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Contested Subjectivities in a UK Housing Cooperative: Old Hippies and Thatcher's Children negotiating the commons

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Abstract

How can a long-standing cooperative respond to changes in society over time, and how do these changes affect the management of the cooperative? We looked at the visions, daily life and policies in a housing cooperative in the UK established in the 1970s and found a messy process that required constant negotiation and involved diverse subjectivities. We identified different visions of the commons: a minimalist vision focusing on housing alone, and a maximalist one, diffusing boundaries between personal and collective and involving many aspects of members' lives. These visions have always existed in the cooperative but the general trend was towards minimalism. Behind the changes are members' changing subjectivities, reflecting changing processes of subject formation in relation to state and market. We found that difference in subjectivities was often displayed along generational lines, and affected commoners' visions of the commons. Although the cooperative changed some of its practices to fit the more minimalist vision, it still endured as a form of commons that is resilient to challenge.

Key words: commons, cooperatives, subjectivities, diverse economies, community, housing

1. Introduction

The experiences of housing cooperatives in the UK and beyond open up opportunities for contemporary conceptual debates and practical action: in the face of an on-going housing crisis and growing precarity across all forms of tenure, they continue to offer an alternative model that provides much needed secure and affordable housing (Bliss, 2016; Field, 2014; Rowlands, 2010). Housing cooperatives have been operating in the UK for a number of decades, offering democratically-run affordable housing (Clapham and Kintrea, 1992). Many of these cooperatives were set up in a political context that predates the current neoliberal period (Ellis, 2017; Kintrea and Whitefield, 1991), but nonetheless persist. In this paper, we view the cooperative as an example of a commons that employs diverse economies and holds together a range of subjectivities. This perspective offers "rich potential for imagining new ways of collective life" (Huron, 2015) and thinking through social and spatial relations beyond capitalism (Chatterton, 2016).

Specifically, we argue that cooperative members embody multiple and contested subjectivities that shape their vision of what a commons means in practice and can create contestation around daily life in the cooperative. Competing subjectivities underpin a difference in visions, ranging from a

minimalist to a maximalist view of the commons. These differences are played out for example through understanding the housing cooperative as a housing solution compared to a more elaborate vision of communal social relations, or preferring management strategies that are formal/compulsory compared to social/voluntary. The maximalist vision is multi-layered and involves various aspects of members' lives, in comparison to the minimalist vision that focuses on the housing aspect. In our case study, these visions often reflected generational differences, which members understood through a narrative of competing subjectivities – from old hippies to Thatcher's children – which reflected the changing relationships of the cooperative and its members with the wider state and the market. As the political context shifted and newer subjectivities emerged, the cooperative renegotiated its meaning of the commons. The paper asks how broader changes in the state and market affect members' subjectivities and in turn their vision of the commons and strategies for its management. Our insights have wider implications for managing a more complex set of urban commons.

Our focus, housing cooperatives in the UK, represents a small sector that aims to provide good quality housing and high level of tenants' satisfaction (Birchall & Simmons 2007; Bliss 2009; Rodgers 2002). However, very little academic research has been published on English housing cooperatives, and recent publications tend to offer overviews of the sector with a focus on policy and governance (Birchall & Simmons 2007; Gulliver et al. 2013; Rosenberg 2011; Rowlands 2012,Thompson, 2018) or discuss them briefly in the context of community-led housing (e.g. Field 2015; Lang & Mullins 2015; Somerville 2004; Woodin et al. 2010). As Bresnihan notes, "there has not been so much work examining the social relations of the commons and the everyday practices that maintain these relations" (Bresnihan 2016:96). We fill this gap by focusing on the micro-scale processes through which the cooperative is managed as a commons, and identifying the subjectivities that are in play in these interactions. We begin this paper by introducing the conceptual context of the commons. We then present the research and the methods used, and position the case study in the empirical context of housing cooperatives in the UK. Our findings suggest that contested subjectivities and different visions of the commons coexist within housing cooperatives. To show how these subjectivities are negotiated in day to day management, we focus on three examples of tensions around the vision of the commons: debates regarding the sense of community and the introduction of two new policies. We conclude the paper with some implications for commons and co-operative studies more broadly.

2. Cooperatives as Commons

The cooperative is a type of commons: a collectively owned and managed resource that fosters "an economic logic in which the use value and general interest prevail above the exchange value and individual interest" (Aernouts and Ryckewaert, 2018:6; see also Peuter & Dyer-Witheford 2010; St Martin 2016; Zitcer 2015). The meaning of commons ranges from large common-pool resources like

our atmosphere, fisheries and forests, through common goods such as radio stations, to smaller scale urban community-gardens and of course housing projects. Our focus in this paper is on collectively owned commons, but the process of commoning can take place with any form of property, "whether private, or state- owned, or open access" (Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy, 2018:193). We draw on a broad literature that sees cooperatives as commons, in which alternative logics and different subjectivities are played out (Huron, 2018; Byrne & Healy 2006; Gibson-Graham 2008; Gibson-Graham & Roelvink 2009; Healy & Graham 2008).

The political potential of the commons is understood in different and complementary ways. First, the commons is understood as a type of collective property which rejects private ownership in favour of co-ownership, co-production and co-management of social goods and spaces (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014; De Angelis, 2017). Second, it is a type of *social relations* that puts human contact and non-monetary exchange at the heart of social interaction (De Angelis, 2017). Third, the commons can be understood as a form of political resistance to enclosure and market logic (Bunce, 2016) – experimental spaces for alternative social forms (Gibson-Graham et al., 2018) that act as "embryonic form of an alternative mode of production" (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014:95). These are not mutually exclusive, and we consider the commons as a messy construct with potential to challenge market logic through alternative forms of property and social relations, but also as a unique space in its own right (J.K. Gibson-Graham, 2006c:35).

Commons are often discussed in relation to state and capital: either as existing against and beyond state and market (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014), as an "immediate escape from the state-capitalist enclosure of the city and the creation of alternative social practices" (Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015:38); or "entangled" with state and market (De Angelis, 2017). Caffentzis offered a nuanced analysis of the commons, demarcating some forms of commons as compatible with capitalism and others as subversive (Caffentzis, 2004). Huron (2018) pointed out that *urban* commons in particular are under greater state regulation and pressure of the capitalist city. Capital puts pressure on the commons in various ways, affecting members' ability to set up, maintain and participate meaningfully in managing the commons. Carving out new commons is difficult in a profit-driven environment, especially when attempting to acquire expensive assets like housing and keep them outside the speculation of the market (Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015; Hodkinson, 2012; Thompson, 2018). Huron's study of housing cooperatives in Washington D.C. identified two challenges for participation in a "commons that exists within the structure of capitalism": first, members may be drawn to the cooperative as a last resort in search of affordable housing, without necessarily having an interest in commoning as such. Second, "life under capitalism can make it terribly difficult to find the time and energy to participate in the commons" (Huron, 2018:139). Similarly, scholars of UK cooperatives described them as vulnerable to dominant modes of housing due to their position between ownership and rent. Birchall predicted

that "[co-operative housing] will always slip into a form of owner-occupation or landlordism, succumbing to the wider social forces which sustain these dominant tenures" (Birchall 1992, p11). **2.1 Commoners' subjectivities, cooperative subjects**

What keeps the commons alive is the community of commoners that produces and sustains it through the social practice known as commoning (Linebaugh, 2008). Through this practice, both the commons and the commoners – the cooperative subjects – are continuously (re)constituted (De Angelis, 2017). Seen as a way of being and doing rather than merely a thing, the commons can become a nurturing environment for postcapitalist subjectivities (J.K. Gibson-Graham, 2006b). For Gibson-Graham, diverse economies and post-capitalist politics must involve "new practices of the self (…) *a politics of the subject*, that is, cultivating ourselves and others as subjects of noncapitalist economies" (J. K. Gibson-Graham, 2006:76, emphasis in the original). These new economic subjects, they argue, "can begin to take ethical action in the economic realm" (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2011).

We therefore turn our attention to the commoners and their subjectivities. Subjectivities are a key element of commons management and cooperation because they are the meeting point of social relations, power and agency, and therefore affect the way people understand themselves in a social situation, and the actions they believe they can take (Nightingale, 2011). Gibson-Graham suggested that cultivating a different form of subjectivity can open up non-capitalist spaces and challenge the status quo (Gibson-Graham, 2006). Here we characterise the cooperative subjectivities with its various aspects: pragmatism, collectivism, agency and security through interdependence.

The key to cooperation is working with others for a common good. The cooperative subject must therefore see herself as part of a collective and aim to ensure the success of a collective project rather than advance her own short-term interests on the expense of the collective. Byrne and Healy argue that in doing so, the cooperative subject tends to be pragmatic and apply flexibility and adaptation rather than rigidly following a set of rules (2006:250). This kind of pragmatism in promoting collective interests was recognized by others, too (Cornwell, 2012). Elsa Noterman in particular offers an important perspective on the cooperative subject in her ethnography of a manufactured housing cooperative in the US (Noterman, 2016); her research shows, among other things, that even when a community is not found on idealistic grounds or a strong "communal subjectivity" of its members, it developed some community-minded aspects and – first and foremost - secured the land for its members merely by formally adopting a cooperative structure.

Barron (2017) found that commoners' subjectivities can be interpreted as neoliberal and counter-neoliberal at the same time. Her conceptualisation of city gardens in New York is useful for housing cooperatives, too. The commoners, observed Barron, may be conceived of as neoliberal for being

entrepreneurs turning a social problem into a business, depoliticised consumers, or volunteers that fill up the gaps left by the neoliberal state. Indeed, the recent wave of support in community-led housing projects in the UK was criticised as a neoliberal move to shift responsibility over to communities where once the state provided social security (Defillipis, 2006). But, as Barron argues, these projects are not for profit and participants are more than mere consumers. Rather, returning to Gibson-Graham's definition of diverse economies, they represent 'alternative capitalist' market and capital (J.K. Gibson-Graham, 2006a:71). Members of housing cooperatives embody three kinds of counter-neoliberal subjectivities that Barron identified: they are *producers* with sovereignty and control over individual choices and available systems. They also perform a *citizen* subjectivity, which entails a sense of belonging to a larger entity – not necessarily the state - that comes with rights and responsibilities. Finally, participants become *activist* subjects, with increased political awareness beyond their own project. Barron's organisational categories are complemented by the interpersonal aspect in De Angelis' (2017) and Jarvis' work: the "soft infrastructure" of relationships, wellbeing and motivation that turns housing projects into communities (Jarvis, 2015).

All these aspects are crucial in fostering a cooperative subject in a neoliberal society. Housing studies highlight subject formation processes in capitalist markets, in which subjects are constructed as consumers who make rational choices: calculating elements such as return on investment and social positioning, and aspire to achieve independence through home ownership (Allen, 2008; Kleinhans and Elsinga, 2010). Those who cannot make valued choices are seen as "failed consumers" who lack taste and status and endure shame and disrespect (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012). In a cooperative, however, a different subjectivity is fostered. Members are valued for their personality and contribution to others, and financial status does not gain members respect. By choosing to be producers of their housing, co-operators disengage from the discourse of failed consumers. Moreover, neoliberal subjects are formed around discourses of competition and speculation that expose them to significant "risk and the possibility of failure (poverty, social exclusion and marginalization)" (Mavelli, 2017:498). They must become resilient subjects, accepting insecurity (Chandler and Reid, 2016) and bearing individual responsibility without the safety net of community (Bauman, 2007). By fostering a *citizen* subjectivity, the cooperative subject can rely on her community for support, gaining security through "economic spaces in which interdependence is acknowledged, negotiated, and enlarged" (Graham and Cornwell, 2009).

But the commons are always impure and messy. As we explored the cooperative we never expected to find a straw-person who is entirely "cooperative" or anti-capitalist (Chatterton, 2010). It was clear that "commons exists both outside and inside states and capital, and, to the extent that states and capital influence the subjectivities of commoners reproducing commons, states and capital are inside commons even if their systemic patterns and logics are outside them" (De Angelis 2017:102). Our

case study revealed the complexity of multiple and contested subjectivities within the commons. This paper, rather than searching for a dominant subjectivity or attempting to uncover neoliberal currents within the commons (as in: Guthman, 2008), seeks to understand how multiple and contested subjectivities negotiate and develop different strategies to manage the commons.

3. Methods: researching (with) a housing cooperative

The research is based on the lead author's in-depth engagement over a nine month period, visiting a housing cooperative at least once a week. Previous experience with housing cooperatives helped her enter the community and build rapport, although there were clear limits to being an "insider", such as making assumptions about the cooperative and its challenges (Ganga & Scott 2006; Humphrey 2007). The research involved a mix of participatory and qualitative research; it was important to engage in research with members in a way that benefits them and answers their questions as well as ours (Kesby et al, 2007). The research methods included individual and group interviews with 23 participants, observations of eight committee meetings, admissions interviews and five general meetings, facilitating two collaborative sessions and attending social events. The lead author was invited to join members in a community project and took an active role in its development. Insights were also generated from reading the cooperative's policies, minutes and other formal documents, including minute books from 1979-2000. These early sources were helpful in tracing the changes in attitudes, practice, policies and discourse over the decades. Where any names appear, they have been anonymised, including the name of the cooperative itself.

The research involved members of various ages, backgrounds and levels of engagement, from active members to those who felt like outsiders. This offered a wide range of views on life in the cooperative and perspectives of the changes in the cooperative over time. The observations and interviews focused on practices, with a critical-realist drive to find out what it was about the cooperative that made it work for its members, which mechanisms were operating and what was the relevant context of the investigation in terms of individuals, interpersonal relations, institutional settings and infrastructure (Pawson, 2013:37). Guided by the critical-realist approach, the interviews asked members to raise the main issues in the cooperative and evaluate the workings of the cooperative according to their own criteria (Manzano, 2016). We looked at written policies and listened to statements on values, then moved beyond them using participant observations and further interviews to examine the way they were implemented and experienced by members.

Initial research questions were adjusted and finalised with participants (Sommer 2009) through two participatory sessions: the first involved mapping out the research questions that members were interested in, which resulted in a clear interest in the history of the cooperative. Together with a

member who discovered invaluable archival materials, members were invited to a story-telling workshop. During the session members asked each other questions and shared their knowledge about the cooperative's past. This well attended workshop did not lead to a longer collaborative project but was instrumental in teasing out the main issues discussed in this paper.

4. Cooperatives in the UK

The story of Beechtree is typical to many housing cooperatives formed at this period. Here we introduce the historical and political context for housing cooperatives in the UK, setting the scene for the main discussion about the relation between large scale changes and small scale experiences.

The number of housing cooperatives in the UK is not centrally recorded, but according to the Confederation of Cooperative Housing, in 2017 there were 836 co-operative housing organisations in the UK (Confederation of Cooperative Housing, 2017). Of these, about 243 were registered with the government as affordable housing providers in 2007. Many cooperatives manage housing owned by local councils or housing associations, and of those who own their properties, like Beechtree, most were set up in the 1970s and 1980s (Co-operative housing international, 2018). A significant majority of those housing cooperatives were registered as social housing providers with the Housing Corporation (Rowlands, 2009), a non-departmental public body that operated until 2008, which "funded new affordable housing and regulated housing associations in England" (Government, 2019).

In the 1970s housing cooperatives had a rare window of opportunity, when "community activists established themselves as credible political actors and forged a closer relationship with local councils, gained access to material resources, information and political networks" (Ellis 2017:56). Under a Labour government, the 1974 Housing Act offered generous funding for third sector actors like housing associations and cooperatives, with grants covering all capital costs and ongoing maintenance, as well as "fair rents" system based on need (Birchall 1988). Campaigns against "slum clearance" in the 1970s and 1980s resulted in establishing "short-life" housing cooperatives to manage council-owned properties (Bliss, 2016), supported by local authorities and housing associations (Moore and Mullins, 2013:8). Short-life cooperatives use empty council properties by offering them to cooperatives for an unknown length of time, paying low rent with a commitment of members to leave the property within a month notice (Laviollette, 2008). Founders negotiated with local councils and housing associations to take over older and derelict houses and redevelop them, with the right to govern themselves, collect rent and allocate units (Kintrea and Whitefield, 1991).

However, political changes led by the Conservative government in the 1980s ended the funding and support opportunities and brought the sector to a halt. Notably, the 1988 Housing Act led to further marketization and professionalization of the housing association sector, forcing new developments to

borrow capital on private markets, which was not a feasible option to many cooperatives due to lack of funds and greater competition (Thompson, 2018). This policy shift was part of a wider neoliberal move to privatise the housing stock and promote "demunicipalisation of local authority housing through policies such as the right to buy and large-scale stock transfers, and a scaling up of the housing association sector drawing it away from interest in small-scale neighbourhood renewal projects such as empty homes" (Moore and Mullins, 2013:8).

At present the cooperative world is facing a different environment. As Ellis argues: "community action groups are constrained by the neoliberal framework which limits their access to resources, clips the wings of their hard-won allies in local government and privileges private sector over community provision" (Ellis 2017:58). At the same time, new opportunities are opening for the first time in decades, offering some grants and support for community-led housing initiatives. A new wave of community-led housing has grown in the UK in the last decade, including new housing cooperatives. Some of these are found in collaboration with housing associations or other cooperatives, some with the aid of local councils or supportive community initiatives, and others through private finance (Bliss, 2016). At the end of 2016, the Government has announced a new grant that could benefit cooperatives but which favours either registered providers or schemes that promote home ownership. These grants did not affect established communities but were aimed at setting up new communities, hence not affecting the cooperative case study.

4.1 Beechtree housing cooperative

Our case study, Beechtree housing cooperative (name changed to preserve anonymity), is an intergenerational housing cooperative that has been running for over 40 years in a large city in the North of England. The cooperative is fully-mutual: all the members are tenants and all tenants are members. The ownership of Beechtree cooperative is collective and according to cooperative rules if it was dissolved it must be passed on to another cooperative or a non-profit organisation with similar aims. Beechtree is set in an inner-city neighbourhood with a very diverse population. At the time of research there were 45 tenant members, who have lived in Beechtree for varying lengths of time: some just joined, and 26 members (61%) have lived in the cooperative for over 10 years, of which some had been members for over 35 years. Members come from all walks of life: unemployed, academics, manual workers, public servants, third sector workers and professionals. The cooperative owned all its units outright: 39 housing units, ranging from one bedroom flats in divided houses to family houses. The size of Beechtree is around the average for the UK (Co-operative housing international, 2018): it is larger than many smaller cooperatives in its own city, but small enough to allow direct democracy rather than a representative structure that is common in much larger ownership cooperatives and Tenant Management Organisations (Bliss, 2009).

Beechtree started as a short-life cooperative in 1977, in a terrace of local council houses that were due for demolition. At this early stage Beechtree included 15 adult members and some children. The cooperative was a collaboration of two groups: a gay men's group from London who were interested in communal living, and local residents who were looking for a collective solution to their housing problem. The tension between these motivations will continue to resurface in the cooperative's history.

During the first two years, members worked to form a community, acquired new houses, formed a relationship with the local council and Housing Corporation officers, and signed a development agreement with a local housing association. By 1981 they were registered as a social housing provider, purchasing 17 houses from a housing association, and managing some properties owned by the association as well as some extended short-life properties of the local council. Their membership had increased to 28 adults. The hybrid ownership and management structure and the registration as a social housing provider reflect the close ties the cooperative had with the state and housing association. Another aspect of cooperation with local government and housing association was the financial and organisational support members were given from these bodies. Like other cooperatives of that era (Thompson, 2018), members of Beechtree received training in the technicalities of acquiring and managing their own houses. Purchasing and refurbishing the houses was made possible due to the 1974 Housing Act. Beechtree cooperative was already established when public funding to cooperatives stopped, and continued to act as a social housing provider, offering low rent social housing for people on the local housing register. In spite of the lack of state funding, the cooperative continued to grow in numbers and in 2000 bought the last two houses from the housing association, gaining full ownership and control over its entire housing stock.

5. Findings: contested subjectivities and visions of the commons

What does it mean to be a co-operator? The cooperative subjectivity was a matter of disagreement in our case study: anti-capitalist or politically neutral; a contractual obligation or a voluntary, communal practice; idealistic or pragmatic. Members of the cooperative held different visions of the commons, from minimalist (providing decent, affordable housing) to maximalist (also building a close-knit community and a political alternative). In this section we give three examples of competing visions of the commons. Contestation around these visions was conceived by members as representing competing subjectivities – the old hippies and Thatcher's children. These types are figurative and ideal: while some members might jokingly say they were hippies or describe the cooperative feel as hippie, none of the participants was truly Thatcherite. The different visions were apparent in three examples: conflicting expectations from the community, the introduction of a business plan and new managerial technologies, and the new participation policy. We discuss these examples by introducing

the change within the cooperative; explaining how it represents diverse visions and subjectivities; and discussing the changes in state and capital that affected the cooperative.

5.1 A sense of community: minimalist and maximalist vision of the commons

"Apparently they had more group hugs; they haven't done that all the time since I joined Beechtree" (Jo)

Our research participants agreed that the cooperative offered more social interaction and mutual-aid than private housing, but the general trend was towards less communality. Members responded to this trend in three main ways: disappointment, satisfaction, and apathy. We see these responses as representing different visions of the commons: a "communal" maximalist vision which involves many layers of meaning and many aspects of members' life, a "pragmatist" middle-way, and finally a minimalist vision focusing on housing only, without additional interpersonal and political ambitions. Pat, a member in her 60s, was a maximalist, and felt that many younger members did not want to mix socially. "We used to call it 'Beechtree village', [but] we have become just a place with low rents where you can have some control over your housing; I'm not sure if people want to be a community anymore". However, many members appreciated Beechtree's community spirit, and younger members in particular found there a good balance between alienation and a suffocating commune. Heather, in her early 40s, said: "I think one of the reasons it's sustained for so long is that it has less of a communal aspect to it, we have our own homes". Those who expected nothing but affordable housing were not engaged socially and were often perceived as non-cooperative.

The vision of the cooperative as providing "more than housing" referred to two kinds of politics: material and interpersonal. Pragmatists like David thought that "providing decent, affordable housing is political", and Heather agreed: "the politics that tends to be the most long-lasting is that which is rooted in your interests". This mundane and minimalist form of resistance to the injustice of capitalism echoes Huron's (2018) observation that self-help can challenge capitalism even when not articulated as politically radical. The interpersonal kind of politics fostered a communal subjectivity, encouraging frequent and caring interaction. For these subjects, the social underpins the organisation, as Pat said: "I feel very strongly that this co-op will not last if we don't regain some kind of sense of community".

Using interviews, collaborative storytelling and archive materials we found that since its inception the cooperative shifted from a maximalist towards a minimalist vision of the commons, and involved less sharing, socialising, resources pooling and collaboration beyond housing. At the same time, a nostalgic sentiment to "more community" existed in the cooperative from its very early days. Therefore, desire for more communal aspects was not simply generational but a personal preference.

In spite of the minimalist shift, Beechtree had many signs of a thriving commoning community, such as care and mutual aid through babysitting, finding lost cats, lending equipment, mending broken trees. Members celebrated birthdays in the communal rooms and gardens and invited all the members, and others organised collective BBQs and bonfires. Gifting was standard: home-grown or superfluous food and household goods were offered for free on the cooperative's Facebook page, although members could just as easily sell them online or offer them to neighbours who are not Beechtree members. These practices were additional to the collaborative management of the cooperative, from taking part in committees and general meetings to daily maintenance jobs in members' homes and communal spaces. Beechtree had a forgiving approach to arrears, prioritising members' wellbeing over financial considerations: the sign of community economy (Community Economies Collective, 2019). Jo found that these qualities made Beechtree "a place that is different from the usual capitalist world where for a lot of housing associations or landlords it's all about the money and they don't always do what they can to meet people's needs or at the very least give some sense of community".

But this level of socialising, cooperation and resources pooling was low in comparison to the past. Archive materials show that at first (January-August 1979) the cooperative had a communal living room, kitchen and dining room, and a co-op nursery. Minutes from 7th December 1979 noted the purchase of two washing machines to share between three houses. For a number of years, the cooperative ran a food cooperative. Minutes from 1988 indicate that members living in separate flats in divided houses shared one telephone – unusual for the UK at that period. Private and collective boundaries were fluid: meetings were held in one house's front room, where an office space was also found. Long term members fondly recalled going out for meals after general meetings, collective trips to the seaside and yearly pantomimes. Childcare solutions are a good example of changes in vision and practice: in the first few years of the cooperative, the first item on the agenda was always babysitting. Later on, the cooperative organised a low-cost crèche, which operated until the late 1990s. In 2017 the cooperative offered refund on individually arranged childcare for members who could not attend meetings otherwise. Moving from non-monetary mutual aid to collective organising to individual refund represents members' lack of time and energy to find collective solutions.

At the same time, archive materials indicate that members always had different expectations from the community. An 1980 memoir by a founding member already lamented the dwindling community spirit in its first two years, and a brainstorming session on improvements to the cooperative included calls to keep up "socials" as well as statements that "communality shouldn't be forced upon people" (minute book 1978-1981). Almost ten years later, at the end of 1988, minutes recorded Rosa saying: "are we going to be a cooperative or just run like a housing association? Wants more sharing and joining especially that includes kids". The following week members decided to "keep the socials going regularly". This decision was made many times in the history of the cooperative, including

during the research (e.g. April 2017 General Meeting), indicating that there was a pattern of losing interest followed by a desire to reinstate.

The shift from a maximalist towards a more minimalist vision of the commons is rooted in changing subjectivities and changes in society. Some founder members saw political value in communal living and viewed sharing as an end, while for others it was a means to an end. Sharing should not be romanticised (DeFilippis et al., 2006): collaboration is a practical response to want and while some view it as a political practice it is not necessarily everyone's first choice (Noterman, 2016; Huron, 2018). In our case study, some elements of sharing have changed as the cooperative became more financially secure: the lack of resources in the first years resulted in mixing housing and work spaces, but that was never desirable, and at the time of research the cooperative's social events and formal business were held in newly refurbished designated office space and meeting space. Moreover, as market changes made consumer goods and services cheaper and common in most households, sharing phones and washing machines became less urgent financially and less desirable socially. Some members related changes in communal aspects to wider societal changes. We now turn to a detailed discussion in these changes and the way members framed shifts in national politics as shaping members' subjectivities.

5.2 The business plan: is efficacy good for community-building?

The first example of policy change is the introduction of a business plan, which transformed Beechtree's management practices and its relation to the state: from close and positive relationship to the decision to deregister as a social housing provider. Deregistration meant that the cooperative was less exposed to state influence, but the shift to greater formality and professionalism brought to the surface different visions for the commons and multiple and contested cooperative subjectivities. The "pragmatists" saw it as an opportunity to improve management, but the "communals" felt that formality compromised the sense of community.

A business plan is a regulatory requirement for all registered social housing providers, including cooperatives, with a commitment to "approve a financial framework, review it periodically and assess and manage the co-op's long term viability" (CCH The confederation of Co-operative Housing 2016:3). Although these regulations have been in place for the last 15 years, the cooperative ignored them and for decades ran without one. In 2017 Beechtree devised a business plan in order to meet regulatory requirement for social housing providers wishing to deregister. In the introduction to the business plan, members explained the move as a reaction to the recent political assault on social housing: "new government legislation limits our income and there is a risk that it may allow our properties to be bought by tenants" (Beechtree business plan, 2017). This is a reference to the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, according to which "registered providers of social housing must reduce

the total rent payable by a tenant in year by 1%" (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2016). Although this does not currently apply to cooperatives (Bryant, 2017), members were wary of the risk involved. The other risk that members were concerned about was the extension of the Right to Buy to housing associations (Manzi & Morrison, 2018), raising the concern that cooperatives were next in line for privatization or demutualization. According to a key sector organization, this decision is not unique to the case study cooperative, and several UK cooperatives took a cautionary measure and decided to deregister in order to be released from state regulations and potentially harmful policies.

The business plan clarified and articulated the cooperative's goals in a professional manner, including the introduction of KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) and SMART goals[1]. The main goals were: increasing participation; making financial projections and improving financial planning; improving the governance; and preparing for deregistration – a process that requires the cooperative to satisfy the Regulator of Social Housing that its management ensures the continued protection of tenants and that there is no misuse of public funds. In this sense, the cooperative demonstrated a consistently flexible approach throughout the years: registering as a social provider when major repairs grants were available through the state, and pulling out of state regulation when it no longer promoted the cooperative's interests. This kind of pragmatism is in line with Byrne and Healey's (2006) view of the cooperative subjectivity, where actions are taken without attempting a "purity of practice". The decision to produce a business plan can therefore be seen as an act of resistance to the Conservative government's policies and a tool to carve up more space for autonomy.

But while most members wanted more autonomy from the state, some were uncomfortable with the new business plan. When introducing the concept of SMART goals at a General Meeting, Amelia said apologetically that getting used to the new conduct will be tough, but was interrupted by Zoe, who justified the move by saying: "the whole world works like this!". In the following general meeting, Jo raised the need to build "the organisation of the co-op as a business and actually sticking to our business plan goals". This kind of language was anathema for some members of the older generation, who reacted strongly to the mention of a business model, although they did not necessarily object to its goals:

> "When people say quite casually, you know, 'we are a business', I will say: 'no we are *not*, we're just not, we're a social organisation, organised on very different principles'" [Adrian].

[1] SMART goal setting was developed as a corporate management tool. The acronym stands for: S – specific, M - measurable, A - achievable, action-oriented; R – realistic; T – Time based.

Adrian represents a maximalist view of the commons, emphasising the social over the business even though cooperatives are in fact businesses, albeit having "durable alternative structures and values rooted in an ethic based on the principle of mutuality" (Davis & Worthington 1993:849).

Interestingly, participants tended to use the formative years of members' political identity as a proxy for their political subjectivities: the "hippies" of the social-democratic post-war consensus in one camp, and the allegedly managerialist "Thatcher's children" in the other. All the participants were politically left-leaning, and so their traits existed in the context of a largely cooperative and non-capitalist identity. Typically, the younger and more politically active members of the cooperative held a view of the capitalist economy "as the real, dominant and or most powerful form of economic life" (Gibson-Graham & Roelvink 2011:29). Long-term members in particular saw a contradiction in the fact that some members in their 30s and 40s were committed to anti-capitalist political activism but preferred a more formal and "authoritarian" style: "they actually do things and protest, but at the same time they're saying everything is a business. And they think in business terms, and I think that contradiction is just astonishing" (Adrian).

The tension between the generations that emerged in interviews echoes the political generations theory, that documents the shift to the Right amongst those who were young adults during the Conservative era (1979-1997), and even more so for those who were young adults during Blair's New Labour term (Grasso et al, 2017; Tilley & Heath 2007). However, in the cooperative, it was people *on the left* who grew up in that era and yet for the older members seemed to embody a "neoliberal common-sense"[2]. By this they referred to the fact that younger members tended to "think in business terms" and criticise the organisational culture of the cooperative as dysfunctional and unsuitable for our times.

Many members evoked the same narrative of change. This narrative had three main parts: necessary professionalization; lack of time; and growing individualism. Daniel articulated this clearly. In the past, he said, "you didn't have to have policies, procedures, things didn't have to be legal (…) things were done on a much more ad-hoc basis". The narrative goes on to explain that market and welfare changes made members time poor, while in the past "most households didn't have to have two adults in employment in order for them to function so they had a lot more time on their hand, so - things ran quite smoothly on an ad-hoc basis". The third aspect that changed was the vision of the commons and members' subjectivities:

[2] In recent years the pendulum swung back and younger people in the UK are leaning to the left, see (Milburn, 2019). This development has not affected the cooperative significantly as the core active members are not in that age group.

> "[Today] there is, probably less of a kind of communal thing; it's less of a commune and it's more of a co-op, d'you know what I mean.
>
> **What do you mean, can you say a bit more about that?**
>
> I think you got a lot of people who are hippies basically, and... which is great - i'd love to be a hippie but you just can't, can't do it nowadays".

Why did members think the cooperative's conduct was not viable, considering that it has been running successfully to this day? The political climate has changed, and ad-hoc practices that were natural before now seemed unimaginable or irrelevant. Many younger members like Daniel held a romantic view of the founding members: in those days, people ostensibly had more freedom and easy opportunities. This glosses over the tremendous professional bureaucratic work with various authorities that enabled the founding of the cooperative, and is documented in the cooperative's first minutes-books. In these documents we found a clear distinction between formal work with the authorities and the highly informal style of the internal management. Arguably, the cooperative's founders were conversant with the formalities of mainstream economy, but had a clear vision of a different form of conduct for their cooperative life. Younger members did not believe such distinction was desirable, partly because they saw the cooperative as struggling in a capitalist environment. As Gibson-Graham and Roelvink acknowledged, the ability that the founders seemed to have, to envision and enact the economy as "a space of ethical action, not a place of submission to 'the bottom line' or the 'imperatives of capital' (…) is no small feat." (Gibson-Graham & Roelvink 2011:30).

Finally, members recognised a tension between becoming 'more like a business' and the desire to foster deeper social connections. This tension was evident in the General Meeting discussion in the introduction of SMART goals and KPIs. Amelia said: "I think some people are concerned that we're going down this awful, boring business-like bureaucratic thing, like, and that's just a bit of a formality and a necessity and we do need to do that, but I think we do need to put effort into the kind of stuff that hold us together". In other words, in an attempt to stop a further slip to a minimalist vision of the commons, the cooperative had to provide more than just housing. This concern resulted in yet another call for more social events.

5.3 Negotiating voluntary and compulsory participation

Participation is one of the defining qualities of cooperatives but also their inherent challenge (Birchall and Simmons, 2007). While lack of participation persists, attitudes towards it changed over time, along with changing subjectivities and visions of commons management. This section discusses changing participation patterns and the cooperative's new participation policy, the contestations around it and the narrative that was used to explain the change.

Maintenance is one of the most demanding committees in the cooperative. Two new members suggested that maintenance work includes skill-swapping instead of relying on external contractors. Zoe, a long-term member, replied that this was done more in the past, but in the last decade things went "to the other extreme", and relations with the cooperative became "more like tenant-landlord". As a result, members turned to paid workers instead of taking collective responsibility and "thinking about the co-op's resources as if they belong to the members". Zoe was pessimistic. In fact, during the course of research, members often posted help requests on Facebook and were helped by skilled members within a few hours. Yet, this short anecdote illuminates the tension between a minimalist and a maximalist vision of the commons and contested subjectivities – the "citizen" who feels commitment to the community versus the passive consumer (Barron, 2017).

Unlike the business plan, which originated in an external incentive, the participation policy emerged solely from members' initiative, four years before the research engagement. After 40 years of voluntary participation, the majority of members voted for a new policy to ensure the fair and smooth running of the cooperative. However, continued debates around the policy led to a revision process. A key point of disagreement was how to engage members in running the cooperative: the involvement committee aimed to enforce a points-based policy of attendance at meetings and other contributions, but some members called for a community atmosphere that would encourage members to join voluntarily for the social value. Following a survey among members, the majority approved two complementary proposals: first, to reduce the number of general meetings from monthly meetings to quarterly meetings; and second, to monitor the participation of all members using a point scoring system for participation, enact a formal procedure to deal with non-participating members according to this system, and if this procedure fails, terminate the membership of non-participating members, and as a consequence – evict them. The policy has increased the number of members in meetings, although we found that almost one third of the members did not come to any meeting during our research. At the time of the research, roughly 15 out of 45 members were involved in committees to different degrees, but this number was reduced during the research period as people had new job commitments and had to pull out. Attendance at general meetings during the research never exceeded 20 members, just under 50%. Some members never participated. However, unlike other cooperatives or commons (DeFilippis et al., 2006; Federici, 2010; Huron, 2018), here participation was balanced in terms of gender.

Again, responses to the policy differed along generational lines. Older members argued that the policy marked a transition from a collectivist view of responsibility to an individualistic one and moves from voluntarism to coercion. Younger members argued that the policy encouraged a mutual and collaborative conduct within the membership, fairness and efficacy. Coercion was used to fulfil a desire for meaningful participation and greater democracy.

Sheryl, a member in her late 30s, defended the policy: “if you don't want to participate and you don't want to be involved, go find somewhere else to live. D'you know what I mean?”. This blunt statement brings to mind Hall and O’Shea’s analysis of the transformation of the concept of fairness since the rise of neoliberalism (Hall and O’Shea, 2013). They showed how ‘fairness’ has become “a quasi-market relation, a reward for personal effort – a long way from the collectivism of the 1940s” (ibid:8). Older members had a similar analysis. Chris (age 68) strongly resisted the new policy and said that throughout the years, even though active members sometimes resented the less active ones, the idea of eviction was never considered. Adrian thought the new policy reflects changing subjectivities in the cooperative and in wider society: “people are conceiving of being a tenant member here, a cooperator, as if it was a contract with an employer that if you don't do certain things, you know, like if I sort of refused to go into work for a few days I'll be sacked”.

Regardless of their view of the policy, members evoked the same narrative to explain the change from voluntarism to coercion: caught between the growing demands of the market and the restructured welfare state, the cooperative adopted a more business-like approach to participation. The following exchange in a group interview represents this narrative neatly. Rob, a younger member, commented that in its early days the cooperative was “more of a subversive community, more of a kind of anarchist community…”

> Sheryl: Anarchist - I was gonna say, like, coming with that, people probably weren't in full time employment in professional jobs.
>
> Rob: Exactly, yeah, yeah. It was the time when you could be on the dole much more easily than you can now.

Here we see the same three-fold change: lack of time due to the loss of social security of the welfare state; firmer regulations that increased the work load; and a changing vision of the commons from communal and political to more pragmatic. For the policy supporters, the remedy for lack of time was higher efficacy: “if everyone was involved in the co-op none of us will have to put more than 20 minutes a week in, really, and we could kind of put this effort into social things” (Rob). Adrian argued the contrary: the fewer jobs there are, the fewer people are needed to carry them out, and hence participation is compromised. In his view, the desire to simplify processes and act more briskly and professionally led to less participation and less agency for the majority of members; it was another example of the business-like approach the “old guard” identified as authoritarian and essentially capitalist.

Some members, especially (but not solely) of the older generation, rejected the compulsory participation policy on ideological grounds: they argued that the cooperative ethos requires voluntary participation and thought that the new “authoritarian” approach reflected a corporate subjectivity

rather than a cooperative subjectivity. Chris, for example, said incredulously: “I said [to a representative of the participation group] 'don't try and coerce people' and he [replied] 'no, we believe in coercion'. Coercion to me is a word that I'm *appalled* at”. Instead of coercion, long standing members recalled a time when running the cooperative was less formal and overlapped with social aspects of the community. The sociability of work made participation more attractive, as reflected in memories of child-care during general meetings and going together for a meal afterwards, or meeting for cooperative-related work over lunch. “This social element”, concluded one member, “has faded”. Pat, who was hardly involved in the running of the cooperative, recalled:

> I was on Management Committee for six years and most of the people on the committee were my friends, but then, you see, this is the big difference – after management committee we’d all go to the pub together, and people just don’t do that anymore.

Our own observations of Management Committee meetings in 2016-2017 confirm that they were indeed very cordial, but focused entirely on the agenda, had a formal structure of reports and discussion, and never involved social outings before or after the meetings.

Participation was strongly linked to a sense of belonging and ownership (Cornwell, 2012). A member of the involvement committee shared the outcomes of the community survey on barriers to participation: “often, rather than any definable thing being wrong for them, it's that they had a sense of being outside of the community and kind of not really part of it”. It was therefore unsurprising to find that active members were generally satisfied with the level of community spirit – and vice versa.

Amidst these debates, the implementation of the policy was partial. Members were sent to talk to non-participating members, letters were sent and a register at the GM was introduced. However, the attempt to actually evict a non-participating member failed because when it came to the vote, the majority of members refused to follow the procedures and voted to continue their membership. They voted with their heart.

6. Conclusion

The commons are never detached from state and capital and their impact on the commons and the commoners was evident in our case study. Through 40 years the cooperative changed its vision of the commons from a maximalist view, expecting the cooperative to provide and produce a lot more than housing, to a vision that fostered a pragmatic cooperative subjectivity rather than a communal one. The cooperative was responding to changes in society in a contested process, constantly negotiating the meaning of the commons.

The cooperative community displayed various forms of diverse economies: sharing, gifting, cooperating and caring. These practices had an important role in making the cooperative a community rather than a bunch of houses in a different ownership arrangement, and reproduced the cooperative as commons and the members as commoners (De Angelis, 2017, p.104). At different times and for different members, the emphasis of the community changed: the cooperative served as a pragmatic solution to the injustice of private property; a community of solidarity of interdependent subjects; and a political form of resistance against capitalism and paternalistic social housing. These elements existed simultaneously, and members felt that the very existence of the cooperative had political value, be it producing decent, affordable housing or alternative social relations.

We found that competing visions and subjectivities were often set along generational lines: the "hippie" communal maximalists of the older generation and the cooperative pragmatists of the younger generation. The "hippie" cooperative subject was characterised by spontaneity and informality, fluid boundaries between the personal and the collective, and a communal vision of the commons. For her, formality and professionalism threatened caring relationships. The "Thatcherite" or pragmatist cooperative subject sought clear boundaries between the private and the organisation, efficacy, transparency and professionalism. Both of these cooperative subjects valued collaboration and interdependency, which were seen as essential to the upkeep of the cooperative. While the tension between these subjectivities was apparent and a minimalist shift certainly took place, we found that the maximalist-minimalist tension existed in the cooperative from its early days. It was not simply a generational change ~~but a valid vision of the commons~~.

Interestingly, although different members had different stances on the main issues that stirred the cooperative, they shared a narrative about how changes in wider society affected life in the cooperative. This narrative focused on the transition from a welfare state and a strong social security safety net to our current neoliberalised society that put pressure on the collective effort. This narrative had three key components: a growing demand for professionalization due to market standards and state regulations; reduced time due to changing working patterns and welfare restructuring; and growing individualism that led to reduced interest in communality.

This narrative echoes findings from Huron's study on housing cooperatives in the US. Huron (2018) argued that for urban commons, the pressure from state and capital is particularly hard. This observation applies for the UK too, although relations with both state and capital are context-dependent and change over time. Although state regulations do affect urban commons, the extent of state intervention has changed over time and was negotiated in various ways according to changing political contexts. The cooperative may have changed its management strategies and culture over

time, and manifested diverse subjectivities, but we argue that by maintaining a collective effort that is not-for-profit, it remains a commons that is resilient to challenge.

Our research opens up several avenues for further research. It is clear that different subjectivities develop different visions of the commons and different management strategies, and we need to know more about how this works out in different contexts. These issues are of importance to cooperative studies. This case study offers rich data but a further comparison with other cooperatives in the UK and beyond can offer a richer picture of cooperative subjectivities in different contexts, including less political and larger settings. Moreover, our analysis focused on the commons-state-capital relations in the UK, but seeing as similar processes happened in the US, a more cultural analysis can offer further insights into how the commons are negotiated.

The paper demonstrates the importance of subjectivities to the character of the commons; if commoning is what makes the commons, the commoners' understanding of commoning is key to the way it is carried out.

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