooperatives are one type of legal form which operates in the market: ‘This sort of “normalization” of the cooperative form is consistent with the view that cooperatives are an essential part of a pluralistic market populated by different players with diverse motivations, which prominent scholars deemed particularly beneficial at the macroeconomic level’ (Cracogna et al. 2013: 5). Cooperatives are also sometimes seen as ‘filling gaps’ where other types of firms will not enter. Social cooperatives, in particular type B cooperatives, are seen as operating in sectors that rely heavily on manual labour and thus have low profit margins. The founders of a small social cooperative that grew during the crisis told me that this period created space for new cooperative ventures that could not have been done by a private company, which would not invest in a similar project, while also filling a gap where the government was not active.

While the majority of people I worked with believed in the potential of cooperatives to uplift people by focusing on members’ needs instead of profit, there was also some anti-cooperative sentiment that cooperatives were helping to entrench, rather than abolish, class divisions and unequal political power. Stefano, a communist youth organizer and former cooperative employee (not member) told me: ‘Even if the cooperatives were truly of [belonging to] the workers, they stay, however, within capitalism and therefore will function the same as capitalism.’ Early socialists in Italy had also been sceptical of the cooperative movement, warning that it could distract workers from participating in class struggles (Ammirato 1996: 66). This is a view that was also held by Marx, who saw cooperatives as a potential trap that would prevent the dissolution of class relations:

Why, those members of the ruling class who are intelligent enough to perceive the impossibility of continuing the present system – and they are

many – have become the obtrusive and full-mouthed apostles of co-operative production. (quoted in Holmström 1989: 3)

Other anthropological research on cooperatives has resulted in similar warnings (Kasmir 1996; Ulin 1996; Bryer 2012; Rakopoulos 2014, 2015). This leads one to question whether the cooperative form can truly reunite individual and society, as Mauss had hoped, or whether, existing in the market, it is it destined to reproduce capitalist logics.

### 1.3.2 *Verdecura and Luminare*

Both Verdecura and Luminare are worker cooperatives, owned by worker-members, and also type B social cooperatives providing work-placement opportunities in the small city of Villacenseo.<sup>25</sup> Verdecura cooperative was founded in the early 1990s with the primary purpose of providing work-based inclusion through public service contracts with the local municipality, while Luminare was founded more recently in 2011 to promote ‘critical consumption’ (*consumo critico*) in a consumer-facing cooperatively owned retail space.

Verdecura’s primary business revolves around environmental services, including waste management, grounds maintenance, and pest control. The cooperative’s website describes these services in turn, starting with a general introduction on the welcome page:

For years, our primary objective has been to safeguard both people and the environment. With a staff of experts and specialized technicians, we work in a timely manner to design interventions for any problem related to maintenance or hygiene, quickly and effectively. We carry out in-depth assessments to ensure the most appropriate solution to the specific needs of our clients, which we follow with consideration, using the most modern products and techniques.

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<sup>25</sup> Both the names of these two cooperatives and the name of the city are pseudonyms. Similarly, names and some details about the individuals working in these cooperatives have been changed to protect their anonymity. Names of the larger cooperatives, however, and the names of academics and Legacoop association staff in Bologna remain unchanged.

The grounds maintenance and pest control sectors operate through a combination of private contracts and local municipal contracts, while the largest sector of waste management relies on a contract with Hera, a regional public-private partnership specialising in utilities and environmental services. Clicking through to the ‘About Us’ section of Verdecura’s website, one finds the cooperative’s mission statement and five key values listed:

#### Mission

We are a social cooperative that deals with social and work inclusion through the implementation of professional services and projects for the community.

We guarantee quality and competitiveness with a constant improvement of our operations and building relationships of trust with customers. We value the skills and diversity of the people who work with us and we offer development in the territory with solidarity and sustainability. We like to believe that we contribute to the common good.

#### Our Five Key Values

Professionalism  
Personal responsibility  
Mutual respect, also for the commons  
Social solidarity  
Fairness and justice in rights and needs

This description of the cooperative’s mission and values, shared on the website for potential clients, was updated in 2011 during a session of the cooperative’s elected board with the help of business consultants. It is similar to that which is included in the cooperative’s statutes (Art. 3):

Its purpose is the pursuit of the general interest of the community to promote human and social integration of citizens through conducting business activities mentioned in article 4 and aimed at providing social and work of disadvantaged persons under art. 1 letter. b) and art. 4 of Law 381/91.

The Cooperative is inspired by the principles that are the foundation of the cooperative movement worldwide and acts in relation to these. These principles are: mutual aid, solidarity, democracy, diligence, the balance of responsibilities with respect to the roles, community spirit, the link with the territory, a balanced relationship with the state and public institutions.

There is, however, one key difference. While the statutes reference the global movement and many of the internationally recognised cooperative values, including democracy, the client-facing values presented on the website do not mention this fundamental aspect, but instead stress ‘professionalism’ as the first key value listed. This reflects the management’s focus on entrepreneurialism and production. As opposed to equality, another of the ICA values, there is a reference only to equity (‘Fairness and justice in rights and needs’). Still, democracy remained a central practice in the cooperative and equality was a concept that emerged in response to unequal pay and uneven influence in decision-making processes.

At the time of the research Verdecura had twenty-eight members, of whom eight were considered disadvantaged. A further five were volunteer members and had limited involvement in the day-to-day workings of the cooperative. The cooperative also employed another twenty individuals as non-members, six of whom were on temporary contracts (*contratto determinato*). Additionally, there were four interns employed at various points throughout the year, a number of work placements in conjunction with the local municipality, and numerous others doing small stints of public service work for minor legal infractions such as driving while intoxicated. Luminare had a similar profile, but was much smaller, with fewer than ten active members.

While Verdecura deals largely with waste produced in processes of consumption, Luminare is a retail space that focuses on promoting conscious consumption (*consumo critico*) via organic, Fair Trade, local, recycled and bulk goods. The cooperative was founded by ‘a group of dreamers’, as they referred to themselves, who were already active in the local cooperative movement as members of Verdecura. On my first visit to the two cooperatives Verdecura’s director Mattia told me that Luminare had been his ‘stupid’ – he corrected himself – ‘brilliant’ idea. From the outside, it looked

unimpressive: a small retail centre in the rural outskirts of a small city; but the inside was striking. Giada, Luminare's vice president, gave me a tour of the retail spaces and restaurant and explained that they had renovated the building using reclaimed wood and local materials. It created a modern, yet rustic look with old scaffolding boards lining the walls and light fittings from a closed elementary school placed on the wall like artwork. Outside, a farmers' market area had a similar look with reclaimed wood tables, bamboo shades and light fittings made from reused clear glass wine bottles. Modern art and refurbished vintage items dotted the bright open-plan interior. It was a stunning place. Verdecura itself was not as glamorous. The operations centre, tucked down a side street on the outskirts of the city, was a garage facility with a mechanic's workshop, tool storage for the other sectors, a locker room and two small offices for the team leaders.

Both cooperatives are also members of the Consortium of Social Enterprises in Villacenseo (CISV), a local consortium of social cooperatives and non-profits that work in the provision of social services. The administrative offices of Verdecura and Luminare are located in the CISV building in the centre of Villacenseo. The two cooperatives also belong to Confcooperative, with ties to the Catholic Church, as well as a national consortium of social cooperatives called CGM (National consortium of social solidarity cooperation of Gino Mattarelli). While Confcooperative and CGM provide regional and national networks and services, the local consortium provides a base for daily administrative assistance and collaboration. Verdecura, for example, ran a project together with another social cooperative in the consortium, helping them to process and market the produce from a therapeutic garden, and it was also in early stages of another project collaborating with the same cooperative, a non-profit and the local government to renovate a warehouse and allotment space for the community. They also frequently used one of the other consortium members for printing and packaging services.

These two cooperatives, with one based on an older model of local services provision through public contracts, and the other a consumer-facing innovative venture, provide a suitable context for this study of the application of cooperative values in the context of modern capitalist practice.

## 1.4 Research Questions

Initially, my goal was to trace the way cooperative values were communicated, interpreted and put into practice. I began with two related research questions: ‘To what extent, if at all, do the alternative values, as represented in the cooperative discourse, impact day-to-day decisions and actions, both within and outside of the cooperative?’ And ‘Are the cooperatives able to practice alternative values in a competitive market context?’ However, the internationally recognised cooperative values did not appear to be as salient as I had anticipated. During interviews with various cooperative managers and employees, they rarely mentioned ‘solidarity’, ‘democracy’ or ‘equality’ directly. This raised the question of whether the cooperative values were perhaps less important than competing successfully in the market. After about two months, I decided to take a more direct approach, and rather than waiting for people to mention these values spontaneously, I asked directly: ‘What are the most important values in your cooperative?’ Again, and again, the answer was the same amongst the administrators and managers of various worker cooperatives: to provide jobs for the members. This, not profit, nor democracy, nor solidarity in the abstract, was their main aim, the highest value they claimed to follow.

My original research questions were in line with much of the existing research on cooperatives that separates the economic and social spheres, placing one in opposition to

the other, and typically describing the attempts, both successful and unsuccessful, to live up to alternative social ideals. Conceiving of the social values as somehow separate from the market-oriented practice of the cooperatives also made them initially difficult to identify because in a social enterprise the values are firmly located in the way they do business, and in what they attempt to maximise, which is not (only) profit, but (also) other ends. After unsuccessful attempts to analyse the cooperative practices in this light, I began to reformulate my research question, hoping to capture the interplay between the market context and the worker cooperatives' goal of meeting the needs of members by providing them with work: 'How does the worker cooperative attempt to meet the needs of both its members and the market?' However, this formulation alone still did not adequately capture the relationship between the cooperatives and the broader context in which they operate. Finally, I began to question the role of 'needs' in the revised questions: 'What work does the concept of need do in the cooperative context and how does this relate to the cooperative values?' And 'Do "need" and "greed" represent opposing social and economic motivations?'

This interrogation of the relationship between needs and values leads me to argue that the concept of 'needs' is extremely important because it is a flexible term that embodies a host of potentially conflicting assumptions and social values. By orienting decisions around the 'needs' of both members and the market, Verdecura's management is partially able to reconcile these two areas that may otherwise seem to be at odds. This instrumentalisation of the concept of 'need' also has consequences for the valuation of labour and the enactment of other values, such as democracy, within the cooperative. Focusing on what is considered to be necessary versus optional also illuminates respects in which the underlying social values may be shared among members, or alternatively in conflict.

Some values typically associated with the free market and more recently with neoliberalism are also found to be embedded with the cooperative's own practices. By focusing on providing a job as the fundamental 'need' of its members, for example, the cooperative's primary social goal also internalises the neoliberal market values of individualism and value creation through labour. Similar findings have led others to conclude that cooperatives reproduce capitalist logics, but I would instead claim that, while they may appear 'neoliberal' in their adherence to some of the same values and use of some similar methods, they use these neoliberal tools for other ends, as Ferguson argues in the context of some South African policy-making (2009). The cooperatives' managers aim to use the market 'differently', shaping it through their actions and invoking values such as local territoriality, inclusion, and social responsibility. However, as need becomes a key differentiator of cooperatives from other actors in the market, the alternative value system that cooperatives represent could be at risk of being undermined.

## 1.5 Values as desirable outcomes

For the purposes of this thesis, I find Nancy Munn's definition of value most useful because it appears to encompass later definitions of value while at the same time evoking the concept of 'need'. In *The fame of Gawa* (1986), she locates value in actions geared toward 'desirable outcomes' that are seen to be essential to community viability (1986: 8). This is similar to Graeber's notion of those things 'that some people wish they had [...] more [of] than they already do' (2013: 219), or Firth's 'something wanted and felt to be proper to be wanted' (1967: 212), but it also grants such desires additional importance through attaching it to 'community viability'. In her argument that value is found in the 'key possible outcomes' of an action, it contains both the action itself and the ideal, as

well as being the parameter along which the amount of value is ‘measured’ (1986: 8). In Gawa, it was measured in terms of *spatiotemporal transformation*, otherwise fame, which was itself both a product and evaluation of a person’s actions (ibid.: 15). In a cooperative, likewise, market actions are oriented around meeting the *needs* of members. As a result, and as the literature on cooperatives below shows, success has regularly been understood as more than producing economic value, also being linked to achieving social values such as job creation, social inclusion and democracy.

Recent contributions to the theory of value in anthropology have tended to emphasize the distinction between economic and social value, while also sometimes exploring the relationship between them. The distinction is explained well by Graeber (2001), who identifies three distinct notions of value that have been used in social theory: 1. sociological values (what is and should be desired); 2. economic value (what you would give to obtain those things); and 3. linguistic values (meaningful differences).<sup>26</sup> Further, he argues that these are all related, meaning that the study of any area in isolation would be incomplete (ibid.: 1-2). More recently Otto and Willerslev (2013a) have also distinguished three themes in the literature on values: cultural value created through *action*, as in Munn’s classic work; economic value created in processes of *exchange*; and Dumontian comparisons of value systems, that understand values as being ranked in hierarchical and encompassing ways (ibid.).<sup>27</sup> Unlike Graeber (2013, 2001), who attempts

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<sup>26</sup> A similar distinction was also made earlier by Sahlins who also pointed to the ambiguity of the term value which can be related to price, meaning and ‘in general to that which people hold “dear,” either morally or monetarily’ (1976: 214).

<sup>27</sup> In Dumont’s vision of holism, central values encompass others, and thus values must be studied as systems (Otto and Willerslev 2013a). A core value such as individualism or equality, he argues, exists in relation to its alternative, interdependence or hierarchy respectively, and the relationship between the two can be reversed situationally. Although individualism or self-sufficiency may be identified as a core value, humans are in fact social beings that depend on one another (Dumont 1982). In Dumont’s theory of hierarchical opposition ‘any distinction is hierarchical because of the different values that are given to the respective poles in the very act of distinguishing’ (Parkin 2002: 44). In this case, the act of distinguishing

to create a unified theory of value, Otto and Willerslev argue that such a theory may be elusive in the face of ethnographic diversity (2013b). Lambek (2008, 2013) in particular has argued that, while economic value is by nature commensurable, allowing for choices to be made among alternatives that are directly comparable, ethical values are incommensurable, requiring judgement, and thus making the two types of value incommensurable with one another. Pedersen, however, encourages us to go ‘beyond analytical separations that often have been more assumed than explained’ to look at the social whole (2008: 5). To this end, Graeber (2013) defines value as simply something that people want to have more of, and he sees the concept of value as central to the project of anthropology and the potential to understand what drives humans. Within different value fields, he argues, humans seek the highest goal, but just as when playing a game, the exact nature of the goal itself ‘becomes inconsequential’ in relation to attaining it (ibid.: 230). Value, whether commensurable or not, created in exchange or through action, appears to be as Munn described, a desirable outcome.

Research dealing with the movement across spheres is revealing in terms of the ideology of separation and processes of interaction between the social and the economic, often linked to processes of commoditization. Kopytoff (1986), building on Bohannon’s (1955) concept of spheres of exchange among the Tiv, argues that the public sphere of commodities interacts with the private sphere of personal valuations in complex ways, often resulting in contradictions. Kopytoff’s notion of singularization builds on his analysis of the commodity as a phase of an object. He points out that not all goods are considered to have commodity potential, and are thus seen to exist in a separate sphere,

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cooperation and meeting social ‘needs’ from market competition and economic ‘greed’ can be seen to privilege it over its alternative within a hierarchy of values.

yet he also highlights that these ideological separations are not fixed, with slavery being the ‘most glaring denial’ of the Western view that people are conceptually separate from things and by nature singular (1986: 84). He also urges that the most interesting findings would be made by studying ‘how one breaks the rules by moving between spheres’ (ibid.: 88). Similarly, in his analysis of the free market as a social construction, Carrier highlights the commonly held view in America that there are separate spheres, with ‘Market relations and values, the world of work, as being not only distinct from but antithetical to the relations and values of the family and household’ (1997: 18), but argues that such a stance requires one to ignore the many examples of production outside the market sphere and those within it that do not fit the ‘Market model’ (ibid.: 31). Miller (2008) suggests considering colloquial uses of value as a link between financial value and inalienable social values, emphasising that we use the same term to describe both. Miller contrasts ‘bottom-line’ reductionist approaches to value with those where value is created by catering to social values. While much of the research that Miller describes is in English-speaking contexts, the same relationship exists in Italian with *valore* (value) being used for financial worth and *valori* (values) to describe the less tangible social values. I argue, with Miller, that it is more productive to explore this link than to assume that value/s are opposed. In the cooperative context, *bisogni* (needs) may also act as a link between the two spheres.

### *1.5.1 Socially mediated needs*

A basic understanding of ‘need’ is not far from Munn’s definition of value as what is considered necessary for community viability. There is an interplay between the material aspect of needs and the social factors involved. While there are undeniably some ‘basic needs’ including water, adequate nutrition and shelter, many so-called necessities are

culturally determined (Gardener and Lewis 1996: 25). Although considered a materialist, Marx's concept of 'use value' is not entirely utilitarian, but 'a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind' (quoted in Martin 2015: 5). Similarly, Malinowski's theory of needs and institutions also recognised two layers of needs: biological needs and secondary needs, derived from culture (Kuper 1973: 44). The difficulty of defining basic needs is apparent in contributions by Nussbaum and Sen regarding the latter's capability approach to welfare economics and development. This approach considers that different individuals would need more or less resources to achieve 'the same level of capability to function' based on their situation and abilities (Nussbaum 2003: 35). What such capabilities are also needs to be defined, as Nussbaum has aimed to do in her list of central human capabilities, while leaving room for these to be considered within local democratic contexts (ibid.: 42).

Rejecting functionalist models, especially in Malinowski's work, that took needs as the basis for human social organization, economic anthropologists moved beyond the study of 'needs' as facts, instead focusing largely on 'wants'. Sahlins, for example, writes in 'The Original Affluent Society' that there are two ways for wants to be satisfied: the 'Galbraithian way' and the 'Zen road', with material wants being finite and few (1972: 2), highlighting that even what is considered necessary for survival is socially contingent. David Graeber, likewise, in his attempt to unify anthropological theories of value, describes sociological values as what is 'desirable', that is, what people want and '*ought to want*' (2001:3). Despite its functionalist overtones, the concept of needs remains useful, particularly when studying aspects of the economy and methods of provisioning. People often do make distinctions between necessities and more indulgent, or personal desires, making it important as an emic category. Furthermore, as Richard Wilk has argued, focusing on wants in the social sciences misses the process of naturalization of

some of these wants into needs, and thus ‘takes them out of contention and embodies them’ (2002: 10).

The idea of derived needs has been developed to the extreme by Baudrillard, who considered the concept of need itself to be a construction (2001: 174). Systems of needs, in Baudrillard’s analysis, are an abstraction of social labour that underpins use values (ibid: 170). He questions not only the ideological distortions and alienation caused by exchange value, but also the social aspect of use value (Presskorn-Thygesen and Bjerg 2014: 201). The images transmitted through media such as advertising serve to distort reality and create endless desire for consumption (or use) of not only goods, but also the images themselves (Parkin 2005: 249). This fetishism of use value, Baudrillard argues, is ‘more profound’ and ‘mysterious’ than that of exchange value because of the way it naturalises ideologies (2001: 176). He contends that the ideological content of use-value also means that it is no longer useful to provide a ‘revolutionary perspective’ as the end of political economy (ibid.). While Marx also recognised that human needs could be socially determined and hence appreciated to an extent the symbolic element of consumption (Martin 2015: 6), Baudrillard’s insight encourages us to question the underlying assumptions of the value systems that shape our needs. While not going as far as to suggest that all needs are *constructed*, it is worthwhile considering them all as socially *mediated* (Best and Kellner 1997: 115), and consider how this may serve to conceal or naturalise underlying value systems.

Needs must also be understood within the specific socio-legal matrix that has defined them. In the case of the cooperatives under study, this includes the local history of the cooperative movement, industrialisation and flexible production, as well as the present-day issues of precarity and austerity. The changing context and understanding of needs in the Italian context is further delineated in Chapter 2, shaped by changes in

employment and labour relations, as well as by the state through changes in labour law and welfare provision. Lynne Haney's (2002) work on welfare in Hungary exemplifies this approach as she describes how the concepts of 'need' and 'the needy' are created in the context of the Hungarian welfare regime, and how these labels change over time. Similar to Haney's findings that historically varied needs have been reduced to financial need in the context of modern Hungarian welfare, in the context of the social cooperatives that I will describe, the 'need' for employment now seems to have replaced older and broader understandings of need. This change seems to coincide with a more market-oriented approach, including changes to cooperative funding models, with increased reliance on market-based earnings and less secure public funding. The introduction of market-based wage scales is another example of the increased market orientation of these enterprises.

Thus, exploring the 'needs' of members as they are defined by the cooperatives' management in both rhetoric and actions taken to satisfy them reveals realities of the changing context within which they operate, as well as providing a lens to explore underlying social values.

## 1.6 Previous studies of cooperatives as a social alternative

There are three main trajectories in the literature on cooperatives, each progressively more sceptical about the possibility of alternative cooperative practice.<sup>28</sup> Early

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<sup>28</sup> Despite the increasing scepticism in anthropological analyses, the cooperative model continues to be presented as a valuable alternative to capitalist economic forms, as evidenced by the UN's IYC 2012 and numerous books written by scholars in Italy and elsewhere (Restakis 2010; Webster et al. 2011; Battilani and Schröter 2012; Agamben et al. 2012).

anthropological and sociological research on cooperatives largely focused on what makes them successful (Worsley 1971; Attwood and Baviskar 1988; Whyte and Whyte 1991; Vargas-Cetina 1993; 2005). This literature highlights the perceived division between economic and social aims, already discussed, with the economic goal of efficiency and the social goals of equality or democracy often found to be at odds. A second large body of research has focused on the cooperative form and cooperative ideology as a not always successful alternative to capitalist markets, conveying the compromises and slippage between ideals and reality that may occur (Nash, Dandler and Hopkins 1976; Müller 1991; Cheney 1999; Stephen 2005; Faulk 2008). A third group, already mentioned above, tends to regard cooperatives as primarily reproducing capitalist market logics (Kasmir 1996; Ulin 1996; Bryer 2012; Rakopoulos 2014, 2015). This thesis aims to add to the second and third lines of inquiry by considering how the flexible concept of ‘need’ enables the cooperatives that I studied to simultaneously satisfy both member needs and market needs by internalizing dominant value systems, rather than by dealing more openly with conflicts between economic and social goals.

The first major anthropological text on cooperatives is an edited volume called *Popular participation in social change* (Nash, Dandler and Hopkins 1976), which provides multiple examples and rich analyses of the cooperative as a socially motivated economic structure. In the Introduction, Nash and Hopkins identify cooperatives as an interesting area for study primarily because these are institutions that are created with intentionality, providing anthropologists with a platform from which to learn how we can ‘use our values, knowledge, and techniques in the present to mold the future’ (1976: 4). The influence of outside forces, including the capitalist market, existing social structures, and politics, is an important topic in Nash and Hopkins’ analysis and in subsequent literature. Rather than being seen as isolated institutions, the cooperative movement grew

as a response to the capitalist system, and thus cooperatives are often seen to be at odds with external values (ibid.: 12,15). According to Nash and Hopkins, cooperatives can pursue one of two competing political objectives: either seeking an alternative that can *transform* society or providing a *stabilizing* impact within the current economic framework (ibid.: 16). The seeming contradiction of the cooperative being both social and economic, as well as the external pressures of competing market values and alternative social values, in theory makes cooperatives a precarious form. Nash and Hopkins reference Gide's paradox, theorized in 1930 by the French economist Charles Gide: as cooperatives become more economically successful, they are less likely to achieve their social goals (ibid.: 17). This theory, or observation, has also been called 'adaptive decline' as the pressures of the market force cooperatives to behave in competitive ways, for example, instituting labour-saving, capital-intensive techniques that displace workers (ibid.: 18). This leads to a fundamental question that continues to be explored: can cooperatives advance the values of equality, equity, democracy and solidarity within a capitalist market context?

Following in the earlier tradition, Gabriella Vargas-Cetina's study of Sardinian cooperatives (1993) focuses on cooperative success as it relates to government policy. Contrary to findings in Africa and India that cooperatives sometimes failed because of a lack of fit with local traditions (Attwood and Baviskar 1988), in Sardinia she finds that the cooperative was successful specifically because the government saw the cooperative form as '*antithetical to traditional cultural systems*' (ibid.: 337, original emphasis). Yet the members of the cooperative were not found to be 'particularly committed' to cooperative or communist ideals, and instead joined the cooperative to access grazing land and government incentives (ibid.: 338). In Sardinia, success was found to be the result of both external support and the 'local manipulation of institutional rules' (Vargas-

Cetina 1993: 338). Her analysis leads to the view that the ideology of Legacoop and the volunteers that help the shepherds are ‘close to irrelevant’ to the latter’s daily activities (ibid.: 339).

For Mark Holmström, cooperatives offer the best of both worlds between capitalism and socialism: a dynamism that rewards innovation, but without hierarchy and oppression (1989: 43). His analysis is based on a short study of three months in cooperatives in Imola and Bologna, both in Emilia Romagna. Holmström reports that, as cooperatives have grown in size through mergers since the 1950s, the management bureaucracies have come to reflect those of private firms (ibid.: 52-53), yet he argues that the democratic selection of management and the ideology of cooperativism mean that managers generally have cooperative ideals and do not act as a separate group (ibid.: 105). Though overall those who have worked in both the private and cooperative sectors generally did not see a large difference between work conditions and routinization, the ‘members insist, with few exceptions that their experience of working in a co-op is different, and better’, with a more relaxed environment and a feeling of trust and consultation (ibid.: 112, 116). Even if the actual work and working conditions are similar, and though motivations for working there ranged from the idealistic, wanting to change society, to the practical, wanting to protect job security, Holmström finds that cooperatives are a more enjoyable place to work thanks to a better work environment characterized by friendliness and respect.

More recently, Theodoros Rakopoulos’s (2012, 2014, 2015) research on anti-mafia social cooperatives in Sicily focuses on food activism and understandings of community as employed by the cooperatives. His work questions meanings and interactions with these various ideological systems as they divide the administrators and manual workers. In the case of food activism, the two groups are found to have different

‘food ethics’ (2014: 119): cooperative workers place higher value on home-grown food and wines over the more mass-produced organic products promoted by the cooperative management. He also finds that the middle-class administrators employ a more formal and legalistic notion of community, regarding the confiscated and repurposed land as being returned to the community through the cooperatives, while the workers’ interest in the cooperatives is primarily financial, and they have other, more local understandings of community (2015: 61-2). Like Vargas-Cetina (1993), his work shows little commitment to the cooperative ideals among workers, who instead were often convinced ‘using only the wallet’ (Rakopoulos 2015: 61). Although considered by the administration as representing the community through participatory structures, Rakopoulos contends that the cooperatives in fact reproduce structures of inequality (ibid.: 65), and that divergent food ethics highlight internal divisions of labour (2014: 123).

These examples suggest that cooperatives tend to work within the broader market economy, rather than against it, with democratic governance being a primary differentiator. They also indicate that there is no monolithic cooperative ‘social’ or market ‘economic’ value system, but that these represent negotiations and compromises made between various actors and groups with their own conflicting value systems.

There has also been a proliferation of research surrounding the Mondragón cooperatives in the Basque country in Spain among both anthropologists and sociologists, following the same trend established above, with a focus either on the factors leading to success, or positing the cooperative as a (not always successful) alternative to the market. Sociologists Whyte and Whyte (1991) recount the history of the Mondragón cooperatives to consider how they have had such a high market survival rate, with 97% of firms persisting over three decades, without losing ‘their democratic character’, defined by Whyte and Whyte as adhering to the one-member one-vote policy (ibid.: 4). Their study

reaches back to the founding of the cooperative group through interviews and documentary review, and also spans nearly twenty years of visits and interviews conducted by both themselves and their students. Their analysis of an internal conflict in the 1970s highlights the rhetoric of the cooperative versus the capitalist market, as reflected in the division between workers and management (ibid.: 101). Yet the cooperative structure also includes a social council, which they argue was designed to consider the interests of the members as workers, as opposed to the general assembly, which would consider their interests as owners. Furthermore, the primary difference, in their view, lies in the different motivation of the firm: unlike private firms that make decisions based on profit potential with employment as an input to achieve that end, ‘*In Mondragón, the generation of profits or surplus is a limiting condition but not the primary driving force.*’ The distinction is between a *means* and *ends*. Leaders of Mondragón recognize profits as *the essential means* for achieving their *ends* of social and economic development’ (ibid.: 214, original emphasis). This focus on the motivation of the firm, participating in the market but with other ends, resonates with the views expressed by the cooperative managers in the present study.

Sharryn Kasmir’s ethnography *The myth of Mondragón* (1996), meanwhile, set out to fill a gap in the literature on cooperatives by focusing on the role of politics in the formation of cooperatives in the Spanish Basque country. Although she had also intended to study cooperatives as a positive alternative that would result in worker satisfaction and equality, she found instead that cooperative ideology can be another means of labour control. She analyses the industrial cooperative from a working-class perspective. While this text deals with issues of cooperative values and ideology, the narrow focus on the working-class from a Marxist perspective has brought criticism that it is a ‘lopsided’ view (Cheney 1999: 68). Kasmir argues that the cooperative movement in the Basque country

was part of a political project to pacify an activist working-class population.

Cooperativism is viewed as an ideology that pacifies the workers, as cooperative bylaws prevent them from organizing in unions like workers in private firms (1996: 138). She argues that rights to power through membership and the cooperative social council are not equivalent to being able to exercise those rights. Further, she contends that the cooperative movement has divided the working class such that cooperative members generally consider themselves to be middle class and do not participate in national worker strikes (ibid.: 166). However, it is also important to take the workers' emic construction of class at face value: ownership in the cooperative provides them with a higher estimate of their own status than wage labourers in private firms, even if they are earning a similar wage. For them, ownership may be valued beyond monetary terms alone. Within the cooperatives, the workers actively debated the meaning of cooperative values and were not passive recipients of a hegemonic ideology, as Kasmir seems to argue.

Following the pattern described by Nash and Hopkins (1976), the Mondragón cooperatives went through a period of modernization, including machine automation and worker efficiency monitoring, which increased stress levels for workers (Kasmir 1996: 156). It is from this perspective that Kasmir also contributes to the discussion of whether cooperatives can be economic institutions in a capitalist market and also promote egalitarian values. In order to rationalise the costs of the new machinery a shift schedule was introduced by the management committee despite alternative suggestions by the workers. This resulted in a disruption of the traditional social and political life in the bar after work, which Kasmir argues is 'an assault on Basque culture and identity' (ibid.: 182). However, Kasmir admits that cooperatives have provided consistent levels of employment and had passed through a previous economic crisis with few job losses and significantly higher job creations than other businesses in Spain (ibid.: 33). In towns with

high unemployment, Basque culture has also been eroded because a lack of money also leads to quiet bars and streets (ibid.: 182). Although the cooperative institution does not live up to its ideal of complete egalitarianism and solidarity, the economic stability it provides allows people to cultivate their lives outside of work.

In a later article Kasmir continues to argue that the cooperative is a means of labour control that decouples workers' political struggles from the global economy (1999). Although Kasmir's work highlights the potential danger of cooperativism as an ideology and reminds us that cooperatives must be evaluated as part of a larger global economic context, she privileges the role of the external system, rather than seeing the potential for cooperatives to challenge it through their own agency and practice. Her theoretical stance and focus on class consciousness seems to prevent her from offering a more balanced analysis of the interplay between individuals, ideology and the market, and it also fails to recognise the pragmatic benefits offered by a corporate structure that exists to provide stable employment for its members.

The values of the Mondragón cooperatives were also studied by George Cheney, who challenges this critical assessment, arguing that 'Utopian visions' of Mondragón are not the best way to measure its success, but rather that economic successes should also be taken into account (ibid.: 113). However, he also finds that cooperative values have been threatened and modified by changes in the wider society:

Changes in the co-ops' structure, the economy, the larger society threaten traditional cooperative values. The co-ops are becoming somewhat more bureaucratic and centralized; there is much more talk today about being competitive in the market; and there is great fear among the old-timers that young professionals are more career-minded than dedicated to the common good (ibid.: 14).

He concludes that the core value of participation has transformed and been reoriented towards meeting consumer needs, through employee engagement in production rather than governance.

Other cooperative ethnographies also show this tendency to see cooperatives and social values in opposition to market values, and under threat of assimilation. Similar to Kasmir's assessment of the Mondragón cooperatives, Robert Ulin (1996) argues that French wine cooperatives, through unequal access to the board of directors and presidency, reproduce existing class stratification among the wine-makers. His approach combines anthropology and history, looking at the role of invented tradition in the successes of Bordeaux chateau wines, also focusing on class stratification in the history of winegrowing (*ibid.*: 13). Ulin argues that small wine-growers are separated from the process of wine-making due to centralization in the cooperatives and are thus in a subordinate position to the technicians who work in cooperatives and have specialized knowledge that was previously shared (1996: 155). Although they are still in control of the production of grapes, they no longer have the knowledge to make or market wine independently. Nevertheless, the members of the wine cooperatives see the advantage in sharing this aspect of the process because they do not individually have the means to make wine (*ibid.*: 162). The wine-growers are interpreted as believing that membership benefits all of them equally, both large and small growers, because they do not have the knowledge or means to vinify and market the wine independently, yet cooperation is done out of necessity (*ibid.*). Furthermore, having the time to participate at the strategic level of the board or as president is only available to those few full-time growers and not those who supplement their incomes with factory work (*ibid.*: 161). In this sense, the ideology of equality encapsulated within the cooperative structure may obscure relations of power by focusing on the communitarian ideals rather than on why they are needed. Still, the

cooperative institution also provides security for members; as theorized above by Nash and Hopkins, it serves to protect members from the influences of the capitalist market. When the cooperatives arose during the 1930s in the face of the economic crisis, they helped the small farmers to maintain ownership of their vineyards and enter the post-war era with good economic grounding (ibid.: 252). They also protect small growers from market price fluctuations and the intermediate merchants who would otherwise purchase the grapes at a profit margin from those without the resources to make their own wine (ibid.: 176).

Likewise, Alice Bryer's research on Argentinian recuperated businesses asks 'Can workers run socially responsible enterprises or are they doomed to bureaucratization and self-exploitation under the pressures of the prevailing socio-economic system?' (2010: 41). She sees the recuperated business movement in Argentina as a workers' response to neoliberal economic restructuring that had left them unemployed, and argues that through accounting as a bureaucratic tool that privileges profit, the workers remain alienated from the source of production. Bryer does identify the important limitations faced by a cooperative that is competing against capitalist enterprises because of pressure to keep wages at subsistence level and also to utilize temporary non-member flexible labour (2012: 47). This downward pressure on wages seems to imply that the price-setting mechanism of the market has been internalized in cooperatives. She develops this further by shifting the focus from ownership of the *means* of production to focus on the *ends*, by which she means the systemic rationality of profit. She thus inverts the means/ends relationship described by Whyte and Whyte, whereby profit is not a means to social goals because its necessity makes it structurally dominant. However valuable, this approach downplays the aspect of motivation and the potential of cooperatives to use neoliberal

techniques for different ends, for example, seeking to maintain employment where previous business owners had closed thanks to low profit margins.

Others have been more willing to accept the potential of cooperatives as a productive alternative, but still imagine them as essentially in opposition to the market economy. Birgit Müller's research on Berlin collectives highlights the difficulties of practicing radical democracy and collective self-management in the face of the 'reality of working day, the need to organise, produce, and sell' and the 'absorbing nature of capitalist society', which would often lead to compromise or no decision (1991: 184). However, she concludes that although informal leaders emerged and membership often declined as a result, the efforts provoked important debates about the alternative economy and the possibility to integrate the will of members (ibid.: 185). Lynn Stephen's (2005) analysis of Oaxaca weaving cooperatives views these textile cooperatives as local and communitarian rather than individualistic, in response to global economic pressures promoted by neoliberal policies, including the North American Free Trade Agreement. Although still participating in the global economy, the cooperatives were founded, mostly by women, to help them gain more control over their work, rather than being hired as temporary pieceworkers or subject to the merchant control in the market. Likewise, Karen Ann Faulk (2008) presents cooperativism in Argentina as providing a counter-logic to neoliberal capitalism. In this example, the cooperative organizational structure is also linked with the grassroots movement of recuperated businesses. In such contexts of economic distress and criticism of neoliberal policies, the worker cooperatives create a new model of citizenship, according to Faulk, that includes a right to work and is based on cooperation, solidarity and community building rather than the individual and materialist citizen imagined by neoliberal policies (ibid.: 608). Such individual choice

theories are linked to a needs-based, rather than social view of the economy (Wilk 2002: 6), as developed by the cooperative.

While all of the cooperative studies mentioned above deal with cooperative values, such as democracy and egalitarianism, most see them as at odds with the economy at large, and few consider how cooperatives aim to balance the two in a holistic rather than dualistic manner. Through their actions, cooperatives not only participate in the market, but also help to reshape it through their alternative (not only profit) motivations and orientations. Cooperatives may at once promote some aspects of free market ideology while also responding to their effects and also changing the market through socially motivated practice. This is not a strict dichotomy, but a dialectical relationship, as argued by Gudeman (2009).

There are some more recent studies that do make headway in analysing the complex interactions between cooperative and market, social and economic spheres. Elizabeth Ferry's (2002) analysis of a silver-mining cooperative in Mexico provides another concrete example of how one group navigates between the long-term existence of the cooperative and short-term profit-making by considering how the silver itself is at once considered to be an alienable commodity and also an inalienable patrimony of the cooperative. Rather than seeing the commodity as a distinct phase of the object, it in fact coexists with an alternative understanding of the metal as a collective possession vital for their future survival. Sociologist Joel Schoening (2006) has developed the concept of 'Cooperative Entrepreneurialism' in an effort to avoid previous trends that consider cooperatives as successful in *either* democracy *or* business. He describes how one cooperative could be successful in the market and also 'maintain the loyalty of their workforce by offering a type of workplace that is more fulfilling than the traditional wage labor market' (ibid.: 295). Schoening details compromises made through the course of the

cooperative's history as they moved from a direct to a representative democracy and the introduction of lower wages and flexible labour, but he also takes seriously the 'intent' of the business and the 'counter-hegemonic' potential of the social values it promotes, despite adopting some neoliberal practices (ibid.: 296-299).

In a later article, Vargas-Cetina (2011) also finds that the cooperative and capitalist business models borrow from one another, with the neoliberal concepts of market share and efficiency also becoming important in measuring cooperative success, even as they try 'to oppose the damaging social effects of the neoliberal economy' (ibid.: S129,133). Her analysis shows how the cooperative's own internal measures of success have changed since the 1980s with the spread of neoliberalism; measuring success in terms of market share and efficiency extended even to rural agricultural cooperatives in Sardinia (ibid.: S129). The cooperatives are at once defending themselves from neoliberalism and the concentration of wealth, in line with the conditions of the origins of the movement, yet also working within the logic of the system to increase the individual profits of members. Still, Vargas-Cetina argues that the cooperative business model is an improvement over shareholder-based models because, through a democratic decision-making process, they are able to maintain a balance between profit motives and social morality (2011: S133).

Building on these findings by considering the role of 'needs' satisfaction in the cooperative's socially oriented market practice, this dissertation aims to add to this emergent trend in the literature that looks at balancing as opposed to contrasting practices. The term 'needs' appears to be useful to the cooperative to satisfy both the market and its members, as this concept is mediated by the same broader system of social (and economic) values.

## 1.7 Methods: locating cooperative values

My engagements in the field ranged from library research and meetings with academics, to interviews and events with members and staff of various cooperatives and the Legacoop apex group in Bologna, and ten months of participant observation as a volunteer employee at two social cooperatives near Bologna. In the first two months of fieldwork I spent considerable time building a network of contacts through meetings and interviews with academics and members or employees of various cooperative organizations. While I was not arranging or attending these meetings, I frequented the Italian Documentation Centre on Cooperatives and Social Economy<sup>29</sup> to learn about the local history of the cooperative movement. Although it took longer than I had anticipated to find a cooperative willing to host me for an extended period of research, the initial phase of trial and error resulted in a number of useful interviews and exposure to the practices of networking in the local cooperative context. In the last ten months of fieldwork, from mid-November 2013 to early September 2014, I focused on participant observation as a volunteer at the social cooperatives Verdecura and Luminare.

My role within Verdecura and Luminare was varied, but I worked mostly in the administration offices of Verdecura. I often helped with paperwork for work placements or public service work, and other record-keeping. From January 2014 I was also asked to help with communications for Luminare. Although it had far fewer members and employees than Verdecura, Luminare was a much more visible project, catering directly to local consumers. My primary tasks there were weekly web updates and daily social media marketing, working mostly with the events coordinator and the vice president of

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<sup>29</sup> <http://www.cooperazione.net/eng/> [Last accessed 10 January 2016]

the cooperative. Lastly, I also helped with marketing and production for a mushroom cultivation start-up project within Verdecura. This project took me to the cooperative's garages, where I had some opportunities to interact with workers outside of the office environment.

As both a worker and researcher I observed daily life in the administrative office and I participated in various events. Aside from day-to-day conversations and lunches in the office, I observed or participated in various meetings, including weekly coordination meetings among the sector leads, one executive meeting, a meeting of disadvantaged members, a general assembly and an extraordinary assembly and the 'social balance sheet' meeting of the local consortium in which both Verdecura and Luminare were members. I also observed or participated in work placement meetings with the Verdecura HR manager and staff of the local municipality, and marketing meetings with Luminare members and their web designer. In the evenings I attended various events, especially at Luminare, including the launch of the mushroom cultivation project, a pamper night promoting organic cosmetics, and an ethical fashion show.

Inspired by both Graeber (2001) and Munn (1986), I focused my attention on actions oriented toward desirable outcomes, in this case meeting the 'needs' of members. I contextualize these observations of management strategies and actions by considering gossip, explanations of actions, joking and other modes of moralization (Barth 1993: 35). I also considered contrastive practices, taking inspiration from Andrea Muehlebach's description of 'boundary work' that volunteers in Lombardy used to distinguish themselves from paid workers in the neoliberal economy (2012: 128). In this case, considering specifically how the cooperatives were differentiated from capitalist firms led me to the centrality of need within the cooperative discourse. I also found that it was productive to consider complaints and comparisons with either past behaviour or other

cooperatives as ideal types. As an outsider, I could also consider how my own actions were judged by those around me.

A further benefit of participant observation in the workplace is that it allowed me as the researcher to have an embodied experience of what the work process entails (Smith 2001: 224). This level of involvement, especially in the administration of the two cooperatives, gave me access to the daily operations and administrative processes of the organization, and unlike many other ethnographies of cooperatives, it also allowed me to consider my own experiences as a worker. The few monographs on cooperatives in Western Europe by Holmström (1989), Müller (1991), Kasmir (1996) and Ulin (1996) rely largely on interviews and surveys, thus limiting the scope of analysis, though Rakopoulos's recent doctoral work (2012) is a notable counter-example that highlights the value of extended participant observation within a cooperative to expose underlying class differences that could be obscured by the cooperative rhetoric of solidarity.

I supplemented this narrow, yet deep view with interviews, document reviews and participation in some networking groups. I used semi-structured interviews throughout the year to explore areas of interest and give the cooperative workers an opportunity to voice their opinions directly in response to my perceptions. I also interviewed members of various other cooperatives, cooperative organizations and academics. Throughout the year, I remained in close contact with two worker cooperatives in Bologna – Voli Group, a medium sized worker cooperative, and CAMST, a large national cooperative – and also participated in networking events for young members of the Legacoop apex organization that some members of these two cooperatives also attended. Participating in office activities at Verdecura and Luminare also provided access to employees and members of the local CISV consortium and the ability to observe some interactions with other social

cooperatives nearby. These varied practices gave me access to a wider view of the cooperative movement in Emilia Romagna.

In terms of data collection, I returned from Bologna with thirty-three semi-structured interviews, including about nine hours of recorded interviews and many pages of notes, logging regular conversations with another twenty-two individuals. Most of these conversations and interviews were conducted in Italian, although with scholars or those who had experience working abroad I tended to speak English. Out of these fifty-five people total, fifteen are from Verdecura cooperative and five from Luminare. They also include individuals from fourteen other cooperatives or cooperative associations, four staff from the University of Bologna and three local business owners. The Facebook page that I managed for Luminare also serves as an important source of information about their social media use and marketing strategy.

There were some key informants that were influential in shaping my access and views of events as they unfolded. Vera Zamagni, an economic historian at the University of Bologna, provided crucial help to set up interviews and access to a variety of cooperatives in and near Bologna. I also met with her throughout the year to discuss the research, providing a local academic viewpoint. Within Verdecura and Luminare there were five particularly influential individuals with whom I interacted on a regular basis. Mattia, the financial director of the cooperative, was very supportive and provided me with his official views, often explaining decisions made by the executive team. Similarly, the human resources (HR) manager Serena was able to provide me with key details about their administrative processes. Both of these members participated in the cooperative's executive meetings and provided a managerial perspective, though Serena was also critical of certain practices. I acted as a sounding board for some of the cooperative members and employees who were dissatisfied in some ways with the cooperative's

current practice. This included two long-time members, Roberta and Marco, and a newer employee, David. I have aimed to present a balanced view that includes my own observations and those of other cooperative members, though I have also provided space for the views of these particular participants to shine through.

For practical and ethical reasons, I had to be circumspect in my relations with and treatment of the cooperative's disadvantaged members, who may therefore appear less visible in this thesis than the managers and administrative staff. First, I have chosen not to specify or write about members based on their category of membership, unless a comment was made or there was a very particular reason to do so, preferring instead to present the various participants as equal members and workers in the cooperative. Secondly, as those members of the cooperative who were defined as 'disadvantaged' had minor physical or mental disabilities or past problems with drugs or economic hardship, ethical considerations imposed a caution in how I dealt with them. Third, while I had access to details about membership types, in practice it was not always apparent who was 'disadvantaged' and who not. I did, however, ensure that there was a proper ethical procedure in place to work with individuals who may be less able to give consent. In addition to being able to opt out of participation in this research directly, the HR manager also coordinated with the disadvantaged members, explaining my research project to them and giving each person an additional avenue to opt out by speaking with her once I had returned to England.

My research also raised other specific issues. While participant observation has a number of advantages, problems of access are common in workplace ethnographies, as pointed out by Smith (2001) and Buchanan et al. (1988). In an analysis of over fifty workplace ethnographies, Smith identifies the study of power, conflict and inequality as a key theme (2001: 223). Echoing Laura Nader's 1972 call to 'study up', this theme leads

directly to the issue of access that Smith identifies, as gatekeepers may be unwilling to grant access, and even once such access is granted, it may not be complete (ibid.: 226). In some specific encounters, I found that the administrative gatekeepers were not helpful in arranging meetings with workers, while in other cases it seemed that workers were less willing to share their views with me because of my existing relationship with managers and administrators. Many employees were hesitant to share their opinions of their superiors, and while some did so, if reluctantly, I have taken care to change names and personal details to protect, as much as possible, their anonymity.

My responsibilities within Verdecura and Luminare and the rather top-down means of accessing various cooperatives meant that I was most exposed to management and other administrative staff. Although I also had some interaction with operational staff, I did not achieve the same depth of relationship with as many people outside of management positions. Though this was partially due to my role and method of access, I also found that scheduling interviews was difficult with people whom I saw infrequently and communicated with only face to face. Many would agree to an interview in theory, but it was difficult to make concrete arrangements. Of the four Verdecura members whom I interviewed in the garages, these were all chance encounters. Instead, with office staff, who are used to scheduling meetings, it was easier to set up interview times in advance by email. The ethnography therefore focuses primarily on the management and administration of the cooperative, but at times where adequate information is available I also provide a perspective on the views of the other workers.

## 1.8 The remainder of the thesis

Each chapter considers an aspect of the cooperative context or practice. Together they draw out some of the tensions between needs and desires, or between needs and cooperative values. While I did not intend to frame the chapters around traditional cooperative values like democracy, equality and solidarity, these repeatedly surface as central themes, along with other local concerns of territoriality and sustainability. Some values that can be associated with the neoliberal setting, particularly individualism and choice, are also associated with the cooperative values of self-help, self-responsibility and democracy.

The first two core chapters provide a context for the history and institutional structure respectively of the cooperative movement in Emilia Romagna, while the final four core chapters deal with specific aspects of work within Verdecura and Luminare. Each ethnographic chapter also includes a brief thematic literature review to set the scene for the analysis.

Chapter 2 provides the historical and ethnographic background detailing the changing concept of need in Italy since mid-twentieth century. I show that cooperatives have responded to different types of socially mediated needs across their history. While cooperatives in the post-war period grew quickly by responding to ‘basic needs’ for housing and access to food, social cooperatives emerged in a period when the concept of ‘need’ had expanded to include rights-based notions like justice and equal access to employment. While in the past cooperatives were tied to broader social movements in Italian society that supported these values, the democratic structure of cooperatives seems

to be the key point of difference today, and responding to the needs of the market appears to be a central concern.

Chapter 3 provides additional context, foregrounding the importance of social networks in the cooperative economy. Networks, even those that are formally defined, are recognised locally for their innovation potential and seen as a kind of ideal egalitarian form as opposed to formal bureaucratic hierarchies in older cooperatives. The instrumental use of the network, however, was limited to some, entrenching the divide between administrative and more manual workers. Network power, such as that exercised by the *Libera Terra* consortium, or the economies of scale achieved by early cooperative purchasing groups can be used ‘for good’, but any such concentration of power can also be exclusive, and the metaphor of network as a ‘neutral’ and ‘natural’ form can obscure underlying structures of power.

Chapter 4 examines Verdecura’s democratic governance through the decision to merge with another cooperative. By considering how this process was played out in the course of various meetings, how it was justified in those meetings, and then later scrutinized in discussions and interviews, the importance of the common need to preserve members’ jobs is seen to be of primary importance in using and critiquing the director’s specialized knowledge within the democratic structure of the cooperative. Although the democratic process was not considered to be ideal by all of the members, there was a continuous attempt to share information and promote discussion, the view being that ‘deciding’ was equivalent to ‘voting’. Furthermore, I argue that being democratic is not necessarily a firmly defined classification, and that various shades of democratic practice are recognised by the members.

Chapter 5 looks at how work in Verdecura is divided between work that is considered necessary financially and work that is seen to be chosen ideologically. I show that ‘chosen’ work has both higher monetary and moral value, also being linked with free voluntary labour. Although a special relationship of ‘mutual exchange’ exists between members and the cooperative, as opposed to the neoliberal employee who is a resource to be managed, this exists in conjunction with various concessions: the introduction of pay scales along with the notion that some work is more valuable than others, and the use of flexible labour to protect members’ jobs.

In Chapter 6, I consider whether the management’s focus on providing work as the primary need of the cooperative’s members may be too one-sided, missing the desire of some of the members for a caring personal relationship with others in the cooperative. I argue that care is the missing link between desires for relationship and the practicalities of production. However, for management desires for care can be dismissed as idiosyncratic ‘wants’ as opposed to the necessity to focus on production and protect their livelihoods.

Chapter 7 looks at the limitations of ‘voting with your wallet’ in the cooperative context. I analyse the social media marketing tactics for the Luminare retail space, revealing underlying values of sustainability and territoriality, but also the limitations to using a mainstream marketing approach, with many cooperative employees unable to afford the choice of the ‘added-value’ items that are promoted as being ethically superior alternatives to ‘basic necessities’. Although the founders hoped to promote a different set of values through the Luminare project, they were doing it firmly within the logic of the

market. The ideal of 'ethical consumption' seemed to be (ineffectively) producing ethical *consumerism*, and struggling to find its place in the local economy.

Chapter 8 concludes the thesis by returning to question of whether the focus on meeting the need of job provision is enough to create alternative practice in the context of an increasingly competitive global market, characterised by neoliberal policies and government austerity. I argue that aiming to meet needs, when narrowly defined as employment, is by definition contributing to the capitalist construct of the labour market. In order to create alternative practice, work must be done to agree on needs that reach beyond employment alone. Further to this, although at the institutional level these cooperatives are diversifying to remain solvent, a singular focus on employment for individual provisioning may itself contribute to labour precarity.

## 2 MEETING NEW NEEDS: SOCIAL COOPERATIVES IN CONTEXT

As discussed in the Introduction, the flexible concept of need allows cooperatives like Verdecura to cater to both their members and the market. This chapter provides historical context, detailing the way cooperatives have responded to various member and market needs since the mid-twentieth century. The construction of these individual and market ‘needs’ and the value systems that inform them are constantly evolving in tandem with other socio-economic changes. While early cooperatives and those in the post-war period of reconstruction were seen to be responding to ‘basic needs’ such as housing and affordable food, social cooperatives like Verdecura developed in Italy to meet ‘new needs’ that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. These new needs and the cooperative form that developed to fulfil them grew out of the social rights movements of the 1960s, while at the same time being linked to the declining welfare state and characterised as an aspect of neoliberal policies of government decentralization. Today, under the direction of Mattia, the professionally educated financial director, both Verdecura and Luminare cooperatives are poised to follow current market trends of adding value through innovation, sustainability and territoriality in order to continue providing employment for their members, as will be detailed in subsequent chapters.

I begin by discussing the recent history of the Italian economy and cooperative movement, followed by the personal recollections of Enrico, an early participant of the social cooperative movement, and ending with a review of work and values in Italy today.

Together, these show dramatic change to both modes of production and patterns of consumption. Developments in anthropological theory and writings over this period reflect not only changes in society, but also in the object of study from peripheral and agricultural areas to the institutions of modern capitalism. Despite this shift from the Mediterraneanist concentration on rural areas and marginalized groups to industry and consumption, they consistently show a dialectical relationship between modes of economic production, politics and broader social values (Silverman 1968; White 1980; Holmes 1989; Blim 1990; Krause 2005; Muehlebach 2011, 2012). These ethnographic accounts also show how changing theoretical paradigms reflect changes in social concerns: while early ethnographic accounts focused on family values and modes of production, more recent work on consumption addresses ethical concerns, including the distribution of resources, an emergent trend in economic anthropology (Gregory 2009). Local practices of neoliberal capitalism and responses to it also emerge as an important theme to contextualize the present research (Molé 2012a, 2012b; Muehlebach 2011, 2012; Grasseni 2013; Heywood 2014).

## 2.1 Historical context: changing needs

This brief history of the Italian economy starts in 1944 when the cooperative movement was re-constituted after the fall of the Fascist regime. The period of post-war reconstruction was often remembered as one of cooperative solidarity, and changes to the economic and social structure that began then continue to influence cooperative structure and practice today. Furthermore, recounting this period shows how conceptions of need have changed and developed with the growing economy.

### *2.1.1 Post-war reconstruction: working together to meet basic needs*

The post-war period in Italy was characterized by economic growth fuelled by reconstruction and industrialization (Zamagni and Zamagni 2000: 45). The Italian economy was ‘on its knees’ after the war, with factories, infrastructure and whole communities needing to be rebuilt (Earle 1986: 30). Cooperatives took advantage of this demand and in the period just after the war, between 1944 and 1946, about nine thousand new cooperatives were formed,<sup>30</sup> largely for the provision of ‘basic needs’ such as housing, employment and access to affordable foods (Ammirato 1996: 79). With employment being considered a ‘basic need’ the social nature of these needs already emerges. Workers took over some of the destroyed and empty factories, and local governments gave contracts for infrastructure reconstruction and repair (Holmström 1989: 24). Though fast growth of building cooperatives during this time was viewed by critics to be the result of political preference, it was defended as a means to create stable local employment (ibid.: 25). ‘These’, anthropologist Mark Holmström writes, ‘were the heroic days of the Italian co-ops’ and were remembered with nostalgia (ibid.: 24). There was a sense of ‘comradeship’ and enthusiasm that grew out of the need to work and learn together without the guidance of professional managers (ibid.: 25). This sentiment is captured in the histories written recently about cooperatives that were formed and grew in Emilia Romagna during that time (Zamagni 2002; Vignudelli 2005; Bertagnoni 2005;

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<sup>30</sup> Although cooperatives had existed in Italy since 1854 and flourished before and during the First World War (Loyd 1925: 8; Earle 1986: 21), they came under attack after the Fascist coup when the national cooperative federations were dissolved and many cooperatives were either shut down or physically destroyed (Holmström 1989: 24). The National Fascist Cooperative Agency, introduced in 1926, aimed to control all of the cooperatives in a top-down approach and many cooperatives lost their democratic nature during this time with Fascist management hierarchies virtually replacing the assemblies (Zamagni and Zamagni 2010: 52; Ammirato 1996: 78). The movement had been reduced by more than half its size, but some cooperatives did survive with the industrial experience that would help them grow after the end of the war (Ammirato 1996: 79).

Casadio 2008), and was also described to me in a similar way by various cooperative scholars and some of the older cooperative members I came to know in Bologna. One co-operator described this period as ‘a remarkable pioneering experience’ (Vignudelli 2005: 26). In CAMST the nostalgia of this period continued to be expressed by referencing Gustavo Trombetti, the cooperative’s charismatic founder, who was described as ‘the spirit of our cooperative’ in a members’ newsletter (Genco 2002: 12).

This period was also important for defining the legal structure and social role of cooperatives in Italy. The cooperative movement had been historically divided by political ideologies between the Catholic Italian Cooperative Confederation (Confcooperative) and the Communist National League of Cooperatives and Mutual Societies (Legacoop). This political division was not only relevant to the cooperative movement, but seemed to divide Italy into two worlds with comprehensive, and mutually exclusive, belief systems and social life (Kertzer 1980: 2).<sup>31</sup> However, after the war, when both associations had been re-established, the ‘white’ Confcooperative and the ‘red’ League worked together to ensure that cooperatives were officially recognised and supported in Article 45 of the Italian Constitution (Zamagni and Zamagni 2010: 54). Around the same time, a decree known as the Basevi Law was passed, providing the basis for the structure of Italian cooperatives, and stating that they were to be democratically managed with the principle of one person, one vote. It also stipulated that at least half of those employed be members, that white-collar workers were limited to only 4% of the workforce, that at least 25% of all profits would be saved in a collective reserve, and that if the coop were to be dissolved, the assets would be given to a public fund rather than

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<sup>31</sup> Despite conflict at the institutional level, the reality was of course much more complex than such a simple division would suggest and individuals were able to navigate the apparent contradictions of dual loyalty (Kertzer 1980: 5).

distributed among the members (Ammirato 1996: 82). This legal structure encouraged a long-term outlook over immediate gains for current members, and democratic governance continues to be recognised as the *raison d'être* for cooperatives to exist along other business forms (Zamagni 2008: 10).

The Italian Constitution was also the basis for national democracy, which historian Paul Ginsborg credits for the development of a plurality of values in Italian society over the next fifty or so years (2003: 135). The Constitution guaranteed 'the inviolable rights of the person' in Article 2 and introduced the principles of universality and equality in Article 3:

All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions. It is the duty of the Republic to remove the economic and social obstacles which by limiting the freedom and equality of citizens, prevent the full development of the person and the effective participation of all workers in the political, economic and social organization of the country.  
(Marzocchi 2014: 3)

These concepts would later become central to the social movements of the 1960s that also helped to inspire the advent of social cooperation (*ibid.*).

### *2.1.2 Consumer culture and the emergence of new needs*

The 1960s were an important period of social change in Italy, linked to a growing economy known as the 'economic miracle'. Consortiums of cooperatives had first begun to form in the late 1950s and they continued to grow in the 1960s, increasing efficiency and helping to promote cross-sectoral trade (Thornley 1981: 160-1). This legal structure allowed individual cooperatives to become more competitive in the market without increasing their size (Ammirato 1996: 86-87), which was seen as a threat to democratic practice (Thornley 1981: 160). Cooperatives were faced with either closure or coming together and using new production and management technologies (Vignudelli 2005: 83).

Structural changes in this period were also paired with a shift from being focused on survival, to being more like agencies focused on employment and playing by the rules of the market (ibid.: 46). This period at the beginning of the Cold War also saw increasing political divisions within the cooperative movement as the Christian Democrats aligned themselves with US-led Western capitalism, and the Communists (PCI) and Socialists (PSI) remained more closely aligned with the USSR and socialism (Ammirato 1996: 84). However, the overarching values of democracy, participation and responsibility were also values of the society, and linked to rights of citizenship (Vignudelli 2005: 96).

As the Italian economy grew, consumer culture and new ‘needs’ began to emerge. Many people in Italy were reaching the living standards of northern Europe for the first time (Earle 1986: 33). In this phase of growth, known as Italy’s ‘economic miracle’, there was a shift in consumption patterns, ‘which saw the passage from a society where basic needs were not satisfied, to one in which they were for the great majority, if not for all, of the Italian population’ (Ginsborg 2003: 83). Consumption increased as people began to buy the products of Fordist industry including refrigerators and washing machines. These items were largely utilitarian, but also provided pleasure and did not fit ‘any simple distinction between needs and wants’ (ibid.). This creation of new desires and the naturalization of some of these into needs helped consumption keep up with production.

During this time, the middle classes also began to demand better working conditions and greater equality (Holmström 1989: 26). The student protest movement in 1968 was only one aspect of the social movements that occurred in Italy and across Europe during this time. Unions also gained influence and helped to support industrial conflicts that climaxed during the Hot Autumn of 1969, leading to wage increases and a shorter working week (Ammirato 1996: 266; Koff and Koff 2000: 87). The worker movements of the late 1960s had culminated in the 1970 Workers Statute that protects

workers' 'freedom and dignity' and the right to unionize (Marzocchi 2014: 6). It also sanctioned workers' rights to health and safety (Molé 2012a: 20). Article 18 also introduced protections for workers at firms with more than fifteen employees who had contracts of indefinite length, 'which give them full-time, lifelong contracts, full social security benefits, health insurance, retirement plans, and accident insurance' (ibid.: 21). This made it an expensive and lengthy process to dismiss anyone with such a contract, which came to be known in popular culture as the "steel barrel" (*botta di ferro*), contracts that were highly protected and stable' (ibid.). The rise of these rights-based movements also marks the beginning of a shift in the concept of 'need' from basic material satisfaction to include more abstract ideals like justice and equality. At this time the Italian welfare state, which had traditionally provided partial support based on the employment of the male head of household, also began to recognise the different needs of individuals within a family, and there was a move towards the development of a universalist welfare state based on individual rights (Ginsborg 2003: 226).

The 1970s were tumultuous years in Italy following the 1973 oil crisis and political scandals linked to corruption and terrorism (Earle 1986: 33). Whereas the previous two decades had seen declines in agriculture in favour of industrialization, the energy crisis marked the beginning the shift to a post-industrial economy with declines in both productive sectors (Allum 2000: 18). Cooperatives, like other firms, had to face a challenging economic environment with low profits, high interest rates and fast-paced technological changes (Thornley 1981: 166). Cooperatives endured where capitalist firms had failed in the economic downturn, but like other firms they also had to reduce labour costs to remain competitive (ibid.: 159). CAMST, for example, would probably not still exist today if it were not a cooperative and it had not overcome increasing price competition through the introduction of centralized kitchens (Zamagni 2002).

Management styles changed along with changes in technology and the social composition of workers; while previously cooperatives were primarily for the working class, they began to expand to the middle classes (Holmström 1989: 27). They increased in size, profitability and management, with legal changes in 1985 to accommodate having more than one in twelve 'white-collar' workers (Ammirato 1996: 105). New 'market opportunities' required new managers and technicians, and so for the first time the cooperatives recruited university graduates and people with technical qualifications on a large scale (ibid.). Many educated young people were now willing to join cooperatives either pragmatically seeking jobs, or out of ideological conviction. Signor Carpanelli, head of the League at the time, said that cooperatives had no choice but to participate in the capitalist system, though they aimed to change the workplace through participation, democracy, and reinvesting profits to create more work as opposed to distributing profits among members (Thornley 1981: 157). While cooperatives were increasing in size and relying more on modern technologies, they continued to be committed to democratic principles, and also allied with the wider social movements through membership in either the 'red' or 'white' cooperative groups.

While the 1970s ended with a high level of worker protections and security and stability for those who were employed, the move towards a universalist welfare state was not maintained due to rising costs, both legitimate and illegitimate, and the state returned to '*delegating* to families rather than *providing* for them' (Ginsborg 2003: 227). Families were once again responsible for caring for children who were unable to provide for themselves:

Parents are economically responsible for children practically for always, if children prove incapable of providing for themselves. Brothers and sisters can be called upon to cope with each other's needs at any stage of their lives. Sons- and daughters-in-law are responsible for their parents-in-law. All this has practical consequences for social rights; it also has consequences for how

individual needs and rights are viewed.  
(Saraceno 1989, cited in Ginsborg 2003: 229)

Those families that sought help from the state were often disappointed, and while the Italian state spent a lot on public services, Ginsborg argues, they did so ‘without guaranteeing some of the most elementary of needs’ including access to justice (ibid.). As the needs recognised by Italian society increased, eventually the retreating state also stopped guaranteeing them.

### *2.1.3 Restructuring and the growth of the services sector*

The economic turn of the 1980s and 1990s was ‘the triumph of the service sector’ (Ginsborg 2003: 7), reflecting a further restructuring of the Italian economy. The working-class movement was defeated at FIAT in 1980, ‘signaling the end of an epoch’ (ibid.: x). While the proportion working in agriculture continued to decline, reaching 9.5% in 1990, the trend toward industrialization did not continue but represented 29.8% of the workforce in 1990, down from 38.1% in 1971 and less than in 1951. There was a sharp increase in the service sector from 22.9% to 42.6% over the same period (Zamagni 2000: 45), but the industrial decline and job losses from restructuring in the 1980s were not fully offset by the ‘marginal increase of workers in the services’ (Allum 2000: 19). While the service sector significantly increased highly paid jobs, it also introduced many low paid and precarious jobs: ‘Fragmentation became the order of the day. So too did unemployment’ (Ginsborg 2003: x). Casual work in the service industry increased, providing quick service food and shopping around banks and office blocks (ibid.: 59). Large firms took on the Japanese model of ‘lean production’ and focused on meeting the needs of individual consumers as opposed to the mass production of standard products (ibid.: 13). Perceptions of poverty also changed. In the South youth unemployment rates

were high. Although they had ‘adequate levels of clothing and food, if not always of health and housing’, they lacked hope (ibid.: 61). Although most people were ‘materially richer than ever before’ they seemed to be losing a sense of collective identity (ibid.: 66).

The cooperative sector, like other parts of the economy, underwent a process of restructuring in the 1980s along with an increase in mergers (Bartlett and Pridham 1991: 8). According to the League president at the time, Onelio Prandini, cooperatives also needed to respond to the opening up of the Italian economy to world markets by making use of technological advances, but were at a ‘disadvantage’ because they were ‘traditionally bound to the idea of maximum employment’ (Earle 1986: 212). Due to their economic success, Italian cooperatives came to be regarded as a third sector, taking advantage of economic opportunities where neither public nor private sector would enter (Thornley 1981: 166). However, this success has also created a problematic situation that was recognised within the League as operating at ‘*due velocità*’ (two speeds) with 5-6% of the fifteen thousand cooperatives in the League accounting for almost half of the total revenues (Earle 1986: 204). In the 1980s there was already concern among the organisation’s leadership that this discrepancy could grow and threaten their unity. A 1985 General Council document from the League states: ‘The traditional perspective of solidarity ... which has sustained our movement for decades, is giving way to a short-term company outlook, in evident contrast to the objectives and requirements that we still have, and that are indeed stronger today than in the past...’ (ibid.). However, even though ideological motivation was seen to be diminishing, it was still felt that the formation of new cooperatives was a means towards the creation of a fairer society through democratization (ibid.: 207). Although cooperatives had been growing in size and becoming more market oriented, they remained connected to the Catholic Confcooperative and Communist League, keeping them embedded in these dominant,

though competing, value systems, each of which provided a source of community and mutualism.

A new form of social cooperative was also starting to develop in the 1980s in response to declining state support. These welfare-oriented cooperatives filled gaps left by the retreat of the state in the provision of care (ibid.: 205). League president Prandini saw this as a great opportunity for cooperatives because they could operate ‘with less expense and greater efficiency’ than the state, paired with an emphasis on solidarity and working together (ibid.: 215). The cooperatives were actively encouraged by the state and granted fiscal benefits as part of a neoliberal project of government decentralization (Trundle 2014: 12-3). Yet at the same time, they were also reverberations of the social movements mentioned above that strove for greater equality and inclusion. Hospitals and other facilities for the mentally or physically disabled, drug-addicts and orphans started to be seen as ‘inadequate structures’, and most were eventually closed (Marzocchi 2014: 7). Two types of social cooperatives were eventually recognised by Italian law in the early 1990s under law 381/1991; though the law had been drafted in 1981 it took ten years to be passed (Restakis 2010: 99). Type A cooperatives were born from a transformation of social care worker cooperatives to include also families of the disabled as members with a say in the care of their relatives (ibid.). Type B cooperatives, by contrast, have the legal obligation to provide work placement opportunities (Bandini 2004: 11). These institutions are both imbued with the values of the social rights movements that helped to create them, and they are also fundamentally vehicles to expand market access; freedom and equality are defined vis-à-vis access to the market economy.

## 2.2 Portrait 1: a new kind of cooperative to meet new needs

Enrico, who was a frequent presence in the corridors of the Consortium of Social Enterprises in Villacenseo (CISV) where Verdecura's and Luminare's administrative offices were located, along with those of a number of other social cooperatives and non-profit organizations, had helped to found one of the early social cooperatives and was involved in the process of getting them recognised by Italian law. He had his own office in the CISV building and sometimes stopped by the Verdecura offices to say hello in his capacity as the director Mattia's father, or on business as the president of Luminare cooperative.

When telling me the story of his personal involvement with social cooperatives, Enrico started from his childhood, highlighting the values that he had learned through his scout group in the local parish: a respect for nature, group life and the importance of working together: 'There are many things you can do together as long as each one strives to do his part.' Enrico underlined this point many times while telling me about his involvement in the early days of the social cooperative movement in Italy. It was the motto of his scout group, which had stayed with him all those years. It had become more than just a motto for a group of boys, but as he has come to describe it, a social program, an idea of society that encouraged him to help found one of the first social cooperatives.

As teenagers involved with the scouts and other activities in the local parish grounds, Enrico and his friends were also coming of age as important social changes unfolded in the 1970s: 'We were children of the 1968 youth protests', he told me, which gave them a strong desire to change the world. To help describe their vision, he listed the key themes for change in those years as he remembered them: democracy, social justice and community. As the concept of universal rights spread, institutions like psychiatric

hospitals, orphanages and facilities for the disabled also began to close, meaning that people who had been kept partially outside of society suddenly became visible. Enrico explained:

Society [now] seemed to include citizens that previously were not there because the disabled, handicapped people, children without families, mad people, they were people who were individuals that didn't exist. They hadn't been people in the society because they were inside institutions. And so these people began to live alongside us, in the apartments nearby, in the houses. And the families of these people called on the mayor and on the parish. They went to ask for help for their families, to give them a place to stay with their family.

As a result, these new citizens began to live alongside Enrico and his friends in the community, participating in their scout groups and other local activities. For the first time he could recall, Enrico came into direct contact with disability, and through his hobbies got to know people who were coming out of mental institutions, or those who had issues with drugs, or were orphans. He made connections with some of these people, and it made him realize, he said, that they were just like himself and his friends: 'even your own child or your own brother' could be in that position. Coming together in those local associations, the 'new' members of society were able to find friendships and avoid isolation.

When they finished school, Enrico and his friends wanted to find a way to help others in their community, while at the same time making a living:

When I was about twenty, after this experience of being in these associations, I found myself facing the traditional question that all young people face: What will I do when I grow up? What choices will I make? Because we enjoyed living in a way tied to those values that we had found during the experience of scouting and at the same time, this group life had taught me also the importance of being together and doing things together.

While some of the friends went to university and others moved away to follow different paths, some stayed together to start an association. They wanted to find a form that would allow them to ensure that their ideas of social justice and a democratic community life

could be realised, and they took inspiration from some other similar attempts nearby, the first being the Nomadelfia community near Modena that was started by a priest in order to help children orphaned during the war. At that time orphans typically grew up until adulthood inside state institutions. If they were taken in by a family it was only thanks to personal generosity, and so the priest created a community where these families could live together. Eventually this developed into an agricultural workers' cooperative with a printing press. 'We were inspired by them,' Enrico told me. There was another similar experience in Bologna, where a priest opened a professional training centre to help orphans. As the years passed he also helped them to start some work cooperatives 'to allow them to have an opportunity' to use their skills.

Taking these two examples as inspiration, Enrico and his friends decided to start a cooperative. This business form embodied their vision and the motto of their scout group:

It was the form of business closest to the desires and hopes that we had because it has a democratic form of business where the property is not private – not of one person in particular but of everyone – and moreover it is made to be left to the successors who come after; it's not seen as personal. It's a business of which the members are users. User means that you are the recipient of a good for a certain time but it's not yours. And it's a business that is based on these principles, on the motto which I told you. And so a cooperative can be successful if each one does their part. If there are only people who don't do their part, then it is difficult for a cooperative to succeed. And so it corresponded to the hopes that I had.

Before starting a cooperative of their own, they searched around for work, based on the needs of the market at that time. They started with odd jobs, collecting recyclables such as paper and iron, and doing work that they contracted from other local artisans. When the cooperative started officially in the early 1970s they began to structure their own activities with a small printing press, which was a growing sector at the time Enrico was describing, and also a small mechanic's shop where they did iron work. The first ten years of his career Enrico had been an iron-worker in that workshop.

And in this workshop, we did the first work placement activities. There was a disabled person, one of my classmates from school, who was paralysed, there was another person who was severely depressed, and so he was practically... he was disabled, and there was an old person who had been in the concentration camp and then in a psychiatric hospital [...]. There were a few young people who had drug addictions because at that time there were a lot of people suffering from heroin addiction. And I am probably missing others because there were many different people in difficulty seeking a community, a larger group.

In addition to providing a place for these new citizens of Italian society to gain work experience, Enrico found that many of them also needed a place to sleep, having previously been wards of the state. The parish refurbished a house to provide community housing, but it was not always enough. Enrico often provided a temporary bed for one or two guests in the house he shared with his wife and two young children – there were rarely only four of them in the house, he remarked to me smiling; ‘It was a little community.’ Thus began one of the first social cooperatives for work placements: because a group of community-minded young people saw a need and wanted to help. Similar projects were popping up spontaneously all over the country, as far south as Sicily, he told me, responding to these new needs: ‘It was the push, the change that was happening in Italian society. It put into motion a process that required a response. And that was one of the responses that the Italian society was giving.’

By the time of the first national meeting of what later became known as social cooperatives in 1985, there were close to six hundred different groups in attendance. Enrico saw this process as representing a break with previous individualistic models of social support:

[It] is very important because [it was] a process of discontinuity with respect to history up until that moment [...] sociality and also help were part of a concept tied to beneficence or to patronage. And so either there were the big foundations funded by religious and secular movements, but they were very, let's say individualistic forms. The patron or the rich person who is beneficent, even one who starts a foundation, is still [following] an individualistic approach. And also the big foundations, the big funders of these big foundations were charismatic leaders, the founders of something

which was of their imagination. Instead, this movement grew from the base. There were of course also some charismatic leaders, but it was a widespread movement which came from the bottom from many different people and, moreover, often in a democratic, more communitarian way.

Although describing how these various experiences occurred across the country in response to similar social and legal changes, Enrico also highlighted that each was unique. It was a long process filled with compromise, he told me, to find common ground and agree on a definition of social cooperatives and a workable legal framework. Some of these cooperatives, like the one he had founded with his friends, focused on social solidarity. Others, known as integrated cooperatives, grew out of specific contexts such as that depicted in the film *Si Può Fare*. It tells the story of a cooperative in the early 1980s in Milan that was caring for people who had been released from a psychiatric hospital. While the former patients were initially kept busy by doing crafts, the newly appointed director saw potential and helped them gain employment as woodworkers. Yet more cooperatives developed in conjunction with government contracts as the public sector relied increasingly on outsourced service provision.

He explained that the social cooperative sector grew exponentially once Law n.381 was passed in 1991. However, this growth was not entirely organic. Though Enrico had highlighted the bottom-up approach and solidaristic nature of the social cooperatives as an important divergence from previous individualistic and top-down means of help, the driver of growth for many social cooperatives was government procurement. According to Enrico this external management, driven by public contracts, led to ‘unilineal development of a business’ with ‘cooperatives [that] are fragmented because they have grown up without a head – the head is outside of them, the planning, the strategy. These aspects were coming from the government procurement.’ It was a sector that developed spontaneously across the country, responding to similar changes to the economy and

society, a convergence of apparent needs that was also reinforced by neoliberal policies of decentralization.

As captured by Enrico's story above, individual cooperatives and an organized movement emerged in response to new socially determined needs. In addition to replacing 'basic needs' including housing that would have been provided previously in institutional settings, the social cooperatives were also aspiring to provide social integration and equality through democratized provision of care and work placements.

## 2.3 Ethnographic accounts: changing values

Despite the rapid industrialization, urbanization and social change that Italy was undergoing in the 1950s and 1960s, ethnographies covering this period were primarily characterized by a Mediterraneanist approach and focused largely on rural areas in the south of Italy. According to John Davis (1977: 17), this focus on what were treated as relatively isolated areas with an 'island investigation' approach led to a limited contribution to debates within economic anthropology. Instead, research often focused on 'traditional' values, such as honour and shame, and the importance of family (Filippucci 1996: 54), value systems that were considered to be threatened by external forces of modernization (Goddard et al. 1994: 7). More recent works have shown how people interact with dominant economic structures (Krause 2005; Molé 2012a; Muehlebach 2012) and actively work to modify them through alternative provisioning strategies (Grasseni 2013; Counihan and Sinsalchi 2014).

One line of research aimed to depict the connection between family structure, values and economic development. The concept of familism in Italian life has persisted since Edward Banfield theorized that 'amoral familism' was to blame for the poverty and

limited economic development in ‘Montegrano’ in the province of Potenza. He proposed that a lack of association among the families was due to an inability to act outside of the immediate needs of the nuclear family (1958: 7-10).<sup>32</sup> Although this theory has been debated and largely refuted for various reasons (Silverman 1968; Davis 1970; Miller Jr. 1974; Ferragina 2009) the centrality of family in Italian society and business has remained an important theme. Historical analysis has shown nuclear families to be central to the successful networks of small businesses (Ginsborg 2003: 19), and family values were found to be a guiding principle in the small-scale industrialization of Italy (Blim 1990) even as traditional values were sometimes felt to be under threat from industrialization (Krause 2005).

Sydel Silverman’s (1968) critique of Banfield’s work is important because she posits a dialectical relationship between the socio-economic structure and the value system: ‘The agricultural system throws up values directly, and it shapes values indirectly through its effects on social organization; values reinforce agricultural and social patterns but do not create them,’ (ibid.: 3). Silverman found that central Italy (including Emilia Romagna) and southern Italy have different ‘agrarian characteristics’ (ibid.: 4). The driving structural difference between central and southern agriculture was the prevalence of rented plots in the south that were often small with unstable tenancies and farmed individually with all the associated risks being assumed by the individual family. By contrast, there was a history of *mezzadria* or sharecropping in central Italy that was characterized by land-use contracts with relatively stable use across decades and production risks that were shared by the landowners and peasant farmers. In the south, the

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<sup>32</sup> Similar ‘culture of poverty’ arguments have also been made elsewhere in the Mediterranean (e.g. Brandes 1973).

family had to be self-sufficient, while in the central region the landowner provided some of the farming tools and would advance capital as needed. As the *mezzadri* would have to share one half of their yields with the landlords, it was also to their benefit to increase productivity as much as possible (Pratt 2003: 74), while the south was seen as lacking a proper work ethic. This historical context of cooperation has also been posited as one of the factors contributing to the proliferation of cooperatives in Emilia Romagna (Holmström 1989: 24, 30). This is all in contrast to the individualized system of land use in the south, where rental and sharecropping contracts were most common, resulting in a fragmented relationship to the land. Silverman concludes that ‘the dominant values’ differ ‘along lines corresponding to differences in agricultural and social organization,’ and in order to spur development in the south of Italy the primary obstacle is the structure of the agricultural system, rather than a deficiency in culture (1968: 15, 17). Silverman’s comparison provides a compelling argument for the role that land use patterns play in influencing both social structure and values, and later ethnographies continue to reflect this connection between economic modes and social values.

Caroline White’s (1980) analysis of patronage in two villages of the Abruzzo region foregrounds the importance of historical circumstances in driving socio-economic patterns. White’s analysis compares two villages in the same geographical area, Luco and Trasacco in the Fucino basin, to determine the impact of land reforms as the peasants went from being tenants to landowners. Anticipating a difference between the two villages based on their respective political leanings, White actually found that the rejection of patronage relations in Luco was contingent upon a ‘unique past’ that encouraged self-reliance (ibid.: 4). While in Luco the farmers had been united during a nineteenth-century protest against a drainage project organized by the ‘Torlonia’, the holders of a local princely title, that would deprive them of their livelihoods (ibid.: 92),

those in Trasacco seemed to benefit when the lake was drained, with total land area increasing substantially (ibid.: 19-21). These unique histories in turn created different 'values and attitudes' according to White. In Trasacco, there was a distaste for manual labour and a preference for professional work. Not land itself, but economic standing was important for prestige. In Luco social life was found to be animated by divergent values, with farmers striving to increase their holdings and taking pride in their crops. In addition to hard work, one of the most important personal qualities was *coerenza*, or acting consistently with one's beliefs, either political or religious. This made political patronage distasteful, as trading votes for favours would require acting against one's beliefs (ibid.: 154-159). Whereas collective action against a common oppressor shaped the shared history in Luco, encouraging the *luchesi* to favour egalitarianism and appreciate their land as a productive resource that they had struggled to maintain, those in Trasacco who had not been so obviously exploited accepted the patronage relationship as an exchange of favours, and strove to attain similar prestige in their own right.

Based on the impact of the collective experiences in Luco, White suggests that one way to end clientalism would be to encourage collectivism. She notes that the development program for southern Italy included a fund to encourage cooperatives, which, she suggests, would encourage collective interests and give would-be clients direct access to the means of subsistence (ibid.: 172). However, research on Sicilian cooperatives by Jane and Peter Schneider suggests that political support is not enough to drive collective economic success as cooperatives in Sicily failed due to external market forces and a history of economic dependency in relation to the north of Italy, despite legal support and subsidies (1976a: 293). In the post-war period of the late 1950s the government supported land-reform schemes and the development of cooperatives to improve agricultural development, but many of these did not last long, which was

believed to be the result of corruption, lack of funding or an unwillingness to work together and a preference for immediate returns (ibid.: 290, 293). By the 1960s there were very few cooperatives left, most of them being ‘machine cooperatives’ where members shared machinery and benefited from equipment subsidies. Schneider and Schneider argue that the failure of the cooperatives in Sicily was inevitable due to structural problems and relations of economic dependence that were not addressed as the region continued to produce wheat on large *latifundia* for the industrialized north, thus highlighting the multiplicity of external factors involved in the success of a collective enterprise.

Although the Italian economy was already starting to shift towards the service sector at the national level in the 1980s, some were still relying on agriculture to supplement wage labour. Douglas Holmes’ (1989) analysis of the continuing transition from agricultural to industrial life in Friuli shows that wage work continued to complement domestic agriculture rather than replacing it in a wholesale change. For the poorest workers, unemployment was frequent and domestic agriculture was necessary for survival (ibid.: 76-77). The key insight is that wage labour could exist without creating a working class per se, with the ‘worker-peasants’ retaining ties to the land and their ‘indigenous culture’ (ibid.: 205). The workers in this region took advantage of wage labour and the state welfare system to supplement their farming incomes and subsidize the farm’s viability, providing an example of a stable socio-economic category that relies on complex combinations of labour (Holmes 1983: 746). Such combinations, or *combinazioni* as the Schneiders call them, are also seen in southern Italy in areas of mafia

activity such as Sicily (Blok 1974).<sup>33</sup> Similar practices continue today among agricultural workers in areas traditionally controlled by the mafia (Rakopoulos 2014, 2015).

The cases above describe the interplay between history, economic structure and value systems. Rather than representing them as monolithic categories, there are nuanced and dialectical links between the economic and social systems.

### *2.3.1 Recent ethnographies of neoliberal Italy*

More recent ethnographies of Italy are focused on changes in Italian life caused by an increasingly globalized flow of people and products, concurrent changes in patterns of production and consumption, and the spread of neoliberal policies and ideology. Some of these explore a sense of uncertainty and instability, including the questioning of traditional culture, the repercussions of new types of job insecurity, and new forms of citizenship that are based on the decline of the welfare state. Meanwhile others explore the new models of production and consumer activism that have grown up as a response to dissatisfaction with dominant economic paradigms.

Grillo and Pratt's (2002) edited volume *The politics of recognizing difference* provides a context for this uncertainty with analyses of how Italians, mostly in the wealthy Emilia Romagna region, have interpreted and responded to immigrants. Italy is no longer a country of emigrants, they point out, but it is now importing labour from poorer countries (ibid.: xiii). Although the politics of identity is not central to my research, immigration is an important aspect of the globalized economy, with impacts on

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<sup>33</sup> The role of the mafia in organizing economic practices, especially in southern Italy, is another area that has been extensively covered by anthropologists and sociologists (Blok 1974; Schneider and Schneider 1976b, 2003). These 'broker capitalists' as they are described by Schneider and Schneider (1976b: 11) came to control 'only marginal assets' yet through this careful control of resources, including personal connections, and also the use of violence, the mafia represent a 'full-fledged market force' where they operate.

sentiments of labour uncertainty. Furthermore, Grillo and Pratt find that the use of foreign labour is especially relevant in Emilia Romagna because of the small and medium enterprises there that compete with lower-cost imports (ibid.: 9). Cuts in the welfare system and the increase of women in the workforce also means that foreign women have become essential for domestic care, a fact that has important consequences for the social structure and the valuation of labour, as described in more detail below (Krause 2005; Muehlebach 2012). Whereas difference had previously been constructed along the boundary between north and south within Italy, as reflected also in the Mediterraneanist anthropology described above, Grillo finds that an emerging cultural essentialism coincides with cultural anxiety and the fear of culture loss or the loss of authenticity (2002: 11, 23). Despite a continuous process of identity construction, or maybe as a part of this constructive process, a nostalgia for the past and for earlier modes of work remains important, as evidenced in the ethnographies discussed below.

In her analysis of the declining birth rates in Italy, Elizabeth Krause finds that an ideological and economic transformation was central to this demographic shift (2005: 19). Nicoletta is central in the narrative, her reflections providing a personal counterpart to Krause's analysis: 'Nicoletta spoke of profound changes in the world of work and the related social milieu, which she said resulted in "another way of life that has been created, another society"' (ibid.). Nicoletta's life story exemplified this change. While her parents in the south had six children, she and her husband had only two, whom they brought north to central Italy, and then had no grandchildren, a situation that was a source of pain for Nicoletta. Krause writes that this 'sense of loss was the result of a clash between old and new values, attitudes, practices and economies' (ibid.). Krause shows that low birth rates are not just a result of rising costs of living or a neutral process of 'modernization', but the result of cultural politics and the meaning attributed to family

size, with large families being stigmatized in connection with a history of peasant life and small family size reflecting new middle-class values (ibid.: 69-70, 185).

While the shrinking family can be seen as result of economic development, the family itself has also been the site of economic growth, as small-scale family enterprises competed in a globally competitive economy as a local response to globalization (ibid.: 66-67). Michael Blim's ethnography of small-scale shoemaking in the Marche region also finds this "new industrialization" to be a primarily conservative movement meant to protect the family and household despite being 'the darling of neo-liberal development theory' thanks to their small-scale, flexible and niche nature (1990: 3, 10).

Krause demonstrates that the 'cold, calculating assumptions of a "rational marketplace"' exist in tandem with other value systems, in which mutual obligations between the customers and the firm, linked to 'former patron-client relations', continue to shape the business, and family remains a focal point, with work stopping every afternoon to share a hot meal (ibid.: 66). She describes the trade-offs that people face as they try to juggle the pursuit of profit with a traditional system based on reciprocity:

Humans are not mere economic animals, calculating their every move in cost-benefit balance sheets. They do calculate but they also feel the pressures of global restructuring that squeeze the space and time available for respecting different sorts of obligations. An ever-encroaching global order demands relationships be based on profit; it threatens an economic and social system, similar to what Mauss described as a gift economy, long based on trust and reciprocity (ibid.: 67).

She describes individuals that exist at once in both the social and economic spheres, but the dominance of profit and the market logic appear to be threatening more traditional social concerns, mirroring earlier Mediterraneanist works.

Job insecurity linked to changes in labour policy is another source of uncertainty that serves as the backdrop for the mobbing practices that Noelle Molé describes in *Labor disorders in neoliberal Italy* (2012a). This ethnography, which was conducted in Padua in

northern Italy in three mobbing clinics<sup>34</sup> and two corporate workplaces, finds mobbing (effectively workplace bullying) to be both a cause and a result of changes in job security. From the mid-1990s through the 2000s the ‘safeguarded workforce’ in Italy shrunk by one half, while the number of ‘semi-permanent or sub-employed workers doubled’ (2012b: 371). This shift was precipitated by numerous changes in Italian labour policy that were ‘designed to render the labor market more semi-permanent, casualized, and privatized, and reduced labor protections and safeguards’ (ibid.: 374). This created a divide between workers on ‘lifelong’ contracts (*tempo indeterminato*) and those who were unemployed or on short-term contracts (2012a: 4, 21). At the same time mobbing, a term from occupational psychology, became part of the public discourse in Italy, for example appearing as the main subject of the 2004 film *Mi Piace Lavorare: Mobbing* (‘I like to work: Mobbing’). The plot of the film serves as a convenient description of what mobbing means for Italian workers: The main character Anna is mobbed by her boss and co-workers; her things are moved without explanation; she is given tasks that are impossible to complete; and when eventually told to quit she sues the company and wins the case in court (ibid.: 2). In the workplaces where Molé studied, economic forces are presented as being unstoppable, and the victims are encouraged to uphold ‘neoliberal values’ in order to overcome the threat of mobbing (ibid.: 36). This is represented in advice given by one of the company’s managers: ‘Enter into the logic of the company! What are you going to do? Leave or adapt’ (2012a: 45). A mobbing clinic organizer describes mobbing as the ‘culmination of precariousness’ (ibid.: 55). While it provokes insecurity for the one being mobbed, those engaging in the practice are trying to protect

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<sup>34</sup> These mobbing clinics are dedicated to helping victims of mobbing in the workplace. They offer therapy, education and raise awareness for mobbing. Some also research mobbing practices (Mole 2012a: 7, 16).

their own livelihoods. The clinic organizer also links this practice to a change in ‘work culture’ which ‘was once more solidaristic, aimed at the group; now it’s more individualistic’ (ibid.: 54). Molé too sees mobbing as the result of a new type of highly individualized and affective work force.

Aside from legal changes, job insecurity is also a consequence of a shift in patterns of production. Molé describes an earlier pattern of industrial mass production with a Fordist ideology that suggests both wealth and stability are available to all (ibid.: 36). This sentiment, combined with the legal safeguards for workers, promoted solidarity. Now in the post-Fordist era, the neoliberal workplace is marked by flexibility with a high use of specialization, short-term contracts and technology, and a discourse of individualism (2012b: 379). Although the labour itself may be affective, in that it is done with the mind rather than the body, the individualized worker faces a loss of connection with others. Mobbing as a psychological illness represents the height of this individualism and precariousness, and Molé argues that the atomized workers still yearn for the earlier Fordist ideals of security (ibid.: 376). She presents a strong argument for the link between modes of production and ideals, while also highlighting the conflict that can occur when these ideals do not keep pace with changes in the economy.

Andrea Muehlebach traces another outcome of the change in patterns of livelihood, family structure, and state support. In *The moral neoliberal* (2012), she interrogates the role of volunteerism in neoliberal Italy. Her critical analysis deconstructs the assumption that neoliberalism is an amoral ideology and shows how in this instance the state can reduce its responsibility to care for elderly citizens only by constructing a moral citizen who feels the duty to fill this gap in care. Muehlebach contends that ‘Italy, in short, is witnessing a vibrant off-modern conversation where modernity and its forms of production and value seem to be undergoing tectonic shifts’ (ibid.: 72). Volunteering is

valued specifically because it is outside the market (Muehlebach 2011: 61). It also has a ‘unique form of value – that of human relationality’ (2012: 185). Paid care workers, on the other hand, are seen as having the wrong motives, being animated by their need for income, and hence incapable of real care (ibid.: 212). The need to provide care for the elderly is also linked with a notion of the loss of family values in Italy (ibid.: 209), a theme also brought out by Krause (2005) above. Muehlebach argues that this new mode of the production of care is dangerous because it means that participating in volunteering as a critique of neoliberalism and of the decline of welfare state reproduces the situation it seeks to undermine (2012: 200). Volunteer trainers thus choose words carefully to avoid conflicts, speaking for example of the ‘coresponsibility’ of state and volunteer and of ‘adding value’ (ibid.: 119). The ‘special value’ of volunteer work is also important because the volunteers are also potentially replacing the work of paid specialists, driving the need for what Muehlebach calls ‘boundary work’ that marks volunteering as distinctive because it provides love rather than expertise (ibid.: 128).

Muehlebach employs Mauss’s theory of the gift as reciprocal in nature to criticize this new regime. Under this rubric, envisioning care as something that is freely given is wounding in a number of different ways. It devalues exploited immigrant workers who care for the elderly, it shapes the care relationship around inequality instead of the previous welfarist ideal of equal rights for all, and it forces both young and old to ‘purchase a form of social belonging’ through volunteer work that excludes others (ibid.: 226-227). In this case, the special value of volunteering can only be created in opposition, by devaluing the work of paid carers and exploiting the young unemployed and older retired people who are otherwise excluded from the new economic order.

These three ethnographies by Krause, Molé and Muehlebach deal with different aspects of modern Italian life. A common thread is the increasing individualism and loss

of mutuality, paired with increasing flexibility, individual responsibility, and the dominance of the market rationality of profit seeking. While Paolo Heywood (2014), along with others (including Clarke 2008; Ferguson 2009), has questioned the utility of neoliberalism as an analytic concept, there is no doubt that neoliberal policies of deregulation, privatization and decentralization serve as the backdrop for these ethnographies. These are aspects of what Aihwa Ong refers to as the technologies of neoliberal governance (2007: 4). Each of these ethnographies in Italy provides local interpretations of how these policies and the accompanying rhetoric impact lived experience. They trace how local versions of neoliberalism and reactions to it are also inflections of older models and values. From this perspective, such ethnographies of neoliberalism reveal the real power of a concept that is hard to define by considering how it gains traction in local contexts (in the manner of Tsing 2005).

Various studies of food activism in Italy serve to depict local reactions to dominant models of provisioning and consumption. Carole Counihan and Valeria Siniscalchi, both researchers of the Slow Food movement in Italy, have defined ‘food activism’ as ‘efforts by people to change the food system across the globe by modifying the way they produce, distribute, and/or consume food’ (2014: 3). As such, food activism is often associated with ‘alternative’ practices, constructed in opposition to dominant – typically capitalistic – supply chains. In Italy, for example, Slow Food grew out of a 1980s movement that opposed the opening of the first McDonald’s fast food chain in Rome, and promoted local and small producers as an alternative to increasing homogenization (Ritzer 2013: 148). Similarly, solidarity purchasing groups (*Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale*, or GAS) promote ‘short food chains’ that support local as opposed to large producers (Grasseni 2013: 5), and anti-mafia cooperatives aim to replace supply chains influenced by illegal mafia practices with cooperatives that promote principles of

solidarity and ‘legality’ (in essence, following both the letter and the spirit of the law)<sup>35</sup> in addition to organic farming methods (Rakopoulos 2014). Some of these alternative practices directly target the distinction between producer and consumer. Cristina Grasseni argues that co-production in GAS is based on principles of socio-economic mutualism (2013: 79). Her research details how these grassroots consumer groups actively aim to reshape the politics of agriculture through direct democracy and solidarity with producers (2014a: 80). Rakopoulos’s (2014) research among anti-mafia cooperatives conversely shows that, despite a rhetoric of food activism, the cooperative practice actually reproduces class divisions amongst the workers. These cases show that alternative practices are possible, though not uniformly successful.

## 2.4 Cooperatives today

Hesitantly, I suggested to Enrico that the vision of society he described, responding to a common need by working together, seemed to be missing from the cooperative movement today. ‘Could it be there is no longer such a need?’ I asked him. Rather than becoming defensive, as I feared, Enrico agreed with the apparent lack, saying that it was natural for the motivational aspect to become less obvious as the scale of these experiences grew. ‘However,’ he also conceded, ‘we are at the start of a phase where in some way we need to start over.’ Changes in the structure of government funding meant that many of the social cooperatives which had developed through procurement contracts found that their primary market no longer existed. A crisis in the traditional relationships between citizens and the government and their role in the provision of quality services

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<sup>35</sup> ‘Legality means responsibility’ (*Legalità significa responsabilità*) Libera 2011 News <http://www.libera.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/4883> [Accessed 20 March 2017]

has made it more and more necessary for cooperatives to adjust to the new situation (Galossi 1994). The days of the ‘so-called closed market’ are over, meaning that cooperatives, public and private businesses alike have had to play by the rules of a national and even international market (Alieri 1994). The model that had led to the growth of the social cooperative sector was no longer relevant. According to Enrico:

This was the model of the Italian state from the 1980s until today. And so this model today doesn't exist any longer. Even if it is still here [now], it doesn't exist as a model because it no longer has a future. It is transforming, and so inside this transformation there is an overhaul also of the role of the cooperative, exactly for that principle of being a response to society and changes in general, and also being now in this phase rethought and regenerated with respect to what are today the needs of the society.

And so, the change of the social cooperatives is a cyclical fact of history, specifically for the original conditions of social cooperation. If it doesn't respect that, in my view, it loses the purpose of existing.

He was describing a process of constant change and adaptation. Unless the social cooperatives were able to respond and adapt to present needs, they would lose their place in society. Enrico continued: ‘In all of Italy we need to return to a society that moves itself more directly based on its own necessity.’ He told me, again reiterating the scout motto: ‘I am interdependent. You can do many things together – not alone –’ he emphasized, ‘but each one has to do his part. Alone you cannot do so many things. But together you can do them, though only if each one does his part.’ He was describing a holistic view, the return to a group morality based on both interest and disinterest at once, as described by Mauss.

Moving forward to 2000, the League was considering how to re-invent cooperative ideology by focusing on the role of democratic principles in the market (Earle 1986: 217). Gabriela Vargas-Cetina's analysis of Italian cooperatives adds support to the idea that cooperative ideology has been modified in Italy since the 1980s with the spread of neoliberalism, as measuring cooperative success in terms of market share and

efficiency became commonplace in the rural agricultural cooperatives she studied in Sardinia (2011: S129). With the modernization and mechanization of traditional cheese-making processes and the need for economic self-sufficiency through marketing techniques, she sees the democratic decision-making process as the main difference between cooperatives and capitalist corporations, reflecting the League's re-invention of cooperative ideology. The ability of cooperatives in Italy to replicate other successful business models is likely a reason for their proliferation. Italian economists Stefano and Vera Zamagni relate this to the early liberal traditions of Mazzini, who saw cooperation as a way to maximise the power of the market rather than as an alternative to it. They argue that this view of cooperatives as primarily economic helped to give strength to the movement (2010: 21-22). They also link the high success of cooperatives in the wholesale and retail sector, where over one-third of large-scale retail outlet sales are affiliated with the Legacoop, to modernization, mergers and a 'professional' approach to branding (2010: 62).

As changes in the broader society and economy encouraged cooperatives to become more market-oriented, there was a recognised need to add vigour to the discussion of values to create the necessary climate for the social role of cooperatives (Zini 1994). In 2004 an edited volume on communicating cooperative values in Italy was published. Based on three case studies, the volume is aimed at understanding how to promote the values of mutuality, ethics and democratic participation to the younger generations. Egidio Checcoli, president of the Legacoop Emilia Romagna at the time, wrote the preface for the volume, stating that the cooperatives have two great resources: their values, and their practice of solidarity. These two aspects, he argues, helped the cooperatives to survive major social and economic changes while also helping to improve the social standing of women and men in their communities (2004). However, he also

notes that these values need to be defended today and promoted in particular to the younger generations, as economic growth and globalization have created a complex world with new problems and new values, though cooperative values remain the same (ibid.). The study found that multiple resources help to promote cooperative values: initiatives at schools, research foundations, a virtual museum maintained by the Italian Documentation Centre on Cooperatives and Social Economy, and cooperatives themselves, for example through internal newsletters. The study suggests that more can be done in this respect, particularly through the use of new internet technologies.

Although the cooperative movement was previously linked to strong communist and Catholic ideologies that were bolstered by broader social movements with aligned political parties and social spaces, today there is an apparent vacuum in the ideology of the movement. Neither Confcooperative nor Legacoop is strongly linked with those parties or the Catholic and communist ideologies that had long supported them. The political landscape changed dramatically following the fall of communism in the late 1980s and the *Tangentopoli* ('Bribesville') political scandals in Italy in the early 1990s (see Kertzer 1996; Newell 2000; Sapelli 2008). Privatization also accelerated in the 1990s under Berlusconi, who wanted to extend this to sectors such as education and healthcare, removing the overlap between private and public that had been supported by both the DC and PSI (McCarthy 1995: 81). Members of the 'red' Legacoop frequently greeted questions about the communist past with uncomfortable laughter, or would pre-emptively mention to me that they were no longer associated with the communist or socialist parties of the past. In the offices of Verdecura, which was part of the Confcooperative group, there was little evidence of this connection, except for a monthly newsletter that was almost always thrown away without being read, or at best was once repurposed as a mousepad: 'It's finally useful!' one of the Verdecura team leaders joked. Economic

historian Patrizia Battilani told me that today there is no longer a ‘cultural’ difference between the two organizations, but rather varying business strategies. While Legacoop strives to save failing cooperatives by brokering mergers and helping to restructure management, the Confcooperative, despite having a more developed financial arm, thinks that cooperatives should be held responsible for poor management. The fact that they remain separate is considered to be an artefact of history, rather than representative of a current ideological division. As evidence of this, a representative of Legacoop Bologna stressed that the recently formed national association, the Alliance of Italian Cooperatives (Alleanza Cooperative Italiane or ACI), aims to eventually merge the apex groups and find greater efficiencies by working together. The fall of great ideology, however, has had an impact on the cooperative movement because it was traditionally linked to these other social movements. According to Battilani, the movement needs a new way to spread values without the help of other these wider movements. Work that was previously done by other social movements now needs to be done by the cooperatives themselves.

Cooperatives are still seen as providing an important point of difference, but when they are compared to capitalist or for-profit firms, the main factors that are often highlighted are the democratic management structure and the focus on meeting the needs of the members. Vera Zamagni, who specializes in cooperative economic history at the University of Bologna, contends that experiencing cooperative values is less important than the application of the structural principles:

The ICA principles [...] are not based on ‘feelings’, but on structures. This means that the first thing one must do inside a coop is to ascertain whether the seven principles are applied. If this happens, the fact that members ‘feel’ solidaristic is marginal. They know that in a cooperative there is one head one vote, profits are mostly reinvested, work is protected etc. etc. and this is enough for them to be called ‘co-operators’, because the structures of a capitalist firm are entirely different. It is not a matter of ‘feelings’, but of different structures.

(personal communication 13 January 2014)

Conversely, economist Ian MacPherson has argued that cooperative values are more important than cooperative principles, or structure, because the principles must be interpreted within the context of the values. MacPherson argues that while the cooperative principles, such as democratic control and member economic participation,<sup>36</sup> are often cited as what makes cooperatives unique, ‘the most important thing in absolute terms is the cooperative values at the base of these principles’ (2013: 165). He lists a number of issues that arise from focusing on the principles, two of which are particularly useful here. First, the principles exist as the means for putting the cooperative values into practice. He references the ICA website, which states, ‘The co-operative principles are guidelines by which co-operatives put their values into practice.’ Second, the principles can ‘too easily become a checklist’ (2013: 167). MacPherson argues that instead, the principles should be considered in the context of the values that inform them. As will be seen in subsequent chapters, if the context of cooperative values is not adequately maintained, cooperative principles such as democratic control can come to be considered instead in terms of the broader context of neoliberal values that prevail in the society at large. Focusing on meeting needs, instead of upholding alternative values, may therefore prove a less effective means for cooperatives to create alternative economic practice.

One of the moments that stands out most in my memory was an early meeting at Verdecura cooperative when the director Mattia said to me, ‘Non-profit does not mean *no* profit. It is simply the container that changes.’ He took my notebook and drew a circle, a square and a triangle and then an arrow pointing towards a dollar sign. ‘They all go in the same direction,’ he explained. In the end, they all have to reach the same goal, which is

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<sup>36</sup> <https://ica.coop/en/whats-co-op/co-operative-identity-values-principles> [Accessed 13 April 2017]

making a profit. The for-profit company is a circle – it is designed to roll efficiently towards profit – while the co-operative is like a square. It still has to reach the same end, but it is not ‘built for purpose’. While the cooperative was technically perfect, he told me, the capitalist market was the problem, imposing decisions through the need to generate profit for survival: ‘Although they move in different ways, it does not matter because they are all heading to the same end.’ This way of describing the various social forms highlights a general tendency to focus on the *structure* of cooperatives, the changing container, as their defining feature. At the same time, Mattia also acknowledged that behaviour is actually driven by the disposition, or values, of the individuals within it: ‘Being responsible towards the environment, the community, etc., depends on the management. The structure is just a container,’ he underlined. Unlike his father, who had chosen the cooperative structure because it was consistent with the values and ideals that he hoped to bring to life through his efforts, the son has begun to see the cooperative as merely an empty container, one that was, however, less efficient at reaching its end.

#### *2.4.1 Is this just another example of degeneration theory?*

The notion that ideological commitment wanes over time, as Enrico noted, and which was visible to me, also frequently appears in literature on cooperatives. Holmström, for example, found that while some members were very interested in the running of the cooperative, others ‘simply do not care’. How can the cooperative keep them interested after the ‘enthusiasm of the early days wears off,’ he asks (1989: 107). The positioning of cooperatives as an ‘alternative’, yet situated within the market, is what led economist Charles Gide to propose in 1930 that cooperatives are less likely to achieve their social goals when they become more economically successful (Nash and Hopkins 1976: 17). This has also been called ‘adaptive decline’ or ‘degeneration theory’ in more recent

economic literature, suggesting a unilateral progression from socially oriented to market-oriented forms of economic activity. However, some economists have also noted a cyclical pattern in the formation of cooperatives, indicating that they may grow and decline counter to the market, and that there are phases of higher and lower involvement as measured by member-employee ratios (Bartlett 1992; 1993). But this also suggests a dyadic relationship between cooperative and market institutions, and the interaction between them is obviously much more complex. Instead, both market and cooperative institutions can be understood to replicate and inflect the values of the broader society, with 'needs' being an important nexus.

## 2.5 Conclusion

Although cooperatives are often posed as an alternative to capitalist forms of enterprise, they are equally embedded within society as part of an ecosystem of various economic and other social institutions. In the post-war period, cooperatives and their members seemed to be united by a shared recognition of basic needs. The cooperative legal structure and broader movement was built around values of social solidarity that were supported by both the Catholic Church and the Communist Party. Today, however, these social movements are less relevant. The legal structure based on cooperative principles, involving in particular democratic governance, has come to be more important discursively for what it means to be a cooperative, while the values at the base of those principles appear to be less prominent. While social cooperatives developed during a time of economic growth and social movements that focused on equality and the universal rights of citizens and workers, today they are operating in a neoliberal setting characterized by insecurity, flexibility and individual responsibility. After the decline of

the great ideologies of the past, cooperative networks like Legacoop and Confcooperative have an important role to play in promoting cooperative values. These networks are seen as flexible and egalitarian, though they can be at the same time inclusive and exclusive. The importance of networks and networking in the cooperative movement today is thus the topic of the following chapter.



# 3 COOPERATIVE NETWORK STRUCTURE AND INSTRUMENTALITY

Historically, individual cooperatives have served as ‘solidarity networks’ for the most vulnerable workers in Emilia Romagna (Navarra 2011: 212), and networks of cooperatives working together have played an important role in responding to new ‘needs’ of the market in Italy and elsewhere (Battilani, forthcoming). In this chapter I explore how some co-operators I worked with actively utilise the networks around them to drive changes for themselves and their cooperatives. While the network is an emic concept that represents inclusivity and flexibility as opposed to hierarchical bureaucratic structures, this form still creates structural advantages and disadvantages. Being able to use networks to achieve desired ends depends on access and types of connections as well as the ability to utilize those that are available. Some use the networks around them to drive innovation and create opportunities, but such access is not equally available. The network is also recognised as a communication vehicle, but it does not necessarily distribute information evenly, creating shared values among participants in the cooperative movement today.

I begin the chapter by situating this discussion within the broader literature of networks in anthropology, highlighting key themes and concepts, and then provide examples to show how *some* co-operators consciously manipulate the networks surrounding them. Although cooperative and personal networks can be used

instrumentally and serve to disseminate cooperative rhetoric, this appears to be contingent upon one's placing and interests.

### 3.1 Making connections

At the outset of this research project I had no personal connections in Emilia Romagna. I sent emails to some of the local branches of Legacoop and Confcooperative, but received no replies. Eventually, I reached out to Vera Zamagni, a prominent economic historian studying cooperatives at the University of Bologna, sending her an email that underlined my affiliation with the University of Oxford, hoping to appeal to a sense of generalised reciprocity among academics. I was fortunate that she replied and eventually helped me to secure an exchange with the University of Bologna, which gave me the necessary legal status for my research, and she also connected me to her own network of cooperative researchers and practitioners.

After failed attempts at reaching out to the cooperative umbrella groups and some local cooperatives on my own, I was able to quickly grow a local network, following the connections that I established thanks to Vera's initial introductions. Figure 3.1 below shows the most important connections that I established over the first months of fieldwork, using coloured dotted lines to denote the person who introduced us, starting with Professor Patrizia Battilani, Legacoop Bologna President Signora Frasinetti and university assistant Giovanni D'Adda, all introduced to me by Vera shown in red font, and linked with corresponding red dotted lines. I did not specifically collect network data, so links in solid black that show existing connections between the informants themselves are based on either physical interactions that I witnessed or spontaneous mentions. The combination of both new and existing links below shows both how quickly I was able to establish a new network with only a handful of initial introductions, and also how

interconnected the participants in the cooperative movement are, especially those within the Legacoop umbrella group. A similar picture would no doubt emerge from mapping personal relationships within Verdecura and members of other cooperatives in the local consortium (CISV).

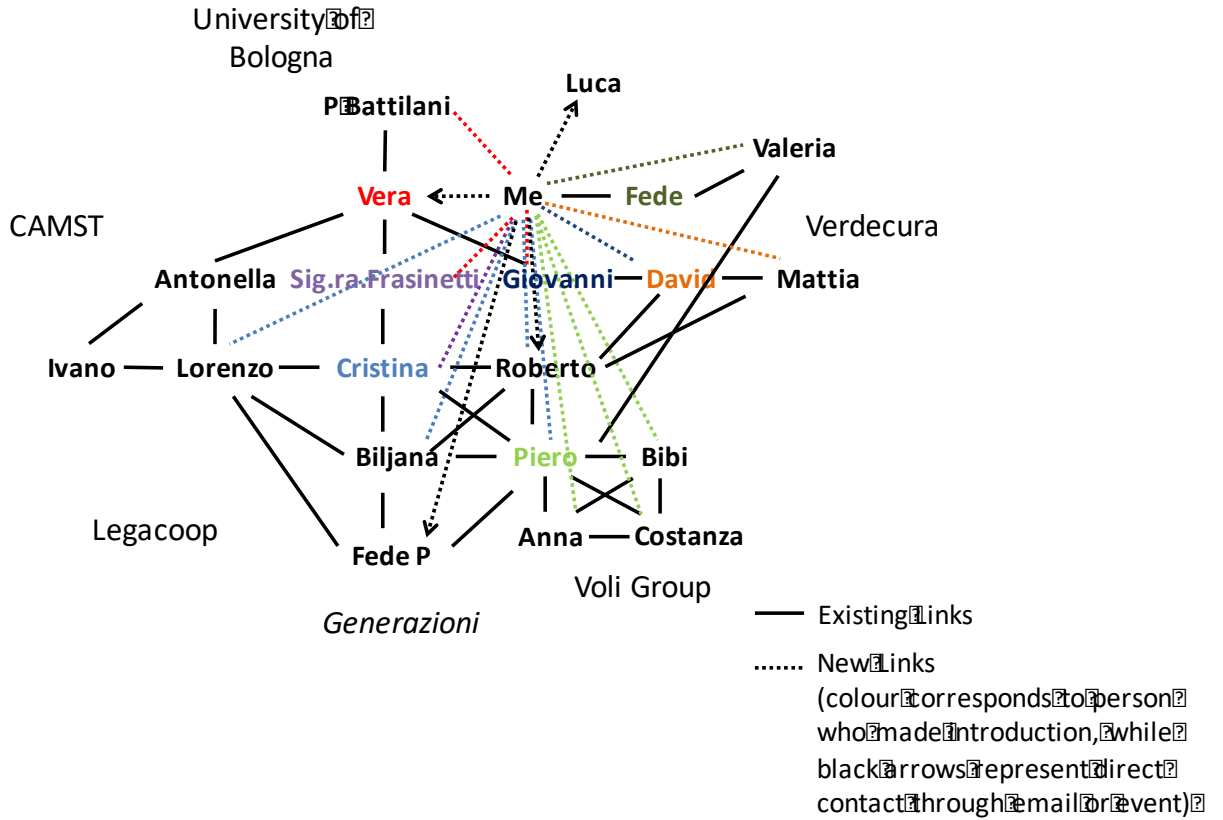


Figure 3.1. Entering the cooperative network.

One of the anecdotes Boissevain used to explore patronage in Sicily (1966: 26-7; 1968: 549) resonated strongly with me during my first attempts to enter the cooperative network in Italy, despite being written close to fifty years ago and being about a different part of the country. In it, a university student, Salvatore, seeks a meeting with a certain professor to secure approval to present his thesis, although registration had been closed for two months. He navigated a path to the professor by calling on a lawyer who owed him a favour. This lawyer was then able to put him in touch with a relative who knew the professor's assistant, who provided him access through a personal recommendation

(*raccomandazione*). The professor was not immediately amenable to Salvatore's request, but through the promise of a future favour, when Salvatore proposed to help the professor campaign for his election to the Chamber of Deputies, Salvatore achieved his wish.

Boissevain describes a system of *quid pro quo* reciprocity, except among kin who are bound by generalised obligation rather than specific exchange (1966: 22). This type of instrumental, or brokerage, relationship would prove important for me to gain access to the cooperatives. In return for access, I promised to volunteer my time, and in return for interviews I expressed my willingness to spread knowledge of the cooperative model when I returned to England.

When I met with Giovanni, who works with Vera to set up internships for students in the university's master's degree in cooperative studies, he highlighted the importance of using networks to find a placement within a cooperative, though without using the word as such. He told me that a 'pre-alert' from someone you already know is helpful, sort of like a 'save the name', or you may forget to reply. 'You see,' he said, 'it happens to me too – you get so many e-mails that you don't have a chance to reply to all of them. If you don't recognise someone, you think, "I don't have time for this." Then, by the end of the week it is at the bottom of your e-mail and the next week on Monday, you forget about it.' He gave an example of how the pre-alert would work: 'If Frank says, "Yeah, I know that person," then you know you should spend time on it.' In fact, the first time that I emailed Giovanni he did not reply, but when I sent a second message, pointing out that Vera had asked me to get in touch, he immediately replied to set up a meeting. It was this link that eventually led to Verdecure and Luminare.

When we met, he suggested that I consider studying a social cooperative because 'you get the feeling of what a cooperative really is', since the people all work together from the employees up to the president, while in larger cooperatives you find more

bureaucracy. Additionally, he noted that it had been hard since the crisis to find internships in ordinary cooperatives in Bologna; it was difficult to justify taking on interns when there was already not enough work for the members. Before leaving, he promised to put me in touch with David, another foreigner for whom he had helped to secure an internship at a cooperative in Villacenseo. David had continued to work there after his internship and degree were complete, and Giovanni suggested that David could give me some further advice.

Shortly afterwards, I met David in Bologna's main square under the statue of Neptune, a common gathering place. Fortunately, we were both connected to the email virtual network via our smartphones because as we waited there we both realised that we had not sent each other a visual description. Among all the others waiting to meet their dinner or drink companions we would not have found each other easily. We both sent each other an e-mail: 'I'm a tall guy with red hair,' he told me; 'I have a jean jacket and purple scarf,' I wrote back. When we found each other (made slightly more difficult because of his assumption that I would be male), we headed to EATaly, a popular grocery chain specialising in Italian goods, and found a table outside at the downstairs cafe.

Over a glass of local red wine and generous chunks of *parmeggiano reggiano* cheese served with bread, we discussed his experiences in Italy and at Verdecura. He had come to Bologna on a sort of pilgrimage of cooperation. Having worked in a cooperative and founded another while he was a university student, David was drawn to the University of Bologna because of its master's degree on cooperation. The Master of Cooperative Economics (*Master in economia della cooperazione*, or MUEC) is offered only in Italian, however, so he settled for a course on International Management, hoping to still benefit from the cooperative economy in Bologna. While the MUEC students were required to complete an internship with a cooperative, Giovanni's primary role being to

organize those internships, David's course required an internship of any kind, which he sought to do in a cooperative to make the most of his experience there. Giovanni thus introduced him to some local cooperatives including Verdecura. His entry into Verdecura was not straightforward, though in some ways typical of the increasingly flexible and precarious labour market. His relationship with the cooperative began informally. As an unpaid intern he built their website and made a short film about the cooperative. After forging a relationship with the director Mattia, he pitched an independent project to the board of directors, which they accepted only after another long period of independent work to prove the concept. Over the following months I would see David's interpretation of this process change as his relationship with the director, and the cooperative as a whole, evolved.

At the end of our meeting, David invited me to join him and two documentary filmmakers from the United States on a visit to Villacenseo the following day. They were going to meet Mattia and tour both Luminare and Verdecura as examples of social cooperation in Emilia Romagna. I agreed to join them.

## 3.2 Portrait 2: Meeting a network specialist

Meeting Mattia that first day at Luminare cooperative marked my real entry into the cooperative world of Emilia Romagna. Not only did I gain access to both Verdecura and Luminare cooperatives, but securing a place within one cooperative gave me a credible position from which to access others. It was obvious from the first encounter that Mattia was a central figure in Verdecura. This was due in part to his position as director of the cooperative, but also because of the myriad personal and institutional connections which he brought to bear. As I would later discover, his father Enrico had been an early adopter

of social cooperatives. Enrico often invited one or more of the workers from the community metal-working company he started, a sort of prototype for the social cooperative, to stay in his home, so Mattia grew up closely tied to this reality. Enrico had also been the president of the CISV throughout much of Mattia's childhood, and was currently the president of a local research centre studying the social economy in addition to being the president of Luminare. Mattia himself was teaching a course on social economy at the local university. Although Verdecura was part of the Confcooperative apex group, when I went to an event for young co-operators from *Generazioni* (Generations), an informal network within the Legacoop group that I will discuss further below, I found that many of the people there also knew him.

Mattia had studied economics at the University of Bologna, and when he finished in the early 2000s he moved abroad and started a business importing Italian products. He built up a profitable trade with many contacts both in Italy and abroad, but after only a few years he decided to move home and change careers. He lost his motivation, he told me, making money by selling goods that would be inexpensive at home for a premium abroad. It just didn't *feel* right, he explained.

When he returned to Italy and to Villacenseo, he was already in contact with Verdecura, a member of CISV, through his father. It was only later, shortly before the end of my fieldwork, that Mattia explained to me why he had been brought in as director of Verdecura. The cooperative was 'about to fail', as he put it. They had been making losses and wanted his advice on how to grow the business. While in the past they had been able to rely on volunteers and external funding, this model was no longer adequate. The cooperative – like others in the consortium – had to be financially viable in order to reach its mission of providing jobs. When he arrived in 2008 there were about twenty members and workers. It seemed, he said, like a family or a volunteer organisation; they

made decisions together, but it was not entrepreneurial (*imprenditoriale*). In the six years that he had been working there, he had balanced the books and paid back nearly a third of a million in personal loans made to keep the cooperative afloat. They had been able to change, he told me, without firing anyone or using *cassa integrazione*, a form of reduced hours working that is seen as a pre-cursor to being fired, and he had also more than doubled the number of employees, ‘personally placing’ three out of five current administrators in their roles. He had been largely successful in his personal mission to make the cooperative financially viable.

Mattia’s success at making the cooperative work from a business perspective was due to his particular combination of knowledge and experience. His position in the local network of people and institutions, and his ability to use this network to his advantage – what he described as ‘an instinct’ – led to new commercial opportunities. He brought to Verdecura his business training and expertise for seeing opportunities and making deals. During that first interview he told me about various joint ventures between Verdecura and other cooperatives in the consortium, and sent me home with a jar of pickled vegetables that had been made in collaboration with another social cooperative. He had helped them find a profitable use for the herbs and vegetables that were a by-product of their therapeutic garden, and Verdecura was also able to share in those profits because of their role in the distribution and marketing.

There were a number of innovative projects that he championed. In the pest control sector alone they were developing two innovations: a new gun mechanism to deploy pesticide (a near-future change in legislation meant that the current system would no longer be legal and this would mean a vast market would soon open up for their device); and a steam-based disinfecting service for ambulances (they had identified another large potential market because of legal requirements to regularly sterilize

ambulances). His ties to local producers, built up during his years as an importer, were also crucial in bringing to life the sister cooperative, Luminare, both through establishing connections with suppliers and through mobilising a group of founding members, including Verdecura and some of the cooperative's members. Luminare itself was recognised as an innovative venture, receiving funding from an EU project on social innovation thanks to its integrated approach to ethical consumerism, a topic that I will address in Chapter 7. Mattia's entrepreneurial leadership of the cooperative, and innovation focus appeared to be linked to his networking skills.

At present, he was planning a merger with another local social cooperative. This was intended as a long-term solution to continuing liquidity problems and to replace, or at least lessen, the need for short-term bank loans. Although the following chapter will address the merger in more detail, at present it is useful to know that this opportunity to merge with Coop Censeo was also a consequence of Mattia's connections. He had been in touch with their director Silvia, working on joint projects in the years since he had started as director of Verdecura, and he had come to know that their business had a different periodicity of incomings and outgoings. Solving their present liquidity issue was probably the more urgent reason for the merger, though for the rest of the membership, who were not aware of this problem because he feared it could cause unnecessary worry for them, the forward-looking rationalization of being large enough to compete in a restructured market would prove to be compelling enough.

For these cooperatives, social media was an important stage for building and strengthening their offline networks. Mattia *was* Verdecura cooperative on social media. He did not have his own Facebook page, nor did he claim to want one for personal use, but he actively cultivated the Verdecura Facebook and Twitter accounts to share information for marketing purposes and to strengthen ties with other local organisations,

liking and sharing their posts to build relationships of marketing reciprocity. He described it as a form of free marketing. Leading up to the merger with Coop Censeo, for example, the frequency of sharing and posting about their events went from virtually none to multiple times per month. The use of social networking sites for building business connections and marketing the ‘added value’ of ethical goods is another topic that I will turn to in Chapter 7.

Mattia might be considered a ‘network specialist’ to use Boissevain’s terminology (1968: 549), with his ability to make links across various networks. His ability to gather and process relevant information also puts him in a position of relative power in a ‘network society’ (Castells 1996). While I am not claiming that a system of patronage as such, often associated with corruption and power imbalances, pervades the cooperative movement in Emilia Romagna, it is clear that various types of personal connections and exchanges help to provide access to the cooperative network, as is also true of businesses elsewhere,<sup>37</sup> and this network structure is also used with intentionality to drive innovation and change within the cooperative movement.

### 3.3 The network in theory and practice: an informal structure

In their instrumental form, networks are both a *means* to attaining influence via social capital – understood as the resources linked to network relationships (Bourdieu 1977) – and an *end* in themselves, just as ‘broker capitalists’ control assets, ‘their most significant resource being their networks of personal contacts’ (Schneider and Schneider 1976b: 11).

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<sup>37</sup> Hitchcock and Wesner (2009), for example, have written about the role of networks in Vietnamese family businesses in London.

In apparent opposition to the capture of resources and theory of network power (Castells 2011), networks can also be an ideal form that represents horizontal relations and egalitarian values (Juris 2008: 17). Although a number of studies have looked at the connection between patronage and corruption or imbalances of power in Italy (Boissevain 1966; Galt 1974; Blok 1973; White 1980; Moss 1995), here I am primarily interested in the (perceived) ability to manipulate existing networks towards a desired end, whether business related or personal. Network power does not only come from one's placing within a network or the structure of the network itself, but also the ability to perceive network potential and successfully manipulate it to desired ends. However, the structural aspects of network power may remain obscured, especially when networks are considered to be an ideal form.

Tito Menzani and Vera Zamagni (2009) have described networks as 'one of the key factors in the success of Italian cooperative enterprises'. At the heart of such networks in the Italian cooperative system is the so-called *horizontal* network, represented by consortiums or second-level cooperatives (cooperatives comprised of member cooperatives), in which a number of cooperatives work together to benefit from increased economies of scale. Coordination for economic reasons spurred this first type of cooperative 'network' (Battilani, forthcoming). There has also been a tradition of *vertical* networks of cooperatives for logistic coordination along supply chains, for example retail cooperatives selling produce from agricultural cooperatives. Finally, there are also *complementary* networks which are a more recent development (Menzani and Zamagni 2009). In opposition to formal horizontal and vertical arrangements, the more flexible complementary networks facilitate the sharing of work among cooperatives based on their specific strengths through affiliations rather than formal administrative structures.

Rather than being an alternative business practice, among the Italian cooperatives this networked way of working was the norm, allowing a 'critical mass' to operate in retail, increasing economies of scale and sharing the benefits of branding, all while remaining relatively flexible (ibid.: 121). This networked way of working is not unique to cooperatives, but typical also of other small businesses in the region (Garmise 1995). While a reliance on social connections previously benefited a network of small businesses, this could be changing with increased competition and consolidation in the market, as the 1990s were characterized by mergers, acquisitions and joint ventures that created larger, more powerful businesses (ibid.: 155). Existing networks, in fact, enabled this process of mergers and acquisitions among cooperatives in Italy and other European countries (Battilani, forthcoming), a pattern that was evidently continuing during my fieldwork. Verdecura, Voli Group and CAMST had all benefited from earlier mergers, and all were planning further mergers while I was in the field, foregrounding the reality of centralization of market power.

Within anthropology, the study of networks can be seen as following a trajectory that is recursively linked to how society understands itself to be constructed. As historian Bruce Mazlish details in his article 'Invisible Ties: From Patronage to Networks' (2000), there has been a progression since feudalism in Europe from using the terminology of patronage, to connections, to networking, networking itself being a late twentieth-century term (OED Online 2017). Mazlish argues that this shift in paradigms of social connection and economy represent a shift towards increasing social equality (2000: 11).

Interestingly, anthropology has mirrored this shift with early network studies citing the importance of moving from the top-down approach of structural-functionalism (Hannerz 1992: 42) to giving credence to individual agency and a more flexible view of society (Boissevain 1968, 1973; Barnes 1969), and also avoiding typical category distinctions

such as kinship and religion (Hannerz 1992; Knox et al. 2006). New analytic concepts related to the study of networks also helped anthropologists to better explain the complexity of European society in ways that ‘had been invisible to functionalist analysis’ (Goddard et al. 1994: 17).

Initially, the network was a metaphor for understanding sets of ego-based personal relationships (Mayer 1966: 99). This provided a systematic approach to understanding informal groupings, or ‘non-groups’ as opposed to the formal structures often described by anthropologists (Boissevain 1968). Notable examples of this work and a summary of the findings can be found in Barnes’ 1969 chapter on ‘Networks and political process’, Boissevain and Mitchell’s 1973 edited volume *Network analysis*, Mitchell’s 1974 review article on ‘Social Networks’ and Leinhardt’s 1977 edited volume *Social networks*. Barnes, who is often cited as the innovator of a network-based approach in anthropological analysis, was himself inspired by Radcliffe-Brown, who in 1940 had called social structure a ‘network of actually existing relations’, and by Fortes’ 1949 book, *The web of kinship* (Barnes 1969). However, earlier works such as Fortes’ focused mainly on ties of kinship informed by marriage and descent, which have a more formal sense than, for example, Boissevain’s concept of ego-centred ‘non-groups’ and patronage relationships (1966; 1968). Despite this proliferation of interest in the late 1960s and early 1970s, network approaches in anthropology declined after the 1970s, even while the term continued to grow in popularity in colloquial use as a metaphor for understanding social and economic life (Knox et al. 2006: 126). As pointed out by Mitchell in a review of social networks in anthropology, the concept ‘has stimulated much more development and elaboration of the idea itself than empirical field work based upon the idea’ (1974: 279). While networks themselves are seen as flexible, ethnographic studies were

generally only able to capture a static moment in time, not fully reflecting the novel aspect of the form being studied.

Despite using terms such as 'patronage' and 'brokers', many studies in the Mediterranean form part of the early anthropological literature on networks. Patronage can be understood as a type of linkage, based on hierarchical (asymmetrical) relationships, in an ego-centred network. The 'lop-sided' instrumental friendship of patronage can be considered in opposition to more equal instrumental friendships, brokerage relationships, and emotional friendships (Wolf 1966). Boissevain, for example, noted the importance of equivalent horizontal moves based on *raccomandazioni* (recommendations), and using one's own kinship network. Of eighteen dyads he analyzed, only half were coded as patron-client or client-patron (1966: 28-29). In fact, the type of link seemed less relevant in practice than the instrumental use of these links to reach a desired outcome: 'while at the analytical level a distinction can be drawn between patronage, friendship and kinship, this distinction has little importance at the operational level. The Sicilian uses all three interchangeably to influence the outcome of decisions which concern him' (ibid.: 25). Studies of patronage can thus be seen as analyses of the instrumental use of networks.

In order for this instrumental use to be possible, Boissevain (1966) identified the importance of overlapping personal networks, which allow for a *system* of patronage through the category of friends-of-friends, a brokerage relationship. This insight is reflected in Granovetter's (1973) much cited work on the importance of weak ties, in which he argues that weak connections between two people (in other words people who are not 'close' to each other, measured for example by the amount of time spent together, or the frequency of mutual exchanges) are important as bridges to create connections across networks. The nature of a social network means that those within it are likely to

have strong ties to each other (in other words they are likely to be close, spending a substantial amount of time together, frequently interacting, etc.), so *weak* links to outsiders provide a point of entry to new networks. In such settings, the maintenance of personal networks becomes very important to achieve both social and economic goals. In Galt's analysis of patronage on Pantelleria, the ability to cultivate a network is locally recognised as being *furbo* (crafty), as opposed to being *fesso* (an idiot): 'In fact, by being a very effective *furbo* (a *furbone*) a man can gather a clientele of his own and produce a certain amount of mobility for himself and his family' (1974: 196). Meanwhile Blok, writing about coalitions among Sicilian peasants, makes the further point that coalitions can have a 'momentum of their own' and that entirely egocentric approaches over-emphasize the importance of the individual in this process (1973: 152, 163). Thus, both individual expertise and the character of the network itself play a role in how it can be manipulated to desired ends.

Network analysis became prevalent again in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In this later phase, it was no longer just an analytical metaphor to understand social groupings, but also a methodology, a recognised emic category, and a means for the transmission of information. Actor network theory revived an interest in networks (Knox et al. 2006) and it has been notable as a new methodology for producing ethnographic research (Riles 2001: 63). Many modern networks, such as trade organizations, are actually formal structures, blurring the distinction between the formal groups and informal networks of earlier anthropological theory. More recent studies have focused on the network itself as an ethnographic fact (Knox et al. 2006). For Riles, studying Fijian bureaucrats and activists, who 'already understand themselves to create networks' (2001: 4), this creates a methodological problem because the network is both the object of study and the method. This brings her to focus on the movement of documents to reveal the

network as information flows through it. While Riles was interested in studying flows of information, ‘networks were described and imagined by those participating in them as tools for creating further, more extensive networks’, thus being both a means and an end (ibid.: 50-51). Much like Riles, in Grasseni’s research on alternative food networks in Italy, the network is also an emic concept, played out both virtually through the solidarity purchasing group website, and ‘practiced’ in person at meetings (2013: 95).

Juris’s research on anti-globalisation activist networks also considers how networks are embodied. In this case protest events are important moments for performing the network, but he also goes further to highlight the importance of the network as an ideal form (2008: 25). For his activists, the decentralized network structure was not just a means of ‘political organizing but also a model for reorganizing society as a whole’ based on egalitarian ideals (ibid.: 15). While the network has the potential for decentralization and horizontal relations, networks are not by nature democratic. Although the potentiality exists, Juris notes that there is always some element of centralization and hierarchy present (ibid.: 17).

In the context of an information-based ‘network society’, Manuel Castells posits that new forms of power are created both through the network itself, and through one’s network position and the ability to manipulate the network. Power, he argues, comes from the individual’s positioning within flows of information and also one’s ability to process this information (1996: 31). To differentiate between those in positions of power and those outside these central networks, Castells uses the term ‘networking power’ (2011). For those within a network that has accumulated valuable resources, networking power is exerted by ‘exercising their gatekeeping strategies to bar access to those who do not add value to the network’ (2011: 774). In the Italian context, Moss has added to the discussion on patronage, theorizing that it is ‘built around the control and dissemination

of information' (1995: 85) as well as access to resources as described in earlier research. Cooperative networks such as the national Legacoop and Confcooperative associations are open to any cooperatives that wish to join, though there are membership fees and the two networks are largely mutually exclusive, creating access to different connections and opportunities, as will be discussed below.

Although the interaction of social institutions with economic goals is often painted in a negative light – for example, a focus on economic inefficiencies caused by corruption (such as the mafia) – the exploitation of social networks can also lead to individual economic benefits, such as the facilitation of job searches (Granovetter 2005). Recent sociological research on networks and work inequality has shown that people utilize networks in an instrumental way for job searches (McDonald et al. 2013: 5). Different results in mobilising network resources can be linked to both the quality and size of one's network, and individual differences in mobilising the network (ibid.). Furthermore, some benefit from network connections even when they are not intentionally utilized, as evidenced by unsolicited job leads. This 'non-searching' phenomenon appears to occur more often amongst those in highly paid or prestigious roles (2013: 6), confirming again the important structural influences of the network.

Theodoros Rakopoulos's recent research on anti-mafia cooperatives in Sicily has emphasized the importance of local understandings in the moral evaluations of *how* different types of personal connections are mobilised. For the manual cooperative workers, who come from the surrounding villages, a system of kin-based recommendations was the preferred means of establishing links with the cooperative, while amongst administrators, who were largely from Palermo, family-based networking was associated with the mafia as opposed to networking based on 'meritocracy' which

was seen to be ‘virtuous’ (2012: 145-187). Thus, whether a practice is described ‘neutrally’ as networking is described as corruption is highly context dependent.

In this chapter, the network is taken primarily as an emic concept, a local metaphor for understanding the role of social capital in business innovation, rather than a research tool or analytical metaphor. By focusing on the way networks are understood and used by cooperative participants, I hope to show how the networks in this context are considered as both a means and an end to change-making potential, as well as being at times seen an ideal form, thus echoing the findings of both Riles (2001) and Juris (2008). Yet at the same time, not all cooperative members and workers engage with the same networks or in the same way, reflecting structural issues of access and differential interests. Relying on the network structure as a means to create shared vision and egalitarian practice is not sufficient in itself.

### *3.3.1 A layered network*

Somewhat like Boissevain’s system of patronage relationships (1966), the cooperative movement in Emilia Romagna can be viewed as part of a multi-level network of people connected through formal institutions, family and informal personal networks, as well as virtual networks. In this multi-dimensional network system, individuals are nodes in their own egocentric personal networks and also act as links between individual and institutional networks, for example linking one cooperative to another, to a third party, or to another institution. These individuals bring prior knowledge, experiences and connections to the networks they form with others around them. Figure 3.2 below falsely flattens these levels, but it attempts to show the network’s layered nature, and the various national and regional associations that are relevant for many of my informants as part of their wider networks. In reality, each level would be made up of a web-like network of

connections that span across both horizontal and vertical levels through individuals based on their memberships and relationships, be they primarily affective or transactional, as people are connected to each other through a myriad of institutional and personal relationships, including family, mutual friends, shared educational backgrounds, formal and informal business networks, and more spontaneously through chance encounters.

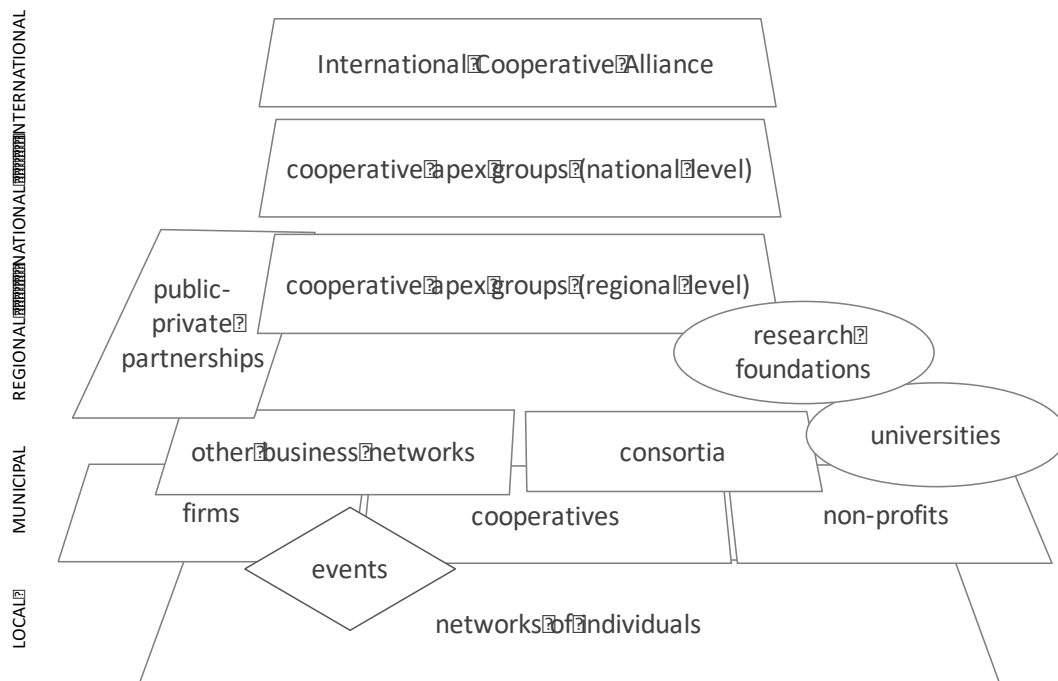


Figure 3.2. A simplified view of the overlapping networks of association from local personal networks to international institutional networks.

Within this complex yet amorphous structure, events including conferences and annual meetings serve as points of localised connection, bringing together people from various networks both formal and informal. In addition to being the physical embodiment of existing networks (Juris 2008: 25), events can also foster the mixing of diverse networks and the creation of new links. For example, the *Settimana del Buon Vivere* (SdBV, or Week of Good Living) event that I attended in Forlì in the first weeks of my research brought together social cooperatives and start-up companies with a goal to create business partnerships. There were individual entrepreneurs linked together through networks such

as Startitup Bologna and CampItalia, members of various local cooperatives, and also representatives from the regional cooperative apex groups including Roberto from *Generazioni* (Generations, the under-40s network within Legacoop), and Francesca from Innovacoop, another Legacoop subsidiary that focuses specifically on supporting ‘innovative’ and international cooperative business development. ‘There is a cooperative network,’ Francesca told me, ‘but it is open. Mutuality is external.’ At events like SdBV, there was a strong sense of territoriality that extended beyond public, private or non-profit in the mixing of so many local networks. A similar view was expressed to me later by a communications cooperative member who said, ‘We have many relationships with different stakeholders in the territory. Working together is how we create social innovation.’ He believed their services, for example educational activities, had a positive impact on the territory as part of a broader network of influences.

It is also important to recognise that individuals and the cooperatives, or other institutions that they constitute, are each participants in individually unique, yet overlapping networks of influence. This became particularly clear when I met with the founders of a small consumer cooperative in Bologna. The cooperative, and hence its individual members, were affiliated with Legacoop, but they told me that they had no real interest in the cooperative network or politics, particularly as it extended beyond the local Bologna office that provided concrete administrative support. Instead, their membership in a Fair Trade consortium and international umbrella organization was more relevant to them. Indeed, the Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International group is one of the most prominent alternative trade networks (Reynolds 2013). Although this small cooperative belonged to the Legacoop network, which gave them access to the national cooperative network and the ICA international network, this network did not appear to be ‘activated’

in the same way that they actively engaged with concepts of Fair Trade and the business connections enabled through that network.<sup>38</sup>

Parallel virtual networks, including social media such as Facebook and Twitter, are also used frequently to promote events, to share information, and to maintain or establish connections. The use of new technologies and online platforms is of particular importance in communicating cooperative values and principles to younger generations according to Egidio Checcoli (2004), former president of Legacoop Emilia Romagna. In the case of Verdecura and Luminare cooperatives, the focus was external relationship building and marketing. In other cooperatives, similar technology was also used to foster solidarity internally. CAMST, for example, actively used Facebook pages and blogs to interact with their members. This was especially important in larger cooperatives, as a Legacoop representative noted: ‘Cooperatives need to take advantage of new technologies to adapt to changes. For example, the general assembly is still used with two or even three hundred members, but people are unlikely to share in that setting. Why not use new social media tools to overcome new challenges like these?’ In addition, as I will describe in Chapter 7, the overlapping of parallel virtual networks helped to maintain relationships with other local enterprises.

Documents also have an important role to play in this networked structure of people and institutions. As the individuals who comprise formal network structures change over time, the formal structures themselves remain thanks in part to the foundational legal documents and other self-defining documents that they produce, such as balance sheets and websites. In addition to being stores of knowledge and records of

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<sup>38</sup> This is reminiscent of Mayer’s (1966) distinction between ‘action set’ and the broader network. While the latter contains all linkages, the former is centred around certain types of activity.

formal structures, or representative of networks as in Riles' case (2001), network-enabled documents can also act as stimuli for change, as will be seen below in the case of the *Generazioni* network.

### 3.4 The potential value of networks: innovation and change

Networks (*network* or *rete*) and networking (*fare rete*) are used strategically by some within the cooperative movement in Emilia Romagna. Despite an analytical difference between the formal institutional networks and informal personal networks, these are manipulated in much the same way to bring about desired changes including wealth and job creation. This section will consider two aspects of how networks are actively utilized. First, networks are used to achieve collective power. Mafia brokerage networks and the social cooperative model used to combat them can both be understood in terms of network power, though with different moral assessments. Second, working together in a network is recognised for its potential to generate innovation, both inside and outside cooperatives. Below I provide short examples of both of these aspects, before describing how the *Generazioni* network within Legacoop was manifested through events, social media and interactive documents, in an attempt to drive generational change. This example also introduces the importance of networks as communication vehicles.

#### *3.4.1 Network power*

If the consumers in early consumer cooperatives gained market power thanks to the economies of scale facilitated by bulk purchasing, with such wholesale groups being the first type of cooperative network (Battilani, forthcoming), many of the cooperatives today appear to gain strength thanks to the formal and informal networks around them

(Menzani and Zamagni 2009). The power of working together in a network is made clear by the efforts of the *Libera Terra* ('Freed Land') consortium, and so too by the backlashes that it has faced in its fight for legality against the mafia.<sup>39</sup> *Libera Terra* is a network of social cooperatives (technically a consortium) and also a non-profit association linked to Legacoop Bologna, that encourages the formation of social cooperatives on lands confiscated from the mafia. These 'anti-mafia' cooperatives aim to replace illegal mafia practices with cooperatives that promote principles of solidarity, legality, and organic farming methods. A group of such cooperatives in Sicily have been studied in detail by Theodoros Rakopoulos (2012; 2014; 2015). Rakopoulos describes the mafia as an entrepreneurial capitalist form that takes advantage of local networks (2012: 69). Following Castells, this kind of network can be seen to exercise power through exclusion (2011). The success of the *Libera Terra* cooperatives is largely due to connections within the Legacoop network, but in this case the focus is on inclusivity through shared ownership and market access. The initiative is frequently promoted at Legacoop events, and many of the products are available for sale in Coop Italia, a network of consumer cooperatives also affiliated with Legacoop. Coop is the only large distributor that sells *Libera* products (Informatore Coop 2008). While mafia brokerage is considered to be corrupt and a distortion of free market principles, the *Libera Terra* network that provides these cooperatives with direct access to national distribution networks is considered a success of civil society. These divergent moral assessments of network use appear to reflect the relative goals of exclusivity and inclusivity, though in both cases an underlying network structure enables both.

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<sup>39</sup> One example was the threat of attack by local *mafiosi*, such as the fires reported in this article from June 2012 in Sicily, and later referenced in a legality event at Luminare cooperative: <http://liberaradio.rcdc.it/archives/ancora-un-incendio-stavolta-calpita-la-coop-terre-di-puglia/> [Accessed 2 February 2017]

A similar project was also underway at Verdecura, activating a different set of relevant local networks. A piece of land that had been confiscated was destined for re-use thanks to the same national legislation that made *Libera Terra* cooperatives possible. Verdecura, along with three other CISV members, the Catholic charity Caritas, and support from the local municipality, was therefore in the process of transforming this disused land into allotments for the community, a therapeutic garden, and an educational centre to promote the concept of legality. Mattia invited me to join some of the early meetings in this process and give any suggestions, especially on how best to market the project – after all, it would have to be profitable eventually to sustain itself in the market. Having seen the successes of *Libera Terra*, with their products readily available in my local Coop store, and branded tote bags occasionally carried by university students in Bologna, I suggested to the team that perhaps they could benefit by joining together with their network. It would not be possible, however, I was told, because CISV and *Libera Terra* are part of different networks: Confcooperative and Legacoop respectively. Unlike the Coop stores, Luminare did not sell *Libera Terra* products, but instead featured the ‘Fruits of Legality’ produce grown by a different consortium of cooperatives and social enterprises that was associated with Confcooperative. These similar, but mutually exclusive, network structures both enabled access, but to a different subset of retailers and suppliers. Unlike Legacoop, which enabled ready access to networks of consumer cooperatives and retailer cooperatives, the Confcooperative network did not include retail access at such a scale. Even such network activation aimed at inclusivity faces the reality of centralization in networks.

### *3.4.2 Innovation potential*

There was a frequent refrain that the collaboration which resulted from networking was a source of innovation that could lead to growth and hence offered the possibility of a reprieve from the ever-looming crisis. Against the perception of inflexible bureaucracies that had been too slow to keep up with the changing needs of the market, collaboration across networks was seen as providing a more flexible approach that could meet a wider range of individual needs. This reflects Granovetter's insight mentioned above that networking through weak ties can lead to innovation: 'More novel information flows to individuals through weak ties than through strong ties. Because our close friends tend to move in the same circles that we do, the information that they receive overlaps considerably with what we know' (2005: 34). This view was apparent both within the cooperatives and also the broader domain of business. At a TEDx Bologna event in late 2013 that focused on 'Exponential Innovation', network-enabled collaboration was a frequent theme with talks that touched on collaborative networks such as [opendesignitalia.net](http://opendesignitalia.net), the Fab Lab 'global network' of digital fabrication facilities,<sup>40</sup> and networks such as Kickstarter that enable both investment and marketing. Such aspects of a growing 'weconomy' were considered potent strategies for innovation and (exponential) growth. Similarly, Francesca from Innovacoop, whom I had met at the SdBV event, told me how important collaboration was for innovation in the region, whether it was between start-ups and cooperatives, or public-private health partnerships that encouraged the use of new technologies to reduce both errors and public spending. Likewise, Piero who focused on innovation as the head of research and development at Voli Group, told me

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<sup>40</sup> Fab Labs started as a project at the MIT Center for Bits and Atoms and have since spread across the globe giving people access to the machinery necessary for digital fabrication and programming. <http://fab.cba.mit.edu> [Accessed 2 February 2017]

that while Bologna had been a leader in cooperative enterprise, the old model, which was reliant on public support, would not last because of budget cuts and new market requirements. This required creating a new cooperative form with a focus on innovation. He favoured the promotion of digital technologies and social platforms to connect with a new generation.

The various innovative business ventures at Verdecura and Luminare cooperatives exemplify the application of this idea in practice. The first day at Verdecura, Mattia highlighted the importance of collaborating with the other cooperatives in the consortium. He impressed upon me his view that Verdecura would be ideal for a study of cooperative business practice specifically because of its physical location in the CISV consortium building, giving access to a network of cooperatives that work together. He showcased a number of product innovations that resulted from their collaboration: a spiced liquor aperitif and various preserved vegetables. These products existed in the market only as a result of ‘mixing their competencies,’ he told me. A subset of the cooperatives and non-profit associations in the consortium had also worked together to start a joint venture providing wellness services to the local community. ‘We are all becoming hybrids in order to survive,’ he explained. They also actively procured goods and services from each other, for example printing services from a type A work therapy cooperative, or catering services from Luminare. Although these links exist within a formal horizontal network in the sense described by Menzani and Zamagni (2009), rather than within an informal structure as is often implied in the distinction made between flexible networks and formal structures, decisions regarding how and when to collaborate are ad hoc, reflecting the more flexible nature of Menzani and Zamagni’s complementary networks. In addition to the innovative and entrepreneurial projects that resulted from working together, Mattia also highlighted the importance of working together to gain market power. ‘Small

companies need to work in a network,' he said, 'because the market is run by big fish, not small fish.'

However, the exercise of local connections to make agreements for Verdecura cooperative was not without scrutiny. Moral assessments of instrumental network use appeared to be dependent on one's position within the cooperative, much like the claims of 'immoral patronage' that Rakopoulos's manual labourers used as a moral critique of the way administrators utilized their own non-kin based networks (2012: 179). Whereas administrators associated kin-based recommendations with local mafia (ibid.: 146), the labourers associated the administrators' non-kin based networks with patronage, another form of corrupt practice. One of the members subversively told me that there was 'mafia' in the cooperatives. Not 'the mafia', he carefully pointed out, but mafia in terms of control. I asked if he meant corruption, but he replied, 'Corruption, I guess is everywhere. This is corruption not for money, but for power.' This kind of informal usage of the term was popularized (for foreign audiences) by Italian journalist Luigi Barzini, who wrote that 'lower-case mafia is a state of mind' that involves 'defending oneself with one's own power' (1964: 253, 275). Creating a shared vision and sense of community to determine who is included in 'inclusive' network practices also appears to be another important role for the cooperative networks, though as seen below network-based communication is not always as inclusive as desired.

### *3.4.3 Enabling (generational) change*

Many of the young cooperative professionals whom I met in the first month in Bologna – people like Cristina who works for the President of Legacoop Bologna, Roberto whom I had met at the SdBV event in Forlì, and Biljana who had been introduced to me by both Roberto and Cristina – were all members of the under-40s group, or 'network' as they

called it, called *Generazioni*. Their slogan, *Occupiamoci di noi*, in typical Italian style is a play on words that means both ‘let’s be interested in ourselves’, and also ‘let’s find ourselves jobs’, highlighting both the entrepreneurial potential of cooperatives to drive economic growth, as well as the generational struggle that they face in their efforts to drive change. The *Generazioni* young co-operator network of Legacoop relies on a combination of in-person meetings, social networking through Facebook and Twitter, and provoking documents to promote the agenda of under-40s in the cooperative movement, a recognition of the changing needs for a new generation, and highlighting the adaptive nature of these networks, as well as the ability to gain power by creating a network among people with shared interests.

Cristina explained that *Generazioni* was focused on bringing about intergenerational change. To explain why it had not already happened in the cooperatives, she said, ‘We still live in a world where a politics of work is very much stalled, in which it is difficult for the young people to develop their careers quickly; [it’s] either very slow or not at all.’ Although the older generation initially felt threatened by the founding of this under-forties group, Cristina told me that they eventually came to accept it as a necessary step in modernizing and facing economic change. Her view appeared to be validated at their first national conference in 2014 when the Legacoop regional president introduced the event and highlighted the need for change to address the ongoing crisis. He highlighted the importance of working together, with big businesses and smaller businesses helping each other. ‘Cooperation can be what produces new innovations, concrete things,’ he urged the group.

The *Generazioni* network was founded in spring 2007 with a small group of young co-operators in Emilia Romagna, and held its first plenary session in November 2007 at Bertinoro, referred to as ‘our “Rochdale”’.<sup>41</sup> The meeting was provocatively called, ‘The important thing is to be young on the outside’, a reversal of the common call to be young on the inside, and rallying around their own relative youth.

# L'IMPORTANTE È ESSERE GIOVANI FUORI



Figure 3.3. Generations 2007 plenary session poster. Caption reads, ‘The important thing is to be young on the outside’.

It was at this meeting that they decided on the name: ‘Generations. In the plural, because we don’t want to disregard anyone. And we listen to teachers of any age.’ This statement of identity confirms their intention to be an inclusive group. About six months later in June 2008 the group, following the typical governance structure of a cooperative, held an assembly to elect the first management team, and from then on, they continued to have

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<sup>41</sup> ‘Generazioni story: 2007-2011’ by Generazioni Legacoop Emilia-Romagna <https://youtu.be/J4pbqhp3Zs> featured on the *Generazioni* website <http://Generazioni.coop/> [Accessed 15 July 2015]

regular meetings, with their first national conference held in Ferrara in 2014, entitled ‘Woodcoop: Generations that change the world’.

Why did they choose to use a ‘network’ as the vehicle for change? The first tab at the top of the *Generazioni* webpage is titled ‘*NETWORK*’ (in English). Clicking on this tab opens a page that explains the reason for network’s existence, and explains what they mean by the term:

*Generazioni* is a network created by an urgent need: to have a supplementary point of view within Legacoop Emilia Romagna. Not because our association needed a ‘stamp of youth’, but because the process of generational change is one that must be led, even in cooperatives, which are, by definition, intergenerational companies.

The network *Generazioni* Legacoop Emilia-Romagna is today made up of young cooperative managers, members, employees, or associates of cooperatives or companies belonging to Legacoop Emilia-Romagna, who are up to 40 years old, and are already active in, or on the path to positions of responsibility.

*Generazioni* is a network in the most literal sense of the term but also in contemporary meaning, because it doesn’t have only one centre but many nodes, because it grows with time and has offshoots throughout the region. *Generazioni* does not have separate legal statutes because the co-operators are part of, working in or in association with cooperatives, are proudly part of the movement and of Legacoop. We believe that to change what is wrong, it is better to work from within. And we have studied hard to learn how to do it.

For *Generazioni* the network was not just a form, but an ideal. Similar to the activists studied by Juris (2008), it is associated with egalitarian ideals thanks to being considered a decentralized and horizontal structure. It was intended in opposition to the formal structures of the older cooperatives in the region. A representative from the Legacoop trade organization for production and worker cooperatives (ANCPL) told me that many cooperatives had developed vertical internal structures. ‘In very big and old cooperatives,’ she said, ‘sometimes the managers think they can involve people in the same way as thirty years ago, but the world has changed. There are new methods, media

and organizational tools they could utilize.’ The informal network, complemented by the international reach of social media, provided a ready alternative.

During an interview with Biljana at Kitchen Coop, she too told me about *Generazioni* and their goals. ‘It is *not* a formal association,’ she told me, ‘just a network.’ In her view, the young co-operators had an imperative to modernize the movement in Italy. The Legacoop annual conference, she joked, looked like something from the Soviet Union in 1964: gloomy, grey and formal. They wanted to rethink the cooperative movement, she told me, in a number of key ways: to be more open to the rest of the world; to have less formal connections; to study more and learn about business outside of Italy; and to care about the younger generations. The cooperatives could no longer act like a closed market, relying on local networks for growth. She said that *Generazioni* members hoped to live these goals both within the co-ops and in their own private lives, for example striving to speak English well (she and I nearly always spoke together in English), to have an online presence, and to use technologies to connect with people around the world. When Biljana told me about the upcoming annual general assembly in Parma, and I indicated my interest, she immediately invited me to join them.

The theme was international cooperation and the logo for the title, World Wide We, played on the image of the internet as a means to form connections. It also made use of English words to enhance the international credentials in a style that I came to recognise as typical.

ASSEMBLEA ANNUALE GENERAZIONI LEGACOOP EMILIA-ROMAGNA  
VENERDÌ 29 NOVEMBRE 2013, PARMA



Figure 3.4. Generations 2013 annual assembly poster, shared on Facebook. The sub-title reads, 'Cooperation is already international.'

When I returned home after the meeting with Biljana, I immediately searched for the event online. True to their ambitions of being connected and modern, the website made use of the social networking site Twitter and featured a live feed for the event running down the right side of the page with updates using #genER. I was surprised to see that Biljana had already tweeted about me to the group. In the first tweet, Biljana wrote: 'I'm writing a line for #genER and twiddling my hair, waiting for a PhD from Oxford who's going to interview me on cooperation. Such oneness!' After we met she tweeted again, keeping her cohorts informed: 'The PhD candidate from Oxford is from Philadelphia and I already invited her to the annual event of #genER (@luciabo: was I allowed?) and to have some beers after.' Apparently she was allowed, because not long after our meeting she followed up with an email, asking me to participate as a speaker in one of the workshops: 'As you can see in the program,' she wrote, 'we have put you into the

*workshop* “Networks and *partnership*”. ...I think that your contribution on the value of local culture with respect to the possibility of creating networks and making a *partnership* would be interesting’ [italicised text written in English]. I agreed to give a short talk in the session in which there was also a talk by a representative from Innovacoop, as well as the person responsible for cooperative outreach at Mondragón in Spain. It seemed that my presence would contribute to the international connections that they were working to establish.

Even before arriving at the event I met two women on the bus in Parma who were also on their way to the conference. Both worked in Bologna at Cadiai, a large type A social cooperative. In my earlier research, I had come across a pamphlet about Cadiai, expressively entitled *Sarebbe il lavoro del futuro se...* (‘It would be the work of the future if...’), that highlighted the disappointments of the reality of the work compared to the ideal, so I asked them what it was like to work there. They looked at each other, pausing. The one who had worked there longer, since 2007, puffed her cheeks then said, ‘Yes, it’s nice. It has a nice atmosphere.’ The other nodded her head in agreement. They had taken the fast train to save time while I had taken the slower, less expensive train. ‘The life of a student’ I joked. The first woman again responded saying that they had a discount, otherwise they couldn’t afford it either – ‘The cooperative life!’ the other woman joked, and we all laughed. In fact, the first ‘if’ of the pamphlet I had read was ‘if the salaries were adequate...’. We walked together towards the entrance, and parted ways at the reception desk.

When I entered the building, it felt like a corporeal *Who’s who* of cooperation in Emilia Romagna. Biljana greeted me at the desk, giving me a name tag and directing me to the coffee bar. I helped myself to a filter coffee and orange juice and stepped to the side to watch the proceedings. Before long, Lorenzo from CAMST, whom I had met

twice previously, came over to say hello. He asked how my research was going and in turn, I inquired about his new restaurant opening. Next I spotted Teresa from Mendis Coop in Villacenseo. I had also interviewed her about a month earlier. She introduced me to a colleague and also asked how my research was going. I told them that Verdecura, also in Villacenseo, had agreed to host me. She had heard of it, and she mentioned Mattia to her colleague as a point of reference. Although Verdecura was part of Confcooperative, they both knew him through local connections. The network of local connections clearly extended beyond the reach of the formalized networks of the cooperative umbrella associations.

As the event was about to begin, we all filtered into the auditorium and I saw more familiar faces – people I had interviewed in various cooperatives or in the Legacoop offices; I should have thought to brush up on their names before setting out, I thought to myself. Cristina from Legacoop Bologna was there, Francesca from Innovacoop and Francesca from ANCPL, Piero from Voli Group, Roberto, Biljana, Teresa, Lorenzo and others whom I recognised by face but not name. It reminded me of a montage sequence in a film where people from past scenes all flash past in a matter of moments. Although the event provided the opportunity to make new connections, such as meeting the women from Cadiai, or being introduced to Teresa's colleague, and I came home with a pocket stuffed full of business cards, I noted throughout the day that people tended to circulate in fixed groups, apparently focused on building on existing connections rather than creating entirely new points of contact.

The president of Legacoop Emilia Romagna provided an introduction for the day, explaining that the purpose was to consider how to overcome challenges for cooperation in Italy, and in particular to find ways to deal with the crisis and create more jobs. The three parallel work groups in the morning each addressed a different opportunity to do so.

First, was a group on networks and partnerships. Roberto, who would be leading the group, introduced the session, mentioning the importance of speaking English as the language of business and partnerships, and highlighting that two of the speakers would be using English, a sign that they are already part of an international network. The second group focused on internationalization, with speakers from five different cooperatives that had successfully conducted business or sold products outside of Italy. Lastly was a work group that focused on how to successfully win funding for EU project proposals. While individual cooperatives, as a formalized group rather than a flexible network, were characterized as hindrances to change and innovation in the past, cooperation in this context was being championed as a potential source of innovation for the future by utilising networks to make international links.

My talk on networks, both the form (in English) and the content (academic theory) helped to validate their claims of active study. It also revealed that they use the term reflexively, practicing networking at the same time that they are seeking to define and better understand the concept. I and the speaker from Mondragón both spoke in English and despite their aspirations to be bilingual, Roberto spent much time writing down key words and important points in Italian on sheets of paper in the middle of the circle (Figure 3.5).



Despite this potential, and no doubt genuine desires to create equitable growth, conferences like this one again highlight an aspect of ‘networking power’ in the sense of Castells (2011), which is that not all of the co-operators have equal access to these events. The *Generazioni* network attracts young co-operators who come primarily from managerial or administrative roles, rather than operational or manual roles. This was highlighted to me by Daniela at their first national event, Woodcoop. Daniela worked in the office of a wood-working cooperative. She told me that while she was interested in the event, none of the men who actually produced their goods were involved in such discussions. They were not interested, as far as she could tell. It is also stipulated in their explanation of the network’s founding (detailed above), that the participants should be ‘already active in, or on the path to positions of responsibility.’ There was also a participation fee, and the need to take a day away from the office, factory or field, meaning that this opportunity was not evenly available to all of those who might have been interested. Despite the inclusive ideology, the network was not truly open to all.

In addition to establishing connections, it was also clear that events such as Woodcoop and World Wide We were important as communication events, establishing shared purpose amongst the participants. Patrizia Battilani has suggested that a shared ideology is important for cooperatives as it enables the democratic governance model. ‘There is a cost to rule in a democratic way, which can be higher if people do not share the same values, as it is more difficult to agree’ (personal communication 2013). Historically, the social values of the two dominant institutions in Italian society, the Catholic Church and the Communist Party, were reflected in the cooperative movement’s two main umbrella organizations, the Confcooperative and Legacoop respectively. As Battilani has theorised, this helped to make them also economically efficient (2011: 157-9). Today, Battilani says, ‘the great ideologies of the past are no longer strong enough to

provide a framework that supports the cooperatives.’ This means that important work to create shared values, which was done previously by other social movements, now needs to be done by the cooperatives themselves, making networking and the flow of information all the more important. However, information shared at such events also reinforced a division, with a ‘shared’ vision only among a subset of cooperative practitioners. Similar again to the anti-mafia cooperatives Rakopoulos studied, where the visions of food activism and legality promoted by the *Libera* network only seemed to reach the administrators (2014), the ideology of the *Generazioni* network only appeared to be reaching the young leaders who attended such events.

The projection from the Woodcoop event, pictured in Figure 3.6, featured prominently on the wall of the conference space, encouraging participants to share live updates of the event on social media. There was a similar practice at other such events, such as the TEDx Bologna 2013 event where the Twitter hashtag was prominently displayed on all of the materials. A glow of mobile phones pierced the blackness of the auditorium as audience members broadcast their presence, advertising the event and their own participation to their own personal networks. Such practices could both enhance connections via linking and sharing of content, while also helping to promote the shared ideals of the group or wider movement.



Figure 3.6. Projection encouraging live social media updates from the *Generazioni* Woodcoop event.

Yet there was also a clear divide in the use of social media, with those who had an interest in promoting the cooperative network, and their own positions within it, actively using social media for this purpose. A proportion of the young co-operators, including Biljana and Roberto, were active on social media, tweeting and sharing news or event announcements on Facebook. It was similar at Verdecura where Mattia used the Verdecura page to establish relationships, and Serena shared news and information about cooperative training on her personal page, while the manual workers with whom I was friends on Facebook posted mostly pictures with friends, sports commentary or funny sayings and images, indicating separate networks of interest and influence at play within the cooperative.

Beyond the in-person meetings and social media where the *Generazioni* network was largely enacted, the group produced an interactive document, called the *Little Red Book*, a nod to the book of the same name by Chairman Mao, and playfully reinterpreting

their socialist past by noting that his book was also intended to inspire the young. This document encapsulates the network's goal to bring about change, and provides suggestions for its members to take back to their own cooperatives. This purpose is explained on the inside cover: 'The Little Red Book of *Generazioni* isn't this book that you're holding in your hands; it's an idea of improving the status quo, starting from ourselves rather than waiting for the situation to change by itself (it almost never happens, and it never happens in the sense that we want).' It is mostly blank, but on every other page there is a suggestion or question about how the young co-operators can have more influence in their own cooperatives, for example:

Make it obligatory to have a young person under 30 on the board.

*Why:* it is an important school for the young with roles of responsibility and also a fairer way to represent the diverse social base on the board.

*How/where:* proposal to the board or the assembly.

As Biljana explained, 'The management needs to generate awareness among members so they know there is potential for change. In the Red Book, it explains to co-operators that if they want something such as a fund for job training, then they should ask because it is possible that it hasn't been done just because no one thought of it.' This document is an interesting reversal of how documents like laws and statutes fix the structure of the cooperatives, giving these institutions their permanent legal form. In contrast, this document is meant to be used individually, but also collectively, to bring about a change in the cooperatives' structure and alter the business culture from within through the 'suggestions, stimuli and concrete actions' included within it. In addition to being further evidence of how these young co-operators view their network participation as a vehicle for change, the document also serves as a store of their shared values, in particular active participation and the desire to create generational change.

### 3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have described the layered network structure of the cooperative world that I entered thanks to a handful of introductions from one academic, leading me to meet a network of young co-operators seeking to drive change from within their cooperatives, and Mattia the director of Verdecura, who used his connections and expertise to make the cooperative more ‘entrepreneurial’ and economically successful. His ‘instinct’ for entrepreneurialism relied on collaboration across his network of personal and business connections. Networks, even those that are formally defined, were recognised locally for their innovation potential, as evidenced by the *Generazioni* network, where it was seen as a kind of ideal form. This particular instrumental use of the network, however, was limited to some, entrenching the divide between administrative and more manual workers. Network power, such as that exercised by the *Libera Terra* consortium, or the economies of scale achieved by early cooperative purchasing groups can be used ‘for good’, but any such concentration of power can also be exclusive. Events like SdBV, Woodcoop and World Wide We served as moments to create new links, maintain existing links, and also disseminate information throughout the network, with provocative documents like the *Little Red Book* created to help further the change-making potential of the network, beyond individual actors.

As will be seen in the following chapters, some aspects of the networks of power seem to remain obscured from view as the social cooperatives fill gaps left by the welfare state and continue to reproduce neoliberal models of citizenship and work precarity.



# 4 MERGING TO SURVIVE: LOCATING VALUE IN A SHARED NEED

The decision-making process used in Verdecura to choose whether or not to merge with another local cooperative is illustrative of how the cooperative's management attempted to meet the needs of its members and the market, because it was presented as a solution to the goal of *remaining competitive* in a tough market and allowing those involved to *maintain their jobs* and also their existence as a cooperative. Furthermore, it was one of the few strategic decisions that were taken to the assembly for a vote, displaying the full range of the democratic process within the cooperative. The possibility of a merger was already being discussed at the strategic level of the cooperative in late October 2013. The idea was brought to the members in May 2014. From there the process moved quickly, with informational meetings in mid-early July and an extraordinary assembly held at the end of July to vote on the proposal. By considering how this process was played out in the course of various meetings, how it was justified in those meetings, and then later scrutinized in discussions and interviews, the importance of the common goal of maintaining members' jobs is seen to be of primary importance in exploiting, and also critiquing, the director's specialized knowledge within the democratic structure of the cooperative. The positionality of each individual within the cooperative necessarily colours his or her questions and reactions, but most framed their evaluations of the process with reference to the same overarching goal.

## 4.1 'A necessity of the market'

It was a sunny and unusually warm morning in late October when I first visited Verdecura, travelling from Bologna by train with the two documentary filmmakers and David, the foreign student turned cooperative employee, whom I had been introduced to by the cooperative internship coordinator at the University of Bologna. Mattia, the director of Verdecura, greeted us at the train station with a midsize black van. It glistened with patches of white, reflecting the bright sunshine that was streaming down around us. We piled into the back seats of the van along with the filmmakers' equipment, and began the short drive to Luminare, a retail space and also sister cooperative of Verdecura. On that van journey Mattia shared some information that, although I did not realise it at the time, would become central to the acts and discussions that I would observe over the coming months and also, in Mattia's eyes, was crucial for the future of the cooperative.

We drove along the motorway, away from the town centre towards the cooperative, and the lush green fields of the Emilia Romagna countryside began to emerge as we discussed some aspects of the Italian cooperative world that the filmmakers, Hannah and John, found to be distinctive. First, was the abundance of social cooperatives. Indeed, the emergence of the social cooperative is recognised as a unique product of the Italian cooperative movement, part of the 'Emilian model' (Restakis 2010). John also brought up the importance of networking, mentioning an article that detailed how some cooperatives in Italy would come together to bid on contracts that were too large for any single cooperative and then share the work amongst themselves. I wondered out loud if this would still be common practice, as cooperatives were increasing in scale through mergers. As detailed in Chapter 2, this process started in the 1970s (Thornley 1981: 154). A professor of economics at the University of Bologna had also recently

described to me how the Legacoop umbrella group uses mergers to help rescue poorly performing cooperatives. The two larger cooperatives in Bologna that I visited regularly had also grown through mergers; one was in the process of a further merger that would see it double in size.

Mattia joined in the conversation, turning slightly to address us where we were sitting in the back seats. The need for mergers, he agreed, was a common problem today, a necessity of the market. Verdecura, he told us, was also considering merging with another cooperative to grow the business, and to help to deal with monthly cash flow. Although their balance sheet was positive, he confided, cash flow was sometimes problematic. Increasing the revenue streams by merging with another local cooperative could help to address this, he suggested to us. Shortly afterwards we arrived at Luminare and we continued on our visit, learning more about the two cooperatives as we toured the space.

The merger was not mentioned to the membership until about five months later, during the general assembly in early May. Discussions had been underway at least since my first day in the office when Mattia was meeting with the director of Coop Censeo, a frequent visitor in the office, though I realized the significance of these visits only later when the merger plan was officially announced. There was some frustration among mid-level managers about access to information and the level of participation in the decision-making process, which they felt were important for the democratic management of the cooperative. It is tempting to criticize the democratic process in a worker cooperative, and this slippage between rhetoric and reality has been a frequent topic in the literature (Hopkins 1976; Ben Salem 1976; Müller 1991; Kasmir 1996; Ulin 1996; Cheney 1999; Stohl and Cheney 2001; Cheney 2006; Smith 2006), but often this only shows that compromise is a necessity and that ideals are not readily achievable. In order to avoid

reproducing these well-worn arguments, here I endeavour to detail the local meaning of the democratic process and how it was practiced in light of a common goal, eventually leading to a unanimous decision about the merger. Such a decision required months of policy planning before the vote, relying on the market knowledge and financial skills of the director, and the existence of and frequent references to a common goal helped to foster trust in him and the necessity of the merger.

## 4.2 Democracy in theory

The word ‘democracy’ is subject to varying and potentially conflicting definitions, which I will not reproduce at length here. However, at a minimum the word normally suggests, according to context, elections, assemblies and other forms of joint decision-making, fair and equal representation, and the ability to hold officials to account and potentially replace them in future elections. Democracy can also range from radical to direct, indirect or formal, the latter two involving mechanisms of representation through elections, voting and assemblies. In the context of work, governance has been considered as a continuum from collectivist (direct) democracy, to self-managed (representative) democracy, horizontal bureaucracy, and hierarchical bureaucracy (Rothschild and Whitt 1986: 71) and a shift from direct to representative democracy in cooperatives has been described as a compromise resulting from market pressure for speedy decisions and actions (Müller 1991; Schoening 2006).

Meanwhile, meetings have been identified as the prime location of practicing democracy and worker participation in cooperatives (Mellor et al. 1988: 117). Just as much of the research on worker participation focuses on ‘rhetoric’ or ‘reality’ and the aspects that can either erode or encourage participation (Smith 2006: xiv), so too has

much of the literature on meetings been geared toward improving their effectiveness rather than viewing them as ethnographic objects (Schwartzman 1987, 1989, 1993).

Engaging analyses of Italian democracy undertaken by political scientists, for example LaPalombara (1989) and Putnam et al. (1993), also take the approach of trying to determine what makes democracy successful, whereas anthropological studies of politics in Italy tend to focus on identity and also problematize, or even avoid, the concept of democracy. In her study of two villages in southern Italy, for example, White focuses on party politics and investigates the use of clientalism to compete for resources such as jobs, grants and even roads in exchange for votes by comparing one village with clientalist tendencies to another that rejects them (1980: 5). The difference is found to be driven by different values and economic realities. She opposes the clientelistic practice to the notion of “‘modern’ democracy’ which implies ‘every citizen is able to influence the government through the ballot box’ (ibid.: 161). Shore’s analysis of political party identity in Italy squares with White’s findings, noting the significant role of patron-clientelism in the party politics of the 1980s with ‘rewards and powers of office’ distributed based on the strength of voter turnout (1997: 30), while also bringing to bear the importance of identity work related to political party alignments in a vein more similar to Kertzer’s analysis of the divided social and ideological worlds of the ‘Church-Communist confrontation’ (1980: 2). Shore found the concept of democracy was itself used as part of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) rhetoric and identity via terms like ‘progressive democracy’ and ‘democratic alternative’, while the term ‘anti-democratic’ was concurrently used as an anti-Communist Cold War stereotype (1997: 44-46). There also appears to be a tendency in these works on Italian politics to write about ‘voting’ or ‘elections’ but not necessarily democracy as such (Kertzer 1980; Grillo and Pratt 1992).

Peró (1992), for example writes about how immigrants sought participation and equality in local politics, even though they were not granted the right to vote.

There are various anthropological works on cooperatives that touch on the democratic process, though studies of the practice of democracy within cooperatives in Italy are much rarer. Holmström (1989) writes that Italian cooperatives have ranged from participatory to oligarchical or in between with ‘responsible’ leaders thinking about re-election, and they propagate a romantic myth of a more participatory past as they often had paternalistic leaders (ibid.: 49). A common theme that emerges, also present in the literature on meetings (Spencer 1971; Moore 1977; Lebra 2004; Abram 2015), is the ritual quality of cooperative assembly meetings (Holmström 1989; Hedlund 1992; Cheney 1999). Despite appearances of their ritualization, however, this does not negate the preparatory work for decision-making meetings that *appear* to be only ritual in nature (Lebra 2004: 118), nor their political value for disseminating information and engendering accountability (Spencer 1971: 195). As mentioned above, many authors comment on the limited decision-making power of cooperative members, sometimes seen as a rubber stamp (Hopkins 1976; Ben Salem 1976; Mellor et al. 1988; Holmström 1989; Hedlund 1992; Kasmir 1996). Yet others consider the relationship between the members’ understanding of democracy versus the actual practice of ‘one member, one vote’ representational democracy, with members often expecting to have more direct control of daily decisions (Schoening 2006; Heras-Saizarbitoria 2014). There is a view that the management team can make decisions more quickly, and while workers do not have ‘a say in everything’, they still have ‘some agency in the cooperative’ (Schoening 2006: 310).

My research finds the assembly meeting to be an important moment for the ritual of democratic decision-making and identity, but it also highlights the value of having a

shared goal in a context where the specialized knowledge of an appointed financial director is considered necessary. Democracy is seen to be a scalable characteristic rather than 'all or nothing', and judgements of the decisions made are not based only on practice, but also how they are believed to advance the members' shared interests.

### 4.3 Democracy in practice

Technically speaking, in most cooperatives 'democracy' means that each member has an equal vote in a representative democracy. The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) principle of Democratic Member Control provides that each member has equal voting rights, 'one member, one vote', and in Italy this is formally codified by law. Article 2532 in Book 5 of the Italian Civil Code, which deals with labour law, describes the assembly as the primary corporate body, stating: 'Every member has one vote, regardless of the value of the share or the number of shares.'<sup>42</sup> Recent legal reforms in 2004 largely confirm the one member, one vote policy, though with some exceptions that are not relevant here (see Fici 2010). Specific details, regarding the role of the assembly, board of directors, and other decision-making positions such as appointed directors and managerial staff, vary by cooperative according to individual statutes and policies. Verdecura, for example, had regular assembly meetings once per year to approve the balance sheet and would vote on the board membership every four years. Voting was done by simple majority, except in special cases such as constitutional changes which would require a two-thirds majority.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> [http://www.jus.unitn.it/cardozo/Obiter\\_Dictum/codciv/Lib5.htm](http://www.jus.unitn.it/cardozo/Obiter_Dictum/codciv/Lib5.htm) [Accessed March 2016]

<sup>43</sup> See appendix for more details.

At Verdecura, democracy was seen as integral to being a ‘real’ cooperative, and this was commonly associated with the ability to influence decisions. It was not, however, a rigid category, leaving open the possibility to be ‘more’ or ‘less’ democratic. Size was sometimes, though not always, also considered to be a contributing factor to a functioning democratic process. On that first day visiting Luminare and Verdecura, Mattia shared his opinion that CAMST, a worker and nationally successful catering cooperative, was not a cooperative but a corporation. While it had the formal structure of a cooperative, it was too large to be considered a ‘real’ cooperative in his view. However, small size alone was not enough to qualify a cooperative as genuine, nor was large size always a reason to discount it. One of the long-time members at Verdecura, Marco, thought the decision-making process had become more vertical and less horizontal, considering the latter to be a more democratic approach. The cooperative had also grown in size over the years so I asked:

Ryan: Is it a question of the size of the cooperative?

Marco: No, no, no. It’s a question of the mentality, of the sensibility tied to a certain vision of the organization.

David told me during our first encounter that one of Verdecura’s competitors was also considered a ‘fake’ cooperative, but not because of its size. Service Coop was perceived as a threat to Verdecura and it too had been growing through mergers. Mattia often described it as ‘eating up’ the other smaller cooperatives, like a larger capitalist firm pursuing takeovers. The ‘real test’, David told me, was ‘whether people feel they are deciding’.

This focus on access to decision-making was commonly referenced as being central to democratic practice. Over lunch one day in the office, some of Verdecura’s members discussed their worry over merging with Coop Censeo because the latter was seen as being less democratic, with ‘strong personalities’ who were hard to work with. On

another occasion Mattia, who was not present during our lunchtime discussion, told me that Coop Censeo had a ‘special mode of democracy’ with an older member who would ‘throw his weight around’. Such behaviour presumably limited others’ influence. Lisa, Roberta and Serena agreed that Verdecura was one of the most democratic of the social cooperatives they knew. In saying this there was the recognition that while not perfect, it could still be better than others. Democracy was not seen as all or nothing. This notion was elucidated further in a later discussion with Roberta, another long-time member:

Roberta: You have to respect the people. And also say, look, your idea, we’ve already evaluated it, and I’ll explain to you why it won’t work. This is democracy, you know?

Ryan: Uh-huh.

Roberta: You don’t even need to do a lot. You just need to understand why that thing isn’t right, or it’s okay, or it can be done. But this doesn’t happen in any cooperative.

Ryan: No?

Roberta: No. I’m telling you this because ours, I’d say it is one of the best in democracy. That is, in the little democracy there is, it’s one of the best.

In other words, despite their complaints, which could be read as expressions of what an idealised version of democracy could or should be like, this did not prevent them from also identifying their own practice as democratic, thus giving legitimacy to their cooperative identity.

Equality of access was also important. In the extreme, this could be simply an adherence to the one-member, one-vote principle. Some cooperatives were united in sectoral groups called a consortium company (*società consortile*), like the example John had mentioned on the drive to Luminare, with membership and also voting rights tied to investment levels:

Mattia: Oh, CNS, they are like the devil. This is the model we are fighting against. It is not a democracy. It is a *società consortile*, not a consortium like CISV, which means that it is part of the market and working towards financial ends, and those members who pay more get more power. We call it *muscoloso* in Italian. [He strikes a pose reminiscent of the Incredible Hulk.]

Ryan: So, not one coop, one vote then?

Mattia: No, it is more money, more power.

However, even in a cooperative such as Verdecura that adhered to the one-member, one-vote policy, it was possible to scrutinize the *amount* of democracy present, as did Marco, who suggested that a horizontal approach could be ‘a little more democratic with respect to the other’ vertical approach, and that it has ‘the opportunity to satisfy the needs of more people,’ despite being seen as slower, or less efficient. Lucia said the same when discussing her experience in Luminare: ‘When it was time to vote, we were supposed to elect the board, but we were basically just told, “We’ve decided to select ourselves again, so let’s vote.”’ Instead of being presented with choices, they were given only one option from the leadership team. This provoked the intern who was sitting with us as we discussed to ask, ‘What democracy?’ In reply, Lucia laughed, shrugged and shook her head.

The trade-off between democracy and efficiency was also a frequent topic, stated by cooperative managers and also common in the literature on cooperatives. After touring Luminare with John and Hannah and making a brief stop at the Verdecura garages so David could show off the first fruits of his mushroom project, we returned to Bologna. Walking together under the grand porticos lining the central streets of the city, we continued to discuss cooperatives. John felt that, while it takes longer to make decisions through democracy or consensus, the result was usually better. Exactly what he meant by ‘better’ is not clear, but he added to this that although you may spend more time making the decision, you don’t need to spend as much time enforcing it. Social scientists have also contended that making decisions through consensus, while more time-consuming, may have advantage to ‘engender greater commitment’ (Mellor et al. 1988: 189). In the sociology of work the conflict ‘between democratic decision-making and efficiency’ has

been called one of central struggles of collectively owned businesses (Schoening 2006: 294). There is seen to be a tension between the desire to ‘keep the structure going’ and ‘continuous adherence to participatory principles’ (Stohl, Cheney 2001: 363). Thus, cooperatives are again seen as likely to face adaptive decline due to market pressure, ‘likely to succumb to merely cost-efficient modes of organization if they produce goods or services that are similar to or competitive with those produced by bureaucratic enterprises’ (Rothschild and Whitt 1986: 117). Mattia also agreed that the cooperative was technically perfect, but the problem was the capitalist market: ‘Democracy and participation (all deciding together), it is not possible in the market. The market imposes certain decisions. A for-profit company with a leader who makes decisions doesn’t waste time and the market is by nature quick. The problem is *practice*.’

#### *4.3.1 Verdecura’s democratic structure*

My first day at Verdecura both began and ended with a meeting, a typical routine of office work.<sup>44</sup> In the first meeting Mattia introduced me to the cooperative as it was, while the second meeting with Mattia and his counterpart at Coop Censeo provided a glimpse of what it could become.

The cooperative had office space in the centre of Villacenseo in a building owned by the Villacenseo Consortium of Social Enterprises (CISV). The three-storey building housed the consortium’s administration, a cooperative training centre, four of the member-cooperatives, including Verdecura, and some private office spaces. Verdecura rented two offices on the top floor and had shared access to a storeroom on the ground

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<sup>44</sup> According to Schwartzman, meetings are so commonly associated with Western ‘basic values of pragmatism, task orientation, efficiency, and rationality’ that they have often been overlooked, or studied only as tools to learn about other things (1993: 38).

floor. Although all of the services that Verdecura provided were run out of the garages on the outskirts of the city, the management and administration were located here in the centre of the city and the heart of the consortium. Mattia shared an office with Giada, the vice president of Luminare. The room had a large bookshelf along the wall to the right filled with books and files; it appeared somewhat forgotten with empty boxes, some old desk lamps, half-dead plants and a broken water kettle scattered amongst them. Mattia's desk was at the far end of the room facing the door, near the two large windows that spanned from floor to ceiling. Giada's desk, across from the bookshelf, created an L shape with Mattia's, and between them were two armchairs arranged to make a seating area. There was also a small empty desk by the door across from Giada.

When I arrived, Mattia welcomed me into the office and said I could leave my things there at the small desk because the intern, Sara, was not working that day. 'Would you like a coffee?' he then offered as I situated myself at the desk. 'Oh yes, thank you,' I replied, having become used to this ritual in other cooperatives I had visited. 'Let's start with an introduction to the cooperative,' he said as he left the room to get the coffees. He shortly returned from the office next door with two small plastic cups of espresso, some sugar packets and plastic stirrers. I thanked him, and we drank the coffees as he opened up the organigram file on his computer to talk me through it. He pointed out some key players and their roles: Lisa, the administrator and secretary; Nicola, the president; Serena, the human resources manager; and Giada, who was working at Luminare that day, but was also one of Verdecura's production managers.

We were interrupted momentarily as Lisa came in with a phone call for Mattia. There was a portable phone in the office next door that Lisa, Serena and theoretically also Nicola shared, though the president was rarely in the office. Mattia told me after the call that about 80% of the work came through Lisa in her role as secretary. This aspect, being

in charge of the finances of the cooperative, was stressful, he mentioned as an aside. Problems with cash flow were hard to manage, and only Lisa and Mattia dealt with money – as administrator she was also in charge of billing and invoicing – and so they took the problems on as their own. ‘They are not [ours only], but it feels that way,’ he said. ‘Each member is like an owner (*proprietario*),’ he continued, ‘but they do not make as much money.’ The aspect of remuneration, in particular as it relates to the level of responsibility for the business, and as a trade-off for doing a fulfilling job, was a recurring theme in Mattia’s evaluation of his own experiences and role in the cooperative (a topic which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter dealing with the valuation of cooperative labour). Mattia explained his role as director as similar to that of a CEO in a private company; as acting director, he continued, he had the responsibility to make decisions; he could do it alone, really, but for the big decisions such as firing he took them to the board.

As a representative rather than a direct democracy, the cooperative had multiple layers and levels of responsibility. At the top was the assembly of members, which met at least once a year. The membership of the cooperative included 23 working members and 5 volunteer members. There were a further 20 non-members and four interns throughout the year. Mattia took care to emphasise the importance of these meetings as moments of *communication* – in the past year they had met three separate times to share important news. He highlighted again the importance of small size in this context, suggesting that a ‘real’ cooperative must be small, less than two hundred or so. However, he also specified that the assembly was *not* a forum for *discussion*, which would waste time and money, a nod to the importance of efficiency, and furthermore, they had to take care in choosing how much to share, for example, seeing the turnover of millions of euros could create ‘strange ideas’ amongst the other owner-members. While ultimate sovereignty was held

by the general assembly that met annually to approve the budget and vote every four years to approve changes to the board of directors, it was the elected board of directors (*consiglio di amministrazione* or CDA) that was responsible for the strategy of the cooperative. The CDA represented the members in appointing the financial director and approving key decisions such as hiring and firing. Larger decisions, such as the proposal to merge with Coop Censeo, would be brought to the full assembly. The CDA was composed of six members, including three working members and three volunteer members. Compared to the strategic decision-making role of the appointed director, the roles of president and vice-president were more formal than functional; however, unlike the director, both the president and vice-president were elected roles as part of the CDA and so had responsibility for strategy on this higher level.

Below is an idealized organigram of the regular meeting groups of Verdecura, taking inspiration from Schwartzman (1987; 1989), who found that this view of the organization, as opposed to traditional organigrams that focused on individual roles, gave a truer depiction of the power structure in the medical centre she studied. Like other cooperatives, the management hierarchy depicted in the organigram below is similar to that of a private firm, except that in cooperatives ‘the bottom is also the top’ (Holmström 1989: 53).

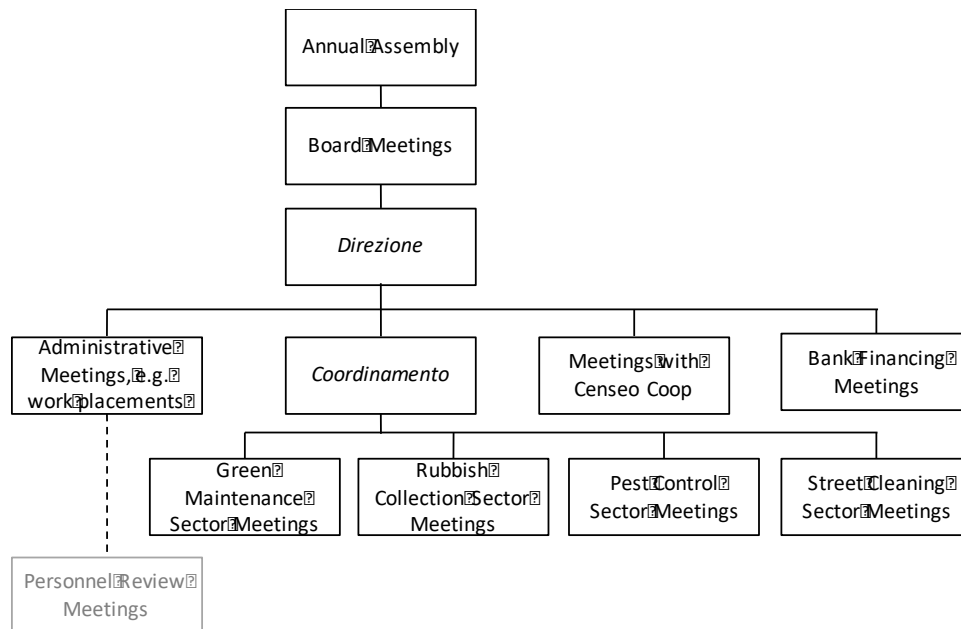


Figure 4.1. Cooperative structure in theory.

Beneath the assembly and the CDA was the operative part, as Mattia called it, which dealt with the day-to-day running of the cooperative. The *direzione* or ‘management’ meeting of the production managers was central. This meeting was theoretically a weekly meeting, though in practice was held less often, when the production managers Mattia and Giada, the president and vice president, and the HR manager would meet to discuss personnel issues and plans for production. Mattia’s role as financial director included both the strategic and operative aspects of financing the cooperative. Lisa, in her secretarial and administrative roles, and Serena, as HR manager and the person responsible for the work placements, were also considered as crucial operative positions. Lastly, Mattia mentioned the weekly *coordinamento* or ‘coordination’ meeting to discuss problems and work needs and plan the next week. This weekly meeting among the heads of the various sectors was often skipped and rarely attended by the director or other members of upper management. The HR manager Serena served as the conduit through which information could transfer between the *coordinamento* and *direzione* meetings. Individual sector meetings were only held occasionally to share specific sector-related

news. Administrative meetings, especially between the HR manager and various public servants to organize work placements, were also frequent, though individual personnel review meetings were very rare (and so depicted in grey in Fig. 4.1, being more theoretical than actual). Other meetings that occurred frequently were discussions between the director and Censeo Coop, and finance meetings between the director and various local banks in preparation for the merger. Below is another version of the meetings, viewed in terms of approximate relative frequency as opposed to the theoretical level of responsibility. This highlights the relative importance of administrative meetings as central to the operation of the cooperative, and the relatively limited input of the annual assembly.

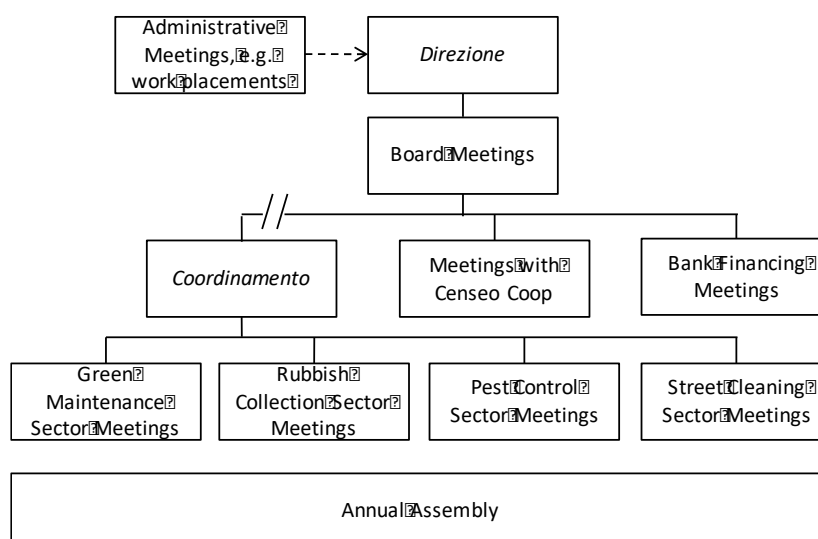


Figure 4.2. Cooperative structure in practice.

Mattia, as the director, while not an elected member of the board, was present at the *direzione* meetings and board meetings. He also chaired the annual assembly, though according to the cooperative's statutes this should have been done by the president, Nicola. On the other hand, he frequently did not attend *coordinamento* meetings, creating a breakage in the flow, or at least the *perceived flow*, of information and access to power. In this case, unlike the medical centre studied by Schwartzman, where she found

meetings were of greater importance than individuals, in this small cooperative the importance of an individual could be great.

In addition to the importance of Mattia's role as director, the structure as well as the physical layout of the cooperative revealed a clear division between management and administrative staff in the office and the operational employees based in the garages on the outskirts of the city. The sector managers who attended the *coordinamento* meetings felt disenfranchised by their irregularity and the lack of attendance by Mattia, Giada or Nicola. A further division, inherent in the mission of the cooperative, also underlies this more functional distinction, namely that between the 'normal' and the 'disadvantaged' members. This difference, too, influenced the amount and type of information that was shared and how decisions were interpreted by various members of the management and administration of Verdecura, as will be revealed in the discussion below.<sup>45</sup>

On that first day, aside from the introduction with Mattia, I spent most of my time observing various interactions as members and employees came and went from the office. David arrived to discuss the mushroom project with Mattia and how they would launch the new venture and promote it for Christmas. After lunch Giada returned from Luminare to work at her computer. Giovanni, the sector lead for waste collection, also arrived in the afternoon and joined in the continuing discussion about how to launch the mushroom boxes. Lisa popped in and out to talk about various job requests or invoices; they needed to order more petrol, for example. When Giovanni left Pietro, the head of the pest control sector, also arrived to meet with Giada and discuss a price estimate for a new job. All the

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<sup>45</sup> There is another division that is hidden from view in the structure above, which is that of member and non-member. While the 28 members are represented by the board, the over twenty other employees, interns and participants of work placements are outside of this hierarchy of responsibility. Although this division does not appear relevant to considerations of the democratic process, I will address the use of flexible hiring practices in the following chapter.

while David was still sitting by Mattia's desk, chatting with him when his attention was available, and working on his laptop computer in the meantime. The small office was full of movement and a relaxed atmosphere that was echoed visually in the swirls of cigarette smoke that crisscrossed the room from Giada's and Mattia's desks and out through the tall windows at the end of the room. The frequent comings and goings also signalled the importance of getting access to Mattia.

At the end of that day, I sat in on a meeting between Mattia and Silvia, his counterpart at Coop Censeo. He explained to me that they were working together on some projects because they both worked with Hera, a public-private utility and service provider, and some of the same suppliers, so they could get better economies of scale by working together in cooperation. Although I was present at this meeting with the director of Coop Censeo on the first day, with my limited knowledge of the situation I could not read the subtext of the discussion. Talking about problems of financing parts of Coop Censeo's business and how to raise funds could have been a crucial moment of information gathering for preparing the merger proposal.

#### *4.3.2 A 'directed' democracy*

The financial director role had been introduced about four years before I joined Verdecura. The need for professionally trained management has been recognised as a weakness of cooperatives, leading to poor management if not addressed, or to potential compromising of egalitarian ideals if implemented (Ammirato 1996: 237). In this case, the cooperative had been struggling to remain solvent, relying on loans from banks and also individual members. In a later conversation, Mattia explained the necessity for his role in the context of a discussion about the disappointment that some members expressed about their limited involvement in the merger decision. When he joined, the cooperative

seemed like ‘a small family’ or a ‘volunteer organization’. Although they were making decisions together, he felt they were not ‘entrepreneurial’ in their outlook. The cooperative had been ‘ready to fail’ in his words.

Although finance was not the goal – the goal was social, he reminded me – the cooperative had to be financially viable to reach its mission. In his role, Mattia could use his business sense, ‘an instinct’, as he called it, to help the cooperative remain viable. Since he had joined, they had more than doubled the total number of employees, more than tripled their turnover and by the end of 2013 paid back all of the personal debts from previous years’ losses. He had done this, he shared proudly, without firing anyone or using the *cassa integrazione* or ‘redundancy fund’.<sup>46</sup> However, in order to reach their goals, they had to change the processes, and some members, he believed, did not want to face the change. Joel Schoening reports a similar sentiment from a long-time member of a US cooperative: ‘Democratic participation in management is all well and good, but people around here don’t realize: no profit, no cooperative. Just like that, your social values are irrelevant’ (2006: 297). Schoening’s concept of ‘Cooperative Entrepreneurialism’ is useful as a reminder that there is not necessarily a trade-off. Instead, it may be possible to remain true to ‘cooperative values of equality and democracy’ while also ‘running the cooperative like a business’ (ibid.: 293, 309).

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<sup>46</sup> *Cassa integrazione guadagni*, or the Redundancy Fund is an Italian policy whereby workers with suspended or reduced hours are partially remunerated through public funds and their state pension contributions are also maintained, unlike during periods of unemployment.

## 4.4 Introducing the merger: setting up the context

The merger was first introduced to the full membership of the cooperative at the annual assembly in early May, just over one week after the 120-day period prescribed in the statutes, and with far fewer than the ten days' notice formally required. In the period leading up to the assembly there was a frenetic, almost frantic feeling in the office as various preparations were being made. Two days prior to the assembly, Serena, the human resources manager, came rushing into the office exasperatedly announcing that the training room was already booked. She provisionally booked a much smaller meeting room, saying that although we might fit in rows, it was not ideal if the members can't sit in a circle. The administrator Lisa responded to her lamentation in agreement: 'It's not proper like this – there hasn't been any communication yet! I need time to prepare...' That day no one in the office stopped to eat lunch, but continued working furiously. A few hours later Lisa said out loud to the room, 'We need to decide where to have the assembly so I can tell the managers and they can let people know...' As she continued to work, without a resolution to this problem, she said under her breath to herself, 'Oh my, how hopeless!' Such a refrain was not unusual when she was under the pressure of a deadline and working hard.

The meeting, which took place on a Thursday evening, was the first time all of the members had come together since before I joined them in November. There had been talk of a Christmas dinner, but it did not materialize. The assembly was scheduled to begin at 6:30pm, but commenced about half an hour later. The manual workers, who worked early shifts, had since been home for lunch, and returned to the office later in the evening. The administrative staff had been in the office since the morning, but Lisa had ordered pizza on behalf of the cooperative so they could gather all together after the meeting for a

moment together. However, when they were preparing the order that afternoon the HR manager Serena had joked it was a shame, but probably most of them would only be willing to stay for pizza because it was free, though not if they had to pay. The pizza was in some small way an offering from the cooperative to encourage the members to stay and participate in sociality after their responsibility to participate in the assembly was completed.

Serena had taken care to find a space where they could all sit facing each other in a circle, a recognised symbol of egalitarianism and participation (Stone and Stone 1974: 74). However, Mattia's chair was both centrally located and also happened to be different from the others, a padded office chair on wheels as opposed to the brightly coloured plastic and metal seats that everyone else was using:

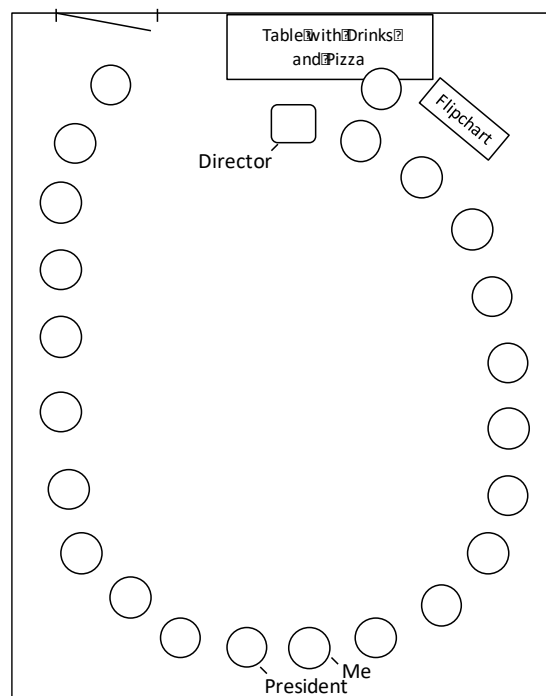


Figure 4.3. Seating for the general assembly.

The first order of business had been to approve the budget from the previous year, including the amount of surplus that would go into the indivisible reserves. Although Mattia had printed out a simplified balance sheet, he apologised to the assembled group

for the technical nature of the document filled with so many numbers. He worked through the budget, page by page, highlighting to the group where they could find the key figures. There was a still quietness in the room and I could not be sure if the members were listening intently or switching off because of the onslaught of so many numbers. At the suggestion of the director, who ran the meeting though it should have been the president's role, the members voted unanimously to approve the budget which included placing all of the surplus into the reserves instead of distributing any as dividends to members. It was necessary, Mattia explained, to make the cooperative strong and ensure that it would be ongoing. Although their financial performance had improved, there were still obstacles to be overcome, he warned. This was the lead in to the merger proposal. It had been glossed in the introduction under a heading of 'things happening in the world.' The assembly had already been going for about forty-five minutes at this point.

Before introducing the merger, Mattia took the time to carefully paint a picture of the market and changes in the contractual and competitive landscape. These changes would require a response from Verdecura if it did not want to be absorbed or lose access to the contracts upon which it depended to provide a livelihood to its members. In the waste collection services, the biggest sector in terms of numbers, Mattia informed them that the agreement between the region and Hera was coming to an end in 2015. There would be a huge tender, probably later in the year, that would alter the rules of the game. Rather than the one- or two-year contracts they had previously obtained from Hera, they would soon be bidding for a contract to span the next fifteen years. Mattia told the group that they would have to unite together with other cooperatives to be able to compete at the regional level, possibly forming a regional consortium of social cooperatives in order to maintain independence, he noted without any hint of irony, unlike others that were likely to be absorbed or 'eaten up' by their larger competitor Service Coop. 'Verdecura doesn't

want to lose independence,’ declared Mattia, speaking on behalf of all the members.

‘However, saying this, making a consortium won’t be enough. We also need to be larger to reach certain qualifications for the bid. Even though we’re bigger than in the past the situation has changed and we still need to get bigger.’ The day before, he had met at Luminare with other social cooperatives in the area to discuss what to do. He told them, ‘The little cooperatives, unfortunately – unfortunately because it’s not right, but it’s the reality – won’t be able to continue in this new context.’

Nicola jumped in, as he did throughout the assembly when the conversation was moving off track, to support Mattia’s argument about the changing world, saying that he had met recently with CGM (National consortium of social solidarity cooperation of Gino Mattarelli) members in Milan and he saw that the problem is not just due to a change with Hera, but because the whole world is changing: ‘Many sectors are making this change, for example municipalities are banding together and will put out a tender for public services together, not just locally. It’s necessary to have a certain dimension to participate.’ They stressed that the change would be radical and that the local governments would also have less to spend. They predicted a future in which everything will be done in the market. For many services currently paid for by the public authority and contracted to Verdecura, in the future the public purse would guarantee only a minimum and the remaining services would have to be paid for by private individuals or mutual funds instead of being provided by the state. Mattia pointed to a joint venture between Verdecura and other local non-profits that provides lower-cost medical treatments for those items no longer covered by national health insurance as an example. ‘It will be continuously more like this in every sector,’ predicted Mattia; ‘In order to manage the services on the market, what will need to happen? We will need to invest money, and to have the capital to invest. If not, you’re left out. We’ve discovered this

with Luminare.’ Unlike Verdecura, which continued to rely largely on contracts with the local municipality or region, as a retail space Luminare had directly confronted the difficulty of remaining viable in a consumer demand-driven market.

In summary, Mattia told them that they were seeking all possible routes to maintain their autonomy and independence and ‘to continue to do what we do’. One of the members joined in with a traditional saying, ‘Unity creates strength (*l’unione fa la forza*),’ his enthusiasm evident in the power and tone of his voice. Mattia continued, ‘The world has changed. To respond to the needs of the past, there was one way, but now we need to respond to the world as it is. The consortium needs to find a means to be stronger, to be more territorial, to find synergies. Otherwise we will be forced to be absorbed, eaten by a bigger cooperative or to build a network. We don’t want to be *eaten*.’ He explained that Coop Censeo had been approached by Service Coop and said ‘absolutely no’ to joining them. Another cooperative that had been absorbed still exists formally but in reality it does not, he told them. Therefore, Coop Censeo proposed a merger with Verdecura. Mattia had painted a clear picture of the context that allowed the merger to be introduced as a solution to an inevitable change, a way to allow Verdecura and its members to maintain their independence and their jobs.

Still, one of the members challenged immediately, showing his desire to be included earlier in the process: ‘Why didn’t you tell us about this?’ Nicola again stepped in to explain that the assembly was the first chance to discuss things all together. ‘These conversations happened in a rush,’ he added. Other cooperatives in Villacenseo would probably join up with Service Coop that would ‘absorb them all’ and so action was urgent. Mattia then explained to the group that upon merging with Coop Censeo they would be big enough to participate in the regional tender. ‘We need to be bigger to compete. Now it’s everyone against everyone.’ He told them that Hera needs the social

cooperatives, though, ‘because we cost less, about 30% lower per contract because the cost of work is lower. For the regional contracts, we could also compete with foreign companies. As social cooperatives, we are no longer those left behind, but we offer added value.’ This is a point that he would detail further in the information session that followed. ‘We’re at the table of the giants;’ he concluded; ‘let’s divide the pie.’ Mattia told the now attentive assembly that they would have to meet again soon to discuss more because the process would move quickly. ‘As soon as we have something concrete to decide we will need to meet again.’

Preparation of the documents and setting the agenda are moments that allow participants to exercise control before the meeting (Spira 1999: 243), and providing advance notice and time to plan are recognised as a means of enhancing democratic participation (Mellor et al. 1988: 117). In this case, the preparations revealed disregard for some aspects that would help members to effectively participate in the meeting. Members were not given the full notice period for the assembly, and the agenda was not shared in advance as it should have been. When the notes from the assembly were sent out a few weeks later, I heard Lisa say, ‘This is democracy?’ as she read them. She then read a part aloud to Serena who agreed, ‘Even the words have changed.’ They were clearly disappointed with some aspects of the democratic process as it worked in practice.

#### *4.4.1 Leading up to the vote: seeking and sharing information*

After the assembly there was silence, or at least no official communication, on the topic of the merger for nearly two months. There were, however, some rumours and discussions, as the members attempted to clarify or confirm pieces of information that they heard in passing. In early June, one of the members asked Serena about the merger when he came to meet her for an HR discussion. ‘It’s not certain (*Non si sa*),’ she replied.

‘Oh, so then Leo was wrong?’ he asked in reply. Leo, although not a manager, was frequently present in the office to discuss another start-up project with Mattia, and must have shared some information either directly gathered from Mattia or gleaned from office talk. Serena deflected his question, reminding him of the levels of responsibility in the cooperative: ‘We are here in the office, but we also are not the decision-makers; we’re also waiting to hear.’ She then reassured him, saying ‘whatever happens, we will still be us.’ Although this was the stance taken with operative members, among the administrative staff there was a tacit agreement that the merger was all-but decided. Three days later we discussed the merger again and Serena admitted that it was more or less certain, except for the timing. ‘Have they announced it? Will there be another assembly?’ I asked. ‘Not yet,’ she replied, ‘but they should...’

There was no formal practice of communication within the cooperative outside of the assemblies and individual sector meetings. Mattia joked once that Lisa served as an informal communication network because if you told her something everyone else would soon hear; in short, she was a gossip. The weekly *coordinamento* meetings, which could have served as a moment to discuss important issues with the sector leads and disseminate useful information, had become an infrequent lunch club rather than a regular management meeting. It was unusual for anyone from the board or Mattia to be present, so they often descended into complaining sessions and were not perceived as a useful communication tool. David told me that the meeting one Friday was depressing because everyone just complained. Roberta often called it the fake Friday meeting. Many different methods of communication were employed by the larger cooperatives to encourage discussion and to share information, for example, newsletters, blogs, Facebook pages, weekly meetings and even discussions facilitated by external consultants. Although

Verdecura had a Facebook page, this was not used to connect with members, but for networking and sharing events with other cooperatives and local organizations.

Roughly two weeks later the information sessions were announced. It was positioned as an invitation from the board to discuss the proposal. The announcement was made by posting A4 size sheets of paper in the office and the garage:

**ANNOUNCEMENT**

*In light of the proposal from the board  
of Verdecura Cooperative regarding*

**THE MERGER PROJECT with Coop Censeo**

**THE MEMEBERS ARE INVITED**

*to the meeting on 8 and 15 July 2014 at 17.00*

*at the headquarters in [...]*

*to expand on and discuss the projected presented.*

These sheets were printed and hung in the offices at the end of June, but were not sent to the garages until 1 July, a few working days later, when I asked Alessio, the vice-president of the cooperative and the head of the grounds maintenance sector, to take them with him when he returned to the garages. Both he and Giovanni, the head of the waste collection sector, were frequent visitors to the office and among the few employees who navigated easily between the two spaces. I wondered how long the announcement would have remained in the office if I hadn't interfered. Some were unable to attend because of prior obligations, and at least one later complained about the short notice, but overall attendance was good according to Serena's perspective as human resources manager. There were eight members at the first meeting and five at the second; with some overlap this represented just below 50% attendance.

Again, Mattia led the proceedings. He explained that both meetings would be informational and that there would be *no voting*, in other words *no decisions made*, until the assembly at the end of the month. The open meetings were being offered to members

who wanted to understand the proposal before voting at the extraordinary assembly later that month. Mattia wanted to share as much information as possible and give members the opportunity to ask questions before the vote. He took care to verbalize the tentative nature of the proposal: ‘Everything here is a proposal and not a decision taken’, often saying ‘if approved’, or ‘when approved’, and frequently correcting himself from ‘will’ to ‘would be’. He started the proceedings by introducing a large stack of papers, the official merger proposal document, which he informed the group would be available to members in the office of the headquarters, where it would have to stay, by law, until the merger decision was made. These documents were the result of a meeting between Verdecura and Coop Censeo and had been written by a notary, a public representative, with inputs from consultants, he explained.

Mattia once again set up the context before discussing the goals of the merger: ‘Service Coop is eating a lot of smaller cooperatives. Bronte Social Coop is likely to be absorbed.’<sup>47</sup> He then shared the two objectives of the merger: to maintain jobs in the two cooperatives and to optimise the work placements and administrative costs. He explained that the cooperatives’ financial performance would be complementary: while one had more assets, the other had more liquidity, and while they were both currently occupied with waste collection, each cooperative also had other activities that did not overlap. Technically, Coop Censeo would be absorbed into Verdecura. This would cost less because of the various contracts and mortgage held by Verdecura, which would require fees to transfer to a new entity. However, unlike Service Coop, he reassured them,

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<sup>47</sup> Since I left the field this cooperative has indeed become part of Service Coop (both names are pseudonyms, like all other business and personal names in Villacenseo).

Verdecura would not be ‘eating’ Coop Censeo because the merged group would re-launch with a new name.

He restated the goal as being to ‘ensure future earnings’; they would have to meet the new size requirements to participate in the regional contract tender. He also elaborated on additional benefits of the new market context and the ‘added value’ that only they, as a social cooperative, could offer. Hera would be a partner in the contract with the region, rather than granting the contract on behalf of the region, so Verdecura and its members would no longer be ‘slaves’ to Hera’s contract terms. ‘We won’t get rich,’ he explained, ‘but the pay will be slightly higher. The contracts have been getting tighter and tighter.’ An increase in bargaining power was not caused solely by their change in positionality from recipient to partner, but also because of Hera’s new position in a competitive tender with foreign companies, according to Mattia, up to forty times larger than Hera. In order for Hera to win the tender they would rely on the social cooperatives; he did not stress the lower cost of labour as he had done in the assembly, but instead their ‘social clout’. As social enterprises tied to the local communities they had gone from being considered losers (*sfigati*), bastards (*stronzi*) or slow (*lenti*) to the good ones (*i buoni*) who could help to save the community. In this way, through the merger, they could maintain different conditions for their future, not just maintain autonomy but perhaps even gain slightly more power than in the past.

The questions raised during the discussion showed a concern for how the merger would impact the members in their own roles. Michele, who supported Giovanni in running the waste collection sector, pushed for details of how the sectors would be managed in the new cooperative. Mattia replied that they would have to be patient and integrate slowly to find a shared way and take the best parts of each cooperative. ‘There should be aspects to improve the quality of life for us all,’ he said. Michele pushed back

again: ‘But who will organize the work, run the teams?’ Mattia assured him that Giovanni would continue to run the teams and his counterpart from Coop Censeo would focus on the administrative aspect: ‘She is better at administrative things and Giovanni at managing people.’ Coop Censeo had higher pay scales than Verdecura, so Giada asked if these would become equivalent over time. Eventually, with timing dependent on contract renewals, was Mattia’s answer. Yet he also highlighted the non-monetary benefits of the merger. Having more managerial and administrative staff would allow people to take sick days and holidays without worrying. ‘If Lisa is sick, who will pay you?’ he asked to point out the difficulty they faced now. Mattia himself had told me that over the previous year he had only been able to take four days of holiday; this was also common among many of the young managers I met in other cooperatives. Lisa asked him in return: ‘Has Coop Censeo been better on this point?’ They had been, a little bit, he agreed. While many of those who joined the meeting did not ask specific questions – though there was some lively debate around the naming of the new cooperative – when I had spoken to some of them in the hallway earlier they were hopeful that the merger would work well. Paolo and Nico were in the green maintenance sector, which did not have a counterpart at Coop Censeo, so they hoped they would not be too affected by the change. On the other hand, Giovanni and Michele in waste collection were worried that the merger could impact their way of work because there was overlap between the two, they later mentioned. It would be similar in the administration, and while these members like Lisa and Giada had some concerns, they came to voice them. Marco and Roberta, however, who were more critical of the process, did not participate in the meetings.

4.4.2 *The extraordinary assembly: a unanimous vote*

This assembly was much shorter and more formal in both tone and layout than the annual assembly in May. Leading up to the vote, Mattia had been busy meeting with banks and other stakeholders outside the cooperative. Lisa had also been busy preparing the constitutional documents, ready for the merger if the decision would go through. The room was set with a head table at the far end of the room, similar to an academic conference or panel discussion. The circular layout of the ordinary assembly was echoed in this instance by a semi-circle of chairs facing the panel. At the front table sat Mattia to the right, a notary in the middle and Nicola, the president, to the left. A legal representative was also seated in the circle near to the front table.

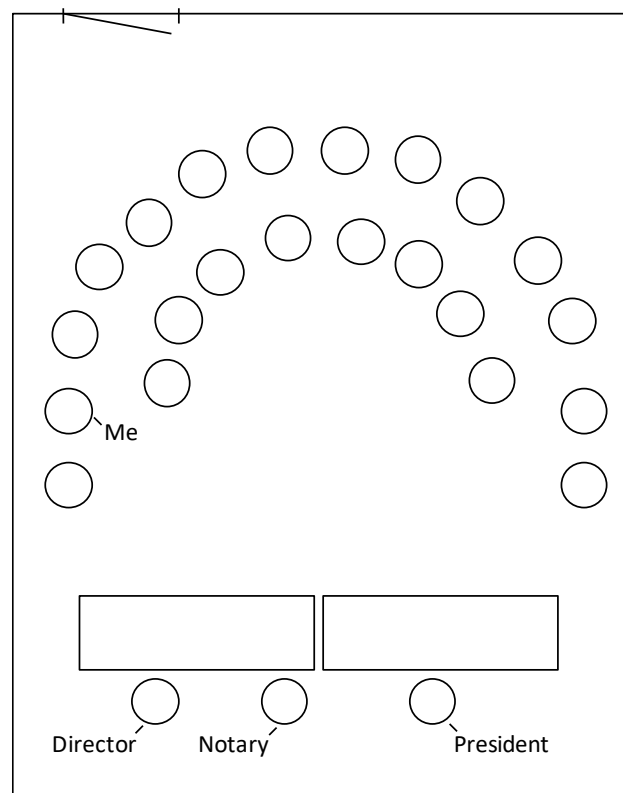


Figure 4.4. Seating for the extraordinary assembly.

This meeting, which was more evidently ritualized with various participants reading off aspects of the proposal, was no longer a discussion or communication about the reasons

behind the proposed merger, but instead focused on the technicalities of the document to prepare those present for the vote. Although others have criticized cooperative assembly meetings such as this as rubber-stamping management plans (Kasimir 1996: 138), or a theatre to ritualistically 'act out' self-management (Holmström 1989: 54), this reading does not necessarily take into account the 'backstage' preparatory work such as the informational meetings described above that serve to generate consensus (Lebra 2004: 118).

The meeting was started by the notary, and the president began by saying that they would aim to conduct the meeting in the most proper way possible. He explained the technical aspects of the merger (as had been done already in the informational meeting) and noted that this was the reason for calling the extraordinary assembly. He noted for the record that there were 22 out of 27 members present as well as the legal representative, nodding to her. He mentioned that the documents had been kept in the headquarters, and the notary pointed to Mattia who, smiling, presented the documents to the crowd. Making a reference to their statutes and the laws guiding the merger process, Nicola passed the floor to the notary, who intervened with some technical details about the merger and explained the changes to the statutes, again as had been already explained in the informational sessions held at the beginning of the month.

Next, Nicola told the members the next steps. If the merger were approved by both Verdecura and Coop Censeo, then the papers would be taken to the chamber of commerce and for review by their creditors. The process would probably finish around mid-November. He highlighted the importance of doing this before January so that they could make a joint balance sheet for the year, saving the cost and time of each cooperative doing it separately in the coming year. Nicola continued, telling the gathered members the new name, the same one that he had proposed earlier; no changes,

apparently, had been made in the intervening two weeks. As the president spoke, summarizing the final details captured in the paperwork, the notary looked around the room, nodding to elicit agreement among the members.

When Nicola had finished reading through the materials, the notary reminded the members that they were going to be voting on three linked decisions: 1) the merger; 2) the revised statutes; and 3) to confirm the new cooperative which is being established. ‘OK,’ continued the president, ‘we will vote by raising hands.’ He began by asking, ‘Against?’ No hands were raised. ‘Abstain?’ Again, no one raised his or her hand. And lastly, ‘For?’ All of the hands raised at once as the votes were captured by the notary. At this point, Nicola concluded the meeting, telling the members gathered there that they could stay to chat, or they were free to go. Checking the time, I noted that only about half an hour had passed, and with the vote passed, everyone began to gather their things and exchanged pleasantries before making their ways home.

#### *4.4.3 Discussing the merger*

Later discussions about the merger revealed two distinct, yet overlapping threads: those who spoke about the process, and those who spoke about the result. There were some questions about the extent to which the process was democratic, which were tied to both access to information and to ultimate decision-making power. However, I would argue, this is not the most important point. Despite some misgivings, the result of the process was a unanimous vote in favour of the merger. This fact, in combination with the evaluations of the result which were overwhelmingly positive, highlights the importance of how the decision was *justified* rather than made. Instead of being divided by their various evaluations of the process itself, the members were unified by the common goal

that was used to evaluate the result of the decision itself, separately from the process used to make the decision.

Some members, who felt that the process was not democratic, interpreted democracy, as above, as equal access to information and participation in decision-making, rather than the formal definition of one member, one vote, which had been respected. Here is a brief excerpt from a discussion with Giovanni and Michele that elaborates on this point:

Giovanni: Now I'm a little confused. The issue of the merger, did you understand if they have announced it, or they haven't? They won't know still until December? Eh...

Michele: Look, in my view it's another thing. It's the assemblies, which in my view, the assemblies that we do serve no purpose. Because we make decisions on decisions already made. That is, it's only a vote, and it's nothing more, there's not— Discussing? We have never discussed anything.

[...]

Ryan: Mattia told me that all of the discussion comes first.

Michele: It comes between them, and then when the assembly of members happens and things like that, they say, 'It's been decided this, this and this. If you want to discuss, you can contribute.' One could also say, 'OK.' I say, it's rubbish, but a new board has been elected. There is one person that I don't even know who she is. So how can I elect a person that I don't even know who she is?

Michele felt that the assembly occurred too late in the process, after the discussions had already been complete. Roberta was also critical of the democratic process, though as already mentioned above, she thought that Verdecura was one of the most democratic social cooperatives. Still, she also thought that limited information made it difficult to contribute:

They are a small group and they keep themselves separate and keep information to themselves. They tease us (*ci prendono in giro*) because you think you're important, involved in making decisions, but really, you're not important. They treat us more like workers (*operai*).

However, though she did not like the way they managed the process, she thought they were right in terms of the decision. 'My anger isn't because they work – that they do bad things. Because they are honest people.' Similarly, Lisa felt that there was a tendency to keep information close. She reasoned that they probably 'really believe' in their roles as decision-makers, that they can make better decisions. She said they felt that they had already shared too much information on the merger during the first assembly. Still, Lisa also said she trusted them and the decision that was made.

Despite various complaints about the process, these were most often paired with, as above, feelings of trust in the people making those decisions and/or an agreement that the resulting decision was sound. The HR manager Serena confirmed that this trust was generally felt by the members despite some difficulties in the practicalities of work:

While people trust the decisions, they are disappointed with the garbage trucks, for example. They have a problem with a truck and they call me. It's not my job, but I help them fix it and they feel like the others don't care.

The information meetings, where Mattia again carefully set out the context of necessity for the merger, and then outlined in more detail the potential benefits for the cooperative and its members, was a moment of trust building centred around expressing a common goal. Although sometimes, Serena noted, she felt that Mattia's personality made it difficult to reach him, or to receive the attention one desired, an aspect that will be discussed further in a later chapter, moments like the information meeting 'really brings back trust.' She continued, 'He gives you these brilliant moments that make you feel good.' Although she had been nervous about the merger a few weeks or even days earlier, she thought he had done a good job, ensuring that everything was clear and understood. Likewise, Marco, another critic of the degree of democracy in the cooperative, had been convinced that the merger was the correct decision. That said, he did not think that it would be an automatic fix for the personnel problems, which were for him as the former

HR manager the most important issues:

While I was in the CDA, I voted in favour of it because in my view it is *necessary* to do a merger. It is an opportunity. It depends how it will be used, this opportunity. Seeing that there are also more economic resources, then like I said also with Nicola recently, it is an opportunity for the cooperative to change the way of managing a number of areas, of sectors of the cooperative, like that of the human resources. [...] It's not automatic that with two cooperatives, more money, it's not automatic that it will be decided to invest this money in the management of the personnel. Because here we return to the discussion of the values, of the weight you give to things...

Although he disagreed with what he perceived as a vertical decision-making process and the upper management's focus on production rather than people, Marco also agreed the decision was necessary.

Mattia, in his role as the financial director, had presented the cooperative with a problem – changes to the market context that would make them unable to participate in the future unless they were larger – and a solution to grow by merging with Coop Censeo. This would maintain jobs, and each cooperative would retain, at least to a certain extent, its independence by joining together instead of being absorbed into a larger competitor. With the support of the CDA, Mattia had prepared the merger proposal with the help of consultants, banks and his counterpart at Coop Censeo, a project that represented months of work in advance. Although he mentioned the possibility during the assembly, he wanted to share the details only when there was a concrete proposal to discuss. Liquidity problems were causing so much concern for Lisa that she nearly quit and could not sleep for days, he told me. He did not want to share too much information or at the wrong time. Whether this was entirely due to a desire to prevent upset, as he explained, or also in an effort to control information for the sake of efficiency it is not possible to know.

Some interpreted this new process as a lack of democracy. It could be tempting to see the vote at the extraordinary assembly as 'no more than a farcical rubber stamp' (Spencer 1971: 190), but as Spencer wrote about council meetings in England, '[i]t may

not have been a decision-making occasion in the normally accepted sense, but it was still of strategic value in the dissemination of highly relevant information to the public at large, and this was closely linked to the accountability of the electorate' (ibid.: 195). Likewise in the cooperative, these moments served as both rituals and information-sharing events, with the vote providing legitimacy for the decisions proposed by the board and the director. Although the broader access to decision-making was felt by some to be limited, the annual assembly meeting did allow time for discussion and alternative views to be heard, and the information sessions gave the members a chance to ask questions and come to their own decisions on the subject. Some members, those who were not willing to face the necessary changes in Mattia's view, did not attend the information sessions or meet with him personally to discuss. There had been opportunities to participate even outside of those formal settings, and not only Mattia but also Serena and Lisa questioned how anyone could complain about being excluded from the process if they did not participate as fully as was possible.

## 4.5 Conclusion

In Verdecura cooperative the democratic governance structure is paired with an appointed financial director, who gives the cooperative the specialized market knowledge deemed necessary to participate in a competitive market and maintain its members' jobs for the future. Although the democratic process was not considered to be ideal by *all* of the members, with some regarding the decisions presented as being 'already made' or vertical in nature, there was a continuous attempt to share information and promote discussion with the view that 'deciding' was equivalent to 'voting'. Furthermore, I have shown that being democratic is not necessarily a black and white classification, and that

various shades of democratic practice are recognised. In the end, what mattered most was not the shade of democracy itself, but the motivation behind the decision being made. It was justified through reference to meeting their shared needs, and thus it was deemed to be the right choice. In this case, meeting the members' needs seemed to have become more important than practicing an ideal version of democratic governance.

# 5 VALUING COOPERATIVE LABOUR: NECESSARY AND CHOSEN WORK

As I argued in the previous chapter, work is considered to be a shared need among Verdecura members, and protecting their livelihoods was the primary justification for the merger that was eventually decided upon with a unanimous vote. In this chapter, however, I argue that for some, work in the cooperative is seen to be more financially necessary than for others. Taking a closer look at how work is managed and valued within the cooperative reveals a dominant neoliberal ideology that prioritizes choice in both financial and moral valuations. Work associated with work placements and internships is considered financially necessary for the individuals, who often have few alternatives available to them. While this work is of low or no cost to the cooperative, and provides low wages for the workers, it is seen to offer the potential for personal growth and social inclusion. Alternatively, I reveal how managerial and administrative work that is often considered to be idealistically chosen is associated with both higher wages and higher moral value. In this case, paradoxically, the work that is ideologically chosen, with an apparent rejection of monetary needs, is actually the most highly paid. Despite references to market-based wage scales to justify this difference, this gradation also reveals a social dimension of how labour is valued, with managerial and professional work being superior to manual work and temporary roles. Furthermore, despite the cooperative's mission to create work as opposed to seeking profit as in a standard firm, Verdecura participates in the potentially exploitative use of flexible labour in order to

protect the work of its members, justifying this with reference to the notion of work as a shared need, and also a critical component of social belonging and self-worth.

In order to bring these arguments to light, I first review relevant theories of how work is valued and introduce the specific nature of mutual exchange in worker cooperatives that privileges the provision of work to cooperative members. I then analyse the valuation of labour in the specific context of Verdecura and argue that this varies ideologically among different types of members and workers. Lastly, I consider the concept of cooperative self-exploitation to explore the connection between exploitation, labour value and individual choice.

## 5.1 Theorising the value of work

This section details the varied literature on the value of work to frame the analysis that follows. I take inspiration from the ASA volume on the *Social anthropology of work*, in which Sandra Wallman contends that work is part of a broader social system where ‘the choices, decisions, and rewards of the worker are constrained by the logic of the system in which he works’ (1979: 2). She continues, ‘Each system of work involves the *management of resources* and the *ascription of value* to those resources’ (ibid.: 7, my emphasis). Therefore, it is important to consider not only the control of labour, but also broader social processes of valuation. While the control of work and labour itself can be transferred to cooperative workers through shared ownership and democratic governance, the processes of monetary and social valuation may be harder to influence. The ethnographic examples below show that the distinction between value and values continues to be relevant. While the financial, or monetary, value of work is sometimes

contrasted with the social value of other forms of labour, these are both dependent upon ‘the logic of the system’, to borrow Wallman’s phrase.

Discussions of work and labour greatly overlap and not all make clear distinctions between the two. Generally, though, ‘work’ is associated with wage labour and other paid labour, while ‘labour’ is a broader category, including virtually any action linked to the reproduction of human society (Mollona 2014: 181). In this context, I will use labour to denote this broader category and work to refer specifically to wage labour and the job or position that it entails. Similar to Kopytoff’s (1986) argument that the commodity is a *phase* of an object, work – as the commoditized state of labour, a ‘fictitious commodity’ in the words of Polanyi (2001: 71) – can be seen as a temporary status of labour that also does not fully describe such work or its worth. As a culturally specific process, the ways in which work is valued range from financial to personal, moral and other social evaluations, and must be understood within broader social and economic systems (Wallman 1979: 2-8). Although the monetary value of work can be an important incentive in a market-based economy where money provides access to the primary means of subsistence, this is only one aspect of how work is valued, and only one of various incentives to work. Examples show that these processes of social and monetary valuation can overlap and are sometimes contradictory.

In terms of the monetary value of work, Massimiliano Mollona argues that the wage has come to be seen as the monetary equivalent of the value of work since industrialization (2014: 183). While Marx theorised that the value of labour is equal to ‘the means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance of its owner’ (1990: 274), ethnographic accounts show that wages are often below subsistence levels and used in conjunction with other sources of income or subsistence labour, for example the *combinazioni* of subsistence farming and wage labour used in northeast Italy (Holmes

1983, 1989) or the mixed economies that rely on both domestic labour and wage labour often found in developing countries (Mollona 2014: 188). Many of the peasant cooperative workers studied by Rakopoulos (2014, 2015) in Sicily also supplemented their wages with farming. Likewise, the lowest paid (and also unpaid) workers in the Verdecura and Luminare cooperatives also received additional support from family, local charities or the state. Mollona argues that these various subsistence measures are interdependent and can serve to enable low wages (2014: 188). In a market economy, such wage levels are often determined – or justified – based on the ‘market rate’, appealing to economic notions of supply and demand in the labour market. However, such market-based valuations necessarily include social and moral valuations of the type of work. In practice, the level of wage depends on many factors including skill, experience and industry (Parry 2009b: 387). The notion of ‘skill’ itself is also socially constructed and could serve to justify wage and status differences (Wood 1982: 11). Consider, for example, the steady streams of UK graduates vying for jobs in the financial sector, which are highly paid in comparison to the nursing positions that have too few qualified applicants. Although the laws of supply and demand may influence wages within a given sector, these abstract models are not sufficient to explain the variation of wages across sectors. Instead, the different monetary values ascribed to different types of work are closely tied to other social and moral valuations, as will be detailed in the following paragraphs and shown in the Verdecura case below.

In his famous labour theory of value, Marx considered all labour to be equally valuable, but historical and ethnographic accounts have also shown this assumption to be invalid (Firth 1979: 183). As Wallman (1979: 8) suggested, evaluations of work and aspects of work change ‘with historical and social context but also with personal circumstances.’ Medieval literature, for example, suggests that the exchange of

necessities was considered 'proper', while trading for profit was 'dishonourable' (ibid.). In modern times, it is often assumed that agricultural labour is more highly valued than factory work or other wage labour. Silverman's (1968) comparison of peasants in southern and central Italy, however, indicates that the typical 'peasant attitudes and values' that privilege agricultural over factory work do not occur consistently. In southern Italy, in particular, commerce was often seen as being 'sophisticated' while the manual labour of agriculture was considered 'degrading' (ibid.: 15). In central Italy, by contrast, there was a greater connection between the land and identity, with divisions between town and country being more relevant than the division between manual and non-manual labour (1968: 16). Likewise, Parry's (2009a) ethnography of contemporary workers in India shows that most preferred factory work to the more physically demanding agricultural work. Rakopoulos's analysis of community participation in a Sicilian cooperative further highlights that conceptions of work can differ along class lines within the same setting (2015). The cooperative was divided into administrators and workers, with the latter group, who supplemented their income as mentioned above, considering themselves to be peasants and identifying with the land more than with the cooperative. The class division of manual versus non-manual work also appears in Harry Braverman's classic study of scientific management. He argues that worker 'deskilling', which separates directive and productive work, is dehumanizing because understanding is what separates human from animal labour (2009: 122). While arguing against this distinction, Braverman's analysis appears to ascribe higher moral value to the directive work, while considering routinized work to be less worthy. This division seems pervasive in the modern capitalist system, leading one economic historian to ask whether 'socially necessary labour time has become or is becoming worthless, at least insofar as the price system can signify its value' (Livingston 2016: xi).

There is often an apparent opposition between the social value and monetary value of work. Labour associated with household reproduction, while sometimes ascribed higher moral value, has typically been outside of the market sphere and less 'valued' financially (Mollona 2014: 182), or when such work is paid, the wages are often low (Thelen 2015: 501). Comparing the value ascribed to paid versus volunteer carers in northern Italy, Andrea Muehlebach argues that the 'forms of production and value seem to be undergoing tectonic shifts' (2012: 72). In this context, the use value of volunteer work has become more important than its exchange value because relationships are the source of its value (ibid.). Paid care-workers, on the other hand, are seen as having the wrong motives, being animated by their need for income, and hence incapable of real care (ibid.: 212). The higher moral valuation is linked specifically to the non-monetary value, while work motivated by monetary need is morally devalued. Other ethnographic cases also show that moral value can be at odds with monetary value. In the classic volume *Money and the morality of exchange*, Parry and Bloch (1989) argued convincingly that the value gleaned in short-term cycles of individual exchange, such as wage labour, have to be carefully processed into the long-term cycles of social reproduction. Andean tin miners, for example, were found to be in a dangerous position, particularly when they were fulltime wage earners and made their livelihoods entirely outside of the local ideals of collective enterprise (Sallnow 1989: 217). In another example, the women in a Malay fishing village would re-appropriate or 'cook' money earned in the village into their household for shared consumption (Carsten 1989: 132). However, it is important to consider who is making such value judgements. Parry for example, cites research from an Indian factory town where the workers themselves benefitted from easier work and greater independence, while criticisms about the consequences of hourly wage work came mostly from higher caste landowners (2009b: 6; 2009a).

Work, of whatever kind, can also be seen as a value in its own right beyond the monetary or other values that may be attached to it. In this capacity, work is often linked to individual or class identity and self-worth (Wells 1981; Kotkin 1994; Buroway 2014). Although sometimes considered only a ‘means to an end’, work can also be an end in itself, especially when people are paid to do what they would have done anyway ‘at leisure’ (Wallman 1979: 5). Voluntary work, as mentioned above, is a perfect example of this, seeming to offer the purest example of work that is chosen without the influence of monetary need. However, when work itself is a value, those outside of work or performing informal labour can be seen as ‘marginal citizens and even socially dangerous’ (Mollona 2014: 183). The link between work and identity can also cause problems in the crises of industrial capitalism as some skills are no longer valued (Goddard 2016; Spyridakis 2013).

Traditionally the anthropology of labour, following in the Marxist tradition, has classified economic systems based on labour relations linked to modes of production and ownership (Durrenberger 2012). However, if work is fundamentally about control as argued by Wallman (1979) then it is important to consider not only who controls the labour, but also the value associated with that labour. Mollona asks, ‘are workers’ co-operatives and mutualist arrangements the same as informal labour or maybe more like the end of labour?’ (2014: 183). Despite the democratic ownership and governance structure, there are larger structural limitations in terms of the necessity to be competitive in the market that lead to centralization of decision-making and reinforce the separation of manual and directive work (Atzeni 2014: 173). As mentioned in the Introduction, Marx was sceptical that cooperatives would advance the dissolution of the class system. In an analysis of the recuperated business movement in Argentina, Alice Bryer (2012) finds that, although the cooperative workers technically own the means of production,

they still lack real control over their own productive power. Instead, the systemic rationality of profit-seeking leads to feelings of a lack of control and that the members themselves are not the priority. Likewise, Sharryn Kasmir (1996) argued that the cooperative workers in Mondragón were not ‘fooled’ by the ideology of cooperativism, but felt exploited because of unequal pay levels and uneven control over policies, just like workers in other firms. One member, discussing a private firm said: ‘At least there they don’t pretend that there is equality’ (ibid.: 152). The cooperative was seen as favouring economic goals at the expense of the members: ‘What are the coops? [...] If they once talked about what it was to be human, now they talk only about profits’ (member of KT cooperative group, ibid.: 188). The reality was similar in Verdecura, with some members disappointed with their lack of impact on the decision-making as seen in the previous chapter, on unequal pay as discussed below, and also on the focus on production over people, a central theme in the following chapter.

However, in the context of consumerism and the increasing mechanization of production processes, it may be that value is no longer created primarily via labour or even the control of labour, but at a more abstract symbolic level. Robert Ulin, for example, argues that work is important beyond the materiality of production, but also due to the symbolic aspects involved in constructing notions of work and identity (2002: 693). As opposed to processes of material production being fundamental, Ulin suggests that work be considered as a process of ‘cultural production’ and social communication. This may not be surprising in the context of the southwest French wine cooperatives that Ulin studied; for these producer and marketing cooperatives must differentiate their wines through cultural symbolism and prestige to achieve ‘commercial clout’ (ibid.: 697). It is a useful insight into how the work of marketing can be used to manipulate both social and monetary value. In Italy, Michael Blim (1990) highlights the continued importance of

controlling labour in small-scale artisanal shoe-making. This includes the use of undocumented labour and family labour to keep costs down (ibid.: 145-154). However, the production of value – as Ulin suggests – also relies on a particular symbolic image of the quality and style of handmade Italian shoes. Rakopoulos also finds a similar dynamic in the anti-mafia social cooperatives with the administrators focused on reputation and marketing through concepts of legality and ethical production as critical for the market success of their alternative model (2014: 116).

In the case of Verdecura, unskilled manual labour has a low ‘market value’. Mattia impressed upon me the fact that such work is the domain of social cooperatives, partly because the low profitability means that other businesses are not likely to enter. In a ‘buyers’ market, where competition for contracts includes low pricing, they cannot compete against larger international companies on pricing alone, but as mentioned in the previous chapter, do so based on ‘added-value’, the symbolic value associated with being a local social cooperative. While the cooperative was exploiting a narrative of added value to win contracts and provide work for members, the pay scales reflected internal divisions of labour value. These mirror those described by Rakopoulos (2014) with managerial and administrative positions that ascribe value to the ideals of cooperation, a category that I describe as ‘chosen’. More ‘necessary’ manual labour appears to be less valued monetarily *and* morally, but carries the potential for self-actualization and eventual reward.

### *5.1.1 Work as a right*

Rather than the negative attitude towards work that may exist for ‘a majority of workers’ thanks to a Marxian sense of being compelled to sell their labour for a wage (Atzeni 2014: 164), for those previously excluded from the workforce, work provided access not

only to financial resources, but also to certain conceptions of citizenship and self-worth. While one could potentially imagine other avenues to achieve self-worth and inclusion, social cooperatives like Verdecura and Luminare grew up within a social and legal environment that promoted conceptions of work and citizenship as interlinked rights (Marzocchi 2014). Such cooperatives, furthermore, are based on legal norms that envisioned access to work as a right. Law 482/1968 acknowledged the right to employment for all, including disabled war veterans and also civilians (ibid.: 10). As seen in Chapter 2, type B social cooperatives grew out of social movements seeking greater equality, and provided this through access to the market economy. During this period, the European Union was also promoting employment and employment rights (Benson 1993; Casey 1993). The provision of work is fundamental to these cooperatives' existence, as Verdecura's articles of incorporation, written during its founding in 1993, make clear:

Art. 3 (Mutualistic Aim)

The cooperative, in accordance with Art. 1 of Law 381/1991, has a non-profit end: its aim is to pursue the general interest of the community regarding the human advancement and social integration of citizens by conducting the business activity indicated in Art. 4 below, and aimed at providing social and professional integration of disadvantaged persons in accordance with Art. 1 letter B and Art. 4 of law 381/1991. [...]

Twenty years later, managers in Verdecura continued to describe work insertion programs as a means of social integration and valuing of the person (*valorizzare la persona*), though as will be seen below, this valuation is frequently linked to market value, thus embedding dominant capitalist conceptions of worth.

Verdecura's HR manager Serena described it this way: 'For years, the social cooperative has had a high number of disadvantaged people within it, surpassing the levels [of 30%] required by law. And it allows them, really, to be a part of, integrated into the cooperative, to be valued and to rediscover what is the dignity of being people, of

being workers in this company.’ Mattia proudly told us about the transformational property of social cooperatives on the first visit. As he described it, the question they had faced was ‘how to take a person with a problem and change them from a social cost into a resource?’ He quoted research from 2011 in Tuscany that showed each disadvantaged person had an average annual cost higher than the average salary. In Verdecura, the twenty-odd disadvantaged people were not only generating savings for the community by being employed, but also earning a salary, paying taxes and spending locally. They have been converted from the recipients of care into neoliberal consumer citizens, reflecting the rationality of the market and the power of the individual. While this model emerged to fill a gap left by the retreating welfare state, this method of providing for oneself and others through cooperative production is itself at risk when the wider economy slows, and protecting the employment interest of members can come at the expense of exploitative relations with others.

## 5.2 Mutual exchange in (the) crisis

Although cooperatives had been able to grow initially while the rest of the economy was shrinking, and the social cooperative sector was performing especially well (ACI 2012: 1), the situation was not certain to continue with *la crisi* coming to be seen as the new normal, rather than a momentary crisis. A trend among cooperatives towards market consolidation through the purchase of competitors and mergers was continuing in an attempt to protect market share and increase efficiencies. The cooperative umbrella organizations Legacoop and Confcooperative, as well as smaller local organisations were busily promoting the cooperative model, for example encouraging cooperative start-ups for young people to create their own jobs in the face of an uncertain future and high

levels of unemployment in the present. The advertisement below is just one of many such start-up events organized by cooperative associations and young entrepreneurs in the area.



Figure 11. A start-up workshop for teenagers, organized by charities and cooperatives that was advertised on Facebook in summer 2014.

Worker cooperatives were in a unique position in this crisis situation thanks to the relationship of mutual exchange that exists between members and their cooperative, and the first of the ICA cooperative principles, known in Italy as the open-door (*porta aperta*) principle, which states that cooperative membership should be freely open to anyone who accepts the responsibilities of membership. This principle was developed initially in the context of consumer cooperatives and is clearly problematic for a group of workers who must share a limited amount of work (Battilani 2013, personal communication). There is a clear recognition of the difficulty of balancing employee levels with market demand,

especially when the economy is not growing. As the president of a large cooperative near Bologna told me:

It is easier to be good to people when things go well. You can be generous, honest, courageous even. But when things become difficult and you have no money, you need to eliminate people, cut costs. This year cooperatives will have to face this problem. What will happen? No one knows.

Being able to navigate the crisis without letting go of any members was a source of pride for managers in many of the cooperatives whom I met, though this will not always be possible and was also not without its own negative consequences as will be discussed later. Again, the same president described the dilemma they faced during difficult times:

If you have difficulty firing people, you need to know this when hiring. The problem is when you are different in theory, but then you have to act the same [as a for profit company]. You have to be prepared at the beginning. For profit companies have no pity for anyone, but the rules are clear from the beginning. Cooperatives must be very careful.

This is because of the special relationship of mutual exchange that exists between the cooperative and its members. In a worker cooperative, mutual exchange is defined as the provision of work to members.<sup>48</sup>

Among many of the managers I encountered across worker cooperatives, the provision of work to members was considered to be of the highest value. This view came out very clearly in various meetings I had with the human resources manager and president of CAMST, a very large and nationally successful worker cooperative based in Bologna, as the following discussion shows:

HR manager: With a person there is a dual relationship – one as employee and one as member – complementary roles, but not necessarily. They are

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<sup>48</sup> The Italian Civil code (art. 2512) which explains the definition of a cooperative of ‘prevalent mutuality’ which grants certain fiscal benefits and duties, specifies this by referring to the type of ‘mutual exchange’: performing their service primarily for members, *providing work primarily for members*, or relying mainly on the contributions of members.

parallel. Therefore, the values aspect, um... clearly the company's writings and publications make its values explicit and then there are people who adhere to these, more or less with conviction. However, in fact, the object, the mutualistic exchange comes through the provision of work (*la prestazione del lavoro*). That is, one is a member, inasmuch as he works in the company. [...] the first point of the mission, as you've read, is to defend work positions, and this of course has repercussions in the strategy of the company, especially from 2008 until today during the crisis. Luckily there haven't been – there have been reductions of hours in certain areas, because we respond to the client's requests of preparing food from one day to the next, and that agency could close, and then obviously, they no longer need the services – but we've carried through this situation trying to send workers to other areas. This is a bit of the difference. It has been very difficult, if an agency closes then of course there is less demand for the food.

President: The loyalty, our mission, which anyway is the social pact we have with our workers, is the work. That is, in article one of our mission we have written: 'Defend, develop the employment of our members. Improve their professional qualifications, and their social and work conditions, maintaining respect for their health, of their moral integrity, of their civil and cultural aspirations, and of their participation in the cooperative enterprise.'

Indeed, CAMST developed various programs to help the workers through this time of crisis. They made an attempt to maintain employment levels and reach out, as much as they felt possible, to financially help those employees who had additional needs to care for children or other dependent relatives. We discussed together how they could best serve the needs of employees with reduced hours or perhaps a partner who had lost his or her job. However, unsurprisingly at a time of wider economic crisis, as the HR manager mentioned to me, there would be many more employees falling into this category of needing assistance than they would actually be able to help.<sup>49</sup>

The mission to protect members' livelihoods also leads to the creation of precarious work for the more vulnerable workers, including young people and those on

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<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, when I first met Mattia, the director of Verdecure, he told me that he did not think that CAMST was really a cooperative. For him, its cooperative aspect was in name only. With national reach and such grand dimensions it was more of a corporation than a cooperative in his personal view. He saw it as being only a formal structure, comparing it to the Coop supermarket, a national consumer cooperative, where having a membership card is the end of a 'mutual relationship' in his words. However, as we have seen in the previous chapter, a democratic work environment is not dependant on size alone.

state-sanctioned internships and work placement programs. This is because cooperatives like Verdecura use short-term contracts and voluntary labour in order to meet the demands of the market, while remaining flexible enough to protect the jobs of cooperative members. The cooperative appeared to rely on lower paid temporary labour and the ‘free’ labour provided by the municipality through both work placements and community service, as they also made use of voluntary administrative and managerial work. The use of temporary labour leads to a similar condition of alienated exchange that occurs in a typical company between workers and capitalists.<sup>50</sup> In a worker cooperative, the employee-members are also joint owners of the business, which immediately creates a hierarchical division between employees and employee-members, where the group of owners has a monopoly on the surplus value generated and also the decision-making power. Previous research has shown, however, that alienation is not only a relationship of ownership, but also of control over decision-making and management (Mollona 2009; Bryer 2012).

At Verdecura’s annual assembly the president noted that they have higher levels of permanent contracts than the CISV consortium overall – which is also very high, he added – concluding that ‘We are not providing precarious work’. Although this may be true in relative terms, his very confident assertion surprised me based on what I had observed in the cooperative. There was the young intern Sara, for example, who was nearing the end a six-month internship. I looked on as she worked with Mattia to apply for funding for an innovative project scheme so that she could extend her contract by another six months. She had just graduated from university and I later learned that she

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<sup>50</sup> This distinction is especially clear in large cooperatives such as the national conglomerate Manutencoop, which has many subsidiary companies (and hence non-member employees) that are managed by a small group of owners.

was only able to afford her portion of the rent in a shared apartment with the help of her parents who subsidised the remaining costs that could not be covered by the monthly stipend. Others who were not on permanent contracts worried as the dates of expiry neared, not always knowing until after the date had passed that it would be renewed. Although the cooperative was providing stable employment for many, it was also creating precarious work for others in order to safeguard the work of its members. The implications of this for the workers is a theme that I will return to in the following chapter on the desires for relations based on care from the cooperative management. Now, I turn to the valuation of labour in this complex and uncertain context.

### 5.3 Valuing different types of work

When Verdecura was founded in the early 1990s, they practiced a more radical kind of work equality with all of the members receiving equal pay, directly linking value and values. All work was considered equal and assigned the same level of monetary value. By the early 2010s, however, a differential pay scale had been introduced. This was just one aspect of the shift toward running the cooperative in a ‘more entrepreneurial’ fashion. Other changes included the addition of the financial director role held by Mattia and a new managerial level focused on production. Both of these new roles concentrated specifically on sales and the financial management of the cooperative and were at the high end of the newly introduced wage scales. Verdecura was not unique in making changes to the wage levels as part of an effort to become financially successful. Joel Schoening’s research on a US cooperative describes a similar situation whereby equal wages had been a symbol of equality, but were ‘over-ridden by pressures from the labour market’ (2006: 310). Schoening describes these changes – much as such decisions were

described at Verdecura – as being based on necessity. ‘[T]he cooperative’s hand has been forced in this decision’ he concludes (ibid.: 311). The need for higher wages for some was linked to the ability to attract people with skills for administrative and more creative roles (ibid.).

As opposed to expressing the value of equality directly via equal wages, as had been the case in the past, there were now ten salary bands with different monetary values accordingly for different types of labour, reflecting a ‘market-based’ valuation system and a clear divide between directive and manual work (see Table 1.).

Responsibility	Salary Band
President	10
Area Production Manager	8-9
Manager of Work Placements	7
Sector Manager	5-6
Team Leader	4
Qualified Worker	3
Manual Worker	2
Auxiliary Worker	1

Table 1. Salary Bands at Verdecura.

The difference between the lowest salary and the highest was only a factor of about two at Verdecura, maintaining ‘relative’ equality as in Schoening’s case (ibid.). However, the pay was lower still for those on temporary internships or the *borsa lavoro* work placements that were paid directly by the municipality. Those at the bottom of the pay scales continued to be subsidized by the municipality through housing benefits, by family or local charities, or the accrual of debts in some cases. The monetary value of work was based neither on the concept of equality nor on a ‘subsistence wage’, but rather a market-

based valuation of what the business could tolerate to remain solvent, as well as considerations of wages in other cooperatives in the area, the ‘market’ rate. Similarly, in the anti-mafia cooperative Rakopoulos researched, hierarchical principles of labour were also considered necessary to ensure the distribution of their products (2014: 121). While the peasants were being paid more than when production was under mafia control, and considered their jobs to be valid, they were also not sufficient as a stand-alone livelihood (ibid.: 117, 121). This again, privileges the value of specialized knowledge for management and marketing.

Mattia explained to me that although everyone was equal in their *right to work*, one could not say that each person brought the same value to the cooperative. Each person’s labour was valued with respect to the skills or labour that they could contribute. In the context of the post-socialist transition in Poland, Elizabeth Dunn described a similar shift in perception from the socialist idea of ‘equality of condition’ to a system that naturalises inequality based on some having ‘more education, experience, merit’ than others (quoting a personnel manager, Dunn 2004: 114). In this kind of situation, the value of work apparently comes from the salary (ibid.: 159). This association of the salary with the value of one’s work was felt particularly by those who were negatively impacted by the change, not necessarily in terms of lower pay, but because they were now considered to be worth less than those who began to receive more. When I asked Roberta about the cooperative value of equality, she spontaneously called my attention to this shift:

No, it doesn’t exist. Equality and justice, that is another disappointment. At the beginning, all were at the same level, even Nicola [the president], at the 6th level. He decided that. Well, he thought of it and then we all got together and decided together. We decided all together because we were few. And then slowly, slowly, when Mattia and Giada came and things like that... now he’s at the 10th, Mattia 9th and Giada 8th, Serena at 7th and Marco... he went on his own to talk to Nicola and he also got the 7th level, which Nicola later justified saying that he was also a manager. Therefore, us – me and Alessio – we remained the two deficient ones on the 6th level. [She laughs

ironically.] Me and Alessio, you understand? Alessio, who is the vice president!

Whereas Roberta had described the wage decisions as being done together in the past, she now distanced herself from the organization and the decision on salary bands, saying, 'Based on the rules, the cooperative decides what you earn and whether to give you a reward.' Meanwhile, those such as Mattia who actually made the salary decisions did so with reference to the market. However, using the market to explain wage differences obscures some of the social and moral judgements about which work is 'worth' more.

People in different categories and skill sets were valued differently and expected to do different kinds of work. David told me once that he sometimes felt that the cooperative was not taking advantage of his skills. He was doing boring, mindless work that someone with no degree, or 'even on a *borsa lavoro*' could do. Although this may not seem to be a particularly 'cooperative' view, it brings out quite vividly the issue of how work is valued and what kind of work is appropriate for whom. In David's evaluation – and he was not unique in making such statements – work that was appropriate for those doing a *borsa lavoro* was 'boring, manual'. In another similar evaluation, the president was chastised behind his back for spending time fixing a broken vacuum cleaner, work 'that a *borsa lavoro* could do'. Work that was appropriate for women was typically either administrative work, done by members, interns and volunteers, or cleaning, which was done by the 'free' female voluntary public service or *borsa lavoro* interns. Roberta was recognised as being unique and noted herself that she did 'man's work'. As someone with a degree and experience in marketing research I found that my time was deemed worthy of strategic issues, such as planning communication and marketing campaigns. When Giada asked me to help her with the marketing for Luminare, she pointed out to me that she wanted to 'value me' and utilise

my skills. On another occasion when Lisa asked to help with some rather mindless filing work she apologised to me many times for it being ‘so boring’. Although the cooperative hoped to create social inclusion through the work provided, the relative evaluations of different employees also helped to further a separate and hierarchical relationship of some over others.

The following section takes into account the motivations for working including non-financial incentives. In addition to the monetary hierarchy described above, I argue that there is also an important ideological division between managers and other workers. Similar to what Rakopoulos (2015) discovered in the anti-mafia social cooperatives in Sicily, the administrators and managers generally identified with the cooperative ideology, while other workers were more likely to cite personal or monetary reasons for choosing the cooperative work. There are, of course, a multiplicity of ways to value work, perhaps as many as there are individuals, but below I distil these into three large groups that represent a continuum of choice ranging from necessary work, to ‘just’ work, to specifically chosen work. While work based on immediate need offers the least monetary value, it seen to offer the potential for personal growth and future work. Alternatively, chosen work offers moral satisfaction and paradoxically is linked to both the highest paid managerial roles and to unpaid volunteer labour. This shows how the value of labour is mediated by conceptions of choice and necessity.

### *5.3.1 Chosen work*

Personal narratives regarding the perceptions of choice varied widely among those working at Verdecura. In a highly competitive job market and a city impacted by international shifts in industry and the closure of some traditional productive sectors, there were limited options available to many of the employees, and seemingly no choice

whatsoever for the *borsa lavoro* work placement labour or those doing community service. At the administrative and managerial level of the cooperative, though, many of the members and employees speak about specifically choosing cooperative work. Based on observations and discussions at Verdecura and interviews with managers in various other cooperatives, it was apparent that this decision was not based on a desire for improved work-life balance, nor was it a financially motivated choice. High levels of personal responsibility meant that vacations were not always possible and the fact that wage levels were lower than similar jobs in other industries was a frequent refrain. Instead, many managers described a sense of personal satisfaction linked to idealistic yearning that motivated them to work in a cooperative environment.<sup>51</sup>

One of the first co-operators I met was the head of research and development for a medium sized communications cooperative called Voli Group in Bologna. He had started his career working for a smaller cooperative that eventually merged with another to become Voli Group, before working abroad at IBM for a number of years. Although the salary was substantial and he felt that he had learned a lot from the experience, he described the time as ‘working for the enemy’. Working in a cooperative, although stressful at times, gave him greater satisfaction. ‘We’re not rich here,’ he told me, ‘so you need to enjoy it. Maybe it’s not for everyone, but there is an enjoyable atmosphere.’ One driver of personal satisfaction was his leadership role. He spoke energetically about his position within the cooperative as he looked for synergies and development opportunities.

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<sup>51</sup> It must also be noted, of course, that not all managers have specifically, or idealistically, chosen cooperative work. As an example, one of the professors I met was asked to give a lecture to the management group of a cooperative to explain what it means to be a cooperative and to review the values and principles of the International Cooperative Alliance. She told me that this should not be surprising because an enterprise must be able to compete in the market place, meaning that they need managers with a formal education who are capable in their jobs. Given that cooperative enterprises are no longer represented in formal business education texts in Italy, it becomes necessary for the umbrella groups to provide training about cooperative values themselves.

He saw himself as an active player in helping to define future trends in technology and communication with new generations. This focus on innovation, he believed, was central to guaranteeing jobs for workers, as indeed, ‘the main point is to make jobs for employees (in the correct way)’. Doing business ‘well’ was another reason for the satisfaction he felt.

Both the HR manager of Verdecura, Serena (band 7), and the director, Mattia (band 9), had similar experiences as Piero, working in for-profit business then choosing to work for a cooperative. Their stories express an even stronger sentiment of not just feeling dissatisfied by the atmosphere, but being disappointed by the way profit motivated the transactions of their previous work. Serena had worked at a job centre where her role was to match applicants with available job opportunities. She described it to me as being like a market for people. It was a physical embodiment of the ethereal labour market in which our alienated labour circulates as a ‘fictitious commodity’, to borrow Polanyi’s terminology. This feeling was what prompted her to seek out work in a social cooperative. In an interview for the annual ‘social balance sheet’ meeting of the cooperative and the consortium, a common practice among cooperatives that seeks to recognise and value social achievements as a counterpart to the standard financial balance sheet used in accounting, she described her experience of working there:

Working and cooperating for me is a life choice. It is what I have always wanted to do and I believe what I will always do. It is collaborating every day with humour, passion and commitment to make the community better, to value every single person, both the personal and professional sides. Cooperating is to feel part of a network, of a large family, and to be at the centre of this family every day to make it stronger and more unified.

I asked her whether this truly reflected her feelings. Would she have said the same if talking to friends outside of the consortium? ‘In terms of ideals, yes,’ she told me, though she added that she would have said more about the tiredness that comes with significant

responsibility and long hours. She may have also exaggerated her commitment to the cooperative model. Although she was enthusiastic and spoke positively about her work, she eventually decided to leave the cooperative (for personal reasons) and started a wellness business of her own shortly after I returned from the field, maintaining the theme of doing ‘good’ business, but in a different form.

Prior to joining Verdecura, Mattia had worked as an entrepreneur, exporting Italian products. Although he had been successful financially, he eventually lost motivation for the work because, as he described to me one day, he felt that he was taking advantage of people by charging relatively high prices compared to the domestic Italian market. Afterwards, when he returned to Italy he had worked with an NGO for just over a year before joining Verdecura as the financial director. After about six years, he still felt motivated, he told me, smiling. Although he was not earning as much as he had previously and he worked long hours – up to sixty hours per week – and rarely took holidays, he was satisfied. His wife, he joked, wanted to know what was wrong with him, but he was happy. ‘It’s what makes me get out of bed,’ he enthused. He was proud to have turned around the cooperative’s finances and although his focus was on the finances, this was not the goal, but a necessity to reach a social goal, that is, their mission of providing work. He told me that he gained satisfaction watching people grow and develop in the cooperative. Still, he measured the worth of his contribution largely in monetary terms, reflecting his educational background in economics. ‘What I do is worth more than the money that I make,’ he told me. He did not, however, share this opinion with others in the cooperative, preferring to set a ‘good example’ by working hard and encouraging others to be proactive in their roles.

The two youngest people working in the office had in turn studied political science and social economy and they had also specifically chosen cooperative work.

David, for example, had come to Bologna from abroad, seeking to experience the famous cooperative economy first hand. He eventually found a position at Verdecura, first through an unpaid internship and then a one-year contract. Sara had studied social economy at the University of Bologna and began work at Verdecura through a six-month internship that contributed to her studies, then extended her contract for an additional year thanks to funding from a European social enterprise grant. Their willingness to work for free or for little showed their commitment and personal interest in cooperatives, but also highlighted the importance attached to work experience as an opportunity to develop skills that would increase one's employability and earning potential.

Volunteers were another important category of 'workers' in the cooperative. Although their labour was unpaid, it was crucial for the running of the cooperative. It also served as the prime exemplar of choosing work for personal, rather than financial reasons. Like Muehlebach's (2012) volunteer care-workers in Lombardy, volunteering signalled genuine interest, not tainted by a desire for money. When I left Verdecura for the last time, the director thanked me and said that it had been an inspiration for him and for others to see me coming in every day to work without being paid. The communications officer for Luminare – considered a crucial role because it was a new venture – was also a volunteer. She became very ill during the year, but continued working because she wanted to maintain a sense of normalcy and said that she gained personal satisfaction from her work there. As argued by Barbara Dilly (2012: 308), volunteering has non-financial benefits including both 'moral and personal rewards', as well as the symbolic value of approval or prestige. In a similar way, many of those who held managerial and administrative positions within the cooperative noted that they could choose to work elsewhere for more money, thus their willingness to forgo additional pay

was also a signifier for their genuine desire to do this work, thus heightening the moral and symbolic value of their actions.

### 5.3.2 *'Just' work*

For some, however, work was viewed rather pragmatically, and it was also *expected* that certain people within a cooperative would have a more ideological view than others. While managers often explained their inspiration to work with regard to cooperative ideology and personal or moral rewards, they often doubted that the other workers would feel the same. Similarly, although representatives from Legacoop, academics and cooperative managers often promoted the values of cooperative business, and sometimes referenced these as a reason for choosing to work in cooperatives, this view was not always, or even often, shared by other workers. Indeed, for many of those working in the productive roles, work at Verdecura was simply that. It was not a specific life choice, or a rejection of other kinds of work. This mirrors Rakopoulos's findings that workers in the anti-mafia cooperative were motivated more by the pay increase that corresponded with 'legality' than with the concept as an ethical ideal that motivated the administrators (2014).

Piero, for example, said that many of the workers at Voli Group may not share the cooperative mentality, but rather feel like they are 'just working a job, getting paid' and that the governance of the company does matter. Furthermore, he highlighted the possible career aspirations of some of the employees, beyond their cooperative work. There was the DJ who may wish to be famous rather than working for a small cooperative, or the librarian who actually wishes to be a published author. He doubted whether an awareness of the cooperative model was shared with the base: 'If you're a paid employee, what difference does it make? Does the governance matter?' he questioned. A similar view was

held by one of his colleagues who managed one of the four ‘pillars’ or service areas within the cooperative. She too pointed to democratic management as the primary point of cooperative difference, but she felt that the value of participation may not be shared by all of the employees. This view was also shared by some of the young leaders I met attending the Legacoop *Generazioni* networking events. Elisa, for example, whom I mentioned in Chapter 3, told me that all the other young cooperative members did manual work on the line, and ‘are not interested’ in such events.

The abundance of cooperatives in the Emilia Romagna region means that working in a cooperative can happen by chance. A former Manutencoop worker in Bologna explained this to me when I asked him, ‘Why might a person *want* to work in a cooperative?’ He replied simply, ‘Because it is a job like others.’ He explained that the profusion of cooperatives in the region makes it likely that one will work in one, not necessarily by choice. In fact, many people I spoke to from various cooperatives and across different levels told me they had ended up working in cooperatives serendipitously. This was true from the cooperative studies centre librarian in Bologna to the president of a large cooperatively-run consumer goods manufacturer. In one telling conversation, when I pressed some of the Verdecura members who work in productive roles about the importance of cooperative values, they told me it wasn’t important to them at all. In their eyes working there was just a job – as promised by the cooperative’s mission. Their values came from their families or from the Church, they explained, not from the cooperative.

As suggested by Piero above, many workers at Verdecura identified more with their role than their place of work. Marco, for example, identified primarily with his training as a social worker, which he had done in various public agencies before joining the cooperative. This role and the kind of work that he did to help others was more

important to him than the ideology of the cooperative, which, as we saw earlier in Chapter 4, he had come to question in practice. Likewise, both Giovanni and Michele had come from a logistics background, as delivery drivers for a private company in a different industry. They were both drivers at Verdecura and discussions around employment focused on this continuity in their roles. That it was in a cooperative was coincidental, though as will be seen in the following chapter it did inspire certain expectations from the management.

### *5.3.3 Necessary work*

In addition to employing disadvantaged people directly and including them as members, Verdecura and other similar social cooperatives provided work placements called *borsa lavoro* for people referred to them by the municipality through local agencies and social workers. The *borsa lavoro* program is a partnership between the municipality, which provides support through social workers and also pays the necessary insurance and stipend, and the cooperative, which provides the work experience and any necessary equipment and clothing. Such ‘opportunities’, as they were called, typically lasted one to two months and could be extended to six months or one year at the maximum. These programs are designed to provide work experience and skills and they are also a source of income for the people who participate. The *borsa lavoro* interns work twenty hours per week and at the time of research were paid €300 each month by the local municipality. At Verdecura they could incorporate about ten *borsa lavoro* workers at one time and the workload required to manage the relationships with these temporary workers, the municipality and various social workers was enough to warrant a fulltime staff member for work placements. However, by the time that I arrived the previous HR manager had changed roles and Serena, who had focused only on work placements was now in charge

of this, as well as being the HR manager and responsible for other aspects of administration and management. As an outsider who was not fully aware of the other types of value ascribed to work, this work placement scheme seemed to me like a clear example of exploitation. I wondered how a cooperative that is designed to provide gainful employment could take advantage of people in such a way, using them as a source of free labour while they are being paid the equivalent of €3.50 per hour by the municipality. The reality is, of course, far more complicated than my initial reactive view.

I met Samir, who was in the middle of a three-month *borsa lavoro* work placement at Verdecura that was sponsored by the local municipality, on my first full day in the office. He was helping with a pilot project for recycling coffee grounds. His main task was to collect the used coffee grounds from local bars, clean them by removing any other refuse such as sugar packets, serviettes and food waste, then pasteurize the grounds in preparation for ‘upcycling’ them into mushroom-growing kits. Despite the manual and repetitive nature of the job, he told me that he enjoyed it and he was glad to be working. When I discovered how little he was being paid by the municipality I asked him how he could manage on €300 per month with a wife and two small children. He didn’t know, he told me. In fact, his rent alone was €400 per month. One day just before his work placement was over he told me that he was at risk of being evicted from his apartment because he had not paid rent over the last months. Money was so tight he had asked another employee for a €20 loan (which he had not been able to repay by the time I left the field many months later).<sup>52</sup> He was trying to quit smoking because he felt terrible

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<sup>52</sup> It was common knowledge that the stipends were low and many of those on *borsa lavoro* work placements were struggling to stretch their stipends to cover monthly expenses. Still, or maybe because of the seemingly bottomless need, such personal loans were discouraged by Mattia. This represents an interesting shift from the mentality of his father, who had personally housed some of the workers in the

taking money away from his small daughters in order to buy the cigarettes. One day I brought in a packet of nicotine gum for him, hoping to contribute in some small way, and he did apparently reduce his consumption, but not quit entirely. ‘It’s the stress,’ he told me.

As an outsider judging the situation from my own perspective and personal expectations of fair remuneration, Samir seemed to be exploited. And yet, when his *borsa lavoro* agreement expired he was eager to have it renewed. Was he in a situation where being exploited in this way is better than nothing, I wondered to myself? He would appear in the office on a weekly basis to check progress on discussions between Verdecura and the municipality and to ask if there was any other work available. He told me that he was making other job applications, but it was very difficult to find anything. Even into the summer, more than six months after his original work placement ended, he would occasionally visit or call. One day in July Samir came for a meeting with Serena. She told him that unfortunately they were not hiring and there was nothing she could do. She did not have the same tools as a social worker to offer him a work placement. While he was in the office she offered him a coffee and David offered some sweets. Samir stayed for a while after the meeting ended, sitting with David. They showed each other pictures on their phones, David of his coffee recycling project and Samir of his children. When he left, he told David that it was a pleasure to stay for a while and he wished us all well. As the door shut, David turned to Serena and both let out a sigh. Although there was nothing more they could offer and the formal work relationship was over, there was still a personal connection. The complexity and human side of the exchange was evident.

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proto-social cooperative he had started, to his son’s view that each individual – in conjunction with state support – should be independent.

The desire to work was tied, not only to financial need, but also to the belief that work is, in itself, good. When Samir, for example, told me that he was happy to be working, he highlighted the work itself rather than the stipend that it earned him. On visits to the municipality offices with Serena I met others in the process of applying for a *borsa lavoro* placement; there were more people hoping to join the program than there were spaces available. In one of those exchanges we met a mother with her young daughter, about three years old. The woman appeared nervous. She held her daughter on her lap, fussing with her hair in quick movements. Serena and I sat next to her, and the social worker sat facing us, her back to a window that overlooked a side street in the city centre. The woman, clutching her daughter, nodded and smiled as the social worker described the opportunity available at Verdecura. ‘I hope to be good, to succeed,’ she replied, indicating her willingness to work. As they agreed on the terms, the woman turned to her small daughter saying, ‘Did you hear? Mama is going to work. You will go to school...’ she trailed off imagining out loud their future, projecting the ‘correct’ roles for a good mother and daughter.

According to the HR manager, Verdecura takes very good care of the people on work placements and internships, ‘caring for them 100%’. Still, I wondered whether the steady stream of free labour provided by the municipality could dis-incentivise the creation of jobs, the apparent mission of the cooperative. It is intended to be a path towards employment, though in the time that I observed the cooperative I saw only one person hired at the end of a *borsa lavoro* period and this was a one-off single month contract. Administrators and managers told me that this was because there were no jobs, because of the crisis and tough competition in the market, yet I watched as they eventually offered a job to a relative of one of the cooperative’s members, and was surprised when they announced in the annual assembly that they had made a surplus of

over fifty thousand euros in the previous year. I wondered if the structural arrangements and lack of choice for some were leading to exploitation, even if it was unintentional.

## 5.4 (Self-)exploitation?

The concept of self-exploitation within cooperatives captures the apparent dominance of systemic rationalities over worker control within the cooperative, as mentioned above. This notion has been used by critics and cooperative workers themselves to describe cases where cooperatives reduce wages (Mellor et al. 1988: 177; Müller 1991: 39, 80; Bryer 2010: 41). While I did not hear this term being used in Verdecura, it seemed at times that free labour was being exploited by the cooperative management in place of creating paid positions. To what extent is it this concept useful to understand the practicalities of valuing labour? Can a cooperative include workers in the labour market without exploiting them?

First, it is useful to define the exploitation term more clearly. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2017) provides three definitions of exploitation in its primary use, all relating to extracting value or otherwise utilizing something or someone:

- a. The action of extracting or harvesting natural resources from a place; the action of deriving value from a natural resource by harvesting.
- b. The action or fact of deriving benefit from something by making full or good use of it; an instance of this.
- c. The action or fact of taking advantage of something or someone in an unfair or unethical manner; utilization of something for one's own ends. Also: an instance of this.

The most relevant point here is the third one, which is dependent on 'unfair' or 'unethical' use. This is a subjective definition based on shared expectations of what is right, leaving room for cultural hegemony and false consciousness. For Marx,

exploitation was not subjective but instead exists as a direct result of the production of surplus value, with ‘the real degree of exploitation’ represented by the ‘ratio between paid and unpaid labour’ (1973: 58). Being paid a wage as a worker necessarily implies some amount of unpaid labour (1990: 769), and thus exploitation. Cooperatives can thus be viewed as reproducing the capitalist mode of production without a capitalist as such (Hedlund 1992: 8). Of course, extractive labour relations are not unique to the capitalist system. Eric Wolf, for example, identified three types of extractive labour: kinship, tribute and capitalism (Durrenberger 2012: 129). Studying the extractive labour in a tribute system, Firth contends, ‘The question of possible exploitation is bound up with that of freedom of choice by the parties concerned’ (1979: 198). Although the Tikopia chiefs were appropriating surplus value, there was a process of selection and these leaders were seen to offer goods and services in return (ibid.: 196-7). In Marx’s ideal of a communist system, labour would be ‘free’ and ‘social’ and used to ‘meet the needs of the community’ (Spencer 2014: 33). While the cooperatives arrange labour with social goals and community needs in mind, to what extent is it really free, chosen, and free of exploitation?

According to one young man I met, cooperatives are just as bad, if not worse, than regular businesses. Stefano, who worked at Manutencoop for three years while he was studying international relations at the University of Bologna, was now a very active youth member of the *Lotta Comunista*, one of the small communist parties that remained active after the Italian Communist Party (PCI) was rebranded as the Democratic Party (PD) after the Cold War. Stefano’s views on exploitation reflected those of Marx, and his analysis of the cooperative as a business is particularly interesting given his own personal experience in the cooperative world:

Exploitation lies in the fact that capitalism, the capitalists, make men work for free for many hours. Because you need few hours of work to produce

what will then be your income. Say in a month one week of your work is paid and the other three weeks are free. And this is the insight of Marx. The problem is that the majority of people in capitalism are working for others - they are exploited.

‘And cooperatives?’ I asked him:

The idea is that there is no capitalist, that the company is theirs... However after, that is... For example, I also worked in a cooperative, Manutencoop. Because I worked in TV, at Rai, but I wasn’t employed by Rai. I was hired by Manutencoop. Why does it work like this? Because a part of the workers are members of the cooperative. Another, bigger, part are employees. However, the cooperative inside has a management - and this management at the end comes from a single person. It was he who decided, the one who had founded it. [...]In big coops, with many members, the management is no longer of the members. The small ones, they have a board like in a public company (*Spa*), for example Coop. Decisions are made by the board, by the managers. At Coop supermarket instead of dividends they give shopping coupons, which are actually less than the dividends would be. They invest the money. Rather than dividing it, they use it for the cooperative. Who decides to invest or not? The same managers. It’s as if the members all say to the managers, do what you like, you’re the ones who manage. These managers are bourgeoisie like the others.

Stefano’s view is that being an ‘owner’ should include rights in addition to the legal category of ownership, and more specifically that one actually has the ability to control the direction of the business and how the surplus generated is used. As seen also in the previous chapter, Stefano believes that the decision-making is restricted to the hands of a few, who are in his eyes part of the bourgeoisie, the capitalist class.

This reading of the situation is in stark contrast to that of another employee, Sylvester, who I met on a bus to Genoa. His height and dark complexion set him apart from the other bus-riders who were mostly native Italians. He was from Nigeria, he told me, and his journey to Italy was neither straightforward nor chosen. He had been tricked by a friend of the family and smuggled to France as part of a band of street musicians, who were then abandoned by their leader after he collected the takings of their performance, promising to return later with food. They waited for four hours, four hours he emphasized to me with his fingers. They were lost and went to the police for help. He

thinks that the older boys were deported - sent home - but the French police told him just to leave the country and sent him away with no money and no food, just a train ticket. He ended up in Italy and again upon arrival went right to the police. He was scared and feeling so alone that he was crying, he said. He motioned again with his hand to show tears pouring down his face. He said that two of the police officers wanted to deport him, but one said he is only a boy and we should help him. A female officer took him in for a few months and took care of him until he moved to Caritas, a Catholic charity, where he lived for a year. 'They give you free room and board and €50 per week,' he told me. He emphasized, though, that he has always worked ever since arriving in Italy. Now he works as a cleaner in the large Italian worker cooperative Manutencoop. He told me that he works very long hours because he cleans in two different locations in different parts of the city, both on the outskirts. On Monday, for example, he would leave for work at 5 am, come home for an hour to eat or rest and then go back out, finally returning home around 10 pm. He had also been playing basketball a couple of nights a week, but was not able to go often because he was too tired. He works six days a week and takes home about €1,200 a month after taxes, significantly more than the €850 a month when he started two years ago. He told me that he works hard and has intelligence. In just two years, he now has a permanent contract and he has hopes to travel the world and maybe visit the United States.

What is most relevant to this discussion is that Sylvester mentioned repeatedly throughout his description of long hours, tiredness and lots of overtime while working as a cleaner at Manutencoop, how lucky he was to have this job. Previously I heard Stefano and others criticise the same cooperative for exploiting workers and relying on low-paid immigrants for manual work. These same people might argue that Sylvester is being exploited by Manutencoop, needing to work overtime and long hours over the course of

the day to make enough money to pay rent in the outskirts of Bologna. A small group of members profit while others work long hours at low wages,<sup>53</sup> and yet Sylvester does not feel exploited, he feels *lucky*.

Shortly before returning to England in early autumn 2014, I posed the following question to some members and other employees at Verdecura: ‘Is it possible to include people in the capitalist market without exploiting them?’ Immediately Lisa, one of the administrators, objected to my implication that the cooperative exploits people: ‘These people have real limitations and they need experience. Value is not just monetary, but there are other aspects, like providing social integration, experience...’ I challenged her, pointing out the typical pattern of work placements for women. In every case I observed they were asked to clean either the office or the garages, not being taught new skills or being carefully mentored. Instead, they were doing a role that was necessary for the cooperative and, rather than creating a paid position, creating a job as described in their mission statement, the cooperative was taking advantage of the free labour from the municipality. I explained that I did not think the cooperative was to blame for this, but that it was part of a larger systemic issue: ‘How can you help someone enter a system that is by nature exploitative without exploiting them?’ I pushed. She mulled this over for a moment, looking upwards to the left then right as she thought and nodded, ‘You have a point.’ While placing ‘blame’ on factors outside of the cooperative’s control, another employee argued that it simply does not make sense to say the cooperative is exploiting

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<sup>53</sup> Manutencoop has a very particular structure, although its large size and combined form of part cooperative and part private enterprise could be seen as indicative of broader shifts in the marketplace with many mergers taking place between cooperatives and the creation of private subsidiary companies. Manutencoop Società Cooperativa is a small cooperative compared to the total employed by the multiple private enterprises that it controls (approximately 18,500), meaning that the ownership and decision-making power is concentrated in the hands of relatively few. [http://www.manutencoopfm.it/eng/investor\\_sintesi-gruppo.asp#simple3](http://www.manutencoopfm.it/eng/investor_sintesi-gruppo.asp#simple3) [Accessed 19 February 2015]

people because no one is profiting from the situation, but rather the cooperative *needs* to use the *borsa lavoro* work placements in order to ‘survive’. He pointed to various external forces that limit the cooperative’s choices: for example, the contracts for waste collection specify the number of workers needed for each route, the municipality defines the terms of the *borsa lavoro* placements, and the banks scrutinize the economic soundness of the cooperative’s business decisions each time they need to take out a business loan. These factors, external to the cooperative, but part of the larger socio-economic system in which it operates, were often granted more agency in such decisions than the members or even managers of the cooperative.

Another employee, Michele, who worked closely with many of the *borsa lavoro* participants in the waste sector, highlighted the non-monetary benefits for the work placement participants. Unlike a charitable gift that seems to imply a lack of accountability for both giver and receiver, this system creates a two-way relationship and also provides the workers with experience and self-actualisation, which he considers to be a resource in its own right:

Ryan: How do you see the work placement here? For example, the people who do *borsa lavoro*, are they used in the correct way, the right way?

Michele: Okay, in my view, yes. Initially, that is, however [he pauses on this word], the real project of a *borsa lavoro*, yes. You get used to working. You get used to it in the sense that you need to consider the journey of these people. What is it? Some are those who had drug problems and they come out, some who have monetary, economic problems. It is a way to give a hand, to help these people here on the part of the municipality. And it is also convenient for us from a certain point of view.

However, let’s say that in my view, it’s a help, a small help that is given. Let’s say that there is help on the part of the municipality and they bring them to the door. They used to give them only money. That is, I have a need, they give me money. And you didn’t do anything. However, in this way here, let’s say that they help you, but also you help with your work, with these things. And this could be a good argument. It’s not wrong as an argument. Because otherwise, the other argument is like how it used to happen, how it often happens, that the rich give money, but they don’t care about you. They don’t involve you. They give you 500,000 lire, €500 and you can do what you want, who cares. While in this way here the people, maybe, are a little more... they are followed a little more, they take more interest in the people.

This is both through us and various social workers in the municipality. However, afterwards they are also included in this period of work, which many times is the other face, the other aspect of the, let's say, the care of the person, they take care of their problems, also because their problems come from their situation, either from an experience with drugs, or because they didn't work. It's okay, if just for that.

Perhaps for those who also have a family there is this need to have a salary, to be able to maintain them, which with a *borsa lavoro* isn't possible.

Ryan: Yes, it's difficult. I've seen many people who have come into the office to ask if they can have a real contract after.

Michele: Yes, yes. Also because – I don't know the figure now – but I don't think it's more than 300 euros. With that figure there, it's impossible.

Ryan: Yes. I agree it's a good idea, but it isn't a salary you can live on.

Michele: In my view, for someone who has no resources, who doesn't have any other resources, like a vagabond, it's also a resource for self-actualisation.

While recognising that the *borsa lavoro* labour is convenient for the cooperative, Michele's view focuses primarily on the positive aspects for the worker: training, care and self-actualisation, despite noting that the salary provided is not a living wage.

Roberta also talked about the importance of the non-monetary benefits of the work, both for *borsa lavoro* work placements and in her own role as a member. She complained to me about how the cooperative had changed over the years, saying that she no longer feels like a member but like a normal employee working for a wage, sometimes even feeling used by the cooperative. She linked this to a decline in the attention paid to developing social relationships within the cooperative and also what she described as 'fake democracy' as mentioned in the previous chapter. Like both Lisa and Michele, she thought that the *borsa lavoro* provided valuable work experience, but she believed that the amount of training had decreased over time. I also pointed out to her that many of the women who do voluntary work and internships are doing work that could be a paid job for someone else, for example a cleaner. 'It became this way, exploited,' she agreed. This suggests that a fair exchange for labour includes not only monetary payment, but also expectations of particular non-monetary benefits: experience and training in the case of a

work placement, and among members both decision-making rights, as discussed in the previous chapter, and care for personal relationships, which is the topic of the following chapter.

While the experience of exploitation is *felt*, I would argue, when expectations of a fair exchange for work are not met, does this emic delineation miss the point, leaving people vulnerable to systemic exploitation that is obscured from view by the prevailing ideology? In the cooperative case, the business model of shared ownership does not result in equal pay for all workers or even all members, meaning that some are – to use Marx’s definition based purely on the difference between wage and total surplus value – being exploited. However, exploitation based on this definition is a fact of the capitalist market in which the cooperative operates, so if some degree of exploitation is inevitable, it is more meaningful to ask if the cooperative manages to temper it in some way. For those who were excluded or otherwise unable to access work and hence the market to buy subsistence goods, it is better to be ‘exploited’ (as in utilised) than to be outside completely. The cooperative is not only extracting value or utilizing labour, but also creating value through the opportunity for working. Furthermore, by working together in the cooperative there is the potential to have an impact on the narratives of value. However, the limited options and apparent lack of choice means that the short-term workers and interns are vulnerable to being treated unfairly. Those in positions of greater choice and power, including the cooperative managers, should remain attentive to ensuring that there is a ‘fair’ exchange.

## 5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown that worker cooperatives like Verdecura have a duty to members to protect their livelihoods. The practice of mutual exchange has been strongly defended at the normative level. In each case, jobs were maintained to the greatest extent possible. This provides a key point of difference versus for-profit firms, as cooperatives which see their mission as providing work to members are also willing to remain in the market with little to no profit as long as this mission is maintained. However, there is also a dark side to this commitment to protecting members' jobs, as the cooperatives also use temporary labour and free labour to remain solvent.

There is also an apparent continuum of work types linked to choice (and thus also to relative power), with specifically 'chosen' managerial and administrative positions commanding higher social and monetary value. It is perhaps unsurprising that the cooperative managers are precisely those that value and choose the cooperative model of business. Similarly to the volunteers studied by Muehlebach (2012), higher moral value can also be linked to lesser financial need as voluntary work and also managerial claims to have turned away from more lucrative work both display. Choice itself has also been recognised as a neoliberal value (Mol 2008). For other workers, the cooperative form is not always important, but instead work and identity may be linked more to the specific position or role. At the far end of the continuum is work that is necessary, including work placements and public service work. Such work is often considered boring and has little or no monetary value, but is seen to offer the potential for self-improvement, and expresses the importance of work as a value in its own right. As managers strive to increase the monetary value of cooperative work via the narrative of social and local labour, the distribution of this type of value within the cooperative remains top heavy,

thanks to the broader context and ‘market’ reference, and also due to their position of relative control. Some cooperatives today still do practice more radical forms of wage-based equality, for example Suma Wholefoods in England, a choice that also sends a powerful message about the social value of labour.

While the cooperative may ‘exploit’ the work of non-members based on Marx’s definition of extracting surplus, and the lowest paid workers do have little choice or freedom in their decision, it seems more relevant to consider to what extent this is a ‘fair’ exchange. To this end, the following chapter considers workers’ desires for care, reaching beyond the monetary value that they receive in exchange for their labour.

# 6 DESIRING CARE: LINKING PEOPLE AND PRODUCTION

This chapter builds on the previous chapter that considered how both paid and unpaid work are valued by members of Verdecura and Luminare cooperatives. I argued that different types of work are valued differently, with work that is considered financially necessary often being valued less both monetarily and morally than work that is considered to have been chosen idealistically. Despite the ostensibly pragmatic financial reasons some have for working in the cooperative, the members and other workers continued to have certain expectations of cooperative work beyond the payment of a wage for their labour.<sup>54</sup> By looking at areas of disappointment, this chapter examines in more detail what the members and employees of Verdecura and Luminare cooperative desired in addition to their incomes. This chapter thus considers two related questions: 1) What is desired by cooperative workers beyond an exchange of their time for a wage? and 2) What kind of relationality is produced, or at least desired, in the cooperative context of mutual exchange?

The importance of personal relationships extending beyond those predicated on an alienating market has already been noted through Enrico's tale of the origins of social cooperatives in Chapter 2, the sociality of cooperative business networks in Chapter 3, and the central role of shared needs in framing business decisions in Chapter 4. In this chapter I use the concept of care to explore the often unmet desires for personal

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<sup>54</sup> In this chapter I consider only the paid workers, members and interns, but not volunteer workers. There were only a small number of volunteers and these often represented special cases for short term help.

connection in the cooperative. While in the labour market work is, in theory, separated from the person, caring is both material and affective, and it is more difficult to separate the person from their activity (Comas d'Argemir 1994: 211-2). As opposed to being recipients of state care as they may have been in the past, disadvantaged people working in type B social cooperatives like Verdecura are integrated into the marketplace through work provision, ideally allowing them to become independent citizens. Yet in addition to their wages, Verdecura's workers and members also desire signals of care from the management team, integrating work and personal relations. These desires for care have multiple dimensions: *temporal*, in terms of time together and access to leaders; *emotional*, i.e. being shown consideration; and *physical*, i.e. having the means to do meaningful work. This is not to say that workers in other types of firms do not have such desires, but in the case of these cooperatives, the expectation of such care also appears to be justified by the rhetoric of being a social mode of production.

Although there are moments when these desires for care and the enactment of meaningful relationships are satisfied, moments of disappointment reveal conflicts between concepts of work as an alienated practice and care as potentially relationship-building. Instead of developing personal relationships within the cooperative through caring practices, a neoliberal model of self-care is apparent in the bureaucratic techniques of the management team. I am by no means arguing that the managers of Verdecura and Luminare do not care about the other members and employees, but rather that their practice of bureaucratised care, attending primarily to the 'need' of job provision for members, leaves more to be desired.

To bring these arguments to light, I begin with Roberta's description of nostalgia for a kind of care that she remembers in the past when the cooperative was smaller and less 'entrepreneurial'. I then contextualise this within a historical and theoretical frame,

exploring the diverse models of care provision in Italy. This is followed by a series of ethnographic vignettes and examples that represent moments of disappointment in terms of the three dimensions listed above, i.e. time, consideration, and means. These bring out the desires of members for practices of care that remained unmet within the cooperative. Finally, I consider the bureaucratic mode of self-care employed through personnel evaluations and other emerging forms of self-management. As opposed to the lack of sociality that some of the members claim, I argue that the actions of the cooperative's management serve to embed them in a neoliberal sociality that relies largely on self-care.

## 6.1 Portrait 3: Nostalgia for a more personal cooperative

I first met Roberta when she came for a *coordinamento* meeting in the administrative office. She was someone who had not specifically chosen cooperative work. Before joining Verdecura, she had not worked in other cooperatives, but as a manual worker in orchards and factories. Her parents were poor (*poveri*), she explained, so she had been working casually (*in nero*) as a babysitter from the time she was a teenager. At Verdecura she had done almost every job, from the very manual waste collection and street cleaning services, to eventually becoming a manager (*responsabile*) herself and coordinating the work of others. She was one of the few people who worked in the *capannone*, the garages, which were the centre of the productive work of the cooperative, and who was also a regular presence in the office. Her role as a manager, as well as her female gender, helped her integrate into this administrative space which was also predominantly female. However, Roberta was also something of an outsider, frequently voicing dissatisfaction during the *coordinamento* meetings, when they were not attended by either of the area production managers, Mattia and Giada. Previously a member of the cooperative's board,

Roberta had stepped down because she was frequently a voice of opposition and felt that her criticisms were not taken seriously.

She told stories of how the cooperative had helped some people, but also described how, she felt, the cooperative had let down others, especially in recent years. It was the personal side that she thought was missing now. She remembered the early years of the cooperative with a fond nostalgia. In the beginning, when everyone – even the president, she made clear – was on the same wage level, Verdecura was ‘like a family’, but over the last few years the cooperative had become a business (*impresa*). This, she reckoned, was necessary to remain in the market:

The social cooperative, after a certain point, [can] no longer stay on the market. Because the companies (*aziende*) want to pay little, and so they take advantage of you. And you have to become a business. We have, by force, had to become a business, a social cooperative enterprise. [...] We grew up as a type B, that is, to help others, to teach them a career, and then... this is no longer possible.

In the course of becoming economically competitive, Roberta believed that the cooperative had lost its focus on helping people. She described how this had changed over time from her point of view:

Because there was a stir of something: I care about you, and so I worry about you. I move myself into action for you. There was this kind of thing. Now, it's no longer there. You understand? It's a shame because... [she pauses]

And these people grew. And so, there have been people to whom we really gave a lot and they have given a lot to us. See, this is the problem, you understand? Not a problem in the negative sense, but the problem. That is, an exchange of the things that each one has to give. Then, you can't not do it for lack of time; lack of time, lack of money.

In her recollections of the past, such personal exchanges were based on care. This attention was not motivated or limited by time or money, but mediated by affect. She listed some examples, such as Thomas, who had been very introverted when he started working there but this year surprised everyone by singing karaoke at the summer

barbecue. She explained that he is ‘much better because he is motivated, because we loved him (*voler bene*).’ Another person was overweight and smoked too much, but now was thin and no longer smoked. ‘Why? Because you have to support them (*stare dietro*).’

This kind of care and support, based on the person, was now all but gone in her eyes. ‘There are injustices,’ she said. ‘Because they help you grow, and then they throw you down. Then they help you grow again, then they throw you down.’ She alluded to an inconsistency in behaviour that others also mentioned, at times being treated as a friend, on a personal level, and at others being managed, as if a resource. She described a growing feeling of demotivation, which she saw in many of her colleagues, even the vice president at times:

If everyone is getting demotivated, why aren't they asking themselves questions? If you speak with the office, it's always the fault of the others. If you're demotivated, it's because you have problems at home. If you're demotivated it's because already you were a substance abuser, so you already had problems – or you have mental problems. However, it's not this way.

Roberta was not alone in sharing such feelings. Although she was known for her outspoken dissent, others also complained quietly amongst themselves. Another colleague, who also said that she often felt demotivated, joked one day that we should create a support group for everyone who felt the same way. While Roberta and Lucia both made reference to personal and emotional support, this lack was also embodied in physical objects, the tools of the job, which were sometimes left broken, out of date or unattended. As Roberta explained:

Our cell phones, we have old fashioned obsolete models. I don't really care because I am... I [just] don't care. But, you understand? For them [the management] there is the money because they need to do things. For the others, there isn't any, not even for a computer for Michele. And if you give him a role, let him do it. Come on. It's like you go to do street cleaning and they don't give you a broom. I mean, but you have to do it. I want to say, ‘Come on.’ And so, this is the lack of, of, I am not even sure myself of what.

Although she could not immediately verbalize what this lack represented, I would argue that it is also a lack of what Roberta had described earlier as care, and it is a lack that presented itself in many different situations in the cooperative. Although the same word was not always used to describe this, the examples of disappointment or frustration with the cooperative's management all point to a similar desire for a relationality built on mutuality and affect rather than an impersonal bureaucratic order.

## 6.2 Three models for understanding care

The concept of care has multiple meanings depending on the context, for example healthcare, social care, or child care. These range from various types of formal, institutionalized care, to the more informal sense of care including everyday practices. This dichotomy is often associated with the distinctions public/private and paid/unpaid, with emotional or 'warm' relations more often associated with the informal and unpaid forms of care, and 'cold' care associated with institutions (Thelen 2007: 36; 2015: 499). Analytically, these have also been mapped onto the logics of the gift versus market exchange. However, as both Thelen (2007) and Muehlebach (2012) show, these kinds of dichotomies are not always productive in practice, nor are they clear cut (Stan 2012). In the section below I introduce three models for understanding care within anthropology: as a gift; as self-care; and as a process. I find Thelen's (2015) conception of care as a process to be the most useful methodologically to understand caring and relationality in this context, while the gift and self-care are useful as ideal types representing diverse moral logics. I also provide a brief review of social welfare in Italy to elucidate these various analytical models of care in their historical context, before considering how

practices of care (or in some cases the lack of these processes) reveal a disconnect between the type of care desired and that provided by the cooperative management.

The notion of exchange, in particular gifting, has proved useful in analysing care, particularly institutionalized care, ranging from charitable giving in the United States (Silber 1998; Mazelis 2017) to voluntary caring in Italy (Muehlebach 2012) and healthcare provision in Romania and in Thailand (Stan 2012; Seo 2016). Following Marcel Mauss's (1990) original insight that the gift was mediated by the logic of obligation – the obligation to give, to receive and to reciprocate – the apparently inherent sociality of the gift is often opposed to the alienated quality of market exchange. In the Romanian healthcare system, for example, both doctors and patients have been found to actively manipulate and negotiate the line between these two ideal types<sup>55</sup> to adjust their relationships and optimise personal outcomes (Stan 2012). In Thailand, Bo Kyeong Seo (2016) has compared the universal healthcare system to an unreturned gift, arguing that when people receive care without directly reciprocating this causes a feeling of imbalance. This reflects Mauss's view that charity was 'wounding for him who has accepted it' because an unreciprocated gift 'makes the person who has accepted it inferior' (1990: 65). However, Seo argues that relationship of dependence created by giving care is not necessarily problematic, but constitutive of relations (2016: 281). Such a reading of state-based care is also dependent on the local constructions and understandings of the right to care. Seo contrasts Thailand's universal healthcare system with England where people believe that they have a right to care because of their tax payments (ibid.: 287). Under the assumption of obligatory reciprocity, interpreting care as

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<sup>55</sup> Carrier (1999), Laidlaw (2000) and more recently Graeber (2014) have all argued that gifts and market exchange are best understood as ideal types.

a gift can also imply the need for gratitude (Mol 2008: 16), or otherwise ‘appropriate’ feelings as a minimal form of reciprocity that is a burden for the recipient (Thelen 2015: 504).<sup>56</sup>

Andrea Muehlebach has also found Mauss’s conception of the gift useful in her study of the distinction between voluntary and paid care work in Lombardy. Her analysis goes below the surface of the apparent dichotomy of ‘capitalism versus the gift’ (2012: 212) to unpick the meanings and consequences of this ideological divide. As opposed to paid care, such as that provided by (type A) social cooperatives, voluntary care was considered to be more valuable because it was imbued with affect as a ‘pure, free gift’ (ibid.: 11). However, conceiving of volunteer labour as a free gift based on generosity is also harmful. Muehlebach argues that this ‘disembeds such labor from the social relations out of which it has risen’ (ibid.: 127). Aside from its power to disguise the exploitation of unwaged labour, responsabilizing individual citizens where the state had withdrawn support, further harm was done in this conceptualization of care in the devaluation of the motivations of those doing paid care (ibid.: 212). Considering care in terms of the sociality of the gift as opposed to an impersonal market exchange is productive in these cases, although the opposition can oversimplify the myriad types of relationships and expectations involved in care practices.

Graeber’s (2010, 2014) transactional logics of hierarchy, reciprocity, and everyday communism can further help us move beyond the simple dichotomy of gift

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<sup>56</sup> Reciprocity, however, is not always the most salient feature of the gift. Ilana Silber’s (1998) analysis of philanthropic giving in the United States finds Mauss’s conception of the gift, with various layers of obligation useful. She adds an additional phase of ‘obligation’ which is that of soliciting the gift. In this case, however, the aspect of reciprocity is not considered. Unlike others, for example Parry (1989), the lack of reciprocity is not seen as a harmful variation on the norm of gifting. The apparent paradox of free gifts as damaging is resolved when gifts and commodities are no longer considered to be opposites (Laidlaw 2000). Instead, Laidlaw argues that there are different types of gifts that entail different expectations of relationships and reciprocity, a concept that is further developed by Graeber (2014) and discussed in more detail below.

versus market-based exchange. As opposed to the typical separation of ‘gift’ and ‘commodity’ defined by the object being exchanged, Graeber points out that, even within various exchanges categorized as ‘gifts’, all three of these transactional logics could exist. Charitable giving and volunteer work have been associated with harmful unreciprocated gifts, mirroring Graeber’s transactional logic of ‘hierarchy’ which is based on precedence and a moral logic of superiority rather than reciprocity. Alternatively, Mauss had hoped that in mutual aid societies – the precursor to modern cooperatives – and in state welfare systems there was a return to the ‘group morality’, the true spirit of the gift that was both interested and disinterested, in which ‘the freedom and the obligation inherent in the gift, of generosity and self-interest that are linked in giving, are reappearing’ (Mauss 1990: 68). This kind of giving, both interested and disinterested at the same time, can be compared to Graeber’s transactional logic of ‘everyday communism’. In this logic, which Graeber also equates to ‘solidarity’ and ‘mutual aid’, there is a recognition of interdependence: ‘from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs’ (2014: 67). Considering care in this light can help to explain the difference between the Thai case and the UK in Seo’s analysis described above. Alternatively, the logic of ‘exchange’ is, according to Graeber, based on reciprocal equivalence and provides a means to end relationship (ibid.: 71). The doctors and patients in the Romanian healthcare case avoided such equivalence ending the relations of informal exchange thanks to the ambiguity surrounding the appropriate value (Stan 2012: 76). In the cooperative case described below, the logic of equivalence in wage labour appears to supersede earlier models of care linked to the moral logics of hierarchy or mutual aid.

Although Graeber’s transactional logics add some additional explanatory power to care exchanges, there are other ways to conceptualize care. Recently, the concept of self-care has also been used to describe charity and caring in Italy and elsewhere (Muehlebach

2012; Trundle 2014: 16). Although the concept of self-help has a long history within the cooperative movement and elsewhere, self-care in particular has been associated with the ideology of neoliberalism. Ideologies of rational individualism and freedom, combined with technologies of self-making, have been identified as technologies of neoliberal governance (Ong 2007; Ganti 2014). Following Foucault's concept of governmentality (1991), such self-making involves managing the self in different parts of daily life including health, education and bureaucracy (Ong 2007: 4). In neoliberal Italy, where individualized models of care had come to largely replace state systems of welfare, Muehlebach develops the concept of self-care in the context of voluntary caring in Italy. She uses the term 'care' in the Foucauldian sense, referring to developing self-knowledge with the goal of ethical transformation, but with the additional focus on 'care for others' (2012: 7-8). This morality of this actor thus includes taking care of others as a means of fashioning an ethical self. However, Muehlebach is critical of this ethic of care as it shifts responsibility from the state to individuals, encouraging people to participate in neoliberal practices, even while being critical of them (ibid.: 9). Elsewhere in Italy, a neoliberal governmentality of self-management has been called upon as both a way to prevent the health risks associated with workplace intimidation practices known as mobbing, and a means to recover from the emotional damage that can result (Molé 2012a: 151-4). This kind of analysis foregrounds the neoliberal ideology of individualism and provides another ideal type for understanding caring.

Alternatively, envisioning care as an ongoing process puts emphasis on how relationships are constructed. This provides a method for studying care and for interrogating the relationships that it may entail rather than starting from self-making or types of exchange that may pre-suppose the existence of relationships. Tatjana Thelen argues that typical dichotomies such as paid/unpaid or formal/informal care often ignore

the *practices* of care (ibid.: 498).<sup>57</sup> She suggests that care be understood as ‘an open-ended process which, as a dimension of social security, connects a giving and receiving side in practices aimed to satisfy socially recognized needs’ (ibid.: 509). Rather than being the result of already existing relations, Thelen considers caring to be an active process that is *constitutive* of relationships, although care can also be linked to the dissolution of social bonds, especially in situations of change where there is a lack of mutual understanding (2015: 507). This aspect is relevant in the case of Verdecura where care practices (or their absence) reveal different expectations regarding the connection between cooperative work and personal relations. Thelen’s (2007) research on the care of pensioners in Germany also provides some interesting parallels to the Verdecura case described below. She focuses on the processes of providing care and the different meanings that this has taken on over time. While caring for pensioners materially had been the primary aspect of such care in the past, events such as the Christmas party and birthday excursions have become secular rituals that are important for creating community. She argues that as the material needs have been met in other ways, the emotional aspect of care has become more important (ibid.:46). The social cooperative form of Verdecura enables workers to provide for themselves, and here too the emotional aspect of care appears to be prominent.

Analysing care-giving as a gift is useful analytically, particularly when layering Graeber’s (2010, 2014) transactional logics to separate out the types of relationships that can be implied by different types of gifts. The concept of self-care is also helpful to consider neoliberal technologies of the self and the moralities that enable caring practices,

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<sup>57</sup> Annemarie Mol’s study of healthcare also highlights the importance of seeing care as something that is shared and invented in ‘every-day practices’ as opposed to being a gift or exchange as is typical among anthropologists studying care (2008: 4).

but both gift relationships and self-care represent ideal types. Instead, considering care practices in light of disappointments, I aim to reveal the discrepancy in expectations about working and caring in Verdecura cooperative.

### *6.2.1 Care provision in Italy*

The provision of care in Italy, meant here in the narrow sense of meeting material and healthcare needs via welfare provision, has changed dramatically over the past century, with social cooperatives being an important innovation towards the end of the twentieth century, particularly in Emilia Romagna.

State-based welfare provision, in theory reflecting Mauss's concept of mutuality, or Graeber's 'everyday communism' began to appear in Italy as early as the late nineteenth century and reached a high point in the 1960s and 1970s (Trundle 2014: 12). This form of care replaced traditional methods of provision for vulnerable members of Italian society through charitable work done by Catholic groups or the patronage of wealthy families (ibid.). Such charitable care can be associated with a hierarchical gift, creating dependencies and affirming inequality. Nationalised welfare systems, however, did not always live up to Mauss's ideal vision and were criticised as being 'paternalistic' or even 'belittling' in much the same way as charitable giving (Restakis 2010: 90). Although social services in Italy were described in terms of rights and universal access, the reality that was created was less one of equality than of patronizing (Muehlebach 2012: 89). The 1978 Basagli law that resulted in the closure of psychiatric hospitals in Italy was characterised as part of a movement towards civil rights and 'the demand for more tailored and better quality services' (Marzocchi 2014: 2). The closure of group care facilities for orphans and those with mental or other disabilities was likewise linked to the idea that they were no longer adequate for the needs of those individuals (ibid.: 8).

Despite not always meeting ‘the most elementary of needs’, a universal welfare system was also not sustainable financially for the Italian state and rising costs meant that the state returned to delegating care provision to families (Ginsborg 2003: 226-227). In the 1990s, the Italian state actively encouraged social cooperatives and other third-sector institutions through legal recognition and tax benefits (Trundle 2014: 13). Such legislation was part of a broader policy of austerity measures that incentivized local municipalities to outsource services to external providers or subcontract the delivery of services to public-private partnerships (Mori 2015: 141). It was also a period characterised by an ‘increasingly neoliberal ideological frame’ in Italy, involving the adoption of a decentralized model of governance, which saw an increased role for religious and civic organisations, including the newly developed social cooperatives, in meeting care needs (Trundle 2014: 12-13).

As state-based models of care provision were replaced with a more individualistic market-oriented model, social cooperatives acted as an intermediary between individuals and the state, enabling local service provision within the market context. As of the early 2000s municipal contracts with social cooperatives accounted for 87% of the capital city’s social service provision (Restakis 2010: 100). Although no longer public, care provided cooperatively remained social and democratic, according to cooperative researcher John Restakis, representing a ‘new frontier’ between the state and the market; and while the focuses on individual choice and market provision can be considered ‘hallmarks of neo-liberal approaches to social policy’, the social cooperative sector can also be viewed as a success of civil society (ibid.). While the provision of care is more visible in the type A social cooperatives that provide care services, it also exists in type B cooperatives through the provision of work. Type B social cooperatives like Verdecura, which developed to integrate people into society through work, also minimise the

distinction between the givers and recipients of care, crafting previous recipients of care into productive and visible members of society, as discussed in Chapter 2. The social cooperative form thus has the potential to support new ways of relating between care-givers and recipients. However, this raises the question whether those working in Verdecura create relationships of interdependence and mutuality as envisioned by Mauss, or whether workplace integration favours neoliberal technologies of self-care.

### 6.3 *Bilancio sociale*: a social balance sheet for a social mode of production

One sunny afternoon, just weeks after starting to volunteer at Verdecura, I attended the consortium's annual *Bilancio sociale* meeting. This two-and-a-half-hour long meeting was held in the grand *sala* of the town hall, just off of the central *piazza* in Villacenseo – a ten-minute walk from the CISV office building and a similar distance by car from Verdecura's garages. It was a moment for all of the cooperatives and other social enterprises in CISV to come together and reflect on the consortium's social mission and achievements. As opposed to the financial balance sheet (*bilancio*) that was approved and discussed at each cooperative's annual assembly, this 'social balance' was intended to take stock of the social goals of the consortium and its constituent organisations. It provided an additional layer of rhetoric, or shared vision, beyond that passed down through membership in Confcooperative, shared at similar moments inside the cooperative, and reinforced or inflected in daily practices and discussions. It also provided a direct communication link from the leaders of the consortium to the individual

members and employees in attendance. In addition to building a professional identity for those within the CISV, the event also provided an external face for the consortium.

The atmosphere was grand and formal, with shiny marketing materials on show. After walking up a grand staircase to the atrium of the large meeting room, the view opened onto a series of tables laid out, one for each member of the consortium, displaying their products and services. Verdecura's display featured their newest venture, the mushroom growing kits, along with some of the herbal products that they manufactured in conjunction with another cooperative in the consortium. Volunteers in matching tee-shirts made up for the event handed out glossy information packets at the entrance to the *sala* that included a program, a 38-page *bilancio sociale* report, and a transcript of the CISV president's speech. These packets and posters advertising the event in the CISV building both loudly proclaimed the event's title in capital letters: 'COOPERATION CREATES LINKS: Towards equilibrium between work and relationality'. This provided a hint about the content that would be shared and set the focus squarely on the conflict between work and sociality that cooperatives aimed to mediate.

I sat near the middle of the room with Verdecura's administrative intern Sara, reviewing the materials they had given us and surveying the room. There were nearly two hundred people seated in the grand hall, and I recognised only a handful from the offices of Verdecura and the consortium's administration, which was located on the floor below us. I spotted Verdecura's president Nicola standing by the entrance and greeting people as they entered. The event was open to the public, and the audience included some journalists and others interested in the local social economy. Sara's friend Giulia, for instance, had studied social economy management at the local university, but was not yet working in one of these local social enterprises. This was also a networking event, creating and solidifying links between various actors in the consortium and the

community. Indeed, the program of events ended with an *aperitivo* curated by three of the consortium's members including Luminare, which served as an opportunity to network and provided another chance to showcase the products of CISV members. I chatted briefly with Sara and Giulia about their experiences studying social economy while we



waited for the event to begin. Our attention was drawn towards the front of the room as preparations for the first speaker brought a hush across the audience.

Figure 6.1. Panel of speakers at the CISV *Bilancio sociale* event.

The director of a local non-profit agency that researched and promoted social economy opened the event by talking about the relevance of the social report, and his theme of social production continued throughout the meeting. ‘The *bilancio sociale* is the real balance sheet of a social enterprise,’ he began. He argued that while the solidarity of the consortium is not itself measurable, the *bilancio sociale* is not about the effect of economic activity. Instead, it highlights the mode of production, the input rather than the output of the work. By starting with a social goal, he contended, the practice of social

economy creates well-being in the community. This reminded me of Mattia's comment when I first joined Verdecura that helping people is 'in the DNA' of social cooperatives. The president of the consortium elaborated on this theme, also with a natural metaphor, in her speech about links. 'Links have to do with chemicals,' she said, '[...] the molecules that have the weakest chemical links inside them are the most unstable. On the other hand, stronger links are closer links and hold together more atoms.' As co-operators, she told the assembled group, and as social cooperatives, 'we have a vision of "strong" links with the local community. This,' she continued, 'is our strength.' She continued to describe some of these links, including relationships with local producers and consumers, being present to help local people with their specific needs, providing services for the local community, providing jobs for some five hundred people in the area and internships for local youths, and also their connections to donors and research institutions. Although she discussed these links mainly in relation to their local economic impact, the CISV president underscored not only their 'orientation to the market' but also 'the type of relationship that we imagine.' She told the group that leaders of the organization continuously 'seek equilibrium between doing business and the theme of reciprocity' and thus by 'seeking equilibrium [they are] always in motion'. It was the orientation towards people guides this constant motion.

The type of relationships that were created were guided by motivation rather than by *a priori* definitions, similar to how Graeber's theory of transactional logics is based on motivation rather than of the type of exchange or type of relationship involved (2010; 2014). Mattia had also impressed upon me the importance of the motivation of the cooperative's management. Capitalistic firms, cooperatives, and even non-profits all had to be financially viable to remain in the market. He could think of cooperatives that were unethical in his view, and private firms with better business practices than many

cooperatives. More important than the type of business was the orientation of the people inside it: 'Being responsible towards the environment, the community, et cetera, depends on the management. The structure is just a container.' The same, I will argue below, is also true of the orientation towards people.

The *bilancio sociale* meeting continued with the projection of a video of interviews from member cooperatives, bringing the voices of these people themselves. Although there were some clips of productive work, the interviews were all conducted in the offices, focusing on the managers and their views of working in the cooperatives. They spoke of wanting to help others, and gaining satisfaction in doing so. These narratives reflected the typical division of management versus other staff and painted a picture of care that, while motivated by concern for others, appeared to be echoing the sentiments of charity, hierarchical giving, and moral self-fashioning rather than the kind of ongoing sociality among equals that was desired by some of the cooperative members.

## 6.4 Care: the missing link between people and production

Although people are central in the rhetoric of social cooperatives, with the mode of production itself being considered 'social', in practice there appeared to be a divide between people and production. As already evident in Roberta's comparison of past nostalgia versus present disappointment, this was often described as a choice between tending to relationships and tending to the business. With work provision being considered a shared need and a value in itself that provided for material needs, the focus on production rather than social integration, except through work provision, was apparent. It was the element of care – materialised through lack of time, consideration, and means – that stands out as the missing link between the personal aspect that was

desired, and the apparent production focus of the cooperative's upper management team. However, unlike the doctor in Noelle Molé's analysis of workplace problems in Italy, who considered his clients had unrealistic expectations of affective relationships from their workplaces (2012a: 24), the expectation of care within a cooperative is supported by the cooperative vision of social economy, as described during the social report meeting above. In many of the narratives below the workers' disappointments and expectations are also tied to the cooperative form.

The divided focus between production and people was apparent in comments made by many of the cooperative members. While some saw it as a zero-sum game, others – in particular the former HR manager Marco – saw it as a sensibility or way of behaving as opposed to a choice between two alternatives. Like Roberta, he described a shift in the focus of management over time. He recognised clear improvements in the work conditions, but felt that the personal side was left unattended:

I remember when I started it was difficult to get a work schedule, to organize the teams; it was very, very disorganized. In time, there were big changes for the better – this, definitely – but I will repeat, the part which has had difficulty entering inside the cooperative is the size inside of work, the relative size of the care of the relations, of management of the relationships. Because? While there were positive changes as far as the material aspect of work, and so of the salaries, which had notable improvement, the aspect of practical organization of work, of scheduling of work, and so forth, the other half, the other side of the moon remains a little in the dark, in my view. [...]

Why? Because a certain mental layout prevails, and a certain *idea* of work, that work at least up until now, you go, do your obligations, give the most of yourself, from the morning until the afternoon, in the hours that you do, you say goodbye and you go home, see you tomorrow.

For Marco, it was a particular vision of work as an alienated exchange that drew attention away from the care for relationships with the cooperative. Michele and Giovanni, on the other hand, considered it to be a balance between the two, with the production focus currently outweighing a focus on relationships:

Michele: You worked well, the relations were good. After it deteriorated because... Well let's say that theoretically they are two different realities. However, the tendency that I see recently is that our reality is getting much closer to the profit one.

Giovanni: In the way—

Michele: In that they are pushing much more on the management of the production, these things, so that the relations—

Giovanni: There aren't any.

Ryan: Mmn... the centrality of the person that—

Michele: Exactly.

Giovanni: All the things that we have done towards this, in my view now, it's a lot of theory and not a lot of practice.

While employees and sector managers consistently expressed disappointment with a perceived focus on production rather than people among the management team of Verdecura, the financial director Mattia saw the focus on production as a necessity. As the financial director, he had guided the cooperative – which he too described as being like ‘a small family’ or a ‘volunteer organisation’, but one that was ‘ready to fail’ – into an ‘entrepreneurial’ organisation. Over four years he had paid back personal loans, generated a surplus and doubled the number of employees. The stronger financial performance was not an end in itself, however, but served a social end, allowing the cooperative to achieve its mission of providing employment. It was a typical dilemma for cooperative business: without profit, there would be no cooperative (Schoening 2006: 297). This required changes in processes that some, he believed, were not ready to face. He referred specifically to two members who had been vocal about their disappointments, but there were others who shared similar views privately.

Despite having their material needs provided for through their salaries, some of the members and employees were left wanting more. These desires ranged from the grand symbolic aspects such as missing Christmas dinners to the everyday practicalities of having the correct tools for the job. The remainder of this chapter will explore examples from members and workers that cover the three main dimensions listed earlier, that is, the

three different types of care practices that they hoped to receive: time together; personal consideration; and the means to conduct their work.

#### *6.4.1 Lack of time together*

Unlike typical wage labour that is based, in theory, on an alienated exchange of labour for pay, the relationship of mutual exchange that exists between the members and their own cooperative implies an ongoing relationship that extends beyond this narrow transaction. Time plays an important role in the extension and measure of this relationship. On the one hand, cooperative members are expected to work harder within the contracted hours and be willing to stay beyond the allotted time if necessary because of their personal commitment to the business. Luca, the president and founding member of a small cleaning-services cooperative in Bologna brought out this point out clearly when I met with him in the first weeks of my fieldwork:

So why a cooperative? There is a difference from a private company where I am the owner: I pay you a salary and our relationship ends there. This is the simplified view. In a cooperative you're not just an employee but a member, and you know that if you work well the cooperative will work and it guarantees you work and better treatment, and so you feel obliged to give 100%. This is the difference of being a cooperative. And then we seek in our small way to be like a large family, like when the members or employees have needs for personal things, such as economic help, we seek to help. But it has to be a give and take. We seek to help the member, the employee, but he has to also seek to give his best. Not, at five o'clock the pen falls, like we say in Italy, but instead be willing to work five minutes more to finish something. This is my personal motivation, for which I selected the cooperative model instead of the capitalistic one.

From Luca's perspective, the commitment that extends beyond an exchange of work for pay within a fixed set of hours also leads to a workforce that is more motivated and hard-working because of the long-term relationship that develops. This is a view that also appears in the literature about the benefits of democratic ownership (Holmström 1989). On the other hand, as I will focus on below, (lack of) time spent together was used to

describe the (lack of) personal relationships or care within the cooperative. As one member of Verdecura said to me sarcastically after the annual assembly meeting, ‘Okay, let’s finish the assembly, see you tomorrow,’ implying that there was an expectation that this relationship should extend beyond the end of working hours. This applied to both social gatherings and time spent with the central decision-makers of the cooperative. Time spent together provided the space in which to nurture personal relationships, and the amount of time granted was also used as a measure for the amount of care given to a relationship. Time can be a way to measure the material aspect of care (Comas d’Argemir 1994: 212), but here it is also a measure of affect.

One of the issues that arose in the annual assembly and throughout the year in conversations about the cooperative was the lack of time they spent together as a whole group, whether at a Christmas party, other social gatherings, or in meetings beyond the individual sector of production. These moments were both symbolic gestures that signified attention being paid to solidarity and relationships, and of practical importance to facilitate meeting other people across the cooperative. The conversation I had with Michele and Giovanni reproduced below highlights the consequences of what they considered to be a missing social aspect:

Michele: Every sector thinks about their own issues, there’s no more... like I said in the last – not sure if you were there in the last assembly that we did – that even a small meal, going to eat a pizza together. But no, when we go out to eat it’s always us [waste collection] and that’s it. If we are going to do a dinner it should be–

Giovanni: In fact, recently, these kinds of things are missing.

Michele: Yes, it should be everyone. I mean, there are some who have been members for a while, and I don’t even know who they are, or what they look like.

Giovanni: Instead, periodically, two or three times there should be times all together.

Michele: I’ll give you that. We have one–

Giovanni: If we get together and organize it, but never from outside, it’s just words, you know? Also in those things at the end only we do them.

Michele: You just find us from the waste collection group. Always.

Both agreed that the cooperative was increasingly divided into groups. Without social events involving the whole cooperative, they did not have the opportunity to meet all of the other members. Such events, in their view, should be actively supported by the cooperative management. Instead, as Giovanni said, 'it's just words' that come from the management, but the actions taken to create relationships were made by the sector groups. The expectation of social gatherings, particularly as a whole group, was linked to the cooperative form. These moments often revolved around eating together, highlighting the important role of commensality in group identity, and mirroring Thelen's (2007) research on pensioner care in Germany in which 'secular rituals' that included eating together played an important role.

The Christmas dinner was especially important as a symbol of attention to spending time together. Throughout the autumn, the *direzione* group had discussed organizing a meal for the whole cooperative, but it did not materialise. Mattia, Giada, and other directors had been busy throughout December, focusing on driving holiday sales at Luminare and working on plans for the merger proposal. Only the waste collection team had organized a casual meal together, meeting for pizza one evening in late December. The consortium had also organized a small event in late December, but only for foreign student interns who were volunteering in the consortium or one of the member institutions. One Friday afternoon in early January we also had a small lunch celebration in the office, sharing a *panettone* and a bottle of sweet sparkling wine. It was not planned, but prompted by these small gifts to the cooperative that had been sitting on the table in the office for nearly a month. The different physical spaces and working hours certainly

contributed to the separation of such social events.<sup>58</sup> Those of us working in the office often ate lunch together, and no one would order pizza or pasta without first checking whether anyone else would like to order or share, but such plans rarely extended beyond the administrative space. The cooperative did indeed seem divided.

Nonetheless, this lack in their annual schedule did not go unnoticed in comparison to the past or to other cooperatives. There had been a Christmas dinner organised the year before, though the members had to pay for it individually, a point which was also criticised. ‘How embarrassing,’ Roberta told me. ‘It came out at the end of the dinner,’ she said, ‘and if people knew they would have to pay, they wouldn’t have come.’ She continued to tell me about another social cooperative in the area that apparently spent their annual surplus on a social dinner: ‘It’s a beautiful thing. We should do more dinners and lunches.’

There was one social gathering amongst the whole cooperative in the year between October 2013 and September 2014 that was organized by some of the *capannone* workers. Its importance was clear in the way people had planned for and later discussed the event. The idea for a gathering was suggested at the annual assembly in May. Marco, the former HR manager, had abstained from voting on the new board members, citing his concern that there was not enough focus on human relations in the management of the cooperative. He added that he did not think the management was doing enough to encourage relationships within the cooperative. Michele jumped in, suggesting that the management team had not been organizing enough social activities.

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<sup>58</sup> Other cooperatives made an effort to exploit common spaces or make up for their lack. In Bologna for example, the small media cooperative Kitchen organized their office space around a shared kitchen where the members took turns preparing meals to share. Alternatively, the national cooperative CAMST with workers divided between offices, production and service spaces made efforts to overcome this through frequent social gatherings and the use of technological solutions like online forums.

As he later reiterated to me, he told the group that recently there had only been some dinners by sector but nothing as a whole cooperative. Mattia, who was chairing the assembly meeting, responded that the members could also organize such events themselves. Fede, one of the disadvantaged members of the cooperative, had organised the last event, so anyone could do it, he remarked. Mattia's quick response, shifting responsibility away from management and onto the other members seemed defensive, and the way he singled out Fede appeared to imply that some members were more able to participate than others. His response was effective, however, and the plans for a barbeque were soon underway. The following week, after a discussion with a few others who worked in the garages, David printed out a sign-up sheet for a communal barbeque the last Saturday of the month. In the days leading up to the barbeque it seemed that everyone who stopped into the office would ask who was coming. Everyone was planning to go, aside from Serena, who was going to be away that week, and she frequently mentioned her disappointment before and after the missed event, signalling her interest in the group.

Sharing food and drink at the barbeque was the focal point of the event. In addition to being a 'symbol of group identity' (Thelen 2007: 44), the sharing of home cooked foods in this act of commensality also allowed the members to share information about themselves and their families. The association of food preparation with the affective labour of caring for the family (Thelen 2015: 510) is also an interesting parallel here, further suggesting the importance of these events for creating intimacy. I arrived at the *capannone* about mid-day on the day of the barbeque. Although it was not scheduled to start until 1pm, the table inside was already set and a table outside was laden with various foods that the members had brought to put on the barbeque. Albo, one of drivers, was already starting to cook some meat. It was a sunny day, so we mingled around in small groups, snacking on bread and crisps as we discussed the remaining preparations.

By around quarter past one in the afternoon everyone was seated and began to enjoy the grilled meat and vegetables that Albo brought to the table in large disposable metal trays. He was serving as waiter to those of us seated at the table and joked that he should be getting paid for ‘working’ on his holiday, highlighting the indistinct boundary between affective labour and work. In addition to the wine and bread laid out on the table, there were plates of cherries that one of the members had picked the night before. Another brought a large bowl of his wife’s ‘famous’ couscous to share; it had been popular at the previous year’s event. Those sitting near me were keen to offer suggestions, encouraging me to try all of the various cuts of local meat and the special dishes they had prepared. There was an obvious sense of pride in sharing the local cuisine.

It was a jovial atmosphere, but most people were sitting near and talking to those with whom they interacted on a daily basis. I found myself sitting in the middle of the table with Sara and David. To our right sat most of the managers and administrators, and to the left sat the manual workers and drivers. As we ate, people were enhancing existing links by sharing personal stories, and also making new links, quite literally, as they added new friends on Facebook. People asked each other about their families and their vacation plans. They talked about how good the food was and how they enjoyed eating together. They mentioned those who were not able to come, for example Serena, but also those who were unfortunately scheduled to work on that day. It was a shame that they had to miss the event.



Figure 6.2. Table set with wine from Luminare, ready for the communal barbecue.



Figure 6.3. Meat and vegetables contributed by some of the cooperative members.

When each had eaten their fill of grilled food and salads, Luigi passed around a bottle of homemade spiced wine and two large Bundt cakes that his mother had made. Before these had made a full circle of the table, a bottle of *limoncello* that someone else had made was also added to the rotation. The alcohol was a social lubricant – later someone joked that the cooperative would be more social if they could drink together at work – and it no doubt helped to ease nerves as one of the members set up his sound system and another impressed the group with his renditions of Italian classic rock ballads, the (curiously recent) culmination of personal growth that Roberta had later referenced. People sang along and danced – swaying left and right to the beat of the music – in a half circle at one end of the table near the DJ and his speakers. At the same time, people joined together to clear the tables, throwing away the disposable plates and trays, and stacking up the chairs before loading them onto a truck to return them to the consortium building. Lisa was coordinating these movements as she divided up the food that was left over to be taken home. As I left for the train back to Bologna, the room was already completely cleared, and Lisa was still there in the middle of a small circle of men, all singing along to the music and cheering them on. I wrote in my field notes after the event that she ‘seems almost like the team mom, always smiling, encouraging others’; it was an example of the ‘warm’ kind of care often associated with families (Thelen 2015), but provided here in a context of sharing time and food together.

While it was referenced as a high point in the year, some of the members also criticized the way certain individuals and groups participated, indicating that there was a ‘right’ way to contribute. Lisa pointed out that some people didn’t mingle but stayed in their own small circles. There was also much lower attendance from the people in the green maintenance sector as compared to those in waste management. Another person noted that Mattia, Giada and the president Nicola had all arrived rather late, and sat

together at one end of the table with their children, then left about an hour before the rest of the group dispersed. This seemed to indicate that they were less interested in spending time with the rest of the group. It also sparked comparisons to other occasions of non-participation, for example the poorly attended *coordinamento* meetings, and thus became *another* case, indicative of a pattern of indifference.

Despite these complaints, and the fact that it was the only such event in the course of a year, this moment was the realisation of the members' desire for social moments together, and later recollections were overwhelmingly positive. In Lisa's eyes, it represented the 'growth of the cooperative – the personal side,' while for others it was a reminder that there could be more. It brought to the fore the importance of spending time together, beyond working hours. Aside from being a measure of the existence of these relationships or of interest in creating them, it also provided a moment to make contact and to strengthen relationships through sharing stories, food, and creating memories together.

#### *6.4.2 Limited time with leaders*

In the course of daily work, access to time with the leaders, in particular Verdecura's director Mattia, was highly valued by many of my colleagues in the cooperative, but such time was not always readily available. Mattia's and Giada's frequent absences from the *coordinamento* meetings, mentioned earlier in Chapter 4, was one of the main reasons cited for their decline in relevance as a shared management tool. Meanwhile, the difficulty of finding time with Mattia became a running joke. One of the members said, 'When you need him, one time he's not there, two times not there. You look to the right, he's not there. He's never there.' Mattia's availability was often read by members in personal terms, though more objectively it appeared to be divided based on project

timelines and perceived income potential for the cooperative. ‘The problem,’ according to another cooperative member, was that ‘he decides when he has the time. And when people like David really need him, he is “too busy.”’ Gaining access to Mattia’s time was critical for those in charge of various projects within the cooperative as he controlled funding and this could create a bottleneck in terms of decision-making and access to resources, but it was often read in personal terms as indicative of friendship.

David’s experience is a good example to detail the importance of such time, and the way it was regarded by those in the cooperative. During the ten months that I spent working at Verdecura, I watched David gradually change from being extremely motivated in his work to losing interest almost completely. At the start of writing he was actively looking for other work opportunities and he has since left the cooperative. David had been the one to introduce me to both Mattia and to Verdecura. Originally a volunteer intern, he was hired with a one-year temporary contract after proposing an innovative waste upcycling project to Mattia and then to the CDA. The proposed project would take coffee grounds collected from the local community and treat them to be used as the growing medium for oyster mushrooms. In addition to doing this on the reclaimed land where Marco was setting up the community gardens, they also planned to sell boxes of mushroom mycelium mixed with the sterilized coffee grounds for home cultivation. This project ticked many boxes for Mattia and the CDA. The concept of upcycling – the repurposing of waste products to create new products and value – was fashionable and already a key aspect of the interior design and procurement for items sold at Luminare. It was aligned with Verdecura’s existing waste management business, consisting of collecting waste for incineration and recycling. It was also a potential source of revenue for the cooperative. However, the relationship between David and Mattia seemed to change over the course of the year as the mushroom box project transitioned from the

pre-launch phase of enthusiastic preparations to the launch phase, which Mattia characterised as unsuccessful.

When I first joined in late October 2013 David and Mattia were meeting frequently to discuss the launch of the mushroom kits. Their goal was to launch them in Luminare in time for the Christmas season. Mattia asked me to help them with the marketing strategy, including Facebook posts and planning the launch event, so I too was frequently involved in meetings in Mattia's office. At that time Mattia also spent much of his time with Sara, helping her with the proposal for EU funding for another project that could potentially add another revenue stream for the cooperative and also furnish her with another six-month internship contract. Aside from regular meetings with the banks and with the director of Coop Censeo in preparations for the merger discussed in Chapter 4, Mattia also spent a lot of his time in the office with Pietro and Andrea from the pest control sector. One was working on the new extermination device, the other on a new service, both of which could also bring in new revenues for the cooperative. Pietro, too, had noticed the competition for resources as Mattia spent increasing amounts of time with Andrea. It was common for two or even three of these people, all competing for Mattia's attention to be present in his office, waiting or taking turns discussing their ideas with him. This left not only David, but also others complaining that Mattia was not also sharing his time on their projects, or ensuring that the other sectors had the tools they needed.

The mushroom kit launch happened in time for Christmas retailing, but after this initial phase the time that Mattia spent with David declined. David felt that he could not get access to him to discuss the project. Roberta also noticed a change, saying that before David was Mattia's friend, but now 'he no longer counts'. Such time spent together was a form of care that could build relationships and friendships, but its absence appeared to

signal the end of those relationships. As the financial director, it seems logical that Mattia would spend his time on those projects and with those employees who he thought could add most value to the cooperative's financial balance sheet, but his assessment of a project's potential for the cooperative was also not communicated, leaving those involved to guess why some projects were favoured over others. This mismatch in actions and interpretations also brings out the distinction between the nostalgic view of the social cooperative (with a focus on relationships) and the present state of being seen as a social cooperative 'business' (with a focus on production). While time is finite, there are other ways that the cooperative's management was expected to show care towards employees and members.

#### *6.4.3 Lack of consideration*

As I argued in the previous chapter, Verdecura's management carefully considers the costs of labour and utilises various forms of temporary and flexible labour contracts to balance the 'needs' of its members with those of the market and protect their livelihoods. In particular, they are limited by the waste management contracts with Hera that stipulate the term and also number of workers needed. However, feelings of alienation go beyond the market-mediated relationality of being a considered a resource to be managed. Instead, complaints focused on a lack of consideration, for example making decisions without (adequate) warning. Two examples of seeming inattention to the impact of workers' changing circumstances – the ending of a contract and variations to monthly pay – elucidate this point. Both also highlight the complicated reality of mediating an apparent boundary between work and personal relationships in which care is desired, but not always received.

The ending of a contracted period was a time of uncertainty and worry for workers, but not an apparent priority for the management team. Even those doing *borsa lavoro* with small monthly stipends from the local municipality hoped for these to be renewed if there was no full position available. Samir, for example, continued to stop by and enquire about openings in the cooperative for many months after his *borsa lavoro* ended without renewal. Despite the high stakes and anxiety for the workers who were potentially going to lose their primary source of income, these moments appeared to be handled casually by the cooperative management. When internships or fixed-term contracts came up for renewal, it was common for the individual in question to be unaware of whether or not their contract would be extended. Under Italian law it is possible to work for a month after the expiration of a contract and still be paid as usual before a new contract is finalized. Thus, Serena explained, this period was not urgent from an administrative point of view. She was currently working on a contract renewal and chasing the *direzione* group to schedule a meeting to finalize details, and told me that she too had been in this situation, ‘uncertain and without a contract’.

One afternoon I happened upon Mohammed, who had been working at Verdecura for six months on a fixed-term contract. He was sitting in the garage break room and apparently upset. When I asked why, he told me that they had informed him the day before that his contract would not be renewed. He was no doubt upset about losing his income – he had a wife and a ten-month old baby at home, he reminded me – but he was also unhappy because he had been told only five days before the end of the contract and given no explanation for the decision. He explained again and again how much he had enjoyed working there and how hard he had worked, doing any job: ‘I do driving, I do manual. I work, I drive. I fill, I empty. I do everything.’ He would pick up extra shifts as needed and went to work when he was feeling unwell. Still, it had not been enough to

secure him further work with the cooperative. ‘At the end, they tell me to stay at home,’ he summarised sadly. The HR manager had apparently informed him of the decision, telling him that ‘they’, meaning the *direzione* had made a decision, but she did not offer a reason (*motivo*), saying there was none. He had worked well, she said. Mohammed was left wondering what more he could have done and believing that he would no longer have a job because he was an outsider. He had emigrated to Italy over a decade earlier but did not have any personal relationships with people in the office. He felt that local connections were more important than job performance: ‘I don’t know how the world works. Maybe it’s because I’m poor. I don’t know. Maybe because I don’t have a supporter, someone who says something nice about me.’ He continued, ‘They don’t look at, really, what kind of work you do. They look at the people. If someone is, I don’t know, the friend of someone, they choose that person. Here I don’t have anyone.’ There was a feeling that a personal connection to management could have changed the outcome. Indeed, a few months earlier the cooperative had hired the husband of one of the administrators at a time when others were coming and going on flexible contracts. Such practice seems to confirm the important role of social networks, also sometimes referred to as social capital, within the labour market (Granovetter 2005: 36).

However, similar sentiment was not exclusive to ‘outsiders’. Like Mohammed, Grazia had a fixed-term contract working at Luminare. It was a short two-month ‘*contrattino*’ as Serena called it. Unlike Mohammed, who felt he was outsider in the community, Grazia had considered herself to be a friend of the vice-president Giada. As her mini-contract came to an end, she worried about whether or not it would be renewed. It was eventually renewed, apparently to her great relief at the time, so I was surprised one day to find out that Grazia would be leaving Luminare before it finished. She told me that she had decided to resign because Giada had not been treating her well, constantly

‘changing her face’ from friend to manager. The personal side of their relationship, including a concern for Grazia’s feelings and wellbeing, had not been apparent in her management style. Grazia felt that Giada cared more about making the business work than she cared about the people doing the work, and claimed that Giada had admitted this herself. ‘I want to do something else in life than work for a so-called social cooperative that doesn’t care about people,’ she told me. Others also made similar accusations, saying for example that Giada ‘doesn’t care’. Such complaints about her way of working, with a seeming inattention to the feelings of her collaborators, show that the issue was not with the structural relations and flexible work per se, but with the affect and attention given to the whole person.

The cooperative also offers the workers some flexibility with regard to their pay. It was not uncommon to see someone in the administrative office chatting with Lisa to arrange an advance (*anticipo*) on the next month’s wages. A mechanism known as ‘flexibility time’ was also built into the hourly work contracts. This ensured that every month the workers paid hourly wages would receive the same amount, regardless of the hours worked, except for one month where the balance of hours would be added or subtracted from their monthly pay. Although it was an annual occurrence, it seemed to come as a surprise, and a ripple of disappointment flowed through the office in the month when the balance was settled.

One Monday morning in July, I sat at the large table in the office, working on the Luminare website, alongside David who was planning his work for the week, and Sara who was filing invoices at her desk. Both Lisa, who dealt with the payments, and Serena, who logged the hours worked, were on holiday that week. Sara was feeling swamped, dealing with paperwork and frequent phone calls, and wondered how it had been agreed for both of them to be away at the same time, leaving her to manage the office alone.

Around 10 am Federico and Paolo entered the office after their morning shifts in waste management to collect their pay slips. Since the monthly salary was deposited electronically, these slips were often left to pile up in a folder on Lisa's desk. This month, however, something was different. Paolo told Sara that they had not been paid enough for working the entire month; both were short by around three hundred euros. They both gestured to their pay slips that contained these lower-than-expected figures. Sara apologised, but told them that if there had been an error they would have to check with either Serena or Lisa, and that both were away until the following week. To reassure the two, she went to check with Mattia in the office next door, and she returned with an explanation, but still not a solution: 'Mattia says that this month everyone is settling the flexible hours. For those who worked less or worked more, it gets added or taken away this month. You'll have to wait and talk with Serena next week to check your hours.' Federico suggested that they go talk with Mattia to settle the issue now, but Sara assured him that Mattia would only repeat the same. Upset with the situation and without means to resolve it, Paolo asked, 'But how am I supposed to pay my rent and everything this month?' He tutted in disapproval as they both left the office. This was the first of a number of disgruntled visitors to the office asking about their payslips that seemed to be short. Their complaints showed disappointment not only with the monetary amount, but also how the situation was handled.

Later visitors to the office joked that Sara and Lisa had both taken holiday this week to avoid the situation, directly implicating them in a lack of care. One of the workers who came the following day to pick up his payslip said, 'It's strange that it is just you two in the office,' to Sara and me. Although he was aware of the flexibility time, he was still certain there had been a mistake in his own pay. He told us that he had come to the office twice already to ask Serena to use vacation time for the hours that he was

missing. It was a lack of respect, he said, leaving him with only six hundred euros. How could he afford to take his family away in August when everyone else would be on vacation? Sara told him, as she had told the others, that unfortunately he would have to wait until the following week to see if there had been an error. As he left, he again suggested that it was not accidental that everyone was away this week, as though there was a conspiracy to block their reprisals.

On the second day of her week-long holiday, Lisa appeared in the office. Surprised to see her, and hoping that she had perhaps come to deal with the fallout of the flexibility time, we asked her what she was doing here. She had to deal with an urgent matter, she told us: someone had not received their pay for the month. In between contacting the bank and checking her records, she asked us how the week had been so far. Sara and I eagerly told her about the confusion over the lower wages, hoping that she would have a solution. Lisa agreed with Mattia's explanation, saying, 'Yes, every June they make up the flexibility hours, so that's it.' Although the managers and administrators were all aware of this variation, most of the workers who came to complain had seemed surprised. I suggested that perhaps the workers should have been given advance warning, but Lisa said that they all know, and moreover they always seem surprised: 'When they get more they are happy, when they get less...' she trailed off. Over lunch that day Mattia also confirmed that each year, despite it being an annual occurrence, anyone who had worked less hours than contracted seemed surprised. 'These people obviously worked less hours,' he assured us. Still, Sara and I agreed that Serena, or someone else, should have advised people in advance if there would be a difference in their pay. Mattia replied jokingly, 'I do wonder whether she took off this week on purpose. I did tell her that it was not a very good time to go away.' Sara considered contacting her, but decided to wait

until she was back, not wanting to ‘ruin her vacation’, keeping the problems at work separate from her personal time.

The ideal of separation between work and personal life caused problems that potentially could have been overcome, or at least mediated by practices of care. For Mohammed, an explanation and warning about his contract expiring would have shown care for the impact that this would have on his personal life, and for Grazia, being treated as a ‘friend’, showing consideration for her as a whole person, could have encouraged her to stay in the cooperative. The lack of warning or reminder to the workers about their recuperated flexibility time was painted as a lack of respect, again for the impact that this would have outside of working hours. As will be discussed below, the solution to this problem that management proposed was not to take more care in the future, but to encourage the workers to track their own hours more closely, and take more care themselves.

#### *6.4.4 Lack of means*

In a type B social cooperative, where the primary goal was to foster social inclusion through employment, I was at times surprised to see the lack of material care afforded to some of the workers in the *capannone* office. The behaviour was at times reminiscent of the mobbing practices that Noelle Molé has described elsewhere in Italy (2012a, 2012b). Mobbing, defined as psychological or emotional harassment in the workplace, includes acts that limit productivity, such as abrupt transfers or changes to work assignment, or being assigned an ‘isolated or shabby office space’ (2012b: 373-374). Such acts can result in health problems including anxiety, depression, and physical ailments (2012a: 3). In Verdecara similar practices varied from Marco’s sudden and largely unexplained reassignment from HR manager to a special project with little relevance to his previous

work experience or what he considered to be his personal strengths, to the denial of basic tools necessary for the job, such as Michele's computer that was too slow to send emails. Marco was frequently the butt of jokes in the office about poor performance and time-wasting, but was not given the same feedback in a constructive manner. Michele, meanwhile, had expressed his recent unhappiness to others. He needed a new computer and his office in the *capannonne* was without a photocopier for months. Serena suggested giving him some pictures from the summer barbecue to cheer him up. However, in Roberta's opinion, 'A photo has nothing to do with it. He needs the tools to be able to do his job.' Such disregard, while not reaching levels that could likely be defined as mobbing, limited daily productivity and appeared to create a sense of malaise among the workers.

This issue was embodied in the broken photocopier of the *capannone* office. It was left inoperative for months. Initially there were frequent requests to have it fixed or replaced, though these reduced over time as the queries were deflected or ignored. As Marco explained to me:

This is a thing I've also spoken about during *coordinamento* with Serena, the example of the photocopier is symbolic of this issue, in the sense that we stayed months without a photocopier in the offices of the *capannone* and you didn't know why, you didn't know anything. Nothing is said at all. With people who need it for work, Giovanni and Michele, every day. However, nothing is said. You don't know the reason why. And this, what kind of communication is it? [...]

The moment in which you let so much time pass, you send a certain type of signal about the care of the relations and the relationships with others. It speaks for itself, you understand? Unfortunately, it's this type of thing. At the end of every month I have to send scans of forms to Tecne, either I have to go to the consortium, or – because here this thing among others makes you lose a lot of time. You're paid by the hour. I have to go to the consortium to do photocopies to take them to Tecne. Then at a certain point I just went directly there [to Tecne]. But actually, they prefer a scan to a paper copy. [...]

Look, aside from the absence of the tools, of the means, the thing that is upsetting is to see, is that it verifies, these things, that nothing is said, therefore a communication that leaves much to be desired. Many people who for months ask, what can we do? How can we do it?

Marco's disappointment shows that care is not just measured in time or abstract sentiment, but also embodied in the resources made available in terms of training and tools. Furthermore, these physical things, as Marco points out, are not important only for their usefulness, but also because they represent and send signals about the care for the relationships between the cooperative and its workers. It is not just the lack of a tool which is an issue, but the amount of time that goes by without it being replaced, and the message that this sends to the employees. I learned later that the photocopier was not being replaced because of the plan to merge with Coop Censeo, which had similar resources that could be shared. While this choice was rational from a business perspective, and perhaps also motivated by the desire to reduce costs and protect the future of their cooperative jobs, the manner in which it was handled, with no communication at all, again seemed to indicate a lack of care for those impacted. Relatively small changes in behaviour, from explaining the reason for decisions, to giving more notice, or ensuring that staff had access to the right tools and training could have provided a signal to members and other workers that the management cared about them.

## 6.5 Bureaucracy and self-care

Bureaucracy in the cooperative was made apparent by the multitude of paperwork that accompanied nearly all activities: signing of payslips, collecting notices for the assembly, formalizing work placements. Even the waste that was taken to be recycled or burned was meticulously catalogued on paper and later compiled into electronic spreadsheets. I felt a sense of irony in the first few weeks at Verdecura as my main contribution was helping with filling and filing paperwork for rubbish one day and for work placements the next. It gave a sense of managing costs and resources rather than people.

The relationship between the HR manager and the individual employees was also governed by a formal procedure of paperwork, one that was mediated by ISO (International Organization for Standardization) requirements and that monitored and assessed the performance of individual employees. Audit technologies like these have been found to embed workers into the self-discipline of neoliberal governmentality, reinforcing the notion of individuals whose performance can be quantified and improved upon (Dunn 2004: 112-118). Such evaluations taught the workers how to monitor themselves. Each person on a *borsa lavoro* work placement was evaluated monthly by Serena and the person they were working with physically. Serena felt herself that it was ‘too mathematical’, but the ISO accreditation meant that it could not be easily changed. The two responsible parties would sit together and rate the worker on a scale of one to ten across five dimensions including timeliness, professionalism and motivation. Some of the dimensions seemed difficult to achieve. When evaluating Samir’s motivation, for instance, David wondered out loud how motivated we would be if we did not have enough to eat. The municipality only paid these workers €300 per month, as mentioned earlier, and not always on time. Samir had recently been waiting for six weeks. Despite these limitations, Serena saw the tool’s usefulness. It also had a section for short- and long-term objectives, which she said ‘helps you create a history of the person and how it changes over time. After the first meeting you write objectives for the project that are shared with everyone including the person and the social worker.’ It helped to develop their experience, she said, though she also admitted that such experiences rarely led to regular jobs within the cooperative. Rather, it seemed to be more effective as a tool for moulding the right kind of worker. An annual satisfaction survey for the regular employees and members was another example of measuring and shaping the workers, teaching them to analyse their own experiences. Serena had hoped to implement an

employee incentive program to encourage them and make the work more rewarding. It was another interesting example of neoliberal governmentality, though it remained a theoretical project.

The expectation of self-care was also reflected in the way that Serena, Mattia and Lisa reacted to the pay flexibility issues. ‘They should have known,’ was the recurrent response. When Serena returned, some workers who were still unsatisfied with the explanations already given were waiting to speak with her. That week, with both she and Lisa in the office, they presented a united front against a group of workers who came into the office. Instead of apologising for the confusion, or agreeing to take more care in the future so that it would not be a surprise, as I had been expecting, Lisa and Serena impressed upon the men that it was their own responsibility to keep track of how many hours they had worked, and if they were going to be above or below the contracted hours. While one protested that he had been paid less than another man who always seemed to leave earlier, Lisa jumped in, telling him that he should check his payslip every month so that there would be no surprises. Serena explained that she does not have time each week to call every employee to check if the hours they logged – assuming the error would have been theirs and not hers – are correct. ‘You need to check the payslips,’ she reiterated. She told them that she could show them how to do this, to make it easy for them. She also offered them a solution for the short term, suggesting that if the pay is not enough to last the month, they could ask Mattia for an advance of the next months’ salary. Finally, when the men left, somewhat appeased, Serena told us that she felt bad about the situation. In particular, she did not like being blamed with the assumption that she had been the one making mistakes. Lisa reassured her, again saying that that same thing happens every year: ‘If they are under, they come to complain. If they get more, no one says anything.’

Serena wished for a more ‘modern’ method to track the hours worked, scorning the manual system which was both time consuming and susceptible to or suspected of errors. ‘If only there was the budget for an electronic time clock system...’ she mused. From her perspective, it would be ideal to completely remove the human element from the calculations involved, so that any problems could be blamed literally on the machinery of bureaucracy. While this would effectively transfer the potential of culpability to the black box of the time-keeping software or to those logging their own hours, it would not address the basic problem of not proactively attending to the impact that the settlement of flexibility time could have on the workers.

Self-help tools were accompanied by the view that the cooperative members must want to be helped in order to grow. As the driver of change within the cooperative and a central point in an evolving network of information and influence, Mattia’s view exemplified the transactional logic of exchange as an ideal type, with the moralities of equivalence and neoliberal self-care. Mattia’s descriptions of his successes in the cooperative were largely numerical, focusing on the growth in revenue and in the number of employees provided with work, but he also told me of the satisfaction that he felt when they helped people. He mentioned his progress with Luigi, who had become a model employee, and said that his positive attitude was a source of inspiration for other workers. This success could only be achieved together, he told me, and the person must ‘want to be helped.’ Others – he was referring those who had been vocal in their dissatisfaction at various points – were not able to face the necessary changes in his view. They were not willing to help themselves. Despite the potential to create a mutualistic community in the cooperative, amongst interdependent individuals supporting each other’s with their different abilities, a moral logic of self-care appeared to be prominent. For those who

managed, it was their duty to ensure that the business was successful to allow the others to help themselves through their own work.

## 6.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that the concept of care is useful to help understand the disappointments of some of the Luminare and Verdecura members and workers, who desired and felt entitled to a degree of personal respect that appeared to be missing in the cooperative. Their disappointments ranged from the lack of time spent together as a group, to being treated as an employee rather than a friend, to lacking the means to be productive at work. The summer barbeque event that some of the members organized stood out as an example of the kinds of caring practices desired. Time together was both a symbol of care and also enabled the creation and maintenance of social links among the members. Care in this context can be understood as a social process that links people together, as opposed to the vision of work as alienated labour that is reflected in impersonal bureaucratic structures. As Thelen (2015) argued, care can build relationships, but this depends on a mutual understanding of needs that are negotiated in everyday practice. There was an apparent disconnect in the models of care that some expected and that the cooperative was providing. Furthermore, constructing care as an object of *desire*, as opposed to the *need* of job provision means that such disappointments can more easily be dismissed as personal or idiosyncratic and not viewed as central to the operations of the cooperative, and thus finding such a mutual understanding seems at times unlikely.

# 7 ADDED VALUE: THE LIMITS OF CONSUMER DEMOCRACY

This chapter looks in more detail at the consumer, the alter-ego of the capitalist worker in a duality of both action and identity that has been suggested by many social theorists (including Marx 1990, Arendt 1958, Douglas and Isherwood 1979, and Bocoock 1993). Type B social cooperatives like Verdecura and Luminare are in a sense creating consumers, or at the least enhancing their purchasing power, through the act of bringing more people into gainful employment. Ethical consumerist strategies position consumers as being able to create change by voting with their wallets, offering a counterpoint to the democratic governance practices of cooperative workers described in Chapter 4. Unlike Verdecura and other social cooperatives that traditionally relied on public contracts to secure work for their members, the Luminare retail space caters directly to individual consumers. Luminare was founded in 2011 by some of the members of Verdecura with the mission of promoting ethical or ‘critical’ consumption (*consumo critico*) in a cooperatively-owned retail space. The assumption at the core of this project is that individuals can choose to consume in a way that is more ethical, placing certain social values ahead of monetary value in their purchasing decisions involving costs and benefits. To what extent is this possible and who eventually benefits from the added-value of this ‘more ethical’ consumption practice?

I argue that the concept of added-value that the management of Luminare employs to describe the more ethical products they sell inherently transcends local conceptions of shopping for necessities and as such has to be justified by consumers and the cooperative

alike. While internal discussions are oriented around the social added-value of ethical production, consumer marketing relies largely on price discounts and shortcuts like ‘organic’ and ‘zero kilometre’ (Km0) labels to define this added value. This tactic does not create a dialogue towards a shared understanding of ethical consumption or the underlying alternative processes of production, but reflects an economistic bottom-line type of valuation. The potential of the broader strategy of consumer-focused activism is also limited as the purchase of these added-value, and often more expensive items is not only a matter of knowledge, availability and choice, but also depends upon income levels.

In the following sections I present Luminare’s concept of ethical consumption within the broader context of consumer activism in Italy, before analysing the Facebook marketing and other tactics used within the cooperative to encourage ethical shopping. I take food products – as the most plainly necessary consumption goods – as the primary focus for the analysis.

## 7.1 Portrait 4: ‘*Stai facendo lo shopping?!*’ (‘Are you shopping?!’)

One Monday morning in the Verdecura office Serena guiltily told us about how she had been ‘caught’ shopping at Zara on her way home on Friday. She put her head down and pursed her lips in mock shame as she began to tell us the story. She had spent *un sacco* (a whole lot), she told us. We asked what she had bought and she admitted: a shirt and a jacket. The jacket was €79 and the shirt €39. While she was waiting in the queue to pay for the items, her phone rang. It was her boyfriend, Tomaso, who asked what she was doing. She told him she was on the way home, but he could hear music, not the sounds of

the street, in the background. ‘*Stai facendo lo shopping?!*’ he asked her in the present continuous tense, emphasizing the act. ‘Noooo...’ she imitated her own guilty admission with an extended ‘oh’ sound made through tightly pursed lips and a wide-eyed plaintive stare to match, indicating that the true answer was the opposite of the word she had spoken. She had arrived to the register also with a handbag and another accessory, but reported asking herself, ‘What am I doing?’, before escaping with a lower bill than she would have had, had Tomaso not called to check in. She also explained to us that she had not bought any new clothes in quite some time, justifying the purchases.

Serena had spoken more than once about the difficulty of balancing her finances. Although she was working full time and in one of the highest positions outside of the management, she always struggled at the end of the month to pay various bills. Lisa, who sat opposite her, would often agree with her lamentations, saying how difficult things were lately, while the intern Sara, who had been working there for over a year at the time, admitted that she was only able to continue living on her own because her parents were paying the rent. Eventually, Serena’s decision to cohabit with her boyfriend was made in part because she was struggling to make ends meet with a single salary.

Another day, in early spring, Serena and I walked down Via Indipendenza, the crowded main shopping street of Bologna, looking for a particular cosmetics shop. This was the first of a number of walks and small shopping trips that I took with Serena through the streets of Bologna. Each time she was looking for a specific item. She wanted to buy a fragrance that an intern in the cooperative had recommended. When we got to the store, Serena immediately asked about the perfume, while I browsed the items on special offer by the store entrance. They no longer carried the perfume Serena was looking for – it was limited edition – so she tried a new blackberry-scented fragrance and decided to buy that instead. She also noticed some natural deodorants and bought one of

those as well, explaining to me that she had wanted to try a more natural deodorant for a while. At the checkout, the shop assistant asked if she wanted to sign up for the loyalty card and get a 2 for 1 deal on the lip balms, conveniently placed in front of the register, plus a re-usable shopping bag. Without a pause, she agreed and, signing up for the card, selected a lip balm and asked me to choose a flavour as well, giving me the bonus gift. I protested, but she insisted: 'It was free!' Later in the year we visited a clothing shop so that she could buy some 'fresh and light' clothing for a trip to the south of Italy. She was hoping to find just the right balance of quality and price, with €20 being the apparent threshold. We browsed through the entire store looking at shorts, skirts and dresses, without finding anything that met these vague yet prevalent requirements.

I got to know Serena well on our walks and train trips, and she invited me into her home. I noticed that nearly all of her groceries were from the cooperatives CONAD and Coop, and mostly organic or fair trade. She was one of the few employees who shopped occasionally at Luminare, buying one or two items when human resources meetings took her there. She would buy the bulk organic olive oil, praising both the taste and quality, and highlighting that it could be used with every meal, making it worth the extra expense. She could not make the same argument for other goods. Although she sometimes bought organic risotto mixes at Luminare, Serena complained that she could buy the same product at an organic shop in Villacenseo at a lower price. I asked her once if she ever felt pressure to shop at Luminare, but she said no, that no one encouraged or even asked her to shop there, especially since she had moved away from the Villacenseo city centre.

## 7.2 Critical consumption or critical consumerism?

The concept of ethical consumption comes in a long line of ‘political consumerism’ which includes both boycotting vs. *buycotting* reaching back to the nineteenth century or even earlier (Forno & Graziano 2014; Lewis and Potter 2011). There is no clear set of shared values but instead ethical consumption is composed of varied local responses to materialism and overconsumption, and linked to a range of concerns including environmentalism, anti-materialism, and sustainability (Lewis and Potter 2001: 4, 7). The founders of Luminare saw the venture as a means through which they could spread their own values of critical consumption by providing a physical space where consumers would have immediate access to a variety of more ethical purchasing options as selected by the cooperative. Luminare’s mission statement details their vision of ‘ethical’ and ‘sustainable’ economic practice:

Luminare is a project developed for the local community, dedicated to the social economy and the promotion of human and economic activities, *sustainable* from an *ethical, social and environmental* point of view, and which do not have profit as the main priority and reason for being. All activities must have as their primary goal the enhancement of the capacity of each person, to be directed to the affirmation of the principles of *solidarity* and *social justice* and pursue the *greater good* for the greatest possible number of people. Any initiatives that do not show *respect for human rights, animals, and nature* are also prohibited. (emphasis added)

Consistent with other examples of ethical consumption, this vision includes a diverse range of overlapping and potentially conflicting concerns: economic, environmental, social, and animal, as well as potentially conflicting views on territoriality and a concern for the greater good.

The everyday meaning of ethical consumption at Luminare was elaborated on by Mattia, one of the cooperative’s founders, as he explained the various features of the shopping centre to me and the two other visitors: an eco-fountain providing filtered still

and sparkling water for a small fee (thus reducing transport costs and packaging waste); a Bio Grocer selling local, organic, Fair Trade, and bulk foods; an organic restaurant also featuring local dishes; and a retail shop with many recycled garments and fabrics or items produced by local artisans. This area is divided into separate corners: green-building consultants; natural toys and organic cotton clothing for children; shoes made of sustainably produced leather; and a natural cosmetics shop. Two days each week there is also 'Km0' farmers market (featuring local foods from within 60km) where people can buy directly from the local producers. Luminare's '360-degree' approach also includes a wellness centre that offered yoga and other mind-body activities, as well as an 'ethics counter' for free specialist consultations for citizens (including lawyers, psychologists, nutritionists and breastfeeding advice). Their particular vision of ethical thus focuses largely on local provenance, a rejection of mass-production, and the reduction of waste through both packaging and recycling, or 'upcycling' as it was called.

In the context of these various strategies of more ethical consumption, it is also important to distinguish ethical *consumption* practices from ethical *consumerism* as an ideology. While some consumption is necessary for survival, *consumerism* represents a particular ideology, often linked to capitalism, for example:

...that is the active ideology that meaning of life is to be found in buying things and pre-packaged experiences, pervades modern capitalism. This ideology of consumerism serves both to legitimate capitalism and to motivate people to become consumers in fantasy as well as reality.

(Robert Bocoock 1993: 50);

Consumption, in its ideological guise – as '*consumerism*' – refers to a material sensibility actively cultivated for the common good, by Western states and commercial interests, particularly since World War II.

(Comaroff and Comaroff 2001: 4).

This distinction is important because while ethical consumption is possible, ethical *consumerism* is associated with capitalism and can be viewed as a contradiction in terms within some ethical frameworks: 'neoliberal capitalism relies on a structural disparity

between rich and poor, and is therefore not itself an “ethical” system to those whose ethical standards include a belief in socio-economic equity’ (Littler 2001: 29). Nonetheless, Gabriel and Lang (2006) have identified five different strands of consumerist ideology, ranging from the dominant Western ideology linked to capitalism described above, to various ‘alternative’ ideologies, all of which grant power to the individual consumer to affect change. Such alternative ideologies of ethical consumerism have grown since the 1980s and focus on the ability of the consumer to improve environmental, labour, health or other ethical issues through advocacy and shopping choices (ibid.: 166). In Italy, a study of various types of ‘sustainable’ community groups found that while a concern about the social and environmental impacts of materialism and consumerism is central, rather than being *anti*-consumption, the interest is in promoting artisanal products over mass-produced alternatives with a focus on the fair distribution of wealth (Forno and Graziano 2014: 143). The vision for Luminare is similar, and relies on empowering individual consumers to support alternative models of production.

What makes Luminare innovative, according to the management, is the ‘360-degree’ approach that combines various types of critical consumption under one roof. Shortly after opening in 2012, the communications director noted the importance of the shopping centre format in their vision: ‘Instead of proposing yet another small organic store, we asked ourselves why it wouldn’t be possible to take advantage of the strengths of a shopping centre – concentrating multiple types of products [in one space] – but to transform it ethically’. The shopping mall is a way to increase ‘efficiency’ for both retailer and consumer by attracting crowds of people and providing numerous shops and activities in one place (Ritzer 2013: 59). Beyond the added convenience, George Ritzer theorizes that the shopping centre is an important symbol in a culture of consumerism (2005: 7). In his analysis of such spaces, Ritzer highlights how the structure and

ambiance of retailers from different eras in Milan influence how consumers practice and experience consumption (ibid.: 156-159). The open plan space with the Km0 bistro and Bio Grocer at the back encouraged Luminare's visitors to browse effortlessly from the sustainable shoes to the organic cosmetics on their way to buy instant consumables. This desire to create synergy, and encourage shopping, is also reflected in their communication strategy below, through the use of events and offers to drive footfall and potential sales. While espousing critical *consumption* in their mission, the physical space and online marketing practices detailed below seem to reflect the ideology of *consumerism* where customers are encouraged to implement their ethics through shopping.

While promoting conscious *consumption*, the Luminare retail space invites customers to shop (*fare lo shopping*), buying also less necessary items such as make up and fashion accessories. In Italy, there is a clear distinction between shopping for necessities, or grocery shopping, *fare la spesa*, and leisurely shopping for other items, *fare lo shopping*. On a Sunday, many people in Italy *fare lo shopping*, or go out for a walk (*fare un giro*) with friends or family, and this is a distinct activity from *fare la spesa*, which is linked to the idea of necessary expenses, *spesa*, being also used to denote bills such as heat and electricity. As argued by Arendt (1958: 124), one solution to virtually unlimited production is the expansion of consumption: 'It consists in treating all use objects as though they were consumer goods, so that a chair or a table is now consumed as rapidly as a dress and a dress used up almost as quickly as food.' The distinction between necessary and optional goods also seemed to impact the performance of the goods sold by the cooperative. This difference appeared to coincide with parts of the Luminare business that were flourishing (consumables linked to daily necessities), versus those that were struggling (clothing and other more durable items). While this may also have been partly due to the poor economic situation in Italy at the time of the

research, this partial failure may also point to a deeper conflict between ethical consumption, and the apparent logic of consumerism being embodied in an 'ethical' retail space.

Thrift is also a key element for many Italian shoppers, just as Daniel Miller observed in his study of shopping in north London (1998). A recent study of market shoppers in Turin found that while doing grocery shopping there is a focus on thrift and justifications are given for occasional sweet treats, shopping at the more expensive Sunday market which features organic and specialty items is considered in itself to be 'a treat, a leisure activity, rather than a necessity' (Black 2012: 83, 71). Although awareness of food origins and organic production has been spreading in Italy because of the visibility of the Slow Food movement and also encouraged by food labelling laws introduced in 2002, price is still seen as the bottom line for many shoppers (ibid.: 148-149). Organic food has also become increasingly available since 1993 when it first achieved national distribution in Coop Italia stores, but retail prices for organic fruits and vegetables continued to be 50-200% higher than standard (FAO [no date]) and thus may still be out of reach for some consumers. This underscores the importance of considerations of justifying spending for added value items.

### *7.2.1 Individual versus collective consumer activism*

Numerous scholars in anthropology and related disciplines have questioned the efficacy of activism geared towards changing individual consumption behaviour. Writing about the GMO movement, for example, Roff (2007) argues that consumerist tactics represent the neoliberalisation of food activism, shifting responsibility from states and manufacturers to individuals. The marketing of 'virtuous' commodities has been important to business as dissent to neoliberal capitalism is 'repackaged as a marketing

opportunity' (Hickel and Khan 2012: 206). Individual well-being for the consumer has been opposed to moral citizenship (Cabrera and Williams 2014: 349) in way that privileges an individualistic analysis over an ecosystem approach, which would argue that there is no individual well-being without also seeking the greater good. While such ethical consumer movements aim to reconstruct these social relations and educate consumers about the geography of production, labels such as Fair Trade may themselves add an additional layer of fetish (Freidberg 2003), and may encourage complacency among consumers (Littler 2001). Labelling standards such as organic and Fair Trade also serve to enable individual consumers as agents of change, yet these alternatives to the standard food system have been, to varying extents, co-opted by the corporate food systems that such alternatives seek to challenge (Jaffee and Howard 2009). Despite the potential for fetishism and status-seeking related to the higher price of some more ethical products, there are also positive outcomes of ethical consumerism, such as sharing wealth in consumer cooperatives and encouraging companies to pay attention to supply chains (Littler 2001: 36). In order to achieve change, rather than doing so through the 'sovereign consumer' as the primary agent of change, Hickel and Khan suggest direct political action (2012: 224), while Littler (2001) emphasizes the potential of cooperative business.

The cooperative movement has sometimes been considered as an early form of consumer advocacy (Gabriel and Lang 2006: 9). Consumer information cooperatives, a form of consumer activism, are founded on implicit assumptions that do not diverge greatly from consumerist ideology, for example: taking advantage of imperfections in the free market that are exploitable for individual consumers, or seeing consumers as a group in opposition to producers (Winward 1994: 77). There has, however, been a conflictual relationship between consumer cooperatives and consumer activism because, while cooperatives have generally viewed their mutualistic model as the best way to protect the

interests of the working class, consumer advocates have instead focused on lobbying, boycotting and information-sharing geared to the individual consumer (Furlough and Strikwerda 1999: 20). Cooperative theorists often agreed with neo-classical economists on the importance of the consumer in generating demand for production, though they saw an important role for associations, as opposed to individual consumers (ibid.: 14). Many contributors to Furlough and Strikwerda's edited collection on the history of consumer cooperatives found that the movement was struggling to meet the demands of consumerism: 'Cooperation's great crisis was adaptation to changing times and tastes, providing a fuller range of goods and appealing to more tastes without giving up the advantages of low costs and democratic, consumer participation' (ibid.: 33). In Italy, this seems to have been addressed by Coop Italia through the adoption of cause-based marketing and strategies that mirror individualistic consumer activist agendas.

### *7.2.2 The Coop: competing through ethical standards*

Consumer and retail cooperatives are very prevalent in Italy, representing about one-third of the total grocery market share.<sup>59</sup> Coop Italia, which is both a network and distribution centre for the regional consumer cooperatives in Italy, invests heavily in education and outreach to promote conscious consumerism. It was also the first national supermarket to sell organic produce after 1993 (FAO [no date]). The Coop logo could also be frequently seen on banners and programs supporting local events ranging from concerts and book fairs to the annual 'Week of good living' held in nearby Forlì. While ostensibly working on the behalf of consumer members, the Coop is at the same time building its own-label brand that focuses on providing the healthiest and best quality food at fair prices. Fabio, a

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<sup>59</sup> <http://www.alleanzacooperative.it/1-associazione> [Accessed 20 April 2015]

young Italian professor, who is on the board of one of the local Coop branches outside Bologna, told me that Coop Italia had worked hard to become an advocate and recognised leader for food safety, for example ensuring that their own label water was the cheapest price, but also competitive with the market leader in terms of quality. Coop Italia had also introduced two additional tiers of own-label: *vivi verde* (an organic line) and *fior fiore* (a gourmet line focusing on local specialty items) to enhance this reputation for safety and quality. ‘We are kind of like the opposite of Lidl’ (a German discount chain) where consumers had started to shop only as a matter of necessity since the crisis, he told me, although they would prefer to buy local.

Despite having a cooperative legal structure, Coop Italia’s large size means that member participation is low, and while the consumer cooperatives do make an effort to include the views of their customers, it is a frequent refrain among co-operators and others in Bologna that a Coop membership is just like having a *tessera* (loyalty card) for any other grocery store. Reaching out for feedback through their in-store circular shows how Coop Italia also uses standard marketing tools to enact its own cooperative identity (Fig. 7.1).



Figure 7.1. Tell us who you are for the Coop you want. Dear member, update your info and help us always live up to your expectations. Find the form to complete in your Coop store. Get to know each other. An initiative to update and renew member relations.

Fabio also noted the importance of maintaining the cooperative ethic, which he linked to providing safe and healthy goods, while also recognising that the Coop is a large business.

That Coop Italia maintains a strong share of the grocery market, despite the low involvement of its members, is due in part to using the language and tactics of consumer activism and cause-based marketing. In store, Coop Italia promotes various types of ethical consumption and also healthy eating for children, as seen in the displays in Figure 7.2. Prominently displaying their stance regarding local food, animal testing, genetically modified organisms and responsible fishing both adds to their brand image and provides a signal to consumers who are concerned about these issues that they can safely shop at the Coop store. Likewise, the ‘Super Vita-mini’ plush toys and books simultaneously promote awareness of healthy foods for kids, while feeding into a customer loyalty program whereby the plush toys are bought with a combination of money and qualifying purchases, or else entirely using membership points.



Figure 7.2. Signs from left to right: responsible fishing; no thanks to animal testing; no thanks to GMOs; 100% Italian olive oil; and the Super Vitamini display of books and toys for children.

Customers are also paying for a certain image, which is captured neatly in the paper bags available for purchase at the till in Bologna in autumn 2013 as seen in Figure 7.3.



Figure 7.3. Coop: ‘This big beautiful bag says something about you: it says you are a friend of nature and that you respect it starting with the little things. Tell everyone! – You are the Coop. Who can give you more!’

This symbolic, communicative aspect of ethical consumption has been linked to middle-class values and the cost of purchasing such goods to status-seeking (Littler 2001: 34). A European Social Survey has found that purchasing ethical products correlated with middle-class social status in cases where those products cost more (Harrison 2010), leaving those unable to pay higher prices for more ethical products to participate through boycotts, collective action or alternative provisioning strategies.

### *7.2.3 Food activism: alternative provisioning in Italy*

Several anthropologists have recently documented the significance of local food movements across Italy, including Slow Food, Km0 markets, and alternative production models including organic cooperative agriculture and ‘co-production’ (Leitch 2003;

Black 2012; Sinisalchi 2012, 2014; Counihan 2014a, 2014b; Rakopoulos 2014; Grasseni 2012, 2013, 2014a, 2014b). The philosophy of the Slow Food founders was to prioritise people and seasonal cycles over the capitalist logic of production, and to bring back enjoyment (*piacere*) as a central element of consumption (Sinisalchi 2012).

Solidarity purchasing groups (*Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale*, GAS), similar to the Slow Food concept, support local as opposed to large producers (Grasseni 2013: 5). The solidarity group practices also extend beyond alternative shopping to include other alternative provisioning strategies such as gifting and self-production (Grasseni 2014a). Grasseni conceives of their provisioning activism ‘as a form of political activity, moving beyond the concept of consumer sovereignty’ (2013: 78). Unlike seemingly similar community agriculture groups in the United States that enable direct links between consumers and local farmers without altering the underlying relationships between consumers and producers, co-production in GAS involves working directly with producers through regular meetings and voluntary work (Grasseni 2014b: 179-180).

However, the aims and ethics of various actors within the food system can diverge, even within groups that are ostensibly working together for change. Theodoros Rakopoulos’s (2014) research on anti-mafia cooperatives emphasizes this point. While the cooperative administrators claimed to practice food activism and linked ‘good’ food with concepts like democracy, solidarity, legality and organic agriculture, the manual workers considered the wine produced by the cooperative to be ‘too commercial’ in opposition to their homemade wine that was ‘authentic and pure’ (ibid.: 117). Thus, Rakopoulos argues, even the claims of ethical production underscored existing divisions of labour that were perpetuated in the alternative model (ibid.). This highlights the difficulty of breaking away from established patterns of production and relationality, an issue that also emerges in the Luminare case below.

### 7.3 Luminare: marketing 360 degrees of critical consumption

Villacenseo city centre is small enough to walk across from one side to the other in less than an hour. The central piazza is surrounded by old *palazzi*, a post office and various other public buildings of light grey stone embellished with multi-story columns and grand arched windows. The route from the train station to the offices of Luminare each morning would take me past office buildings of modern brick and converted factories, many small shops, and multiple grocery stores: a large Coop supermarket, part of the Coop Italia network; an A&O supermarket chain store; and the discounter Lidl. Dotted throughout the city were other small discounters and supermarket chains, CONAD retailer cooperatives, an EATaly chain specializing in Italian products, and three small organic stores. Aside from the specialty stores, Coop, CONAD and the other large retail chains like A&O also sold organic and Italian specialty ranges. Even the German discounter Lidl actively promoted the Italian provenance of many of its goods.

Although Luminare is not a consumer cooperative like Coop Italia, it has adopted a similar approach that focuses on promoting ethical consumption practices. While the parent cooperative Verdecurea deals with the waste that results from the process of continual production and consumption of goods (Arendt 1958: 134), and is contracted to do so by Hera, in a public-private partnership with the regional government,<sup>60</sup> Luminare, while technically also a social cooperative, is a retail space catering directly to

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<sup>60</sup> Like many other social cooperatives, Verdecurea is also now operating more fully on the market than in the past since it wins contracts through Hera, which must make a profit for investors, whereas previously the waste contracts were organised directly by the state. Conversations with managers in other (type A) social cooperatives in the CISV consortium revealed that they were also having to supplement state funding for their care services with more production oriented tasks, keeping marketability of goods in mind.

consumers. This is a new element for some social cooperatives which had previously relied heavily upon state-provided funds, thus requiring them to compete with other businesses for a share of consumer spending. While Luminare is positioned to respond to the needs and wants of consumers, while enabling more ethical shopping choices, as a social cooperative it is fundamentally, from a perspective of mutual exchange, geared towards serving its members through the provision of work. This means that it is necessary to attract customers to provide for its members.

Luminare is located about five kilometres outside the city centre, closer to the farms and orchards that are the engine of the Emilia-Romagna countryside than to the other shops and markets in the centre of the city. There was ample parking space in front of the building and a small bike rack, which more often than not remained unused. The nearest bus route was rather inconvenient. Most customers and the cooperative members working there arrived by car. This posed a problem for the management in terms of attracting custom from the city centre, so much of the physical advertising of printed leaflets and newsletters was geared toward the surrounding neighbourhoods. However, the environmental impact of the reliance on individual transport did not appear to be a concern, despite the apparent conflict with their promotion of Km0 foods and the spring water dispenser that eliminated transportation for pre-bottled water. A market research survey conducted by Luminare in 2014 to better understand their customers and optimise the Bio Grocer's offerings found that nearly half of their customers lived within five kilometres. This finding encouraged them to stock more ready foods, as it was considered as a local, convenience shopping trip, and also confirmed Luminare's strategy to focus marketing efforts locally.

Much of the open-plan retail space at Luminare was decorated with reclaimed wood, 'upcycled' items like lights made from wine bottles, and vintage or artisanal

furniture and artwork. This created a certain aesthetic, which, the vice president Giada explained to me, was an alternative look, yet one that would hopefully not alienate fashionable women. Women in Italy, as elsewhere, have traditionally been responsible for the unpaid work of social reproduction including shopping and food preparation (Thelen 2015), and have thus been at the forefront of many grassroots practices of food activism (Counihan 2014b). It is also an arena, that according to Counihan, gives women an opportunity to express their agency both publicly and privately, though she calls into question the extent to which this can change society at large, including the gendered division of labour itself (ibid.: 63, 99). Giada envisioned Luminare as more than ‘just about being “good” but also showing that it is possible to be innovative, fresh, and responsible with higher quality products and with glamour.’ Events such as vintage inspired fashion shows, featuring sustainable, upcycled or reused garments, organic cosmetic beauty evenings, and cooking classes for children were also part of this outreach to women, which also appeared to be targeting an affluent population.

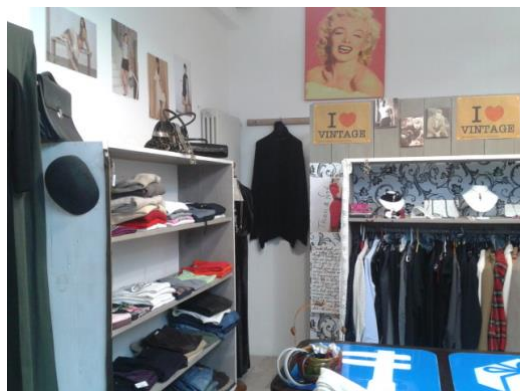


Figure 7.4. Clockwise from top left: Luminare 'Conscious living' re-usable shopping bag; fashion show with vintage, artisan and eco-friendly clothes; outdoor seating for the organic restaurant; Luminare's vintage corner.

Shopping at Luminare also provided customers with a certain image. One day I joined Mattia for lunch at Luminare's restaurant along with a professor and his class that was studying social economy at the local university. Mattia noted how interesting it was that the students had bought so many things on their visit; he had arranged for a set lunch menu because, he joked, students are normally poor. Their professor said that they were just participating in the social economy: 'It's like if you go to a Martin Luther King museum,' he said, 'you are going to buy something, like a shirt that says "I have a dream" on it.' Similarly, Giada encouraged me to borrow some clothing items from Luminare when I went to a social economy conference on their behalf: a brightly coloured scarf and matching small clutch made of recycled fabrics. Giada wanted me to look the part – my style was 'very American', she remarked – and this way I could also casually showcase some of their products. Such luxury items, as opposed to those considered necessities have a symbolic, political function (Appadurai 1986: 38).

However, when I stopped by the office later, instead of praising the 'look', Serena gasped at the price of the bag, about €40, and laughing she said that I should take care not to stain it. She also recognised the fabric used. It seemed to be recycled from a free shopping bag given out by one of the clothing chains she liked, and she had one herself. We wondered how something made with free materials could end up costing so much. Similarly, the 'vintage' clothes that had largely been donated to the cooperative ranged in price from €10 for used high-street brands to €200 or more for used designer items. Serena, too, liked vintage clothes. After the Christmas holiday, she came to the office wearing a new coat. As was customary, I complimented the coat and asked her if it was new. Taking a guess, I also asked if it had been a Christmas present. 'Yes, it's new and a

Christmas present from my mom,' she confirmed, also adding, 'It was very expensive, too expensive.' She was ashamed to say how much, and told us that she would not have spent the money, but that her mom bought it for her. 'It is vintage,' she explained, justifying the price, but then wondering out loud, 'Why is vintage so expensive?' Both David and I replied nearly simultaneously, 'Because it is unique.' This represents a somewhat economic analysis of the situation, with prices seen to be determined by supply and demand, yet demand for fashion, like other commodities, has been shown to be 'socially regulated' (ibid.: 32). While Kopytoff (1986) has linked singularity to pricelessness, not all unique items are personally, or symbolically valuable.

### *7.3.1 Added value*

In a similar way that being a local, social cooperative was seen to add value in the competition for public waste contracts, the added value (*valore aggiunto*) of the goods sold by Luminare was seen to advance social values thanks to their alternative production. In the context of marketing, added value is usually something added to a product or service to make it more attractive to potential customers. The concept of added value, and the idea of finding a balance of quality and price, was commonly used by managers at Luminare to describe the products being promoted. Miller has also found the colloquial use of value, especially added value, to be ubiquitous in the offices where he did fieldwork (2008). Miller (ibid.) suggests considering colloquial uses of value as a link between financial value and inalienable social values. The concept of added (social) value employed here hints at this dichotomy, which is dealt with, but not overcome by Luminare's consumerist strategies.

On one occasion Giada called me in as their 'marketing consultant' because of my past work experience with the marketing research company Nielsen. Giada arranged for

me to meet with the owner of the cosmetics corner because he wanted some advice on how to optimise his range of organic facial cream. They wanted to introduce a new, lower-priced range, replacing the current professional range that they carried. I explained a little about the concept of price-tiering, noting that the goal is to capture, most efficiently, the various groups of consumers depending on their willingness to pay more or less for a given product or service. This would also require that products also offer distinct benefits, or some kind of added value. They couldn't identify any additional benefits for the highest price professional product, so thought to replace it with a similar but less costly product from same brand and also add a lower price tier around €13 versus the highest price of around €40. While we were discussing, Giada joined us to inquire if they had decided what to do. She had wanted me to convince the cosmetics manager to keep the professional line too, but looking at the benefits mentioned for the two lines, I asked her how to differentiate them. 'Because it is professional,' she said. 'It also gives them a certain...' she couldn't define the idea exactly, but reasoned that having a professional product creates a certain image, even for people who do not want to buy it. They decided to keep a more limited selection of the professional range in addition to adding the new lower-priced range. This would also make the less expensive products appear to be a better price in comparison. The cosmetics assistant suggested introducing the new range as '*contro la crisi*' (against the financial crisis), which was agreed, though Giada reminded that they should maintain a focus on quality rather than price. The cosmetics corner advertised this on its own Facebook page, which we shared on the Luminare page and added to Luminare's website. While maintaining an emphasis on quality, the communication model used in essence prioritized price.

Giada also stressed the importance of the added value of the goods they sold as a way to address a general impression that the Bio Grocer was an expensive place to buy

food. She suggested a two-pronged approach for the communications effort: ‘Why does it cost more?’ and ‘Does it *really* cost more?’ I suggested a direct comparison to other stores. Recalling Mattia’s comment on my first visit to Luminare that some of the basic organic goods were at a similar price to regular branded products like Barilla pasta, I suggested that we could provide a comparison of a similar basket of products to show that the absolute price was not very different, as a starting point to combat price-value concerns. Giada thought that this would be too direct and aggressive. Instead, she suggested using the website and e-newsletter to focus on quality, and on the added ethical value, created through relationships with producers. Instead, as will be detailed below, much of the communication to potential customers focused on price reductions to attract sales, rather than emphasizing superior quality or social values as intended.

### *7.3.2 Luminare’s communication strategy*

Although the rise of political consumerism in Italy and elsewhere since the early 2000s has been attributed, at least in part, to the use of new information and communications technologies (ICTs) (Forno and Graziano 2014), research on how these technologies have been used to promote food activism in Italy is limited. In the case of the anti-mafia wine cooperative studied by Rakopoulos, administrators used websites, e-newsletters and other tactics to build the reputation of the cooperative and to encourage distribution and consumption of their products, and this focus on the consumption end of the process, he argues, shaped the divergent food ethics between administrators and manual workers (2014: 115-116). Other ethnographic cases like the GAS network in Italy and the Luminare example below show how ICTs can enable and support existing local networks. Grasseni’s research on GAS suggests a minor role for ICTs in organizing their co-production practices. Although the network maintains a website and encourages member

groups to register online, Grasseni highlights the relative importance of in-person meetings and the amount of offline work necessary to coordinate a collective purchase initiated by an online survey (2013: 99-100). Furthermore, she chronicles the rejection by some GAS participants of the use of online communication methods to coordinate large-scale orders, as these participants argued that online communication was antithetical to their ideal of supporting small local producers (ibid.: 105).

Social media marketing, which figures centrally in the Luminare case below, also reflects local practices and concepts. The concept of marketing itself is culturally contingent, and intended to produce markets for goods or services (Araujo et al. 2010: 1). Social media marketing is a new form of marketing that, in opposition to the traditional communication methods of mass marketing, has potential to reach consumers on a more individualized basis via social media such as blogs, forums and social networks (Evans 2010). Miller et al. (2016) found engagement with advertising on Facebook to be functional primarily at the local level, mostly useful for ‘commercial enterprises that are themselves based on personal connections and small-scale sociality’ (ibid.: 97). In southern Italy, for example, social media use was common among entrepreneurs and part of a wider context of cultivating relationships and personal visibility (ibid.: 93). Indeed, as will be seen below, Luminare’s use of Facebook marketing showed a greater potentiality for maintaining existing network ties than it appeared to have for reaching new ethical consumers.

The website and Facebook page were central to Luminare’s communication strategy because they could, in theory, generate awareness of their products at virtually no cost, one of the potentialities of ICT noted by Berry and McEachern (2005). ICTs were part of a broader integrated strategy that included various traditional and new media. Figure 7.5 below, which was drawn by the vice president during a meeting to introduce

me and others to Luminare’s communication strategy and the roles that we would play, shows how various online channels, notably Facebook (FB), the website (SITO) and newsletters (newsletter) were used to communicate the planned events and the weekly offers (*offerte settimanali*) that were also published in a paper and e-newsletter, and occasional (often online) press releases.

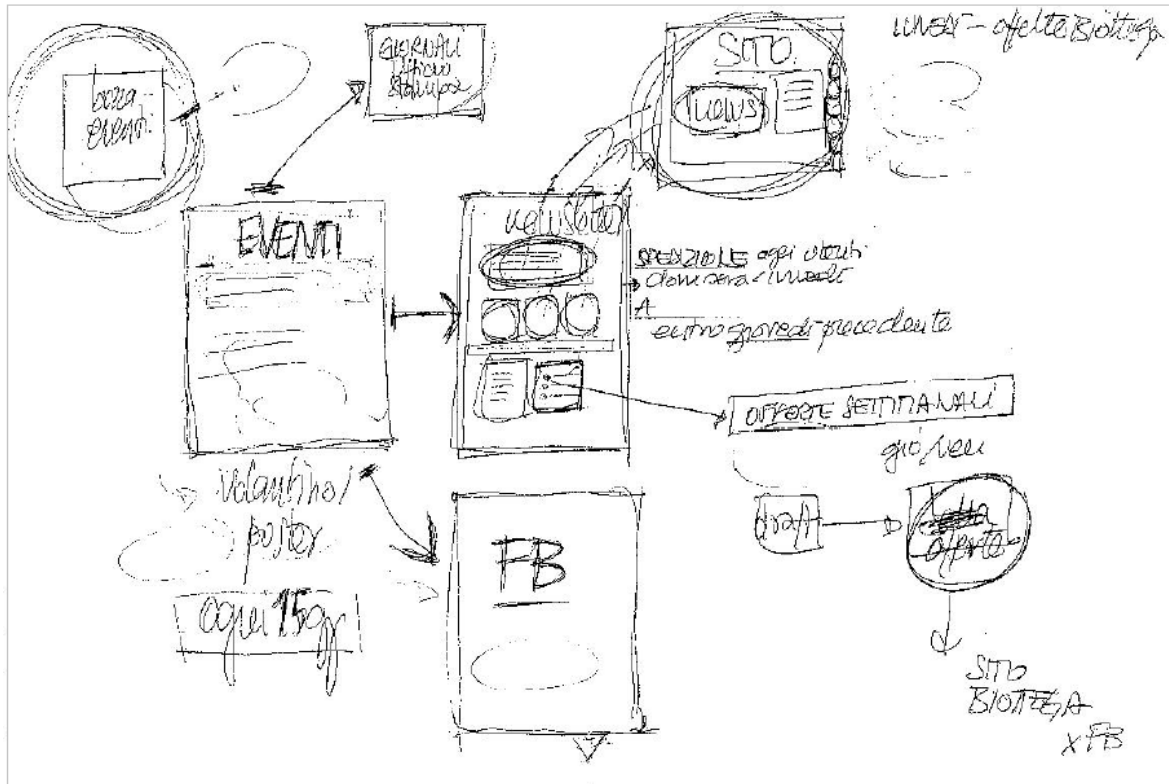


Figure 7.5. Luminare communications flowchart showing the flow of information from the events draft (top left) and weekly grocery offers (bottom right) through to events flyers, the newsletter, press releases, website and Facebook.

Luminare’s management conceived of their Facebook presence primarily as a marketing vehicle. Although the stated mission of the cooperative was to promote ‘human and economic activities, sustainable from an ethical, social and environmental point of view, and which do not have profit as the main priority and reason for being’ (as described in their mission statement above), Facebook activity was intended to cultivate critical consumers, with an emphasis on *consumers*, to drive Luminare’s sales and make the retailer itself sustainable from a financial point of view.

The Facebook page for Luminare was not promoting conscious consumerism per se, but the events and products on sale for the sake of generating revenue. Sharing other content was encouraged, but primarily as a means to get people to like and follow the page by offering interesting content, as opposed to doing so for the purposes of creating a shared view of sustainable living. Mattia had told me early on that it is necessary to '*fare il ruffiano*' (be sly or pandering), in other words market-oriented and commercial, when posting on Facebook. As an example, he suggested we could post kittens to catch attention even if not relevant; the social media content was thus seen as less important than the outcome: generating page-likes and casting a wider marketing net. One day, a few months later, I congratulated Lucia and her assistant as they practically danced around the shop floor after the Luminare page-likes reached one thousand.

One afternoon while we were waiting for a communications meeting with the web designer Nico, Luminare's vice president Giada and event-planner Lucia, fellow volunteer Rachele and I sat together and discussed the marketing strategy and questions for Nico. We would soon be taking over the external communications: she would be working on the bi-monthly newsletter and press releases, and I would be doing the weekly website updates and Facebook posts. We considered how we might make the communication more successful and attract more customers. 'We need to use the same tools as the large corporations, but in our own way,' Rachele suggested. The idea of 'marketing' to encourage ethical consumption seemed like a contradiction in terms, but we agreed to remain open-minded and do our best.

Nico provided technical training for website updates, while Giada described how we should approach the Facebook marketing. As mentioned earlier, she told us that the focus should be on the added value of the goods. Facebook could be used to create more publicity, to really 'bombard' people with messages as it was free. She outlined the

recommended practice for the posts. For each event, there should be three reminder posts: two days before, the day before and the same day. The length should be 60-70 characters maximum, and she suggested using the hashtag symbol and capitalization to emphasise important words. Each post should have an image to grab attention or a link pointing to the website to drive traffic. Furthermore, I could also share posts from other relevant pages, for example Greenpeace. The test for posting was, 'Would I be interested to read this?' Nico added, 'If the page is "us, us, us, us" all the time it doesn't work very well,' so varying the content in that way would help to keep people interested. This mirrored the suggestion from *Social Media Marketing for Dummies* 'to share in the spirit of giving' in order to encourage other users to share your posts (Khare 2012: 10), and displayed Nico's specialist knowledge of social media marketing theory and praxis.

The resulting interactions via social media reflect Luminare's marketing approach, as Facebook was mostly used to promote events and share grocery offers, other new products or special deals, all tactics to drive footfall. Below is an example post that both highlights one of the Luminare services while also building its ethical credentials:

4 FOOTBALL FIELDS [referencing a picture below]. Why??? Over the course of the year 2013 483 thousand litres of water were dispensed by the Eco-Fountain, which is equivalent to the contents of 325 thousand 1.5 litre PLASTIC BOTTLES, which to produce would require: 26 thousand kilos of petroleum, 515 kilos of hydrocarbons, 322 kilos of sulphur oxide, 257 kilos of nitrogen, 231 kilos of carbon monoxide, and about 29 thousand kilos of carbon dioxide, not to mention the 19 international transport trips that it would have taken to transport those bottles! WE ARE TALKING ABOUT AN AMOUNT OF PLASTIC SAVED FROM THE ENVIRONMENT EQUIVALENT TO 4 FOOTBALL FIELDS!!

This example confirms and quantifies the impact that can be made through consuming particular products and services. Though in some areas, such as the example above, Luminare marketing encourages using less (in particular packaging through the eco-fountain and bulk grocery items), the main thrust of their communication remains

consumerist, promoting Luminare's products specifically rather than engaging in wider-reaching debates about what ethical consumption means.

The weekly Km0 market reminder post is typical, consisting of an image of the market or of fruits and vegetables, and highlighting the local nature of goods through the use of the Km0 label:

TODAY 14:30-18:30 Km0 organic market with local producers Fruit,  
vegetables and many other specialties directly to your table!

Likewise, the separate Bio Grocer page shared weekly specials, recipe ideas and often reposted the Luminare events. Below are some typical posts of products on offer. These also relied on labels, in this case 'organic', to promote the ethical added value, yet in order to drive sales the primary focus of the posts is on price reduction. In both cases the discount is written in capital letters for emphasis, while only in the second example is the organic label also capitalised and given equal importance.

THE SUPER OFFER of the Luminare Bio Grocer for 10-15 JUNE!  
Organic Prosciutto Crudo – EXCEPTIONAL 25% DISCOUNT: only €2.15  
per 100g!  
To see all the offers > [web link](#)

The new SUPER OFFER has arrived in the Luminare Bio Grocer!  
ORGANIC sparkling white wine from the Azienda Agricola Fiammetta –  
PAY ONLY ONE EURO FOR THE THIRD BOTTLE WHEN YOU BUY  
TWO!!  
> From the clear notes of the pignoletto and trebbiano [grapes] are born the  
pleasing bubbles of Clarinetto! A wine to drink in the countryside, ideal as an  
aperitif, with fish, or the whole meal.  
OFFER VALID from 10 to 24 May as supplies last.

Such posts did not generate discussions or debate online, but represented a one-way flow of digital information. The Bio Grocer page had around 400 followers, and over the ten months that I observed there was only one post to the page from a would-be consumer. Other posts were from other cooperatives in the network, extending their reach among the

followers of each other's pages. In a typical example of a Luminare Facebook post, there were only four post shares, all of them by other local cooperatives in the same consortium.

Giada, Lucia or Mattia would often like the Facebook posts, and I wondered if it was their way of recognizing my efforts, or rather an attempt to boost their visibility via assumptions of how the Facebook algorithms might work.<sup>61</sup> Sharing posts was also frequently done by certain individuals, but I recognised them as those who worked in communications or other management positions within the cooperative or broader consortium. This could be viewed positively as cooperative behaviour intended to help promote the messages of their peers, or, from a more cynical viewpoint, could be read as self-interested behaviour to strengthen their own network connections. In either case, the posts appeared to represent a top-down flow of marketing information from an elite group of administrators, as opposed creating a dialogue towards a shared view of sustainable living.

### *7.3.3 Orienting potential consumers to alternative models of production*

However, Facebook marketing was only one part of a larger communication strategy that included the Luminare website, (e-)newsletter, weekly events and press releases such as the one mentioned above. The newsletter draft was the central source of inspiration for online content, containing all announcements of events and discounts and short articles on critical consumption. Each newsletter had a similar format of four colourful pages

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<sup>61</sup> In the Luminare and Verdecure offices we passed around the link below to a blog post describing the Facebook algorithm changes:  
[http://www.slate.com/blogs/business\\_insider/2014/02/14/how\\_the\\_new\\_facebook\\_news\\_feed\\_works.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/business_insider/2014/02/14/how_the_new_facebook_news_feed_works.html) [Accessed 20 February 2017]. While ostensibly focused on quality of posts, we noted that it coincided with prospecting calls from the Facebook marketing team.

(two external and two internal), also published virtually on the website and distributed via email. The front page was filled each time with a large image corresponding to a short editorial piece, highlighting a particular product or service at Luminare. A selection of front-page editorial topics included vintage and restoration, eco-fountain filtered water distribution, oranges for health and legality, and clothing made from recycled fabrics. The back page comprised a selection of vouchers and announcement of current offers in the Bio Grocer. Inside was a calendar of events, a recipe suggestion (using ingredients available in the Bio Grocer), and a few short feature articles, also promoting products or services available. Examples include: ‘Some recommendations for a GREEN WARDROBE’; ‘We are what we eat’; ‘Why organic undergarments?’; ‘Why buy bulk goods?’; and various cosmetics articles related to the season such as ‘Summer skin protection’ and ‘SOS for cold weather’.



Figure 7.6. Selection of front page editorial topics: vintage and restoration; eco-fountain filtered water distribution; oranges for health and legality; clothing made from recycled fabrics.

Although these articles promoted various aspects of Luminare’s vision of more ethical shopping, they all encouraged some sort of consumption rather than including other tips for sustainable living such as reduction, re-use or self-sufficient production. The articles, again, appeared to promote ethical *consumerism*, rather than a version of critical consumption that included various acts of non-consumption or questioned the role of the consumer.

Nevertheless, looking at one example to see how it was communicated on Facebook, in the newsletter, and in person at the event itself, shows that taking into consideration *only* the Facebook posts outside the context of Luminare's broader communication strategy could exaggerate the consumerist aspect of the initiative. In early 2014 the cooperative held a small convention entitled 'The Fruits of Legality' with four speakers: a lecturer on social enterprise and three presidents of social cooperatives, including a citrus cooperative that participated in the anti-mafia cooperative agriculture movement. The Facebook post, limited in length, provided only the date, title and list of speakers. Thus, an analysis of the Facebook posts alone would be unlikely to provide a useful understanding of the concept of fruits of legality. The newsletter, on the other hand, featured an article titled 'Health, quality and legality, all in an ORANGE' that fleshed out the concept in more detail. In addition to promoting the taste and health benefits of the organic oranges – sold exclusively in the Luminare Bio Grocer, the article noted – it detailed the legality project of the social cooperative: 'These oranges "are good" (*fanno bene*) not only for the people who eat them, but they are also the fruits of the lands of legality. From Locri to the plains of Gioia Tauro extend hectares of land confiscated from the mafia and rehabilitated by producers who have chosen to join the GOEL consortium.' This begins to paint a picture of the alternative production model implied by 'The Fruits of Legality' label.

For the twenty-odd people who actually attended the event, the meaning and implication of the concept of legality was again further elaborated. The president of the citrus cooperative focused on their goal to create a model that was not only more ethical in its business practices, but also seen to be more effective than the previous one, with mafia involvement perverting the 'proper' functioning of the market. Whereas previously producers could earn only about five cents per kilo of fruit, the minimum price to

producers in the consortium was forty cents. Those who stood up against the mafia as part of the consortium risked the destruction of their property through fires, but they could also expect to earn eight times more. Rakopoulos has written about Legality cooperative members being convinced ‘using only the wallet’ as opposed to being indoctrinated into a shared vision food ethics (2014: 117), but in the view of this citrus cooperative president, like the administrators in Rakopoulos’s case, this mode of production was a tool for cultural and political change, which required offering a viable alternative. His hope was that, as more people began to move towards spending their own money ethically, it would transform society. Luminare, he said, was going in the direction that the whole economy needs to – and will, he hoped – move towards. The aim was to empower people, as consumers, to contribute to change through their shopping choices, and while GOEL provided the alternative production model, retailers like Luminare provided the link between producers and consumers. Therefore, cultivating critical consumers was necessary to sustain both Luminare’s own alternative retail model and to support that of the alternative producers that they stocked. While not challenging the fundamental roles of consumer, producer and retailer, the hope was to orient them all towards more ethical and sustainable practices.

#### *7.3.4 Personal encouragement*

Sometimes softer techniques were used to encourage those working in Verdecura to shop at Luminare. Both criticism and praise of recent purchases were frequent in the Verdecura offices. One day before Christmas Giada stopped into the administrative office and asked Lisa, ‘So, when are you coming to do your shopping at Luminare?’ Lisa replied, looking uncomfortable: ‘I already did it. Really, I tried sincerely, but I couldn’t find anything

there. The objects are particular and you really need to know the person, for something like that, so I did it differently.’ Giada nodded, ‘I understand.’

Frequently I was the subject of criticism for my purchases in inexpensive supermarket chains. One day Mattia walked into the office and saw my empty sandwich packet and drink bottle in the waste basket. ‘Is that from Lidl?’ he asked me knowingly. David joined in the discussion, adding that there were probably a lot of chemical additives. Mattia asked what I thought was in the ready-to-drink coffee. ‘Milk, coffee, sugar...’ I offered. He read from the ingredients list (skipping those primary ingredients) and listing various additives and stabilizers. Eventually I promised never to buy it again. ‘Good,’ he said, ‘because I care about you and I want you to live longer.’ Another afternoon Mattia came into the office and mentioned that he was hungry. I offered him some raisins, which he accepted, but then looking at the packet he asked, ‘So who shopped at Pam, you Ryan?’ I tried to justify the decision: ‘It’s on my way home from the train station and it’s open longer than other stores, and on Sundays too. But,’ I admitted, ‘I do feel bad when I go there.’ To which Mattia replied, ‘You did well [to feel bad]. It is a terrible corporation!’ Although Mattia’s various comments did not result in changing my shopping behaviour, due to both budgetary restrictions and the convenience of these outlets, they did result in feelings of guilt and shame each time I shopped there. Over time, perhaps I would have been convinced to spend a higher proportion of my budget on organic food from the ‘right’ outlets. In this particular setting, justification was required for buying inexpensive, rather than more expensive organic or otherwise sustainable items, reversing the typical order as found by Black (2012) and other Verdecura members who, like me, struggled to pay the additional price for the added value items.

There was also evidence of even more subtle encouragement, consistent with Appadurai’s (1996: 66) vision of consumption as an embodied practice of ‘habituation

through repetition' with imitation as a key aspect of this process. Although this is not an example of ethical shopping, the following story taken as an excerpt from my field notes highlights the importance of imitation in establishing shopping and consumption patterns:

Crackers... how easy it is to influence purchases of others. A few months ago I bought a multi-pack of whole grain crackers because I noticed a lot of us were buying them from the machine downstairs and it is much, much cheaper per pack if you buy them in the supermarket. Earlier today David was eating some whole grain crackers from a multi-pack from the Coop. He had brought them in to replace the earlier pack which he'd help finish. Serena asked him if he liked those crackers. He said he bought them because they were the same as before. Serena, who'd bought the previous pack, said she bought them because I bought them and she assumed I liked them. I said actually no, I don't really like them, I just bought them because they are more healthy! Each of them bought these crackers thinking that they were doing so because someone else liked them but in fact it was not true - they were just repeating a process based on an assumption of the underlying motivation.

With just one instance of purchasing a multi-pack of crackers to share with my office mates, I had established a cycle of purchasing that was repeated multiple times, including a number of repeat purchases myself, and it was established quickly that there would always be crackers in the office for everyone to share, and most, though not all, contributed to purchases. A simple look could be enough to encourage this behaviour. One day after lunch David ate two packs of crackers. Although I had purchased the crackers with the intention of sharing them, I inadvertently gave him a scornful look as he tucked into the second pack. He responded by quickly reassuring us that he would buy the next pack of crackers.

At Luminare, the retail space and marketing practices served to promote a consumer-centric vision of ethical consumption that relied on shopping as a primary tool for practicing food politics. Food consumption has become increasingly oriented to sustainable practices, as the rise in organic production and consumption in Italy shows (FAO [no date]), and Mattia's comments above show that for some at least, this has

become normalized to the point where making purchases that are seen as less ethical have to be justified. This vision was extended through their 360-degree approach to other more luxury items including accessories and sustainable fashion, though with less success.

## 7.4 The limits of consumer democracy

Although in some areas Luminare did encourage using less (through reduced packaging and upcycling), the main thrust of the communications remained consumerist, with a focus on discounts and product features, and not all consumers could choose to pay the higher prices for organic produce, limiting the efficacy of this approach to generate change. While there are some who can choose to spend ‘more ethically’, for others it is not only a question of ethics, but basic affordability. To illustrate this, consider the differences between a typical Luminare shopper and the two cooperatives’ employees. I became close to a local entrepreneur who lived just outside Villacenseo, not far from Luminare. She and her family were part of the core target of the Luminare Bio Grocer, that is, local families. She and her husband shopped there regularly, buying basic groceries, paper products and cosmetics. Their grocery shopping repertoire also included organic goods from CONAD, Coop and produce from local markets. They shopped at Luminare without appearing to question the price; I watched as they dropped goods into their basket without making any display of checking the price. Alternatively, most people working in the cooperatives Verdecura and Luminare felt they could not afford to pay more for many of the goods being sold there, as an excerpt from my field notes capturing an exchange between Serena and Lisa in late 2013 shows:

Serena is saying she doesn’t shop at Luminare because it really costs too much. She describes something she wants to buy and the price, but, ‘No’.

She can buy something in a small store nearby for much less. ‘I know that many people go there and spend a lot, but I feel like saying, eh...’

Lisa: ‘I’m not sure what kind of clients can shop there.’

Serena: ‘People with lots of money who don’t care about the cost.’

Both agree that even if they agree in principle, they can’t afford to shop there.

Lucia, the events planner, also made weekly deliveries of organic groceries to the offices in the consortium, though her Friday shopping deliveries only went to people like Giada and Mattia – those at the highest management levels. Although Mattia had pointed out to me when I first met him the small disparity at Verdecura between the lowest-paid and highest-paid employees, about 35% difference in his estimate, this discrepancy of €300-400 per month was enough to make a difference in discretionary spending – the difference between buying only on the basis of price, and having room in the budget to choose to pay extra for added value(s). I heard frequent laments that the goods were nice, but just too expensive. In the political consumption repertoire of many of my colleagues, boycotting and other forms of reduced consumption were readily available, whereas making the more ethical purchase often was not.<sup>62</sup> While the social cooperative was effectively creating consumer purchasing power via work placement salaries, ethical purchasing options were not equally available, and Luminare was marketing added value to a small group of relatively affluent consumers. Making the alternative products available and increasing awareness of them via social media marketing did not address the root problem of some consumers. Such practices that place responsibility on individual consumers are essentially neoliberal, taking the ethical burden away from

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<sup>62</sup> This issue also extended to those working in other cooperatives, for example Chiara who worked at a national worker cooperative based in Bologna. She had worked there for about two years, working through three temporary contracts before being offered a permanent one, yet still she was unable to afford any savings after her monthly expenses were paid. ‘At the end of the month there is nothing left,’ she told me.

manufacturers and states (Roff 2007), and not all were equally able to participate in change that costs more.

## 7.5 Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the assumption that individuals can choose to consume in a way that is more ethical is true in some cases, but depends on the individual's ethical framework and available income. While mirroring the findings of Rakopoulos (2014) that the food ethics of management and workers within social cooperatives may diverge, it also highlights the difference between will and desire, and the limitations of driving change through purchasing. Those with greater purchasing power were more able to 'implement their hopes' (Jansen 2015: 55), with the ability to reach desired ends being at the intersection of economic and social values.

Luminare's sales were contributing to creating jobs locally, contributing to the sales of other local producers and artisans, and in the case of the Eco Fountain having a measurable impact on the environment. However, this consumerist strategy is incomplete. Practicing consumption politics primarily through the purchase of more ethical goods leaves some less able to participate. When social values are added on top, instead of being made essential to the production process through regulations or other systemic changes, the act of choice itself is ascribed value and discriminates amongst different types of consumers. When choosing more ethical, often more expensive goods is encouraged, those who feel unable to do so may also feel morally inferior. Addressing such issues instead through alternative provisioning strategies that also include non-consumption, self-production or other forms of exchange may also be more inclusive.

The concept of added value that the management of Luminare employs to describe the more ethical products they sell inherently transcends local conceptions of shopping for necessities, and consumers are responsible for making a choice that has to be justified through a cost-benefit analysis. While internal discussions were oriented towards the social added-value of ethical production, Facebook marketing was used to attract customers to the retail space with attention paid to the total number of page-likes, and content being sometimes less important than gaining visibility. Despite discussions of added value, the weekly promotions shared on Facebook regularly utilised price discounts. Rather than adding to shared understandings of ethical consumption or alternative production methods, this tactic reflected and encouraged a bottom-line type of valuation, again showing the limitations of relying on individual purchasing power to fundamentally change the food system.

Despite the limitations of the approach, and recognizing that using labels like Fair Trade and Km0 may reproduce processes of commodification of the types of products they sell (Freidberg 2003), Luminare's approach takes advantage of these existing paradigms to drive the awareness necessary to maintain their own alternative distribution model, and consequently support alternative producers. While only a partial solution and one that creates divisions with moral implications for consumers who feel that spending more is not a viable choice, promoting these alternative models may help to create a sense of diffuse solidarity as discussed by Forno and Graziano (2014). While being criticised and asked to justify less ethical purchases may be uncomfortable, perhaps this is a first step toward changing the parameters of the meaning of basic necessities. While Baudrillard's (2001) critique of the concept of 'need' is based on the neo-Marxist assessment that it legitimates capitalist production, perhaps such projects can also help to construct, or reconstruct, 'needs' based on alternative values.





# 8 CONCLUSION: A PRECARIOUS ALTERNATIVE

To remain in the market in a non-precarious manner, social and civil businesses must be able to ‘do as well’ as other businesses and at the same time ‘do more’.<sup>63</sup>

- Bruni and S. Zamagni, quoted in Bandini 2004: 13

It is easier to be good to people when things go well. You can be generous, honest, courageous even. But when things become difficult and you have no money, you need to eliminate people, cut costs. This year cooperatives will have to face this problem. What will happen? No one knows.

- President of a cooperative group, Modena 2014

While the primary focus of this dissertation has been to consider the role that the concept of need (as opposed to greed) plays in cooperative rhetoric and practice, the broader context of precarity and austerity has emerged in each of the chapters as an important backdrop to the cooperative practice that I have described. As mentioned in the Introduction, precarity has become an important theme both for political organizing and in ethnographies that document the struggles of modern life. Various examples of labour precarity appear to be the culmination of flexible labour regimes (including the Emilian model), which have been an aspect of some types of capitalist practice since the 1970s, the concurrent growth of the service sector, and neoliberal policies of market privatisation and deregulation that have spread globally since the 1980s. More recently, austerity policies, such as the labour market reforms introduced in Italy in 2014, seem likely to further trends of insecurity as they support the continued expansion of the commoditised

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<sup>63</sup> My translation of original in Italian: *‘Le imprese sociali e civili, per rimanere sul mercato in modo non precario, devono essere in grado di “far bene” quanto le altre imprese e, nello stesso tempo, di “fare altro”.’*

market sphere and reversals of social protections. Such moves have been described in terms of control, with labour losing ground to capital (e.g. Piore and Sabel 1984: 156; Berardi 2009).

Taking inspiration from *The Human Economy*, a collection that the editors describe as a search for ‘ways of democratizing the economy’ by ‘look[ing] at actual experiments that have been made around the world’ (Hart, Laville, and Cattani 2010: 11), this conclusion considers the cooperative alternative in this context of precarity.<sup>64</sup> Cattani describes cooperatives as an alternative ‘rooted in capitalist reality’ (2010: 355). With this, he underscores the practical approach taken to existing within the contemporary economic reality. What can we learn from the experiences of these cooperatives and their leaders as they aim to provide stable work for their members and work placement opportunities for others in the community during these uncertain times? What does this labour of imagining a better work-place entail?

Although cooperatives are owned and managed by their members, changing local regulations and increasingly global flows of goods and service, also governed by national and international legal agreements, together create a precarious situation for the cooperatives and subsequently also those working there. Precariousness can be seen as both external, with regards to the funding model and the cooperatives’ ability to exist within capitalism, and internal, with regards to the ability to produce alternative values and practice. Considering attempts to overcome external challenges highlights the important work involved in finding new ways to live ethically under these shifting

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<sup>64</sup> This volume is positioned as a response to the 2008 financial market crash, and *la crisi* was also a central factor for many of my informants. Cooperatives figure in this volume only as examples of other types of practice. They are variously described as one of the legal forms of the solidarity economy (Laville 2010), as one of the first types of social enterprise (Defourny and Nyssens 2010), as part of a ‘mixed’ economy that aims to reproduce both capital *and* labour (Coraggio 2010: 119), as part of the ‘social economy’ that fills gaps between state and market, or as a ‘hybrid’ of market and non-market (Alexander 2010: 214).

external conditions. This is the subject of section 8.1 ‘Precarious cooperatives’, which describes everyday attempts to meet the shared need of job provision. This brings to the fore the contradictions embodied in a social enterprise as it attempts to navigate both member and market needs. The next section 8.2 ‘Precarious ideals’ considers how the focus on need, narrowly defined as providing employment, obscures the reality of different positionalities and individual needs, leaving some excluded from the benefits of membership (or even employment), and resulting in missed opportunities to connect on a deeper level. Finally, defining need primarily via employment also presents a fundamental limitation of the social enterprise model in the current context, which is the subject of the final section 8.3 ‘Precarity and labour market fundamentalism’. As the market sphere and precarious work increase, to what extent is the social cooperative model a viable alternative for the future?

## 8.1 Precarious cooperatives

How did the managers of cooperatives like Luminare and Verdecura imagine and create a better work-place through their daily practices? And in doing so, what tensions or limitations arose? Providing stable work was the primary mission for cooperative managers, which is of particular importance in the context of labour precarity. Mattia and other cooperative managers spoke about survival – not literally their own survival or the survival of other workers – but the survival of their cooperatives under rapidly shifting conditions including changes to their funding models and changes in local demand. Only through finding ways to control costs and generate additional income, could the cooperatives remain open and continue to fulfil their missions to provide work to members. However, many of these practices also resulted in compromise on cooperative

values or created divisions, revealing the tensions of being an alternative rooted in capitalism.

Over the course of only one year, I observed how Verdecura, Luminare and other local cooperatives dealt with changing access to public funding and limited demand for their goods or services. The changing context included changes to the national employment regulations surrounding short term contracts in March 2014, with further labour reforms planned later in the year. There were also changes planned within the local municipality regarding the use of *borso lavoro* work placements, reducing the funding and limiting the number of placements available. For Verdecura, a type B social cooperative, the most pressing change was the end of the current regional contract with the public-private service provider Hera in 2015. Managers of type A social cooperatives in the local consortium that provided work-based therapy also described gaps in public funding that they attempted to fill by ensuring that their activities were market-oriented. The Luminare retail space, designed to be a consumer-facing and fully self-sufficient social cooperative to overcome those funding challenges, also struggled to find an audience for many of its alternative products. Other local worker cooperatives, including a catering cooperative in Bologna and a woodworking cooperative in nearby Imola, saw declines in the demand for their products and services as other local businesses closed or reduced their budgets. This contributed to a context of uncertainty for these cooperatives, their members and other staff, yielding feelings of uncertainty (as in Chapter 4, fears that sharing too much financial information would worry members, or in Chapter 5, job concerns among temporary staff). Still, the cooperatives aimed to survive or even thrive in these conditions to continue providing work for their members. This inspired various actions to overcome the challenging business environment.

Regional regulatory changes meant that Verdecura needed to rescale ‘upwards’. Whereas labour regulations had previously encouraged small, flexible firms, the new terms of the regional contract bid forced these small cooperatives to become larger in order to participate. As described in Chapter 4, this eventually yielded the decision to merge with another local cooperative. Although this would allow them to participate in the tender and they would likely win a new contract, this also meant that democratic practice within the cooperative came under question. Increased size itself is sometimes considered a barrier to democratic practices within cooperatives. Additionally, in this case the non-elected director Mattia played a central role in guiding the decision because of his specialized business knowledge, which led some to question the amount of influence they truly held as members. Ultimately, the process itself was generally deemed less important than the shared need to maintain their jobs, highlighting the compromise of democratic principles over the need of employment.

Innovation-driven growth, facilitated by local collaboration and national cooperative networks alike, was a crucial component to cooperative survival. As described in Chapter 3, Verdecura had benefited from the sales of various product and service innovations, offered in collaboration with other local cooperatives. These projects were oriented towards various visions of ethical living. The Luminare retail space is a good example of the recognized need adapt to changing circumstances and create jobs that are independent of state funding, while also catering to local notions of sustainability. Some projects appeared to create value out of waste materials. The addition of mushroom spores to discarded coffee grounds allowed them to extract additional value out of the refuse. Other ‘upcycled’ goods, like clothing and furniture, filled the Luminare retail space. These upcycled items could become valued again through their (re)introduction into cycles of exchange, giving them new commercial value (Graeber 2012: 287). The

spiced liquor aperitifs and preserved vegetables made from the produce from another cooperative's therapeutic garden turned these wasted outputs into profitable – and also socially mindful – consumer goods. Collaborative projects like Luminare's partnership with 'Fruits of Legality' anti-mafia cooperatives, and the relationships with local producers who attended the weekly 'Km0' local markets, benefited all involved through increasing the awareness of their ethically-focused alternative production models, and by creating access to their goods. While these projects can be seen as creating value by finding markets for undervalued goods, similar to the sea cucumbers described by Reichman (2013), which were considered trash fish by Maine fisherman before profitable export markets were discovered, they were also doing more than this by actively participating in developing symbolic value.

In a similar way, the cooperative managers were 'adding value' through their marketing of the concept of social production, which could increase the market value of socially produced goods and services, thus unifying social and economic conceptions of value and supporting Miller's (2008: 1131) argument that communication can act 'as a bridge between forms of value that are otherwise difficult to reconcile.' This was true in the case of Verdecura's upcoming regional tender, with reference to the added value of their social production allowing a small local organization the possibility to compete with larger international firms that could feasibly offer lower prices because of efficiencies of scale (Chapter 4), and at Luminare, where the added value justified higher prices for the local and artisanal products it sold (Chapter 7). Rather than being entirely at the mercy of external 'market' valuations, there thus is a potential for cooperatives to influence the value of their products, as Ulin (1996) proposed in the case of cooperatively produced wines. This confirms the importance of control not only of labour, but also of its

valuation (Wallman 1979), and shows how working in a cooperative has concrete potential to enhance the shared agency of the members.

Still, appraising their social mode of production through the concept of ‘added value’ foregrounds exchange value, which has the potential to commodify the social relationships theoretically at the centre of this added value, while also reinforcing divisions. Luminare was imagined by its founders to be innovative because it brings local shoppers the ability to choose more ethical alternatives. However, this represents an important issue with models that focus on [ethical] consumption, as the option to choose is not evenly distributed (Narotzky 2012: 86). Choice itself has been described as a neoliberal value linked to individualism (Mol 2008). Those who shop at Luminare can afford to choose more ethical products, leaving those who are less able potentially wounded by the judgements placed on them. In a society of individual consumer citizens who are encouraged to make change through their purchasing decisions, the ability to choose is itself power. Similarly, for the cooperative’s managers who have chosen this work over other, more profitable alternatives, their decision represents a choice of certain ethical principles over the potential for greater income. While their motivation to help others contributed positively by managing production and innovations that generated work opportunities, the limited employment choices available to interns and those on other flexible contracts means that they were not necessarily able to make the same choice, and were also vulnerable to being treated unfairly. Those in positions of greater choice and power, including the cooperative managers, should thus remain attentive to ensuring that there is a fair exchange, with other, non-financial expectations to cooperative membership also being met, a point which I will discuss further in the following section.

For those who managed, it was their duty to ensure that the business was successful to allow the others to help themselves through their own work. Still, stable work was not available to everyone who worked in the cooperatives. Access to the benefits of membership was only available after working in the cooperative for over a year, and necessitated paying a membership fee over time. Additionally, many practices described above appeared to culminate in bottom-line valuations and market fundamentalism, while the concept of ‘need’ and various rhetorical devices (e.g. ‘added value’ as discussed above, or ‘network’ as discussed below) can hide or naturalise divisions, and even erode economic democracy. Although they are not an *alternative to* capitalism, cooperatives are an *alternative within* capitalism, so the next section focuses on how the cooperative managers might more effectively evoke the concept of ‘need’ to create alternative practice internally.

## 8.2 Precarious ideals

The centrality of ‘need’ as a guiding concept is understandable in such times of uncertainty. As opposed to ‘greed’, which represents the profit that guides the capitalist model that is being questioned, focusing on need may seem to provide a revolutionarily social alternative. However, ‘need’ actually serves as the nexus or inflection point between capitalist greed and cooperative values, allowing slippage versus these alternative ideals. When profitable production is necessary for cooperative survival, and thus considered as a means for a social end, the management’s focus on the bottom line is apparently justified even when it impinges on other values like democracy (Chapter 4), equality, equity (Chapter 5) and solidarity (Chapter 6). This is not to say that there is no requirement for profitability in the reality of cooperative production; cooperatives are

firmly rooted in local market contexts, which impose real limitations that include the renewal of public contracts, access to bank loans, competition for talent, and investments of surplus to maintain and modernize tools. Without paying attention to these basic rules of the system, a cooperative like Verdecura could fail and members' jobs would be lost. Based on Mattia's account this seemed to be a likely outcome for the cooperative before he was brought in as a director with the goal of making the enterprise financially viable. From this perspective, my research supports Bryer's (2012) contention that cooperatives are limited by the systemic rationality of profit.

However, as other research has shown (Whyte and Whyte 1991; Müller 1991; Vargas-Cetina 2005; Stephen 2005; Schoening 2006; Faulk 2008), cooperatives also have an important role to play within the market as a site of alternative values and practice. The intentionality of using values to build structure is what made cooperatives interesting to anthropologists in the 1970s (Nash and Hopkins 1976: 4). Especially in difficult times, when cooperatives are challenged to be 'good to people' and 'to do well', the real difference would seem to lie in the alternative ideals that they promulgate. Although the managers with whom I worked recognised the trade-offs and sometimes less than ideal practices required to maintain profitable operations, one of the areas where my positionality as an external observer is most able to add to local understandings is around the production of difference, the multiplicity of needs, and the missed opportunities to build consensus. Many lines of difference emerged in the study of these cooperatives, including member/non-member, manager/manual, disadvantaged/normal, local/foreign and even gendered divisions of labour. These varied subjectivities and conditions created different needs, not all met.

As detailed in Chapter 5, the value that the Verdecura created was not equally distributed. While in the past the value of equality was expressed directly through equal

wages, Verdecura has since implemented a market-based pay scale. This, along with the use of flexible short-term contracts, was justified based on the need to be competitive and to protect members' jobs. Mattia and Giada spoke of individuals adding different levels of value to the cooperative. This entailed an assignment of lower value to the type of labour done by manual workers, and in particular those being supported through work placements. As Mattia mentioned one day, manual labour such as waste collection and street cleaning was often left to social cooperatives specifically because there is little profit potential. However, this obscures the underlying social and moral valuations of work that contribute to low pay for 'necessary' operative jobs and higher pay for those in managerial positions. Some work was also invisible in that it remained entirely outside of market valuations. Although one of Verdecura's contracts with the municipality was for street cleaning, cleaning within both cooperatives was never a paid job, but typically assigned to women on work placements. This supports previous findings that women's labour is often naturalised and valued less than men's labour (Elson and Pearson 1981; Thelen 2015).

Some workers were also less visible than others. The workers on internships, rotating work placements or public service assignments were entirely outside of this track to membership and nearly invisible in the bureaucratic structure of the cooperative, aside from the paperwork that needed to be processed and filed with various municipal agencies. These work placements and internships rarely resulted in more permanent positions, with people rotating in and out of these temporary placements. This was not only true for municipal placements, but also the student interns like Sara, who had to apply for external funding to keep her position, or David who had worked for free for six months before being hired. In a precarious situation itself, the cooperative was using these precarious unemployed workers and student interns to survive. The disadvantaged

workers were also less prominent in some important ways, as no disadvantaged members spoke at the annual ‘social balance sheet’ meeting or were interviewed in the video that was shared, nor were there any disadvantaged members on Verdecura’s board of directors.

Networks like *Generazioni* within Legacoop, which were envisioned as egalitarian as opposed to official bureaucratic management structures, actually fostered divisions as these meetings were limited to young administrators and managers, while excluding young manual workers. Social media outreach for this organization also appeared to be limited to a relatively small group of actively engaged young leaders, also enabling an ideological divide between administrators and other workers, as also found by Rakopoulos in the social cooperatives he studied in Palermo (2012, 2014, 2015). In terms of work opportunities, insiders, especially those with familial connections to the cooperative, had easier access, with Mattia’s role as director being created for him and an administrator’s husband being offered a role in the *differenziati* (rubbish collection). Others, including Samir and Mohammed reached out to create connections, sharing their own stories of need, but their needs for employment were not met by the cooperative. Networks, even familial networks, can be both inclusive or exclusive, for example when divided by betrayal (Yanagisako 2002: 115).

Decisions made by the management centred around maintaining employment as meeting the need of members, though discussions of survival were actually framed at the institutional level – the need for the cooperative as a whole to remain competitive and produce enough surplus to be considered financially healthy (as discussed during the annual assembly in Chapter 4). Such decisions also referenced the needs of the local market, as opportunities to create surplus value were shaped by local demand, municipal placements that reduced labour costs, and also regulatory changes that could grant or

withdraw market access. As the cooperative's constitution was updated to enable the merger with Coop Censeo, the cooperative board also took the opportunity to broaden the cooperative's mission statement to include a multiplicity of activities so that their operations would not be limited to the current sectors of environmental management, broadening the access to varied market opportunities.

As the managers focused on the survival of the cooperative and the single need of employment, other areas may have been overlooked. There were multiple opportunities to align on members' needs beyond the provision of employment, but as seen in Chapter 4, a common understanding was not fully met during the assembly or the merger discussions. While the managers proposed the merger to maintain their livelihoods, others like Michele, Marco and Roberta shared their desires for something more by commenting directly, or abstaining from the vote on the new board of directors. Although the final merger vote indicated a consensus on the need to maintain market access, there had not been further alignment on how work should be done within the new cooperative, with what attention to care for the workers. There were other missed opportunities to connect, with the summer barbeque seen as an important social moment in the cooperative, though some arrived late, stayed in their own small circles, or did not participate at all, indicating indifference on this level. As discussed in Chapter 6, the shift towards more market-oriented practices appeared to force a trade-off between production and building personal relationships. While in the labour market work is, in theory, separated from the person, caring is both material and affective, and difficult to separate the person from their activity (Comas d'Argemir 1994: 211-2). Indeed, the person and his or her work are not truly separated, with personal relationships providing workplace benefits, as mentioned above. Other communication techniques used to align on values and share information, such as newsletters or blogs as used in larger cooperatives were also not employed within

Verdecura or Luminare, with most communications focused outwards to generate awareness or cultivate the added value of their services.

If this work to align on shared needs is not done, and the understanding of need is not openly debated, then this term can serve to hide assumptions and naturalise aspects of capitalist practice, even while the cooperative model is endorsed as an alternative. This leads me to suggest that focusing on meeting needs, as opposed to focusing on achieving other ideals such as democracy and equality, may not be as effective to create alternative, and inclusive, practice. The focus on employment as a central need also presents limitations for this model.

### 8.3 Precarity and labour market fundamentalism

Precariousness for Italian workers has been associated with flexible and short term contracts, and regularly positioned as a response to labour gaining too much power. Piore and Sabel, for example, described the decline of mass-production and decentralization of firms as a result of the loss of control of labour, as labour protections were making it more difficult to remain profitable (1984: 156). Goddard adds to this context the role of the competitive global markets, with less expensive US imports adding additional strain to the conflict between workers and employers (1996: 35). Berardi (2009) and other Italian activists like Alex Foti (2008) of the EuroMayDay movement characterise precarious working conditions as a new means to control labour. Precariousness has thus become a new leftist platform for organizing in neoliberal Italy (Molé 2012a: 18) after the unwinding of labour protections earned in earlier Left leaning political regimes.

Labour is central to the Italian republic and tied to democracy, as Article 1 of the constitution begins, ‘*Italy is a democratic Republic founded on labour.*’<sup>65</sup> As mentioned in Chapters 3 and 5, important reforms distributed the right to work and protected it, for example Law 482/1968 which acknowledged the right to employment for all. However, labour (*lavoro*) need not mean only employment (*occupazione*). The distinction that Narotzky and Goddard (2017) make between work and livelihoods is an important one, bringing attention to varied but interlinked forms of labour and spheres of production. Ethnographies of Italian labour, as discussed in Chapter 2, have frequently shown how people provide for themselves and their families through multiple sources, sometimes called *combinazioni*, that include but do not rely exclusively on wage labour (Schneider and Schneider 1976b; Rakopoulos 2014, 2015). Holmes’ (1983, 1989) worker-peasant model also shows how families in Friuli relied on multiple strategies for their livelihoods, including wage labour. Krause (2009) describes Tuscany in the 1930s, where access to multiple forms of subsistence through sharecropping was less precarious than relying on wage labour alone, while D’Aloisio (2017) reminds that resourcefulness in the recent past helped to overcome uncertainty, and that this continues today among the female workers of Fiat in Melfi, as it does among the Sicilian cooperative workers studied by Rakopoulos (2014). Unlike Rakopoulos’ workers who also farmed small plots of land, many of the unemployed or underemployed workers in Verdecura had previously been fully employed in the declining local industries. In her analysis of workplace mobbing, Molé (2012a: 28) contends that, ‘Precariousness only becomes a social problem because job protections have been a routine social expectation’ with the expectation of stable work and labour

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<sup>65</sup> [https://www.senato.it/documenti/repository/istituzione/costituzione\\_inglese.pdf](https://www.senato.it/documenti/repository/istituzione/costituzione_inglese.pdf) [Accessed 20 August 2017]

protections stemming from a brief period of industrialization from 1945-1975. Beyond the neoliberal shifts in labour policy that Molé describes, there has been a further disembedding caused by the neoliberal and austerity-related roll back of public funding, as well as the rapid increase of urbanisation<sup>66</sup> throughout the twentieth century, which further limits access to other types of subsistence.

In a cooperative structure although labour owns the means of production, as seen above these organizations still face uncertainty at the institutional level, and create precarious positions for non-members. Instead of aiming to change the system fundamentally, such cooperatives aim to make the labour market more inclusive, but this model does not overcome fundamental external factors leading to uncertainty. Although social cooperatives are commonplace in Emilia Romagna and have grown throughout the crisis, filling gaps where private enterprise or the state do not operate, they rely on public contracts and increasingly on market opportunities to provide work, and are thus limited by the same external factors that prevent other businesses from thriving. These cooperatives have also played a crucial role in the decentralization of public services. Such third sector institutions were seen as more flexible and efficient when compared to the bureaucracy of the state (Alexander 2010). In the context of austerity, however, it becomes apparent that these cooperatives have not only been providing crucial services but also internalizing risks. Mattia and other social cooperative managers today are confronting unemployment, including high levels of youth unemployment, at an entirely different scale than the founders of the movement who worked to integrate people into a stable or growing economy.

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<sup>66</sup> The percent of the population living in urban environments increased from 28.1% in 1901 to 66.6% in 2000 (Malanima 2005).

A key component of the capital economy that underscores the social cooperative model, and also worker cooperatives more broadly, is the labour market. This entails the commoditisation of labour – a ‘fictitious commodity’ according to Polanyi (2001: 71) – in a supposedly ‘self-regulating market where the price (wage) and the conditions of the work contract are fixed by supply and demand, without reference to the needs of the workers’ (Corraggio 2010: 120). The focus on meeting the needs of their members is one of the key differentiators between a cooperative and a regular enterprise, as described by many cooperative managers and in Legacoop and Confcooperative promotional materials, yet the needs (*bisogni*) of members in a worker cooperative are normatively defined as providing work.

While at the institutional level these cooperatives were taking a multi-faceted approach to survival – ‘We are all becoming hybrids in order to survive,’ as Verdecura’s director Mattia stated – they elevated employment as their highest value – the ‘desirable outcomes’ essential to community viability (Munn 1986: 8), over other perhaps more communal forms of subsistence. In her analysis of the recuperated business (cooperative) movement in Argentina, Bryer (2012) contends that although the workers technically own the means of production, they still lack control over their own productive power. The *systemic rationality* of profit-seeking leads to feelings of lack of control and that the workers themselves are not the priority. I would add to this that the goal of worker cooperatives to generate employment makes them complicit in the promotion of ‘labour market fundamentalism’, as opposed to a broader, ‘provisioning based approach’ that privileges multiple sources of individual or family subsistence. Lordon (2014) argues that the necessity of employment emerged over time, and as a result of the capitalist social structure because money provides the possibility to satisfy other desires. He traces this to the closure of the commons, as argued earlier by both Marx and Polanyi (*ibid.*: 7), and

concludes that less work (as in employment), rather than more work may be the solution. If ‘need’ actually means ‘employment’ in the context of worker cooperatives, then following Lordon’s (2014) argument it is no surprise that organizing around this term results in the replication of capitalist practice, rather than being revolutionary in the face of greed, or profit-seeking.

Although more work could have been done, or could be done in the future to maintain democratic processes and equality within these two cooperatives, in a situation of labour precarity, the act of providing stable employment for their own members is in itself an important alternative. Yet if cooperative work is ultimately also precarious, what can these cooperative leaders do to help their members find stability? Beyond the diversification of the cooperatives themselves, as they seek funding from public sources and various market opportunities, they can also help to create more stability for their members and community by broadening the focus within the cooperative on livelihoods instead of on work only.

In future research, it would be worthwhile to focus more on the concept livelihoods within cooperatives like those I studied in Villacenseo to understand in what ways they already do move beyond the provision of employment. Some areas already begin emerge in this study, for example working alongside the public agencies that provide housing to people on work placements, or supporting a public garden project in conjunction with the municipality and a local charity. The free consultation services offered at Luminare also go some way to providing non-economic support for community members. In what other ways do these cooperatives partner with other local institutions to meet a variety of needs, or how else might they do so in the future? Further focus on the cooperative members and workers in more precarious situations would also provide valuable insight into the ways they balance temporary or part time work with other forms

of income and support, and thus would likely highlight continuities with past, and the reality of multiple overlapping spheres of work in the present.

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# 10 APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1: GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE OF VERDECURA

- Assembly:
  - the assembly may be ordinary or extra-ordinary
  - the convocation of the assembly must be announced ten days prior
- Functions of the ordinary assembly:
  - approve the balance sheet and determine the destination of the surplus:
    - to the indivisible reserve (at least 30%)
    - to the mutualistic fund [at least 3% by law]
    - to the revaluation of social capital
  - deliberate on the issue of shares for investor-members
  - deliberate on the issue of shares for co-operator-members
  - nominate administrators and auditors and determine their compensation
  - deliberate on responsibilities of administrators and auditors
  - approve internal rules
  - deliberate on other issues as prescribed by law and the statutes
- Timing:
  - must be held once a year with the timings described in art. 26 (within 120 days of the closure of the financial year though there are some exceptions noted)
  - can also be called whenever the board finds it necessary or with written request of at least 10% of voting members (in the latter case it must be held no more than 20 days after written request)
  - the assembly is considered extra-ordinary according to the law when it is called to deliberate on modifications to the statutes or any topics prescribed in art. 2365 of the civil code
- Voting:
  - by show of hand unless otherwise deliberated by assembly
  - elections are determined by a relative majority
  - voters must be a member for at least 90 days and not delayed on their share payments
  - one vote per co-operator member
  - voting for investor members under art. 19, comma 2 (they cannot account for more than one-third of total votes or they will be re-weighted by a coefficient to reach one-third)
  - if unable to be present can delegate their vote to another voting member who is not an administrator or auditor and each member can only represent one other
- Chair of assembly:
  - assembly is presided by the president, or in his absence the vice president, or if both are absent then by someone chosen by the assembly with a majority of votes
  - the president nominates a secretary to keep a written record, unless a notary is present