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## **Democratisation of Economic Research and Policy by Building a Knowledge Commons: Inspiration from Cooperatives**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

The article argues that the current economic crises are deeply rooted in an institutional crisis, in a social and democratic deficit. By insisting on the virtual reality of ‘homo economicus’ and excluding alternative behaviours and rationalities of the real economy, economists are at high risk of producing inefficient and unjust theories and policies. Therefore, we propose the democratisation of economic research and policy by building a knowledge commons. The aim is to socially re-embed the economy and economics by re-defining knowledge to incorporate substantive aspects of human life and well-being as well as to embrace the plurality of people’s values, priorities and rationalities. The article begins by envisioning a knowledge commons as a space where knowledge is shared and deliberated upon by all interested parties in science and society on the basis of participatory and democratic principles and practices. It focuses on the key role of democracy to underline the social and moral values that define it and the conditions that need to be met to enhance people’s capacities to realise these values. Then the article concretises its arguments by presenting the case of cooperatives as a source of inspiration for building a knowledge commons in economic research and policy. Cooperatives offer fertile ground to develop principles and practices of public participation, democratic decision-making, redistribution and reciprocity. Moreover, they have the potential to constitute a force for social change by creating prefigurative and transformational relations for a self-governing and solidaristic economy and society. The article describes ways in which economics could learn from alternative non-capitalist economies and non-commodified forms of commons in order to employ participatory and democratic values and practices in research and policy.

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## **I. Introduction**

The current financial crisis, which led to one of the worst recessions in the post-war era, has fomented citizens' scepticism and mistrust towards economic and political institutions. In public debate, many question the capacity of Western democracies to translate people's needs into social welfare: austerity policies have led to unemployment, poverty and inequality; public goods and services in crucial areas of health, education and the environment are in decline; decisions in parliaments, elections and referenda are being disputed; freedom of speech is being threatened; human rights, especially those of immigrants and workers, are being violated; outspoken scholars, journalists and activists are being persecuted; and extremist groups are on the rise, spreading fear and violence. Still most experts in economic research and policy insist that the only solution is reaching fiscal objectives, growth and competitiveness, and fail to see that the recent depression is rooted in the democratic and social welfare deficit of economic and political institutions.

Mainstream economic approaches versed in the neoclassical tradition tend to adopt a reductive purview of the economy by assuming that all kinds of human behaviour within and without the economic realm can be analysed and explained on the basis of rational choice principles and self-interested motivations. Theoretical and empirical studies of behavioural economics and evolutionary game theory have taken steps in incorporating alternative motivations and rationalities of human behaviour, which develop beyond the economic realm and affect economic decisions, like sympathy, trust and commitment. However, they maintain mainstream assumptions: individualist and instrumental aspects of behaviour; incentive-based rather than value-laden motivations; the economic and historical superiority of capitalism and profit-maximisation; and the supplementary role of the state and society in correcting market inefficiencies and asymmetries.

The present article argues that the economy needs to be re-embedded in the society in order to transform into one that is truly social in its means and objectives. Social re-embeddedness, understood in the Polanyian sense, relies on the combination of diverse forms of social integration, namely market exchange, state redistribution, and reciprocal relations of the civil society. Moreover, it focuses on the crucial role of knowledge in achieving a social economy. Though knowledge plays a key role in the transformation of material resources and the creation of value in modern economies and maintains considerable influence over the ways we redefine and reshape our objectives, motivations and behaviour, these aspects of the social economy have received less attention.

The article supports the view that knowledge must be re-defined to incorporate substantive aspects of human life and well-being as well as to embrace the plurality of people's values, priorities and rationalities. In classical philosophy, knowledge is considered to be the most vigorous of human powers, which enables us to activate all our capabilities (physical, mental, moral and social) in order to define and attain the 'Good' of life: what things are of real value for human well-being, beyond wealth and power. Public participation and democratic decision-making are considered key elements in producing knowledge, building capabilities and preserving the Good (Cornford, 1941; Bloom, 1968; Scaltsas, 2007). In contemporary times, Sen's (1999) conception of development as freedom emphasises the importance of enabling people to develop their human capabilities in order to achieve the life they value most. Furthermore, he stresses the critical role of democracy and

pluralism in determining the capabilities and values worth pursuing. He supports a kind of human development, which does not solely focus on increasing growth and wealth, but pursues a quality of life by improving health, education, human rights, democratic institutions and the natural environment. By shifting our priorities to social and environmental objectives and collective, democratic processes, Sen’s approach resonates with recent de-growth theories, where having more material goods does not always mean having a better life; in fact, a better life may mean resisting consumerist and materialist tendencies that destroy the environment (see, for instance, Martinez-Alier, 2012; Muraca, 2013; D’Alisa et al., 2015).

To the contrary, in the age of neoliberalism and market hegemony, economic ‘expertise’, upheld by those trained in the economics discipline or/and employed by those in public policy and business institutions, is not always used for enhancing human capabilities and social values. It is predominantly used to gain wealth and power by turning knowledge not only into a scarce commodity but also into a worthless one by excluding the real economy with its social, political and moral outreach. Knowledge, the power of all human powers, is subjugated to experts’ intellectualism and paternalism, leading to theories and policies devoid of truth and responsibility, participation and welfare, innovation and social change. As a result, experts lose stock in the eyes of the public and are treated with suspicion and resistance, even in genuine efforts and collaborations to build socially-embedded research agendas and policies.

In this light, the present article proposes the democratisation of economic research and policy by building a knowledge commons. The article envisions an active and informed participation of all those affected by these decisions on the basis of principles and practices of democratic decision-making, equal distribution of resources and participatory governance. In particular, experts are called upon to engage in dialogue with the public, not only to learn the complexities of economic reality, but also to become socially accountable and produce reasonable and responsible theories and policies. The article draws inspiration from the realm of cooperatives to inform economic research and policy on ways to promote democratisation and build a knowledge commons. Cooperatives provide a fertile ground that enables us to propose a mode of production and consumption that combines economic considerations with social objectives by way of negotiated coordination and collective planning. As a labour commons, a cooperative has the potential to challenge and reshape our perceptions and behaviour in the economy by adopting principles of deliberative, democratic participation of all those whose interests and needs are affected by its activities.

The article is structured as follows. Section II introduces knowledge as a commons to democratise economic research and policy and restore scientific coherence and public accountability. Section III appeals to theories and practices of cooperatives to seek alternative modes of working and decision-making and discover ways to build a knowledge commons in economics. The article closes with some concluding remarks.

## **II. From ‘common knowledge’ to ‘knowledge commons’**

### *Envisioning knowledge as a commons*

We suggest that to democratise economic research and policy it is necessary to redefine knowledge. In particular, the ‘common knowledge’ that market forces naturally, inevitably and universally restore efficiency and growth, should be replaced with a ‘knowledge commons’, which brings human forces together to collectively discuss, assess and pursue alternative economies and rationalities that promote human capabilities and social values. The intention here is not to favour a specific alternate ‘common knowledge’ on how humans behave and the economy works. Rather it is to envision a public space in which people, regardless of class, education, gender and race, freely and equally produce and share knowledge and determine in a participatory and democratic way the values, principles and institutions that govern their behaviour, organise the economy and ensure personal and social well-being.

According to Hess and Ostrom (2011, pp. 4-6), commons is a general term that refers to a resource shared by a group of people. Though the authors focus on the production and management of knowledge in the vortex of hyper-changing technologies and social networks in the digital world, their analysis virtually applies to multiple types of knowledge. First of all, knowledge is understood as intangible human resources consisting of intelligible ideas, thoughts, data and information, discovered or to be discovered, and expressed or obtained in whatever form (including scientific or digital form), by means of personal and social processes. Secondly, unlike shared natural resources (water, forests and fishery), knowledge is typically cumulative and non-subtractive, potentially forming a constitutive force of society: as more people share useful knowledge, the greater the common good will be. Thirdly, a self-organised knowledge commons requires collective ideals and institutional arrangements, which determine in a clear and stable manner the rights and obligations of all interested parties and establish trusting relations and commonly-shared understandings of objectives and operations in the commons. Finally, the production and distribution of knowledge in a knowledge commons are inevitably related to questions of equity, efficiency, sustainability, openness/inclusiveness, democracy and freedom.

Hess and Ostrom’s idea of a self-governed commons highlights the potential of collective action at the community level to undertake the management of a commons by means of social norms and rules of cooperation, reciprocity and trust (Vasquez and Gonzales, 2016; Akbulut, 2017). Therefore, it challenges traditional views that see either the market or the state as the sole solution to the social provision of knowledge, especially in the areas of basic/general knowledge, academic/scientific research and technological/organisational innovation. However, in this framework commons governance still relies on incentive-based mechanisms that alter and adjust individuals’ pay-offs to minimise defection and opportunism. Therefore, knowledge is still pursued as a resourceful way to make strategic choices and maximise utility/profit. This offers a reductive perception of knowledge. Though knowledge is perceived as a major source of economic growth and competitive advantage, giving rise to so-called knowledge-based economies and knowledge markets,

it is pursued for its instrumental value in producing more goods and more profits over and above its intrinsic value in promoting personal and social well-being.

In the context of Marxian political economy, knowledge perceived as a profitable resource is accumulated by means of privatisation, dispossession and commodification (Marx, 1990 [1867]; Jacob, 2003; Bechtold, 2016; Vasquez and Gonzales, 2016; Akbulut, 2017). This approach offers an alternative view of the evolution of the commons. As Akbulut (2017) describes, the enclosure of the land commons was employed at the advent of capitalist production (or when it faces a crisis) to achieve accumulation and surplus. She extends her analysis to the commodification of cultural forms, histories and intellectual creativity (e.g., production and management of genetic material) by observing the ways that intellectual property rights on culture and collective knowledge can be used to enforce enclosure not only of producers' intellectual products (by means of patents and copyrights), but also over their physical and mental labour to produce knowledge (by means of employing or 'purchasing' their labour power, which itself has been transformed into a commodity). In this manner, knowledge becomes subject to expropriation and fragmentation, and producers and users of knowledge lose their autonomy.

Jacob (2003) and Radder (2010) provide an extended analysis of the debate and practices associated with the commodification of knowledge produced by universities and academic research. They observe the expansion of variant layers of commodification in academia, reflecting a shift in values and objectives towards the accumulation of capital. Universities and academics not only produce knowledge as a primary commodity in a chain of wealth creation; they also produce knowledge as 'added value' by fortifying patents or establishing spin-offs and start-up firms.<sup>2</sup> The authors further explicate how commodification in academia has led to: the predominance of commercial interests; the diffusion of an entrepreneurial ethos; the production of sub-optimal research methods, biased results and short-term achievements; the abuse of public funds for private purposes; the decline of public trust in science; the discount on scientifically- and socially-useful knowledge; and the social and moral impact of the privatisation of public knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

In relation to the field of economics, Radder (2010) points out how mainstream approaches have functioned to offer legitimacy to the commodification of science by means of their economic vocabularies and metaphors. Indeed as Madra and Adaman (2010) point out, the literature on the 'performativity of economics' suggests that the 'economisation' of the social has the potential to transform social subjectivity. When economic, social and political institutions are reconfigured to impose 'homo economicus' as the model that governs human behaviour and social relationships, they end up re-shaping individuals' motivations and rationalities so they behave like 'homo economicus'. Notably, knowledge has the distinctive potency to shape preferences, ideas, thoughts,

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<sup>2</sup> Patents or profitable firms can be sold for a considerable amount to large multinationals scouting for new, ready-made ideas, while proceedings are distributed among founding academics and the university. Additional incentives include course credits, research grants and tenure. Notably, this kind of mentality is cultivated from school, where young adolescents are invited to compete in creating and promoting new business ideas and are thus motivated to develop a business-oriented mind-set, a competitive streak, and a profit-centred vision and strategy at work and in life.

<sup>3</sup> This is particularly apparent in the area of biomedical sciences, where patents on information regarding viral diseases or genetic codes may delay cures and treatment, jeopardising public health and the quality of life.

identities and subjectivities. By fundamentally reorganising the operations and objectives of educational, academic and research institutions on the basis of ‘homo economicus’, commodified knowledge legitimises and solidifies a ‘culture’ of individualisation and marketisation. Ultimately, knowledge is not ‘valued’ in relation to advancements in science and social welfare, so this kind of knowledge is under-produced. On the other hand, commodified knowledge is appropriated by the few, who obtain the power to exploit and control others.<sup>4</sup>

However, as Vasquez and Gonzalez (2016) argue, the social construction of knowledge as a common good is grounded on a very different logic to that of the traditional commons, because knowledge is a common good *par excellence*: it is not a scarce resource; its consumption is non-rivalry; it is non-divisible; it is a non-excludable good; and it is essentially non-instrumental and self-reflexive. More importantly, knowledge creates value not simply by means of capital investment, but mainly through “the multiplicity of social relations between creative brains” and “a process of cooperation that exceeds the division of labour” (Ibid, p. 142) and “is not subordinated to the logic of economic valorization” (Ibid, p. 144). In this manner, the authors perceive knowledge as a “rebel” or an “anti-economic” resource, difficult to be tamed under the capitalist order of the market and the state. This resonates with the idea that there exist alternative forms of knowledge that support non-capitalist economies and non-commodified forms of commons in order to fulfil different social values and needs. These ideas are discussed further in Section III in relation to cooperatives.

Alas, we must bear in mind that knowledge is segregated along the lines of other social biddings, which can be influenced by, yet develop independently of, capitalist structures. Certain groups are believed to lack the intellectual and perceptive capacities to produce knowledge on the basis of other natural characteristics, like gender, age, race, ethnicity and health, and are usually identified with what are perceived to be subordinate types of knowledge, namely practical, emotive, manual, technical, or tacit knowledge. Thus, these groups are excluded from processes and institutions of knowledge production, and are patronised by those who apparently hold dominant types of knowledge, namely theoretical, logical, mental, scientific, or codified knowledge, which often require some kind of investment in education and specialisation in an area of expertise.<sup>5</sup> However, excluding types of knowledge and social groups can only cripple our human capacities and weaken our ‘greatest powers’. Rather than a process of reflection and development, knowledge turns into a datum devoid of human intellect and social purpose.

Thus, it is only to our benefit to accept and incorporate the multiple truths and the uncertainties and complexities which abound in our everyday life in the real world, including our economy. Our research and policy should not run on one single truth, but on divergent versions of the ‘truth’ and competing objectives held by multiple actors who negotiate certain issues. To be

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<sup>4</sup> Foucault (1995) argues that we should abandon the idea that knowledge can exist only where power relations are suspended and the subjects of knowledge are ‘free’. In fact, power produces knowledge, not simply because it is useful to power; knowledge enables power to create a disciplinary society of surveillance.

<sup>5</sup> It is noteworthy that relations of domination and distinction create a bias against both manual, practical knowledge, as well as mental, theoretical knowledge. DeMartino (1991) observes an activist-intellectual divide in the US, where activists may set themselves apart from abstract theoretical debate on the grounds that it does not respond sufficiently to people’s real needs and reflects the conceit of ivory-tower intellectuals.

concrete: let us focus on the topic of environmental preservation, which heavily impinges on our economic systems.<sup>6</sup> Özkaynak et al. (2012) stress that scientific analysis alone cannot be an adequate basis for decision-making, as both scientific and local knowledge are needed to address and manage the complex interrelationships among variant aspects of a specific environmental problem, especially in cases where conditions are uncertain and the stakes are high and conflicting. The main reasons are threefold. Firstly, the systems involved can be so complex that the current state of scientific knowledge would be subject to considerable uncertainty. Secondly, the issues may be so pressing that there would be insufficient time for further scientific research to significantly reduce uncertainty before decisions are made. Finally, there is no unique, privileged perspective on the system, because the criteria for the selection of data, methods and theories are all very likely to be value-laden. To deal with multiple truths and complexities, Özkaynak et al. (2012) suggest that quantitative, computer-based techniques can and indeed should be complemented by alternative approaches which rely on decision-making processes and procedures that bring together a range of information and views. Mainstream optimisation principles, result-based approaches and rules of preference-aggregating are to be replaced by alternative consensus-building strategies, which would guarantee the quality of the decision-making process by ensuring that it is participatory and democratic; it strengthens dialogue among all interested and affected parties; and it expands human capabilities and social values.

It is indeed our position that economic research and policy should incorporate the multiple truths, uncertainties and complexities of the real world by embracing a pluralism of methodologies, disciplines, and relevant ethical and social considerations within a participatory and deliberative process of problem-solving. In a knowledge commons where plurality of methods and views is valued, we can challenge the positivism of mainstream approaches, which overestimates the predictive power of economic models; underestimates the actual and considerable potential of models to function as one of multiple, complementary analytical methods; and restricts our competence to master various kinds of truths and improve our theories and policies for the economy.

Overall, our analysis reveals that knowledge constitutes a source of human power, only if it is shared as a commons. Yet several questions remain unanswered: How do people overcome the barriers that exist at the individual and social levels and prevent them from voicing their needs and interests? How do they develop their human capacities to actively, freely and equally participate in public discourse and social change? Before discussing the practical contribution of cooperatives in tackling these issues, attention is drawn to the specific role of democracy in shaping the means and ends of a knowledge commons.

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<sup>6</sup> Multiple truths and complexities are evident in the area of ecology: see, for instance, Funtowicz and Ravetz (1991, 1994), Haas (1992), O'Connor et al. (1996), Jasanoff (1997), Barry (1999), Müller (2003), O'Neill (2007), Blaikie (2008), Adaman et al. (2009), Özkaynak et al. (2012).

### *The role of democracy*

By envisioning as a commons, knowledge is held by all and developed by all. It is shaped by people's relationships and networks and by processes of reflection and social learning. In other words, knowledge is dialogue, inextricably related to values and institutions of public participation and democratic decision-making.

However, democracy remains a controversial concept. One might argue that defining the substance of democracy runs the risk of presenting it as a transcendental configuration with ideal premises and universal principles, which goes against the inclusive, pluralist and reflective principles and practices of a commons. However, as Manitakis (1987) argues, a prescriptive definition of democracy is not incompatible with a descriptive one; rather one depends on the other. In fact, a prescriptive perception of democracy is borne out of reality and at the same time it determines, modifies and regulates reality and gives it continuity by re-orienting democratic practice and organisation towards an ideal. Often democracy is simply identified with the rule of the many or with people's sovereignty, attached to the 'ideal' forms of direct democracy in ancient Athens. Yet this perception of democracy misses critical social and moral dimensions introduced as soon as the classical era of democracy:<sup>7</sup> the act of collective decision-making to determine the means and ends of the 'common good'; values of autonomy<sup>8</sup> to build institutions of self-governance and self-organisation; the role of reason, speech and deliberation from the people for the people; and the 'citizen' as a duty and virtue cultivated within the demos and agora where individual interests are publicised and at the same time socialised. Democracy is thus more than an electoral outcome determined by majority/plurality rules and vote counts; it depends on values of pluralism and freedom of speech, accountability and transparency, egalitarianism and solidarity, education and culture, mutual respect and understanding, active participation and openness, argumentation over dogmatism, tolerance over prejudice.

The present article supports the view that values and institutions of public participation and democratic decision-making are fundamental to economic research and policy. Mainstream economics may also consider the importance of democracy in the operation of economic, social and political institutions. However, they perceive democracy simply as another intangible asset, a political means, for dealing with problems of information asymmetries, moral hazard and preference aggregation. The article emphasises a kind of democracy that is not reduced to the exchange of information among different and competing sources; it is one that essentially empowers citizens by building their social and moral capabilities.

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<sup>7</sup> It also misses crucial historical and cultural aspects of political institutions in ancient Athens, such as the elitist character of democratic practice and organisation (which excluded women, immigrants and slaves); the social conflicts between various classes (aristocrats, merchants or farmers) or between collectives representing different views of governance (oligarchy and democracy); and the interludes of tyranny resulting from these struggles.

<sup>8</sup> Autonomy should not be mistaken as a kind of 'individual freedom' to satisfy one's own interest, which then should be constrained by external sources for collective purposes. A literal translation of the Greek word would be 'self-rule', that is to say, to be free and capable of governing our own behaviour.

Enjolras and Steen-Johnson (2015) distinguish between three normative conceptions of democracy: competitive democracy, participative democracy, and deliberative democracy. Competitive democracy, a basic mode of democracy, emphasises voting as a mechanism to aggregate political preferences, choose between rival interests and select representatives and leaders. Participative democracy stresses the participation of all citizens in political discourse and decision-making in order to resolve problems of indirect participation, especially the disconnection between the political system and democracy. Finally, deliberative democracy highlights rational discussion and deliberation in the public space in order to solve conflicts of interest by means of preference transformation rather than aggregation. Apparently, mainstream economic approaches focus mainly on competitive modes of democracy, while giving little attention to participative and deliberative modes.

According to Sen (1999), one of the main reasons why mainstream economics fails to explain acts of participation and deliberation on behalf of the members of a collective is its reductionist purview of the social and moral values embedded in human behaviour. The model of ‘homo economicus’, with its individualist and instrumentalist underpinnings, fails to incorporate the intrinsic and non-consequentialist aspects of values like sympathy and commitment towards the needs and interests of others on the basis of good will and solidarity. Yet such values constitute quintessential elements of democracy by fostering a sense of belonging; expressing collective needs and interests; forming shared values, goals and identities; and building collective processes and procedures for participation and discourse. In fact, Sen (1999, pp. 148, 157-158) argues that the significance of democracy lies in three distinct virtues: 1) its instrumental role in enabling people to voice and support their claims, including claims to economic needs, and receive political attention; 2) its intrinsic importance, that is, its direct importance in human living by enhancing basic capabilities of social and political participation; 3) its constructive role in the creation of values and norms by providing the public space to assess and re-conceptualise needs, interests, values and objectives within a social context. He particularly stresses the role of public discourse, which allows us to consistently reflect, debate and deliberate, and thus to uncover the fallacies, prejudices and stereotypes, which misguide and disempower us. It also allows us to learn about democracy itself: by taking responsibility for our decisions and engaging in public discourse, we learn how to participate in collective processes and implement democratic principles. Finally, he highlights the importance of democracy not only within the state, but also within families, schools, businesses and communities, in order to further cultivate our social and moral capabilities.

In the context of economic research and policy, democracy encourages us to: engage in a fundamental discussion about ‘homo economicus’; anticipate the complex economic, social, political and moral dimensions of the economy; and create a professionally- and socially-responsible discipline based on reflective processes and a commitment to scientific research and social welfare. Generally, the production and reproduction of knowledge depends on creating values and institutions that would foster and safe-guard democratic principles. However, democracy can be threatened when individuals do not have the motivations and capabilities to actively, freely and equally participate in public discourse and decision-making processes. According to Devine (1988), for democracy to be real, and not simply a formality, people should develop the knowledge and capacities needed to participate in taking and implementing the decisions that affect them. This in

turn depends on equal access to material and non-material resources, the abolition of the social division of labour, and participatory governance structures.

Firstly, in relation to political democracy, Devine (1988, pp. 141-148) argues that an appropriate balance must be reached between centralised and decentralised decision-making. Though participatory democracy identifies with more direct and pro-active forms of participation, implying decentralisation at the local level, it does not rule out democratic decision-making via representation and centralisation at a more aggregate level. Each level of administrative structure would involve representatives of all groups with a legitimate interest in the policy under consideration, beyond the interests of business and public officials. Young (2002; cited in Singh, 2015) argues that active participation is compatible with political participation and that representative democracy can be participatory by encouraging plural associational activities in the civil society. The civil society is identified with the sphere of non-governmental, not-for-profit self-governing organisations, which have the potential to strengthen participatory democracy within and outside the sphere by generating social awareness, mobilising groups, and educating citizens in voicing their concerns and pursuing social values and objectives. Devine (1988) suggests a three-way relationship between representative bodies, administrative structures and self-governing groups within civil society.

Secondly, in relation to economic democracy, Devine (1988, pp. 163-185) stresses that equal access to resources is needed for effective participation in a self-governing society. One way to achieve this is by abolishing the social division of labour (e.g., the division of labour based on gender differences or the division between manual and mental labour). This is particularly relevant to the process of creating a knowledge commons to democratise economic research and policy. Devine argues that the technical or functional division of labour is necessary to articulate and satisfy diverse and interdependent personal and social needs. However, the challenge is developing ways to ensure that knowledge and education do not convey social power, power over other people, which hinders people’s potential to engage in activities of emancipation and self-development. Practically, Devine suggests that members of society, whether they are part of a family, firm, public office, or community, should be encouraged to take on and share the various tasks needed to assure the effective operation of these collectives.<sup>9</sup> This will enable people to: develop their capabilities and expand their knowledge of different tasks with variant demands and responsibilities; anticipate the complementarity and indispensability of different activities in the pursuit of personal and collective objectives; build trust, solidarity and a sense of belonging within the group and the community; and increase the effectiveness of self-governance and self-organisation. The type of labour-sharing applied within various collectives is the outcome of democratic decisions, where all those affected by these activities participate to discuss how to allocate in an efficient and just manner the material and non-material resources available to them.

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<sup>9</sup> The present article stresses that the efforts put into these tasks must be measured in relation not only to the demands posed by the task itself, but mainly to the social service it provides. For example, ‘leaders’ and ‘experts’, who perform the more skilled tasks of planning and managing in private and public institutions, which are usually held in high esteem, should be humbled by the idea that they serve the needs and goals entrusted to them by the collective.

All in all, democracy, with its combination of social and moral values at different levels of governance, contributes to the effective operation of a commons which relies on principles and institutions of cooperation, trust and knowledge-sharing. In this context, knowledge makes power and inequalities explicit and it turns them into an issue of public debate, so powerful groups become accountable to society and social groups become aware of and mobilise to combat inequalities. Values, identities and subjectivities can change when they are brought into the public sphere and become the object of mutual dialogue, debate, understanding, reflection and revision. Given the crucial role that civil society can play in promoting public participation and democratic decision-making, the following section focuses on a certain part of the civil society comprising the ideals and practices of cooperatives.

### **III. Building ‘knowledge commons’: the role of ‘labour commons’**

#### *Cooperatives as a labour commons*

Broadly speaking, cooperatives are perceived as organisations borne out of civil society activities to implement alternative ways of working and producing on the basis of values and institutions of self-governance and social welfare. A cooperative is often defined as “an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise” (ICA, 2015). Cooperatives are founded on “values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity”, and their members share a strong belief in “the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others” (ICA, 2015). They therefore share common principles which enable them to put their values into practice: voluntary and open membership; democratic member control; member economic participation; autonomy and independence; education, training and information; cooperation among cooperatives; and concern for the community (ICA, 2015).

The present article takes the argument further by stressing cooperatives’ potential to redefine the way we work and live by fostering the participatory and democratic values which contribute to the creation of prefigurative and transformational relations towards a solidaristic, self-governing economy and society. The article is cautious in not placing cooperatives within the context of a ‘social market economy’ – a political-economic model created in the post-war period, aspired to combine the principle of market freedom with the principle of social security by giving the state an active role in balancing market competition and social development. However, atomised self-seeking individual action remains the dominant motivation and prime principle of human action, while civil society and state organisations are viewed only as a means to preserve market mechanisms and objectives. As discussed later in this section, the article takes a different stance by placing cooperatives at the heart of the social re-embeddedness of the economy and the implementation of values of redistribution and reciprocity in production. Though variant civil society organisations may be vigorously working towards the transformation of society, we focus on cooperatives precisely because they operate as

alternative production units by advocating and incorporating democratic processes and social welfare objectives within and outside these units, creating potential for social change.

Cooperatives relate to the concept of commons, because they virtually constitute a labour commons. Commons are perceived not only as forms of shared, non-commodified wealth, but also as spaces of collective cooperative labour and democratic decision-making (Akbulut, 2017). On the other hand, the history of the worker cooperative movement provides a practical demonstration of the art of collective association and decentralised control of common resources, which are crucial to all commoning practices. As de Peuter and Dyer-Witthof (2010) argue, in worker cooperatives it is not capital that uses and owns labour; it is labour that efficiently and creatively combines and shares capital and other resources to produce goods and services that respond to social needs and welfare, especially for viable and meaningful employment. Our labour becomes a social responsibility, as much as a personal need and desire. In this sense, a commons of knowledge-sharing is a commons of work-sharing.

According to Ranis (2016), many thinkers committed to the working class struggle, including Marx, Bernstein, Luxemburg and Gramsci, agree that worker cooperatives represent an emancipatory germ, capable of countering capitalist monopoly and societal hegemony. The author stresses the importance of worker cooperatives nowadays, due to economic crises, capital flight, long-term unemployment, job insecurity, and the absence of social protection. By studying various cases across the globe, he concludes that worker cooperatives enable workers to: come together for a common purpose on the basis of solidaristic values; create new motivations and identities that alter their intellectual perspectives and ideological outlook; enhance participatory involvement in the management of the enterprise, the de-commodification of labour and the equitable distribution of wages and surplus; share information on the efficient and just organisation of production in a process of collective, democratic decision-making; conceive themselves as collectivities not as private individuals striving to survive; expand collective engagement and public dialogue so as to include women, minorities and immigrants; join forces with other social movements; and create community solidarities beyond the enterprise to promote educational and outreach programmes, collective leisure and learning environments with a special focus on the articulation and implementation of cooperative values and principles. Unlike for-profit firms, cooperatives encourage the active and democratic participation of all members in decisions regarding investments and the use of material and non-material resources owned by the cooperative.

Of course, there are concerns about whether cooperatives have the capacities to escape the hegemony of the commodity form (Gibson-Graham, 2003; de Peuter and Dyer-Witthof, 2010; Ranis, 2016). The so-called ‘degeneration thesis’ portrays the limitations that cooperatives face in becoming driving forces of social change. As Gibson-Graham (2003) describe, the thesis claims that the democratic character of cooperatives may be threatened by inherent tensions between efficiency and welfare objectives, mostly due to the pressures of a global environment where the pursuit of economic profit and cost-competitiveness prevail. For instance, the authors observe that the successful Mondragon cooperatives in the Basque region of Spain have started to outsource the production of inputs to enterprises abroad in the Eastern and Southern parts of the world in order to reduce costs and maintain competitiveness in international markets. However, they express concern regarding the impact these relations will have on the ability of Mondragon enterprises to sustain

cooperative values and institutions in the region, and to transfer these principles to their foreign subsidiaries, which often operate as for-profit enterprises and apply cost-minimisation strategies of low pay and poor working conditions.

A major challenge for cooperatives in a competitive global market is raising capital. This has been a long-standing debate in the realm of cooperatives, leading to various propositions and structures regarding the distribution of resources and the relationships among members, as well as between cooperatives and other private and public entities. For the purposes of our analysis, we focus on some of the practical difficulties cooperatives face and how these strain their collective, democratic nature. When cooperatives compete with large-scale, multinational conglomerates in the global market, their internal sources of capital originating from members' shares and retained surplus may not provide adequate resources to expand and sustain their activities. Thus they turn to external resources to finance their activities. Due to the economic crisis and fiscal consolidation, public support in the form of financial assistance (grants, donations, and development funds), and in kind (physical and human capital) have become scarce, compelling cooperatives to seek alternative ways to raise capital by appealing to financial and credit institutions. However, it is difficult for cooperatives to obtain access to credit in conventional financial markets due to the collective nature of their governance structures, where resources and risks are shared and invested in the pursuit of both economic and social goals. Conventional institutions oriented towards the maximisation of private profits and financial returns will refuse to offer credit because they are unable to assess and incorporate the positive social impact of cooperatives' investments within and outside the organisation.<sup>10</sup> The evaluation and monitoring of cooperatives' eligibility and performance still rely heavily on quantitative, economic outcomes and less on qualitative, process-based assessments, which take into account the social processes of transformation within organisations and within the broader community towards a solidaristic and self-governing economy and society. What remains crucial, according to some studies (e.g., Christoforou, 2017), is that cooperatives forge networks with private and public entities to obtain access to resources in ways that do not threaten their autonomy and make them vulnerable to elite capture and exploitation.

To tackle these obstacles, some authors purport that we must alter our understanding of civil society organisations and cooperatives. Laville and Salmon (2015), more specifically, argue that these organisations should be treated as a result of a 'double-movement', a term introduced by Polanyi, whereby the economy becomes socially 're-embedded' to counter the power of capital and money. According to Polanyi (1944), the market does not rely solely on principles of exchange, but also on principles of redistribution, which belong to the state, and principles of reciprocity, which belong to not-for-profit, non-governmental organisations. Laville and Salmon further observe that civil society organisations transcend traditional public-private and market-state dichotomies and constitute a hybridisation of these different poles of the economy in order to achieve multiple, diverse objectives and resolve tensions within and outside these organisations. Similarly, Adaman and Devine (2017) argue that organisations pursuing cooperative values and principles can confront the competitive forces in the local and global economy by constructing and implementing values and institutions

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<sup>10</sup> There have been cases in which banks would require all members of a cooperative to provide collateral to personally guarantee the loan they requested. For examples in the US, see <http://www.geo.coop/node/60>.

which combine the variant forms of social integration. This process, they contend, should be coupled by a scaling up of activities, whereby the cooperative movement can encompass different physical, social and political spaces, combining forces with other social movements and developing into a participatory economic system. As a matter of fact, though these organisations are primarily responsible for building reciprocal relations in the economy, they also perform commercial activities for which they employ market values of exchange, and they serve public policy objectives via the social provision of goods and services for which they employ public values of redistribution. In this manner, they re-assess and re-define the role of the market and the state and cultivate a social and moral commitment to values of redistribution and reciprocity.

A practical way to overcome the difficulties and tensions within cooperatives may be the application of participatory decision-making, especially participatory budgeting. Though processes of participatory budgeting usually focus on activating citizens' involvement in the management of public money, they can also be found in cooperatives, where they are applied as ways to distribute surplus and use external funds supportive of social welfare objectives served by cooperatives. Participatory budgeting is usually an annual cycle of meeting and voting, which becomes part of the broader budget decision-making process.<sup>11</sup> It enables citizens to deepen democracy, build stronger communities, and make public budgets more equitable and effective. It has already been implemented in various forms by many countries around the globe, revealing its potential to enhance public participation and democratic decision-making. Though participatory budgeting processes are context-driven, they tend to comprise a set of standard steps. The first step is designing the process, creating the rules in partnership with government officials to ensure the process is inclusive and meets local needs. The second step is bringing community residents and government officials together to brainstorm, share and discuss ideas for projects through meetings and online tools. Developing concrete proposals would be the third step, where volunteers, usually called 'budget delegates', develop the ideas into feasible proposals, which are then vetted by experts. After proposals are constructed and disseminated, residents are invited to express their views and take a vote to decide how to divide the available budget between the proposals. In the final step, the government implements the winning projects, while both government and residents track and monitor the implementation of these projects and the effective use and allocation of funds. This information is taken on to the next cycle, offering residents, experts and government officials the opportunity to learn from prior experience, improve the allocation of resources in the future, and, more importantly, renew their commitment towards a participatory budgeting process.

Overall, to become a force of social change cooperatives depend on a kind of learning process where different types of knowledge are produced and shared to develop people's social and moral capacities and emancipatory activities. The following section discusses what economists can learn from cooperatives on how to conduct research and policy effectively, responsibly and democratically.

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<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, <https://www.participatorybudgeting.org/>; <https://www.citizenlab.co/blog/civic-engagement/steps-to-effective-participatory-budgeting/>

*Economics and cooperatives*

Though cooperatives and the broader spectrum of civil society organisations have been a crucial part of the economy for centuries, contributing to reform, production and welfare, limited attention has been given to the development, management and advocacy of these organisations in economic research and policy. The present article suggests that economists can benefit from the historical example of cooperatives in order to cultivate their social and moral capacities and build a sense of belonging and responsibility as both professionals and citizens. Economists can achieve this in three ways. Firstly, they can inform and enrich theories, methods, practices and policies by studying the emergence and evolution of non-capitalist economies and forms of commons and commoning, especially at the local levels, where individuals and groups develop alternate rationalities other than ‘homo economicus’. Secondly, they can learn to discuss, assess and revise theories and policies on a regular, participatory and coordinated basis with other researchers and practitioners versed in variant approaches and disciplines in order to improve theories and policies and make them more realistic, efficient and just. Finally, economists could learn ways to adopt and implement cooperatives’ ideals and institutions of democratic participation and decision-making in the public spaces they use for the production and dissemination of knowledge (including schools and universities, or the more modern spaces of innovation hubs and digital networks).

A first step towards democratising economic research and policy would be to develop alternative perspectives and theories regarding the reality of the economy and civil society organisations. Mainstream economics remains faithful to rational-choice theory and therefore views civil society organisations as another means to correct for market inefficiencies. Laville et al. (2015) and Adaman and Devine (2017) suggest a broader understanding of civil society organisations, which combines the values and structures of different organisations, institutions, disciplines and cultures in the economy, and integrates the commons, the public sphere and substantive rationality. Practically experts can discover alternative economies and rationalities by discussing in a fundamentally active, inclusive and democratic manner with other social groups and organisations, cooperative and community members, who have a direct and legitimate interest in the processes and outcomes of economic research and policy. Experts could even be motivated to move out of their ivory towers and converse with economic actors in various public spaces where citizens gather to work or deliberate, like community or civic centres, trade unions, cooperatives and associations, health and cultural centres, even public squares, streets and parks (e.g., Wall Street Occupations, Gezi Park).

Within this multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural space, economists could also engage in deeper discussions concerning specific issues that remain unresolved in the theory and practice of civil society organisations, including cooperatives. These generally relate to conceptions and rules of surplus distribution; the involvement and balance of multiple, diverse interests within the organisation and the broader community; relations with market and public actors; building networks and alliances among organisations; setting up governance structures encompassing multiple interests and administrative levels; collaborating with other social movements to support and incorporate their objectives, like human rights and environmental protection; and re-creating new individual and collective identities and subjectivities versed in cooperative ideals and institutions (Christoforou,

2017). Such analysis should take into account different context-specific factors across space and time, namely power structures, social inequalities, international relations, legal frameworks, welfare state institutions, the business ecosystem and the natural and cultural environment, which have a determinative impact on the development, or degeneration, of cooperatives. In this manner, economists could produce a research and policy framework which provides general guidelines for understanding and applying new cooperative values and principles and at the same time is open and adaptable to contextual interests, needs and priorities (see also Gibson-Graham, 2003).

Conversations on alternative theories and economies are not restricted to open public debate on academic and policy issues. They can also take place through the construction and application of research methods, which employ a combination of human and social powers not only to explain, but also to *change* society. To illustrate, in the area of field work research in the social sciences we recently observe the use of so-called participatory action research approaches, which bring together researchers, managers, participants and community members to conduct studies and analyse social phenomena on the basis of principles and practices of democracy, participation, collaboration, reflection, collective inquiry, experience, history and social change. Seferiadis (2016) offers an illuminating application of these approaches. She assesses the socio-economic processes and outcomes of a long-term action-research project for alleviating women’s poverty in rural Bangladesh by stimulating social entrepreneurship. By means of case studies, network analyses and interactive/ reflective methods, she shows that the project’s participatory processes and outcomes ultimately helped women overcome the social constraints of patriarchy in the region and contributed to their active, free and equal participation in the household and in the community. Though local development programmes for the empowerment of the poor have often been criticised for perpetuating women’s exploitation, the Bangladeshi experiment may be indicative of the critical role of social participation, deliberation and responsibility in producing more positive and desirable outcomes.

The greater challenge is reversing the commodification of knowledge solidified in a ‘culture’ of individualisation and marketisation. Practically this means that we need to go beyond the collaborative networks discussed above and take further steps in introducing variant forms of organisation and governance on the basis of participatory and deliberative democracy. In this context, Winn (2015) explicitly suggests the implementation of cooperative forms in higher education. He discusses the example of the Mondragon University, which is part of the largest federation of cooperatives in the world and is referred to as the ‘coops of coops’. It is called a worker cooperative, but recognises three types of membership: workers (academic and professional staff), users (other cooperatives, businesses and the local community), and students (perceived as producers of knowledge). Despite tensions between personal and social, economic and political motivations and goals, it appears that, according to Winn, the collective drive towards individual and economic gain is mitigated by workplace democracy and constant discussion of the cooperative’s values and aims. Ultimately, “the purpose of higher education is not the production of students for wage labour, but rather the production of knowledge appropriate to the needs of humanity” (Winn, 2015, p. 49).

Generally, civil society organisations, including cooperatives, may be seen as a laboratory for the creation of prefigurative relations and subjectivities towards alternative economies and

rationalities. Thus, they can operate as schools for socially re-embedding the economy and economics.

#### **IV. Concluding remarks**

The present article argued that the economic crises we have been experiencing in the past decade are deeply rooted in an institutional crisis, characterised by the absence of public participation and democratic deliberation in economic research and policy and by the dominance of powerful interests pursuing profit over people. Even in developed Western democracies people have ceased to have a substantial say in their way of living and being, though they are directly influenced by the decisions of researchers and policy-makers. Experts in economic research and policy have also fallen short of informing and being informed by insisting on the virtual reality of ‘homo economicus’ and excluding alternative economies and rationalities from economic discourse. As a result, they have distanced themselves from the real economy and the actual needs and interests of human beings, leading to inefficient and unjust theories and policies.

The solution proposed by the present article was the democratisation of economic research and policy by redefining knowledge as a commons. A knowledge commons is a space where knowledge is shared and deliberated on the basis of participatory, democratic principles. The article focused on the key role of democracy and the conditions that would enable people to actively, freely and equally participate in democratic decision-making processes. It exemplified cooperatives as a source of inspiration for the democratisation of economic research and policy. The idea is that building a knowledge commons requires a labour commons. Cooperatives can be considered as alternative, ‘non-capitalist economies’, provided they operate on the basis of participatory governance and democratic decision-making, and they combine values and institutions of redistribution and reciprocity. Moreover, they have the potential to create prefigurative and transformational relations towards a solidaristic and self-regulating economy and society. The present article described ways in which economists can further learn from the example of cooperatives in order to cultivate their social and moral capacities, build a sense of responsibility in the scientific and social community, and create efficient and just theories and policies. Economists can enrich theories, methods, practices and policies by studying the emergence and evolution of non-capitalist economies and forms of commons and commoning. They can also develop collaborative networks with other social actors and learn to reflect upon theories and policies on a regular, coordinated, participatory and democratic basis. Finally, they can apply cooperative values and structures in universities and generally in the public spaces within which they produce and disseminate knowledge.

Cooperatives still face difficulties and tensions in the global economic environment, where objectives of growth, competitiveness and profit tend to prevail over social processes and objectives for enhancing human capabilities, social values and a quality of life. Thus, further research is needed to resolve these issues. One issue that deserves special merit is the articulation and dissemination of cooperative values and principles. Experts are usually trained in the mainstream, so they will have

difficulties in understanding, managing and auditing these alternative economies. Therefore, a new understanding of economics is required, a gestalt switch which recognises the social embeddedness of the economy, the performativity of economics, the critical role of norms and values in shaping alternative rationalities and subjectivities, the importance of principles of public participation and democratic decision-making, and the need to redefine knowledge as a commons. Cooperatives, as schools of democracy, can still show economics the way to open dialogue, promote social change and develop a truly social economics and economy.

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