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Wars of position: Folk-politics, counter-hegemony and the cooperative movement

Matthew Wilson

abstract

Interest in alternative forms of organising has been growing within a number of academic disciplines – inspired largely by the horizontal/prefigurative turn in recent social movement praxis. This prefigurative praxis, however, has been subject to a growing critique from those defending a more vertical form of radical politics; these critics argue that the fragmented world of prefigurative praxis is incapable of developing a coherent counter-hegemonic strategy capable of replacing capitalism. Whilst questioning elements of such critiques, I suggest here that prefigurative social movements have indeed struggled to build on their early successes. Listening to both vertical and horizontal positions, I suggest critical organisation scholars need to consider organisational forms which can address the concerns of each side; as such, I suggest the cooperative movement offers an invaluable tool through which we can develop a counter-hegemonic war of position.

Introduction

> A randomly dispersed multiplicity of movements, fights and alternative practices of the 'common' is unlikely to elicit broader social change. It is more likely to founder on incoherence, conflicts among heterogeneous courses of action, and the weakness of fragmented, isolated forces that are confronted with entrenched interests. To achieve a minimum of convergence among diverse struggles and to amass enough force to challenge the status quo, we need to engage in the politics of hegemony (Kioupkiolis, 2019: 25-26).

Recent years have seen a growing interest in alternative forms of organising within numerous academic disciplines (Phillips and Jeanes, 2018). Such work has explored a diversity of praxis, with no fundamental definition of what is considered 'alternative' (Parker et al., 2014), yet there is something of a shared understanding, to the extent that we can meaningfully talk of an 'it' whilst never knowing precisely what *it* is.[1] One important, often defining feature of this discourse is its relationship to a broader political terrain of social movements. The standard narrative of this terrain, charting the rise of the Zapatistas, the Battle of Seattle, the growth of the movement of movements, to the global uprisings and occupations of 2011, looked to an emerging politics which, at its most basic, sought to change the world by actively building a new one – or many new ones – even whilst the old world is still very much standing (Raekstad and Gradin, 2019). These social movements have explicitly influenced thinking about alternative forms of organising within academic work (Pickles, 2012: 544). Yet, academics motivated to think prefiguratively by these movements have mostly failed to register recent shifts in the radical political imaginary, which is increasingly critical of these movement's prefigurative common-sense (Monticelli, 2021).

In their well-received book *Inventing the Future*, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams critically dissect this prefigurative terrain, which they refer to as 'folk politics'. Fearing that 'the tendencies of the mainstream and radical left are moving towards the folk-political pole' their work '*seek[s] to reverse this trend*' (2016: 22-23, my emphasis). Yet in an *Afterword* in the book's second edition, just nine months after its initial publication, they talk of the development of 'new socialisms', which they see emerging through 'the *remnants* of the horizontalist movements' (185, my emphasis). Indeed, 'the prefigurative turn' has come under sustained critique in recent years (Blühdorn and Deflorian, 2021; Dean, 2018; Pellizzoni, 2021); importantly, such critiques appear to be resonating with activists on the ground. A

[1] The same might be said about the 'we' who are talking about this 'it'; arguably, the two are mutually constituted, iteratively shaping a certain discourse which is sufficiently coherent, at least to those who, in theory or practice, help shape it.

growing sense of frustration that movements such as Occupy failed to build on their early successes has opened up space for what some have dubbed 'the electoral turn' (Swann, 2020) - a renewed interest in more traditional, 'vertical' forms of organising such as unions and, of course, the political party (Nunes, 2021).

This shift in the political terrain is a complex one; in the following, I argue that a growing movement towards counter-hegemonic strategies (Carroll, 2010; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Schneider, 2022) is perfectly commensurate with certain readings of horizontalist/prefigurative politics. Acknowledging that a such an approach has so far failed to be substantially developed, I argue that this is no less true within political spaces which reject the prefigurative-focus. Whilst verticalists such as Srnicek and Williams have been quick to declare horizontalism a failed project, the recent (re)turn to electoral politics has been equally unsuccessful in destroying capitalism. What is lacking - from both the horizontal and vertical terrains - is a suitable vehicle through which to channel such a counter-hegemonic war of position, and which can bring together both horizontal and vertical traditions of the left (Nunes, 2021). Though not without its problems, I suggest that the cooperative movement offers such a vehicle.

For such a project to have a chance of success, a huge amount of theoretical and practical work is needed. Here I can do little more than point to some key features of that work and sketch out possible ways forward. Developing a genuinely counter-hegemonic bloc will always be an iterative process, as the social forces and subjectivities it contains constantly shape its form and direction (and each other). However, we cannot begin such a process remaining at the level of abstractions. Neither can we develop such a project out of thin air. Looking to the cooperative movement will, for many on the leftist forces, appear too reformist; whilst the movement at present has lost much of its radical agenda, I argue that this can be changed. Similarly, engaging with the market as part of a postcapitalist economy is likely to be met with derision or ambivalence from some. Whilst space limits my capacity to engage in this issue more deeply, I point to the recognition within counter-hegemonic theory that such projects must tread a fine line between a radical vision for the future and the need to start from where we

are (Soetens and Huybrechts, 2023). Whatever some hypothetical future may look like, economically, a leftist politics which rejects the market entirely cannot be conceived in counter-hegemonic terms.

Hegemony and the war of position

> [H]egemony can be understood to cut both ways. It signifies the organization of consent – the practices and forms in which loyalty to bourgeois leadership in economics, politics, and culture is secured – but also the possibility of organizing dissent and ultimately of constructing a counter-hegemonic bloc (Carroll and Ratner, 2010: 8)

Counter-hegemonic strategies have long been part of the left's strategic toolkit (Kiersey and Vrasti, 2016) and have recently (re)emerged as a growing preoccupation. For our purposes here, it suffices to understand hegemony as 'being the sum of social, cultural and political practices that [are] used to consolidate power under a certain ideology' (Worth, 2015: xvii); in other words, a hegemony, or hegemonic bloc, is formed when certain social forces - industry, finance, the media, educational institutions, civil society, political parties, and so on - are able to coalesce or 'condense' (Hall, 1990) around a coherent-enough set of ideas in such a way that the society within which the hegemony functions is more or less fixed according to these ideas. Hegemonies are not reducible to one clearly defined ideological position, but are the coming together of a diversity of ideas which are connected or 'articulated' by an over-arching common-sense. Common-senses are structured around what Laclau and Mouffe call an 'articulatory principle' (1985) such as *capitalism* or *socialism*, which is simultaneously broad enough to be acceptable to a variety of diverse political, ethical and economic positions, but coherent enough to establish a broad social understanding. Hegemonies therefore work to establish a common-sense around an articulatory principle, or perhaps several principles, generating support for their claims to authority.

Hegemonies, and the support they receive, are never absolute, in part because there are always those who remain explicitly outside their common-sense, and in part because the unity created by this articulation of multiple positions is always internally contested. The precise contours of what we call

a hegemonic bloc are forever shifting, as those within it vie for power over the finer points of its common-sense.

Counter-hegemonies are, simply, formations which attempt to depose and replace existing hegemonies. A counter-hegemonic strategy therefore entails the development of a new common-sense which can articulate diverse social forces, and a plan through which to propagate this common-sense. Such a strategy is primarily developed through what Gramsci calls a 'war of position'. This war of position is a deeply iterative process, developing a new common-sense and building a culture in and through which this common-sense can be further developed and propagated; it requires intellectual work - the generation of new ideas, norms, subjectivities, and so on - and requires a complex infrastructure through which this intellectual work can be dispersed and put into practice. A war of position is waged on countless fronts, engaging civil society in its widest possible sense, working with and through institutions, the economy, cultural practices and norms. Such spaces:

> operate as centres of collective force, diffusing hegemonic ideas and values, orienting political action and preserving the status quo or putting up resistance against it. In circumstances of social complexity and differentiation, a new socio-political alliance can eventually prevail in its bid against the establishment only if it undertakes a protracted and inventive struggle, which wins such positions of power in society. A counter-hegemonic 'war of position' besieges existing institutions and associations, or it pioneers its own forms and centres of social activity (Kioupkiolis, 2019: 138)

Key questions for anyone pursuing a counter-hegemonic strategy, therefore, are what a counter-common-sense might look like, and what infrastructure can be employed to help its diffusion throughout society. Adopting the logics of a war of a position gives us an abstract strategic framework, but says nothing about the particularities of our current condition; understanding these particularities - what Hall might call the conjunctural terrain (1990) - is vital; crucially, this entails developing analyses of not only the neoliberal hegemony and the conditions it imposes, but also the various discourses of those who might collectively contribute to a counter-hegemonic bloc. For our discussion here, we need to consider the fact that calls to develop a counter-hegemony have commonly been developed

through *an explicit critique of horizontalist and prefigurative discourses* which, these critics claim, are incapable of developing such strategies. Given the need for a counter-hegemony to connect with a broad swathe of progressive and leftist positions, it is worth briefly examining such claims to understand better the current conditions of a potential counter-hegemonic bloc.

Hegemony/Counter-Hegemony: the failure of folk-politics

Employing the notion of a prefigurative common-sense - dubbed *folk-politics* - Srnicek and Williams challenge the reluctance of much recent leftist discourse to engage in strategic thinking. Following a standard Gramscian interpretation, *common-sense* is understood as 'a constellation of ideas and intuitions [...] that informs [...] ways of organising, acting and thinking politics' which 'often operates intuitively, uncritically and unconsciously' (Srnicek and Williams, 2016: 9-10). Acknowledging that their work does not engage with an 'explicit position, but only an implicit tendency' (*ibid.*: 12), they qualify their critiques with a number of provisos; but fundamentally, their argument takes aim at the core features of the folk-political *common-sense*[2], which, they suggest, can be located within a broad swathe of contemporary leftist praxis. As such, we see can find 'traces' of it in

> organisations and movements like Occupy, Spain's 15M, student occupations, [...] most forms of horizontalism, the Zapatistas, and contemporary anarchist-tinged politics, [and] other trends like localism, the slow-food movement, and ethical consumerism, among many others (Srnicek and Williams, 2016: 11-12).

Despite the diversity of these movements, Srnicek and Williams suggest their central ideas have 'increasingly sedimented as a new common-sense' (*ibid.*: 22); what unites or defines this folk-politics - what constitutes its common-sense - is its emphasis on 'temporal, spatial and conceptual immediacy' (*ibid.*: 10). It therefore

> [t]ypically remains reactive (responding to [...] rather than initiating actions) [...it] ignores long-term strategic goals in favour of tactics [...] prefers

[2] Equally, there is no vertical *common*-sense.

> practices that are inherently fleeting [...] chooses the familiarities of the past over the unknowns of the future [...] and expresses itself as a predilection for the voluntarist and spontaneous over the institutional (Srnicek and Williams, 2016: 10-11).

As such, the folkish common-sense 'ignore[s] or smooth[s] over' questions of scale (*ibid.*: 11), offering instead 'a strategic vision that sees temporary and small-scale changes as the horizon of success' (*ibid.*: 49). Importantly, it therefore mostly rejects counter-hegemonic strategies as inherently antithetical (*ibid.*: 26). When such hegemonic strategies *are* embraced, the refusal to engage with vertical organisational structures renders such visions fundamentally ineffective (*ibid.*: 46-47). Whilst conceding that the particular tactics of folk-politics have some merit as a 'starting point' (*ibid.*: 10), Srnicek and Williams stress that they are fundamentally self-limiting, unable to expand spatially or persist temporally: 'as the latest cycle of struggles has shown, the folk-political approach of prioritising various forms of immediacy has failed to transform society' (*ibid.*: 131).

For some, this 'failure' is inevitable - even when elements of folk-politics seek to produce counter-hegemonic positions: counter-hegemonies need a discursive dimension – the articulatory principle, the *common*-sense which condenses otherwise disparate voices – *and* the infrastructure to facilitate the process of their diffusion; even the most effective political principles – democracy, say – cannot perform the work of building a counter-hegemonic bloc on their own. For that, some argue, good old-fashioned centres of power – principally political parties, and the state - are needed (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Hall, 1990: 168). And it is well understood that folk-politics rejects these in favour of more directly democratic spaces.

Yet clearly, those advocating for counter-hegemonic strategies from a vertical position which embraces the state are not in control of much, when it comes to the nuts and bolts of state-craft; Rojava and the Chiapas region of Mexico, the occasional spurts of the pink tide in Latin America, and the generally short-lived moments of leftist governments in Europe notwithstanding, 'the left' is not in power. Those theorists who have argued for the reintroduction of the state *in theory* seem curiously unconcerned with the truth that such ideas must, for the foreseeable future, remain entirely

theoretical. Of course, we might concur with Srnick and Williams that such strategies will take a long time, and that patience is therefore needed; but we may also ask why the same patience isn't offered to folk-politics, which is deemed by the same theorists as having already failed. Leaving aside this hypocrisy - it is still a legitimate response that whilst we do not currently have any real 'political' (i.e. state) power, the task must therefore be the gaining of such power.

But there is additional question, unaddressed by recent theorists. A war of position needs to somehow embrace those elements with which it shares some common goals, but with which it also disagrees. Srnicek and Williams argue that we should move beyond folk-politics, but they do so precisely because they see these horizontalist discourses as constituting a significant common-sense within contemporary left politics. Yet they fail to fully consider what this means for building a counter-hegemonic bloc. Unless or until this common-sense is significantly diminished, a counter-hegemonic strategy must seek to appeal to *both sides* of the vertical/horizontal debate. A more productive step forward would be to acknowledge the counter-hegemonic work which has in fact been produced from within the 'folk-political' terrain and to work with, rather than against, such tendencies.

The vertical common-sense and the trauma of organisation

As we shall below, many advocates of folk-politics have in fact recognised the need to develop some form of counter-hegemonic strategy (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Kioupkiolis, 2019); however, it is also true that there is a tension between this recognition and the deeply felt concern that to engage in such a process is to wander into a terrain which many horizontalists find as troubling as the neoliberalism which they seek to resist; that terrain is the vertical common-sense which Srnicek and Williams at times exemplify. Just as Srnicek and Williams quite legitimately point to the 'implicit tendenc[ies]' rather than the 'explicit position[s]' (2016: 10) of a folk-politics, so too can advocates of that folk-politics point to the implicit tendencies often found within this vertical common-sense - *and* point to numerous reasons to be mindful of them.

Whilst I suggested above that a folk common-sense was developed without the work of the political party, it was on many levels the *rejection* of the political party which performed the articulatory work of condensing diverse political positions into a coherent folk-political project (Holloway, 2010; Wilson, 2014). This rejection, was, and is, more than an intellectual position, however; as Rodriguez Nunes argues in his excellent analysis of radical politics, we can in fact point to generations of trauma associated with the legacies of an authoritarian left which was as brutal and destructive as capitalism (Nunes, 2021: 46). Much of what has occurred in the last three decades in terms of radical politics has been an attempt to redefine a 'left' so that it is incapable of making the same 'mistakes' again. Whilst this story is a complex one which I can only sketch out here, it is well known - if not always well understood.

For as long as there has been something we call *the left*, disagreements have raged as to how best to challenge capitalism, and what sort of world should replace it. The often antagonist relationship between Marxism and anarchism perhaps best exemplifies this debate, and the folk-political turn was often implicitly or explicitly understood as an acceptance that, on many questions, the anarchists were right (Swann, 2020). Defining political positions through a process of opposition, however, is rarely a productive strategy, and Nunes offers a convincing case that too often, the horizontal turn went too far in its rejection, not simply of the state and the political party, but of the very notion of organisation. However, Nunes also stresses the philosophical and cultural complexity inherent in this process, recognising that the trauma associated with the vertical common-sense of the left's not-too-distant past is both legitimate and deep.

This trauma will not be addressed by simplistic calls to return to the party, but nor will it be addressed by nebulous references to 'a functional complementarity of organisations' (Srnicek and Williams, 2016: 169) without a clear sense of what such organisations will look like. Rightly or wrongly, 'to this day, talk of 'organisation' so easily slips into, or is effectively treated as shorthand for, a discussion of 'the party'' (Nunes, 2021: 74), and if the folk-political common-sense is to be 'articulated' with contemporary vertical positions, a very considerable amount of work needs

to be done to conceptualise what such a convergence might look like. Moving forward in this direction requires not only much greater clarity with regards the organisational forms we might adopt, but also with a greater understanding than is shown by Srnicek and Williams. Folk-politics might well have been ineffectual, but it was fighting on two-fronts, against capitalism and against a leftist position which was certainly strategically efficient - but brutally so; if 'we' are to unite our collective energies into fighting against capitalism and not each other, the folk-political common-sense needs to be assured that it can trust that its critics understand that what happened in the 20th century under the name of socialism was not an aberration but a direct result of an authoritarian logic which must be roundly rejected.

The significant challenges we face in building a counter-hegemony in the 21st century are not, I have argued, entirely or even significantly reducible to the folk-political turn; in fact, there is a reasonable case to be made that folk-politics has helped move the radical terrain in precisely the direction it needed to go for such a strategy to be realised. If we wanted to reduce the hegemonic complexity of *common-sense/articulatory principle/antagonistic other* into a catchy political slogan, it's hard to think of a better contender than *one no, many yeses* - the clarion call of the folk-political movement of movements. The current lack of strategic thinking within this folk-political terrain is undeniably in need of correction, but any counter-hegemonic strategy which might hope to condense multiple left (and other progressive) positions must take the horizontalist critique of the vertical common-sense seriously. A brief examination of some horizontalist counter-hegemonic strategies will help us better understand where we are, and the work still left to do.

From folk-politics to counter hegemony; principles and forms

> [T]his "movement of movements" appears to be converging around a counter-hegemonic vision [but s]uch an holistic project is not easily posited, let alone pursued. (Carroll, 2007: 37-38).

Articulatory principles

Srnicek and Williams' contention that folk-politics is entirely unwilling or unable to construct a coherent strategy is one that does not stand up to scrutiny. A clear strategic position is evidently not part of the folk-political *common*-sense, but the picture is very different when we examine individual theories and practices which make up that common-sense. In fact, not only do we find an extensive and varied collection of strategic positions within folk-politics (Kiersey and Vrasti, 2016), we find amongst them a number of unambiguously counter-hegemonic approaches (Carroll and Ratner, 2010; Gill, 2000). One such approach is to be found in the work of J.K Gibson-Graham, one of the most influential theorists within the folk-political terrain. Their work seeks to 'de-center' capitalism in order to open up the possibilities of seeing other, 'diverse economies' which exist within and alongside capitalist logics (Gibson-Graham, 2006). Such a position by no means denies the systemic nature of capitalist hegemony, nor does it deny the need to radically move beyond it; but it does suggest, contrary to what we might consider to be a traditional leftist common-sense, that capitalism does not dominate each and all understandings of the economy, in theory or in practice. Such a view is entirely commensurate with a hegemonic reading of the world, and it is no surprise that their work explicitly grapples with questions of how best to construct a post-capitalist counter-hegemony. And, despite their focus on the individual and the local in practice (and pre-emptively challenging Srnicek and Williams' claims that folk-politics refuses to move beyond the local) Gibson-Graham understand that the counter-hegemonic potential of their work requires *individuals* to *collectively* identify with a new common sense which must be consolidated through a unifying – or *articulatory* – principle; to this end, they propose the signifier 'the community economy' (2006).

Despite the influence of Gibson-Graham, the community economy has as yet failed to gain significant ground within the broader radical landscape. One reason for this is that it is already a crowded terrain.

> We are not alone in calling for a new political discourse grounded in visions of sociality and conviviality [...] Indeed, many alternative economic movements and practices are explicitly about resocializing economic relations. One has

> only to think of the fair-trade networks [...] the farmers' markets and farm-share arrangements [...] employee buyouts [...] worker takeovers [...] the anti-sweatshop movement [...] shareholder movements [...] the living wage movements [...] a universal basic income [...]. (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 79-80)

Indeed, there is an expanding world of alternative economic discourses which might act as articulatory principles and help frame a new common-sense, including, but not limited to, the foundational economy, the solidarity economy, the social and solidarity economy, the new economy (North and Scott Cato, 2018; Russell et al., 2022). Whilst this might appear to be, and in some ways should be, seen in a positive light, challenging the neoliberal common-sense that there is *no* alternative, there is a clear problem with this proliferation of terminology and discourse; to frame a new common-sense, we will need to get behind a smaller number of positions in order to present a more coherent and understandable alternative. As I shall argue below, a significant advantage of the cooperative movement comes from it being an already well-established concept, spanning an impressive range of both geographical locations and political positions.

Organisational forms

Regardless of how we move forward in terms of articulatory principles, there remains the question of which organisational forms are best suited to help structure, develop and propagate them. Addressing this concern, Alexandros Kioupkiolis (2019) presents a 'hybrid' approach between contemporary social movement approaches to *the commons* - what Srnicek and Williams would call folk-politics - and the verticalist demand for greater strategic cohesion. Like Nunes, Kioupkiolis argues for a position which

> negotiates a variable combination and interaction between collective and 'connective action'; formal representative politics, parties, elites and diverse civic engagement; and hierarchical and horizontal, decentralised structures, rather than a full displacement of the one by the other. (2019: 233).

In implicit agreement with Srnicek and Williams, he concedes that the horizontalist approach is

> unlikely to carry on over time unless it addresses everyday problems, amasses decision-making power over key matters of public concern and devises

> institutions that combine efficacy and openness with moderately demanding levels of civic commitment. Critical engagement with ruling state apparatuses will thus be required in order to gain decisive powers or to launch effective political initiatives that push forward open and common representation. (2019: 234).

Unlike Nunes, however, Kioupkiolis sees a stark divide between the horizontal and the vertical, between 'the commons' - his preferred articulatory principle - and hegemonic politics, which he understands as inherently verticalist. He nonetheless accepts the need for a coming-together of these forces, whilst stressing that

> a conjunction of the plural, open and horizontal common with hegemonic politics could not be seamless and frictionless since they embody conflicting political logics and practices. (2019: 25).

Not only do they conflict, but, by their very nature, vertical/hegemonic forces are inherently more powerful than those embedded in horizontalist frameworks: they are

> better resourced, better organised, relatively isolated from direct collective influence and, most often, power-mongering. Therefore, effective steps need to be taken in order to tilt the balance of force between vertical hegemony and the plural commons in favour of the latter (2019: 35).

Inspired by recent examples of the social movements dismissed by Srnicek and Williams, Kioupkiolis sees evidence of such praxis providing much of the infrastructure and strategic capacity to implement a counter-hegemonic strategy. Kioupkiolis's work provides a strong counter-argument to that presented by Srnicek and Williams, and his arguments, and many of the political spaces he looks to, would make valuable contributions to a horizontally-informed counter-hegemonic project. What I want to suggest in this article is not contrary to his proposals, but complementary. That said, if Srnicek and Williams must be challenged for being overly dismissive of folk-politics, Kioupkiolis is arguably guilty of a reversal of this, uncritically looking to organisational forms and discourses which were enthusiastically embraced by folk-politics but which have been critiqued for their self-limiting tactical repertoire (Wilson, 2014). Furthermore, we must be mindful of the conjunctural reality of radical politics - of a vastly changed political

terrain: the social movements that inspired Kioupkiolis are, for better or worse, increasingly absent.

The works of Gibson-Graham and Kioupkiolis expose the superficiality of Srnicek and William's analysis, demonstrating a clear strategic project from within the folk-political terrain. All agree, to varying degrees, on the need for the left to develop a counter-hegemonic project. And they would also surely agree that, despite their efforts, we are very far from achieving it. Although by no means suggesting it is a silver-bullet which will solve all our problems, I turn now to the argument that the cooperative movement could play a significant role in the creation of broad counter-hegemonic bloc.

The Cooperative movement and counter-hegemony

Despite the electoral turn (Swann, 2020) of recent years, there is still a deep and wide resistance to the vertical common-sense and the organisational forms it is channelled through. The left of the next decade may well be one which looks to political parties and the state as part of its tool-kit, but it is unlikely to do so exclusively. Whilst Nunes and Kioupkiolis present a more considered position, even Srnicek and Williams acknowledge the need for an 'ecology of organisations' which bring the horizontal and vertical together (2016: 169). Arguably the central question the left now faces is how best to realise such an ecology in practice. For me, it is the organisational philosophy of Nunes which comes closest to capturing both the dilemmas we currently face and the theoretical way forward: the solution offered by Nunes, in the abstract, however, must be responded to and fleshed out in the concrete. We still lack a clear articulatory principle - or principles - which the left can work with. As we have seen, there is no shortage of proposals, but that is arguably part of the problem. There needs to be a process of movement behind a much smaller number of principles through which to advance a new common-sense. There also needs to be a stronger sense of which organisational forms can most effectively develop and propagate this common-sense; if a 'hierarchical party is a non-starter for the egalitarian politics' of folk-politics (Kioupkiolis, 2019: 137), we still need a 'hub of

coordination' (*ibid.*:137) which can help pull together and direct other social forces.

In this final section, I want to suggest that the cooperative movement has the potential to fulfil such a role. Unlike the fragmented and often temporary praxis which came to dominate the common-senses of horizontal and prefigurative praxis, the cooperative movement offers a considerable level of organisational capacity, and a commitment to its durability and development, And, unlike the party form, which attracts strong ideological, and emotional, resistance, leading to a sort of 'organisational trauma' (Nunes, 2021), and which is always limited by the institutional, ideological and geographical constraints of electoral politics (Worth, 2023) the cooperative movement is mostly unburdened by such associations. Furthermore, whilst efforts at establishing new articulatory principles have failed to take root in large enough sections of the leftist imaginary, the *cooperative* has a long and established heritage from which to build a new common-sense. Superficially, then, the movement suggests a viable route beyond the current organisational impasse of a vertical/horizontal binary, and towards a counter-hegemonic project capable of unifying a post-capitalist politics.

One immediate barrier to such a project is the enduring ambivalence towards cooperatives within much of the left politics – an ambivalence which is as likely to veer towards rejection as it is approval in certain spheres (Jossa, 2014). This is not the place to engage with those who reject the cooperative model entirely; the debate is a long-standing and well-trodden one and there is little value in repeating it here (Mulder, 2020). But to develop a counter-hegemony is to necessarily pull together a broad coalition - of social forces and of political perspectives - and, at least to some degree, to connect with elements of the existing hegemony. On this latter point, whilst there are very real concerns about the current state of the cooperative movement, this can be viewed as a strategic strength, opening up the possibility to connect with a large and diverse social, political and economic terrain which, however muddied, contains within it elements of a non-capitalist vision (Sharzer, 2017).

In this final section, I examine the movement's organisational logic and its concomitant (intellectual and material) infrastructure, before expanding on the question of a new common-sense which, amongst other things, contrasts 'a market economy to an economy with a market' (Coraggio, 2018: 16). In order to provide a coherent overview of the existing cooperative common-sense *and* a theoretical argument about how we might engage counter-hegemonically with it, I sacrifice depth for breadth, and offer this analysis as a starting point from which, if my arguments are convincing, we must develop a much greater level of empirical knowledge and strategic insight.

The Cooperative Capacity

> The greatest strength of the cooperative movement today is its global reach—its spread across every geographic region, its multi-sectoral character, and the sharing of a common identity. Through the [International Cooperative Alliance], the cooperative movement forms a well-defined, well-linked global network. (International Cooperative Alliance 'Strategic Plan, 2020: 2).

Although the preceding two centuries have witnessed the spread of multiple cooperative models around the world, emerging from countless political and geographical terrains, the official line of the movement is that it began in 1844, in Rochdale, an industrial town in the north-west of England. This origin story reveals and continues to reproduce an important ideological dimension of the movement around the world; whilst there is a degree of political and cultural diversity within the movement, this historical narrative allows for a powerful institutional and discursive control – over the cooperative form, and over the movement as a whole, ensuring that diversity is contained and managed. The myth of cooperation's birth in a specific place at a specific time allows for a line to be drawn from a there and then to a here and now, conferring legitimacy on its organisational heir – the International Cooperative Alliance (I.C.A). *The cooperative movement* is defined almost exclusively as any and all organisations which place themselves under the formal tutelage of this one institution. This rarely discussed dynamic has profound repercussions for the - at times distinct - political *project ofcooperativism* which can and does express itself in ways outside of these institutional confines; increasingly, we may well need to talk of two movements - a movement defined, as is now common practice,

by some level of adherence to/connection with the I.C.A, and a movement defined by some level of adherence to/connection with the political notion of cooperativism (Vieta, 2010). Here, I will make no further distinction between the two, but part of the necessary work in building a cooperative counter-hegemony must be to consider these related but distinct spheres of cooperativism and more fully understand how to strategically connect them.

As the name suggests, the ICA is an international *alliance* of cooperatives, established over 125 years ago, spanning almost the entire planet, laying claim to over 1.2 billion members, and, quite remarkably, 'remain[ing] an alliance [and] never becom[ing] a federation' (Rhodes, 2020: 6). What makes this remarkable, and not merely a point of terminological interest, is that, as with membership to any individual cooperative, the relationship between the I.C.A and cooperatives is entirely voluntary, with the alliance acting as a 'global hub' (International Cooperative Alliance 'Strategic Plan', 2020: 2) 'network' and 'forum' (International Cooperative Alliance 'About Us', n.d) which exercises considerable cultural - but little or no formal - power over individual cooperatives. Whilst it performs a number of roles - lobbying, promotion, advice - at root, the I.C.A's central task is to develop and promote the cooperative identity. We might even say the I.C.A.'s core role is the development and maintenance of an articulatory principle. Indeed, the cooperative movement is primarily a normative construct, functioning according to its famous Cooperative Principles, first established by the Rochdale Pioneers in 1844, and subsequently revised (through long and collaborative deliberation) by the I.C.A in 1937, 1966, and 1995. The I.C.A acts, then, not as a regulator or enforcer, but as

> the guardian of the [cooperative identity] which includes a definition, 10 values and 7 operational principles [which are] the minimum common denominator for all cooperatives in all sectors and all regions. (International Cooperative Alliance, 'About us', n.d.).

A thorough understanding of the Principles' functions - how they shape cooperative structures in practice varies considerably from place to place; cultural and legal differences around the world make pinning down a strict definition of what it means to be a cooperative an ultimately impossible task: but this, in many ways, gets to the heart of the movement's arguably

unique status - more formal and contained than the praxis of folk-politics, but more open than most vertical organisations.

Formally, the I.C.A is made up of 318 regional, national and sectoral organisations, situated in 112 countries. Each of these are themselves membership organisations, made up of relevant cooperatives, and operating along similar lines to the I.C.A, acting as apex bodies which provide services to their membership, promote and lobby for cooperatives, but commonly having little or no formal power. Whilst like the I.C.A they may be powerful with regards shaping a common understanding of what it means to be a cooperative in their particular geographical or sectoral spheres, and whilst they are commonly instrumental in helping governmental legislation which may impact cooperative praxis, their power is strictly and intentionally curtailed by the first and fourth Cooperative Principles - Voluntary and Open Membership, and Autonomy and Independence: depending on local legislative contexts, individual cooperatives can - and do - function with no formal or even informal relationship to any other coop or cooperative organisation. This is not to say that these organisations, and the I.C.A itself, have *no* power: their capacity to shape the discourse of cooperatives is extremely important, impacting everything from the day-to-day life of an individual coop to the global common-sense of cooperativism. Understanding in greater detail how such power functions, and to what ends this power is currently used for, would be a vast but extremely useful question to be answered if the cooperative movement was brought into a counter-hegemonic project. What interests us here is the existence of an extensive institutional infrastructure which has, to-date, succeeded in performing a feat which is truly unique in its form, longevity and scale: a globally connected network which is neither endlessly fragmented nor hierarchically controlled, and which has evolved over time, adapting to a changing world whilst maintaining a sufficiently coherent identity.

Beyond the I.C.A and its member organisations, we find an even more expansive patchwork of grassroots cooperative praxis. An unknowable number of cooperative development agencies which undertake educational training and promotion (Simmonds and Brown, 2019) sit side-by-side an equally countless number of hubs, networks and projects. At times, the

movement extends into the more conventional world of politics, through a growing number of municipal projects (Agustín, 2020) and, in some countries, such as the UK, through representation in the form of political parties - ostensibly, at least. The terrain of folk-politics has helped further establish a culture of 'new cooperativism' (Vieta, 2010), which unites numerous discourses of community organising, mutual aid, prefiguration and new (and often more radical) interpretations of the cooperative identity itself (Elzenbaumer and Franz, 2018). Some of this connects to the formal movement, subscribing to the I.C.A framework, whilst some exists independently of it. And, of course, the cooperative culture contains two of the most radical and far-reaching experiments of horizontal - or indeed any - politics in many decades - the Rojavan revolution, and the Zapatista community.

This vast organisational ecosystem means an equally impressive infrastructure: offices spanning almost the entire planet, with extensive communication channels both within and between organisations, regions, and sectors; cooperatively owned media, educational establishments, training programmes, and a regular timetable of national congresses and other small and large-scale events; and of course - money. Lots of it. Given the autonomous nature of cooperatives, it is impossible to know just how much the cooperative economy is worth, but of the 3 million known cooperatives, the largest 300 of these had a turnover of 2,146 billion USD in 2020 (International Cooperative Alliance 'Facts and Figures', n.d).

This race through the organisational architecture of the cooperative movement provides a glimpse of its infrastructural capacity. This type of infrastructure is vital for a successful war position, but is commonly lacking in horizontal spaces, and all too often in the hands of our political opponents when it comes to state power. On a purely practical level, then, the cooperative movement offers a staggering material and discursive base which could potentially be put towards a counter-hegemonic project. Equally, we get a sense of a certain organisational logic – of very considerable autonomy of individual coops, with a complex nesting of networks and federations building towards an ultimately global movement. Whilst my argument would place this cooperative architecture into a broader

bloc of organisational forms - such as those advocated by the theorists discussed - the cooperative movement itself is arguably an already-existing example of an organisational ecosystem which strikes a workable balance between the whole and its constituent parts. The balance may not be perfect, but it's hard to think of a progressive left movement or position which has come close to achieving this level of federated cohesion. Crucially, this organisational logic has the capacity to satisfy both horizontal and vertical demands.

The question, now, is whether any of this matters: can the cooperative movement be part of a counter-hegemonic bloc to move away from capitalism? Organisationally, it may be well-placed – but what about its political dimension? In the following section, I make the case that the answer to this is in large part a relational one: whilst there are significant concerns about the cooperative movement's politics – in theory and practice – there is reason to believe this can change, if the wider left is willing to connect cooperativism and counter-hegemony.

Cooperative common-sense(s)

> Cooperatives can be seen as a response, at once antagonistic and accommodative, to capitalism. (de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford, 2010: 32).

I have so far suggested that the cooperative movement is well-suited for the task of building a counter-hegemonic bloc when considered in light of the contemporary landscape of radical thought, which increasingly recognises a need for both horizontal and vertical organisational and political positions. I made this argument, in part in response to a growing critique of horizontal and prefigurative discourses – folk-politics – and in part in response to my own critique of such spaces (Wilson, 2014). I share with others the concern with a lack of strategic capacity within the radical landscape of the last two or three decades. Yet from this point of agreement it is far from clear where and how we might move forward; the cooperative movement is, I suggest, something of a litmus test as to how much the vertical and horizontal spheres can unite in terms of some additional and fundamental questions – about politics, and economics.

Multiple questions surface when we consider cooperativism and counter-hegemony: does the abstract notion of the cooperative align - at least sufficiently, if not entirely - with enough of the broader left for it to be accepted? Does the reality of the present-day cooperative movement align in the same way? Can those sides of the left reluctant to embrace the idea of the cooperative market be nonetheless brought onside, given the undeniable infrastructural capacity available to us through the cooperative movement?

Capitalists or socialists? Towards a new common-sense

Although cooperatives are commonly discussed – or at least evoked - within radical alternative organising and postcapitalist discourses (Cheney et al., 2014), the cooperative form, and the movement itself, have an extremely complex political history - which makes for a deeply ambiguous political present. This ambiguity can be found both within the movement itself and with regards its reception amongst wider left politics. Indeed, in terms of a leftist common-sense, we would have to say that cooperatives occupy a relatively small and overlooked terrain, at times prompting hostility or support, but often simply being ignored (Jossa, 2014). With the rise of horizontal and prefigurative positions, this dynamic has shifted in certain political spheres, though the 'folk-political' common-sense was by no means united in this regard, with many horizontalists opposed to any market-based economy, cooperative or otherwise (Albert, 2003). Any discussion about the political potential of the cooperative movement must tackle the broader question of if and how a leftist counter-hegemony engages with another concept the left is notoriously divided over - the market (Sharzer, 2017).

I have no illusions that the cooperative movement *will* be accepted by a broader left position; but if a counter-hegemonic bloc is to be formed, I would argue the left needs to put its long-standing ambivalence to bed and finally bring the cooperative movement into the political battlefield; as part of this, it must do the same with 'the market'. This is, I would argue, precisely what a counter-hegemonic common-sense ought to do, taking back ground ceded to its hegemonic opponent, refusing to allow a concept like 'the market' to be so fundamentally captured by the right that markets and capitalism have become synonymous.

There are two distinct but related problems with the existing cooperative common-sense: firstly, whilst many radical voices can be found within the movement, they are a minority; the majority position is perhaps best described as a third-way centrism which clearly fails to offer a radical enough departure from capitalism to constitute a counter-hegemonic position (Huckfield, 2021). Secondly, and with this being the case, we might struggle to convince large parts of the left to 'condense' around such a project. We have already seen the potential for a growing divide between vertical and horizontal positions with regards political strategy, but we have yet to consider how this corresponds to differing positions with regards what a non-capitalist economy might look like. Although the (already over-simplified) binary of vertical/horizontal politics by no means corresponds perfectly with an additional economic axis, there is an identifiable over-lapping of common-sense positions which sees verticalists rejecting all market-based solutions (or at least refusing to defend them) and horizontalists seeing the potential for markets to be part of a diverse postcapitalist economics (Gibson-Graham, 2006; North and Scott Cato, 2018). Srnicek and Williams are quite clear that they are 'seeking a systematic replacement for markets' (2016: 176). Yet they are less clear about what will replace them, making far-from concrete proposals for new 'modes of participation and deliberation' (*ibid.*:183) and a post-world work of full-automation.

In their efforts to invent a radically distinct future, however, Srnicek and Williams forget the relationship a war of position must have with the present. Whilst the idea that the right has been far more successful at hegemonic strategy than the left has been much discussed (Gilbert and Williams, 2022; Srnicek and Williams, 2016), it appears that the left is not quite able to learn from this success – a point made frequently by Stuart Hall (1990) who is quoted approvingly by contemporary theorists but whose lessons, arguably, are yet to be learnt. The neoliberal common-sense is, as its name suggests, a clear extension of preceding social and political positions; put simply, it takes a well-known, and generally supported concept - the market - and extends that into spheres of life from which it had previously been excluded; and it does this whilst defining the process

against a clear antagonistic enemy - state-socialism and the horrors of a centralised economy (Hall, 1990). Throughout this process, neoliberalism has commonly made small and sometimes large concessions to decidedly non-neoliberal positions - regulatory frameworks, union organising, and so on - whilst consistently working to undermine those same positions as and when it was strategically able to do so. Perhaps by mere virtue of its power (rather than as a developed strategic position), neoliberalism has been more able to adapt and compromise when necessary, whilst always fundamentally moving in one overarching direction; arguably, one of the lefts failures has been its inability to do the same.

Despite the explicit references made to the right's success in conducting its own war of position, the left seems unwilling to commit to a similar approach. To follow the lessons of Gramsci *and* neoliberalism, the left needs to develop a common-sense which resonates with people *now*, but which has the *potential* to be moved in a radical direction. Offering vague promises of full-automation and an end to work might excite a few, but it seems reasonable to assume that such a proposal would strike fear into the heart of many, already fearful that their job might be replaced by a robot or computer - or foreigner. Moreover, offering vague promises that algorithms and computers will replace the market will surely be connected in too many minds more to a fear of the left's legacy of authoritarian social control than it will to its lauded desire for social equality. In short, the new common-sense offered by Srnicek and Williams starts from a place too far distant to do any real work in a war of position. It is perhaps for this reason that in his more recent collaborations with Jeremy Gilbert, Alex Williams now looks to the 'green new deal' rather than full-automation; but even here there is a reluctance to engage much in the way of concrete economic proposals, and they offer no radical reconceptualisation of the market which they nonetheless accept will continue to exist. Their discussion of how we might replace platform capitalism, for example, is an obvious place to consider the ever-expanding world of platform *cooperativism* (Scholz and Schneider, 2016) yet they make no mention of this, or any other cooperative approach.

A persistent common-sense position of the vertical left, I would argue, is marked by its failure to conceive of a viable alternative to the market for all

economic activity, with a corresponding refusal to fully accept this failure: the result has been that the left has abandoned the concept of the market - arguably one of the most powerful ideological reference points of modern times - entirely to the right. A radical embrace of cooperativism and a cooperative, non-capitalist market, as part of a diverse economy, could take the difficult but necessary approach to reclaiming this ground (Wright, 2019; Meissner, 2021).

Once again, this problem is relational; given the left's enduring ambivalence towards the cooperative model, the cooperative movement has, over decades, increasingly lost much of its socialist dimension (Huckfield, 2021). It is hardly surprising then that in much of the world, those elements within the movement that do embrace a defiantly anti-capitalist position are increasingly marginalised, not only within the cooperative movement, but also by the broader left.[3] For such radicals, there is little to look to by way of a cooperative common-sense - in theory or in practice - which rejects capitalism but embraces cooperativism, and, through it, accepts the market as a legitimate feature of a socialist economy. One component of a counter-hegemony which looks to the cooperative movement must be the development of such a common-sense, and the active support of those radical voices which do exist within the movement itself; in other words, if cooperativism and the cooperative movement are to be connected to a genuinely post-capitalist counter-hegemonic project, we will need a war of position *inside* the movement, in order that it can sit within a wider war of position against neoliberalism.

Concluding Remarks

I started by examining recent efforts by the vertical tradition to reverse the folk-political and horizontal trends within recent radical terrains; yet it is clear that, on either 'side' of this landscape, there is an acceptance of the need for an 'organisational ecology' which looks to both vertical and horizontal positions. Such an ecology, however, is arguably what has been

[3] The situation differs greatly from country to country, region to region; but as global movement, radical voices are by no means in the majority.

developing over the last few decades; the folk-political common-sense was never all encompassing, or of one mind, and many vertical positions remained active alongside, and even within, horizontally-inclined movements. This hybridity of positions, as Nunes (2021) demonstrates, is not so much something we need to *create*, but something we need to acknowledge already exists. But if this is the case, if we already have something of a vertical-horizontal ecosystem, then a counter-hegemonic project needs something *more* - something which can collectively articulate and develop it.

Whilst it cannot do this work alone, I believe the cooperative movement is uniquely placed to play a vital role in this project. Its organisational structure and relative internal cohesion, combined with its vast geographical and social reach, make it extremely well-suited for a war of position, directly connecting not only to hundreds of millions of people around the globe, but doing so in almost every conceivable social field, from heavy industry to local sports clubs, housing to agriculture, through the arts, religious communities, social care, and in science, in local hubs and national networks, through municipal projects, parliamentary relationships and anarchist social centres; and through discourses of culture, values, work, economics, politics, and countless other features of the social world we live in. The cooperative movement, and the cooperative principles, thus connect to almost every aspect of life, and are expressed in diverse and contingent ways, whilst always holding on to some semblance of democratic control and some element of normative cohesion. Arguably, its temporal and spatial spread is because it has, in its own way, conducted a counter-hegemonic strategy, building a counter-power to both liberal capitalism and state-socialism.

It has also, in diverse and profound ways, 'degenerated', with many cooperatives functioning in ways that are in most respects indistinguishable from their capitalist counterparts (Cornforth, 1995). The current common-sense of the movement must be actively challenged and shifted in more radical directions – yet this is equally true of almost any other large institution we might look to; it is certainly true of most of the unions and political parties which verticalists still hope to harness for their wars of

position. For those who believe we can change *the world* through a counter-hegemonic strategy, it would seem strange to believe that we cannot change the cooperative movement through a similar process - and then put it to more progressive ends (Sharzer, 2017).

To develop such a project, a huge amount of work is needed, and this position paper is an explicit call for others to engage in such work. To those who might agree with what I have argued here, agreement will not be enough; we will need to map out the movement as it currently exists, on every analytical level - geographical, political, sectoral, cultural - and begin the work of constructing a micro-war of position within the movement. This will mean finding radical individuals and organisations and projects within the movement and helping them push it in a more progressive direction. There is already a sizeable body of work exploring cooperatives, their potential, and their problems (Diamantopoulos, 2012; Kokkinidis, 2015; Langmead, 2017): what has generally been lacking are efforts to connect these spaces, and the movement they help constitute, to a broader political strategy for social change (Wright, 2019).

The I.C.A recently developed a Strategic Plan for the next decade; it is in many ways a timid document, but as the climate crises deepens and as the political consensus of the post-cold war era begins to crumble, it is becoming increasingly clear to many that the neoliberal, and even capitalist common-sense, is in need of replacement. For all its flaws, the cooperative movement understands the need for change, and understands that it has a responsibility, and a certain degree of power, to help with this. A war of position organised in such a way as to promote cooperation and common-ownership, rather than competition and private ownership, has the potential to iteratively shift the cooperative movement itself; as support for such ideas within wider society is developed, the cooperative movement can be emboldened to push itself in more radical directions, and the voices calling for such shifts will increasingly be listened to rather than ignored and dismissed. Without the movement, and without embracing its contradictions, we run the risk of offering vague and disconnected proposals which will struggle to reach, let alone connect with, those for whom capitalism appears the only viable system. Whilst we might connect

cooperativism to other principles such as the green new deal, we will need to limit our conceptual library and find those powerful shortcuts through which we can make a radical postcapitalist message relatable and unthreatening. Folk-politics did us a great service in bringing back to life the idea that another world is possible, but we now appear to be unsure as to how to continue this project. For Gramcsi, inventing the future meant working from, not against, the present. Imperfect as it may be, I can think of no better way to do this than to harness the potential of the world's oldest and largest social movement which, for all its current limitations, has always presented an alternative to the neoliberal common-sense of competition in the wonderfully counter-hegemonic notion of cooperation.

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the author

Matthew Wilson is a Lecturer in Organisation Studies at Swansea University. He has been an active participant in the cooperative movement for many years, and is currently working on a project to make cooperatives more visible within the university setting.
Email: Matthew.wilson@swansea.ac.uk