

'Re-Embedding the Social: Cooperatives, Political Consumerism and Alternative Lifestyles'

SASE Annual Meeting: 29 June – 1 July 2017, University of Lyon

Call for Papers

Link: <https://sase.org/event/2017-lyon/#mini>

Abstract Deadline: February 3, 2017 (1000 words)

Abstracts should specify the research question, the thematic strand (cooperatives, political consumerism or alternative lifestyles) the theoretical and empirical literature, and the methods deployed.

Full papers to be submitted by: June 1, 2017

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Abstract

In recent years, the 'collaborative economy' has become the buzzword in academic research and public debate – gaining prominence in tandem with the growth of digital capitalism. While much has been said about the ways in which digital technology is transforming entire swathes of the economy and constructing new forms of exchange, the predominant tendency has been the reification and expansion of modern capitalism aimed at maximizing profits and reproducing exploitative mechanisms towards workers, natural resources and the environment.

Within this critical juncture in the development of capitalism cooperatives, political consumerism and alternative lifestyles are being adopted and advocated by a growing number of social groups. These practices share a steadfast belief in the idea of 'social sustainability', and a desire to move towards a society which - in the words of Amartya Sen - promotes not just environmentalism but also values of equality, diversity, social cohesion, quality of life and democratic governance of our workplaces and every-day lives.

Taken together, they have the potential to gradually transform corporate dominance of economic activity and the ways in which we consume goods and services. The engine of this slow but long lasting transformation is the exercise of some form of social power – rooted in the voluntary association of people in civil society, and based on the capacity to organize people for collective action of various sorts.

This Mini Conference follows on from last years' successful one held at the University of California, Berkeley and has two overall aims. Firstly, to continue the vibrant discussion and allow for new researchers to participate. Secondly, to help ensure the establishment of a new research network at SASE that brings together ideas and insights from the interstices of research programmes on cooperatives, political consumerism and alternative lifestyles.

1) Cooperatives and Cooperativism

As a form of economic organization, it has long been acknowledged that cooperatives can help buffer economic insecurity and provide the building blocks for economic democracy. By inculcating solidaristic social relations and the values of democracy, solidarity, equality, and reciprocity, cooperatives also play an ideological role in society which remains relatively under-researched. One way of approaching this line of enquiry is by examining the (inter) subjective dimension of the cooperative experience, and exploring the ways in which internal factors (decisional) and external factors (cultural, economic, political) shape people's views in different local, regional and national contexts.

Another line of enquiry concerns the response of the cooperative movement to the dominant tendencies of digital capitalism: temporary labour, venture-capital financed platforms, monopoly, speculation, and surveillance. One prominent proposal which has received considerable attention is 'platform cooperativism' (Schneider 2014; Scholtz 2014, 2016, Gorenflo 2015). This idea calls for using the Internet in the same way as the Silicon Valley mediators, but to redirect customers to worker-owned companies. Another related proposal calls for the establishment of worker-consumer cooperatives which embrace workers and consumers as co-equals, combining production and consumption under a single organizational umbrella (Cohen 2016). While perhaps the most radical idea involves mobilising workers to transform digital corporations, which have benefited enormously from public investment and infrastructure (McChesney 2013), into worker-cooperatives. Two of the most promising sources of social power for promoting their respective advancement are trade unions and political parties.

In light of this preamble, we welcome theoretical and empirical contributions which address the following questions:

- How does the cooperative experience shape people's political subjectivities? And to what extent do these experiences play an ideological role in society by promoting progressive values in the public sphere?
- What types of collaboration/opposition exist between trade unions and cooperatives? How have these relationships changed since the North Atlantic financial crisis of 2008? Is there evidence to suggest that new alliances are emerging?
- Which political parties support cooperatives and on what grounds? How successful have they been and why? What types of economic and communication policies are being promoted to further the development of cooperatives (both offline and online)? Which barriers exist and how can these be overcome?

2) Political Consumerism, Collective Action and Social Innovation

In the literature on political consumerism, many authors have identified the growth of critical forms of consumption across Europe and North America (see, for example, Koos 2012; Stolle and Micheletti 2013). The increasing market demand for products and services from companies that adopt codes of conduct and respect workers' rights and the environment indicates that cultural, political and economic opportunities currently favor its spread. However, the analytical connection between political consumerism and collective action as well as its capacity to promote 'social innovation' remains questioned, both empirically and normatively (see, in particular, Micheletti 2010).

Besides traditional consumer organizations that seek to protect customers from corporate abuse (such as unsafe products, predatory lending or false advertising), political consumer practices have, in fact, also been widely employed by social movement organizations to achieve diverse political and social goals. Calls to citizens to take action in their role as consumers have been made by social movements of different types, either to build transnational awareness so as to step up pressure on corporations or to facilitate the purchase of goods/services that meet specific ethical criteria. Along with large-scale boycotting and global fair-trade initiatives, political consumerism has entered the repertoire of actions of a number of local grassroots organizations seeking bottom-up solutions for sustainable development. Within such experiences the act of shopping move beyond political consumerism as a form of merely individual responsibility (Micheletti 2009) to develop collective, citizenship-driven alternative styles of provisioning. (Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012; Grasseni 2013; Forno and Graziano 2014).

This strand welcomes contributions discussing the relationship between political consumerism, collective action and social innovation. We are particularly interested in papers that investigate and elucidate:

- When, why and where are grassroots economic initiatives emerging and engaging the public;

- What is the effectiveness of political consumerism actions and campaigns at the local, national and international level;
- What is the relationship between political consumerism, sustainability and new forms of governance;
- Which new forms of coordination are emerging between types of organizational actors and initiatives;
- Alternative supply chains;
- How political consumerism promotes social innovation and learning among actors.

3) Alternative Lifestyles: Embodying the Critique

Recent contributions like Erik Olin Wright's 'Envisioning Real Utopias' (2010), Hartmut Rosa's reflections on acceleration and de-synchronisation in contemporary capitalism (2010), Klaus Dörre and colleagues' 'Sociology, Capitalism and Critique' (2015) and D'Alisa et al. 'Degrowth. A Vocabulary for a New Era' (2015), among others, are giving a new momentum to concepts like 'resilience', 'real utopias', 're-politicisation' of everyday life, 'de-colonisation of the imaginary' and 'transition'. These emerging themes are influencing the academic discourse and research agenda in fields like political economy, economic sociology and social movements studies.

In light of this, the panel aims to gather and discuss both theoretical and empirical contributions focusing on collective and community-based practices that aim at 'embodying' the critique to consumerist and capitalist societies. These include co-housing, eco-villages, intentional communities and transition towns which are increasingly widespread and inter-connected examples of how people are trying to concretize, not without effort, 'real utopias' (Wright 2010). They are based mainly on values like reciprocity, downshifting, environmental and social justice, and voluntary simplicity – rather than on mechanisms of monetary exchange. While some experiences constitute occasional episodes (bartering of skills and time, urban gardens, social-community street art), others entail radical changes to everyday work and life conditions, narrowing the boundaries between labour and spare time, private and collective goods, production and consumption activities.

In this panel, we welcome papers addressing the following issues:

- The extent to which these practices succeed (or fail) in introducing new societal values and norms (reciprocity, exchange, mutual help, simplicity, social and environmental justice) and creating 'new imaginaries' for progressive social change;
- The way through which these practices manage to provide not just material goods but experiences and services outside a 'market' logic;
- The way in which citizens, public institutions, and businesses perceive and interact with these radical practices;
- The extent to which these practices constitute (or not) 'coping mechanisms' for socioeconomic exclusion in times of austerity and crisis;
- The way in which these experiences affect conceptions and experiences of labour and its relation to spare time.

Abstract Submission:

Abstract must be submitted through SASE's website (<https://sase.org/event/2017-lyon/#mini>) by logging in and clicking on the 'Submit' button on the conference event page.

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For further information, please contact the convenors responsible for each section via the email addresses below:

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