

The Rhizomatic Growth of Integral Cooperatives: within an Ecology of Commons and against the Capitalist Hegemony

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My research addresses the model of the integral cooperative, and how it unfolds into a network of inter-cooperation throughout the Portuguese territory. The term "integral cooperative" refers to a non-profit commercial organization that comprises all branches of economic activity needed for its members to develop their projects. To not risk being too abstract and vague, I decided to focus on the example of a concrete organization - Rizoma - which I've been studying as an active member.

Rizoma Cooperativa Integral was created in November 2020, in Lisbon. Like the other Portuguese integral co-ops, it is legally registered as a multisectoral cooperative. It has branches in consumption, services, housing, culture, agriculture, and commerce. It started with approximately 40 members and the pioneer project of a self-managed grocery shop in a borrowed space. In less than three years, Rizoma expanded to more than 500 members, moved to a three-floor building, and welcomed a diversity of projects and events. In coherence with the concept of "rhizome", developed by Deleuze and Guattari and which inspired its name and structure, the cooperative aims to grow horizontally, in a non-hierarchical way, constituting a kind of network that "connects any node to any other node". Its growth, however, did not keep up with its increase in costs, especially following the rise of the interest rates on its loan to buy the new space.

This presentation will depart precisely from such economic coercion posed by financial capital on non-profit organizations like Rizoma, and focus on the tension it creates between, on one hand, the co-op's moral values and, on the other, the need to increase the surplus value generated by its activities in order to pay debts and other expenses: in other words, in order to survive. The analysis of the implications of such tension will unfold in dialogue with the book *Omnia Sunt Communia* and the framework Massimo De Angelis develops to conceptualize the commons.

Inspired by the work of evolutionary biologists Maturana and Varela, De Angelis perceives the commons and Capital as two distinct, autonomous social systems that seek to self-govern and reproduce on the basis of different and often clashing codes, measures and values (De Angelis 2017: 103). While Capital reproduces itself through profit and its accumulation - which imply exploitation of labour, social stratification and ecological destruction - Commons reproduce through commoning or doing-in-common, a social process based on values that define a sharing culture in a given time and context, through which they

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reproduce resources and the community that manages them. Translating these concepts to our case study, we can perceive Rizoma as a commons guided by values such as solidarity, equality and environmental care. Its members (the *commoners*) comprise a community that shares resources (its *commonwealth*) - such as a common fund, a building, and a digital platform - but also debt, bills and legal responsibilities, which are generated within a distinct social system: Capital/State (for De Angelis, Capital and the contemporary State share the same *modus operandi*; for brevity, I will refer to it as just “Capital”).

Capital and the Commons are often coupled through the Market. Both social systems buy and sell, but with different goals: Capital buys in order to sell at a profit; Commons, on the other hand, tend to sell commodities in order to buy means of sustenance and reproduction. Taking Rizoma’s grocery shop as our focal point, we observe that the money generated through the sale of products is directed, not to shareholders, but first, to the maintenance of the project itself, and second, to improve conditions for other commoning practices within the co-op.

Adopting De Angelis’ systemic lenses to approach the commons reveals a whole set of social relations, practices and wealth that sustain not only productive activities, such as commerce, but also reproductive activities, such as mutual care, which defy economic rationalism and the model of *Homo Oeconomicus*, both of which neoliberal economists tend to fetishize. On the other hand, this approach also allows us to see the Commons as the source of a social power that is antagonistic to Capital, seeking to weaken its social impact and gain traction in the social fabric. In that sense, integral cooperatives constitute forces of social transformation, since they extend the possibilities of socioeconomic organization, not only rejecting capitalist rationales, but also seeking to create alternative socioeconomic relations, practices and narratives “in the shell of” neoliberal capitalism. For De Angelis, social transformation “is not only *structural* change, that is, change in the material and immaterial components of systems, but also change... in social relations, in modes of production and distribution, of making sense, giving meaning and valuing... [and] of accessing socially... produced wealth” (De Angelis 2017: 108).

Coming back to Rizoma’s tension between moral values and the need to increase the surplus value generated, it is evident that the cooperative, in a society dominated by neoliberal logic and the “free market”, is at the intersection of diverse conflicting forces, some communalistic, other capitalistic. In addition to the rise in interest rates, it has to face, for example, the lower prices offered by the monopolist competition, which is not limited by values of social and environmental justice, and the limited time and energy that its members can dedicate to the co-op, due professional commitments elsewhere, or having been pushed to more peripheral neighbourhoods following the rise of housing prices. When De Angelis paraphrases Foucault, saying that the art of governance is about surviving in a sea of opposing forces, he is very aware that the threats the commons face are very powerful and that surviving them implies making some compromises. Behind such compromises, however, there is the risk of enclosure (the appropriation and expropriation of commonwealth) or co-

optation (the absorption and distortion of one's ideas to fit distinct purposes, in this case, accumulation of capital), if not self-destruction. You don't need much imagination to foresee how the idea of a mandatory shift of 3 hours per month - as is required of Rizoma members in order to have the right to consume - could be seen as an advantageous strategy for a capitalist entrepreneur to cut costs and maximize profit; it could even fit the concept of "sharing economy". The question, then, is: how to make compromises in relation to Capital without giving up one's integrity, values and autonomy?

According to De Angelis, "if capital regards these [commons] as a barrier to overcome, then it will set out strategies for their enclosure or co-optation. Whether capital succeeds in doing this or not will depend on the relative power each of the opposing social forces are able to deploy" (De Angelis 2017: 173). At such decisive moments, then, social power has to be actualized if the commons are to survive and keep reproducing. This is also when good governance is most crucial, since strategic decisions have to be taken, while guaranteeing that compromises don't imply giving up one's integrity, values and autonomy. As De Angelis states, "[t]he question of co-optation is a strategic field of possibilities, one that requires situated judgments based on context and scale. For example, many would argue that access by commons to markets... to meet some of their needs, is by definition contextual evidence of their co-optation, while in fact it could be a contingent strategy of survival and a precondition for their reproduction" (*ibid.*: 316). As he also explains, both capital and the commons rely on resources produced by each other (*ibid.*: 334). He calls this phenomenon "*structural coupling*", which he defines as an "intersystem relation among systems that are environments to each other" (*ibid.*: 331). For example, while Rizoma resorted to materials produced within capitalist industries to restore its building, Capital frequently appropriates ideas and goods that are developed in contexts of commonality. However, the symbiotic relation of Capital toward commons is rather "parasitic", frequently extracting value for free in order to maximize profit. On the contrary, commons often pay, if not directly, at least indirectly - in terms of environmental and social costs - to use capital's resources (*ibid.*: 335).

Taking into account the hegemonic power of Capital, for a commons such as Rizoma to thrive in the face of coercive forces depends on its integration into a wider commons ecology. As De Angelis explains, "commons ecologies are the interrelations among different commons and their environments" (De Angelis 2017: 287). These would be weaved "by a particular type of commoning that puts them into communication and sustained cooperation", referred to as "boundary commoning" (*ibid.*: 287). This type of commoning would have the ability to "produce *structural coupling* between and among different commons" (*ibid.*: 291), activating and sustaining relations among them, thus giving shape to commons at larger scales and intensifying their presence throughout the social fabric. Commons ecologies, then, would "consist of webs of interrelated commons, cooperating at different scales and intensity (*ibid.*: 287). This is the case in the Network of Integral Cooperatives, which constitutes my second dimension of analysis. It consists of an informal organization that seeks to connect the different Portuguese integral cooperatives through monthly meetings, and to develop

common goals, practices and events, based on principles of inter-cooperation, solidarity and mutual aid. The Network was formed at last year's first Forum of Integral Cooperatives and has been organizing online meetings with international organizations in areas such as solidarity economy, ethical finance, cooperative federations, and others. This year's Forum, which was also organized within the Network, witnessed the expansion of its ecology, with the official creation of three new integral cooperatives, as well as the development of other collectives in the process of formalization.

As De Angelis explains, there are two different types of structural coupling among commons: "symbiosis" and "meta-commonality". "Symbiosis occurs with the inclusion of the boundaries of two (or more) commons into one unit" (De Angelis 2017: 292). This happened, for example, when the housing collective Aldrava or the audiovisual collective Sintrópica joined Rizoma. In this process "[e]ach group retain[ed] its own identity, autonomy and autopoietic processes while operating within the boundaries" (*ibid.*: 293) of the cooperative. However, the Network of Integral Co-ops is a case of the second type. As De Angelis explains, in meta-commonality each commons maintains "its identity and internal commoning, while at the same time establishing a new systemic coherence with other commons" (*ibid.*). Likewise, in the Network of Integral Co-ops all organizations retain their structure and components, while being integrated into a higher level of coordination among organizations. This allows them, for example, to share knowledge and other resources, develop common strategies and projects, or join forces to exercise political pressure.

Nonetheless, as De Angelis also recognizes, commons alone are not enough to tackle the threat posed by Capital in coalition with a State subsumed to its *modus operandi*. Therefore, he argues that the commons would benefit immensely from joining forces with social movements, not only to protect themselves from being enclosed or co-opted by Capital, but also in order to expand their sphere of action (De Angelis 2017: 332). Hence, reproducing commons and building commons ecologies would imply the creation, maintenance and expansion of "commons movements". This would mean an alignment between commons and social movements, "as interrelated sides of the same process" (*ibid.*: 384). Thus, commons movements are "hybrids between social movements and commons, created by repeated and sustained interaction between social movements and the commons, the commons turning into social movements and social movements into commons" (*ibid.*: 385). Applied to our case studies, in practice this would translate into Rizoma joining forces with local movements, as well as the Network of Integral Co-ops joining forces with national and international movements – or generating a social movement in its own right. This hybridization could materialize, for example, in an alliance between Rizoma's housing section and local movements claiming housing rights: while the first would be more focused on developing prefigurative projects, the second would be more focused on exercising political pressure in converging directions. As such, commons movements would "*articulate [both] frontline struggles and (re)-production*" (*ibid.*: 386). Such social movements, sustained by commoning practices, would represent a favourable environment for boundary commoning, that is, for

establishing connections among existing commons or even developing new commons, thus expanding commons ecologies throughout different territories. This phenomenon is well captured by Angelos Varvarousis, when he describes how, in the wake of Greek social movements of 2008-2011, in response to the financial, political and social crisis, his country experienced a “rhizomatic expansion of commons” (Varvarousis 2020: 5), “characterized by the simultaneous emergence of various commoning projects in different places and times” (*ibid.*: 9). Some of these were quite ephemeral or transitional, while others “transmuted from ‘liminal’ to more stable commons” (*ibid.*: 5). Likewise, the expansion of integral co-ops throughout Portuguese territories in the last few years also expresses a rhizomatic nature, manifesting itself in unexpected places – Alentejo, Lisboa, Algarve, Minho, Tomar, Porto - without any central management or hierarchical structure.

Massimo De Angelis believes that “if commons and social movements were able to generate themselves endlessly in a virtuous cycle, they would force the overall social system to evolve, and more and more aspects of social reproduction would be *commonised*” (2017: 384). For the Network of Integral Cooperatives – or should we talk about a Movement of Integral Cooperatives? – the combination of prefigurative practices with claiming for a transformation towards a social system that prevents capital accumulation and is based on shared management of wealth, would mean increasing its coherence with the word “integral”, taking the holistic character of its project beyond the limits of commercial organizations. As one of the organizers stated in this year’s Forum of Integral Cooperatives: “*integral cooperativism* is more than integral cooperatives”. Let’s see how its reach expands beyond organizational boundaries.

References:

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