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ARTICLE



# Worker cooperatives for social change: knowledge-making through constructive resistance within the capitalist market economy

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores worker cooperatives' possibilities and challenges of knowledge-making through constructive resistance within the capitalist market economy. Based on qualitative material from five Swedish worker co-ops, the analysis reveals that the co-ops' constructive resistance encompasses knowledge-making by setting an example – that it is possible to organise businesses that challenge dominant capitalist undertakings. The knowledge-making is however limited in scope due to contextual circumstances related to the market economic system wherein the co-ops act. This stresses the importance of exploring the resistance context and also the links between knowledge-making and constructive resistance.

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## 1. Introduction

This article explores the possibilities and challenges faced by worker cooperatives (co-ops) in practicing constructive resistance against the dominance of the capitalist market economy, the very context wherein they act, by focusing on how knowledge-making is part of this resistance. Through an analysis of interviews with members from Swedish worker co-ops, this article provides new insights on resistance in relation to power, and specifically, on the links between knowledge production and constructive resistance.

Co-ops have been associated with endeavours for social change for a long time. As economic businesses owned and run democratically by the member workers ('one member, one vote' (Spear 2004)), worker co-ops exclude the possibility of having external capital owners who may exploit the work force for profit. Previous research substantiates the notion that worker co-ops can function as resistance to different forms of power, such as the dominance of bureaucratic organizations (Webb 1930, Rothschild and Whitt 1986), state policy (Pahnke 2015), and neoliberal capitalism (Satgar 2007, Faulk 2008, Alperovitz and Dubb 2013, Ranis 2016, Springer 2016, Rowe *et al.* 2017). In research on alternative economic projects (Araujo 2016), political social movements (Polletta 2002), anarchist organisations (Land and King 2014), and co-ops (Rothschild and Whitt 1986, Pahnke 2015), the participatory democratic self-government associated with co-ops is

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found to offer grounds for both overt and covert opposition against the dominance of capitalism.

However, resistance against capitalism is not inevitably applied by all co-ops. As Vieta argues, ‘autogestión in the new cooperativism, to be sure, is not a ready-made solution for liberation from capitalist exploitation’, since ‘it remains always at tension within the existing capitalist economic status-quo and its supportive state apparatus’ (Vieta 2014, p. 800). Worker co-ops that explicitly challenge capitalist ideals also compete within the capitalist market economy in order to survive, and can thus be understood as positioned in a rivalry between self-determination of radical democracy and economic market mechanisms of global capitalism (Diamantopoulos 2012, Langmead 2016).

Nevertheless, worker co-ops are possible within the present economic system, and can engage in prefigurative practices in the ‘here and now’ without having to transform the system beforehand. The concept of *constructive resistance* is therefore especially suited for analysing worker co-ops, since it refers to a particular form of opposition characterised by creating the future one wishes to see in the present, in contrast to resistance by protesting against power with hope for future change (Vinthagen 2005, Sørensen and Vinthagen 2012, Sørensen 2016, Koefoed 2018). When exploring the potential of such resistance, a Foucauldian conceptualisation of language as a conflictual web (Foucault 1980b, 1990, 2007) – ‘a site of variability, disagreement and potential conflict’ (Burr 2003, p. 54) – becomes relevant to explore not only worker co-ops’ potential practices of constructive resistance, but also how such practices partake in the discursive struggle of knowledge production.

The purpose of this article is to explore the possibilities and challenges of knowledge-making through constructive resistance by Swedish worker co-ops within the capitalist market economy. The analysis is based on interviews with members from five small worker co-ops in Sweden all organised explicitly as alternatives to capitalist ideals. Below, the analysis will show that through everyday constructive resistance practices, the worker co-ops oppose the perceived dominance of capitalism, and contribute to knowledge-making by showing that it is possible to organise economic businesses differently. The dissemination of such knowledge is however limited by circumstances related to the economic context for which change is sought. Thus, the article highlights the importance of exploring the context of resistance including the connection between resistance and knowledge-making in order to further our understandings of social change processes.

The next section offers a background, followed by a theoretical discussion on constructive resistance and the Foucauldian notion of power/knowledge. Subsequently, a methods section is followed by the empirical analysis and a concluding discussion.

## 2. Background

Despite numerous critiques directed against it over the decades, the dominance of capitalism has persisted (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007/1999), including attributes such as profit accumulation, freedom of the market, market competition, wage-labour, and commodification (Weber 2007/1927, Marx 2013/1867). In Sweden, capitalist logics have even become increasingly embedded in institutions and organisations in line with a dismantling of the public sector and the expansion of a capitalist market economy during the last decades (Almqvist and Anders Linder 2017, Bergh 2014, Therborn 2018).

In this context, worker co-ops in Sweden are still rare, even though they became more common during the ‘green wave’ in the mid-1970s (Pestoff 1991, p. 7). The organisational form *economic association*, especially suitable for worker co-ops, consisted in 2018 of only about 1.4% of all registered businesses in Sweden (Bolagsverket 2019). But since not all economic associations are run as a co-op, and not all co-ops are *worker* co-ops, the prevalence of worker co-ops is even lower.<sup>1</sup> Worker co-ops are seldom mentioned in public discourse (Rothstein 2012), and in a market survey of the Swedish public’s awareness of co-ops, every other respondent reported being unfamiliar with the notion of ‘cooperative businesses’ (Ahlqvist *et al.* 2017). This highlights the marginal position of worker co-ops in Sweden which makes it an interesting case for studying worker co-ops’ grass-roots resistance and knowledge-making.

Co-ops around the globe relate to the general cooperative values and principles, adopted in 1995 by The International Co-operative Alliance (2019). These values consist of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity, complemented with the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility, and caring for others. The main purpose is member benefits rather than profit accumulation, and the seven principles include: 1) Voluntary and open membership; 2) Democratic member control; 3) Member economic participation; 4) Autonomy and independence; 5) Education, training and information; 6) Cooperation among cooperatives, and; 7) Concern for community.

Worker co-ops’ challenges against the capitalist economic system have been identified as more or less built into the organisational form through the cooperative values and principles (Williams 2007, Faulk 2008, Birchall 2012, Paraque and Willmott 2014, Ranis 2016). But the cooperative form has also been deployed by state power, for example in Socialist states by imposing collectivised production organisations controlled by the government (i.e. the *kolkhoz*) (Holmén 1990, p. 21). Worker co-ops can even be promoted as a way for each member to increase their monetary benefits in line with capitalist logics (Wiksell 2017).

Jaumier *et al.* (2017) have identified three ideal types of co-operators characterised by their relationship to capitalism: *pragmatic*, *reformist* and *political* co-operators. *Political* co-operators aim for a global alternative to capitalism by promoting co-ops’ self-management and advanced democracy (Jaumier *et al.* 2017). This position can be associated with the so called ‘Co-operative Commonwealth School’ aimed to make the cooperative movement an all-inclusive system involving all societal spheres (Holmén 1990, Sentama 2009, Alperovitz and Dubb 2013). *Reformist* co-operators aim to mitigate certain negative effects of capitalism such as social exploitation and lack of democracy, but as transformation, rather than obstruction (Jaumier *et al.* 2017). This indicates resistance of a less radical character, possibly related to ‘the Co-operative Sector School’ that sees cooperation as a potential third sector, in addition to the public and the capitalist sectors (Holmén 1990, Sentama 2009). In contrast, *pragmatic* co-operators see member benefits in financial terms as the primary aim of the co-op (Jaumier *et al.* 2017). The pragmatists can be related to ‘the School of Modified Capitalism’, which aims for modifying rather than obstructing capitalism, by restraining profit distribution to the members (Holmén 1990, Sentama 2009).

To conclude, worker co-ops may practice resistance to different extents, depending on how they relate to the capitalist context, the very same context wherein they must survive in order to practice constructive resistance. In the following section, the concept of constructive resistance is discussed.

### 3. Constructive Resistance

In a thorough review of different conceptualisations of resistance, Hollander and Einwohner (2004) highlight that resistance generally refers to an action related to some kind of constraint, and a possibility of opposing that constraint. Resistance practices can be understood as *attempts* to undermine power regardless of whether the resistance is successful or not, or whether the target identifies the action as resistance or not. This indicates that intentionality is key of resistance. However, Baaz *et al.* (2016) define resistance as practices that, *irrespective of intent*, undermine or challenge subordinating power by someone upholding a subaltern position, or acting on behalf of someone in a subaltern position. In this article, resistance is analytically identified based on the co-operators' own accounts of challenging forms of power they depict as undesirable, although such attempts are not always demarcated explicitly as *resistance* by the co-operators.

Even if co-ops are rare, and may perceive different forms of constraints, it can be questioned whether they act from a subaltern position or not. I draw upon a conceptualisation of resistance as not necessarily practiced from a subaltern position, but defined as a potential replacement of an undesired, dominant way of presently organising the society with an alternative social order that one wishes for. Such proactive resistance is understood here as *constructive resistance* (Vinthagen 2005, Sørensen and Vinthagen 2012, Sørensen 2016, Koefoed 2018).

The concept of constructive resistance was first defined by Stellan Vinthagen (2005) inspired by the 'constructive program' formulated by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1945), which put emphasis on building positive alternatives to oppression through civil disobedience in communities. Constructive resistance includes the creation of the reality one wishes to see, which challenges power by refusing to adhere to the terms and conditions set up by power. Such resistance adds to the emergence of a different society by a 'bringing of the future into the now through prefigurative politics' (Baaz *et al.* 2016, p. 143). This does not mean that resistance movements which do not practice constructive resistance are merely destructive. Koefoed stresses that constructive resistance should 'not be confused with useful, welcome, desirable, or better', but rather, 'understood in a literal sense, as in building up, enacting or experimenting with alternatives' (Koefoed 2018, p. 101). Thus, to practice ideals other than those which are dominant involves resistance in a constructive manner, by enacting a desired future rather than merely protesting against aspects of the present.

Previous research has not studied worker co-ops from a perspective of constructive resistance. Anarchist studies offer a similar perspective (see e.g. Ward 1973, Marshall 1992, Shantz 2010). Classical social anarchists in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century emphasised the self-management of workers' organisations such as co-ops as a way to enact alternatives, which 'stimulated ideas about the other society free from capitalist and state exploitation, (...) ultimately leading to a theory of a "new cooperativism" for the 21st Century' (Vieta 2014, p. 781). But few recent empirical studies explore worker co-ops' organised resistance. One interesting approach is offered by White and Williams (2012), who argue that to focus on cooperation as a presently occurring and viable alternative can be a way to practice resistance to capitalism, since it shifts the view from reproducing knowledge about capitalist dominance. This argument highlights the advantage of applying the concept of constructive resistance together with knowledge-making in the study of worker co-ops' oppositional practices.

#### 4. The Nexus of Power/Knowledge

Knowledge has been connected to power and resistance through a variety of perspectives (see e.g. Gramsci 1971, Fairclough 2001, Foucault 1980a, Haraway 1988, Haugaard 1997, Latour 1993, Marx and Engels 1998/1845, Mohanty 1984). When exploring knowledge-making through constructive resistance, a Foucauldian perspective on resistance, power and knowledge offers a particularly useful approach (Foucault 1980a, 1990, 2007). As it emphasises the interdependence of resistance and power, it is suitable for exploring how the context of power relations can constrain resistance. Resistance is understood to occur within a discursive and materialising field of power relations where legitimised knowledge is being produced in certain ways. Hence, a Foucauldian perspective can illuminate how local knowledge production is possible but also affected by the dominant nexus of power/knowledge.

Power, according to Foucault, ‘needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body’ (Foucault 1980a, p. 119), that produces things, discourse, and forms of knowledge, and makes itself true through normalisation processes (Foucault 1977, p. 183). This means that discursive regimes and material structures have histories, which function as ‘constitutive constraint’ that facilitate reproduction of certain knowledge and practices (Butler 1993). However, both constraints and the possibility of resistance is being formed through the productive power that materialises and shapes normalised discourses:

[w]e must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. (Foucault 1990, p. 101)

The web of discursive contingency offers an understanding that knowledge can be produced in ways that serves power, but also as an instrument of resistance. Following Foucault, Butler emphasises that although the constraint ‘does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it does locate agency as a reiterative or rearticulate practice, immanent to power’ (Butler 1993, p. 15). This notion makes it interesting to explore how co-ops’ resistance encounters both possibilities and challenges by being practiced within the context for which change is sought.

Foucault states that ‘for knowledge to function as knowledge it must exercise a power’ (Foucault 2007, p. 71), but also argues that challenges against more established forms of knowledge can be put forward by producing counter-history as well as by re-emerging subjugated knowledge that promote alternatives (Foucault 1980b, 1997). Such alternative knowledge production may have been deemed disqualified by the way ‘true’ knowledge is produced and legitimised by power, for example by only valuing scientific knowledge, but has the possibility to contribute to change by spreading itself as a network of practices, in so far that ‘points of resistance, (...) makes a revolution possible’ (Foucault 1990, p. 96). I understand the worker co-ops’ knowledge-making as alternative, subjugated knowledge where the producers presently uphold a marginal position in Swedish society. Just like constructive resistance enact a future in the present, the knowledge-making potentially related can be viewed as attempts to enact future ‘knowledge as power’. The specific form(s) of knowledge production associated with the co-ops’ constructive resistance is not set beforehand, but explored below in the analysis intended to shed light on this relationality.

## 5. Research Methodology

This article is based on qualitative material generated from five small worker co-ops in Sweden. In contrast to Sweden's strong tradition of consumer and producer co-ops (in agriculture and food consumption), worker co-ops have been rare (Vamstad 2012), and, as mentioned above, are still marginalised compared to dominant ways of organising economic businesses in Sweden.

The five worker co-ops were selected according to the criteria that all are organised as economic associations, operate in the private sector, understand themselves as co-ops, and associate themselves with the cooperative values and principles outlined by The International Co-operative Alliance (2019). This means that the organisations, as equally owned and run by the workers, exclude the capitalist feature of having external capital owners. All five worker co-ops express opposition against capitalism. By working in the private sector, the co-ops compete with other privately-owned businesses in the market economy. As the number of worker co-ops in Sweden are few, the selection of these particular co-ops has partly been dependent upon availability. Besides the shared characteristics, differences are sought in other respects, such as background and business branch. Due to anonymity, the worker co-ops are named in this article according to their main business branch: 1) the Transportation Co-op, 2) the Drama Co-op, 3) the Heritage Co-op, 4) the Environment Co-op, and 5) the Art Co-op. All co-ops are service providers rather than producers, and sell their services to actors within both the private and the public spheres. At the time of the study, they are located mainly in large cities in the southern half of Sweden, have been active between 3 to 30 years, and consist of 3 to 11 members. The small member counts are put forth as crucial by four of the five co-ops to keep a participatory, direct democratic management.

The empirical material was generated through semi-structured interviews, participatory observations in meetings, and collection of the co-ops' central work and policy documents. The analysis in this article focuses on the interview material, consisting of 12 individual interviews and two group interviews. One group interview was held with two members from the Drama Co-op and the other with four members from the Art Co-op. The interviewees were selected with consideration of variations regarding gender, age, and role in the co-ops. The interviews, ranging from one to two hours, focused on how the co-ops are organised in areas such as economy, management, division of labour, working conditions, aims and scope, and relation to other actors outside the co-ops. The resistance theme was not amplified in interview questions but came forward during the subsequent analysis. The interview accounts are understood as articulations of the co-ops that are intertwined with the co-ops' social and material practices, and thereby reflect a reality beyond the interview situation, in line with a theoretical perspective on discourse as 'top-down and bottom-up (re)production through continually (re)articulated citational chains' (Springer 2010, p. 931). The analytical focus is to explore how reality is being constructed in these articulations rather than trying to detect the interviewees' underlying intentions or motivations (Potter 1996).

The analysis has been conducted through an initial open coding of the interview transcriptions in the search for patterns. A strong tendency of critical comparisons with aspects in the surrounding society came forth, particularly articulations of resistance to capitalist values and ways of organising work and businesses. This motivated a more

focused coding using the theoretical perspective on constructive resistance, upon which the perspective of knowledge-making is employed in order to explore its actualisation in the constructive resistance practices. Focus is on attempts and challenges of knowledge-making through constructive resistance as articulated by the co-op members, reflected in the analytical themes below, where the co-ops are synthesised in a joint analysis due to the shared patterns.

## 6. Analysis

The analysis is structured into two parts. The first part concerns the possibilities, namely how the Swedish worker co-ops contribute to knowledge-making through constructive resistance by setting an example. The second part focuses on how the market economy wherein the co-ops act offers challenges for their potential to contribute with knowledge-making through constructive resistance. Lastly, a concluding discussion.

### 6.1. *Possibilities of Knowledge-Making through Constructive Resistance*

This section explores Swedish worker co-ops' possibilities of constructive resistance by enacting economic businesses differently to typical ways associated with capitalist systems. A recurrent pattern in the empirical material is that this realisation is represented by the co-ops as a display or proof that co-ops function, and that their cooperative principles can offer an alternative to the dominance of capitalist ideals. This can be illustrated by the following quote:

That we exist and . . . still exist, is a proof that yes, sure, it's possible to work like this, and it's, what we'd like to say, better than many other ways of working. (IP2, Heritage Co-op).

The quote represents the view that the co-ops' continuing presence function as a practical enactment of the fact that worker cooperation is possible, which points to that their very existence may add to knowledge production by setting an example. The following quote illustrates a more extensive elaboration on how the co-ops can demonstrate that it is possible to run an economic organisation according to other values, with implications for a different kind of economy.

I also think it's interesting how the very organisational form of co-ops can lead to another kind of economy, in a bigger perspective that is, so that's very interesting. Not only that it's good for the members but that it's . . . well, for me personally it's interesting to show that it's possible to run a successful business as a co-op . . . [...] If one's a joint-stock company, it only takes a little effort in order to be viewed as serious, but an economic association is seen . . . [...] it feels like it's downgraded a bit, in some way. So, I think it's fun to show that it's possible to run a business with other principles, [...] with these cooperative principles behind. (IP3, Transportation Co-op)

Here, the co-operator raises concern about the lack of knowledge and faith in co-ops as stable businesses, which the co-op's very existence can correct, and thereby challenge the dominant production of knowledge. This highlights how the co-ops can strive for social change by setting an example that businesses can be organised according to the cooperative principles and values, which emphasise democracy, solidarity, equality, concern for community, and member benefits rather than profit accumulation (The International

Co-operative Alliance 2019). The co-ops' constructive resistance is thus paralleled with the representation of what doing business can mean. Although the co-ops themselves do not actively roll out the cooperative form through particular knowledge spreading activities such as campaigning, the co-operators reflect a view that their organising may inspire others to act similarly and thereby enhance the presently marginalised position of worker co-ops in Sweden.

Another member further explicates the importance of practically enacting and displaying the potential of worker cooperation in the strive for social change.

It's more important that we go for qualitative, good things just to show that one can work in this way, and it becomes another workplace where one doesn't have to sit and wear oneself out and work with a lot of, well, yes, not meaningless projects ... [...] but it's maybe even better that we also make sure to do some other things in between, that may not be profitable, but that we actually use our profit to do projects involving a loss but that can raise some bigger issues, and make some other impression in the society. (IP2, Heritage Co-op)

The member emphasises the importance of setting an example – 'just to show that one can work in this way' – and that it includes working in ways that have a societal impact. This indicates that even if it would mean an economic loss, it is valuable to stay true to one's ideals, because a side-stepping of the ideals could diminish the potential of setting an example. Similarly, another member expresses that their commercial service will only be offered to partners that correspond with the co-op's ideals.

[W]e think that we can sell commercial space for other businesses and so, on the vehicles. But we won't allow any businesses, only if they adhere to the fundamental values. (IP3, Transportation Co-op)

The co-operator stresses that the co-op only want to spread knowledge about businesses they agree with, by marketing on their vehicles. This may limit the co-ops' profit, but enable them to practice constructive resistance through their choice of customers. Two members from the group interview with the Drama Co-op also emphasise how they commit to the co-op's ideals in relation to customers.

IP2: We've clear values and visions to work with sustainability for both human and environment, and with questions of equality between the sexes, and [...] even if it's not clear in the ordered project, it's still a part of how we work. [...] But we always make sure that it's included, either explicitly, or that we slip it in.

IP1: We slip the norm critique in wherever we go ... [laughs]. (Drama Co-op)

These accounts illustrate the general tendency of how the five co-ops realise their cooperative ideals and strive for social improvement through their everyday practices, indicating that constructive resistance is an important part of their organising. This points to an understanding that when the co-ops stay true to their ideals regarding both work content and organisational structure, they set the example that their cooperative ideals and organising is a viable option for economic businesses. Thus, by practicing constructive resistance, these worker co-ops produce knowledge by 'validating' that their form of organising is possible, and thereby resist reproducing knowledge about the dominance of capitalist businesses (White and Williams 2012). By connecting co-ops with premodern ways of organising work, one member disputes a dominant view on the present economic system as the only alternative.

It has been fun to participate in this study, so I look forward to the result, that it's actually possible to organise work in this way as well, and then perhaps actually in a better way, too. I think that different forms of cooperation have been very common, for example in the old peasant societies, [...] and this individual ownership and wage-labour are a pretty new invention. I'm interested in this long perspective – that we've had it like this for hundred years doesn't mean that it's something essentially human, we've made it up, it's culturally created, we can change it, we can do something else instead. (IP3, Heritage Co-op)

The notion of individual ownership and wage-labour as the main ways to organise economic activities is explicitly opposed with reference to history, highlighting how the present economic system can be transformed into something else, namely into the 'better way' characterised by cooperation. Instead of representing co-ops as a marginal exception, the member challenges the present dominant forms of organising by making the cooperative form a universal, natural way of organising that has been dominant in earlier times.

Further, participation in this research project is articulated by several interviewees as a way that could contribute to knowledge-making about the benefits of co-ops. However, the worker co-ops' close surroundings involve challenges regarding the possibilities of knowledge-making through constructive resistance, as will be shown in the ensuing section.

## **6.2. Challenges of Knowledge-Making through Constructive Resistance**

This section concerns the five Swedish worker co-ops' challenges in contributing to knowledge-making through constructive resistance. There is a clear tendency that the co-operators express that knowledge about co-ops is limited and not to their advantage, which restrains the co-ops' communication about worker cooperation. For example, several interviewees point out that it is not always positive to mention that they are a co-op.

I don't think we mention it so often. It's just a business, it messes things up for them ... it's nothing positive at that point. In marketing. On the other hand, if one may've had a customer, then they're a bit more interested. [...] But in the marketing, I haven't seen it as positive. [...] One must be a business, it's important for the customer to get what service they buy, they buy a service, that's it. 'Cooperative' may get this kind of goofiness about it, this that all sit and work together, kind of ... (IP3, Environment Co-op)

The co-operator expresses that co-ops risk being associated with unreliable forms of collectivism that may limit potential customers' interest in working with them, indicating that the general knowledge in Sweden about what co-ops are makes them seem less reliable than the 'conventional' businesses. This is also expressed in the following quote:

For some it's probably quite political ... and a little complicated to understand, that we like to work with this in the way we do it. But on the other hand, if we say that we can offer better deliveries than other companies [...] then it doesn't matter how we run the business really. Then, depending on follow up questions, it could be interesting to also tell that we've a democratic business structure. Others may think that's good ... [...] So, it's in the sales talk where we perhaps must seem a bit more conventional than we actually are, when one will like sell us. Because otherwise one can probably be a bit put off, because it ... it's a bit odd and weird and then it's maybe dangerous to work with us. Perhaps it's contagious ... [laughs]. (IP4, Transportation Co-op)

Here, the co-operator discusses a need for worker co-ops to tone down their cooperative identity and market themselves more like a conventional business in order to be perceived as reliable. Some of the co-operators contemplated that they wish to get better at emphasising the democratic organising and cooperative principles outwards, but still are cautious since the knowledge about co-ops is low. This means that due to conditions in the market context where they are active, the co-ops do not spread knowledge about cooperation as much as they could have. The knowledge-making thus risks being limited to the close circle of the cooperative organisation – just a bubble of constructive resistance within the economic and societal sphere which they aim to change.

One important aspect, however, is that the co-ops involved in this study act in different sectors. The Drama Co-op and the Art Co-op are embedded within the cultural sector, where the economic market has a higher proportion of public funding, whilst the Transportation Co-op, the Environment Co-op, and the Heritage Co-op are all active within more conventional service and consultant sectors. The problems of emphasising the cooperative form are clearly articulated by the latter three co-ops, whereas none of the members from the two cultural co-ops discuss difficulties in marketing themselves as a co-op. Although possibilities of communicating the cooperative identity is not problematic for all the co-ops, the lack of knowledge is generally represented as a hindrance for the cooperative movement's strive for social change, as illustrated by this quote:

I don't think it's in peoples' mind to any large extent. Neither I think it's any active resistance to it, but people are completely used to capitalist or publicly owned production models and they're all hierarchical, and based on thousands of middle bosses and chiefs and ... and one complains about it and complains about the control and the increasing administration and ... the lack of freedom and equality, but it doesn't feel like cooperatives pop up as an alternative then. (IP4, Art Co-op)

Here, the co-operator depicts common ways of organising work and businesses as a dominant norm that people are critical towards, but have become used to. This indicates that a normalisation of the present economic system marginalises awareness about the possibility of resistance by organising otherwise. The co-operators convey that worker co-ops are being delegitimised as odd, goofy, leftist, political, and not being a 'normal' or 'legitimate' business in the way that economic businesses usually are understood in the discursive power/knowledge nexus. The practical experiences of the Swedish worker co-ops' everyday organising can thereby be understood as marginalised, subjugated knowledge (Foucault 1980b, 1997). This marginalisation points to a possible challenge for the cooperative movement's expansion in Sweden, related to a common form of critique against co-ops that questions how they could be so good, if so few choose that path (Elster 1989, White and Williams 2012).

When talking about spreading knowledge about cooperation, several of the co-operators emphasise the importance of other actors. One member, for example, calls for the Swedish employment agency and the educational system to contribute with awareness about cooperation.

I think it's dreary, mostly in the schools. There, one should definitely strike a blow, it's like a right, I think, to get to know things and not get a misrepresentation of reality. [...]. One could increase the knowledge about co-ops if one had the opportunity to discuss co-ops in relation to entrepreneurship. Because it's needed ... (IP3, Environment Co-op)

The co-operator stresses that neglecting to present cooperatives as a viable business alternative produces an untruthful picture of how it is possible to organise economic businesses. Reproduction of this false picture indicates that the nexus of power/knowledge related to public societal institutions stifles the alternative route of cooperation. In the following quote, a member expresses the changes required in the dominant discourse about cooperation, while also pointing to the potential of grass-roots constructive resistance.

Lots of changes are needed, that is, political changes and the whole discourse and mentality around doing business, and above all to premiere democratic businesses ... And, I think, when it comes to co-ops, ideological convictions play a key role concerning the cooperative drive to ... well, for me it's also connected to a much bigger idea of a democratic non-capitalistic economy, and there's an incredible potential in cooperation since it's allowed within the capitalist system. [...] But many won't go that far. There're also other ideological problems, for example *Coompanion* [the Swedish state-funded national organisation to promote and support co-ops], the primary tool to develop cooperative businesses, they get their money from *Tillväxtverket* [the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth] and therefore cannot be political [...] in their rhetoric, they can only say that it's fun to run a business together and cooperative businesses grow the most, but there's nothing about democratic economy or non-capitalistic businesses or another distribution of ownership ... since that would be too leftist or something. (IP4, Art Co-op)

Here, the member expresses a view that since worker co-ops are possible within the present system, so is grass-roots constructive resistance. But the member also emphasises that the system transformation sought for in the long run requires support and more thorough changes in the surrounding political and societal context. This implies that the impact of knowledge-making through constructive resistance by setting an example risks to make the co-ops' resistance a slow process for social transformation. The quote indicates that when cooperation is talked about apolitically, such as by the national organisation *Coompanion*, cooperation risks co-optation by present-day capitalist economy and its political potential might become hidden. Since co-ops can be practiced more or less as resistance, the neglect to communicate the political potential may risk that some co-ops become organised in ways more similar to conventional, capitalist enterprises.

Even though, as indicated by previous research and this analysis, knowledge about the (political) alternative of worker cooperatives is marginalised in Sweden, worker co-ops can still be practiced as grass-roots constructive resistance that contribute to social change. The lack of knowledge just seem to make their political practices more challenging. On the other hand, knowledge about co-ops' compatibility with – rather than political challenge against – capitalism, might allow some of them to be more outspoken in their communication with customers. This indicates that the relation between constructive resistance and knowledge-making is a balancing act in the intersection between pragmatics and politics.

## 7. Concluding Discussion

In this article, I have conducted an exploratory analysis of the possibilities and challenges of knowledge-making through constructive resistance by five Swedish worker co-ops within the capitalist market economy. The analysis shows that the worker co-ops'

enactment of alternatives contribute to knowledge-making in opposition to the dominant nexus of power/knowledge (Foucault 1980b, 1997). Through ongoing repetition of everyday resistance practices, the worker co-ops oppose the perceived dominance of capitalist enterprises by organising differently, and can be understood as adhering to a political rather than pragmatic stance in relation to the capitalist market economy (Jaumier *et al.* 2017). The analysis shows that by living one's ideals in the present through small-scaled grass-roots resistance, understood as constructive resistance (Vinthagen 2005, Sørensen and Vinthagen 2012, Sørensen 2016, Koefoed 2018), the five worker co-ops challenge views that there is no alternative to the present capitalist economy. The co-operators express their organising as a display or proof that worker cooperatives are a viable, functionable alternative – a setting of an example that may contribute to social change by producing knowledge about cooperation and inspiring others to act similarly.

However, the analysis also shows that the five worker co-ops are practicing a form of self-development within the system, but are limited by that same system, which brings forth a risk that their resistance project fails. Specifically, the potential of contributing with subjugated knowledge production through constructive resistance is being limited due to the worker co-ops' dependence of economic markets where the cooperative form may not sell, causing them to be cautioned in promoting themselves as a co-op. This points to possible challenges of practicing knowledge-making through constructive resistance within the same system that is being opposed. The context has bearing on the co-ops' possibilities to spread the knowledge-making beyond the borders of the cooperative. Since knowledge-making is primarily being practiced by setting an example that the co-ops are a viable alternative, the impact diminishes if communication of the cooperative form is hindered in the everyday work. These constraining contextual circumstances may stifle their possibilities to grow into a bigger social change movement.

Thereby, this article adds to previous research that has acknowledged the dual reality of worker co-ops in a tension between self-determination of radical democracy and economic market mechanisms of global capitalism (Diamantopoulos 2012, Vieta 2014, Langmead 2016), indicating that in Sweden, worker co-ops' constructive resistance might not be enough for the political alternative to overthrow capitalism into a new economic system, as emphasised by the abovementioned 'Co-operative Commonwealth School'. Since worker co-ops may function together with a continuation of capitalist logics, they risk to get caught in the pragmatic position related to the 'School of Modified Capitalism' (Holmén 1990, Sentama 2009).

The analysis however indicates that the Swedish worker co-ops' constructive resistance has the potential to grow into an expansive resistance movement if paralleled by practices of other co-ops. Other parts of the world offer examples of large-scaled efforts, such as Mondragón in Spain (Whyte and Whyte 1991) and the MST's agricultural co-ops in Argentina (Pahnke 2015). The sixth cooperative principle, *cooperation among cooperatives* (The International Co-operative Alliance 2019), refers to one way of enhancing such a development. However, that principle is difficult to follow if worker co-ops are rare, as in Sweden. Alperovitz (2011) emphasises that the cooperative movement needs support in order to grow, which is also indicated by the present analysis. Some political initiatives in Sweden have recently supported co-ops by making their required administration easier (Bet 2017/18:CU25) and aiding co-ops as work integration social enterprises (Tillväxtverket 2019) – small steps that could spread knowledge beyond the constructive resistance of individual worker co-ops.

Being an exploratory study based on five Swedish worker co-ops, it is possible with different insights from research based on other worker co-ops. For example, co-ops located on the countryside with fewer competing businesses than in large cities might experience more awareness about co-ops, in so far that they are in close proximity to their customers. Nevertheless, the type of worker co-ops included in this study are mostly found in larger cities in Sweden. The patterns found encompass worker co-ops in different business branches, which indicates that even though they are not representative for Swedish worker co-ops in a strict sense, it is possible with similar experiences reflected by other co-operators.

So far, this article has shown that the context of constructive resistance and the links between knowledge-making and constructive resistance are important fields to explore further in order to deepen the understanding of how resistance could bring about social change. This can be done by focusing on the contextual implications for practices of constructive resistance and knowledge-making in different societal spheres.

## Note

1. It is not possible to report on the exact number of worker co-ops in Sweden. The Swedish Companies Registration Office (Bolagsverket) only produces statistics about formal legal forms. Worker co-ops can also have other legal forms, but those are excluded from this study since they do not necessitate equal ownership for all members.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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