**“No One Washes a Rental Car”: Parsing Contested Narratives of Worker Ownership in the Massachusetts Cooperative Economy**

By

Tyler Luis Rivera
A.B. in Geography
Dartmouth College, 2016

Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Author: _____
Department of Urban Studies and Planning
May 18, 2022

Certified by: _____
Ezra Haber Glenn, Lecturer
Department of Urban Studies and Planning
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by: _____
Ceasar McDowell, Professor of Civic Design
Department of Urban Studies and Planning
Chair, MCP Committee

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the structural deficiencies of a capitalist system in which short-term profits and shareholder value are prioritized over human well-being and economic stability. With the search for a more humane and resilient economic model urgent now more than ever, a groundswell of interest in worker cooperatives — firms that are collectively owned and democratically managed by their employees — has recently emerged. For many, worker cooperatives (co-ops) represent a means to raise wages, improve working conditions, mitigate precarity, and build resilience for workers and communities. But worker co-ops have also been envisaged as vehicles for more radical economic change. Indeed, prominent scholars of worker co-ops have framed the burgeoning cooperative movement as a transformative political project striving to build alternative economic institutions to challenge and replace capitalism altogether. Compelling though this vision may be, this thesis explores what is largely missed by such top-down characterizations of the cooperative model’s transformative potential: the perspectives of actual worker-owners. Animated by this gap in the discourse on worker ownership, this thesis addresses a critical question raised by the absence of workers’ voices: to what extent do the actors ostensibly charged with leading such a transformative movement (i.e., worker-owners) think of their businesses as viable alternatives to capitalism and themselves as harbingers of a new economic paradigm?

Drawing from semi-structured interviews with ten worker-owners in worker co-ops based in Massachusetts, this research reveals how worker-owners hold complex, multifaceted understandings of worker ownership and its potential to transform our economy. I find that worker-owners embrace narratives emphasizing how worker ownership can improve the lives and livelihoods of working people within capitalism, while also positioning worker co-ops as stepping stones toward a new economy built around a fundamentally different set of productive arrangements and economic relations. Ultimately, I argue that these multivalent dispositions reflect a hybrid politics of worker ownership rooted in the real-life experiences of worker-owners caught between the intellectual vanguard of the cooperative movement and the working-class polity of which they are a part, with implications for the future of the cooperative movement.

| | |
|---|---|
| Supervisor: | Ezra Haber Glenn |
| Title: | Lecturer in Community Development, Department of Urban Studies and Planning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology |
| Reader: | Penn Loh |
| Title: | Senior Lecturer and Associate Chair, Department of Urban Environmental Policy and Planning, Tufts University |

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This thesis is dedicated to the workers of the world, and to all those who dare to imagine that a better future is possible.

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## CHAPTER 1: Introduction

We are at an inflection point. The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown into sharp relief the multiple structural pitfalls of an economic system still recovering from its last meltdown just twelve years prior. Amid decades of stagnant racial disparities, soaring wealth inequality, and a declining labor share of income, capitalism's latest crash triggered these long-simmering crises to erupt, with the unfolding trail of death and immiseration largely hewing to the system's pre-existing fault lines (Stevano et al., 2021; Sparke & Williams, 2022). While capitalism's weaknesses were well-known before the outbreak of COVID-19, the pandemic raised a magnifying glass to the limitations of a paradigm that prioritizes short-term profits and shareholder value over human well-being and economic stability (Spash, 2020; Giroux, 2021; Jones & Hameiri, 2021; Sell, 2021; Šumonja, 2021). Against this harrowing backdrop — made only grimmer by the looming prospect of a capitalism-fueled climate catastrophe — the search for a more humane and resilient economic model is urgent now more than ever.

In the modern era, the primary alternatives to capitalism's systemic dysfunctions have been state socialism, in which economic power is transferred from private ownership into state hands, and social democracy, which maintains private ownership but with the addition of a robust welfare state. However, with the collapse of experiments in state socialism during the twentieth century and the steady erosion of social democracy in the face of neoliberal pressure, many are questioning what other alternatives to today's corporate capitalism, if any, might exist. This thesis explores one possible alternative already taking root in communities across the globe: worker cooperatives.

Cooperatives (co-ops) are enterprises owned and controlled by their members. Depending on a co-op's ownership structure, members may be producers, consumers, workers, or a combination of these stakeholders. Worker cooperatives are businesses collectively owned and jointly managed by workers, who are typically referred to as 'worker-owners.' Worker co-ops vary greatly in their size and scope of activity, from CERO, a seven-person commercial composting cooperative based in Dorchester, Massachusetts, to the Mondragón Corporation, a federation of 96 worker cooperatives employing more than 70,000 people in Spain's Basque region. But in all cases, worker-owners collectively own the businesses in which they work, assume responsibility for decision making at all levels, and benefit from a share of any profits that their labor and skills generate (Krimmerman & Lindenfeld, 1992).

Since their emergence during the heyday of industrial capitalism in the early nineteenth century, worker co-ops have been embraced as a means to organize productive activity for the mutual benefit of working people (Curl, 2009; Restakis, 2010; Ness & Azzellini, 2011; Bateman, 2015). Through the formation of cooperative enterprises based on democratic participation, self-management, and collective ownership, the worker co-op movement has long sought to secure better wages, raise working conditions, enhance agency and power, mitigate precarity, and build resilience for

workers and communities (Krimmerman & Lindenfeld, 1992; Lawrence et al., 2018). But worker co-ops have also been envisaged as engines of more fundamental economic change beyond their capacity to improve workers' material and social conditions within the capitalist economy.

In place of private ownership of the means of production under capitalism or state ownership and planning under socialism, many scholars have posited worker co-ops as the basis for a more just economy in which productive resources are socially owned and democratically controlled by workers (de Peuter & Dyer-Witheford, 2010; Restakis, 2010; Wright, 2010; Alperovitz, 2005; Wolff, 2012; Wright, 2013*;* Mulder, 2015; Ranis, 2016; Schneider, 2018; Kelly & Howard, 2019). As economist and renowned worker co-op evangelist Richard Wolff argues (2012) in *Democracy at Work: A Cure for Capitalis*m, his treatise on worker ownership, an economy of worker co-ops would undermine capitalism's dominance by upending the defining relation of the capitalist mode of production: employers exploiting workers (Wolff, 2012). By decentering individual owners and absentee shareholders — by "getting rid of the bosses" (Semuels, 2015) — worker co-ops could serve as "the emancipatory germ that can counter capitalist monopoly over the means of production and societal hegemony" (Ranis, 2016: 16), thereby engendering a more egalitarian and democratic society overall (Mulder, 2015). In this light, the worker cooperative movement is framed by its intellectual authorities as a transformative political project striving to build alternative economic institutions to challenge and eventually replace capitalism.

But while many prominent scholars have expounded a compelling vision of worker co-ops as economic alternatives to capitalism, their perspectives largely operate in a discursive space detached from the everyday experiences of the individuals at the very heart of the cooperative model: actual worker-owners. Indeed, within the narrative proffered by the intellectual class of cooperative advocates, it is taken for granted that worker-owners share a desire to disrupt the capitalist economy and accelerate the transition to a different economic system. However, the conspicuous dearth of voices from the front line of the cooperative movement casts doubt on the credibility of this assumption. For scholars and practitioners interested in the role worker co-ops might play as part of a movement for economic transformation, this absence of frontline perspectives raises a crucial question: to what extent do the actors ostensibly charged with leading this transformative movement (i.e., worker-owners) think of their businesses as viable alternatives to capitalism and themselves as harbingers of a new economic paradigm?

This thesis strives to fill this gap, if only partially, by exploring the bottom-up perspectives of worker-owners immersed in the day-to-day realities of owning and operating cooperative businesses. In the chapters that follow, I present a series of research findings from semi-structured interviews I conducted with ten worker-owners in Massachusetts-based worker co-ops from mid-January to early-February 2022. These interviews were informed by the core research question guiding this thesis: *what does*

*worker ownership mean to worker-owners in cooperative businesses, and to what extent do these self-stated meanings align with and/or diverge from the dominant framing of worker co-ops as economic alternatives?* A key motivation in framing my research around this question was a desire to expand the discursive focus of worker ownership beyond the scholars writing about worker co-ops and toward the ordinary, working-class people actually embedded within cooperative businesses.

From my interviews emerged a rich set of qualitative data suggesting that worker-owners possess complex, multifaceted understandings of worker ownership and its potential to transform our economy. Using Fraser's (1995) typology of remedies for injustice outlined in Chapter 2 as a heuristic lens to parse the political valences (i.e., orientations) of worker-owners' perspectives, this research demonstrates the contested nature of the discourse on worker ownership. On the one hand, participants articulated affirmative narratives emphasizing the concrete, material benefits of the cooperative model for individual workers, while eschewing the radical, anticapitalist rhetoric of the cooperative movement's intellectual establishment. Referencing the familiar aphorism that "no one washes a rental car," for instance, participants juxtaposed the lack of ownership most wage laborers derive from their work with the visceral sense of investment and care that accompany the cooperative model. On the other hand, participants voiced more transformative outlooks in which they critiqued capitalism as a root cause of inequality and positioned worker co-ops as stepping stones toward an alternative economic model based on new forms of relations, values, and productive arrangements. Counterposing the cooperative model with capitalism's inherent flaws, for example, worker-owners characterized worker co-ops as a fundamentally different way of structuring society and the economy, making them "a direct threat to everything as we know it, our economy as we know it," in the words of one participant.

Far from being uncompromising ideologues subscribed to a singular worldview, the worker-owners I interviewed expressed nuanced, often conflicting positions exhibiting a range of political valences. I find that these divergent orientations toward the the transformative potential of worker co-ops reflect not an ideological ambivalence but rather a hybrid politics of worker ownership grounded in the real-life experiences of worker-owners caught between the intellectual vanguard of the cooperative movement and the working-class polity of which they are a part. Positioned at the interface between the cooperative movement and the working-class, worker-owners' hybrid stance exposes the boundary between affirmative and transformative narratives as porous and negotiable, opening the door to a more pluralistic future in which worker co-ops are conceived of both as a means to improve the lives of working people in the world as it is and as instruments by which workers can collectively usher in a new economy built around solidarity, interdependence, and democracy. Ultimately, I argue that by elevating the voices of those at the heart of the cooperative model — by recentering workers in the discourse on worker cooperatives — a movement that embraces multiple horizons for change toward a more just economy for all might be realized.

Before fully elaborating on my research findings and their implications, Chapter 2 establishes the conceptual framework underpinning this thesis, including a brief overview of the entanglement between narratives and power, as well as a description of Fraser's framework, which I brought to bear on the narratives of worker ownership that emerged from my interviews. It then presents the research design, methods, and data analysis protocol I used to advance this thesis. Chapter 3 delves into several key bodies of literature this thesis engages with and draws on, including the political-economic context of neoliberal capitalism; the solidarity economy and efforts to imagine more just alternatives to capitalism; the evolution of the worker cooperative movement; the historical and contemporary discourse on worker cooperatives as economic alternatives to capitalism; and the extant literature on the politics of worker-owners. In Chapters 4 and 5, I present the *narratives of affirmation* and *narratives of transformation* that emerged from my semi-structured interviews with worker-owners, relating these disparate yet complementary sets of findings back to the dominant narrative of worker co-ops as economic alternatives espoused by high-profile cooperative advocates. In Chapter 6, I conclude by bringing my dual sets of findings together to describe what they can collectively tell us about the politics of worker ownership and the implications of these findings for the worker cooperative movement more broadly.

On a final note: I want to emphasize that while an aspiration to explore the limits and possibilities of worker co-ops as a viable alternative to capitalism admittedly underlies my personal interest in this topic, the purpose of this thesis is neither to argue in favor of nor against the worker cooperative model. Rather, this thesis is motivated by a desire to better understand what worker ownership means for the actors most central to this model, and by a commitment to elevating the voices of worker-owners in an effort to spark a more nuanced dialogue on worker co-ops that meaningfully reflects the lived experiences and perspectives of workers at the forefront of the cooperative movement. By shifting the center of gravity in the discourse on worker ownership toward the perspectives and lived experiences of worker-owners themselves, I hope to crack open the door to a future in which the power to articulate and shape the direction of the cooperative movement rests more firmly in the hands of everyday working people.

## CHAPTER 2: Conceptual Framework and Methodology

### *2.1 Narrative Power and Counternarratives*

Narratives — specifically, how social actors construct, mobilize, and contest narratives — constitute the conceptual backbone of this thesis. Thus, before exploring how worker-owners in Massachusetts-based worker cooperatives create and deploy multivalent narratives of worker ownership rooted in their lived experiences, and how these ground-level articulations relate to the dominant framing of worker cooperatives as economic alternatives to capitalism, a brief excursion into the literature on narratives and their entanglement with power is first warranted.

Derived from the Latin verb *narrare*, meaning to tell or recount, narratives are the universal form through which we construct stories about, assign meaning to, and make sense of our lives (Bruner, 1991; Sommers, 1994). Narratives are present not just in books, film, and other artistic mediums but in virtually all human discourse (Fludernik, 2009). Indeed, some have described narratives as fundamental to the human condition. "Our very definition as human beings," literary critic Peter Brooks (1996) theorized, "is very much bound up with the stories we tell about our own lives and the world in which we live… Life is in many respects narrativized in series and bunches of intersecting stories—never complete until our death" (19). In other words, narratives are an intrinsic and universal aspect of the human experience.

As a way of representing and giving voice to our lived experiences, narratives always and everywhere offer subjective interpretations of the world (Patterson & Monroe, 1998; Frank, 2010). Literary theorist James Phelan (2007) defines narratives as "somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened" (203). The operative word in Phelan's definition is "purpose," as narratives are not stories that exist in a vacuum but rather rhetorical devices curated and deployed to accomplish particular purposes in relation to specific audiences (Phelan, 2017). Political actors enlist narratives to rationalize their policy positions, corporate executives craft narratives to bolster their companies' reputations, nonprofits leverage narratives to appeal to potential donors, and grassroots movements exploit narratives to stir individuals into collective action. Far from the voiceless reporting of facts, narratives are powerful discursive instruments imbued with subjective meaning and wielded to influence perception and behavior (Salmon, 2010; Ganz, 2011; Roselle et al., 2014; Plummer, 2019; Szymanski, 2021). To borrow a metaphor from sociologist Donald MacKenzie (2006), narratives are "an engine, not a camera."

But narratives do not operate independently of human *narrators* and are not powerful per se; rather, they are embedded in and inextricable from social power relations that shape their currency in public discourse (Mumby, 1987; Roselle et al., 2014). Consequently, social actors enmeshed within asymmetric power relations will possess disparate degrees of influence and agency over which narratives become dominant and

which are obscured (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004; Krebs, 2015). Postmodernist philosopher Michel Foucault's (1972; 1978) theorization of the symbiotic interplay between knowledge and power is particularly instructive for understanding how relations of power produce, perpetuate, and legitimate certain discourses while subjugating others. It is power, Foucault contends, not positivist science, which authorizes a privileged body of experts (i.e., gatekeepers) to define what counts as legitimate knowledge and who has the right to participate in its creation (Turner, 2001; Pitsoe & Letseka, 2013). Power — itself mediated along dimensions of race, class, education, gender, sexuality, ability, and age — shapes what can be said, when, by whom, and with what authority, thus structuring the discursive terrains within which we operate.

Yet the dominance of a narrative does not preclude the construction of counternarratives aimed at subverting, challenging, or offering an alternative to dominant ones (Talbot et al., 1996; Bamberg & Andrews, 2004). Indeed, Foucault believed in possibilities for discursive action and resistance:

> Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby a discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart. (1978: 100-1)

Though the effects of dominant narratives advancing a specific worldview may not be deliberate, their prominent positions can nonetheless crowd out or make unavailable discursive space in which alternative narratives might arise (Lindemann Nelson, 2001; Crabtree-Condor, 2020). But while specific narratives can, intentionally or otherwise, foreclose or constrain discursive space, counternarratives can be used to open up space for resistance and inquiry. In a broad sense, counternarratives emerge from marginalized, underrepresented, or otherwise overlooked perspectives. They disrupt dominant narratives' discursive fixity and top-down authority, allowing for fluidity, nuance, contextual embeddedness, and self-authorship (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004; Mutua, 2008; Tamboukou, 2013). Through the voicing of alternatives, counternarratives recast discursive space as a site of struggle and contestation.

This thesis is not the place for a more detailed review of the literature on narratives, power, and social theory, but the brief overview offered here touches on the most important concepts underpinning this research. Specifically, I consider who is authorized to speak on behalf of the worker cooperative movement, how power relations shape the legitimacy of some narratives associated with the movement over others, whether worker-owners on the front line of the movement see themselves in the dominant narrative of worker ownership, and what narratives emerge from the self-stated perspectives and lived experiences of individual worker-owners. I argue that the

dominant narrative, which views worker cooperatives as engines of transformative economic change and is propagated by prominent cooperative scholars, obfuscates a ground-level understanding of what worker ownership means to worker-owners themselves. Further, the dominant narrative implicitly assumes that the agents tasked with marshaling this transformative change (i.e., worker-owners) think of themselves as stewards of a new economic paradigm, despite the lack of worker voices affirming this position. In embracing narratives as a site of contestation, this thesis explores points of convergence and tension between this top-down rendering of worker cooperatives' radical potential and bottom-up narratives of worker ownership mobilized by actual worker-owners. The following section describes the framework I use to analyze these bottom-up narratives in relation to the dominant narrative of worker ownership described more fully in chapter 3.

### *2.2 Affirmation and Transformation*

To parse the political valence of the narratives of worker ownership that emerged through this research in relation to the theoretical discourse surrounding the worker cooperative movement, this thesis adopts a framework for distinguishing between remedies to injustice devised by Nancy Fraser, a feminist political philosopher whose work largely deals with justice, injustice, democracy, and inequality. Fraser's (1995) framework articulates two broad approaches to remedying injustice: 'affirmative' approaches and 'transformative' approaches:

> By affirmative remedies for injustice I mean remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them. By transformative remedies, in contrast, I mean remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework. (82)

Fraser's distinction between affirmative and transformative remedies turns on the contrast she evokes between tending to the symptoms of inequitable social, economic, and political arrangements versus targeting and reforming those arrangements themselves. Affirmative remedies seek to improve unjust end-state outcomes; transformative remedies aim to radically reimagine the systems that produce them. By way of example, Fraser differentiates between gay identity politics and queer theory as competing approaches to redress the injustices of homophobia and heterosexism. "Gay identity politics," Fraser argues, "tend to enhance existing sexual group differentiation" (83) by valorizing marginalized sexualities and solidifying a coherent gay identity and culture that are separate from heterosexuality. Queer theory, on the other hand, aims not to "solidify a gay identity, but to deconstruct the homo–hetero dichotomy so as to destabilize all fixed sexual identities" (83). In this case, the affirmative remedy (i.e., gay identity politics) seeks to improve the outcomes and status of sexually minoritized individuals within the structure of normative heterosexism. In contrast, the transformative

solution (i.e., queer theory) strives for the complete dismantling of heteronormativity and all socially constructed binaries around gender and sexual identities.

More relevant for this thesis, Fraser also applies her analytic schema to the sphere of economic injustice. Fraser describes how affirmative remedies for economic injustice aim to redress the unequal distribution of economic resources without disturbing the underlying architecture of the political-economic system itself (i.e., capitalism). Affirmative remedies are usually associated with the liberal welfare state and include means-tested social assistance, unemployment insurance, social security, and other safety net programs. To be sure, such affirmative remedies provide critical material support to individuals in need. But rather than attacking the edifice which produces poverty and inequality, affirmative approaches tend to reinforce the durability of the status quo by making it more tolerable for those who benefit least from it.

By contrast, transformative remedies strive to redress the maldistribution of economic resources by fundamentally changing the structures that generate economic injustices. Transformative approaches have historically been associated with socialist politics, and include universal social welfare programs, nationalized industries, significantly expanded public-sector employment, and collective ownership models. Such remedies aim to not only improve individual material circumstances and consumption but also to reengineer the relations of production and social division of labor for all. Rather than reinforcing existing arrangements, transformative remedies seek new ones altogether.

Much more can be said of Fraser's framework, but for the purposes of this thesis it primarily serves as a heuristic through which narratives of worker ownership can be interpreted and analyzed. Following the precedent set by DeFilippis et al. (2019), in which the authors apply Fraser's framework as a 'lens' through which to evaluate how different social actors within Minnesota's community land trust (CLT) network talk about and understand the politics of CLTs, I similarly bring the concepts of affirmation and transformation to bear on the thoughts, experiences, and perspectives of the worker-owners interviewed for this thesis. Specifically, I employ Fraser's typology of remedies for injustice to expose points of convergence and contradiction between the prevailing, top-down rendering of worker cooperatives as economic alternatives to capitalism and the bottom-up narratives of worker ownership mobilized by worker-owners themselves.

I argue that top-down narratives of worker co-ops as economic alternatives to capitalism largely operate in a discursive space detached from workers' concrete, material realities. To better understand the extent to which these top-down narratives align with the experiences and priorities of worker-owners embedded within cooperative businesses, I draw on Fraser's framework as a lens to identity *narratives of affirmation* emphasizing the compatibility of worker cooperatives with capitalism, as well as *narratives of transformation* offering glimpses of radical imagination and economic

possibility. Importantly, the distinction I draw in my analysis between affirmative and transformative narratives does not imply a normative value judgment. Instead, this framing cultivates an awareness of the contested, unsettled character of the discourse on worker ownership by bringing the narrative fault lines that exist within the worker cooperative ecosystem into focus.

### *2.3 Case Selection and Context*

This project investigates how worker-owners at worker co-ops in Massachusetts understand and experience the transformative potential of worker ownership. My primary motivation for selecting Massachusetts as the location for this research was logistical. As a student in Massachusetts and intern with the statewide Coalition for Worker Ownership and Power (COWOP) through the Boston-based Center for Economic Democracy (CED), it was far less complicated to establish connections with nearby worker co-ops, recruit interview participants, and make sense of the local cooperative ecosystem than it would have been to conduct this same fieldwork in another context.

Massachusetts is also conveniently home to the third-highest concentration of worker cooperatives of any state, surpassed only by California and New York. The most recent "State of the Sector Report" on worker cooperatives counted 53 worker co-ops in Massachusetts, representing nearly a tenth of the 612 worker cooperatives identified in the nationwide census (USFWC & DAWI, 2022). A more localized tally of worker cooperatives in the state identified 57 worker-owned co-ops operating in Massachusetts as of 2022 (MassCEO, n.d.). In addition to a large number of worker cooperatives, Massachusetts is also home to a robust community of so-called "secondary institutions" (Tanner, 2013) that support the growth and development of cooperatives. These institutions include cooperative developers like the Cooperative Development Institute and Massachusetts Center for Employee Ownership; technical assistance providers like Wellspring Cooperative and the Boston Center for Community Ownership; cooperative funders like the Cooperative Fund of the Northeast and Local Enterprise Assistance Fund; and federations/associations of worker cooperatives like the Valley Alliance for Worker Cooperatives and Greater Boston Chamber of Cooperatives. Massachusetts' rich ecosystem of worker cooperatives and support organizations provides an ideal environment to investigate how worker-owners view and understand worker ownership in relation to the narrative propagated by high-profile advocates within the broader worker cooperative movement.

### *2.4 Literature Review*

Before applying a ground-level approach to understanding the narratives of worker ownership mobilized by worker-owners themselves, this thesis takes as its point of departure an inquiry into the theoretical underpinnings of the worker cooperative model. Specifically, I review the literature on worker cooperatives as economic alternatives to capitalism in order to trace the historical origins and contemporary

evolution of the dominant framing of worker cooperatives as vehicles for post-capitalist economic transformation deployed by the intellectual class of cooperative advocates today. After elaborating on this top-down narrative in Chapter 3, the remainder of this thesis explores the self-stated perspectives and experiences of individual worker-owners within cooperative businesses in an effort to uncover bottom-up narratives of worker ownership emerging from the front line of the worker cooperative movement.

### *2.5 Semi-Structured Interviews*

To bring these grounded narratives of worker ownership to light, I conducted semi-structured interviews with ten worker-owners at cooperative businesses in Massachusetts, on the ancestral and unceded lands of the Mahican, Massachusett, Nipmuck, Pennacook, Pocumtuc, and Wampanoag peoples, as well as those who I have omitted due to colonial erasure or my own ignorance. Interviews took place between January 21 and February 18, 2022. All interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom and BigBlueButton video conferencing softwares to protect the health and safety of all interview participants; minimize travel; and allow participants to feel a greater sense of comfort and privacy by speaking from their home or another familiar setting. While there were undoubtedly limitations to conducting interviews virtually — notably those outlined by ‘t Hart (2021) in her description of the challenges of practicing ‘deep listening’ via video interview — I strived to mitigate these shortcomings by making my interviews purposefully conversational in the hopes of encouraging participants to speak freely.

An interview guide (see Appendix A) comprising a series of open-ended questions provided a framework to ensure consistency across interviews. The first portion of each interview focused on participants’ prior work experiences in order to gauge the extent to which their previous experiences in the workforce may have influenced their path toward worker ownership. The second portion covered participants’ journeys to worker cooperativism, including how participants learned about the opportunity to join their current co-op and the extent to which the business being worker-owned was a factor in their decision. The third portion inquired into participants’ experiences with worker ownership, with specific questions aimed at elucidating participants’ thoughts on the advantages and drawbacks of the worker cooperative model in relation to the conventional business model. In the final section, I asked participants to share their thoughts on whether and how worker co-ops might hold the potential to bring about transformative change in the economy. All interviews were conducted in English and lasted 60 to 90 minutes.

### *2.6 Sampling*

Interview participants were selected using a nonprobability criterion sampling strategy. In line with Kemper et al.’s (2013) general principles for sampling in social science research, criterion sampling was appropriate for this project given the research question being addressed, scope of the study, and practical considerations around what

was ethical and feasible. Like other purposeful sampling strategies, criterion sampling is used to identify information-rich cases related to a phenomenon of interest, specifically selecting cases or participants that meet some predetermined criteria (Palinkas et al., 2015). For this research, the sampling criterion was the participant's experience with being a cooperative worker-owner. All interview participants shared the experience of being a worker-owner while varying in their personal characteristics and unique lived experiences with worker ownership.

To recruit participants, I primarily relied on a proprietary database of contacts representing organizations across the Massachusetts worker cooperative economy compiled by the Coalition for Worker Ownership and Power (COWOP). While COWOP agreed to share its database of contacts from which I recruited prospective participants, it was not involved in any aspect of the recruitment or interview processes, nor was it informed of the worker-owners who agreed to participate in interviews. To supplement the database provided by CED, I also independently conducted online research to identify additional worker co-ops from which I recruited prospective participants. In total, I contacted 34 individual worker-owners from 26 worker cooperatives via email to recruit them into this study using a pre-approved recruitment email (see Appendix B). I received ten positive responses from worker-owners representing ten different worker cooperatives in Massachusetts from this outreach. An anonymized list of interview participants can be found below in Table 1.

*Table 1. List of Interview Participants*

| **Co-op Location** | **Co-op Industry** | **Tenure** | **Founder** | **Prior Co-op** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cape & Islands | Building Design | 9 years | No | No |
| Central MA | Accounting | 5 years* | Yes | No |
| Greater Boston | Food Service | 5 years | Yes | Yes |
| Greater Boston | IT | 9 years | No | No |
| Pioneer Valley | Building Trades | 6 years | Yes | No |
| Pioneer Valley | Food Processing | 9 years* | Yes | Yes |
| Pioneer Valley | Food Production | 3 years | No | No |
| Pioneer Valley | Renewable Energy | 5 years | No | No |
| Remote | Behavioral Health | 1 year | Yes | No |
| Remote | Media & Communications | 3 years | Yes | No |

**Participant's actual tenure is longer, because they were employed at the business before it converted into a worker cooperative.*

Four of my interview participants were members of worker cooperatives in Massachusetts' Pioneer Valley, which is home to a long-standing cooperative economy.

The remaining six participants were geographically dispersed throughout the state, with representation from cooperatives in the Cape and Islands region, Greater Boston, Central Massachusetts, and two fully-remote cooperatives based in the state. Reflecting the diversity of the cooperative sector, my participants were worker-owners of businesses operating across ten distinct facets of the economy, ranging from food production and behavioral health to renewable energy and accounting.

The mean tenure among my interview participants was 5.5 years, and just two out of ten participants had previously worked at a worker cooperative before joining their current cooperative. Interestingly, six out of the ten worker-owners I spoke with were founders of their current co-op. This balance might reflect the composition of COWOP's contact list and the fact that worker-owners in a position to make decisions on behalf of their respective cooperatives within the context of the Coalition are more likely to be senior/management (i.e., founding) staff. Another possible factor is that founders of worker co-ops presumably have stronger feelings about and are more willing to share their perspectives on worker ownership than workers who join existing co-ops. Thus, it is plausible that founder worker-owners were more likely to respond to my recruitment email than non-founder worker-owners. Because this research does not aim to produce generalizations about worker-owners as a whole but rather to expose narratives of worker ownership that emerge from the actual experiences of individual worker-owners, the risk of sampling and response bias is not a concern in this case. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the stories and perspectives evoked in this thesis are taken from a small sample of worker-owners in a particular location and are not necessarily representative of the diversity of views held by the broader population of worker-owners.

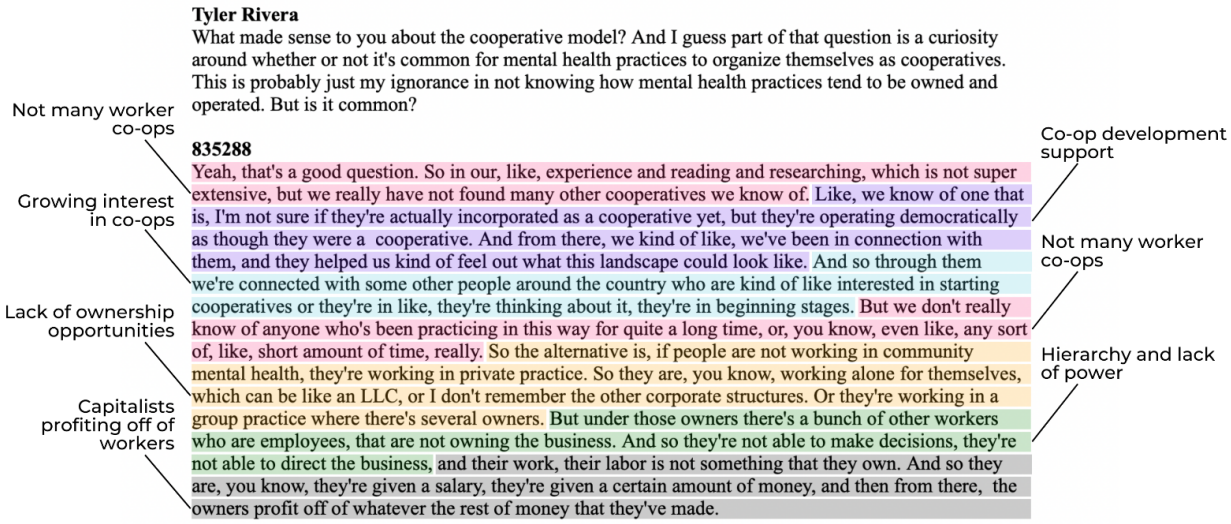
It is also worth bearing in mind that my interview participants were not asked to share any demographic attributes or socio-economic indicators about themselves, such as their race/ethnicity, age, educational attainment, or household income. Given my small sample size, this was a precautionary measure taken to prevent the reidentification of participants through their demographic identifiers. All participants were worker-owners in small and medium-sized cooperatives with fewer than fifty employees, and with only a few personal attributes it might have been possible to deanonymize an individual participant based on their responses. Further, with a small sample, participants' demographic characteristics simply held less utility for making sense of my data. With a larger sample it might have been feasible to use participants' demographic attributes to explore potential patterns in their responses (e.g., immigrants versus U.S.-born worker-owners, white versus non-white worker-owners, etc.). But with only ten participants, slicing and segmenting my data as such would have yielded relatively trivial subsets of responses of little value for my overall analysis. Hence, the demographic and socio-economic make-ups of my sample are not included here.

### *2.7 Data Analysis*

With participants' permission, interviews were digitally recorded using the built-in recording features in Zoom and BigBlueButton. Audio recordings were uploaded to Otter.ai for transcription within 72 hours of completing all interviews. After transcripts were thoroughly checked for accuracy, all audio recordings were promptly deleted. Transcripts were then uploaded to Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software, for analysis. The qualitative data obtained from my interviews and contained in the interview transcripts form the basis of my analysis and findings.

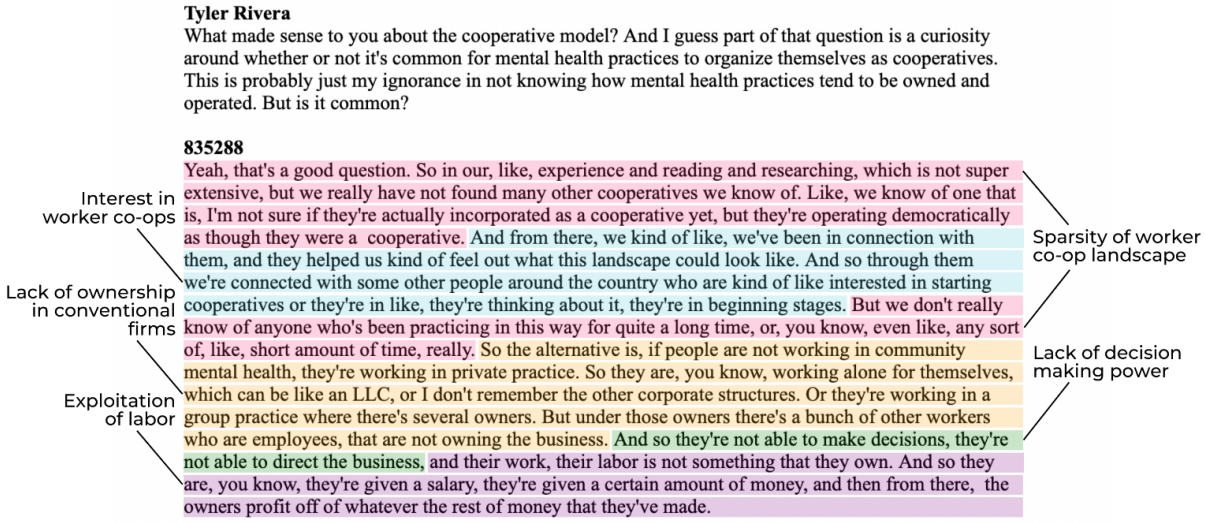
Broadly following Braun and Clarke's (2006) method for thematic analysis, and prior to attempting to inductively identify patterns of meaning that emerged in the data, I read over each transcript in its entirety to familiarize myself with the data. During this stage of open-ended reading, the intention is to "open one's mind to the text and its meanings" (Sundler et al., 2019: 736). After exploring the transcripts, I created and applied an initial set of codes to the data. These initial codes were tentative and intuitive, using shorthand labels to express and interpret the essential meanings of the content "that lie beneath the semantic surface of the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2012: 61). Through the coding process, I broke my qualitative data down into discrete excerpts with corresponding meanings. Figure 1 below provides an example of the kinds of codes this initial round of analysis yielded using an excerpt from one of my interviews.

*Figure 1. Example Output from Initial Coding Phase*




In the subsequent stage of data analysis, I returned to each interview transcript to update my codes based on insights that emerged during the initial coding phase. This was an iterative process in which codes were collapsed, combined, and refined based on their analytical utility, recurrence in the data, and relevance to my research question. Figure 2 below provides an example of the updated codes that emerged from this second round of data analysis, using the same interview excerpt as in Figure 1.

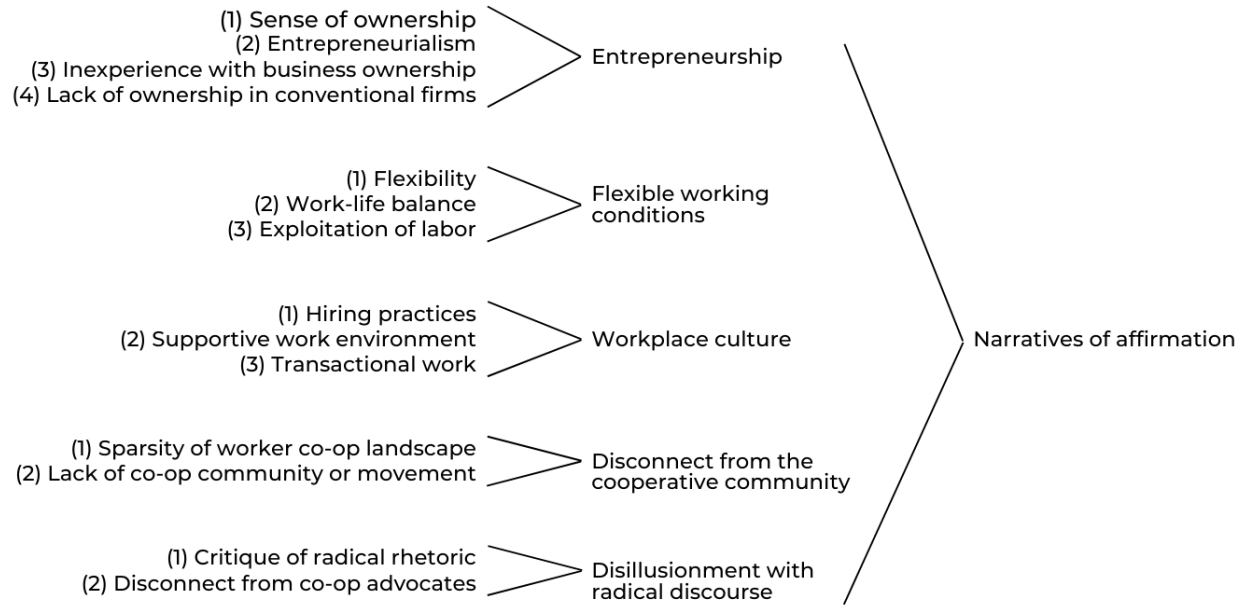
*Figure 2. Example Output from Secondary Coding Phase*




Next, I focused on inductively synthesizing recurrent narratives of worker ownership articulated by participants. For the purposes of this research, I leveraged the concept of 'narratives' in place of 'themes,' despite the latter being customary when conducting a thematic analysis. A theme, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), "captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set" (82, emphasis in original). I adopt a similar approach to Braun and Clarke in broadly defining narratives as related stories or accounts deployed by social actors to subjectively describe an aspect of the world around them. For example, the dominant narrative of worker ownership espoused by high-profile cooperative advocates casts worker co-ops as already-existing alternatives to capitalism. While the specific theoretical arguments underlying this narrative differ from scholar to scholar, they collectively echo a top-down rendering of worker co-ops as engines of transformative economic change.

Synthesizing bottom-up narratives of worker ownership from my interviews with worker-owners involved critically reviewing the coded data for recurring patterns of meaning and then synthesizing across these codes to join together related pieces of data conveying a shared narrative. I used the codes developed in the initial two phases of analysis to define the contours of the narratives I inductively generated in this process. It is worth noting that the qualitative data constituting each narrative were obtained in response to a range of questions and reflect a host of unique insights, experiences, and perspectives expressed by worker-owners across my interviews. What binds these data into the narratives I later expand on is a common orientation toward worker ownership—a unified outlook on the cooperative model and its potential to transform our economy.

*Figure 3. Example Output from Narrative Synthesis: Narratives of Affirmation*




In this phase of analysis, I used Fraser's typology of remedies for injustices (1995) as a heuristic lens to evaluate the political valence of the narratives I generated in relation to the dominant narrative of worker ownership. Figure 3 above provides an example of how I moved through this analytical process, from aggregating my data into the codes outlined on the left, to synthesizing these codes into the narratives listed in the middle, and finally organizing these narratives under the umbrella of 'affirmation' as shown on the right (see Appendix C for an analogous output for the narratives of transformation I synthesized).

In the penultimate phase of my data analysis process, I critically reviewed and refined the narratives I generated by considering a number of key questions: *Does this narrative tell me something useful about the dataset and my research question? What does this narrative include and exclude? Is there enough meaningful data to support this narrative? Is the data too diverse and wide-ranging?* (Braun & Clarke, 2012: 65). The goal at this stage was to arrive at a set of narratives evoking the most salient and relevant aspects of my data in relation to my research question. Finally, in the last phase of my analysis, I proceeded to draft my findings based on this analysis. In approaching this process, my goal was not to simply describe the data I collected through my interviews; rather, I aimed to critically parse the narratives of worker ownership that participants appealed to in my interviews, with a particular view toward the extent to which these bottom-up framings align with or diverge from the dominant framing of worker co-ops as economic alternatives. Findings from this process are presented and discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

### *2.8 Confidentiality*

Maintaining the confidentiality of my interview participants throughout the research process was an utmost priority. Per the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Committee on the Use of Humans as Experimental Subjects (COUHES), which approved this study, all participants were provided with an informed consent agreement detailing the purpose of this research and their rights as participants via email to review and sign in advance of the interview. Upon receipt of each signed agreement, I added my signature as the researcher and provided a copy for participants to keep for their reference. Furthermore, at the beginning of each interview, I verbally explained the parameters of my research project to participants and obtained their verbal consent to record the interview. I also emphasized that participation was fully voluntary and that they were free not to answer any questions or to withdraw from the interview at any time.

All data, including audio recordings and interview transcripts, were securely stored in an encrypted folder on a cloud storage platform. No one besides me had access to this data at any time. Transcripts were uploaded to a qualitative data analysis software and were analyzed offline on a password-protected computer. To protect interview participants' identities, I assigned each participant a unique six-digit identifier and used this identifier to label any files or data related to their interview. Any mentions of participants' names were removed and replaced in the interview transcripts with their respective identifiers. I retained a key linking individual participants to their unique identifiers on a password-protected computer only accessible to me and separate from the rest of my research data. All data reported in this thesis have been anonymized such that the identities of individual interview participants cannot readily be ascertained.

### *2.9 Positionality Statement*

As a researcher, and in the spirit of self-reflexivity, I want to acknowledge the experiences, assumptions, and biases that I hold and inevitably brought with me to the research process. Growing up in the working-class suburbs outside Seattle, I watched my single, immigrant mom struggle day after day to provide for me and my younger brother. While working as a customer service agent afforded us a modest existence, my mom experienced little in the way of personal fulfillment while on the job. Lacking a safety net to fall back on or generational wealth to tap into, work for my mom was always a means to an end—a way to pay the bills and feed her family. This experience in many ways shaped the political values I hold today: I believe deeply that all people deserve to have dignified work that provides them not only with a living wage but also a sense of meaning and purpose. Viewing worker co-ops as a vehicle through which to broaden access to dignified work, I gravitated toward this research as a means to better understand the transformative possibilities of worker ownership from the perspective of actual workers. In this process, my own lived experiences no doubt colored how I approached my interviews with worker-owners, the kinds of questions I posed, and, ultimately, the meanings I discerned from participants' responses. Unable to disembed

myself from a social world I am inextricably bound up in as a researcher, this thesis reflects my subjective interpretations of the world based on my own "social-historical-political location" (Darwin Holmes, 2020: 3) in it rather than a positivistic conception of objective reality, and should be understood accordingly.

Further, I have never been part of a worker cooperative and have no firsthand experience with the intimate realities of democratic worker ownership. What knowledge I possess on worker cooperatives has been overwhelmingly acquired in academic spaces, through my work with the Coalition for Worker Ownership and Power, and from the worker-owners who generously shared their experiences with me in my interviews. This thesis project thus stems from a desire to better familiarize myself with the worker cooperative model, as well as from an abiding interest in exploring the limits and potentialities of worker cooperatives as a viable means to challenge capitalism and advance economic democracy. While I cannot claim impartiality on the question of supporting a transition to a post-capitalist economic paradigm, I have remained steadfast in my commitment to collecting, interpreting, and reporting the data upon which this thesis is based in as honest a manner as possible. The perspectives and lived experiences I draw on deserve careful attention, which I have duly strived for throughout this research process.

## CHAPTER 3. Locating Worker Cooperatives in History and Theory

### *3.1 Neoliberal Capitalism and the Restructuring of Work*

All around us, signs of neoliberal capitalism's contradictions abound. Amid an unprecedented economic collapse in which 22 million jobs evaporated nearly overnight due to pandemic restrictions (Handwerker et al., 2020), low-income households have suffered disproportionately (Ross & Bateman, 2021; Gould & Kassa, 2021). Low-wage workers lost jobs at five times the rate of middle-wage workers (Chetty et al., 2020), and almost half of lower-income families (i.e., those earning less than about $40,000 per year) report that they or someone in their household lost a job or took a pay cut as a result of the pandemic (Parker et al., 2020). Meanwhile, and against this dire backdrop, the ultra-rich have realized extraordinary gains and are now wealthier than ever. According to Forbes data, the total net worth of America's 745 billionaires surged from $3.4 trillion at the start of 2020 to $5.3 trillion in November 2021 (Peterson-Withorn, 2021). Buoyed by pandemic-era growth, the top 1 percent of households now hold an astounding $44 trillion—close to a third of all wealth in the United States (FRED, 2021a; 2021b). By contrast, the bottom half of the distribution collectively owns just $3.4 trillion, or 2.5 percent of U.S. wealth (FRED, 2021c; 2021d).

The divergent fortunes of the 'haves and have-nots' during the pandemic are not an anomaly; rather, they should be seen as a microcosm of longer-term trends in economic inequality (Milanović, 2010; Saez & Zucman, 2016; Piketty et al., 2018). Economist Thomas Piketty, perhaps more than anyone in recent decades, has revitalized the debate on extreme economic inequality by arguing that inequality is not a glitch in an otherwise just system but instead an endemic feature of the capitalist economy (Piketty, 2014). Armed with a vast trove of wealth and income data stretching back centuries, Piketty has shown that periods of convergence across the socio-economic ladder — such as during capitalism's so-called 'Golden Age' from 1945 to 1973 (Marglin & Schor, 1992) — are but interregnums in a historical arc in which the rate of return on capital has far outstripped the rate of economic growth, fueling the concentration of wealth into fewer and fewer hands. Galvanized by Piketty's groundbreaking findings, as well as by the discursive shift around economic inequality catalyzed by the Occupy Wall Street movement, an army of researchers have set about investigating the extent of inequality in recent years—and their findings have been damning.

Beginning in the late 1970s and coinciding with the neoliberal transformation of American capitalism (Koechlin, 2013; Abramovitz, 2014), the gap between high- and low-income earners has steadily widened over the past several decades (Stone et al., 2020). From 1979 to 2019, real wages for the top 1 percent of earners grew by 160 percent (Mishel & Kandra, 2020)—more than ten times the wage growth that median earners realized and over fifty times larger than the wage growth earners at the 10th percentile experienced (Gould, 2020). In 2018 alone, the top 1 percent of households took home a staggering 22 percent of aggregate income in the United States, while the

top 10 percent captured more than half, representing the most inequitable distribution seen since the Gilded Age (Saez, 2020). Further exacerbating America's economic cleavages, productivity growth has outpaced wage growth by 3.5 times in the last four decades (Mishel, 2021), the CEO-to-worker compensation ratio ballooned from 21-to-1 in 1965 to 351-to-1 in 2020 (Mishel & Kandra, 2021), and an estimated 52 million workers — roughly a third of the U.S. workforce — are struggling to get by on less than $15 an hour (Henderson, 2022).

By most measures, our economy is "Of the 1 percent, By the 1 percent, For the 1 percent," as Nobel-prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz (2011) has argued. But this has not always been the case. Prior to the neoliberal restructuring of the American economy and global labor markets, American workers enjoyed an extended period of high employment and wage growth during the post-World War II economic boom. This period of sustained economic expansion turned on a social compact forged between capital and labor that provided workers with high levels of job security and robust wages in exchange for good-faith cooperation with corporate managers and company loyalty (Daguerre, 2014; Hopkin, 2020). As the mid-century economy roared, this truce helped to ensure prosperity was broadly shared: high productivity and wage growth were tightly linked (Mishel, 2021), and incomes increased at roughly the same rate up and down the income ladder between the late 1940s and early 1970s (Stone et al., 2020). But a cascade of economic shocks during the 1970s — including Nixon's wage and price freezes, the demise of the Bretton Woods system, runaway inflation combined with high unemployment, and the OPEC oil crises of 1973 and 1979 — set the stage for a dramatic remodeling of the global economic order.

With Margaret Thatcher's rise to power in 1979 and Ronald Reagan's in 1980, a tidal wave of free-market reforms signaled the end of what neo-Marxian economists Samuel Bowles, David M. Gordon, and Thomas E. Weisskopf (1986) termed the "postwar social structure of accumulation." In the shadow of the postwar period emerged the dawn of a new era marked by extreme inequality and widespread insecurity (Koechlin, 2013; Abramovitz, 2014; Fuentes-Nieva & Galasso, 2014; OECD, 2015). From Chile to the U.K. and beyond, the neoliberal counterrevolution saw the deregulation of financial markets, slashing of marginal tax rates, hollowing out of social welfare programs, and squashing of organized labor. In effect, neoliberal policy prescriptions facilitated the upward redistribution of wealth and concentration of economic power with spectacular success. Advocates of such measures have breathlessly argued that tax breaks for corporations and the rich inevitably 'trickle down' to benefit society overall, but recent research has resoundingly discredited the myth that a 'rising tide lifts all boats' (Hope & Limberg, 2020). Even the IMF — the world's chief institutional evangelist of neoliberalism over the past forty years — has now admitted that its free-market agenda has failed to deliver economic growth as promised and has instead deepened inequality and increased economic volatility (Ostry et al., 2016).

Along with the demise of broad-based prosperity, the organization of work has also drastically changed over the last forty years. During much of the postwar economic boom, workers across the income spectrum could reasonably expect to work continuously for one employer full-time until reaching retirement age (Kalleberg, 2009; Schoukens & Barrio, 2017). However, coinciding with the early 1980s recession, this 'standard employment relationship' defined by permanent, open-ended work began to disappear as firms adopted nonstandard, atypical forms of work (Schoukens & Barrio, 2017) to shore up their bottom lines (Appelbaum & Batt, 1993**;** Lippit, 2006). Fragmented, flexibilized hiring arrangements, such as temporary workers, part-time employees, and contractors (Polivka, 1996), have since become normalized in a labor market replete with temporary staffing agencies, outsourcing firms, and 'human capital advisory' companies that assist employers with cutting labor costs and maximizing workforce flexibility (Rahman & Thelen, 2018; Doellgast et al., 2021). Labor economist David Weil (2014) has termed this process "workplace fissuring," wherein companies have replaced the standard employment relationship with arm's-length market transactions mediated by constellations of subcontractors, temporary workers, and third-party workforce vendors.

The reconfiguration of work has given rise to an economy increasingly characterized by employment insecurity, social precarity, and economic vulnerability (Kalleberg, 2009; Casilli & Posada, 2018; Vallas & Schor, 2020). Workers in contingent roles (e.g., temporary workers, fixed-term contractors, outsourced workers, etc.) typically have lower wages, fewer fringe benefits (e.g., pensions, health insurance, retirement accounts, etc.), higher turnover rates, and limited promotion opportunities compared to workers with permanent contracts (Kalleberg et al., 2000; McGovern et al., 2004; Giesecke, 2009). Further evidence has found that rather than serving as a stepping stone to better opportunities, precarious employment can have 'scarring' effects that trap workers in dead-end jobs with low prospects for upward mobility (Amuedo-Dorantes, 2000; Watson, 2013; Pedulla, 2016). Beyond the direct economic consequences of precarious employment, precarious work has also been shown to have negative impacts on workers' physical health (Kim et al., 2008; Lewchuk et al., 2008) and mental well-being (Vives et al., 2013; Canivet et al., 2016), with spillover effects on life satisfaction (Green, 2011), suicidal ideation (Min et al., 2015), and marriage and divorce rates (Lim, 2017; Donnelly, 2020), among other facets of life. Recognizing the exigent challenges engendered by the erosion of employment security, economist Guy Standing has argued (2011; 2014) that contingent workers now constitute a discrete socio-economic class — the 'precIat' — defined by chronic job insecurity, social instability, and material deprivation.

These transformations in capitalism's macroeconomic structure and the organization of work, alongside the systemic inequalities they have yielded, are crucial to understand as they form the backdrop and rationale for the emergence of a growing movement calling for alternatives to the dominant capitalist paradigm (Kotz, 2021). Faced with an economic order that has produced "persistent poverty, precarious employment, food and livelihood insecurity, [and] rising vertical and horizontal inequalities" (Utting, 2015: 9), communities exploited and left behind by neoliberal capitalism are resisting the

inevitability of the status quo and imagining possibilities for a better future. In many ways, the alternatives described below seek to respond to and remediate the structural weaknesses of the capitalist model by designing alternatives predicated on equity, democracy, cooperation, and, above all, solidarity.

### *3.2 Solidarity Economy and Cooperatives*

Across the United States and throughout the world, people are suffering from the effects of an economy that prioritizes the profits of a few over the well-being of the many. Up against the concentrated power of corporate executives and Wall Street financiers, though, fighting back can feel futile. Marxist political theorist and literary critic Fredric Jameson once famously remarked that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (Jameson, 1996: xii). Cultural theorist Mark Fisher later adapted Jameson's adage into a concept he called "capitalism realism" (2009), intended to capture the pervasive feeling that, faced with capitalism's command over all domains of life, it has become impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to capitalism. The fog of capitalist hegemony is so thick and impenetrable — the underlying architecture of the system so deeply mystified — that many feel incapable of understanding how capitalism works, let alone conceiving of viable alternatives.

But while the political and financial elites who benefit from this arrangement claim that "there is no alternative" (Flanders, 2013), communities around the world are boldly proving otherwise. Spurred by routine financial meltdowns, soaring economic inequality, crippling inaction on climate change, and other planetary crises manufactured by capitalism, a rising global movement is rallying around a watchword of its own: "another world is possible" (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Escobar, 2020). This posture toward possibility opens up discursive space to imagine new possibilities for more just, sustainable, and democratic ways of being (Loh & Shear, 2015). Workers, indigenous peoples, and grassroots movements are among the many today employing a diverse array of productive practices that foster community well-being and resilience, such as community land trusts, subsistence agriculture, participatory budgeting, and mutual aid. Taken together, these experiments widen the scope of economic possibility beyond neoliberal capitalism and offer stepping stones toward a new way of organizing our economy, increasingly referred to as the 'solidarity economy.'

Solidarity economy (SE), also called 'social and solidarity economy,' is an alternative development paradigm that gives primacy to social and environmental goals over profit (Quiñones, 2008; Miller, 2010; Loh & Shear, 2015; Utting, 2015; Johanisova & Vinkelhoferova, 2019; Kawano, 2021a). While many SE practices have long existed in communities globally, SE emerged as a distinct framework during waves of economic activism across Europe and Latin America in the 1990s (Miller, 2010). Under the umbrella of SE and its cognate concepts of economic democracy, popular economy, social economy, and new economy (RIPESS, n.d.) can be found a variety of perspectives and political orientations, from accommodationist approaches to more revolutionary politics

(Hudson, 2018). But embedded within these diverse understandings of SE is a set of shared values standing in bold contrast to those of capitalism: cooperation in place of competition, interdependence in place of individualism, reciprocity in place of self-interest, and sustainability in place of short-term profit maximization (Utting, 2015; USSEN, n.d.). From the long-established social economy in Quebec to the growing movement for economic democracy in Jackson, Mississippi, SE experiments taking root throughout the world are, as Miller (2010) argues, "asserting that another economy — an economy for people and planet — is not only possible, but is already being born" (2).

Cooperatives are an integral part of the solidarity economy (Bateman, 2015; RIPESS, 2015). Indeed, cooperative movements in Colombia and Chile were among the earliest forerunners of an *economía solidaria* (Miller, 2010; Primavera, 2013). According to the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), a cooperative is "an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise" (ICA, n.d.). As the chief custodian of the global cooperative movement, ICA enshrined this definition in its 1995 "Statement on the Co-operative Identity, Values and Principles." Taking inspiration from the ideals set out by the first modern co-op founded in Rochdale, England in 1844 (Fairbairn, 1994), the 1995 statement further established the movement's seven cooperative principles: voluntary and open membership; democratic member control; member economic participation; autonomy and independence; education, training, and information; cooperation among cooperatives; and concern for community. To this day, these principles guide co-ops the world over in their daily operations.

Co-ops, by definition, are owned and controlled by the people who use them: their members. Members may be consumers, producers, workers, or some combination of the three depending on a co-op's ownership structure (Bouchard et al., 2020). Consumer co-ops pool the demand of their customer-owners to purchase goods or services that they need. They are active in a variety of industries, including financial services (e.g., credit unions), utilities (e.g., rural electric cooperatives), and retail (e.g., food co-ops). Producer co-ops are owned by members who produce similar goods or services, with the goal of purchasing, marketing, and distributing goods more effectively. They are most common among agricultural producers, such as dairy farmers (e.g., Dairy Farmers of America) and fruit growers (e.g., Ocean Spray). Worker co-ops are businesses that are collectively owned and managed by their employees. They operate across diverse sectors, from care work (e.g., Cooperative Home Care Associates) to transportation (e.g., The Drivers Cooperative) to fairtrade food distribution (e.g., Equal Exchange) and beyond. Finally, multi-stakeholder co-ops are owned and controlled by some combination of producers, consumers, or workers. Regardless of the form they take or activities they engage in, all cooperatives share a commitment to delivering collective benefits for and upholding democratic control by their respective member-owners.

Cooperatives are foundational to a core tenet of the solidarity economy: that "diverse economies" already exist in the world through arrangements of production,

exchange, and ownership operating outside the capitalist market (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Gibson-Graham, 2008; Healy, 2020). While capitalism is undeniably the dominant economic system of our time, it is by no means the *only* way that humans care for each other and meet our material needs. Communities make use of a multitude of practices to sustain life and livelihoods, and recognizing these practices is key to shifting the focus away from capitalism's dominance and toward the full range of economic activities already utilized by people and communities today. By strengthening and connecting these extant alternatives to capitalism, an entirely new economic system might be assembled from the ground up (Miller, 2010; RIPESS, 2015).

As perhaps the most visible and far-reaching example of the solidarity economy in the world today, cooperatives are vital to this strategy. The 2020 edition of the World Cooperative Monitor found that roughly 12 percent of the global population are members of any of the world's 3 million cooperatives (WCM, 2020). The report further estimates that the 300 largest cooperative and mutual enterprises (measured by total revenue) generated $2.1 trillion in revenue in 2018. In the United States, the University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives has identified nearly 40,000 cooperative businesses employing more than 630,000 people (Hueth, 2017). This thriving global ecosystem of cooperatives and the cooperators who run them offer a counterpoint to the notion of 'waiting for the revolution' (Kawano, 2021b) to break capitalism's stranglehold on the economy. Rather, these concrete, real-world manifestations of the solidarity economy demonstrate that people are already hard at work building alternatives that operate outside the dominant logics of our current economic system. Cooperatives are opening the door to economic possibilities beyond capitalism in the present while illuminating the path toward a future world that puts people and planet before profit.

### *3.3 Worker Cooperatives: Past and Present*

As a specific form of cooperative organization, worker cooperatives are businesses jointly-owned and democratically controlled by their employees, who are commonly referred to as 'worker-owners.' According to the Democracy at Work Institute, worker co-ops are defined by two key characteristics: 1) worker-owners invest in and own the business together, sharing in the firm's profits; and 2) decision-making is democratic, adhering to the 'one worker, one vote' rule (DAWI, n.d.). Most worker co-ops are small, and worker-owners are able to shape management and production decisions directly. Some, however, rival large non-cooperative firms in size, such as Bronx-based Cooperative Home Care Associates, which has over 2,000 employees and is the largest worker co-op in the United States. According to the latest "State of the Sector" report on worker cooperatives, there are an estimated 612 worker cooperatives in the United States today, employing an estimated 4,700 people and generating nearly $300 million in annual revenue (USFWC & DAWI, 2022).

Worker co-ops are distinct from other cooperative enterprises in that they provide their members with employment and income alongside ownership and control. The

worker cooperative model is also fundamentally at odds with the structure of conventional capitalist firms in which there is a sharp division in power between owners, who command, and workers, who obey (Curl, 2009; Wright, 2011). In lieu of workplace hierarchy, worker co-ops enshrine workplace *democracy*; the egalitarian principle of 'one worker, one vote' enroots participation in the governance structure of worker co-ops, giving worker-owners direct control over the workplace decisions that impact them (Reynolds, 2000; Hsieh, 2008; Vrousalis, 2018). By extending political democracy into the workplace, worker co-ops can be considered "perhaps the purest form of economic democracy currently operating in the U.S." (DeFilippis, 2004: 66).

It is worth distinguishing between worker cooperatives and a more prevalent model of employee ownership in the United States: the employee stock ownership plan (ESOP). An ESOP is a qualified retirement plan akin to a 401(k) that gives a company's employees an ownership stake in the business. With an ESOP, a company is able to transfer all or part of its shares to a trust, which is administered by a trustee *on behalf* of the employees (Kerr, 2015). Employees gradually accrue shares of the company based on proprietary formulas and receive the cash value of their shares upon exiting the company. However, employees do not own their shares directly (the trust does) and, unlike in worker co-ops, typically do not have the right to participate in governance or management decisions (CDI, 2014). ESOPs are not necessarily designed to provide employees with democratic control over their workplaces, but instead to broaden the benefits of ownership and profit (NCF, 2006). Per the National Center for Employee Ownership (2020), over 6,000 companies now have ESOPs covering more than 14 million employees, making ESOPs the most common model of employee ownership in the United States by far.

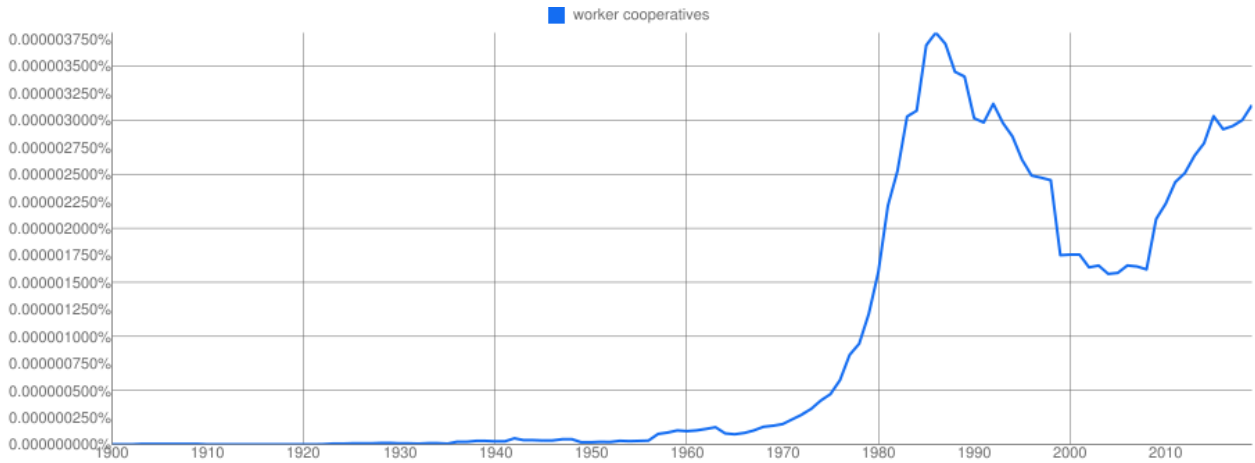
Despite having a limited footprint in the economy today, worker co-ops have long played an important role in shielding working people from the depredations of capitalism (Curl, 2009; Ness & Azzellini, 2011; Gordon Nembhard, 2014). The modern worker cooperative movement originated in the early nineteenth century with the dawn of the industrial revolution in England. Rapid technological advances at the time led to widespread adoption of labor-saving machinery, lowering demand for skilled labor and fueling the rise of English poet William Blake's (1810) "dark satanic mills." Faced with grueling workdays and oppressive — if not outright deadly — conditions, many workers sought alternatives to the excesses of industrial capitalism, including the 28 weavers who established the first modern cooperative, the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers, in 1844 (Fairbairn, 1994). The Rochdale cooperative was an unequivocal success, proving the viability of the cooperative business model and inspiring the formation of hundreds of new cooperatives across England in the years after 1844 (Thompson, 1994; Bibby, 2014).

The earliest worker co-ops in the United States similarly formed during the height of industrialization, responding to the injustices of capitalism and the concomitant impoverishment and disempowerment it yielded. The Knights of Labor, the country's first nationwide industrial labor union, made forming worker cooperatives one of its central

organizing strategies in the 1870s and 1880s (Curl, 2009). Envisioning a "cooperative commonwealth" in which workers would abolish wage slavery and run the economy on principles of cooperation and solidarity, the Knights of Labor helped organize an estimated 200 worker cooperatives. Unfortunately, this vision was never fully realized, and the Knights collapsed soon after following the Haymarket Affair in 1886. As powerful corporations tightened their grip on industry and the economy into the twentieth century, successive waves of cooperative development focused largely on producer and consumer cooperatives, while worker co-ops were “relegated to the realm of impractical dreamers and radical groups” (Curl, 2010: 19).

Nonetheless, movements for worker ownership in the United States continued to fight onward, playing a particularly prominent role in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Political economist Jessica Gordon Nembhard, whose work (2014) highlights the long tradition of Black cooperative economic practices and thought in the United States, has chronicled how worker cooperatives like the Freedom Quilting Bee, established in 1966 in Alberta, Alabama by poor African-American craftswomen, were integral to struggles for Black liberation and economic equality. When compared to the countries with the greatest concentrations of worker-owned businesses today, however, worker cooperatives have remained stubbornly scarce in the United States (Arana Landín, 2018). A 2019 study conducted by Italy’s National Institute of Statistics identified 29,414 worker cooperatives employing more than 480,000 workers and generating €12 billion in annual economic activity (ISTAT, 2019). In France, 3,600 worker co-ops currently provide 67,200 jobs with aggregate revenues of €6.3 billion (Voinea, 2021). And in Spain’s Basque region, the legendary Mondragón Corporation’s federation of 96 worker cooperatives collectively employs more than 70,000 people and generates upwards of €12 billion in yearly turnover (Goodman, 2020). The estimated 600 worker co-ops in the United States, by contrast, represent a comparatively minor slice of the American economy.

*Figure 4. Google Ngram of “Worker Cooperatives,” 1900-2019*




*Source: Google Ngram Viewer*

But in a historical conjuncture in which neoliberal capitalism's structural flaws have been laid bare (Spash, 2020; Giroux, 2021; Jones & Hameiri, 2021; Sell, 2021; Šumonja, 2021), a groundswell of interest in worker-owned co-ops has recently emerged among American workers (Bibby, 2012; Anzilotti, 2018; Quart, 2021; Kadvany, 2022). In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, the number of worker co-ops in the United States has more than doubled, from 254 a decade ago (Hoover, 2012) to more than 600 today. Further, an estimated 450 worker co-ops are currently in their start-up phase (Quart, 2021). This post-recession upswing in interest is mirrored in the growing frequency with which worker cooperatives have been mentioned in English-language books since 2008, as depicted in Figure 4 above (Google Ngram Viewer, 2022). Facing broad economic insecurity, declining prospects for upward mobility, persistently slow wage growth, and the rise of precarious forms of work, worker co-ops hold resurgent appeal for American workers as vehicles through which to secure better wages, improve working conditions, mitigate precarity, and build resilience for themselves and their communities (Harvey, 2018; Lawrence et al., 2018; Theodos et al., 2018).

A wealth of research has affirmed the myriad benefits of worker ownership. Worker cooperatives have been shown to be equally, if not more, productive when compared with conventional firms (Craig & Pencavel, 1995; Pérotin, 2012). Worker co-ops also substantially reduce wage inequality: worker co-ops have an average top-to-bottom pay ratio of 2-to-1, compared to 351-to-1 ratio of CEO to typical worker pay in the country's largest firms (USFWC & DAWI, 2022). Cooperative worker-owners benefit from greater opportunities to participate in workplace decisions (Craig & Pencavel, 1995) and tend to be more highly satisfied with their jobs than conventional employees (Berry, 2013; Schlachter & Prushinskaya, 2021). During economic downturns, worker-owned cooperatives are more likely to employ job-preserving measures such as blanket pay and hour reductions, rather than resorting to mass layoffs (Burdín & Dean, 2009; Billiet et al., 2021; Davis, 2021). Additionally, worker cooperatives have been shown to respond countercyclically to the business cycle, thereby providing a reliable source of employment during recessionary periods (Pérotin, 2006; Murray, 2011). Worker cooperatives' disposition toward job sustainability can also have positive spillover effects for the communities in which they operate, such as stabilizing tax revenues, reducing social welfare spending, and improving health (Pérotin, 2013) and environmental outcomes (Booth, 1995). Though the worker cooperative movement in the United States is only beginning to gain its stride, it holds the potential to engender deep and lasting changes in the American economy and workers' lives.

### *3.4 Worker Cooperatives as Economic Alternatives*

The case for the worker cooperative model, however, goes beyond its ability to improve workers' material and social conditions. Indeed, many have framed worker co-ops as a viable alternative to capitalism altogether—as a means to accelerate the transition to a new economic paradigm by prefiguring present-day alternatives to existing capitalist relations (de Peuter & Dyer-Witheford, 2010; Restakis, 2010; Wright, 2010;

Alperovitz, 2005; Wolff, 2012; Wright, 2013*;* Mulder, 2015; Ranis, 2016; Schneider, 2018; Kelly & Howard, 2019). Cooperative scholar John Restakis (2010), for example, posits that worker co-ops “hold the keys to the emergence of an economic model that is capable of remaking and humanizing the current capitalist system” (3). Kin to this proposition, economist Catherine Mulder argues in *Transcending Capitalism through Cooperative Practices* (2015) that “[worker cooperatives] show that alternatives to capitalism are attainable and often preferable to their capitalist counterparts” (6).

The idea that worker cooperatives might be an antidote to capitalism or engines of a transition to a post-capitalist future is not new. In fact, it has been continuously advanced by both cooperative theorists and practitioners for nearly two centuries. Among the earliest proponents of economic cooperation was Robert Owen (1771–1858), a wealthy Welsh industrialist turned social reformer who instituted a series of groundbreaking labor reforms at his New Lanark mill in Scotland, including an eight-hour workday and free education and housing for workers (Sharzer, 2017). Owen later took the social and economic ideas he pioneered at his New Lanark test-bed and fashioned them into a proposal (1817) for reorganizing the whole of society into communal villages based upon principles of cooperation and self-sufficiency. Intent on putting his “principles into practice” (Owen, 1813: 25), Owen eventually squandered his fortune trying to construct models of the socialist utopias he envisaged, like the Owenite village he established in New Harmony, Indiana (Carmony & Elliott, 1980; Harcourt, 2018). But his vigorous promotion of cooperatives as the means for worker emancipation and economic reorganization would prove highly influential in the future development of the cooperative movement (Gibson-Graham, 2003; Sharzer, 2017).

Active in the same milieu as Owen, French philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865) is best known as the founder of modern anarchism and for famously asserting that “property is theft” (Levy & Adams, 2019: 497). But he also advocated for workers’ self-management and cooperatives in the form of his ‘mutualist’ philosophy. Proudhon adopted the term mutualism for his brand of anarchism and socialism, which argued for an economy in which workplaces would be "handed over to democratically organized workers' associations” (Guérin, 2005: 77-8). Workers would no longer sell their labor power in exchange for a wage but instead work for themselves or in free association with other workers and exchange their goods at cost via the free market. This system, Proudhon posited, would naturally lead to "[c]apitalistic and proprietary exploitation stopped everywhere, the wage system abolished, equal and just exchange guaranteed" (Proudhon, 1969: 281). In place of the violent overthrow of the capitalist mode of production, worker cooperatives and other mutualist assemblages served as portals to a new, more just political economy.

But by far the most recognized socialist to consider the emancipatory potential of worker cooperatives was German philosopher Karl Marx (1818–1883). Marx commented on the role of worker cooperatives in challenging capitalism on numerous occasions (Marx, 1864; 1867; 1894), and there are competing interpretations among Marxist scholars

regarding his ultimate conclusions (Ji, 2020). In an address before the First International, Marx argued that worker cooperatives "have shown that production on a large scale… may be carried on without the existence of a class of masters employing a class of hands" (1864). By revealing the redundancy of capitalists to production (Sharzer, 2017) and proving that the "subordination of labor to capital can be superseded by… the association of free and equal producers" (Marx, 1866), Marx posited that worker co-ops could point the way to an alternative system in which workers themselves control the means of production. However, Marx dismissed the notion of a peaceful transition to a non-capitalist order as 'utopian' (Gibson-Graham, 2003: 131) and was highly critical of the tendency of worker cooperatives to shy away from politicized class struggle (Ji, 2020). To revolutionize the capitalist system, Marx encouraged cooperatives to join arms with broader movements focused on building working-class power and class consciousness among working people. Absent such direct political mobilization, however, worker co-ops would be incapable of wresting real power from the capitalist class, thus remaining — to paraphrase V. I. Lenin — 'islands of socialism in a sea of capitalism' (Krausz, 2021).

In the intervening years since Owen, Proudhon, and Marx first contemplated how worker cooperatives might help to create a more democratic, humane successor to capitalism, the demise of the Soviet Union and China's world-altering embrace of capitalism have deeply unsettled the political-economic imaginary of the left (Gibson-Graham, 2003). While some once saw revolutionary socialism as the only route to transforming the capitalist mode of production (Luxemburg, 1900), the failed socialist experiments of the twentieth century have prompted many on the left to return to worker cooperatives as the foundation for an alternative, non-capitalist society (Bowman & Stone, 2007; Jossa, 2014; Marcuse, 2015; Ranis, 2016; Garrido, 2020). Among the chorus of advocates praising the virtues of worker co-ops today, Marxist economist Richard Wolff stands apart as a singular champion of the narrative of worker cooperatives as economic alternatives. Through his academic scholarship, popular writing, and nonprofit media project aptly titled "Democracy at Work," Wolff argues that worker co-ops — or 'worker self-directed enterprises,' as he often refers to them — not only offer solutions to the problems generated by capitalism but can also form the basis of "an alternative economic system free of capitalism's structural flaws" (2012: 11).

The crux of Wolff's thesis on the transformative potential of worker cooperatives (Wolff, 2012; 2013; 2021) turns on a theory of class he developed with fellow economist Stephen Resnick, in which they define the class structure of an economy in relation to how surplus value — the value workers create in excess of the wages they are paid — is produced, appropriated, and distributed (Resnick & Wolff, 1987). Within capitalist firms, the means of production are owned by capitalists, who purchase workers' labor power in exchange for a wage. Workers then create value above their own labor costs through the production process, which is appropriated and distributed by capitalists in the form of profit. Worker co-ops, Wolff contends, subvert this unequal capital–labor dynamic by eliminating the dichotomy between capitalists and workers. Instead, cooperatives place collective ownership of the means of production in the hands of workers themselves,

who democratically decide how the surpluses their labor generates get distributed. Extended over the whole of the economy, "such a reorganization of workplaces," Wolff affirms, "would effectively end capitalism" (Wolff 2012: 13). Rather than forcefully dislodging the capitalist system in a proletarian revolution, as Rosa Luxemburg (1900) famously advocated for, Wolff's theorization of the transformative power of worker co-ops focuses on the micro-level of the individual firm. Through the gradual expansion of the cooperative mode of production and systematic reorganization of workplaces into worker-owned enterprises, such that the producers of surplus become its appropriators and distributors, Wolff argues that cooperatives could catalyze the transition toward a post-capitalist future.

Marxist sociologist Erik Olin Wright proffers a similar conclusion in framing worker cooperatives as "real utopias" (Wright, 2010). Real utopias, Wright describes, are emancipatory alternatives to systems of inequality and oppression (e.g., capitalism) that are both idealistic and pragmatic. In paradoxically joining 'real' and 'utopia,' Wright forges a concept that encompasses radical solutions for a more egalitarian and democratic world that remain attentive to the practical realities of transforming deeply-rooted systems under existing social conditions. As "the oldest vision for an emancipatory alternative to capitalism" (234), worker cooperatives constitute an archetypal real utopia: simultaneously embedded in the present as a tangible alternative to the capitalist paradigm while embodying the contours of a future beyond capitalism.

In *How to Be an Anticapitalist in the 21st Century* (2019), Wright foregrounds worker-owned cooperatives as a core component of his strategy for 'eroding capitalism,' which he posits is "the most plausible strategic vision for transcending capitalism in the 21st century" (38). To challenge capitalism's dominance, Wright argues that anticapitalists should focus on building democratic and egalitarian alternatives such as worker cooperatives, credit unions, housing and caregiving cooperatives, and other building blocks of a democratic socialist economy (71). By progressively growing these alternatives within "capitalism's niches and margins" (Wright, 2013: 20), it might be possible to fissure capitalism's seemingly immutable edifice and accelerate its eventual collapse. Wright terms this process "interstitial transformation": "a process in which relatively small transformations cumulatively generate a qualitative shift in the dynamics and logic of a social system" (Wright, 2010: 321). While considering the potential for "ruptural transformation" (i.e., a system-level break with capitalism won through revolutionary class struggle), Wright concludes that the only plausible pathway toward emancipatory transformation under existing political conditions is one which combines reformist strategies aimed at improving the material well-being and social empowerment of people in the world as it is — what he calls "symbiotic transformations" – alongside more pertinent efforts to build counterhegemonic institutions that can challenge capitalism's dominance. Fellow sociologist John Holloway's (2010) notion of 'cracking' capitalism by exposing, exploiting, and expanding fractures from within the system to disrupt the established economic order hangs on a comparable theory of change. These ideas reflect the enduring salience of Owen and Proudhon's gradualist politics, which

eschewed violent class struggle in favor of the progressive replacement of capitalism by networks of worker co-ops and other non-capitalist formations. Though Wright himself does not reject the need for struggle to wrest power from the ruling class, he too believes that "incremental modifications of the underlying structures of [capitalism]" (2013: 321) through the expansion of worker co-ops and other alternatives to capitalist economic forms are the only feasible way to realize transformative change.

Although Wolff and Wright are among the most visible and vocal exponents of the 'worker cooperatives as vehicles for post-capitalist economic transformation' narrative, they are certainly not alone in celebrating the emancipatory possibilities of the worker co-op model. Jessica Gordon Nembhard has articulated (2021) a vision of a 'cooperative solidarity commonwealth' in which self-organized, interconnected networks of worker co-ops and other collectively-owned enterprises would form the basis of a new system "that is of the people (putting them before profit), indigenous, participatory, and based on human needs, humane values, and ecological sustainability" (274). Imagining what *America Beyond Capitalism* (2005) could look like, political economist Gar Alperovitz has also advocated for a 'pluralist commonwealth' in which multiple configurations of democratic ownership are structured at different scales and sectors, with worker cooperatives forming the backbone of local economies. Worker co-ops are also a central plank of economist and cooperative developer Emily Kawano's framework for a solidarity economy (Kawano et al., 2010; Kawano, 2021a; 2021b). The solidarity economy's transformative potential, Kawano argues, lies dormant within already existing practices and formations such as worker co-ops — what Kawano calls 'imaginal cells' — waiting to be unleashed. And Marjorie Kelly and Ted Howard of The Democracy Collaborative have argued (2019) that worker cooperatives can serve as the bedrock of a new economic paradigm that "takes us beyond the binary choice of corporate capitalism versus state socialism" (xiii) and toward a system with democracy at its heart.

The scholars included in this brief sketch of the literature on worker cooperatives as economic alternatives represent just a fraction of the many more who have extolled the transformative promise of worker co-ops. Together, they exemplify a narrative that is overwhelmingly sanguine about the prospects for worker cooperatives to contribute to a paradigm shift away from capitalism and toward a more just economy. Feminist geographers Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham, writing under their joint pen name J.K. Gibson-Graham, have described such assured conceptualizations of how economic changes unfold and the linear processes by which such transformations occur as "strong theory": "powerful discourses that organize events into understandable and seemingly predictable trajectories" (2014: S147). Strong theory attempts to essentialize and reduce reality in pursuit of theoretical clarity and generalized claims to truth. In contrast, Gibson-Graham posits "weak theory" as a way to see emergent possibilities for transformation by attending to nuance and "refusing to know too much" (2008: 619). Reading the above-mentioned theorizations of worker cooperatives as economic alternatives to capitalism through a strong/weak theory lens, it is clear that much of the dominant academic discourse on worker co-ops leans toward the "embracing reach" and

“reduced, clarified field of meaning” (2006: 4) of strong theory. In presupposing the transformative potential of worker co-ops — and worker-owners, by extension — to disrupt existing capitalist relations, cooperative scholars bring the connections between cooperative practices and post-capitalist futures into focus, while ignoring other trajectories along which economic change might occur.

Many scholars have theorized how worker cooperatives might seed the transition to a new economic paradigm, but surprisingly few have attempted to substantiate their theories against the views or desires of actual worker-owners. Without these grounded perspectives, it remains an untested assumption that worker-owners are interested in and committed to building an economy beyond capitalism. This lack of engagement with the lived experiences and political outlooks of worker-owners embedded within cooperative businesses reveals a lacuna in the scholarly discourse on worker ownership, as it is unclear the extent to which worker-owners — who generally lack the platform that scholars benefit from to influence public discourse and policy — see themselves as part of a larger movement for radical economic transformation. Animated by this discursive gap and viewing narratives as a site of contestation, this thesis explores bottom-up narratives of worker ownership mobilized by the actors at the forefront of the cooperative movement, paying particular mind to the political ethos of these grounded narratives of worker ownership in relation to the broader discourse surrounding the worker cooperative movement.

### *3.5 Politics of Worker-Owners*

Worker cooperatives are the subject of considerable scholarship — a search for “worker cooperatives" on Google Scholar returns 144,000 results — but surprisingly few studies have investigated why individual workers join worker cooperatives (Oerton, 1994; Meo, 2013; Vieta, 2014; Sdrali et al., 2016; Sacchetti & Tortia, 2020; DeBalsi, 2021). Sdrali et al.’s (2016) investigation into the motives driving worker participation in Greece’s cooperative economy, while not reflecting the same political or socio-economic context as this thesis, nonetheless provides an interesting precedent to consider. The researchers conducted a close-ended survey asking participants to share both extrinsic factors (e.g., economic conditions, working conditions, benefits, etc.) and intrinsic motivations (e.g., personal values, interests, politics, etc.) for working in the cooperative economy. Their findings, based on a sample of 81 worker-owners and 119 members of non-worker cooperatives, indicate that commitment to personal values is the most salient motivation for working in the cooperative sector, followed by opportunities to participate in decisions, better working conditions, and usefulness to society (10). Further, they found the vast majority of respondents are satisfied with their jobs, and virtually all respondents would continue working in the cooperative sector. However, most respondents reported wanting a wage raise (12). Overall, Sdrali et al.’s study reveals that cooperatives naturally attract individuals strongly motivated by their personal values.

Rather than examining worker-owners' motivations at a broad level, though, this thesis focuses specifically on parsing the political ethos of worker-owners' perspectives and experiences in relation to the dominant narrative of worker co-ops as economic alternatives espoused by high-profile cooperative advocates. To the best of my knowledge, only a handful of prior studies have attempted to characterize cooperative worker-owners' political views, attitudes, or orientations (Greenberg, 1981; Sandoval, 2016; Hudson, 2018; Tait, 2021; Zaunseder, 2021). Political scientist Edward Greenberg's investigation into the relationship between worker ownership and political attitudes provides an interesting jumping-off point to explore the extant literature in this area.

Greenberg's study (1981) set out from a remarkably similar vantage point as this thesis, albeit forty years prior. Specifically, his research sought to test the empirical validity of what he termed the "theory of escalation" (1983): "the view that self-management at the point of production nurtures new individuals with a commitment to communitarian and democratic values ready to participate in movements for economic democracy" (197). Influenced by the work of Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, the theory of escalation held that self-management would cultivate in workers not only a sense of confidence and self-efficacy but also a consciousness toward "the absurdity of capitalist social relations" (196). With cooperative workplaces serving as "schools for the self-education of the working class" (1981: 30), newly radicalized worker-owners would inevitably set their sights beyond the democratization of individual firms and toward entire industries and the economy as a whole, such that "the transformation to socialism might be accomplished through a peaceful process in which workers and communities gradually take over an ever-larger proportion of enterprise" (29). As Greenberg argued, however, the "presumed relationship between self-management and the nurturance of socialist orientations" is undercut by the "absolute paucity of data that would enable any reasonable judgment to be made about its veracity" (30). Thus, and paralleling the motivation behind this thesis, Greenberg's research strived to uncover the individual political attitudes of cooperative worker-owners to begin to fill this knowledge gap.

Putting the theory of escalation to the test, Greenberg (1981) studied 14 worker-owned plywood manufacturers in the Pacific Northwest, a region known for its thriving ecosystem of plywood cooperatives (Pencavel, 2001). Through observations, interviews (n=38), and surveys (n=551) at each co-op, he explored whether being a member of a worker co-op changed worker-owners' political orientations toward socialism. From this fieldwork, Greenberg concluded that worker-owners were motivated to join cooperative businesses not on political or ideological grounds but instead for financial reasons. He found that the experience of worker self-management nurtured 'petit bourgeoisie' orientations among worker-owners rather than socialist orientations, and that worker-owners tended to affirm liberal/individualistic values more strongly than even their counterparts in conventional firms. "[Worker-owners] seem to nurture outlooks characterized not by community, mutuality, equality and confidence in others," he argued, "but outlooks more congruent with the tenets of classical liberalism: those of individualism, competition, limited government, and equality of opportunity" (1981: 40).

Overall, his findings yielded a gloomy assessment of the capacity of worker co-ops to cultivate anticapitalist ideals: “Self-managed enterprises operating within a system of market capitalism seem unlikely settings not only for the practice of socialist relationships, but especially for the promulgation of general attitudes appropriate to a more egalitarian/cooperative society” (41).

Greenberg’s work represents arguably the most robust attempt to compare the politicized rhetoric associated with worker co-ops to the actual political attitudes of worker-owners to date. But more recent scholarship has further investigated the diverse political alignments of worker-owners compared to those of other stakeholders within the worker cooperative movement. Sociologist Katherine Tait adopted this exact approach in her research (2021) on New York City’s growing cooperative ecosystem. In the wake of the Great Recession and amid surging interest in worker cooperatives as a tool for economic development among social service nonprofits, economic development organizations, and local government actors — stakeholders she collectively refers to as ‘advocates’ — Tait’s research examined the multiple meanings and political undercurrents that advocates and worker-owners associate with worker ownership. By distinguishing between the perspectives of actual worker-owners in cooperative businesses and those of the broader constellation of actors who “work to develop, support, and promote worker-owned firms” (101), Tait’s work models a framework comparable to that which this thesis relies on, and thus serves as a useful reference for my analysis.

To investigate how different stakeholders understand worker ownership, Tait conducted 35 semi-structured interviews with actors from across New York’s cooperative ecosystem, including 20 worker-owners and 15 co-op ‘advocates’ (i.e., nonprofit leaders, co-op business developers, city agency staff, and elected officials), in addition to observing several co-op events and reviewing public documents. From this fieldwork, Tait found that worker-owners’ citizenship, race and ethnicity, prior work experiences, and educational attainment significantly shaped the sets of meanings and values they associated with the worker co-op model (Tait, 2021: 44). Immigrant worker-owners — many of whom had limited English-language skills, lower levels of educational attainment, and had experiences with workplace exploitation — consistently emphasized 'extrinsic’ aspects of co-op employment: job security; safe and dignified working conditions; fair wages and scheduling; and the absence of a boss (70). Worker-owners born in the United States, who tended to have higher levels of educational attainment and more positive labor market experiences, typically stressed ‘intrinsic’ factors when discussing the advantages of worker co-ops: autonomy, independence, creative freedom, and personal fulfillment (81). By contrast, cooperative advocates — specifically, “advocates with advanced degrees” (129) — were far more likely than worker-owners to discuss worker co-ops as part of a broader movement for economic transformation or as “prefiguratively creating an alternative to existing market relations in the present” (131). This disconnect between the values and priorities of worker-owners on the front line of the cooperative worker movement and those of co-op promoters championing the model

from the sidelines is the essence of what this thesis explores. As such, Tait's findings provide a key empirical benchmark against which my findings can be compared.

Before discussing the narratives of worker ownership that emerged through this research, it is worth reviewing a final study that similarly deals with the political attitudes of actors immersed in the cooperative economy. Working in the same context as Tait, feminist geographer Lauren Hudson (2018) has critically examined how different stakeholders in New York's solidarity economy movement construct and deploy distinct, often competing narratives about their movement. Hudson analyzed testimony from a City Council hearing on worker cooperatives and public reports from a worker co-op development initiative run by a city agency, revealing the salience of a narrative promoted by the "professional class of developers and organizations that incubate worker co-ops" (4) focused solely on the material benefits of cooperatives as part of a broader poverty alleviation strategy. The cooperative worker-owners and other solidarity economy practitioners Hudson interviewed, on the other hand, rejected this 'poverty alleviation' framing and instead emphasized the political nature of their collective work and the role of capitalism as the root cause of poverty (7). In the contested discursive space of New York's solidarity economy movement, Hdson argues that worker-owners — not cooperative advocates, as Tait found — are the chief promoters of the "worker cooperatives as potential engines for radical political action" (2) narrative.

Hudson's conclusions are striking, as they contrast sharply not only with Tait's findings also drawn from research in New York's worker cooperative ecosystem but also with the core premise animating this thesis (i.e., that the dominant narrative of worker co-ops as vehicles for transformative economic change, propagated by the cooperative intellectual class, obscures how bottom-up narratives of worker ownership do not necessarily align with the dominant framing). However, I suspect Hudson's findings are a reflection of her research design. For instance, Hudson's interview sample was very small (n=5) and participants were recruited solely from the membership pool of Everyday Solidarity for Everyday Sexism, a "supportive space to process patriarchy within the cooperative and Solidarity Economy movement" (Hudson, 2018: 7). In all likelihood, this approach resulted in a sample of ideologically-similar participants who, while no doubt sharing valuable perspectives, did not fully speak to the breadth of outlooks and orientations within New York's worker-owner community. Further, Hudson drew on a relatively narrow set of texts (i.e., testimony from one city council hearing and two reports from the Worker Cooperative Business Development Initiative) to establish the dominant 'poverty alleviation' narrative of worker co-ops advanced by co-op advocates and developers. While these texts are credible sources from which to make sense of how worker ownership is framed in particular contexts, they almost certainly represent just a sliver of the many perspectives on worker co-ops that exist. Indeed, Hudson herself argues the framing espoused by cooperative developers and professionals, which presents the cooperative model as a means to improve wages and working conditions, obscures other, more radical understandings of what worker co-ops are capable of.

Nonetheless, Hudson's findings importantly demonstrate the dynamic, unsettled character of the discourse on worker ownership, in which distinct visions of economic justice and social change are mobilized by actors within the solidarity economy movement to stake out claims over the movement's direction. "Solidarity Economy movement is not an unchanging plane," Hudson argues, "but in fact a contested space; competing narratives between developers, worker-owners, and Solidarity Economy organizers reveal possible schisms" (8). By holding space for worker-owners to articulate in their own words what the solidarity economy movement means to them, Hudson invites participants to "reclaim their subjectivities as *authors* of a movement" (8, emphasis in original). Taking inspiration from Hudson's precedent, this thesis similarly strives to lift up the voices of worker-owners at the forefront of the cooperative movement in order to reveal what worker ownership means to the people at the heart of the cooperative model.

Though the existing body of research on the politics of worker-owners is fairly thin, this thesis nonetheless aims to build on the foundation established by Greenberg, Tait, and Hudson, among others, by revealing narratives of worker ownership mobilized by worker-owners in the Massachusetts cooperative economy and examining the political valence of these narratives in relation to the dominant narrative of worker co-ops as economic alternatives. Findings from this research are presented and discussed in the following chapters.

## CHAPTER 4. Narratives of Affirmation

> *"I think if I had to distill it into one sexy line, it would be that quote: 'In the history of humankind, no one has ever washed a rental car.' Like, you're not gonna take care of it if you don't own a piece of it. And it just changes your whole perspective." — Worker-owner*

From mid-January to early-February 2022, I conducted semi-structured interviews with ten worker-owners in Massachusetts-based worker cooperatives. This sample was modest in size, but it was diverse across multiple dimensions. The worker-owners I spoke with were engaged in an array of productive activities, from renewable energy to strategic communications to food service, across all corners of the state. Some participants had previously worked in other worker co-ops, and others were first-time members of a cooperative. Some actually founded their cooperatives, and others joined after their businesses were already fully operational. Some worked in person at a processing plant or in an office, while others worked remotely. In speaking with each participant, I learned not only these aspects of their backgrounds and work experiences but also the pathways that led them to join worker co-ops and their multivalent understandings of worker ownership and its potential to transform our economy.

In the chapter that proceeds, I present a subset of the research findings that emerged from this process. Specifically, I focus on the *narratives of affirmation* that worker-owners appealed to when describing their experiences with and perspectives on worker ownership. To briefly review how the concept of *narratives of affirmation* is applied in this thesis, narratives can be thought of as subjective interpretations of the world around us, including the people and events that are constitutive of it. In other words, narratives are stories that we use to talk about how the world works. In the context of this thesis, the individuals I spoke with consistently couched their responses to the questions I posed within narratives rooted in their concrete, material realities as worker-owners. Through the data analysis process, I coded participants' responses based on recurring patterns of meaning I identified in the data and then used these codes to define the boundaries of the narratives presented here. The data underlying each narrative are not homogeneous, nor did they arise in response to a fixed set of questions. Instead, they reflect a host of nuanced experiences, ideas, and accounts that emerged across my interviews and which share a common theme related to the research question at the heart of this thesis: *what does worker ownership mean to worker-owners in cooperative businesses, and to what extent do these self-stated meanings align with and/or diverge from the dominant framing of worker co-ops as economic alternatives?*

To make sense of the narratives of worker ownership that emerged through this research in relation to the broader discourse surrounding the worker cooperative movement, I employ Fraser's (1995) classification of 'affirmative' and 'transformative' remedies to injustice as a lens through which to parse the political valence of the bottom-up narratives of worker ownership mobilized by worker-owners. Affirmative

remedies target the outcomes of inequitable social, economic, and political arrangements, whereas transformative remedies strive to reimagine the systems that produce those outcomes in the first place. For the purposes of this thesis, *narratives of affirmation* are those which express the compatibility of worker co-ops with capitalism, or which emphasize the material benefits of the cooperative model for workers while eschewing the political/macroeconomic implications of worker ownership. *Narratives of transformation*, on the other hand, foreground an explicit critique of the capitalist economy and articulate a desire for an alternative economic model based on new forms of relations, values, and productive arrangements. Importantly, the distinction between affirmative and transformative narratives drawn here does not imply a normative value judgment of the perspectives and experiences discussed in this thesis. Rather, this framework provides a way of organizing and understanding the data I obtained in relation to the transformative narrative of worker cooperatives as economic alternatives to capitalism. By viewing the bottom-up narratives of worker ownership that emerged during this research through this lens, the unsettled character of the discourse on worker ownership can be brought into focus.

With this conceptual framing in mind, the following chapter outlines five unique but interrelated narratives of affirmation voiced by worker-owners: 1) business ownership; 2) flexible working conditions; 3) workplace culture; 4) disconnect from the cooperative community; and 5) disillusionment with radical discourse.

### *4.1 Business Ownership*

Among the many narratives of worker ownership that emerged from my conversations with worker-owners, perhaps the most consistently mentioned was the affirmative notion of worker cooperatives as instruments for the creation of business ownership opportunities. Worker-owners repeatedly emphasized how significant being an owner of a business was for them, both personally and professionally. For example, in response to a question about the aspects of worker ownership that they most enjoy, one worker-owner commented:

> Originally when I went into grad school, I thought that maybe I would start my own private practice, on the side of whatever else I was doing, in like ten years. I had this idea that maybe ten years out, after I've been practicing as a therapist, I would feel confident enough, and also bolder and smarter or something, that I could run my own business when I was forty. Like, that sounded like an okay goal to me. Without the collective — without my colleagues that I met — I would have never been able to do this. I would have still been working for someone else... this just would not have been possible had I not been a worker-owner.

Individual work histories differed substantially from person to person, often determined by each worker-owner's education, interests, and tenure in the workforce. But having typically been employed as standard employees in various capacities leading up to their current roles, almost all of the worker-owners I interviewed described how

joining a worker cooperative provided their first foray into business ownership. For many, joining or starting a worker co-op was a means to fulfill a long-term goal of owning one's own business. One worker-owner stated how prior to joining her cooperative, she had "always liked small businesses... a sort of a small entrepreneur who's doing an interesting thing in their neighborhood." Nodding to her family's history of entrepreneurship, another worker-owner shared:

> My dad got laid off from a major corporation in his forties, and then bought into a business and turned it into this multimillion dollar business for himself. A real rags to riches story, literally out on his own at fourteen kind of thing... So I saw a really privileged conception of capitalism that was, if you had a superior product, you were going to be a standout and you were going to get rich. And to me, co-ops are a great example of that.

Though the worker cooperative model is built around a collective ownership structure, worker-owners affirmed the value of individual entrepreneurship as a strategy for improving the lives of workers. Participants depicted worker co-ops as vehicles for economic advancement that, far from subverting capitalist logics of individual ownership, can make owners out of an even greater share of the population. When asked how collective ownership might be transformative for worker-owners, for example, one participant who went through the process of converting her small business into a worker co-op shared how she did not see the change in ownership structure as making much of a difference:

> Yeah, well I guess I didn't really conceive of it being a shift. I just imagined I would continue doing the same work I always had, and others would have the same opportunity... I think that I've cultivated a very traditional American model of work, rather than a cooperative model.

Other participants more explicitly painted the cooperative model as a tool for the inclusion of working-class people within the realm of business owners:

> I really think that, at the core, co-ops are about inviting everyone to the table. About giving everyone a seat, giving everyone a stake, and giving everyone a chance to benefit... I think it's really just about calling everyone in.

> I certainly like the idea of offering ownership to more people, and I like that sort of incentive for growth. I love working in a worker co-op and it would be great to have this opportunity available for more people.

In these and other responses, participants highlighted how worker cooperatives can open up pathways to business ownership for a broader swath of the workforce. As beneficiaries of the cooperative model's shared ownership structure, worker-owners conveyed a sense of optimism that other workers might also be able to benefit from becoming owners. This was particularly true in how worker-owners underscored that, in

contrast to conventional businesses, worker cooperatives instill a more meaningful connection between workers and their labor. A typical reflection on the sense of ownership that cooperatives provide was:

> Over the years as we've been a co-op, I feel much more invested. I think it was a job that was fun and that I really liked early on. But now it really feels like I'm really committed to it. I want to see it succeed and am willing to put in extra hours to make it succeed.

In this particular worker-owner's case, she had started working for the business before its conversion from a sole proprietorship to a worker cooperative. But rather than foregrounding the transformative impact that transferring the means of production into the hands of workers might have on the broader economy, she emphasized the individual feeling of being more invested in her work on a day-to-day basis. Other worker-owners echoed this sentiment in describing how, unlike in prior jobs where they could "come in, do the work, and punch out," being a member of a worker cooperative required additional commitment and "emotional investment." As the titular quote evinces, participants took pains to underscore the psychological difference between feeling unengaged by one's work as a wage laborer versus the visceral sense of investment and care that accompanies worker ownership. Though it may or may not be true that "no one washes a rental car," worker-owners were steadfast in their belief that individuals with an equity stake in something — whether a vehicle or a business — are more committed to its stewardship. Put otherwise, investment begets investment.

These excerpts demonstrate the concrete ways in which worker co-ops are improving the lives of workers within capitalism, in this case through the creation of opportunities for business ownership. For many participants, business ownership was part of a long-term goal for financial security, and joining or starting a worker cooperative provided a more accessible route to achieve this goal. In addition to the economic aspects of ownership, worker-owners also stressed the psychological benefits of worker co-ops in terms of the sense of purpose and gratification they engender. In this light, participants characterized worker co-ops as a means to grow the ranks of the capitalist class by enabling workers to realize an otherwise unattainable 'American Dream.' Through a narrative emphasizing the compatibility of worker ownership with "the two American ideals of owning your own business and democracy," as one worker-owner put it, participants affirmatively cast the cooperative model as a way to help workers like themselves achieve economic security and personal fulfillment via the normative goal of becoming a business owner.

### *4.2 Flexible Working Conditions*

The flexibility of working conditions at worker cooperatives was yet another affirmative narrative that echoed across many of my interviews with worker-owners. Participants frequently portrayed worker cooperatives as bulwarks against demeaning,

exhausting, or otherwise bad jobs, often in relation to their prior experiences in the labor force. In response to a question about how working at a worker cooperative is different from her past jobs, for example, one worker-owner responded:

> The one part of the corporate mentality that I did want to get away from is that, I work very hard but I'm chronically ten minutes late. And it's always because I'm helping somebody else. And that kind of thing making or breaking your career, you know, getting a sideways glance because you've commuted through a snowstorm and you're ten minutes late. I'm very glad to be away from that.

Reflecting on her previous experiences working for a number of companies in the financial services sector, another worker-owner commented:

> I thought that banking would be a walk in the park, you know? Very, very simple. I'd go in, you know, nine to four, and I would just write books on the side and it would just be a real slow pace, very doable. And it is so vicious, so vicious. Like, the whole industry is structured to keep people overextended, it is structurally overextended. You're depleted by nature, you're understaffed, it's really intentional.

Compared with their current roles, worker-owners often characterized their relationships with past employers as being inflexible and unaccommodating. Scheduling policies were dictated by management with little input from workers or regard for their needs and preferences. Critiquing the arbitrary rigidity of the 9-to-5 workday, one worker-owner stressed that “You've got to work when you're at your best. You can't be in there at 8am if you're a night person, that's crazy... That's not what's important. The end goal is important.” By contrast, worker-owners described how their worker co-ops provide more humane, sustainable working conditions, and repeatedly outlined their cooperatives’ flexible scheduling policies, shortened work weeks, and other efforts to protect members’ work–life balance:

> We've grown the team to try to get to a place where it can feel like the work is more sustainable. Like, if one person's out now there should be one other person who could probably fill in if needed, or cover their work, or cover that meeting. So there's a little more redundancy, instead of it just being that if that one person is out now this thing can't happen.
>
> The point is that we just want sustainable jobs, and we're willing to take hits to live better. Like, I'd rather work 35 hours a week, you know what I mean? I think the sustainability of people just wanting to have good jobs, and maybe get paid more to do those jobs.
>
> I think the quality of life is probably a little bit better in terms of flexible schedules. Most of the managers are working like four to five days a week, rather than 40 hours plus a week. And that was a real shift for me, going from [a company] where

> everybody was on salary and worked more than 40 hours a week, to [this co-op] where we're all paid hourly and I sometimes work less than full time.

As these quotes from three worker-owners illustrate, participants consistently turned to affirmative narratives of worker ownership highlighting the advantages of the cooperative model for individual workers within capitalism. Recognizing the prevalence of unsustainable, undignified working conditions under the capitalist status quo, worker-owners framed worker co-ops as channels by which to bypass the indignities of capitalist employment relations and realize a better way of working. As one participant put it:

> The cooperative model is usually more people oriented. I know it's a business, but it is designed to allow the business and people to coexist in a more humane and respectful manner... It's an effort to make the bottom line success of the business compatible with a respectful treatment of the worker.

Rather than viewing capitalism as being fundamentally at odds with any semblance of dignified work, participants articulated an affirmative vision of an economy in which worker co-ops can provide workers with decent, sustainable working conditions without dismantling the very edifice of the capitalist system. Indeed, through more flexible scheduling practices and reasonable employment expectations, the cooperative model is already delivering material improvements for the worker-owners I interviewed. And the impact of these improvements for worker-owners' lives and livelihoods cannot be overlooked: as organizational sociologists Erin Kelly and Phyllis Moen outline in their work (2020) on the growing intensification of work, unhealthy and unsustainable work environments are becoming increasingly common as overseas competition and globalized supply chains stretch workplace expectations beyond their historical bounds. A study from the World Health Organization found that globally in 2016, 488 million people were exposed to long working hours, with more than 745,000 people dying that year from health complications related to overwork (Pega et al., 2021). The pressures of overwork are particularly severe in the United States, where the average worker puts in longer hours than the average worker in any peer nation (Cooper, 2019). In light of these troubling realities, participants demonstrated the possibility of improving working conditions for individual workers within capitalism through the cooperative model.

### *4.3 Workplace Culture*

Alongside business ownership and flexible working conditions, a third recurring narrative of worker ownership mobilized by worker-owners during our conversations was the importance of the internal workplace culture within cooperatives. Worker-owners regularly made reference to the positive workplace cultures cultivated at their cooperatives, particularly in contrast to their prior work experiences. For example, one worker-owner noted how the challenges her cooperative was facing at the time were manageable when compared to the "toxic" environments she had previously worked in:

> I think coming out of all the culturally really terrible workplaces I've been in, despite all of the challenges that I'm naming, one of the things that we've noticed is that the challenges we're dealing with are usually about navigating growth. And that's not a bad thing. Like, the people themselves are actually all really lovely. We have a really, really good team. And when we run into issues, it's never because of malice, or because of a toxic workplace environment

Another worker-owner similarly remarked how her co-op's culture around sales is fundamentally different from what she had previously come across in the workforce:

> I've always been in sales. And the way in which sales are looked at collectively, rather than individually, is very different. You know, there isn't this 'beat you over the head with your numbers' kind of energy that I had experienced at every other company I'd worked for.

Reflecting on their past work experiences, participants routinely described how the workplace cultures they encountered reflected the cost-cutting, profit-maximizing logics of capitalism: managers prioritized meeting performance targets over employees' well-being, rigged hierarchies engendered environments of fear and domination, and workers were treated as disposable. As two worker-owners described:

> You know, I just felt anonymous. I was a cashier at a supermarket in high school, and then I worked at a cafe on Copley Square. And there was a feeling of just, like, being sort of interchangeable.

> So all my prior work experience was, like, pre-adult. I was a waitress, I was a camp counselor, I was a barista, I was a deckhand on a sailboat, and it was all very transactional. They saw me as just labor, there was no investment beyond that. No "what could I bring to the organization" or "what could they bring to me" kind of thing. And there was really like, no eye to the future, right? We were just there to get a job done.

Counterposed against the predominantly negative atmospheres they faced in prior workplaces, participants consistently highlighted how their cooperatives foster workplace cultures rooted in transparency, respect, and unconditional support. Worker-owners voiced feeling trusted and valued in their current roles, often linking these positive cultural features to the processes by which workplace decisions are made in their co-ops. When asked about the experience of transitioning from a job in a venture capital-funded startup to a worker cooperative, for example, one participant commented:

> [When I started] it was kind of like being with a group of friends that are planning some kind of an outing, you know? It just rang familiar. Like, a project isn't just handed to me with a list of 'to do's.' It's a list of discussion points: is this how we're going to do it? Who's going to work on it? Why do you want to work on it? Is this a good client for us? ... It was just all inclusive, everything was open. The books are

> open, calendar, and your input is always welcome. And if you make a mistake, you're not punished. It becomes a learning point.

Another worker-owner who had previously worked as a consultant for a number of large fossil fuel companies shared how joining a worker cooperative exposed him to a different way of interacting in the workplace:

> I would say that one of the things that I have learned and grown to realize is that respect amongst your fellow workers is paramount. Nothing can be gained without folks having respect for the process, and the process of a cooperative is that everybody has a voice. And it must be heard, even if you disagree, it has to be heard. And I've learned that myself.

As these experiences demonstrate, the worker cooperative model has the potential to engender a substantively different kind of workplace culture than typically found in conventional, capitalist firms. Compared to the dysfunctional, transactional, often toxic environments to which they were previously subjected, participants held up the cultures in their cooperatives as beacons of dignity and respect—no small matter in a contemporary moment in which accounts of Amazon delivery drivers urinating in bottles (Klippenstein, 2021), poultry workers being forced to wear diapers on the production line (Oxfam, 2016), and garment workers facing sweatshop-like conditions and systematic wage violations (Sainato, 2021) are disturbingly commonplace. While not directly taking aim at the overarching structure of neoliberal capitalism as the root source of toxic 'workplace dictatorships' (Anderson, 2017), worker-owners illustrated how the affirmative pursuit of healthier company cultures — of "a workplace that feels good," as one worker-owner put it — at the scale of individual cooperative businesses nevertheless represents an important strategy with the power to dramatically and materially improve workers' lives within capitalism.

### *4.4 Disconnect from the Cooperative Community*

Worker-owners not only voiced narratives of worker ownership related to how co-ops expand access to business ownership, enable more flexible working conditions, and enhance workplace cultures; moreover, they introduced narratives raising doubts, both implicit and explicit, about the transformative potential of the cooperative model. Implicitly, participants vocalized a sense of disconnect from other worker cooperatives and the broader co-op community, calling into question the current capacity of worker co-ops to bring about structural change in the economy. When asked if/how they partner with other cooperatives in their community or industry, for example, two participants pointed to a shared feeling of isolation from other worker co-ops and worker-owners:

> Um, it's funny, you know, I think one of the things about being a practitioner is that sometimes it's hard to sort of be plugged into the co-op world, you know? It sometimes does feel kind of isolating. Like, who are my peers, right? Are they other fermentation businesses? Other worker co-ops? Other co-ops?... I think I did

> feel a little bit more plugged in a couple years ago, and it's a little harder to feel plugged in now.
>
> You know, we benefit from a lot of worker cooperatives here in Western Mass, actually. There's quite a few. But I think if you were to ask even people in a worker cooperative to name two or three other worker co-ops, they'd be hard pressed to do it because we kind of isolate ourselves.

Participants often attributed the dearth of linkages between their co-ops and the wider cooperative community to a shortage of cooperative businesses from which to procure needed goods and services. One worker-owner in the renewable energy sector put it this way:

> We're pretty insular. We don't have, in my opinion, enough ties to other aspects of the market. We're part of a buying cooperative of 55 solar companies and that's been fantastic. That's kind of our external connection. But we're less dynamic with other cooperatives and so forth. And I think that's what [our cooperative] needs.

Another worker-owner described a parallel challenge with establishing ties to cooperative suppliers and service providers in Boston:

> I think there's more of an ecosystem in other places. Boston doesn't have much of an ecosystem that I see. There's lots of nonprofits that do funding, CDFIs and whatnot... And we directly purchase composting of our food from CERO, which is another worker cooperative. But it's not like there's a lot of it. There's not even a lot of people to buy s**t from, do you know what I mean? There's not really a lot of worker co-op people that we can collaborate on anything.

At best, these excerpts demonstrate the nascency of the worker cooperative movement, which — while growing rapidly in recent years — remains limited in its current extent; at worst, participants' comments reveal the perceived fragmentation of the worker cooperative movement from worker-owners positioned directly on the front line of the movement itself. While the present scale of the cooperative economy does not rule out the possibility of its future expansion, these reflections from worker-owners signal a less-than-optimistic outlook toward this prospect. In fact, a number of worker-owners voiced uncertainty about the very existence of a worker cooperative movement. When asked if she views worker co-ops to be part of a movement, one participant noted that "it's hard to know if there is a movement when you're in the movement," later questioning if "[the worker cooperative movement] is just there because I'm looking for it versus it being something that's actually happening in the world or something significant." Though this sentiment might reflect, in part, the difficulty of observing a phenomenon that is inherently dynamic and dispersed, it also speaks to a sense of disconnect that multiple participants conveyed. While expressing a need for worker-owners to get organized and "push for something," another participant similarly described a lack of cohesion among worker co-ops at present:

> So as for being a movement? Ugh, you see, that's really a challenge because there are so many areas where we need to get together and push for something. I don't really see a focus on that... Like, I work with some people who were recently incarcerated, and a movement to abolish prisons and abolish the justice system as it is now and start with a fair system—those are movements. But I don't see that everyone in cooperatives is adopting the same platform for a movement.

As the worker-owners I spoke with are a clear testament to, there is no shortage of committed, talented individuals who are hard at work building and running cooperative businesses today. But absent the kind of intentional coordination and cross-pollination needed to grow and sustain a vibrant social movement, individual worker-owners and cooperative advocates will likely continue to operate in isolation from one another. As one worker-owner put it:

> I guess I don't really feel like I'm part of a movement. I think there's a lot of really smart people out there that will talk to you. I'm not trying to say that. Like, there's a lot of people who are constantly leading on these resources out there... But I think movement is too strong a word.

This sense of disconnect from a broader cooperative community — let alone from a coherent social movement capable of winning transformative change — represents a formidable challenge to the ability of worker co-ops to meaningfully unsettle capitalism's dominance. While many of the worker-owners I interviewed stated a desire to do business with, and even organize alongside, other worker cooperatives, the lack of existing infrastructure to facilitate such collaboration points toward the tenuousness of the current iteration of the worker cooperative movement. Indeed, given that many worker-owners themselves are unclear about the movement's existence, let alone its constituents or goals, it remains unknown whether worker cooperatives will be able to fully erode capitalism's power in the near term. Though neither foreclosing on the possibility of a robust movement for worker ownership taking root in the future nor denying a desire for this scenario to arise, participants were far from confident that such a transformative formation might eventually emerge.

### *4.5 Disillusionment with Radical Discourse*

By voicing their disconnect from other worker co-ops, as well as uncertainty about the very existence of a worker cooperative movement, participants implicitly put into question the extent to which worker co-ops, in their existing configuration, can meaningfully contribute to the realization of a post-capitalist economy. But worker-owners also engaged in explicit critiques of the prevailing narrative of worker cooperatives as economic alternatives to capitalism. When asked to reflect on this narrative and the extent to which it resonates with their personal views on worker ownership, participants consistently sought to distance themselves from what they perceived to be extreme or hyper-partisan rhetoric. One worker-owner, for example, stated his dismay at what he

characterized as “the extreme view” of worker co-ops while affirming the compatibility of the worker cooperative model with capitalism:

> There's a far left and a far right to everything. And I do believe that the far left — and I'm not saying this from a political standpoint — but just that if one's view of cooperatives is so far to one side, you make it difficult for other people to see the virtues of cooperatives... I do believe that the worker-owned cooperative model can coexist with the capitalist model that currently is, you know, in favor in this country. I do believe it can coexist. I don't believe that one has to be destroyed for the other one to survive.

Referencing a common framework used to identify an organizing campaign’s allies (i.e., ‘fives’) and opponents (i.e., ‘ones’), another worker-owner shared a similar concern about the political slant of co-op rhetoric not holding broad enough appeal:

> We tend to focus on ones and fives a lot, when it's actually not strategic because the fives are already on our side and the ones are never going to be on our sides. The most strategic place to focus energy is on the twos, threes, and fours, because they're actually persuadable... So I think the answer to your question is that that language — like, being super political, this is gonna end capitalism, this is gonna take the whole system down — that language is only helpful for fours and fives. If you want to reach the twos and threes and bring new people in, you have to use different language that's more accessible and more about people having control over their lives and their work.

Far from categorically endorsing the dominant framing of worker cooperatives as engines of transformative economic change as advocated by prominent cooperative scholars, these excerpts reflect a hesitancy on the part of worker-owners to cosign a more narrow, one-sided narrative of worker ownership. Instead, participants called for a more reform-oriented narrative capable of appealing to politically diverse audiences. Such appeals for moderation demonstrate an acute understanding of how a radical narrative of worker ownership could be alienating for everyday workers not already bought into this message. Embedded in their communities and with an ear to the ground, worker-owners emphasized that affirmative narratives touting the pragmatic benefits of worker ownership — better wages, more flexibility, real autonomy — might speak to the material interests of workers with greater salience than a focus on restructuring the economy writ large.

This misalignment between the transformative political vision expounded by high-profile cooperative scholars and the political pragmatism of the worker-owners I spoke with evinces a clear gap between the theorists and practitioners of worker cooperativism—between those who talk about worker co-ops and the actual workers within cooperative businesses. Recognizing this gap themselves, participants openly voiced their discomfort with the rhetoric espoused ‘about them without them.’ As one worker-owner shared:

> The problem is, the people who are talking about worker co-ops are at the, like, pinnacle. Even people who are talking about worker co-ops in a radical sense are the quintessential, like, nonprofit industrial complex to a degree that's just wild... Just completely disconnected. The left has become so academic, it is so removed and alienating for working people.

Two other participants shared similar concerns with the disconnect between the more radically-oriented upper echelons of the cooperative movement and "the people running the businesses":

> I mean, we live in a world where there's a lot of positive change happening. But there's a lot of people that are trying to capitalize on it without having to do the work, and sort of just using the million dollar words in a really performative sense... Hearing something like that, like, "Yeah, the workers are doing great" from a top down approach just seems really inauthentic to me.

> You know, I wish they would get more away from the 'non-capital' narrative and more into 'if you want it done right, if you want a good job, if you want to be supporting the little guy, go cooperatives' ... I mean, at the end of the day, I think who really knows what's the most effective marketing are the people running the businesses.

Participants not only distanced themselves from *what* is being said about worker co-ops—they explicitly took issue with *who* is saying it. Worker-owners expressed a notable sense of disillusionment with the prominent worker co-op champions ostensibly speaking on their behalf. Rather than hearing from self-styled advocates who, in the words of one worker-owner, "[are] just talking and have never done any work, never been part of a worker co-op," worker-owners foregrounded a desire to have their own stories and experiences speak for themselves. As another worker-owner stated, "those stories have to be coming from worker-owners, because they're the ones whose lives are being transformed."

The worker-owners I spoke with were well-acquainted with the dominant narrative of worker cooperatives as economic alternatives to capitalism, but repeatedly balked at what they considered to be an extreme and politically polarizing view of worker co-ops. In seeking to disassociate themselves from this radical discourse, participants stressed the need to center the lived experiences of worker-owners and the concrete benefits of cooperative businesses in the discourse on worker ownership. Such an approach, worker-owners reasoned, would have broader appeal across the political spectrum and put worker ownership on the radars of a more diverse array of workers. This emphasis on framing worker co-ops as a means to affirmatively improve working conditions in the world as it is, rather than only touting the transformative reconfiguring of the systems underpinning capitalism, reveals a political pragmatism among worker-owners that stands in contrast to the idealistic, anticapitalist politics espoused by the cooperative movement's intellectual establishment.

### *4.6 Chapter Summary and Discussion*

The foregoing excerpts from my interviews with ten worker-owners at cooperative businesses in Massachusetts demonstrate the profound impacts that worker ownership can have — and is already having — on the lives and livelihoods of workers today. Participants described the significance of becoming business owners, both personally and professionally, and stressed the psychological benefits that accompany ownership in terms of feeling more invested and engaged in one's work. Pointing to the pervasiveness of unsustainable, inflexible working conditions in the existing labor market, worker-owners also framed the cooperative model as a means to achieve a more flexible and humane work–life balance. In addition to business ownership and flexible working conditions, participants emphasized how, in contrast to the transactional, often toxic environments they encountered in previous jobs, worker co-ops foster workplace cultures rooted in dignity and respect. In highlighting how the cooperative model can improve workers' lives in terms of expanding access to business ownership, creating more flexible working conditions, and enhancing workplace cultures, participants mobilized affirmative narratives of worker ownership portraying worker co-ops as fundamentally compatible with capitalism, albeit a more livable version of the status quo.

Further, the worker-owners I spoke with not only framed worker co-ops as vehicles through which individual workers can pursue a more humane way of working within capitalism, but they also implicitly and explicitly raised doubts about the transformative potential of the cooperative model. Implicitly, participants voiced a sense of disconnect from other worker cooperatives and uncertainty about the very existence of a worker cooperative movement, calling into question the capacity of worker co-ops to pose a meaningful threat to capitalism in their existing configuration. Worker-owners also openly eschewed the dominant framing of worker cooperatives as engines of transformative economic change, as well as the prominent cooperative scholars who champion this framing ostensibly on workers' behalf, citing the need to foreground their own stories and experiences as actual worker-owners. Through worker-owners' self-stated appraisals of the cooperative model and its potentialities, a grounded narrative of worker ownership chiefly concerned with improving the working lives and well-being of workers emerged from my interviews.

It bears repeating that neither this focus on the material benefits of worker cooperatives maintained by worker-owners nor the benefits themselves ought to be diminished. Faced with accelerating levels of precarity, declining prospects for upward mobility, and the everyday indignities and depredations of neoliberal capitalism, the prospect of securing humane working conditions and a higher quality of life through worker ownership can certainly be transformational in a sense. This is especially true considering worker-owners' prior experiences in the workforce, which, while varying from person to person, contributed to a shared understanding of what worker-owners did *not* want their work to look like while also shaping their vision of a more fair and democratic business model. As one worker-owner put it:

> Our workplaces take up a huge portion of our lives. And it is just so sad that people can spend a huge portion of their lives doing something that makes them miserable, or doing something with people that are not appreciating them or respecting them as a human being.

However, and as these findings bear out, the desire to enhance one's working conditions does not necessarily engender transformative politics in itself. The pursuit of financial security, flexibility, self-determination, and other workplace improvements can just as easily propel one toward efforts to realize a more ethical capitalism as it can lead one toward a radical disposition favoring post-capitalist futures. In the case of the worker-owners interviewed for this research, affirmative narratives oriented around the incremental improvement of individual outcomes were often articulated alongside the more politically transformative narratives outlined in the following chapter.

These findings are significant in multiple respects, the first being that they are largely consistent with the outcomes of previous inquiries into the political dispositions of cooperative worker-owners described in Chapter 3. As Greenberg (1981) found in his investigation into the political attitudes of worker-owners, in which he determined that worker ownership cultivated a 'petit bourgeoisie' orientation among worker-owners instead of a more radical socialist politics, this research similarly shows how worker-owners openly embraced affirmative narratives touting the compatibility of worker ownership with a more livable version of capitalism. Further, my findings validate Tait's (2021) conclusions on the divergent meanings and political leanings of various stakeholders in the worker cooperative movement by revealing the disconnect that many worker-owners perceived between their own politics and priorities and those of the worker cooperative movement's high-profile thought leaders. Moreover, as Sandoval (2016) argued in a comparable study interrogating the politics of worker cooperatives in the United Kingdom, my findings here point to the fact that, in spite of the anticapitalist orientation of the literature on worker cooperatives, "radical politics are not inherent in the cooperative structure" (Sandoval, 2016: 5). Indeed, worker-owners explicitly advocated for a more moderate, pragmatic narrative of worker ownership touting the material benefits of the cooperative model in lieu of "the extreme view" of worker co-ops.

These findings are also consequential insofar as they reveal the narrative gap that exists between how worker cooperatives, and by extension worker-owners, are framed by prominent cooperative scholars and the genuine perspectives of worker-owners themselves. This gap matters because, as discussed in Chapter 2, narratives are not just stories—they are powerful discursive tools wielded to accomplish or influence particular ends. And power inevitably shapes what can be said, when, by whom, and with what authority, thus determining which narratives become dominant and which are obscured. High-profile scholars positioned prominently within the worker cooperative movement espouse a narrative which frames worker cooperatives as "beachheads of socialism" (Marcuse, 2015) and worker-owners as revolutionary vanguards building the foundations

of an alternative, non-capitalist economy. But operating from the trenches of this same movement, the worker-owners I interviewed articulated their own narratives of worker ownership rooted in their lived experiences and perspectives. These self-stated counternarratives reveal that, far from regarding themselves as harbingers of a new economic paradigm, worker-owners hold political subjectivities oriented around the incremental improvement, rather than wholesale replacement, of existing systems.

But not *all* of the narratives evoked by worker-owners during my interviews can be accurately categorized as affirmative. From question-to-question and person-to-person, worker-owners' responses reflected varying, often diametric political valences. In the chapter that follows, I present a second set of findings demonstrating glimpses of a more transformative political outlook voiced by worker-owners in relation to capitalism and the prospects for an alternative economic model based on new forms of relations, values, and productive arrangements. Importantly, the sets of findings presented in this chapter and the following one are not positioned in contest or contradiction with each other; rather, they should be viewed as complements encompassing the messy, multifaceted politics held by worker-owners. It is only by engaging with both narratives of affirmation as well as transformation that the fault lines in the discursive terrain of worker ownership can be more fully appreciated.

## CHAPTER 5. Narratives of Transformation

> *"We're fed up, we're fed up. We're just so fed up with obfuscation and backroom dealing. We're just so fed up with the lack of transparency and lack of pay equity. It's on so many levels. There's this collision of race and gender and class pissed off-ness. And when you're angry, you need an antidote, you need hope. And hope is in this model." — Worker-owner*

Before embarking on my field research, when the prospect of speaking with actual worker-owners and learning from their experiences with worker ownership was little more than an idea on paper, I had a vague hypothesis as to what such a process might yield in terms of findings. Having no firsthand experience with worker cooperatives myself, and with a limited base of knowledge acquired largely in academic settings, I imagined that worker-owners would overwhelmingly point to the material benefits of the cooperative model while paying little mind to any notion of co-ops potentially transforming the economy or accelerating the transition to a post-capitalist society. This hypothesis was driven by an assumption I held about workers being motivated first and foremost by material, rather than ideological, concerns—an assumption itself informed by my own lived experience growing up in a working-class, single-parent home wherein making ends meet held primacy over any moral ideals or partisan beliefs.

As the findings discussed in the previous chapter demonstrate, this prediction was more or less borne out through my research. The worker-owners I interviewed frequently appealed to affirmative narratives of worker ownership asserting the advantages of worker co-ops for individual workers, particularly in contrast to their prior job experiences in conventional, capitalist workplaces. They also actively rebuffed the anticapitalist politics promoted by high-profile advocates of worker co-ops, advocating instead for framings centered around the lived experiences of worker-owners and concrete benefits of worker ownership. These responses underscore that, despite how cooperatives are portrayed by academic theorists (i.e., as vehicles for post-capitalist economic transformation), the experience of worker ownership does not nurture an intrinsically anticapitalist political orientation among worker-owners.

This thesis was motivated by a desire to uncover grounded narratives of worker ownership obscured within the scholarly discourse on worker cooperatives, and the findings presented in Chapter 4 hold true to this intention by revealing the narratives of affirmation mobilized by worker-owners in my interviews. However, those narratives represent only a part of the picture. Though worker-owners voiced affirmative framings of worker ownership, they mobilized — both explicitly and tacitly — more transformative narratives as well. At times, worker-owners leveled criticisms of capitalism as the dominant economic paradigm and expressed an appetite for, in the words of one worker-owner, "something different": an alternative way of organizing society and the economy. But glimmers of a more radical edge in the perspectives offered by worker-owners also surfaced through their reflections on how worker co-ops cultivate

fundamentally different productive arrangements based on values antithetical to capitalism: democracy, cooperation, interdependence, and sustainability.

Before fully outlining these narratives of transformation, I want to emphasize that the data included in this chapter are not drawn from a different subset of interviews than the data in the prior chapter. As complex individuals with nuanced, multifaceted political beliefs, all ten of the worker-owners I spoke with deployed both affirmative and transformative narratives during the course of our conversations, often oscillating back and forth between the two in their responses. By disentangling these braided discourses, and showing how they are not contradictory but rather complementary, this thesis strives to capture in as holistic terms as possible what worker ownership means to the people at the heart of the cooperative model.

With this in mind, the following chapter outlines five principle narratives of transformation: 1) cooperative alternatives to capitalism; 2) workplace democracy; 3) solidarity and camaraderie; 4) community embeddedness; and 5) awareness and consciousness raising.

### *5.1 Cooperative Alternatives to Capitalism*

The most outright transformative of the many narratives of worker ownership that worker-owners employed during my interviews emerged through participants' explicit critiques of capitalism. Given the focus of this research, worker-owners were posed a series of questions that allowed them to reflect on the current structure of the American economy and its implications for their lives and livelihoods. In response, participants consistently pointed to capitalism "as being a root cause of a lot of the problems that we're facing," as one worker-owner put it. Reminiscing on his transition out of a career in the corporate sector, one worker-owner commented that his decision was fueled in part by a lingering discontent with the inequalities borne by capitalism:

> Well, you know, with deep reflection it was just the unfairness of capitalism. I just couldn't make it jibe with my personal feelings... The spread of wealth is one thing. Workers' voice in their workplace, frankly in most instances they have very little voice. I felt like even though I was in human resources, and while it was publicly stated that the concerns of the workers were first and foremost, I found for the most part that it was lip service.

Other worker-owners voiced nearly identical concerns with the structural inequities baked in to the capitalist economy, focusing specifically on imbalances in power and wealth between the owners of capital and workers:

> The entire mechanism of capitalism is taking someone who has extra money, and then figuring out a way to give them even more money, right? And so another way of saying that is money is power. We're taking people who already have more

> power than others, and then finding a way to have our entire system generate more power for that individual.
>
> Looking at the economic similarities between now and [the 1960s], the gap between the rich and the poor is still so in our faces. And it's in the faces of poor people more than anybody... The swing between this elite wealth and this mass poverty is going to have to start to swing back, or the wealthy aren't going to survive.

These quotes reveal a keen awareness of capitalism's unambiguous role in producing the gross disparities we see today. Much like the generations of critics and reformers who preceded them, the worker-owners I interviewed recognized how capitalism is inherently exploitative, unsustainable, and anti-democratic, given its systemic bias favoring those already in possession of accumulated resources. But worker-owners also expressed a sense of optimism that the worker cooperative model might hold the potential to ameliorate these deficiencies in capitalism's structure. For example, one worker-owner explained how a conscious desire to avoid the innate injustices of capitalism compelled her to co-found a worker cooperative:

> It was kind of a no-brainer that we don't want to be perpetuating systems that are taking advantage of other people... Traditional business models, both for-profit businesses and non-profit businesses, are structured in a way where there are workers who are underneath, getting paid a wage that is not livable. And then there are individuals who are in ownership positions that are getting paid over six figures. And it didn't make sense for us to repeat those kinds of structures. We wanted to do something different.

While not advocating for the outright dismantling of capitalism, worker-owners repeatedly framed worker co-ops as fundamentally "different" from the capitalist status quo—a "different way of doing business, a different way of living and owning things," as one worker-owner said. Another worker-owner similarly characterized the cooperative model as "counter to the dominant, capitalist principles in terms of how it functions internally." Contrasted against the capitalist system's structural flaws, participants positioned worker co-ops as a more just, sustainable way of organizing society and the economy:

> With capital, the motive is to grow or die. And what we're seeing now is that, fundamentally, that's incompatible with the planet, and always has been... So the thing that's very interesting to me about worker co-ops is that they don't have the fundamental logic built into the way they're set up to continue to grow at all costs. The idea that worker cooperatives don't have to scale is actually an amazing thing.

In moments such as this, participants cast worker co-ops not simply as tools for incrementally improving outcomes within the capitalist economy but rather as a means to transcend capitalism entirely. Contrasted with their affirmative appeals to the material

benefits of co-ops for individuals, worker-owners mobilized transformative narratives to accentuate the fundamental differences between the capitalist and cooperative business models—differences which put the two models at irreconcilable odds. For example, one worker-owner depicted worker co-ops as a fundamental threat to the interests of those who benefit from capitalism (i.e., the owning class):

> I don't think that people who have money and power would want cooperatives to succeed. Under capitalism, the people who have money and power, who own businesses, who own equity, who invest in big corporations—they're directly profiting off of the labor that the workers have. And they are not going to want workers to organize because that's going to affect their bottom lines. So it's a direct threat to everything as we know it, our economy as we know it.

In these and other responses, worker-owners gestured toward the transformative potential of the worker cooperative model. Recognizing the structural deficiencies of an economic system that naturally concentrates wealth and power in the hands of a small minority at the expense of the vast majority, participants articulated a shared vision for an altogether different way of structuring productive arrangements and economic relations. By juxtaposing worker co-ops with the capitalist status quo, worker-owners shifted the rhetorical frame away from affirmative narratives citing the cooperative model's compatibility with capitalism and toward new possibilities for more just, sustainable, and democratic ways of being. Taken together, these bottom-up renderings of the cooperative model's transformative potential not only demonstrate how the worker-owners I spoke with consciously embraced the dominant narrative of worker cooperatives as economic alternatives to capitalism; moreover, they help to expand the discursive scope of economic possibility beyond capitalism by imagining worker co-ops as stepping stones toward a new way of organizing our economy.

### *5.2 Workplace Democracy*

While at times worker-owners advanced openly transformative narratives of worker ownership critiquing capitalism and positioning a cooperative economy as its alternative, they also evoked subtler yet equally transformative narratives describing how worker co-ops challenge and subvert fundamental aspects of the capitalist system. One way in which these implicitly transformative framings emerged during my interviews was through the consistent emphasis worker-owners placed on their involvement in workplace decisions. Participants' reflections on democracy at work frequently came up by way of comparison with their prior job experiences within conventional, capitalist firms. For example, when recounting her career up until co-founding a worker cooperative, one worker-owner expressed the total lack of autonomy she felt:

> I felt like there was always just this looming limiting factor that had to do with the institution I was working for. I just did not have power over the decisions that were being made, over the programs I was directly involved in administering. Like, I had no say in what work was getting done really. I was just kind of plugged into this

> work that other people had decided needed to be done. And I didn't know who these people were, and I couldn't do anything about it.

Echoing a comparable sentiment, another worker-owner voiced how he often found himself at odds with the decisions of managers in his past jobs, but felt little reason to speak up and raise his suggestions:

> As a worker, I've had a million jobs where I got paid by the hour and someone told me to do something and I'm like, that's a really f**king stupid way to do it, but I don't care. I'm getting paid by the hour, so is my friend, so f**k you, dude. Yeah, it'll take 60 hours, great. Like, I could do this in 30 hours if you did this, this, and this. But why do I care, right?

A shared sense of disempowerment and voicelessness characterized the pre-cooperative work experiences of virtually all of the worker-owners I spoke with. They repeatedly cited the dearth of opportunities they had in previous roles to offer ideas, express concerns, or speak earnestly without fear of reprisal. As one worker-owner bluntly stated, “Oftentimes, in my experience anyway, if you speak up about something that's really on your heart, it could mean that you're looking for a job.” Lacking outlets to exercise their voices on the job, worker-owners conveyed feeling underutilized and disengaged in their work—like “being sort of interchangeable” as one worker-owner put it, or “just a cog in a wheel” in the words of another.

These experiences of powerlessness were offered in sharp contrast to participants’ experiences as members of worker co-ops. Worker-owners remarked again and again during our conversations how fundamentally different it is to be an employee of a conventional capitalist firm and a worker-owner in an employee-owned cooperative. Where the former is marked by alienation and authoritarian hierarchy, the latter is built around self-determination and democratic participation. As one worker-owner stated:

> I have a lot more control over the biggest picture of the business. I have this piece of it, which is my job. But then there's also this other piece, you know? Do we scale back in a year when we're really busy and burnt out? Or do we keep pushing? I think in another business that decision would be made by the owner or that decision would be made by whoever. But at [our cooperative], I'm part of that decision.

Reflecting on her first encounters with workplace democracy after joining a cooperative, another worker-owner further noted how different it feels to be empowered in decisions at work:

> It rocked my world. Like, I'd never been in a work environment like that, but I immediately knew I loved it. The first company meeting I went to as an intern was two weeks into my job. The company was reviewing its mission statement, and everyone was just shooting out ideas. And so I suggested an edit to it and

> everyone was like, “Oh yeah, good idea.” Afterwards, the founder and CEO was like, “I'm so happy you felt comfortable to talk.” I felt really empowered from day one, like I had something to offer and that my opinion would be valued, which is not the case in a lot of places.

The advantages of shared decision-making and participation within the worker cooperative model surfaced constantly during my interviews. Worker-owners extensively outlined the procedures in place at their respective cooperatives to facilitate democratic engagement among members in decisions big and small. One worker-owner in a management role noted how he and his team “never make decisions as a management without talking it through with people who it's going to directly affect,” adding that “it's the day-to-day discussions that are constantly informing everything we do.” Another participant described how in her cooperative, “Once a decision is brought up, everyone is a part of that decision. You can abstain, obviously, if you want to. But nothing is a secret.” While they were certain to underscore the challenges of democratic decision making, worker-owners unmistakably pointed to their degree of involvement at work as one of the most significant benefits of worker ownership.

The worker co-op model not only provides workers the feeling of empowerment—it materially shifts power into their hands by giving them the ability to shape the day-to-day decisions and long-term strategies that directly impact them. By highlighting how worker cooperatives structurally transform the distribution of power within firms, worker-owners intimated the transformative potential of worker ownership to upend a capitalist status quo in which nearly two-thirds of workers feel their voice is ignored on the job (Workforce Institute, 2021). When power is shared collectively by workers rather than concentrated among the owners of capital and their shareholders — when those who create value in the workplace are also entitled to decide where that value is directed — new possibilities for a more equitable and democratic economy emerge. And in the process, the class distinctions currently separating workers and capitalists (i.e., those who work for a living and those who live by the work of others) might begin to dissolve. Through narratives foregrounding the far-reaching benefits of workplace democracy, worker-owners quietly rendered a transformative vision of an economy beyond capitalism that is of, by, and for workers.

### *5.3 Solidarity and Camaraderie*

The deep-seated spirit of solidarity and camaraderie within worker cooperatives was yet another transformative facet of worker ownership that my interview participants repeatedly spoke to. Worker-owners emphasized how their success and the very continuance of their cooperatives rests on the relationships they hold with their colleagues—relationships rooted in trust and interdependence. These mutual bonds among co-owners were held in contrast to the competitive ethos of the conventional,

capitalist firms worker-owners had been employed at in the past. For example, a worker-owner with experience in the financial services sector described the shocking response she received to her heterodox management style:

> When I first started, I had a kind of a pollyanna approach to team building, and I led with that. I wanted to help people understand their animal totems and really get people having conversations outside of the technical, logistical day-to-day. And they took a poll out to see how long this little minnow would last in the shark pool. The longest was six months, and I stayed at that bank for over two years.

While this anecdote is perhaps an extreme example, other worker-owners shared similar stories of feeling isolated and disconnected from their colleagues in previous roles. As another participant put it:

> I think we don't depend on each other as much as we can, because people are not readily available to speak to their needs. You know, that's a crazy corporate structure thing that really pits people against each other. And it is detrimental to your well being and your health, to feeling like a valued member of something.

Faced with the rigged hierarchy of the typical employer and the atomistic individualism endemic to capitalism, worker-owners echoed a shared struggle to cultivate meaningful relationships or find a sense of purpose in their pre-cooperative work lives. As one worker-owner said, “It can be a pretty dim, hopeless, wheel spinning, gears grinding world.” And it was a conscious recognition of the dim hopelessness of this world that drove many participants to seek out alternative options.

Against this backdrop, joining a worker-owned cooperative marked a sea change in participants’ working conditions. All of the worker-owners I interviewed expressed a deep sense of connection and companionship with their fellow co-owners. This spirit of solidarity manifested in how worker-owners related to themselves, their colleagues, and the work at hand in their cooperatives. One worker-owner noted how, as a manager in his co-op, he intentionally resists the tendency to measure firm performance at the individual level:

> One of the things I try to do as a coach is to teach and coach that our progress — how far we're going to advance, whether we're going to succeed or not — is not based on a single person. It's based on the collective. It's based upon all of us working as a group. And when that starts to happen, and when I see signs of it here and there, it gives me hope that we're on the right track.

Along the same lines, another worker-owner conveyed that in the process of working with her colleagues to get their behavioral health business off the ground, their bonds took precedence over other aspects of their work:

> We mutually value our relationships with each other, and we use that as a kind of gauge to make all of our decisions within the work... There's just this open communication that we have, where we are working through conflict as it comes up. Making decisions through having mutual respect for each other, and wanting to maintain a safe workplace for each other. That is one of our highest priorities.

Worker-owners made frequent references to the importance of their relationships with coworkers throughout my interviews, particularly in regard to how the culture of solidarity in co-ops foments a fundamentally different set of relations in the workplace than under capitalism. The notion of 'camaraderie' surfaced in multiple conversations as a way of encapsulating the essence of these deeper connections. One worker-owner stressed how her relationships at work have enabled her co-op "to do things together that I would have never been able to do alone," adding that "to have that sort of camaraderie and support within a professional environment is not something that a lot of people get in their lives." Another participant shared how this companionship imbues her work with a greater sense of meaning: "I like the feeling of camaraderie with coworkers that I don't think I would have if I weren't owning a business with them. There is something that feels more consequential because of that."

The structure of a cooperative itself brings workers together to meet their common needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned enterprise (ICA, n.d.). And in sharing this commitment, cooperative members enter into reciprocal relations in which one's prosperity becomes inextricably bound to and contingent upon the whole—in which cooperation supplants individualism. Such mutual interdependence is diametric to free-market capitalism's *homo economicus*: the monomaniacal economic individual concerned only with maximizing their self-interests (Persky, 1995). By subverting this core assumption of capitalist political economy and installing solidarity and reciprocity as the grounding principles of an alternative set of productive arrangements, worker co-ops seed the conditions in which a new economy can take root.

Worker-owners did not explicitly argue that the ethos of solidarity borne by worker co-ops holds the potential to undermine capitalism overall. However, the narratives they mobilized to express the profound importance of their workplace relationships contain a transformative kernel pointing toward the possibility of an economy built around a fundamentally different set of values than is capitalism. This implicitly transformative framing is best captured by the reflections of one worker-owner on the connection between her spiritual practice and the worker cooperative movement:

> I feel a sense of solidarity, spiritual solidarity, knowing that when I'm sitting there are people sitting and meditating across the world. That kind of visceral understanding of connection is what I feel about being a worker-owner. There's an economic solidarity to people who are choosing a different way of being in the economy together.

### *5.4 Community Embeddedness*

Another transformative perspective on worker ownership shared by the worker-owners I interviewed dealt with the embeddedness — socially, spatially, and economically — of worker cooperatives within the communities in which they do business. In both direct and indirect ways, worker-owners articulated how deeply rooted their co-ops are in the places they are located, often by contrasting the fixedness of worker cooperatives with the impermanence and opportunism of conventional capitalist businesses. Drawing on their own experiences in the workforce, worker-owners voiced an acute cynicism around the connection between capitalist firms and their surrounding communities, typically characterizing those firms as highly exploitative. A worker-owner at a food production cooperative, for example, described how the usual trajectory of firms in the same industry leaves few lasting benefits for local residents:

> In the natural foods world, businesses get sold a lot. A founder starts a business and is really passionate, it stays around for 15, 20 years, and then it gets sold to some conglomeration of brands. It gets hollowed out and stops being a thing, or the production gets moved... And that's success.

Echoing this criticism, another worker-owner explicitly attributed the loss of business and jobs to the *modus operandi* of capitalism:

> Capitalism is extractive, and the whole nature of mergers and acquisitions is smoke and mirrors. So much of it, you know? And then what happens with all of that wheeling and dealing at the upper echelon is that people lose their jobs. That's always the way it goes.

In these and other statements, participants depicted the dominant business model as one in which communities are drained of their resources and wealth while the owners of capital and their shareholders are enriched. Local communities are treated as little more than production inputs—something disposable to be economized and consumed, while negative consequences are written off as 'externalities.' As the same food production co-op member explained, "A lot of natural foods businesses that I know are based somewhere else, and have some production facility out here and are really like pulling out resources and pulling the wealth out." Meanwhile, communities are left to deal with the fallout from this 'churn and burn' economy: empty factories, hollowed out job bases, social dislocation, and "deaths of despair" (Case & Deaton, 2020).

Counterposed against the exploits of winner-take-all capitalism, worker-owners emphasized how tethered worker co-ops are to their local contexts, and how transformative these connections can be for both individual workers and the economy as whole. Participants portrayed worker cooperatives as being deeply entwined in the fabric of their communities due to the structure of the co-op model: rather than treating the surrounding community as an expendable input in the search for maximum profit, worker-owners — who tend to live in or near the area in which their cooperative is

located — have a natural incentive to be 'good neighbors' and help their communities thrive. Further, it is in a worker-owner's direct self-interest to keep their co-op firmly entrenched in the local community, rather than outsourcing production, and thereby their job, to a lower-cost market. As one worker-owner framed it:

> There is something about worker co-ops that are really rooted in the community. I think it's a real advantage for having them stick around... You know, we keep wealth in our communities and keep it within the business in ways that aren't extractive as they are in a lot of other businesses.

Responding to a question about the benefits of cooperatives for their surrounding communities, another worker-owner drew an equivalent contrast between the operating logics of cooperative and capitalist businesses:

> Well, the stability, you know? The resilience, the ability to ebb and flow. When profits are great, we share it or we reinvest, we make decisions on that level. But when they're not, we hunker down and we figure out how to pare back, we innovate really hard. That is different from a corporation. A corporation's first instinct is to merge and acquire. That's so different from hunkering down and going leaner.

The narratives of embeddedness and sustainability worker-owners mobilized in our conversations point toward a fundamentally different relationship between cooperative businesses and the communities in which they operate than capitalism engenders. Because of their ownership structure, worker cooperatives are far less likely to outsource jobs, move production overseas, or pollute the local environment in the pursuit of maximizing profits, precisely because such measures would directly harm their intended beneficiaries: worker-owners. It is not only in the interest of worker-owners to keep their business rooted in the local community; moreover, cooperative businesses and their owners benefit when their prospective customer base — people and businesses in the nearby area — and the local environment are also flourishing. As such, worker co-ops often take a 'long view' when considering how to grow and invest in their businesses. In the words of one worker-owner, "Our eye is always towards the future."

Foregrounding the deeply rooted character of worker cooperatives, and their entanglement in the social, spatial, and economic fabric of their communities, worker-owners subtly gestured at perhaps the most transformative aspect of the cooperative model: the subordination of capital to labor. In a conventional firm, capital 'rents' the labor power of workers, who serve the production process merely as instruments for the creation of surplus value that accrues to capitalists (Marx, 1867). Cooperatives invert this baseline condition of capitalism by placing capital at the disposal of the people who produce its value: workers. By upending capitalism's power imbalance and collapsing the boundary between those who own capital and those who create it, worker co-ops shift critical decisions about the fixedness of a business in a community into the hands of the very people who are impacted. To be sure, the worker-owners I

interviewed spoke directly to this dynamic in highlighting the abiding, mutually beneficial relationships between their co-ops and surrounding communities. Through these narratives of embeddedness, worker-owners surfaced possibilities for structuring the relations between productive enterprises and communities in new, transformative ways.

### *5.5 Awareness and Consciousness Raising*

Of the transformative narratives of worker ownership that emerged through the course of this research, perhaps the most recurring was the importance of raising awareness of and expanding access to worker ownership for the broader public. The worker-owners I spoke with were in near-universal agreement about the need to grow the ranks of the worker cooperative movement, and about the critical role of education in building this movement. Just two out of ten participants had previously worked at a worker co-op before joining their current cooperative, and most had little to no prior experience with the cooperative model prior to becoming a member of one. As one worker-owner shared when asked how she first learned about worker co-ops, “I truly stumbled upon worker ownership and I knew nothing about it.” Her lack of prior knowledge was not uncommon, though; another worker-owner remarked that after growing familiar with the co-op model, “the lack of knowledge that other people have about them has really become blatant to me.” Worker-owners pointed to this general dearth of familiarity with the worker cooperative model as a barrier to its uptake in the economy:

> I think that people don't understand worker cooperatives, I really don't. It's novel to people. When you tell them, "Yeah, I work for a worker-owned cooperative," they kind of look at you, and you have to explain. You know, they get it, the workers own it. But, you know, really how does it work? And I think it's an educational process.

Given the lack of public knowledge surrounding worker co-ops, worker-owners repeatedly expressed a desire to help strengthen awareness of the worker cooperative model. For example, one participant shared that his cooperative’s philosophy is “If we like what we have, we should give it to other people too and create ways to almost open new avenues for workers to have these opportunities as well.” Another participant remarked on how cooperatives ought to be taught about more intentionally:

> I'm lucky that so many things pointed me to [this cooperative], but I would have loved to learn about it in high school or college. All you hear about are corporate structures, right? Or mom and pops. I think it just needs to be part of that larger education effort of people knowing that that opportunity exists. So like, anywhere I can shout it from the rooftops I strive to.

A worker-owner who regularly leads workshops and offers lectures on worker cooperatives added:

> I really enjoy being able to help people who are new to the idea of co-ops understand it. Especially people I know who are in the corporate world and struggling with the ethics of working in a company that's not doing good things, but tells you they are.

As these quotes demonstrate, the worker-owners I interviewed were in firm alignment around the importance of building public awareness of their and other cooperatives in order to expand the footprint of co-ops within the economy. But they also articulated a more transformative posture toward education as a vehicle for consciousness raising. Recognizing the structural failings of capitalism, as well as the potential of co-ops to form the basis of an entirely new economic system, worker-owners highlighted their awareness-building efforts as a means to help other workers take notice of capitalism's dysfunctions and consider alternative possibilities. For example, one participant noted how she, despite not considering herself much of an activist, felt it was important for her to expose others to the viability of the cooperative model:

> I feel like part of the work of helping make a world that's more just and more fitted for all of the people in it — not just the people who already have power and money — is helping to spread awareness of alternatives, where people are going to be able to be more in control of their life, and they're not going to have to work super, super hard. If they want to, they can, but they're going to be able to make that decision. I feel very strongly that people deserve more than they're getting and they have the power to do things differently. And I want to help that happen.

Another worker-owner shared a similar mentality, viewing his co-op as an instrument for shifting the consciousness of workers around the existence of alternatives:

> I think worker co-ops are an amazing way of showing people a different way of doing business, a different way of living and owning things. And businesses like [our cooperative] matter because people can see there's an alternative that actually works... It's like propaganda of the deed, in the sense that it actually exists and you can see it. That really makes sense in creating an ideological grounding for a lot of people.

In these and other responses, glimmers of a transformative narrative of worker ownership emerged that emphasized the need for not only awareness building around the cooperative model but also a more liberatory consciousness raising that casts co-ops as economic alternatives to capitalism. Viewing worker co-ops as prefigurations of what a future economy beyond capitalism might look like in the here-and-now (Raekstad & Gradin, 2020), participants reflexively posited their own roles as building these blueprints for a new economy while also proselytizing their benefits to unenlightened publics. In this light, bolstering a broader awareness of worker co-ops is understood as a prerequisite to building a cooperative movement capable of delivering on this transformative vision. As one worker-owner commented, "At the end of the day, you're only able to make change collectively with community. It's a movement rather than an individual vision."

### *5.6 Chapter Summary and Discussion*

Prior to conducting this research, I hypothesized that ordinary worker-owners embedded within cooperative businesses might align themselves with a different set of politics than those held by the cooperative movement's intellectual authorities. I imagined that, while high-profile cooperative scholars proffer a narrative in which worker co-ops are seen as vehicles for post-capitalist economic transformation, worker-owners would largely eschew this partisan framing and instead focus on the pragmatic advantages of worker ownership (e.g., financial security, job stability, scheduling flexibility, etc.). After speaking with ten worker-owners from worker co-ops across Massachusetts about their experiences with and perspectives on the cooperative model, I found that worker-owners did frequently appeal to affirmative narratives of worker ownership highlighting the concrete benefits of worker cooperatives for individual workers, while simultaneously distancing themselves from the anticapitalist politics they associated with the intellectual elite of the cooperative movement. However, as the preceding excerpts from my conversations reveal, participants mobilized more transformative narratives as well.

The most blatant form in which these transformative narratives emerged was through worker-owners' explicit critiques of capitalism as the dominant economic paradigm. To varying degrees, participants acknowledged capitalism as a root cause of social, political, and economic inequality. Many rebuked the status-quo system as inherently unfair, pointing to the structural power imbalance that exists between wage laborers who must work for a living and the owners of capital who profit off their labor. As one worker-owner put it, "We're taking people who already have more power than others, and then finding a way to have our entire system generate more power for that individual." Keenly aware of capitalism's role in producing injustices, worker-owners participants positioned worker co-ops as a more equitable way of structuring productive arrangements and economic relations—as stepping stones toward a new economy.

Beyond the moments in which worker-owners explicitly characterized worker co-ops as a plausible antidote to the inequitable, anti-democratic tendencies of capitalism, they also voiced implicitly transformative narratives conveying how the worker cooperative model challenges and subverts essential features of the capitalist economy. In contrast to the powerlessness and alienation they encountered within conventional capitalist firms, worker-owners highlighted how the collective decision-making structure of cooperative governance empowers workers to exercise control over the decisions that impact them. In contrast to the atomistic individualism and competitive ethos found in typical workplaces, worker-owners emphasized how a deep-seated spirit of solidarity and mutual interdependence underpins the reciprocal relationships on which their cooperatives rest. In contrast to a dominant business model in which local communities are exploited and expended by capitalists seeking to maximize profits, participants portrayed worker cooperatives and their members as being firmly rooted in, and indeed

products of, their local communities. These distinguishing advantages of the cooperative model notwithstanding, worker-owners cited an urgent need to elevate public awareness of worker co-ops both to expand the footprint of co-ops within the economy as well as to shift the consciousness of workers toward the existence of viable alternatives to capitalism. Only by building "a working class movement that is capable of inspiring people around what they want to see in the world," as one worker-owner opined, can the cooperative model meaningfully pose a challenge to capitalism's dominance.

Troubling my priors entering into this research, the worker-owners I interviewed conveyed a deep disillusionment with the structure of capitalism and its outcomes for workers and their communities. Recognizing, and often having experienced first-hand, the harms engendered by the exploitative, extractive logics of capitalism, worker-owners consequently held up worker co-ops as a means to not only mitigate against the negative consequences of the capitalist economy but also enact an alternative way of organizing society and the economy by prefiguring capitalism's replacement in the present. These narratives of worker ownership accord closely with the dominant narrative of worker cooperatives as economic alternatives and evince the transformative political orientation that participants embraced alongside the more affirmatively-inflected politics highlighted in the previous chapter.

These findings are significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, and with respect to the existing literature on the political views of cooperative worker-owners, my findings in many ways contradict those of prior studies. Whereas Greenberg's (1981) inquiry into the political orientations of worker-owners led him to conclude that worker co-ops fail in the "promulgation of general attitudes appropriate to a more egalitarian/cooperative society" (41), my own findings show that worker-owners not only expressed solidaristic — even collectivistic — political values; moreover, they imagined worker co-ops as prefigurative models of what a more just and democratic economy could look like. Further, while Tait (2021) found that cooperative advocates were more likely than worker-owners to discuss worker co-ops as part of a broader movement for economic transformation, this research illustrates that worker-owners articulated a belief, albeit fleeting, in the potential of co-ops to form the basis of a new system structured around a different set of productive arrangements and economic relations than under capitalism. On the other hand, my findings are mostly consistent with Hudson's (2018) in revealing that worker-owners do, at times, view worker cooperatives as potential catalysts of radical political action.

Additionally, and to my surprise given my initial hypothesis that worker-owners would gainsay the dominant narrative of worker cooperatives as economic alternatives to capitalism, these findings demonstrate a robust alignment between how top-down framings of worker cooperatives portray their radical potential and the bottom-up manner in which worker-owners reflexively understand the implications of their work. As discussed in Chapter 2, worker cooperatives are commonly depicted by high-profile co-op scholars as engines of transformative economic change, and worker-owners as the agents tasked with marshaling this transformative movement. Wolff, for example, has

argued extensively about how worker co-ops can form the basis of “an alternative economic system free of capitalism’s structural flaws” (2012: 11). Wright has similarly cast worker co-ops — “the oldest vision for an emancipatory alternative to capitalism” (2010: 234) — as potential building blocks for a democratic socialist economy (2019: 71). From the grounded perspectives on worker ownership that emerged in this research, it is evident that workers-owners sampled here share a similar disposition regarding the transformative potential of worker co-ops as economic alternatives. Though rarely approaching the decidedly anticapitalist politics espoused by many cooperative advocates, worker-owners emphasized how the cooperative model is “counter to the dominant, capitalist principles in terms of how it functions,” thus representing “a direct threat to everything as we know it, our economy as we know it.” Through these and other responses, worker-owners advanced bottom-up narratives of worker ownership framing worker co-ops as the instruments by which workers can actualize an economy beyond capitalism that is rooted in democracy, solidarity, sustainability, and community.

But as previously mentioned, the narratives of transformation discussed here reflect only a portion of the findings that emerged from this research. Indeed, as presented in Chapter 4, worker-owners also articulated narratives emphasizing the compatibility of worker cooperatives with capitalism while simultaneously rejecting the anticapitalist rhetoric that many associated with high-profile thought leaders in the worker cooperative movement. The disparate bodies of findings discussed here and in the previous chapter in many ways exemplify the very subject I intended to explore through this thesis: the messy, multifaceted politics of everyday people. Far from being ideological zealots committed to upholding a particular school of thought, the worker-owners I interviewed expressed nuanced, often conflicting positions exhibiting a range of political valences. In shifting between divergent perspectives and politics in their responses, worker-owners demonstrated how the discursive space of the worker cooperative movement remains contested and unresolved. In order to make sense of this fraught terrain, I deliberately disentangled the braided discourses that worker-owners shared into the related yet distinct *narratives of affirmation* and *narratives of transformation* that I have so far discussed separately. But in the next and final chapter of this thesis, I attempt to bring these complementary bodies of findings together to describe what they can collectively tell us about the politics of worker ownership, as well as the implications of these findings for the worker cooperative movement more broadly.

## CHAPTER 6: Conclusion

Are worker cooperatives an already-existing alternative to capitalism—beachheads of a more just and democratic economy representing a radical disjuncture with the capitalist status quo? If your only exposure to worker co-ops were through the writings and rhetoric of high-profile cooperative scholars, you would be forgiven for assuming the answer to this question is a clear and unqualified 'yes.' Indeed, despite varying considerably in the theoretical thrust behind their arguments, the worker cooperative movement's thought leaders are resoundingly bullish on the prospect of worker cooperatives catalyzing the shift to a radically different paradigm in which workers — rather than bosses or shareholders — collectively own the means of production and control how the fruits of their labor are allocated. In the words of prominent cooperative scholar and advocate Richard Wolff, worker co-ops offer "a concrete vision of what an alternative, more just, and humane society would look like" (Wolff, 2020).

Compelling though this vision may be, this thesis was motivated by a desire to uncover what is largely missed by such top-down characterizations of the cooperative model's transformative potential and by the personalities who epouse them: the voices of workers themselves. Theoretical arguments about how worker co-ops might erode capitalism's dominance through the gradual expansion of cooperative, worker-owned enterprises are projected onto a discursive plane devoid of the real-world experiences of worker-owners in existing cooperatives. Absent this essential perspective, the prevailing discourse on worker ownership takes for granted that the agents ostensibly responsible for carrying out such a fundamental restructuring of the economy are actually interested in or committed to this revolutionary project. One can reasonably assume that some share of worker-owners align themselves with an anticapitalist political orientation, but it remains to be seen whether the actors most central to the premise of worker co-ops as economic alternatives conceive of their own work as helping to realize an economy beyond capitalism. And It is precisely this quandary that sits at the heart of this thesis.

The research I conducted and elaborated on in the foregoing chapters did not yield findings with the power to dispositively resolve this question, nor did I intend for it to. Rather, this thesis occasioned the opportunity to speak with and learn from ten worker-owners intimately acquainted with the opportunities and challenges that inevitably confront members of cooperative businesses. In the process, the worker-owners I interviewed shared with me many more insights on the realities of worker ownership than I was able to fully unpack given the scope of this research. Nevertheless, and as the findings discussed in the prior two chapters demonstrate, my conversations yielded a rich set of data suggesting that worker-owners hold complex, multivalent understandings of worker ownership and its potential to transform our economy that are at once affirmative and transformative, per Fraser's (1995) typology of remedies for injustice outlined in Chapter 2.

In terms of the affirmative positions worker-owners took, the notion that 'no one washes a rental car' echoed across my interviews through participants' frequent appeals to the importance of business ownership as a strategy for improving the lives of workers. Worker-owners also emphasized how, contrasted with the unsustainable and unaccommodating workplaces to which they were accustomed, co-ops provide more flexible working conditions enabling a healthier work-life balance. Further, worker-owners routinely stressed how their co-ops foster engaging and supportive workplace cultures that feel, as one participant described, "like being with a group of friends." Beyond the narratives they voiced outlining the material benefits of worker ownership, participants also expressed a sense of disconnect from the broader cooperative community and uncertainty about the very existence of a worker cooperative movement, casting doubt on the capacity of worker co-ops to bring about structural change in the economy. Most tellingly perhaps, worker-owners repeatedly stated their distaste for politicitized rhetoric painting cooperatives as capitalism's foil, as well as the intellectual class of worker cooperative advocates they associated with this rhetoric. In all these cases, participants either explicitly rebuffed an anticapitalist view of worker co-ops in favor of more politically palatable framings, or themselves portrayed cooperatives not as a transformative alternative to capitalism itself but instead as a means to improve outcomes for workers within the capitalist economy. Subverting the radical politics mapped onto worker co-ops by highly visible cooperative advocates, these bottom-up narratives reveal the affirmative lenses worker-owners see their own work through.

But glimpses of a more transformative political outlook also emerged throughout these same conversations, in both obvious and indirect ways. Acutely attuned to the structural power imbalance that exists between workers and owners under capitalism, participants openly critiqued the status quo system as a root cause of inequality and positioned worker co-ops as a more just, sustainable way of organizing society and the economy. Worker-owners also voiced narratives illustrating how worker co-ops hold the capacity to upend the operating logics of the capitalist economy by, for example, enshrining workplace democracy and empowering workers — rather than capitalists and their shareholders — to shape the decisions that affect them. Thwarting the atomistic individualism and competitive ethos endemic to capitalism, worker-owners pointed to a deep-seated spirit of solidarity and camaraderie which undergirds the social relations of cooperative production. Participants further emphasized how, contrary to the impermanence and opportunism of conventional capitalist firms, worker co-ops are rooted deep in the fabric of their local communities due to the ownership structure of cooperative businesses. Recognizing these advantages of the cooperative model, as well as the lack of public knowledge around worker co-ops, worker-owners repeatedly cited the need not only for general awareness building but also a more liberatory consciousness raising that casts co-ops as viable alternatives to capitalism. In these narratives, worker-owners embraced a transformative posture toward possibilities for an alternative economic model based on new forms of relations, values, and productive arrangements.

These disparate bodies of findings demonstrate how the worker-owners I interviewed refused to subscribe to an all-encompassing set of perspectives on worker ownership; in their responses, worker-owners expressed neither fully affirmative nor transformative orientations regarding worker cooperatives and their potential to serve as bellwethers of radical economic change. In place of an unwavering and totalizing politics of worker ownership, participants mobilized differentiated, at times conflicting positions spanning the gamut of political valences, from anticapitalist to accommodationist. But while worker-owners frequently shifted between affirmative and transformative narratives during my interviews, their appeals to these distinct political registers were not arbitrary. To the contrary, participants' responses seemed to vary in patterned ways that influenced when they voiced affirmative framings of worker ownership versus the moments in which they spoke to the transformative possibilities of worker cooperatives.

In terms of the moments in which more affirmative perspectives arose, worker-owners often hemmed in the political horizons of the cooperative movement when describing how they have personally benefited as members of worker co-ops. Responding to questions about the impacts of the worker cooperative model on their own lives, participants cited the importance of having a deeper sense of ownership at work, more flexible working conditions, and positive workplace cultures as the tangible fruits of cooperativism they individually experienced. In these responses, participants framed worker co-ops as aberrations within the capitalist status quo—as an escape route through which to evade the indignities of capitalism, rather than as a transformative alternative to capitalism itself. But in their affirmative renderings, worker-owners brought to light the meanings of worker ownership that are most resonant with their lived experiences, as well as the profound effect that joining a worker co-op has had on their material well-being and livelihoods.

On the other hand, participants tended to articulate transformative orientations toward the cooperative model when commenting on the general idea — as opposed to the actual practice — of worker ownership. While many of my questions asked participants to reflect on their personal journeys as worker-owners and the pathways that led them to the worker cooperative movement, I also asked participants to share their thoughts on how worker co-ops are different from conventional business and whether they have the capacity to create systemic change in the economy. Responding to the latter set of prompts, worker-owners typically abstracted away from their lived experiences by appealing to higher-level understandings of the way both cooperatives and capitalism function. For example, participants conveyed a broad sense of optimism that worker co-ops could form the foundation of a different way of structuring the economy, often by juxtaposing the exploitative, anti-democratic bias of capitalism against the solidaristic and egalitarian bent of the cooperative model. Such abstraction away from on-the-ground reality of worker ownership was certainly not without exception, as participants' stories of being involved in decision making and the spirit of camaraderie within their co-ops illustrate. But the tendency to frame cooperatives more

transformatively when invoking conceptual framings of worker ownership was a noticeable pattern that emerged during my interviews.

This divide in how participants discussed the theory and practice of worker ownership — the former as transformative, the latter as affirmative — reflects, in part, the interstitial position that worker-owners occupy between the intellectual vanguard of the cooperative movement and the broader working class. On one side of this nexus lies the working class, composed of the overwhelming share of ordinary working people not yet engaged into the cooperative economy. At the opposite end of this nexus is the worker cooperative movement, helmed by the intellectual class of cooperative scholars preaching the radical potential of worker co-ops as economic alternatives to capitalism. As workers within cooperative businesses, worker-owners lie at the intersection of these circles, bounded on one side by high-profile advocates championing the cause of worker co-ops, and on the other by everyday working people just trying to get by. Positioned at the interface of these two worlds, worker-owners must negotiate a janus-faced politics capable of bridging these divergent spheres. Hence, the worker-owners I interviewed articulated an intermediary politics embodying both affirmative and transformative perspectives on worker ownership: the former as members of a working class confronting widening inequality and deep-seated vulnerability under capitalism; the latter as participants in a movement seeking to accelerate the transition to an economy beyond capitalism.

From these dyadic orientations emerges a hybrid political subjectivity defined by worker-owners' mediating role between the intellectual vanguard of the cooperative movement and the working-class body politic. Following Foucault's (1982) notion of 'subjectification,' I apply the concept of political subjectivity here to underscore the reflexive process by which individuals construct subjective meanings, understandings, orientations, and identities as agents — rather than objects — of political action. In other words, political subjectivity denotes how individuals carve out distinctive 'points of view' on the everyday issues that impact them (Häkli & Kallio, 2018) At once reformist and revolutionary (Luxemburg, 1900), worker-owners' hybrid political subjectivity reflects how they hold in mind seemingly contradictory positions regarding the transformative potential of worker co-ops: that they are simultaneously a means to incrementally improve working conditions and economic outcomes for individual worker-owners within capitalism *and* instruments by which workers can collectively bring a more just and democratic economy into existence. On the surface this might appear to suggest an ideological ambivalence, but I argue that it instead demonstrates the political realities of worker-owners compelled by both immediate, material interests as well as by personal values and political beliefs. Far from simply dithering between affirmative and transformative narratives, the worker-owners I spoke with mobilized a hybrid politics emanating from their boundary-straddling location within the cooperative movement and indicative of their manifold priorities and concerns. By eschewing an ideologically cohesive disposition and embracing multivalent discourses rooted in their actual

experiences as both workers and movement actors, participants exposed the boundary between affirmative and transformative narratives as porous and negotiable.

In contrast to the prevailing, top-down narrative of worker ownership that posits worker-owners as economic insurgents invariably striving to disrupt existing capitalist relations and usher in a post-capitalist economy, my findings suggest the existence of an alternative, bottom-up politics of worker ownership—a hybrid political orientation grounded in the real-life experiences of worker-owners caught between the ideological vanguard of the cooperative movement and the working-class polity of which they are a part. Crucially, this hybrid mode of politics does not dismiss the notion that worker co-ops might serve as economic alternatives to capitalism, nor does it deny the plausibility of achieving a more humane economy within capitalism via the cooperative model. Rather, it signals a rejection of 'either/or' approaches to worker ownership detached from the lived experiences and perspectives of workers in cooperative businesses. To be sure, the worker-owners I interviewed flatly criticized the disconnect between "the people who are talking about worker co-ops," in the words of one participant, and worker-owners such as themselves. By elevating the voices of those at the heart of the cooperative model — by recentering *workers* in the discourse on *worker* cooperatives — a movement that more meaningfully reflects the interests and aspirations of everyday people might be realized.

But the fullness of participants' perspectives as depicted in these findings eludes "strong theory," defined by Gibson-Graham (2020) as understandings of the world that seem to offer explanatory insights and even predictable trajectories along which change occurs (5). By contrast, "weak theory" adopts an open, exploratory stance to differentiated possibilities for transformation and ways of being-in-common that transcend easy explanation (10). Reading worker-owners' responses through a "weak theory" lens upends a binary understanding of their political valences and exposes the already-existing ways in which transformative economic change is unfolding within cooperative businesses today. By seeing the concrete benefits of worker ownership that participants emphasized (i.e., greater access to business ownership, more flexible working conditions, healthier workplace cultures) not as capitulations to capitalism's inevitability but instead as openings to a different way of working that might alter the trajectory of our economy more fundamentally, multiple horizons for transformation can be advanced. Such an expansive view regarding the multitudinal possibilities for systems change is precisely what Wright (2010) envisioned in advocating for an "emancipatory metamorphosis" (322) to an economy beyond capitalism. Through complementary — rather than conflictual — efforts to improve the conditions for human flourishing in the present while also building new ways of organizing our economic life in the future, another world might yet be possible.

Looking beyond this moment and toward the future of the worker cooperative movement, the importance of foregrounding worker-owners' stories and political outlooks in the discourse on worker ownership cannot be overlooked. If the movement hopes to grow beyond its currently niche footprint in the economy and expand the ranks

of worker-owners within the working class, it will need to overcome the 'narrative barrier' separating those already sold on the merits of worker ownership from the vast majority of people who are unfamiliar with the worker cooperative model but who stand to benefit from it. As one worker-owner put it, "There is a narrative barrier as well, beyond the structural barriers, for a lot of folks who either don't know what co-ops are at all, or who think it's not for me." Another participant remarked that some workers might harbor preconceived biases against worker-owned co-ops because of the politics typically associated with the cooperative model:

> There has to be a unified voice for cooperatives so that people aren't fearful of it. I know that it goes against the grain of the typical business model, so I wouldn't be surprised if some people are afraid of worker cooperatives. And, you know, to a lot of people in the older generation, from an ideology standpoint, some people even think it's unsavory. Some people are threatened by a democratic workplace, quite honestly. So I do think it's a matter of education, it's a matter of letting people know what we do.

Through such observations, participants demonstrated an astute awareness of the optics of the cooperative movement, and how the transformative-leaning rhetoric espoused by high-profile cooperative advocates might be alienating to an ideologically diverse working class. But in mobilizing a hybrid politics combining both affirmative and transformative narratives of worker ownership, the worker-owners I interviewed evinced an alternative path forward for the cooperative movement beyond the broadly anticapitalist disposition of the movement's vanguard. Thus, a grounded discourse on worker ownership, rooted in the real-life experiences and perspectives of actual worker-owners, might set the stage for a more pluralistic movement that conceives of worker cooperatives both as a means to improve the lives of working people in the world as it is *and* as stepping stones toward a new economy built around solidarity, interdependence, and democracy. Ultimately, such an embrace of the multivalent meanings of worker ownership — such a posture of possibility as to the futures that worker cooperatives might engender — can open up discursive space to imagine different ways of advancing the worker cooperative movement in pursuit of a more just economy for all.

## CHAPTER 7: Epilogue

This thesis began with a modest goal: to explore how worker-owners in cooperative businesses think and feel about the transformative potential of their work and the worker co-op model. After being surprised by the paucity of perspectives from worker-owners within the academic discourse on worker cooperatives, I found myself motivated to delve into this research from a place of both intellectual curiosity and political concern. On an intellectual level, it struck me as ironic that while so many brilliant scholars have championed worker co-ops as a means to shift power into the hands of workers to control their own workplaces and destinies, these same scholars have themselves failed to meaningfully center the voices of workers-owners in their own work. If worker co-ops are a tool to give power to the people doing the work, then surely the scholarship on worker cooperatives should similarly strive to empower the actors most central to the cooperative model. Spurred on by the paradoxical absence of workers in the academic discourse on worker cooperatives, I sought to use this thesis as a platform by which to raise up the voices of worker-owners and spark a more nuanced dialogue on worker co-ops that better reflects the lived experiences and perspectives of workers on the front line of the cooperative movement.

Politically speaking, I gravitated toward this research as a way to 'ground truth' the prevailing narrative of worker cooperatives as economic alternatives to capitalism espoused in the literature on worker ownership. Ground truthing is a concept borrowed from the field of remote sensing, referring to the process whereby the accuracy of data obtained remotely is validated against in situ observations made on the ground (Vajjhala, 2006). Recognizing the top-down manner in which scholarly renderings of worker cooperatives' emancipatory potential are conveyed, and in light of my own interest in bringing forth a more just and democratic economy, this thesis occasioned the opportunity to investigate the extent to which worker-owners view their businesses as stepping stones toward post-capitalist futures and themselves as stewards of this transformative change. By surfacing the grounded, bottom-up outlooks of worker-owners embedded within cooperative businesses, I hoped this thesis might shed light on the limits and possibilities of worker co-ops as a coherent alternative to capitalism.

After interviewing worker-owners about their experiences with and perspectives on the cooperative model, a multifaceted portrait of worker ownership emerged revealing worker-owners' shapeshifting orientations to the transformative potential of worker co-ops. At times, my interview participants underscored how worker co-ops can drastically improve the material well-being and livelihoods of workers without dismantling the existing architecture of the capitalist economy. Concurrently, worker-owners also articulated a sense of hope that worker co-ops can be an antidote to the exploitative, anti-democratic logics of capitalism and form the basis of an economy built around an altogether different set of relations, values, and productive arrangements. Eschewing a bifurcated understanding of worker cooperatives as either reformist or revolutionary, participants embodied a pluralistic stance toward worker co-ops both as a means to

realize a more humane economy within capitalism and as a bridge to a new economy beyond the capitalist status quo. This hybrid politics of worker ownership, rooted in the real-life experiences of worker-owners straddling the boundary between the cooperative movement and the working-class, challenges the discursive binary between capitalist and anticapitalist — affirmative and transformative — exposing new narrative terrain from which to begin to theorize the potentialities of the cooperative model from the bottom up.

These findings are valuable for many reasons, chief among them being the new directions they open up for scholarship on worker cooperatives. Indeed, the political commitments and ideological dispositions of worker-owners within cooperative businesses have been woefully undertheorized by the academy. While marking a step forward in our understanding of worker-owners' heretofore overlooked political beliefs as to the transformative possibilities of worker ownership, this thesis ultimately provides an opening to expand on through future research rather than an ironclad set of conclusions. One avenue for further inquiry might entail assessing the salience of the narratives of affirmation and transformation identified in this research with a larger sample of worker-owners. The worker-owners I interviewed conveyed a vibrant, complex collection of ideas and experiences that spoke to the intimate realities of being a member of a worker cooperative and its myriad benefits, drawbacks, joys, and frustrations—a fertile proving ground to develop a preliminary typology of narratives evoking the multivalent meanings of worker ownership shared broadly by worker-owners. Additional work is needed, though, to know whether this typology has analytical utility beyond the ten Massachusetts-based worker-owners included in my sample. Purposefully recruiting participants across a range of relevant characteristics — in terms of their tenure and involvement in the worker cooperative movement, prior work experiences, degree of management responsibility within their co-ops, and demographic and socio-economic attributes, for example — could be a particularly generative way to evaluate the resonance of the narratives that emerged from this thesis with the wider population of worker-owners.

The hybrid mode of politics identified in this thesis also warrants continued exploration, as it signals perhaps a novel approach for understanding what worker ownership means and does for those whose lives are most directly impacted by it. This research demonstrates how, rather than being fixed to a one-dimensional spectrum from capitalist to anticapitalist, worker-owners' orientations and aspirations are instead mediated along expansive, intersecting planes of political possibility emanating from their experiences as everyday working people not bound by any rigged ideology. Participants cast worker co-ops as a means to secure dignified working conditions and healthier workplaces in the present while also positioning the cooperative model as a crucible of more just and solidaristic ways of being in the world, throwing the hybridity of their outlooks into sharp relief. By starting from the grounded perspectives of actual worker-owners, as opposed to an *a priori* notion of worker cooperatives' emancipatory potential, a politics transcending staid binaries and reflecting the actually-existing transformations engendered by the cooperative model can be brought into view. This

politics demands closer attention, as it represents a way of reconceptualizing worker cooperatives not just as vehicles for future revolution, but as tools for "rendering revolution possible in the here-and-how" (Miller, 2015: 365). Such a framing opens up space for ongoing theorization of the concrete, continually-negotiated ways in which worker-owners conceive of and enact the transformative possibilities of worker ownership through discursive and material practices too often ignored in top-down theories.

Beyond these emergent directions the scholarship on worker cooperatives might take in the wake of this thesis, my hope is that this work can serve as a jumping-off point for a much broader effort to lift up the voices of worker-owners within the scattered spaces of the movement for worker ownership. While writing this thesis, I had the privilege of interning with the Coalition for Worker Ownership and Power (COWOP), a statewide alliance of worker cooperatives, co-op developers and technical assistance providers, nonprofits and movement-building organizations, labor unions, and funders working collectively to advance the worker ownership movement across Massachusetts. This opportunity not only strengthened my understanding of the various stakeholders embedded within the state's flourishing cooperative ecosystem but also afforded me first-hand insight into the intergroup dynamics present in this ecosystem. What struck me as immediately apparent after taking on this role was the conspicuous lack of worker-owners in the Coalition, made only clearer by the robust participation of nonprofit advocates and representatives of other allied organizations. During COWOP's monthly convenings and working group meetings — the Coalition's primary organizing spaces — worker-owners were consistently and disproportionately underrepresented, despite the concerted efforts of COWOP's staff to enlist representatives from worker co-ops.

While not necessarily stemming from the same underlying drivers as the dearth of worker-owner perspectives within the academic discourse on worker co-ops, the scarcity of representation from worker-owners within COWOP poses a similar challenge: when the voices of those most central to the cooperative model are not adequately elevated, the critical perspectives and wisdom they have to offer end up being omitted from the narratives that are constructed about worker co-ops. In the case of COWOP and other grassroots groups striving to expand the footprint of the cooperative economy, this omission risks, at best, ignoring the actual needs and policy interests of worker-owners embedded within cooperative businesses; at worst, such oversight risks permanently alienating worker-owners from organizations and movements they do not see themselves or their priorities reflected in. As this thesis makes clear, worker-owners possess invaluable insights that hold the potential to dramatically reshape the way we think about worker co-ops and the pursuit of an economy beyond capitalism. By both holding space for worker-owners to articulate their own visions for the worker ownership movement and enrooting these visions at the heart of the movement's shared work, the ideals of worker ownership and control can be more fully brought to life.

In this moment of profound political, economic, and environmental turmoil, when there are so many reasons to despair, the promise of worker cooperatives — that ordinary working people can collectively own, control, and reap the benefits of their labor — serves as a catalyst for hope. As one worker-owner I spoke with put it:

> I'm very excited about this time that we're in, with the great resignation, with workers having such a big bargaining chip. I feel like the world is just so ripe for adopting this model, and I'm really excited to see what happens. I'm hopeful that, you know, forty years from now we'll be witnessing the fruits of that pivot.

Indeed, the stories reflected in this thesis demonstrate with abundant clarity the life-altering benefits of worker ownership, from the sense of meaning and agency it offers individual workers to the relations of interdependence and mutual respect it forges among colleagues. Taken together, these stories from worker-owners at the forefront of the cooperative movement reveal that a different economy, rooted in values antithetical to those underpinning the dominant capitalist paradigm, is not only possible—it is already under construction in the world today. As the failures of our current economic system continue to mount, compelling an ever greater number of workers to seek out alternatives beyond the capitalist status quo, this emerging foundation for an economy of, by, and for working people will only grow stronger. This thesis set out from a deep-seated belief that the everyday people leading this movement deserve to be heard, and it is my hope that the findings presented here demonstrate just how critical it is that we — all of us, but cooperative scholars and practitioners in particular — listen. By grounding the discourse on worker ownership in the perspectives and lived experiences of worker-owners themselves, we can together ensure that the power to articulate and shape the future of the cooperative movement rests more firmly in their hands.

## APPENDIX A. Semi-Structured Interview Guide

### Introductory script

Thank you again for being willing to participate in this interview. As I mentioned to you over email, this interview will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes, during which I will ask you a series of questions about your experiences as a worker-owner, how and why you decided to join a worker co-op, how your understanding of worker co-ops has changed over time, and your thoughts on the transformative potential of worker co-ops. You can decline to answer any question for any reason. You indicated on the consent form that I have your permission to record our conversation. Is this still okay with you?

> *If yes*: Thank you. Please let me know if at any point you want me to turn off the recording for any reason. I'm going to start recording now.
> *If no*: Thank you for letting me know. I will only take notes of our conversation.

And before we begin the interview, do you have any questions for me?

> *If yes*: [Discuss questions as needed]
> *If no*: If you have a question at any point during the interview, please feel free to ask me at any time.

### Prior work experience

*I would like to start by asking about your previous work experience…*

1) What was your work experience like prior to your current job?
2) Where did you work previously?
3) What position(s) did you hold?
4) Did you enjoy your previous job(s)? Why/why not?
5) Did you have any experience in [current industry] before joining [co-op]?

### Path to worker ownership

*So shifting gears toward your transition to working at [name of cooperative]…*

6) How did you first learn about the opportunity to join your worker coop?
7) Did you intentionally seek out worker cooperatives during this process?
8) What were the aspects of [co-op] that motivated you to pursue working there?
9) To what extent was the business being worker-owned a factor in your interest in working there?

### Experience of worker ownership

*Next I'd like to ask about your experiences with the co-op model and worker ownership…*

10) When did you join [co-op]?

11) What was your experience like when you first started working at [co-op]?
12) How familiar were you with the worker co-op model before starting at [co-op]?
13) Can you describe any training you received on the worker co-op model?
14) What are your day-to-day responsibilities as a worker-owner? Do these differ from working in a traditional business?

*Diving a little deeper on your perspectives on worker ownership...*

15) Do you have any specific goals that you are working toward by working in a co-op?
16) What aspects of worker ownership do you most enjoy?
17) What aspects of worker ownership do you least enjoy?
18) How is working at a worker co-op different from your past work experiences?
19) How does your involvement in workplace decisions at [co-op] compare to your prior work experiences?
20) Has your perspective on worker ownership changed since you started? If so, how?
21) How important is working at a co-op in the future to you?
22) Are there any other stories or anecdotes you would like to share?

**Worker co-ops as economic alternatives**

*Finally, I would like to discuss your thoughts on whether and how worker cooperatives can bring about more transformative change...*

23) Do you think worker co-ops are different from traditional businesses in terms of their impact on their local communities? If so, how?
24) Do you think worker co-ops are different from traditional businesses in terms of their impact on the broader economy? If so, how?
25) Do you think that worker co-ops can help to improve, or even be an alternative to, our current capitalist economic system? If so, how?
26) Do you view worker cooperatives to be part of a movement? If so, do you think of yourself as a part of this movement?
27) How important is it to you that worker cooperatives focus on creating large-scale economic change?

**Closing script**

So those are all of the questions I have for you today. Is there anything else you'd like to add related to what we've discussed?

Well thank you so much for your time and sharing such valuable insights and perspectives with me. I'm going to take your responses and compare them with what I hear from other worker-owners in order to identify recurring themes and patterns to discuss in my final thesis write-up, which I am more than happy to share with you once it's finished. In the meantime, you have my email so please feel free to reach out at any point if you have any questions or have a different reflection or thought on any of the questions we discussed. Thanks so much, have a great rest of your day.

## APPENDIX B. Participant Recruitment Email

TO: [Prospective participant's professional email address]
FROM: Tyler Rivera
SUBJECT: Invitation: Worker Co-op Research Project

Dear [Name of prospective participant],

My name is Tyler Rivera and I'm a graduate student in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at MIT. I'm writing to invite you to participate in a research project on the experiences of worker-owners within worker-owned cooperatives in Massachusetts.

The purpose of this project is to explore the perspectives and experiences of cooperative worker-owners in MA in an effort to better understand what worker ownership means to the people at the heart of the worker cooperative model. A key question guiding this project is: *"to what extent do worker-owners think about worker co-ops as an alternative to capitalism or as a vehicle to bring about a more just economy?"* By holding space for worker-owners to share in their own words what worker ownership means to them, this project aims to contribute to a richer, more grounded dialogue on worker co-ops that meaningfully reflects the lived experiences and perspectives of workers at the forefront of the cooperative movement. As a worker-owner at [name of cooperative], you are eligible to participate in this project.

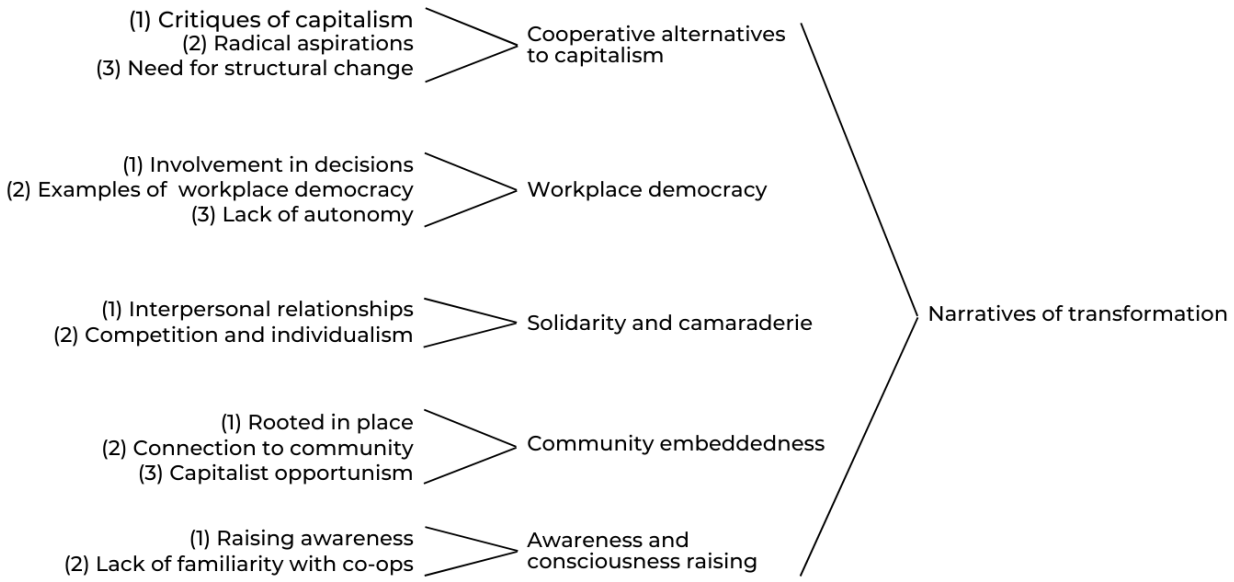
Please treat this email as a formal invitation to participate in an interview. If you are able to participate, we can find a day/time to schedule the interview that is convenient for you. The interview will be conducted via Zoom and will take about 60-90 minutes. With your consent, an audio recording of the interview will be taken. Any information you provide will be kept confidential and any personal identifiers such as your name, organization, and job title will be removed to protect your privacy. Your responses will not be shared with anyone else, and will be analyzed solely for the purposes of identifying patterns and themes that will contribute to my master's thesis.

Your perspectives as a worker-owner would benefit this research project enormously, and I would greatly appreciate your participation. If you would like to participate or have any questions about the project, please email or contact me at [my phone number].

Thank you for your consideration,

Tyler Rivera
*Master in City Planning Candidate*
*Department of Urban Studies and Planning*
*Massachusetts Institute of Technology*

## APPENDIX C. Output from Narrative Synthesis: Narratives of Transformation



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