

“The economy of trust”? Competing grassroots economics and the mobilization of (mis-)trust in a Catalanian cooperative

Critique of Anthropology
2023, Vol. 43(2) 149–166
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DOI: 10.1177/0308275X231175995

journals.sagepub.com/home/coa



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Abstract

Rather than theorizing trust and mistrust in the abstract, recent anthropological scholarship has shown how trust and mistrust emerge in particular social settings. In this article, I build on this scholarship by drawing on fieldwork with the members of an anti-capitalist Catalanian cooperative who looked to create alternative economic systems that were said to be based on trust. The central aim of this article is to redirect analytical attention from the emergence of the experience of (mis-)trust in particular contexts, toward an analysis of how trust and mistrust are mobilized to make particular iterations of an ‘alternative economy’ emerge out of competing grassroots economic conceptualizations. By analysing how trust and mistrust are constituted within a relational field involving the state and a broader landscape of cooperative movements, this article shows that socio-economic formations are continually formed through embodied, affectively charged practices instead of being solely ‘based’ on trust or mistrust.

Keywords

Catalonia, cooperative, crisis, grassroots economics, mistrust, trust

A special meeting was called before the general assembly in June 2017 at the downtown headquarters of the Cooperative in Barcelona. Tensions had been running high leading up to the assembly, and there were rumours that a letter, signed by several current and former

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members, was to be read aloud to Niko,¹ a member of the Welcoming Committee. At the meeting, the atmosphere could be cut with a knife as we all anxiously awaited the presentation of the letter. The opening words were telling: ‘we have lost our trust in you’. The letter continued by accusing Niko of misconduct, emotional and physical abuse, and of instilling a general sense of fear among members of the Cooperative. At the subsequent assembly a week later, Niko’s departure was an emotional affair. The Welcoming Committee, in defence of Niko, was trying to make a case that the protocols for expelling someone from the Cooperative had not been followed. The tension rose steadily as both Niko and his opponents lost their cool and the discussion escalated into a shouting match. However, by the end it became clear that Niko and his supporters did not have enough argumentative power to make his case, so he did indeed have to leave the Cooperative. In other words, Niko was not able to restore the trust that he had lost.

In this article I direct ethnographic attention to the mobilization of trust and mistrust in the context of projects that work towards achieving what [Narotzky and Besnier \(2014: S5\)](#) call ‘a life worth living’ during times of prolonged and systemic crisis in Catalonia. This article draws on 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted from 2016 to 2017 with an organization that takes inspiration from Catalonia’s long history of cooperative movements. I will here refer to this organization simply as ‘the Cooperative’. The members of the Cooperative strived to create an economic system situated at ‘the margins of capitalism’, making it part of a wider landscape of projects in Catalonia in which participants explicitly embody the term ‘alternative’ and look to create ways of living that are said to fall outside of the capitalist system ([Conill et al., 2012](#)).² What an ‘alternative’ economy should look like, however, was a hotly debated matter and the members of the Cooperative used a myriad of terms such as ‘alternative economy’, ‘alternative economic system’, or ‘network (*xarxa*)’. In this article I approach these conceptualizations through Susana [Narotzky’s \(2020\)](#) distinction between grassroots economics and grassroots economies. According to [Narotzky \(2020: 10\)](#), grassroots economics refers to how ‘people explain the logics of economic processes of which they are a part’, whereas grassroots economies are the practices people engage in to make a living. Below I will more closely discuss the relation between grassroots economies and grassroots economics. For now, I will point out that the members of the Cooperative engaged in a variety of practices – cooperative organization, self-employment, social currency exchange – that were articulated in relation to various, often competing grassroots economic models that all, however, emphasized that these practices were said to be situated at the ‘margins of capitalism’.

It is in these margins where, as stated on the Cooperative’s website,³ the ‘human element’ of economic relations could be recovered and an economy ‘based on trust, reciprocity, solidarity, and cooperation’ could be realized. Indeed, trust was seen as one of the pillars of an alternative economic system. However, as is evident from the vignette above, members of the Cooperative certainly expressed their relations to one another in terms of mistrust⁴ as well. This invites critical reflection on how relational modalities and socio-economic formations are given shape through affective forces in the long aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis in Southern Europe (see [Knight and Stewart, 2016](#); [Narotzky, 2020](#)).

Recent anthropological accounts of trust and mistrust move away from artificially distinguishing (mis-)trust from a whole range of affective experiences such as friendship, solidarity, suspicion, and doubt, and instead examine how trust and mistrust arise in specific socio-cultural contexts (Galvin, 2018; Mühlfried, 2018; Saraf, 2020). In this way, trust and mistrust act as heuristics for understanding a broad range of phenomena ranging from trading in border zones to food provisioning practices (Grasseni, 2014; Humphrey, 2018). In the case of the Cooperative, however, trust and mistrust were powerful categories that were actively reflected upon and repeatedly invoked, both within the internal politics of the Cooperative as well within a diverse relational field involving state and market institutions. The contribution of this article is to direct analytical attention to how, within this relational field, trust and mistrust are mobilized in order to make particular iterations of an ‘alternative economy’ emerge out of competing grassroots economic models (Narotzky, 2020).

This article is structured as follows. I will begin by positioning myself in relation to recent debates on trust and mistrust in the social sciences. Then I will offer a description of the Cooperative and place it within the socio-historical context of Catalonia. Moving to the ethnographic section of this article, I will analyse the way in which trust was conceptualized and mobilized to mould social relations into particular forms based on principles of proximity and familiarity. Throughout this section, however, I will show that, alongside trust, the idiom of mistrust was also explicitly verbalized, mostly towards state institutions and the market. I then go on to show how the Ministry of Labour subjected the Cooperative to a number of labour inspections. This put pressure on the ideal of interpersonal trust among my interlocutors and brought to light the politics of mistrust within the Cooperative. Rather than assuming that the mobilization of mistrust was straightforwardly detrimental to the Cooperative, however, I will draw on recent anthropological work on mistrust (Carey, 2017) and show how the work of mistrust brought about changes in the organizational form of the Cooperative and served to rework the organization’s relational modalities. In the conclusion, I recap my central argument and suggest that in addition to analysing the tenuous emergence of trust and mistrust in given socio-cultural contexts, we need to examine how these affective forces are mobilized in everyday life to create particular socio-economic formations.

(Mis-)trust, grassroots economics, and grassroots economies

There is a broad literature on trust that spans a number of fields. In sociology and political science, the focus is generally on analysing the nature of trust, delineating its functions, and trying to answer the question as to how trust – both interpersonal and in institutions – is even possible (Cook, 2001; Gambetta, 1988; Mistral, 1998; Möllering, 2006). In anthropology, trust and mistrust have also long been objects of study (Banfield, 1958; Mauss, 2002; Turnbull, 1972). Rather than offering sweeping generalizations, anthropological works have instead shown the diverse ways in which trust and mistrust work in a variety of socio-cultural settings (Hart, 1988; Robben, 2018; Shipton, 2007). In the introduction to an edited volume on trust and mistrust, Caroline Humphrey (2018: 11) captures this approach succinctly in the following way: ‘The contributions in this book do

not take part in causal theorizing about trust in the abstract, but instead address the conditions in which it exists – or fails to exist – in particular circumstances.’ These works look at how trust and mistrust emerge or do not emerge in specific settings and the emphasis is on the fact that trust and mistrust are what Aditi Saraf (2020: 397) calls tenuous outcomes rather than cultural givens.

These are important anthropological correctives to perspectives from the broader social sciences that often deal with trust and mistrust by abstracting them from any particular context. Yet by embedding the emergence of trust and mistrust in particular contexts and treating them as outcomes of particular social processes, what remains somewhat under-examined is *why* trust and mistrust become such powerful idioms across different contexts and *what kind* of performative effects the mobilization of these affective forces has. While my approach aligns with recent anthropological works on (mis-)trust, I therefore build on this scholarship by focusing on how trust and mistrust, as meaningful categories of practice (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 6), were mobilized in everyday life to distil ‘alternative economies’ out of a variety of grassroots economic conceptualizations.

Indeed, while anthropologists may be wary of conceptualizing trust, my interlocutors were not shy in their usage of the term and had explicit ideas as to what trust was. The members of the Cooperative engaged in their own ‘grassroots economics’ (Narotzky, 2020) and were very much, as Bill Maurer (2005: xv) writes, ‘fellow travelers along the routes of social abstraction and analysis’. This is understandable in a context where, amidst the continuous failure of the state and market to provide for the protection of rights and livelihoods in the Mediterranean, ‘the only reliable form of trust is a personalized one’ (Giordano, 2012: 23). As we will see in more detail in the following sections, in the face of prolonged institutional failure, the members of the Cooperative strived to materialize ‘an economy of trust (*economía de confianza*)’, where everyone would be able to personally know and interact with one another.

These conceptualizations of trust closely mirror dominant sociological understandings of trust as based on proximity and familiarity (Lewis and Weigert, 1985). While trust is never a given, Lewis and Weigert write that proximity and familiarity – being close to someone and knowing them – allow people to accept a degree of uncertainty in social action and trust that their actions will have positive outcomes. There is a hypothesis at work here, shared by both social theorists and the members of the Cooperative, that familiarity and proximity breed trust, and the members of the Cooperative worked hard to create spaces where people could get to know each other on a face-to-face basis. At the same time, however, discourses of mistrust, as we have seen at the start of this article, were also prevalent in the Cooperative. Indeed, recent anthropological work suggests that trust and mistrust should be seen as two sides of the same coin in the sense that these affective modes of interacting in the world are often mutually constructed within particular relational modalities (Corsin Jiménez, 2011; Humphrey, 2018). When referring to the mobilization of trust and mistrust in a general sense, I therefore use ‘trust and mistrust’ in the same breath or use the blended term (mis-)trust to emphasize that, as Peter Geschiere (2019) suggests, these notions could be seen as ‘conjoined twins’.

It is important, moreover, not to view the mobilization of (mis-)trust in the Cooperative as separate from a wider institutional matrix involving state and market actors. It is in this

respect that Narotzky's heuristic distinction between grassroots economies and grassroots economics is instructive. We have seen that the latter refers to the frameworks people come up with to explain and interpret economic processes 'against the backdrop of state policies and expert discourses' (Narotzky, 2020: 2). The term 'grassroots economies' refers rather to the diverse ways of making a living, including but not limited to: various forms of credit, waged labour, self-employment, state subsidies, barter, and the mobilization of trust and care relations. Grassroots economies, then, *can* be constituted through practices presented as 'alternative', but in practice often span across a wider spectrum of economic practices.⁵ As I show in more detail below, the Cooperative's employment system, for instance, was dependent on a broader network of cooperatives and was subject to state regulation. Following this insight, the rest of the article shows how my interlocutors attempted to create an 'alternative economy' through the mobilization of trust and mistrust within a diverse relational field.

Economic alterity and (mis-)trust in Catalonia

The 2008 financial crisis has had far-reaching consequences for many people from different classes across Spain and has reignited questions about the legitimacy of political and economic institutions (Molina and Godino, 2013). This has been particularly evident in Catalonia, where the struggle for independence has laid bare the fault lines of Spain's tenuous political constellation, born out of the democratic transition in 1978 (Narotzky, 2019; Rübner Hansen, 2017). Moreover, research has shown that the popularity of alternative economic practices – such as barter or social currency networks – has increased in the wake of the 2008 crisis (Conill et al., 2012; Fernandez and Miró, 2016). Within such a context of crisis, both real and perceived, talk of trust and mistrust often becomes more salient in public discourse and in sociological analysis (Bock and Everett, 2017). We should be careful, however, not to make an overly causal and functionalist argument in which political and economic crises automatically lead to the deepening of mistrust in society and the emergence of alternative economic practices. This neglects both (1) that 'durable forms of distrust have been an inherent component of all democracies, however legitimate' (Rosanvallon, 2008: x–xi), and (2) the continuity of contemporary movements in relation to Catalonia's rich history of left-wing politics, popular labour movements, and anti-capitalist collective action from before 2008 (Junco, 1994).

Indeed, social mobilizations in Catalonia of the early 20th century showed 'disdain for parliamentary politics and reform' and sought to 'topple ... or at least expose' the weakness of the ruling classes through collective action directed against the state (Junco, 1994: 306). After the end of the civil war in 1939 and the subsequent installing of the Francoist dictatorship, however, the powerful anarchist and communist labour movements from the civil war era were crippled, and Catalan was prohibited as a spoken language (Narotzky, 2019: 39). Jeffrey Juris (2008: 66) writes that within this climate of repression a fusion of Catalan nationalism and Catholic and Marxist traditions occurred, spawning a 'counterhegemonic frame around anti-Francoism and democracy, reinforced by an oppositional culture based on Catalan language, symbols and identity'. Juris (2008: 65) has shown how historical values and practices such as 'self-management, autonomy,

decentralized coordination, and direct action' were repeatedly mobilized in a number of movements and associations in the past two centuries.⁶ The Cooperative is part of this tradition of political organizing because its members constructed their organization based on the very same principles of horizontality, self-governance, and collective decision-making in an open assembly (Fominaya, 2015). Moreover, like other autonomous movements in Spain (Fominaya, 2007: 337), the Cooperative is both denunciative, in the sense that it rejects a particular political order, and propositional since it prescribes an alternative way of organizing society or, in this particular case, the economy.

The Cooperative was officially established in 2010 and was an ambitious project that resulted from the coming together of various activists from a variety of networks active in Catalonia at the time, such as the anti-corporate globalization movements, squatter movements, de-growth networks, and local currency networks. Its name would indicate that it is indeed a cooperative, that is, a legal entity made up of members who collectively own an enterprise and work towards realizing shared goals. However, in his welcoming sessions to newcomers, Niko would always say: 'The Cooperative is a political name.' Meaning that the Cooperative was more akin to an autonomous movement that used juridical structures designed by the state in order to 'hack the system' and create autonomously governed economic spaces that were thought to lie outside of the state's reach. Or, as Valerie put it whenever she gave the welcoming sessions instead of Niko: 'the idea is to use the law to subvert the system'.

In a legal sense, the Cooperative was made up of five different cooperatives that were used for specific purposes. The most commonly used legal form was the *cooperativa mixta* (mixed cooperative), which on the one hand allowed for the production of goods for third parties (i.e. for non-members), and allowed the Cooperative to receive goods and services (e.g. donations) and to redistribute them among any affiliated members (González and Zubillaga, 2003). These cooperatives were used to set up a variety of different projects: from an interest-free bank to an alternative employment system, and from a telecommunications service to a food distribution network. Later in this article I will examine exactly how this practice of '[using] the law to subvert the system' worked by analysing the Cooperative's employment system in more detail.

All these projects were designed so that people could become less dependent on 'the System', which referred to globalized, state-sanctioned political and financial institutions (i.e. both the state and capitalism). As mentioned on their website, the Cooperative allowed for 'overcoming our dependence on the structures of the System and ... [re-constructing] society from the bottom up by recovering affective human relations based on proximity (*proximitat*) and trust (*confiança*)'. I will return to the particular meaning of trust (and mistrust) and what kind of performative effects the mobilization of these categories had in later sections. For now it is necessary to give a brief overview of the kinds of people involved in the Cooperative.

During the first years of the Cooperative's existence, the core group of members consisted of highly educated, young (in their twenties to mid-thirties at that time), predominantly middle-class Catalan speakers. The Cooperative grew in the aftermath of the anti-austerity protests beginning in 2011, where millions of Spanish citizens took to the streets over the course of several weeks to call for changes in the political and

economic system (FnF Europe, 2013; Fominaya, 2015). In this context, many Spanish citizens were left disillusioned by the ‘business as usual’ of conventional politics and looked for different ways of organizing society through projects like the Cooperative. It is complicated to gauge the number of people that were involved in the Cooperative, as the members often engaged in a kind of politics of scale when it came to discussing the size of their organization. When I asked how many people were part of the Cooperative, I heard various estimates with some claiming that there were over 10.000 people directly involved. These estimates varied according to what was included within the scope of the organization, but there was no officially agreed-upon number and the members of the Cooperative were still trying to map out their organization during the time of my research. In this article, however, I will focus mostly on the approximately 40 people who received remuneration from the Cooperative. These remunerated activists were spread throughout Catalonia but had their base of operations in a squat in downtown Barcelona.

The youngest member of the Cooperative was 24 and the oldest was close to 60. So while some had experienced Spain’s transition to democracy (1975–78) and were even active in anarchist-libertarian⁷ movements during the dictatorship, most of the people involved in the Cooperative came of age during the 1980s and 1990s. Most had enjoyed a university education, and the majority hailed from (lower) middle-class backgrounds, while others proudly identified as working class. In fact, many members of the Cooperative previously enjoyed comfortable, salaried positions before joining the Cooperative. There were roughly as many women as men, and at least two people who did not identify according to this binary. In general, Catalan speakers outnumbered non-Catalan speakers and there were a few non-Spanish members. Much like the way the Cooperative’s economic system was said to be built on trust, so were the relations fostered between the people involved in them to be formed on the basis of *confiança*. In the next section, I will explore what trust meant within the context of the Cooperative.

Proximity, familiarity, and the ‘economy of trust’

When I asked my interlocutors what trust meant, the response often remained very general. ‘Trust is everything’ or ‘Without trust, this system wouldn’t work’ were statements that, while repeated with great regularity, did not tell me much about the actual way trust worked in the context of the Cooperative. As anthropological studies have shown, in practice it is often difficult to disentangle trust from other categories such as friendship and care (Aguilar, 1984). This was also the case during my fieldwork, where *confiança* was often mentioned in the same breath as notions such as *suport mutu* (mutual aid) and reciprocity. Yet trust seemed to hold a particularly central spot in the imagination of my interlocutors. As Pep, a member of a local social currency network that fell under the umbrella of the Cooperative told me: ‘trust is our mantra’. Or, as stated on the website of the Cooperative:

The fundamental change of the economic system will happen when relations based on mistrust ... turn into relations that are based on trust between persons.... The goal is to pool collective resources for the benefit of people who interact and function based on spontaneous reciprocity, relations of affinity, mutual aid and high levels of trust.

These notions of trust were related to specific scalar imaginaries. Since its inception in 2010, the Cooperative had grown rapidly over a short period of time and had constructed a governance structure based on three levels: the Local (projects operating on a local scale such as social currency networks), the Bioregion (regional assemblies in the north and south of Catalonia with representatives from local nodes), and the Global (the overall structure of the Cooperative and all affiliated projects in Catalonia). Even though the Cooperative operated at a regional scale, the local nodes that fell under its structure were still the units of reference when it came to the question of the scale at which trust relations could appear.

The importance of the Local became evident to me when I first encountered the remunerated activists working in the Cooperative. At the time, the Cooperative was renting an office space in Girona, where Lena and Jana, two of the remunerated activists, were making themselves available to members of the Cooperative, helping them with any issues they had.⁸ As I entered the office I was greeted by Jana, who, clad in black attire adorned with anarchist symbols and her short hair dyed a deep yet vibrant shade of red, gave the impression of being a dedicated *anti-Sistema* activist indeed. I told her that I was curious to learn more about the so-called ‘decentralization’ (*descentralizació*). Earlier I had heard that, without this necessarily being the intention, all the resources and knowledge had accumulated in the downtown offices of the Cooperative in Barcelona (i.e. the Global). This concentration of power and wealth was, however, antithetical to the core principle of non-hierarchy of the Cooperative and was seen as a reproduction of the logic of *el Sistema*. The Cooperative was looking to reverse this trend through a process of decentralization.

‘Yes that’s right,’ Jana said, when I asked her if this was correct. She proceeded by first pointing to her head then rubbing her stomach while saying: ‘We want to go from here, to here.’ She continued: ‘We realized we were communicating to our members only via e-mail, very coldly.... We’re trying to have some more face-to-face contact (*cara-cara*).’ She added that the reason they had started to visit and support *sòcies* (members) in Girona was to get to know them better. ‘We don’t have a clue what most of the *sòcies* are actually doing,’ as she put it. Throughout the day, as I observed the *sòcies* interact with Jana and Lena, it became clear that the *sòcies*, for their part, also did not really know what the Cooperative was doing. There was evidently a mutual lack of familiarity and close encounters between the activists of the Cooperative and the *sòcies*, and the former group tried to solve this by bringing about face-to-face encounters with the latter.

‘Getting to know one another’ through ‘face-to-face’ contacts was seen as an important prerequisite for the emergence of trust. Indeed, the ideal scale of operation was seen to be such that it would still be possible to personally know each and every member. When I asked Edmon in an interview whether he thought his local node should grow, he replied:

When we’re talking about the economy of trust (*economía de confianza*), we can’t just go all out. That’s when things start to overload, people get involved who just want to mess things up.... It’s better to have smaller groups.

According to Edmon, an ‘economy of trust’ had to be kept small lest strangers enter with the intention of tearing everything apart. In a localized economy, trust could only flourish, apparently, if everyone knew each other and could physically get together.

Here we see that this conceptualization of trust serves as an index for proximity (*cara-cara*) and familiarity (knowing people) (Lewis and Weigert, 1985). Matthew Carey refers to this as a ‘very widespread notion that there is an umbilical relationship between the holy trinity of proximity, familiarity, and trust’ (2017: 8). Yet knowing someone or having a certain amount of information about a person, system, or product, is not sufficient grounds for trust to appear. There is always an element of uncertainty involved in trusting someone or a system, which requires what Guido Möllering (2006) calls the ‘suspension of doubt’. Similarly, Niklas Luhmann (1979: 76–7) writes that at the end of the day, we ‘trust in trust’, simply meaning that we bracket the contingencies of social life and trust that our actions will have positive outcomes.

Often it is the state that provides the institutional control that secures trust in markets and formal provisioning systems, enabling the suspension of doubt that, for instance, markets may malfunction or that public funds will be depleted through mismanagement by corrupt politicians (Humphrey, 2018: 11–12). However, the members of the Cooperative expressed a general mistrustful attitude towards outsiders and, in particular, towards ‘the System’, an umbrella term that referred to hegemonic political and economic institutions (i.e. the state and the market). In her welcoming sessions for newcomers, Valerie would always explain the existence of a kind of general sense of mistrust in the following manner: ‘Because the Cooperative is also a social movement, the activists of the Cooperative are naturally mistrustful towards outsiders.’ That is, there was always the possibility that people might join for the wrong intention and, as Edmon said, ‘tear everything apart’. What I argue in this section, therefore, is that in the face of institutional failure, trust and mistrust appeared less as the basis of social action, but became propositional categories for the members of the Cooperative that were used to mould social relations in particular ways based on relational proximity and familiarity.

But the state does not just feature passively in the background as institutional failure, although this is often how people involved in alternative economic projects (and researchers alike) have tended to interpret their own activities. In fact, towards the end of my fieldwork, the Cooperative’s employment system came under the legal scrutiny of the state and was subjected to a number of labour inspections. The next section analyses the details of these events and shows how the state’s politics of mistrust shaped the way that my interlocutors were able to mobilize (mis-)trust.

The politics of mistrust

Spain’s economy has been marred by structural unemployment and job insecurity since the 2008 crisis (Riesco-Sanz, 2016). Within this climate, one option to work outside of wage labour is to become self-employed (*autónoma*). However, there are considerable financial barriers to being an *autónoma*, most notably the mandatory minimum monthly tax of €294.⁹ This is one of the highest rates in Europe and makes securing a livelihood as a small business owner complicated. The Cooperative managed an employment system

that offered people a way to be self-employed and have a degree of legal coverage, but without having to pay the taxes required by the state.

This system worked in the following way. As a small business holder or a collective project, one would become a *sòcia* (member) of one of the legally registered cooperatives of the Cooperative, while still maintaining one's autonomous economic activity like a regular *autònoma*. Yet instead of paying monthly state taxes, *sòcies* would pay a minimum trimestral fee of 75 monetary units¹⁰ to the Cooperative. The *sòcies* would then in a legal sense appear as volunteers working for the Cooperative and be allowed to use the Cooperative's fiscal information on their receipts. The monetary flows the *sòcies* paid to the Cooperative would then be seen, in the eyes of the state, as donations. For small-scale enterprises, being a *sòcia* was nearly always cheaper than being an officially registered *autònoma*, making this an attractive option for those who struggled and/or refused to pay the self-employment taxes required by the state.

This way of operating is not much different from other so-called *cooperativas de facturación* that have become increasingly prevalent since the 2008 financial crisis to mitigate the high costs of self-employment (Garrido, 2017). The major difference between these cooperatives and the Cooperative is that the former rarely have an explicit political discourse and do not strive to create alternative systems 'at the margins of capitalism'. Regardless of their ideological position, these constructions have come under increasing scrutiny and their legality has been fiercely debated. The Ministry of Labour's supposed concern is that these cooperatives are also frequently used for so-called 'false self-employment'. This is a practice engaged in by, for instance, platform companies such as Deliveroo and Uber, whereby people are not given a standard employment contract but are subcontracted as self-employed 'entrepreneurs', thereby absolving companies of the responsibility to provide standard workers benefits and pay the accompanying taxes (Schor et al., 2020). The official stance of the Ministry of Labour is therefore that being a member of a *cooperativa de facturación*, regardless of whether it facilitates false self-employment, is fraud. The number of labour inspections that try to track down fraud in these cooperatives has subsequently increased (Alonso, 2018).

With regard to trust in relation to economic activities, the economist Dasgupta (1988) has pointed out that there is a kind of background agency, often the state, that ensures that all parties involved in a transaction can trust that certain agreements will not be breached. Moreover, when contractual arrangements are broken, the state also acts as an arbiter providing legal punishment. What happens in the case of the Cooperative is that the state engages in a politics of mistrust, whereby it places practices and monetary flows that could potentially be fraudulent from the perspective of the state under greater scrutiny. Within this climate of increased surveillance, two *sòcies* underwent an inspection and were fined. The Cooperative not only had to cover the financial costs of these fines, but these inspections also prompted the members of the Cooperative to make their organization comply more with the legal requirements of the state, as further non-compliance might lead to more fines and severe legal actions against the Cooperative. I have detailed the exact consequences of this development for the Cooperative in legal terms elsewhere (Bäumer Escobar, 2021). In this article, I want to highlight how the state's politics of mistrust, which upholds

‘proper’ functioning markets and state provisioning, made the ‘economy of trust’ my interlocutors strived to create increasingly untenable.

The members of the Cooperative explicitly disavowed hierarchies. As one prominent member of the Cooperative would always reiterate: ‘there are no bosses here (*aquí no hay jefes*)’. That is, there was an absence of both an officially recognized boss to whom people would have to be responsible as well as formalized labour control. Instead, as we have seen in the previous section, the members of the Cooperative explicitly stated that they were organizing social relations based on interpersonal trust. Much like in other autonomous projects, however, this principle of non-hierarchy was often more desire than reality (cf. Kadir, 2016). Indeed, one member, in an oblique reference to Jo Freeman’s (1972) ‘tyranny of structurelessness’, attributed the formation of informal hierarchies to what he called the ‘the tyranny of informality’. While this had been a bearable situation in the past, the state’s labour inspections put the members of the Cooperative under increased pressure. If mistakes were now made in handling the *sòcies*’ accounts, or dealing with the administrative side of the inspections, this could have grave consequences for the existence of the organization.

Within this context of increased state pressure and with the future of the Cooperative at stake, Jaume had taken it upon himself to make sure people would follow through on their promises. As he told me in an interview: ‘I want to suggest some norms so that people own up to their responsibilities and do what they said they would do, something that forces them, because there’s no monetary pressures or state laws here [within the Cooperative].’ A tall, athletic figure in his mid-forties, with short and nearly white curly hair, Jaume was part of the Coordination Committee and directed the assembly in a decisive manner, often speaking in a determined and calm way while surveying the room with a steely, focused gaze. He seemed to command a great deal of respect, although I would later learn that he was also seen as having concentrated too much power and was criticized for being too controlling and *capitalista*. To ensure that people made good on their promises, he designed a revised version of a series of timesheets that he used in his previous job at a multinational company. This was a simple Excel sheet in which individual committee members had to list all the tasks they did and the hours they dedicated to these tasks. This was done in order to quantify and make visible the amount of work being done by the members of the Cooperative. The idea was then to present this to the entire Cooperative in the trimestral evaluation so that everybody knew what everyone else was doing, and so that remunerations could be adjusted accordingly. Jaume later revealed how his own sense of mistrust had grown when he told me that this was also intended, in part, to show or expose who was actually doing work and who was not. For Jaume, the stakes were apparently too high too simply ‘trust in trust’ (Luhmann, 1979: 77).

The politics of mistrust deployed by the state to track down potentially fraudulent cooperatives, then, affected how my interlocutors gave shape to the ‘economy of trust’ they were looking to construct. The members of the Cooperative always stated that they preferred to interact with each other based on mutual trust and therefore generally strived to suspend any doubt that people were not actually committed to the cause. However, in the face of the mounting pressure exerted by the Ministry of Labour, a small group of members, led by Jaume, resorted to implementing systems of labour

control that clashed with an understanding of trust as mobilized by many other members.¹¹

What was at stake here, then, was what the proper form of an alternative economy should be. In other words, there were competing grassroots economic models vying for supremacy in the Cooperative. Jaume and others maintained that the ideal of interpersonal trust needed to be supplemented by mechanisms of control and a more 'bureaucratic' organizational culture. As I explore in the next section, this development was met with resistance and brought to light the Cooperative's internal politics of mistrust. Much like the way trust was mobilized as a propositional category by my interlocutors in order to bring about and fortify alternative socio-economic constellations, the final section of this article will examine how mistrust was similarly mobilized to steer the Cooperative in particular directions.

Rekindling the cooperative?

Where trust is supposedly generative of social relations and the thing that holds society together, mistrust is often viewed as being 'uniquely corrosive of human bonds – it is social acid' (Carey, 2017: 2). Michael Carey offers a different perspective on mistrust and instead explores how mistrust, as a general human disposition, can also be generative of social configurations. Ultimately, Carey (2017: 3) sets out to demonstrate that mistrust can be the basis of 'social forms' which are 'not merely the photographic negative of those produced by trust', but social forms that can be 'interesting and occasionally admirable constructs in their own right'. Following this insight, I want to show how mistrust was mobilized to make the Cooperative congeal into a supposedly more radical form.

I started this article by recounting Niko's expulsion from the Cooperative. A strong-minded, honest, yet at times also a short-tempered and stubborn person from the south of Spain, Niko had certainly rubbed many people the wrong way during his time at the Cooperative. As he himself admitted: 'I'm no saint.' Particularly in his early days at the organization, he often butted heads with people who, according to him, were not doing their work properly. After a short period of self-imposed exile from the Cooperative, he returned with a calmer attitude. Now an avid practitioner of Qigong, he was looking to be more mindful and constructive in the way he approached his activism. However, through his past actions and the way they were perceived, he had burned many bridges with important figures in the Cooperative. Upon his return, Niko felt as though now it was his turn to be '*el malo* (the bad one)'. He often told me that he had the feeling that 'they' were 'coming for him' but that he was not afraid of '*los altos rangos* (the leaders)'.

Niko was quite right in thinking that he was going to be next in line to be thrown out of the Cooperative. In fact only a few months earlier, a similar thing happened to Jaume. At the trimestral evaluation in March, each committee had indeed filled out Jaume's timesheet which he had designed to monitor the kinds of tasks people were taking on and how much time they spent on them. However, when it was the turn of the Communications Committee to present, it turned out that all members had put down that they did zero hours of work and had done so in an ostentatious manner. 'I put down zero because I do a lot of very diverse things,' one member said, emphasizing that 'you can't just

quantify all the things I do.’ This was met with signs of approval by many participants at the assembly, who also felt this timesheet was a capitalist mechanism of control that had no place in an alternative organization. This whole episode in fact ended with things being flipped on Jaume, where he was the one who ended up looking like a ‘capitalist’ who was not to be trusted.

I later talked to Jaume regarding this process and he told me that he had seen it before, but that now he was experiencing it first-hand. According to Jaume, people went about this in the following way: ‘[During assemblies] they make a very quick comment and don’t let you respond.... This generates noise (*ruido*), they create confusion.’ From Jaume’s point of view, this is what happened to him when he was interrupted during the assembly while discussing the amount of hours they worked. For Jaume, the only way he thought he could respond was by raising his voice and becoming more aggressive, which had negative consequences for him. ‘The assembly remembers: “But hey, this Jaume guy, he must be doing something wrong, he’s always making trouble”.’ Jaume then went on to say that these stories get reinforced in hallways and informal channels, and then are put on display again during assemblies. Through this kind of work of mistrust, then, Jaume and his timesheets, protocols, and talk of order and power, was painted as being too capitalist and bureaucratic for an organization like the Cooperative. Ultimately, Jaume decided that it would be best to leave the organization entirely. He said did not feel as if they threw him out necessarily, but he noted wryly that all his work would be undone ‘within four assemblies’.

Almost exactly four assemblies later – in June 2017 – was when Niko was expelled from the Cooperative. To return to this event once more, a number of members read a letter to him during a special meeting that was arranged before the monthly assembly. The letter opened with the words: ‘we have lost our trust in you’. This explicit expression of mistrust came at a time when certain members of the Cooperative were in the process of undoing some of the changes that Jaume had implemented. After Jaume left, a number of members of the Cooperative and myself were hanging around in one of the rooms at the downtown squat and were discussing the future of the organization. Valerie shared a reflection that she thought that things seemed to go in cycles: ‘There are cycles of bureaucratization ... and then cycles of, like, everything is possible and let’s do whatever we want.’ For Valerie, the departure of Jaume seemed to usher in a new cycle that would rekindle the Utopian flame of the Cooperative: ‘It’s maybe not a very realistic view, but it’s *bonito*.’

Previous anthropological work on trust and mistrust shows the importance of documenting how and under what circumstances trust and mistrust emerge in certain social contexts. Yet as I have shown, it is analytically productive to extend these kinds of analyses and enquire into what then happens with these experiences of trust and mistrust. With the possible consequences of the labour inspections looming large over the Cooperative, the expulsion of Jaume and Niko through the work of mistrust was a way to, by proxy, push back against the state. In this way, a particular form of organizing the economy that was associated with ‘the System’ was kept at bay, while at the same time consolidating a grassroots economic conceptualization of the Cooperative that emphasized its supposedly more revolutionary anti-capitalist spirit. While it remains to be seen if the Cooperative did manage to remain afloat under the threat of more labour inspections,

what is certain is that the work of (mis-)trust will continue to shape the organization in different ways.

Conclusion

For the members of the Cooperative, a crucial part of creating an economy ‘at the margins of capitalism’ involved the mobilization of various affective registers in order to recover ‘affective human relations based on proximity and trust’. Capitalism was seen to have erased these socially thick ties and replaced them with a system in which alienated individuals interacted coldly as strangers in a market setting with the state acting as an enforcing agent. In this article I have interpreted this desire to recover an ‘economy of trust (*economía de confianza*)’ within the context of a history of social provisioning and the ongoing breakdown of legitimacy of hegemonic political and economic institutions in Spain. When there can be no trust or, in [Luhmann \(1988\)](#) terms, confidence that institutions work to one’s benefit, it is best to look towards those who are closest and to build one’s own institutions and systems entirely.

Recent anthropological accounts abstain from theorizing trust in the abstract and analyse how the experience of trust and mistrust emerges in different contexts. In this article, I work at something of tangent to these perspectives. Rather than offering a general theory of (mis-)trust, I show how the members of the Cooperative articulated their own grassroots economics and grassroots economic practices ([Narotzky, 2020](#)), highlighting similarities in the way that trust is conceptualized by social theorists and my interlocutors. Moreover, I have shown that the ways in which (mis-)trust can be mobilized is contingent upon a wider institutional field. This became particularly evident when the state’s labour inspections re-formatted the politics of mistrust within the Cooperative. Rather than assuming that trust and mistrust form the ‘basis’ for social action, it has become apparent that, in the case of the Cooperative, (mis-)trust was a key performative idiom that was mobilized to make a particular form of the economy emerge out of competing grassroots economic models. I therefore suggest that embedding trust and mistrust in particular social and cultural contexts only takes us so far. That is, in addition to tracing the particular histories and cultural meaning of trust and mistrust from place to place, we need to pay attention to the way the mobilization of (mis-)trust serves to fortify or break down certain forms of the economy in the context of prolonged institutional crisis.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the participants of the Writing Think Tank at the Department of Cultural Anthropology at Utrecht University for their invaluable comments, suggestions, and insights on the earliest draft of this paper. In addition, my thanks go out to the anonymous reviewers who helped further develop this article through their probing and generous comments. The writing of this article was completed while receiving funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement no. 851132). Lastly, I would like to acknowledge and thank all those I had the pleasure of meeting and working together with during my research in Catalonia.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the European Research Council (ERC) under the Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement no. 851132).

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Notes

1. Throughout this article I use pseudonyms to refer to the members of the Cooperative.
2. I leave the question as to whether it is possible to live outside of capitalism aside, as this debate has little bearing on the desire of the members of the Cooperative to do so.
3. To further safeguard the anonymity of the Cooperative, I do not name the organization's website in the references of this article.
4. Carey (2017) writes that distrust is usually based on previous experience, whereas mistrust refers to a general disposition that one has or can be cultivated. In this article, when referring solely to mistrust or distrust, I will follow Carey's usage of these terms.
5. Narotzky (2020: 2) emphasizes that her usage of the term grassroots goes beyond the common understanding that 'tends to equate the grassroots with social movements to improve society.'
6. Where Juris foregrounds political terms and practices, my interlocutors also mobilized various affective registers that spring from a history of anarchism. The idea of mutual aid (*suport mutu*), for instance, derives from the Russian anarchist philosopher Peter Kropotkin (1989), who emphasized the importance of cooperation, reciprocity and mutual aid in the evolution of animal and human life.
7. In this context, 'libertarian' does not mean the same as contemporary US libertarianism. Libertarian movements in 20th-century Spain draw inspiration from anarcho-syndicalism.
8. Following my interlocutors in reversing the male-dominated connotation of language, I use the feminine form of Spanish and Catalan words except when referring to specific individuals.
9. This is the current fee as of January 2022. During my fieldwork in 2017 the fee stood at €274.
10. These fees could be paid either in euros or social currency, or a mixture of both.
11. Trust and control here should not be seen as mutually exclusive categories. In fact they 'assume the existence of the other, refer to each other and create each other' (Möllering, 2005: 284).

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