

Research Article

# Cooperative Cooperation: Being, Doing, and Becoming



Cooperação Cooperativa: o Ser, o Fazer e o Devir

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## ABSTRACT

**Context:** the consolidation of an economic system based on competition has not eliminated the importance of cooperation for life in society, or the continuing emergence of cooperative organizations, even in a hostile environment. Why do they continue to emerge? What are their possibilities? What happens when they are developed? **Objective:** to comprehend, in theoretical terms and on the basis of existing research, the cooperation phenomenon, especially that which inspires cooperative organizations. **Methodology:** the research employed a systemic and complex conception of the cooperation phenomenon and of its object of study, developing a qualitative, interpretative, and reflexive discussion according to three themes: being, doing, and becoming. **Results:** Cooperatives, as human organizations, go through an evolutionary process, suffering the inherent problems of administration and maintenance of democracy. To face the degenerative process, it is necessary to rethink cooperative management based on systemic theories and self-reinforcing cooperative identity. **Conclusion:** cooperation is fundamental for life in society, which explains the fact that cooperatives continue to emerge even in the midst of a hostile environment. Contrary to what has been disseminated, we are not only competitive, we are also cooperative and our knowledge needs to be urgently reconstructed.

**Keywords:** cooperation; cooperative; development; organizations; systems.

**JEL Code:** C71, A13, F63.

## RESUMO

**Contexto:** a consolidação de um sistema econômico baseado na competição não eliminou a importância da cooperação para a vida em sociedade, nem impediu que organizações cooperativas continuassem emergindo, mesmo em um ambiente hostil. Por que continuam emergindo? Quais as suas possibilidades? O que acontece quando se desenvolvem? **Objetivo:** compreender, em termos teóricos, o fenômeno da cooperação, especialmente aquela que inspira organizações cooperativas. **Metodologia:** a pesquisa empreendeu uma concepção sistêmica e complexa do fenômeno da cooperação e do seu objeto de estudo, desenvolvendo uma discussão qualitativa, interpretativa e reflexiva em três eixos: o ser, o fazer e o devir. **Resultados:** cooperativas, como organizações humanas, passam por um processo evolutivo, sofrendo os problemas próprios da administração e manutenção da democracia. Para enfrentar o processo degenerativo é preciso repensar a gestão cooperativa com base em teorias sistêmicas e autorreforçantes da identidade cooperativa. **Conclusão:** a cooperação é fundamental para a vida em sociedade, o que explica o fato de cooperativas continuarem emergindo. Ao contrário do que se disseminou, não somos apenas competitivos, somos também cooperativos e nosso conhecimento precisa ser urgentemente reconstruído.

**Palavras-chave:** cooperação; cooperativas; desenvolvimento; organizações; sistemas.

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## INTRODUCTION

The consolidation of an economic system based on competition and the dominant idea in the sciences that man reigns over a world of objects, a holder of truths (Morin, 2007) who excludes himself in his relations and responsibilities with regard to others and nature (Maturana & Varela, 1997), is a violent combination because it is predatory and unsustainable. We should no longer speak only in terms of economic crises, since there is a latent crisis that is structural, economic, and political concerning human relationships. Even so, cooperation has always been present, even in the midst of a hostile environment, from spontaneous manifestations of altruism and mutual aid, to the use of cooperation to perform joint actions, on behalf of common goals or not, as a form of resistance in the sense of human self-realization.

This article is the result of research that has sought to comprehend in theoretical terms and on the basis of existing research the cooperation phenomenon, especially that which inspires cooperative organization, with the aim of developing an updated theoretical conception about this theme. Why do they continue to emerge? What are their possibilities? What happens when they are developed?

Knowing that there are epistemologies of distinct trends, and aware of the questions related to an object that, although it is a type of organization, is foreign to the interests of organizational studies in both Administration and Engineering, as in other areas such as Economics and the Social Sciences, the research required a new epistemological perspective that comprehends the need to break disciplinary barriers, having as a reference the autonomy of the researcher, and in this case, that of the object to be studied, also. Such characteristics are found in the most recent developments of systemic thinking, which are characterized by the (re)approximation between science and philosophy, between nature and culture, between object and subject.

According to Le Moigne (1996), a systemic project requires new perspectives. The first implies the recognition of a modeling theory that presupposes the plurality of conceivable models for a given phenomenon and of modeling methods. Freedom is at the core of cognition, knowledge is designed, we are not reduced to the recipes of **hypothetical-deductive** models, but we have at our disposal an open field of **axiomatic-inductive** models. The second perspective is related to the paradigm of complexity, which recognizes and accepts the complexity of the observed phenomenon. The third perspective is

that everything is organization. Systemic modeling has the capacity to respect the “dialectics that constitutes all complexity: to function by transforming and to transform by functioning, maintaining its identity” (Le Moigne, 1996, p. 28). The fourth perspective is that systems are systems, not groups. “In order to overcome group analysis, it is necessary to go from the question ‘of what is it made?’ to the question ‘what does it do?’ This allows us to overcome analytic-organic modeling and to move to a systemic-functional modeling” (Le Moigne, 1996, p. 31).

The fifth perspective is that to model is to decide. The modeler is endowed with creative freedom, which explains or verifies a priori the axioms upon which he or she will progressively support his or her inferences.

This paper is the result of a systemic conception of research, for it recognizes its object, the cooperative, as a complex system. In order to answer the questions that it proposes to address, it was developed according to these perspectives.

Also, in order to recognize the world in transformation, as science and the construction of knowledge transform by transforming themselves, such an enterprise of modeling requires new methodological precepts (Le Moigne, 1996), which may be explained as follows:

1. The precept of pertinence, which asserts that the object is defined by the intentions (declared or not) of the modeler, by his capacity to develop relations associated with some perceptible and explainable purposes. This involves accepting that the modeler’s perception and the actual object can change.
2. The precept of globalism, which considers that the object to be discovered is included and active in a greater whole, and that comprehending this environment is a condition for knowledge of the object.
3. The teleological precept, which interprets the object through its behavior, not by seeking to explain it on the basis of some law of eventual structure or causality, but by seeking to consider its ends, means, and relations.
4. The precept of aggregativity, which realizes that every representation is deliberately partisan. One seeks to select the pertinent aggregates through some orientation, recognizing that the objectivity of the exhaustive census is unreal. One accepts interpretation in relative and contingent terms.

In order to realize these precepts, in addition to the formal description of what the phenomenon or object is (to which science restricted itself for a long time), it is necessary to add what happens when in contact with its environment. This is called the experimental or praxiological definition of the object. The emphasis is not on composition, but on behavior. In addition to essence and experience, it is necessary to know the object in its history (hereditariness) and in its becoming. Thus, **being**, **doing**, and **becoming** represent a triangulation and opening to the representation and knowledge of the object, each conception being unique. Therefore, for the questions that the research proposed to answer, due to the complexity of its object, the cooperative, which involves the cooperation phenomenon, we encountered a research method and strategy in the triangulation proposed by Le Moigne (1996).

The discussion is qualitative, interpretative, and reflexive, based essentially on the interpretation of theoretical concepts and implications. First, a historical review of the cooperation phenomenon and of cooperativism (**being**) is developed; next, theories resulting from empirical research are reviewed in order to find references about cooperative behavior (**doing**); finally, some theoretical aggregates pertinent to the comprehension of the cooperation phenomenon were sought, on the basis of game theory, collective action theory, and analytical philosophy (**becoming**). Thus, we are dislocated between paradigms of broader philosophical systems (which involve ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies) and not-so-developed perspectives (although this association is a difficult exercise), which are superimposed and even competing, in a reflexive way through interconnected representations, developing an interpretative structure (Denzin & Lincoln, 2006).

This paper constitutes a basis for comprehending the cooperation phenomenon, as well as for studies on the development of cooperatives as democratic organizations, which in a competitive environment of economic globalization undergo strong internal and external pressures, which may result in an isomorphism in the sense of becoming more and more similar to traditional businesses, even managing to degenerate, or to survive by adopting strategies to reinforce their own identity. It is seen that, although emphasis has been given to competitive behavior, cooperation is the foundation for life in society (Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Candau, 2018; Kropotkin, 1902) and in any organization, which explains the fact that cooperatives continue to emerge even in the midst of a hostile environment.

## COOPERATION: *BEING*

### Definition

Cooperation can mean both action and movement (Jesus & Tiriba, 2003). It means action in the sense of effort or commitment, even if it is not formalized, of undertaking something, or producing with other people. In this sense, it is opposed to the individual, for it is to take part in a collective endeavor that depends on the action of each person. Cooperation also refers to movement in the sense of the actual history of humanity's evolution, which made the survival of not only man but also other species possible (Gambetta, 1993). Complementing this sense of movement, it is important to observe how collectivism based on cooperation was gradually suppressed in Western modernity through several revolutions: the economic revolution, when individuals came to have an economic life independent from the family economy; the intellectual revolution, which refers to the (re)discovery of the use of reason; the spiritual revolution, for the freedom of thought; the agricultural revolution, in which peasants left collective organization and feudal ways behind; the political revolution, with the achievement of fundamental rights; and, finally, the industrial revolution (Lasserre, 1972).

Throughout this development, cooperation gained a new meaning or a specific form of the capitalist labor process, transforming itself into a productive force of capital, a generator of surplus value through the simultaneous labor of workers in workplaces (Marx, 2002), a mechanism that has been improving since the beginning of the past century with the developments of the management sciences.

Although this process contributed to the development of an individualist society, in which an attempt was made to suppress forms of collective organization, cooperation continues to exist, filling spaces unoccupied by formal structures and even existing within them. For this reason, there is today an ample and promising field of studies on cooperation (Bear & Rand, 2016; Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Candau, 2018; Grossmann; Brienza, & Bobocel, 2017). From the perspective of scientific research, the study of cooperation is difficult due to its conceptual sophistication and the difficulty of analyzing it, for it involves the monitoring of different agents interacting in complex environments (Gambetta, 1993). In addition, cooperation is normally linked to other dense theoretical discussions such as confidence, morale, recognition, culture, altruism, and solidarity, resources that cannot be manufactured,

bought, or measured. Although the market has become interested, they constitute a capital that cannot be controlled and that is hidden in human sociability (Bauman, 2004).

One of the main references for the study of cooperation is Piotr Kropotkin (1842-1921), especially his work *Mutual Aid*, in which he developed a wide-ranging analysis of human evolution. The work is important for understanding the origins of practices of cooperation, in contrast to the Darwinist concept of natural selection (Bowles & Gintis, 2011). Based on observations made during his travels, Kropotkin (1902) perceived the overwhelming importance in nature of that which Darwin described as the natural checks to over-multiplication in comparison to the struggle of individuals belonging to the same species for means of survival, which is present in certain circumstances but which never overcomes the first. The most important factor for the maintenance or preservation of the species and its most profound evolution would be the mutual aid and mutual support among individuals of the same species. Kropotkin (1902) observed such a compromising period of evolution precisely in periods of calamity/scarcity of food, when physically disabled individuals, in an effort to preserve life, develop competition. The author criticizes the thinking of Darwinists (not Darwin himself) and sociologists who affirm that man, due to his superior intelligence, can mitigate the effort and competition for life among individuals of his own species. Nonetheless, at the same time, they consider competition for means of survival as a law of nature.

Mutual aid institutions are human groupings that have existed since the remotest periods of the human species and that are responsible for its development. The immense influence that these institutions have exerted on the human species led the author to research other periods, including the institutions for mutual support of his time, when there was an expansion of unions and cooperatives in industrialized society, and also of several types of associations such as clubs, study groups, and teaching groups (Kropotkin, 1902).

In that context of consolidation of capitalist labor organization and production, what made cooperation different resided precisely in the experimentation of different forms of organization capable of emancipating workers from wage labor, since they organized themselves in egalitarian and free associations (which continues to make them different). As such, cooperation represents self-management through: participation in management, collective interest in production, direct election of management boards, equality

among voters, defining collective goals for the company as a whole, and rotating duties, just to name a few (Arvon, 1985).

Therefore, cooperation in collective enterprises is different from that described by Marx (2002) in the capitalist production process, in which workers develop group activities, but without bonds among them, without possession of the means of production, having only the figure of the capitalist as a link. Here bonding occurs among workers, who form work associations in a voluntary and conscious manner, because they understand that their strength is in collective organization, which is capable of generating a differentiated sociability.

### A history of cooperativism

The history of cooperativism is normally linked to the foundation, in 1844, of the Rochdale Cooperative in the United Kingdom, where cooperative principles originated. However, the cooperative experience is prior to this, to Robert Owen who influenced it or to Fourier in France, who are considered utopians that inspired the cooperative movement. The origins of rural and agricultural cooperatives are related, in part, to collectivist experiences of mutual aid in the countryside, and in part, to the conditions of modern agriculture, which has been developing since the rural economy came to be related to the market — whether through the need for credit, the acquisition of compost, seeds, and other items, or through the need to commercialize production. On the other hand, urban cooperatives were born in the midst of the development of industrial capitalism, together with the labor movement, through experiments that suppressed wage labor, which were expressed through production cooperatives, and also as a development of mechanisms that freed the way for workers to enjoy their wages and purchasing power, through the cooperative action of consumption and habitation, and finally in order to inhibit truck systems (a system in which the employee would go into debt with the employer through the purchasing of merchandise) (Fauquet, 1980).

In the context of the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup>, there were divergences among those who thought about the cooperation practices that inspired cooperativism, the anarchist ideology that foresaw a self-management project for society, and social transformation through revolution and a takeover of power. These different perspectives created a conflict with respect to the possible developments of the experiments in collective and democratic organization of labor and even the separation of



Marxists and labor movements from cooperativism, considered by some a bourgeois experiment. These elements helped cause the institutional form of the cooperative to be gradually and almost exclusively assimilated by a **cooperative movement**. One trend began to think about the existence of a specific sector of the market economy in which cooperatives would be included (Fauquet, 1980), thereby contributing to the study of cooperativism, specifically its role, characteristics, and developments.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some cooperators still thought that, in a free market, the indefinite development of cooperative institutions would be able to absorb, little by little, free competition. Fauquet defended — in the 1930s — the idea that capitalism itself had undergone transformations. Free competition was compromised by the power of trusts and cartels, large corporations, and capitalist companies were cooperating amongst themselves. The cooperative movement had to adjust to the changes: it was no longer possible to expect indefinite growth in an environment of economic freedom, and to affirm itself the movement had to reflect on its content and characteristics (Fauquet, 1980).

The consolidation of an international cooperative movement and the conception of a cooperative sector helped cause the term Social Economy to lose strength in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is because the term Social Economy arose in Europe at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the midst of a debate on economic thought that referred to the relations among politics, economics, and values, in addition to the role of cooperative work and the association among workers in the economy. The term would be taken up again in the 1970s and 1980s due to the economic crisis and the solidarity among socioeconomic movements, such as the rapprochement among associations, cooperatives, and mutuels in some European countries, in the discussions for a plural economy (Chaves, 1999). A similar movement occurred at the end of the 1990s in Latin American and African countries, appearing then as Solidarity Economy or Social and Solidarity Economy. Therefore, despite the predominance of capitalist organizations, they did not make old forms of organization based on cooperation disappear.

In addition to the transformation of the context in which cooperatives were included, already in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, studies pointed out how difficult it was for these companies to maintain their democracy (Meister, 1969, 1972), whether through democratic, participatory management in particular, which seeks the consensus and full realization of its members, or through the growth and development of differentiated populations within cooperatives

— members, elected administrators, managers, and wage laborers (Desroche, 1976) —, as well as the creation of networks or cooperative groups that may or may not tend towards a democratizing, shared management.

For Desroche (2006), the cooperative economy was associated with an ethics of contestation present in the cooperativism of Christian influence or in the various ways it was interpreted by socialism. Cooperativism treated in terms of principles or postulates runs the risk of distancing itself from the morals that created it, turning it into a vague doctrine susceptible of being exploited in a reformist manner by means of collectives within the capitalist regime of free enterprise. Even within actual socialist experiments, it became bureaucratic through a centralized and planned state that neglected cooperation. For these reasons, Desroche understood that it was necessary to develop a cooperative ethics that was able to contemplate the pluralism of cooperativism as an international movement. On the basis of his research he suggested that cooperative ethics involves the following elements: (a) creativity, related to the pleasure of creating the group, the company, in developing relations, movements, etc.; (b) solidarity, manifested at the limits of the rights and interests of capital, in which the emphasis is on social results and the cooperator gives up his immediate interests hoping to find an economic regime capable of generating a higher level of living, which is better for him and the group in which he is included; (c) ecumenicity, which recognizes a point of convergence between the interests in cooperation and solidarity, allowing for a common practice that can accommodate different references, the whole being coherent with the ideologies of each of its parts; (d) an ethics of responsibility, which is counterposed and balanced with an ethics of conviction (which in this case is related to the other elements mentioned), in the complementary sense proposed by Weber (2009), which may be the weakness of cooperativism but also its strength, its capacity to combine human value with the weight of responsibilities (Desroche, 2006).

In reviewing the origins and the discussion about the practices of cooperation and cooperativism, we also noticed the transformations that occurred throughout this period and how the discussion of cooperation did not have an important impact either on socialist thought and experiments, or on the capitalist world. Nonetheless, even in the midst of this hostile environment they continue to emerge, as a basis for human sociability or as a form of resistance.

## TENSIONS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF COOPERATIVES: *DOING*

Cooperative evolution, when it happens, creates a great challenge: to maintain participation/democracy and avoid degeneration — the disappearance of the cooperative, its absorption by another group, or legal transformation (Bretos & Errasti, 2016, 2018; Chaves & Sajardo, 2004; Cheney, Cruz, Peredo, & Nazareno, 2014; Errasti, 2013; Martínez, 2005; Spear, 2004).

The degeneration thesis basically establishes that cooperatives will inevitably tend to adopt the same organizational model as traditional companies to survive, gradually developing a ruling elite that discourages democracy. Due to the necessity of increasing efficiency, cooperatives consequently need to develop different structures and a new division of labor. Non-member workers may become numerous and the aims may become very similar to those of traditional companies (Cornforth, 1995). The argument that cooperatives operate in a capitalist system and are therefore limited experiments that end up reflecting this system, originates in Marxism and socialist criticism. It is also present in other theories and studies, such as Elite Theory (Michels, 1969).

For its part, the degeneration thesis is also criticized. The argument by Michels (1969), for example, which assumes direct democracy as a standard model in opposition to other forms of organization, attests that any form of representation or delegation is a sign of oligarchy. This idea is criticized because, after a certain size, any organization needs some type of delegation or representation. Therefore, would it really be correct to affirm that every large organization is an oligarchy? The second criticism concerns the assertion that leaders, due to the position that they occupy, necessarily come to belong to a different world than the led, thereby losing contact with members and their interests. Actually, this may not necessarily occur, it being important to remember that cooperatives are smaller than unions and political parties, which are the focus of the analysis by Michels (1969). Although it improves the analysis in question, the cooperative evolution described by Meister (1969), in which participation is gradually lost, would be too pessimistic (Cornforth, 1995).

From a theoretical perspective, there are basically two main criticisms of the degeneration thesis: first, that it is extremely deterministic, denying the possibility that those who cooperate have some autonomy in relation to their form of organization; and second, that it develops an idealized view of democracy that would be unviable, except in small organizations. In addition, each

cooperative has a specific economic, technological, social, and political context that should not be ignored (Cornforth, 1995).

Based on arguments such as these, a line was developed that opposes the thesis of inevitable degeneration, defending/verifying that processes of regeneration also occur in different phases of the cooperative life cycle, due to a recognition that there was a separation between the reality and rhetoric of democracy (Bialoskorski, 2004; Cornforth, 1995; Martinez, 2005; Stryjan, 1994).

Nevertheless, as cooperatives evolve, they face a challenge which is perhaps more difficult than that of traditional companies, the balance between quantitative growth and qualitative development, which involves the conservation of their identity. Martínez (2005) made an adaptation of the organizational life cycle to the reality of cooperatives and synthesized it in the following phases (Martínez, 2005).

**Phase 1** — characterized by the small number of members and reduced volume of operations, which allows the systems to be more informal and for there to be an aversion to business practices; from the beginning, the mechanisms of participation are determined. This phase is perhaps the most difficult to overcome, due to the lack of experience and resources.

**Phase 2** — there is an increase in the number of members and a need to contract paid technicians; a balance between rationalization of activities and cooperative identity; a monitoring of internal operations in the face of growth challenges; a consolidation of forms of participation; a preoccupation with the qualification and profile of the people contracted, and with the mechanisms of inclusion of new members and managers.

**Phase 3** — participation is threatened by the growth of bureaucracy and technocracy. In this phase, the group of founding partners in most cases has already been or is being completely substituted. It is necessary to develop tools that stimulate the renewal of confidence, participation, and decentralization. Internal growth by way of participation reaches its limit, and development comes to occur through external relations. A greater risk of degeneration is experienced (Martinez, 2005), but processes of regeneration are also observed (Cornforth, 1995).

Self-management is permeated by contradictions, and for this reason, it should be seen as a constant process of reproduction. Any research in this area should be preceded by an examination of the possible failures and successes, for the fundamental difference between

cooperatives and traditional companies is the types of problems encountered and the solutions for facing them (Stryjan, 1994).

Stryjan (1994) developed the perspective of cooperative reproduction, offering a systemic orientation — labor, management, and a constant redesigning of the organizational project — to deal with the challenges of organizational changes and stability, based primarily on the concepts of members and the inputs generated by them. Through interactions, members build the organization and are trained, sharing visions and actions.

Over time, the way the organization responds to the inputs of its members will determine the composition of its population, which influences the type of individual that it will attract and retain. From there many paths may be taken and degeneration is only one of them. In addition to environmental influences (Baum, 2007; Dimaggio & Powell, 2005; Hannan & Freeman, 2005) to which they are also susceptible, degeneration in the case of cooperatives may be the combined result of the poor administration of the inputs — which in certain circumstances would have a corrective effect — and the deterioration of the remaining population, as well as of new members (Stryjan, 1994).

In order not to degenerate, cooperatives should act on two large fronts. The first refers to the prospect of reproducing active members, through the adequate selection and socialization of members, which may seem strange, for in itself it is an adaptation of the principle of free membership to a context in which an important element for cooperativism is not easily encountered or realized: member affinity and interest in participating. Practices that stimulate the development of common meanings and commitment, such as training processes, constructive discussion, and the rotation of duties, have shown themselves to be crucial in the case of cooperatives that were able to maintain internal democracy. This is particularly important with growth, when contact among members becomes more difficult or formal, and in the extent to which motivation to participate is greater when members are capable of developing varied and important activities (Cornforth, 1995; Stryjan, 1994).

The second front of action is related to the division of labor and management of structure. These two aspects are related to the need to increase the efficiency and horizontal division of labor. However, greater specialization and internal differentiation do not necessarily create the development of an elite or weaken democracy. Experience shows cases in which precisely the

opposite was observed: members more aware of what was happening, participating and controlling information through policies strongly committed to the rotation of duties and sharing of adequate knowledge, information, and technology, or in some cases, through rotating support teams responsible for maintaining this dynamic. However, these measures alone do not guarantee that elites will not form within the group, so it is important for there to be a predisposition on the part of those who occupy key positions. After a certain size, normally around fifteen or twenty members, democratic involvement can be guaranteed through the development of a more complex democratic structure that combines forms of representation and of direct participation, which reinforce each other (Cornforth, 1995).

From an environmental perspective, Bager (1994) developed a study of the process of isomorphism adapted to cooperative environments, concluding that they undergo a congruent isomorphism and an incongruent one. The former exerts a force in the direction of homogenization in relation to the cooperative model itself through cooperative legislation, through a cooperative institutional framework (national and international promoting institutions, regional and national federations, and in some cases credit cooperatives, umbrella organizations, etc.), through competition (which sometimes also exists) among cooperatives, and through cooperation with other cooperatives or organizations with the same social base. The latter exerts a force in the direction of homogenization in relation to other forms of organization through company legislation and commerce in general, through the organizational field of the sector in which traditional, for-profit capitalist companies are active, through competition with other types of organizations, through cooperation with other types of organizations, through employees or managers who do not have a cooperative profile, and through professional organizations.

Therefore, to evaluate these two forms of isomorphism would be a fundamental question for the study of the process of transformation. The predominance of incongruent isomorphism stimulates the process of transformation, degeneration being its extreme. Nonetheless, this evaluation is challenging and requires a historical analysis of the process of change. The contexts — sectors, types of cooperatives, and countries — are many, which helps to compose varied isomorphic processes. In addition, just as in other types of organizations, not only isomorphism influences the process of change, but also management actions (Baum, 2007), and in the case of cooperatives, the prospect of internally reproducing members (Stryjan, 1994). For these reasons, the training and

selection of managers with a Social and Solidarity Economy profile have proved to be important (Chaves & Sajardo, 2004; Mozas Moral, 2004; Spear, 2004).

Therefore, cooperatives need to review their economic and social performance permanently to avoid degeneration, in a cycle of constant monitoring and improvement, reinventing themselves every day. There is no model for success. Just as circumstances change, new procedures and structures need to be reviewed by the members themselves, which demands a capacity for ongoing exchange (Cornforth, 1995; Stryjan, 1994).

Manoa (2001) analyzes the cooperative as a dual, semi-open organization that combines two types of exchanges at the same time: internal exchanges developed by the grouping of people that constitute the organization, and exchanges with the market. The existence of internal exchanges is the first factor that should be considered and conserved in the cooperative dynamic, since it constitutes an unquestionable advantage in relation to the traditional company. That is what numerous theoretical papers, with different epistemologies and methods, have been likewise concluding (Manoa, 2001, p. 33).

Internal exchanges are the core of the democratic company, they are intrinsically linked to it, and they develop without implied direct costs, for their basis is found in cooperation, the main comparative advantage of this type of organization and at the same time that which makes its survival more difficult in a competitive logic (Manoa, 2001). Paradoxically, it is this characteristic that the traditional company has been trying to reproduce nowadays, faced with the need for more and more personalized and creative products/services. The traditional company seeks to develop this characteristic in an extremely costly manner, normally through the hiring of highly qualified people, differentiated salaries, constant training programs, and incentives, in order to get differentiable information and competencies in the competitive market.

## THEORETICAL AGGREGATES FOR THE STUDY OF COOPERATIVES: *BECOMING*

Game theory is recognized as an area that provides important models of representation for collective social phenomena, since it creates a logical and practical apparatus for their interpretation and explanation (Ullmann-Margalit, 1977). So much so that researchers in this line have given importance to the cooperation phenomenon's emergence (Bear & Rand, 2016; Fiani, 2006), contributing with studies in the areas of Economics, Social Sciences, and even Philosophy. In Economics, game theory is applied not only within a cooperative perspective but also within a competitive one (transaction costs, possibilities of economic cooperation, etc.). In areas such as the Social Sciences and Philosophy, there is a special interest in forms of spontaneous cooperation, their conditions and ability to increase the well-being of society, precisely because it is more difficult to encourage cooperation through external mechanisms, even if there are reward mechanisms or penalties for players. This role is actually exercised by judicial bodies, police, regulatory agencies, professional associations, unions, and others. However, for life in society a considerable portion of the population must necessarily choose to cooperate spontaneously (Fiani, 2006).

One contribution of game theory is the study of the emergence of cooperation in repeated games, by simulating real situations in which players meet again, thereby developing a process of infinite strategic interaction, in the sense that players do not know when the process will end (Fiani, 2006). The prisoner's dilemma has served as a basis for several studies because it represents common situations, from personal relationships to international relationships. In real life, the strategy adopted (to cooperate or defect) obviously depends on the circumstances in which each player finds oneself, one's individual characteristics and expectations (Axelrod, 2010). Table 1 shows the representation of the prisoners' dilemma.

**Table 1.** The prisoner's dilemma.

	Cooperate	Defect
Cooperate	R=3, R=3 Reward (R) for cooperating	S=0, T=5 Sucker's (S) payoff for cooperating; temptation (T) payoff for defecting;
Defect	T=5, S=0 Temptation (T) payoff for defecting; sucker's (S) payoff for cooperating	P=1, P=1 Punishment (P) payoff for defecting

**Note.** Source: Axelrod, R. (2010). *A evolução da cooperação*. (p. 8). São Paulo: Leopardo Editora.



One difficulty encountered for the adoption of the cooperate-cooperate strategy, with a more balanced outcome, occurs because players tend to select their optimal strategy. This situation is inefficient, because non-cooperation on the part of one player while the other cooperates (or others cooperate) generates rewards that surpass cooperative behavior only in the short term. If the players meet again, with the move history they begin to reproduce non-cooperative behavior, which is transformed into the worst result. The short-term opportunism described by the prisoners' dilemma has terrible results, from the simplest to the most complex interactions in a society (Fiani, 2006).

Axelrod's work has had an impact on cooperation studies since the publication of *The Evolution of Cooperation* in 1984 (Axelrod, 1984). Based on the prisoner's dilemma, Axelrod developed a computer tournament relying on the strategies sent by professionals from several countries — only in the second phase, more than a million moves were simulated. The approach developed was based on strategy and not on genetics, by using an ecological perspective in which effective strategies are imitated and unsuccessful strategies tend not to reappear over time. As such, there was no change in strategies but rather a learning process, it being possible to observe the distribution of strategies over the course of rounds. The exploitative strategies — which do not cooperate or which defect — are among those that perform worst because, as time passes, its exploited base decreases, thus making them unsustainable.

The most successful strategy, not necessarily the highest scoring, but which achieved stability and an average result over the course of generations of tournaments, was an **Eye for an Eye**, which is considered a gentle type that prevents unnecessary problems, that does not allow exploitation, that is forgiving because it is capable of restoring cooperation, that is clear and allows for easy comprehension, and that encourages cooperation in the long-term. The success of this strategy is due to the encouragement of cooperation, not competition, since it is based on the principle of reciprocity: a gentle attitude of cooperation can obtain the best performance in the long-term, and is able to attain collective stability in circumstances in which the future is relevant to the players, and in which the durability of relations and not necessarily friendship or affinity is required. These aspects are related to the capacity of human foresight, something quite similar to what Kropotkin (1902) defended. Another important conclusion is that the strategy of defecting can also achieve collective stability and in any circumstance, since it is based on immediate self-interest. However, this strategy

does not achieve a better performance, neither in the present nor in the future (Axelrod, 2010).

Cooperation can emerge even in a world of defectors, provided that cooperating individuals have the opportunity to interact with each other and are able to protect themselves from those who adopt other strategies. For this purpose, the gentle strategy needs to be motivated and to develop collective stability, and is even able to dominate in a world of selfish people by means of groups of individuals that depend on reciprocity. This experiment suggests that cooperation arises even in cases in which there is no friendship or foresight, as in the real case of **live and let live** in war trenches (Axelrod, 2010).

Recognizing society as a system in which cooperation plays a fundamental role justifies the relevance of developing research on this theme. A great challenge is that learning by trial and error is slow, thus there should be a commitment, through a better understanding of this process, to developing better conditions for the evolution of cooperation and not the opposite (Axelrod, 2010).

The Finnish philosopher Raimo Tuomela, who is interested in issues related to social action, also argues that it is necessary to get to know the mechanisms of cooperation and the conditions for its development. This author acknowledges that game theory is a useful model of representation, yet he criticizes the inadequate way in which cooperation is usually studied, that is, by following the individualistic approach and ignoring the social question. Tuomela defends the use of game theory associated with the study of collective action dilemmas (Tuomela, 2000).

Using analytical philosophy, Tuomela (2000) develops the possibilities of a more effective cooperation, which is called full-blown cooperation, through philosophical inquiry, by analyzing not only the types of cooperation possible, but under what circumstances they are, in fact, possible, useful, rational, and from what points of view. His aim is to offer a satisfactory theory on cooperation, by analyzing the notion of cooperation and presenting a taxonomy of its sub-varieties. Among them, there is a crucial distinction: group-mode cooperation (g-cooperation) and I-mode cooperation (I-cooperation). The former is based on a commitment to the collective, the latter to private interests. Game theory can solve many aspects related to I-cooperation, but to go beyond it, one must make connections between the fields of Philosophy and the Social Sciences, as Axelrod (2010) also recognized.

If one assumes a (pre)disposition to cooperate in the human species (Bowls & Gintis, 2011;

Kropotkin, 1902), it is difficult to predict under what circumstances individuals are willing to cooperate or defect, acting in a competitive, selfish, or even aggressive manner. Thus, it is important to discover more about the nature of cooperation and the conditions favorable to its development, since it is also conditioned by the institutional and normative context of social groups and society in general.

Tuomela (2000) approaches the study of cooperation through a philosophical theory on social action, which argues that group action and collective commitment are central aspects for a more sophisticated and full-blown cooperative action. This type of cooperation arises from a g-cooperation, in which individuals act together intentionally seeking to achieve a collective goal while they choose to pursue or not to pursue their private goals or interests.

The type of cooperation that appears in games such as the prisoner's dilemma, I-cooperation, is considered a kind of weak cooperation. It occurs through collaboration or coordination, in which the individual cooperates in the interest of achieving his or her private goals and interests. The two types of cooperation are important as an object of study, although most empirical studies have been more concerned with cooperation in the sense of collaboration (coaction) (Tuomela, 2000).

People are thinking beings, who feel and act according to their morals, and who cooperate and question one another, thus building and maintaining social institutions. Our actions occur in a social context, they depend on the existence of other individuals, for social reasons, and we intuitively think of cooperating or not. Cooperation is therefore analyzed as social action, ranging from weak to strong. Ideally, a person performs an action that benefits his or her group (group-attitude) if, and only if, he or she has (or shares) that attitude, believes that the group has this attitude, and believes that there is a mutual expectation among members for everyone to have that attitude. A group-attitude is a shared social reason by which the agents are guided, and which constitutes the intention of the social action in question. It is social, for it needs to take into account other people as participants in the cooperation. This creates the type of physical or mental dependency necessary for there to be cooperation, which would be a collective condition. Acting together in a strengthened way requires working in association with others, according to a common plan of action (Tuomela, 2000).

The preferences of the participants in a social action may be totally cooperative if they are very correlated or the opposite. The correlation

of interests determines the type of cooperation: there are motivations and rationalities that underlie cooperation, that is, there are preferences or interests related to the need for association or collective action. Depending on the case, cooperation may also be natural or institutional, and yet highly dependent on culture. It is not a dichotomy, but different forms and variations of cooperation, depending on the contexts (Tuomela, 2000).

Cooperating in a situation defined by a regulation presupposes that the participants accept the goals, the tasks, and the responsibilities defined. Nonetheless, the correspondence between the preferences in question will be in part determined by regulations, since they are previously defined by agreement or social norm, which represents a mutual expectation in relation to what the norm determines or regulates. A participant may still cooperate in certain situations with goodwill or reluctance, such as in the case of a strike that is declared by vote and in which members who were not in favor see themselves forced to participate (Tuomela, 2000).

People who are willing to cooperate can transform this attitude into a way of life, since they come to take into account that it is rewarding to act this way in the situations they face. Here, the action and developments associated with it may not necessarily be related to altruism, but are a result of practice, of experience, of knowledge constructed by the individual himself. This reward for cooperating can be perceived both through the achievement of goals and through participation in intermediate activities (Tuomela, 2000).

A collective action can also be based on a strong sense of involvement with the collective without necessarily being agreed upon, formalized, or deliberated. Acting together can be based on a shared plan, on shared principles, on mutual trust, or on the basis of plain belief (Tuomela, 2000).

In formally structured groups, on the other hand, there is usually one or more people responsible for making decisions and helping to shape the intentions of cooperation, as well as contributing to its realization. In these cases, it is supposed that the rest of the group cooperates on some level. Some members may contribute to the purposes of the group without really being involved with those goals, while others accept those goals and actions only tacitly, with no intention of collaborating. It can be said that these last two cases are variations of I-cooperation (Tuomela, 2000).

Without a doubt, the discussion of cooperation and the achievement of shared collective goals encounters broader discussions of life in society

that are related to philosophical meta-levels — liberal, communitarian, republican, libertarian, etc. — regarding social organization. Tuomela (2000) seeks to avoid these discussions and only assumes that society is constituted by social institutions that generally, or at least in most cases, depend on cooperation.

The discussion of the conditions for the development of cooperation refers to another important concept that contributes to the maintenance of social institutions, whether they are of an unequal collaborative nature, as in the case of I-cooperation, or a more egalitarian organization in terms of a g-cooperation: the concept of social norms, resulting from human action and experience, which are not necessarily implemented deliberately and which influence the conduct of individuals.

The emergence of norms and standards of conduct is complex, and they are related to the rationalization process of Western societies, to transformations in labor and human interactions. One example was the abusive use of the Darwinian theory of evolution to justify competition and the purposes of social class structure in the contexts of inequality. Justifications such as these have contributed to the assimilation of a pattern for all of society and for satisfying interests that have emerged in a disorderly way. Norms do not come into existence at a given time, nor are they the result of deliberate actions. They are the result of the complex behavior pattern of a large number of people over time (Ullmann-Margalit, 1977).

Ullmann-Margalit (1977) developed a study that proposed to carry out the rational reconstruction of the formal characteristics of the states of social interaction through which the norms are created. She was interested in the types of norms and the way in which they are created, not in the historical but in the structural sense. Contexts of social interaction imply situations in which the participants recognize the interdependency of expectations, decisions, and actions, unlike in the decision-making theory that considers the decision-maker to be isolated, in risky and uncertain conditions. By social interaction is meant:

a number of persons who cannot behave as if the actions of the others were given and hence still make their decisions in isolation; rather, these persons are interacting in an essential way, such that no choice of action can be made wisely without taking into account the dependence of the outcome on the participants' mutual expectations (Ullmann-Margalit, 1977, p. 7).

The author sought, therefore, to study the conditions that make norms emerge through a few paradigmatic interactions with the aid of game theory, believing that it is possible to develop an abstract and relative description of the resulting norms. The basic argument is that norms appear as solutions to problems posed by certain situations of social interaction.

The correlation between certain types of problem situations and the norms that make their solution easier is the justification for the creation of these same norms. Thus, norms play a functional role and may not necessarily meet the interests of all parties or of society as a whole. The solution to a problem is the type of specific connection between norms and paradigmatic interactions, which justifies their creation more than a mechanism designed to create them. In other words, some references of this type may even be found for the norms of situations of coordination, but they are considered secondary, since they will need to be legitimized by the members (Ullmann-Margalit, 1977).

Even if they focus on different objects, we find a common point in the arguments of Tuomela (2000) and Ullmann-Margalit (1977) on cooperation and the emergence of norms, respectively. Both result from social interactions: cooperation as a recognition of some degree of dependence, norms as solutions to problems.

Such studies induce us to conclude that the organization of capitalist labor, typical of the traditional company, creates a structure and dynamics that, yes, depend on cooperation, but a cooperation of the I-cooperation type, defined and legitimized in advance by the current organizational rationality (functional/bureaucratic) to achieve goals designed by a person or group through the coordinated labor of other individuals, even if, upon analyzing Tuomela's arguments and how norms emerge from social interactions, the realization of a sophisticated cooperation, even in a traditional company, would not be impossible — as in the case of a more organic, participatory, and decentralized organization. Self-managed companies, for the most part, have a differential: they arise from voluntary cooperation and association, not due to capital investment and property rights.

In fact, more recently, the French theorist Christophe Dejours — one of those responsible for the emergence of work psychodynamics — defended this idea, but by following another line. This author has developed a critical definition for labor by evoking the cooperation dimension, considering what is necessary to constitute a team or a united collective to work together (Dejours, 2012). The author's aim was to develop the idea of

the emancipatory power that labor can have, since this idea was the object of disagreements among Marxists, for whom the idea that labor alienates was predominant. Others made use of the idea that through the trials of labor the powers of the human being could be revealed, as well as the idea that social work was the path to emancipation.

Collective labor is the link among the intelligence, skill, and ingenuity that potentially exist in each individual and the way in which each one can contribute to culture or the polis. It is thus the mobilization of individual intelligences. Prescribed labor occurs through coordination, while collective labor can only take place through cooperation. This labor may be guided by an instrumental goal — to be able to produce something together — but what unites is the will to carry out a common project that mobilizes the relations among individuals. Labor as a collective activity through cooperation is viewed, then, as a way of emancipating the individual, making it possible to counterbalance more selfish tendencies on account of the collective experience of building a common project (Dejours, 2012).

Cooperation is not a spontaneous construction, but a complex practice permeated with contradictions. The space for internal deliberation in the organization only exists if the company management grants room for discussion and power to its workers. Dejours (2012) argues that there can be emancipation by work through cooperation, as an activity built by a collective, even within the scope of the traditional company, provided that management grants room for it. Nevertheless, we see that this possibility brings its own contradictions of ownership and the power relations inherent in them: in a context of necessity, the employee remains an adjustment variable. In the scope of self-managed companies, ownership is collective and the building space is created by the workers themselves. Being a political experience, it is possible to develop a cooperation dynamic that is closer or, in fact, achievable in terms of the g-cooperation described by Tuomela (2000), in such a way that cooperativists developed cooperative principles (as regulations), the memory of the values and norms that govern this type of organization.

This would thus be a model of organization that creates more favorable conditions for cooperation, whether between members internally — even though the benefits of cooperation itself were not the initial focus of interest, since people normally coordinate to meet economic or survival needs — or between the cooperative and its external environment — when cooperation goes beyond the internal environment of the cooperative, which

comes to also cooperate with other institutions in its environment, acting in its space (Barros & Oliveira, 2019; Comissario & Webering, 2017; Webering, 2019).

Social structures, as they developed in the last century, contributed to a kind of standardization of utilitarian behavior among individuals. Cooperation, when it exists, also occurs in individualistic terms and not in the sense of how everyone's actions affect each other's lives or the collective. Yet, due to his own autonomy, man is capable of finding alternative ways for his self-realization (Maturana & Varela, 1997), which explains the emergence of these organizations, whether as a survival mechanism or as a conscious alternative to labor organization.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The way in which the research synthesized here was conceived has followed an insightful path in comprehending the cooperation phenomenon and the cooperative enterprise, which surpasses the conjunctive analysis of “of what is it made?” (Le Moigne, 1996, p. 31) and answers the question “what does it do?” (Le Moigne, 1996, p. 31). The triangulation proposed by Le Moigne (1996) was filled with elements that help us to comprehend the history of these experiences, the reasons for their emergence and development (**being**), the practice and what happens when in contact with the environment (**doing**), and finally, the evolutionary tendencies or possible paths that they can take (**becoming**). Organizationalism was further explored along with the awareness that this is a self-reflective and therefore always incomplete perspective (Morin, 2007).

The challenge assumed in this paper was the effort to reconstruct knowledge about cooperation, especially that which inspires the self-management of economic enterprises, by revisiting already classic theories and concepts, how these experiences were seen within the scope of cooperativism itself, and how they were complemented by more recent research tied to game theory (Axelrod, 2010) and to analytical philosophy for the study of cooperation (Tuomela, 2000). Therefore, the way in which it was developed sought to solve the problem of the complex, without denying that this type of enterprise undergoes great challenges, difficulties that are often insurmountable. Cooperatives represent political projects, and in this universe, there are clear differences.

To achieve their social and economic goals, cooperatives need to agree upon the prospect of internally reproducing members and face



environmental pressures, being that they evolve with more quality the more they have autonomy and are guided by the members, for the members. In this sense, degeneration is not inevitable (Cornforth, 1995; Manoa, 2001; Stryjan, 1994).

The broader institutional framework of society is based on the bureaucratic and market-oriented organizational model. In order for there to be an expansion of cooperative enterprises, this discussion undoubtedly involves strengthening the cooperative institutional framework in order to develop congruent isomorphic sources of this model.

Cooperatives transform the dynamics of capitalist labor organization, in which workers do not coordinate themselves by their own will, but have their work organized by third parties, since they are trained on the basis of cooperation among workers themselves. However, as human organizations, they also go through an evolutionary

process, and undergo the problems inherent in the administration and maintenance of democracy, the emergence of a ruling class, the division of labor, and power disputes. However, knowing and understanding these dynamics is important for the development of self-reinforcing strategies by the cooperative identity.

Collective labor, even if undertaken to guarantee the survival of the individual, gains new meanings through cooperation, for it recovers its autonomy and emancipatory potential, thus creating better conditions for the balance between substantial rationality and functional rationality.

It is hoped that this will contribute to the urgency of rethinking labor and the relations that it emanates: humanity and freedom reconsidered. Contrary to what has been disseminated, we are not only competitive, we are also cooperative, and our knowledge needs to be urgently reconstructed.

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