PATHWAYS TO TRANSFORMATION: A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF WORKER COOPERATIVES IN THE UNITED STATES AND THEIR CURRENT POTENTIAL IN A DEGROWTH MOVEMENT

By Sydney Andersen

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Approved:

Brian Petersen, Ph.D., Chair

Janet Stephenson, Ph.D.

Jessica Barnes, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

PATHWAYS TO TRANSFORMATION: A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF WORKER COOPERATIVES IN THE UNITED STATES AND THEIR CURRENT POTENTIAL IN A DEGROWTH MOVEMENT

Through the contradictions created by a systemic growth imperative, the current economic system drives environmental degradation, inequality, and declining social wellbeing. To change these outcomes is to move outside of and beyond the specter of capital accumulation. This paper examines a potential degrowth movement as the most effective pathway to a new system goal, and thus sustainable socio-ecological outcomes, exploring the role of worker cooperatives in this movement as effective sites of non-capitalist relations that foster social wellbeing and ecological responsibility.

Adding to previous literature about cooperatives as tools for system transformation, this paper analyzes U.S. worker cooperatives by asking what they represent in the context of degrowth. Worker cooperatives are not inherently alternative economic entities; however, they have the potential to create non-capitalist culture under certain conditions. To better understand whether, and how, U.S. worker cooperatives are currently producing a culture that aligns with degrowth visions of transformation, this paper analyzes interview data from 38 worker cooperatives across the United States. What motivations, values, and impacts might lead to cooperative cultures that function outside of the growth-dependent mainstream system? How are these businesses changing the broader economic, social, and ecological landscape, if at all? Results reveal potential for an alignment between worker cooperative cultures and degrowth,

leading to discussions about the necessary actions required for the mobilization of current non-capitalist sites in a broader socio-ecological transformation.

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The thought manifests as the word,

The word manifests as the deed,

The deed develops into habit,

And the habit hardens into character.

So, watch the thought and its way with care,

And let it spring from love

Born out of concern for all beings.

- - -

The Buddha

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

It grows more vital every passing year to imagine a world where people and ecosystems are no longer funneled into the gaping pit of endless growth, where they instead flourish in local networks attuned to nature. Can you imagine that? Because to imagine and to reframe what is possible is to act rebelliously. Instead of one inescapable status quo, imagine many different, localized systems, some driven by growth, but others driven by cooperation and fulfillment of collective needs. Amongst these collaborative entities, worker cooperatives stand out as an interesting case. Theoretically, they are smaller and less hierarchical, based on wellbeing rather than efficiency, and they develop with the communities that they serve. However, "mainstream" pressures to grow and to place profits over people may eventually degrade the values of worker cooperatives, leading them to lose their alternative structures and motives. But if they can resist this pressure, if they can limit their growth and size and maintain their focus on sufficiency, then they have potential as actors in a social transformation away from degradation and inequality. What follows is an interrogation of this process- a measurement of worker cooperatives' alignment with degrowth to draw conclusions about the strategies that might result in transformation.

The current "mainstream" economic system, capitalism, is touted as a hegemonic and unshakable force (Gibson-Graham, 2006b). It relies on constant accumulation and growth to continue, which leads to contradictions. As a system dependent on growth, it ironically creates environmental degradation, inequity, and declining wellbeing which all make continued growth more difficult (Watts & Peet, 2004). The current economic system, through this contradictory degradation, produces outcomes that are harmful to humans and the environment, causing climate change, uneven wealth distribution, injustice, and exploitation. To limit the harm that

climate change causes, and to move outside of the specter of a growth-dependent system, a dramatic shift in our economic system becomes necessary. While there are a variety of proposed solutions, such as decoupling or green growth, these are largely insufficient because they do not address the growth imperative that is the underlying driver of the current system. However, degrowth offers a viable alternative because it does address this imperative (Schmelzer et al., 2022).

Degrowth is a set of practices and a social movement that evolved from *The Limits to Growth* report published by the Club of Rome in 1971. Its name was initially coined by André Gorz, then later published in English for the first time by Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen (Medak et al., 2020). Although degrowth is not a new concept, it has gained notable support in the last 15 years or so (Brossman & Islar, 2020). First and foremost, degrowth identifies an endless drive for capital accumulation as the primary cause of social and environmental degradation. To reduce environmental degradation and increase social wellbeing, a planned economic contraction is necessary (Demaria et al., 2013; Kallis et al., 2018). This contraction requires a transformation of system goals and arrangements, necessitating a fundamental restructuring of social relations to reflect democracy, sufficiency, and equity rather than maintaining individualism, competition, and privatization (Hickel, 2019; Schmelzer et al., 2022). I borrow from feminist degrowth literature to clarify these social changes, where restructuring of social relations requires challenging mainstream intersectional power imbalances, such as boss/worker and man/woman, and increasing the social value of unpaid reproductive work (Akbulut, 2023; Barca et al., 2023; Dengler & Lang, 2022; Hanaček et al., 2020). However, this work regards degrowth as a whole.

Degrowth strategies utilize a combination of multiple modes of alternative production, consumption, and distribution which aid in a transformative movement. These include

cohousing, reduced working hours, and more direct forms of democracy amongst others (Brossmann & Islar, 2020; Medak et al., 2020). One of these economic aspects are cooperatives. Cooperatives are autonomous businesses jointly owned and democratically controlled by their member-owners. “Member-owner” comes from language used by both cooperatives and Limited Liability Corporations (LLC’s), where “members” have a stake in business governance and “owners” have a stake in business finances (*Rights and Responsibilities of LLC Members*, 2024; Warren, 2021). Placed together, they refer to individuals who have a stake in both, as is the case in cooperatives. Rather than answering to one owner or to faceless stockholders, cooperatives distribute financial and governmental control among many member-owners collectively. Although they are still businesses who generally seek to make a profit, they are different from mainstream firms in that they adhere to seven international cooperative principles: voluntary and open ownership, democratic control, economic participation of member-owners, independence, training and information, cooperation among cooperatives, and concern for community (Abell, 2014; Cunico et al., 2022). These qualities, at least in theory, align with the social goals of the degrowth movement that focus on participation, equity, and wellbeing (Medak et al., 2020). However, cooperatives can vary in size, industry, and structure, and many cooperatives are indistinguishable from mainstream, profit-driven corporate businesses (Abell, 2014).

This wide variety makes it difficult to differentiate between cooperatives that might align with degrowth and those that might not. For example, the American outdoor goods store, REI, is technically a cooperative. However, it has over 24 million owners (they don’t perform member functions), and recently its board of directors has been attempting to prevent employees from unionizing by firing them (Halverson, 2025; Moreno, 2025). This, along with other claims that it

has abandoned its cooperative principles, means that REI functions as a mainstream firm despite its legal designation.

To properly sort the REIs from the actual cooperatives, there are multiple ways to classify cooperative types, including by primary business activity, market area (local versus international), or ownership structure (Zeuli & Cropp, 2004). This project divides cooperatives by ownership as, because of the diversity of other characteristics like size, sector, and function, classifying them by ownership, or by who holds the decision-making power, is a reliable way to create consistent categories (Webb & Cheney, 2014). But even with this consistency, almost every academic paper and online resource provides a slightly different definition of cooperative categories (Abell, 2014; Fanasch & Frick, 2018; Preluca et al., 2022; Zeuli & Cropp, 2004). Combining these differences as much as possible, the general categories of cooperatives, as distinguished by ownership, are as follows:

- Worker cooperatives- Employees of the business hold collective ownership and exercise democratic control over governance and operations (Employees are owners)
- Producer/Small business cooperatives- Individuals or businesses who produce similar types of goods/services work together to gain shared access to better pricing or markets (Businesses or producers are owners)
- Consumer cooperatives- Community members with a common interest in the consumption of a product, like local produce or municipal solar panels, collectively buy into a business that provides that product (Customers/consumers are owners or "members")

- Multi-stakeholder/Solidarity cooperatives- People with different roles and relationships create a unique mix of member-ownerships to achieve shared goals (mix of businesses, consumers, workers and workers are owners)
- Purchasing cooperative- A group of individuals or businesses that cooperate to purchase goods at more convenient prices or locations (Individuals or businesses are owners)

This project will exclusively consider worker cooperatives (cooperatives where employees are the member-owners) because they are the only category where employees collectively own the means of their own production and hold democratic control over governance (Abell, 2014). Having both collective ownership and democratic control over governance provides a strong incentive to build a business around worker wellbeing and values-based principles rather than profit alone (which necessitates worker exploitation) (Webb & Cheney, 2014). These dual characteristics also set worker cooperatives apart from other, non-cooperative business types which may seem similar. For example, worker cooperatives may be compared to collectives, but a collective simply refers to a flat management style where all member-owners participate in decision making. A cooperative might be a collective, but collectives do not refer to an ownership model, only a management style (Zeuli & Cropp, 2004). The same is true for democratic workplaces, which refer only to democratic employee participation in decision making, not to employee ownership (Frega, 2022; Kokkinidis, 2011; Rothschild, 2000). On the other hand, Employee Stock Ownership Plans, or ESOP's, are a business structure that gives employees partial ownership over time through pension plans (Zeuli & Cropp, 2004). However, ESOPs rarely lead to full employee ownership and do not require democratic employee control of the company or workplace (Pendleton, 2006; Zeuli & Cropp,

2004). In addition, unlike ESOP's, there is no single legal structure that defines worker cooperatives in the United States. They can be legally incorporated in multiple ways, from corporations to joint-stock companies to "cooperatives," and can be either for-profit or non-profit entities (Sobering et al., 2014).

1.1 Cooperatives Past to Present

Cooperatives in the United States arose from European organizational reactions to the first Industrial Revolution. The enclosure movement in England drove people into cities and the decline of the cottage industry pressured them into low paying, harsh jobs. People responded by beginning mutual aid organizations, which led eventually to the formation of cooperatives (Pitman, 2018). The Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers, the first modern cooperative, was founded in England in 1844, and its principles have become the seven cooperative principles that define this business type today (Abell, 2014; Brouder, 2010; Parker, 1956; Pitman, 2018).

However, the first cooperative in the United States, a mutual fire insurance company started by Benjamin Franklin in 1752, preceded these principles. Franklin's company was followed closely by a dairy and cheese cooperative in 1810, and then by other agricultural producer cooperatives. These cooperatives played an important role in protecting farmers from harsh markets and long supply chains, especially as The United States expanded west over the 19th century (Pitman, 2018).

After the Civil War, cooperatives were more actively developed by higher level organizations, beginning with The Order of the Patrons of Husbandry and later the Farmer's Alliance and the Colored Farmers' National Alliance. Around 1900, cooperative activity increased as the public became wary of monopolistic business practices and capitalist goals

(Parker, 1956). During this time, the American Farm Bureau and the National Farmers Union became strong players in cooperative development. Credit Unions also began to emerge, and they proliferated particularly throughout the 1920's. This latter decade also saw the creation of the cooperation Extension System funded by land-grant universities and the USDA as well as the Capper-Volstead Act, the "cooperative bill of rights" that protected farmers' right to cooperate on marketing or processing without violating antitrust laws (Zeuli & Cropp, 2004).

The Great Depression, while devastating other business types, led to increased public and state support for cooperatives (Chambers, 1962). A system of banks was set up for agricultural cooperatives, the Federal Credit Union Act made it easier for credit unions to exist, and the Rural Electrification Act of 1937 financed rural electrical cooperatives and electrified places where investor-owned utilities would not serve (Pitman, 2018). Thousands of cooperatives sprung up, creating jobs and some level of economic autonomy (Baskaran, 2015). This combination of federal and public interest continued through World War II and afterwards, despite a post-war reduction in state cooperative support. Agricultural cooperatives continued to prosper, but this was now due in part to consolidation through mergers that aligned with the broader agricultural industry trends of the time (Pitman, 2018; Zeuli & Cropp, 2004). This process continued through the remainder of the 20th century, leaving agricultural cooperatives as some of the biggest corporations in the country (Sridhar & Bareeche, 2022; Zeuli & Cropp, 2004). Ironically, I will note that it was the "magna carta" Capper-Volstead Act that primarily allowed this bloat to happen, as a document meant to protect marginal underdogs now guarded the rights of ever fewer and larger cooperative giants (Guth, 1982; Phillips, 2019).

The 1960's and 1970's gave rise to a shift in the cooperative movement. Prior, cooperatives had served to protect workers from economic instability and to address community

needs (Pitman, 2018). But in this period cooperatives also began to incorporate social and political motivations into their foundational rationale. This was an especially fruitful time for consumer cooperatives as they focused on combining the consumer desire for organic food with involvement in social movements and anti-capitalist sentiments (Baskaran, 2015). Although many of these cooperatives failed going into the economic downturn of the 1980s, they provided an important framework for later cooperatives and food movements (Pitman, 2018; Zeuli & Cropp, 2004). On the other hand, that same 1980's downturn resulted in a strong interest in worker cooperatives because of the way they preserved jobs and distributed income more equally- worker cooperatives are often more popular during periods of economic stress (Baskaran, 2015; Zeuli & Cropp, 2004). This was also the case in the aftermath of the 2008 recession. While many mainstream companies were reeling, worker cooperatives were far less affected, in many cases laying off none or very few workers in comparison (Webb & Cheney, 2014). Post-recession, worker cooperatives have more than tripled in the United States since 2008, and roughly 40% of them transitioned or started in the 2010's (Democracy at Work Institute & U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives, 2023). Perhaps the growing popularity is a lingering reaction to the recession, or perhaps there are other factors which contribute more, such as the 'silver tsunami' of baby boomers looking to sell their businesses and retire (perfect for conversion into a worker coop) or increases in state support for cooperatives in some areas (Anzilotti, 2018; Love, 2023).

However, this abundance of worker cooperatives is not equally distributed across the United States. There are higher concentrations in areas like the San Francisco Bay Area, Boston, New York City, Chicago, and western North Carolina (Abell, 2014). This can be ascribed in part to the aforementioned state support, which varies drastically from state to state. This is one

reason that states like Arizona might have so few worker cooperatives- while Arizona has allowed any business to incorporate as a cooperative since 2016, there are no state-funded incentive programs or additional legislation to support worker cooperative formation (Thrive Consultancy Inc., 2024). Comparatively, municipalities with higher numbers of cooperatives often correlate with more city or state aid- for example, New York, NY currently has the highest concentration of worker cooperatives. However, prior to 2015, there were only about 14 worker cooperatives in the city limits. Then, in 2015, New York City passed a bill that dispensed 1.2 million dollars to build a network for cooperative financing and management and to create the Worker Cooperative Business Development Initiative (WCBDI) within their Department of Small Business Services. By 2018 the WCBDI budget had more than doubled and the number of worker cooperatives in the city had more than quadrupled (Sutton, 2019).

This is not to say that federal aid doesn't matter. In 2023 the Biden Administration passed the Worker Ownership and Readiness and Knowledge Act, which is dispensing $50 million over five years (starting in October of 2024) to create a new initiative within the Department of Labor to promote and support employee ownership programs (Employee Benefits Security Administration, 2023; U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives, 2023). However, the federal government has not historically placed great emphasis on worker cooperatives. And why would they, for a small sector that is based on principles antithetical to their status quo ideology (Medak et al., 2020; Wiksell, 2020)?

1.2 Linking Concepts

Degrowth, although it is a set of ideas that effectively addresses necessary system changes, does face a few critiques. One critical angle questions how networks, relationships, and

economies can be truly revolutionary when they must emerge from a system that is entirely dominated by a growth-dependent, individualistic ideology. From this perspective, degrowth cannot be realized from within a growth-dependent economic framework since it is antithetical in its strategies and goals (Boonstra & Joosse, 2013). However, if the mainstream economic system is indeed an all-dominating ideology, then that means it is impossible to realize degrowth at all. This critique is valid if one accepts complete system domination, but there is another theory- the economic imaginary- which claims that capitalism is not dominant but rather exists as one amongst a plurality of coexisting economic systems. The economic imaginary, which developed from feminist thought, decenters the mainstream system and frames non-capitalist economic sites and actors as viable alternatives. This reframing plays a role in critiquing capitalism and encouraging system change (Gibson-Graham, 2006b, 2014). Specifically, the economic imaginary provides space for social change to occur from within already existing alternative, non-growth-dependent economies, such as bartering, cooperatives, and unpaid labor (Bogoeski et al., 2023; Fischer & Stedman, 2020). By engaging with the economic imaginary, alternative economies begin to appear in multitudes, ever-present and waiting to be expanded upon and invested in.

Worker cooperatives are one of these alternatives if they can adhere to the seven cooperative principles and resist pressures from the mainstream economy to act like mainstream firms (Abell, 2014; Cunico et al., 2022). Specifically, mainstream system goals result in businesses that are privately owned and organized around profit maximization and shareholder value rather than wellbeing (Levy, 2017; Tyree-Hageman, 2013). Additionally, mainstream businesses tend to organize in a hierarchical fashion to streamline authority and responsibility, increasing internal efficiency at the cost of democracy. They seek to maintain business growth

by reducing costs and raising production (Weber, 1947), and they align with a growth imperative by expanding both structurally and spatially through movement into new markets and through the proliferation of multi-national corporations and franchises (Dunning, 2000). Generally, key characteristics of mainstream firms are hierarchy and a growth-oriented objective. This is a response to the demands of the mainstream system- one that seeks profit above wellbeing, private ownership above collectivism, and growth above the needs of the planet (Hinton, 2020; Shimshon & Nitzan, 2020).

In contrast, worker cooperatives tend to be smaller and have a more horizontal structure (meaning smaller differences in power and position across employees) than mainstream businesses. These qualities- limited size and horizontal workplace power dynamics- position worker cooperatives as potential sites for challenging and overturning "mainstream" ideologies of growth and hierarchy (Bretos & Marcuello, 2017; Schmelzer et al., 2022). Worker cooperatives also provide higher levels of wellbeing for their member-owners, and, in times of economic downturn, they do not conduct layoffs like mainstream businesses (Pérotin, 2013). Cooperatives become more popular during times of crisis for this reason, as well as when people feel economically or socially exploited (Abell, 2014).

1.3 Research Statement

Ample evidence exists to support the conclusion that worker cooperatives operate on different principles than mainstream, growth-dependent firms (Abell, 2014; Gibson-Graham, 2006a; Schmelzer et al., 2022). However, what remains to be explored is how well this business structure functions in alignment with degrowth "on the ground." Although there is literature to suggest that the culture of worker cooperatives is non-capitalist, they may not always adhere to

principles of equity, wellbeing, and democracy in practice (Cunico et al., 2022; Hinton, 2021; Meyers, 2022; Sobering et al., 2014; Wiksell, 2020). Worker cooperatives can choose to prioritize growth, taking on the internal structure and profit motivations of a mainstream firm (Cunico et al., 2022). And, in some cases, the spatial and social contexts of cooperatives are tightly intertwined with social norms and state and corporate structures. A cooperative might look very different embedded in an economy mostly made up of other cooperatives, or in a state with no support and no networks for cooperatives. Under the latter conditions, worker cooperatives are highly pressured to organize along capitalist principles, whereas they might act as alternative economic actors in the former situation (E. O. Wright, 2010).

In addition, a degrowth economy is an inherently gender-equitable society (Schmelzer et al., 2022). Worker cooperatives can address gender inequalities, supporting broader feminist social desires via their ability to challenge traditional workplace power relations and expectations. However, this is not legally binding and depends on the hierarchy and size of the organization, as well as its commitment to competition with mainstream firms (Meyers, 2022; Sobering et al., 2014). And, in some cases, worker cooperatives still experience, and reproduce, gender inequalities (Wanyama, 2014). Worker cooperatives have a structure that can create increased equity, but a gender gap still exists with regard to leadership and opportunity. This is a pervasive problem that persists in worker cooperatives despite differences in governance structure and organizational goals. Women have a much higher presence and rate of decision-making in worker cooperatives versus other types of cooperatives, but inequalities which exist in other areas of life (lack of access to education, barriers to entrepreneurship, lack of childcare, etc.) can carry into the cooperative setting (Wanyama, 2014). One part of this is also intersectional disparities- while cooperatives respond to class-based problems within capitalist

systems, they do not necessarily have to support gender problems or racial problems (Sengupta, 2015). Worker cooperatives can either support neoliberal gender disparities or offer an alternative to them, all based on how committed they are to creating a governance structure that is conceived by women or that seeks to distribute authority in a way which challenges mainstream workplace hierarchies (Meyers, 2022; Sengupta, 2015). The issue is that not all worker cooperatives do, or can, place value on uplifting diverse voices in this way or seek to challenge authority hierarchies.

Taking this variety of reported behaviors into account, the aim of this study is to explore how worker cooperatives in the United States are actually functioning- whether or not, in practice, they produce a collective culture that has different goals and outcomes than the mainstream system. Research questions seek to understand the actual potential of worker cooperatives as a way to achieve cultural change towards economies that are not dependent on growth, and how well their current cultures align with degrowth. This project addresses:

1. To what extent do worker cooperatives' cultures support an alternative economic structure?
2. If worker cooperatives are alternative economic actors, do their cultures support degrowth?

To answer these research questions, both semi-structured interviews and website content analyses were conducted with 38 worker cooperatives across the United States. Research is addressed in a cultural context, where culture is defined as shared and learned patterns of motivators, activities, and materiality that interact dynamically with each other and also with

other cultural assemblages across varying scales (Stephenson 2018). Culture is the growth-imperative of the socially constructed mainstream economic system, and it is also the non-capitalist values held by one worker cooperative. Ultimately, culture is able to engage with nonlinear relations between actors, ideology, agency, and system change. Understanding how these elements might create system change or prevent it is integral to transforming broader social relationships with profit and consumption towards degrowth goals (Stephenson, 2023).

The cultures framework, a conceptual model that allows for the assessment and explanation of how a culture is connected to certain outcomes, is used in this project to analyze how the culture of worker cooperatives might result in outcomes that support (or do not support) an alternative economic system (J. Stephenson et al., 2010; J. Stephenson, 2023). By framing worker cooperatives through the concept of the cultures framework, the study explores how different alternative economic tools might fit into the context of systems based on cooperation and democracy rather than growth and accumulation. Worker cooperatives provide increased wellbeing for workers, as well as offering the potential for increased gender equity, but it is unclear how central these elements are to their actions and values. There are some studies about how the practices and motivations of worker cooperatives specifically uphold the goals of, and might act as a tool for, economic alternatives like degrowth (Cunico et al., 2022; Gradin, 2015; N. Harris & Jervis, 2024; Peuter & Dyer-Witheford, 2010; Preluca et al., 2022; Wiksell, 2020). However, not many discuss this from a cultural angle or focus on current capacity for transformative cultural outcomes. To contribute to this area of literature, my thesis project will focus on worker cooperatives across the United States, asking if, and how, they might fit into the context of a pluralist economy and act as a tool for cultural transformation.

The following chapters serve to set up and explore the novel outcomes of this work. Chapter two is a literature review that provides context for the study and how it will contribute to broader literature. Chapter three will outline the methods used for data collection and analysis. Chapter four will then report on the results of both the website content analysis and the interviews. Chapter five will lay out the discussion, and Chapter six will reflect on the work and set up future research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

To analyze the relationship between worker cooperatives, alternative economies, and degrowth, it is necessary to explore why an alternative system is necessary in the first place. The current mainstream economic system, as I have mentioned, is driven by continual growth and accumulation (Schmelzer et al, 2022). This growth imperative has utilized harmful tactics to maintain itself, namely the false separation of humans from their environment, the alienation of workers from their labor, and the production of a culture of false scarcity, competition, and individualism (Medak et al., 2020). Along with the current system, the process of neoliberalism has aided the movement of wealth and power into the hands of geographically northern and upper-class elites and greased the wheels of economic inequality through privatization, free trade, and private property (Hardt & Negri, 2003; Harvey, 2007). However, despite the fact that neoliberalism claims to promote economic growth, it has had only limited effectiveness for expanding the economy (Harvey, 2007). Rather, its ideology of individualism, paired with elite accumulation by dispossession of common goods, has created yawning wealth gaps and stoked colonialism as capital performs spatial shifts to avoid collapse (Foster et al., 2011; Harvey, 2007).

However, after the 2007-2008 financial crisis, scholars debated whether this period of neoliberalism was coming to an end. After the crisis, the ways that the state chose to bail out the financial sector and how they failed to reconstruct a social safety net led to widespread public desire for another sort of system (Aalbers, 2013b; Harvey, 2009; Peck & Theodore, 2019). Post-crisis, public interest turned towards economic and social alternatives, as evidenced by global collective mobilizations and a rapid rise in the number of U.S. worker cooperatives (Aalbers, 2013a; Democracy at Work Institute & U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives, 2023; Luna,

2015). However, despite hopeful expectations about how the financial crisis might expose status quo contradictions and lead to successful system change, this kind of action did not come to pass (Harvey, 2009). This was partly due to neoliberalism's relationship with crisis- it creates and manages crises in ways that further the upward movement of wealth rather than faltering or failing (Harvey, 2007; Aalbers, 2013b). For this reason, although the original ideology of neoliberalism might have fallen away, its mechanisms are still in place (Aalbers, 2013a). States continue to act in ways that support accumulation by dispossession for the benefit of elites, and will continue to do so regardless of system crises that arise (or are manufactured) (Aalbers, 2013a; Harvey, 2007; Peck & Theodore, 2019).

Scholars ultimately agree that, rather than the end of neoliberalism, the 2008 financial crisis marked a restructuring of its qualities. Post-2008, neoliberalism has taken a turn towards authoritarianism (Aalbers, 2013a; Arsel et al., 2021; Bruff & Tansel, 2019; Peck & Theodore, 2019). Neoliberalism and authoritarianism have always been intertwined, but the contemporary turn towards "authoritarian neoliberalism" is marked by a distinctive mixture of austerity and reactionary conservatism that almost seems to contradict "old" neoliberal tenets (Arsel et al., 202). Promises of free trade and self-regulating markets have been supplanted by a prioritization of legal mechanisms and consolidation of state power at the expense of public participation as well as the use of state apparatuses to repress oppositional social forces (Arsel et al., 2021; Bruff & Tansel, 2019). In addition, the 2008 crisis exacerbated social landscapes made uneven by neoliberalism, which gave rise to reactionary right-wing populism amongst those who felt marginalized (Peck & Theodore, 2019). Neoliberal authoritarianism captured this same anger that its own policies had created, reestablishing authority by accusing the state of capture by progressivism and building on feelings of nationalism and xenophobia (Arsel et al., 2021; Peck

& Theodore, 2019). These social aspects are paired with a "business-as-ususal" deregulation, privatization, and dispossession (Peck & Theodore, 2019).

This recent theme can be connected to broader theoretical claims about future system trajectories. A wide variety of pathways have been predicted by scholars, anywhere from a return to Keynesian economics and a restrengthening of western dominance to a rise of non-western powers that will replace the west (J. Harris, 2019; Luna, 2015; Mignolo, 2011). However, exposure to continuing neoliberal legislation and the compounding negative socio-ecological results of a growth-dependent economy leads people towards nationalism and isolationism, which in turn can lead to neo-fascism (Daggett, 2018; J. Harris, 2019; Malm, 2021, 2021; Mocombe, 2019; Satgar, 2021). This is the presentation of an extreme trajectory- the current national rise in populism is also associated with nationalism and isolationism and is certainly not fascist (Campani et al., 2022). However, increasing social and ecological degradation under a growth-imperative, paired with rising disenfranchisement and discontent, can lead to certain fascist futures (Malm, 2021). For example, "fossil fascism," introduced by Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective, describes a reactionary right response to the threat of a world without the fossil fuel industry. Right-wing attachment to fossil fuels is tied up in western ideological ideas about racial supremacy and masculine, individual identity (Daggett, 2018; Malm, 2021).

Scholars who warn about neo-fascist futures point to a recent rise in right-wing activity to claim that the steady social transition towards fascism has already begun (Satgar, 2021; W. Stephenson, 2021). However, this project contextualizes these positions within a broad economic imaginary. Rather than accepting future system trajectories as a linear progression, the economic imaginary favors the idea that a plurality of alternatives (including fascism) exist simultaneously within the economic landscape (Alperovitz & Dubb, 2013; Gibson-Graham, 2006b; Kennedy,

2020; Naranch, 2002; Zanoni et al., 2017). While this does not negate the threat of fascism or continued neoliberal state control, it does challenge their perceived dominion by decentering them and opening space to consider alternatives. This project also draws on Erik Olin Wright's idea of interstitial change to understand how economic and social transformation might emerge from the varied economic landscape and coalesce into a social movement.

Interstitial change relies on grassroots, bottom-up strategies for transformation (E. O. Wright, 2010). However, not every degrowth scholar agrees with the idea that so much emphasis should be placed on bottom-up strategies. Degrowth is not a unified theory, but rather a collection of studies with a common objective to expose the harmful outcomes of exponential economic growth and to work towards alternative trajectories for social development (Boonstra & Joosse, 2013). In fact, there are five distinct sub-currents within the degrowth movement, each with varying preferred pathways to system transformation. They are: sufficiency-oriented critics of civilization, immanent reformers, voluntarist-pacifist idealists, a modernist rationalist Left, and the alternative practical Left (Eversberg & Schmelzer, 2018). The heaviest tensions exist between the critics of civilization and the rationalist leftists- the leftists place emphasis on policy while the critics, who are deeply influenced by anarchism, place emphasis on practice (Asara, 2022; Eversberg & Schmelzer, 2018; E. O. Wright, 2010).

At the 2018 International Degrowth Conference in Malmö, Sweden, a rift emerged within the degrowth community between those who favored stronger top-down control (led by Andreas Malm) and those who favored breaking down the obstinate global status quo through bottom-up approaches (led by Ruth Kinna) (Leitinger, 2018; "Looking Back on the 6th International Degrowth Conference for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity," 2018).

Ultimately, this division amongst degrowth scholars and activists represents opinions which stem from a pluralist movement that needs diversity to exist and to succeed (Asara, 2022). While this project interrogates a bottom-up, interstitial pathway to degrowth goals, it is not necessary to make wider claims about which division within the degrowth movement its outcomes align with. Every degrowth sub-current agrees on the same fundamental vision: that an economic contraction is necessary and that a system transformation which addresses capital accumulation and achieves this contraction will result in increasing socio-ecological wellbeing (Eversberg & Schmelzer, 2018). Also, given the extent and speed of system change required by this vision, it is unlikely that a new system can emerge from bottom-up or top-down strategies alone. In reality, a mixture of simultaneous strategies are required (Buch-Hansen et al., 2024; E. O. Wright, 2010).

2.1 Theoretical Angle: Gibson-Graham's Economic Imaginaries

This project follows the work of Gibson-Graham by supposing that the capitalist, growth-dependent economic system is not supremely dominant- there are alternative systems and activities in the same space as the capitalist ones (Gibson-Graham, 2006b). Put another way, the ideology of mainstream, growth-dependent economies doesn't definitively cause a cycle of perpetual accumulation, but rather it simply justifies one way of looking at reality where capital accumulation and growth are the norm (Walsh, 2020). Gibson-Graham's economic imaginary decenters this growth imperative, allowing non-capitalist forms of production, from slavery to cooperatives, to be analyzed and considered as sites of alternative economies (Gibson-Graham, 2006b). And in fact, according to Smith (2024), Gibson-Graham's ideas about economic pluralism actually reject the notion of a growth imperative at all because the use of "imperative,"

even by degrowth scholars, serves to reinforce the ideological strength of the mainstream (Gibson-Graham, 2006b; Smith, 2024). Imperatives close off possibilities and communicate disempowerment (Smith, 2024). However, a growth imperative is the foundational characteristic of the capitalist system, and using this imperative language is common across literature that seeks to reject it (Barca et al., 2023; Jessop et al., 2008; Schmid, 2019). For this reason, I invoke both terms despite their tension.

Reframing capital's presumed hegemony in the context of a pluralist economic landscape plays a role in supplanting it, critiquing it, and further encouraging alternatives- rethinking the economy is a revolutionary task (Gibson-Graham, 2006b, 2014; Zanoni et al., 2017). Considering a plurality of non-capitalist sites is also critical for imagining pathways to system transformation, as currently marginalized actors can grow in size and influence over time (Bogoeski et al., 2023; Gradin, 2015). It is important to note here that this refers to 'undesirable' alternative enterprises like slavery as well as cooperative ones (Gibson-Graham, 2006b)- they are both non-capitalist alternatives as I mentioned. However, because of the narrow scope of this project, I will focus specifically on 'desirable' alternatives like worker cooperatives (not slavery, feudalism, etc.). Focusing on these particular types of alternatives effectively analyzes system transformation informed by degrowth- the slow spread of heterogenous shifts in response to the contradictions of the mainstream system that ultimately coalesce into a broader bottom-up movement (Medak et al., 2020; Schmelzer et al., 2022).

Gibson-Graham's economic pluralism- the idea that the economy is made up of a rich diversity of markets and activities- provides a solid theoretical angle for interrogating how worker cooperatives contribute to economic alternatives (Gibson-Graham, 2006b). According to Gibson-Graham, these alternatives exist at the social margins and thus, attempts to develop non-

growth-dependent and democratic practices and institutions must happen in a visionary, revolutionary interstices (Gibson-Graham, 2006b, 2008). These visionary spaces are the economic imaginary- the place where values, ethics, actions, and new ideas meet. It is understood as a space of indeterminate potentiality, the "ground of reason" and fundamental to an understanding of the connections between the self and the world (Gibson-Graham, 2001, 2006b; Kennedy, 2020; Naranch, 2002). In addition, it is anti-essentialist, relying on the contingency of outcomes rather than structural logic (Gibson-Graham, 2008). Critically, imaginaries are seen as having the ability to reconfigure identity beyond 'worker' or 'owner,' and this ability can thus reconfigure power differentials and economic relationships in a way that can lead to tangible relational shifts (Gibson-Graham, 2006b; Zanoni et al., 2017).

The idea of the economic imaginary comes primarily from feminist modes of thought. It originated from Lacan, but in the feminist formulation it specifically draws a connection between the self and the power structures and possibility of emancipation outside the self (Naranch, 2002). It is also conceptualized as a place with a radical nature, which lends to the way Gibson-Graham use it to discuss economic imaginaries. In the imaginary, the supposed dominance of capitalism becomes a combination of commonly held values, like phallocentrism and commitment to production, rather than an all-encompassing force (Gibson-Graham, 2006b; Naranch, 2002).

Furthermore, Gibson-Graham advocate for what they call "weak theory" and "thick description" to interpret economic identity and potential social change. By this, they refer to an emphasis on the description of the complex social and economic interactions without the focused lens of theory pulling the interpretation of those interactions in any predetermined direction (Gibson-Graham, 2014). Weak theory applied to diverse economies does not assume the

direction of economic change but instead looks out for the differing conceptions and identities across economic landscapes. Within this, the researcher has the option to emphasize certain threads, focusing on a story that reflects their own political choices (Geertz, 1973; Gibson-Graham, 2014).

The economic imaginary, ultimately, is a way of looking at pathways to degrowth that offers hope and greater expectations- academics and activists alike cannot make real what they can't imagine, and this imagination is a powerful tool (Naranch, 2002). Using this conceptual framework is a way to describe the interactions of worker cooperatives without assuming a predetermined outcome and to explore the success of current alternatives (Gibson-Graham, 2014). Although, it is also relevant to include here that Gibson-Graham present a critique of the term "economic alternative." It falls into the 1/0, or man/Other binary that is characteristic of patriarchy under capitalism, where all economic alternatives are relegated to an interconnected and inferior Other, placed in relation to a centered "mainstream" (Cameron & Gibson-Graham, 2003; Salleh, 1997; Schmelzer et al., 2022). This is the same binary that ecofeminists reject because it provides a basis for gendered and ecological repression (Salleh, 1997). This brings up reflexive questions about how my own language in this project might diminish the power of worker cooperatives by calling them alternatives. Rather than "alternative," why not call them the system and call capitalism something else? But ultimately Gibson-Graham point out that every term "has its dangers" (2006b), and so my choice of another name might not have resolved the capitalocentrism underlying the language of comparison.

2.2 Real Utopias: "Transition" as Transformation

Erik Olin Wright, in his book *Envisioning Real Utopias (2010)*, provides a framework for understanding transformative social change through three interconnected strategies: ruptural transformation, symbiotic transformation, and interstitial transformations (E. O. Wright, 2010). These strategies, together, offer an approach to envisioning and enacting alternative systems-utopias that are real and cannot be dismissed as an unattainable fantasy (Bogoeski et al., 2023; E. O. Wright, 2010). The first strategy, ruptural transformation, is characterized by its emphasis on radical change through revolutionary means, advocating for a decisive break with the current system's mainstream structures to dismantle them entirely. This is the most direct method for achieving transformation, although also the most difficult and seems impossible in our current economic state. The second strategy, symbiotic transformation, emphasizes the potential for cooperation and collaboration between existing social forces, such as the importance of building alliances and fostering relationships among diverse groups to create a more equitable society in the present. This results in gradual changes that enhance any elements of democracy or equality within the mainstream system, solving daily livelihood challenges in a way that the other two types do not. This may not be enough to actually achieve anything different, and may just act as a sort of pacifier, but Wright puts emphasis on its ability to engage with the state in ways that neither of the other transformational methods do. Finally, the third strategy, interstitial transformation, emphasizes the creation of alternative institutions and practices within the cracks of the mainstream system. The aim is to build upon existing alternatives, letting "new," more beneficial social and systemic arrangements coexist with, and eventually challenge, the "dominant" culture. In this way, localized initiatives coalesce to achieve broader systemic changes over time (E. O. Wright, 2010).

This project engages with Erik Olin Wright's idea of interstitial change for several reasons. First, Wright (2010) explicitly mentions that worker cooperatives are a prime example of an interstitial actor (E. O. Wright, 2010). And second, the coalescence that Wright describes of multiple alternative institutions and arrangements into an interstitial movement aligns with the theoretical basis of the feminist economic imaginary on which this project rests (Gibson-Graham, 2006b). The mainstream economy attempts to marginalize economic alternatives, "allowing" them to exist in certain spaces by explaining their existence in a way that serves its ideology (Gibson-Graham, 2006b; E. O. Wright, 2010). Through interstitial change, Wright presents a strategic vision for expanding localized alternatives into viable movements in a way that rejects these ideological attempts and supports economic pluralism (E. O. Wright, 2010).

In addition, scholars tend to disagree on appropriate strategies for a potential degrowth system transformation, or to leave these aspects underdeveloped (Schmid, 2019). However, while a variety of simultaneous top-down and bottom-up strategies are most likely required (Buch-Hansen et al., 2024), some studies support that an accumulation of varied bottom-up actions, strategies, and localized cultural changes are a potential future pathway (Boonstra & Joosse, 2013; Kallis, 2011; Kallis et al. 2018). This fits well with interstitial change, offering a potential theoretical strategic alignment.

Engagement with interstitial change also requires clarification on what transformation means in the context of this project. Transformation is a diverse and highly contested term (Brossmann & Islar, 2020; Brown et al. 2013; O'Brien 2012), and varies between social science disciplines (Brown et al., 2013). Literature on transformation often disagrees, or does not adequately resolve, critical aspects such as scale, who constitute transformational actors, and the point at which transformation has occurred (Blythe et al., 2018). Literature also often conflates

adaptation and transformation, which can lead to a co-opting of transformation by mainstream ideology to maintain the status quo (Blythe et al., 2018; Nelson et al., 2007). To avoid this, transformation can be distinguished from adaptation by its outcomes, which are characterized by the crossing of a threshold into a fundamentally new system with new goals and cultures (Brossmann & Islar, 2020; Brown et al., 2013; Nelson et al., 2007). Crossing this threshold requires multi-scalar shifts in power, ideology, and socio-ecological relations (Blythe et al., 2018; Brossmann & Islar, 2020).

Despite this reductive description of the literature, it is important to maintain plurality within discussions about transformation to keep the term from being reduced to a single perspective that could be co-opted by the mainstream (Blythe et al., 2018). For this reason, I do not attempt to characterize ongoing discussions about how transformation must come about and how it happens- for the scope of this project, I will use Erik Olin Wright's (2010) theory of emancipatory social transformation. According to his work, social transformation includes four components. The first is an account of obstacles to transformation (social reproduction). This theory engages with how structural powers prevent disruption and transformation through a variety of means including ideology and culture, which Wright describes as the conscious (beliefs) and unconscious (habits) aspects of subjectivity (E. O. Wright, 2010). This contrasts with the conception of culture put forth by the cultures framework, where both motivation and action are part of the cultural ensemble (Stephenson, 2023). This is drawn out in section 2.3. For this component, the obstacle to transformation is the perceived dependence of human wellbeing on continued economic growth.

The second component is a strategy for overcoming the obstacle and creating possibility (seeing contradictions). No system is perfect- complexity, imperfectly produced institutions,

unintended consequences, and unpredictability lead to gaps that provide opportunities for intervention and transformation (E. O. Wright, 2010). This component is represented by the feminist economic imaginary and the contradictions inherent in capitalism.

The third component is specification of future trajectories of obstacles and possibilities (social change). This refers to both unintended social changes resulting from people operating under status-quo social relations- like women going back to work immediately after giving birth- and to intended effects of people acting strategically towards social change- like a social movement. These two types of social change shift the status quo over a long timeframe in both planned and unplanned ways, keenly reminding change agents that they have no theory with which to accurately predict the future (E. O. Wright, 2010).

The fourth component is then a collective transformative strategy employed in light of the other components. This comes full circle to informing decisions about rupture, interstitial, and symbiotic strategies (E. O. Wright, 2010).

2.3 Culture's Role in System Transformation

To better help define the culture of worker cooperatives in relation to broader mainstream business culture and to assess their usefulness as a tool for degrowth, this study relies on the cultures framework (J. Stephenson et al., 2010; J. Stephenson, 2018, 2023). The cultures framework is a conceptual framework that allows for the assessment and explanation of how the culture of an actor (individual, business, etc.) is connected to sustainable (or non-sustainable) outcomes. Or, in this case, how a worker cooperative's culture results in outcomes that align with an alternative system goal. It allows researchers to understand non-linear causalities and relationships, and in this project, it assists with organizing and illustrating how the culture of

worker cooperatives might lead to organizational outcomes which align with degrowth, and thus present an effective alternative to the mainstream, growth-dependent economy (J. Stephenson, 2023).

The cultures framework originated as the "energy cultures framework," a model for interrogating the drivers of household energy behaviors (J. Stephenson et al., 2010). It took inspiration from Lutzenhiser's idea that energy consumption is embedded in cultural processes (J. Stephenson, 2018). Then, over time, the energy cultures framework was expanded upon to reflect an expanded selection of social theories, notably Giddens' ideas about structuration and systems thinking and analysis (J. Stephenson, 2018; J. Stephenson et al., 2015). This version was able to study the relationship between cultural formations and their outcomes and was used in studies which went well beyond topics relating to energy. It did have a common element in its applications though, which was how outcomes had implications relating to sustainability and socioecological relationships. From this, the model with an updated title- the sustainability cultures framework, and then later the cultures framework- was born (J. Stephenson, 2018, 2023).

The current framework formation is made up of several components (Reference Figure 1 below). In the center is the cultural ensemble of an actor, made up of materiality (products, technologies, and infrastructure), motivators (norms, customs, and meaning), and activities (actions, rituals, and repeated behaviors). These elements interact with each other and within themselves, which can generate cultural learning. Then, the agency boundary (dashed circle) represents the extent to which an actor can make a deliberate change considering their acculturation. The external influences (big arrows) account for the fact that no system is a bubble- they are beyond the control of the actor and can either drive or stunt cultural change.

Finally, outcomes (triangle) share a causal relationship with the cultural ensemble. The arrow between the actor and the outcomes points both ways- the outcomes can in turn result in changes to the cultural ensemble (J. Stephenson, 2018, 2023).

The "actor" can be as small as an individual or as large as an organization. The revised cultures framework is very flexible, and it has been applied to many different scenarios (Bach et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2019; Klaniecki et al., 2020; Lazowski et al., 2018; McKague et al., 2016; Muza & Thomas, 2022; Scott & Lawson, 2018; J. Stephenson, 2018; Tesfamichael et al., 2020; Walton et al., 2020). In this case, the actor is a worker cooperative, and within that are several smaller cultural ensembles representing the interview participants. They hold personal views and interact with their cooperative, and the cooperative in turn interacts with mainstream firms, state policies, and federal laws. For this project, I focused on all aspects of the cultural ensemble (materiality, motivators, and activities) within worker cooperatives to understand how their cultures might drive larger outcomes which either adhere to degrowth tenets or not. Additionally, I focused on the external influences that support or limit worker cooperatives as this is an important aspect for understanding why they exist where they do and how they are affected by pressure from outside competition and support (or lack thereof) (See Figure 1).

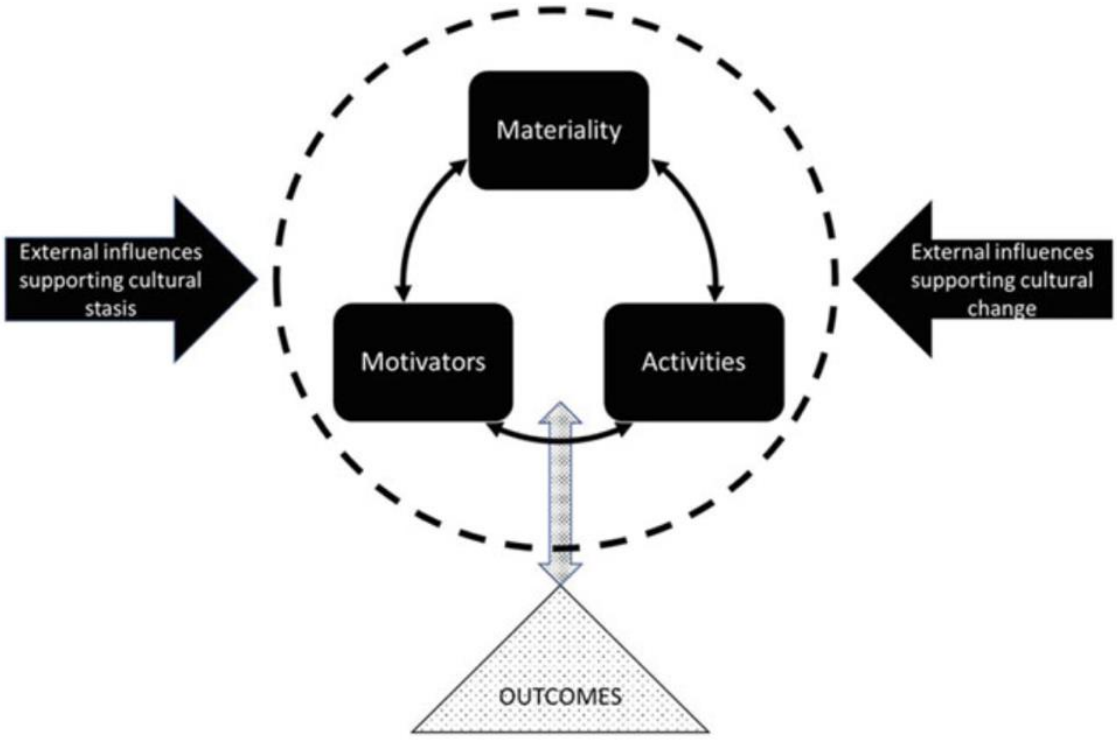

Figure 1 *illustrates the cultures framework as it appears in Culture and Sustainability: Exploring Stability and Transformation with the Cultures Framework (Stephenson, 2023).*

Culture has a wide variety of meanings which have changed and branched out over time, and so it is necessary to clarify what I mean by "culture." For the purposes of this project, I rely on what Stephenson 2023 calls culture-as-structure, which considers the social relationships and networks that emerge from shared ideology. Social structure, which can be conceived as the enduring aspect of cultural phenomena, is upheld on one end by the "rules" of ideology and on the other end by society's continued willingness to adhere to those rules. Combinations of agency and power allow an actor to break out of this social structure, to be stuck within it (Blythe et al., 2018; J. Stephenson, 2018, 2023). Drawing on this form of culture can help lead to the underlying causes of system stagnation, identifying the power relations, ideologies, and

structural elements that keep worker cooperatives from creating and performing an alternative economic culture (J. Stephenson, 2023).

Although the cultures framework uses some of the same language as structure and has similar aspects (shared rules, ideology), it differs in that it focuses on praxis, culture and cultural formations, and uses culture as a medium through which to look at agency and structure rather than practice (J. Stephenson, 2018, 2023). However, like in the structure-agency model, the cultural actor must confront the pre-existing cultural system and will either allow it to be reproduced or transformed through interaction. This shouldn't be seen as a reduction to structure and agency, just a confirmation of their dialectical nature (Buch-Hansen & Nesterova, 2021).

Structuration theory was first proposed by Anthony Giddens. He claimed that structure is simply the repeated actions of people over time, which creates rules or expectations about behavior. Structures are "made" of those rules- people, or actors, tend to follow them, thus making them more real. People have freedom to act as they wish and break down structures, or what Giddens calls agency, but they often do not (Giddens, 1979; J. Stephenson, 2023). This two-way process is the duality of structure (Chatterjee et al., 2019; Giddens, 1979). This duality suggests that while structures shape human behavior, individuals also have the capacity to alter these structures through their actions, emphasizing that structure and agency are interdependent (Chatterjee et al., 2019; Heracleous, 2013; Pozzebon & Pinsonneault, 2005). Put another way, social structures like education or family are constraints on human actions, but at the same time, they are produced (and reproduced) through those very human actions (Pozzebon & Pinsonneault, 2005). One of the key concepts in this theory is the notion of "practical consciousness," which refers to the nuanced understanding actors have about social structures while at the same time they are not fully aware of how those structures shape their actions

(Baber, 1991).When actors are able to make use of their agency to change or break down structures, it is due to collective or personal resources. This could be something like wealth, or it could be some capability or capacity, which increases their power to affect change (J. Stephenson, 2023).

Critics of structuration theory point to its lack of a detailed methodology and argue that Giddens' approach can be overly abstract (Chatterjee et al., 2019; Pozzebon & Pinsonneault, 2005). Despite this, structuration theory has been applied to a variety of topics (Callahan, 2004; Heracleous, 2013; Heracleous & Hendry, 2000; Jones & Karsten, 2008). In the context of the cultures framework, it is a valuable jumping off point for understanding how agency and ideology can contribute to either cultural change or stagnation (Jones & Karsten, 2008; J. Stephenson, 2023). Culture is critical as part of systemic change, otherwise efforts to change economic structures will ultimately fail (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). Ideologies such as the current growth imperative are deeply seated in mainstream culture- true system transformation cannot occur without radical transformation of ideology as well, which a growing degrowth movement could achieve (J. Stephenson, 2023).

2.4 The Clarifying Purpose of Feminist Degrowth

Not all forms of feminist thought are compatible with degrowth (Schmelzer et al., 2022). Feminists across disciplines and movements do not constitute one united voice- there are multiple movements with varying degrees of interest in system transformation, and some inform degrowth more than others. Mainstream feminism, for example, has received harsh critique for its overwhelming whiteness and its lack of engagement with foundations of wellbeing (Grande, 2003; Kendall, 2020). It is a form of feminism that subscribes to the phallocentric status quo,

seeking to create gender "equality" in the public sphere of production without addressing uneven labor burdens in the private sphere and rejecting an analysis of how capitalist relations exacerbate both social and ecological ills (Grande, 2003; Salleh, 1997).

However, feminist degrowth draws on work from more critical feminist thought like ecofeminism, incorporating its recognition of the interconnectedness of social and ecological issues and its argument that environmental degradation is rooted in systems of power and oppression (Park, 2025; Saave, 2022). Ecofeminists offer a critical lens on traditional economic and political analyses, emphasizing that economic and political systems are not neutral, but rather deeply embedded with power relations related to gender and intersectionality. They make a M/W=N claim where the dominion of man (M) over Other (W) is a naturalized process. In this case, Man is the central entity, X, whereas the Other, whether that is women, nature, animals, etc., is defined as a lack of X (Salleh, 1997; Öztürk, 2020). This dualism under capitalism has become the basis for repression of both women and nature, as well as spatially and racially marginalized peoples, meaning both human and environmental exploitation are linked to patriarchy and a growth-imperative (Schmelzer et al., 2022; Adams, 1990). This also includes analysis of the separation of production (paid, "formal" labor) from reproduction (the unpaid labor involved in maintaining people and households). Reproductive, unpaid work is predominantly carried out by women, and although it sustains formal economies, its social and economic importance is devalued under capitalism due to its "unproductiveness" and association with nature (cooking vegetables versus factory work) (Öztürk, 2020).

Feminist degrowth, like broader degrowth, critiques economic growth as the primary driver of social and ecological wellbeing (Akulut et al., 2023). The economic contraction that will address the growth imperative requires a fundamental restructuring of social and power

relations as well as new system goals centered around values like democracy, sufficiency, and cooperation rather than growth and capital accumulation (Hickel, 2019; Medak et al., 2020). Feminist degrowth draws from feminist theory in its clarification of what that social restructuring should include, claiming that a social transformation requires a transformation of gender relations and intersectional relationships as well. Reimagined relations should ensure equitably distributed social reproductive expectations, where social reproduction is defined as the work of fulfilling the needs of human and non-human life (Akbulut, 2023). These relations should also focus on environmental and spatial justice and prioritize economic relations centered around cooperation and interdependence (Akbulut, 2023; Barca et al., 2023; Dengler & Lang, 2022; Hanaček et al., 2020). And finally, feminist degrowth addresses the connection between human and environmental emancipation and the importance of care work (Dengler & Saave-Harnack, 2019). If degrowth succeeds in lowering material throughput and contracting the economy, there will be an increased emphasis on unpaid care work. Without the express inclusion of gender equality into the degrowth movement, there is a dangerous potential for that additional labor to fall to women and other groups marginalized by the current system (Akbulut, 2023). However, by focusing on a redistribution of reproductive labor, justice, and by seeking to build economies of care, the degrowth movement can transform the labor inequalities that create disparities in power and repression.

Feminist degrowth is used in this project to support and clarify how worker cooperatives might function as degrowth tools. Rather than a specific analysis, feminist degrowth and degrowth are referenced and discussed together.

2.5 Cooperatives and Degrowth

Hinton (2021) identifies five business dimensions most important for a post-growth economic transformation: relationship-to-profit, incorporation structure, governance structure, strategy, and size and geographical scope. Some of these are more permanent and have more influence on the others, especially relationship-to-profit and incorporation structure (Hinton, 2021). Relationship-to-profit regards whether a business is for-profit or not-for-profit, and incorporation structure refers to who the business owners are and what obligations the business has to the owner.

Using Hinton's dimensions, cooperatives are not necessarily aligned with degrowth (Hinton, 2021). They can still aim to grow and generate as much surplus capital as possible (or identify as for-profit), and they are not legally bound to environmental consciousness or social reinvestment (Sobering et al., 2014). Their relationship-to profit is also not enforced, since a cooperative has no obligation to be a not-for-profit business (Hinton, 2021).

Broader literature about system transformation outlines two main reasons that worker cooperatives might act as mainstream entities. First, there is an assumption that worker cooperatives are always organized as non-hierarchical, direct democracies, but this is not always true. Especially as they grow in size, worker cooperatives often become more bureaucratic, and thus more prone to reproduce inequality (Meyers, 2022; Sobering et al., 2014). When the firm grows, it becomes harder to maintain a collective or an egalitarian democracy, and pressure to instate hierarchy mounts (Gupta, 2014). If the cooperative does not attempt to limit this hierarchy as much as possible, distributing managerial power equally, the business' practices end up reinforcing power inequalities inherent in mainstream firms (Sobering et al., 2014).

Second, worker cooperatives can act like capitalist firms because of infiltration by corporate politics, changing priorities as they grow or as a result of restrictive legislation and

markets (Bretos & Marcuello, 2017; Ratner, 2016; Wiksell, 2020). For example, member-owners might value their own profit over long-term investment, leading them to distribute income in short-term cycles instead of reinvesting (Bretos & Marcuello, 2017; N. Harris & Jervis, 2024). This individualism limits the ability to work cooperatively across businesses- cooperation amongst cooperatives is one of the cooperative principles- and thus eliminates the ability to aid to any broader, transgressive or transformational movement (Preluca et al., 2022; Wiksell, 2020). Worker cooperatives, no matter how transgressive on a small scale, can only do so much to aid system-wide change due to the limitations placed on them by mainstream cultural and economic structures (Stuart et al., 2020).

These critiques both fall under the degradation thesis, an idea first advanced by Beatrice Webb and Rosa Luxemburg that claims worker cooperatives ultimately bow under the pressure to act as mainstream capitalist businesses do (Bogoeski et al., 2023; N. Harris & Jervis, 2024). However, this "degeneration" into hierarchical, competitive firms is not inevitable. Worker cooperatives can prevent the traps of hierarchy, individualism, and profit motive through efforts to build a strong, values-based culture (Cornforth, 1995; N. Harris & Jervis, 2024; Langmead, 2016) and they inherently differ from mainstream firms in some critical ways that may enable them to "regenerate" (rather than degenerate) (N. Harris & Jervis, 2024).

First, worker cooperatives share seven principles that create provisions for an economic business model based on member-owner wellbeing, democracy, equity, and cooperation rather than growth (Abell, 2014; Cunico et al., 2022; Wanyama, 2014). While these are not legally binding, they do make up the foundational ideas on which the organization, at least initially, operates. Connected to this is the idea that cooperative principles create a cultural commons for member-owners to draw on (Gibson-Graham, 2006a). "Cultural commons" refer to cultures

created in time and space that are freely shared by a cohesive community, regardless of its size (Santagata et al., 2011). An example of this is a story, or an industry-specific knowledge practice, that acts both to create a sense of belonging amongst the member-owners and to reproduce the culture and values of the cooperative (Eizaguirre Anglada, 2022; Faugère, 2018). Second, worker cooperatives generate community benefit due to the fact that they are usually small and locally invested (Bretos & Marcuello, 2017). This investment results in community networks and relationships that benefit local development and address community needs (Abell, 2014; Bretos & Marcuello, 2017), compared to mainstream, larger firms that exacerbate uneven development and reduce community members to consumers (Bretos & Marcuello, 2017; Tyree-Hageman, 2013). And finally, worker cooperatives have a governance structure that allows for flexibility, reduced hierarchy, and reimagined organizational relationships (Schmelzer et al., 2022). Business growth, which often results in increased hierarchy, leads to the reproduction of capitalist social inequalities, but most worker cooperatives are small in size and growing quickly (Bretos & Marcuello, 2017). In addition, by limiting managerial hierarchy, even if it leads to less efficient governance, cooperatives can actually create a work environment that challenges traditional power dynamics and work inequalities (Sobering et al., 2014).

These three qualities, while innate to worker cooperatives, are highly dependent on their size, hierarchy, relationship with community, and emphasis on growth and profit (Bretos & Marcuello, 2017; Cunico et al., 2022; Sobering et al., 2014; Hinton, 2021). However, if they can be maintained, worker cooperatives avoid "degradation" and function as alternative economic actors.

Degrowth literature relating to worker cooperatives supports the highly conditional conclusions drawn by broader transformation and post-capitalist literature (above). Some studies

acknowledge that worker cooperatives can potentially align with degrowth if they maintain a horizontal governance structure, emphasize care and wellbeing in their workplace and community above profits, and if they place collective limits on business size and growth (Cunico et al., 2022; Hinton, 2021; Meyers, 2022; Sobering et al., 2014). Other studies are critical, maintaining that values-based principles are not enough to keep worker cooperatives from functioning as mainstream businesses do (Busk, 2023). But still more studies do not question alignment, placing faith in the foundational structure and culture of worker cooperatives as an indication of their alignment with degrowth (Akbulut, 2023; Cunico et al., 2022; Johanisova et al., 2015; Schmelzer et al., 2022). However, it is important to note that this work tended not to focus on worker cooperatives exclusively or extensively.

What emerges is a rather small and inconclusive literature regarding worker cooperatives and degrowth. While there is more frequent engagement with worker cooperatives in broader system transformation and post-growth literature (Gradin, 2015; Harris & Jervis, 2024; Peuter & Dyer-Witheford, 2010; Preluca et al., 2022; Wiksell, 2020), and while degrowth literature often considers cooperatives as a whole (Brossmann & Islar, 2020; Buch-Hansen et al., 2024; Demaria et al., 2013; Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; Giorgi et al., 2020; Kallis, 2011; Medak et al., 2020; Sekulova et al., 2023), the specific connection between degrowth and worker cooperatives is slightly weaker (Cato, 2024).

2.6 Literary Contribution

This project is situated within a robust literature that ties the feminist economic imaginary (Gibson-Graham, 2006b) to Erik Olin Wright's idea of interstitial transformation (E. O. Wright, 2010) via complimentary contributions to situating worker cooperatives as potential

alternative economic actors. Current literature agrees that worker cooperatives can function alternatively only if they maintain a truly horizontal governance structure, emphasize care and wellbeing above profit in the workplace and in their community, and place a collective limitation on business size and growth (Cunico et al., 2022; Hinton, 2021; Meyers, 2022; Sobering et al., 2014). However, while these specifications are clear, there is disagreement as to whether worker cooperatives actually conform to them in practice. Furthermore, while worker cooperatives are well represented in literature about economic transformation, there are far fewer degrowth studies that specifically engage with them (Akbulut, 2023; Busk, 2023; Cunico et al., 2022; Hinton, 2021; Johanisova et al., 2015; Meyers, 2022; Schmelzer et al., 2022; Sobering et al., 2014). For this reason, I will conduct a broad study that collects information about the culture of worker cooperatives in the United States to determine whether they fundamentally differ from mainstream firms and if they are aligned with degrowth. This work will serve to both add richness to degrowth literature on the topic and to contribute to an important discussion about the usefulness of worker cooperatives as transformative elements.

I consider the relationship between worker cooperatives, degrowth, and interstitial system transformation from a cultural angle, which most current studies about social transformation have paid little attention to (Stephenson, 2023). This angle, as well as the utilization of the cultures framework, provides an effective structure for qualifying worker cooperative cultures and understanding how their motivations, actions, and interactions with the material world might result in sites of alternative economic activity.

This is also a timely study: 2025 is the second international year of the cooperative and U.S. worker cooperative numbers have been growing at a steady rate since 2008 (Democracy at Work Institute & U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives, 2023; UN General Assembly, 2024).

This growing interest in worker cooperatives indicates degrowth scholars and activists have a potential opportunity to mobilize a broader interstitial movement while interest and cooperative numbers are high.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

For this project, I utilized a qualitative research methodology that included two primary approaches. First, I performed a website content analysis to better understand the relationship between worker cooperatives and their advertised connection with the seven cooperative principles. Second, I conducted semi-structured interviews to collect data about worker cooperative activities, motivations, and interactions with the material world. Both these approaches sought to collect data that would answer (1) To what extent do worker cooperatives' cultures support an alternative economic structure? And (2) If worker cooperatives are alternative economic actors, do their cultures support degrowth?

To guide data collection and interpret results, this project relies upon the cultures framework, which allows for the assessment and explanation of how a culture is connected to sustainable (or non-sustainable) outcomes (Stephenson, 2023). It allows a researcher to understand non-linear causalities and relationships, and, for the purposes of this project, it assists with organizing and illustrating how the culture of worker cooperatives might lead to organizational outcomes which align with degrowth, and thus present an effective alternative to the mainstream, growth-dependent system. Combining this theoretical approach with interview and content analysis data offers a methodology that is supported by previous uses of the cultures framework (Bach et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2019; Stephenson, 2023; Tesfamichael et al., 2020), and provides an effective analysis of worker cooperatives' potential as agents of transformation (Stephenson, 2023). It is applied in this project for the first time in the United States.

3.1 Selecting Participants

Potential participant worker cooperatives were selected using the U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives (USFWC) online directory tool. USFWC's directory identifies the number of worker cooperatives in each state, as well as their name, contact information, and website link (*Directory of Worker Co-Ops and Democratic Workplaces*, 2022). I aimed to capture worker cooperative perspectives at a scale representative of the United States, but also to conduct a number of interviews reasonable for the project timeline. For this reason, I chose potential participants from a subset of states within each of the four regions and nine divisions designated by the Census Bureau.

The U.S. Census Bureau currently divides the country into four regions: Northeast, Midwest, South, and West. Each region is further split into two or more divisions: New England and Middle Atlantic within the Northeast, East North Central and West North Central within the Midwest, South Atlantic, East South Central, and West South Central within the South, and Mountain and Pacific within the West (*Geographic Levels*, 2021). Regions and divisions are a long-standing type of geographic breakdown, having evolved with national notions of differences in regional identity, climate, and economy since before the American revolution and the formalization of the nation's Census ("Chapter 6: Statistical Groupings of States and Counties," 1994). They recognize generally homogenous characteristics across large areas, shifting with the nature and makeup of the particular region or division. As a far as official Census Bureau designations, they have shifted around less and less until their last major change in 1984, at which point they became a stable and long-recognized form of national division ("Chapter 6: Statistical Groupings of States and Counties," 1994; Ullman & Klove, 1957).

The use of these census regions and divisions resulted in a geographically varied range of both content analysis and interview data. U.S. regions contain between 9-16 states and divisions

contain 3-9 states (*Geographic Levels*, 2021). However, to make sure all geographic sections were represented, I selected a subset of states that included at least one per division (Table 1).

This non-probability selection process, in addition to ensuring geographic variety, provided the greatest flexibility to expand and shift the participant population as the project evolved (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Specifically, I used non-probability purposive sampling, which includes participants based on criteria set by the researcher (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021; Gomez & Jones, 2010). This sampling method is widely used in qualitative research, and, rather than minimizing bias, aims to identify individuals who are both especially knowledgeable and willing to participate (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021; Palinkas et al., 2015). In the case of the study, selection criteria were: (1) organizations in the U.S. who identified as worker cooperatives, (2) worker cooperatives whose business appeared on the USFWC map tool, and (3) worker cooperatives representing a roughly even distribution across Census regions and divisions. Based on this criteria, 306 worker cooperatives across all Census divisions were contacted via email or phone about participating in the study. Each cooperative where a member agreed to participate was counted as one participant for both the website content analysis and the semi-structured interviews, with the option for several members to participate in the interview step. In total, 38 participants, or 38 worker cooperatives, were included in both the website content and interview analyses (Table 1).

This sampling approach's ability to expand and shift with my participant pool was important because social and professional networks are not random, and being able to follow these relationships is key to understanding the whole social system. Additional participants were identified via snowball sampling at the time of the interview, and thus I wanted to have more control over which states were involved, even if that resulted in a study without a representative

sample (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Snowball sampling, besides allowing me to "follow" social networks, is effective when a researcher is trying to connect with a difficult-to-reach group. Although cooperatives are businesses trying to advertise themselves, a complete list of names and contact information are not always available (Gomez & Jones, 2010). Therefore, I included states in the study based on the national distribution and richness of participant options, then relied on snowball sampling to build out interconnecting networks.

There were several limitations to this selection approach. First, as with any political boundary, Census regions and divisions may cut across other types of informal geographic partitioning, such as communities or social connections. However, they are still a useful unit of spatial measure for the national distribution of worker cooperatives because of their adherence to state boundaries and their mix of both municipal and social significance (Roberts et al., 2016; Ullman & Klove, 1957). Second, the dataset collected by this method is not a representative sample of worker cooperatives in the United States given its coarse geographic scope and non-probability sampling process. The purpose was rather to gather voices from across the country to provide a varied, nation-wide view of worker cooperatives.

Table 1 *details the number of worker cooperatives in each U.S. state, divided by Census region and division (Directory of Worker Co-Ops and Democratic Workplaces, 2022). The gray highlights indicate the states in which interviews were conducted.*

Worker Cooperatives in United States Regions and Divisions				
Region	**Division**	**State**	**Worker Cooperatives**	**Interviewed**
West	Pacific	Washington	26	3
		Alaska	0	
		Hawaii	1	
		Oregon	10	
		California	99	9
	Mountain	Montana	3	
		Wyoming	0	
		Idaho	0	
		Nevada	9	
		Utah	0	
		Colorado	12	2
		Arizona	3	1
		New Mexico	2	
Midwest	West North Central	North Dakota	2	
		South Dakota	0	
		Nebraska	1	
		Kansas	0	
		Iowa	1	
		Minnesota	11	4
		Missouri	3	
	East North Central	Illinois	7	1
		Indiana	0	
		Michigan	5	
		Ohio	12	
		Wisconsin	18	1
Northeast	Middle Atlantic	New Jersey	0	
		New York	70	7
		Pennsylvania	11	
	New England	Connecticut	0	
		Maine	11	
		Massachusetts	39	3
		New Hampshire	2	
		Rhode Island	3	
		Vermont	19	
South	South Atlantic	Delaware	0	
		District of Columbia	3	
		Florida	2	
		Georgia	4	
		Maryland	10	
		North Carolina	10	3
		South Carolina	0	
		Virginia	4	
		West Virginia	1	
	East South Central	Alabama	2	
		Kentucky	1	
		Mississippi	0	
		Tennessee	3	2
	West South Central	Arkansas	0	
		Louisiana	2	
		Oklahoma	3	
		Texas	8	2

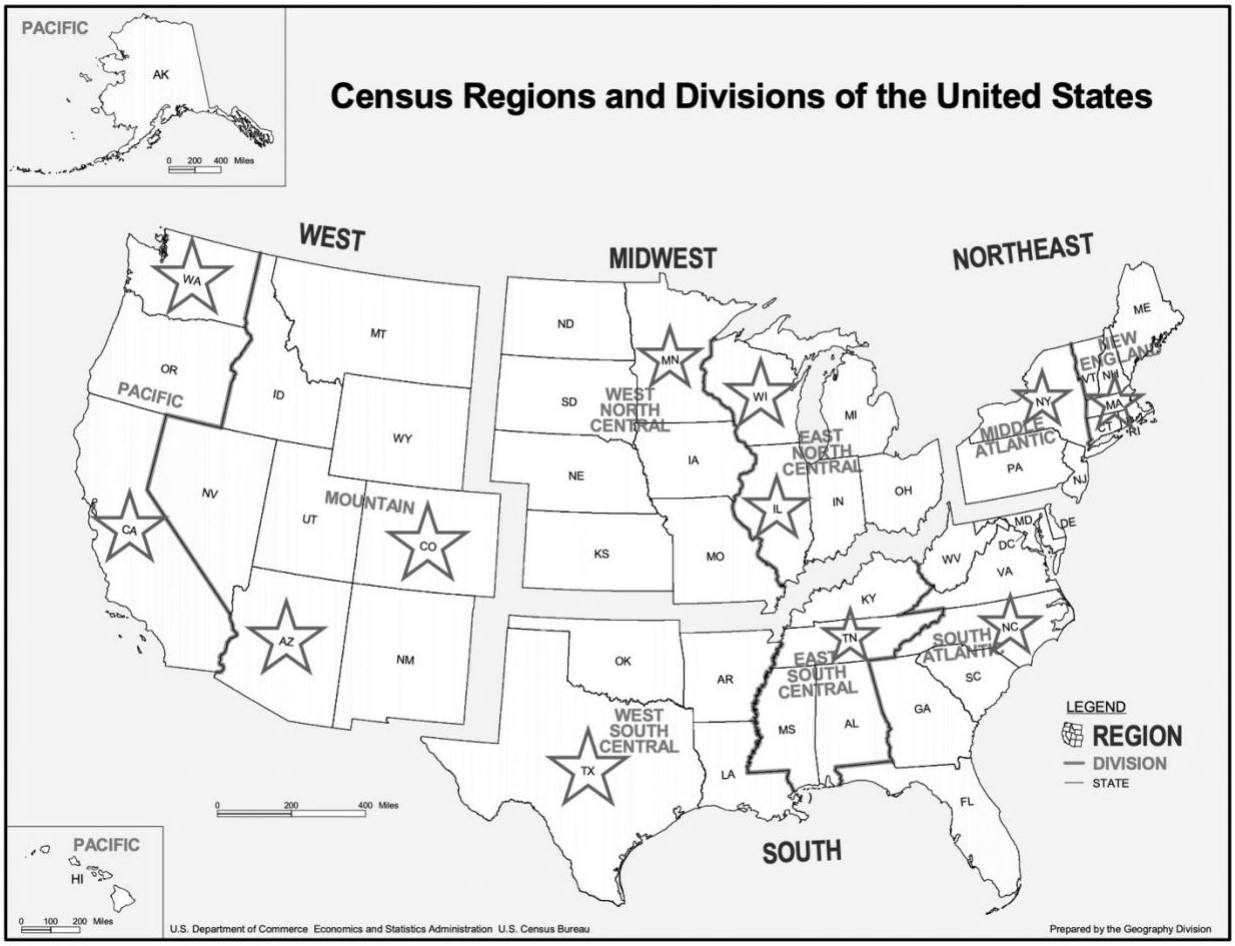

Figure 2 *illustrates a map of U.S. Census regions and divisions provided by the U.S. Census (Geographic Levels, 2021). The stars, overlayed by me, designate states in which interviews were conducted.*

3.2 Website Content Analysis

In this project, a content analysis was used to review the websites of worker cooperatives that participated in the study to measure how they "speak" their values to their broader base of customers and peers. The aim of this review was to note if, and how, each business presented their seven cooperative principles. While worker cooperatives are theoretically driven by these principles, they are not legally binding and so actions and values aligned with the seven

principles might be abandoned for competitive gain at any time with no repercussions (Meyers, 2022; Sobering et al., 2014). A website is a form of advertisement for an organization's visions and values, so a public-facing display of worker cooperatives' adherence to the seven cooperative principles provides an interesting contrast to interview data (Duguid & Balkan, 2016). Will cooperatives' promotion of values on their website be differ from what they disclose in interviews? What gaps might exist between this arranged identity and the revealed reality? The website content analysis addresses these questions, drawing conclusions that allow for a better understanding of how study participants represent themselves within their state and local contexts.

Content analyses track and analyze themes, words, and phrases across different content formats in a way that discerns patterns (Dinçer, 2018; Gomez & Jones, 2010). Technically any object can be subject to this type of analysis- it is simply a way to discover and formalize connections between themes across books, websites, or images, and to understand signifiers in the context of a broader system (Gomez & Jones, 2010; Stemler, 2000). Content analysis assumes that each signifier (word or phrase) means something constant, and so a constant meaning is present each time it is used. Furthermore, frequency of signifiers overall, or frequency of one signifier in relation to another, can indicate that the meaning behind those words, phrases, or images is closely aligned or significant to the creator (Gomez & Jones, 2010).

I used a website content analysis to determine how often worker cooperatives' websites engaged with the seven cooperative principles. To conduct the analysis, I read through the website of each worker cooperative who agreed to participate in the study. I searched their main web pages looking for terms that corresponded with each of the seven worker cooperative principles. This was based loosely on the website content analysis conducted in Duguid and

Balkan (2016). In that paper, the researchers identified terms associated with sustainability based on the content that informed their theoretical framework. They narrowed terms and their synonyms/ "word families" down to 34 for a more manageable list, then read through the websites and reports of worker cooperatives and searching for those identified terms to determine how those cooperatives communicated about sustainability to member-owners and the broader public (Duguid & Balkan, 2016). For my coding frame, I used the seven cooperative principles as terms and broke them into their key individual words. For example, for "concern for community," I would also look for "community," but not for "concern" because while the use of "community" still conveys that the cooperative cares about that, "concern" is not necessarily key to that meaning. The full coding frame of principles and key phrases is below (Table 2).

Table 2 *shows the cooperative principles and key phrases used to conduct the website content analysis.*

Voluntary and Open Membership	Voluntary	Open membership	Membership
Democratic Member Control	Democratic	Member control	Member controlled
Members' Economic Participation	Economic participation		
Autonomy and Independence	Autonomy	Independence	
Education, Training and Information	[Member] education	[Member] training	[Member] information
Cooperation Among Cooperatives	Cooperation	Cooperatives	Cooperation with
Concern for Community	Community		

I created an excel spreadsheet of numbers which correlated to the names of the participant worker cooperatives. I then placed the words/terms as headers and used this table to quantify the number of times each term showed up on each respective website (Table 4). This is high level analysis, but Excel can be an efficient tool for content analyses in certain contexts (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021; Cherrstrom et al., 2017; Duguid & Balkan, 2016; Ivanov et al., 2018). A second level of analysis can also be performed through Excel, but this content

analysis simply serves the purpose of providing a contrast to the interview data. Since presentation and context is important for connecting with and changing broader social ideas and power dynamics, having a website content analysis to contrast against 'private' interview responses is powerful enough for the purposes of this study (Gomez & Jones, 2010).

3.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews, in contrast to the website content analysis, explored the internal cultural elements of worker cooperatives, offering a more intimate and complex understanding of each participant. Interview data for this project consisted of 38 in-person and virtual interviews collected over a 5-month period from June to early November of 2024.

Interviewing is used by both qualitative and quantitative scholars, and it is a practice that can look vastly different depending on the desired outcomes. For example, a structured interview, in which the interviewer plays a neutral role, and the participant provides short or formulaic answers, might run like a script based on a pre-established coding scheme (Fontana & Frey, 2008). On the other hand, an unstructured interview is open-ended and ethnographic, allowing for a wider breadth of information and an acknowledgment of the relationship between interviewer and participant (Boucher, 2017; Fontana & Frey, 2008). My own work took the middle route between these two options. Assessing the viability of cooperatives as an agent of social and economic transformation requires an in-depth exploration of the relationships between actors, organizations, and state and federal policies. A qualitative approach utilizing semi-structured interviews creates space for essential depth and width and allows for inductive and emergent connections to arise (Kaiser, 2012; Warren, 2012). However, it also provides some structure, which helps to maintain the focus of the interview (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021).

I followed an interview protocol which provided some structure for the interview while also leaving room for follow-up questions. The interview protocol was a reflection of the cultures framework- the interview questions sought to get at answers which spoke to motivators, materiality, activities, external influences, or some combination of those (Stephenson, 2023). Interview questions also take inspiration from surveys and interview protocols used to study the cultures framework in other contexts (Hopkins & Stephenson, 2016; Łapniewska, 2019). Using this format, the protocol is primed to efficiently target information about different cultural aspects of worker cooperative culture and narrow in on the prevalence of social wellbeing, ecological awareness and responsibility, and desire to aid in system transformation. The protocol was submitted for review to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in spring of 2024 and was approved on May 6, 2024.

Interviews took 30-60 minutes and took place either in person or on Zoom. This mixture had to do with convenience- because of the large study area, participants were not always within close proximity to the researcher. In person interviews can be more beneficial because the researcher is able to take note of non-verbal or visual participant reactions. However, if it is not feasible to meet every participant in person, then incorporating video interviews allows for most, if not all, of those cues to be communicated (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). In addition, offering both in-person and video interviews can reduce participant drop-out rate and increase the breadth of a geographical sample that can be considered in a study (Peasgood et al., 2023). The distribution of my study area and my desire to have the highest percentage of replies possible, necessitated a mixture of in person and video interviews via Zoom was the most logical.

Post-interview, I followed up twice with the member-owners from each worker cooperative via email. The first time, I thanked them for their time directly after our interview. And the second time, several weeks later, I reached out to confirm the number of member-owners if it had not come up.

Participants were businesses with multiple member-owners, where each "point" was one worker cooperative containing many possible voices. For this reason, I hoped to interview a representative number of people with varying identities and experience levels at each organization. However, I sent my initial email to the main addresses of each cooperative, and the responses that I received from member-owners were based on self-selection by interest and ability to participate. I then arranged one interview with all those who responded, whether that was one member-owner or many, and treated their shared responses as the data point for their respective cooperative. This mirrored the collective way that worker cooperatives are run, allowing the data to emerge from a democratic commingling, similar to the way decision-making and daily business operations occur collectively in worker cooperatives. This partial self-selection process does introduce some self-selection bias, where certain types of people might have been more likely to respond to my email, and thus represent their cooperative (Palinkas et al., 2015). However, by describing who my participants are- those that would respond to an email to the general business and agree to meet for 30 minutes with a grad student- I am forthright about the study construction that ultimately led to my results (Freeman, 2000; Palinkas et al., 2015).

It is also important to acknowledge the biases that exist in this type of interview data collection. I, as the researcher, bring an inherent bias into the data collection process as I affect the participants over the course of our conversation. At the same time, the participants have an

equal effect on me, guiding my thoughts and perceptions from interview to interview (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2008). As a human collecting and interpreting the perceptions of other humans, bias is unavoidable and, furthermore, is not something that should be avoided. However, it is critical to admit that boas is present and to reflect on my own reactions and shifts in opinion during the interview process (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2008).

3.4 Interview Data Analysis

All 38 interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent at the time of the interview, then transcribed using Clipto.AI. Then, because the AI transcription service left the documents with many typos, I relistened to each interview and edited the transcript as necessary. At this time, I also replaced the cooperative name with a corresponding number and removed any mention of participant names or identifiers in the transcripts.

Once collected and transcribed, the data was coded using NVivo. Coding is a systematic process in which words and phrases are marked within content to form themes, quantitative counts, or other levels of analysis (Gomez & Jones, 2010). There are many ways to do it and many programs in which it can be done, but this project's coding methodology was a combination of deductive *a priori* codes and emergent themes (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Specifically, *a priori* codes, which entail creating codes prior to the review of interview data (Blair, 2015), best fit the project's cultural angle by best allowing codes to be created around the cultures framework before the initial analysis of interview data in NVivo. To accomplish this, *a priori* codes adhered to the organization of the interview questions and the methodological framework, drawing out and marking phrases which spoke to actor motivators,

activities, and materiality within the cultural ensemble and to external influences (Stephenson, 2023; Stuckey, 2015).

Coding also encompassed space for emergent themes established after preliminary data examination to help explain unanticipated themes or trends related to the outcomes of the cultural ensemble (See bottom of Figure 1) (Stemler, 2000; Stuckey, 2015). Only a few codes were established as emergent, namely codes in the outcomes section: “Degrowth Eco,” “Degrowth Soc," "Not Degrowth,” and “Challenges” (See Table 3).

I then used NVivio 15 to analyze the interview data in two cycles. First, I extracted themes and main points in summary form, which is the most basic approach to condensing interview data (Gomez & Jones, 2010). This served to identify the main themes of my results and to organize the data. Second, I went back to the coded words and phrases to conduct a cross-case analysis using a variable-oriented approach (Miles et al., 2014). I compared coded data in each code category by focusing on general values and themes, aiming to identify general patterns and relationships between the coded segments- and then between code categories- rather than deeply analyzing the unique characteristics of each individual interview or code category (Miles et al., 2014; Porta, 2008). This resulted in generalizable themes across all coded interview segments, which helped to clarify the relationships between the elements of the cultural ensemble- not only was I interested in the causal relationship of the cultural ensemble and its outcomes, but also in the interactions between ensemble elements (Stephenson, 2023). The emphasis of this analysis is thus the relationships between data points (particularly the ensemble data points) (Miles et al., 2014).

The final data results and analysis are displayed through a reconfiguration of the cultures framework model (refer to chapter 4). This type of reconfiguration is a common way to organize

and display findings in studies that utilize the cultures framework (*see* (Bach et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2019; Lazowski et al., 2018; McKague et al., 2016; Scott & Lawson, 2018; Tesfamichael et al., 2020).

Coding, interpretation, and the display of the data condensed and "reduced" the data points, drawing together themes and patterns that generated a snapshot of the culture of U.S. worker cooperatives (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The general approach was a deductive one, drawing conclusions about the country-wide system from interview data and a content analysis that was framed within the cultures framework and the assumptions and goals of degrowth. This approach allowed for a "zooming in" on one use of worker cooperatives as tools for social transformation, viewing the data through the lens of what has already been established about cultural change and economic imaginaries. This put theory first as a way to narrow the scope of the data to identify causal relationships and specific themes more efficiently than an inductive approach might have (Armat et al., 2018; Bingham & Witkowsky, 2021; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Table 3 *details the codebook used for analysis in NVivio.*

Code	Code Description	Subcode	Subcode Description
Motivators	Norms, values, beliefs, knowledge, symbolism, customs, rules	Mot- Degrowth Familiar	Participant(s) knows about degrowth and its implications
		Mot- Degrowth Unfamiliar	Participant(s) does not know about degrowth and its implications
		Mot- Trad Similar	Indications that the coop's motivations align with traditional firms/businesses
		Mot- Trad Differ	business
		Mot- Feminist	Norms/values about diversity, work-life balance, unpaid care, etc.
		Mot- Principles Cultural	Unwritten or written cultural foundational principles of the cooperative
		Mot- Principles Gov	Principles regarding government and hierarchy
		Mot- Soc Transform	Motivations to transform broader systems beyond the cooperative
		Mot- Soc Transform Foil	cooperative
		Mot- Growth Limits	Motivators which limit business growth
		Mot- Growth Exp	Motivators which encourage business growth
Activities	Routines, actions, habits, doing, making, behaving	Act- Principles	Activities mentioned in connection with, the cooperative's foundational
		Act- Governance Hier	Governance routines, actions, etc. that are hierarchical
		Act- Governance Horiz	Governance routines, actions, etc. that are horizontal or non-hierarchical
		Act- Growth Limits	Actions which limit business growth
		Act- Eco	Activities which serve an ecological or sustainability purpose
		Act- Growth Exp	Actions which encourage business growth
Materiality	Products, acquisitions, objects, intellectual works, tools	Mat- Sup Chain Short	Aquirment through short supply chains
		Mat- Sup Chain Long	Aquirment through long supply chains
		Mat- Production	Production and products produced by cooperative
		Mat- Eco	Materiality used in a way to serve an ecological or sustainability purpose
External Influences	Factors or influences that support either cultural stasis or change	Peer Orgs	Connections to other coopertatives or businesses
		Peers Lack	Comments about lack of peer orgs, loneliness, singularity, etc.
		Org Ambivilance	No effects by external influences
		Support Org Goals	External influences supporting co-op's culture
		Obstruct Org Goal	External influences obstructing co-op's culture
Outcomes	The results of, and in relationship with, the cultural ensemble	Degrowth Eco	Outcome- ecological aspect of cultural ensemble that aligns with degrowth
		Degrowth Soc	Outcome- social aspect of cultural ensemble that aligns with degrowth
		Not Degrowth	Outcome- aspect of cultural ensemble that does not align with degrowth
		Challenges	Challenges that are outomes of the cooperative cultural ensemble

3.5 Conclusion

The methods used in this project result in data that fully explores the culture of U.S. worker cooperatives. A content analysis of participant websites illustrates how worker cooperatives advertise their affiliation with care-based values, acting as a measure of outward-facing adherence to, and support for, cooperative principles. Semi-structured interviews compliment this content analysis by collecting data about internal values and influencing factors that shape the cultural elements of worker cooperatives. Together, both methods provide a full picture of the motivations and actions of worker cooperatives to understand whether the outcomes of these cultural elements align with a potential degrowth movement. A cultural angle, and utilization of the cultures framework for this purpose, offers a view of this degrowth

alignment that is able to focus on the ways that “localized” sites of social change might hold the agency and potential to challenge the broader status quo.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The following subsections present the results of the website content analysis, and the 38 semi-structured interviews conducted for this thesis project. The content analysis sought to gather information about how worker cooperatives publicly present their alignment with the seven cooperative principles. These results are presented in subsection 4.1 below. The interviews then gathered more specific data about the internal culture of each participating business: their motivations, activities, interactions, and the outcomes of these elements on their respective communities and environments. These results are presented in subsections 4.2-4.9. Findings from the content analysis broadly supported interview data, reflecting a strong emphasis on community integration and wellbeing as well as internal democracy. However, website data did not capture the more complex relationship between worker cooperatives and their broader networks or what made them distinct from mainstream businesses. Overall, the content analysis served to support a portion of the interview data, but it is the interviews themselves that are of primary interest in this study.

The results of the website content analysis are all in section 4.1, then interview results are organized in subsequent sections by broad emergent themes which inform elements of both degrowth and the cultures framework. A discussion of the findings in connection with these elements can be found in chapter five.

In this chapter, it is important to clarify that results include references to "small cooperatives" and "large cooperatives." What constituted "small" and "large" varied across participants, but all responses categorized the threshold between the two as a membership (a

number of member-owners) of 50 or less. More details about these responses can be found in section 4.7.

It is also important to make two notes about language. First, I reference both "cooperatives" and "worker cooperatives." In all cases, I am referring strictly to worker cooperatives involved in the study. Second, interview participants often refer to themselves or others as "members." While I chose to use the term "member-owner" in this thesis instead, the two terms are interchangeable.

4.1 Website Content Analysis of Participating Worker Cooperatives

The website content analysis looked specifically at key words in the seven cooperative principles: voluntary and open membership, democratic control, economic participation of members, independence, education/ training/ information, cooperation among cooperatives, and concern for community (Abell, 2014). This narrow scope served to measure public-facing cooperative adherence to the principles, which in this case were indicators of a culture motivated by values of autonomy and wellbeing rather than solely by profit (Cunico et al., 2022). If a cooperative publicly advertises adherence to the seven cooperative principles, then this might correlate to a culture that upholds them.

What emerged from this was a narrow perspective on which principles cooperatives were most publicly aligned with according to the frequency of website word choice. "Cooperatives" was the most frequent term by far, which makes sense for a cooperative business describing itself on its own website. For this reason, I did not focus on this outcome as a significant result of the analysis. The next most frequent term was "community," appearing 313 times, supported by "concern for community" (appearing 12 times). This correlates with the "concern for

community" principle and reflects a strong desire to advertise alignment with community needs and broader wellbeing. Other frequent terms were "democratic" and "democratic member control," mentioned 53 and 20 times, respectively. These correlate with an adherence to equitable political voice within the cooperative workplace as well as minimal structural hierarchy (Table 4). This language supports worker cooperative adherence with "democratic control" and "concern for community" and aligns with interview data results that drew connections between cooperative cultures and motivations to maintain voice and wellbeing both in the workplace setting (through democratic, horizontal governance) and in the broader community (through generation of community benefit through various means).

The principles least frequently mentioned across websites were "voluntary and open membership," "economic participation of member-owners," "independence," and "education/training/information," as the terms associated with those principles were used infrequently (Table 4). This does not necessarily indicate that these principles are neglected, just that they are not advertised publicly. For example, "education, training, and information" was important to some interview participants in the context of sharing their cooperative message and creating social change through their cooperative (section 4.8).

In addition, while website content broadly supported interview results (detailed in subsections 4.2-4.9), it failed to reflect some cooperative principles that were present in interview participant responses. For example, participants spoke in interviews about how networks of peers and other organizations were influential to their success, but this emphasis on network was not reflected in website language about cooperation amongst cooperatives. In addition, overall cooperative principle term frequency did not adequately reflect businesses with values distinct from the mainstream economy. Few principles were mentioned with high

frequency, and very few websites included information about the seven cooperative principles as a set. If they had, each "full term" category would have at least 38 counts.

It is perhaps due to the narrow scope of this analysis that results were underwhelming, but they do still serve to underscore worker cooperative commitment to internal democracy and external wellbeing in interviews, as will be explored through the data results in subsequent subsections.

Table 4 *illustrates key words from the seven cooperative principles, showing how many total times they appeared on the websites of participating worker cooperatives.*

Principles and Related Terms	Total Count Across Websites
Voluntary and Open Membership	2
Voluntary	1
Open membership	1
Membership	12
Democratic Member Control	20
Democratic	53
Member control	2
Member controlled	3
Members' Economic Participation	3
Economic participation	1
Autonomy and Independence	2
Autonomy	3
Independence	2
Education, Training and Information	2
[Member] education	9
[Member] training	2
[Member] information	0
Cooperation Among Cooperatives	7
Cooperation	9
Cooperatives	687
Cooperation with	2
Concern for Community	12
Community	313

4.2 Hierarchy and Governance

Participant member-owners spoke about horizontal governance practices slightly more often than hierarchical ones when describing their worker cooperative, however most mentioned that some form of hierarchy was present in their workplace. This was often described as two tiers: the day-to-day operations on one level and larger, more abstract decisions like long-term financial plans and business partnerships on the other level. Day-to-day operations encompassed activities that included operating the storefront, making low-stakes decisions at job sites, and collaborating with coworkers. Some cooperatives had a more mainstream approach to these operations, such as assigning a manager, and described this portion of their business as less informed by cooperative principles. Others had horizontal everyday power structures. For example, this quote describes a mainstream approach to daily operations:

"There's the day-to-day, so we have project managers, we have designers, we have heads of our different departments, and their roles, I would say, kind of function regardless of whether we [are] a cooperative or not, right? Like project managers are leading the project and doing what needs to be done. That's not necessarily informed by the cooperative model…" – Interview 11

And this quote describes a typical horizontal approach:

"We kind of have tiers of decision making… There [are] the things that are very small that you are empowered to like, make your own decision about. And then, to a higher tier of decision making, we do put it in a chat. And a lot of times we're able to make decisions that way." - Interview 4

Whether this was the case largely depended on size. Member-owners of cooperatives with a smaller employee size felt that it made more sense to function horizontally, making all their decisions through consensus, versus larger cooperatives who implemented day-to-day hierarchy to save themselves from unnecessary communication obligations to large teams about low-stakes decisions. Member-owners of smaller cooperatives also spoke directly about how their small size made governance by consensus much easier and direct, reporting that they spoke to each other casually or held regular meetings for the whole team.

As for cooperative boards, these were described as a unit- often an elected group with multi-year terms- for resolving interpersonal conflict, setting the budget, and performing tasks that related to business strategy and administration. Boards were either organized as one group of member-owners who handled all these types of decisions or as multiple groups with specific specialties (budget group, marketing group, etc.). The relationship between the board and daily operations was not a linear power structure, however. 'Two-tier' systems of governance resulted in checks and balances of power, or circular accountability that ensured no group enjoyed too much power over another. As one member-owner stated:

"The board… does performance reviews of the general manager; she cannot serve on the board because of that. I appreciate that it does turn back around. Assistants and supervisors combined get to tell the general manager how she's doing on her job and so there's kind of like a circular thing… The GM goes to the board for guidance and asks them questions, so they directly get to be involved in some of the nitty-gritty co-op decision making." – Interview 5

In this way, member-owners felt that, although they did have some form of hierarchy, it was more collaborative and democratic than mainstream business structures. As a member-owner stated:

"We do have a hierarchy, but I think with us, it's different because every person who comes into the company… there is a path to ownership, which gives everybody an equal voice for voting and those kinds of things." – Interview 11

Participants, in fact, put a strong emphasis on the balance of power and ultimate lack of stratification within their businesses. Having general agreement, or at least getting everyone on the same page, was an important aspect of governance to them. This means listening to different opinions and trying to incorporate them into the group vision, even if this results in slower and more laborious governance processes. Although these longer timelines result in some frustration, it is the result of a conscious effort to care for and respect other member-owners. Worker cooperative member-owners are not only coworkers and co-owners; they are also human beings sharing risk. This results in complex interpersonal relationships, varying stakes in certain decisions, and an intimate knowledge of group members. As one cooperative member-owner said about reopening after the pandemic:

"There was some tension around how soon we would reopen [after Covid], but there was never a sense of like, 'well, we're just going to put it to a vote and if people who don't feel comfortable or safe reopening lose the vote then they just have to suck it up and figure it out.' Like, there was always a sense [that] we're going to get there when we can all feel good about it. And even if

that might feel a little frustrating sometimes, the underlying values of care for each other are strong enough that we're committed to that process." – Interview 29

In addition, governance was driven by values which prioritize responsibility, autonomy, democracy, and respectful agreement. No matter what emphasis cooperatives placed on their version of hierarchy, these values were the backbone of their approach to governance. Participants spoke about the need to come to agreements and overcome disagreements together- not necessarily through compromise, but through mutual understanding. In addition, taking personal responsibility was a key theme, whether that was responsibility for listening to others, for being honest about personal needs, or for investing oneself in the decision-making processes of the business. There were a few comments made by participants about how cooperative size affected this ability to foster direct compromise and decision-making. Direct democracy, and the personal connection and consensus that it provides, seems to hit a limit around a certain membership size, making it necessary to divide tasks into working groups and avoid the headache of full-member meetings. However, what this exact membership size is was variable amongst respondents. Consensus was a limit at what they personally considered a small versus large membership size.

4.3 Social Wellbeing in the Workplace

The interview protocol includes the question, "Is gender equity one of your values? Where and how does this show up?" However, when approaching this question with participants, I expanded the conversation to encompass activities and motivations that might align with feminist degrowth ideas about work and the economy (see chapter 2, section 2.2). From this, I

hoped to collect data explicitly regarding the valuation of care work, reproductive labor, and workplace policies supporting equity (or equality) amongst member-owners. Responses to this inquiry were varied, displaying a wide range of foci, from work-life balance, Spanish-speaking and immigrant member-owner support, to the diversity of member-owners in positions of power. However, the driver of all these values was respect for boundaries and a desire to provide the highest quality of life to cooperative member-owners. This is for logical reasons- as a group of owners making decisions about their own work and their own happiness, there is an incentive to create a workplace that is not exploitative but rather respectful of non-work duties to family and to self. "Collective care," as one participant called it, acknowledges that every member-owner is a whole person, that it's not just work but also mutual desire to support other member-owners and have them support you when you need it (Interview 29). As one member-owner told me:

"There's a lot of firms [where], you know, it's not uncommon to just push beyond a 40-hour week…. And that's what you're required to do. But that's not our jam. We all have other things that we love to do. We have families. We really respect people's boundaries around work and other interests." – Interview 3

This sort of support is for everyone but tends to benefit women the most as they are often the primary partner for care work within their families. As another participant noted:

"Our schedules are really flexible, and kids can come to anything. And we do the same with our students, like if a student needs to bring a kid to class one day that's great. I think we've created

a really solid organization for women and all the things that [they] have going on." – Interview 12

Cooperative member-owners were also cognizant of the role of immigrant status and varied backgrounds within their membership. There were diverse reasons for it, but participants placed a high value on supporting immigrants as member-owners and as communities who could receive benefits for their services. Translation and interpretation cooperative members, specifically, said that they understood cooperative businesses as places that could provide important services to communities whose first language was not English. "Language justice", as it's called, creates equitable spaces of collaboration where people are not limited by language or cultural barriers in negotiations or public processes (Interview 28). Other cooperative members, primarily those involved in cleaning services, described their businesses as a way to offer valuable training, investment, and ownership to people of varying immigration status. Immigration might come with trauma and loneliness, and worker cooperatives offer a workplace where close, trusting relationships can be built and where member-owners have the flexibility to visit their home countries to care for family members or to grieve loved ones. In a mainstream workplace, especially in the low-paying jobs immigrants must often take, this same trust and flexibility is not afforded (Interview 14). As one participant stated:

"The immigrant people, the immigrant black people… They do a lot of the work that's badly paid. They pay taxes but, you know, they're not going to receive benefits from it… so I think co-ops have been an opportunity for the immigrant community to stop being so invisible in the economy and be more a part of the system." – Interview 14

Finally, participants were proud of the diversity of those leading their businesses, whether that was an emphasis on the number of women member-owners or creating a safe workplace for diverse genders and backgrounds. Particularly, cooperatives were seen by their member-owners as more supportive of diversity than mainstream businesses in their respective fields. For example, one participant said:

"I know that there's… some statistics out there about [our industry] and what the makeup of those businesses looks like compared to traditional businesses. And I do know that it's more diverse, more gender equitable than you would traditionally see. You know, in that field… it's always been a little bit more male dominant than female. But, you know, right now we have one person who identifies as they, three as he, and two as she." – Interview 35

However, there is an acknowledgment of the challenges associated with attracting diversity and building a business whose practices and membership align completely with its values. Participants acknowledged that although they are trying to build something different- places where everyone has an equal seat at the decision-making table regardless of identity- they are also almost all individuals who were raised in a patriarchal, hierarchical society, and this fact makes them predisposed to "bad habits" (Interview 36). In addition, one cooperative member-owner did not believe that cooperative structures are inherently justice-oriented, besides its proclivity for allowing many voices into the decision-making process (Interview 3). Still, most participants did believe that their cooperative could combat identity-related inequalities present in mainstream society, and they actively attempted to unlearn the potential vestiges of their

acculturation to it by holding diversity and anti-discrimination trainings, trying to maintain honest communication with each other, and continually working to align their actions with their values. As one participant emphasized:

"Diversity and inclusion [are] very important to us. That's definitely a part of our community. Definitely something we need to work more on, but… definitely a principle that we value." – Interview 35

4.4 Relationship to Resource Use and the Environment

Worker cooperative member-owners spoke about their relation to resource use in practical terms. They acknowledged the energy and material usage of their operations but thought often about what could be done to mitigate it. These strategies primarily fell into two categories: reduction of energy usage and reduction of waste. Energy usage was addressed through activities like installing solar panels or working from home instead of having a shared central office (Interviews 1 and 7). Reduction of waste was accomplished through a variety of strategies. Some cooperatives, such as those whose main focus was retail or waste services, had a very direct connection between the purpose of their business and waste reduction. One member-owner of a retail cooperative mentioned:

"I think running a thrift store in general contributes to lower waste, encourages reuse and upcycling, and meets a need for affordable clothing and other goods that would like, otherwise not be available to many people." – Interview 25

And, as another participant stated:

"We see ourselves as trying to fulfill ecological goals [like] keeping compostable waste out of the landfill and then getting that into the hands of people who will use it for their gardens and farms and landscapes and that type of thing." – Interview 4

These points also speak to the perceived connection between resource use and community wellbeing. Waste reduction is seen as a goal not simply for its own sake, but also as a pathway towards communities whose needs are met with reduced pressure on resource extraction. Waste reduction is not thus seen as an individual project but as a collaboration with neighbors and the broader community (Interview 35).

Other cooperatives purposefully reduced their consumption of energy intensive machinery or extensive technology. This looked like eliminating the use of company vehicles in favor of bikes (Interview 2 and 21) or limiting the use of toxic products (Interview 23 and 26), and was often a point of pride that member-owners felt set them apart from mainstream businesses in their sector. As one member-owner from a compost pickup and disposal cooperative stated:

"A typical trash company is going to have to rely on these giant trucks that cost a lot of money and are requiring gas that costs a lot of money constantly. Pretty much all what we're doing… is just bikes…" – Interview 2

Efforts to source production materials locally and shorten supply chains depended heavily on cooperative industry type. Many cooperatives produced nonphysical goods, like consulting services, education, or care work, and did not see themselves as intimately connected with supply chains or material resources. But those who produced physical services like food, waste disposal, or retail tended to emphasize locally sourced materials when I asked them if they focused on local acquirement. Member-owners at retail and food related cooperatives in particular mentioned sourcing some items from other local businesses, such as close-by meat and millers, because of their desire to use higher quality products, keep ingredients seasonal, and support small farmers and distributors (Interview 17 and 34). While this reasoning supports shortened supply chains and sustainable agricultural practices, it does not illustrate a general connection between materials sourcing and a valuation of reduced resource use. However, this connection was, in some cases, the goal, as evidenced by this quote:

"The more locally we source, the more ecologically it benefits the world, right?" – Interview 10

And member-owners of cooperatives that worked more directly with the land, such as those in landscaping, tourism, and agriculture clearly expressed a connection between their work and ecological wellbeing. They place an emphasis on soil health, water retention, and stewardship, acknowledging that "we are nature, and we live in nature" (Interview 11). This translates into work based around healthy and functional ecosystems, but it also elicits a poignant sense of responsibility for the land on which the business functions. A member-owner of a tourism cooperative exemplified this sentiment when they said:

"We spend a lot of time in really vulnerable landscapes. A big part of what we're thinking about is like, what is the value of introducing people of resource to a rapidly changing landscape where the impacts of climate change are incredibly evident?" – Interview 9

What is the role that the business might play in climate change, and how does a cooperative balance the need to earn income with the reality that those who can afford their services are, through their affluence, causing more harm than others? This is an important question, one that many participants voiced when responding to broader questions about their interaction with the environment. Worker cooperative members tended to see their role in this question as one of public outreach and client education, which they mentioned as an important part of their producer/consumer relationship. Others said that the nature of their business tends to draw in clients who share their ecological values, particularly in opt-in services like compost pick-up.

But overall, participants in sectors related directly to the land felt that by running their business, they were actively fighting climate change. Not only were they involved in landscaping or architectural design, but they were also in the business of soil retention, habitat creation, and carbon storage. One participant aptly summed up this sentiment:

"We feel that our work in building soil and drawing carbon down into the earth is a very important aspect of helping to relieve climate change. We're adding carbon to the soil… We make compost tea, we mulch, we add gray water and rainwater to the soil. We add climate-appropriate plants… For us, it's like preventing fire, preventing landslides, directing fire-landscaping in ways that [are] not dangerous and also beautiful and can irrigate the land… So

we're trying to actively contribute to the reversal of climate change in our work. That' s one of our commitments and passions." – Interview 21

4.5 Benefit to the Broader Community

Worker cooperatives' community-oriented actions stem from an adherence to the seven cooperative principles but become more complex and take on a life of their own as they are interpreted by each business. Participants claimed that a focus on fostering community leads to better decision-making and a stronger business because it is essentially getting to know others and build networks of trust with them. In several cases, this close relationship led to salvation of the business, where a cooperative was in a tough financial position and their community members offered them assistance or loans that kept them open (Interview 22). Member-owners, in these cases, emphasized the reciprocal relationship between communities and cooperatives and how they provide direct support for each other.

These strong relationships also lead to smoother democratic processes and increased cooperation within the workplace itself- qualities which support other cooperative principles. Through that, member-owners saw community as the foundation of their business, and as the foundational reason that worker cooperatives exist at all. Member-owners spoke about starting cooperatives as community members to support a need they had, and how this has been the way that worker cooperatives have sprung up over time. One member-owner told me:

"If you go to the history of cooperatives- the history of cooperatives in the United States - I would say that that community in general has been like, the base of everything." – Interview 14

Cooperative member-owners also see community support and engagement as a way to resist the broader mainstream system that acts as an oppressive force on their sense of work and self. One member-owner stated:

"I want to, to the extent that it's possible within the capitalist hellscape that we're all forced to live in, support myself doing work that I think is pretty unambiguously good. I think [the cooperative's work] is very good for the community. I think we're really respected by the community." – Interview 2

While not every participant communicated this sentiment so strongly, they chose to join a cooperative because they wanted their work to help more than just themselves. Rather than seeing the cooperative as an entity that they owned, member-owners saw themselves as "stewards of [a] community good that is in service of the community (Interview 22)," or as a sort of public good retained by the community in which it serves. This, they felt, set them apart from mainstream businesses (Interview 12, 14, and 38). This quote sums it up:

"Everything is centered on the person, on the people. That's the capital of the business. So, everything moves around that, not around the profit." – Interview 14

The high value that worker cooperative member-owners placed on community resulted in collective action that sought to give back, so to speak, or to create public good for community members. Cooperatives attempted to generate broader wellbeing through a variety of means, including the creation of third spaces, financial donations, or, in one case, the protection of

community members from state persecution. The first type of wellbeing generation, the intentional creation of public spaces, took the form of either community rooms and event spaces open for public use within the physical business or the hosting of block parties, public meetings, and other one-time events. Respondents felt these spaces build rapport with consumers and local supporters, building relationships and resulting in input for the business while also offering valuable third spaces for socialization and community conversations (Interview 15). For example, one participant described this event:

"We just threw a 50th anniversary block party… It was tons of work, but it turned out to be this really beautiful community event where so many people showed up and it was so positive and really successful." – Interview 22

The second type of wellbeing generation was the donation of either money or other forms of support to organizations or causes that the cooperative member-owners believed in. In the case of monetary donations, cooperatives either allocate any funds left over after paying out annual patronage to member-owners (Interview 16) or they put aside a set portion of profits every year (Interview 22). These funds are then given to local organizations that provide benefit to the community. However, it is important to note that in the former case, the cooperative may never make the required excess profits and thus never provide funding. In the case of public support, this could look like anything from public vocal support for global issues- such as support for Palestine (Interview 34)- or donation of equipment and time to local causes like homelessness (Interview 4). This kind of action does not have to be local but is generally oriented towards local issues.

And finally, one cooperative retail business acted on its support for the community by refusing to prosecute shoplifters (Interview 29). Member-owners mentioned that thieves were often simply not acquainted with their mission, assuming the business to be part of a larger, hierarchical organization. If they notice someone stealing, they pull them aside to discuss how the cooperative business is enmeshed in the wellbeing of the community and how there's no boss, no repressive 'head honcho.' This tactic has a surprisingly high rate of success and avoids the criminalization of the cooperative's community members. One participant described the reasoning for this choice:

"We, in looking at [the cost of lost inventory], have realized that there's a reframing that's possible where we think about it like, "Would we spend four or five thousand dollars a year to do something that we really believe in?" And if the thing that we really believe in is not criminalizing people for shoplifting or not making people feel like they're under constant surveillance while they're in our space, then actually that's worth four or five thousand dollars." – Interview 29

4.6 Relationships Between Worker Cooperatives and Broader Networks

As part of my methodology, I sought to enrich my participant list through snowball sampling. However, I did not end up finding this to be an effective tactic because, when listing peers, participants tended to mention worker cooperatives within their state to whom I had already reached out or they spoke about businesses who were in the same market but did not have a worker-owned structure. Still, inquiring about peer worker cooperatives within participants' support network revealed important results regarding the growth of the cooperative

movement in the United States. One hundred and eight passages were coded in NVivo as containing discussion about peer organizations, and 15 of them mentioned connections between participants and their peer groups regarding interest in, or imminent conversion to, a worker cooperative structure. Chapter one mentions the growth of U.S. worker cooperatives since the 2008 recession, and participant responses provide support for a continuation of that trend into the 2020's. As one member-owner informed me:

"I think we had like… the last count of cooperatives was like 500, 600… something. And nowadays we have more than 1,000. So, after the pandemic, there was a big growth." – Interview 14

Another seconded this belief in a recent rise in interest:

"I do feel like the cooperative movement has never felt so viable. I think, in our country as it is right now, there is just a ton of interest in it and I think there's a ton of interest within the rebuilding of communities… the taking back of dignified work. Yeah, so I strongly feel like it seems almost at its most viable now." - Interview 20

Most often, member-owners mentioned how other groups trying to get started as cooperatives will contact them for advice about how the transition might work, tips for financing a group purchase from the current business owner, or just to express interest and ask questions. Worker cooperatives welcome this, offering advice freely or, in some instances, providing trainings (Interview 28) or distributing their employee handbook (Interview 5) to help peer

groups get going. In the case of one cooperative, their 'mentor' gifted them an espresso machine which was a major boost to their ability to open a storefront. Now, years later, they are in the position to pass on some of their own coffee equipment to a cooperative in Florida, which they are excited about knowing how much that kind of generosity benefitted them previously (Interview 29).

In general, worker cooperatives are connected to broader networks at several points: through peers across industries who might act as the mentors I just mentioned, through regional cooperative communities, and through national convenors and resource hubs (See Table 5). Regional communities can take the form of formal alliance organizations, such as the Network of Bay Area Cooperatives, who might lobby state governments, hold workshops, or offer loans. Regional communities can also look like more informal interaction with areas of high-density or close-knit worker cooperatives, such as in places like New York City. In this case, it functions as a base of solidarity and increases the chances of public awareness and support.

National organizations are important to participants because they provide general resources about running a cooperative business as well as assist with sourcing cooperative lawyers or providing healthcare access for member-owners. Organizations like the U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives (USFWC) also act as conveners, holding annual conferences and providing spaces where cooperatives can connect with one another. One participant gave this example:

"Recently I was part of a [USFWC] seminar about open enrollment for the next year in vision and dental benefits …The person who runs the benefits section was talking to me about, like, "how did y'all acquire your ability to offer an IRA to people? Where do you get your life and

death insurance and whatever from?" So, sharing that information with other worker cooperatives that were just in the same webinar just gives the opportunity to, like, network a little bit more, share advice, look into their own local resources." – Interview 5

Table 5 *lists both more localized and national cooperative actors who participants had a connection with.*

Regional Community Actors	National Community Actors
Valley Alliance of Worker Cooperatives (MA)	Project Equity
CoSound (WA)	US Federation of Worker Cooperatives
Arizmendi Association (CA)	Sustainable Economies Law Center
Network of Bay Area Cooperatives (CA)	Democracy at Work Institute
North Carolina Employee Ownership Center (NC)	Cooperative Development Institute
Cooperation Buffalo (NY)	Seed Commons
Southeast Center for Cooperative Development	Fund for Jobs Worth Owning
Northwest Cooperative Development Center	ICA Group
Cooperative Fund of New England	UW Center for Cooperatives
Sustainable Communities Law Center (CA)	
California Center for Cooperative Development (CA)	
Cooperative Council of North Carolina (NC)	
Cooperative Fund of the Northeast	
Cooperative Development Institute (Northeast)	

Interestingly, despite these numerous connections, some participants spoke to a distinct lack of peer support. They felt that, even in places with a high density of cooperative businesses, they were still alone because they either didn't know many cooperatives who were actually

worker-owned or, more often, because of their industry. Participants spoke about being the first worker cooperative to do what they do, or to be one of very few in the US, which leads to an amount of isolation within their industry and within cooperative networks. As one participant put it:

"We're so just like, strange and isolated in what we do… co-op people don't understand our industry enough to really help us and industry people don't understand co-ops enough to really help us." – Interview 9

More broadly, participants also pointed to several systemic challenges that prevent them from forming connections. First, even though formal worker cooperatives have been in the United States almost as long as it has been a country, business legislation and Internal Revenue Service (IRS) policies are not tailored to businesses who are collectively owned. Some cooperatives attempt to circumnavigate these issues by following worker cooperative principles, organization, etc. but legally incorporating as Limited Liability Corporations (LLC) or another type of business (Interview 5). However, this is highly dependent on the state. In some cases, a cooperative must incorporate as an LLC because there is no legal cooperative designation (Interview 12). This is prohibitive to networking and community-building because a misaligned structure and legal designation can be a hindrance to communicating the value of the cooperative and maintaining a cooperative identity. One member-owner stated:

"So, as an LLC… it can make it harder to communicate with people and, for lack of better words, convince them of the value of work-around cooperatives because somebody who's not

familiar with the structure can be like, "well, you're just an LLC but you're like, playing co-op. Like, you' re opting in- nobody's making you do that."" – Interview 9

In other cases, a lack of historical cooperative culture and fierce business competition lead to low levels of collaboration with local peers. Participants spoke about how high prices, false scarcity, and competitive business cultures affect the success of their efforts to form business connections. However, this did not dissuade them from their efforts, as one cooperative member-owner described:

"It's so hard to live here- it's so expensive and it's really cutthroat and changing really fast… [but] there's also so much resistance and like, grassroots resistance… It feels like a really poignant moment to be engaging in [cooperative] work here. Sort of overcoming those barriers with faith and friendship if I'm allowed to reduce it like that…" – Interview 16

4.7 Relationships and Limits to Growth

Worker cooperatives' relationship to growth was divided between member-owners and between cooperatives. Participants told me that taking actions to accrue more work or to hire more employees requires consensus, and varying opinions within even one workplace draw out the pros and cons of expansion. Some member-owners want to stay small and provide greater resources to fewer member-owners and closer communities while others want to grow to expand cooperative membership to more people. In both cases though, what is important to note is that worker cooperatives are primarily set up as for-profit businesses, and the inherent goals of this structure can't be ignored. Even those who desired small, steady operations acknowledged that

cooperatives are not nonprofits, that there is an imperative to make enough profit to sustain the operation, its owners, and its employees. This participant said it best:

"We're a for-profit business. We try to give back to the community. We try to invest in our neighbors, and I think we're a really generous business in terms of donations and fundraising. But we're also a for-profit business and our bottom line is really important to us." – Interview 17

Some member-owners feel growth is necessary to stay viable in the economy and to provide a living wage. They feel pressured to make sure everyone gets paid well and to see increasing patronage every year, because in some industries member-owners could make more money at a mainstream firm and so there is a feeling that cooperatives need something more than their values to retain member-owners. These motivations are also attached to a belief that, like it or not, the cooperative is functioning within the capitalist system and "in the capitalist system you have to grow (Interview 30)."

However, most member-owners who wanted to see their cooperative grow did not limit themselves to a narrow view of growth based on personal gain or some sort of linear progression. Instead, they had a desire to create more cooperative jobs (Interview 5), to afford group health insurance (Interview 5), for the cooperative to own its own building (Interview 5 and 22), to better fill a perceived need in the community (Interview 8), or to further another values-based mission (Interview 11). And not only is this good for the group and the community, they argued, but also for the broader environment in cases where the cooperative takes waste and emissions reduction seriously. As one member-owner put it:

"The work we're doing is very unambiguously good. And like, the more bike trailers are out there, the fewer trucks there are. You know, less fossil fuel use, less noise and annoyance for the people in the whole community, and so I see no reason why we shouldn't be aspiring to supplant garbage trucks completely." – Interview 2

For proponents, this type of a very slow, more opportunistic growth process becomes essentially a balance between capacity to do work and ability to provide enough resources to each member-owner. There must be enough work for everyone, but also not too much resting on only a few people in an unsustainable way that creates an unfavorable work-life balance. Faster growth for the sake of short-term profits was also associated with potential layoffs, and thus slow growth was preferred as the best course long-term. When asked about plans for future growth, some member-owners described a situation where they felt they had finally reached a workload that was sufficient- they did not feel the need to grow as this would tip that balance and cause them to have less time for interpersonal connections and hobbies (Interviews 4, 15, 24, and 36). As one participant said:

"And I think the growth is also… more, like, long-term stability. So, investing in our employees… And having a really stable group of people working on our team. And then also looking more towards the clients and building long-term relationships with them." – Interview 11

Another compelling way to look at this is through a bar metaphor. One participant told me about an interview they read where another worker cooperative member-owner was asked about growth:

"He likened [his cooperative] to a neighborhood bar where they're the proprietors of the neighborhood bar. They hope to give a good product. They hope that they have a lot of regulars. They hope that everyone has a good time in the bar. But, like, their ambitions aren't to create a network of 5,000 versions of this bar. They're just content serving their community and doing it in a way that is sustainable for them." – Interview 7

Growth beyond a certain size forces cooperative operations to change, which participants did not want. Growth, and especially a fast growth in workload, was perceived as a force that would alter the autonomy of the workplace culture as member-owners would be expected to labor for more hours with higher stakes. There was also the perception that growth in membership would at some point lead to a tipping point where direct democratic decision-making would have to be done away with in favor of more efficient processes, or where the foundational principles of the cooperative would become hampered.

The exact membership size that would cause this change to occur varied from cooperative to cooperative. For one cooperative's member-owners, it was 50 people because their preferred governance process consisted of gathering in a room and weighing varying opinions to reach a consensus, and they felt they could continue to do this until they exceeded 50 member-owners (Interview 5). Another cooperative's member-owners also chose 50 people as their tipping point based on certain legal thresholds and what they had read about cohesion and

organization theory (Interview 24). For yet another group, the threshold was around 10 people because they had previously been double that membership and found themselves unable to meet everyone's personal needs (Interview 11). And for yet another it was 15-20 member-owners, or what they personally viewed as the difference between a "small" versus "large" cooperative (Interview 1).

There was one cooperative member-owner who opposed this idea, though, stating that membership size does not matter as long as a worker cooperative can keep its values, principles, and governance style aligned with one another. Although only one opinion, this answer provides an interesting point of opposition, so it is included here:

"I think bigger cooperatives with like, 70, 80, 100 members, you know, are able to manage the growth in a way that they keep their values and principles in place. Cooperative Home Care Associates, right? That's one of the biggest in the United States, and they're still focused on keeping the governance in alignment with their values and principles. And in spite of their growth, right? ...I would say that is the main thing… that will set up a different tone for this type of business immediately. Like, if you're going to sell something, you will think about the environment, you will think about your community, the needs of the community. You're not going to sell anything because you need to have a good job- that's not a cooperative." – Interview 14

An agnostic or wary view of growth was also, in several cases, due to previous periods of rapid or unsustainable growth that harmed a cooperative. One cooperative reached its peak membership and sales right before the 2020 pandemic with full intentions to keep expanding, but then during and afterwards lost more than half their membership (Interview 17). Now they are

rebuilding their membership, but they are more wary of what is sustainable for them and are having conversations about limiting their size this time.

And finally, financial and membership growth are not prioritized in many cooperatives because the primary goal of the businesses is seen as human wellbeing. Member-owners spoke about a desire to fight the exploitation of workers, which often means higher prices and less emphasis on cutting costs. This also entails, as mentioned above, creating a different work environment than the mainstream one that many member-owners have previously worked in. One member-owner from a retail and restaurant cooperative described to me the division amongst their co-members regarding the goals and mission of their business. Despite the disagreement, they said any member-owner would agree on this:

"I think that we could probably find common ground on our frustration with the capitalist system as it exists, and that we would like to try to do it differently and in a way that allows us to be kind and supportive of each other, and not, you know, beat ourselves into the ground trying to make a profit." – Interview 17

People and wellbeing come first, clearly, but there is some ambiguity as to the extent that growth is seen as playing a role in that wellbeing. Member-owners refuse to exploit themselves for the sake of profit, a characteristic that they see as setting them apart from mainstream businesses in their respective sectors, but some cooperatives feel pressure to compete with those same exploitative and profit-driven businesses. Also, a slow, sustainable growth that ensures member-owners' wellbeing is still growth without a clear stopping point. One participant said about their 5–10-year business plan:

"Sustainability, I think, is more important than growth as long as we're successful enough to make it worthwhile for people to join our company and stay with our company and be happy…" – Interview 18

Success as a business must, to some extent, come first so cooperatives can stay in the economic market and provide for their members before their values (sustainability, community, etc.) can take precedence. The exact threshold for "success-" the point where profit and growth take a backseat to community wellbeing and responsibility for resource use- is different for each worker cooperative based on sector and collaboration style. However, it primarily falls into three categories: (1) the number of member-owners that can be sustained before more labor must be obtained and governance style must become less democratic, (2) the amount of labor that each member-owner can perform before they feel they have either insufficient income or insufficient time for friends and family, and (3) the number of business ventures and/or size of market share before the cooperative is no longer invested in their own community context. Interviews in this study indicate that worker cooperatives who feel they have achieved a sustainable balance between profit and capacity may no longer desire to grow, choosing instead to fulfill community needs and act in the interest of their collective values.

4.8 Social Transformation

To be a tool for transformation in the context of this project's theoretical basis, worker cooperatives must have a culture that is fundamentally different from the mainstream economy. However, participating worker cooperatives did have some things in common with mainstream

businesses. As mentioned earlier, cooperatives sometimes had hierarchical elements such as boards and managers. These hierarchical power differentials are not informed by the seven cooperative principles and might lead to cooperative governance that functions just like a non-cooperative business (see section 4.2). Secondly, cooperatives must pursue profit to the extent that they remain solvent and must compete with other businesses in their market, leading to a potential drive for consistently increasing profit and growth to 'keep up' (see section 4.7).

Despite these common elements, participants discussed far more ways in which worker cooperatives differed from mainstream business. First, they agreed that worker cooperatives have a values-driven approach to community and member-owner care that goes beyond what is typical of other business types. As one participant said:

"You won't find the big hauling and recycling company, the trucking company, having a social justice committee to spend their money on. They're just simply funneling the money as much to the top as possible. So, I think that that's one way that we differ drastically- not only do we take care of our workers, which a typical business could, but we also have a more value-based driven system." – Interview 2

Second, participants agreed that worker cooperatives distribute income among their members more evenly, providing direct and sufficient livelihoods for themselves. This is paired with a high level of financial transparency, which is not typical for other types of business. As a member-owner described:

"[Traditionally], there's not a lot of transparency around salaries and certainly there isn't profit sharing in the way that we profit share. And I think a lot of just traditional businesses… I don't want to say there's secrecy but there's just not transparency about finances, about how decision making happens." – Interview 3

And third, the structure and principles of worker cooperatives lead to a high level of democracy and close collaboration. This not only creates a space where voices can be heard more equally but results in better decision-making than strictly hierarchical businesses, even accounting for the limited hierarchy that does tend to also exist in some cooperatives. As a participant told me:

"Everyone thinks, "oh, [non-hierarchical governance] is going to be such an inefficient means of governance. No. When you have one person making all the decisions, they cannot have all the information needed to make a good decision." – Interview 19

And as another stated:

"We make better decisions when… four brains are actively talking and thinking about, like, how we operate this mechanism that we have. I think that if one of us was in charge, we would just mess up more. One person just can't think about all of the different angles, and so I really think that we make better decisions because we need to have consensus, or at the very least [a] majority…" – Interview 4

Participants are fundamentally different from their mainstream counterparts in these ways, but do they work towards, or acknowledge, system transformation? Many member-owners responded yes: They have a clear vision of themselves as an agent of change for a different kind of reality. Amalgamating the various definitions of this reality as best I could, participants would agree on something like, 'Worker cooperatives see themselves as sharing a collective ethos that, whether it is explicit in their bylaws or not, contributes to the transformation of society into an egalitarian, democratic place, a world that is more inclusive of identity differences and respectful of the interconnectedness of the natural environment. This is a world free of oppression and predicated on abundance rather than scarcity (taken from responses in the following interviews: 4, 12, 21, 23, 29, 33, and 35).' Several respondents went as far as to say that they place strong cultural value on fighting the mainstream system (Interviews 8, 10, and 30). They call out capitalism as the name of this system, acknowledging its far-reaching effects while vowing to separate themselves from it. One member-owner phrased it like this:

"We are really passionate about what we do and very connected to one another in supporting each other in this movement of fighting capitalism, of which we are all a product, of which affects all of our lives every day." – Interview 8

This is paired in many cases with specific action items. They vary from workplace changes like four-day work weeks and sub-forty-hour weekly work obligations (Interview 36) to broader goals for tackling systemic barriers like inaccessible healthcare. A participant had this to say:

"[The state government is] trying to make funding and tax breaks and things accessible, but they aren't actually accessible. And how do we help them help us in that sense? No health insurance is the big one, and I know from talking with a number of other cooperatives in [my state] and elsewhere that that's not a unique challenge to be up against the health insurance or the healthcare system. And I think that's a really important thing to work with, and I think that's… in the US, like, its own monument to take down… that abuse. But that's kind of where we aim to start." – Interview 37

Other types of action fell under education, both of other businesses and the broader public (Interviews 5, 9, 36, and 37). And this was described as a natural follow-up to the common claim that by modelling something different as visibly and intentionally as possible, worker cooperatives challenge the status quo (Interviews 2, 11, 15, 16, 23, and 35). The presence of cooperatives, when they are able to succeed, highlights the poor working conditions of mainstream businesses in the same fields. Additionally, representing the seven cooperative principles despite a lack of state support- or despite any other challenges- shakes up a seemingly monolithic approach to American business structure. As one participant summed it up:

"Just continuing to exist is, you know, a middle finger up." – Interview 2

Across all participants, worker cooperatives in business sectors related directly to the landscape (including compost services, outdoor tourism, landscaping, and seed retailers) were most closely aligned with system change. According to member-owner responses, they were almost unanimously proponents and actors of transformation.

However, a few member-owners were hesitant about their cooperative's role as a pillar of alternative business. This came partly from a belief that, while worker cooperatives play a role in creating a better working environment internally, they cannot be separated from their need to operate within the status quo. Proponents of this idea argue that while cooperatives can avoid causing harm to workers, communities, and local ecosystems, they lack the ability to reduce system harm over time, or to flip the characteristics of the broader system just by existing. System transformation is then, of course, not part of their business goals- they see their objective as a purely practical and localized one (Interviews 1, 3, 7, 13, 18, and 24). And, in several cases, cooperative members did not imagine themselves as existing parallel to the mainstream system, but rather underneath its thumb. Because of this, they did not view cooperative structures as explicitly transformative (Interview 25).

Ultimately, only member-owners from three worker cooperatives explicitly said they were fighting to change capitalism as a system, and a little over half of worker cooperatives (21 cooperatives) collectively identified themselves as agents for broad societal transformation. Those cooperatives that claimed they did not have transformative potential (17 cooperatives) still maintained that they were transforming work for themselves and wellbeing for their communities. They just felt this localized transformation was not applicable to broader scales and that they had not discussed social transformation as a cooperative value with co-members.

4.9 Challenges to the Worker Cooperative Ethos

Regardless of participants' opinions on their cooperative's transformative potential, they brought up several major elements that challenge the efficacy of the worker cooperative model's

goals. First, it takes an incredible amount of responsibility and loyalty from each member-owner to successfully run a cooperative. As one long-time member-owner said:

"It really does take a certain type of person to be able to succeed in a worker co-op. I don't think it's necessarily [the case] for everybody… for small co-ops, like 20 or under, 15 or under employees, I think it really does take… a team effort way more for sure." – Interview 1

For many of the people who join worker cooperatives, there is a learning curve as they adapt to the reality of collaboration and try to shake off the habits of mainstream workplaces. A member-owner is responsible for transparent communication with others, which can be surprisingly difficult. This extends to meetings too, where member-owners described how a person's idea may be rejected by the group for impersonal reasons, but that misunderstanding might spark animosity. Member-owners also described the tension that can spring up between founding member-owners and new member-owners or as a result of perceived seniority. However, while people have to adapt themselves to collaboration, they also must get comfortable with leadership (Interview 17). People feel bossy taking charge, but temporary leadership is necessary for a functioning cooperative business. As one member-owner described it:

"I think what's hard for people is that they don't want a hierarchy or a manager, but at the same time are not willing to lead… the lack of leadership can be destabilizing so some people are very reluctant to be told what to do in any way, even if it's as simple as, "Can you wrap this cheese?" or whatever, and that can be hard when we need to get the work done." – Interview 17

There is also the demanding physical aspect of the work, depending on the sector. One member-owner of a landscaping cooperative spoke about how they attract employees (who are potential member-owners) who value cooperatives without giving enough thought to what landscaping entails (Interview 11). This speaks to a broader dichotomy that captures both the interpersonal and physical realities, because "you can love working at a cooperative, but you may not love doing the work (Interview 11)." There is an idealism about the work and the ideology that must fall away in order to integrate fully. One member-owner refers to this process of losing one's idealism as "unlearning" expectations, apathy, and impatience. Entering a new dynamic can be uncomfortable, and discomfort in many cases leads to a rejection of the cooperative culture and an inability to unlearn old work habits.

However, how to address this process of unlearning and cultural integration with each new member-owner is a struggle. Participants agree that honesty, participation, and shared responsibility are key to combating tension and a missing sense of ownership. However, how to actually foster these qualities is less clear, and sometimes a failure to do so leads to the breakdown of the business. Below, one member-owner describes their personal experience with this:

"[My co-members could] do anything, and they just decided to make demands that were infeasible. And when those demands came butting up against the reality of the bank account, they claimed that they were being exploited and didn't think creatively about how to fix that. Like, if they wanted more money, all they needed to do is figure out how they were going to do that… But they didn't. And I think the other thing going on here is [that] we're not in a good time for personal responsibility. When people think personal responsibility, they think neoliberalism.

They think, "Oh, a collective problem is being foisted upon the individual" or "Oh no, I have to do something." And this is… this is bullshit. We're not going to get to the kind of world that we need to get to by everybody deciding that they shouldn't be responsible for the conditions of their existence. That they shouldn't be responsible for taking power when they have it and doing something fucking righteous." – Interview 19

This particular member-owner's cooperative was near dissolution as a result of, in their opinion, two things. First, their co-members lacked broader cultural values that placed emphasis on responsibility, so they had a difficult time accustoming themselves to the culture of responsibility necessary at a cooperative. And second, they were so used to being exploited in previous positions that, when provided a voice to shape their labor as they desired, they didn't know how to do so. This difficulty adapting, and the collective difficulties of building a strong cooperative culture, led to a business that could not function outside of the mainstream economy, much less beside it or inside of it.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The revised cultures framework (Figure 3) depicts how research themes led to the main findings, or the cultural outcomes, of the study. Materiality, motivations, and activities interact within the dashed line of the cultural ensemble, reacting to (and in some cases reciprocating) external influences. These interactions make up the simplified production process of outcomes, although in reality there are many non-linear cultural elements that also play a role (Stephenson, 2023). In the cultures framework, outcomes are social, economic, and environmental indicators for sustainability (Bach et al., 2020; Muza & Thomas, 2022; Stephenson, 2018; Stephenson et al., 2010; Tesfamichael et al., 2020). However, this project replaces sustainability with degrowth. The "new" degrowth indicators are the qualities necessary for a worker cooperative to be a non-capitalist actor: a reduction of material consumption and throughput, limits placed on growth, and restructuring of social relations to eliminate inequality and increase wellbeing. Fulfillment of these qualities results in alternative, transformative potential (Kallis, 2011).

Expanding on the presentation of interview data from chapter four, the following subsections will discuss study results within broader discussions about interstitial transformation and potential degrowth movements. First, an analysis of the cultures framework explores the relationship between cooperative culture, cultural outcomes, and tensions with external structural elements. This sets up subsequent discussions about the role of worker cooperatives as alternative economic actors and what this might suggest about system transformation and interstitial strategies. This chapter also serves to address the research questions that have guided the project. First, I address the extent to which worker cooperatives' cultures situate them as alternative economic actors. Then, I extend this to analyze how worker cooperatives might be

specifically aligned with degrowth as a transformative pathway. In answering both questions, I engage with broader implications about transformation in the United States.

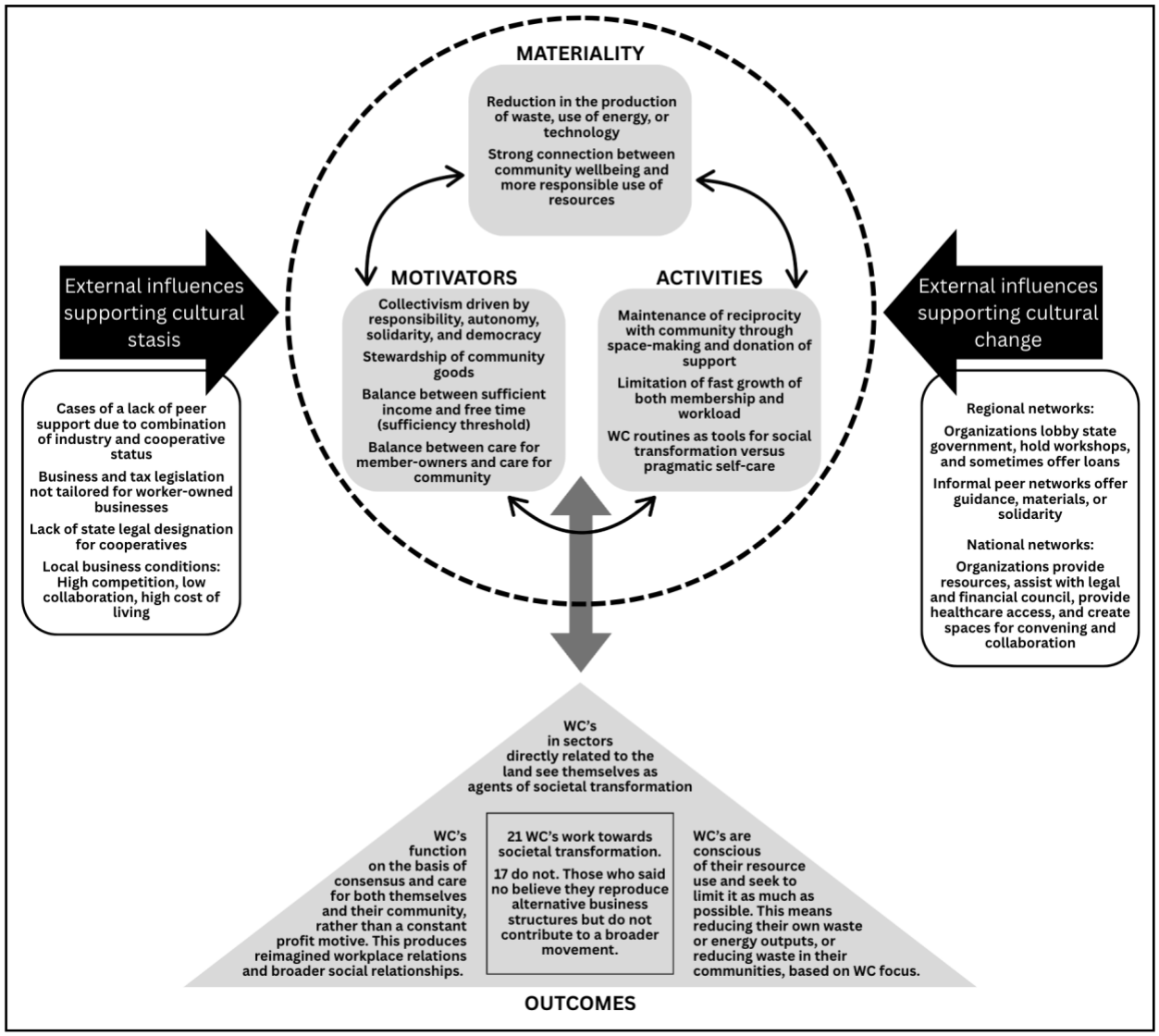

Figure 3 *depicts the updated cultures framework as it reflects the outcomes of study interviews and coding. Notice that, for the sake of space, "worker cooperative" is shortened to "WC."*

5.1 The Cultural Ensemble

The elements of the cultural ensemble- motivations, activities, and materiality- are highly influenced by each other, sharing highly interconnected relationships and non-linear patterns (Stephenson, 2023). Because of this, the important ways they overlap are a critical precursor to discussing their cultural outcomes. Figure 4 helps to illustrate these interconnections. First, worker cooperatives are motivated by responsibility, autonomy, solidarity, wellbeing, and democracy, as is reflected by their actions (a relationship between motivators and activities). They emphasize wellbeing for their member-owners through a balance between working hours and free time, reducing labor to a level they find enjoyable (or acceptable). In addition, this is supported by actions and values that emphasize horizontal governance practices and member-owner responsibility, or a limited hierarchy in the case of those cooperatives who feel they need an elected board or committee structure. These governance practices come even at the expense of efficiency, acting in ways that place consensus above time or profit. This internal emphasis on values-driven action goes beyond what is typical of a mainstream firm (Levy, 2017; Tyree-Hageman, 2013) and supports the claim that worker cooperatives function on different principles and foundational drivers than other, non-cooperative business types (Abell, 2014; Cunico et al., 2022).

U.S. worker cooperatives further support this pre-established difference by emphasizing their reciprocal relationship with the communities in which they reside and whom they serve. They value wellbeing within these communities as well as internally, and this results in activities such as third space making or donation of time and resources to social and community causes. This also results in actions which limit business growth, as some member-owners want to stay small and provide greater resources to fewer member-owners and closer communities. And even in cases where worker cooperatives might express a desire for growth, this motivation is driven

by desire to expand cooperative membership and its benefits to more people and to increase provided benefits to surrounding communities. Those who are motivated to grow envision this growth as a slow, opportunistic process dependent on workload and the business' ability to maintain internal wellbeing and democracy. So again, these actions are highly influenced by values-based motivations and support literature which defines worker cooperatives as alternatives to mainstream businesses.

Finally, I will address materiality, which in this case I use to refer to the ways that motivators and activities shape interactions with material resources and the natural world. U.S. worker cooperatives are cognizant of their material usage and try to limit it through the reduction of energy usage, reduction of waste, or through limitation of technology and resource-intensive equipment. This variety of activities is highly dependent on business sector, and some actions might result in a greater reduction of material throughput than others. However, worker cooperatives, regardless of choice and level of activity, see a strong connection between responsible resource use and community wellbeing, further underscoring motivations to increase solidarity and wellbeing. Broader literature connecting worker cooperatives to degrowth and alternative economies does not seem to explicitly focus on the relationship between cooperatives and their natural environment, which positions this aspect of cultural materiality as a novel result of the study. In respect to this, the results of the study that relate to worker cooperatives' cultures in relation to reducing material throughput might contribute to an understudied area of research, abet with some additional data. This is expanded upon further in section 5.3.

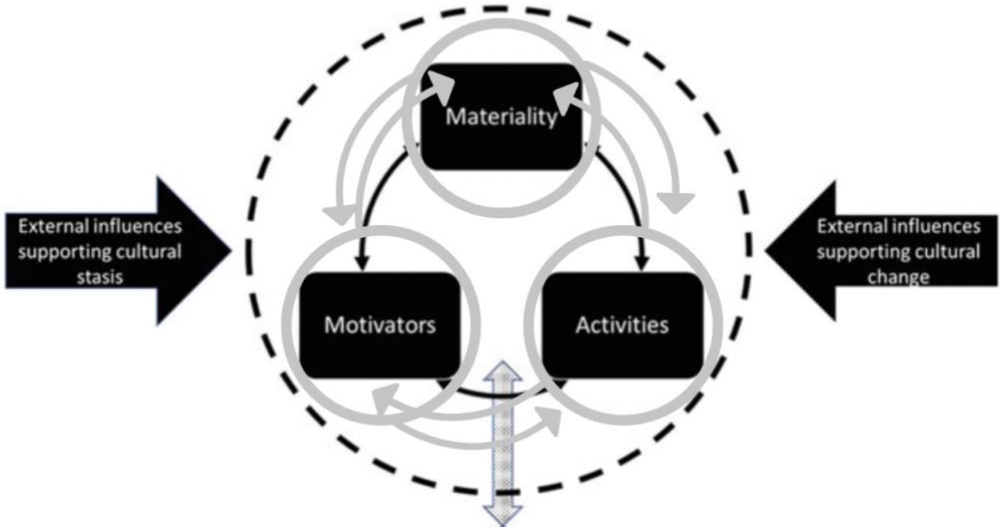

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Figure 4 *Shows the interconnections between the elements of the cultural ensemble. The black aspects of the figure are from Stephenson 2023, and the lighter gray arrows are my addition to highlight how materiality, motivators, and activities affect each other.*

5.2 External Influences

Culture-as-structure engages with the networks that emerge from shared ideology as well as with the structures that further reinforce it (Stephenson, 2023). An inability to break out of socially defined "rules" or structures, or the inability to form networks with like-minded actors, constitutes a lack of agency to challenge the status quo. Because culture-as-structure engages with structuration theory, social structure is produced through repetitive action. To break habits and perform other cultural actions and values is a direct alteration of that status quo (Chatterjee et al., 2019; Pozzebon & Pinsonneault, 2005). This is in theory at least, as cultural actors might be unable to shape structures in the same way those structures shape them, that is, unless they act in tandem with many others. Stephenson (2023) describes a change in New Zealand's electricity

sector as result of a cultural change amongst thousands of households. One household would not have achieved that, no matter its individual agency.

Ultimately, this underscores the importance of peers and support systems in cultural change (Stephenson, 2023). Interview data illustrated strong participant connections with informal peer groups and regional or national NGO's, which indicates that U.S. worker cooperatives have collective cultural agency. The current rate of expansion of worker cooperatives also indicates this agency (Democracy at Work Institute & U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives, 2023) because of the ways sharing resources and information with 'younger' cooperatives is seen as a contributing factor. An acknowledgment of this agency provides context for the outcomes of the cultures framework and later discussion about transformative potential- if cooperatives can engage with structure collectively, and if they maintain social connections, it supports their role as change agents. However, this point does not speak to whether that change is transformational or aligned with degrowth.

The cultures framework (Figure 3) was very useful for arranging study results in a way that emphasized internal versus external influences. Culture is multi-scalar (Stephenson, 2023), and so "measuring" external influences both deepened my understanding of the cooperative cultural ensemble and provided some glimpse of interconnected cultures at other scales. For example, interview data showed that regional and national NGOs support social change towards cooperativism, but they also perform important work around providing cooperative education, offering workshops, and convening worker cooperatives to collaborate and deepen network connections. They also lobby for better cooperative legislation and recognition, and, in the case of the U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives (USFWC), provide health insurance. In a sense, these organizations fill in where a state business association or grant program serves to help

mainstream businesses instead. Because of the NGO's, citizens in the United States have access to worker cooperative data, resources, and business strategies. The support of these organizations in the modern worker cooperative movement cannot be emphasized enough. However, my search for documentation of this relationship in existing literature was fruitless. If not for the cultures framework's acknowledgement of this dialectical relationship across scale, critical components of the "cooperative landscape" might have been missed.

5.3 Outcomes: Worker Cooperatives as Alternative Economic Actors

An economic alternative is an entity or system with an underlying driver that is radically different from the mainstream growth imperative (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Zanoni et al., 2017). While this could include a large number of economic relations, this project considers degrowth alternatives where entities act to reduce material throughput, increase wellbeing, and who are not driven by growth (economic actors seeking meet community needs, increase social capital, etc.)

Worker cooperatives can function as alternatives to the mainstream economy only if they are able to maintain a horizontal governance structure, emphasize care and wellbeing above profit in the workplace and in their community, and place a collective limitation on business size and growth (Cunico et al., 2022; Hinton, 2021; Sobering et al., 2014). These elements are based on common consensus in papers concerning cooperatives, degrowth, and alternative economies, and they are tailored to these topics. But for an actor to constitute an economic alternative to capitalism, all that is required are underlying drivers that are radically different from the mainstream system's growth imperative (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Zanoni et al., 2017). This includes economic actors who are vastly different from each other. In *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew it): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*, by J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006),

alternatives to capitalism are presented as slavery and theft as well as cooperative businesses. So, although I use the broad term "economic alternative" here, the work is actually engaging with a narrow definition of a much wider set of actors.

For worker cooperatives to function as alternatives to the mainstream, they had to produce and maintain a culture that resulted in horizontal governance, emphasized wellbeing above profit, and placed limits on business size and growth- the requirements laid out in the section above. Literature about cooperative governance claims worker cooperatives that maintain a non-bureaucratic, horizontal governance structure are able to challenge mainstream power dynamics through offering an egalitarian democratic voice across intersectional identities (Meyers, 2022; Sobering et al., 2014). Regarding this, interview participants did maintain a horizontal governance process with as little hierarchy as possible. In addition, democracy and collective decision-making were strong motivators across interviews, suggesting cultural adherence to international cooperative principles two and four (democratic member control and autonomy and independence) (Abell, 2014). While governance hierarchy theoretically depends on size (Bretos & Marcuello, 2017), no worker cooperative respondents reported that their business was too large for horizontal, directly democratic processes. While I did not officially collect data on the membership size of participants, this would have been very useful for comparing what each cooperative considered "large" or too large to function as an economic alternative.

Then, regarding the other two requirements, interviews emphasized the mutually beneficial relationship they shared with their respective communities. Emphasis on care and community, not on "getting rich," as some participants put it, suggests a business centered around values rather than profit (Peuter & Dyer-Witheford, 2010). In addition, growth beyond a

certain membership size or workload was not desired. In interviews, worker cooperatives almost unanimously spoke of a primary focus on non-monetary member-owner benefit, specifically benefits that concerned the fulfillment of social cohesion and work-life balance.

What is interesting about these outcomes- besides that they confirm that worker cooperatives function as alternatives to capitalism- is the relationship between member-owner emphasis on their own wellbeing and an emphasis on values above profit. These two qualities end up creating a reinforcing feedback loop that limits business growth past a certain size. As it is described in Cunico et al. (2022), at a size that is different for every worker cooperative, the business reaches a point where growth would require either additional member-owners (who would "cost" the cooperative in compensation) or an increased workload for each current member-owner that might diminish their wellbeing or free time. Because the cooperative values wellbeing over additional profits, they will reach a natural point where profits are sufficient and workload is not overwhelming, and so a size equilibrium is theoretically reached.

The central aspect of Cunico et al.'s idea is a definition of sufficiency that is related to degrowth and worker cooperatives. Literature that engages with sufficiency thresholds tends to have vague metrics based on minimums to achieve social justice or arbitrary maximums to limit consumption (Jungell-Michelsson & Heikkurinen, 2022; Spengler, 2016). However, Cunico et al. invokes a "degrowth ethos" where a greater collective commitment to degrowth ideals leads to a lower sufficiency threshold (Cunico et al., 2022). While this is still highly context-dependent and theoretical- it almost feels like an afterthought in the paper- it provides a more concrete theoretical basis for my interview data than broader sufficiency literature. I noticed the same trend in my interview data that Cunico et al. did, even before reading about their findings. While participants did not often give a specific number, they did have a personal idea of what was a big

versus small cooperative size, and they expressed sentiments about finding this sufficiency and not wishing to grow any larger.

I have not been able to find any other publications applying sufficiency thresholds to cooperatives in this way. Because of the way it helps to explain why worker cooperatives choose to remain small despite mainstream economic pressures, and because this explanation engages the cooperative elements that are required for alternative economic functioning, I later suggest that it be part of future work beyond this thesis.

5.4 Outcomes: Worker Cooperatives as Tools for Degrowth?

Degrowth is both a theory and a movement that critiques the current systemic growth paradigm and calls for a radical alternative to it (Medak et al., 2020). Pathways to this alternative are various and should embrace pluralism and complexity rather than reducing discussion to "top-down" or "bottom-up" strategies (Schmelzer et al., 2022). In reality, a combination of simultaneous strategies will most likely be necessary (Buch-Hansen et al., 2024). This study has addressed elements of an interstitial change, where a coalescence of alternative actors can lead to a new system without revolution (E. O. Wright, 2010). This is supported by the feminist economic imaginary, where mainstream and alternative actors exist at once rather than linearly (Gibson-Graham, 2006b). So, for example, a cooperative business could be non-capitalist even if it participates in capitalist markets and profits in the "mainstream economy." This provides support for worker cooperatives as alternative entities that might contribute to interstitial change as a path to degrowth. However, these cooperatives must meet certain criteria to do this.

Specifically, worker cooperatives whose cultures are aligned with degrowth are necessarily alternative economic actors who adhere to the qualities in the previous section about

horizontal governance, wellbeing above profit, and limits to growth. However, these worker cooperatives must also contribute to social wellbeing and the reduction of material throughput- both of which are key components of a degrowth movement (Abazeri, 2022; Hickel, 2021). And finally, in order to align with degrowth, I argue that it is also necessary for worker cooperatives to have a stated goal or desire to transform the economic system (Peuter & Dyer-Witheford, 2010). Degrowth is both a social movement and a research framework (Medak et al., 2020), and I have invoked both to characterize a necessary system transformation and worker cooperatives' potential role in that. However, for degrowth to move from an idea into a reality- actions which succeed in transforming the status quo- degrowth literature imagines a social movement with an explicitly shared goal (Demaria et al., 2013; Medak et al., 2020). In other words, to be a tool for degrowth, worker cooperatives must align with the movement's values and must also engage in deliberate change efforts that align with degrowth as a movement.

A reduction in material throughput is necessary to contend with biophysical limits (Demaria et al., 2013) and to reduce production and consumption (Busk, 2023). Inside worker cooperatives, this reduction can look like streamlining waste or sourcing locally (Preluca et al., 2022). All interview participants had something that their business did in this regard, mainly energy and waste reduction, and they saw these kinds of behaviors as connected to wellbeing. So, succinctly, worker cooperatives seek to reduce their throughput.

In relation to social wellbeing, worker cooperatives tried to produce benefits for both broader communities (mentioned in 5.2) and for themselves. Interview data revealed that work-life balance was important to member-owners, leading to prioritized time for interpersonal relationships, unpaid work, and family responsibilities. In addition, many cooperatives placed emphasis on their intentions to maintain anti-colonialist, non-patriarchal, and diverse workplaces

and communities. This was not without its challenges, as the results on unlearning mainstream cultural dynamics suggest, cooperatives can reproduce capitalist spaces with inattention to governance hierarchy or values (Meyers, 2022; Sengupta, 2015). However, participating cooperatives were not inattentive to this and had built collective spaces where they felt comfortable and empowered to work towards similar standards in the broader community. Cooperatives' cultural emphasis on community and member-owner wellbeing also supports feminist degrowth's claim that a transformation of social relations and "mainstream" power dynamics is necessary for broader societal and economic shifts to be truly liberated from the status quo (Harcourt et al., 2023). Worker cooperatives can be sites of this type of reimagination of relationships if they are able to limit both their hierarchy and size (Meyers, 2022; Sobering et al., 2014). And, as section 5.2 stated, worker cooperatives largely did do this, describing a collective decision-making process that emphasized deliberation and democracy as well as maintenance of a membership size that served this.

And, finally, I think it serves my discussion to briefly restate that I asked interview participants directly if they thought their worker cooperative aspired to transform society. Twenty-one cooperatives' member-owners agreed that their business was either actively working towards broader social change or that they were challenging societal norms through example. Seventeen cooperatives' member-owners stated that their business was not engaged in social transformation and did not see that as one of their goals. This nearly even divide is interesting because worker cooperatives' cultures meet the criteria to be both alternative economic actors and tools for a degrowth movement. They function on non-capitalist foundations and align with the social and material goals set by degrowth literature. However, almost half of participating worker cooperatives denied that their goal is to transform the current economic system. Because

of this, I claim that U.S. worker cooperatives currently function as economic alternatives and that they have transformative potential in a degrowth movement. But I can't claim that worker cooperatives at a national scale currently function as tools for degrowth (Brossmann & Islar, 2020; Kallis et al., 2018).

This claim is a result of interview data and my own interpretation of degrowth literature. However, its nuance is partly a result of a study caveat. Few participants seemed familiar with the term "degrowth." While their cooperative culture aligned with degrowth principles, they did not utilize its specific terminology. Because of this, the actual term "degrowth" was implicit in most of the interviews. When I did engage with the term directly, it was rare to have a participant recognize it. In almost all interview cases, even in those where I might have referred to "degrowth," my assessment of cooperative alignment with degrowth was inferred based on their adherence to "degrowth qualities" like the generation equitable wellbeing distribution, reduction of material throughput, and a limit to cooperative growth (Demaria et al., 2013).

However, despite being unfamiliar with degrowth, many cooperatives had cultures that perfectly aligned with it. They did not invoke degrowth, but interview results relayed that they sought to reduce the material usage of their business (and the waste and material usage of their communities in several cases) as well as increase the wellbeing of themselves and the communities in which they were situated. Almost all spoke of business drivers beyond growth-meeting community needs, meeting member-owner needs, or generating "good" for broader purposes. What lacked was, for half, an acceptance of the power their business structure provided them, but for the other half, what might be the difference between enacting the general qualities of degrowth without explicit alignment versus having the same goals with "degrowth" attached to them? If this explicit alignment truly didn't matter, then, theoretically, the United

States would be beginning a degrowth transition now as worker cooperative numbers increase. This brings up necessary further research about the cultural differences between worker cooperatives who identify with degrowth explicitly and those who do not.

I do want to note that one group of worker cooperatives was closely aligned with both degrowth and social transformation. Cooperatives in business sectors related directly to the landscape (including compost services, outdoor tourism, landscaping, and seed retailers) not only had deeper relationships with their environment via conscientious work, but they also almost unanimously self-identified as working towards system transformation. Despite this, there seems to be little to no acknowledgement in the literature of "land-based" cooperatives' potential strength as a tool for degrowth. While studies in agroecology and sustainability do draw connections between agricultural and "land-based" cooperatives and degrowth, it is not to make the claim that they are the best suited for it, or for social transformation (Boillat et al., 2012; Flachs, 2022; Gerber, 2020). I suggest exploring this in a future study to better understand the relationship between cooperative connection to land and willingness to act as transformative agents.

5.5 Implications for Transformation in the United States

The current mainstream system works to effectively erase alternative actors (Gibson-Graham, 2006a). However, utilization of the feminist economic imaginary decenters the status quo, revealing its ordinariness and helping to illuminate the contradictions of a system based on capital accumulation- this "unbeatable empire" is, in reality, riddled with inconsistencies. In *Seventeen Contradictions and The End of Capitalism* (2015), David Harvey outlines seventeen contradictions inherent in the pursuit of capital accumulation (the defining characteristic of the

mainstream system in question). The most "dangerous" of these contradictions are (1) the constant expansion of capital accumulation despite finite resources, (2) the way capital dominates ecological discourse and cultural conceptions of nature while also profiting from the ecological disasters and degradation that its activities create, and (3) capital accumulation and expansion come at the cost of the alienation of humans from their labor, which causes these humans to agitate and to revolt, so capital must expend increasing energy to suppress and surveil them (Harvey, 2015). This system, although seemingly moments away from collapse, avoids confronting its contradictions through spatial and temporal fixes. These come in a variety of forms, from expansion into cheaper, resource-rich areas for exploitation (spatial), the use of credit to avoid immediate collapse during economic crisis (temporal), or a combination of fixes in both time and space, called spatio-temporal fixes (Harvey, 2015; Jessop, 2006). One might argue that neoliberalism, which was mentioned in chapter two, is one of these spatio-temporal fixes. As Harvey points out, neoliberalism is a form of capital management ushered in in the 1960's and 1970's to "fix" post-war citizen discontent with capitalism (dangerous contradiction number 3) and a stagflation crisis (Harvey, 2007). This resulted in drastic upward shifts of wealth and power into the hands of elites as well as the opening of new markets via coercion in Iraq and other oil producing countries under exploitative conditions. Through neoliberalism, capitalism avoided collapse in the short run, but its subjugation of common people has led to new oppositional movements, and its contradictions have become apparent over time (Harvey, 2005, 2007).

However, this system is neither supreme nor immovable. The economic imaginary rejects the supremacy of capital and neoliberalism, reminding us that there are many co-existing alternatives outside of the "mainstream" on which transformational movements can draw

(Alperovitz & Dubb, 2013; Gibson-Graham, 2006b; Medak et al., 2020). Erik Olin Wright's interstitial plan for transformation offers a way to mobilize these many localized alternatives such that they will eventually coalesce into a broad force (Wright, 2010).

Worker cooperatives have experienced an extended period of growing numbers and popularity since the 2008 recession, which is considered a hugely consequential neoliberal crisis that marked a turning point in both the strategies of the status quo and the desires of people to seek alternatives (Aalbers, 2013b; Democracy at Work Institute & U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives, 2023; Harvey, 2009; Peck & Theodore, 2019). This perceived cause and effect, as well as the presence of worker cooperatives in degrowth literature as possible tools for a new system, positions worker cooperatives as alternatives to the mainstream system and as viable tools for a bottom-up degrowth movement (Hanaček et al., 2020; Hickel, 2021). However, this optimistic claim in largely not true in the United States. A little under half of participant worker cooperatives stated that they did not have transformative potential beyond transforming work for themselves and perhaps life for their communities. This localized power, however, was not applied to broader scales, or was not seen as a force for overcoming the status quo.

This study sought to clarify ambiguity in the literature about whether worker cooperatives are tools for degrowth transformation or not. Because of the lack of participants who were acting towards broader system change, the study technically found that worker cooperatives do currently function as tools for transformation. What is interesting about this though is that the majority of participants met the criteria for being non-capitalist actors and met the criteria for being aligned with degrowth. They just did not seek to, or feel they could, be something political and larger than themselves. This speaks to a potential for transformation, if not a current quality.

If worker cooperatives can be convinced that their culture makes them primed for a degrowth movement, perhaps the majority would see their business as a transformative force.

5.6 Discussion Conclusions

This study found that U.S. worker cooperatives are alternative economic actors, and that their cultural motivations, actions, and materiality align them with degrowth. The outcomes of their cultures include attempts to lower resources use and environmental impact, to maintain horizontal power structures and generate wellbeing for community, and to prioritize member-owner wellbeing over growth. However, worker cooperatives as a whole cannot currently be considered tools for social transformation due to a lack of belief that transformation is possible through their respective businesses. Still, a little over half were working towards transformation, and all are non-capitalist economic actors regardless of this opinion. For this reason, the study concludes that while U.S. cooperatives are not currently tools for a degrowth movement, they have potential to be so with changes in intention and cultural beliefs about their collective power.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

2025 is the second UN international year of cooperatives. While it may seem like the United States is farther from cooperativism than anything else, with increasingly blatant ploys by elites to continue neoliberalism and its resulting upwards transfer of wealth and removal of common goods, it is essential to expand our economic imagination. This would perhaps be too utopian a request if it were not clear that alternative systems exist right now, are growing at the periphery of our vision right now. Other future trajectories are possible because they already exist. Although seemingly a part of the current status quo, these tools and pathways are in fact something quite different, based on cooperation, sufficiency, and care rather than profit, efficiency, and short-term gain. The UN general assembly places emphasis on the role of cooperatives in increasing social wellbeing and advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (UN General Assembly, 2024). However, worker cooperatives go a step further than this, attending to social and ecological wellbeing through reproduction of a culture that addresses the root causes of inequity and environmental degradation. Worker cooperatives in the United States do not uphold the status quo, but rather proof of other economic options and cultural possibilities. Potentially, with networks that show them the power they have to enact transformation and to flourish, they might yet become an effective pathway towards degrowth transformation.

This project set out to answer two questions: (1) To what extent do worker cooperatives' cultures support an alternative economic structure? And (2) If worker cooperatives are alternative economic actors, do their cultures support degrowth? Both questions were addressed via website content analyses and semi-structured interviews with 38 worker cooperatives across the United States. The content analysis' purpose was to assess how worker cooperatives

presented themselves to clients as businesses based on the seven cooperative principles. Then, the semi-structured interviews gathered complimentary "inward facing" data about cooperative cultural ensembles and external influences. Results of both data collection methods informed a fleshed-out version of the cultures framework that illustrated the connections between worker cooperatives, alternative economies, and a future degrowth transformation.

The community wellbeing generated by worker cooperatives, the effect of their horizontal structure on equality and gender relations, and their values-based business imperative are all well documented by literature relating to degrowth and transformation (Cunico et al., 2022; Schmelzer et al., 2022). However, this study provided a national clarification of the current literature, settling contrasting claims about whether U.S. worker cooperatives are economic alternatives (and degrowth alternatives) to the mainstream system in practice. In addition, the economic imaginary and interstitial change were drawn together in a novel context with the cultures framework. Together, they provided a structure for determining worker cooperative cultural outcomes and how those outcomes might be applied to transformative change.

However, despite the relevance of this project, there are some additional channels of inquiry that I regret I was not able to address. Foremost, the study did not focus on the ways immigration, American indigeneity, and multiculturalism have affected the modern worker cooperative movement, or to what extent non-western, highly cooperative cultures might contribute to outcomes which align worker cooperatives with degrowth. Immigrants make up a greater share of United States worker cooperative member-owners each year, and in 2016, immigrant member-owners were the largest and fastest-growing segment of worker-owners in the country (*Support for Immigrant Cooperatives*, n.d.). More recently, the Democracy at Work Institute's *2023 State of the Sector Report* revealed that 51.7% of member-owners were Hispanic

or Latino and 2.45% were Native American (Democracy at Work Institute & U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives, 2023). Including these perspectives in my project might have further clarified how worker cooperative cultures are produced: is the recent proliferation of worker cooperatives due to a marginal change in mainstream western culture, or does this actually reflect the "importation" of non-western, cooperative cultures to the country?

Furthermore, economic organizations that function as worker cooperatives, but that may not call themselves that, exist particularly amongst indigenous American groups. If cooperation and communalism align with their cultural values, this business type makes sense for them, but the "cooperative" label can carry colonial baggage (Rose, 2014; Sengupta, 2015). One member-owner told me in our interview, "Worker cooperatives have been working throughout Latin and Central America much longer in small communities there. You see them- they may not be cited or written about quite as much, but they certainly are there. I often feel like we as [western] America were a little late to the game… (Interview 20)" Both global south perspectives and "non-official" indigenous cooperative values are a part of the complex cultural landscape of United States worker cooperatives. Focusing on these diverse contributions to both the historical context and the recent national growth of worker cooperatives is critical for further informing the cultures framework and for "measuring" the continued compatibility of worker cooperatives with degrowth and social transformation.

Future research should address these cultural nuances, including "non-western" cooperative elements and worker-cooperative-like businesses who don't adhere to arbitrary labels. I suggest this work take place in one or two business sectors, perhaps where cooperatives have a direct connection to the land and where this study found the closest alignment with degrowth. In terms of research questions, it should further interrogate the connection between

worker cooperative culture and explicit alliance with the degrowth movement, testing if knowledge about degrowth equates to a greater desire for, or success in, the broader social changes needed for transformation. There is also ambiguity as to self-imposed limitations to cooperative size, and so future research questions should expand on the concept of sufficiency thresholds, figuring out what exactly is considered too big for democratic processes and maintenance of member-owner wellbeing, and how this is affected by factors like knowledge about degrowth or other motivations.

Lastly, this thesis has brought up interesting questions regarding temporality, crisis, and the trajectory of worker cooperative numbers in the United States. Worker cooperatives tend to become more popular during uncertain economic conditions due to their stability, and a review of previous literature and interview data responses support a correlation between the last major economic crash and a growing number of worker cooperatives (Baskaran, 2015; Zeuli & Cropp, 2004; Democracy at Work Institute & U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives, 2023). Because of this correlation, this work supports the idea that worker cooperatives might already exist as a perceived alternative to the capitalist status quo and that they are experiencing a current period of expansion due to that fact. However, in terms of situating the findings of this study more firmly in relation to longer time periods and past system shocks, further work should be done to compare this rise in worker cooperative numbers with previous periods of interest and historical economic system activity. The past and potential future desire for transformation as it relates to interest in worker cooperatives is an understudied area, and while this study did not produce the data to address it, future work should.

6.1 Implications and Recommendations

Worker cooperatives in the United States, although they are alternative economic actors and their cultures align well with degrowth, can't be considered a "tool" or "strategy" for degrowth movements because, while a worker cooperative might see themselves as transforming labor, a substantial number of them do not see themselves as broader transformative actors. This explicit goal may not be necessary in the short run, as certain cultures and their outcomes can create change regardless of expressly shared intention (Stephenson, 2023), however the formation of a social movement with express goals for change is required, in the long run, for a degrowth movement (Demaria et al., 2013; Medak et al., 2020). For this reason, this work finds that U.S. worker cooperatives are not yet a viable interstitial degrowth strategy.

However, connections drawn between this study's interview results and broader degrowth literature confirm that U.S. worker cooperatives hold great potential as sites of degrowth transformation (Cunico et al., 2022; Hinton, 2021; Meyers, 2022; Sobering et al., 2014). This potential exists and is reproduced through worker cooperatives' cultures whether they acknowledge it or not, so the logical conclusion is to make a transformational, degrowth-aligned goal explicit through the provision of information and collaboration through the preexisting networks of support that cooperatives spoke about in interviews (Table 5). Culturally, this is the use of cultural vectors to emphasize and spread cultural identity (visualized in Figure 5). Culture is learned through what Stephenson calls "semantic knowledge" and "bodily knowledge" (2023). Bodily knowledge is gained through repeated exposure to similar experiences over time through physical and emotional actions and the 'picking up' of cognitive messaging. Semantic knowledge is more removed from personal context, learned through less repetitive exposure to spoken or written ideas (Stephenson, 2023). Through semantic knowledge in the form of educational materials, meetings, and information, external actors in worker

cooperative networks have the opportunity to shift and create a common transformational cultural motivator.

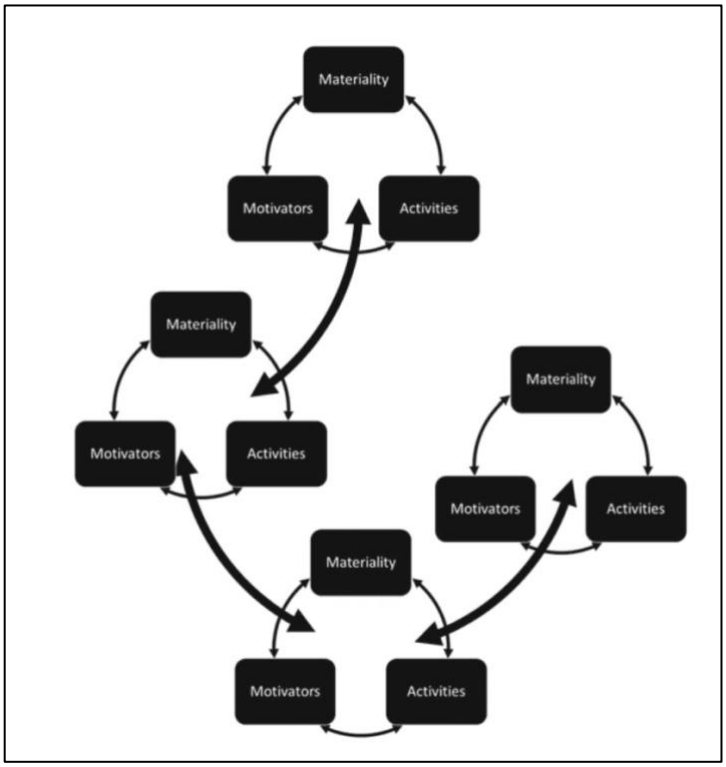

Figure 5 *illustrates how cultural identity spreads and is shared across many actors. This figure is from Stephenson 2023.*

Worker-cooperative-oriented organizations at national and regional levels like the USFWC or NOBAWC could spread semantic knowledge via information sharing about degrowth strategies and the power of cooperatives in effecting social change. Worker cooperatives' cultures already align well with degrowth goals for reduced material throughput and increased social wellbeing (Kallis et al., 2018), so if they could connect these cultural elements with a clear and united system goal then a strong interstitial movement might occur. This would result in networks of worker cooperatives in the "cracks" of the mainstream

economic system that share a transformative goal, or at least the belief that worker cooperatives can have these broader kinds of effects. There are already, as chapter 4 outlined, regional and national organizations working to strengthen support for worker cooperatives and provide them resources and opportunities to convene. If these resources contained information about the degrowth movement, how worker cooperatives tend to be culturally aligned with it, and how a cooperative might use their business to effect system change, then perhaps more localized efforts would begin to connect under a unified and change-oriented goal. Not all worker cooperatives form for the same reasons or view their purpose and structure similarly, but this study has shown that the majority wish to solve needs for their communities and local environments as well as for themselves. The desire for social change is there and might be expanded through provision of education and encouragement.

To some extent, this sort of idea already exists in political economist Gar Alperovitz's concept of the pluralist commonwealth. The pluralist commonwealth seeks system change through ownership change- a society with more localized ownership to achieve equity and community wealth. It advocates for community wealth building strategies, like worker cooperatives, community land trusts, and public banks, that can shift wealth and power from concentrated corporate hands to communities, restructure economic systems, and reverse systemic inequality (Alperovitz, 2013, 2017). This idea is associated with The Democracy Collaborative, who pursue Alperovitz's vision through research (The Next Systems Project) and development (Community Wealth Building) (The Democracy Collaborative, 2025). Community Wealth Building has consulted on projects around the world to build up localized economies and create spaces that reflect a pluralist commonwealth (The Democracy Collaborative, n.d). While this has not led to the massing of social changes needed for system transformation in the United

States, it is an example of how degrowth-adjacent ideological elements can enter networks of business incubation and support to hone their purposes.

Attempting to attune worker cooperative networks to the language and ideas of degrowth is not ultimately enough to achieve a broader degrowth movement. A strong degrowth movement requires a variety of approaches- including worker cooperatives with alternative cultural outcomes- where many elements must come together simultaneously (Buch-Hansen et al., 2024). But worker cooperatives are an important aspect of cultural transformation (Harris & Jervis, 2024), and if their current potential can be realized, they can be a part of that larger interstitial transformation. So, although worker cooperatives are not currently tools for a transformative degrowth movement, they could be with some alignment and strengthening within their networks. For this reason, it is important to continue to focus on them- both how they can be useful to degrowth and how their proliferation and success might be ensured.

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

General Questions:

1. What is your role at the cooperative?

Motivators:

2. Are you familiar with the degrowth movement? Do you think your cooperative aligns with degrowth?
3. How does your cooperative differ/to what extent does it differ from mainstream firms? From the "traditional" economic system?
4. What are the foundational values or principles of your cooperative? Are these explicitly written in official documents, or are they just commonly understood?
5. What aspirations, if any, does your cooperative have to transform society more widely?

Motivators and Activities:

6. What do your foundational principals look like in practice?
7. Is gender equity one of your values? Where and how does this show up?
8. What is your cooperative's governance structure like? How much hierarchy is present?
9. What does growth look like at your cooperative? Do you see the growth of the business as essential?

Materiality:

10. How does your cooperative approach product acquisition or supplies? Do you seek to shorten supply chains? Do you focus on local acquisition?
11. Do you seek to lower your carbon footprint? What does that footprint look like?

External Influences:

12. Is there an equivalent mainstream firm that does what you do?
13. What supports you as a cooperative? (e.g. legislative support, political support, other cooperatives, customers, etc.)
14. What makes it difficult to be a cooperative? Can you describe any barriers?

Wrap-Up:

15. Is there anything else that you would like to share? Is there anything you think I should have asked?