

## Cooperative Labor Beyond Growth

Jukka Peltokoski  
jukka.peltokoski@ksl.fi  
Educational producer  
KSL Civic Association for Adult Learning, Finland

Economic growth in capitalism is structurally tied to the organization of labour as wage work. In capitalism an employee produces surplus for an employer to fulfill the economic anticipation invested in the firm. This 'growth imperative' is built inside the form of wage work. It is a functional part of the social relation between labour and capital, between worker and capitalist.

In the contemporary era of permanent economic and ecological crisis, the capitalistic growth has to be questioned radically. It seems that ecological problems, such as overconsumption of natural resources and uncontrolled climate change, are tied to the continuous economic growth. The time of cheap oil is over. Technological solutions seem uncertain.

The cooperative mode of labor is an alternative to wage work. In a cooperative workers control their own work. Cooperatives can be seen as a possibility of autonomy and democracy of work.

Marx is famous for his criticism toward cooperatives, but he was also one of the early enthusiasts of the cooperative movement. He saw cooperatives as an embryonic form of 'united labor' which would substitute wage work in the socialist future. He insisted that the cooperatives should form nation wide alliances and establish their own credit systems to compete against the capitalistic firms. However, cooperatives were a promise of workers' democracy and economic planning over the repression and competition.

In the history of workers' movement it has been the workers' autonomy that has been the main reason for establishing cooperatives. Today we should perhaps think more about breaking the tie between economic growth and wage work. We should emphasize the general social and ecological crisis. Cooperatives carry the promise of disconnecting work from capitalistic order. This is where the commons come into the picture.

The cooperative movement has always had relationship to the capitalistic crisis. It has, for example, been noticed that people start more cooperatives under the times of depression than under the stable economic conditions. There is also evidence that cooperatives create new jobs even under the times of depression, whereas capitalistic firms only create unemployment. In general, it seems that cooperatives are more resilient to the crisis than capitalistic firms. There is a certain 'possibility of another work' deriving from the cooperatives as a response to the capitalistic crisis.

In this sense, the crisis opens the possibility for the cooperatives from the point of view of 'the negative'. The commons, on the other hand, open the possibility from the positive side. The commons are something that are established as a promise of overcoming the crisis and social alienation.

Michel Bauwens has argued that a problem in commons production is the precarious situation of the commoners'. Cooperatives can offer solution to the problem of income at the same time as they make possible different kinds of commons production. Cooperatives are commercial firms, but they break the form of wage work and operate as platforms for the 'doing against labour', as John Holloway would put it. They are, at least potentially, disconnecting people from the growth imperative.

However, the old problems remain. Cooperatives do not work if they are not commercially profitable. The alienation, command and exploitation can be reproduced also without a boss. Producers' democratic capitalism is still the same capitalism tied to the competition between the firms.

In this presentation I go through the theoretical critique against the wage work as well as the critique against the worker cooperative movement. I study the social conditions in which the worker control may mean disconnecting from capitalistic growth.